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Series: Part 1 of Like One Sundered Star
Stats: Published: 2013-07-04 Completed: 2017-09-13 Chapters: 33/33 Words: 1552409

Like One Sundered Star
by oriflamme

Summary

Who are these shining like one sundered star?
[Like kindled lights in untempestuous heaven,
Fair flower-like stars on the iron foam of fight]

---

Teenage superheroes deal with hormones, mental illness, and extremely secretive guardians in a world of Horrorterrors, giant mutant lusii, mob violence, nightmares of a past life,
warring anti-heroes, and asshole carapacians. Sburb AU divergence from Real Men Wear Tights.

- Inspired by Real Men Wear Tights by Bananaramses, SergeantMeow
Awake and Aware

Chapter Summary

Free, without pity, withheld from woe,
Ignorant; fair as the eyes are fair.
Would I have you change now, change at a blow,
Startled and stricken, awake and aware?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARC I - INTRODUCTION

Karkat Vantas wakes up in the middle of the night to the dulcet skrees of the enormous albino crab looming over the side of his recooperacoon, clacking its meaty claws over its head. "Oh my fucking fuck," he groans, resisting, with great effort, the urge to attempt to drown himself in sopor. Not only is it physiologically impossible for a troll to drown in sopor, the attempt probably wouldn't even faze Crabdad. "What do you want?" Maybe he'll get lucky and Crabdad will shut up if Karkat tosses him a slice of grubloaf. Just, please, don't start screeching about -

With a petulant skree, Crabdad flings an empty black plastic tray to the ground, the demand clear as it skitters from side to side on skinny legs.

You've got to be fucking kidding.

Stupid. Fatass. Lusus.

Karkat is aware that lusii become redundant as a troll ages and becomes self-sufficient. Eventually, it reaches the point that the troll takes care of lusus rather than the other way around. From that point on, it's only a matter of waiting until it's time for them to be assigned to a new grub, or eventually released for retirement.

Karkat just hasn't quite been able to accept how fucking annoying it is when your lusus gets it into its head that you're in charge of feeding it when it gets weird cravings at one in the morning. This always, always, without fail, happens on the rare occasions when Karkat wants to sleep through the night. It's like he's fucking cursed to never get a good night's sleep. He's so used to operating on three hours of sleep by now that it's almost pathetic.

Another screech pierces the air, and Karkat grabs the nearest comic from the desk by the 'coon and flings it at Crabdad. "Shut up! You're gonna get us fucking evicted, you incompetent festering nookstain!" he hisses, hoisting himself out of the sopor and yanking off his sopor-drenched black shirt. He throws on the same hoodie he's worn all week and the first pair of pants that aren't similarly covered in sopor. Appeased by Karkat's movement, Crabdad clicks his claws but shuts the fuck up, thank god. The last thing they need right now is to get kicked out over Crabdad's constant fucking noise the goddamn week before school starts.
Toeing on a raggedy pair of Flashstep sneakers, Karkat grabs his wallet off the desk and removes a twenty - no fucking way is he wandering around this part of town at night with his wallet on him. "Keep quiet, and I swear to god I will bring you back iced roe," he promises.

Crabdad gives a slightly quieter skree in reply, and, wearily, Karkat skrees back, feeling like a fucking wiggler. Content, Crabdad huddles down on the floor in the kitchen block and doesn't even look up as Karkat walks out. He does not slam the door, but only because knowing their piece of shit hivelord she would probably choose tonight of all nights to get pissed about it. Hunching his shoulders, Karkat shoves his glasses up his nose and stomps down the stairs.

The closest store that stocks lusii rations is the shitty 24-hour convenience store five blocks away, on a slightly less shitty street that hosts a McDonalds, a bank, and a cheapass pharmacy. The street is relatively quiet for once, one of the street lights buzzing in flickering death throes even as Karkat shuffles underneath it. A bum is scrawling through a dumpster by the side of the shitty McDonalds, eyeing Karkat sideways with dull human eyes. Karkat turns the corner before the man can decide whether he's an easy mark or not. Crossing the street, he ducks into the convenience store, squinting his eyes against the harsh fluorescent lighting. The troll girl behind the counter snaps her bubblegum as she drums her claws on the counter, her luminescent eyes a dirty green as they flash under the lightning.

Automatically, Karkat goes tense, pinning his stare on the ground and nervously readjusting his glasses as he stalks to the back freezer. His own eyes ache and itch, as though just the thought of another troll's eyes was enough to trigger a reaction. He fights the urge to prod at them, to scurry to the bathroom and check to make sure they're still rusty red, and forces himself to open the freezer without accidentally ripping it off its hinges. Stacking three trays of iced roe in the crook of one arm, Karkat shoulders the door closed and shuffles back to the front, dumping the trays in front of the olive-blood.

Thankfully, the troll girl has just as few fucks to give as Karkat at the moment, tapping in the item codes with a stabbing claw and nearly tearing the currency when she takes it from his palm. When the roe and the change have both been stuffed in a tattered grocery bag, Karkat thanks her "very fucking much" and barges right out, relaxing only when he's out of the range of the fluorescent glow. Shoving his hands in his hoodie pouch, he slumps over and keeps to the lit part of the sidewalk as he starts back toward the corner.

Which is, of course, when the police cars veer around the corner, sirens going full fucking blast.

Karkat stares, jaw dropped and one eye twitching, just as the doors of the bank behind him burst open with a huge crash and a flurry of shouts. Before him, the police cars shudder to a stop in a rough circle, trolls and humans popping out with various strife specibi in hand and claw.

The next second, a gunshot cracks the air and Karkat realizes those fucking fucks behind him are shooting at the cops

And he's standing in the middle of it.

Instinct kicks in, and Karkat flings himself to the ground just as yet another gun goes off overhead. His ears ringing, he crawls around the side of a car parked by the curb, rolling so that he has the very solid vehicle between him and the crazy shooting bank robbers.

"Hold fire! Civilian!" one of the human policemen shouts, and the few police wielding firearms jerk to a halt. A troll with a pistolkind fires off once before someone yanks him back behind the armored car doors. The shot doesn't come anywhere near Karkat, but he still flinches, frozen in place. The robbers on the other side of the car are still firing, the repeated blasts of sound hammering into his
auricular sponge clots. Every few seconds another bullet pockmarks the front of the police car doors, which means that if Karkat tries to run he's most likely fucked in every conceivable way.

Oh my god, he thinks. This is it. This is how the universe decides to flip one last middle claw at Karkat Vantas: by having him accidentally get shot by a bunch of Taintchaffing Spaz Maggots Without A Single Fucking Thinkpan Between Them, revealing the secret swilling through his veins like a cosmic 'fuck you.' Hell, if they see what he is on the inside, the cops might just finish him off themselves. The troll cops, anyway. He had thought he'd at least make it through high school before a highblood decided to punch a hole in his chest cavity, but apparently even asking for that was too much.

The only warning Karkat gets is a sudden roar coming at him from the right; then someone is kneeling beside him, a pair of arms shooting out around his back and under his crumpled up knees. "Hold on!"

Karkat doesn't even have time to ask "What the actual fuck?" before there's a blast of air and the wind tunnel makes his eyes water as they rocket up into the sky. He somehow swallows down a reflexive scream, but his arms latch around the other person's neck desperately, tight enough to choke out a grown troll. The bag full of iced roe cubes is squashed between his side and the person's chest, and he wants to cry hysterically over the fact that he almost died over lusus food. That was a thing that actually happened.

It's not until the wind dies down a little and the little veil of rust clears from his eyes that Karkat realizes what the hell just happened, as the person cradling him in their arms floats down gently and touches down on the roof of a nearby building. The gunshots below sound like little pops of noise that barely register over the fact that the fucking Heir of Breath just flew Karkat out of harm's way. The arm under Karkat's knees drops away and a firm hand steadies him as he stumbles onto the roof, dazed by the realization.

"Are you okay? Hey, sir, are you okay? Were you hurt?"

Karkat shakes his head before the questions reach his thinkpan, too busy staring at the Heir's masked face as he tries to process what just happened. "I - I, no, yeah, I'm fine," he says at last.

"Just hang tight here for a few minutes, okay? I'll give you a ride down after I help take care of that mess down there." A small grin presses through Heir's blue mask, the outline barely visible beneath the obscuring layer of cloth.

The last thing Karkat has time to notice is that Heir's eyes are really, really bright blue through the slight tint of his goggles, the same unreal ice blue you see on all the photoshopped posters in the local comic book stores. Then Heir is in the air once more, the breezes streaming around him in a nearly visible curl, and the hero shoots back down the side of the building, right back into the firefight. Karkat walks over to the edge and peers over, the plastic handles of the grocery bag knotted in shaky hands.

It's not even a fight. Heir lands right in front of the robbers with a burst of wind, slamming all five criminals up against the wall and holding them there with a hand outstretched. A single gesture, and the pistols the robbers hold are knocked out of their hands, revolving in a circle in midair before the Heir sets them gently on the ground well behind the police line. The police respond after a brief pause, advancing on the robbers with specibi still at the ready. Heir lets the criminals drop and takes off, easily floating over the cops' heads, his hood blown back to reveal a thatch of messy black hair.

Karkat's brain must be completely pansmashed, because he's slow to realize Heir is flying back up to the rooftop. Like he'd just promised he would. Fuck.
"Sorry about that. You should never have gotten caught in the middle of that," Heir says before he even reaches Karkat's level, yanking his hood back up almost as an afterthought. "If you want, I have time to drop you off somewhere else. This was the first real emergency I've had all night."

Karkat's mouth feels drier than a desiccated sheaf of molt-skin. "I just live in that building over there," he croaks out, pointing in the general direction of his apartment. "If that's, uh, okay." He wants to slap himself upside the forehead. So fucking suave, Vantas. Way to sound like a stammering fuckwit in front of the Heir of Breath.

Heir just tilts his head to the side and smiles again. "You got it!" he says, chipper. There's another whirl of wind and Karkat is once again in the air, Heir's arms supporting him as they arrow over a block of buildings. Seattle is a blur through the wind enveloping them, the glow of the city lights hazy and yet dazzling. They touch down without a jolt in front of the apartment's front entry. "Stay safe, okay sir?" Heir says earnestly, bright blue eyes meeting Karkat's.

"Yeah," Karkat manages, wondering where the fuck his usual eloquence had fucked off to. Usually he could go on for ages, but right now he can't even muster up a full sentence. Heir has him completely at a loss. "Thanks - thank you."

"No problem! Goodbye, sir!" And with that Heir takes off, the greyish blue of his suit vanishing against the cloudy night sky.

Karkat realizes he's been standing around aimlessly for a good five minutes, staring at the space in the sky where the Heir had flown off, and shakes himself. He goes inside and back up to his apartment block, mind still absorbed in running through the night's events on a loop. He doesn't realize his mistake until he's already absent-mindedly told Crabdad about everything that happened, and the lusus begins skreeing in genuine alarm, flailing around the respite block with such frothing agitation it starts toppling lamps and breaking plates, utterly beyond pacification until Karkat shoves an entire tray of iced roe down its gullet.

By the next morning, there is no more roe to bribe the lusus with, and Crabdad is tossing Karkat's belongings around into packing boxes, ignoring all of Karkat's attempts to hang his hero hoodies back in the closet and apologize to the hivelord for the lusus's intense screeching.

By the end of that day, Crabdad has pissed off the hivelord enough that Karkat no longer has any choice but to go along with their relocation because they've been fucking evicted.

Motherfucker.

That's how six days before school begins, Karkat Vantas finds himself loading a small moving van and driving out to Maple Valley, Washington, a suburb probably voted 'more sleep-inducing than nitrous oxide.'

But it's too late. The idea has already worked its way into Karkat's thinkpan. It consumes him as he tapes up the box of utensils, as he empties his recooperacoon and dumps the sopor into the disposal unit, as he piles all of his earthly belongings into one van. It's with him as he takes one last look in the ablutions room mirror, tracing the edges of his eyes with a single nubby claw.

It's going to take a while. He's nowhere near in fighting shape, and he's been suppressing certain parts of himself for so long, he can barely remember how it all works. This is going to involve months of training, if not longer.

But now that he knows he can have it, he wants it. It's about time he stopped hiding, whiling his life away in the grip of suffocating fear.
In his mind's eye, he can already see the shape of a mask creasing across the brow of his nose.

It looks good. It looks right.

---

Rose doesn’t sleep anymore. One’s intimate connection with the Horrorterrors of the Furthest Rings does not tend to itself, you know.

There is a moment of disconnection before she settles back into her body, and she is slow to readjust to the feeling of being confined in a single container. She sits in the center of the observatory, legs folded neatly beneath her and back arched in a perfectly straight line, a faint light seeping out from behind closed eyelids. When she opens them at last, lips parted in a dry gasp, the glow vanishes, leaving only lilac eyes with pupils blown out like dark stars. Her perfect posture slumps the moment she returns to herself, and she lets it happen, feeling like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

That simile is inaccurate. No, it is more that she has felt what it is to have porcelain in place of bone, piano wire instead of muscle, dank clammy water rather than blood. How can she hope to support herself with mere meat and bone after that?

Sweat sticks her reddish-blonde hair to her wide forehead as she tremblingly tucks stray strands behind her ears. She rises on shaking legs, her head hollow and fumbling without the absolute will of the Void chanting into her mind. There is a vast goldenrod sun painted in wide, haphazard splashes of paint across the inner curve of the observatory ceiling, the curling tendrils of sun rays embossed with orange and gold. Her childhood self had thought it a heartening venture, a pleasant image to open her eyes to and a way to ease her mental state after hours in the cold damp.

Her childhood self had been a fool.

Early morning rain patters on the roof and the uncovered balcony as Rose makes her way back into the house proper. There is a moment, when the wind picks up and her hair and skirt toss wildly, where her balance falters and she is uncertain whether her foot will fall on the balcony or through air, and she is giddy with the jolt of adrenaline that shoots through her veins. Then her foot slams hard onto the balcony, and she staggers against the side of the house, head still dizzy with the near fall.

She regains herself with more focus this time, her regular analytical mind expanding outward from the protected corner in which she hid herself from the corrosive presence of her Tentacled Patrons. By the time she strides down the stairwell and into the restroom, leaving a trail of damp footprints in the lush ivory carpet, she feels fully herself at last, no longer worn thin by the dark. She refreshes herself in the restroom, stripping off clothes that drip with sweat and rainwater, and turns the water as hot as it will go, a hint of raw desperation in the tremble of her hand as she turns the knob. She tucks the wild emotion away, smoothing it into the logical pattern of her thoughts before it can consume her.

If she had not learned to control herself this way, she would have gone fully mad years ago. As it is, she can feel the dark cracks in her mind, the scraped raw edges where her thoughts and emotions trail away. Dampness oozes up through the cracks, but she can ignore it. For now.

She finally peels herself out of the shower, the hot water having done nothing to warm the ice in the marrow of her bones and the creases of her brain. Drying herself carefully with a fluffed towel, she begins pulling on the uniform she had laid out the evening before her nightly trance. First is the light, woven Kevlar body suit, specially ordered and tailored to her body. Then the lower layer – dark orange pants tucked into supple boots, and a pale yellow top with long, tight sleeves. She straps on the arm guards for her needles and another vest of Kevlar, this one painstakingly dyed orange in a fit
of fashion-savvy a few months ago.

She slides a yellow headband into her hair, tucks her orange hood in and pulls on a short sleeved, billowy, creamy golden tunic, with an orange sun covering her entire slim chest. It flares just right from her hips, tight around her waist as she does up a utility belt loaded with her backup knives and needles. She pulls on the standard gloves that heroes all gravitate towards, high quality and soft against her palms, tiny orange suns sewn across the backs.

The next part is the hardest, the most pointless and yet most central part of the ritual. She smooths out her complexion with powder, highlights her cheekbones and erases the deep purple shadows that underscore her eyes. She forgoes mascara – it would only look unnatural on her nearly translucent eyelashes – but liberally applies layers of gold and white eye shadow. Finally, she lines her mouth dark, and fills in her thin lips with lipstick so dark a purple it verges on black, purple like bruises and the dark between the stars, her one concession to the horrors that lurk within her mind.

Finally, she fits her mask onto her face. It is a slim strip of gold cloth, a single layer between her face and the eyes of the world. Her façade feels as inadequate as ever. Most heroes work in the dead of night, she knows, and they can get away with flimsy disguises when the dark does most of the obscuring for them.

She has more pressing obligations when the sun falls. So instead, she fights crime in the day, from earliest morn to the latest in the evening she can manage before the coiling darkness calls her home. Horrors know, there is enough crime in a city as large as New York that she has plenty to occupy her even at high noon.

Rose Lalonde takes one last look in the mirror, taking in the elaborate embroidery worked into the hem of her coat, the sky-blue bright of her boots, the edge of her armguards peering out just beneath her sleeves.

(One day, she will walk the streets of New York dripping with darkness and wrapped in sleek shadow. But for now, she is the Seer of Light. She is the heroine of this story. She must be. She has no other choice.)

Unable to meet her own eyes in the mirror, Rose wrenches away and walks out, picking up her twin needles with slim fingers and sliding them into the arm holsters. She strides out of the house without hesitation, stepping over the shattered wizard statues and overturned furniture that she has not had the energy to clean up since the day she’d first toppled them.

It’s not as though her mother is around to passive-aggressively pander to the mess, anymore. Rose has more important matters to occupy her time than thoughts of that final unfinished martini, still sitting abandoned on the table by the front door as Rose strides out of the house.

Picturing her usual destination in her mind’s eye - visualization is key - she raises a needle and cloaks herself in light that burns at her tearing eyes. The thick forest that surrounds the country estate vanishes in a flare of white-hot light, and when she blinks away the film of tears she is on top of the Flatiron Building, the slowly growing roar of New York City rising up beneath her.

(For a brief moment all she sees below is so much meat. The humans of this city are of such startling insignificance, and the idea of saving them from themselves yet again draws a chuckle of mind-breaking laughter from the tangle in the back of her brain -)

Banishing all such irrelevant thoughts to the back of her mind, the Seer of Light swallows the bile rising up in the back of her throat, raises her needles, and tilts her head to the side as she surveys her domain. Other heroes have to hunt for crime, comb through back alleys and wait for cries of pain and
gunshots to alert them.

Rose closes her eyes, and when she opens them again the sun illuminates all she needs to see, some of them current events, some potential crimes that she can just barely sense the makings of, glowing in her mind’s eye like little bursts of light. The colddamp, grimdarkness subsides, and she sighs with relief as the last of the night’s taint is burned away.

A faint smirk curving her purple lips, she teleports to the scene of a robbery *in media res.*

And she begins her work.

---

Dave rolls over and punches his head into the pillow, his much-battered sunglasses creaking as the plastic bends under the pressure. He can really give no fucks at all. If he keeps his eyes shut and the sunglasses on, the sun pouring in through the gaping hole in the wall won’t mean a thing. It’s not like he has somewhere to be – Striders don’t do public school. He can stay in bed all day while other unfortunate souls have to wake up and go through the motions of caring. It would be deliciously goddamn ironic, and it is going to be a Thing. He is totally doing this. He is making this ha-

He doesn’t hear Bro. He never does. One moment, Dave is wrapped up in all kinds of awesome sleep irony; the next he rolls out of bed, a katana stabbing into the pillow where his head used to lie. He snatches up the first sword he lands on and comes up in a fighting stance. Bro has already vanished again, and there is only a second’s pause between the bright blue smuppet flying at Dave’s face and a sharp blade slicing in from the side.

He dodges both, and hears the faint whine when Bro’s katana finds nothing but air. Next there’s a flurry of puppets and sword all coming at him at once, and Dave is too busy parrying and dodging and darting out of range to even think about striking a blow of his own.

Time to even the odds a little.

Oh fuck, that has to have been the corniest pun in the history of paradox space. You’re welcome, world, hold your applause, your daily dose of ironically sick humor has just been served by Dave fucking Strider.

He barely manages to brace himself. Dave sucks in a breath and twitches his hand, shoving at a tiny part of his mind and telling it to *stop* -

Everything goes hazy red and sluggish as time grinds to a relative halt. Dave can only hold it for a breath, but it’s enough; he flashsteps out of range, and when time jolts back into motion, Bro’s lunging strike stabs the wall rather than Dave’s face.

This doesn’t faze Bro, of course. Not a second later the blade is free and slicing once more, the edge of the nigh-unbreakable blade glinting in the light from the hole in the wall. Every other breath Dave has to brace himself and reach inward to twist time to a standstill just to be able to keep up with his brother’s agile moves.

In a straight, sword-to-sword fight, Dave knows Bro would utterly wreck his shit. He’s just that good. It’s only since Dave figured out how to flashstep that he’s been able to hold his own, and even with the ability to stop time in his repertoire, he can’t get off the defensive.

None of the dumb shits they beat up on a daily basis are anywhere near Bro’s level, but that’s not the point. Dave has been trying to catch up to Bro his entire life, but some days it feels like the gap just keeps widening, like he’s gunning for warp one but can’t break light speed, and fuck, that thought is
just nerdy enough that Bro’s next swing opens a thin slice along Dave’s cheek before Dave can parry it. Jaw clamping tight, Dave reappllies himself to the strife, stopping time and trying to hold it so he can get in past Bro’s guard.

All he manages to do is set off a firework in his brain. One sharp burst of pain later, and the world blanks out in a fuzzy veil of reddish darkness.

Dave wakes up on the carpet, an elegant sword stabbing into the floor mere inches from his sunglasses. His head is pounding like a bassline gone horribly wrong, which means he's overdone it again. Fuck. He accedes, avoiding Bro’s probing gaze as he puts a hand to the dip between his nose and his upper lip, smearing a tiny trickle of blood down his face with a finger and grimacing. Bro gives a sharp nod, and Dave pauses before nodding stoically back, waiting until Bro puts the sword away and vanishes before rubbing the blood off and standing. A few moments later Dave can hear the click of the shitty microwave turning on. Bro can’t stop time like Dave, but he’s fucking fast enough that there doesn’t seem to be a difference.

So much for sleeping in. If Bro is actually cooking something in the microwave, as opposed to fiddling with it as part of his latest foray into bizarre technological experimentation, then it means he wants them out and working today. Dave tosses his current shitty sword back onto the overturned bed and goes to the closet to obtain a slightly less shitty model.

As always, the only warning he gets is a split second blur of color before the trap is triggered; Dave flashsteps backward, and what seems like a hundred disgustingly colorful smuppets topple out of the closet, forming a sinisterly plush pile on the ground where Dave had been standing.

There is a pause as Dave is gripped by revulsion and the noise in the kitchen stops, waiting. Dave is sure the pile hadn’t been set to go off until Dave had pushed himself too far; this is, in an incredibly fucked up way, Bro’s concerned way of making sure Dave hasn’t actually had a time-stop induced aneurysm and broken his brain.

Dave grimaces and kicks the pile out of his way, pulling on a layer of Kevlar before yanking a pair of fancy crimson suit pants on. He keeps his sleep shirt on instead of going all out and wearing the rest of his costume. Bro can go from predictably ironic to unpredictably ironic on the slightest inscrutable whim, and it wouldn’t be the first time Dave has assumed they are heading out, only for Bro to simply tilt his head to the side, take in Dave’s outfit with a smirk, and then stay at home all day to play FPS games while Dave stewed.

But it’s all cool. That’s the thing about being ironic heroes; you have to do what feels right in the moment to achieve the maximum amount of irony. Dave is totally on board with that.

He hesitates, eyeing the thin metal collar lying on the floor by the torn up bed. With a raspy sigh, he leans down and picks it up, staring out the window for a few long minutes as he debates inwardly. After the third inspirationally ironic internal rap, he wraps the paper-thin layer of metal around his throat. Hell, even if they don't go out today, maybe Bro will feel like an actual rap session today instead of locking himself up in that creepy puppet shrine he calls a room.

(He doesn't bother testing the collar anymore; sure it's an amazing piece of technology and blah, blah, blah, but he's been using it for years now and the awe factor had worn off basically the day after he got it.)

He stops time to walk out into the kitchen just to prove he can, kicking open the pantry door and dodging a wave of spare parts as it falls out. If he's honest, the multiple traps spread out throughout the apartment on a daily basis are starting to get old. Heh. Maybe Bro is getting predictable in his old age. He's got to be hitting upper thirties by now, right? Practically ancient.
With that thought to bring a faint smile to his lips, Dave excavates a three-quarters empty box of Cheerio’s left over from some bygone age of edible bounty. He scarfs down the handfuls of cereal before another trap can go off or Lil Cal can steal it from over his shoulder, which yes is in fact a thing that has actually happened. He still has nightmares about it.

He doesn’t look up when he finishes the box, just tosses it back in the pantry empty. His stomach still complains a little, so he starts hunting for anything else not lost to the great summer mold infestation. In the end he has to settle for chugging a few glasses of water, both to settle the last of the emptiness in his stomach and in preparation for a day of work. Bro catches his eye from behind pointy shades and nods approval before scratching at the scruff of beard growth on his jaw and disappearing into his room.

Which means they are working today. Hell yes. Hell. Fucking. Yes.

Dave is back in his room in one fluid motion, the headache of overreaching himself vanishing in the sudden clarity sharpening his mind. He’s not excited. Just. He appreciates the work. Being a hero is a pretty selective field of work, okay, not everyone can be blessed with the kind of raw talent Striders casually throw around on a daily basis.

Ripping off his sleep shirt, Dave finishes putting on his newest work outfit. He’s never seen Bro wear anything but his white polos, tanks, fingerless gloves, and jeans when they head out, which Dave guesses is decently tongue-in-cheek because it’s the exact same thing Bro wears almost every day anyway, regardless of whether they do hero work or not. But Dave personally thinks coming up with a new costume whenever the mood strikes him is pretty damn hilarious too.

(This is due in large part to the fact that he trolls the local hero fan sites, and there are entire blogs dedicated to helping people recreate and cosplay Flashstep’s latest ensembles. Entire flame wars have erupted over whether he personally alters his more outlandish suit jackets himself or not.

The answer is yes, but it’s not like he actually likes sewing or anything. Irony is a demanding mistress, alright? She requires regular blood sacrifices and the occasional bout of indentured servitude at the altar of Her battered sewing machine. And Dave is a loyal disciple, what can he say.)

This week it’s all about the red and white. He covers up everything with Kevlar before tucking a white dress shirt into his pants, hooking on a pair of red suspenders so his pants don’t fall the fuck off while he’s running across rooftops all day long, and shrugging a too-long, bright crimson jacket over it all. He pulls the hood over his head. And fuck yes, the little miniature black gear on the lapel is hand sewn. Fuck the haters.

He belts two black, battered sword sheathes across his back, the straps crossing his chest in a black x, and stuffs the inner pockets of his jacket with some of the card-suit themed ninja stars he keeps mostly for shits and giggles. He skips over his favorite shoes to put on a sturdy pair of white sneakers. He’s learned the hard way that he can’t actually wear his favorite shit out in the field, or eventually it’ll be destroyed before its time by the sheer amount of wear and tear his clothes go through on a regular basis.

Selecting two only moderately shitty swords for the day, he goes out to the kitchen again and sees that Lil Cal is absent from his usual perch above the fridge. Dave grunts to himself, the metal collar humming along with him, and digs through the pantry one last time until he finds a carton of apple juice he stored for just such an occasion. He tosses it back as he heads to the stairwell and starts upward.

Aw yeah. Motherfuckin’ AJ. It’s like the goddamn elixir of life. Without it, how could he hope to maintain all this concentrated awesome? If he ever has to pick one thing to subsist on for the rest of
his life, apple juice is where it’s at.

On the roof the sun is hot overhead. The air feels muggy and sticks Dave’s shirt and Kevlar vest to his skin almost instantly. The onset of fall has done absolutely nothing for taking the edge off Houston’s stubborn heat, but Dave’s been putting up with Houston’s bullshit all his life. The best fuck you to an uncaring sky god is to wear long-sleeved shirts and stew in your gloriously Pyrrhic victory.

Bro is standing by the AC unit, staring off across the Houston skyline with an impassive face. More impassive than usual, anyway. When Dave flashsteps to the edge of the roof and raises an eyebrow at him, Bro just raises an eyebrow right back. That’s all the signal Dave needs, the usual Strider-speak for ‘get going, kid.’ Dave nods without a word and pulls off his sunglasses, leaving them in the little nook between the AC unit and the roof itself. He doesn’t see Bro take his off, though he does note that there are now two pairs of sunglasses sitting in the shade when he straightens up, now alone on the rooftop.

It’s ironic as fuck that for Striders the best disguise is to leave their faces completely uncovered, and Dave is all for irony, but hell if he doesn’t feel just as naked with his eyes exposed today as he did the very first time he and Bro went out to wreck people’s shit.

Suck it up, Strider.

He orients himself by the sun and aims for downtown. He checks to make sure his swords are secure across his back and then takes a running leap at the roof next door. Soon he’s built up enough momentum that he can afford to fall into a rhythm, the steady beat of the bass in his head syncing up with each stride he takes.

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In the slow moments between dreaming and waking, John imagines he can feel the breath sliding in and out of his lungs, the cool brush of air sinking into alveoli, sighing down through his trachea, flushing into his blood. He’s intensely aware of every flutter of air stirred up by the turning fan overhead, the autumn air suffusing the room through the open window. Somewhere, at the edge of his awareness, he thinks he can feel the inhale and exhale of a second pair of lungs, just barely out of sync with his own, and that presence comforts him deep in his bones.

With a grating beep, the alarm clock goes off, and John flinches bodily in response, his mind jolted out of its sleepy, muddled imaginations. The hyperawareness of his own breathing dies back, and the sensation of a second pair of lungs fades out. All that remains is his usual sense of the wind curling in through the window, tousling his hair and skimming across his face like a familiar greeting.

He scrubs the base of his palms over his eyes before putting on his thick glasses. He turns off the alarm and then concedes to the eager nudging of the breeze: he flips his palm upward, and a small gust of wind sends his bed sheets flying off him. Wrapped instead in a blanket of breezes that rustles his pajamas and hair constantly, John stumbles to the bathroom to get ready for the day, sighing wistfully at the thought of crawling back into bed.

But of course, he can’t afford to miss the first day of school.

John’s dad is already downstairs in the basement by the time John arrives, just beginning to flow through the familiar patterns of a t’ai chi sequence. Stifling one last yawn with his hand, John smiles at Samuel Egbert, and receives a faint smile and a slight nod in return as he falls into line with his dad, falling into the correct first stance and synchronizing his movements with the ex-Marine’s. He enjoys the steady, soothing way his lungs rise and fall, paying strict, practiced attention to his every twist and sweeping reach and correcting minute flaws in his technique. Morning katas have been a
part of John’s routine pretty much since he could walk on his own, and he never feels fully awake until they’ve finished their father-son morning run-through.

After a half an hour, by mutual agreement they both stop, though they haven’t finished the last sequence. The school year always calls for changes and readjustments in John’s tightly scheduled workout routines, particularly once swim season starts up. Schoolwork has never been a problem for John, but there’s just no way around the eight-hour daily commitment that has to be accounted for come August.

“Do you have everything you need?” his dad probes after they towel off and return upstairs, pouring homemade batter into the waffle iron and setting bacon to sizzle on the already heated frying pan. “Nothing last minute?”

John nods from where he is rinsing strawberries in the sink and slicing them up into thin slivers, occasionally popping a whole berry into his mouth. “I should be okay. How do my contacts look?”

Samuel wipes off his hands with a hand towel and takes John by the chin, angling his son’s face from side to side. John lets him, tilting his head obediently despite the fact that he could resist the manhandling if he wanted to. “They’ll do,” Samuel says at last, patting John on the cheek before turning back to the waffle iron. “Just make sure you keep your glasses on as well.”

“Yes sir.” When the waffles are ready John covers them with the sliced strawberries and a dash of syrup, taking the plate to the table to eat while his dad makes another round and prepares a bowl of granola garnished with sliced banana and cinnamon. By the time Samuel places his own plate, a rasher of bacon, and the bowl of oatmeal on the table, John has already ploughed throw his waffles, the usual ravenous hunger slightly assuaged. He starts in on the oatmeal, savoring each hot mouthful.

Maybe it’s John’s powers, his duties, or just the growing pangs of a regular teenage boy – whichever is the case, John has always needed twice the amount of sustenance per meal that his dad has. When he’d been younger, his dad had been incredulous at the sheer amount John could put away; now, he just makes sure that everything John eats is healthy and filling without worrying about John’s total intake. With the kind of regular, strenuous activity John engages in every night, there’s certainly no worry about him getting flabby.

John finishes his meal and waits for Samuel to finish as well, his legs bouncing with restless energy in no way worked off by the t’ai chi workout, then takes all the plates to the sink to wash while his dad dries. He runs upstairs to change out of his workout clothes and into something more appropriate for the first day of school, finally deciding on a Superman shirt, dark jeans, and a white zip-up hoodie. Adjusting his tinted contact lenses and glasses one last time in the mirror, John practices a smile on his reflection, pushes the corners up with his fingers when he judges it a little too hesitant, and swings his backpack over his shoulder.

“I’m off!” he calls as he leaps down the stairs two at a time, landing easily in a tiny burst of wind. He’s trying to burn off as much of the excessive energy as he can before he gets to school and has to sit relatively still for an interminable length of time. That had been an issue last year. “See yah later, Dad!”

Samuel Egbert intercepts him at the door, brandishing two slices of toast even as John puts his hand on the doorknob. “Have a good day at school, kiddo,” his dad says as John stuffs the first piece of toast into his mouth.

There is a moment of tension, and John’s stomach turns uncomfortably. His dad is well aware that last year had been…rough, having had to deal with John’s emotional ups and downs throughout the school year until the sudden relief of an overdue summer. Sure, they have plans for how to deal with
any kind of similar trouble this year, but John can still feel the space between them that hadn’t been there before, the void where a relatively stoic but supportive father just hadn’t quite been equipped to handle a stupidly hurting sixteen year old on his own.

Then his dad finishes. “I am very proud of you, son.”

John smiles back with real feeling, so hard his cheeks hurt, as the familiar praise warms him and eases the last of the jitters from his system. They run through the usual last few Dad-required questions (“Do you have your lunch?” “You put it in my bag yourself!” “Try not to stand out too much.” “I know, Dad.”) and then with a final pat of the head from his dad John’s out the door and down the street. He suppresses the urge to fly; the cool dawn air is crisp and enticing, the breeze light and welcoming, but he knows better.

He feels wistful all the same, and maybe a little depressed, but he puts that out of his mind. He always feels a little blue when school starts, because it means less time for flying and his duties, but school is just as fulfilling in its own way! He just has to adjust, that’s all.

A house three doors down still has the moving boxes piled up in a messy heap by the end of the driveway for the garbage truck, and, not for the first time, John tries to peer in through the windows to get a glimpse of his new neighbor. It’s no good – the blinds have been drawn shut for the past two days now. He knows for sure it’s a troll – he’s seen the spindly, ghostly pale crab lusus skreeing and trundling huge stacks of cardboard boxes inside from the moving van, but he has yet to get a glimpse of the troll itself. He’s intensely curious, and wonders if his dad will wait and take John with him when he goes to deliver a traditional welcome-to-the-neighborhood baked confection so he can meet them. It has to be a kid or an adolescent, or someone just barely out of adolescence; a fully matured troll wouldn’t still have an accompanying lusus.

Such thoughts occupy his mind as he walks to school, fifteen minutes away. He’s early, but the parking lot is already a mess of confused new students in their cars and parents walking their ninth-graders in. The first day of school is always a nightmare, but this year in particular a lot of school zoning has changed, shuffling enough people around to make it even more hectic than usual. John examines the schedule emailed to him back in July, locates his new locker and the first classroom he needs in his mental map of the school, and takes a deep breath before summoning another smile and diving through the crowd.

He weaves between the thronging crowd expertly, reaching his locker without incident. He sees a few familiar faces in the crowd, and three members of the swim team actually wave at him from a distance, but he’s painfully aware of how many more personal, exuberant reunions are taking place around him as old friends and groups shout at each other across the halls and embrace each other. He takes the rising stab of wistfulness, all too similar to the pang he’d felt about not flying this morning, and quashes it, waving at one last fellow swimmer before ducking into the AP Biology classroom, happy to be away from the claustrophobic, crowded hallway.

Three other students have already made it to the classroom, though there’s no sign of the teacher. Two of them John knows; one is a relatively well-known member of the football team that he is familiar with by reputation, while the other is a slim female troll whom Rose used to complain about back in middle school.

The third is totally unfamiliar, and even as John goes to sit at the desk just behind the unknown troll, he is struck by two significant details. One, the troll is wearing an oversized Batman hoodie, black and grey with the occasional flash of bright yellow. And two, this guy’s horns are tiny. Like whoa, some of the troll kids at school have pretty dramatic racks, but this guy is the exact opposite, his candy-corn horns rounded and almost obscured completely in bed of glossy grey-black hair.
And John can hardly help it if his first thought is ‘shit, he’s adorable.’ He finds himself staring at the back of the troll’s head instead of reviewing his textbook even after he opens the book, unduly intrigued by the smooth bumps of the troll’s horns barely rising above his head.

The urge to talk seizes John, and he’s halfway leaning forward before he even registers the old tightening of nervous anticipation in his chest. “Hello, Bruce,” he says before he can abort mission, and then immediately wants to slam his head against the desk with humiliation. Way to be a complete nerd, Egbert. If the Superman shirt hadn’t been enough of a hint, he’s just outed himself completely as completely lacking in any kind of social graces.

Almost sick with fascination, John waits as the troll’s entire body stiffens, and the kid slowly turns to eye John with an intent, rusty-red eye flashing from behind thin-rimmed glasses, and wow that is one hell of a scowl. It’s too late now; John plasters a wide smile across his face, torn between trying not to seem to eager and ducking his head and hiding his face in shame for the rest of the day. The troll is silent for a long time, his mouth in a firm scowl as he raises a delicate eyebrow. “What do you want, Clark?” he says at last, with so much annoyance laden in his tone that John almost didn’t register the deadpan emphasis on ‘Clark.’

And then John feels his smile widen stupidly, uncontrollably, as he kicks his legs forward in a burst of irrepressible excitement. He’d actually talked back. It’s such a stupid thing to get excited about, pathetic really, but he can’t stop feeling it like a little firework going off in his chest. “Eheheheh. I’m John. What’s your name?”

The troll frowns, and his scowl deepens, any trace of that deadpan humor John thought he’d seen completely shut down. “None of your goddamn business,” he says, his voice just barely tinged with a growl, and spins around to face the front of the classroom.

That Batman hoodie seems more and more fitting with every passing moment.

Before John can press his luck, the teacher begins to speak, calling out attendance. This suits John just fine; unwilling to let his determination flag, he waits impatiently as the teacher runs through the list, almost missing his own name being called in his preoccupation, and is finally rewarded when she calls out the name “Karkat Vantas,” and the troll before him raises a hand in response. Success.

“Nice to meet yah, Karkat,” John says, leaning forward a little to nudge the troll with a finger. The troll looked over his shoulder once more, and oh yes, that had to be the most downright unimpressed, 120% done-with-you face ever worn by trollkind. John can’t help it; he barely contains the burst of laughter that attempts to spew out of his mouth, swallowing the body-shaking giggles down after a single choked-off snort. Karkat just looks at him like he’s a complete and utter imbecile, but that frown is just so expressive, so completely done with John’s shenanigans, that it just sets off another bubble of laughter that has the teacher eyeing both of them. Karkat whirls in his seat when the teacher gives a significant cough, and John smiles at her apologetically before settling down, almost humming as he watches the back of Karkat’s head.

John should be discouraged by this, especially when the troll ignores him through the rest of class. But for some reason, he can’t feel his excitement dying at all, listening to the teacher give her first-day lecture without really paying attention as he looks over Karkat’s horns, trying to figure out why they seemed so damn familiar.

And then, finally, John places where he’s seen those nubby horns, angular features, and rusty eyes before, and has to swallow down an exclamation of recognition.
He looks different, in the bright light of day, not trapped in the middle of a shootout between bank robbers and the police with nowhere to run. But, yeah, this is the troll Heir had flown home not a week ago. John had been distracted at the time, first by the need to get the troll to safety and to stop the shooting before someone was seriously injured, and then by the nagging tug of the wind informing him of a break in across town he needed to take care of, but he remembered the nubby little horns and the utter, shell-shocked sincerity in the way the troll had thanked him.

Holy shit. Someone John’s saved is in the same class as him. He doesn’t think this has ever happened before, ever. His stomach is doing something really bizarre that he can only describe as a mix of excited flailing and panicked twisting. Because on one hand, oh my god, maybe he can be friends with someone he saved as Heir, and then on the other hand, oh my god, someone who has seen Heir up close and personal is sitting barely a foot away from John’s face, with only the assurance of a mask, a pair of goggles, and tinted contact lenses keeping John’s secret identity from being all over the Seattle Times. It’s like a birthday present and a nightmare all wrapped into one.

John’s dad would probably be a lot more worried. But after that initial moment of panic, John is right back to the bubbling burn of excitement. He doesn’t even know what’s causing this; he just knows that he is determined to be friends with Karkat Vantas, even if it’s the last thing he does. Him and Karkat, best friends – it is going to be a Thing.

When class ends, Karkat is one of the first on his feet, packing up his things in one smooth motion before heading for the door without looking back. Despite the abrasive attitude Karkat blasts, John still can’t shake the desire to talk to the him again, so he heads after the troll, weaving between slower students with practiced ease as he trails Karkat through the crowded hallway.

The troll comes to a stop by a locker not far from John’s own and begins to fiddle with the combination lock, giving John time to catch up. Then he pauses, realizing he doesn’t actually know how to initiate a ‘let us engage in glorious brohood my friend’ invitation without the medium of a pesterchum window between him and the potential bro. Which, uh. Awkward.

While he waffles and feels his momentum slipping away in the face of his awkward inexperience, Karkat looks up from his lock, which he’s still having trouble with, and grants John yet another annoyed glance. “This is getting really creepy, really fucking fast, Clark,” he drawls, yanking on the stubborn combination lock and bestowing upon it an even more fantastic death glare than the one he’d given John. “Either spit it out or shut your flapping mastication trap and leave so I can get on with my life. Newsflash, asshat, I have better things to do than be on the receiving end of your panaddled attempts at awkward social interaction, so if you would be kind enough to fuck right off and let me annihilate this shitty lock in peace, I would be the happiest little wriggler in this entire blasted cave!” Karkat finishes this with a vehement, but ultimately futile, tug on the lock, letting his head fall forward with enough force to probably dent the locker itself.

The answer is on John’s lips before he really processes the fact that he knows the answer, can feel exactly what he wants to say next with perfect clarity. “S’okay, man. You know, since my name isn’t Clark. It’s John.”

Karkat goes completely still, and then, almost in slow motion, knocks his head against the locker again with a groan of bone-deep existential despair. John snickers. “God damn it,” Karkat says seemingly to the empty air. He angles his head to glare up at John. “What. Do. You. Want.”

John barely suppresses another burst of giggles. It’s an entirely novel sensation - he's never been so thoroughly entertained by the sight of someone else being so very, very annoyed. "Uh. Nothing, just - you're new here, right?" Oh my god he's awful at this.

"This is either the worst attempt at flirting ever, or you are the single most painfully awkward person
on the planet,” Karkat says, turning his attention back to the locker. This time, it clicks open and he almost snarls in triumph. It's just as adorable as the angry faces.

"Whoa! Uh, no, not flirting, uh!" John says coherently, flailing as he scrambles to shake his head in negation. "I guess I'm just not really good at this, huh?" He tries to keep up the smile even as he feels something low in his stomach begin to tighten and sink, a kind of wistful regret that he recognizes all too well. He should have known better than to try this, he muses, shoulders sagging as Karkat's unamused glower remains intact. He's never made a friend in his life, aside from Rose, and Rose had done most of the groundwork there.

"...You're absolutely fucking awful." A hint of a smile tugs at Karkat's straight frown, and for a moment John thinks he's imagining the faint amusement in the troll's voice. "I can only assume that means this is intended to be some kind of inane human friendship initiation ritual. Well, you have my attention for the next thirty seconds. Proceed."

"Really?! Oh, uh," John says, thrown off by the sudden release of the tension in his stomach. Somehow he hasn't messed this up yet, and realizing that brings the smile back up to full intensity on his face. "Ahaha, I was just wondering what your next class is. I have Intermediate Alternian."

Karkat rolls his eyes, sorting through his textbooks and slamming the locker shut again. "Film," he says succinctly, tucking a textbook away in his bag. "The class your fumbling, pathetic human gesture of friendship is keeping me from is Film, and I intend to leave in the next ten seconds so I can go revel in what may be the single enjoyable class offered by this pedestrian little high school. Continue."

"Oh." John deflates again. "Sorry, then, um, I didn't mean to keep bothering you."

Karkat arches an eyebrow, waiting as the last ten seconds tick by, and then huffs out a long-suffering sigh. "The solution here is to ask me about the rest of my schedule," he says, folding his arms across his chest.

"Can I see your schedule, Karkat?" John asks automatically, seizing on the opportunity. Karkat whips the yellow paper schedule as though he'd been just waiting for his cue. Then he frowns again as John reads over it, as though he hadn't meant to give away that much enthusiasm.

John's good mood is rapidly returning. Okay, maybe John sucks at making friends, like that's anything new, but he's starting to get that he can't take all of Karkat's glowering expressions seriously. Whatever the reason for it, the troll's actions don't match his expressions, and it's possible John isn't annoying him as much as he thinks. Right now Karkat looks both angry and curious, as though he's incapable of showing any emotions with mixing in a balancing dose of annoyance to offset any genuine expression.

John can work with that.

And judging by the number of shared classes they have, John is going to have more than enough time to figure this whole friendship thing out. "I'll see you in physics, then, Karkat," he says, grinning at the troll as he hands the schedule back. He almost bounces back on his heels when Karkat rolls his eyes and squashes the smile threatening to edge out his perpetual frown. "See you later!" John calls as Karkat starts walking in the opposite direction.

The troll raises a hand without turning around, a kind of half-wave that transitions into rude gesture before Karkat vanishes around the corner, an irate smile still half-visible on his face.

John hurries off to his own class, still in a daze, and barely arrives before the bell rings. He doesn't
mind though. If everything goes well, he may just have made his first friend since Rose moved out of town. It's not as though friends are out of bounds; he's just always been very aware that with the kind of life he leads, anyone he befriends could be at risk, so he's tried to keep it to a minimum.

But last year had only made it clear where trying to go at it solo would land him. Shrugging off a wave of unsettling memories, John takes out the Alternian textbook and focuses on the teacher, even as she begins to review the chapter he's already read.

Maybe school won't be so lonely this year.

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Jade wakes up with a jerk, snorting and sending the pen clattering across the work desk. There's a thin trickle of drool running down her chin, the source of a mostly-dry puddle on the top layer of papers spread across the desk. For a brief moment, she can't breathe, a last ripple of fear shaking her before the half-remembered nightmare is forcibly shoved out of mind. She rubs at her chin with the back of her hand, grimacing at the leftover drool from her nap, and then turns her head to smile at her masterpiece. "It's almost time to go, Bec!" she says, reaching down unerringly behind her chair to scratch behind the ears of the enormous wolf sitting guard beside her. "Come on, boy, lets finish packing!"

Humming, Jade strips off her oil-splattered work apron as she dashes out of the garage, into the middle of a clearing. A large stretch of the jungle has been cleared for nearly three miles - maybe overkill, but Grandpa always said there was no kill like overkill!

She soon approaches a steep cliff face, takes a running leap, and begins scrabbling upward, not willing to waste time going the long way around by the actual path. She knows this cliff well by now, her grime-rimmed fingers expertly finding the cracks and crevasses she needs to pull herself upward. When she reaches the top, she whistles. In a crackle of electric green light, the white wolf appears beside her, still sitting at attention. When she ruffles his fur, Bec's bleach pale tongue lolls, and he gets to his feet at last. Together they run the rest of the way to the spindly towers and round orbs of the Harley residence. The thick, sweet scent of lush tropical plants fills the air.

Jade has already used the transportalizer and Bec's help to move most of her belongings to the garage over the course of the past few weeks, ever since she had found her Grandpa's last plans in his study and followed his instructions for this next big step in her training regimen. All she has left to pack are the essentials she's needed to keep out to live from day to day.

Now she bursts in through the ground level door and onto the battered transport pad, reappearing on her floor in a flurry of tangled brown hair. The suitcase is mostly packed; she shoves her second to last rifle into its case, tosses her favorite bath towels and toothbrush on top, and does a once over of the mostly stripped room, checking in the drawers. She leaves the doors of her empty wardrobe hanging open when she whips around with a laugh to duck under the bed. She finds one last dusty squiddle, a limited edition Fancy Princess Berryboo, underneath, and throws it in the suitcase before slamming it shut.

"Goodbye room!" she says cheerfully, waving at the walls, bare of posters. She hefts the massive suitcase in a single hand, unbothered by the fact that it weighs approximately two hundred pounds. Then it's back to the transport pad with her suitcase in hand, and down to the kitchen floor. There she takes the time to irradiate a steak for Bec, and slices enough tomatoes and meat and lettuce for twenty sandwiches, topping each off with a flourishing slather of yellow mustard before storing them in an icebox. She has a long trip to make after all, and she can sometimes eat three sandwiches a meal!

Everything is ready. Almost. Twisting her hand sideways, Jade mimes opening a drawer and tosses
the suitcase and ice box into her sylladex pocket. Bec noses at the rip in space/time and wrinkles his pale muzzle in distaste. Bec never likes when Jade uses space for selfish things, but the sylladex dimension is really really useful and convenient! Grandpa had shown her how to open one up, one of the last things he'd trained her in before dying and leaving her to the care of the practice strife robots.

And Bec of course!

Smiling a little sadly now, Jade transportalizes to the living room. A familiar figure stands outlined by a permanent electric fire, framed by a pair of tall clocks. "Goodbye, Grandpa! I'm off on an adventure!" Jade hesitates, and then steps over a pile of her grandpa's hoarded junk and takes the last rifle in the house down from its rack, cradling it reverently. It is a prototype sniper rifle, one with no official make or model, a custom job Grandpa had designed himself. Jade has always used one of the hundreds of riflekind stocked around the house and island for practice. Grandpa always said she needed to wait for the right moment to take up his arms.

Well, she decides, the moment is now. Slinging the rifle across her back on a well-worn strap, Jade nods decisively and flips open the faces of both tall clocks. Beneath the one on the right is a bright red button; behind the left, a blue button. She plants a kiss on the taxidermied cheek of her grandfather's face, and pressed both buttons down at the same time.

Overhead, a familiar gruff voice chortles over the speakers. "Self-destruct engaged, my dear girl! Let's give it the count of ten-nine-"

Jade sets the transportalizer to the coordinates of the pad in the garage she'd just come from and activates it. Safely away from the house, she turns and walks over to the rickety plane waiting in the center of the garage. It is more than fifty years old, and looks as though a stiff wind could rip the wings from its sides. A blue wolf's head has been painted on one side, a large atomic symbol on the other. Bec appears in the pilot compartment as Jade tosses the last of her tools and rifles from the garage into the hold.

She changes her outfit, even as a low rumble rocks the garage - the sound of the residence imploding, leaving no trace of the Harley home and sanctuary for the outside world to find. Tying her hair back up in a long green scarf, Jade pulls a pair of old-fashioned aviator goggles over her face as she slams the hold shut and clammers up into the pilot seat. "Ready Bec?" she asks. Bec presses his nose to a fuel gauge, then huffs and lies down, at ease.

Cackling, Jade cranks the engine. The fuel is a little old, but no less potent for it; the nuclear engine warms up with a purring thrum, and the gauges and GPS screen light up bright green, a personal touch. Metal shields slide over the ancient wings, augmenting them, and an airtight cover closes over the pilot's compartment. Pressing a few more keys, Jade's lunchtop, sitting on the panel beside her, connects to the onboard Bluetooth. The display plays a hologram across the reinforced glass screen, outlining distance to destination, altitude, latitude, longitude, and assorted other necessities.

Jade revs the engine one more time. Just for fun.

She types a last message to her penpal on her lunchtop before shutting down everything but the program needed to help fly the plane. Then she lets the plane roll forward, picking up speed, and cues the engine one last time.

Fueled by the power of science and great justice, the plane containing the heroine who will be called Sharpshooter takes off, loud whoops escaping the airtight dome as Jade punches the air.

Success.
Behind her, the entire island shudders, and explodes, the volcano triggered by the secondary self-destruct sequence. That's okay - most of the important stuff can be replaced, and the really unique stuff is safe and sound in the hold. Fragments of half-molten rock patter against the back end of the plane, but they're already almost out of range.

Jade reaches cruising altitude, pulls out a sandwich from her sylladex, and crunches down on a juicy tomato and parrot sandwich. Delicious, delicious science. And to think, her career as a super heroine hasn't even begun yet! She can't wait to reach the mainland. Grandpa is gonna be so proud of her!

On the floor of the airplane, Bec gives a start and growls, staring with blank white eyes at something in the shadows at the back of the plane.

But in the next moment the unnatural shadow is gone, vanished back down the vent opening it had emerged from, and the green sparks playing along Bec's teeth die down. If the wolf could think in English, it would have admitted to itself that the thing now hiding in the hold never proved itself a threat to Bec's mistress even once during all those years on the island, and thus can be permitted to remain alive.

For now.

Jade, oblivious, stretches out and lets the autopilot do its thing.

The sunrise from the pilot's compartment is the most beautiful thing she's ever seen. Then the autopilot steers the plane away from the east, and they begin to coast toward her first destination.

Down in the hold, a black figure, barely distinct from the lightless shadows of the hold itself, conceals itself in the depths of an old cupboard, muttering to itself with irritated clicks and grimaces every time the plane jolts a little. It has grudgingly enjoyed its time on the island these past few years, against its will, but now - it's time.

Spades Slick has an old score to settle on the mainland, and nothing will stand in his way.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfiction of a fanfiction, you guys. This is what my life has come to. The original work is Real Men Wear Tights by BananaRamses, SergeantMeow, and PanicIsMyRain, and it is gorgeous. Please note a slightly modified timeline; I didn't want to rehash too much of Karkat and John's storyline when it's already been done so well, so I rushed them along to meeting on the first day.

A spoiler-heavy list of major ships as of Chapter 26, as well as general warning explanations, chapter-specific content warnings, and credits are available here.

EDIT: 09/19/2015 Just a note that this IS a first draft with minimal editing and no beta reader - there's plenty of early installment weirdness and plot/character inconsistencies, particularly for characters and storylines that only got fleshed out later on. I'll probably go on an editing spree when the fic is complete.
The Wind's Way

Chapter Summary

The wind's way in the deep sky's hollow
None may measure, as none can say
How the heart in her shows the swallow
The wind's way.

Chapter Notes

(Hover over the Russian in Jade's section for a translation. I know absolutely no Japanese, which is why I take no responsibility for the abomination that is the fake translated name of the Tokyo Aquatic Wildlife Reserve. Why did I set this short section in Japan wHY?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Karkat makes it to lunch, he's so thoroughly confused that he just agrees mindlessly when the source of his confusion asks if they can eat lunch together.

John Egbert isn't just in Karkat's biology and physics classes. Oh no. Karkat has weaseled out of him that, out of an entire seven period day, they somehow have five of the same classes. And the same lunch. And their lockers are in the same hallway, so Karkat can't escape even between classes.

If Egbert were a troll, at least Karkat would be able to say with some bewildered certainty that he's being hit on. Bewildered, because like hell would anyone court Karkat seriously. Ever. Like, this much unadulterated flirtation from a troll would be fucking embarrassing and any troll with a shred of pride left would at least make an attempt at not seeming so painfully desperate.

Egbert isn't a troll though, and so Karkat is faced with the key quandary that has plagued human/troll relations since the two species first met - how to interpret the difference between flagrantly pale come ons, and regular old human friendship offerings. If nothing else, Karkat's secret stash of embarrassing romantic comedies have taught him that the line between pale romance and the human disease called friendship is a line both subtle and variable, which can lead to embarrassing (yet comedic) shenanigans for all parties involved.

All things considered, it would probably be for the best if Karkat heads off any potential palemance or friendship off before the situation mutates into a giant tangled knot of inane antics and concentrated stupidity.

There's a major problem with that, though.

The problem is that when Karkat emerges from the serving line, a tray of questionable food in hand, he looks up to glare at John Egbert and gets a faceful of the most pitiful fucking puppy dog eyes ever worn by mankind. When Karkat then sighs and glowers and starts stomping toward Egbert, the kid's entire face lights up and he practically starts bouncing on his heels, grinning.
This is not normal behavior. Normal people don’t smile and laugh when faced with Karkat’s standard bitchy expressions. The entire reason he doesn’t bother hiding his rage hardon behind a civil mask every day is so that people don’t get too close to him, don’t get curious about him or his eyes or his blood or any number of things that it would just be better for the entire goddamn planet if no one ever got wind of. Sure, Karkat has one persistently obnoxious pesterchum, but she’s persistently obnoxious with everyone, not just him, and he’ll most likely never meet her in person again, so he’s pretty much in the clear.

Egbert, however, finds Karkat’s best, most practiced rage masks entertaining. And when he laughs, Karkat doesn’t get more irritated at what should feel like mockery. Quite the opposite in fact.

Which is a really, really ominous sign. Like wow, current Karkat, you need to stop being pacified by this nookchafing asshole right the fuck now. You’ve known this totally annoying dumbass for a grand total of five hours, get a fucking grip. He’s some random guy who gets some perversive amusement out of being yelled at, that’s all.

Karkat launches into a very nice rant even before he’s finished walking up to Egbert, keeping his face in a nice neutral frown as his shoulders tense up. "Well? I can only assume you have a miniature horde of fellow buddychums waiting within this sea of uncivilized asshats ready to continue your work at trying to latch onto me like a parasite on an unsuspecting herdbeast. I’m warning you right the fuck now, it’s not going to work. I’m only putting up with you because your looks of pathetic disappointment resemble a small animal after it’s been caught stealing cookies from the pantry. If you think I’m going to be this disgustingly charming to every random wriggler you throw at me, you can think a-fucking-gain." He glances around the cafeteria suspiciously; he hadn’t noticed Egbert plotting with anyone while he’d been in line for food, but it could have happened when he turned to grab the carton of milk from the freezer.

When he looks back at Egbert, irritated by the lack of immediate response, Egbert is fiddling with the strap of his backpack, and his grin has lost its lopsided earnestness, tightening into a perfectly constructed, apologetic grimace that can only nominally be called a smile. He’s looking at something over Karkat’s shoulder rather than at Karkat himself when he answers. "Oh, uh, no. No, I wouldn’t just throw you to the wolves, Karkat! Ahahaha! I thought we could eat outside, since the weather is really nice today!"

Okay, wow. He’s only spent half a day around this kid, and Karkat can tell something is up. It’s like all that goofy sincerity got sucked out of Egbert, which yeah, Karkat has been trying to provoke the kid into revealing his ulterior motives all day long, but he didn’t actually think he’d get a response like this? Egbert almost looks like he’s in pain and trying to hide it. He’s a horrible actor, of course.

"Fine. Lead on, Egbert," Karkat says at last, rolling his eyes at the exit doors of the cafeteria. At his old school in the middle of the city they hadn’t been allowed outside during lunch, but that’s apparently not a thing here - or at least, no one yells or moves to stop Egbert from pushing open the exit door and holding it open by leaning against it, some of the goofy tilt returning to his grin as he looks back at Karkat.

Like hell is Karkat going through that door then. For all he knows, it could be a trap, this whole morning an elaborate setup for some stupid prank by Egbert that involves dumping a bucket of water on his head or something. Karkat just has that kind of shitty relationship with the cosmic distributor of good luck. He shoulders open the other door, glaring at Egbert before he can protest, and walks out onto the grass, chomping on an apple in a satisfactory burst of irritated victory. Sure, choosing to open another door in a moment of all-consuming paranoia is a little fucking weird, but hey. As far as Karkat Vantas is concerned, he just gave a massive pair of middle fingers to the prankster’s gambit of the universe, and it’s totally worth it.
Egbert matches his stride anyway, his slowly growing smile and the lack of disappointment over a failed prank probably a major hint that Karkat had indeed imagined that whole paranoid prank saga without any basis in reality. The kid is almost whistling as he strides to a tree wedged up on a hill, and there's an actual fucking bounce in his step. Karkat seriously has to find out what happy drugs they have this kid on, because they're clearly top quality and super effective.

A passing breeze runs through the tree branches, ruffling Karkat's hair as he slumps down against the side of the tree. He combs at it absently, then uses the same hand to adjust the apple in his mouth and take another bite. Then he looks up and realizes Egbert is still standing.

Which is really creepy. He raises an eyebrow and is about to say so (in much more elegant, vitriolic terms, naturally) when Egbert catches himself with a visible start and sits down, legs sprawled out in front of him as he pulls a brown bag lunch and a Tupperware container out of his backpack.

Egbert fidgets with his food, turning his brown bag to face the other direction for some bizarre reason before opening it up, while Karkat processes two major things:

One, they are alone out here. Yeah, it's a nice day, and the weather is fucking perfect, but no one else has decided to take the opportunity to claim part of the yard for themselves. Egbert has staked his claim on this spot under the tree, but the rest of the schoolyard is like a goddamn ghost town. All the social interaction is going on inside, which Karkat is totally okay with, except -

Two, yes, judging by Egbert's reaction to Karkat's quip about friendmobs earlier, and by the fact that the kid has literally chosen the most isolated spot on campus for this little friendship and feeding ritual, Egbert-

"There actually isn't a friendhorde, is there, Egbert?"

Egbert takes a massive bite out of his sandwich and blinks at Karkat innocently as he tries to talk around it. It's as disgusting a display as it sounds. "No! I told you, Karkat!" He swallows loudly, and Karkat is left to marvel at how one mere mortal can fit that much food in his mouth without choking as Egbert takes another impossible bite.

"So, for whatever reason, despite your looks, your hypothetical but as yet unproven swimming talent, and stupidly happy personality, you're a social pariah who spends most of his free time socializing with a tree." Karkat feels that this is something that needs to be firmly established before he can move on with the conversation.

John stops chewing, and there's an almost painful pause before he swallows and looks down, smiling weirdly at the sandwich in his hands instead of Karkat. "Ahaha. Yeah, I guess?" Egbert rubs the back of his head, making his cowlicks worse as he closes his eyes and grins at Karkat, the smile once again dangerously balanced and symmetrical.

And Karkat realizes, with a sick twist in his stomach, that he could break Egbert. He could break him so, so easily, right here and now. It's so obvious.

All he has to do is ask why.

And -

He can't do that. He can't.

"I'm glad we covered that," he says instead, letting the apple drop onto his tray.

Egbert recovers in the space of seconds; it's a remarkable process to behold, as his smile creaks back
out of line and he crosses his legs, leaning toward Karkat as he starts talking again. "Anyway, enough about me, Karkat! You keep ignoring me in class! Come on, I'm really curious - why did you move here?"

Karkat doesn't swallow back his reply and try to mitigate his usual abrasiveness. If he's going through with this friendship ritual, he thinks, he can't start pulling punches with Egbert. Just because the kid has some fucking issue where the subject of other friends are concerned doesn't mean Karkat is going to treat him like he's made of glass. "None of your business, you panshattered friend of trees. My lusus just decided to freak the fuck out and get us evicted from our apartment over something stupid."

Egbert just leans in further, eyes going big behind his thick-framed glasses with naïve curiosity. "Whaaaat? There has to be more to it than that!"

Karkat keeps eating on autopilot as Egbert bothers him until he tells the kid the story of the bank robbery incident in bits and pieces, rolling his eyes at Egbert's bright-eyed worry.

He doesn't know how or why Egbert has somehow ended alone. It's not his fucking business, and unlike Egbert, he's not going to go prying into someone's personal life. Especially not when it's clear that even barely mentioning the topic sets Egbert off like that.

But hell, if it isn't pathetic as fuck.

Karkat spends the rest of lunch fighting an internal battle with the sneaky tentacles of impotent pity trying to wriggle their way into his friendship ritual.

God fucking dammit.

- 

He drives home and stops there only long enough to confirm that yes, Crabdad has somehow managed to transform their new kitchen into a warzone of tattered boxes and overturned chairs. The thermal hull appears to be upside down, and for reasons unknown an entire crate of untouched tomato soup cans has been lodged in front of the window, so that the only light in the entire kitchen is that which streams between the cupboards and the crate, and through the open front door when Karkat walks in.

It would be almost hilarious if it wasn't so panmeltingly frustrating because Karkat has to clean this up. As far as Crabdad is concerned, it has done its job and it has enjoyed a rapturous success. The giant crab has taken up residence atop a nest of shredded cardboard in the corner, lording its lazy ass over a court of futile destruction and broken dreams. It even has the gall to skree in triumph when Karkat stares slack-jawed at the new levels of failure to which his lusus has sunk.

No doubt it expects a reward for this.

After a long day of pale confusion, Karkat doesn't have it in him to even argue. He strips the plastic wrapping off the iced roe he picked up from the store, mouth tight. His lusus lurches to attention, eyes fixed on Karkat as it clicks its claws. Feeling old beyond his years, Karkat wearily shakes the tray of roe as he kicks off his shoes and leads Crabdad through the house, clicking every so often whenever the lusus gets impatient and tries to snatch at the tray. Karkat yanks open the back door and flings the entire tray as far as he can. Tiny cubes of iced roe glint in the sun before landing a long line across the backyard.

With a war screech, Crabdad flings itself after them. It's fucking embarrassing, is what it is. Shaking
his head, Karkat closes the door. He can't lock it or Crabdad will just freak the fuck out until Karkat lets it in. But hopefully the unwarranted dessert before dinner will keep the incompetent little shit occupied until Karkat has somehow restored the house to livable levels of cleanliness. Fortunately, he'd planned for this kind of unmitigated disaster, because Crabdad is getting fucking predictable in his old age.

Thankfully, the kitchen seems to have received the brunt of Crabdad's 'helpful' rampage, and the lusus didn't have time to upset Karkat's room. Tipping over a still-intact box in the entry way, Karkat starts sweeping everything on the floor back into the box. When the box is full, he takes it out front and dumps the contents into the already crammed trash can, and then heads back inside to repeat the process.

Soon he can actually walk on floor instead of a layer of ragged packing paper and cardboard strips, and he is in the middle of setting the fridge the right way up when the doorbell rings. Out in the backyard, Crabdad skreezes once before scrabbling at the door, frantic to get back inside. Swearing under his breath - which for Karkat implied a level of volume most people used for shouting at the top of their lungs - Karkat slams the broom into the corner and stomps his way to the door. Much to his disappointment, when he swings the door open, his mouth ready to unleash the full force of his wrath upon the unsuspecting asshole beyond, he only catches the tail end of the UPS truck as it zooms down the street, its headlights flashing a merry 'fuck you' in Karkat's general direction.

He forgives the UPS asshole a moment later when he looks down and sees the package sitting on the corner of the front porch. "Yessss," he hisses, snatching up the parcel. He throws a suspicious look from side to side, and glowers at the world as he hunches over his prize and closes the door. Cleaning up the rest of the mess can wait until tomorrow - Crabdad is only going to fuck more shit up in the morning when Karkat leaves for school - and he feels only a small stab of regret as he goes to let the lusus in, the package occupying most of his attention.

He's so preoccupied that he makes it halfway up the stairs before he realizes that it's not just the sound of his footsteps on the stairwell. Freezing, Karkat rotates his head to stare at his lusus, which has decided to follow him up the stairs. It stares right back with big eyes, letting loose a short, trilling shriek as it clacks out a question with its claws.

"No. Absolutely not. Go back downstairs," Karkat orders, glaring. He runs the rest of the way up the stairs and darts into his room.

An enormous, meaty white claw catches the door before he can close it. Crabdad screeches and waves its other claw in a wide circle, nearly knocking a lamp over in the process.

Karkat kicks at the claw on his door, rapidly losing his shit. "Oh my god. No. I do not have time for this. Go the fuck to sleep. God dammit, what the hell have I been feeding you?!!"

His kicks are having little to no effect on the lusus, who seems to think Karkat kicking at him is a hilarious game, clicking its claws playfully in return swipes. No, fuck no, this is not turning into some wriggler game of pseudo-strife with his custodian, not when said custodian is apparently of such unfathomable girth that its fat is serving as some kind of unnatural shield against damage. Karkat refuses to believe the crab's exoskeleton is this durable. No fucking way. Crabdad screeches with new volume, grating against Karkat's eardrums, and yeah, that's the last straw.

"No! Nononoo!!" Karkat screeches back, his voice hitting a shrill note he'd thought he lost the ability to make back around his second pupation. "Sleep! It's time to sleep! In your own fucking nest! Yes! Sleep!"

Crabdad warbles out another high note and tugs at the fabric of Karkat's shirt. Karkat gives the lusus
a swat with the empty delivery box and drives the custodian back until he can close the door on its continued shrieks. Eventually the sound of pincers scrabbling on the door dies away and the lusus clicks away down the hall, no doubt intending to gorge itself on whatever food Karkat has failed to nail down to the cupboards. Fattass lusus.

Crabdad is definitely overdue for a new grub assignment: its custodian instincts seem more overbearing than ever in the new house. Karkat is more than ready for some peace and fucking quiet in his life.

Now then. He rips open the package with his claws, and closes the blinds in a fit of paranoia before laying out the fabrics on his desk.

Seeing the dull crimson of the smaller roll of fabric brings home that this is actually happening. He actually ordered this stuff, he paid money for it, and now it's been delivered to his house and it's all sitting on his bed, having the audacity to look like totally innocuous heaps of fabric.

Which means he can't put this off anymore. He made a resolution last week, before he'd been distracted by this sudden, inconvenient relocation to the 'burbs, and now - the nervous anticipation roiling in his stomach reads more like eagerness than terror.

He's actually doing this.

Looking down at the rolls of neoprene and other materials, Karkat decides to deal with that later, the nervey anticipation in his stomach riling him up for something else he needs to deal with, something more important than his costume. His plan is still in the beginning stages, and he's not even sure the half-pictured outfit in his mind's eye will look anything like the finished product. He just wants to order material now, and at intervals, so that no one searching records for a large order of durable, hero-typical fabric will notice him purchasing a shitton of black, grey, and crimson. It would kind of be a dead giveaway.

No, what he really needs to do is to start practicing. Right the fuck now, before Future Karkat does something idiotic like changing his mind. He knows enough martial arts to defend himself, and he already has plans to take more classes so he can reach his maximum potential as a fighter. But there's one aspect to his plans that no one can help teach him, that no one can ever even know about until he has a mask between his face and their eyes.

He has to figure out his powers. Again.

He only has vague memories of his childhood, when he'd been a lot more lax about keeping his mutations secret - past Karkat being, as usual, the embodiment of sublime idiocy, the standard by which all other examples of stupidity are measured and found wanting. But he knows it's been a good thirteen or so years since he began suppressing his talents in earnest and covering himself in so many layers of baggy fabric that even when he does get injured, the unfortunate color of his blood can be easily concealed.

So he doesn't know if he still has that same control he had as a kid. But he knows what he chose to specialize in for his strife specibi, and he's fairly certain he can use his abilities to create a weapon that can never be left lying around where someone could find it and trace it back to him, as they could with the regular sickles he keeps for practice in his closet.

He sits down on his bed, rethinks it, and then goes to the ablutions block, pacing back and forth before sitting on the counter top. He's got a kitchen knife in case he needs it, but he doesn't think he needs to get too crazy here.
Hopefully. If his powers even still work at all. Maybe his long standing wish came true, and his freaky mutant powers have vanished, right when he needs them the most. That would be a pretty fucking typical comic plotline, and probably just the kind of luck Karkat has every day of his cursed fucking life. He's already been putting this test off for a full week, his ingrained wariness about seeing even a drop of his own blood driving him to make up stupid excuses to avoid doing this.

Fuck it. No more running. Only half believing this stupid stunt is going to work, Karkat pressed a claw into the pale grey patch of skin at the base of his wrist, just above the artery that runs a dusky maroon line down the inside of his arm. The maroon is, of course, misleading; the blood that wells up slightly around the yellow of his claw is a bright, searing candy red, and Karkat only realizes he's starting to hyperventilate and flail around reaching for a towel when he has already lunged for the towel hanging on the wall, clutching his wrist in a death grip.

Sucking in breaths, Karkat forces himself to look away from the trickle of red running in a line down his palm, staring at the ceiling as he backs away from the towel. Shit shit shit, this is such a stupid idea; he can't even handle the sight of his own blood, so how does he expect to use it as a fucking weapon?

Okay, no. Fuck no, he's not wriggling out of this one, not now. "Motherfucking fuck pismaggot-eating cowardly sack of shit," he chants to himself, baring his teeth in a silent snarl as he forces himself to look down at the cut on his wrist.

As though all it needed was his attention, the blood stops trailing down his palm, and slowly, as he gnaws on his lips and pictures what he wants, it begins to reverse direction. Little globules of bright red trundle back up, a few drops even rising from the ground when he thinks to extend his focus to them.

He sinks into his veins, his awareness of the thrumming pulse of his own heartbeat overlaying the sound of his harsh breathing. Pressing in, he guides himself to his wrist, and the artery he tapped into. Instead of letting the blood pool back into his body and congeal with a scabless, unmarred surface, the way it wants to, he fights the healing instinct and directs more blood outward.

The blood emerges still wet and pulsing, his head spinning and dizzy as he leans heavily back against the countertop. The sheer amount of red is getting to him again, well-trained reflexes urging him to pull it back in because what if someone walks in right now.

Karkat grits his teeth, forgetting that his lip is still in-between his front incisors, and blood starts to trickle down his chin as he envisions the shape he wants.

A sickle. Give me a sickle, give me something to fight with. Do this. Do this because I will it.

The blood forms a shaking curve, and he hardens it with a deft thought, letting out the breath he's been holding when the thought actually works. The blood sickle is rough and unbalanced, the point is duller than a pencil eraser, and it sticks out of his wrist at the worst possible angle.

But hey. He fucking did it. Angling it this way and that, Karkat stands upright, and catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

It’s a good thing he does. From the corner of his eye, he can see the bright candy red luminescence burning around the edges of his rust-colored contact lenses. Forgetting the sickle, he nearly stabs himself in the throat as both hands jump up to touch his eyes in horror. He swears loudly and uses one hand to remove both lenses, laying them out on the countertop.

Both lenses are limned with bright red blood, and he leans forward to inspect his eyes themselves. A
shiver of old revulsion runs down to his toes at the unnatural red of his uncovered eyes. They don't seem to be hurt when he prods at them with a claw, and when he taps into his blood sense again, he can't detect any injury. There's nothing that his body registers as needing to be healed; apparently, leaking blood from his eyes is considered a completely fucking normal process.

Wow. What is the point total now? Universe, three million and fifty two, Karkat zero? Yes. It is official. He has been fucked over by the universe yet again. Now, suddenly, he can't even hide his eyes if he goes through with this stupid plan. It has been hard enough deciding to use his obviously mutant blood to its full potential, but now -

Well. Maybe it says something about just how invested Karkat is in this insane plan that no, not even the thought of running around with his eyes uncovered is enough to scare him off.

He studies his eyes for a long moment in the mirror, blinking several time as he adjusts to the unnatural sensation of having his eyes free of contact lenses. He brings the blood sickle up, and closes his eyes against the freaky reflection in the mirror.

He opens them again with a grimace, and begins the tedious process of transforming the dull sickle from a useless piece of shit to an actually useful weapon.

And in the back of his mind, he starts thinking of names.

Something to do with blood, he thinks, a crooked smile breaking across his face.

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Rose finishes cleaning up a hostage situation on 48th Street with an unintentional bang.

It is one of the few situations she cannot predict the specifics of, due to the unpredictable nature of the crime. When she is near blinded by the flare of sunlight that directs her to the bank, she only knows the situation is serious, and has the potential to escalate quickly beyond her ability to control it. Rather than teleporting directly in, she summons a palmful of swirling orange stunning spells and appears across the street from the miniature sun pulsing around the bank.

She can see from the dim glow around a troll sitting behind the wheel of a black van that he is somehow related to the criminal activity, and she strides up to him to knock on the driver's side window. He rolls it down, fangs already bared in a snarl, and she gently pats him on the cheek, letting the stunner do its work. He slumps over, and she reaches inside to unlock the car door. She opens it and removes the gun from his lap.

It is a very unsafe place for him to have kept it; she is only doing him a favor by setting it down where the police can find it under the van.

Then she turns and stiffens when she realizes just how bad the situation within the bank already is. With an impatient jerk of her hand she turns off the early crime detection logo-thaumic vision (magical copyright pending) and the blinding brilliance of the robbery in process dims until all she sees is an ordinary bank, and she can observe the scene through the large glass windows that line the front of the building.

Several figures in masks walk between the huddled forms of civilians who are crouched or lying on the floor with their hands over their heads. Seer magnifies her vision by splaying her fingers across one eye and letting magic run through her hand. Judging by the shape of the specibi carried by each robber, these are professionals; they have specialized in assault rifles and the like, and she can predict with a good amount of certainty that these are merely the guards; they aren’t demanding anything of
the bank tellers behind the bullet-proof windows at the counter, merely keeping their weapons trained on key members of the crowd - the security guards, all of whom have been disarmed and lined up against a wall. This is not a good sign: it reads like a potential firing squad.

The best course of action is to knock as many out at once as possible, and disarm the rest. The priority is the firing squad goons; the men in the back stealing the actual money can wait until she has the security guards clear. Her method of approach must be immediate, and she will position herself within the security guards' bullet proof office, which will provide her with cover from stray gunfire.

Calmly, Seer sits cross legged on the sidewalk, blocking out the increased crowd volume and the sound of sirens as more people become aware of the hostage situation within the bank. Breathing in and out in a steady rhythm, Seer begins preparing the spells she will need: six stunners for immediate use, fast acting corroders for guns whose wielders she can't stun in time, and a mass shield spell for deployment over the people on the ground. With these three spell types carefully envisioned in her mind's eye, Seer rises and slides her wand into its holster. The wand is specialize for focused blasts of power; for this job, she'll need to spread her attention too much for it to be of assistance.

She breathes in one final time, and closes her eyes.

She opens them within the security guard's office. She stuns the masked troll standing beside the kicked in door with a tap on the side of his head, and then kneels to touch the floor, casting a dome of light with a height of three feet over the floor of the lobby. It is intangible to anything but bullets, a special design of her own creation, and protects most of the people on the floor. "Will the civilians please convey themselves to the doors and abscond in an orderly fashion?" she orders sweetly, smiling when all the robbers turn to gape at her.

Before they can recover she fires mobile stunners at the four criminals covering the security guards, dropping them. She hears the glass door of the bank open, and the sirens outside become near deafening in volume while people crawl out on their hands and knees. She gestures to the security guards silently, and all but one take up their strife specibi from the counter on which the robbers had stored them and begin to provide cover for the absconding civilians. The last one ducks past her with a grateful nod and answers a radio in the guard booth, responding to inquiries from the police outside.

However, in the time it took her to ensure the guards' safety, the sixth robber takes advantage of her priority on saving lives to run through the door into the back of the bank. She surveys the lobby one last time, assuring herself all potential threats here have been neutralized, and raises a small shield that only covers her body before teleporting into the back hallway.

She realizes her mistake when she opens her eyes to see a man holding a gun to the chin of a bank clerk. "Don't move, Seer!"

Seer freezes, mind moving rapidly to reassess the situation.

What she comes up with is...disturbing.

Because of course there are more bank tellers and workers at risk back here, trying to hide. Of course the second team of robbers would similarly take hostages in the event the lobby was compromised. Seer of Light is a very well-known New York City hero; any potential bank robbery would have contingencies in the event she came to stop them. Her hostage situation has always extended beyond the lobby, and she has been a fool not thinking of that.

But she is not a fool. So why? How could she have missed something so obvious? It doesn't make any sense, it's not the sort of thing the Seer of Light herself could fail to foresee, and now -
Now she is going to have to - to -

(kill them all)

It is not Seer but Rose who flinches and gasps, clutching at her skull as a sudden wave of colddamp seeps up into the folds of her brain, brine leaking into her sinuses and tendrils of darkness caressing the backs of her eyes.

(no other choice now you have no other option kill the fleshlings who stand before you rip them apart-

"No," Rose gasps, tears streaming down her cheeks as she leans heavily on the wall. She can see the robber's mouth moving as he gesticulates dangerously with the gun, yelling at her, but she can't hear it. The roar of the ocean rumbles in her ears and the absolute whisper of the Void booms in her mind, both sounds she has only ever heard in the dark of night, in her meditation room. She closes her eyes, shaking her head, but all the action serves is to send water trickling icy cold down her spine, twining into her nervous system.

(do it)

This is impossible. The Horrorterrors can't reach into her mind during the day, and especially not at high noon, when her light powers should be at their peak -

(he's going to kill the fleshling you care about so kill him this is the logical choice we understand rose our rose the other fleshy thing is insignificant so you don't have to kill it rose just him justhim)

Breathing air feels unnatural. Rose does it anyway. "I won't," she says, voice cracking. "Stop this, stop, we had an accord!"

She can feel her hands moving against her will, the grimdark tendrils working through her nerves until she is standing and moving forward, some unspeakable spell on her lips.

(yes we are friends aren't we rose we are buddies we will help you this is only way now because you forgot about them forgot about the little landdwellers and now you have to kill him if you want to save them-)

"You made me forget." The insight blazes in Rose's mind like sharp clarity, and her heart beat is suddenly the loudest thing in the room. Louder than the grimdark. Louder than the robber with the muzzle of his gun pressed to Rose's forehead. "You made me forget the rest of the hostages," she whispers, the anger pounding a new tempo in her brain.

And then -

And then, she has control again.

Her fingers are still smoldering with black fire when she rips them away from the robber's throat, and she can't release the charge of the spell in her palm without blowing something up, without unleashing the concentrated grimdark into something. She doesn't have time to predict the blast radius, or how the robber will react to this turn of events. She spins away from the gun muzzle and slams her blazing palm against the reinforced steel wall.

Dark cracks appear across the wall, and then everything explodes.

Rose goes flying back, feeling the crunch of her spine against the opposite wall before that too is blown back by the force of the explosion. At the last second, she rips the last of her self-control free,
and casts a cushioning spell just before she hits the ground in the lobby, tumbling over and over until she hits a counter in the center of the lobby and stops. Her back screams with pain and her ribs ache when she rolls onto her side, but aside from what feels like a scrape down one side of her face and slices where shrapnel cut up her gloves, she is relatively unharmed.

If that blast had gone off against human flesh, though, it would have torn that man apart from the inside out. It would have reached in and wrapped around his bones and organs and simply twisted - Rose throws up. She hasn't eaten much today, so it's mostly bile. But there's also a tinge of black when she wipes her mouth off on her sleeve, and she shudders.

It is only when she looks up and sees that the rest of the robbers have appeared in the opening she blew through the lobby wall that she realizes she can't hear anything at all. Even the roar of the ocean has subsided. All she can hear is an intense ringing, her ears slightly bloody when she touches them.

But the Horrorterrors are gone. And at the moment, that's more important than anything else in the world. Suddenly, she can do anything.

She raises her hand, deaf to the low murmur of incantations on her own lips, and launches the corroding spells she'd prepared earlier, the pattern still fresh in her mind. In moments the robbers yelp soundlessly and drop their gun specibi while the metal corrodes hundreds of years in a matter of seconds. Now that they are thoroughly disarmed, Rose - no, she can be Seer again, she can be Light again now that the dark whispers have fled - Seer summons a trembling smirk and stuns them all, using as little power as possible. They'll only be unconscious for a few minutes, unlike the earlier robbers, whom she had put down for several hours, but better they wake up as the police arrest them than she risk something grimdark bolstering her spells unconsciously, amping the power up to the point that the robbers might not wake up at all.

No, she can't risk that. Not now. The burst of confidence subsides as Seer pulls herself upright, hugging at her ribs briefly before sucking in a breath and regaining her poise and composure. No doubt there are camera crews outside the bank by now, and she can't afford to look anything less than the serene, dignified Seer of Light in front of the camera. The Seer's reputation rests on her ability to foresee and head off major crimes and on her unflappable certainty.

So when the first police officer steps in through the door and turns to her hesitantly, his lips moving against the backdrop of ringing in Seer's ears, she simply nods at him, smiling enigmatically, and gestures toward the robbers. "All yours," she says, brushing her hair back behind her ear and adjusting her uniform so that the rips and smears of dust and debris are less noticeable. "Sorry about the wall. Things got a little out of hand. It will not happen in the future, I assure you."

Then, Seer takes the only logical option. She is not in a fit state to endure an interview with the media outside, primarily because she wouldn't be able to hear a word they were saying. Instead, she strides to the front door and steps out into the sunlight, smiling brightly and nodding to the crowd.

Before the news crews can rush the police line, she teleports out. She does not return to her base atop the Flatiron Building; instead, she reaches desperately for the comfort of home and finds it. She lands hard in a veil of light that is just a little too bright, the glow of the spell brittle and white-hot. The grass burns in a circle around her, leaving a smoldering ring of ashes when she stumbles forward and limps to the front door. She shoulders the door open and sucks in a welcome breath of the still, dusty air within the manse.

She does not know what happened today. But it is clear that she will need to spend far more time in meditation tonight. It is tempting, so tempting, to stop meditating altogether, but she has tried that before. Unfortunately, as unpleasant as interacting with the grimdark is, the consequences of ignoring
the Outer Gods would be far more severe than what had happened today.

Swallowing another wave of bile curdling the back of her throat, Rose Lalonde strips off her mask and rubs at dry, aching eyes. Then she heads for the kitchen, and the wine cellar that lies beneath it.

She needs a good, strong drink.

---

Dave’s considering the merits of sitting on the Metro and riding it uptown a ways just to dick around when he hears gun shots. He automatically tags the sound and adds it to the beat he’s working on in his head, then races toward the origins of the booms.

Another shot rings out and he skids to a halt on the roof across from a gas station, just in time to hear a faint scream. He jumps off the edge of the roof in the next step and drops to the fire escape stairwell, falling with precise control until he hits pavement with bent knees. Then he takes off across the street, rolling over the hood of a car still in motion, and at the last moment falls into a slow pace, slouching in through the front door of the gas station with his hands in his pockets as though he’s got all the time in the world. No need to let the asshole with a gun think Dave is in a hurry to meet him.

“Hey, hands up! You too, asshat!” the gundouche yells, lowering her shitty pistol from where she shot three rounds into the ceiling to level it at Dave. Her partner in crime snaps her gum, looking bored out of her mind as she keeps her own firearm trained on the cashier’s nose. So it’s basically a hostage situation, except the hostage is strictly in an unofficial capacity, and neither girl realizes they’re about to experience justice slamming down upon them like a heavenly facepalm.

That said, why did it have to be girls? It’s stupid, but hell if it isn’t harder for Dave to hit girls than guys. It’s not like Bro is all about that southern gentleman shtick, so Dave’s not entirely sure how he developed this useless chivalry complex.

“Sup,” he says, obediently putting his hands up and wrapping them around the hilts of the swords.

He pauses time just as the trigger happy girl’s eyes widen with panic and she pulls the trigger on reflex. He steps neatly out of the way, checks behind him along the bullet’s trajectory, and lets time go again so the bullet buries itself in the wall beside the door. He knocks the gun from her startled hands during the obligatory pause between flashsteps, and punches her square upside the chin.

He halts time once more to lower her unconscious body to the floor and steps behind a row of chips and candy, so when the girl at the register reacts by whipping her gun away from the cashier to follow his random position, he knows any shot she fires will end the short, overinflated life of a bag of chips rather than that of any of the customers flattened on the ground. Then he jumps over the row and brings the flat of the blade to her throat between one second and the next. “Drop it,” he says, meeting her eyes with his red eyes narrowed and the hand on the hilt of the sword braced to flip and cut if she tries anything stupid.

She drops the gun. “I-I’m sorry!” she stammers. “We weren’t going to hurt anyone. Please don’t kill me!”

Yeah, he doesn’t have the patience for more than a few seconds of pretty subpar apologist whining. He pops her one in the chin as well, nods once at the cashier, and then kicks both guns away from their respective criminals. He puts the swords away, and stuffs his hands back into his pockets to leave.

“You’re not going to stick around until the cops get here?” the cashier stammers, eyeing the
unconscious girls nervously.

Dave has to fight the urge to raise an eyebrow; with his shades off, it’s much more difficult to present an emotionless, unexploitable straight face to the world. Until they’d started taking off their shades as part of their disguise, Dave hadn’t realize just how much he and Bro expressed behind them, the little cues that only Striders could read behind them that become obvious tells in the light of day. “Dude, they’re down for the count. Just hit ‘em with something if they start to wake up.”

Having imparted the wisdom of the ages to the cashier, Dave walks out of the gas station. Fuck yeah. Mission accomplished. He can already hear the sirens as two police cars round the corner, drawn by whatever alarm the cashier had hit under the counter.

As the cops approach and skid to a halt, Dave sighs and flashsteps away. By the time the first officer shouts, “Freeze, vigilante!” Dave is already on the rooftop again, rolling his eyes to the evening sky.

Some goddamn lucky sons of bitches get cities who embrace their resident vigilantes; the Seer of Light is practically a New York City franchise, the Lady Cascade of Los Angeles has a yearly regatta in her honor, and the Meorails over in Jacksonville are pretty much universally accepted as the most disgustingly adorable pair of heroes ever to make a living off terrible cat puns. Even Heir up Seattle way has a quiet policy of mutual non-interference with the police; as long as he’s in the air before they arrive, the cops report to the papers that Heir made several dozen citizens’ arrests in one night and conveniently ignore the whole vigilante aspect.

Then there’s Houston. Sure, Blind Justice has every Chicago legislacerator on the force clamoring for her blood, but they’re legislacerators – it’s pretty much standard operating procedure for them. For some reason Dave cannot fathom, the entirety of the Houston PD has openly named the Flashstep and the Puppeteer as their top priority for arrest.

It’s just so hilariously stupid that it loops right back around to just being fucking idiotic.

Knowing them, that entire squad will waste an hour pissing around trying to locate Dave, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that with his ability to stop time he’s halfway across the city in a few minutes. That’s part of the reason Dave and Bro go out during the day, just to show them how very few fucks the Striders have to give.

Sometimes, it’s the little ‘fuck yous’ in life that really bring a half-smile to a hero's face.

Dave stops for lunch and a badly needed water break at noon, eating a motherfucking chicken salad from Trader Joe’s on the roof of a parking garage, then loses track of time. This happens a lot; for someone whose power relates to time, he finds it easy to lose himself in the seemingly endless afternoon. Probably all the accidental time stopping when he was a kid did a number on his internal timer. He always knows exactly what time it is, down to the millisecond, but he just can’t bring himself to care about the time slipping away.

All he knows is that when he next blinks and looks up at the sun, it’s halfway to setting, the sky burnished orange and red, and his hand throbs with a dull pain from where he may or may not have broken a knuckle smashing it into a car jacker’s smug face. Yeah, he probably should have known better than to punch a troll head on. It’s harshing on his sicknasty beats.

Shoving the injured hand into a pocket, Dave starts jumping toward home. He should probably pick up some actual food from the convenience store – fuck, Bro going grocery shopping, even ironically, would probably be a sign of the apocalypse. Adjusting his course, Dave locates the nearest CVS-knockoff and lands noiseless on the fire escape. The ladder barely even rattled. Flawless landing. He flashsteps his way down the stairs and crawls down the ladder. He already knows he’s heading
He turns around and only then does he realize there’s actually a crime in progress at the back of the alley and holy fuck how did he miss that.

“What,” he says, waiting for his brain to catch up while he stares at the five figures fighting in the shadows. A tall woman presses up against the shadows of the wall. A wide-brimmed hat obscures her face, and her body is wrapped in a tight black trench coat that makes about as much sense in the late Houston evening heat as Dave’s elaborate suit jacket does. The four assailants are ranged around the woman in a rough circle, each with strife specibi at the ready. It’s an even split between trolls and humans. The really weird thing is, they’re all wearing heavy black suits. All of them, even the female troll.

Four seems a little much for a case of robbery. Four people in suits in 85 degree heat is downright bizarre. But hey, not like Dave’s complaining. He keeps the fucked-up hand tucked into his pocket and draws a sword with the other. “Should probably leave the lady alone, asshats,” he says, kicking a rock out of his path as he strides toward the tense group.

“Stay out of it, brat,” one of the men spits, not even turning his head to look in Dave’s direction. “This ain’t business of yours.”

“A beautiful lady in distress is always my business,” Dave drawls, raising an eyebrow at the dame when the brim of her hat angles slightly in his direction. “These guys giving you trouble, just say the word and I’ll help you kick their asses.”

The brim of the hat raises, and he has a direct line of sight on her face. For an instant he wonders if he’s seeing things, if the summer heat has finally cracked his brain open to fry like a yolk on the pavement, because the lady is black as night with slitted eyes as pale as bone, and that’s not skin, it’s a carapace. He sees her hands flowing in a series of motions that are definitely not ASL, but the words bloom in his mind like black, cold ink skimming over his brain.

??: Oh, do feel free to jump in if you wish. But I can more than take care of ones such as these.

“You get one last chance,” another of the assailants begins, and that must be the cue for the battle music to start, because the carapacian dame reaches out and quite calmly grips his hair and slams his face into the wall three times.

By the time she lets go, the guy’s face is a bloody pulp, and he slides to the ground unconscious. The other four black-suited assailants flinch away, clearly taken aback by the sudden violence, which Dave can totally sympathize with because damn. The carapacian draws a long, thin-bladed knife and tilts her head to the side, beckoning the others on.

??: Come on then, if you think you’re hard enough. I will rend you like the benighted worms that you are.

The male troll flips the fuck out and lunges at the carapacian with a hoarse roar. And maybe the lady can take care of herself, but the troll has probably a hundred pounds of pure muscle on her, so Dave stops time with a twist of his injured hand and darts in close, cracking the hilt of his sword against the guy’s temple.

The carapacian is staring right at him. Even as he watches in that breath before time restarts, she blinks and smirks.

She moves.
Time rushes back in. The force of the blow catches up with the male troll and he goes crashing sideways into the wall, slumped over just as unconscious as the first man. Dave then lashes out with his sword to ward off the third assailant, who turns to attack him with a small cudgel in hand. One time stop later and the guy is on the ground with a slash down his left side and a stabbing hole in his palm, gritting his teeth against the pain as Dave wipes the blood off his sword. These guys are dressed weirdly, but they’re not really a challenge.

While Dave is occupied, he can still see the carapacian dame as she whirls in a fluid circle to knock the last troll’s glancing blow aside, kicking out with a slim leg to yank the troll’s legs out from under her. She stabs the thin blade into the girl’s side before kicking her unconscious, inspecting the upwelling of teal blood soaking the troll’s suit with clear disdain.

“Don’t suppose you’re gonna want the police called,” Dave says, trying to judge just how serious the troll girl’s wound is from here. Bro drilled him on how to inflict nonfatal but debilitating sword wounds all through his childhood because killing people is the opposite of cool, but the carapacian clearly has no such qualms.

Fuuuck. Is she a bad guy? Did he just help the bad guy take out four possibly totally innocuous passersby in the heat of the moment? Logic is telling him the four had drawn their weapons first and were clearly threatening the carapacian about – something – but Dave’s mind does this thing where it gets stuck on a tangent and won’t shut the fuck up. It’s great for coming up with nonsensical raps, but awful when he just want it to stop winding itself up in knots of confused, morbid fascination and fucking focus.

??: No, I do not.

The carapacian seems to have noticed his mental disarray, her hollow eyes crinkled perhaps with a silent chuckle.

??: They are the heavy-handed efforts of a foolish man trying to convince me to join him in a business venture of questionable legal repute. Naturally, I refuse to negotiate with such lowly pawns.

“Yeah. Of course. Naturally,” Dave deadpans as he puts his sword away. If this lady was going to attack, she’d have tried it already.

??: Your assistance is appreciated.

??: I am glad to have met you at last, Dave.

The hair on the back of Dave’s neck pricks and he rips his sword back out. Fuck. Fucking fuck.

“What the fuck did you just say. Who the fuck are you?”

The carapacian isn’t concerned by Dave’s fighting stance or the high-strung tension he’s giving off in waves. She has put away her own knife, but he’s seen how fast she can move. Not as fast as Bro, but with enough skill that she could take him off guard.

??: An ally, perhaps.

??: An answer for an answer, Dave. Why did you stop time that way? It is…inefficient.

“How do you know my name?” Dave grits out, the metal collar burning against his throat.

??: That is not how an exchange works.

She shows no sign of answering the question, waiting with a talon on her hip for a response. A bead
of sweat drips down the side of Dave’s face, stinging his eye, but he’s too tense to wipe it away, keeping his sword leveled at the carapacian’s throat. When the pause lasts long enough, tension growing a pulsing headache behind Dave’s ears, he answers. “Because – fuck – because that’s the only way to stop time. At least for me. That’s how the powers work. How do you know me? What do you want?”

??: I have always known your name, Dave Strider.

And that…is just weird enough that Dave lets the sword fall, completely and utterly dumbfounded. “Okay that’s a great answer except for how it answers nothing at all and fuck, you know my last name.”

The carapacian chuckles.

??: I’m sure you can figure out the answer on your own, in time. But for now I have other matters to attend to. Meeting you at last has been most fortuitous, but I am afraid it has happened at a bad moment.

??: But I give you this last boon – some advice, as a token of my gratitude. Your power is more than you know. Stopping time is merely the first step, but it is an unnatural step. Time will most likely fight you if you attempt to hold it too long. If you truly wish to attain your full strength, I advise you to stop pausing it at all.

??: Time is not meant to be stopped. It is meant to flow. And you, Dave Strider – you have the ability to flow with it. To alter the course of the flow itself.

??: I do wish you all the best.

??: Now then. Tah, love.

“Wait, seriously, what,” Dave gets out. Then there is a swishing sound and the shadows behind the carapacian rush forward holy shit. The carapacian smirks as she falls back into the darkness, completely unconcerned about the fact the wall has just decided she’s the main course of one fucked up buffet. “Who are you?” Dave says, but the shadows finish swallowing the carapacian whole and settle back against the wall.

“What. The. Actual. Fuck.” One of the assailants still on the ground moans and stirs, and Dave kicks him in the temple to keep him down, not taking his eyes off the shadowed wall.

She never had told him just who the fuck she was. But there’s no doubt in his mind that this mysterious dame is a total Badass. A Badass Quandary, if you would.

Shuddering and sheathing the sword in one motion, hunching his shoulders defensively as he does, Dave scans the pile of criminals one last time and leaves the alleyway, looking for another fire escape to climb that isn’t attached to a people-eating shadow wall. He walks by the convenience store, pauses to deliberate with himself for a few long minutes, and then trudges back, edging his way inside. The old guy behind the counter has been working there as long as Dave can remember. His name is Gerald and he barely rolls his eyes at the sight of Dave in costume. “AJ’s in a new place by the coffee, Mr Flashstep,” he says before flipping his paper open once more.

“There’re some assholes beaten up in the alleyway. You might want to call the cops.”

Gerald grunts and pulls the phone off the receiver without looking, unfazed by Dave’s news. Dave can’t remember how many time he’s reported the unconscious bodies of criminals to the people behind the counter here. Apparently the novelty factor of having a hero visit your store once a week
runs out after a few years.

Dave grabs his juice and a couple frozen pizzas and pays with cash before trudging back out, significantly more laden down. It’s officially night now, and he forgoes the rooftops until he’s almost back to the apartment, using the time to mull over the weirdass encounter with the carapacian. Then he flashsteps wearily up the fire escape of an adjacent building, feeling the mental strain that’s built up over nearly twelve hours of crime-fighting and time-stopping sap at his strength.

When he reaches the roof, bags in hand, he ducks under the AC and retrieves his sunglasses, his whole body slumping with relief once he has the protective shades between him and the world. He sees that Bro’s glasses are still underneath. Whatever. He’ll show up when Dave has finished heating up the first pizza just to fuck with him and eat all the crust and then hog the bathroom for one of his marathon endless showers.

As luck might have it, this is pretty much exactly what happens. Bro is unscratched and looks completely unaffected by the day’s work when he finally shows up, yoinking a pizza slice out of Dave’s hand without even looking at him. Lil Cal appears atop the refrigerator, as glassy eyed and smiling as ever.

Dave grimaces at the puppet. He’d been down with the puppet when he was a little kid, but in recent years he has realized that Cal is just plain creepy, the kind of creepy that smiles down on you with unblinking eyes while you struggle and squirm through life like the miserable little fleshcreature you are.

He should probably mention the carapacian now. Usually the Striders don’t talk about work – hell, they don’t really talk much at all, with good reason – but something as huge as a random alien dame knowing Dave’s real name and vanishing into the shadows should probably be stated for the record. It did not mean that actual conversation had to take place. Just a quick, offhanded mention –

Dave swallows his AJ too fast and nearly chokes. The words are on the tip of his tongue, the metal collar around his neck tight as a noose, and when Bro gives him a sweeping, bored-but-curious look, Dave swallows down what he had been about to say.

Bro ruffles Dave’s hair as he walks to his room, and Dave is left sitting alone at the shitty kitchen table. He tries to imagine finishing the piece of pizza in his hand, but the thought of all that grease just makes him feel kind of nauseous. Food does that sometimes, when he hasn’t eaten in a while and he’s past the point where the hunger actually hurt. He crams it in anyway and swallows, reaching up and unclipping the collar from his throat. He tosses it on the table and scrubs a hand through his hair, trying to figure out why the fuck he had just not mentioned the Badass Quandary. At the very least he should get Bro’s opinion on how to deal with such a massive breach of their secret identities.

He doesn’t. Instead, he shoves the leftover pizza in the fridge for later and slouches into his own room, stripping off the last of his costume as he goes. He gets into the same sleep clothes from that morning and sits down at the computer, staring unseeingly at the screen and ignoring the little flicker of a Pesterchum window at the bottom.

He’s…not going to tell Bro. It takes him a minute for his brain to really process the thought, and then he knows why.

Because he maybe, just once, he wants something in his life to be completely his own. He wants to investigate the Quandary by himself, independent of Bro Strider, and maybe he wants to take her advice about the whole time travelling thing, and maybe he’s actually more intrigued by her knowledge of his name than rightfully worried, now that he’s had time to process the shock of it all.
Having settled that in his mind, he smiles and plugs in his headphones, setting up a playlist of his own mixes and zoning out as he settles in to draw some shitty comics and answer his one chum.

Hell yeah, secret shenanigans. Hell fucking yeah.

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The rest of the day passes in a pleasant blur; none of John's classes are doing anything more strenuous the first day of school other than going over the syllabi, and Karkat shares all but two of his class periods. Sure, Karkat isn't exactly much of a talker when he's intently reading ahead in the textbooks instead of listening to the teacher, but that doesn't stop John from sitting next to the troll and passing him notes from time to time just to see Karkat's exasperated glares of impotent fury.

The thing is, John is learning to catch the faint hints of amusement that barely touch the corners of Karkat's permafrown, the way he doesn't just stand up and walk away despite how outright annoying John knows he's being. When John suggests they eat lunch outside together, Karkat has every opportunity to say no and sit with another group of people; instead, with another faint not-smile, he agrees, and they spend the lunch break outside under John's favorite tree, chatting about nothing important at all.

If this is a friendship, it's going to be an odd one, one that builds in the spaces between classes, in the oblique smiles that don't quite make it to Karkat's face.

It's wonderful.

John walks home in a better state of mind than he's had in - too long. The breeze actually billows up through his shirt at one point, sensing his ridiculous excitement and tugging in an attempt to get him to celebrate in the air, and he has to flail madly to flatten his shirt back down, glancing wildly from side to side in a search for possible witnesses. Thankfully, no one seems to have noticed the wind's slip up.

However, the brief lapse in John's control dampens his mood a little, especially as he turns the corner and his house comes into view. His dad's car isn't parked outside yet, but he should be home in a few hours, maybe sooner. Dad had talked about coming home early in case...the first day hadn't gone well.

And yeah, John is totally grateful that his dad cares about him that much! Of course he is! But now, when his dad comes home, John is going to have to tell him that he's made a friend in Karkat Vantas, and John is just a little nervous about how well his dad will take it.

This has always been the price of the good John does as Heir. He’s never been able to make time for friends outside of school, not even during the summer months. No conceivable excuse can explain away how John occupies nearly 90% of his time with training and duties he can never share with anyone. He’d been friends with Rose, back in middle school, before his dad had really picked up the pace of his training in anticipation for John’s fighting debut, but then she had moved all the way to New York and John had found himself in a limbo, all of his friends made through Rose gradually dropping away, with no time or opportunity to reach out on his own.

By the end of last year he’d only had people from the swim team he could sit with at lunch, not because they were really friends, but more out of a sense of team camaraderie. He'd ended up eating outside on his own, because it was just easier than dealing with the hesitant dance of glancing over an entire cafeteria full of people he barely knew. And at least outside, he'd had the breeze to fluff up his hair in comforting gusts of sympathetic understanding.
And. Fuck. John can't go through another year like last year. He can't. The very thought makes his stomach lurch, and bile rises up in the back of his throat.

He can't handle being so alone anymore.

So if his dad says it isn't safe to be friends with Karkat - John doesn't know what he's going to do. It's going to royally suck, okay? The worst part of it all is that John already knows and has had the reasons why having a close friend is a bad idea drilled into him since he was five years old. Rose had been a pre-approved potential friend, who knows why. But Karkat will definitely be a potential target if John's heroic secret identity is ever discovered. And John doesn't want Karkat to be in danger, but on the other hand, he wants to be friends with Karkat a whole lot. Enough to take that risk.

He's just going to have to convince his dad of that.

Piece of cake!

- 

Oh god this is not a piece of cake this is the opposite of cake this is spinach quiche or something why did John think he could do this -

"John. You've barely touched your meal. Do you have something you need to talk about, son?"

John looks up from his bowl of chicken salad and accompanying plate of whole wheat pasta, sure that the haunted expression on his face has been more than enough to tip his dad off to his troubled state of mind. "Uh, yeah. I do," he says, fiddling with his fork. He stops himself from gnawing on his lip, and settles himself inwardly. Focus. He can do this.

He meets his dad's eyes. "I made a friend at school today."

The silence over the table lasts just a fraction of a second too long. John can feel his stomach collapsing in on itself in hollow despair even as he watches his dad for any reaction. Samuel Egbert doesn't look angry or stern, just thoughtful, but that only means his logic, when it comes, will be well-thought out and irrefutable, and then John's first friendship in two years will be over -

"I see. I'm sure you put a lot of thought into this kind of decision, John. I trust you." His dad smiles at him, his eyes crinkled reassuringly.

John's mouth falls open, and for a long moment he has to slam down on his innate connection to the wind and grip the edge of the table with both hands shaking, because otherwise he's going to go flying out the window and start doing some celebratory cartwheels a few meters above his house. That kind of thing is a no-no, for obvious reasons.

"I - yeah." John smiles back, his grin so wide his lips feel like they're tearing a bit at the edges. He starts eating in earnest now, chattering about Karkat between huge bites. "His name is Karkat! Karkat Vantas! We're in a lot of the same classes together, and we have the same lunch period. So, I can see him a lot every day, and I don't think I have to worry as much about not being able to meet him after school, because he seems pretty busy too. So, I think I can make it work."

His dad nods throughout all of John's sometimes stuttering, sometimes too-loud rant, and keeps smiling. A little more of the nervous tension eases out of John with every passing moment that his dad doesn't shoot this idea down. "That's good, son. I'm glad you've found someone you can connect with."
"Yeah. He's new at school, and he seems kind of angry a lot of the time, but I think we get along okay. Or at least he didn't try to run away when I kept talking to him." John smiles when a memory of one of Karkat's many furiously despairing frowns returns to him.

There's a note of hesitation in his dad's voice when he speaks, and John understands why when he hears the full question. "Son...will this help you? Do you think this will prevent something like last year?"

That...yeah. John should have been expecting that. He shovels the last of the salad into his mouth to keep from responding, chewing and swallowing deliberately while he tries not to feel guilty about being the cause of that solemn, anxious look on his dad's face. "I don't know," he says at last, because he's learned after last year that he has to be honest about this. He can't lie to his dad; it just lets things build up until John can't handle them anymore. "I think so. I didn't feel all that claustrophobic today after I started talking to him. I hope I just needed a friend as an outlet. But one day isn't enough to judge by, I think."

Thankfully, his dad just nods in response. "I understand. Thank you for being honest with me, champ."

By the time they finish dinner and start cleaning up the dishes, John feels a lot more even-keel. Now that he's not freaking out over the whole Karkat thing anymore, he can let himself relax into the usual rhythm of their father-son dinner routine. When there's nothing on John's mind, there's just something inherently relaxing about being around his dad.

John fills the sink with hot water and dish soap and begins scrubbing on autopilot, handing the cleaned dishes off to his dad by his side to dry. In these brief moments a pleasant buzz fills his head instead of the usual swift analysis and careful self-censorship necessary to maintain his secret identity every minute of the day, and he can think of nothing at all but the clink of dishware and the warm awareness of his only family standing beside him.

Part of him still has to focus beyond the quiet calm on keeping the air around him calm and still; more than once in his childhood the sheer happiness of being around his dad had led to unfortunate mishaps in public playgrounds. The wind likes it when John is happy, and wants to frolic and tug at him to express that joy with action. John is so used to curtailing the instinctive rush of wind that it barely registers anymore when he’s around his dad. He’s had to learn how to manipulate the wind for battle and flight mostly on his own, not just because flying isn’t exactly in a Marine’s repertoire, but because he’d been so unable to focus properly around Samuel as a kid that training proved impossible.

Not that he could really remember those early attempts, of course, but the sheer number of near misses and barely-avoided accidental sightings of a kid flying ten feet off the ground because his dad had been proud of him had been significant enough – and amusing enough, in retrospect – that Dad has shared the stories numerous times, particularly around birthdays.

"Go ahead, son. I'll finish up here," Dad says as the last of the light leaves the sky. He reaches over to turn on the kitchen’s overhead light and takes one of the last uncleaned dishes from John so he can take over. John feels the pleasant buzz leave his mind, and grins, drying his hands and running up the stairs three at a time. His heart pounds dizzyingly in his chest, little wisps of breezes slipping around his wrists and tousling his hair in reaction to his excitement.

Once in his room, he carefully removes a worn but loved poster of Captain America – one of his favorite fictional heroes – from the wall, laying it gently on the bed. Behind its usual position on the wall sits a metal safe, and he fishes out the two keys from their usual places. One he has hidden in a careful pouch underneath the bedside table drawer; the other he wears around his neck beneath his
shirt. Even if one is ever taken – say when he has to remove the shirt key for swim practice – it would be useless to any potential thief or snoop without knowledge of the second key and the seven digit key code known only to John and his dad. Sliding each key into their respective locks and thumbing in the key code, John swings the safe open.

He’s been wearing variations of this same basic costume for so long, he takes him mere moments to change into the plain neoprene suit, check and recheck the Kevlar weave for holes, buckle on the arm guards and pouches, and pull on the steel grey boots and gloves. He pulls the goggles on over his head with a pop, barely needing to adjust them, and then yanks the thin nylon mask up over the bottom half of his face. By the time he slings Casey across his back, the heavy weight of the war hammer barely registering as a light thump, John thrums with anticipation, the wind practically a gale force dragging him toward the window, stirring the carefully pinned posters on the wall and ruffling the pages of his textbooks.

He needs to be gone, needs it, a bone-deep desire that’s as close to terror as it is to desperate longing. Dragging his hood up over his head at the last minute, John plants one boot on the window sill and kicks off.

And finally, finally, for the first time in nearly fourteen hours, lets go.

He’s never known what it feels like to fall, but Rose had described it to him once, how the fear of heights and falling worked for those who felt it. She said it is because when a normal person falls, they have no control, no way to stop themselves from feeling a lurch in their gut that says gravity has them, and no chance of surviving a fall from anything higher than perhaps twenty feet without severe injury. She had described the sensation of having one’s stomach drop out from under them, and John had experienced it for himself one blisteringly hot day years ago, at an amusement park during the summer with a parasol-toting Rose at his side, when they had decided to ride a rollercoaster.

But he just can’t associate that half-remembered, sickening drop with flying. All he feels as the night wind wraps around him and he shoots up into the sky is joy. His hoods rips off in a flurry of wind as his speed increases, the breeze responding to the ecstasy singing through his veins with renewed energy.

The drive from Maple Valley to Seattle is forty minutes on a good day; John makes it in five. As he hovers over the glowing city, he begins to pull the wind back in, using calming breathing patterns his dad had taught him to slow his racing heart and bring the irrepressible joy of flying back under control, until it is barely a niggling hum.

Within moments, John is in hero mode, the winds streaming around him in sleek, controlled waves that do no more than support him in midair. He has a job to do, duties to attend to. He can’t just let the breeze run wild while he’s on patrol; it would be unprofessional and distracting.

Having settled down, John begins his patrol, drifting over the city in a grid formation with his eyes scanning the ground intently. He pays close attention to dark alleys and other trouble spots whenever he passes over, but he pays more attention to the gentle pressure of the wind as it wafts him through the air. Nine times out of ten, the breeze alerts him to criminal activity before he even sees it himself. It can be difficult to interpret the wind’s will, but it almost always leads him where he needs to go.

For example, right now. A faint curl of air tightens around his wrist, a murmur of urgency brushing up against his ears. John focuses, letting the sense of unerring direction guide him as he urges a little more speed from the winds pulling him along. The breeze tugs him over to an alleyway near the center of the city, and he lands on a cushion of air atop the roof nearby, peering over the edge to assess the situation.
It looks like a fairly standard mugging; three men with strife specibi in hand have a single man backed up against the wall. The victim is shaking his head, most likely in some stubborn, foolhardy attempt to deny the muggers whatever they're asking for. He's going to end up shanked if he isn't careful.

Bluhhhh. As though Heir would actually let that happen! Grinning, Heir checks to make sure his hood is in place and then steps off the edge of the building. He floats down, arms crossed as he comes to a halt hovering just a little above the ground. "Hey, guys?" he says, clearing his throat. All three muggers spin to face him, and he waves, still smiling. "Sorrrrry, I can't let you do this. I just don't condone this kind of criminal activity. I don't suppose you'd be willing to give up now and come quietly? Turn yourselves in, and no one gets hurt."

The mugger on the left tries to shoot him. The blast echoes in the enclosed alleyway, loud in Heir's ears. Between one second and the next the wind rushes forward in his defense, howling as it wraps around the bullet and Halts it, the bullet flattening out against a solid wall of dense air just inches from Heir's forehead. Heir flicks his fingers to the side, and the spent bullet falls to the ground with a clink. "Wow. Rude. Not okay, guys. Not okay," he tells the muggers, all of whom have gone pale. Apparently, these guys missed the memo on what happens to criminals who cross the Heir of Breath.

Heir cracks his knuckles and sets to work. The moment these guys threatened one of the citizens under Heir's protection, they earned a nonrefundable ticket for a righteous asskicking. He disarms the one with a gun first, ripping it from the mugger's trembling hand with ease and sending it flying into the dumpster nearby where no one else can grab it. The man tries to pull a fistkind next, but he's clearly not well trained in hand-to-hand strife; Heir dodges to one side, swaying easily around the man's very obvious pattern of attacks, then darts around to hit him in the back with a broad swathe of wind. One last kick to the temple, his strength carefully adjusted so as to not break the guy's head open, and the mugger falls forward on his face, unconscious.

Heir ducks under the next mugger's swinging blow, and palmheels him in the chin with an accompanying blast of air that tosses him against the wall. By the time he rounds on the last mugger, one eyebrow raised, the guy is sweaty and pale, his knife almost slipping out of his grasp.

And then he turns and runs away.

Heir scratches his head, and put his hands around his mouth to amplify the sound. "Uh, running away wasn't an option! Hey! Hey? Mister?"

The mugger just keeps running.

"Seriously, man. I'm not letting you just abscond from justice!"

...Still running.

"Soooo rude," Heir huffs. He twists his hand and clenches it in a fist. The air around the fleeing criminal's feet lashes in a sudden gale, knocking him off balance. The mugger hits the ground hard with his chin and doesn't get up, even when Heir floats over to nudge him in the side and make sure he's breathing. Whelp. That was...kind of anticlimactic.

Oh well. Heir shrugs his shoulders and zipties the mugger's hands together, then floats back over to the mugging victim, trying and failing to calm himself down enough to just walk. He gets that the whole flying thing can weird people out, but he can't help it sometimes, honestly - when his adrenalin is up and pumping, the wind doesn't want to let him go.
Thankfully, this guy turns out to be a fan. A major fan. "That was awesome!" he yells when Heir gets close enough, all of his fear vanished now that the muggers are unconscious. He continues to babble as Heir cuffs the other two muggers and dumps them all bodily in the dumpster, and is absolutely euphoric when Heir asks him to stick around to wait for the police and make sure he testifies so they'll be arrested and not just released immediately.

Normally Heir would stick around until the police actually arrive in person, but after the first five minutes of nonstop, fawning chatter, he's just plain uncomfortable. "I'm just going to wait up there. You'll be totally safe," he assures the almost-victim, and then he takes off in a single bound, not really waiting for an answer. He settles down on the edge of the roof and sits with his legs swinging over the void, his chin resting on his hand as he observes the scene below. He replays it in his head a few times, a play by play looking for any mistakes he might have made, any fighting stances that could use some extra practice. He thinks he did well, but there's always room for improvement, right?

Anyway. When the cops arrive, the guy below flags them down, and Heir waves at the one cop who thinks to look up and check the skyline. He gets a stern nod in return, which is always cool, and then he lets the wind whisk him up into the air, tugging him up gently until he's high enough that the city spreads itself out beneath him, a glittering array of glowing lights, moving cars, and dark shadows. A faint grin still playing on his lips, the Heir of Breath guards his city.

And if he indulges in a few midair cartwheel and backflips, well, it's not as though anyone can see to judge him.

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Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai, off the coast of Eastern Russia

A pair of Russian fishermen sit, mostly apathetic to the cold as they keep watch and huff quietly on cigarettes. When later questioned, they would state that they were busy cleaning the last of the previous day's work off the deck. Instead they chat between cigarettes and rub their gloved hands together to keep warm, the flickering gleam of the lighter casting their faces in half-shadow.

To say that they are unprepared for the boat to suddenly jolt and tilt dangerously to one side in a sudden upswelling of water is an understatement. They both roll off their perches and crash against a strapped down stack of equipment. The entire boat – not in the best shape to begin with – groans in protest, and the two men can only cling to the railing, the dark belly of the ocean yawning beneath them until, at last, the boat settles back in the water, uncapsized.

One makes the sign of the cross against his chest, his cigarette still clamped between clenched teeth, and mutters a belated Lord’s prayer. The other, his coat hood fallen back, gets to his feet and stares up at the fifty-foot tall, pure white squid that has just emerged from the sea. Its heavy mantle hangs slightly to one side, unsupported by the water. The enormous lusus opens its beak, screeches loud enough to rock the boat, and begins slowly drifting through the water, heading south.

"как это могло опять случиться?" one man says, shaking his head as the mutant lusus slouches away.

"Серьёзно. удачи, Япония." The other spits out the ruined cigarette in his mouth, takes out another, and lights it up. There is no doubt in either man's mind where a giant sea monster from the Pacific could possibly be heading, and so they contemplate the lusus’s sluggish trek south in a companionable silence until the irate captain stumbles up on deck to demand to know what the hell just happened.
"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" someone in the crowd yells. "Why am I even surprised?!
"Another man sighs and walks over to the nearest public bulletin board, and swaps out the number under "Number of Days Without a Giant Sea Lusus Invasion" from ten to zero. Nine tenths of the crowd simply whip out their smart phones and begin recording as the enormous pale squid paddles its way through Tokyo Bay and onto dry land. It flails a tentacle, and then flops over onto a street, writhing weakly when someone crawls up onto a lightpole and begins filming it from a safe distance.

"Yes, we have a squid-morph lusus *naturae* encroaching on sector 4," a police officer says over the radio. "A possible rogue from an aquatic retirement preserve. Yes, please see if we can request a violet-blood's presence as soon as convenient. Thank you." The officer walks in closer and watches the squid's frantic motions, sighing and shaking her head. Aquatic lusii are harder to keep contained in their retirement preserves, but for a lusus of this gigantic size to have escaped, it could only have come from the poorly maintained Dalni Vostok preserve off the coast of Russia.

Again.

One day, the government is really going to have to petition Moscow to start paying for these fiascos. Between the exorbitant cost of tranquilizing each near-feral giant sea lusus and the additional expense of then housing it in the Tokyo Aquatic Reservation for the rest of its natural life, Russia must surely owe Japan trillions.

But of course, no one asks a lowly police officer how to handle foreign relations. They just send her in to clear the area around the giant monster incursions and wait for backup.

That's when a small fighter jet lands on the roadway, barely twenty feet from the white squid's mantle.

"No you fool, you don't have room to taxi!" the earlier irate man in the crowd screeches, sounding nearly hysterical. The plane proceeds to prove him wrong, the thrusters in the back flipping around to face forward and bring the entire machine to a near-silent halt. The green flames die down and the plane taxis to a calm standstill just a few feet from the police officer, the whole braking procedure having finished in a mere fifty feet. "THAT'S NOT EVEN FUCKING POSSIBLE!" the man protests before he breaks down into sobbing tears.

"Yeah, Control? We have an unidentified retrofitted British fighter plane that just landed next to me." The police officer listens to the questioning response over the radio. "Looks to be nuclear powered, sir. Probably unrelated to the lusus incident. Please send for the British ambassador and the Sailor Senshi squad, in the event the pilot self-identifies as a villain. Thank you."

The dome of the pilot compartment slides back, and a girl in aviator glasses and a green headscarf pops up. "Hey there! Do you need some help with that?" she asks, grinning, her teeth bright against her dark face. "You have a giant monster on the road!"

"We are aware of the situation, yes. You get used to it after a while." The officer takes out her notepad and clicks open a pen. "May I ask for your name, country of origin, and whether or not you have any intent to commit acts of villainy, mass property destruction, and/or grand larceny during your visit to Tokyo?"

"Ohhh! Sharpshooter, none, and no, hopefully not!" the girl chirps. "That's my codename, you know! Having a hero name is still a thing, right? My grandpa said having one was important if I
wanted to be a hero, but he also thought the Internet was a newfangled instrument of German
propaganda when he was having a bad day."

"Ah, you identify as a hero. Excellent." The police officer nods. She takes out her radio and cancels
the order for the Sailor Senshi. Then she bows politely to the hero. "Unfortunately, I must ask you to
remove your unregistered aircraft from Japanese soil before our lusus naturae task force arrives. You
have parked within one hundred feet of a major aquatic lusus incursion, and we will need the road
you are parked on in order to position the cranes and the tranquilizing tanks."

"Why do you need all that? I bet between me and Bec, we can move Mister Squiddle back into the
water, no problem!" The girl whistles, and grins as a large white wolf sticks its head up beside hers,
sticking its nose into the side of her neck.

The police officer has to squint at the wolf, slightly thrown off. "Is - is that a lusus?"

"Nooooo~" the girl says, pursing her lips. "It's Becquerel! He doesn't have a code name yet. He still
hasn't decided on one he likes."

"Of course not."

"Anyway, yeah! You just need the big guy back in the water, right? We can totally help with that!"

"While we appreciate heroic assistance in the event of any violent lusii incursions, it would appear
this lusus is merely senile, rather than actively violent. The lusus naturae task force is on its way,
and then this lusus will need to be tranquilized before it is taken to the deep sea preserve, located several
hundred meters offshore. Unfortunately, unless you have mega-elephant dose tranquilizers and a
very strong propulsion system on that plane, you would be unable to manage it."

"Eheheh, don't worry! Definitely not a problem!" The girl vanishes back down into the pilot
compartment.

When she emerges, the aviator goggles and headscarf are gone. She's in a skin tight black and dark
green body suit, with a white lab coat over top that doesn't quite fit her right. She has a set of noise-
deadening headphones on, presumably to block out the sound from the massive rifle slung over her
shoulder, and a pair of thick glasses with an attached telescopic lens on the right eye. A spiral pattern
combined with a duplex crosshair sniper scope pattern is sewn into a patch on her right sleeve.

She's also floating in midair.

"Great. We've got a flier over here," the police officer mutters into her radio.

The wolf hovers up to fly next to her, crackling with green fire, and for a moment the police officer
isn't sure if it is just that the wolf's fur covers its eyes, or if the wolf is, in fact, eyeless.

"She also has a flying wolf sidekick," she adds, and then she ducks down behind the guard rail,
because like hell is she getting between a flying super hero, her possibly radioactive blind flying
wolf, and a still flailing giant sea monster.

"Ready, Bec?" Sharpshooter calls. The wolf lets its tongue loll out of its mouth, then vanishes in a
flash of bright, caustic green. When the police officer next locates the canine, she sees it has taken up
residence on the mantle of the giant squid, tongue still hanging out of its mouth as it pants and tilts its
head to the side, awaiting further instruction. Sharpshooter brings the rifle - no, not a rifle, it's a
massive dart gun, where did she even get that? - the dart gun up, bring her telescopic lens down over
the right side of her glasses, and takes aim. She pulls the trigger and the recoil sends her floating back
a bit. She just laughs a little too loudly, occasionally snorting and clapping a hand over her nose
The dart hits the squid dead on and disappears in the mantle. Presumably, Sharpshooter manages to hit the mantle artery, because within a few minutes, the squid stops trying to feebly raise a tentacle to brush off the white wolf and just passes out, the mantle deflating even more than it already had when the lusus heaved itself out of the water.

Up above, Sharpshooter pulls out a handheld computer, tapping at it thoughtfully with the dart gun slung over her back. "You said you wanted Mr Squiddles in a deep sea preserve?"

"The lusii preserve, yes," the police officer shouts back.

"The one called Tōkyō Suisei Yasei Dōbutsu Hogo-ku on the Google map?"

"Uh. Yes!"

"Okie dokey! I have the coordinates right here. Bec! 35° 0'13.85"N and 142°27'12.83"E!"

Sharpshooter makes a rectangular box with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, squints through the box with her tongue sticking slightly out between her teeth, and then gives the wolf a thumbs up. She floats down to land beside Becquerel and there is a pause. The air hums and vibrates after a second, and the police officer feels her ears pop as a large amount of air is suddenly displaced.

The squid is also displaced, along with the girl hero and her wolf.

"Oh dear," the police officer says. After all three fail to reappear after nearly five minutes, she removes her radio from its holster and prepares to cancel the lusus *naturae* team and contact the deep sea preserve in the faint hopes that the squid lusus actually made it there in one piece. If they've actually lost a sea lusus on her watch, it is coming out of her yearly review, she can feel it.

- At the coordinates 35° 0'13.85"N, 142°27'12.83"E, somewhere a good ways away from the Tokyo coastline, Jade Harley lands with a splash on top of a tranquilized squid-type lusus in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. She whoops loudly, laughing when a wave of saltwater crashes over the side of the lusus and splashes Becquerel. The wolf glows a faint green, and dries itself off with a thought, not even moving to shake itself.

"Awesome job, Bec!" Jade says, even as the squid recovers from its drugged sleep and begins sleepily rousing itself. Water is already lapping at her boots. "Now, let's head back to the plane!"

The world warps away in a portal of green light as Bec obliges. Jade catches herself on the back of the pilot's chair in her plane, wiping her damp boots off on the floor. "Awesome first job!" she repeats, stretching an arm over her head and taking off the dart gun to hang it on the rack on the wall. "We saved the city from a really depressed giant Squiddle, and no one even got hurt! Grandpa was right, going on a Grand Tour of the world is a great idea!"

Becquerel pants in silent agreement. Then it tilts its head to the side, listening and smelling something Jade can't. "Something wrong, boy?" she asks.

Bec vanishes, but Jade can see the slight greenish glow of its luminous fur through the open hatch to the hold. That's funny, though. Jade could have sworn the hold had been closed when she and Bec left; it had been locked down for the duration of the flight, so that nothing went flying out of the hold when Jade got creative with the flight controls and practiced some midair death-defying loops. She stomps back and kneels beside the open hatch, looking down into the mess of boxes and eccentric
antiques that she had rescued before imploding the Harley residence. "What's up, Bec?"

Down in the hold, Bec maintains its usual silence. Having searched the entire hold in a matter of milliseconds, the wolf has deduced that the third passenger on the plane, who had been quiet and relatively nonthreatening throughout the transoceanic flight, has vacated the premises.

Becquerel is, of course, well aware of who and what the stowaway had been. But at the moment, it is no longer relevant. Bec's duty is to guard Jade Harley, and nothing else.

For now.

- 

The police officer will return to where she parked her vehicle to find it gone, and she will be forced to call in backup to pick her up and return her to base, where she will then have to explain to the irritated violetblood troll, who swam in specially from Okinawa to deal with the lusus, that said lusus has been detected within the deep sea reserve by the motion sensors within the preserve. This will end her day on an overall unpleasant note.

Spades Slick could care less, okay? He has places to go and people to stab, and the police vehicle had been the closest thing with the keys still in the ignition. He needs wheels if he's gonna get where he's going, and he doesn't have time to fuck around with that crazy dame and her enormous dog. Fuckin' thing gives Spades the heebie jeebies.

Eighteen years he's spent trapped on that godsforsaken island, five of which he'd spent locked up in the joint being interrogated by that ancient geezer before he kicked off and got stuffed by his own daughter.

Humans. Fuckin' lunatics, the lot of them.

Spades floors it. He's the only carapacian around for miles, and he has to take advantage of that fact for as long as he can, because there's a certain Bearcat Quaintrelle he'd like to avoid for as long as possible.

Yeah, he's running scared. But what can he say? That dame is damned good at what she does, and he still has nightmares about the last time he crossed her.

Better he keep his nose clean, and stick to the shadows.


And a certain Crew to deal with...

Chapter End Notes

RMWT chapter 8 is where I intend to veer wildly off canon and cackle maniacally as I blast off into Weird Plot Territory. John's more than a little broken, Karkat is ready to take control of his life, Rose is on a whole new level of crazy, Dave is in so much denial it's actually hilarious, and Jade is ready to wreck everyone's shit.

/cracks knuckles
For the curious and the discerning, my personal tumblr is coldcloudsandchaoticstars; I tend to tag update notifications under 'like one sundered star.' As always, the original fic can be found at RMWT.
Chapter Summary

There shines one sun and one wind blows till night.
And when night comes the wind sinks, and the sun,
And there is no light after.

Chapter Notes

We pick up with John after his second encounter with one Hearts Boxcar, which is where current canon RMWT ends as I'm writing this, and where I'm going full AU. For now, enjoy a delicious time skip, Karkat's first night out on the town, shenanigans with Rose and a surprise guest star, Dave being...Dave, and Jade taking up her Grandpa's legacy!

/screeches like a pterodactyl and flings self into the sun

ARC II - PROVOCATION

18 MONTHS LATER

Karkat Vantas never expected to fill any of his quadrants. Any of them.

Aside from his absolutely charming personality, he’s always known that having someone get as close to him as a quadrant could only unleash a tempest of hemohierarchical outrage if (when) his little mutation is noticed. Which, given the nature of troll romance, was basically inevitable; matesprits draw blood even if only by accident, ashen and black romances have physical violence both minor and major as key components, and palemates can specialize in feelings jams to the point of tears, just as damming as blood if Karkat doesn’t keep his lenses fresh.

For some reason it had never occurred to him to try to find a connection with a human. In hindsight, Past Karkat was so stupid a potential matesprit could have salsa-danced past him stark naked with ‘ALL HUMANS HAVE CANDY-RED BLOOD YOU DUMB SHIT’ tattooed across their chest and he probably wouldn’t have been able to logic his way into the right conclusion.

So the only reason he can possibly be so lucky as to have the human moirail flopped across his lap, engrossed in watching Batman Returns, is because Past Karkat was not only completely emptypanned, but also the most spectacularly lucky spawn of a female barkbeast to have the fortune to wriggle onto the base earth at the same time as John Egbert.

Even if his moirail is a massive nerd with the worst taste in movies ever observed in a sentient being with half its thinkpan intact.
In a way, he almost regrets the fact that now he can’t tell John the truth for an entirely different reason. After tonight, in fact, it’s going to be more vital that ever that he keep his blood hidden, but for once the thought of hiding himself doesn’t fill him with shame and fear.

After tonight, he’ll have the outlet he feels like he’s always needed, one where even if he spills blood and reveals his other unusual abilities, it can’t be traced back to his real life and get him culled. Even the guilty thought of keeping such a secret from his moirail can’t blot out the sheer anticipation.

Of course, before he can begin Operation Scarletgilante (name pending due to absolutely shitty quality of the current portmanteau), he needs to somehow detach himself from John. It’s an unusual problem; generally, Karkat has been able to dedicate much of his spare time over the past year and a half to training without alerting John to his unusual extracurricular activities by virtue of the fact that John had almost as much training to do for swim team. Combined with the human’s near constant volunteer commitments, part-time job, and bizarre father-son bonding activities, most of the time it feels like John begs off feelings jams more than Karkat himself does. But despite the unusual hours they both keep, Karkat has never felt deprived of support; even when he can’t see John in person, they’re in constant contact over Pesterchum or their phones. And in the end, isn’t that the very essence of moirallegiance? To be able to support each other equally, to be perfectly in tune with the other’s emotional needs, capable of easing distress and pain with effortless pity, even when you can’t be physically together?

Tonight of all nights, however, John Egbert seems to have cleared out his schedule for Karkat, and now Karkat finds himself in the difficult position of having to figure out a way to lie to his moirail’s face.

It’s so very tempting to just stay like this, one hand combing through John’s perpetually messy hair, absently smoothing wayward cowlicks whenever John gets too emotionally involved in the drama of the movie until the human settles down. John isn’t a troll, Karkat knows, and is probably oblivious to just how big of a deal it is that he trusts Karkat so completely, that he relaxes rather than tenses when Karkat has his claws this close to John’s throat. Sure, trolls aren’t nearly as prone to extreme bursts of violence and rage as they were all those millennia ago when the two species first met, but the fact remains that in the hindbrain of every troll there is an innate wariness, a primal instinct that tells them to brace for pain when another troll places their horns or claws too near a vital organ. John has no such compulsive wariness, and the way he sprawls out with his head in Karkat’s lap, neck bared where any passing troll could rip it open, makes Karkat’s bloodpusher ache so fucking pale it feels like it’s about to burst, raw with the need to protect this fragile dumbass.

But tonight is the night. As tempting as a night spent jamming on a pile of ridiculously soft human pillows sounds, Karkat has made this commitment, and he’s not backing out now. When the ending credits roll, he reluctantly untangles his claws from John’s hair and pushes at his face lazily with the palm of his hand, trying not to convey the tension knitting its way up his spine. “Get up, John, we’ve watched that cinematic abomination for the last time.”

John pulls a stupid face and shoves Karkat right back, his palm half shooshing, half abjuring at the same time in that disgustingly adorable way he had, even as he sits upright. “Batman Begins is a goddamn classic, Karkat. A shining gem of its genre.”

Oh for pity’s sake, it’s official – he adores John, but he is in diamonds with a complete moron. “Said genre being the age-old category of ‘atrocities created specifically to induce brain death by rage-aneurysm and cause the viewer to attempt to remove his eyeballs with a rusty pair of tweezers?’”

“No, the genre of heroic drama!” John replies, with that shit-eating grin that means he knows exactly what Karkat is talking about, and is pretending to be deliberately obtuse in order to troll Karkat into
new depths of existential despair. Karkat remembers with horrific clarity the day he learned John actually liked pissing Karkat off, because apparently his swear-word laden rants fueled by *righteous indignation* amuse John to no end.

That had been the day he realized just how fucking pale he was for the idiot, and that John was just as pale right back, because who else could put up with Karkat’s obnoxious personality for more than a year and actually find it endearing?

“I can’t even argue with you about this anymore. You have no taste in movies, John, it’s absolutely pathetic.” Karkat stands up, picking a kernel of popcorn off his shirt and dropping it in John’s hair. *Because he can.* “Walk me to the door, you insufferable, ungentlemanly, tasteless host.”

“Whaaaat? Where are you going?” John yelps, flopping back over on an unfinished pile of pillows, and yeah, Karkat has to turn away and march toward the living room door before the pity overwhelms his better judgment and he just crawls over to tuck his head under John’s chin. Another yelp and the thump of feet start up as Karkat toes his shoes on by the front door. “Come on, Karkat, you know we probably have time for another, reeeeally short movie!”

Karkat can read between the lines, and some of the guilt eases. John has something to do as well; most likely the idiot is in fact supposed to be doing it right now, and is putting it off for Karkat’s sake. “We’ve both got stuff to do, John. Like sleep. As if I don’t know that you pass out around 10 even on weekends after all this time.”

John blushes dull red across his face, the flush more prominent now in March after the sunless winter months have caused his dark, olive brown skin tone to fade slightly. “Y-yeah, like you’re not just as bad.”

“I have one more AP class than you, and I’m somehow stuck being the goddamn friendleader of the single most incompetent herd of nookchafing imbeciles ever to presume they could produce a modicum of talent in the creative arts,” Karkat retorts, grimacing at the mere thought of this year’s crop of Film students. “If I don’t micromanage their asses, nothing will get done.”

“Hehe, alright,” John says, his lopsided grin firmly in place by the end of Karkat’s mini-rant. Which was in no way Karkat’s intention when he started off on his angry tangent. “Oh, wait! Before you go!” He jogs through the door opposite into the kitchen, and Karkat slaps his forehead when he hears the freezer door open and John emerges with a tray of fucking iced roe cubes. “Oh please no. Please tell me you didn’t -”

“It’s an iced roe pie!” John declares, blithely ignoring Karkat’s look of pure horror as he stacks a more familiar looking lemon merengue pie on top of the abomination. “And that’s for you. Say hi to Crabdad for me!”

“That fatass lusus cannot retire too soon,” Karkat mutters, then stops at the sight of a pout slowly edging its way onto John’s face. John has somehow become more attached to Karkat’s lusus than Karkat is himself, and the news that Crabdad is mere months away from being set out to pasture in the wilds of a lusus sanctuary in Brazil has hit him particularly hard. “Yes, fuck, John, I’ll tell it you said hi.”

“Yay! G’night, Karkat!” John beams and then Karkat lets himself out, closing the door on the Egbert house and breathing in the late evening air.
Not even the pie equivalent of the Antichrist sitting in the crook of his arm can stop the feral grin from spreading across Karkat’s face. He runs home, barely stopping long enough to toss the roe pie at Crabdad and the lemon merengue in the thermal hull for tomorrow before he dashes into the respite block and starts tearing off his clothes.

This is the first time he’s pulled on the suit with the intention to actually wear it out in public, in front of other people, and as he does so he's hyper aware of just how goddamn skintight this thing is.

Nothing is left to the imagination.

Nothing. At. All.

His cheeks burning so hot he can almost see the red in the corners of his vision, Karkat starts pulling his other clothes back on over top of the grey and red suit. When he creeps down the stairs, the weighty backpack slung over his shoulder, Crabdad is still occupied with the culinary abomination born of John's sick imagination, and Karkat is easily able to slip out the front door, closing it behind him without a sound.

He regrets that he can't drive his car to the city. The last thing he really wants is to ride the night bus with a bunch of random fuckwads while he's secretly in costume, but he can't take his car. For one thing, someone (and by someone he means John fucking Egbert, the stalkerish asshole. <> would notice if his car consistently drove off in the middle of the night every day; for another, he didn’t have the goddamn gas money to pay for that kind of daily round trip.

So instead of driving to Seattle in the safety of his nice government-issued car, Karkat catches a bus to the city, trying to appear completely absorbed in the music blaring over his headphones whenever the driver and the two other passengers happen to look in his direction. Why, why did Seattle have to be a forty-five minute drive from Maple Valley? If he still lived in the city, he wouldn’t have to take public transport and risk fucking up in front of witnesses like this. He’s hyperaware of the suit hidden under his ratty old clothes, and of the fact that he hasn’t put the mask on yet, and that the tired looking man in the nursing uniform may look like he’s flipping through a magazine but he could actually be looking at Karkat and noticing the exposed edge of a neoprene collar or the weird material of Karkat’s boots –

He slaps himself mentally, berating internal Karkat for being a paranoid little fuck until the bus rolls to a stop. He rushes off, head ducked as he glances around the street. He has memorized where he’s going, but he’s still on edge as he skulks toward the Seattle Public Library, trying and no doubt failing to look innocuous as he makes his way around the back entrance. He used to volunteer here in a darker time in his life, and he’d just so happened to visit two weeks ago. His old co-workers thought it was nice to see him again; Karkat had just endured the torment of having the life stories of twelve librarians dumped on him while he stole one of the spare sets of keys hanging in the back. Yeah, great start to being a crime-fighter – break into a library.

But he needs a place to hide his regular clothes, and to surreptitiously change in and out of them where no one passing by will notice Karkat walking in and Hemogoblin walking out, and fuck if he trusts any of the downtown bathrooms to be secure enough. There are no cameras in the circulation room, and the only ping on the security system will be a log that someone with maintenance keys came and then left in under five minutes, which he hopes will be ignored by anyone who might be checking. Until he can put together some kind of secure base in the city itself (which he honestly doesn’t have the first clue how to do; renting an apartment is not only financially infeasible but would again involve his regular identity being linked to his alias) he’s just going to have to commandeer the library.

Yeah, this is incredibly stupid.
But it’s also the best plan he’s come up with over all these months of planning, so it looks like past Karkat’s stupidity is rapidly becoming current Karkat’s as well.

After making sure the coast is clear and that no stray librarians have decided working until eleven at night is a good idea, Karkat locks himself in a printer room and starts shedding his baggy outer layers, folding them up and stuffing them into a paper cabinet where they won’t be seen. He pulls on a pair of skintight arm warmers, tugging them up until they sit right on his arms and keep his wrist and palms exposed. He knows he’s a better fighter than your average troll, has been training himself specifically for the kind of work he anticipates tonight, but in the event he has to make use of his more…unusual talents, he’d rather not fuck up part of his costume trying to defend himself.

He puts on his mask, smoothing it anxiously across his nose and checking and rechecking that it is fully secured because, of any of the pieces of his costume, if the mask falls off he is royally fucked. He then attaches the prosthetic horns. He’d ordered them as discreetly as possible, paid in cash, and repainted them himself from the standard candy-corn orange to a deep red, crudely altering the basic shape so that no one would connect them with the original prostheses he’d purchased. He’s not leaving anything to chance, and like fuck is he running around the city with his extremely recognizable stunted horns exposed. No troll hero with half a thinkpan intact would leave their horns unaltered or uncovered, not with how uniquely each pair is shaped, like the human fingerprint. Okay yeah, there’s Blind Justice over in Chicago, but her’s are a generic enough shape that no one could call her out.

The last step makes Karkat hesitate. He stands awkwardly in his skintight suit (like fuck, this outfit doesn’t hide anything at all) and grips the edge of the printer as he stares down at the contact lens case. It wouldn’t matter, really, if he left the lenses in. No one would know any different except Karkat. He’d just be a rustblood hero with obviously dyed horns, and no further questions would be asked.

But he – fuck, he’d told himself he’d do this. Because if he isn’t hiding his powers and his unnatural endurance anymore, why hide this.

In fact -

He’s so sick of hiding this. His claws are fucking shaky and he snarls at himself as he reaches up, places a claw on each side of the contact lens in his right eye, and – pops it out. Immediately his eye starts tearing up, exposed to open air for the first time since he’d last exchanged the lens a week ago. He plops it in the lens case and then removes the other lens before he can second-guess himself, blinking rapidly to try to clear the suddenly wash of stinging fluid from his eyes.

Abruptly, the world shifts into sharp focus, and he stares around the room, adjusting to the sensation of being able to see clearly since the first time he’d had to cover up his changing eyes when his secondary pupation hit around almost five years ago. Even blinking feels different without the thick layer of color-muting contact lenses between him and his eyelids. It’s a double-whammy, being free of both his contacts and the ever-present dark frame of the glasses he always has to wear to make up for the blurriness the lenses cause.

Taking deep, steadying breath, he sets the lens case inside the cabinet on top of his civilian clothes and locks it with a key. He tucks the key into a slim pocket flush against his leg and does one last check of his uniform to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything before he leaves.

Karkat’s just grateful there aren’t any mirrors in the room; the sight of his own gleaming, candy red eyes would probably have sent him scurrying back to the lenses like a wriggler running to its lusus for comfort.
Not Karkat, he then corrects himself mentally. Hemogoblin, Hemogoblin, Hemogoblin. It's better than Scarletgilante, alright? He can’t afford to accidentally drop his own name while on the job; better if he starts thinking of himself as Hemogoblin from the moment he puts on the suit.

From the moment he steps outside the library he feels exposed. Surveying the area to reassure himself he’s alone, Kar-Hemogoblin runs to the building across the street and ducks into the alley. He’s confused for a moment by how well-lit the empty alley is, until he remembers he’s not wearing the contact lenses; there’s nothing obscuring his night vision anymore.

The spring air is still cool enough to nip at his fingers and the gap between his arm guards and the shoulders of his bodysuit, and it wakes him right up as he scales the building and begins to run and tumble across the rooftop, slowly gaining confidence as he goes. He’d known himself capable of travelling this way for some time, but again, this is the first time he’s done it with all of his senses clear and alert. Each leap across the gap between one building and the next is a breath of weightlessness, before his body reacts almost before he thinks to land smoothly, with plenty of room to spare.

After running nearly to the point where he intended to begin patrolling in earnest, Hemogoblin stops, taking a moment to revel in the adrenaline pumping through him before making last minute adjustments to his costume, his mask, and his false horns. Everything seems to have held up well despite the jostling, just like in the practice runs, and now –

With one hasty look at the sky, flushing at his own (stupid) half-formed desire to see the form of Heir hovering somewhere above, Hemogoblin goes to work.

- It takes Hemogoblin nearly an hour to come across his first crime-in-progress. It’s possible he’s nervous and overlooking potential incidents, but he really hopes not; it just seems to be a relatively quiet night, crime-wise. But a sharp cry breaks the night to his left and he nearly stumbles to stop himself midstride before another arcing leap would have taken him in the wrong direction. He turns and runs in the direction he thought he’d heard the noise, scanning the alleyways and the street even more intently until he hears another scream. He reaches the source and steps without hesitating off the edge of the building, from a height no normal troll or human could handle without breaking bones. He lands lightly in a crouch, and keeps to the shadows as he observes the scene before him, fighting every flaring instinct that tells him to rush in and start kicking.

What he sees looks like – if he’s honest – a drug deal gone wrong. A tall troll in a raggedy overcoat stands over the prostrate body of another troll, who is trying to cover his horns as the tall troll kicks at him viciously. “Where’s. The. Money?” he demands, punctuating each word with another blow, the last one catching the fallen troll square in the ribs. “Where is the fucking money, Qexien!!”

“I don’t have it,” the fallen troll wheezes, rolling away. “I’m sorry, I don’t -” He chokes and spits out a mouthful of blood when the tall troll kicks again.

Alright. Time to intervene. Hemogoblin circles around the two figures in silence, almost holding his breath as he creeps in closer behind the tall troll’s back. The troll on the ground stops whimpering and Hemogoblin glances down to make sure he’s still alive. He catches the troll’s startled gaze, which only widens when he sees the exact luminescent color of Hemogoblin’s eyes. ‘Wha-’ the troll mouths, and Hemogoblin places a finger to his lips, shaking his head.

Too late. “What are you gawking at, you useless waste of -” the tall troll whips around with a snarl creasing his face. He blinks when he sees Karkat, clearly just as stunned.
Well, fuck.

So Hemogoblin kicks him in the face, a horribly angled kick that glances off the taller troll’s cheek. It’s enough to knock the startled troll back a few paces with a yelp, his pale blue eyes widening as he focuses on Hemogoblin’s face with horror. “What the fuck are you?”

Karkat has thought the same thing too often for the words to do more than trigger a panicked wave of self-preservation instinct.

Someone has seen his eyes.

He channels the ensuing burst of tense panic into a more controlled, sweeping roundhouse kick, this time landing perfectly and slamming the troll’s head to the side with a sharp crack as bone crunches beneath his heel.

He doesn’t pause. Even as the troll growls and lunges at him, Hemogoblin’s leg lands and he spins with the momentum, bringing his other leg up in a back kick that angles up and collides with the troll’s chin as Hemogoblin kicks up into a handstand. He pushes off and lands upright again, turning to face the troll in a fighting stance again.

He needn’t have bothered. The tall troll crashes back against the wall, blood pouring from his nose and trickling down over his mouth, eyes shut as he slumps to the ground. Hurrying forward, Hemogoblin jabs at the troll’s pulse point and pulls his eyelid up to assess him. A tiny fraction of worry eases when he finds a very strong pulse. Just unconscious then. Most of his training has been not just to get into fighting shape, but also to learn to constantly pull his kicks so that he doesn’t accidentally kill someone.

Looks like he has managed to hit just the right balance. It isn’t quite a one-hit knockout, but he’ll take it. Reaching into a pouch, he takes out a ziptie and cuffs the troll’s hands together behind his back. “Hey, you-” Hemogoblin says, turning to look at the fallen troll –

Who is gone. Hemogoblin takes a full minute to process the tiny smear of blood on the ground where the other troll used to be curled up in a defensive ball, then smacks himself in the forehead for being a fucking idiot not fit to pass a third grade level logic test. Clearly the smaller troll had been involved in some kind of illicit activity with the guy Hemogoblin knocked out; no way he’d stick around to wait for the cops when he would only be arrested as well.

Now Hemogoblin is stuck with an unconscious body and no witness or potential victim to leave behind to explain the situation to the police. That’s always Heir’s modus operandi, and here Hemogoblin’s very first act of vigilantism has already gone off script. Rolling his eyes, Hemogoblin raises an eyebrow at the unconscious dealer. “And what the grublicking fuck am I supposed to do with you, now?”

In the end, Hemogoblin ends up calling the police from the nearest payphone, and he leaves the still-unconscious troll ziptied to a bicycle rack. He checks around the area for the beaten troll, worrying he’ll find the guy passed out and dying of internal bleeding or something. He’s pretty sure letting the first civilian he’s ever rescued die would be the heroic equivalent of fucking up so bad you literally transform into the physical embodiment of abject failure and shrivel up in shame for all eternity. He finally finds the guy passed out behind a recycling bin four streets down, and drags the guy back to the same bike rack, leaving him at the opposite end as the other troll, and smacks himself again when he realizes he has to find another round of quarters to call the ambulance.

By the time the police arrive, Hemogoblin has scaled the nearest building again, and is watching right up until the ambulance appears a few minutes later. Okay, maybe his first rescue ended up
being a possible drug dealer who needed to be shipped off to the hospital afterward, but hey. He actually hadn't fucked up that badly. Nobody even died. What a goddamn pleasant surprise; finally, something Karkat Vantas hasn't ruined just by touching it.

With considerably more confidence in his step, Hemogoblin starts patrolling in earnest.

Within a month, Hemogoblin merchandise has appeared in the local comic store. It's fucking creepy to be on the receiving end of this, Karkat realizes, even as his moirail proceeds to geek out. John has never been a huge Heir fan, but he reveals that can fangirl with the best of them when the first Hemogoblin posters show up. Over the next few weeks, this new enthusiasm for a real life hero, as opposed to one of John's usual obsessions like Captain America, shows no signs of abating.

Karkat can only draw two conclusions. It's either John having really, really weird taste in heroes - because now that Karkat has actually met Heir in person, he is only more convinced that Heir of Breath is fucking awesome - or some bizarre, previously unknown twist of moirallegiance that John is obsessively supportive of Karkat, even when he doesn't know it's Karkat that he's supporting.

Which would have really disturbing consequences, and Karkat would prefer isn't the case. John has made several worrying comments about Hemogoblin's butt that are in no way in line with moirallegiance, and Karkat has literally no good excuse lined up for why he could possibly object to the butt of someone he's pretending he has no connection to.

Okay, fucking everyone has noticed the butt. Everyone and their mother has commented on it. Why. Why is it a thing. Karkat's brain may yet explode from the incomprehensible nature of the general attention that is paid to his behind. Even motherfucking Heir has noticed the butt and holy fuck it takes everything Hemogoblin has to maintain a flirtatious mask and not freak the fuck out whenever he's within ten feet of the other hero.

That stops being a problem sometime between Hemogoblin witnessing an enormous explosion from halfway across the city, and him arriving at the Dockyards just in time to watch Heir get blown out of the sky.

After that night, Hemogoblin and Heir are partners in crime fighting, and maybe for the first time, he feels less like Karkat in a suit, and more like Hemoglobin isn't just some stupid whim.

This...this feels right. Maybe it's cliche as fuck, but he can feel it in his blood, in his bone barrow.

He can spend the days with John, being stupidly happy. But at night, he's free.

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Rose is quite tipsy when the first Pesterchum alert begins flashing in the corner of the screen. She ignores it and continues mixing some sugary and purple in preparation for the on-coming day. Lately, it seems as though if she doesn't start with a couple of martinis before noon, the day just never goes as planned. She completes the drink and sips at it experimentally as she sways toward the desktop, stumbling and staggering over books on the floor as she does.

When she sees the color of the pesterer's text, she makes a face. She's not sure what the face looks like, as she hasn't been able to feel her skin in several hours, since she'd woken herself up with a shot of cognac. One is supposed to sip cognac slowly and enjoy the subtle flavors; Rose, however, stopped tasting the alcohol a couple months ago, when the occasional 'good stiff drink' had become more of a persistent habit.
Anyway. Focus. Rose makes a face. It's a truly scandalous face, but Rose is feeling more than a little lax about appearances at the moment. The jade green of the text on the screen is worth a face or three, though.

The purple drink is, as usual, an abomination to the senses and an affront to human decency, but she downs it as she half-falls into her chair to reply to the steadily but politely escalating chat.

-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] at 5:45:02 --

GA: I Have Been Very Patient.
GA: I Have Contacted A Friend Who Possesses Expertise In Technological Matters, And He Has Informed Me That There Is Nothing That Would Have Prevented You From Receiving Or Viewing My Messages Over The Past Few Weeks.
GA: I Have Drawn The Conclusion That You Are Avoiding Me.
GA: I Did Consider That You May Have Been Injured Or Otherwise Disabled And Thus Prevented From Responding, However Your Continued Appearances In News Reports Out of New York Would Suggest You Are Completely Able Bodied.
GA: By An Extremely Loose Definition Of Able.
GA: There Have Been No News Reports Today. The Media Has Noted Your Absence.
GA: Seer.
GA: Seer, Please, Answer.
GA: Rose.
GA: Rose, Please.

-- tentacleTherapist has joined the chat! --

TT: Are we upgrading to first names now?
TT: How forward of you, Kanaya.
GA: Rose.
GA: The Abominable State Of Your Quirk Tells Me You Are Once Again Intoxicated.
GA: You Told Me Once That You Began Work At Six O'Clock In The Morning.
TT: And I will aggrieve when I aggrieve, Kanya.
TT: *arrive
TT: The city will not excoriate in my absence if I do not get in until seven.
GA: Rose, It Is Five O'Clock In The Evening.
GA: You Did Not Work At All Today.
TT: Noo, that's not
TT: Kaanyaya
TT: *Kanaya
TT: I missed wrok???

Rose collapses half off the chair before she regains her footing. Her heart beats an unsteady, too-hard drumbeat in her chest, and the pressure makes her feel woozy and sick to her stomach. She lets the drink topple over as she goes to the bedroom window and peels back the thick blackout curtains.

The sun peers through the trees just over the horizon, and Rose is ready to lurch around and triumphantly inform Kanaya that her clock must be broken when Rose remembers that her window faces west.

That is a setting sun.

Rose pushes back from the window, making a lunge for the closet before she realizes there is no point. The setting of the sun has always been her alarm bell, the deadline after which she has to travel home from work and take up residence for the night in the observatory. She sits down hard in the
computer chair instead, vaguely aware that her fingers are trembling as she swallows hard. She feels quite sickeningly sober now, and it is an unpleasant sensation.

She can feel that she has part of her costume on, the leggings half-sagging down one leg with a single boot laced up in clumsy knots. She most definitely began getting ready this morning, so what had happened? Her memory is a blur, fogged with alcohol and the ever-present weight of sleep-deprivation, but she would have noticed an entire day passing by! This is not -

(shhhhh)

The edge of a headache twinges behind Rose's left eye, and she has to knuckle at it with her fingers until the deep ache abates. When she reaches out for the purple drink, she spies the glass overturned on the floor, a small grape-purple stain forming a puddle on the ivory carpet. Having failed that, Rose takes up the vodka sitting next to her computer and takes a quick swig, grimacing and nearly choking on the hard burn. It's hard to keep the alcohol down with her stomach in knots like this, but she suppresses her gag reflex through sheer force of will.

She's had too much practice at this. Her stomach protests, but the headache subsides, assuaged by the psychosomatic relief of a straight shot of alcohol burning its way down her throat. She doesn't know when the migraines started, and has honestly lost track of which are genuine headaches and which are just the result of the constant cycle of hangovers.

It is most likely irresponsible and foolish in the extreme to go out to fight crime while intoxicated, but she hasn't had much choice lately. If she doesn't drink her way into a pleasant buzz before work, debilitating tremors bring her to her knees before the day is halfway gone. It is a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle.

Resting her cheek on the lip of the bottle, Rose returns to Pesterchum, the happy buzz gone as she begins to respond to Kanaya's ponderous messages. She takes extra care to ensure her own quirk doesn't include any more typos, which would only provoke Kanaya further.

GA: Yes, You Did Rose.
GA: You Did Not Realize That?
GA: I Find This To Be Extremely Concerning.
GA: This Conversation Has Yet To Assure Me As To The Continued Status Of Your Well-Being.
GA: Rose?
GA: Please Do Not Cease Communicating Again Or So Help Me I Will Take Matters Into My Own Claws.
TT: I am still here, Kanaya.
TT: It is nothing. I must have lost track of time.
TT: I am quite well. There is no need to feel undue concern over me. I am quite capable of taking care of myself.
TT: You have your own city to care for.
GA: Philadelphia Can Go Without Its Malachite Sylph For One Night.
GA: Criminal Activity Would Be Minimal Even If The Masses Noted My Absence.
GA: Please, Rose. Tell Me Where You Are.

(- do not respond)

Rose doesn't respond. Her brain is comfortably numb as she takes another long sip of vodka and closes her eyes against the foul taste, the sick feeling in her stomach from having lost an entire day fading beneath the heavy weight of the alcohol swishing in her gut.
Rubbing her hand against her face, she leaves the pesterlog open on the screen, ignoring the little flash that goes off each time a frantic new message arrives, and stands up. Her floor feels uneven and rocks up beneath her, as though she is at sea. It is nearly nightfall, and her time in the observatory is almost upon her. She can do no more than feel resigned when she realizes that to her foggy mind, it feels as though she only just left the meditation room an hour ago; now she must return to the horrid chore without even memories of a long day at work in the sun to sustain her.

As she stumbles down the hallway, occasionally clipping her elbow on the wall when it seems to leap out into her path, she strips off what little of her uniform she managed to struggle into earlier, leaving only the skintight Kevlar undershirt, leggings, and the skirt she had worn to meditate in last night, which she had apparently never managed to take off. She has to balance herself with one hand on the railing overlooking the dark living room in order to undo the messy knot she has made of the left boot, and she kicks it off the landing. The boot takes out a small wizard statue as it flies, and then lands in a dry puff of dust somewhere below.

(hush)

She is so very tired. She stops in the middle of the hallway and wonders - why not? Why not just go back to her room, the room she has never slept in? Why not see how it felt to actually lie down and just sleep for once in her life? The blasted meditation can wait one night...

She has turned without realizing her feet are moving when suddenly, impossibly, there is a knock on the front door.

Rose freezes, a little of the haze in her head clearing as she shifts behind the wall, glancing over her shoulder at the door below. It is hard to focus, like her eyes can't quite stay all the way open, but she does hear the second knock when it arrives.

Someone is at her house.

For the first time in nearly three years, someone is at her house.

(do not-)

She half-runs, half-falls down stairs, forgetting all dignity and grace as she does. Her hair is lank and unkempt, hanging in her face, and she just has time to shove it back behind her uneven headband, taking in her own haunted stare and bedraggled clothing in the mirror by the front door. She can't bring herself to care about the mess, not when there's only one person in the world who still knows where this house is -

Rose yanks the door open, an unwanted tear blurring her sight. "Mothe-"

There is no one there.

There is - There is no - no one at all -

(hush rō sē)

Rose feels nothing. She steps out onto the porch, and scans the lawn, the edge of the forest where it hedges in the grounds. There is no one in sight, and no movement in the trees to mark where they might have passed out of sight. She cannot hear the rumble of an engine, so the knocker had to have been on foot. She should still be able to see them -

But no. She is still alone. You'd think after spending a long enough span of time in solitude, one would adjust, but the disappointment is as fresh and bitter as ever. Perhaps she should have read up
on the effect of isolation on a growing adolescent mind, but she can’t recall the last time she received her subscription to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. It mostly likely stopped being delivered around the same time the postman had stopped noticing their house, and the letters from John had trickled to a halt.

She slumps to her knees in an ungainly pile, the wood of the porch scraping through her leggings, and something crumples beneath her leg. She blinks slowly, wearily, and somehow finds the effort to extricate a flimsy envelope from under her knee. She turns it over in her hands, squinting to try to make the letters focus.

It bears her mother’s seal, and for an instant Rose's heart pounds, until she realizes with a dull pain that there is no point in being excited. It had been foolish to expect her mother to deliver something in person after three years of the good doctor avoiding the Lalonde manse like the plague. No doubt she'd sent some suitably passive-aggressive form of messenger, who had stuck around just long enough to deliver the letter and play upon Rose's emotions, to teach her better than to get her hopes up. Her mother's lessons in fortitude and self-sufficiency have always combined needless complications, psychological games, and passive-aggression in equal measure. Not even a three year pause seems to have changed her despicable tactics.

(it’s all right, Rose)

Rose just wishes she were bitter enough to take the letter and set it alight. But no, she is still desperate enough through the dull pain to slit the sealed edge of the letter with a perfectly manicured nail, and unfold the paper to read the contents.

What she reads is a perfect work of art. Doctor Rue Lalonde's handwriting is a masterpiece, none of her drunken slur present in the looping whorls and elegant curves of her script.

Daughter mine,

I do hope this note find you in good health. I have always had utter confidence in your ability to succeed and flourish even in my absence. You have always been such a self-sufficient child.

I wish that I could have communicated with you sooner. Three years is rather a long time. But I have only just now engaged a Passing Messenger whose methods would not draw undue attention to your location.

I assure you, it is all for the best. Don't forget to meditate regularly, my dear. And do give my regards to John.

Affectionately yours,

Doctor Rue Lalonde, Ph.D

The note is, as always, everything Rose has never wanted.

(it will be fine, Rose)

She rips it in two.

There is something wet streaming down her face. She shakes her head, sucking in breath through her nose as she attempts to control herself. She must maintain her calm. As long as she can show that her mother has not affected her, Rue Lalonde hasn't won this standoff. Rose just has to be serene. Be inscrutable. Go up to the observatory and meditate until she’s too tired to feel all this hate.
At approximately 18:21:03 on a Friday night, a massive explosion occurs in the middle of Hamilton.

Darkness overhead and all around her, the darkness between the stars. The grimdark curls its tentacles into her mind, and the last thing she sees as Rose Lalonde is the roar of the absolute Void, the notice all, shrieks and writhes in protest as it is slowly crushed beneath the rolling tide of Her head feels like it's about to split in two. Part of her - a rapidly dwindling portion, barely noticeable after all, wiping at the tears, even as she wails in agony at the empty night sky.

She loses all control, screaming as a sob racks her body. She reaches up with both hands, furiously wiping at the tears, even as she wails in agony at the empty night sky.

Her hands come away bloody, and she can taste the blood in her mouth, but she doesn't care. She is just so - so enraged.

How DARE she?!

(don't cry, sweet rose, I'm not here)

It doesn't hurt. Why should this hurt, after three years of nothing, after three years, after rather a long goddamn time?

Rose isn't hurting anymore. She is brutally, coldly, undeniably furious.

(after all)

(we are here)

(we are A'L'G'W'Y'S' here)

(and we will N'E'V'E'J' & L'E'A'V'Y'Y'0'U'W')

Yes. Why would Rose have ever been hurt, when she has never been truly alone? Her entire body rocks with convulsions.

She isn't crying anymore. She is laughing. The tears are still running down her cheeks, but all she can do is laugh, her lungs wheezing as she gasps for the air to keep laughing.

stop laughing what are you doing rose why did you drink so much you need to fight them you need to wake up wake up YOU NEED TO STOP THIS ROSE NO!

Her head feels like it's about to split in two. Part of her - a rapidly dwindling portion, barely noticeable after all, shrieks and writhes in protest as it is slowly crushed beneath the rolling tide of colddamp.

The other half roars with triumph as Rose realizes the truth. It is the roar of the absolute Void, the sound of the Abyss, and it can no longer be denied. If there is any spark of the Seer of Light left in her, it doesn't matter. What good has the light ever done her? Now that she has the dark -

She will W'1/E'0/N'E'Y'V'0'Y'Y'0'U'W'

The grimdark curls its tentacles into her mind, and the last thing she sees as Rose Lalonde is the darkness overhead and all around her, the darkness between the stars.
county, New York. It is, reportedly, visible from orbit.

At the epicenter of the blast, a slim figure rises from the resulting crater, and turns eyes that burn white with power to the south. It bares sharp teeth in a vicious grin, and steers the body formerly known as Rose Lalonde toward New York City.

---

Dave zones the fuck out. It takes true talent to be this unfocused, even as his hands move over the turntables and adjust sound quality at intervals. His latest ironic project is an attempt at turning Bruno Mars into something worth listening too. So far, all he’s managed is to elevate *Grenade* to the point at which it no longer makes his ears bleed in horror.

It’s not that he doesn’t like mixing some sick beats anymore, and gets sick thrills off subjecting himself to this torture. Quite the opposite. It’s just that at the moment, he’s attempting something a little bit more complicated than –

The door to his room swings open, and a second Dave walks in. “It works,” he says around a mouthful of taco. “I didn’t even die of a brain aneurysm or anything, so kudos on not fucking up in about five minutes from now.”

Dave raises an eyebrow, but otherwise doesn’t react to the fact that there’s two of him. If other-Dave can keep a straight face about this, so can Dave.

Sure, this is the culmination of nearly two years’ worth of hard work and embarrassingly stupid shenanigans that will never be spoken of in polite company ever again, but they’re Dave Strider. No need to get all worked up into a lather about winning. Success is basically a forgone conclusion when you pack this much coolkid into one fantastic bod.

Well. Two bods, at the moment. Details.

“Five minutes?” he asks, turning back to the turntables. The rest of the question goes unspoken – *what happens in five minutes that makes this attempt so different from the hundreds of other times we tried this?*

Other-Dave shrugs noncommittally and walks over to the turntables, switching off the Bruno Mars. “Stop listening to that shit, it’s probably rotting our brain or something. This project isn’t ironic anymore. We’ve been working on it for weeks. Now it’s just sad. The irony is dead. Rotting. Risen again in a twisted mockery of its former glory. BTW, the BQ will be hanging out around the medical center when you think to go looking for her. Don’t be fucking late. You don’t keep that dame waiting, she’ll fuck you up. Start a reign of creepy shadow terror all over your ass or something.” He shovels the rest of the taco into his mouth, and then kicks Dave off his chair.

Dave lands flat on his back on the floor. “Not cool,” he says, sitting up. “Seriously. What happens in – three minutes, now?”

“Other-me didn’t tell *me* when this all happened to me, so I can’t tell you. Is the impression I get, anyway.” There is a pause as both Striders have to pause and think about the use of tenses in that first sentence. Both raise an eyebrow at the same time in mutual agreement that there’s probably no better way to have phrased it. Other-Dave starts fiddling with the turntables, pressing a headphone to his ear as he frowns at the readouts. “This is how I remember it happening, and hell no, we are not dicking around with paradoxes when we’ve only just started getting this thing to work right. This is me, drawing the line. Right there. It’s a huge fucking line, you can’t miss it. We’re not unraveling the fabric of space-time to satisfy our morbid curiosity.”
"Wow, you need to calm down man. Our inner asshole is showing," Dave says, getting to his feet and stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Pretty sure if you just tell me what to do, this will all be over with that much faster and we can sail off into the sunset with our brand new time-travel merit badge on our sashes."

"I still don't remember me telling me. So I'm not." Other-Dave rubs the bridge of his nose and shakes his head slightly.

"I think you're full of shit. Tell me."

“Whatever. I’m too tired to argue with me. I don't even have the energy for Pesterchum right now. That bed is serenading me with some intense lullabies. You can’t hear them, but they’re there, dude. It wants me, and I want it. Some of us just spent twenty-four hours awake without thinking through the consequences of reliving an entire day.” He lifts his fingers off the turntable in a gesture Dave recognizes – it’s the same hand motion he tends to make when he’s finished up a project. It’s hella weird watching himself do it from three feet away. There’s the weirdest sensation in his own hand, as though he can feel some phantom limb shit going on.

Other-Dave unplugs the headphones and a steady bassline pumps through the air unchecked, the volume rattling the dead things in their jars on the shelves. ‘Here, listen to this for a minute,’ that total asshole signs with his hands as the bass drowns out all other sound.

Dave refuses to give in and sign back. The collar at his throat burns and vibrates slightly as he determinedly plows through audible words. The sound comes out garbled and unintelligible in his ears, the loud drum beat in the air confusing the sensors. But what he means to say goes something like, “I thought I only had one minute. Shouldn’t I be engaging the flux capacitor? Firing up the metaphorical DeLorean? Can you please turn this off?? Ho-ly shit why is future me a total douche?”

It feels like a giant fucking robot is bouncing on a pogo stick against his eardrums. After a long day of trying to focus on his internal sense of time and make the clock run backwards with Bruno Mars wailing in the background, it’s the exact opposite of what Dave wants in his life. He’s extremely tempted to stop time and flashstep around himself to turn down the volume. But he only has thirty seconds left before apparently he’s due for this major epiphany that will let him time-travel like the Badass Quandary has been harassing him to do since day one of their weird friendalliance. He decides to wait it out, leaning against the edge of the hole in the wall where the window used to be, where the noise from the bass rumbles out into open air. Other-him just sits there at the turntables, face unreadable even without the sunglasses on, and yeah, that is frustrating as fuck when Dave’s on the receiving end of it.

The bass drones in his ears, until it feels like one big pulse pounding so insistently even his heart matches tempo and fuuu-

-uck, is he losing track of time again?

Yeah, he is. He totally is.

Everything feels like it’s happening in half-time, and his movements are sluggish as he shakes his head to try to clear it. Dave claws at his own sense of time, trying half-heartedly to care when his body starts feeling distant and disconnected. It feels like trying to walk outside in Houston on a slow, muggy summer afternoon, when the air is more humidity than oxygen and breathing feels like drinking a glass of lukewarm water. If he fucking misses when he finally figures out time travel just because his future self started blaring some brain-melting bassline, he is going punch other-Dave in the goddamn gallbladder. He doesn’t care if it would be the same as punching himself in the gallbladder, it would be worth it.
“Sorry, man. This is the way it’s going to have to go. I do feel kind of like an asshole about it, though.”

Dave blinks and time chimes back into focus. The air is weirdly still and clear, and he realizes that the bassline has stopped. All that’s left is the residual thrum in his brain. He has just enough time to stare at other-Dave, who is suddenly standing right in front of Dave’s face, for about a second, before the other guy puts a hand on Dave’s chest and shoves him backward.

Out the fucking hole in the wall.

“Wha-” Dave starts, before his survival instincts kick in. The problem is, his instincts say to grab onto the fire escape, which is completely out of reach. His feet kick wildly but neither the metal bars of the fire escape nor the wall are anywhere near him; he’s got nothing to push off of and get the momentum needed to jump to the wall opposite, because other-Dave shoved him hard enough that he’s falling almost exactly a foot out of reach of anything useful.

Future-me just pushed me off a thirteen story building, Dave thinks, feeling a bit put out. When he looks below him, he can see the dumpster right beneath him in the alleyway.

Future-me just pushed me off a thirteen story building to land in a fucking dumpster, Dave thinks, completely incensed.

This is…

This is beyond irony. This is the pinnacle of everything irony has ever aspired to be. Irony is the naïve handmaiden in service of the goddess that is this moment right here, right now, at exactly 4:13:00 in the afternoon on a Friday. Oh my fucking god, not even Bro can top something as ridiculously stupid as this. This is incredible.

The only problem with this sublime moment is that Dave has no way to stop the whole falling thing. He’s around the eighth story now and okay he definitely has a problem. Yup. Oh, there goes the seventh story, that’s awesome. This is the highlight of his day. This is clearly how he was always meant to go, falling to his doom from his own apartment building after years of insane roof-jumping antics in the name of great justice and ironic heroism.

Around the fifth floor, he starts to panic.

Something feels like it’s lodged in his throat and it’s really hard to breathe around it, so he starts wheezing a little as his arms flail around for something, anything to grab onto and halt his fall. That fucking bassline is still going in his head and he refuses to die with that and Bruno Mars the last music he ever listens to in his life. If Dave Strider ever dies, ever, he fully intends to do it with a goddamn symphony going full blast in the background, thank you very much, so fuck this fucking noise, and –

Something seizes in his throat, and he can’t breathe at all.

Dave jerks forward, curling up as he grabs at his neck, fingernails scraping on the metal of the collar. But it doesn’t feel tight, and he can’t find the clasp when he’s busy falling past the third fucking floor anyway, and his throat seizes in pain again and he’s dying even before he hits the bottom of the empty dumpster, what a class act -

With the last shred of consciousness he has left, Dave yanks mentally on the part of him in charge of time, rips at the time-stop option that won’t do a damn thing to help because he’ll just keep falling while the rest of the world stops around him. It’s the last thing he can think of to do, and he stops
time, stops it and holds it there until the usual firecrackers start spitting fire into his brain.

He blacks out before he hits the ground.

- 

Dave wakes up.

This is a huge deal. He feels like this deserves a round of applause. Unfortunately, his arms feel like they’ve been ripped off his body and filled with enough helium that they’ve floated off into the atmosphere. He’s used to a little disassociation here and there, but this is a whole new level of dreamy weirdness. Normal people would need some good drugs to hit this kind of high.

While he tries to regain his sense of his limbs, Dave does a quick inventory. Point number one – not dead yet. He pauses for another round of mental applause. Not every day you survive a thirteen story fall with your skull mostly intact. Point number two – everything stinks like a dumpster, and when he shifts his body, trying to tilt his head enough to see if his legs move when he tells them to, he sees that he is sprawled out on top of several bags of garbage, one of which apparently burst open under the force of his plummeting body.

Point number three needs to wait its fucking turn because this goddamn dumpster had been emptied this morning. Dave had heard the rumble of the garbage truck all the way through Bruno Mars at around eight in the morning, and he had looked down while falling and definitely noticed that his future resting place was empty. That was totally a thing that happened.

Still woozy, Dave raises his arm and pats at the garbage bag cushioning his lower body. All he manages to accomplish is unleashing another wave of rotting garbage smell, and ascertaining that yes, his butt isn’t just imagining the garbage bag. It’s real. He’s lying in a pile of several days old trash that hadn’t been here when he’d started falling at 4:13 pm.

Dave’s eyes widen behind his shades, and he stares, fascinated, at the sky above as he checks his always accurate internal clock.

Like a handy little internal pocket watch, the little ticks that always tock along in the back of his mind inform him that it is 6:12.

In the morning.

“Son of a bitch,” Dave Strider says, watching the peach and orange streaks of a sunrise eat their way across the morning sky.

- 

The first order of business is making sure his neck isn’t broken.

Dave swings himself out of the dumpster, wincing when his feet hit the ground and his entire body aches in protest. But hey, he’s not bleeding anywhere that he can see, and he can still feel his legs so, awesome, his neck isn’t broken. Seriously, A+ landing. Maybe a smart person would have waited and called for help or something before trying to move with a possible broken neck, but Dave doesn’t have the best precautionary first aid training. He’s still alive and kicking, so he must be doing something right.

The next is figuring out what the hell he’s supposed to do all day. He can’t go back to his room – otherwise he’d remember himself walking in and chilling all day on the bed, nursing bruises and minor abrasions. He doesn’t remember that happening, so it…must not have happened?
This is going to be annoying, isn’t it. Yeah, it is. He can feel it.

His mood worsens when he remembers what his future-self had been wearing. Dave is still currently in his shades and sweats and his totally, purely ironic red Star Wars shirt, and they all reek of garbage. Other-Dave had been in an old work outfit, with a pair of not-very-shitty swords on his back, and he hadn’t smelled like trash that’s been sitting out for days on end in a Houston springtime. Which means at some point, Dave – current Dave – has to go back to his room and, presumably, steal his own clothes from his closet without waking himself up. It’s going to be a pain in the ass, even though he’s successfully done it once already – in the future. And if he chooses not to go through the hassle, he’ll not only be creating a paradox, he’ll be forced to walk around all day in clothes that smell like they need to be doused in kerosene, burned with extreme prejudice, and then scattered into the ocean as ashes in tribute to the truly epic lazy-day level of comfort they once gave him.

Actually, no wonder other-Dave was in such a bad mood. No doubt he was in mourning for this beautifully ironic Princess Leia shirt, and had just been taking out his well-deserved grief on an unwitting victim. Dave gets it. He really does. It’s all such a jumbled up mishmash of potential paradoxes and temporal obligations that Dave can already feel a new headache brewing in the already aching tissue of his brain. Between the whole near death experience and the usual aftershocks of trying to hold a time-stop, his brain can’t handle much more of this nonsense.

Time travel is hard. It’s hard and – yeah, no fucking way is he going to sink to that level of self-pity. Suck it up, Strider.

Looking up, Dave sighs and tries to jump up and grab the edge of the ladder for the fire escape.

Jumping hurts. Never trying that again. Nope. He grits his teeth, smooths the pain off his face, and then shifts a stray box of recycling under the ladder until he can just barely grip it with the edge of his fingers. Pulling himself up is nearly as bad as the whole jumping thing, but he manages it, and then he starts jogging up the stairs. He slows to a tiptoe when he nears the thirteenth floor, and he continues up the stairs past his room until he reaches the roof. After scanning it to make sure Bro isn’t up there training, Dave walks along the edge of the roof until he’s above the hole in his bedroom wall where he’s going to fall out nearly ten hours from now. He stops time gingerly once before he tries climbing down, and thankfully all his brain does is whine in protest at the brief pause. With that established, Dave stops time and lowers himself down into the bedroom, flashstepping and tiptoeing for all he’s worth.

Past-him is asleep in bed, dead to the world from the neck up. It’s really fucking weird seeing himself sleep, maybe even weirder than watching himself walk around being a future-douche, so Dave pointedly avoids looking at the giant puddle of blankets curled up in the corner of the bed by the wall. He grabs the first outfit he finds in the closet, a black hoodie and pants combo he’d worn last week and that his future self has - had - will have been (god fucking dammit) apparently slumming around town in all day long. He can’t change in here, because if he left his garbage-clothes in the room he would remember smelling them earlier. Later.

Earlier in his timeline, later in the day.

Fuck. He’s going to say it. Time travel is hard. It’s hard and no one understands. Dave’s not even sure he understands – he has no idea what made the whole time travel thing happen, or why his throat started seizing up right before he went back. And time-travel tenses are going to annoy the shit out of him, he can tell.

It hits him when he’s in the middle of changing his shirt in the restroom of a classy McDonalds just down the street, and he starts changing in more of a hurry.
There’s always been one person who mysteriously has known more about his powers than either Dave nor Bro have ever been able to figure out, and his future self already told him where to find her.

Dave hits up the McDonalds for dinner, only to find that there are no chicken nugs. None. Only breakfast food.

Because it's six in the goddamn morning.

Everything tastes just a little bit less satisfying after that revelation. He ends up ordering shitty McDonalds pancakes from the brownblood behind the counter, a troll with curvy horns who stares right through Dave's hero costume with the shell-shocked thousand yard stare of a man who has spent too long in food service and has started having war flashbacks while still trapped in the trenches.

With his daily dose of absolutely pointless calories out of the way, Dave walks to the medical center. He does end up taking the Metro this time, because honestly if he tried to run across roofs right now he'd probably face plant. No one even gives him a second glance. It's possible the bag of soggy pancakes throws them off his manly, heroic scent. The perfect accessory for a disguise; just add one standard McDonald's bag and viola, everyone thinks you're a hero cosplayer who forgot to change back in the morning. He disembarks in a swarm of medical students in their sickly pastel scrubs at the Memorial Hermann stop, immensely dissatisfied with the pancakes but still mindlessly shoveling them in when he spies a familiar, dark green trench coat lurking in the entrance of a parking garage. He's there between one moment and the next, everything else in the world stopping except for the Badass Quandary, who merely tilted her head to the side and continues to stare at the tiny embers at the end of her cigarette. She's not actually smoking it; she just has it lit up while she taps on her cigarette holder with a sharp black claw.

See, what Dave had first thought to be a really thin bladekind when he met the carapacian dame in a dark alley is, in fact, a weaponized cigarette holder. And the fact that BQ is tapping away on her strife specibi means that she's fucking pissed. Part of her strange telepathy is tied up in the motion of her hands when she speaks, which means that she's giving him the silent treatment.

He leans back against the pillar of the parking garage, dumping his empty food bag in the trash. "Figured out the whole time travel thing," he offers. "Any other miracles you'd like, ma'am, because I'm on a roll here. I refuse to slow my roll. I can't be tamed -"

She lightly tips the cigarette holder away from her mouth and the little furrow appears in the smooth carapace above her right eye that Dave thinks is the equivalent of an eyebrow raise. But then she puts the cigarettekind away and he relaxes a bit as she starts to speak.

BQ: Dave Strider, your nonsensical verses test my patience on a regular basis.

BQ: However, the news that you have at last begun to refind yourself, after all these years of futile effort on my part is...undeniably welcome.

BQ: If, of course, it is true.

BQ: Prove it.

"What." Dave folds his arms. "Lady, future-me had to shove me out of a building to make it happen. Sorry if I'm not jumping up and down trying to recreate the circumstances.
BQ: It could be arranged.

Dave takes a step to the side, so he has the street behind him. This lady doesn't make idle threats, and if he needs to run he wants to be in the sun, where her freaky shadows can't grab him. "As awesome as that sounds, I think I'll pass. Thanks though."

She just smirks at him, folding her arms as she leans up against her own pillar, one hip hitched up higher than the other.

BQ: I will pander to your whim for now, Dave.

BQ: Though there are many reasons why you might wish to feign ability you may not yet possess, I think I shall give you the benefit of the doubt.

BQ: If you are foolish enough to lie to me, you may as well suffer the consequences which may befall you.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it," he drawls, folding his own arms. "Now, can we get to the point here? Are you finally going to explain how you knew about the time thing? How you know anything you know, really? Because my patience ran out, like, two years ago. You didn't even have the decency to test it, my patience literally just ran out the door when you arrived. You goddamn owe me, woman. You owe me a patience debt."

BQ: You are being inanely whimsical again.

BQ: Sometimes I wonder exactly where they find you people. All of you are so...damaged.

BQ: You do not even realize how broken you are, do you?

Dave shifts restlessly, and has to fight the urge to look down at his feet, at the shadow he casts on the ground. He doesn't know if she can control his shadow, or if it's just whatever shadow she's touching at the time. But when she starts spouting really vague, ominously all-knowing bullshit like this, he gets antsy, as though the shadows might come alive and swallow him up while she has him distracted. "See, stuff like that," is all he says, allowing himself a small frown. "Some context for those things you just said? That would be fantastic. I might even shed a tear of joy. A tear, I'm telling you."

BQ: You are not ready to know the truth.

"No. Oh, hell no. You did not just pull the 'You Are Not Ready' card, what are you, some kind of alien dame Jedi mentor - oh." Dave freezes, then stares at her, jaw dropping. "Oh my god -"

BQ: Cease. Cease speaking. Do not even finish the sentence I know you are about to utter. I will not tolerate it. I absolutely refuse to tolerate these shenanigans.

BQ: I intend to tell you one thing and one thing only, Dave Strider.

BQ: Now that you can harness your true ability, it will begin. Once you have fully mastered it, they will know, and they will come for you.

Dave waits. The Quandary shows no sign of elaborating on that last bit. She just stands there, eyebrow raised, as though expecting some kind of reaction from him.

He flings up his hands and rolls his eyes so hard they actually ache. Or maybe that's still the headache from earlier. "Oh shit," he deadpans. "The nonspecific 'they' are coming. I can't believe it.
"Say it ain't so. I will not go -"

"Lady, there's nothing to take seriously." Dave lets his arms fall. "Yeah, I get it. The spooky lady in a trench coat thing. It's your thing. It's a great thing, it works for you. The thing is also causing some serious communication problems here. Like. If you want me to be worried about some mysterious 'they,' I kind of need more to work with here. Striders don't scare that easy."

BQ: They are the same people who approach me on a regular basis seemingly with the sole purpose of earning my undying ire.

BQ: The ones who will destroy you if you are not careful.

BQ: They would already have set upon you if not for my efforts, and those of your elder relative.

"Now Bro knows about these guys?" Dave wants to fling his hands up in genuine confusion. He sticks his hands into his hoodie pocket instead, fiddling with some card suit-themed ninja stars still stuck in there from last week. "Wow, somehow a bunch of nameless unspecified assholes trying to destroy me never came up at the wholesome, all-American Strider dinner table."

When the Quandary responds, her voice feels cooler and almost disdainful as it blooms in his head - but she literally always sounds as though she expects Dave to bow down and kiss the toes of her sleek boots every time they meet, so he's just learned to let it fly over his head.

BQ: If I were you, I would question your 'Bro,' then.

BQ: Ask him what he knows about the Midnight Crew.

BQ: Better yet, I would check the news. They have already begun to target one of your own. He too has been foolish enough to go wandering around in the public eye, flaunting his powers.

BQ: The females, at least, have been discreet.

BQ: Well, I say discreet...

"And now there are females. Your story keeps getting more complicated. The bullshit is shining through the cracks. Like a pile of gold-plated bullshit in the sun." He spreads his hands apart and shrugs again. "Nice try. If you're not getting any more chatty now that I've finally fulfilled your insane reality-breaking requirement, I'm done here. Sayonara, g2g -"

BQ: You think to win more details from me by plaguing me and threatening to ignore me.

BQ: Do you think me so simple?

Dave keeps his mouth shut. He runs a nervous hand through his hair as the awkward silence stretches out, scratching behind his ear to keep the hand near the hilt of his sword. He still doesn't know who has the quicker draw, him or the BQ, and he doesn't want to find out the pointy, painful way.

Clearly reveling in her conversational advantage, the Quandary nods her head, adjusting the brim of her ever-present hat. She stands up from her lounging position against the pillar and lets a hint of a sharp grin crinkle her eyes.

BQ: You think I do this deliberately to frustrate you, Dave.
"And the truth is...you are absolutely right."

"Oh my fucking god."

BQ: I am kidding.


"Okay, now that just sounded painful, did that actually hurt you -"

BQ: In truth, you would simply not believe me. It is literally impossible. Your brain would not allow you to hear the words as I spoke them. You are, all of you, such painfully broken creatures.

BQ: And so I will simply lead you to draw your own conclusions.

BQ: I will provide you the ability to access all the tools you need, and no more.

BQ: And you will be forced to accept the truth, one slow step at a time.

BQ: I am not here to mollycoddle you. I am here to make you strong, because I have no other choice. If you fail, we all do.

Dave lets his face meet his palm. "I remember we talked about the vague thing," he says, his voice muffled by his hand. "I swear, we just had this long conversation about how making really vague statements about dire consequences is a really cheap plot device -"

BQ: Ask the one that you call Brother.

BQ: And tell the blue windy one to tone it down.

BQ: His antics are making more than one major party nervous.

BQ: The Heir has always been...flighty.

BQ: But he listens to you.

Dave's head shoots up and he meets the Quandary's eyes. "Shit. What don't you know, lady," he said, licking at dry lips.

BQ: I know everything.


Dave twitches bodily at the harsh laughter that coughs out in black bursts in his head. "Okay, no, that needs to stop. That needs to stop being a thing. It needs to have never been a thing. Like, I am willing to jump off another building and go back in time and prevent you from ever making that kind of hell-noise again. Please stop."

BQ: A tempting proposition.

BQ: But no, I am afraid our time is up for the day.

BQ: Until our next session, Dave Strider.

"Can you at least wait until I look away before you do the - yeah, you're already doing it," Dave says, averting his eyes too late as the shadows of the parking garage rip up and swarm the Quandary,
wrapping her up and dragging her down into the floor. He gets a little nauseous whenever she does that, like some kind of weird motion sickness.

When he looks up at the sky, waiting for his stomach to settle a bit, he sees the sun is now edging upward, his internal clock telling him it's nearly 10 in the morning. The heat of the oncoming day is burning away the little clouds of polluted mist, and he still has nearly eight hours before he's due to show up in his own room with delicious, delicious tacos and shove himself out a hole in the wall.

How did this become his life? When did he start having legitimate issues with time tenses on a regular basis? For that matter, why had he actually believed that learning how to travel back in time would make the Quandary any less of an answer-hording, stab-happy alien mentor-figure?

How long has that janitor been standing there, jaw slack, staring in total horror at the spot where the Quandary used to be?

Dave waits for a second. The poor guy just keeps staring, eyes wide. It doesn't seem like he's taking the sight of a woman being eaten by shadows very well.

"I feel you, man," Dave says, patting him on the back. Then he pulls his hood up and walks out of the parking garage, leaving the traumatized janitor behind.

He still has hours until he can reach his computer or his phone - both of which were on his desk when future-Dave pushed him out a window, and are now currently still in his room with past-Dave, because he remembers using them throughout the day and therefore couldn't yoink them when he raided the room for clothes. So he may not be able to log onto his Pesterchum account, but he can at least find a computer and check the Seattle Times. Try to figure out what the hell has the BQ all riled up.

Seriously. He leaves his ironic penpal alone for a few months, and apparently everything goes to hell and crazy alien dames start name dropping the Heir of Breath in ominous conversations.

Muttering under his breath, Dave crosses the street and heads for the nearby library. He has some catching up to do.

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Even after surviving a grenade, Heir had thought he'd be able to finish up his patrol, riding the high that came from successfully dealing with Boxcar and getting Hemogoblin to agree to be his partner, but no dice.

At the moment, he is dealing with a couple of vandals in the Lake View Cemetery on 15th Avenue East. This crime had only been a gentle touch of the wind on his shoulder, not all that urgent since no one living was likely to be harmed by some assholes breaking into mausoleums. But it feels like it’s the first alert the breeze has given him since he’d ignored it earlier to go confront Hearts Boxcar by the docks, so Heir goes along with it, flying down until he’s concealed in a tree above the two men. Privately, Heir suspects that the wind is sulking; sure, he had let loose with a proper tornado for the first time since he was a kid, which naturally got the breezes excited, but before that he’d disregarded them entirely. And, as weird as it sounds, yeah, the air gets moody. It's still willing to waft him along above the city in a grid-search pattern, but he had to hunt down at least one attempted break-in on his own, without even a hint from his powers that a crime had been in progress beneath him.

Heir waits until the two men have chosen their next target and one pulls out a pair of bolt cutters before he descends, landing as lightly as possible to avoid jolting his collarbone too much. The general bodily ache from the grenade explosion has eased a bit as the night has worn on, but even
turning too sharply in midair proves enough to send a stab of sickening pain outward from the broken bone. Definitely going to need to wear a sling to school; John wonders how he's going to explain this one to Karkat.

No, stop that. No thinking about John things while on the job. Focus.

"Guys, I don’t even want to know why you’re breaking into dead peoples’ tombs, do I?” he asks, folding his arms and wearing his best imitation of a look of stern fatherly disapproval. “Seriously, no. Just stop.”

The two men flinch and whirl to face at him. To Heir’s surprise, the guy with the bolt cutters groans and tucks them away into the back of his pants, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Wow. Great. Heir is here. Tonight must be our lucky night.”

“Come on, we can take him!” the shorter vandal insists, waving his flashlight in Heir’s direction. “He’s just one guy!” He does a double-take when the flashlight crosses Heir’s face. “He’s a kid!”

“Aha. Yeah, and I’m sure every single other person he’s put in prison thought the exact same thing before he kicked their ass. Just leave it. We’ve already been to three cemeteries tonight, and I’m pretty sure this one is a bust too.” The other vandal shakes his head. “This is so not worth it.”

“Come quietly while I have the night guard call the police, and no one has to get hurt,” Heir offers, doing an internal dance of glee at this turn of events. Even after years of crime fighting, it’s still really rare that a criminal decides to surrender when Heir arrives. One day, he likes to think, he’ll have established enough of a reputation that people choose not to commit crimes at all out of wariness of Heir's presence, but the city isn’t quite there yet. It's a long term goal.

The shorter one laughs briefly, rolling his eyes up at the sky as he hefts the flashlight, his hands spread out on either side. “Yeah, police. About that. I don’t do police.”

And then he lashes out - with the flashlight. The first wild jab is aimed right at Heir's face, and he's so startled he barely knocks the stab off-course with a wall of wind in time.

A flashlight strife specibus? Who even does that?! Crazy people, that's who! Jeez!

Heir dodges another swing of the unconventional weapon, and the bright beam of the flashlight blinds him momentarily. Shit. Blinking hard to try to restore his night vision, he swipes out without looking with a blast of wind. He must hit something, because he hears an 'oof!' of pain. When he can see again, the flashlight guy has stumbled back against a tall tombstone, looking winded.

Oh god yes. What a truly epic pun. He's adding that one to the list of convenient one-liners.

All puns seem funnier when you're concussed, Heir decides. But as much as he hates to admit it, fighting with a broken collarbone kind of sucks, and he needs to wrap this up before he topples over sideways. He walks over the guy and knocks the flashlightkind out of his hand. Just when he socks the guy in the jaw, however, the ground shimmies underneath his feet, and his center of balance vanishes. Heir catches himself on the tombstone, but his vision spins for a few long, dizzy moments, and he panics internally until the graveyard comes back into focus. "Augh," he mutters, standing upright and putting up his hands in a fighting stance as he turns to face the second vandal.

The criminal looks hesitant, then raises his hands above his head. "Yeah, sorry about him. I swear, I'm not stupid. I'm coming quietly."

"Good," Heir says, flying off the ground a little. The world tilts as he flies up to scan for the groundskeeper, and he has to close his eyes for a moment while his brain tries to keep up with his
thoughts. He finally has to use the wind to shout for the groundskeeper and send the noise directly to the old man's ears, and then Heir floats down to the ground to wait by the two vandals as the guard hurries over between the rows. Thankfully, the flashlight vandal stays down, and the other criminal stays true to his word, staying docile and quiet until the police sirens begin to grow in volume.

It isn't Heir but John who flies away, arcing up into the early morning sky. His collarbone throbs in earnest now, and between the slight nausea and the headache, his vision feels slow and unreliable.

Yeah, he's going to have to call it a night. Being this dazed on the job is just too much of a risk to take. Waving down at the police below, John takes off into cloud cover.

The sharp, dull ache in the back of his skull only worsens as John flies home. His ears are ringing, and he highly suspects that more than once during the flight he starts to veer off course, lost in a fog of sudden fatigue until the wind nudges him roughly in the side to wake him up. He yawns widely and his mask catches between his lips when he closes his mouth. He hasn't felt this bone-tired after a night of work in a long time, and he's beginning to suspect that somewhere along the way he managed to exacerbate that head injury from the first explosion into a full-on concussion.

Or at least, he thinks he feels concussed. He might be too concussed to judge accurately. Definitely time to get a second opinion.

So, for the first time in quite a while - years, actually - when he gets home and lets the wind gently set him on his feet in his bedroom, he closes the window, strips off his goggles and mask, and crosses the hall to knock on his dad's door.

- The worst part about being officially concussed, John muses, is that he can't go to sleep.

He knows he's unusual in that he only needs three or four hours of sleep to function well - he relies on that endurance to maintain his long days and nights as a crime fighter. But the fact is, he really, really needs those four hours of sleep. When seven in the morning on Thursday rolls around, his eyes feel too dry and gritty, and he can barely keep his head upright as he lounges on the couch in the living room, his dad propped up on the armchair across from him for moral support. His muscles feel heavy and useless on top of the residual ache from the grenade and the bank explosion, and without any sleep he's not healing as fast as he usually does, either.

Basically, when he staggers to his feet and looks in the mirror over the bathroom sink, he has no choice but to admit he's a mess. While the scabby bump on the back of his head is hidden by his hair, at some point, perhaps when the grenade blew up, he managed to take enough of an impact to his face that the entire right side is a bruise that just barely misses swelling up to close up his eye. Combine that with the sling on his arm, and he looks like he came out the loser in some kind of bar fight. Or, you know, like some guy who just survived a grenade.

He knows exactly what his dad is going to say when he sees this mess in the light -

"No school today, I think," his dad says, leaning in through the door to raise an eyebrow at John in the mirror. He raises a hand for silence when John starts to protest. "No buts, John. I want you awake for at least eight more hours, to see if this concussion gets any worse. I don’t want you going to school and collapsing in the middle of class, in which case I wouldn’t be aware of the situation until the school or the hospital informed me. We’ll talk about work tonight after we assess you again."

John sighs, well aware that his dad is probably right. He grimaces at the mirror one last time before
smiling ruefully. “Oh my god. Karkat is going to be so pissed.” He does feel a little bad about that, actually. Karkat likes to hide behind his prickly outer shell, but he really does have a soft, squishy inside when it comes to his friends, of which there are few. Actually, aside from a few rare pesterchums, John might be the only one Karkat knows in real life, and it shows. When they’d accidentally blown up a glass beaker in Chemistry earlier in the year, Karkat had fretted over a cut on John’s hand to the point that the nurse had almost used troll-class sedatives on him. John can only imagine how he’ll react to the rather obvious bruises and sling.

The ragegasm will no doubt be of epic proportions.

It’s probably for the best if he doesn’t let Karkat see him until tomorrow, after he gets a chance to actually sleep the concussed headache off. John scrubs at his face and nods to his dad. “Alright. I’m gonna call Karkat so he knows I won’t be there.”

His dad steps aside so that John can leave the bathroom and walk to the phone in the living room. “Karkat can come over later, but no roughhousing,” he cautions, eyebrow raised speculatively. Haha, Dad. John only wishes there were a certain kind of roughhousing involved in his relationship with Karkat. “Nah. I’m pretty sure Thursday afternoons he has his part time job until late,” John says. Yeah, Thursdays are definitely Karkat’s work-intensive days, when he works two shifts back to back at the store to make up for taking Friday afternoons off. John should be more certain about that, but his head is still a little foggy, and even stuff he has memorized like Karkat’s afterschool schedule seems kind of fuzzy. Blehhhh. Yeah, he doesn’t think he’d be able to focus in class, even if he did go. Good thing he’s always so far ahead on the homework!

“And your cover story?” Samuel asks, closing up the first aid kit on the coffee table and tidying up the couch where John had been sprawled in a daze for the past four hours.

John thinks. “I went to catch a box when someone was unloading a shipment at the community center, and it was too heavy to be dropped like it was on my collar bone. Totally an accident, nothing serious. The hospital sent me right home.”

Before he begins dialing Karkat’s number, Samuel’s hand covers the number pad. When John looks up, confused, his dad gives him a searching look. He reaches up and pulls on John’s eyelids, ignoring John’s surprised jump as he inspects John’s pupils. “Son, you don’t have community center ‘volunteering’ lined up for Wednesdays. That’s Tuesdays and Thursdays. Your cover on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays is the land training for swim team.”

Oh. Whoa. Okay, yeah, now John understands why his dad might be checking his pupils again. He bites his lip. “Yeah, I remember now. It’s alright, I almost messed up Karkat’s schedule, too. Sorry. I think I’m just tired.”

“Confusion and fatigue are symptoms of the concussion. Just let me know if it gets any worse than a little confusion.” His dad pulls away, apparently satisfied that John isn’t completely out of touch with reality.

Still, there’s a weight in John’s head, a feeling he recognizes with a flip in his stomach as a kind of tired, sad resignation. Just another thing for his dad to worry about, huh? Just another way John has failed to balance his work life and his personal life -

He’d thought he was done feeling that particular emotion. That way only useless self-recrimination lies. He shakes his head as the dial tone rings in his ears, unpleasantly shrill, and tries to shove the resignation out of mind.
“And son?”

“Yeah, Dad?” he says. There’s silence except for the phone ringing until John looks up and meets his dad’s eyes, curious.

Samuel smiles warmly. “I’m proud of you. You did great work last night.”

The familiar words work instantly. John’s shoulders slacken as the tension stirred up by his brief foray into resigned self-pity falls away. Yeah, he still feels like he got blown up a few times, but emotionally, the obvious care and pride in his dad’s face brighten his darkening mood.

Sometimes, John doesn’t know how he’d get by without such an awesomely supportive dad. Unable to suppress a wide grin in response, John is smiling when the line clicks and Crabdad answers. Not even the lusus’s piercing skree of greeting can get him down! “Hey, Crabdad! How are you!”

The lusus’s screech may or may not have hit a high F note worthy of a trained soprano. Then it devolves in a series of excited clicks and skrees, Crabdad chattering at John incomprehensibly while he sits down on the couch again, maneuvering his sling so that it rests on a cushion. He doesn’t really understand the lusus; apparently it’s a troll thing that a custodian basically develops its own language for use with their assigned trolls, so the only one who actually communicates with Crabdad is Karkat, and John gets the feeling a lot of that is just Karkat swearing in crab-language. But Crabdad doesn’t seem to mind that John can’t talk back. Maybe it’s just happy to have an audience that doesn’t try to silence it with food bribes and pseudo-strife whenever it starts screeching.

He doesn’t need to ask the lusus to go get Karkat for the same reason – Karkat seems to have the uncanny ability to sense whenever his lusus is on the phone. Well, John says uncanny. It’s more that Crabdad’s regular speaking voice is so shrill and loud that you can hear it talking from half a block away. Sure enough, after three minutes of John nodding to himself and making small sounds of affirmation whenever the lusus pauses, he can hear the heavy thump of footsteps that means Karkat is charging downstairs to intercept the call.

“JOHN! I CAN HEAR YOU ENCOURAGING THIS! I CAN HEAR YOU ENABLING THIS FATASS, INCOMPETENT, MISERABLE EXCUSE FOR A LUSUS! STOP THAT RIGHT THE FUCK NOW OR SO HELP ME – PUT THAT TABLE DOWN, NO, NO! DOWN! DAMN YOU, I AM ARMED!”

John starts cackling, and he’s still giggling on and off by the time Karkat tames his lusus and extricates the phone from the crab’s pincer grip. “I do NOT need this first thing in the goddamn morning, John,” Karkat growls. “I have not yet had my coffee and you have caused these shenanigans. What can you possibly want before coffee happens, John? What. Do. You. Want.”

“Ah. About that coffee,” John begins. “Uh. I probably won’t be able to make it to school today. At all. Sorry about that.”

“What,” Karkat says, his voice flat. “What in the sixteen hells could possibly prevent you from going
to school?! I think you have a better attendance record than me. I’m pretty sure the day you miss a full day of school is the same day I’m due to have this bloated fucking rage tumor removed from my brain, and oh wait, looks like I forgot to pencil that one in on my calendar! What the hell is wrong with you, John?! Do I have to come over there?!”

“Haha! Calm down, Karkat,” John laughs. “I just kind of tripped yesterday during land training. It was really weird, I was on a hill, and my collar bone took one for the team! It’s not really that bad, it just hurts a little, so my dad’s making me stay home today. I really am sorry about the coffee thing. I’ll owe you two on Friday!”

He waits for Karkat to answer, but there’s a long pause before he gets a response, long enough that he wonders if the connection dropped. He’s about to ask if Karkat is still there when the troll finally speaks.

“…I’m coming over. Don’t fucking move, you clumsy idiot, I’ll be over in five fucking minutes.”

Oops. “Whaaaat? Karkat, school starts in like a half an hour! Seriously, I’m okay! I’ll be back tomorrow, I promise.”

“School can go fuck itself right in the state-funded, clique-infested ass. If you’re in pain, I’m coming to see you.”

Oh, boy. John has seriously underestimated Karkat’s protective streak. The last thing he needs is for Karkat to come over here in a defensive rage over the collarbone and get an eyeful of John’s very concussed-looking face. The troll might literally implode. “No – Karkat, you have that…thingy today, right?” He’s scrambling for the answer; he knows Karkat has something in one of the classes John isn’t in, his brain is just so slow on the uptake – “History of film! You have that group presentation today!”

He can almost hear Karkat jerk to a halt, pausing for a moment before letting loose a low, sobbing groan of despair. “Those imbeciles.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty much carrying the team, right?” John says, seizing on this line of thought. Of all the classes at their high school, Karkat’s most tumultuous relationship is with his History of Film elective. He can swing from babbling excitedly about the chiaroscuro effect of early 1930s black and white films, to tearing his hair out while declaring totally platonic hatred for every single other person taking the class. “And that’s first thing in the morning. I don’t want you to get screwed over by your team in your favorite class because of me. I’d feel awful!”

Karkat has started muttering unintelligibly to himself, and John can already tell he’s going to try to skip out in the afternoon even if the troll does give in and go to Film. Before Karkat can jump in and insist on coming over, John continues, “I’d really appreciate it if you’d apologize to Ms Hathaway for me in chem, too. I know she wanted us to finish up with that crystallization lab today.”

“…Fuck. I’ll go in and finish it,” Karkat says, sounding defeated. “Goddammit, you asshat, I have work right after school today, too. Can you somehow manage to avoid further damaging yourself until tomorrow morning? I’m fucking serious, if you say no, I swear to God John -”

“I’ll be fine. Seriously, man, I’m going to be pretty boring today anyway. They gave me some pain pills just in case, and I think I’m about to just pass out on the couch here.” John doesn’t need to fake a yawn, he just lets some of his exhaustion out from under the cheery shield he’s been maintaining. His jaw gives a small crack with the force of the yawn. Nailed it. “Hit me up on Pesterchum during lunch or something so you can make sure I’m not dead yet.”
“Do not say things like ‘dead’ right now, John,” Karkat hisses. “I mean – fuck – just – don’t even move from that couch. I absolutely forbid it as your moirail. That couch is your new seat of power. If your ass leaves that couch, I will know about it.”

Guilt starts building up in John’s stomach again, and he purses his lips. Now that some of the instinctive anger has died off, Karkat sounds tense and worried, and by the end of his mini rant he sounds almost like he’s in pain himself, and John can’t stand it that he’s made Karkat that upset. John’s mouth opens and the sound just kind of – happens. “Shoosh, dummy. I get it, the couch is my friend. Shooooosh.”

There’s silence on both ends of the line. "Did you just shoosh me?" Karkat asks.

Oh, fuck it. "Shoosh, Karkat."

Karkat is quiet again, and when he replies at last, the pain is gone. He just sounds kind of dazed. "I. Yeah. Alright. Um. I'm just - I'm gonna go - can you do that again?" He sounds almost painfully hopeful.

Meanwhile, on the inside, John is screaming and trying to mentally beat himself into shutting up sometime this century because why why why this is the opposite of what he wants oh god why is this happening.

On the outside, he can only pathetically repeat, "Shoosh?"

"...I'll see you tomorrow then, John," Karkat says, still dazed. John realizes why the troll sounds so strange - there isn't any anger or irritation in his voice at all. He hasn't even said fuck in nearly a minute, which is seven different kinds of freaky. "Stay safe and don't injure yourself anymore, got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," John says weakly. "Have a good day at school, Karkat!" Then he hangs up in the middle of Karkat's dazed farewell and topples over sideways onto the couch, letting the phone fall from limp hands as he stares into the middle distance.

Yeah, he succeeded in getting Karkat to go to school.

But he’s also pretty sure he’s just moirail-zoned himself into the next century.

John takes the cushion from under his sling, plants it over his face, and muffles a frustrated scream against the fabric. When he finally emerges, his head buzzing with a new headache, he hears a chuckle that tries to morph itself into an innocent cough at the last minute. He looks up to see his father standing in the kitchen, still coughing and trying to look busy with making breakfast.

Yeah, John is never going to live this one down.

- After a very long, rather boring day of staying at home and forcing himself to stay awake, running through only the gentlest of t'ai chi forms when it's time for he and his dad to practice together, John crawls into bed as soon as his dad gives the all clear. He wakes up once during the night, groggy and confused by the fact that it's dark out and he isn't patrolling, before fatigue yanks him back down into slumber.

The next morning when his alarm goes off, he's so bleary-eyed and sticky-mouthed that it feels like he's been to the fifth dimension and back. This is what usually happens when he's slept for too long, and it feels awful. He wakes up properly and feels more alive after a shower, though it's hard to
maneuver with the pangs from his collarbone restricting his motions. However, when he gets out and
dressed, the bruises on his face have clearly faded, and he knows he can't endure another endlessly
drawn-out day of sitting around like yesterday. He needs some fresh air before he explodes or
something.

His dad insists on driving him to school. John rolls the passenger side window down and the wind
stirred up by the car blows right into his face, curling around and through his hair with bright
greetings. By the time they reach the school, he feels almost normal again, totally recharged by the
crisp spring air.

Now he just has to face down Karkat. This should be fun. Stacking one mug of hot, black coffee on
top of the promised second mug, John rolls out of the car and waves with his sling as his dad drives
off. Then he walks into the school building and heads upstairs to his and Karkat's lockers.

Karkat isn't even bothering with the pretense of sorting through his textbooks when John rounds the
corner. The troll scans the hallways with his back to his locker, hunched over in his oversized grey
hoodie, and when John waves and begins his approach, Karkat glowers at him with a combination of
relief and his usual irritation.

Then his rust-red eyes open so wide John can see them almost bulging as Karkat gets a better look at
John's face.

John grins with all his teeth and braces for impact. "Heya Karkat! Good morning!"

It is a slow-building rage, and is somehow simultaneously heart-warming, hilarious, and terrifying to
behold. The dull dark red of a flush rises in Karkat's cheeks, one of his eyes twitching as his lips
move soundlessly. His hands jerk and flail in weird, half-aborted motions; Karkat is clearly torn
between tearing at his hair in distressed fury, reaching out to grab John's arm, and attempting to
strangle him. The latter instinct may or may not be winning out, which would be goddamn hilarious,
if painful to fight off.

But Karkat's face just keeps getting redder and redder, and John's not really sure the troll is
remembering to breathe between his choked noises of utter fury. The last thing John wants is to
finally cause the rage-aneurysm Karkat has repeatedly threatened to develop in the past, so he drops
the shit-eating grin and puts on his best apologetic face. Karkat would say he was pouting if Karkat
could speak at the moment. He would be right. "Yaaaaah, it looks a lot worse than it actually is -"

Karkat holds up a hand, and John shuts up. The hand twitches between strangle-mode and calm as
Karkat visibly attempts to collect himself, hiccupping silently as he opens his mouth, then closes it
repeatedly, still unable to find words. Tears of pure, undiluted fury seem to be touching the edges of
his eyes with red.

John has finally done it. He has made Karkat so angry, the troll is literally speechless. He wishes he
had a camera to immortalize this moment of their friendship for all eternity because this is hilariouse.

A single chuckle bursts out of John's lips, and he realizes what he has done too late, slapping his free
hand across his mouth.

And then, like a volatile, incensed god unleashing his boundless wrath upon an unwitting creation,
Karkat loses. His. Shit. He reaches out and seizes John by the - thankfully - uninjured arm and
suddenly John is being dragged through the halls by a surprisingly strong grip. He lets Karkat do his
thing, despite the fact that they're aiming for the biology classroom rather than their first classes,
because John has a feeling Karkat needs to get this off his chest, and John has kind of been a bit of a
dick about this by keeping him out of the loop.
Karkat kicks open the door of the biology lab with great prejudice, and the teacher grading papers at
the front of the room yelps and bangs her knee on the side of the desk as she stands up, giving the
two of them a wary eye. Ignoring her, Karkat rounds on John, and the invectives pour forth like a
fountain of fury.

"Oh my god, you pompous fuckwaffle, what the gibbering fuck did you do to yourself?!" he yells,
his voice half-shrieking when he hits a high note and keeps climbing.

"Ahaha, sorry, Karkat, I told you I got kind of banged up yesterday-"

"'Kind of' he says! 'I FELL', he tells me! You look like you got into a fight with the wall, and the
wall fucking well kicked your ass, and then it called its magical gang of wall-friends and they
decided 'you know what would be fun? You know what would be fucking hilarious? If we beat the
everloving panshattered fuck out of John 'dumbass' Egbert!' Does any of that sound familiar?!
BECAUSE IF NOT YOU BETTER HAVE A GOOD EXPLANATION FOR THIS!"

Ooooh, boy. He'd sworn he wouldn't do this. He wasn't going to -

"JOHN EGBERT I AM GOING TO HUNT DOWN THE PERSON WHO PRESUMABLY DID
THIS AND RIP THEIR SHAMEGLOBES OUT THROUGH THEIR STOMACH IF YOU
DON'T ANSWER ME RIGHT NOW -"

But he needs a distraction! Before the scared-looking teacher calls the police on them or something!
Shit! He's going to do the thing!

John paps Karkat on the cheek. It takes everything in his being not to stroke said cheek and take this
in a very different direction. Instead, he takes his hand off and paps Karkat again. "Shoosh." When
he doesn't get his hand bitten off, he does it again. "Shoosh, Karkat."

Karkat's hands fall and he stares at John, one eye still half-scrunched in stilled fury. "You're not
getting out of this that easily," he says weakly, sounding uncertain and dazed.

Oh my god, it's like a magic anger-off switch, John thinks, equally dazed. Why has John never
known about this before? Has this always been a thing?! He's not oblivious, he's watched Karkat's
stupid rom-coms and seen how the troll romances work, how the moirails shoosh each other and the
auspices slap their feuding partners into stunned calm. He's just never put two and two together and
realized it works when it's a human and a troll friendship. Interspecies moirails aren't exactly a
common thing, not when troll serendipity works the way it does.

Which means Karkat really and truly does see John as his moirail.

John's stomach twists with guilt, and he swallows back bile as he musters up a smile from
somewhere. Pretending he doesn't wish he could just lean forward and kiss the anger off his best
friend's face, he pulls Karkat into a hug. "I'm fine. I'm fine, and you're fine. We're fine. You don't
need to eviscerate anyone in the middle of a schoolday, I promise. I just fell down a hill badly."

When Karkat hugs him back, his short claws digging into John's back and his coarse black hair
brushing against John's face while the troll rests his forehead on John's shoulder, John feels both
guilty and happy at the same time and he has no idea what to do about any of it.

Because yeah, he really doesn't want to get friend-zoned the rest of his life. But he also really wants
his best friend to not be upset. John is happiest when Karkat is his usual irritated, amused self, not
drowning in so much rage on John's behalf that he can't even breathe.

And he thinks, as Karkat pulls away and glares to hide the faint smile on his lips, that if being
moirails makes Karkat happy, then he doesn't know how to say no.

But somewhere low in his belly, he can feel the ugly guilt twisting into a more permanent knot.

This...isn't going to end well. He can feel it.

- 

When John gets upstairs, easing his backpack off over his sling and tossing it beside his desk, the first thing he notices is the small beep of a notification from Pesterchum from his computer. Which is kind of weird; Karkat wouldn’t have reached home yet, and normally they don’t really pester each other in earnest until they’ve both had dinner and settled down to do homework. Sometimes their schedules sync enough to work on their homework together, but it hadn’t worked out today, though John could tell by the worried look on Karkat's face that he’d probably wanted to just sit and watch John some more. Even after getting shooshed into a stupor, Karkat had spent the rest of the day all up in John's personal space, following him in the hallways even when their classes were are opposite ends of the building, and growling whenever someone - particularly trolls - accidentally jostled John's arm and aggravated his collarbone. He seemed to accept John's story about a bad fall, but John still caught the troll eyeing the facial bruising speculatively.

Frowning, John pulls his hoodie off and opens the window to let in a nice breeze, wrapping it absently around him as he sits heavily in the chair, clicking open chat window with the scent of early spring heavy in his nose.

It isn’t Karkat’s handle, carcinoGeneticist, nor is it an unceasing wall of caps locked grey text spewing artfully crafted metaphors and invectives on his screen.

The handle is turntechGodhead, and John sucks in a breath at the bright crimson text that is currently sprawling its way down the screen in rambling, short, uncapitalized fragments. It’s been months since he’s heard from this particular contact. There had been a time when speaking to him had been the only thing saving John from a mental breakdown. Then Karkat had moved into town, and John’s mental stability had a real life friend to latch onto and depend on, not a chum with strange hours and a penchant for rapping at length about anything from the weather to the latest criminal he’d captured.

That’s because turntechGodhead is the handle for Flashstep, the time-stopping hero based in Houston. Of course, they don’t use their heroic aliases or last names on here; it would be idiotic to leave that kind of electronic evidence lying around where any decent hacker could find it. Instead, John had given Flashstep his real first name – in hindsight, that had been pretty fucking stupid, but… John hadn’t exactly been on top of his game when they’d met. In return, he’d been told to call the other hero ‘Dave.’ Who knows if that’s actually the guy’s name or not.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 19:36:01 --

TG: yo
TG: sup EB
TG: john
TG: john
TG: your chumstatus says away
TG: but my heart says he wont let me down in my time of dire peril this is john were talking about here
TG: yeah i can wait
TG: drink some aj
TG: finish this godforsaken taco
TG: god not even the tacos bring me joy anymore nothing can make today worth it john
TG: you wouldn’t believe how unbelievably long today has been
TG: …
TG: john
TG: john i will rap so help me god
TG: yup thats it im feeling some sick beats rn
TG: i just have to let it out
TG: near
TG: far
TG: wherever you are
TG: i believe that
-- ectoBiologist has joined the chat! --
TG: oh thank titty christ i thought i was alone in the void john
TG: was about to have myself a commemoratory last man standing orgy of existential despair up in here
TG: i mean are you reading this i nearly broke out into celine dion and called it a rap
TG: thats not even ironic anymore that goes straight past ironic and into full crazy
TG: cant leave a guy hanging like that EB it does things to a mans mind
EB: sorry! jeez, dave, some of us have regular people school to go to! :P
TG: im telling you EB
TG: homeschool
TG: its the wave of the future for all aspiring hero types
TG: 10/10 would recommend
EB: yeah, yeah
EB: hang on while i shut my door

John has been glancing over his shoulder all this time, his anxiety increasing with each new line of red text. He leaves his chair, listens to the sounds of dinner being prepared downstairs, and closes his bedroom door noiselessly.

Yeah. His dad doesn’t exactly know that John’s in contact with another hero.

It’s not that John had intended to keep it a secret; it was just that at the time he had been in a really bad place, mentally. He had felt so caged in and suffocated by the work, so very alone when Rose’s letters trickled to a halt, and talking to his dad had stopped helping and started being part of the problem once John was thoroughly immersed in the negative, circular logic of his depression. When John had returned from his…excursion, he had kept his near hourly conversations with Dave on the downlow as he slowly worked through the process of dealing with his depression, not wanting to risk his dad cutting off one of the few human connections John had left.

Between the awkward therapy sessions where he wouldn’t talk about half of his real problems and the much more useful, rambling chats with Dave, John had somehow pieced himself together enough to get out of bed in the morning. The summer months had helped, freeing him from the constraining burden of acting normal at school and letting him channel his frustration into nearly sixteen hour shifts of nonstop crime-fighting. Then the next year Karkat had arrived, and things had gotten so much better.

But in the midst of all that chaos and motivation-sapping, tired sadness, the topic of going to Houston and accidentally running into the Flashstep, only to end up being pesterchums with the guy, had somehow failed to come up. His dad knows John reached Houston, but not what happened there that made John turn back and come home. And now it’s been long enough that John feels reeeally guilty about neglecting to tell his dad about such a huge potential security breach.
But the Flashstep is also a hero. John uses this to justify it to himself that if the other hero ever leaks John’s side of the pesterlogs to the media or something, he also risks exposing himself. And in the part of his brain that grew up on a steady diet of Rose Lalonde-brand psychoanalysis, John knows that he sees Dave as a backup, a failsafe, a safety net in case he loses control again. In case he’s alone again. If he reveals this secret to his dad, John risks losing that safety net, and somewhere deep down, he’s still not ready for that. He doesn’t know that he ever will be.

By the time he goes back to the computer, only a moment later, Dave has somehow managed to rack up another monologue. He and Karkat are both as bad as the other about chattering nonstop about nothing at all. Rose could do the same thing with her psychobabble if you let her. Does John just have some talent for picking up friends who enjoy monologuing?

TG: whoa closing the door
TG: damn son you move fast
TG: i mean i dont know if my innocent eyes are ready for this
TG: you said no webcams does this mean were doing this the old fashioned way with selfies from a camera phone
TG: ngl EB that would be ironic as fuck and i would have no choice but to be proud of you
TG: against my better judgment
TG: the anticipation is killing me
EB: oh my god dave how is it even possible for one man to type so much in twenty seconds???
TG: its a talent john an art passed down in my family for generations
TG: now put out
EB: i'm not sending you naked pics you assat! :P you're the one who pestered me, so what did you need?
TG: whoa
TG: a man cant just want to talk to his main internet compadre?
TG: catch up after a few months of heartwrenching silence?
TG: heartwrenching john you hear me youre taking the contents of a home improvement tool kit to my heart here
TG: youve replaced me havent you
TG: and you didnt even have the decency to refund my dowry
TG: you bastard i want my bros twenty head of cattle back
EB: no refunds man sorry
EB: the cattle are alllll mine now
TG: cold man
TG: and now my family will starve through the long winter months
TG: will send you pics of our frozen wasted corpses later for the scrapbook
EB: winter is over, dumbass!
EB: do they even have winter in houston? i thought snow was a myth there.
TG: it is john
TG: snow is a conspiracy of global proportions
TG: but thats not the point the point is i am speaking to you from beyond the grave because you didnt return my familys cattle before the long cold came and now the world will never be blessed with the rightfully sick beats of my first solo album

John can feel his face almost hurting with the force of his smile, and he tones it down, shaking his head slightly. He’s forgotten how weird conversations with Dave could be. It’s a change of pace from talking with Karkat about school and part-time jobs and superhero comics. You never know what bizarre tangent Dave will go off on next.

There’s also an opportunity here. Usually they keep the hero stuff to a bare minimum on the chat forum; neither of them have ever outright declared the subject out of bounds, but by mutual
agreement they didn’t bring up hero work unless John was having a crisis, and that clause hasn’t been used in ages.

The thing is, from what little John has been able to decipher from Dave’s unpredictable banter over the years, the Puppeteer is more than just the Flashstep’s partner; they’re brothers, and they definitely seem to live together. Maybe it’s a stretch, but the Puppeteer is probably around twenty years old than the two of them, and he would have more experience as a hero than Dave. He might have run across the Midnight Crew before – Houston is a big port city after all, and John can’t imagine a big-time criminal organization wouldn’t have attempted to put down roots in such a key urban area. Dad had promised to check all his contacts for information on the Crew, and he’d found out quite a bit. John should do the same.

EB: serious talk time
TG: what
TG: oh fuck
TG: tell me you’re not pregnant EB
TG: i am not the goddamn father am i
TG: fight me i am not
TG: my body is a virgin temple dammit
EB: stopppp dave i’m not pregnant! :P
EB: i just have a question for you
EB: and maybe your bro
TG: whoa
TG: whoa man when did bro become part of this
TG: you been cheating on me with him EB that aint cool
TG: i want a paternity test
EB: dude will you calm down? this is not a federal fucking issue AND I AM NOT PREGNANT
EB: ANYWAY. i just wanted to ask if you or your bro have ever come across an organization called the Midnight Crew
EB: they came into town recently and they started off by blowing up two buildings and tossing a hand grenade at my face
EB: which you can imagine was kind of a downer
EB: so i wondered if your bro might have dealt with them before

Radio silence. John winces and cracks his neck, eyeing the pesterlog before glancing back over his shoulder. The door is still closed, but when he tugs on the air that passes under the door frame he can hear the sounds from downstairs, the beep of the oven as it finishes cooking something that smells like chicken parmesan. He doesn’t have much longer before he has to head down to eat, or his dad will come looking for him. Rubbing at his collarbone absently, he turns back to the screen.

EB: dave?
EB: daaaaave?
TG: okay you’re the second person today to mention this midnight crew thing to me
TG: the other one told me to ask bro about them, too
TG: let it be known that i am officially concerned
TG: also a grenade
TG: literally what the fuck
TG: hang on lemme figure out how to ask my bro
EB: why is that a problem? are you keeping me a secret dave?
EB: and you accuse me of being ashamed of our brohood!
EB: lame, man
TG: shut up our broship is the stuff of legends
TG: but maybe i just want something that my bro hasn't completely taken over in my life
TG: oh but no now everyone and their mother wants a piece of him
TG: christ

Whoa. That was...unexpected. John actually sits back a little from the computer screen and raises an
eyebrow. The Puppeteer and Flashstep have been partners basically since they first showed up, and
they've never shown any signs of animosity. Hell, they barely interact while on the job at all, at least
according to the Houston news reports and numerous fan-made comic series. But that was definitely
some resentment John just read, there.

EB: uh
EB: do we need to jam about this?
EB: because i don't think i'm allowed to have unsolicited feelings jams without permission anymore
but that rant right there? reeks of some feels that need jamming
TG: dude what the fuck is a feelings jam why is that a thing
EB: it's a troll thing okay can we get back on topic
TG: im still thinking okay
TG: you're not a troll
TG: which means you're totally in one of the troll things aren't you
TG: why am i the last one to hear about this john

John just rolls his eyes, pulling a face. This conversation is going nowhere fast. Seriously, why do all
of his friends go on and on like this? Does he secretly just like suffering through this kind of
pesterspam all the time? He wishes Rose were here to help sort things out.

Actually, he just wishes Rose were here at all. He's been missing her a lot lately, though it's still not
nearly as fresh a pain as it had once been.

In the end, he decides to put Flashstep off by playing the confidentiality card.

EB: one of my significant relationships is with a troll alright. any more detail is breaking our
confidentiality clause
EB: :PPP
TG: fine i see how it is
TG: anyway okay im gonna go ask my bro
TG: since the grenade thing means things are all kinds of fucknasty
TG: seriously you alright
EB: oh my god dave, it was like two days ago, i'm fine now. but it seems like things might be
escalating again and that is Not Okay.
TG: fine
TG: wait what
TG: did you actually just say this happened two days ago
TG: and yet you're FINE
TG: do you not listen to the words that come out of your mouth because holy shit
EB: gosh dave you're totally overreacting
EB: the, you know, windy thing caught most of it, and i'm pretty resilient. all things considered, i got
off pretty lucky!
TG: yeah none of this is okay
TG: no assholes are allowed to blow up my promised husband without my permission
TG: it's on
TG: gonna go approach bros lair brb
-- temperedTitan has joined the chat! --
TT: already here
TG: what
EB: what
TT: that's just fucking adorable

Wait, is that - it must be. This is the Puppeteer. John has to readjust his sling, staring at the screen with shocked fascination on his face. Of all the things he'd thought he'd be doing tonight, chatting with the actual real-life Puppeteer was not on the list in any way. This is...kind of awesome.

TG: how
TG: you've been spying on my chatlogs
TG: you fucker
EB: uh
EB: hi dave’s bro?
TT: sup
TT: don’t need to spy on you kid
TT: trust you not to fuck up too bad
TT: just got a trace on ‘Midnight Crew’
TT: which your friend set off
TT: it piqued my interest
EB: so you do know about them!
TT: depends
TT: gotta a few questions for you first kid
TG: okay no
TG: fuck no
TG: you see this this is me telling you no
TG: piss off and ill come ask you about this in your room
TG: get out of our chat this is fucking private
TT: nice try kid
EB: you guys seem to need to talk about this, should I leave for a bit?
TG: no
TT: no

Well then. John just shakes his head, trying to figure out where this messed up conversation is going. It's like Dave is just incapable of staying on track.

TT: first – you’re Heir, right
EB: um, no i'm not.
TT: good enough
TT: second – the MC just got started in your neck of the woods this past week?
TG: i can’t believe you're doing this
-- turntechGodhead has banned temperedTitan from the chat! --
-- temperedTitan cannot be banned from the chat! --
TT: let the kid answer my question
TG: leave him alone
EB: uh, it's okay dave, they're pretty reasonable questions!
EB: yeah, actually, they just showed up out of nowhere about four days ago.
TT: good
TT: then you still have time to run
EB: huh?

John feels his whole body go tense, darting a look at the open window even as a restless breeze stirs around him, wary and ready for trouble. He has to unclench his fists before he can type again,
painfully aware as he types that his dad should be coming up the stairs any moment, and he has no good explanation for the conversation going on right now with not just one but two prominent heroes. This is really nerve-wracking!

TG: oh my christ
TG: why the fuck would he run are you completely insane
EB: seriously!!
EB: i can’t just run away and abandon my city to them! >( not cool dave’s bro!
TT: you fucking run kid
TT: you take whoever you care about in this world and you run
EB: why?!
TT: because that’s what i did

John stops. His head is buzzing, and he stares at the strange mixture of blue, red, and pale orange-yellow that form a long column on his pesterchum window. He buries a hand in his hair and tries to fight back the frustration and confusion pounding in his brain. This is not what he wants to hear from one of the most powerful known heroes in the continental United States.

TG: what are you talking about
TG: bro wtf is going on
TT: kid you think i have a texas accent?
TT: we started in fucking Atlanta
TT: then those MC fuckers turned up out of bugfuck nowhere and started harassing us
TT: you were a barely toilet trained and they had machine guns
TT: and they weren’t pissing around trying to take over the city or anything
TT: they were targeting us. deliberately.
TT: when i couldn’t run them out of the town i grabbed you and we fucking ran
TT: if i couldn’t fucking root them out, no fucking way this kid is gonna be able to

By this point, John can only shake his head, trying and failing to imagine just what the Crew could have brought to bear against the Puppeteer that would actually have driven him out of town. He's a legend among the ranks of real life heroes, almost inhuman in his fighting prowess with both sword and puppet.

But knowing the Crew has faced off with the Puppeteer himself and won, as disturbing as the news is, doesn't change anything.

TG: EB
TG: john
TG: fuck john you still there
EB: yeah i'm here...
EB: and like hell am i running away!
TT: i can’t believe i’m fucking saying this
TT: don’t be the hero here kid
TT: you’re only gonna get you and everyone around you hurt or killed
EB: that’s not gonna happen.
EB: i’m not turning tail just because you say so!
EB: i was just asking if you had any info that might help me and my partner counter them.
EB: anything that isn’t telling me to abandon my city to these guys?
TT: nope
TG: you never fucking run from anything what the hell happened
TG: no way a bunch of pansy ass gangsters could beat you so what the fuck
TT: i had my priorities
EB: well clearly you and i have different priorities!!! and mine include not running away when these
guys keep blowing up public buildings! >;

John is shaking with anger now. He doesn’t actually know that he’s ever been this angry just staring
at a computer screen before. He can hear the loud clattering downstairs that means his dad is setting
the table, a chore John usually helps with, but he doesn’t think he could leave this spot even if his
dad came upstairs and started reading the chatlog over his shoulder. The sharp pain of the concussion
is beating a tattoo against the back of his head, which just irritates him even more.

John is so. Fucking. Furious.

How dare this guy suggest Heir run.

TT: then you're suicidal
TT: at least give this partner of yours fair warning before you drag him into a firefight he can’t walk
away from
EB: that’s not gonna happen!
EB: we can handle ourselves!!!
TT: they have way more than bombs and guns kid
TT: you haven’t met all the card suits yet
EB: what, like Hearts Boxcar? been there, beat that.
TT: if he’s not dead you haven’t beat him kid
TT: Hearts isn't gonna go away just because he’s behind bars
TT: believe me kid. i went through this before. you think you can handle this, but they have
numbers, they have money, and they have one thing none of us can match
TT: they have Jack Noir
EB: i don’t know what the hell a Jack Noir is but i get it. you can’t help.
TG: im sorry EB
TG: fuck this was a fucking mistake
EB: it's not your fault dave. your bro is apparently just a totally unhelpful douche...
TT: last warning, kid. just get out of town. go settle down in some nice new urban locale and pick up
where you left off
EB: just. stop. just stop i can’t even deal with this right now.
EB: you barge in on our private conversation and you have the nerve to tell me to leave my city to be
taken over by some crazy gang cult???
EB: fuck you.
EB: fuck. you.

John’s fingers mash the keyboard too hard; he can hear the plastic creaking with each pointed jab.
But he can’t stop. The breeze is tearing up the posters on his walls, upsetting the sheets on his bed,
and prowling around the edges of the room, ready for a fight that won’t come.

He’s too agitated. He knows this, objectively, but he can't seem to calm down. He needs to get a grip
on himself, or something incredibly stupid is going to happen, he can feel it. Dave’s Bro isn’t here,
and there’s nothing else he can hit. He needs to just walk away from the fucking computer and go
down to the basement and hit things until he passes out, but he can't because his arm is in a goddamn
sling and his head hurts and ow ow -

EB: i think i need to go :
TT: i know your chumhandle kid i’m not letting this go. it's fucking serious
TG: okay stop
TG: leave him alone bro for fucks sake
TG: this is getting old
EB: now what? you're going to fucking pester me until i say i’ll leave town?!
EB: you are infuriating you are the single most infuriating thing on this fucking planet
congratulations it is you!
TG: (daaaamn fucking tell him EB)
TT: fuck your city. fuck whatever moral code is making you so blindingly stupid right now.
TT: I really mean that, fuck them over and get out now while you still can
TT: better they get another city than they get you
TT: go somewhere new. think up some new air pun, or better yet, rework your powers so you can
pretend to be something other than a fucking air-bender, they’ll be looking for you after this. they
won’t stop. now stop being a fucking stubborn moron and act like you have a modicum of
intelligence. your guardian should be telling you this, not me, where the fuck is he in all this?
EB: OKAY THAT IS IT YOU PESTILENT NOOKSTAIN CONGRATULATIONS YOU ARE
OFFICIALLY THE MOST RAGE-INDUCING BULGELICKING ASSHAT THE UNIVERSE
HAS EVER HAD THE DISPLEASURE OF SECRETING INTO EXISTENCE!
EB: LOOK AT THIS I AM REDUCED TO USING HIS FUCKING CAPS LOCK QUIRK!
THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE!
EB: I SWEAR TO ANY GOD LISTENING I AM GOING TO
TG: whoa what
TT: shit
TG: john you know caps lock
tG: were those weird troll swear words because i got maybe half of that
TG: john
EB: WKSHRISEHSKW
TG: oh my fuck what was that
TG: did you just keyboard smash in rage
TG: I swear to god bro if you broke my fucking friend i will end you
TT: shit
TG: im not fucking around here

After a minute of inactivity, the computer goes into sleep mode.

The room is empty.

The curtain flutter in an uncertain, aimless breeze.

-

“John! Dinner is ready!”

Samuel Egbert places the bowl of pasta on the table with a thud, frowning slightly as he leans over to
look up the stairs to the second floor. John’s door is still closed, which isn’t unusual, but usually
doesn’t impede the boy’s hearing, either. John’s mastery over the wind lets him hear things most
people can’t perceive. The last time John had ever really ignored Samuel, whether deliberately or
incidentally, had been almost two years ago.

“John!”

No response.

Samuel freezes up, stripping off his oven mitts in slow, deliberate motions. He walks to the foot of
the stairs and looks up into the dark hallway above. “John?” he asks, more quietly.

Nothing.
Then he’s going up the stairs a bit more quickly than his usual measured pace, taking the last few steps two at a time before striding to John’s closed door. He forces himself to stop, breathes in once, and raps out his usual knock on the door. It’s entirely possible John has simply lain down and decided to take an impromptu nap, after all. He can’t assume the worst just because –

No answer, not even the muffled yelp of a boy awakened from sleep. The door isn’t locked when Samuel tries it and he pushes it open, eyes scanning the room with more than a little worry.

That worry becomes full-on desperation when he realizes John is gone.

The window hangs open, the curtains fluttering in a gentle breeze, with John’s backpack kicked under the desk and his bed torn apart by something – a breeze no doubt. Samuel takes only two steps to cross the room to the Captain America poster he knows John uses to conceal the safe with his uniform in it. It doesn’t make sense for John to have left in the middle of the evening without telling Samuel, unless perhaps there was an emergency -

He uses his backup key and opens the safe. Heir’s costume lies folded up in a neat square beside Casey, and John’s flying goggles still hang on their hook.

John is gone.

John is gone, again, and this time he hasn’t bothered to put his suit on before leaving. Anyone could see him flying like this, anyone at all.

What the hell is John thinking? Swallowing back a mix of both concern and anger, Samuel composes himself. He can’t jump to conclusions. The room is a mess, but John may have left a note explaining his disappearance, only for it to be tossed into a hidden corner by the wind when he took off. Samuel methodically searches the entire room, sweeping beneath the bed itself and through John’s closet and flipping through the textbooks still in his backpack. He can only conclude there is no note. He moves the computer mouse and the login screen comes up, the computer having gone into sleep mode due to inactivity at some point. And Samuel doesn’t have the time to figure out John’s password.

Maybe once they had trusted each other with everything, but John’s depression two years ago had driven a wedge between them. Even with his illness having abated, there are still hollow, painful gaps Samuel can’t touch, topics that bring a weary sadness to his boy’s face and a weight to his shoulders that Samuel can’t force the issue about without risking breaking his own child.

But Samuel had thought that John had recovered. The specialist had said there might be relapses and darker swings, but John has always kept Samuel abreast of his day to day shifts in mood, in addition to his crime fighting performance evaluations. And his friendship with Karkat Vantas, which Samuel might once have disapproved of as a distraction, seemed to have smoothed away the last of the lines from his child’s face.

Karkat.

With one last intense look out the window, trying and failing to pick out the dark shape of his son flying against the dark evening sky, Samuel runs downstairs to the home phone line, and dials a number he has memorized from the sheer number of times he has seen it before John picks up the phone.

Maybe this is all very easily explained. Samuel has researched the concept of moirails ever since Karkat first mentioned the term. Perhaps, if John has had an episode, he simply flew to Karkat’s house in order to have one of their feelings jams. It would be a reckless, stupid course of action, but it
is a legitimate sequence of events. The depression had taken out John’s better judgment last time, too.

He is greeted with the loud, customary skree of Karkat’s lusus. It gabbles and clicks at him incoherently. In a calm, sensible tone of voice he tells it, “This is Samuel Egbert. May I speak with Karkat, please?”

Another trilling screech echoes across the line with a burst of painful feedback, before the lusus sets the phone down with a loud thump. It sounds as though the giant crab is still screeching, though the noise grows more distant as it scuttles away. Samuel waits impatiently, eyes closed, until he hears thumping footsteps and irate yelling rather than the clack of claws on the other end. “Y-Yeah, Mr. Egbert?” comes the wary, just-this-side-of-yelling growl of the young troll. “Can I help you with something, sir?”

Samuel would normally have smiled and shushed Karkat’s nervous formality. Now, he has more pressing concerns than maintaining the façade of an ordinary parent around John's friend. “Karkat, my boy. I just wanted to check to see if John might have gone over to your house for a visit after school today.”

“Huh? Fu-no, John isn’t here. I dropped him off at your house after school.” The troll boy hesitates, and when he speaks again there is an undertone of worry that Samuel had hoped to avoid triggering. “Why, is something wrong?”

“Nothing at all,” Samuel says, tacking on a reassuring chortle of laughter, and proceeds to feed Karkat one of his standard emergency excuses. “I believe he took off to his extra volunteer hours without stopping by my office to say goodbye, that’s all. He did say he was running late, and he knew I was in an important conference call. I thought I’d check with you, just in case. Take care, Karkat.”

“...Yeah, okay, are you su-”

Samuel hangs up too soon, but he barely pauses to regret it. He dials John’s cell number, and begins to list swears in a military cadence under his breath until he hears the familiar, buzzing ring of ‘Final Countdown’ echoing down the stairs from John’s room, and his blood runs cold.

John doesn’t have his cell with him, he’s not in uniform, and he’s not at Karkat’s.

Where the hell could he be?

---

Touring the world is fun! Jade doesn't know why people don't do it more often!

She's been at it for almost a year and a half now, exploring places and saving people, but she has in no way seen even a fraction of all the cool stuff out here! Clearly if she really wants to reach her final destination, she's going to have to cut some of her planned stops short. It's kind of disappointing but not really. She'll have plenty of time for saving the world after she finishes running some errands for her grandpa!

Sighing, Jade pats Bec on the side and stands up, brushing the black-footed penguin off her lap. It brays like a donkey in irritation before waddling off. This island off the coast of South Africa is populated almost entirely by these obnoxious things, but they're just so cute! And the island air is nice and warm and salty, though not as tropical as back home. Jade hadn't thought she'd ever want to go back to that tiny island in the Pacific until after she'd already blown it up and started feeling homesick. Not her smartest move, in retrospect.
Nothing she can do about it now!

"Bleehhhhh. Alright, Bec, let's go." Jade slides on her aviation goggles and concentrates until she teleports into the plane. A year and a half has done wonders for her control; she hardly ever needs Bec to help direct her and orient her spatially anymore, though he still helps her out with moving heavy objects. The wolf appears a moment later, a brief glimpse of foreign galaxies visible instead of fur before it settles down behind the pilot's seat.

Jade doesn't mind the lights show. A lot of people seem really surprised by Bec's abilities when they're out saving people, but she doesn't see why. It's just how the wolf gets around; it rarely, if ever, walks when it can just as easily teleport everywhere.

Anyway. Jade reaches into the pocket next to the driver's seat and pulls out a messy bundle of papers that she's been consulting on and off since she left home. One's training is never over, of course! These are Grandpa's last lesson plans, diagrams for repairing the plane in case of emergency, and details on a few last minute errands Grandpa always intended to finish, but never got around to. Some of them are really boring, but a couple are time sensitive apparently. And Jade has crossed most of Asia and Africa, visiting the places Grandpa visited during his wilderness adventurer years. It's only right that eventually she visit Grandpa's old lab in his hometown!

She fires up the engine and starts typing in new coordinates.

Her fingers hesitate over the lunch top's keyboard after she finishes, and she bites her lip. Then she shakes her head vigorously, hard enough that her hair comes loose and ends up in total disarray, which makes her feel a bit better.

Just because her only Pesterchum hasn't ever answered her pesterings, ever, doesn't mean it won't work eventually! Grandpa had been the one to give her the chumhandle, and she's been trying to establish contact with her chum for years. After a while, she'd realized that for whatever reason, her messages weren't going through, or at least, her chum wasn't logging on to see his messages.

Ahaahaha! He's going to have such a backlog when he finally decides to login!

Jade smiles at the absolutely hilarious thought of the look on her chum's face when he sees how much material he has to read through, and starts a new chatlog to begin her daily, rambling monologue.


GG: heyyyy!
GG: good morning john! :)
GG: it must be around eight in the morning where you live, right?
GG: i hope you're feeling awesome this morning :)
GG: i met a bunch of penguins today, and we played tag together!
GG: Bec always wins of course, but it doesn't get that it's not supposed to cheat by teleporting everywhere
GG: this one time, it teleported into the ocean to catch a penguin that was trying to swim away. the poor penguin was sooooo surprised! it made a face like :O
GG: and then afterward we took down an animal poaching ring! that was really sad though because they'd already hurt a lot of rhinos by the time we got here, and i almost didn't catch them in time
GG: does that ever happen to you john? i'm sure you're an awesome hero, just like me! otherwise why would Grandpa say to stay in contact with you and talk to you about hero stuff???
GG: usually i really like being the hero because i get to help people and save them and everyone is happier after that
GG: but sometimes things go wrong and then people get hurt
GG: and usually when i arrive it's the bad guys who get hurt but i still feel bad about it :( 
GG: i don't know!
GG: anyway, i hope you start to answer me soon, john! having a one-sided conversation gets really boring sometimes! :P doofus!
GG: byyyyye! :DDD

-- gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering ghostyTrickster [GT] at 17:34:12 --

Jade runs out of steam after that, and signs off with a flourish. She realizes she’s chewing on a wayward strand of hair and spits it out before hitting enter on the keyboard one last time. The engine rumbles to a start, and the radiation shields sound off little pings as they confirm they’re working to keep the engine from irradiating the rest of the plane.

Excellent. As Grandpa always liked to say – tally ho! Jade pulls down her goggles, spins once in her chair for luck, and –

Someone is standing in the back of the plane.

She skids to a stop by dragging her feet, heart pounding as she pulls a rifle from her sylladex and levels it at the back. “Hey -!” she starts, then stares, nonplussed, at the empty compartment behind her. There’s no one there. The roof at the back of the compartment slopes down low enough that Jade would have to crouch to fit, and there’s nowhere a stowaway could have hidden that fast, not with the hold bolted shut.

Her skin is crawling though; the dark figure she’d seen had just been standing there, watching her from behind. It definitely hadn’t been there when she first teleported in, or she would have noticed the extra mass impacting the space around her. In fact, even in that brief moment, she’d barely felt its presence at all, as though its atoms had only stabilized and possessed mass for a split second, when her eyes had scanned over it while she turned –

“Huh. But that’s so interesting,” she murmurs, fixed her eyes on that one spot. “Hey, Bec? Someone was in the back of the plane just now, right? You felt them too?”

The wolf huffs an affirmative, its weighty head heavy as the wolf tucks it onto her foot. It doesn’t appear to be overly concerned about the mysterious figure, which does a lot towards calming Jade down, and she feels free to let the SCIENCE! instinct take over her brain. Because ooooh yeah, there is some serious science going on here. She wishes the figure would appear again, but she highly suspects that it won’t. She’s observed it, but then she’d looked away in that split second between her seeing it and drawing her specibus, and she might never get that opportunity again. Darn!

Because that hadn’t been teleportation – not enough leftover baseline radiation in the air – and definitely hadn’t been remote viewing or anything involving a spiritual/mental energy construct – there wouldn’t have been mass involved if it was just an image or a spell. Which leaves the extremely intriguing possibility that she just witnessed someone with serious issues at the quantum level. If her theory is right, as long as no one observes this person, they exist in all possible quantum states at once, including the states where they don’t exist at all, cancelling out their own mass; but if observed under the right circumstances, they can collapse into one single possible quantum state and can be seen, heard, felt.

Considering current scientific experiments have only managed to observe this effect in molecules on a scale of nanometers, the fact that she just saw someone the size of a grade-schooler exhibiting quantum wave superposition is a pretty darn significant scientific breakthrough.
This requires *investigation*.

Jade faces forward and sets the autopilot running, eyeing the back of the plane every so often as the plane takes off and veers to the north. She remembers to stick her head out and wave good bye to the penguins at the last minute. Warm wind tearing at her hair, she shouts out, “Byyyyy!” and laughs when a penguin slips and falls off the side of a rock in surprise. Then she lowers the pilot’s dome again and begins shuffling through her sylladex pocket for her tools and her palmtop to take readings of the spot in the back of the compartment.

It’s a good thing she’s headed for Grandpa’s old secret lab! This is going to require some SERIOUS SCIENCE.

- Jade has to stop and meddle a bit as she passes over the western coast of Africa, stopping several smuggling and poaching operations and more individual crimes when she spots them from above. She can’t let herself think of all the criminal activity she might be missing. There’s a reason there are so many heroes in the world - one person can’t solve all the world’s problems just by running around and beating people up. That was something Grandpa had drilled into her early on, and Jade is really grateful he did; it’s hard enough knowing that someone, somewhere is *always* being hurt or stolen from or killed, without feeling guilty over not being able to save the *entire* world. If she took responsibility for the whole world at once, she’d probably explode!

But anyway, between that and her periodic breaks to adjust the engines, trying to alter their radiation output and perhaps trigger another decoherence event for her quantumly unstable passenger, she takes nearly a week to arrive in British airspace. When she reaches the coordinates from her grandpa’s records, she lands the plane, braking to a halt at the end of an overgrown, mossy runway.

The radio crackles. “Password required, old sport! Quick now, hup hup, we haven’t got all day, the missile launchers are locking on as we speak!”

Jade grins at the record of Grandpa’s voice. “It’s me, Grandpa! The password is -” she glances wildly from side to side and leans forward to whisper “‘Frederick Marshman Bailey, tiptip tally ho, and an epicycloid with a k value of 4.13’.”

There is a long pause as the responder ticks along to the next prerecorded message. “Quite correct, my girl! Welcome to the old estate! Do try to keep the good china intact, and redirect all explosions to the portrait gallery on the third floor, there’s a dear. There are spare riflekind in the usual places; do *not* go outside with taking at least three! One must always be prepared!”

Jade mouths the last part of the advice along with her Grandpa, smiling nostalgically as the airplane hangar off to the side of the runway opens, the automatic gates still running smoothly even after years of disuse. Grandpa had always been really big on preparedness, and it’s really nice to hear him say the words himself again instead of just the faded memory she plays back in her head sometimes when she and Bec are about to go somewhere new.

She steers the plane inside the dark garage and parks it between an antique WWII fighter plane (definitely a Hawker Hurricane) and what appears to be a fully operational late model Churchill infantry tank. Jade pulls off her goggles and brushes crumbs off her skirt as she stands up to leave the plane. “Come on, mister Variable!” she says loudly, cocking an ear to listen for a reply. Sight isn’t the only way to observe someone, after all. She has begun talking to herself out loud again instead of just to Bec, hoping that her stowaway is at least able to hear her even when he might not necessarily have access to ears at the moment.
From the occasional promising blip in her palmtop readings, she can say with relative certainty that the figure is still on the plane. It seems to like the back of the compartment, but she’d almost panicked one day when she couldn’t find any quantum markers there. Worried, she had gone over the plane with a scanner until she finally located evidence of partial wave state collapse in the hold, wedged between a refrigerator full of food and an old suit of armor.

Yeah, no one ever said Jade knew how to pack for a crime-fighting world tour. In hindsight, bringing along her Grandpa’s entire collection of weird paintings and other miscellaneous artifacts had been kind of dumb, but she’d certainly had the space for it all after opening up a secondary sylladex dimension in the hold. And now she can transfer all this weird junk to the Harley estate here in Britain! Everybody wins!

“Let’s go see the old lab, guys!” Jade yells, opening the door for the Variable to use before jumping out herself. A tiny cloud of dust rises up when her boots hit the ground, and she sneezes once, rubbing her nose on her sleeve. “Blehhh! Looks like no one’s been around since Grandpa left,” she says, lifting up a boot to observe the clear footprint she’s left behind. “Let’s hope the lab computers don’t have this kind of gunk all over the insides!”

Instead of teleporting straight over to the main building, or using the dusty transportalizer she spies in the center of the airplane hangar (because who knows how such an old transportalizer would interact with someone as atomically unstable as her mysterious companion!), Jade runs across the stretch of lawn between the hangar and the main estate. Well, it probably used to be a lawn, anyway; now it’s more of an open field, full of tall wildflowers and the thin saplings of new trees. It’s a little bit chilly out, and dew coats the plants, so by the time she emerges on the other side, where the field gives way to a gravel driveway, she’s damp all over, even inside her boots. Squishing in wet socks, Jade makes a face, swapping her footwear out with a click of her fingers. Having a sylladex and the ability to teleport objects between the pocket dimension and reality instantly makes it really easy to change her clothes in seconds. So convenient!

“Come on, Bec! Here, boy!”

Bec slides into existence next to her, green fire flickering around its paws as it sits and sniffs at the air, its hackles half raised. Grandpa had told Jade Bec only ever lived on the island, and had never visited the other Harley estates. The fact that the wolf is on guard, as close to baring its teeth and growling as Jade has ever seen it, puts her instantly on guard as well. Her smile slips a bit as she observes the estate more carefully, reaching out with her sense of space and dimensions to feel for any intruders on the grounds. She’s really excited about getting to see one of her Grandpa’s labs for the first time in two years, but there’s no reason to let her guard down in a strange new place. Grandpa would slap her silly if she let nostalgia overwhelm her good common sense.

She can’t feel anything though, aside from a brief flicker that might or might not have been her Variable friend, who could possibly be standing just to her left, on the opposite side as Bec. Variable has never set off Bec’s guard instincts before, which was just another reason for Jade to trust that the mysterious person didn’t mean any harm. Having established that there’s no one in her range that she can sense, Jade slings a rifle out of her strife sylladex and keeps it at the ready as she steps onto the wide front porch and places her thumb on the fingerprint scanner disguised as a doorbell. It lights up pale blue as the machine scans her thumbprint, and then beeps cheerfully. The fancy, lion-faced door knocker flips over to reveal an eye scanner, and she widens her eye and presents it for the reader. When it asks, she gives it the same password as before.

The door does not unlock or swing open. Instead, the wooden slats of the porch a couple paces to Jade’s right emit a whirring sound and fold up, revealing a dust-free transportalizer pad. She hesitates, turning to look at where she can’t see the Variable. “Oops. I didn’t think of that,” she says,
feeling a bit sheepish as she rubs her chin with her thumb, thinking. “Grandpa’s most secret labs are only connected to the main estates by transportalizers. I still don’t know how that will affect your quantum state though. Maybe I can use that old explosives pack to blow a hole from the basement through to the sublevels—”

Something brushes up against her arm, and Jade’s sense of space jolts, like her body suddenly jumped a foot to the right without her consent. Heart pounding and shocky, she whirls around, trying to see what just touched her, but that sudden jolt is the only warning she gets before the transportalizer fires up without anyone on it, and crackles with electricity as it sends something down to the lab.

Bec noses at her side, but he doesn’t immediately chase after the source of the jolt, so Jade figures she must still be all in one piece, even if it does feel like her arm just got struck by lightning.

She’s starting to think she underestimated just how much power might be involved in whatever had caused the Wandering Variable to end up like this. Because when she tries to calculate it, the amount of energy involved in a human-sized quantum anomaly like that has to be astronomical. Worse still, the universe is playing fast and loose with how much mass – and therefore, how much energy – is at play in the Variable’s atomic structure at any given moment.

Even if she does help observe and stabilize him permanently so he can communicate with the observed world, the Wandering Variable might turn out to be just as powerful as Bec. And that’s… kind of a scary thought. The only reason Bec isn’t scary is because Jade knows the wolf loves her. She doesn’t know anything about the Variable aside from a few readouts on a palmtop and her own hypotheses.

…Yeah. She’s going to have to run a few more tests before she messes around with Variable’s quantum state. A lot of tests, actually. Take this slow. Science can’t be rushed, you know.

Between that revelation sinking in and the tension she can still feel in Bec’s spine when she pats him on the back, Jade is feeling a little more sober about this visit. She wants to enjoy her time here at Grandpa’s old place, but she can’t fight the lingering sensation that, even though she can’t sense them, someone is watching her.

- Jade appears in a spartan hallway, about forty feet below ground level according to her internal altitude sensor. As she steps off the transportalizer pad Bec steps into space beside her, and a blip from the sensors in her glasses alerts her to a registered energy signature that belongs to the Variable. “Are you still all in one piece?” she asks aloud, worried, but she receives no response – none that she can hear, anyway. “We can start trying to collapse you into one permanent eigenstate once I’ve finished up with Grandpa’s errands, all right?”

She takes the silence as an implicit affirmative and strides off down the corridor, her footsteps echoing in the dull, still air of the lab. It feels like the air is still fresh, so the life support protocols must be running, and the lights brighten to a comfortable level automatically when she enters the main room. The lab counters have been swept clear, but when she unlocks one of the cupboards by the wall with her thumbprint, she finds a shining array of clean lab equipment. The chemicals will be in a much more iffy state, but she’s not too concerned about them right now.

“Awesome,” she murmurs reverently when she finds a modified Winchester rifle stowed behind a row of test tubes. This one is a keeper. She smiles to herself as she loads it with ammo, still crouched down on the floor, and tucks it away in her sylladex for later.
“Right-o. Attention. Code 653,” Grandpa’s voice suddenly rumbles from overhead, and a red light starts to flare on and off in the corner of the room, painting everything red. Jade stiffens and drops back into a fighting stance at the stern, severe tone in his voice. “Unidentified projectile inbound at 370 kilometers. Please evacuate to the tenth basement or man battlestations. I repeat, chaps, code 653 in progress, potential code 413, please see monitor 42 for tracking information.”

“Whaaaat?! Where’s monitor 42?” Jade demands, kicking the cupboard shut and heading for the nearest computer monitor. It turns on obligingly when she hits the power button, and she frantically runs through Grandpa’s list of usual passwords until one (HKSWRISEWSKH) lets her access the system. It appears that this is monitor 36; 42 is somewhere else, but she should be able to pull the same information up here if she can just find it -

“Attention. Unidentified projectile inbound at 340 kilometers, descending at a rate of ____ km/sec. No paradox radiation detected; deployment of standard point-defense counter missiles recommended. Cancel potential code 413.”

“Argh! Where are the defense controls, Grandpa!” Jade yells, but the warning voice over the intercom isn’t an auto-responder like the radio earlier; it continues to drone out updates on the projectile’s position and rate of descent, but that doesn’t exactly help her out when she can’t find the missile launcher controls from this computer! She just doesn’t have time to search through the masses of data and programs that she finds on the hard drive, and Grandpa’s cheat sheet notes never mentioned the possibility that she’d have to activate the estate’s more specialized defenses.

Which mean –

Oh yes. Hecks yes.

Jade gets to pull out the big guns.

“Stay down here, WV!” she calls over the alert system, and she snaps her fingers, centering in on the roof of the estate above. She misjudges it a bit in her haste, and appears a few inches above the roof itself. Instead of landing, she lets herself fly up a bit, manipulating her position in space until she’s facing up toward the sky. She squints behind her glasses, then flicks her sniper-scope into place, staring up at the angle at which the alert system had detected the inbound projectile. She should be able to see it in 5…4…3…2…1…

There.

The projectile is growing rapidly in her field of vision, little burst of friction sparking along its sides as it plummets down toward her current location. It looks like a relatively advanced missile, streamlined and efficient.

Jade switches out her riflekind for a rocket launcher specibus. The only reason she’s able to hold up the weight of the extremely large apparatus is because mass doesn’t mean very much when you can levitate things through space with the power of your mind. The recoil is going to hurt, but who cares! She’s been waiting to use this beauty for years!

Tongue poking out slightly between her pursed lips, Jade takes aim. It’s a slightly more laborious process than she’s used to, with a small computer attached to the launcher itself helping her to line up the sights instead of just relying on her spatial sense. She doesn’t want to mess up when she’s dealing with a pretty frickin’ huge explosive, here.

The incoming weapon is still about ten kilometers out when she hits the trigger. She has enough foresight to put the rocket launcher back in the sylladex moments before the recoil slams her back-
first through the roof of the house.

“Oof!” she grunts, yanking herself to a halt before she crashes through the floor of the attic. Bits of the roof fall around her, and she coughs on a wave of dust. Letting her shoulder rest for a bit, she floats just a little bit upward, watching as her missile rockets up to meet the inbound projectile. When they collide and explode in a delightful display of mutually assured destruction safely in the air above the house, she claps her hands together and squeals with happiness. The resulting explosion is quite magnificent.

One snap later, and she’s back down in the basement sublevels. Mission accomplished.

“I took care of the mean explosive missile!” she calls, righting herself and bending to scratch at Bec’s ruff. "I wonder who was shooting at us, though." Bec doesn’t appear to have moved from where she left it, having apparently decided she could handle the missile on her own. But now she can’t tell where Variable ended up. “WV? You still in here?”

“Good show, lads and ladies!” her grandpa’s voice echoes through the lab. “Cancel code 653. Air debris shields up and running at full capacity. Station 42 should be extrapolating point of origin in an hour, and then we'll give these impudent bastards the old what-for! Back to work, all!”

“Yes, sir!” Jade chirps back, giggling as she salutes. She shakes her head and stretches her sore arm, rubbing at a budding bruise she can feel swelling up across the upper right side of her chest. “Soooo worth it,” she says, and then she scans the lab with her palm top until she locates the WV’s signature huddling in the corner by a dark computer screen. “All right, Mister V! Just a few more minutes – Grandpa just wanted me to recalibrate the temporal and spatial distortion sensors, and then we'll be all set to start figuring out what’s wrong with you!”

She spins in a circle and grins widely at the lab. “This is going to be so much fun!”

- 

Prospyet, Outside Astana, Khazakstan

MP: Are you sure you have to go?

Approximately three hundred years ago, an enormous meteorite crash landed in the middle of the Kizil Kum Desert. The alien creatures that survived the impact never quite explained how or why they ended up in an uncontrolled descent towards Earth on runaway space debris, most likely because the descent was neither uncontrolled, nor was the landing a crash.

Carapacians are quite the experts at piloting meteorites, thank you very much.

Most of them have since learned to cluster in the desert cities, after an incident in 1940s Eastern Europe had resulted in near genocide for a significant portion of their genetic records. Prospit-A and Derse-1 are both major cities now, populated almost entirely by carapacians, on opposing sides of the original crater.

Prospyet, in northern Khazakstan, is significantly smaller. The checkered pattern of the buildings and streets is less noticeable than in the major carapacian metropolises, with more mingling between light and dark. Few of the inhabitants still claim allegiance to the Reginae Absentes, and fewer still acknowledge the Grey Protector as their liege. No, this is a place that remembers the Villein and his creed, and no one has direct ties to the Queens' Shatranj spy networks anymore.

The perfect place for a certain carapacian down on his luck to lay low for a few years, at least until the heat dies down.
Spades stays hunched by the open balcony door, glowering out into the night. The moon is a sickle overhead, and he feels like that’s an omen of things long past, an old, heavy weight that presses down on his chest, cracking his carapace.

After his initial run in with the Midnight Crew – what, almost two years ago now? – he’d realized he needed to rethink his strategy. Because the Crew isn’t his anymore; they’re all soft and spongy humans, for one, and they answer to some new big shot now. And the Huge Bitch hadn’t even been involved in the takeover – in Spades’s absence, some new goon and his gal took over, their names spoken only in hushed whispers that even Spades’s sharp ears hadn’t been able to catch. A select few talk a little louder about some scumbag called Jack Noir, but Spades doesn’t think about that guy too hard. It makes his head hurt.

Upon scoping out the situation and realizing he and the Crew were no longer going to see eye to eye, Spades had fled back to Europe. America has too few carapacians. They’re seen as exotic mysteries, aliens with a tragic, unknown past. Being a carapacian on this world gets you noticed, which is the last thing Spades wants at the moment.

Eventually, he made his way to Prospyet, intending to stay only until he lost the Shatranj and Crew spies on his tail.

At least until he went and met the woman of his dreams.

He doesn’t want to talk about that part. It’s fucking embarrassing, all right? He’s dizzy for the dame, end of story.

A pale hand touches his arm and it’s only through great strength of will and months of practice that he represses the instinct to stab first and ask questions later. One does not go around stabbing things willy-nilly around a classy Prospitian dame like Ms. Paint.

MP: I understand why you have to go.

MP: But please allow me to be selfish, this one time, and let me ask.

MP: Please do not go.

Oh, is it tempting. Spades Slick, hardened criminal, is very much on board with staying here with his lady love, and for a moment there’s a warm space in his carapace that might have been a heart – if, you know, the person feeling it wasn’t Spades Slick. He doesn’t get all sappy and namby-pamby like that. It’s just heartburn or something.

Besides. He can feel not one but two things pulling him west, and while one of them he hates with a seething passion that knows no bounds, the other has settled a claim in the very darkest depths of his being, an old vow sworn in blood and carved into the fabric of paradox space, that draws him back to the troll that he once called bloodbrother.

SS: I can’t. You know I wish I could, and you don’t know how much I wanna make yah happy.

SS: But I don’t think I’m allowed to –

MP: To?

SS: …Be happy.

SS: Some things you can’t atone for.
SS: Some things you can’t run from.

SS: Some assholes you need to give a good kick in the face before they go and get themselves killed.

SS: ...This is something I gotta do.

Ms. Paint sighs, and the sound most certainly does not tug on the nonexistent heartstrings of the completely hypothetical heart that Spades does not have. She rests her pink-wrapped head upon his bony, sharp shoulder, and they look out at the stars together. And if Spades maybe spends more time eyeing his lady love than the stars, that don’t mean a damn thing.

MP: I know. I know.

MP: I think I’ve always known.

MP: It seems all I can do for now is wish you luck.

MP: And ask that you come home soon.

Spades just looks at her, and looks and looks, and wonders when he went and found himself a home.

SS: You got it, darlin’.

SS: Home before midnight, that’s what I always say.

She smiles at him, her dimples silver in the moonlight. And maybe people really can change. Maybe even people like Spades Slick, because what he does next feels natural. Feels right. It’s the exact opposite of what he’s always done before, but to hell with that. He’s defined his life by this damned thing for too long. If they’re throwing out the rules, they’re throwing out all the damn rules.

He’s sick of looking at this ring and seeing the monster he could become in his nightmares.

He takes the ring on its chain out of his pocket and stares at it almost as long as he’s stared at Ms. Paint. And then he presses a hand to her cheek and loops the chain around her neck. Her eyes are huge black pools in the pale light, and he touches her face lightly with both hands.

SS: Now I have to come back.

SS: Me and that damned thing, we’ve been dancing together for how long now?

SS: Somehow, someway…we always find ourselves together.

SS: If you can’t fight fate, make fate your little bitch.

SS: So if you have this ring, no power on this pathetic, watery rock can come between you and me.

Ms. Paint pats him on the cheek, and it’s stupidly adorable and loveable and oh no Spades is doomed. There are no words for how very doomed he is. This woman will be the death of him, he can feel it, and yet he can’t fight it because being with her feels like being whole for the first time in his life.

MP: Don’t say bitch, dear.

SS: …Yes, darlin’.

He stays the rest of the night standing by the window with her, swaying to a tune Ms. Paint just
barely hums above a whisper. In the morning, he tells himself, his expression less of a malicious glower and more of a contemplative stare as he rests his chin atop her head. I can leave in the morning.

And Karkat goddamn Vantas had better appreciate what I'm walking away from for his sake, the little shit.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the secret of this AU - everyone secretly knows everyone but they don't know that they know each other. Then John went and changed his chumhandle and poor Jade got cut out of the loop. Dooooooofus. :P

Also I talked with SergeantMeow and ohmy god you gUYS it's like I just got permission to go COMPLETELY INSANE this is fantastic it's like fucking christmas in here time to start pulling out the big guns I can do anything, I can even put that one person's brain in the robot body just like i always wanted to <3
The Wind That Wanders

Chapter Summary

The thorns he spares when the rose is taken;
The rocks are left when he wastes the plain;
The wind that wanders, the weeds wind-shaken, These remain.

Chapter Notes

The font style for the grimdark text may not show up, or may just appear as those pesky [] boxes on some phones, but I really feel it conveys the 'holy shit is rose crazy' kind of distortion effect that I’ve been looking for, so please bear with me.

This chapter is going to be a lot of people messing around being stupid and blah, to set up for the next chapter where shit gets real. Rose isn’t fucking around here, you know. People are going to get hurt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It really was only a matter of time before Karkat's shitty luck kicked in.

Sure, he's had a good run of it lately. Maybe he's been overdue for a good old-fashioned Karkat-class fuck up (a phenomenon which is capable, according to general consensus among the scientific community, of wreaking about as much interpersonal havoc and emotional distress as a class-5 hurricane) after all these months of disgustingly wholesome happiness.

First he met John and actually managed to maintain a friendship that didn't slowly self-destruct due to Karkat's brain and its easily overstimulated rage gland. Then, he miraculously didn't fall off a tall building during his first few weeks as Hemogoblin, and even got Heir's attention. And apparently the other hero liked what he saw enough to want Hemogoblin as a partner.

Yeah, he's still internally screaming over that last part. It's like something out of an actual comic book - the newbie hero and the seasoned veteran partnering up to kick ass and wreck shit. Hemogoblin had even helped rescue Heir last night. In fact, since Karkat is a huge Ancestors nerd, he can in fact tell you that this is all uncannily similar to the classic plot line from the first ever Signless/Ψiioniic crossover, in which the mysterious unsigned troll frees the more experienced psionic hero from a mindtrap, beginning a partnership that continues, despite occasional falling-outs, in the comics to this day.

This is fucking huge, okay, and he reserves the right to internally fan-girl about it whenever the urge strikes him.

Since that night at the docks, when he'd formally accepted Heir's offer (insert high-pitched shriek of fan-girly goodness here), he's been antsy. The problem is, he wants to rave about this mind-blowing development to someone - aka John - and about how fucking fantastic it is that he - and by 'he' he'd
of course mean Hemogoblin, and not actually him because they're clearly two different people - gets to fight crime with Heir of fucking Breath. He almost fell out of his recooperacon wiggling around with repressed excitement, reaching periodically for his phone and getting slime fucking everywhere in repeat attempts to pester John because this news must be shared with the whole goddamn world and John is his whole damn world, only to catch himself at the last minute.

Because only Hemogoblin and Heir know about this partnership. That's it. If Karkat starts blathering on about it like a panaddled, vacuous dipshit the morning after it fucking happens, it's going to be pretty fucking obvious he's privy to knowledge only two people could possible have.

So he has to sit on this until the team-up becomes common knowledge. Which holy fuck is going to be hard. Karkat's specialty is running his mouth, not censoring himself.

So he expects his biggest problem Thursday morning is going to be sitting on this priceless nugget of intel while hanging out with John all day, especially knowing that John is a massive Hemogoblin fan.

It's when he's awakened by Crabdad's shrieking click-skree that is the lusus equivalent of John's name that everything goes sideways. By the time he retrieves the home phone from his custodian's grubby claws, he's ready to punch a baby or something. No, really, put a wriggler in front of him, he will punt that sucker through the wall. Crabdad's retirement cannot come soon enough.

And then John has to open his mouth and tell Karkat he's going to be out of school because he 'fell.'

This sounds like so much bullshit, because John may be a ditsy, nerdy son of a bitch, but it's not like he's tripping over himself all the damn time. Some of the swim team kids - what few Karkat has been forced to absently notice, since he's always getting dragged along to cheer at John's swim meets - are downright klutzy on land, at home only in the water, but John isn't, despite the fact that he blows everyone out of the water the vast majority of the time. So some random fall during the land training he puts himself through instead of the regular swim practice the incompetent members of the team (read: anyone who isn't John) go to doesn't make any fucking sense and so help him he is going over to the Egbert house right the fuck now to see this for himself -

"Shoosh."

That's all that Karkat really hears. The rest is soothing, humming white noise, and before he knows it, he's put down the phone and begun to walk in a daze to get his school stuff together, buoyed in a weird sense of goodwill. It feels suspiciously like not being angry, and that's just not normal.

Fucking serendipity. Wow.

- 

The effect in person is much more dramatic, and Karkat would be lying if he didn't admit that some part of him deliberately lost its shit when he saw John in the hallway in the hopes of provoking a repeat moirailing. John has no subtlety, of course, and zero sense of timing (because who starts initiating such blatant pale flirtation in front of a teacher for god's sake?! Fucking John, that's who), but that doesn't really seem to matter after Karkat gets shooshpapped right back to that same level of lulled, peaceable calm. Seeing John throughout the day keeps him reassured that his moirail is well, and by the time Karkat drops John off at his house, he can barely maintain a properly angry rant, except to instruct John to stop breaking his fucking collar bone, for fuck's sake.

His bad luck really hits its stride, however, sometime around six in the afternoon, when John's dad calls and everything starts going downhill.
Karkat is absorbed in his calculus review when he hears the phone ring downstairs, followed by an answering screech from Crabdad. Karkat groans and lets his head thump forward onto the desk, slamming his clenched fist down onto the open textbook with the pencil still in hand. When he huffs angrily through his nose and sits up, composing himself to answer the phone in a state of only mild irritation rather than murderous intent, he sees that he has stabbed the pencil into the pages of the textbook itself, so deep that the pencil actually remains upright when he lets go of it.

Wow. Fucking fantastic. Good to know that he can put all of this strength and fitness training to good use by stabbing textbooks right in the problem set. Criminals, beware, Hemogoblin’s new fucking weapon of choice is a goddamn mechanical pencil, and he will shove that fucker right through your kidney.

Unless the caller is John, they better have an absolutely mindblowing reason for calling. Really, Karkat wants to see chunks of brain everywhere after this call is through. Muttering to himself, he clatters down the stairs and wrests the phone away from Crabdad. The lusus doesn’t fight him nearly as much as usual, so it’s not John, who always encourages flagrant mutiny from the lusus for his own incomprehensible amusement.

What ensues is the most worrying conversation Karkat has ever engaged in with John's dad ever. Usually he’s too intimidated by Samuel Egbert to do more than stiffly exchange pleasantries and try to keep the swearing to a minimum. This conversation is strange enough that Karkat can't help but try to pry more details out of Samuel.

He fails miserably. John's dad doesn't even let him get a word in edgewise, which for Karkat is an unpleasant new experience. Samuel has the nerve to fucking chortle as he shuts Karkat down, hard. “I believe he took off to his extra volunteer hours without stopping by my office to say goodbye, that’s all. He did say he was running late, and he knew I was in an important conference call. I thought I’d check with you, just in case. Take care, Karkat.”

All these last few sentences are spoken rapidly, with no pause for breath, as though to prevent Karkat from trying to break in and start his own question. “...Yeah, okay, are you su-” he finally gets the opportunity to demand, when the click of the phone hanging up greets him.

Dad Egbert just hung up on him. Always polite, ridiculously courteous Dad Egbert. Hung up. On Karkat.

…Wow. Like that wasn’t suspicious at all. Karkat totally believes every word out of that man’s mouth!

He throws a look back up the stairs toward his room, then growls and grabs his hoodie off the hook beside the front door, yanking it on over his head. After the collar bone debacle, like hell is Karkat ignoring some fresh fucking crisis going on at the Egbert house. Anything that can rile Samuel Egbert up is pretty damn serious. Especially when, from the way Samuel was talking, he has no real idea where John is. Given that the kid has such a regimented schedule, losing him would have been pretty hard work.

He gives the door a piece of his mind as he kicks it open and slams it shut in one smooth motion before Crabdad can try to escape. He sets off down the street toward the Egbert house. If Karkat’s moirail is actually missing or hurt, he reserves the goddamn right to freak the fuck out.

He knocks on the door of Chateau Egbert (also known as the House of He Who Makes Me Vomit Diamonds), and begins tapping his foot in anxiety the moment he’s forced to stand still and wait. He
jogged all the way here, but that’s done nothing to work off the nervous energy engendered by that really fucking weird phone call. Twitchy and irate (or at least, more so than usual), Karkat waits for Dad Egbert to answer the fucking door.

And waits.

…He pounds on the door again.

Still no answer.

“You just called from the goddamn grubfucking home phone, you – grah!” Karkat swallows down a burgeoning rant just as the door swings open, and tries to cover up his guilt with a forced, toothy smile as he looks up at Samuel Egbert. All he really manages is a grimace. Dad Egbert is just really fucking intimidating sometimes, alright?

Right now, though, Samuel looks…at loose ends, and that puts Karkat on edge. For the first time Karkat can remember, he’s not perfectly done up in one of his dapper white suits, and his cropped blond hair is in slight disarray, as though he’s been raking his fingers through it. “Ah. Karkat,” he says, his icy blue eyes sharpening as he recognizes Karkat at the door. “Is something wrong?”

“I can only assume there is. Or did you really think I would just ignore you calling me in a panic over John? What’s going on – uh, sir.” Karkat tacks on the ‘sir,’ an afterthought as always. There’s just something about Samuel Egbert that screams ‘military man’ even twenty years after he apparently resigned, at least according to John’s account. Whatever it is about him, it works to intimidate pretty much everyone on the planet except John.

But if Samuel thinks he can use that to put Karkat off when John is involved, he has another thing coming.

Samuel laughs, and it sounds so obviously forced Karkat nearly gags himself. “Karkat, my boy, John really is just at his volunteer hours. I’m sorry for the little scare. I don’t know how I got it into my head that he might have stopped off at your home first. I apologize.”

“Where is he volunteering?” Karkat demands. He sees Samuel’s hand tremble on the door, and Karkat puts his own hand on the door, leaning on it without an ounce of subtlety as his jaw tightens.

Oh yeah. Something is up. Karkat talks right over the start of whatever excuse Samuel tries to give. “I mean, usually he says he’s doing land training on Fridays, not volunteering. And anyway, shouldn’t he take the afternoon off? That collar bone isn’t going to fu- I mean – oh for fuck’s sake – isn’t going to fucking heal if he doesn’t get some rest! I will drag that halfpanned idiot back by his fucking goggles if he thinks I’m letting him do some kind of manual labor in a sling!” By the end of his tirade he’s almost spitting. He can tell he’s working himself up into a fucking knot, tripping over the line from mere irritation into a full-fledged meltdown, but he can’t stop himself, how is he expected to stop himself when his moirail isn’t here, isn’t anywhere –

“Karkat, there is no need to -”

“Do not ‘Karkat’ me!” Oh fuck. Oh fuck. He’s freaking out. The rage is squeezing his bloodpusher so hard he thinks his chest might implode. He staggers back from the door, trying to put distance between him and John’s dad. Homicidal rages are more the purview of highbloods with coldblood-type dementia, but all trolls can get stupid and violent when they get worked up, and who even knows how Karkat’s mutant brain will react to a genuine meltdown.

Karkat has always thought that by maintaining a standard level of fury, he’s been able to regulate it
himself, to prevent any violent incidents that could draw blood, but this is the third time in as many
days that he’s nearly gone crashing into a full-on class-A tantrum. He digs his claws into the
hornbeds around his horns, feeling the prickle of claws digging into his scalp. Everything is too
much, too close, too tight, and he can’t focus. Get it together, you fuck up, come on, this isn’t hard,
you’ve managed without John for fucking years –

“Karkat. Breathe.”

It’s not soothing or reassuring or relaxing. It’s just an order, spoken with the expectation of
obedience, and Karkat’s jaw unclenches automatically in response. He sucks in a breath, and almost
immediately some of the pounding in his head dies away, the tunnel vision widening so he can see
more than just the blurry white of Samuel’s shoes.

Oh, way to fucking look like an idiot in front of John’s dad. Karkat can’t believe he just freaked out
so hard, he literally forgot to breathe. Sucking in furious breaths through his nose, Karkat glares
when he catches a hand descending to land on his shoulder. He lurches backward a step to dodge the
hand, and hugs himself. He’s progressed into sobbing hiccups now, and he can barely meet Samuel’s
eyes as he hiccups and gasps for control like a wriggler barely out of its first cocoon. “Then – why
didn’t you – know where – he went,” he forces out between hiccups. He’s still furious, but at least at
this level of anger, he can still fucking talk. “Not like – him – to take off – without telling you.”

Samuel spreads his hands out placatingly, but Karkat’s in no fucking mood to be placated by anyone
but his moirail, goddammit. “It was just a mix-up, Karkat. I got a little caught up with my work, and
missed John when he left. Like you said, though, he really shouldn’t be working with that collar
bone – I told him so, myself. So I just thought, perhaps, that he went to your house instead, and
called in sick to his volunteer work. But I called the community center, and he is definitely there. He
is not missing, Karkat. He’ll be back in a few hours.”

And okay, yeah, that…sounds logical. Certainly more so than the hasty explanation Samuel gave
over the phone not ten minutes earlier, even though it basically is the same explanation. Besides,
what reason would Samuel have to lie?

But does it really match the state of Samuel’s hair, the way his white suit jacket has been left
crumpled over the top of the sofa rather than carefully and neatly hung up on a hanger?

Karkat can’t tell anymore. Some part of him, the part that isn’t hiccupping and struggling not to
swandive off the metaphorical handle into a panic attack, can tell he’s not thinking clearly. He rubs
his hands up and down his arms, chafing against the chilly spring air of the on-coming evening.
Finally, he just nods, clamping his mouth shut against more hiccups, not trusting himself to stop
before tearing his moirail’s guardian a new one in a fit of irrationality.

Samuel nods solemnly back. “Now, my boy, you seem distraught. Is there anything I can get you,
anything you need?” Samuel smiles and yeah, he has this reassuring, fatherly look on his face, but it
just pisses Karkat off all over again.

“What I need is for my moirail to not be wandering around taking heavy boxes from old ladies like
an oblivious, dumbass gentleman and pretending he doesn’t have a fucking broken collar bone,”
Karkat hisses, before losing it with one huge hiccup. “Where is he right the fuck now, I’m going to
help him. I want the address.”

“Karkat.” Samuel fold his arms, giving Karkat a stern look. “While I appreciate that you care about
John, you are in distress and in no fit state to be operating a motor vehicle or wandering around while
John is working. I’m certain John knows better than to overwork himself. He knows his limits. And
while I’m sure he’d be glad to see you, he would also feel obliged to work longer to make up for any
distraction you might pose. Please, do not become a distraction.”

Karkat freezes up. He has about five different instincts yammering at him, three of which urge him to go corral his moirail and prevent that dopey idiot from injuring himself further.

But Karkat is not a goddamn grub. He isn't some demented highblood who can't help but act on ancient psychoses. And this is him. Putting his foot down. Enough.

Samuel must see something in Karkat's face at the moment Karkat forces himself to calm his fucking tits. This time, when Samuel reaches out a hand and claps Karkat on the shoulder, Karkat lets him, even though he feels an immediate spike of irritation at the touch. He crushes it as best he can, trying to maintain just a faint grimace of distaste. Control. Control. "Thank you for understanding, Karkat," Samuel says, and then the door shuts, perhaps with a little more force than usual. Hell, Karkat can't tell anymore.

Karkat stands outside the Egbert household for a long time, staring at his shoes. All he really wants to do is head down to the community center - walk there, if he has to - and see John, to make sure he really is there. The urge is overwhelming.

But. Fuck. Dad Egbert is right. Jeez, John shooshes him one damn time and suddenly Karkat starts getting all clingy. Fucking fuck.

Instead, Karkat goes home. He strips off his clothes on his way up the stars and sits in the recooperacoon for nearly an hour instead of working on his homework, letting the sopor soak its way into his skin. A heavy fuzz settles over his thoughts as his body shifts gears from panic to a drugged lethargy, and when he drags himself out to do homework instead of just going to sleep, his thoughts feel like they’re slogging through mud. He feels like shit, but his breathing has calmed and his heartbeats ease to a slow rhythm.

He no longer feels like crawling out of his skin and clawing at anyone who breathes too loudly, but he also feels – well, drugged. It’s extremely fucking tempting to just dunk his head back into the ‘coon and sleep through the night for once, because at this rate he’s not sure he’ll be alert enough to handle crime fighting. But he can’t. Working off some of this distress with a night of being Hemogoblin might be the only thing that can work the aggression out of his system – or at least distract him until he can latch onto John again.

He’s never been this dependent on John before, and Karkat can only assume it’s because John’s the source of the distress itself. Objectively he knows John isn’t some fragile dumbass glass butterfly, but in his troll hindbrain all those lovely hormones in his panic glands are stewing because John got hurt, and it just keeps building up every moment Karkat isn’t able to personally reassure himself John is safe.

Serendipity. Wow, it can be a bitch.

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Three aborted muggings, a thwarted car-jacking, and a domestic dispute gone wrong later, Hemogoblin feels just a little bit more sane. Few things in this world are more therapeutic than getting to kick bad guys in the face. Every thirty minutes or so he’s seized by the urge to run all the way back to Maple Valley and bust down the doors of the community center, demanding his moirail be returned at once, but John has no doubt gone home by now; it’s nearly one in the morning. He had pestered John via his phone before leaving the device in the library, but hadn’t received a reply before starting his patrol. It wouldn’t be unusual for John not to reply until early in the morning. That does not lessen Karkat’s brand new goddamn anxiety problem in the slightest.
Focus. He can’t fall back into Karkat thoughts, no matter how much they’re weighing on his mind tonight. Hemogoblin leaps from one roof to the next, landing in a neat tumble and rolling to his feet, trying to lose himself in the attention-consuming work of running across the roofs without missing a step. Yeah, he’d probably survive the fall, but with his run of bad luck he’d probably break his arm or some other bullshit he can’t heal instantly.

That’s when the third explosion rocks the air.

Hemogoblin is far enough away that he feels the blast as barely a ripple in the air, but it sounds like a gun just went off by his ears. He stops before leaping to the next building and kneels beside a bird coop, searching the skyline for the source of the explosion. To his relief, when he locates the blast site, it’s nothing like the raging, fiery inferno that had broken out two nights ago, when Hearts and the Crew had torched an empty warehouse. Smoke plumes up in a heavy black cloud not far from his current location, but he can’t see any fire spreading to other buildings. Rolling his shoulders, Hemogoblin takes off in the direction of the fire.

He keeps checking the skies though. There’s no way Heir missed that, and he’s sure the other hero would have come to the same conclusion as Hemogoblin – this is retaliation in some way for Hearts Boxcars’s arrest the other night.

As it turns out, it’s a little worse than that. Hemogoblin’s stomach sinks as he draws closer and closer to Virginia Street, and realizes that the building that exploded is not some warehouse or bank, or any other convenient target.

It is the police station.

Well, fuck.

He approaches with more caution after that uncomfortable discovery, his stomach sinking as he scans the streets and alleys below for any sign of a fleeing prisoner. But by the time he reaches the station, he can’t find a damn thing, and he suspects – if Hearts was the source of this particular explosion, which Hemogoblin doesn’t doubt in the slightest – that Hearts and his accomplices are long gone.

Where the hell is Heir? Hemogoblin stops on the roof across from the police station to take in the damage, but his mind is still on the weirdly empty sky. There doesn’t appear to be much structural damage to the station; the street is flooded with evacuated officers and staff, but aside from a smoking hole where the front wall used to be, it doesn’t look like any part of the building is in danger of collapsing.

After a few minutes, Hemogoblin realizes he’s stalling because his next instinct is to drop down and ask the police if they’ve already spoken with Heir. This seems extremely unlikely, since Hemogoblin would have seen the other hero fly down to street level even if Heir had beaten him here, but it’s possible. And if Heir hasn’t been by yet, it would probably be a good idea to check in with the cops, see if anyone is trapped in the building and needs assistance, or if they’d seen which way Hearts and his gang of merry fucking assholes took off to.

He should hurry this along. Uh huh. Yep. Time to go downstairs and play nice with the cops. Gather some valuable intel. Be the hero.

…Any second now.

Yeah. He’s stalling like a pansy-ass wriggler. It’s Karkat who turns away from the edge of the roof and has to spend a few seconds checking over his costume, his false horns, his uniform, before trying to shake off the nervous tension turning him into a twitchy, stilt-legged spaz. He’s failing pretty
fucking miserably.

But the last thing Karkat’s ever wanted is to attract the attention of the police. His blood color is down as rust red in the records, thanks to either the most gracious, forgiving jadeblood in the history of trollkind, or the most colorblind son of a bitch this side of the Atlantic, and that has protected him from the more unfortunate consequences that would ensue if it got around that he was a mutant. However, he’s gone through most of his life avoiding hospitals, skipping out on blood drives, and hoping that he never gets selected for a random drug screening, either at work or at school. And now here he is, prancing about as Hemogoblin with bright red eyes and a costume most people would associate with the color of human blood. So far most rumors seem to have Hemogoblin down as wearing candy red contact lenses for dramatic effect, but who even knows how a troll police officer will react.

He jumps down at last, after a few long minutes of wondering where Heir could possibly be. Hemogoblin lands soundlessly in the shadows just beyond the edge of the street lights and the flashing police emergency lights, and saunters his way closer to the ring of emergency responders trying to contain the situation and keep people out of range of the smoke. This situation is even more sensitive than most; Hemogoblin has no doubt by morning people will be whispering about a potential terrorist threat. Three bombings in a row? Homeland Security could show up any day now, and he and Heir will have to watch their steps. Vigilante heroes and local police generally cooperate together without incident, but federal law enforcement is notorious for interrogating first and trusting heroes later, after they’ve been Mirandized.

Karkat would be intimidated. Hemogoblin isn’t. He can’t afford to be. He slinks up to the nearest human officer and clears his throat. The last thing he wants is to sneak up on an entire crowd of jumpy cops. His smile inches up into something more seductive when the cop turns and very obviously gives Hemogoblin an unintentional once-over. The human turns bright red. “H-Hemogoblin, I presume,” he says, taking a step back. “Should have known you or Heir would show up after something like this.”

Hemogoblin lets the smile drop. Shit. “Heir hasn’t been here yet?”

“No, there’s been no sign of him all night. And now this? If you or he have any information on what the hell is causing this ruckus, we here at the police department that just got blown up would really appreciate a heads up.” By the end, the cop has lost his fluster and gotten serious. He’s clearly pissed about the explosion. Which is pretty fucking understandable, all things considered.

“Let me guess. The explosion came from a holding cell containing one Hearts Boxcars,” Hemogoblin says, folding his arms over his chest and glancing at the shattered glass that litters the road in front of the station from where the front windows blew out.

“Actually, it was the interrogation room,” the cop says, pursing his lips. “He asked for a lawyer. An hour later, the lawyer shows up, and the next thing we know everything’s fucked to hell and back. Er. Don’t quote me on that.”

Like Hemogoblin would have any right to be offended on the whole swearing front. But – “Who was his lawyer? You just let someone just waltz in there with a bomb in their briefcase?”

He winces, because that came off way more accusatory than he intended, and the last thing he wants is to antagonize the police the very first time he interacts with them.

“Well obviously, now we’re fairly certain it wasn’t a lawyer,” the cop snaps back, his body language shutting down. Fuck. Way to shit all over that one with your incompetence at social interaction, Hemogoblin. Note to self – grow some fucking tact glands, starting yesterday. “I’m going to have to
ask you to leave; this is being classified as an on-going potential terrorist attack at the moment, and I doubt you or Heir want to be around when the feds show up. Legislacerators could be involved.” He raises a meaningful eyebrow.

Great. Exactly what Hemogoblin had expected, but not wanted, to hear. He hides an outright grimace behind a flirtatious smirk. It’s one of his many layers of disguise that he uses to separate Karkat from Hemogoblin; whenever Karkat would want to throw a fit and run his mouth for days on end decrying the incompetence of the Seattle police department, Hemogoblin just simpers and flirts. “Thanks for the heads up,” he says, winking, and then he slides back into the shadows of the alleyway. There. Mission accomplished.

He is torn, though. When he scales the building and searches the skies, he finds nothing. There isn’t a lot of cloud cover tonight, aside from the burgeoning cloud of smoke rising from the police station, and thus nothing really obscuring his now-impeccable night vision. Over the past few weeks he has definitely seen Heir in flight a few times, so he can see that slate blue uniform against the night sky.

But now there’s nothing. Nothing at all.

Hemogoblin’s stomach turns over.

The Midnight Crew has already lured Heir into a trap once. What are the odds they could do it again, lead him somewhere far from the police station so he couldn’t interfere with Hearts’s escape? Last time they had grenades and semi-automatics, and there’s no doubt in Hemogoblin’s mind after that harrowing night that the Crew intended to kill or at least maim Heir to get him off their backs. He wants to believe that Heir could have handled the situation even if Hemogoblin hadn’t arrived when he did, but…he’s not so blinded by hero worship and a (tiny, absolutely miniscule) flushcrush that he couldn’t see that Heir was in serious trouble.

If Heir got here via the sky, as he always does, then if the Crew wanted to lead him somewhere, they –

Would leave the note where Heir’d see it from above. Wanting to slap himself for taking this long to work through some grub-level logic, the exact same process he went through two nights ago (way to go, Karkat, you’re truly measuring up to your usual minute level of intelligence on this fine night, crack job dunking yourself in sopor before heading out to fight crime), Hemogoblin crosses the rooftops in a wide circle around the mess of people and vehicles packed in around the station and ascends the building next to the police station, using blood hooks to get a better grip on the vertical surface. Once he reaches the top he switches to the police building, landing gracefully in a crouch when he swings himself up over the edge.

It’s a similar set up to the other roof two nights ago, a mirror set up this time to reflect the beam of a flashlight up into the sky. The mirror rests at an angle against the side of the covered stairwell that leads down into the police station, and there is a slip of paper tucked underneath the mirror. Checking the surrounding buildings for any watchers or traps, Hemogoblin darts over to the mirror and carefully lifts it up, removing the paper and unfolding it.

‘Sorry, kid,’ the note reads. ‘Got orders not to kill yah anymore, but here’s a little something to remember us by. Special delivery, to pay yah back for getting me arrested twice. It’s only a little personal. Give my regards to that sneaky troll son of a bitch.’

It’s not signed. Hemogoblin frowns. There’s nothing here that he can see that would have lead Heir away from the police station to another amush. Fuck, it doesn’t even look as though anyone’s touched this note but Hemogoblin. Has Heir even been up here? Is he even patrolling tonight? Heir has such stellar record for patrolling nightly that it’s a thought that hadn’t even occurred to
Hemogoblin until this moment – maybe Heir just isn't working tonight. Maybe that grenade messed him up more than Hemogoblin noticed, which is a scary fucking thought.

And what does Hearts mean by a special -

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

The flashlight beeps, and the light shining at the mirror shuts off, and fuck, Hemogoblin is crouching barely a foot from it -

And the device explodes.

---

Through the lens of the grimdark, everything is clear. Now that the essence of light has been drained from the world, she is no longer blinded by the sun's harsh, deceiving glare.

Everything is dark and she can see the truth now. The channel between her mind and the swirling depths of eternity flows freely, the upwelling of bloodbrine and silt and ink flooding her body unhindered by such pathetic things as mental shields and a sober mind.

(wake up wake up wake up wake up)

There is nothing of the light here. She rides over the world wrapped in darkness, with thorny tentacles of power arcing up into the sky above and trailing in black whorls over the forest beneath her. The tentacles above reach out and gather in clouds, blotting out even the light of the stars until nothing can shine through.

When she glances beneath her feet, surveying the too-dry, cluttered earth beneath her, she waves a smoldering hand and her dark aura drips down in smears of grimdark. Her thorns tangle down amidst the trees and stab into the base earth, and she begins to rend and tear. Darkness envelops the forest and sinks through the bark of trees to the soft rings within, poisoning them from the inside out. Everywhere she reaches out, death snuffs out fleeting bursts of life, animals that flee before the onset of the blight. Of course, everyone is welcome to become a tanglebuddy in death, and she soaks up their minds as their feeble land bodies perish. They stop screaming once they understand that they will NEVER BE LONELY AGAIN.

Much better.

But honestly, everything the light has ever touched will have to go. All of these blighted, blasted creatures that thrive on such petty things as sunlight and clear air have no place in the salt sea of the Darkest Depths. Yes, when the Gate is open, they will have to cleanse this world and wash it clean with grimdark void and colddamp sea.

And then there will be nothing but the absolution of the void, the damp embrace of the tanglehorde, and everything will be at one with the most Noble Circle of Horrorterrors.

(please you have to stop this you can't let them do this wake up!)

There is, of course, that niggling voice that whispers up through the blood-dimmed tide, the strained, hoarse cry of a golden, bright mind. But it is swept aside in a rolling wave of dark water, and is gone once more. It stubbornly refuses to join the hivemind, Terrors only know why, but she will deal with it properly later.
Alas, that she must keep moving. She cannot loiter here and finish this work, not when there is still a Gate to open. Her gaze blank and pitiless as she looks down on the dark wastes beneath her, she continues to make her way south.

Rose wakes up over Albany.

She has been swallowed up by the sea for several hours now, and when she heaves herself up onto a dry refuge in her mind, she regains control of her eyes just in time to see that the forest has given way to city streets and buildings. The skyline is unfamiliar enough that it takes her a moment to identify it.

Albany is not the first town she has crossed while the Horrorterrors direct her toward New York City. It is simply the first Rose will be awake and aware of while the callous thing manipulating her body destroys it. While trying to make sense of the scattered memories that have survived being filtered through the grimdark, she can see what the Horrorterror working through her has wrought on the forests and small towns between the Lalonde manse and here, and she wants to vomit.

She is not the one in control, though, and the fragment of Terror that is in charge is in no way disgusted by the memories of destruction Rose sifts through. But suffice to say, if she were more than a simple mental construct isolated within the possessed depths of her own brain, Rose would be vomiting right now. From what she recalls, there is now an entire swath of dead earth through the middle of New York, and it is almost entirely her fault.

The thing controlling her body raises a hand gone grey with grimdark, and a thorny spell grows out of her palm. The rush of filmy, slick cold through her veins sickens her, and she has to retreat from the thin layer of salt left behind by the swelling power. But she can see what is about to happen; the spell is dark and crackling with unnatural power, but she can identify the basic magical structure, and extrapolate what this abomination means to unleash on Albany.

It will be awful. It will be cruel. It will be bloody.

What she does next is foolish, and reckless, and stupid. But Rose can't let this happen. She has to stop this. She can't let these people die.

She flings her mind at the tangle of raw power just before it can fire, wrenching at the smooth, moist flank of a massive intellect that is foreign and distorted, absolute and all-consuming, trying to divert the blast before it can happen. If she can just redirect it, just a little, take out a wall instead of a human, blow up a road instead of an apartment complex -

Her mental hands slide off the impenetrable, writhing tangle, and something slams into her side with the force of a geyser. Rose's mind cracks under the impact. Shards of herself break off and trail down into the dark sea below, and she barely stabilizes herself before she dissolves completely. When she finally connects to her vision again, she looks out through her own eyes just long enough to watch the spell drop to the ground below and explode in a brilliant burst of white fire and black thorns.

It's not Albany's fault, really. It was just in the way.

Thankfully, the tangle in her mind seems uninterested in more than that short display of its power. Even as screams and alarms begin to break the night sky, smoke rising from the wreckage below and feeding into the dark aura smoldering around Rose's body, she begins to float forward again, the black tentacles of power returning to wrap around her.
The words drum straight into her mind, and Rose screams, clawing at ears that aren't there as the voice of the Void echoes through her skull, acidic and knife-edged and ecstatic as it smiles at the destruction below. Even in meditation, even when she had to deal with the Horrorterrors directly and bargain for them to respect the seals she placed on her mind, she has never heard them like this.

It sounds like her voice. It sounds like her and she can't she can't she can't -

- Everything is sticky and wet, and when Rose licks her lips, she tastes blood and brine.

For the past few hours she has not been conscious within her own mind, and she knows with cutting certainty that the only reason she woke up this time is because the writhing, inky sea below has deliberately spared her. The tangle in her mind could have finished dissolving her from existence whenever it felt so inclined; but it seems to take some measure of amusement out of her horror whenever a new atrocity is committed by Rose's hands.

Black, thorny vines wrap around her hands, spikes digging into the flesh of her palms, and drag her forward out of the surf, and she no longer has the mental fortitude to fend them off. When the tangle brings the visual centers of her brain back online, she can see New York City through them. From this angle, they are no doubt on top of the Flatiron. The city looks rather unnervingly untouched.

"Tell the Seer of Light the Abyss is waiting. The Eldest Gods have only abated during the day because that was when there was the most light for destruction below. Even in meditation, even when she had to deal with the Horrorterrors directly and bargain for them to respect the seals she placed on her mind, she has never heard them like this.

Get out, Rose begs them silently, seeing more than a few foolish souls take up their smart phones and begin filming from behind food vendors and around corners. They don't understand; walls won't keep them safe from the monstrosities this tangle will unleash. Run!

The tangle descends. Rose's body glides down to the street below, her grimdark appearance and the crackle of dark tentacles reaching up into the sky sending people scurrying for cover. "The tangle continues, spreading her hands to encompass the crowds below. It is full morning, by now, but Rose has no hope that the tangle will be driven back into the Abyss by the rising sun. It is clear by now that the voices of the Eldest Gods have only abated during the day because that was when there was the most light for Rose's other powers to feed upon. The moment she spent a day in the darkness of her house, drunk and hungover in equal measure, her mind became an open channel for them, and she no longer has the strength to reach out to the sun and drive them back.

The Seer of Light is effectively dead.

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They are important to me, Rose thinks, but the tangle already knows this. In fact, Rose realizes, that is the reason they came here at all. Hadn't it said itself, 'these are the people you protect?'

Why use a few random, doomed souls in Albany to open a gate to the Furthest Ring when the Horrorterrors could wring so much more grief and despair from their host by using her city. By undoing all the work the Seer ever did?

The tangle cackles, and charges up its first spell. **YES, T'HE'I'R'N'DE'AI'T'H'S'S'H'AL'L'BR'IN'G'U'S'TH'RO'U'G'H'TH'E'G'A'T'E.'**

_I won't let you do this. I won't let you get away with this. I will find you and I will kill you and I burn you for this -_

The tangle clucks, and lets fly the spell in its hand. Black thorns like lightning erupt from the ground beneath a cluster of curious on-lookers, and they are impaled instantly.

Rose screams.

"RE'AL'LY, M'RO'SE? A'NY'TH'IN'G.' A'T A'L'L?"

This is a trap. This is a trap, and everything left of Rose, of Seer, knows it. But does she have any other choice? She cannot wrest back control, but she _can_ take any opportunity to convince the tangle to stop using her body as an instrument of genocide. _Yes,_ she thinks, and some last part of her mind cracks. _Yes. Anything. Anything at all._

_I will bring you through the Gate myself._

One by one, the tentacles supporting Rose above the grimdark sea detach from her wrists, and then she is falling, falling, falling -

"TH'E'CO'N'TRA'C'T'IS' SEASE'D.'"

And Rose drowns once again.

Everything beneath the surf is cold and dark and bloody, and there is no light after.
She considers, for a moment, simply ripping the puny creatures before her to shreds. No, their deaths are no longer a necessary component of the Gate, but it would have been amusing to hear the last of Seer choke on her screams.

But alas, a contract is a contract. And the work of the Gate will still take hours, even if she doesn't waste time smiting every fleshling she comes across.

Shrugging, she stretches her arms over her head, the reinforced bones of this borrowed body creaking and cracking and breaking before settling back into place. She flaps a careless hand at the humans that still remain. "B E G O N E, W O R M."

They mewl and shriek and babble in their flat, lonely voices, but they obey, scrambling this way and that with no order, no finesse, trampling each other in their haste to escape their doom.

There. That should do it. Having fulfilled her obligation to get them out of the way and uphold the accord not to kill them all immediately, she begins charging the first of the sigil-carving spells between her palms, tracing with her eyes exactly where in the road she will carve the first curve of the Gate.

She hums to Seer, as cheerful as an eldritch abomination can be, the goodwill of the Tanglebuddies returned now that the host serves the horde willingly, rather than trying to block them at every turn. "O H O N O W Y O U A R E W I T L I N G N O W W E ' H A V E ' A N A C C O R D N ' O N E D TO D R A W T H I S O U T."

She raises the spell between her hands, and she grins maliciously.

"L E T IT B E G I N" she croons, and beams of power lance out, clawing up the street to burn the first curve of the Gate into the earth.

Clouds continue to gather over New York City, blotting out the rising sun.

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Dave is stupid angry. Just. Stupid angry. The only reason he hasn’t flashstepped to his Bro’s room to initiate a beatdown is because Heir is throwing down with equal intensity, stubbornly rebutting Bro every time he tries to pull this weird bullshit. Mad props to the windy dude; he may so goofily sincere it’s almost sad, but he doesn’t take shit from anyone.

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, everything goes to fucking hell in a lacy little basket full of freshly picked what-the-fuck posies.

EB: OKAY THAT IS IT YOU PESTILENT NOOKSTAIN CONGRATULATIONS YOU ARE OFFICIALLY THE MOST RAGE-INDUCING BULGELICKING ASSHAT THE UNIVERSE HAS EVER HAD THE DISPLEASURE OF SECRETING INTO EXISTENCE
EB: LOOK AT THIS I AM REDUCED TO USING HIS FUCKING CAPS LOCK QUIRK
THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE
EB: I SWEAR TO ANY GOD LISTENING I AM GOING TO
TG: whoa what
TT: shit
TG: john you know caps lock?
TG: were those weird troll swear words because i got maybe half of that
TG: john?
EB: WKSHRISEHSKW
TG: oh my fuck what was that
TG: did you just keyboard smash in rage
TG: I swear to gog bro if you broke my fucking friend i will end you
TT: shit
TG: im not fucking around
TT: shit
TG: why do you keep saying that
TG: i don’t think it means what you think it means
TT: shit

A crash rings out through the apartment, coming not from the direction of Bro’s room, but from the kitchen. An unfamiliar voice yelps in pain as the kitchen’s pile of shitty swords collapses in a clatter of metal on linoleum.

Dave has his sword in hand and is in the kitchen the next moment, sword at the ready. Bro is already there of course, his face unreadable behind his shades as he observes the fuckass kneeling in the pile of piece of shit swords. Lil Cal is lounging lazily on his shoulder though, which means Bro is deadly serious.

“Ow,” the rando says, extricating himself from the sword pile with a wince. Dave can see the guy took a hard fall and landed pretty much in the worst way possible. One of the swords cut a long, deep slice up the guy’s inner arm, which is already in a sling, and he’s spewing blood everywhere. “Oh, fuck,” the guy says, gingerly dabbing at his arm.

“Yeah. Fuck,” Bro says, tucking his thumbs into his pockets. The more nonchalant he appears, the more of a threat he is. But there's no way this intruder will know that.

The guy whirls around, eyes wild. Dave’s stomach jolts with a sudden burst of recognition but – fuck, there’s no fucking way –

“Where the heck am I? What is this jackassery?!?” the guy demands, tucking his injured arm up against his blue t-shirt. Blood starts staining it immediately, and the sling itself isn't looking so hot either, considering it's been slit up the side. His eyes track over both Dave and Bro, frowning and defensive. They're both wearing their sunglasses, so he wouldn't know them for Flashstep or Puppeteer. “Who are you?”

“Right questions. One problem. You should be the one answering them.” Bro shifts a hand slightly and Lil Cal’s eyes gleam. “Care to explain just how the fuck did you get in our apartment, little man?”

“Your apartment,” the guy says, shaking his head slowly. And yeah, those fake brown eyes are kind of hard to forget, the rings where the contact lenses don’t quite cover a brilliant blue. “What are you talking about, I was just sitting in my room -”


The guy freezes. He meets Dave's gaze through his shades, eyes widening. Then, slowly, his frown transforms into a look of pure terror. “No,” he whispers, his face turning a sickly shade of maroon. “No, fuck no, fucking fuck -”

Dave drops the sword and steps forward, just as John – aka Heir of fucking Breath – takes a step back and nearly steps on the shitty sword pile again. A weird breeze stirs up, and it takes too long for
Dave to realize it’s Heir about to flip his shit. He hides his face in his good hand, his eyes turning an ominously luminescent blue as he stares out from behind splayed fingers. “This isn’t possible,” John stammers. “Dave? You live in Houston!”

Dave just nods, spreading his hands wide to try to look nonthreatening. He just - needs to keep it cool. Yeah. Random heroes from halfway across the country pop up in his kitchen all the damn time. It’s getting pretty old, actually. He wants a refund.

Yeah, he’s not kidding anyone, not even himself. This is fifty shades of fucked up, right here.

“Bro, put the creeptastic puppet away,” he hisses at his brother. Bro gives him a considering look, one eyebrow very firmly raised as he ignores the order. Yeah, Dave probably has some explaining to do. Which can, you know, wait until after Heir stops bleeding out all over their goddamn kitchen floor. “John, hey. Yeah, this is Houston,” Dave says, taking a step closer.

John has his back up against the fridge, and can only straighten up when Dave comes closer, still trying to conceal his face with his hand. It makes sense; the one time Dave had met Heir, he’d had pretty thick goggles and a face mask on. Secrecy is pretty important to the kid; half of the rules that guide their chat sessions were laid down by John. Even in the middle of one pretty fucked up mental break, Heir had been a stickler for protocol. Being caught without something covering his face must be just eating at him.

Well. There’s a solution for that. Dave takes his shades off and holds them out, squinting his eyes against the kitchen light. Even as he does so Bro is at the light switch, dimming the lights to a level more comfortable for someone just this side of albino. “Here, cover your eyes man,” Dave says, deliberately looking down at a corner of the countertop rather than John’s face. It’s too late and everyone here knows it; they got a nice eyeful of John’s face the moment he looked up from the swords. But this way, everyone except Bro will be almost halfway to hero mode, and maybe that will make John calm the fuck down and stop flinging wind around willy nilly.

John reaches out and takes the sunglasses, putting them carefully on his face. They sit weird on him; they’re a style suited to the impassive face of a Strider, and they look too big and clumsy on John. But they do the job, and John’s shoulders visibly slump with relief, the warning breeze dying off into a soft susurrus. “Thanks,” he says, with that same note of sincerity that Dave still remembers all these years later. Jeez, the kid hasn’t changed at all, has he? Just got a bit taller, filled out some, lost that hollow look in his face that stemmed from some serious depression.

Little things, really, not that big of a deal.

“No problem, man.” But of course, there’s still the question of - “Seriously, how the hell are you here? Last time I checked you were chatting with us from a computer in Seattle. How’re you suddenly in Texas?”

John shakes his head slowly, hugging the injured arm to his chest. There’s actually a worrying amount of blood spreading across the front of his shirt, now. “I have absolutely no idea,” he admits. “I mean – I was just chatting with you guys and then - I don’t know, I just suddenly landed face first in a bunch of sharp objects. Why do you guys have this stuff lying around on the floor, anyway?”

“You didn’t come here on purpose?” Bro says, his tone too noncommittal to sound like a demand. Lil Cal is still on his shoulder, even when Dave scowls at him. Then he remembers he’s not wearing his sunglasses, and he won’t get away with showing such obvious expressions. He smooths his face out again into stoicim.

“How could I?” John’s hand fists in his hair. The shades don’t work for him; Dave can still see the
panicky confusion contorting his face. “This is – not possible. Even when I’m at top speed, I can only go as fast as the wind. I think the most I’ve ever clocked in at was maybe 250 miles an hour? And that was in a dive, almost free-fall. To get from Seattle to Houston – wait, what time is it -”

“You stopped responding five minutes ago,” Bro says, his shades glinting. “And we’ve been talking for three of them.”

John shakes his head. “That can’t be. That kind of distance – it would have taken me hours, if I flew nonstop. Days, if I needed to stop to rest, which I would have.”

“And yet, here you are,” Bro murmurs. “Go check out the window if you don’t believe us.”

John’s head swivels toward the open window in Dave’s room, visible through the open door, and he stiffens. “That’s not my skyline,” he whispers. “And – fuck, I can feel the humidity. Okay. I’m in Houston.” He laughs, and it sounds hysterical before he muffles it. “This is just. Wow. What a fucking mess.” His shoulders shake with suppressed laughter, and he winces visibly, pulling his arm away from where it lies sticky with blood against his shirt.

“Alright, yeah, we need to deal with that,” Dave says, taking another step closer. “Give me your arm.”

John stiffens, then holds his arm out, as though begrudging the motion. But his arm is shaking when Dave takes it by the wrist to examine the cut. It really does run pretty fucking deep, and it’s gonna need stitches, in addition to a metric fuckton of antiseptic. Dave knows his sword wounds, and this is at least moderately concerning.

“Here, we have some Neosporin and shit in the bathroom,” Dave mutters, keeping his eyes fixed on the line of red running down John’s forearm. If he looks up now John will get a good look at Dave’s eyes. Without his shades, in a situation that kind of fucks the boundary between work and personal life, Dave feels more vulnerable than ever with his bright red eyes bare. “It’s gonna need stitches though.”

“I heal fast,” John says, with the practiced tone of something he’s clearly memorized in the past.

“You’re not gonna heal if you pass out from blood loss and get fucking infected,” Dave says, raising an eyebrow. Eyebrow raises are still on the table.

“…Point,” John says, nodding. “Can I -”

Bro holds the first aid bucket in his hand when Dave looks up. Supposedly the bucket started out a mere first aid kit, and had been upgraded to full on bucket status as the intensity of Bro and Dave’s training increased over the years to accommodate the amount of shit they needed to keep from losing fingers. “Rinse it off in the sink,” Bro says, setting it on the counter by the kitchen sink, and then he vanishes again. Who even knows where to. Dave’s lived with the guy his entire life, and he still has no fucking clue where all the hiding places are. Hide and seek as a kid had been all kinds of life-ruining.

Dave realizes he’s still got his hand on John’s arm when John steps over to the sink and turns the water on. One half of the sink is full of smuppets, and Dave’s face burns bright red for a moment before he stops time to pull a stray towel over them, mortified. John doesn’t seem to have noticed the puppet abominations, too busy extricating his arm from that sling and gingerly stretching out his arm to let water run into the cut, his jaw set against the pain. Dave hands him more towels to dry the arm, which is already starting to bead with blood again.
The silence is weird and strained as Dave helps smear antiseptic on the wound, with John biting back noises whenever the Neosporin has to touch the open gash itself. On Pesterchum words come easily; in reality, Dave is very aware of the collar around his throat (which he had only put on to go talk to Bro before he’d crashed their chatroom) and of the vague, ever-present buzz in his voice. It’s not like he’s fucking self-conscious, it’s just – it’s a thing, alright. And maybe John hadn’t noticed when they met that first time, but there’s no need for Dave to go waving a pair of middle fingers at the guy and belting out an opera to show off how fake his voice is.

“Damn. It is going to need stitches,” John says, sounding mournful. He prods at the edge of the wound, and sighs. “I don’t even know how I’m going to explain this to my – guardian.” The pause when he probably means to use a more gender-specific word for a guardian is obvious. What a paranoid kid. Then again, Dave is hardly allowed to talk, right?

Then John’s eyes widen behind the shades. “Shit,” John breathes, digging in his pockets with his uninjured hand, patting at them a few times uselessly when he fails to find whatever the hell he’s looking for. “Shit! My phone is still in my backpack. Dammit, my lusus must be freaking out by now.”

Dave has to think about that one. “Dude, did you just use the troll word for parent? Exactly how much time have you been spending with your new troll buddy? Because that’s a little weird.”

“It’s gender-neutral,” John says, burying his face in his hand. “Fuuuuuck. How do I even explain this? For that matter, how do I get back home?!”

“First you let Bro stitch up your arm.” When John shoots him a harassed glare, Dave shrugs. “Puppets, man. He’s fucking good at stitching and shit. And you can use a phone here, dumbass, we’re not gonna just stitch you up and shove you out the front door. For one thing, you’d probably try to keep my shades while you blasted off into the metaphorical sunset.”


Dave’s phone background is one of his many ironic selfies. He maintains a perfectly straight face as he unlocks it and goes straight to the phone app before handing it over. “Knock yourself out, kid.”

Bro returns between one step and the next, a sewing kit tucked into his hand, and Dave exchanges a look with him.

Are we going to have a problem?

Not from John.

Bro grunts and starts setting up his needles while John is tapping in a phone number, slow and careful, as though worried he’ll forget the number halfway through and can’t afford to mess up. His arm is oozing blood still, and his shirt is smeared with both blood and Neosporin now. However he’s getting home, he’s probably gonna need to borrow a shirt before he goes out in front of people and gets an ambulance called on him. When Bro tilts his head at John’s arm, John isn’t paying enough attention to notice, intent on the phone ringing against his ear, so Dave nudges his arm onto the countertop, trying to play it off smoothly. John looks at him worriedly, before his face lights with comprehension and his whole body braces for the first stitch.

Someone answers on the other end of the phone line just as Bro starts stitching silently. Dave gives the kid props, he doesn’t even need a bottle of vodka to keep from flinching at the pain. “D-d-lusus,” John catches himself. No, that was just…wow. Dave mouths ‘just say dad’ at the kid, and John
flushes painfully. “Argh. Sorry Dad.”

Dave can hear the force of John’s dad’s response with ease; but then, he is standing all up in John’s personal space. He should probably move, but how else will he listen in?

“John. Where are you. This number has a Houston area code – is someone with you right now?”

“Yeah, someone’s with me, you could say that.” A stitch tugs at John’s skin and he twitches and bites back a yelp, one eye clearly twisted up in a weird half-grimace behind the shades. Wow, those shades are doing absolutely nothing at all on the concealment front. “Um. This is gonna sound pretty much impossible. Uh. I kind of, uh. I am in Houston.”

A long silence ensues. “John, stay where you are. I can trace this number to its location, I just need you to stay on the line. Are you injured?”

John blows out air through his nose. “Dad, I’m serious. I am in Houston. I have no idea how I got here, but apparently I managed it in just under a minute or so. I’m, uh. I’m with Flashstep and the Puppeteer.”

“John, I’m going to need a little more explanation than that,” the voice says flatly.

“When I landed – however I landed – I ended up kind of accidentally stabbing myself on this pile of shitty swords,” John goes on, kicking one leg absently. He yelps aloud and then claps his free hand belatedly over his mouth when a particularly deep stitch tugs at the edges of the sword wound. “So now I have to get stitches. But uh, other than that, I’m fine. Just reeeeeally confused.”

“Password,” John’s guardian says at last. “I mean it John, if you’re in danger, I need the password.”

“I’m not giving you the password when I’m not in danger.” John rolls his eyes, proving that the shades have in fact begun to slide down the bridge of his nose and reveal his eyes anyway. No wonder the kid wears the goggles, nothing else stays attached to his face. “I’m just confused and kind of hungry and wondering how the heck I managed to cut a ten hour flight down to less than a minute without remembering anything about it. And also how I’m gonna get back.”

Another long silence occurs, during which Bro’s quick, neat stitch work ends and he ties off the knot with a nod before vanishing to hide his sewing kit again. Dave wordlessly hands John the Neosporin again, and the kid makes a face before starting to salve more onto the wound, head tilted to the side as he listens.

“You don’t have your wallet with you, or your phone. I have both here. Do you think you can return the same way you left?”

John hesitates, eyes flicking toward Dave, who just raises another pointed eyebrow. He doesn't even know what that look was about, but he’s not going to let that ignorance show. Strider rule number one, never let them see you confused. A coolkid is always on top of his game, even when the game involves twelve different types of dice, people can teleport from one end of the map to the other, and the points don't matter. “I wouldn’t even have the first idea how to. I don’t even know if I did it, or if it was some kind of outside force. All I know is – uh, Flashstep and Puppeteer were just as surprised when I showed up as I was.”

“Preach it,” Dave says, slouching with his hands in his pockets.

“Have them set up a secure email.” John’s dad is suddenly all business, some of the urgency gone from his voice. He still sounds coldly furious, though, the barely restrained tension in his voice audible even to Dave. The guy sounded like a fucking douche – what, John didn’t even get a ‘glad
you’re not dead or kidnapped’ spiel? “I don’t want you flying back to Washington out of uniform. I can see what flights run between Seattle and Houston and send you the ticket information.”

“Dad,” John begins to protest, pulling another hilarious face.

“No buts. Nothing is up for discussion until we get you home. Did you have plans with – your friend tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I’ll cancel th- no, I can’t. He’d notice the area code, too.”

“I’ll do my best to get you on a flight tonight. If we need to, you can send me your password and I’ll text him through your phone.” A pause, and the cold voice continues. “I’ll call you back in a few minutes. Please answer when I do.”

“I will.”

The phone clicks. John looks up, shoving the shades back up his nose when he realizes how far they’ve fallen. “I guess I’m flying the old fashioned way,” he says, a faint, forced smile on his face. And –

Fuck.

Dave knows that weird, wistful smile, knows it too well for having only witnessed it one bizarre day nearly two years ago. Feels it like an ugly twist in his gut, a sickening lurch as though he’s misjudged the landing while crossing the rooftops. Hell, if he wouldn’t do anything to make that smile fuck right off, because it isn’t a smile at all. It’s a question mark, like the kid doesn’t remember how to be happy.

So much for ‘i’m feeling much better now dave, you don’t need to worry so much i think i’m not so alone anymore.’ Load of bullshit. If he hadn’t overheard Asshole Dad mention a friend, Dave would be seriously doubting the existence of said friend at all. Apparently one good conversation with Dad of the Year and none of that mattered, because John looked just as lost and tired now as he had the day he punched a mugger in the face with a fistful of air and then turned to smile at Dave with a too-wide, rictus grin, more suited to a skeleton than a boy.

Dave does the same thing he did back then, when faced with that mockery of a smile. He takes the phone out of John’s hand and yanks him roughly into a hug, ignoring the kid’s flailing protests as he wraps his arms around his shoulders and holds on tight. “Shut up, John,” he says, clapping at a handful of John’s shirt, aware that he can feel the sticky damp of blood from the front of John’s shirt smearing onto his own. He could fucking care less at the moment. “Fuck your dad. You want to fly home yourself, then fucking fly home yourself. We can go all professional robber-chic and buy you a ski mask so no one can take your picture while you’re buzzing Nevada.”

“My dad would be pissed! And it would probably take me two days to get there, if I pushed it,” John protests, getting all squirmy. Dave just gets comfy, patting him on the back occasionally. That’s the nice thing about having the ultimate poker face; shit like this doesn’t even faze him. “Ka-my friend would definitely notice if I just mysteriously vanished or something over the weekend. I already made him really suspicious when I had to miss school on Thursday!”

“Yeah. But you still want to.”

John stills, and then, abruptly, Dave has an armful of heavy, quiet John. All the fight has gone out of him, and for a moment they’re both silent. “You know, I’m pretty sure that counts as shooshpapping,” John mutters, knocking his head on Dave’s shoulder. “Asshole. No one’s supposed
to do that but my moirail. Which I have now. *Fuck.*

Yeah, Dave has about zero context for any of this. Whaat, so he’s culturally insensitive - he has enough trouble maintaining all this Strider brand cool without worrying about weird trollmance quadrant shenanigans on top of that. “Contrary to whatever your troll buddy is telling you? Humans don’t follow troll quadrants,” Dave says, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, sometimes people get their hatemance on and everything, but seriously, I’m pretty sure serendipity is just some troll hormone thing. You’re a human. Guess what. If the shooshpapping works, it works. Whatever the hell shooshpapping is, anyway. Sounds like a troll made-up word, so that makes about as much sense as anything else about trolls.”

“Haha. I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.” John shakes his head. “Why do you know me that well, anyway? How did you know I want to fly?”

“Aside from the fact that you practically gave me a play-by-play of your issues last time you were here? I’ve been talking to you for years now, dumbass. You *always* want to fly.” Dave lets go of the kid at last. You can only hug so much before it stops being either necessary or ironic and descends into the realm of the disgustingly sappy. “Seriously, this isn’t anything new. You were practically in tears last time because you wanted to zoom off during school hours and fly to your classes and take people for crazy tornado fun times instead of *walking* everywhere like the rest of us peons.”

John blushes so much his whole face looks stained the color of tea. “Shut up,” he says, picking at the stitches in his arm.

“We should wrap that up if you’re flying back,” Dave notes, turning to dig through the first aid bucket again.

“I haven’t said I’m flying back.” John makes a face, but it’s no longer plagued with the old, weary exhaustion; he looks alive again. Behold the power of Strider. “I still wish I knew what got me here. If it happened again mid-flight, who knows where I’d end up.”

“You don’t remember anything at all?” Dave yanks a roll of bandages out of the bucket and starts unrolling it. “Because it looked like you were pretty pissed off at Bro, and you got cut off before you could finish your assuredly epic-level death threat.”

John purses his lips as he glances at Bro’s closed bedroom door. Apparently, care and keeping of Heir has been left to Dave for the duration of his stay. Even Lil Cal has fucked off to parts unknown, which is vastly reassuring. The older Dave gets, the fucking creepier Bro’s puppet of choice gets. He swears to any god listening that one day he will take that puppet and introduce it to the fucking blender.

“Yeah. Uh. Sorry about whole chat thing,” John says, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “I kind of did a flip off the metaphorical handle, didn’t I? I don’t know why I got so *angry.*”

“A full-on pirouette,” Dave agrees. “But to be fair, Bro was getting all weird and shit about this Midnight Crew thing.”

“That’s because they’re dangerous.”

Both he and John yell, because Bro’s voice doesn’t come from behind his bedroom door but from *right the fuck behind them.* The wind whips once before John settles down again, sending the bandages flying at the wall to bounce off the stovetop. The kid is fucking twitchy.

“Apology accepted by the way, kid,” Bro says, a tiny smirk in the corner of his mouth. “But hell. I’ll
only say this one more time. You want my advice, you don’t go home. You call your guardian and
tell him you’re moving somewhere else. Maybe Vancouver – Vancouver is still clear, and you’re still
near your old turf. I wasn’t fucking kidding around; people die when the Crew gets pissed off. And
after what just happened today? I think they’ll be very interested in you.”

John frowns and leans against the counter, crossing his free arm awkwardly over his chest while
Dave commandeers his other arm to bandage it. “What the heck does that mean? Why would they be
interested in me after today? I didn’t even fight them today. I’m probably going to miss patrol at this
rate.” He sounds bitter, but Dave is too busy keeping steady pressure on the arm wound to clap him
on the shoulder again.

Bro tilts his head to the side. “Because I just took a look at the kitchen cameras.”

Dave slaps his forehead. “You have the cameras on again?! I thought we said no more creepy
puppet porn in the kitchen!” He should have known better after seeing the pile of smuppets once
again taking up the kitchen sink, but he’d still held out hope for an alternative explanation.

“Ain’t porn, kid,” is all Bro says, which is a total lie. Dave knows. He's seen things, man. Terrible
things. Things not meant to be witnessed by a sane man.

John rips his arm out of Dave’s grip, the bandage job only half finished, and he stares at Bro with
wide-eyed horror, and, for the first time, genuine rage. “You have me on camera.”

“I have fucking all of us on camera at some point,” Bro says with a shrug. “And you’re going to
want to see this, anyway. It’s pretty fucking enlightening.”

"No, just - no. This stops right now. You need to delete that, whatever you have on camera. This is
not cool, okay?” John insists. His brown contact lenses seem to have fucking dissolved, because the
blue is showing through and starting to look luminous again.

"Fine, I don't fucking need it," Bro says. "But you'll wanna watch it first. Come on, kiddies." With a
wise-ass smirk he vanishes.

Dave catches John by the arm, and John gives him an irate glare, eyes all gloowy and shit. "Come on.
If he says he'll delete it, he will." This is a blatant lie, but Dave has a fucking spectacular poker face,
as has been stated. Bro follows his own weird, puppet-freak whims, and only keeps his word about
half the time. Usually when he doesn't, he only breaks his promises to some inscrutable end that ends
up saving lives in an unfathomably badass fashion, so Dave's learned to let it just roll over him.
Mostly. "Let's just get it over with. Then we can get you a new goddamn shirt or something, you
look like fucking Carrie."

John grimaces, but his eyes power down as he tugs at the edge of his shirt and makes a face at the
blood smeared down his front. "Oh, great. Yeah, I'd appreciate that. What a mess…”

And so peace is restored to the land. Dave is the Heir-whisperer. It is him. He walks without
flashstepping toward Bro's unholy hellhole of a room, and John follows, the windy thing around him
relatively calm but still present.

Bro's room is deceptively clean and free of puppets, and his bed, unlike Dave's is perfectly made, as
though Bro is too cool for such lowly human functions as sleep. Dave knows this to be an ironic
cover for the fact that his closet is fucking jam packed with creepy ass puppets and high quality
swords. Instead, robot parts and gears litter the corners in piles, and a single battle puppet - not Lil
Cal - lies out on the desk, its mechanical insides exposed. Bro is putting on a show of tinkering with
the gears, but the four monitors on his desk are all tuned to one channel, a silent hint that he's more
interested in the screens than the robots.

Dave and John crowd in behind Bro’s chair, Dave keeping a good distance from the screen to hide just how very interested he is in getting a goddamn explanation for tonight. John just leans in, one hand clenched on top of the desk, oblivious to how close to a potentially deadly puppetkind specibus he’s leaning. Seriously, Dave is gonna have to sweep his room for fucking sword traps and shit before he lets John anywhere near it; the kid just does not comprehend the many different ways this apartment is designed to fuck with the minds of the unwary.

Once they’re both there, Bro absently reaches up and presses a button on his keyboard, and then pretends to go back to working on the puppet as the video starts.

On the tape, the kitchen is dark and cluttered with random shit (John is right, why do they have all this random-ass stuff everywhere?), the pile of smuppets in the sink silhouetted in the moonlight, which is creepy as fuck.

They watch about five minutes of the same scene before John gets antsy. True, Dave doesn't see the point of this either, but John shows his restlessness, shifting his weight from side to side, his frown deepening with each passing minute. How does this kid feel so damn much all the time? John opens his mouth, then snaps it shut, as though swallowing the urge to say something. It's bizarre, watching someone with so many tells in their face. And all that is just what Dave can see in the corner of his eyes, with most of his focus on the video feed.

Finally, something changes on screen. It doesn't really make sense, either. A whooshing feedback blasts through the speakers, loud enough to make even Dave wince, and then - John is on screen. He just magically appears out of the air two feet above the ground, one arm flying out to grab the edge of the kitchen counter. The other arm, trapped by the sling, ends up taking a sword to the forearm before John can yank it free, which is actually a pretty lucky coincidence - the angle of that sword could have fucked John's lungs up good.

Then Dave and Bro are in the kitchen, having flashstepped their way in, and Bro pauses the feed.

"What...the heck?" John says, looking nonplussed. "I just - showed up. I didn't even fly in through the window, or anything. Are you sure there isn't something wrong with the tape?"

"I have five cameras on that kitchen, kid. Same thing on all of them. No sign of tampering or distortion. Kudos, Heir, you've apparently mastered teleportation." Bro doesn't even bother with a slow clap; it's implied.

"I don't think you can call it 'mastered' if I have no idea how I did it," John says, still staring at the paused video feed. "Weeird. So weeieird."

"Well, figure it the fuck out. Dave and I are still overdue for a nice long, heart to heart chat about how he knows you, and the only reason you're still in this apartment right now is because he's vouching for you. If you figure out how to do it again, feel fucking free."

"Vouching for - he didn't even say anything," John protests. Dave has to shake his head. Apparently a lot of the subtext has been going over John's head.

"Boy, sometimes you are as dumb as a sack of hammers," Bro says, shaking his head almost at the same moment Dave does, shrugging sarcastically. "Anyway, your guardian called."

John flinches, then looks confused, one hand going for the pocket where he'd put Dave's phone. "Wait, what? When?! I thought I had the ph-"
Bro holds up Dave's phone in his hand, and Dave bristles. John stops patting at his pockets, looking embarrassed. "He emailed over the flight number and shit," Bro says, smirking at both of them in his victory. "You head out at five in the morning. Crash on the couch or do fuck all in Dave's room, I don't care. I printed off the tickets for you."

He holds up a folded piece of paper in a gloved hand, a smug grin on his face as John snags the ticket. Then he lobs the cell phone at full speed toward Dave's head. Dave stops time and grabs it. "Nice selfies, btw, Dave," Bro finishes, swiveling in his chair to face the computer monitors and the puppet once more. "Classic irony. Truly vintage stuff, right there."

He has the tone in his voice that means Dave's slipped up in the great game of irony again. It's gone past vintage irony and straight into cringe-worthy. Fuck.

"Wait, that doesn't make any sense. What did you say - he would have asked for me if he called. There's no way he'd trust you guys with something like this. No offense," John says. He doesn't look apologetic, though; he's eyeing Bro warily, one hand still at his pocket where he'd kept the phone. He no doubt wonders how Bro got in and out of his guard so easily. John is smarter than your average non-Strider, but Dave could have told him there is no point in wondering - Bro's impossible speed and stealth remain a mystery even to Dave after all these years.

"None taken, kid. What can I say? I have my ways," Bro says, answering basically nothing at all. He pulls out a fucking welding torch and starts using it on the puppet without even putting on a safety mask over his shades. Sparks fly everywhere, and it's probably a side effect of Bro's eternal aura of cool that nothing catches fire.

"What does that mean? What did my dad say?" Bro finishes, swiveling in his chair to face the computer monitors and the puppet once more. "Classic irony. Truly vintage stuff, right there."

"None taken, kid. What can I say? I have my ways," Bro says, answering basically nothing at all. He pulls out a fucking welding torch and starts using it on the puppet without even putting on a safety mask over his shades. Sparks fly everywhere, and it's probably a side effect of Bro's eternal aura of cool that nothing catches fire.

"What does that mean? What did my dad say?!" John demands, taking a step forward.

Bro grunts. "Nothing much. Told me to mind my own fucking business, then had to go answer the door and deal with people. Probably afraid I'm gonna trample all over his precious single-parent territory. What can I say, I intimidate other parents with my fantastic guardianship skills. It's why they kicked Dave out of preschool - the other kids couldn't handle their jealousy over the fact that Dave got to come home with me everyday, kept trying to ditch their own parents to get some of this parental goodness."

John looks suspicious, but he folds up the ticket and stuffs it into his pocket after scanning it again. "Thank you for printing it, sir."

Bro's eyebrows could have raised the roof. "Sir? Dave, why the fuck don't you call me sir?"

"Because fuck you, that's why," Dave replies, giving him the middle finger. "Now delete the creepy kitchen video before I beat you to it and introduce the hard drive to my shitty swords."

"You could try, little brother. You wanna go? Because it sounds like someone's getting a little uppity." Dave catches the twitch of Bro' fingers that could mean anything from a puppet pile to a stack of shitty swords is about to appear out of thin air. He braces himself to stop time -

"I really would prefer if you destroyed that video," John interjects, before Bro can finish issuing the deathmatch challenge Dave can feel coming. "I'm sure you guys wouldn't leak it to the Internet or anything like that on purpose, but it's still a risk to have that kind of evidence lying around. And you two are out of costume on it, too."

He clearly thinks he's being reasonable and convincing with that last point; it probably has yet to hit him that Bro is wearing exactly the same kind of outfit he always wears in the field on patrol.
"...Fine. I'll erase every copy of that clip. Just for you, kid, because Dave likes you, and it's fucking precious that after eighteen years he's finally figured out this mysterious thing called friendship." Bro cracks his knuckles. "All I ask is that you hear me out about the Midnight Crew thing."

What.

"Dude. Okay. What. No. What the fuck," Dave demands. John just seems speechless, his mouth opening and shutting wordlessly, and Dave completely understands. He'd thought they'd put this whole MC farce behind them but apparently not. "Alright, yeah, John, just ignore him, we're leaving."

"Stop, Dave. Let the kid talk. Your massive secret friendship boner is just embarrassing," Bro drawls.

Wow. Shut down. Again. Dave feels his teeth grit, his cheeks flaring a bright red of both embarrassment and anger, and knows that even showing that much irritation is too much. In Bro's eyes, Dave just lost, no matter what he says or does afterward.

And maybe John had a point earlier, on Pesterchum. It's been building for years now, but Dave is just...tired. So tired of this fucking nonstop game Bro plays. Irony and self-control - the twin essences of the coolkid, the way of the Strider.

Yeah. Maybe it had been fun when Dave was a kid, and all he wanted to do was prove himself to his big brother. Lately, it just feels stifling. Annoying. Every time he has to remind himself not to express emotion, it's a pain in the goddamn ass.

Of course, there's absolutely no one he can talk to about this. Perks of being raised by a fucking isolationist. Bro would have done the Monroe Doctrine proud, and no, don't ask Dave how he knows what the Monroe Doctrine is. You come across some weird shit on the Internet, alright? Suffice to say, Striders are a fucking island, and Dave's spent so long avoiding normal social interaction, he can't remember how it works, if he even knew in the first place.

John and Bro have still been arguing while Dave seethes, lost in his own head. "It's not going to stop with blowing up random buildings," Bro is saying when Dave's brooding intermission comes to an end. "They'll go after you directly now that you've crossed them. And now that you're dicking around with teleportation, you'll jump right to the top of their most-wanted list."

"He already tried a grenade once already," John yells, flinging his hands up in the air. Dave is almost impressed by how much excess emotion the kid has to spare. Even at his most outraged Dave doesn't think he could feel that much. "I don't see how they're even going to find out about this whole Houston thing - I'll be back by tomorrow!"

"They know. They always know."

"If you can't be more explicit than that, there's no way you can convince me to leave Seattle," John says, shaking his head. "I have a duty to my city. I'm going back. I'm not running away," His expression goes still and solemn behind the shades, and his lip pouts out a bit, but the overall effect is pretty clear. "I appreciate" - the word practically scrapes over John's tongue with clear reluctance - "your advice. But that's enough. Once I get home, I'm in my territory. I'm not telling you what to do about Houston, am I?"

"...Touché. It's your ass, kid. Up to you how you want to risk it," Bro replies at last. He pushes his pointy shades up his nose, and they glint in the half light. "I already gave my two fucking cents to your dad. I'm just telling you. Let that troll kid know what he's up against, before he gets hurt. I'm
"Sure you can take care of yourself, but he's probably not half as resilient."

"Why do you even care?" Dave bursts in. "Oh my god, Bro, and you call me embarrassing. You and this Crew thing, it's like a dog and a fucking bone. Aren't you supposed to be the chill one? Lay off."

"Please," John adds emphatically, nodding at Dave. Fuck yeah, solidarity.

Bro goes totally still. The kind of still that implies a truly harsh smackdown is about to be unleashed when they're strifing, and Dave tenses. Between John's (totally justified) anger, Dave's simmering rebellion, and Bro's incredibly idiotic decision to be a stubborn ass today, they're basically setting up for a three-man cage match, which is both awesome and amazingly stupid. Particularly since they're in the seat of Bro's power. It's like a puppet depot up in here.

Somehow, it doesn't all end in a free-for-all. "Yeah. I don't let shit rile me up. But I'm also not a total dick," Bro says, his tone actually dry with detectible sarcasm. His volume starts to increase, until it's louder than Dave has ever heard Bro speak before, and Dave can't help but stare as though Bro has started to grow a second head. "I raised a fucking kid, I'll have you know. Dave didn't just magically walk out of the sea fully formed in a cloud of seafoam and rainbows. Maybe your guardian is okay with letting a pair of kid heroes go up against an entire gang of dangerous motherfuckers, but I. Am. Not."

Dave's jaw drops.

Bro shakes his head and puts down the welding torch. He closes up the puppet's chest cavity and takes up his needle and thread. "Get outta my room, you punks. Go the fuck to sleep or something."

There's some weariness in his tone that brooks no argument. Dave is shaken, still trying to process the violent emotion that had suddenly emerged from Bro's monotone at the end of that rant. He - he can't. He touches John's shoulder instead, jerking his head toward the open door. He doesn't know what his face is doing, too much confusion and shock roiling around to contain it all, but whatever John sees is enough to get him to walk out with Dave.

They leave Bro alone, hunched over his desk, sewing quietly in the bluish light of the computer monitors.

"...Wait here," Dave says, putting out an arm to stop John from crossing the threshold into Dave's bedroom.

"What's up?" John says, standing awkwardly in his blood-smeared t-shirt and the reattached sling. Using his windy thing earlier seems to have dissolved his false-colored contact lenses or some shit, but even with the brilliant blue eyes exposed, the difference between John and Heir is obvious. John may be on the alert, stuck in an unfamiliar place under mysterious circumstances, but he does seem to trust Dave a little, at least, so he's lost some of the battle-ready aura and tension that followed him from the kitchen into Bro's room.

"Gotta disarm all this shit, man. Try to make this place safe for human habitation. There's some sacred law of hospitality about this kind of thing, all right?" That all cleared up, Dave walks into the room, fighting the urge to flashstep all over the fucking place and just clear up any potential traps that way. Bro knows about the flashstep - that's the whole fucking point - so most of the traps will be set to go off in places he least suspects it, places he'd only step if he happened to walk there normally rather than skipping over it in a time-stop.
So Dave does a careful, shuffling circuit of the room, hands stuffed into his pockets. He's painfully aware with each passing minute of how stupid he looks, circling his own room while nothing at all happens. He even opens his closet door and steps inside, and nothing happens.

Did someone abduct Bro and replace him with a normal person? Jesus Christ, Dave is about ready to believe that, even if he only just saw Bro two minutes ago. After that glimmer of actual emotion from his brother at the end of his argument with John, Dave doesn't know what the hell to think anymore. There isn't a single fucking trap in here. This ain't natural.

Trying to distract himself, he grabs a short-sleeved red shirt with the Iron Man symbol on it (everything is done in the service of irony, okay?) and tosses it to John. The wind catches it instead, which is - really fucking cool, all right, he said it - and John glances around the room once more with an appraising eye before stepping in, apparently put on his guard by Dave's residual wariness. Then John looks down at the shirt in his hands, and pauses, blinking at the shirt. "You know, I think I own this shirt, too!"

Dave shakes his head, going to his desk and shoving his latest taxidermy find, a four-eyed black cat, behind a pile of old vinyl records. Knowing John, he wears that shirt unironically, and Dave wants no part in that level of geekery.

He has also never been more aware of just how many dead animals he has lying around in various different states of preservation. He sees John's jaw drop as he inspects a Gila monster in a jar of formaldehyde, and he quickly kicks a stuffed platypus into the shadows under his desk before John can see it. "Anyway, mi casa, su casa, John," he says, hitching a hip on the corner of his desk. "Except, you know, don't go near Bro's puppet sex torture dungeon by yourself. There is evil there that does not sleep. Seriously. I've never seen that asshole sleep. Not even once."

"Haha, really?" John shakes his head. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen my dad asleep, either. Even when I wake him up to report like, head injuries and stuff, he's usually already sitting up and putting on a robe before I finish opening the door."

"Fucking guardians, man," Dave says, fervent. The best part is, John doesn't give him a look for letting that bit of emotion out; he just nods back in agreement. "Anyway. Yeah. I think there's another blanket in here somewhere. I've got the floor."

John actually tries to put up a fight. But Dave is pretty sure it's automatically a dick move if you make guests sleep on the floor, and any argument John tries to make is totally cancelled out by each wide yawn he lets out. It's barely nine, Central time, but despite John's protestations he looks completely beat. There's the fading edge of a bruise down the side of his face, presumably from that whole grenade incident he still refuses to acknowledge did a number on him, and though he claims to be able to work on four hours of sleep a night, Dave is willing to bet that however that teleportation thing worked it involved a fuck ton of energy. Space isn't exactly his forte, but he's pretty sure you can't break the laws of physics and catapult yourself halfway across the country without expending some massive amounts of energy.

Finally, John is half passed out in the bed, barely keeping one eye open. "Hey, Dave. Do you want to talk about you and your Bro? Because it definitely seems like you have some kind of beef with him, but he's ignoring you. Like, he just talks right over you sometimes. And he's really fucking obnoxious."

Dave locates his spare pair of shades in the drawer of his desk. They're dusty and really fucking ancient, but he slides them on, since John shows no sign of taking off his current pair, even with half his face mashed into a pillow. "No, not really. I'm sick of his fucking asshat rumpus tonight," Dave mutters. "He think he can do no wrong or some shit. Fuck him."
"Hear, hear," John agrees. Then he laughs, sounding halfway asleep. "You know, I'm glad you're just as big of a nerd in real life as on Pesterchum, Dave. We only ever really talked once before, and I kind of shoved all my issues at you at once. But you're still a total coolkid nerd."

What. Dave sprawls out on the floor, one leg still propped up with his knee bent as he stares at the blank ceiling. "I have no idea what you're talking about, John. Seriously, where do you come up with these bizarre ideas. What the fuck is a coolkid nerd supposed to be? An abomination of science?"

"You can pretend you're as cool as you want, Dave, but I know you quoted Lord of the Rings just then." John chuckles, before another yawn interrupts him.

Fuck. Well. "Fellowship is the shit. It gets a special pass and it in no way reflects on my coolkid gambit, John." Dave folds his arms behind his head.

"I wear super hero shirts, and you quote Lord of the Rings and rap Celine Dion. I'm just, you know. Saying it. For the record. Nerrrrd."

John is smirking, damn him. Dave can hear his smug tone. Oh, hell naw. "I'm not saying I'm cool, John. Irony," he says. "Don't make me come up there and instruct you on the exact difference between irony and being a total nerd. I'm sure I've given you this vital life lesson before, I don't want to repeat any material."

John snorts. "Yeah, yeah, Dave, okay. Whatever you say. You are the irony master, after all."

"Damn straight I am."

After a few minutes of silence, he thinks John has gone to sleep. The kid's breath rustles every piece of paper in the room, which can't be fucking normal, but after a while the windy thing settles down, and Dave nods to himself. He's kind of tired himself, but he still has to get up and -

"...Is Dave your real name?"

Holy crap John is still awake. Dave stays very still while his heart does a two-step, and thinks about how to answer.

"John is yours, isn't it?" Dave says at last. He doesn't really know how else to respond. Because yeah, of course Dave is his real name, but it would have been the smart thing to give a fake one when they met that first time. John might not even believe him if he confirmed it.

He's asked himself countless time why he just gave out his real name to some random depressed hero who just flew in unannounced from New York, but he can never really come up with a good answer. Nothing that makes sense, anyway. He doesn't know why, but he's always assumed John gave his real name, too. The kid is paranoid as fuck, but - Dave doesn't know.

Sometimes he says their internet brohood is transcendent. As stupid and corny as that sounds, maybe some part of him even believes that. Even when it might be dumb to give each other their real names and risk blowing their aliases, they both did.

"...G'nite, Dave."

"...Yeah, sames."

-
An hour later, when John has sunk into a fitful doze, a second Dave walks into the room. "Just go," future-Dave tells current-Dave, shaking his head. He looks like he's sweating, which is really goddamn weird, but Dave has a system now. Future-him doesn't tell him anything about what's about to happen during his daily round two, except the life and death shit. After the whole shoving himself off a building incident, all Dave Striders past, present, and future must obey the law of mortality-threat disclosure. He will have order, goddammit. He has a fucking system.

"How far back?" Dave whispers, putting on the same pair of shoes future-Dave is wearing. He throws a few glances at John asleep on the bed, but other-Dave just shushes him and doesn't seem too concerned about waking up the unexpected guest. They've had these plans to go meet the BQ for a while now. And hey, this way there will still be a Dave around to keep Bro from kidnapping John for his own good or some shit.

"Only about four hours. It's a fucking shitshow, though. Take the good swords," future-Dave advises.

Dave does.

---

John can't really sleep. The air coming in through the window is hot and humid and unfamiliar, a good ten degrees warmer than back home in Washington, and he has to kick off both the sheets and the covers from Dave's bed before he can begin to doze off. Part of the problem - a huge part - is that this is the second night in a row he's missed his patrol in Seattle. The fact that he's stranded all the way down in Texas does nothing to assuage the rising tide of guilt eating at him, preventing him from relaxing enough to fall asleep.

He wonders if he could teleport himself back, right here and now. But...he just doesn't have the first clue how he did it in the first place! It's like there's a blank spot in his head between being pestered by Dave and his Bro and suddenly landing in their kitchen.

See, John is in Houston.

That still hasn't really sunk in yet. But every time he turns around, he gets another reminder: the piles of dangerous junk lying everywhere, the sticky, hot smell of pollution drifting in through the hole in Dave's wall, the unknown age of the pizza that Dave excavates for them to eat from a fridge full of shitty swords. Oh, and the fact that every time he looks outside, he sees Houston.

He feels like he should probably be freaking out a lot more. This is a mess. He’s stuck in a tiny apartment with two people who wave swords around for a living, and just because one is his Internet chum and the other is a relatively well-known hero doesn’t make him any safer with them than with any other strangers. Okay, Dave’s not really a stranger, but this is the first time John has met the guy in years, and anyway, that first meeting only lasted about a day before they went their separate ways.

His dad calls one last time before John goes to sleep. Dave hands him the phone wordlessly and stares out the window while John has a muttered conference with his dad on the details of his flight tomorrow morning, once more blank-faced behind a pair of sunglasses he found somewhere. Which means, in a way, Dave is out of uniform; Flashstep doesn’t cover his face while he’s working. So now that both John and Dave have shades on, somehow, John has ended up the only one in disguise in an apartment full of three heroes. Flashstep and the Puppeteer are just a totally different type of hero from the kind John has been raised to be. They’re careless and John is pretty sure they’ve mentioned what may be their real last name a couple times so far, with no regard for his presence. It’s backwards and confusing and blehhhh.
He doesn’t understand how he can be tired so early, either. He runs a mental check when his eyes first start drooping over a slice of reheated pizza, but despite the fact that it’s only seven in the evening, Seattle time, he can barely think straight past the exhaustion. On a regular night, he wouldn’t even have started patrolling yet! Jeez! The cut on his arm has already started to heal and barely stings anymore, but his collar bone aches grumpily when he changes out of his gross bloodstained shirt and into one of Dave’s.

Using the wind for big things like tornados and stuff always tires him out a bit faster, and he can only assume that…whatever happened that landed him here in Dave’s apartment, it took even more out of him. He doesn’t want to call it teleportation. Teleportation isn’t even close to what the wind has been able to help John do before. The wind obeys his call, helps him fight, catches him when anyone else would just fall. It doesn’t mysteriously transplant him over two thousand miles out of his way in under two minutes.

_You’re also strong_, a niggling voice whispers in his head. _You heal too fast. On a normal day, you barely need to sleep. Those aren’t windy things._

Okay, John’s power has never been restricted to just the wind. But being really resilient doesn’t have much to do with teleporting, either.

So what gives?

He supposes this could all still be an elaborate conspiracy by the Puppeteer, who was the only one to have access to the tapes before John and Dave viewed them. Bro is insanely fast, so fast that John can barely track his breathing when he moves around in a room, and could hypothetically have the technological skills to quickly alter the video while John was dealing with a giant stab wound in the kitchen. But why? What would be his motivation?

If all of this is some kind of trap, what’s the point? John can’t figure it out, and it’s goddamn frustrating.

All John remembers is being so pissed. A whole new level of pissed. Sooo pissed. Like, he’d been channeling the spirit of his inner-Karkat or something, only being that angry wasn’t so hilarious when you were the one feeling it. You were just…angry, and everything was awful, and it sucked. He doesn’t know how Karkat maintains that level of pure irritation all the time. John had had to just stop talking to Bro earlier, because – he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t let himself get _that_ angry again. His dad has drilled into him that getting angry could get people hurt, with John’s level of strength and his abilities. While honestly, of all the people in the world, the Puppeteer could probably give as good as he got, John didn’t want to hurt anyone out of some irrational anger because that person was worried about his well-being.

Because even if at first it just seemed like Bro was being a dick? After his outburst earlier about raising Dave, John just feels bad. Bro’s default state seems to be stuck on ‘emotionless douchebag,’ but apparently being annoyingly persistent and taunting people and smirking is how he…shows brotherly concern?

Yeah, no, John doesn’t get it. Maybe it’s a brother thing. He’s only ever had his dad, after all.

He doesn’t know how he’s going to get to sleep now, though. How can he be expected to sleep with all of this crazy stuff on his mind, in a strange place with people he barely knows?

…”He apparently fell asleep. Uh. Well. Okay. That was easy.
John rolls over, the wind tugging at his hair but not trying to yank him up into the air like usual. He can’t tell if it’s because the air is heavy and sluggish with humidity, or because he himself is slow on the uptake, trying to make sense of the hovering pile of rainbow puppets that hangs over his head, supported by the wind.

“Dave?” he asks tentatively, reaching up to adjust the shades on his face. They won’t stay on properly over top of his glasses, but he draws the line at removing either pair. It’s going to be weird and attention-grabbing enough that John is flying back to Seattle without having legally flown down to Houston in the first place; no need to have his face exposed so everyone can see that John Egbert’s eyes have turned a bright blue. His tinted contact lenses are just – gone. No explanation. It’s too late to keep Dave and Bro from seeing his face and the real color of his eyes, but he wants to be as low key as possible at the airport, where there could be yet more cameras that could record his face.

Or maybe Bro’s paranoia is just contagious.

“Dave?” he repeats when he gets no reply.

“No,” Dave’s voice mumbles. “No Dave here. Whoever told you that was a lying liar who lies.” When John leans over the bed, holding both pairs of glasses up with a hand, he sees Dave half hidden under the bed, and half covered in more of the weird rainbow puppets. Seriously, do these things just generate out of thin air?

John looks up at the puppets above him, and then gestures with the wind, sending them toppling down in a pile on the floor.

Someone flickers through the air, in and out of the room before John can process who it is. Suddenly, the puppets rise up and fling themselves at Dave, bombarding him from all sides as he flails. “Augh!” Dave yells, and he must pause time right then, because the next second he’s standing over by the desk and the puppets are scattered in pieces with stuffing everywhere, like he sliced his way free. “Mother. Fucking. Puppet. Ass,” he chokes out, clearly struggling to suppress some intense emotion as he lets his head rest back against the wall. “Oh my god. Why. Why is this happening. So plush. Eurghhhhh.”

“Does this happen a lot?” John asks.

“You have no goddamn idea, John. My life is a puppet-themed hell.” Dave recollects himself, shoulders slumping out of a battle-ready stance as he sticks his hands in his pockets, as though he didn’t just have a minor episode over a bunch of relatively innocuous puppets.

Remembering a certain offhand comment about puppet porn, John decides not to think about it. Seriously. He’s not thinking about it. Ever. “Hey, what time is it?”

“What do I look like, a watch?” Dave says, his tone too flat for John to tell if he’s joking or not. “It’s like six in the morning. Normal people shouldn’t even be awake right now. This is obscene. Thanks, Bro. Thanks for the wakeup call!” He raises his voice a little on the last part, sarcasm giving the words bite, and John hears a grunt of acknowledgement from the kitchen. “Can’t even deal with him right now,” Dave mutters. Then he frowns at John. Or at least John thinks he’s frowning – his eyebrows furrow a bit, but John obviously can’t see all of his expression. “You managed to avoid a faceful of puppet ass, John? Oh my god. Teach me your ways. Right here, right now.”

John stands up, stretching carefully to avoid jolting his arm. “Were those puppets supposed to hit me, too? I guess the wind just caught them.”
“You don’t know how lucky you are, man.” Dave shakes his head. “I stop time and I still can’t evade these fucking things. Ugh. I feel violated. Learn from my mistakes, John. Do not ever piss off a carapacian dame and a puppet-obsessed maniac on the same night. I regret all of my life choices right now. So much regret.”

John blinks. “Wait, what? When did that happen? Was I asleep for that part or something?” Sure, he could see Bro maybe starting a fight in the middle of the night, but when did a carapacian enter into the equation? They’re really rare, aren’t they? John doesn’t think he’s ever met one in person.

“Or something,” Dave says, rubbing at his eyes behind his shades. “Come on, if we’re going to be functional at ass o’clock in the morning, I need way more AJ.”

“Heh, okay. Whatever you say, Dave.” Self-conscious and awkward in his borrowed shirt, John follows Dave out into the main room. After two more piles of things—a stack of robot parts and an entire table, which doesn’t really count as a pile, he supposes—ambush them, evaded by Dave and caught by John’s breezes, he starts to get that yes, this really is a regular thing. Dave looks grim but not surprised by the constant barrage.

John realizes, with a combination of wonder and dismay, that this might well be Bro’s equivalent of John and his dad’s morning t’ai chi routine. After that first disastrous puppet pile in the bedroom, Dave is flashstepping around flying cutlery and empty pizza boxes without missing a beat, while John lets the wind circulate around him in a constant shield to deflect anything that flies his way.

This is more than just the unfathomable whim of a cruel and distant brother. This is…training.

...Sooooo weeeeeeird.

They somehow survive the journey to the kitchen, despite one flurry of swords that nearly took John’s eye out, and John sees that most of the piles of junk scattered around the room, including the shitty swords he cut himself on last night, have vanished, repurposed as part of the trap-riddled obstacle course. Dave goes into the pantry, heaves himself up onto the third shelf, and feels around in the shadows of the topmost shelf before a tiny smirk of triumph breaks through his blank face. He holds up a bottle of amber yellow liquid solemnly. “Fuck yeah.”

He jumps down to the ground, apple juice in hand, and the ceiling bursts open. Dave barely has time to look up, mouth parted in horror, as he is completely buried in puppets. John can only watch, startled, as puppets continue to pour down in wave after wave of rainbow goodness.

“John.” The voice comes from within the pile of puppets. One last puppet tumbles down from the trap door in the ceiling and bounds off the top of the Dave-pile.

“Yes Dave?”

“I need you to be my second. Bro just declared war on the sovereign nation of Dave Strider. It’s on.”

John raises an eyebrow. “I thought the puppet thing was normal?”

“That fucker stole my apple juice.” Dave emerges from the pile between one second and the next, leaving most of the puppets decapitated behind him. “The deathmatch commences now.”

Apparently, in addition to doing hero work without masks and buying groceries while in costume, the Puppeteer and Flashstep engage in semi-regular rooftop duels, where anyone in one of the apartments on either side could easily look out and watch them go at it. Even as John anxiously scans
the windows of the building next door to make sure the coast is clear, a woman with a small child opens up a window on level with their roof and yells, “You two gueros locos better not fuck up my window again!”

Bro salutes her with a sword.

“Chingate!” With that she closes the window with a resounding slam and disappears.

John’s brain hurts.

Dave raises his swordkind, the corners of his mouth turned slightly downward in an amazing display of fury. “One rule, Bro. One. Do not. Fuck. With my apple juice.”

Bro tilts his head to the side. John looks at where Bro is staring, and sees one of the many puppets propped up on the edge of the air conditioning unit, the bottle of AJ enclosed in the embrace of its arms. Its wide blue eyes glimmer uncannily, its cheeks stretched in an unnatural grin. It freaks John right the fuck out, enough so that he unconsciously tugs more of the Houston morning air around him. Puppets like that didn’t belong anywhere but carnivals and horror movies. He recognizes the Puppeteer’s puppet of choice, Lil Cal, but it’s a lot more terrifying in person than in newspapers. It just…stares. Unblinking. Soulless. Ever-smiling.

Bro finally says, “Nut up or shut up, kid. Fight me or the AJ goes over the edge.” He raises a hand and Lil Cal twitches closer to the edge of the roof.

Dave stiffens. “You wouldn’t.”

“Last night just proved you need some schooling, little brother,” Bro says, shrugging. “If you weren’t so attached to fruit juice, I wouldn’t have to use this weakness against you. You should probably look into that.”

“You bastard. What did the apple juice ever do to you? Just give it back and no one has to get a fucking sword in their kidney.”

Bro raises a hand and curls his fingers in a ‘bring it on’ gesture. Dave obliges, crossing the yards between him and Bro in a matter of seconds. Then both men begin flickering and out of sight as they move too fast for John to follow, their swords flaring with reflected light in the rising sun. Neither of them take off their shades, either, which means they’re both doing this in their civilian attire. John doesn’t even bother to point that out.

This would be really, really cool and all, getting to watch two of the best heroes in the US in action, except that John doesn’t understand why any of this is happening, and these two are completely insane.

“Do we really have to do this right now? This whole thing seems like it could turn out to be completely pointless,” John calls, hands cupped around his mouth. He feels he should throw his opinion into the ring. “And I have to go to the airport eventually!”

“Kid, you can fly!” Bro shoots back, slowing just long enough that John sees him kick out to trip Dave before the battle’s time-defying pace resumes. “You don’t need a fucking babysitter!”

He’s an asshat, but he does have a point. “Hey Dave, just yell if you need me to, I don’t know, avenge your death or something, I’m gonna go find something to eat.” He’s starving by this point – reheated pizza doesn’t exactly last long when you usually eat as much as three men per meal.

Dave nods before parrying another blow. Bro is practically invisible by this point, and it would look
like Dave is just fighting by himself except for the occasional stray puppet or spark of steel on steel that gives Bro’s position away. All the while, Lil Cal looks on with shining eyes.

Yeah, as interesting as it is to watch the Puppeteer and Flashstep duke it out in person, John is 120% done with that creepy puppet. He backs away from the duel, not really willing to turn his back on the scene when there are really sharp swords everywhere, and then descends the stairs back down to Dave’s apartment. He lets out a sigh of relief when he can’t feel Lil Cal’s eyes on him anymore. How does Dave stand that all the time? He wanders to the fridge and opens it, bracing the unstable pack of shitty swords with his shoulder as he hunts through the drawers for something edible.

...How do these two even survive?! There’s a drawer full of something unmentionable that’s gone fuzzy and green, and apart from that the entire fridge is taken up with empty apple juice bottles and sword specibi. This is unnatural; how can two people live with only a single three-day-old pizza to sustain them?! Shaking his head, John grabs a slice of pizza. It tastes like cardboard and mushrooms, but he coughs it down. He's still wallet-less, and he's really hoping Dave will finish up this deathmatch in time to direct John to the airport -

John stops. He had started to wander back towards Dave's room, thinking he might retrieve his old shirt, but on the way he sees that Bro’s door is hanging open. A single puppet wedged between the door and the frame must have caused the door to slowly open rather than closing completely.

And that normally wouldn't have caught John's attention, except that he can quite clearly see, through the open door, that the video from last night is still up on Bro’s monitor. As he does a slow, deliberate doubletake, swallowing a piece of pizza, he sees that it has been paused right when past-John has just mysteriously appeared over the sword pile.

The Puppeteer promised he'd delete that, John thinks vaguely. The wind starts to pick up around him, new gusts streaming in through the hole in Dave’s wall and whipping around John in a protective circle as he storms into Bro's room. No traps go off or anything as he marches up to the desk and takes in all four monitors. Three have different angles of the kitchen from last night, with John in the center of the shot.

The fourth has a tiny popup that reads 'File Copy Complete."

Bro didn't erase the footage. He saved a copy.

For a long moment, John can only stand there, feeling the fury rise up inside him. Then, his chest explodes in pain.

He huddles forward over it, one hand clutching at his chest, but between the pain all he can think is he is going to punch The Puppeteer into next fucking week -

And then –

John’s ears pop, and he’s falling. He yelps, and closes both fists reflexively, and the wind catches him a foot above the Puppeteer’s head.

He’s back on the roof.

More precisely, he’s hovering seven feet above the roof, suspended mere inches from a really sharp, not-so-shitty katana.

“Dude. What.” Dave is somewhere under John’s feet, which is makes it awkward when John tries to turn and look at his face. With a twist of the wind John flips himself upright and eases himself down onto the roof. His legs feel kind of wobbly, but he lands alright. The sudden chest pain is gone, but
he presses a hand to his sternum anyway, shaken. He'd been so angry that the pain barely registered, but the shock of appearing above the roof sucked the rage right out of him, along with the pain.

Just like it had earlier, when he'd teleported from his bedroom to these guys' apartment.

Well then.

"Sup?" John says weakly. "Uh. I think I might have done the teleport thingy again."

"You know, I wouldn't have guessed that, John, not with the way you just appeared out of bugfuck nowhere," Dave says, facepalming with his free hand.

"Any idea what you did this time?" Bro asks, tucking his sword away across his back. Dave is still at the ready, but the Puppeteer walks away from him and John, striding to the AC unit by the edge of the roof. He rests Lil Cal on his shoulder, completely unconcerned about the fact that Dave still has his sword out and a total revenge face on.

John glares at the man. "You didn't delete that video! I saw it on your computer still. You lied!"

"And that got you all righteously pissy, didn't it," Bro states. He flings the entire bottle of apple juice at Dave’s head. Dave catches it and takes a moment to stare at bottle before hugging it under one arm. "And then, you ended up all the way up here."

Bro then goes silent. After a long minute, John gets it. "I got mad at you – again – and I – ohhh."

"Except this time you came up here with Dave and saw where I was, first. And traveled a shorter distance. Probably helped you aim more accurately. So that’s one mystery solved. You’re fucking welcome, kiddos." Bro raises his hands to some unheard applause, and then readjusts his hat on his head, slouching toward the stairwell.

"So now John fuels teleportation with his own rage? What next, you start photosynthesizing when you're feeling peachy?" Dave snarks, finally putting the sword away with clear reluctance.

"I said one mystery, you little shits. Do your own fucking homework, I’m done for the day." And with that, Bro disappears.

John can feel the faintest rush of air as the Puppeteer vanishes back down into the apartment unseen. He and Dave exchange bewildered glances. Then John remembers – "Hey! Come back here! You still didn’t erase that video!"

They all end up back in Bro's room, somehow. John harasses the Puppeteer until he actually deletes the video in front of him, though John can't be sure there aren't still more copies saved to the hard drive. Then Dave gets into a renewed one-man argument about how the apple juice is out-of-bounds when it comes to 'being a huge fucking asshat,' while Bro blatantly ignores him and starting tinkering with a bright pink puppet that has scissors for hands. The only possible explanation for the combination is some kind of irony John can't even hope to fathom, especially not when a short bout of exhaustion hits him. He paces for a bit until the tiredness dies off. He's starting to think it's not just the concussion anymore - teleporting takes it out of a guy! But it's not nearly as bad as last night, when he'd passed out before the sky had even gone dark.

Having exhausted even his strange, tangent-based method of arguing and ranting, Dave finally subsides, taking off the ancient pair of shades and pressing the tips of his fingers against his eyes. "Fucking dick," he says halfheartedly, keeping his eyes shut. Then he shakes his head, and turns
back to John. "You okay, EB?" he asks shortly, putting the shades back on.

John nods. "Yeah. Just still trying to wrap my head around all this. Sorry for interrupting your apple juice war."

"Dude. Bro clearly used you to cheat his way into a draw. I claim this one a victory in my name by default." Dave smirks.

"In your dreams, kid," Bro replies absently.

Dave just shrugs. "You're really not controlling this at all?" he asks, sticking his hands into his pockets. "Just hoppin' on the reality-warping train and hoping for the best?"

"I definitely didn't do it on purpose. I just got really mad. Actually, I really wanted to punch you in the face," John says, directing the accusatory tone at Bro, who ignores him. "And then - nothing."

John scrunches up his face, but the seconds between getting angry and being on the roof again remain a stubborn void.

Bro folds his arms, leaning back as though to inspect his work, and then interrupts with, “And you didn’t feel anything? It’s just a blank?”

*Just the opposite it's too much i can't remember i can't i'm not allowed –*

“Nothing,” John says, more forcefully than he intended to, and he can already see Dave's eyebrows rising like pale birds, Bro swiveling around in his chair until -

A phone rings. The ring tone is ‘Barracuda’ by Heart, and it seems to be emanating from Bro Strider’s back pocket. Bro hesitates, then flips the phone out and slides it onto speaker phone in one smooth motion. He then goes back to tinkering with his bizarre puppet project. “…’Sup. You’re on speaker.”

“Ambrose.” The feminine voice is smooth and warm and just slightly slurried on the ‘s,’ like a mug of hot chocolate with a good shot of cognac mixed in for taste. It is weirdly familiar, though the distortion from the phone is severe enough that John can’t place it.

Without looking, Bro reaches out and hangs up.

Dave raises an eyebrow. “Ambrose?”

“We don’t talk about that,” Bro grunts. “Must have been a wrong number -”

Barracuda plays again. This time Bro doesn’t put it on speaker phone, just puts the phone to his ear while he begins to solder a puppet joint with one hand. “I told you no, woman.”

“Put me back on speaker phone this instant, darling. This is a matter for your ward as well.” The woman on the other end of the phone speaks loudly enough that John can still hear her, even from here. But he has better ears than most. “And I do hate having to raise my voice.”

“Who says I still have a ward,” Bro says. His voice has gone flatter than usual, and he pulls open a drawer on the work desk to start tapping buttons on a heavy black machine. “I’m tracing this call, woman. In about five minutes, I will know exactly where to go to wreck your shit.”

“Speaker phone, there’s a dear,” the woman repeats, just sounding amused. Bro Strider huffs and sets the phone down on the table, hitting the speaker phone tab. “Thank you,” the woman says, her voice now reverberating slightly. “Dave, love, I know you’re there. It’s been too long.”
John feels Dave tense at his side. Outwardly, he’s still slumped against the wall with the practiced nonchalance both he and his brother favor, but his surprise is clear in the way his shoulders stiffen up. “Can’t say I know you, lady,” he says at last. “Random broads with phones, not my specialty.”

“No, you wouldn’t remember.” John can hear the smile in her voice. “You were perhaps three years old when I last saw you. After that, circumstances conspired against us meeting. I believe you would have been five when the trouble with the Crew began, and your guardian never quite trusted me again.”

And yeah, now John is paying attention. “You know the Midnight Crew?” he blurts out, earning himself a smooth-faced but probably irate stare from Bro.

The line is silent, buzzing for a good minute. “Is that -” the woman begins, voice shaky.

Bro cuts her off. “Not now, Lalonde. I’m still one wrong word away from cutting you off. For all I know, you could have been the one to tip them off in Georgia. Say what you want, then piss off before I hunt you down.”

Lalonde.

“Doctor Lalonde!” John yelps, leaning over the desk. He can’t help but ogle the phone with wide eyes, as though if he stares through the cheap plastic hard enough he’ll be able to see through to the lab coat-wrapped form of Rose Lalonde’s eccentric, terminally tipsy mother.

“What the fucking fuck,” Bro says flatly.

“John. I thought that sounded like you.” Doctor Rue Lalonde laughs a little. “I should have known you’d find your way to Dave eventually.”

“What,” Dave says.

“We haven’t heard from you in years! Is Rose doing alright?” John bounces on his heels, ready to laugh now that the mystery has been stripped away. He’d know Doctor Lalonde for nearly six years before she and Rose had moved abruptly to New York.

Then he realizes what she just said. “Wait, what do you mean, I’d find my way to -”

“You haven’t heard from Rose? In how long?” Doctor Lalonde interrupts, urgency slurring into her words. “A few days? Longer?”

John stops bouncing. He frowns at the phone. “Doctor Lalonde, I haven’t heard from Rose in – it must be years, now. First she stopped calling, and then she stopped writing. Maybe three years ago? ...You didn’t know?”

“Three -” There is a long pause, and then the sound of someone crying out, and a glass shattering against something hard, as though Doctor Lalonde has thrown her habitual appletini against the wall. John flinches and Bro actually pushes him back from the table, as though just hearing the sound over the phone is somehow a threat. “She didn’t say why?” Doctor Lalonde demands, her slur suddenly gone.

John shakes his head before he remembers she can’t see him. “No, she just – stopped. I guess I thought she just maybe moved on with her life. I’m sure she made other friends who didn’t live across the continent from her, right? She probably got tired of trying to psychoanalyze me through letters.” He laughs, swallowing back old pain.
“I’m fairly certain that was not the reason, John,” Doctor Lalonde says, with an equally bitter laugh. “You see, I’m afraid the Midnight Crew caught up with us three years ago. I left Rose in New York to draw them off. I have not seen her since. It would seem that in my absence, the situation has… deteriorated.”

“They found you?” Bro cuts in. He’s still fiddling with the puppet, but it’s obvious by now that he isn’t paying attention to it. “And you left her alone?”

“I don’t understand,” John says before Doctor Lalonde can reply. “You mean – has Rose been all by herself by three years? Who’s been watching her? Why were the Crew after you in the first place – what if they went after her again?!” He clenches a fist and can feel the wind starting to whip around his hand as his confusion simmers. He’d known Doctor Lalonde as a kind, if eccentric and most definitely alcoholic, guardian, despite Rose’s insistence on viewing her mother’s strangeness as deliberately passive-aggression directed against her.

But abandoning Rose for three whole years? That smacks of something truly unforgiveable.

“I’ve always trusted Rose to take care of herself,” Doctor Lalonde says, her voice slurring slightly again. There is a pause, and the clink of ice in a glass, and a throaty swallow audible through the speakers as she no doubt finishes mixing herself a new drink and tosses it back. “Though I worry now that I may have made a terrible mistake. As for why the Midnight Crew would seek us out – they sought Rose’s power. To harness it, or to destroy it, if they could not. Just as they sought Dave. I have been able to lead them a merry chase by pretending to still have Rose by my side while she has remained at work in New York, but recent events have shown that perhaps it would have been better to stay with Rose and fight a bloody war against the Crew than – than to have allowed this.”

“Allowed what, Lalonde,” Bro demands, spinning the phone on the table to drag it closer to him. There are tiny lines visible between his brows, where the pointy shades don’t quite meet. “The hell is going on? You wouldn’t call this number unless it was a fucking emergency. What’s wrong with your kid?”

John can’t tell what his insides are doing. It feels like the bottom of his stomach has dropped out, like that one horrible moment a month ago when the explosion at the bank had ripped him free from the safety of the breeze and nearly sent him falling to his doom. He’s so lost; half of this conversation isn’t making sense, but he feels like he’s two seconds from being sick all over the nearest pile of weaponized puppets. All he understands, really, is that Rose is in some kind of trouble. “What’s wrong with Rose?” he says after Bro finishes, before realizing that he’s just repeated nearly what the Puppeteer had just said.

“…Tell me. Are you familiar with the hero Seer of Light?” Doctor Lalonde asks, sipping audibly again. “Forgive me, I need to be more drunk for this. If what I hypothesize is happening, has in fact happened, we are all in grave danger.”

“Seer of Light? I’ve heard of that one. She’s up New York City way,” Dave says, folding his arms across his chest, his red eyes glinting over the brim of his shades. “Shiiit. It’s this Rose chick, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Doctor Lalonde says.

It takes John a second.

Then he flips the fuck out.

“Wait, what?! Rose is a hero?” And yup, that’s it, he has absolutely no clue what to think now. His
brain rams up against ‘Rose is a hero??’ and begins to flail uselessly, spitting out meaningless phrases like ‘how?’ and ‘how do?’

“Not the quickest on the uptake, are yah, kid,” Bro Strider says beyond the haze of John’s mental reboot. “Yeah, we know about Seer. What’s happened to her?”

“If the news reports I’m seeing are to be believed? She has gone full grimdark.” Doctor Lalonde says. “Just turn on any news channel, if you even have a television in your usual hellhole of an apartment. The broadcasters do not recognize her as Seer of Light without her costume, but I know my daughter’s face when she goes about blowing things up without a mask on.”

Bro Strider is gone between one blink and the next, just as John comes snapping back to reality with horror clenching in his gut. He looks at Dave, only to find the other hero halfway out of the room already. John dashes out after him, stopping behind the coach where Bro and Dave now stand. Bro flicks through the channels on the widescreen television hanging on the wall so fast the pictures are a blur. He stops on a prominent news station with a banner declaring a ‘breaking news’ bulletin in the corner. The rest of the screen is taken up by what appears to be a live video feed.

The camera is shaky and jolting, though the cameraman seems to be on a relatively clear street; the only problem is that the streets are almost empty, despite the fact that it should be almost eight in the morning in New York, and therefore the middle of the morning commute for one of the most crowded cities in the country. The streets should be absolutely packed into a gridlock. Instead, there is one car visible – and it has been flipped upside down, the wheels still spinning as it rests heavily on a crunched in chassis.

An explosion of dust bursts out over the street, blinding the camera with a film of greyish brown haze for a long moment as someone unseen, perhaps the cameraman himself, yells. John can’t tell if it’s a yell of pain or just shock.

And then John sees there is something moving in the dust. It looks like a shadow on the monitor, coiling and uncoiling sinuously before splitting into countless black tendrils that stab into the street, digging through the pavement with huge clouds of dust. The edges of the tentacles seem to burn with black fire, twining up toward the sky when they aren’t busy tearing chunks out of the sides of buildings.

Something shifts in the writhing mass, and John nearly falls to his knees. “Fuck, EB,” Dave swears, one arm under John’s before he can hit the ground.

But it’s Rose.

It’s Rose.

Maybe somewhere in his head, John has been denying it, unable to believe that Rose Lalonde with the sharp smiles, the slim fingers, the angled eyes and the silvery golden hair framing her tiny face could possibly be involved with anything related to hero work. Rose had always pandered to and tried to analyze John’s passion for heroes, but had never expressed interest in them herself, preferring to share details of the latest fantasy books she read or the newest knitting pattern she had attempted when they had hung out together in the park by their houses. The idea of Rose being a hero hadn’t felt quite real.

But he knows that face. He knows it.

And it’s breaking his heart at the same time it’s freaking him the fuck out.
Rose’s golden-pale skin is gone, eaten up by a greyish black tinge that’s just a few shades darker than troll grey. White-hot fire burns and oozes from her eyes, leaving them pupil-less and brimming with power. She looks like she’s wearing just leggings and a tight, skin-hugging top that might once have been the neoprene-and-Kevlar, pale yellow undershirt Seer of Light wears beneath her golden tunic in official press releases. Everything is painted with that dull grey stain. Her hair is more silver than blonde, and it tangles and floats in the air, unnervingly similar to the coiling motions of the black tendrils of grimdark surrounding her body.

But she’s still unmistakably Rose, even as she turns her head in a stiff, unnatural motion to stare at the cameraman – and grins with a mouth hollow and burning with white fire.

The camera feed cuts out. The anchorman in the newsroom appears on the screen, babbling something about losing another camera feed, before Bro shuts it off.

“Lalonde. You need to explain grimdark. Yesterday,” he states, holding up the cell phone. The call with Doctor Lalonde is still going.

“I can give you the short version if you wish, but trust me when I say we don’t have time for me to explain the multi-faceted nature of the Noble Circle of Horrorterrors,” the doctor says, her slur once again gone. "In essence, Rose has had mental contact with what you would think of as the Eldritch gods - the many-angled ones, the Outer Gods of the Furthest Ring, our Great Tentacled Tanglebuddies - for most of her life. She has always fought their influence. It would appear she has lost. They have taken over her body, driven her into grimdarkness, and if the reports are valid, have been using her to destroy parts of the city in what appears to be a summoning spirograph."

"Why does the summoning part sound really, really bad?" Dave mutters in John's ear.

“I called to ask a favor of you and Dave, Ambrose," Doctor Lalonde finishes. "The fact that John is already with you just saves me the trouble of attempting to contact Samuel as well."

“What do you mean?” John asks, bracing himself on the couch. He still struggling to process what he just watched, and Doctor Lalonde’s words sound like white noise.

“I have no right to ask this of you. But I am asking. Please. Save my daughter.”

“Can she be saved?” Bro retorts, bristling. “Lalonde, no offense, but your kid looks pretty fucking evil out there.”

“It is not her choice, I assure you,” Doctor Lalonde replies. She is silent for a long moment before beginning again, slowly, her words completely clear and unslurred. “Her power has always stemmed from two disparate sources. I studied it as well as I could until I was forced to leave, but could find no explanation for why Rose possesses two such radically different powers. She has always favored her talent with light magic over the whispers of the grimdark - it gave her nightmares while she slept, and so she suppressed the darkness constantly, too afraid to unleash it. I don’t know what may have happened to trigger this sudden descent into grimdark, but the last time something similar almost occurred, she was terrified.”

Doctor Lalonde stops, and she swallows loudly before continuing. “The grimdark possessed her body and left her powerless to control her actions, yet still able to see and feel everything she did. She screamed and cried constantly, begging me to stop her, because that was the only thing she could still control. I was able to free her only by isolating her in a sensory deprivation tank and remaining with her for weeks, soothing her. Eventually, she was able to take back control. There have been no further incidents until, apparently, last night, when news reports began to reach my location describing what could only be a grimdark event in Albany.”
“And now your kid is tearing up New York City, and you can’t get to her, can you?” Bro says, folding his arms. “Where are you, Lalonde? Are you trying to stop her? Or are you heading the other way.” His voice has gone low and dangerous.

Another long silence. “I am, in fact, on my way to New York as we speak, Ambrose. I know how this may look to you, but trust me when I say I had no choice but to leave my daughter. I trusted in her ability to fend for herself, and I have been able to convince the Midnight Crew she was relocated to Zimbabwe for the past three years. She has been safe, even when I could not be by her side. Now, however, she has quite obviously been exposed. The Crew will be attempting to capture her soon, once they think they have enough manpower to handle the grimdark.”

“How – how do you know my powers?” The room is doing wild loops around John, and he has to rest most of his weight on the back of the couch because this is – it’s too much. It’s all too much. The way Doctor Lalonde is talking, Rose has had these powers for years, probably longer than John knew her. And somehow, Doctor Lalonde knows about John’s powers too. Has probably known about his alias as Heir all these years. She had said she meant to contact John’s dad in order to ask John to come to New York, after all.

Did that mean John’s dad had been the one to break his cover? Without even telling John that ‘oh, yeah, the drunken family friend who used to live down the street knows exactly what you are, don’t worry about it’? Were they talking about the same Samuel Egbert who had drilled it into John’s head from age five that he could never, ever speak about his powers to anyone but him? Who had taught John everything he knew about maintaining a double life?

He can’t – he can’t even handle this right now. Dave has a hand on his shoulder and is saying something too him, a weird, low buzz underlying his voice, but John can only focus in on the conversation between Bro and Doctor Lalonde, almost hysterically giddy in anticipation of some new world-altering whammy.

“We don’t have time to go into details right now, John, I apologize. Suffice to say that I’m sorry that I haven’t spoken with you in so long; your father was as adamant as Ambrose that we maintain distance from each other’s wards once the Midnight Crew began to gain strength over the years.” Doctor Lalonde sighs. “Well, Ambrose?”

Bro stands utterly still, one hand thrust into his pocket, his eyes unreadable behind his shades. “I don’t control the kid, Lalonde,” he says at last, looking at Dave. “Up to you, kid. Feel like helping Lalonde fix her fucking mistakes?” The tinge of bitter anger has returned to his voice, and John wonders why the two adults have such contempt for each other – or at least, what happened that Bro
seems to disdain Doctor Lalonde so much. He’s missing a whole lot of context for this, but it’s obvious that at some point the Lalondes and the Striders had known each other much the same way the Egberts used to know the Lalondes.

And it’s pretty fucking suspicious that all three families later ended up producing heroes in cities across the United States.

But he can’t focus on that right now, as downright freaky as the idea is. His mind scrambles to make sense of the flood of scattered information, but his first priority is already obvious.

He can’t go back to Washington now. Not when his oldest friend is being possessed by crazy shadow tentacles.

No, he needs to be in New York. And he needs to get there fast.

“I’m coming to help,” John says, interrupting whatever fresh argument Bro and Doctor Lalonde are trying to stir up, talking right over their acerbic barbs. “I don’t have any money on me, though, Doctor Lalonde, I’m sorry. Can you cover a flight to New York? Are they even letting air traffic go near the area?”

“Kid, you should think about this-” Bro starts to say, before, suddenly Dave cuts him off. “I’m going too,” Dave says, meeting John’s eyes when John turns to look at him startled. Dave winks a crimson eye, an uncharacteristic gesture for someone who seems to abjure expressing emotion, and John is struck by the feeling that he’s not looking at Dave, but at the Flashstep, cocksure and confident, the same coolkid mask he had worn the first day they met. “Can’t leave a lady all distressed and blowing up shit against her will, Bro. Definitely can’t leave my man Heir hanging. This field trip is gonna be ironic as fuck.”

Dave then raises his chin and meets Bro’s stare head on, as though this is some kind of weird power struggle between the two Striders – and for all John knows, it is. The way the media always plays it, the way Dave has never denied in their chatlogs, the Puppeteer takes the lead in their partnership, which has always made sense in the context of their older and younger brother dynamic. They’ve been clearly in the middle of some major power struggle since before John arrived, though Bro still has the advantage. Right now there’s nothing but disapproval in Bro’s blank stare, but Dave isn’t backing down.

Then, without any visible sign that John can see - “Fine. We’re in,” Bro says to the cell phone. “But I don’t fucking like this, Lalonde. If we pull your kid out of the fire, this is the last fucking chance you get from me. Clear?”

“Thank you, John, Dave,” Doctor Lalonde says quietly. “I still wish you didn’t suspect me of giving away your location last time, Ambrose – I assure you, I have never betrayed you. But I can’t argue this now.”

“So how do we get to New York?” John demands. He can feel a tug in the place where his sense of the wind lies, and a breeze starts to pick up in the room, even though he knows intellectually that flying to New York is as time-consuming a process as flying to Washington would have been. Never mind the fact that he somehow managed to cross nearly the same distance in a little under two minutes. He can’t trust this new teleportation thing yet, not for something as important as this. “It’s something like a three hour flight in a plane, right? How soon could we get through airport security?”

“No need to worry about all that. I ordered the private jet to rendezvous at Hobby Airport the moment I realized I would need backup,” Doctor Lalonde says, her voice brisk and efficient. It’s a startling change from her earlier slurring. “And with your powers, I have utter confidence in your
abilities to sneak onto the flight strip. Why waste time pandering to airport security protocol when you're all in disguise anyway?"

Bro raises an eyebrow above the line of his shades. “The private jet? How’d you get your hands on that?”

“You’d be surprised what you miss out on when you cut yourself off from those who’d wish to help you, Ambrose.”

“That’s not my name.”

“Yes it is, darling.” Now that they’ve agreed to help Rose, all of Doctor Lalonde’s slurring, chortling confidence seems to have returned, and she needles Bro as carelessly as though she hadn’t just a moment ago been begging the three of them to save her daughter. On the other hand, Bro hadn’t been complaining about her use of the name Ambrose all through the earlier conversation, either.

John decides he can’t be bothered to puzzle out what the hell is going on with these two. He just really can’t care about anything else anymore, not when Rose is in danger. “Private jet. Sneaking onto the runway. That’s the plan?” When Doctor Lalonde chirps a drunken affirmative John nods, feeling the last of his confusion get sucked away into the back of his mind. He’ll deal with the metric fuckton of weird and disturbing stuff he’s just heard later. For now, the mission-centered part of his brain kicks in, the part of him that focuses on the work each and every single night, and knows that nothing else is more important than the task at hand. The only thing standing between John and a mad dash for that waiting jet is –

“Dave, I don’t have my uniform with me,” John says, the realization smacking into him with the force of a freight train. “Agh, dammit, we do need disguises. Can I borrow something of yours? I can’t go out and fight in public with all those cameras they have on her without -”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you covered, John,” Dave says. They leave Bro behind in the living room, still talking to Rue Lalonde.

Dave flashsteps to his closet and starts flinging things out with wild abandon, including a mummified cat and one or two of the same long-nosed puppets that seem to litter nearly every surface of the apartment. “Heh,” he says in some kind of dark triumph as he emerges from a corner of the closet and throws an entire bundle of clothing at John. “Try that on, man. We don’t have time to resew the whole thing, but I can stitch a quick fix on the plane. We’re nearly the same height. Ain’t your usual thing, but once you go Strider chic, you’ll never go back, man. You will be wearing suits all over Seattle. The bitches will fling themselves down at your feet. It’s hard exuding as much awesome as you’re going to, but don’t worry, I believe in you, John. I believe.”

John shakes his head and unfolds the crumpled clothing, looking it over as he strips off his own clothes and the borrowed red shirt. He mentally struggles to piece together how the new outfit works. He’s known, vaguely, that the Flashstep’s costumes are ridiculously elaborate, an ever-changing array of suits and trendy styles that make absolutely zero sense in a crime-fighting position. This looks as ridiculous as anything John has ever seen in internet forums. John’s just going to have to wing it. A Kevlar vest comes flying John’s way, and he catches it with the breeze before it hits him in the side of the face, slipping it on.

He pulls on the black pants first, stops halfway through, and stares at Dave in abject horror. “Oh my god, are these skinny jeans?!”

“Own it,” Dave deadpans, throwing him a middle finger.
“We’re not all built for skinny jeans!” John says, exasperated. They do not have time for this. “I need regular pants, Dave! Forget it, I’ll just wear my shorts.”

“Oh hell no.” Dave starts tearing through the closet again. “I’ll find you regular pants, don’t you dare try to mix your nerd cargo shorts with this work of genius.” He flings another pair of black pants at John, and while these appear to be an extremely high-quality pair of dress pants, at least they mostly fit when John tugs them on, though they’re still tight in the thigh. Just how skinny is Dave?!

Unable to waste brain power on the question, he starts frantically buttoning up the white, long-sleeved dress shirt and eyeing the bright red suspenders and the white suit jacket still lying on the bed. The suit jacket has a hood attached seamlessly rather than stopping at a collar, and tiny cloth loops that blend into the back where John’s supposes that sword hilts are meant to hang. “Dave, dude, why are your outfits so weird and complicated?”

“It’s ironic, okay. Just put it on.”

“I think I’m okay without the suit jacket.”


John wears it. The shoulders are tight (because Dave is totally a skinny little shit, no matter what he says about John having too many muscles) but apart from that the clothes all fit. It feels totally different from wearing his Heir uniform, with not nearly enough Kevlar and neoprene involved for him to feel comfortable, and the lack of a grey and slate blue color scheme makes him blink in confusion when he glances in the mirror. His face feels totally naked, because Dave is so right, the shades aren’t gonna work. They’ll fall off the moment John tries to fly. “Take these back for the airport,” John says, handing the shades over carefully when Dave emerges in full, bright crimson regalia. Jesus that’s a lot of red.

Dave snatches the sunglasses back too quickly, almost sighing with relief as he swaps out the old pair for the new. Clearly wandering around without them for the past night has been bugging him, which John would feel bad about if he didn’t have a million other problems clamoring for his attention – first and foremost, the issue of his oldest friend still rampaging through New York on a demon-possession high.

“Shades aren’t for you,” Dave says, tossing a handful of possibly shitty swords into a baseball bag and swinging it over his shoulder. “We’ll get you goggles or something along the way, you make them work.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Is the fucking fashion show over?” Bro stands in the doorway and holy shit John is getting really sick of being startled every time Bro appears out of nowhere. He’s used to being totally aware of the people around him at all times, sensitive to their movements thanks to the air that surrounds them, but apparently Bro is just that good.

“Yeah, we’re done,” John says, hesitating before kicking his cargo shorts under Dave’s bed. He has no idea if they’re coming back here; maybe Dave will forget about the shorts and discover them later on, and John will have some belated revenge for the skinny jeans. “Is Doctor Lalonde still on the phone?”

“No,” Bro says shortly. He throws the phone at John and vanishes. John catches it with a twist of air, startled by the abrupt throw, and then follows Dave out into the kitchen area, dialing his dad as he
goes. His stomach flip-flops as the phone begins to ring.

Yeah, he has no idea how he’s going to explain any of this. Hell, John doesn’t even know what’s going on, and he knows his dad will say that flying in blind is the best and quickest way to get himself killed.

But he doesn’t have a choice. His dad is just going to have to understand – John can’t abandon Rose in her time of need.

Nor can he forget the image of the grimdark destroying the street, and possibly killing that poor cameraman. That, even more his old connection with Rose, is what is driving him to skip out on the flight back to Washington.

People are dying. Maybe New York City isn’t his city, but people are people. And with their resident hero out of commission due to grimdark possession, New York could probably use a temporary stand-in.

Or three.

The phone clicks in John’s ear, and he opens his eyes, determination setting his jaw as he begins to speak without hesitation.

“Dad? I’m sorry. I’m not coming home just yet. There’s something we need to do.”

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Jade is dreaming again. Everything is black thorns and red vines and green fire, and a bright golden city that gleams in the light of an unfamiliar sun, its inhabitants carefree and oblivious to the horror raining down from above. She strains herself, running as fast as she can, but she can't outrun it. She never can. No, she needs Bec, she needs him, where is he when she needs him most -

"Waaagh!"

Jade wakes with a jolt, topples sideways off the lab stool, and lands on her butt. Her chin hits the edge of the table as she falls, and she rubs at the spot, grimacing as she sits upright. "Bec?" she calls, and for a single tense moment she is certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what answers will not be her wolf anymore.

Bec flickers into existence, its body as sleek and pale as ever, and Jade sighs with relief, hooking fingers into its thick fur and drawing the wolf in close. It allows her to, and she takes comfort in the unnatural cool of its side. There is no pulse of a heartbeat in Bec, only the smooth whir of a functioning, stable nuclear fusion engine.

She doesn't know why Bec is a he in her dreams when it is an it in real life. She just knows that thinking about the dreams too hard makes her queasy. She rubs at a spot in her chest that feels sore until the imagined pain fades away, and then slaps Bec playfully on the flank, giggling. "Silly Bec! You're supposed to wake me up if I fall asleep in a weird place like that, remember? You know I hate dreams!"

Bec sniffs at her neck with a cold nose, and then sits back at attention without a reply. Not that she'd expected one, of course. Patting on top of the desk, Jade finds her glasses and pushes them back up on her nose, humming as Grandpa's lab comes back into focus. That's right - she'd been in the middle of analyzing the results from the latest round of tests she'd done on the Wandering Variable. She wonders exactly when the exhaustion caught up with her and she passed out on the table. Long enough ago that she dropped into REM sleep, at least.
"WV?" she calls, pressing the button on the side of her glasses that activates some of the wire frames' more eccentric features. She flicks on the sniper scope as usual, and then the quantum filter, an ad hoc program she only just invented herself on the flight up to Britain. A quick scan of the room lets the program adjust itself, until it registers the furniture and computers as relatively quantumly stable. By the time the fine-tuner finishes sifting through and ignoring stable objects, the only figure that is lit up like a star with quantum superposition is the Variable, who appears to be sitting on the stool next to the one she'd just fallen from, kicking legs that may or may not exist. At least he hasn’t wandered off, then.

He still can't reply, but Jade talks as though he has. "Sorry about that! Using the missilekind must have taken more out of me than I thought! My arm is still a little sore." Pressing absently at her collar bone and feeling the bruise that has finished growing there, Jade yawns. Then she sniffs again, and catches a whiff of her own smell.

Uh oh. Oops. When was the last time she showered? Or did more than swap her clothes out for a new uniform from her sylladex pocket?

She winces, and casts a glance over the table. There is nothing there that is time sensitive anymore, she decides. She must have finished the finally battery of tests before passing out, because the more fragile samples are already stored in the fume hood, in case something goes wrong and they explode. That's good! She would have hated to have lost a hard-won sample just because she got tired!

"I think I'm going to have to shower reeeeeeally quick, though," Jade says, making a face in the Variable's general direction. "No peeking, mister!" With that ground rule laid down, Jade stows away her lab equipment, leaving some test tubes in the sink to clean later, and then strips off her gloves as she heads down a small side hallway. She has to consult the maps engraved in the walls a few times to reorient herself, but with her sense of space it's easy to feel out the difference between another research lab and the locker room. The water still works here, just as it had in the sink in the main lab, and Jade starts digging through her sylladex for shampoo and conditioner. Her hair really is getting kind of snarled; time to get some of the grime and gunk of the road out of it!

When Jade emerges in a cloud of steam fifteen minutes later, Bec is waiting outside by the row of lockers. She raises an eyebrow at it, but the wolf doesn't give any indication why it chose to leave the lab without Jade calling for it.

She automatically raises her alert level a few notches, just in case Bec senses something she doesn't, and then proceeds to towel her hair until it no longer streams water down the backs of her legs. Long hair can be pretty hard to deal with, especially hair as thick and crinkly as Jade's, but she really likes it this long! Oh well! Once it's mostly dry, she towels off the rest of her and then lets the towel drop. Picking the first costume her hand touches in the sylladex pocket, she steps into a slinky emerald green neoprene suit and zips it up the back by tugging on the zipper with her power.

She thinks she left her lab coat up in the lab, and it probably needs to be washed anyway, before it starts getting all discolored and gross. There probably isn't a laundry room down here in the sublevels, though; she'll need to venture back up to the main estate for that. Well, this is her first time in a house in more than a year - she should probably make the best of the amenities while she still can -

Bec growls and bursts into green flame.

She has no idea how it gets by the house's defensive arrays and sensors; she doesn't sense it in time, herself, because she just doesn't think to spread her spatial awareness out that wide until it is too late.
The explosion comes from above, and Jade barely has time to think WV! before the ceiling - and the collective debris of nearly four floors of mansion and foundation above it - come crashing down on her head.

She doesn't have time to grab her samples or the fancy lab equipment or even the white lab coat she left slung over the seat of the stool. Instead, trusting in the cold weight of Bec as he tackles her and the green fire swallows them both, she reaches out with everything in her to where she remembers the tiny outline of the Wandering Variable swinging his legs on a stool. Her mind fumbles, as she forces it to wrap a bubble around what feels like empty air, to clutch a fistful of space about five foot square to be safe and yank it at a diagonal through space.

They land hard in the field outside the front of the Harley residence under a clear, pale blue sky, the impact strong enough to send the breath whooshing out of Jade in a huff. Bec is unaffected by such things as breathing, and leaps at the first assailant before Jade has time to realize they are, in fact, surrounded. The grass is tall and green, and full of men and trolls in dark suits.

"Get offa my lawn!" Jade yells, forgetting the Variable's uncertain fate as she loads and hoists her modified pistols, raising them from within her strife sylladex to level them at the backs of the nearest troll's knees. She's not as good with a pistolkind as with long-range weaponry, but she counts at least fifteen unknown agents around her, in such close proximity that a rifle would only slow her down.

The first two shots of rubber bullets catch the troll square in the knees and they immediately fold forward, the troll letting out a shocked cry. Jade rolls to the side as a woman swings a quarterstaff at her, coming up with both pistols still cocked. The pistol kicks in her hand and the troll she hit first pitches forward onto his face, unconscious.

Her sense of space is almost completely overwhelmed as all of the assailants begin to move, almost all of them lunging toward her. Jade kicks out sideways and catches a female troll in the stomach with the ball of her foot, the ducks under another wild swing from the woman with the quarterstaff. Yelling, Jade teleports two feet up into the air and pistol-whips the woman in the temple. Her momentum carries her forward, and she lands on the woman's unconscious body with a thump.

She lurches back up onto her feet, the bare sole of her right foot crunching down on a sharp stone that distracts her for a split second. A blunt cudgel appears in the corner of her eye, and she whirls on her heel, bringing the pistol to bear -

Bec appears against a backdrop of galaxies and closes heavy jaws around the man's throat, tackling him to the ground. Unfazed, Jade coolly fires the pistol anyway, catching the orange-blooded troll that had been waiting behind the cudgel wielder smack in the middle of his chest. She rolls forward and puts a pistol away temporarily, rising to her feet with the orangeblood's Taser in hand. She fires it at the next man to come at her from the side, and he drops to the ground. Taser spent, she pulls out the pistol specibus again and loses herself in the fight.

She starts aiming for headshots, despite the risk of possible brain damage at this range. There are too many of them to pull her punches any more than she already has. As she spins and teleports between oncoming blows, she can see through brief glimpses that a good quarter of the Harley residence is in ruins, still smoking from the explosives these guys somehow snuck in to blow through the floor and reach the sublevels.

She can only assume that these are the same assholes who tried to fire a space-to-ground missile at the estate yesterday. She still wonders how they knew where to find her, but hey, she can wait on answers until after she's dealt with all twenty five thugs, total, that have been sent to blow up her goddamn house and ruin her experiment.
"And that one is for blowing up my good photonic crystal laser!" she spits, bringing the hilt of her pistol down on the back of a man's neck. As he falls forward she looks up, whirling to see where the next attack will be coming from.

She blinks as she realizes the field is full of unconscious bodies. Bec whuffles at her from where it sits on top of a troll a few yards away, and then lies down, at ease.

Oh. Well. I guess we took care of them all, Jade muses, still in a battle-haze as she stows the pistols away. Cool. She rolls her sore shoulder, but nothing feels strained. The bottoms of her feet are pretty torn up from the small chips of sharp rock that litter the ground, though, and when she gets an unimpeded view of the residence, she sticks out her tongue. Most of the easternmost wing has completely collapsed in on itself. She can see metal shield walls have shuttered down to cut off the intact portion of the manor from the gaping holes, but it's the principle of the thing, alright? They blew up her house!

"Straight to the nearest prison, okay, Bec?" Jade says, hands on her hips. "Do not pass Go. Blowing up Grandpa's house is the opposite of okay. Straight to the big house for these chuckleheads!"

Bec pants, a pale tongue lolling out of its mouth, and green lines expand outward from its back, stretching out in a rectangle that divides up into smaller, proportional rectangles that box in each unconscious assailant. All of them follow the golden ratio, as far as Jade can see, and after a flare of green fire the perfectly proportional series of rectangles vanishes, along with the bodies. Jade waits, bemused, for the wolf to reappear.

Then she remembers WV.

"Oh nooo!" she yelps, patting at her face and swatting herself before remembering she took her glasses off in the shower. No wonder that fight made her feel so dizzy! Jeez!

She pulls out the glasses from where she stored them in the sylladex and flips on the quantum filter again, slowly rotating in a circle even though her first instinct is to freak out and teleport-search the entire field in a grid formation, which just wouldn't work to find a person who doesn't really exist half the time. The afterimage of Bec's mass teleportation takes a while to manually filter out, and Jade begins to think that either her hasty teleportation missed WV entirely, or she flung him too far in her hurry to get him to safety, and he's ended up in France or something -

A familiar buzzing shock jolts her elbow, as though she whacked her funny bone and the sensation got turned up to eleven. She exclaims with relief when the glasses' filter shows a tiny figure that barely comes up to her waist flicker in and out of stability by her side. WV is barely a cloud of atoms that can't quite form a real body, but she drops to her knees and tries to hug the space where he should be anyway, enduring the faint shocks whenever one of his super-charged particles is observed enough to collapse and brush against her own atoms.

Bec arrives a second later, minus about twenty five troll and human assailants, and Jade stands upright, putting her hands on her hips as she surveys the house again. After a few moments of speculatively staring at the damage, her spatial sense confirms that the sublevel they were working on earlier has completely collapsed in on itself, crushing the equipment and samples inside. Kind of a bummer. Darn.

She claps her hands together and grins. "Oh well! Looks like it's time for round two, WV! We're going to have to start from scratch in B-lab!"
It takes a while to locate B-lab's transportalizer. Grandpa's backup labs are much more difficult to find and unlock than his regular secret labs; the whole point is that if the first lab is compromised, the second will be ten times more secure. Which is smart, but also reeeally annoying when Jade is kind of in a time crunch, here. They can't afford to stay here much longer, not when they literally have missiles and unknown teams of assailants in black suits targeting them on purpose, but the next closest lab Jade can think of that might have all the equipment needed to perform the last tests on WV.

Grandpa would probably scold her if he were here for getting so sidetracked from the instructions he gave her. But he also always told her to trust in her heart and do what feels right, and helping WV definitely feels like the right thing to do. Besides, she can clearly take whatever these bozos feel like throwing at her.

They finally find the transport pad hidden in a study on the fourth floor of the mansion, thankfully on the opposite side of the building from the demolished wing. WV goes down first, as before, and then Jade follows. She's worried about how having his molecules broken down and teleported by machine will affect the test results, if they even did the first time, but when she gets down to sublevel B the outline of WV shows no sign of distress.

Would she even be able to tell if he were in distress? She just has no way of knowing.

This time, she knows what she's looking for, though, which speeds up the process immensely. Between Bec's help and her own levitation abilities, Jade is able to rush headlong through repeats of the vital experiments she performed last night, running the Variable through the human-sized spectrometers and scanners that are essential to any good mad scientist hero's laboratory. The most difficult and time-consuming part is sampling some of WV's atoms directly, which involves waiting for the opportune moment, when Jade is able to observe one of his fingers directly by staring at the same spot for hours, and take a scraping from between stubby black claws to run through the analyzer.

She can't let herself fall asleep this time. Jade moves her stool away from the desk and sits in the middle of the room. She flips on the wifi-function of her glasses and starts surfing the web for a bit. She supposes that now would be a good time to send off another letter to her penpal, while she has nothing else to do!

-- gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering ghostyTrickster [GT] at 9:34:05 --
GG: hello john!
GG: sorry i haven't been able to write in a while - i got up to so many shenanigans these past few days! :DDD
GG: grandpa told me after i recalibrated some of the sensors for him, i should come see you right away, but i got really sidetracked. :P
GG: there was science, john! i couldn't resist the science!
GG: anyway, right now i'm trying to help out this guy i've been calling WV, and once i have these test results i think i'll be able to use my spacey powers to stabilize him!
GG: i already have an idea for how to do it, i just need to make sure he won't explode or something if i mess up~ :O
GG: also i've never tried using my powers this way before, but it can't be that hard, right?
GG: and Bec is here if i mess up!
GG: but after this I will definitely come visit you
GG: get ready - the Sharpshooter is headed your way! ;)
GG: oops! the carapace cultures are ready! gotta go!
GG: be safe john!
Jade kicks off her stool and floats over to the beeping analyzer to spare her bandaged feet, snapping her glasses back into safety mode. After a few minutes spent reading over the printout of the results of the test, she grins. "Good news, WV!" she announces, spinning to face the empty space of countertop where the Variable has taken up residence. "I thiiink I get what's going on with you! All of your quantum possibilities are firing at once, so we just need to narrow you down to your ideal self, the one you want to be observed as, and I should theoretically be able to collapse you down into one eigenstate." She droops a little as a thought occurs to her. "The only problem is, how are you going to tell me what you're supposed to look like? Oops…"

The cloud of quantum superposition leaves the counter top and makes for the computer monitor beside the analyzing unit. Jade had logged into it early, only to discover that this is, in fact, the infamous monitor 42 with the mansion's anti-missile launcher controls. Way to go, Grandpa, sticking the controls in the secondary lab…

With a spark and a violent whine, some of the WV's atoms brush up against the computer, and the screen flicks on. It doesn't display the login screen; instead, static fuzzes up the screen, occasionally lit up with streaks of green fire, like the kind Bec uses to get around. For a moment, Jade can half-see the form of a figure silhouetted against the distortion, as though she almost managed to observe WV head-on for the first time since he showed up in the back of her plane. She keeps her eyes open as long as she can, tearing up a little as she focuses on the minute form of a tiny carapacian.

The screen flares a bright white, and Jade can't stop the reflexive blink.

When she opens her eyes again, the WV can't be seen for a long moment while her glasses relocate him. He is back to being nothing more than a cloud of mostly air, his matter too unstable to register for long.

But on the screen, monitor 42 is analyzing something new. Jade approaches cautiously, careful not to walk into the middle of WV's personal bubble, because that would be sooo rude! The numbers and equations zoom by too quickly for Jade to catch them all, and she frowns as the coding for what appears to be ectobiological genetic markers flashes by.

And then the computer finishes processing whatever data WV fed into it, and a model appears on the screen. It is very basic and polygonal, the best representation of the data that the computer is able to produce. The figure is the size of a grade-schooler, with beetle-black carapace and a round head, blinking out of the screen with button-white eyes. It is swathed in faded greyish brown fabric, leaving only its spindly legs exposed.

"Is this you?" Jade asks, studying the data with renewed interest. Oh yes, this is exactly what she needs! All of the dimensions and details of WV's chemical makeup are here, the exact configuration of quantum states that the WV apparently considers his correct collapsed state. Jade plops down in the nearest stool and drags it closer, speed-reading through the lines of data as fast as she can. She can't afford to miss a single line, or she could mess up WV's entire vascular system.

Thankfully, the amount of data is...surprisingly short. Almost as though a lot of the most basic details of the Variable's body are clone-copies of an original genetic pattern. That would explain the ectobiological markers that show up everywhere - Jade doesn't know much about carapacians from the internet, but she does know they reproduce via cloning.

"You want to try this now? I bet we could get you stabilized and observed in time for lunch!" Jade says, rubbing her hands together with glee. "Wouldn't that be great?!"
There is really no way to tell if the violent tremor that runs through the cloud of atoms is an affirmative or a negation. But the WV doesn’t try to leave the room or anything when Jade waves it toward the center of the lab, or when she pulls down her lab goggles and puts on her Sharpshooter gloves. They help her focus her space powers too, which she’s going to need help with to pull off of this kind of complex quantum manipulation.

Breathing in deeply, Jade raises her hands and frames the cloud of the Wandering Variable between the rectangle of her fingers. Her tongue slowly migrates out between her lips until it sticks out the side as she become engrossed in thought. Static electricity begins to arc between metal surfaces and computer monitors, building up in Jade's hair. She doesn't notice, too caught up in focusing on the WV in her mind's eye. Over in the corner, Bec whines in apprehension.

It isn't working. Jade bites down a bit, her tongue still stuck between her teeth, and frowns in concentration. She can feel exactly how she needs to do this, can see in her mind's eye how she means to nudge WV's particles just a little bit, isolate all the extra quantum states in space until all that's left is the basic being that is WV, not all the beings he could have been or not been.

Maybe - maybe she just needs to apply a little more power. She's been holding back, afraid of hurting the WV by accident, but - just a little more couldn't hurt. She pours on a little more power, and the floor begins to quake under her feet.

There is no warning. One moment, Jade is applying the barest minimum of pressure, trying and failing to push through a barrier that stubbornly refuses to let her through to the Variable's quantum possibility cloud. She's getting kind of frustrated, now; there's no logical reason why what she's doing just won't work. She has the skill and control and sheer power needed to pull this off - so what is she doing wrong? She grits her teeth and pushes -

Something gives, and a dark figure flickers into being across the lab from Jade.

At the same time, Jade's entire body explodes in pain, crushing pain that drops her. She lands hard on her knees but that's nothing compared to the pain of burning burning burning falling -

There is a loud pop as all the air is displaced from the room, and all of the contents of the lab, including the girl and the carapacian, vanish.

Bec follows its absent mistress a few moments later, unaffected by the massive explosion of green fire that radiates out from where Jade just stood, bursting upward through the floor of the mansion above and causing a second wave of destruction to rock the Harley estate.

The residence stands empty, the lower levels hollow, as though its contents have been scooped out with a spoon and deposited elsewhere. Just outside of Jade's range, a truck containing an array of spatial, temporal, and paradox sensors explodes in a flurry of activity, jolting the head Crew operative manning the outpost awake. By the time Clubs Deuce gets a handle on the situation, however, they have completely lost the trail of Sharpshooter.

- Sydney, Australia

Oof.

Note to self: next time you want to stabilize a strange person into a single quantum state using only the power of your mind? Don’t.

It feels like Jade's brain is about to burst out through the front of her skull. Groaning, she covers her
face with her hands, unable to work up the motivation to open her eyes. The air temperature seems to have skyrocketed, and she can feel sunlight (burning) on her skin. So at the very least, whatever the heck just happened, it looks like she managed to blow through another roof. Grandpa would be so proud.

"Bec? WV?" she croaks at last, her throat dry and gritty. She opens her eyes and regrets it instantly; the setting sun is obscenely bright, and she shuts her eyes against the burn.

Wait. The setting sun?

She touches the side of her glasses, still unwilling to open her eyes again. "Computer, what time zone am I in?" The voice-activated responder does not reply, and Jade is forced to crack open her eyes again to see that the power level displayed in the corner of the frames is dead. Great - now how will she keep track of WV?

If he's even still alive. If whatever knocked Jade out hasn't done damage to his quantum state that can't be repaired.

A pair of white eyes appear over her head, tiny white lines underscoring them as they stare quizzically down at her. A second figure also appears, the more familiar, reassuring eyeless face of Bec. "Oh. Hey." Jade says, rubbing at her eyes one last time. "Bec, have you seen -"

She stops, and sits upright, nearly whacking Bec in the chin as she does so. She flips around onto her knees and stares at the short, shadowy figure kneeling next to Bec. "WV?" she whispers.

The carapacian nods wildly, flinging his arms around as he gestures in quick succession at himself, Jade, and the sky. It seems like some kind of sign language maybe, but Jade doesn't understand a word of it. Even when he moves his mouth a little - though not nearly enough for the amount of information he seems to be trying to convey - no sound comes out, and he seems to become frustrated by this. Jade can only stare, bemused and uncomprehending.

He hiccups in a last paroxysm of this desperate attempt at speech. For a moment, his whole body turns into bright green and white plasma, kind of like the greenish fire Bec uses to teleport sometimes. WV doesn't teleport anywhere, but he does seem shocked after he settles back into a normal black shell, patting at his body and filthy bandages as though to reassure himself he's still all there.

Oops. Jade gets the distinct feeling that the green fire might be her fault. But she can't really feel too guilty about it when holy cow, it actually worked! WV is (almost) totally stabilized!

Behold, the power of science!

"Ahaha, don't worry, I'm sure I can fix that!" Jade laughs, dragging the tiny carapacian into a headlock and giving him a noogie with her knuckles. He squirms and shakes his head in silent protest, but his whole body shakes with giggles that sound like strangled gasps. He hiccups again and is a burst of green flame for a second before solidifying. It doesn't burn, really, which Jade is really, really grateful for!

Now, all she has to do is figure out where she is. Tilting her head to the side, she tries her space powers. After this whole weird day, she really hopes she hasn't broken her powers or something - Her eyes pop open, and she lets go of WV to grab the sides of her head in shock. "We're in Australia?! John is nowhere near Australia! Agghhhh!"

WV sits back and listens to the Witch's confused wailing as she tries to figure out how she crossed
half a planet when her previous range has always been limited to a few hundred meters. He pats Bec hesitantly, and when the wolf merely rests its head on its paws, he decides that despite the scary shape of the wolf's head, they might be able to get along. After all, Bec hasn't tried to kill him all this past week.

The Witch may not be able to hear his words anymore, but honestly, WV's just happy to be alive again.

Everything else can wait.

-  

A few hours later, a cloaked figure comes to a halt before the wreckage of the Harley estate in Britain. What little hadn't been destroyed in the explosion earlier in the day is now smoldering with green fire.

It had travelled here as quickly as possible, but it seems it still missed her by a good amount of time. Shaking its head, the figure begins to fly up into the air, lifted by bright red rocket shoes with yellow flames down the side. Not exactly the figure's sense of style, really, but it hasn't yet figured out how to create rocket-based transport devices without the flames. It seems to be a multiversal constant, a fundamental property of paradox space, that all rocket shoes must be red with yellow flames.

Once it comes to a halt over top of the destroyed residence, the figure makes a noise that may or may not be a sigh.

The blast radius from Jade's takeover has left a mark scorched into the foundations of the house, easily visible from any eyes watching from above.

Some may have described the scorched shape as a Borjgali, a Georgian symbol of the sun, or as a spiral galaxy, with six arms curling in whorls of green fire and grey smoke.

The figure knows this to be the symbol of Space, and bows its head. It can no longer feel weariness or weakness in its body, but it still feels a kind of mental exhaustion within the parts of its brain that are still organic. It has always known this day would come.

Jade has become more than a simple manipulator of Space. From this moment on, they will never stop hunting her.

Which means, of course, that the figure above the Harley residence will simply have to guard her from afar.

It's about time it began to give these Crew ruffians a piece of its mind.

-  

_Somewhere in the continental United States..._

Diamonds Droog adjusts the cuffs of her suit jacket with precision, tucking in a stray thread that she makes a mental note to remove at some later point. She has an open slot of time from 10:15 to 10:17 tomorrow morning, and if there is one thing she can always make time for, it is a stray thread. One must always look one's best, after all. If there is one thing she cannot abide, it is an ill-tailored suit.

She must always look impeccable, and she holds her subordinates up to the same standards, naturally. Hearts, Clubs, and their barbaric ruffians can flout uniform protocol all they like; when Diamonds is in charge of an operation, not a stitch may be out of place. The Midnight Crew has an
image to maintain, and if Diamonds must be the only one to enforce that image, so be it.

As she strides through the corridors, the tail of her suit jacket fluttering slightly and the heels of her shoes clicking, the peons around her shrink back against the walls. The combination of her cue-stick strife specibus and her (admittedly) short temper inspire exactly the degree of awe and intimidation in her subordinates that she has found can shape an obedient, efficient crew out of a pack of otherwise lawless hooligans.

After ascending a flight of stairs, Diamonds finds herself on the tenth floor, dedicated to questionable accounting and stock manipulation. Not her division - she's more of the covert affairs and kidnapping cut, herself. No, this floor is part of the Felt's territory, and she bristles at the garish, pale green décor. Ever since the new big shot took over and merged the two gangs into one crew, she has been visually assaulted by this abominable hue on a regular basis. She has even taken to performing more field operations in person, rather than simply directing lackeys to do her will, solely to escape the sickly wash of green. Alas. Her struggle is real.

Speaking of these useless pawns. Just as Diamonds finishes bracing herself to pass through the crowded desks of human and troll thralls scribbling and typing away at their desks in the bullpen* that lies between her and the stairs to the eleventh floor (her final destination), a tiny man in a ghastly green suit scurries around the corner, his trim hat's pale purple color clashing offensively with everything else he's wearing, right down to the matching felt green bowtie.

He crashes into her right as she steps out into the main room, the stack of papers clutched in his arms flying everywhere and littering the repulsive green carpet with sheets of paper. Diamonds remains upright, barely jolted by such a weak impact, while the Felt operative topples backward and hits the ground.

Diamonds is about to smirk and sweep away, leaving the pathetic man to make his fawning apologies to her back, when the unthinkable occurs.

Her hat falls off.

The hair underneath, of course, is flawless, an elegant coif worthy of a 1930s debutante styled to survive being hidden under a hat for most of the day. But Diamonds must watch, frozen, as her equally elegant hat, the one specifically crafted to match this particular suit, floats to the floor, the brim bent at a strange angle as it comes to a stop.

"You bent my hat," she says hollowly, aware that her lips are parted in a most uncouth, gawking stare.

"O-oh! I'm sorry, sir - ma'am!" the Felt operative stutters, but that one slip up costs him any of Diamonds's remaining good will, such as it is. She extends her cue-stick to its full length with a flick her wrist, and winds up like a batter. "I didn't mean it-!" the Felt shrieks, scrambling to his feet and trying to back away from her with his hands raised beseechingly.

She brings the cue stick around with all the strength of a major league baseball player, and the cue-stick slams into the Felt man's ribs. He goes flying backwards and, with a crash, he crashes through the outside window. The force of the impact actually breaks not just the window glass but the window frame itself, huge chunks of the wall on either side flying out into open air along with shards of glass and the Felt operative himself. His scream of flailing panic slowly dies out in volume as he falls out of sight.

Still seething, Diamonds takes out a lighter and stoops to pick up her fallen hat. She sets it on fire and watches with an impassive expression until the last of the disgraced article of headgear burns away,
and she lets the final smoldering piece fall to the ground before crushing out the embers with her heel. Then she places her spare hat on her head, and smiles. Perfect.

The balance of the universe thus restored and all due final respects paid to a fine piece of headwear, Diamonds adjusts her dapper hat and smirks at the horrified thralls, all of whom have looked up from their mindless paper-shuffling to gape at her and the new hole in the wall. "Relax. The fool is too lucky to let a little fall kill him," she says, collapsing her cue-stick with a brisk flick of her wrist and placing it back in the inside pocket of her suit jacket. Smoothing her suit jacket and brushing a fleck of green debris from her pants, she strides through the middle of the desks, away from the evidence of her wanton violence.

Though she presents a confident front for the peons - and, truthfully, is quite pleased herself with the outcome of that little encounter - she knows that when she reaches the eleventh floor she'll have to explain herself to the big man. Urgh. He doesn't approve of infighting between the Felt and the Crew's aces, and his disapproval can be...unpleasant. Clubs, of course, blindly obeys the restrictions, and probably has the best relationship with these felt green nightmares, but Clubs is a bumbling fool at the best of times. As much as it sticks in her craw that someone as useless as Clubs has a better record than her in any way, she can't help it. Sometimes it's like these Felt go out of their way to rouse her ire.

But hey. Diamonds is the bearer of good news for once. Or at the least, very promising news. Between her own spy network's latest intel, and the babbling reports she's been intercepting from Clubs out in the field, she's fairly certain the boss will cut her a little slack on the whole 'use of needless and excessive force against allies' front.

Still, she's apprehensive as she approaches the dark green door at the head of the stairs. Quite aside from being a repulsive shade of green, this door has always given her the heebie jeebies. Maybe it's the bizarre, strange carvings and unfamiliar words engraved in the stained green wood; maybe it's just the creepy aura of the big man bleeding through. Either way, Diamonds makes sure her gloves are firmly in place before rapping on the door with the back of her knuckles, affecting as much of a carefree demeanor as she can.

Oh, do come in, Droog. I've been expecting you for quite some time. I'm sure the business of punting poor Clover out of the building must have been a vitally important delay.

Oh, balls.

The door opens soundlessly, without even a decent creak to match its creepy aura. Schooling her expression into confident boredom, Diamonds straightens her tie and walks through the open door.

The room within is plush and richly decorated, and it is a testament to the boss's good taste that the only flaw Diamonds can find with the interior design is the abominable color scheme. There is a fire crackling in the hearth, though it does nothing to alleviate the dead cold of the air. Diamonds highly suspects the hearth is only for show, as the fire within is a bright green, and flickers out of existence every few seconds. There is a bowl of Swedish fish by the door and she fights the compulsion for all of five seconds before giving in, reaching out with greedy fingers to start shoveling the delectable treats into her outside pockets. She doesn't know how the Doctor always predicts correctly which candy to place by the door, given that every member of the Crew has a different unnatural predilection, but he has never failed to tempt her with these blasted things every time she thinks her visits will surprise him.

She's resigned to the fact that he'll already know exactly the news she comes to report. Her entire division of the Crew often feels more than a little redundant, given that any news she brings seems to be old news to the Doctor. He simpers and panders to her and assures her that her work is quite
necessary. The way he's explained it, the one time he deigned to acknowledge her concerns about being replaced, he has some way of knowing (nearly) everything Diamonds knows. However, he requires Diamonds's work to ferret out the information in the first place, before he can pluck it from her mind and draw his own conclusions. Something about an "abnormally high level of Void background interference" in the air.

Sounds like a load o' bull to Diamonds, but then, so does most of the Felt's blathering about their temporal experiments. She doesn't much care; as long as she gets to keep doing what she good at and gets paid *quite* handsomely to do so, she's more than willing to put up with this all-knowing crap.

"Sir. I have something of significance to report," she says, still reluctantly pocketing the Swedish fish. She knows from experience she can fight the urge all she wants - by the end of this meeting, she will be scraping at the bottom of the bowl with her fingernails, hunting for the last morsels of artificially flavored treat. "Though of course, I am certain you are already aware of it."

Do not be petulant, Droog, not in front of the company. Your work is invaluable, as you well know. I am indeed aware of the goings-on in New York, but only because the media outlets are covering the explosion in Albany as we speak. My guest has just arrived to discuss it, in fact.

Diamonds controls her expression, but then she sees exactly *who* is lounging on a chaise lounge by the window, absorbed in tapping away on a slim fuchsia cell phone.

Diamonds knows that the only reason the Crew has been able to expand and profit as well as it has over the years since the corporate takeover is due to the Doctor's uncanny, illustrious connections with several major figures in the government and the justice system. But she had no idea the Doctor's connections in the upper echelons reached *quite* that high. It is one thing to have the Vice President in your boss's pocket, and quite another to find Her Imperious Condescension with her Grand Culling Fork leaning on the wall beside her.

This is...unnerving. She should have known about this. With a spy network as intricate and wide spread and well trained as her own, something as huge as *this* should not have slipped between the cracks.

When the undisputed economic and political powerhouse of the entire world shows no sign of looking up from her phone, completely engrossed in whatever is on the screen that involves so much tapping, Diamonds shakes off the unpleasant surprise and refocuses on the back of her employer's chair. The Doctor is facing away from her, looking over an intricate chessboard. He'd once called it a Mobius net, but to Diamonds it just looks like someone crumpled up a piece of paper and arranged it in a ring around an inner blue sphere.

He moves a single piece into position, so miniaturized to fit on the minute squares that she can't even identify it, though she thinks it may be black with lavender accents. Not your standard chess set, to say the least.

Is there anything I can assist you with, Droog? Something else appears to be on your mind, aside from the reappearance of the Seer in a reversed aspect.

Diamonds blinks. It seems strange that the Doctor hasn't just told *her* the news while pretending to couch it in all-knowing certainty, but if he really wants her to say it first, she can oblige. "It's - well. It's about the Heir in Seattle. A few hours ago the paradox sensors spiked, and his signature disappeared from Seattle. He is now in the greater Houston area, though as usual the Puppeteer's efforts make it difficult to pin down an exact location. Our agent's suspicions have been confirmed - the Heir is no mere wind-manipulator; he has begun to alter the fundamental laws of reality."
There is a pause, and then the Doctor swivels around in his chair. Diamonds folds her hands behind her back, the collapsed cue stick slipped up one sleeve just in case. No matter how often she tells herself that the smooth, unyielding surface of the Doctor's head must be a mask, an anonymous disguise, she can't quite believe it. It is perfectly spherical and pale as bone, and its lack of features leaves his expressions and tells a mystery. She can never read if he's upset or enraged or excited; he is simply, eternally, composed.

She does, however, detect a note of surprise when he speaks next, his words a crackle of white and lime green in her brain.

I suspected as much. Thanks to this universe's active attempts to stymie my foresight, however, I simply couldn't be sure. In a world populated by such over-powered life forms, after all, there have been more than a few false alarms over wind-users in the past. Thank you for informing me of the gap in my knowledge, Droog.

"I - you're welcome, sir," she replies, feeling a little as though the rug has been pulled out from under her. The Doctor has never admitted to ignorance before; even his confession about only being 'nearly' omniscient always rang hollow. "What step should we take next?"

The Doctor pulls open the drawer of his grandiose desk. Then, even as Diamonds observes, intrigued, he lifts up a false bottom to reveal several small chess pieces. He plucks out a bright blue figurine and begins to study the intricate chess board once more.

Clubs has also reported that he wishes to confirm the Witch's presence in Britain, as I am sure you are well aware. Combined with the temporal disturbances we confirmed around the Knight several years ago, it is quite safe to say that they are all active once more. There was a very real possibility that they would be born years apart, scattered throughout time and space. That they were born and have begun to reactivate within such a short period of time...is fortuitous.

"You sure 'bout that, Doc?" the Condesce says, the first words she has spoken since Diamonds entered the room. She doesn't look up from her phone though, and in fact puts the screen closer to her face as her deadly claws tap away faster and faster, the light of the game flashing across her reflective goggles until - "Oh, hell no, this fuckin' candy game is kickin' mah glubbin' ass. #fuckinbullshit #cullthismotherfucker"

Did - did she just say hashtags -

I wouldn't go down that road, Droog. Greater minds than yours have been broken attempting to comprehend the intricate, unfathomable nature of our good friend's chosen linguistic vernacular. And yes, my dear Condescension, it is excellent news indeed that all four have risen in such quick succession. They are already being drawn together - they can't help it.

"Hell yeah, fucking color bombs," the cultural figurehead of all trollkind mutters to herself, her untamed masses of fuchsia-tinged black hair twitching as she rolls over on the lounge seat, lying on her stomach with the phone resting in front of her as she continues to play Candy Crush. "Yeah, Doc, maybe lettin' a buncha super-powered lil shits team up ain't the best idea. NGL, I think we could still cull 'em afore they, yah know, rise up an' wreck our glubbin' shit. Jussayin'."

"Pull Clubs out of the field and reassign his agents to me, Doctor," Diamonds adds, wanting to throw a metaphorical hat into the ring. Excitement clutches in her throat, and she wants to squirm with delight at this wonderful opportunity. Here is a chance to personally kidnap the four heroes that have been the object of the Crew's time for nearly as long as the Doctor has been in charge. Better still, with the Heir halfway across the country from Seattle, Hearts is going to look like a fucking idiot when he misses out on capturing the hero in
And maybe after they take care of these four miscreants, the Crew can finally get back to what it does best - delicious, elegant criminal works - instead of being constantly distracted by the Doctor's weird obsession with these kids.

Oh, no. One cannot simply rush the game, Droog. There is an order to these things. A proper sequence of events, however convoluted it may appear from your perspective. I'm afraid you lack the context to make any informed decisions about this matter just yet. Suffice to say that while your enthusiasm does not go unappreciated, now that we have confirmed the four, all active members of the Crew are to follow gradual escalation protocol. Tell Hearts to return to base before he attempts to go crashing about on an ill-advised rampage. Three explosions in under a week tells me he's getting far too worked up.

"...Of course. Shall I recall Clubs as well?" Diamonds asks, her shoulders slumping a little. "He recently requisitioned a low earth orbit-to-ground missile launch and sent an entire team of covert agents to confront the Witch. Both operations proved a waste of time and financial resources -"

"Bitch, I gotchu fuckin' covered," the Condesce interrupts. She is now playing with only one hand, using the palm of the other to rest her chin on. Her slim feet kick in the air absently. "M'rollin' in the big boonbucks, you feel me? #blingblingmothafuckas"

"Boonbucks?" Diamonds is thoroughly lost. She's never heard of such a thing before, and the hashtags have become rather distracting.

The troll holds up a sparkly, pink block in response. No really, it glitters all over with an opalescent hue, and Diamonds is immediately intrigued. She can't identify the mineral that makes up the majority of the block, but she can damn well extrapolate that the material must be quite rare and quite valuable.

Concentrated, compressed majyyks, utilized as units of arbitrary monetary value by a select oblivious few.

"So it's fake money," Diamonds says, disgusted. What is the point of fake money? Counterfeiting is yet another despised Felt division, and she holds no truck with it. She has earned a living throughout her life with good old-fashioned conspiracy, ransom, and espionage, and has never had to stoop so low as to printing her own cash to pay for her suits.

"It's glubbin' real money if dis bitch says so. DWI," the Condesce snaps, scratching behind a long horn at the horn bed buried in her hair. "You got anythin' else we needta get our heart to hearts on about, Doc? There'sa snippy lil basic bitch Imma have to cull if she gets any more uppity on my turf while I ain't around. #bitchezain'tshitttt"

Yes, your complaints about the young heiress do grow tiresome and unconstructive. By all means, I believe this meeting is adjourned. Droog, a moment of your time after our good friend takes her leave.

"Yeah, yeah, you got it, Doctor," Diamonds says, fingers tightening around the handle of her cue-stick as the fuchsia-blooded troll growls at her phone one last time and clicks off the screen, placing it within a pocket of her skin tight suit. She wraps a hand around the balance point of her 2x3dentkind and stands up.

She barely comes up to Diamonds's ribs.
Diamonds has to do a double-take, not sure what she's witnessing, and then fights the urge to step closer to the troll for comparison purposes when the Condesce makes for the back of the room. Diamonds is devastatingly tall of course, and her high heels simply elevate her further, but she'd expected the most infamous, long-lived troll in history to be a little more - well, imposing. But no, she's...she's...shrimpy.

Diamonds has never felt more ashamed of a mental pun in her entire life. It takes everything in her not to remove her hat and resign on the spot. And from the way the Doctor's head tilts toward her and an amused green chuckle crackles in her skull, he knows.

This is humiliating.

Instead, long, slim horns make up for in height what the rest of the Condesce's body lacks. It is more than a little off-putting. As Diamonds watches, the troll walks to the enormous green grandfather clock by the fireplace and pulls the front panel open. Whistling something that sounds suspiciously like 'Beez in the Trap,' the Condesce steps into the clock and - vanishes. Diamonds squints, trying to see into the clock because what, but after a moment the panel shuts itself with a series of mechanical clicks, and is still.

Well, it makes about as much sense as anything else in this damn room.

"What did you want to talk about, boss?" she asks, folding her arms across her chest, careful to arrange them so that the white diamond insignia on her lapel remains visible. "You got something for me to do?"

Oh, just two final matters I'd like to clear up. First and foremost, I wished to assure you that poor Clover survived the ten story flight you helped him to achieve, but he most graciously does not wish to press charges. A most fortuitous turn of events.

Diamonds just rolls her eyes and sighs internally.

DS: Second, though I do not wish you to see this as a reward for your earlier actions - I have an assignment for you. Something to get you out in the field. You are clearly growing restless if you have begun ejecting my agents out of windows during business hours over an admittedly very dapper hat and a shade of green that you find disagreeable.

Diamonds straightens up. "You've got my attention, boss."

Excellent. Now tell me - are you familiar with the name Spades Slick?

Chapter End Notes

I feel like everyone’s sections are shorter compared to Dave’s and John’s but that’s mostly because Dave doesn’t shut up. And then there’s Karkat’s section, where it always seems a little short, but then shit happens like OH MY GOD DID I JUST SET OFF A BOMB IN YOUR FACE

So today, instead of Spades, we get a new member of the MC! Diamonds Droog is a woman here; the Crew are equal opportunity employers! But what is she going to get up to now…
Burn Me Blind

Chapter Summary

The gods are heavy on me, and all the fates
Shed fire across my eyelids mixed with night,
And burn me blind, and disilluminate
My sense of seeing, and my perspicuous soul
Darken with vision.

Chapter Notes

Okay Rose, it’s time to calm the fuck down. You've got this. I believe in you. I believe in the you who believes in me. John, get your ass in there and give her a cool down hug or something, jeez.

And always remember - Hemogoblin and Heir belong to Real Men Wear Tights. I just appreciate the chance to inflict new and unusual trauma on them. >:D Hover over the crappy Spanish in Jade's section for a translation.

Let’s get this show on the road. Today's power anthem is Wake Up (AWOLNATION). Act II boss battles, engage!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first three seconds after the blast, Karkat can’t believe he’s still alive. His body feels numb, as though he got slammed by an icy cold wave of water rather than a concussive blast. He can taste the adrenaline running through his veins as a bitterness in his mouth, sharp and unpleasant, and even has the mental clarity to wish his powers didn’t let him taste chemicals in his bloodstream – it’s fucking nasty. He blinks his eyes, and gets about five seconds worth of a hazy view of the night sky overhead before the pain comes crashing down.

“Fuu-uck!” he gasps, his hand fumbling as he clutches his side. He had been crouched at an angle to the flashlight bomb, and he thinks he remembers covering his head with his arms in the seconds between his realization and the detonation. His arms feel as though they’ve been scraped raw, and there is a throbbing ache in the side of his calf, but the most pressing pain emanates from the left side of his ribs. As his hands press against his side, he immediately regrets that decision; something metallic and sharp-edged is wedged up around between his ribs. He can’t tell how deep it goes.

Fuck.

Even around the pain that radiates through his torso, Karkat is aware of just how very fucked he is. The bomb hadn’t been powerful enough to kill him or throw him off the roof, obviously, but that’s part of the problem: he’s just been blown up on top of the police station in charge of most of Seattle, and the anti-terror unit could show up any fucking second and decide to arrest his ass for being at the scene of the crime.
As he rolls onto his stomach, letting loose a torrent of unimaginative swearing (yeah, let’s see you try to think up creative new insults when you’ve got shrapnel jabbing at your lungs, nubfucker), he gapes in silent pain again, throat working to swallow down a scream. He has to rest his forehead on the roof, closing his eyes and breathing in uneven spasms. The roof is cold, despite the recent goddamn explosion, and a piece of rock digs into his skin between his eyebrows. He can feel that his mask has survived the blast, but when he lists to one side, panting, one prosthetic horn does not quite come up even with the other. They’re both supposed to curve forward, past his profile, but if he can lean his forehead down to touch the ground, then – yeah, the left horn feels as though it has cracked all the way through, and the tip has broken off.

Shit. Hopefully he can do this before the cops arrive and see his false horns mutilated, because he’s not going anywhere until he heals this side wound. Fighting through the threat of unconsciousness, Karkat zones out, focusing on the pain beating through his blood until all he can feel and see is red. The pain simultaneously grows distant, and intensifies; he is aware of every minute nuance of the damage that has been done to his body, but also better able to ignore it from this perspective. If these were just simple cuts, he could simply reverse the damage by drawing the blood back up to quickly scab over the wound and heal in a matter of seconds. Hey, power over blood – it has its perks.

But the raw rash running down his arms is a series of burns, running the gamut from first to second degree depending on what angle the arm had been facing the blast, with little flecks of shrapnel speckling his skin. And burns are tricky, to say the least. Gritting his teeth, Karkat urges blood to well up, washing out infection and forming long, thin strips of scabbing. It’s a quick fix – it’ll keep the burn from getting infected until he can rinse it off and treat it properly. He leaves smears of drying red blood behind on the roof when he hesitantly shifts his arms, but he can do no more than grimace at the marks, and trust that since he’s never had his blood drawn, the police won’t have a sample to match it to.

There’s a slice along the back of his calf, and he deals with that in seconds, sighing with relief as he knits the skin together and the pain instantly dies off. The arms still sting when he stretches the skin, but now he only has one major source of pain left to deal with before he can get the fuck out of here.

…The longer he leaves that fucker in there, the more likely the chance Karkat will fuck up again and twist his torso the wrong way, and end up with the shard of metal stabbing right through his lung. The only way this is going to heal is if - Yep. Fuck. No choice. The shrapnel’s gotta come out.

This is quite possibly the stupidest thing he has ever contemplated doing in a very short but rather busy life of contemplating myriad acts of stupidity. This may well make the top five, right up there with allowing Crabdad to choose him as a wriggler. Most people would argue that a grub lacks the sentience to know such things as right from wrong, or to protest a lusus choosing them. Karkat would say sentience is fucking overrated, and that past-Karkat should have taken one look at that fatass and wriggled in the other direction as fast as his tiny mutant nubs could carry him.

Before he can lose himself in another tangent and talk himself out of this latest act of stupidity, he just does it. Curling up on his right side, Karkat wraps a gloved hand around the blood-slicked shrapnel in his side and pulls and ohfuckohfuckohnublickingfuck why is past-Karkat such an idiot?!

Karkat chokes out a whining scream, slamming his other fist against the roof. Hissing out a breath, he finishes the job, probably ripping edges as he turns the entry wound into an exit wound. He brings the piece of shrapnel up to his face, unleashing the full force of his righteous glare upon the offending scrap of metal. It looks a lot smaller than it felt, and is absolutely coated in bright crimson blood. Throwing the metal to the side, offended by its impudence in daring to stab Karkat motherfucking Vantas, Karkat presses his hand right up against the open wound. His side is damp
and warm with blood, but now there’s nothing in the wound preventing him from just closing it up.

There’s some muscle damage that will take longer to heal on its own, but Karkat reaches into the blood rapidly pulsing out of his veins and tugs it back into its proper place. The veins reattach and seal themselves up, and he knits together what skin he can before letting a scab coagulate over the area. Peeling away the tatted edges of his suit and the Kevlar lining, Karkat sits and props himself up against the wall of the stairwell, counting backward from ten in his head. By the time he does, the scab cracks and falls off, and all that’s left is blood-smeared grey skin where the stab wound used to be.

Well. Alright. Way to go, mutant powers, at long last you have justified just a tiny fraction of the life-threatening hassle and apprehension you have caused me every day of my life, he thinks. He only feels about half as bitter as usual. Shaking his head, Karkat stands carefully. He still feels shocky all over from the surprise and sheer impact of the explosion, but considering he just survived a bomb from three feet away, he’s feeling surprisingly chipper.

Note to self: never use the word ‘chipper’ in conjunction with one Karkat Vantas ever again. Ever. He’s making this a universal law. Seriously, he will personally ascend to Raging Fuckass levels of godhood and smite any dumbfucks who so much as think that word in his presence again.

Shuddering, Karkat gets his feet under him, bracing with both hands against the wall as he slowly slides up into an upright position. His left side aches a warning from the muscles, and then is quiet. The overwhelming pain has almost completely subsided, but he’s going to feel this one in the morning.

He cracks his neck from side to side, trying to work the kinks out of his system, and then scans the roof, taking in the damage. A dark blast pattern radiates out in a three foot wide circle from the spot where the flashlight had been set up. There’s no sign of the reflecting mirror or the note left by Hearts – they’ve either been incinerated or tossed off the roof entirely.

That much of the note was true, though. Hearts had said something about not having orders to kill Heir. With such a small blast and Heir’s skill with using the wind as a defense mechanism, Karkat is willing to bet he wouldn’t have been badly damaged at all. Heir certainly wouldn’t have been unlucky enough to take a wad of metal to the ribcage. No, this had been intended as a warning shot, and Karkat just happened to waltz up and stick his cartilage nub in where it didn’t belong.

Except of course, this is Hemogoblin’s new partner the Crew wanted to blow up. One could argue this is, in fact, exactly where he belongs. Especially since Heir is still missing in action after not one, but two, explosions.

For the first time since the explosion went off, Karkat is able to switch back over from survival mode into a more heroic mindset. Hemogoblin steps away from the wall, twisting his tattered arm guards absently until they mostly cover the scabby, blistering burned sections. He’s going to need to replace a lot of his costume after tonight, which is a pain, but for the most part the skintight Kevlar and neoprene did its job. This could have been a lot worse.

Now then. If Hearts and his phony lawyer took off just after the initial explosion Karkat witnessed, they’ve probably only been running for about fifteen minutes, now. The problem is, a gang as well-funded as the Midnight Crew seems to be probably had an escape vehicle waiting to pick them up, and they could have taken off in any direction in the ensuing confusion. By wasting time getting blown up, he may have lost the opportunity to pick up their trail at all.

But maybe he hasn’t completely fucked himself over.
Heir may have flown into that fight the other night from above, but Hemogoblin snuck in from behind, circling around until he found a good vantage point from which to back Heir up in the firefight. If he’s right about what he saw while he weaved his way through the maze of containers to catch the Crew off guard, he believes that Hearts will at least make a quick stop at Dock C before fucking off to parts unknown. At the very least, there might be some residual Crew members hanging around there he can interrogate.

It’s not much. But it’s better than nothing.

Hemogoblin hightails it for waterfront. If he remembers correctly, there’s a certain dock in the container port with some contents the police might have missed.

- 

He doesn’t see the members of the Seattle bomb squad who flood onto the roof seconds after he begins loping across the rooftops. He doesn’t look back as they spread out and search the roof for more explosive devices, and eventually locate a puddle of candy red blood, drying into a rusty, copper brown stain in the half-light of the moon.

He doesn’t think anything of it.

Why should he?

- 

Most of the docks along the Seattle central waterfront are ferry terminals and cruise ship docks, the vestigial piers reclaimed for use as parks and boardwalks for tourists. But just to the south lies the container port yard, where most of the maritime trading in Seattle now occurs. As he approaches, the number of roofs he can travel across peter out, and Hemogoblin has to drop to the ground and sprint across the road, then scale the fence and neatly flip over the top into the container yard. He pays for the deft flip with a spasm of pain from his ribs when he lands hard on the other side, but he pushes through it, sticking to the shadows where the too-bright industrial lighting from overhead doesn’t quite reach.

He creeps through the rows, and knows when he sees a line of yellow police tape flapping in the slight breeze ahead that he’s at least in the general vicinity of the site of the showdown on Wednesday.

The line of tape has been cut.

Eyes narrowing, Hemogoblin rises up onto the balls of his feet, and continues down the row with more caution, listening carefully. The heavy, crunching tread of boots on gravel alerts him long before he sees the person round the corner, and he slips back into the narrow space between two containers like a sigh. Crouching in the shadows, he watches a cerulean-eyed troll stalk by the opening. The troll is in a black suit, which bodes very, very well. After one last disguise check – his false horn had nearly fallen off during the race to reach the docks earlier, and is still rather unsteady thanks to the crack running through it – he scales the towering stack of containers noiselessly, slithering on top of the stack and keeping his belly low against the roof of the container as he surveys the container yard from above.

And yeah, it’s still here. A squat, bulky container ship sits heavy by the loading dock beyond the rows of containers, its sides a rusty and nondescript maroon-brown mix, and the name at the prow just a string of letters and numbers in faded white paint, difficult to make out from this distance. More significant, to Hemogoblin at least, is the series of four containers that stand open in the harsh
lighting, a few rows over from the clearing where the Crew had confronted Heir. Leaning to the side a little, he can see a black-clad figure standing guard, and the mysterious unlabeled crates within that had perked his interest the last time he passed through here.

He’d found this little setup while evading debris from the miniature tornado Heir whipped up Wednesday night. It had kind of slipped his mind afterward. Okay, fine, it was shoved violently to the side to make room for the extreme internal fangirling that ensued while he accepted Heir’s offer of partnership. Hey, he could either forget temporarily about the shipment of stolen goods that he’d assumed the police would find anyway, or he could squeal like a mewbeast in excitement and make himself look like a pancracked lunatic in front of Heir.

…He has his priorities, okay? And he really did have every reason to believe the cops who came to arrest the members of the Crew would at least bother to search the nearby shipping containers – isn’t that kind of investigation 101? But judging by the slightly scruffy black suits worn by the two trolls patrolling the rows and the female human guarding the open end of the large container, a wicked looking pistolkind in her hand, the police not only missed out on a few members of the Crew, they also forgot to check for and confiscate whatever stolen goods the Crew seem to be shipping out tonight. Sloppy.

But it may well pay off in the long run. Past-Hemogoblin’s forgetfulness means that current-Hemogoblin has an advantage he might otherwise not have. He may not have done it on purpose, but he can sure as hell work that angle if anyone tries to say otherwise. Clearly, he is a criminal activity predicting machine, and thanks to his innate talent for cunning, subtle manipulation and his associated degree in guilefoolery, he now has the Crew right where he wants them.

He searches the rows again, this time picking out the rumbling shape of a forklift as it returns from dumping off one of the suspicious containers on the deck of the squat shipping rig. He can’t identify who is driving it until it comes closer, at which point a human male leans out, signals at one of the patrolling Crew members, and trundles on to retrieve the next container. Hemogoblin growls under his breath.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like Hearts Boxcars is here. Hemogoblin is painfully aware of how much slower his method of transit is across the city; he still gets chills when he remembers how it felt to fly with Heir, how quickly the ground had sped by beneath them as the wind ushered them along. But for whatever reason, Heir isn’t patrolling tonight. (Hemogoblin has accepted this must be the case by now, though it still worries him – how badly would Heir have to be hurt to be off the job on a night like this?) And given Hemogoblin’s much slower rate of travel, Hearts Boxcars should have beaten him here in a vehicle.

Hemogoblin eases forward to peer over the edge of the container stack again, very aware of the empty air behind his back. He hadn’t known how reassuring it was to know Heir patrolled the skies until that assurance was gone.

Then he hears a distinct, loud rattling, and he slithers backward to the center of his perch, raising his head to watch as the front gate of the shipping yard creaks open, admitting a pitch black car. The vehicle has neither plates nor identifying car brands on it. It drives to the edge of the narrower container rows before purring to a stop. The driver emerges first, and the human nods in familiar greeting to the Crew woman who steps out from the container to meet him.

The second person to exit the vehicle is Hearts Boxcars.

Hemogoblin shouldn’t have beat them here on foot, even if he did haul serious ass to make it on time. They must have stopped along the way, or maybe lost time evading police traffic stops or traffic cams. Either way, it looks as though Hemogoblin’s hunch has paid off. At last, something happens
this catastrophe-riddled night that actually manages to go right. Hemogoblin lets a slow smile creep across his face as he silently observes the hulking form of Hearts address the gang members who gather around him.

"I want all of the goods outta here by dawn," Hearts is saying. "The boss wants us gone yesterday. And any damage to the goods I take outta your hides, got it?"

There is a chorus of "yessirs," and then the members of the Crew scatter, the guards helping the forklift driver to line up with one of the last containers.

So, the Crew is definitely leaving town, at least for now. Hemogoblin wonders if two encounters with Heir and being arrested were really enough of a turn off for them to completely give up, but it's not like he knows shit about how the inner workings of a criminal enterprise operate. Maybe they've decided Seattle is just too risky an investment, and have chosen to cut their loses.

Unfortunately for them, Hemogoblin takes exception to being blown up by a bunch of pansy-ass fuckwads. Maybe before he had hunted them down because they were particularly violent criminals who needed to be stopped; now he's more than a little pissed. And Karkat in a pissy mood doesn't let things go. If Hearts Boxcars thinks he can just sail out of this city without so much as a slap on the wrist, he had better think again.

Hemogoblin tracks the sentries one more time, memorizing their routes, and then lowers himself down the side of the containers to the ground.

Time to get to work.

He cultivates two blood sickles from his wrists, and finds that he has to adjust the angle of the one on his left wrist when the burns begin to prickle with pain. Swinging a few times to adjust to the change, Hemogoblin lopes down the row to where the first troll's route will cross his path. He presses himself into the space between two containers, a slightly wider passage than his last hiding place. He lounges against the side of the container, affecting carelessness, but keeping his luminescent eyes hooded so the slight glow won't give him away.

The troll strides by without looking at him. Hemogoblin simply steps out behind the sentry's back, leans back and plants a heel at the vulnerable base of the troll's skull. An "oof!" of pain escapes the sentry's mouth, but then Hemogoblin presses in close and wraps a hand over his mouth to muffle any warning shouts. There is no struggle from the troll, and abruptly he has an armful of sagging, unconscious dead weight to drag over into the shadows. He leaves the troll there and traces the maze of containers in his mind as he darts through the rows to intercept the second sentry.

This one causes more trouble. He'd been lucky to run into the green-blooded sentry first - the lower on the hemospectrum you go, as a general rule, the less stamina and strength a troll is capable of developing. In exchange, the warmer bloods tend to develop psychic abilities more often, and are more mentally stable and less susceptible to dementia.

But the second troll sentry is the cerulean from earlier, his eyes a dark enough blue for Hemogoblin to be wary. His abilities and training seem to have kept him on par with the fighting ability of most of the trolls Hemogoblin's fought and put in jail over the past few weeks, but he's still wary of challenging blues and above. If he tangles with them recklessly, he could easily spill more than a few drops of blood. Red eyes can be explained with contacts - candy red blood is a bit more of a stretch.

So when he locates the other sentry, he doesn't fuck around with the flashy kicks. He slinks in behind the blueblood and launches immediately into a chokehold, keeping his chin down to protect his windpipe and nose when the grubfucking dickweed tried to slam his head back into
Hemogoblin's face. He keeps up the pressure on the artery running up the side of the troll's neck and his hand on the troll's mouth.

The troll bites him. Hemogoblin bites back a yelp of pain and tightens his grip, clinging to the cerulean blood's back as he tries to slam up against a container. He's tall enough that Hemogoblin's feet scrabble at the gravel on the edge of his toes. Finally, still fighting and shoving against Hemogoblin's grip, the Crew member falls forward to his knees. This is taking too long, they're exposed in the middle of the row, but the blueblood still won't stop.

The teeth stay clamped on Hemogoblin's hand even when the troll's head lolls forward, which is naturally the most fan-fucking-tastically unpleasant sensation to ever inflict itself on his hand. Grimacing, he peels the sentry's head back and prises his hand free, letting the blood pulse out and fill in the broken skin, easing the pressure on new bruises until his hand is unmarked again.

Somehow, he manages to drag the second sentry out of sight before anyone shows up. But his luck stops there. When he looks up out of the container he stuffs the unconscious body into, he has the unwanted pleasure of meeting the eyes of the driver from earlier, just as the man turns around the corner.

The man's mouth pops open and he shouts, "We have a hero over here!" Two pieces of metal slide out of his sleeves; a pair of knives fall into the driver's hands.

Shit shit shitfuckery. There goes his surprise advantage. Hemogoblin brings his sickles up on guard, sidestepping a little so he can check over his shoulder with the corner of his eye without looking away from his main opponent. The driver remains on guard as well, and there's something weird about that. Most of the Crew members are shoot first, ask questions later type thugs, in Hemogoblin's short experience; they seem to take after their rather violent boss in that respect.

So why does it feel like something is different about this one. Maybe it's the slightly higher quality of his suit, as though it is better tailored than the cheaper make most of the Crew members favor; maybe it's the weary, calculating look in the man's eye as he simply waits for Hemogoblin to make the first move.

As much as Hemogoblin doesn't want to run into some kind of trap, he can't wait around here forever. He's not letting this prick distract him while Hearts gets away. He grits his teeth and prepares to jump forward and to the side, to throw the driver off -

Hearts Boxcars himself rounds the corner behind the driver. "And what do we have here?" he says, walking up alongside the driver, eyeing Hemogoblin with a face that's a little worse for the wear since the showdown on Wednesday. "Great. You again."

Hemogoblin tenses up, and starts changing his game plan right the fuck now. He'd really hoped to whittle away the Midnight Crew in the area until he could focus all of his effort on Hearts alone; the man is too skilled a boxer for Hemogoblin to take him lightly.

"I can handle this one, sir," the driver says. To Hemogoblin's surprise, the man appears to be gritting his teeth, and he glances at Hearts impatiently.

The larger man fails to notice the irritation radiating off his underling in waves. "It ain't just the one. Where there's one of these bozos, there's two. Trust me, I'm not makin' the same mistake twice," Hearts grunts, eyeing the sky. "You can't underestimate these two lugs."

Hemogoblin doesn't let his relief show. If Hearts thinks Heir is in the sky to back him up, that means the Crew isn't responsible for the Heir's disappearance tonight. He can use that.
But he doesn't have Heir at his back, and he doesn't think much of his odds against both Hearts and a second man, going head to head. Instead, Hemogoblin smiles knowingly, raises his sickles - and darts back into the shadows.

He doesn't risk looking back, even when he hears shouts and the scramble of shoes on gravel behind him. He flings himself down the first narrow intersection he can find, and then the next, trying to lose Hearts's line of sight long enough to climb a container.

The first chance he gets, he takes it. One foot slips on the way up, and he just barely manages to swing his legs on top of the container before the driver squeezes through the passageway, panting. Hemogoblin allows himself a small smile; it looks like Hearts is just too bulky to shove his way through the tiny openings between containers and give proper chase. Good. Hemogoblin would prefer a one on one.

Hemogoblin tenses, ready to hook his legs over the edge and grab the driver from above, but the man swears and starts easing back out the way he came, too far away for Hemogoblin to reach.

He'll have to head them off again, before they reach the container ship. Who knows how many Crew members are manning the ship itself? No, he has to knock Hearts out before the nookstain absconds from Seattle and gets away with arson, theft, and two attempts at blowing up law-abiding heroes.

Seriously, fuck this guy. Hemogoblin is ready to vomit fury all over this guy and his fruity asshole shenanigans.

Descending from the container roof, Hemogoblin takes advantage of his slim build to keep evading the two men who are now searching the gaps between containers in earnest as they hurry through the main rows. Hearts and the driver meet up again before he can drop the second man, and he silently fumes as they stalk out toward the two remaining containers of contraband.

When he draws closer, he realizes their furious, whispered conversation is more of an argument. He lurks in the shadows nearby, easing his feet over the gravel to prevent the same crunch that keeps giving away the Crew's location.

"You need to go, sir," the driver is saying, his knives still held in a practiced grip. "It is my task to see you out of the city before dawn."

"And I'm tellin' yah, I leave when I leave. I ain't runnin' from these two little shits," Hearts snaps, impatiently waving the forklift into position. "I gave 'em more than enough warning. If they want to try this again, I'm gonna show them you don't mess with the Midnight Crew!"

"You can't," the driver insists, looking both anxious about contradicting his superior - at least, Hemogoblin assumes so - and yet irritated. "If you will not board that vessel of your own volition, I am to forcibly assist you. My lady Droog insists."

Dissent in the ranks? Hemogoblin snickers, kneeling in the gravel behind a container to observe.

"You think you can make me, you pompous deliveryboy?" Hearts says in a low voice. He reaches out with a thick hand and grabs the driver by the collar, yanking the shorter man upward until he's barely balanced touching the ground. "I'd like to see you try. You think Droog can tell me what to do?!

The driver just looks at him. "He would know," he says, quietly. "If you disobey him in this, he'll know. He always knows. And he wants the children alive. He wants you out of the field, and Lady Droog would rather not see what happens when he finally gets mad. And sir? He. Would. Know."
The air is tight with some tension Hemogoblin can't name, confused by who exactly this he could be. Then Hearts releases the man and loosens his own shirt, grunting and glancing around shiftily so that Hemogoblin catches sight of his face. He looks, Hemogoblin thinks, as though he's ready to shit bricks of solid fear. His ruddy face has gone pale and slick with sweat, and he looks ill.

"...Fine. Fine," is all Hearts says, and then he whirs on the forklift operator. "Hurry that up, yah dunce! What, do you have butterfingers?! We gotta schedule to keep!"

Well. That was...enlightening. Hemogoblin files this "he" and the name Droog away to wonder about later - right now, he has to focus on recapturing Hearts. Unfortunately, the next second, Hearts storms off toward the ship, stomping alongside the forklift, accompanied by the female guard with the pistols. It looks as though the driver has somehow won the argument. The driver himself scans the containers around him before striding back to the vehicle he escorted Hearts to the dockyard in. He flips away his knifekind and adjusts his suit jacket before entering. The car engines starts a moment later, and the driver veers back out of the container rows, heading back to the front gates. Apparently he still has some business in the city to deal with.

As long as that business doesn't involve blowing people and buildings up like a certain fucking maniac, he is officially less of a priority to Hemogoblin than said fucking maniac, who is currently heading for the ocean.

Fucking fuck fucker. He has to get ahead of Hearts before the gangster can surround himself with whatever backup is waiting for him on the ship. This would be so much easier if Heir really was here - Hemogoblin is painfully aware of just how much more time he wastes as he is forced to duck and weave between containers to avoid the pistolkind range of that female guard.

He doesn't make it in time. By the time he finds a vantage point near the old, barnacle-infested, unrepaired dock, Hearts Boxcars is already waving down another black suited-troll from the deck of the ship, who lowers the gangway and stomps down to listen to Hearts's whispered instructions.

Stealth isn't going to help him much anymore. Nevertheless, Hemogoblin waits until the woman with the pistols begins to scan the containers down the row from his location before he recklessly sprints out into the open. The troll from the ship gives a warning shout, but Hemogoblin is already kicking her legs out from under the woman before she can aim at him. He slams down on her wrist with a foot and twists to pin her other arm, ruthlessly slamming his palm into her chin when she tries to stand up.

When he rises, sickles growing from his wrists once more as he squares off against the forklift driver and the troll, he sees Hearts already has both feet on the gangway, striding up toward the ship. "Hey!" Hemogoblin shouts, and then he proceeds to (possibly, maybe, perhaps) overreact a tiny amount. "Get the fuck back down here, you nookwhiffing shithead!"

And wow, it's probably the massively inappropriate language that actually provokes Hearts into turning around, both eyebrows nearly disappearing into his hairline with mild surprise. "Wow. Got a mouth on yah, don't you, kid?" Hearts shakes his head. "Yeah. Nope." And on that note Hearts stomps up the gangway, disregarding Hemogoblin completely. "Keep him busy, boys."

Oh my fucking god, did he just get shot down by a fucking criminal dick with a heart fetish? Tell me that did not just happen. The forklift driver removes a fucking spear from within the driver's compartment, and the greenblooded troll from the ship draws a single wickedly sharp, curved bladekind from his side. Both of them come at Hemogoblin at the same time, and he loses track of Hearts's progress as he dodges their wild stabs.

Neither fighter is particularly skilled, not compared to Hemogoblin and his sickles, but they take up
time, and Hemogoblin chafes at the delay because it's exactly what Hearts wants. By the time Hemogoblin brings the last Crew member to his knees and knocks the man unconscious with a boot to the temple, the gangway has already been drawn up, and the Crew's ship has begun to pull away from the dock. Hearts is going to get away.

Or maybe not, Hemogoblin thinks, spying a rope that trails down the side of the ship. Yeah, with enough of a running start, he could reach it. Probably.

Time to find out.

Fuck. He's going for it. Hemogoblin jumps over the fallen Crew member and runs as fast as his legs can carry him, the muscles in his side flaring with pain as he races along the edge of the dock. When he reaches the end, he leaps up and forward, and catches the rope trailing off the side of the ship with one hand. He goes spinning in circles around it, tangling the line around his fist and banging against the side of the ship hard before coming to a stop. With a grunt, he untangles himself and begins to drag himself up the side of the ship hand over hand, the muscles in his arms straining as the burn scabs crack. The ship continues to pull out into the middle of the water as he slowly makes progress.

The rope trembles menacingly, and Hemogoblin nearly loses his grip. He wraps his hand again before he looks up.

All the adrenaline dies away, and a stone lodges itself in his stomach as he looks up the last few yards at Hearts Boxcars's square face. "Well, well," the man says, leaning over the side. "Real cute, kid. I give you points for persistence, a'ight? But this is the end of your little adventure." He raises a wickedly sharp knife, one he had failed to reveal last time, and Hemogoblin clenches his jaw. The specibus must be borrowed, because it's clumsy in Hearts's hands, but he can still saw away at the rope with ease, causing more vibrations to run through the rope and jostle Hemogoblin.

"You're not going to get away with this," Hemogoblin says, and it's the most pathetic, clichéd stock phrase to ever crawl out of his mouth and die. Frankly, after a horrible line like that, he deserves to get cut down.

Hearts pretends to think this over. "Nah, I think I will. Looks like Heir decided not to show up, after all," he calls down, wearing a smug grin that just makes Hemogoblin want to rip the man's entire ugly face off and feed it to him. "Shame. Give him my regards, will yah?"

Hearts cuts the dragging line with a deft stroke of the knife, and then Karkat is plummeting toward the water. He barely has time to shout out in surprise and suck in a breath of air before he runs out of air to fall through.

He lands in the water with a hard splash. The momentum of his fall carries him down further than he expects, and when he waves a hand through the water above his head, he fails to find the surface of the bay. For a moment raw panic floods him, and his heart seizes up. It's dark and cold and he can't see which way is up. For all he knows, he could be frantically paddling in the wrong direction, going down instead of up, and he can't breathe -

Because his fucking costume is covering up the edges of his fucking mutant gills.

Jesus bumblefucking Christ, if Karkat dies because he made this goddamn suit too tight, he is going to shit on everything that moves. The left side of his suit is already fucked thanks to the shrapnel, so he tears at the fabric on that side first, ripping right up to where the candy red slits of gills cut their way across his upper ribcage. He gulps down nasty port water. It tastes like he's filtering solid pollution as it works its way through his system, but the resulting influx of oxygen in his bloodstream is far too welcome for him to care.
The suit is already fucked anyway. He cuts a new hole in the other side to let his other gills help take up the strain, and he blinks his eyelids rapidly, wishing he had the second set of eyelids that help true aquatic trolls see underwater. With the ability to breathe underwater thus reestablished, he can think a little more clearly, and stops panicking like a scared little wriggler.

Yeah, he has gills. He doesn't like to talk about them. They're yet more proof that he's the kind of mutant that's so fucking bizarre, it makes you question just what kind of illegal mind-altering drugs the mothergrub who mixed his gene slurry had to have been on at the time. Usually by the time a troll dips below indigo on the hemospectrum, the gills are vestigial and barely function, and by the time you hit olivebloods they don't develop at all. Somehow, Karkat has gills and the kind of internal vascular system that can filter oxygen from water, but he missed out on the webbing between fingers, the elaborate ear-fins, and, oh yeah, any one of the fucking blood colors that would have saved him a lifetime of living in fear of being culled.

What the fuck ever. Karkat shakes his head and begins kicking his way back to the surface of the water. He's a slow-ass swimmer, despite the gills, and by the time he makes up for all the time he lost flailing around drowning like a dumbass and breaks the surface of the water, his heart is sinking. He treads water, slamming a fist angrily and futilely against the rolling surface of a wave that overtakes him.

Hearts's ship is already halfway out of the port, kicking up waves in its wake that buffet Karkat and drive him back towards the dock.

There's no way he'll ever catch up before they hit open water.

As though the universe can't bear to let this momentous fucking failure end on such a devastating note, his cracked fake horn falls off a second later. The splash of water right in his eye just about sums up the general mood of his entire existence, and he spits foul port water out of his mouth, ignoring the horn as it vanishes into the depths.

Karkat is forced to watch as the Midnight Crew ship vanishes into the night.

Wow. Fuck this night. Fuck everything about this night. He's going the fuck home. Waterlogged and with half his costume shredded, Karkat swims for shore.

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She carves the old symbol into the base earth of the city. The fleshlings have done their own work of cutting into the base earth and riddling it with tunnels, and she must waste precious time sealing off the pipes of filth-ridden water and draining power from cut wires that spit blue sparks. At one point she delves down to form the inner corner of an epicycloid curve, and finds to her distaste an entire metal tube of mewling humans speeding along beneath the earth. She loses her patience and gestures sharply. As one, her thorns reach down and scoop beneath the underground train.

She rips it out. It is longer than she expects, and the street crumbles and caves in along an entire block as the sectioned train is torn up through the pavement. One section of collapsed road intersects with the Grand Spirograph, and black, incensed fury consumes her in a wave of dark fire.

When the rage of the tanglehorde clears from her eyes, the train has been flung through the nearest building, lodging there with the bottom torn up by thorns. Blood and twisted metal hang down above the street, and screams echo within the tiny metal trap.

They are worth no more effort than that. Still crackling with rage, she returns to her work, carefully summoning a new carving spell to trace over the marred section of the Gate.
Everything must be perfect. They can afford no such flaws in the design. There are, after all, still rules that must be obeyed, covenants that must be fulfilled.

It does not help that the Noblest Gods have not been forced to make use of such a Gate in so many an eon. This is an elaborate work, and despite their many glorious, intertwined minds, a shared sentience beyond anything conceived of by mere singling quicklives, it remains...difficult to craft the old, hated symbol of the Spirograph, even in the service of the Eldest Gods. Destroying gates has always been a far simpler task for one such as she.

On a second flyover of the city, observing her work and noting the sections still left to be carved and consecrated, she sees it. The abomination. The wings are the wrong shape, more insectoid than cosmic, and the enormous statue bears a thorny crown and twin, slender horns that no angel ever bore, but the tangle within reacts with old hatred nonetheless. Screeching unintelligibly, she raises both hands and unleashes a wave of dark fire. It shreds through the coppery metal as though through flesh, and the wings are sheared away from the solitary metal form that the fleshcreatures have seen fit to erect in their harbor. Then, almost as an afterthought, she lands on the statue's shoulder and, with grimdark-laced hands, rips its head from its shoulders, tossing that too down into the muddy waters below.

Something tattered and pathetic in the corner of her mind thinks that this is a suitable ironic gesture, and then subsides into broken, ever weakening struggles.

Having thus satisfactorily defaced the Statue of Liberty and Equality in the name of both her mindrending Gods and that mysterious mistress of paradox space called irony, she smiles down at the ships fleeing from the tiny sub-island that served as base for the abomination, and turns to float above the city.

The butterfly wings of the statue topple over at last, sinking into the mud and kicking up a massive wave of displaced water that tosses the fleeing ferries and swamps some of the roads on the main island. She does not mind the rising waters, even as they begin to trickle into curves of the Gate. She prefers a cold-damp canvas for this glorious work, anyway, and the water will not interfere as metal or earth would.

And so it goes.

In a space that is not, between one world and the Void, there is Rose.

She thinks there will always be Rose, even when the thought of the name 'Lalonde' enrages her, even when all that is left of her is a sliver of pale light, a battered and brine-pickled husk that must watch as the grimdark swallows the world.

Sometimes she can feel the tentacles creep and crawl into what little of her own mind remains, and she must feebly shove them away, batter at probing thorns with lacerated hands. It hurts, it hurts, and she is so tired. Sometimes she thinks she has been tired her whole life, never sleeping, with the whispers of the Void ringing in her ears all those endless nights. And now she can only observe, feeling old down to her bones, as her body is used to create the Gate. Once the outline is finished being carved, it must be consecrated and opened, but now that Rose has given her consent, that consecration will only be a matter of minutes, rather than the hours that it would have taken up if they’d had to consecrate it the old fashioned way, with death and torture and sacrifice.

It isn't hard to extrapolate where such a grimdark construction will lead. Already the scent of cold and dark and brine hangs heavy in the air, so thick Rose can taste blood when she swallows. This
will be a Gate to the Outer Ring. She has no idea of the distance, both in light years and across
paradox space, that must be bridged in order to create such a portal, but the swelling tangle satiating
itself upon her mind seems unquestioningly confident the summoning will succeed.

However, in the part of her that can still think, can still analyze, can still See, Rose has an inkling of a
plan. And she has already set it into motion. Because the Horrorterrors may like to believe that they
are absolute, but she herself has ignored and refuted their murmured urgings almost since she was
born. She will not fall prey to this false dichotomy.

If they wish to believe the Horde is infallible, let them toddle along in their delusions. Rose is still
Rose, and she will not let them win.

Perhaps it would be easier to give in and become one with the embrace at last.

When has Rose ever done what is easy?

And so, under the guide of drifting aimlessly through the tide, she paddles her way, slowly but
surely, toward the pattern that occupies the center of the tangle, the loops and points and curves of
the Gate.

The many-angled ones are just such - many angled, tangled and thorny and messy, with no order, the
embodiment of chaos and death made sentient. She can see even now how the tentacles and stickers
of the tangle clutch and writhe around the edges of the spirograph, and then are just as quickly pulled
away. For whatever reason, the smooth order of the Gate is anathema to the Horrorterrors; they make
use of it simply because they seem to have no other choice. Rose cannot comprehend all of the
massive, overwhelming intelligence that controls the tangle, but she can see well enough how the
Gods must fight their inner urge to tangle in order to keep the pattern of the Gate pure. Otherwise,
the Gate will not open.

It is no more than a stray thought, a fledgling idea that she pours herself into. She masks it with blood
and salt, and then marks it with a single beacon of light before setting it loose on the tide that swills
and corrodes in tangles around the spirograph.

Just a simple thought. Just a tiny urge. As easy as breathing.

Rose smiles and falls away from the spirograph. She cannot let the tangle notice her near here, in
case it realizes she and that subtle, slippery thought are one and the same.

That is the beauty of this plan. It demands nothing of the tangle that the Horrorterror does not already
wish to do, the most insidious, corrupting kind of thought. It is the same method of gentle suggestion
and tantalizing whispermurmur the Gods have used to entice and manipulate Rose her entire life. In
hindsight, it is easy to see where they encouraged her alcoholism and fed her fury with her mother, to
create that perfect moment of despair in which they could take over her body.

Surely turnabout is only fair play?

The pattern shines, order in chaos, a symbol balanced above the churning sea. The tentacles draw
forward and abate, reach out to tear, then restrain themselves -
And then, with a shudder that rocks her mind and sends her spinning into the dark, the tentacles surge forward and embrace the spirograph. There is a keen of hungry, grim triumph as thorns wrap themselves around the curves of the Gate's image, and the bitter, distant pain of acid floods the waters of the deepdark.

As Rose watches, that perfect, unsullied pattern begins to melt and sag, dripping into the sea.

The tangle does not appear to recognize what horror it has wrought upon the Gate. It only follows its most primal instinct, after all, to bring chaos to order - why should that register in the hive mind as a breach, a failure? This is natural. This is acceptable.

Within moments, the same overwhelming force that tore the Seer of Light to shreds has also altered and distorted the Horde's only hope at a successful summoning into a warped version of its former self. The great spirograph lists to the side, slimy and scummy with brine and smears of grim dark.

Checkmate, Rose whispers to the Void, a soft sound audible only to herself.

She has no idea what such a damaged Gate will do once the unwitting Horrorterror has finished recreating the broken pattern in the streets of New York City. She would lay money on it all exploding rather disastrously, and she is well aware that she has condemned not just the island but any remaining inhabitants to almost certain death. At the very least, when the tangle realizes its failure, and the cause, it will turn upon what remains of Rose and finish the job of annihilating her individual identity. She will be Rose no more.

But she thinks that this sacrifice is well worth the price. If she had let the Gate be completed, the Horrorterrors would have flooded the world in their true forms, and more than just New York City would have burned.

Yes, this is...an acceptable outcome. The best possible future that she can See, in the dim pale light of her broken mind.

Rose closes her eyes, and lets herself drift away. She is so very tired, and now that she has done all she can, all she can do now is await the end.

She tears and carves with gleeful abandon. The perfect order of the Gate no longer seems quite so urgent a priority. She is so close to completing her goal, white fire drooling from her mouth as she lashes out with great vines of power. More and more often, she accidentally crushes the edges of stray buildings in her violent haste, but she simply knocks the debris out of her way and continues on.

When a tiny human bearing a camera rushes across her path, trying to conceal its pitiful form behind a fallen vehicle, she smiles and clenches her fist, shrieking with wild laughter as the camera explodes with dark fire in the man's hands. She does not even stop to watch if he burns with it. She floats upward, baring her teeth at the looming dark clouds of the sky.

She is so gloriously, gloriously close, and all her inhibitions are gone. This is so much fun!!!

And oh, she does. Does she ever. These pathetic fleshlings will never know what hit them when her work is done.
She fails to notice how her careful carvings begin to deteriorate and warp, the lines trailing off at loose ends and fading out as she begins to hack and tear at the earth indiscriminately. All she notices is an old and familiar hunger, the ever-present urge to DESTROY, to FEAST.

The urge, in short, to tag along.

Reaching out with all the tentacles at her disposal, she hurries to finish her work on the Gate. Hurry! For once the work is done, the Many may feast! They can clear the useless fleshy creatures away, and the great FEASTING may begin, free of the inconsequential mortal beings that paradox space holds so dear.

Unheard, unnoticed, a shred of a voice sighs into the grimdark waters with a an unseen smirk.

(checkmate, motherfuckers)

She has no idea that the Seer has already won.

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Sneaking onto the runway at Hobby Airport is easy. I mean, Dave and his Bro, they’re basically the equivalent of the most badass ninjas ever. He’s only worried about John for a second; he turns around to face the fence they’d just hopped, expecting to see John failing every stealth check known to man, only to realize the other hero has disappeared entirely. He looks up and sees John hovering overhead, his face obscured behind the cheapass black rimmed swim goggles they had picked up from a sports store and a black scarf that had drawn the weirdest looks because hello, they’re in Houston in the bugfuck middle of spring. No one in their right mind is rocking a scarf at this point. The kid is so much of a goof out of uniform, it’s easy for Dave to forget he’s just as competent at the hero thing as anyone.

John lands and they all three run the rest of the way to the sleek, almost military-style jet idling illegally on the runway with the engines running. Bro seems to know where he's going, which is the only reason Dave actually trusts that this is the right private jet.

Once they’re up the gangway and inside, the pilot and copilot eye them through the open door of the front compartment before nodding and closing up the outside door as well, preparing for takeoff. “We should reach our destination in a little under two hours,” a troll informs them hurriedly as she strides through the most luxurious interior of a plane Dave has ever seen. Seriously, when Lalonde said private jet, she hadn’t been kidding. This place is decked the fuck out. “Please be seated for takeoff and landing. If you require anything, call me.” The troll disappears into the back and buckles herself in.

Apparently, they aren’t dicking around. The next second the plane jolts and starts rolling along under Dave’s feet. Shaking himself, he sees John aiming for the window seat by a large television screen. Bro has vanished, though how he’s managed it in such a confined space is a total mystery. Probably off to call the elder Lalonde again. For someone who claims to hate the dame so much, Bro sure has a lot to say to her, considering how tight-lipped and stoic as fuck the guy usually is.

Still. None of this had been in Bro’s plan. Dave had stared down Bro until he agreed they were going on this hella awesome rescue mission, not the other way around. Dave doesn’t think he’s ever disagreed with Bro like that and won – well, ever. Dave’s heart squeezes with elation, and he has to sit on the urge to throw a because damn. Damn. He is the one and only reason he’s here. And he is all for this new state of affairs. He is the Secretary of this State. Fuck yeah.
Of course, now they’re flying off to confront one of John’s old friends who is apparently possessed by tentacle monsters because some lady who calls Bro ‘Ambrose’ of all fucking things has asked them to. There is so much pure, unadulterated ‘what the actual fuck’ going on in that sentence than Dave doesn’t even know where to start.

Well, it doesn’t look like Bro is willing to be interrogated at the moment. John is probably an easier target anyway. Dave sprawls into a seat across from John, just as the jet takes off and he would have fallen over anyway, timing it so smoothly it looks like the last little jolt shoving him back and down into the seat is all part of the plan. Awesome.

He waits.

John stares out the window.

He waits.

John appears to have decided that the clouds slowly appearing through the window are the greatest thing since man first invented apple juice. Which is literally impossible, because no one can ever top that crowning moment of achievement. Ever.

“John.”

John blinks, looking startled, as though he were so engrossed in the sky outside the window that he hadn’t noticed Dave sit down. Eh. Doesn’t matter. Dave’s smooth moves aren’t for an audience – they’re a one-man ritualistic offering to irony, goddess that she is.

“Dave,” he says in reply, a faint smile flickering across his face before he shuts down again, with an intense, far off gaze that hones in on the sky outside the window. It’s not quite the weariness that makes Dave want to hug the sadness out of the kid, but it’s only a few shades off from the mask that he’s seen John wear when he’s trying to hide that fatigue in front of a crowd. The kid has his hands folded up in his laps and he’s sitting straight up like he’s sitting before an audience, making no effort to make himself comfy for the two hour flight.

“Something fascinating out there?” Dave asks. “I mean seriously man, how can you bear to look away from the face of a Strider? This is some Bernini-quality anatomy here and you’d rather cloud-watch?”

John bursts out into laughter, and immediately tries to choke it back, snorting behind a hand he claps over his face. “Oh my god, Dave, where do you even get this stuff from?” he laughs. “Sorry John, this is 100% homegrown Strider, my man. All original material, all the time.” Dave slouches in his seat, letting his legs stretch out into the aisle. “Totally au naturel. Now come on, John. Talk to me about this Rose chick or something. Do the conversation thing.” He wants to stop doing the majority of the talking now. John has really good ears. Eventually he has to notice something is up.

“Sorry, Dave,” John says as though on automatic, tugging his wandering eyes away from the clouds. “Ah, what do you want to know? Because honestly if we should be asking anybody around here questions, we should be asking your brother or Doctor Lalonde. I don’t even understand half of what was going on in there. I didn’t even know Rose had powers, or that she was Seer of Light all this time.”

Interesting, but not unexpected. Dave had kind of already figured John didn’t know about little Lalonde running around playing hero after the kid nearly collapsed in shock on their shitty sofa. “All
those years running around being adorable little friendderps and holding hands, and you never once suspected she could grow space tentacles? She never realized you float when you’re winning at video games?”

John flushes. Dave wishes he could count it as a point to him, but he's long since realized that playing the game against someone who isn’t a Strider, and therefore isn’t even trying to pretend they don’t have feelings all the damn time, renders the game kind of moot. “I do not float, man. Do I?”

John flips into earnest anxiety, searching Dave's eyes with a worried expression. Doesn’t he get whiplash, changing his expression that dramatically every two seconds? Dave hadn’t noticed it as much yesterday, but damn, is John easy to read. “Dude, I play video games with – people who don’t know, I can’t have been floating all that time or they would have noticed.”

“Chill, John, you only did it the once.” Dave allows himself a victory smile when John splutters out another protest. “I’m fucking kidding, bro. We haven't even done a proper video game faceoff, how the fuck would I know about your floating tendencies in the long term.” Dave begins tapping out a beat with his foot. Between John's sudden arrival and last night's exhausting shenanigans, he hasn't had time to work on his sick beats in almost twelve hours. He's getting antsy. "But seriously, neither of you knew about the other?”

John pulls a face and leans his head against the window, tangling his fingers together. “I – look, it's called a secret identity for a reason, you know. My dad had been teaching me to keep my powers a secret from everyone since I was, like, five years old. He discouraged me from getting friends all through elementary school because he was afraid I’d forget and want to show off in front of other kids.” John shakes his head, looking confused. “But now it turns out that Doctor Lalonde knew all along, I guess? She and Rose moved into town in the third grade, and I just – wanted to be friends with someone, finally. And my dad said it was alright if it was Rose.”

Dave raises an eyebrow at that. "Really? Damn. I mean, obviously they were in some serious cahoots, right? Mom Lalonde clearly knew all along about you, and who else would give her the lowdown?"

John nods, frowning. "I didn’t even question why some girl from out of town was a safe choice for a friend. But you're right - I think maybe my dad and Doctor Lalonde knew each other even before the Lalondes moved in. Knew about the two of us, and trusted each other enough to discuss that information, even if they never talked about it where we could hear."

Dave scans the plane, but there's still no sign of Bro. Like that's unusual. "Bro, too," he adds in an undertone, even though he's resigned to the fact that Bro can probably hear him anyway. The man is fucking psychic or something. "Or at least, he and Lalonde go way back. I mean, fucking Ambrose? No wonder he tried to bury that one."

"He talked to my dad, too." John folds his arms over his chest, then grimaces, tugging at the collar of his borrowed suit jacket. He opens his mouth, but Dave beats him to it with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk. John shuts his mouth and goes red again, pouting. Heheh. No one complains about borrowed Strider swag, not while Dave's here to taunt them about it. "And Dad wouldn't talk about it when I asked him what it was all about. Said it wasn't safe to discuss anything over the phone." John huffs. "They all have a lot of explaining to do. But I don't think we can bug them about it right now. We have to focus on saving Rose."  

Dave remains silent when John gets his thinking face on, and starts drumming on the armrest with his fingers, running through the beat for Poker Face.

...Shut up. It's not even ironic at this point. It's a sick, sick addiction that will drive him, alone and unloved, to an early grave. At least maybe he'll have John to give a kickass eulogy, even if Bro will
probably show up fifteen minutes late on a shitty skateboard with Starbucks -

John leans his head against the back of his seat and starts talking again, interrupting one of the most depressingly funereal tangents Dave has ever gone on. "Anyway. Me and Rose just spent the next six years being best friends, apparently never once letting it slip that we were both…different.” His face falls even more. “And I definitely never knew about this grimdark thing. I mean, Rose used to talk about her cat – I think she called him Jaspers. But she always told me he died when she was 4 years old. She was four the last time this grimdark thing happened? I mean…that’s horrible. I can’t even imagine being possessed and losing control of my body that way. For a little kid – god.”

John trails off, and then he’s looking out the window again, a little crease of worry between his eyebrows. And yeah, okay, that kind of had been a conversation killer. Dave is very careful not to think about how it would feel to have your body possessed, to be forced to march along to someone else’s commands, merrily wearing your meatsuit as they drive you to an early grave, damning you and everyone around you, while all you can do is scream inside and watch as you - you - you -

(you -)

Yeah, he’s not thinking about this. He’s forgetting it ever happened at all. He’s –

-When Dave comes too, the plane is at a really weird angle, and it takes him a few blinks before he realizes someone is shaking his shoulder gently. If it had been Bro, he'd just have shoved Dave out of the seat entirely without a word. “Hey, Dave, are you still zoned out?” John asks, leaning over in his seat with a worried expression behind his clear goggles.

Dave grunts in response, mind slowly kicking back into gear, just in time to feel every bone in his body creak. Chrriiiist. Had he really just passed the fuck out while sitting upright like that? He feels like he’s been to the fifth dimension and back, and whatever he met there kicked his ass ten ways to Sunday. Seriously, if sleeping upright leave him feeling like he has fucking osteoporosis, he’s sticking to horizontal siestas from now on. He can still feel the headache from earlier edging in, because tapping your fingers isn't exactly a work of musical genius. He needs his turntables like he needs air, but oh fuck, look who decided to go on a cross-country road trip to rescue some broad from tentacle monsters. He couldn't even bring any sick beats - his iPod got wasted last night when Bro had torn him a new one for keeping his pesterchumhood with Heir a secret. Way to plan ahead, Strider.

Then he looks out the window and realizes why they’re all leaning at a funky angle, and why he’s half slipping out of his seat. “We here already?” he asks, not wiping at his bleary eyes until John glances out the window himself, giving him a second to recover his composure. Naps always knock him for a loop.

“Yeah, we are,” John says, his voice grim as he turns back to the window. “And you might want to see this.”

Dave surreptitiously hooks a leg around the edge of the seat to keep from slipping any further, feeling like a stealthy genius, and puts his face to the window.

New York City looks...a little worse for the wear. For one thing, enormous black thunderclouds tinged with sickly green and bruise purple have swollen up overhead, taking up the entire sky. Their plane is looping in a wide circle around the worst of it, aiming for a small runway to the northwest of the swirling vortex. Every so often, a crackle of thorny black lightning rises up from the city itself, and another building bites the dust. Shit, there isn’t even going to be a city left by the time this chick
He whistles. "Wow. She really did a number on the skyline, didn’t she?" He narrows his eyes and frowns, squinting at the tiny figure out in the harbor. "What the fuck did she do to the Statue of Liberty and Equality? I mean, aside from the head." He wonders if grimdark monsters have a sense of irony, because it so, 10/10, well done tentacle dudes. Classic. "It’s different, I can tell, I just can’t put my finger on it…”

John cranes his neck to the side to get a better angle. "It was those troll wings they sometimes pupate with. Looks like she cut them off. I wonder why.”

“Tentacle monsters, man. Truly, their whimsy is inscrutable to us mere mortals.” Dave sits back a little, clenching his jaw against the edge of a throbbing headache. He refuses to raise his hands and rub at his temples in front of witnesses. “Maybe they just don’t like angels.”

"Yeah, maybe," John murmurs.

When they disembark at the Newark airport, as close to the chaos in Manhattan as the pilot is willing to land, a woman who can only be Doctor Rue Lalonde is waiting for them on the runway. The storm from the island sends gusting winds flying everywhere, kicking up the doctor's pristine white lab coat and fluttering the edges of her military, high necked fuchsia dress. She raises a flask in one hand and tosses back a good shot of unidentified alcohol even as Bro disappears from the gangway and reappears before her, arms folded.

A stray breeze slams into Dave sideways when he's halfway down the walkway, and he has to brace himself as discreetly as possible by grabbing the hand rail, his hair flying in his face. Fuck everything.

Abruptly, everything goes still. Rue Lalonde's hair settles down into messy blonde, bobbed curls, and a soft smile spreads across her face, aimed behind Dave. He turns his head slightly to see that John has exited the plane, one hand raised in a tight fist as he frowns up at the sky. The wind lashes one last time, then wraps around him and settles.

So, the windy thing has mundane applications as well. Kick ass.

Dave slouches down the rest of the stairs with more finesse. Need to make a good first impression on elder Lalonde.

Well. First impression that Dave can remember. Shit, this lady probably saw him in diapers or some shit. Bro has some serious explaining to do.

"Mom Lalonde," is all Dave says, sticking his hands in his pockets. That earns him a startled, though pleased smile, which is - really fucking weird. Yeah. He takes a small step back and refrains from letting his very fucking weired-out expression show.

John stops next to Dave, folding his arms. He looks solemn, almost stern. "Doctor Lalonde," he says evenly.

"Dave. John." The doctor hesitates, then smiles again. "Or it's Heir at the moment, yes? It's been too long, both of you.”

"Not long enough," Bro mutters. "Can we hurry this up, Lalonde? Eventually your kid is going to get tired of restricting herself to one little island. Unless you've figured out why the fuck she's so
fixated on it in the first place?"

Rue's gaze lingers on Dave and John for a long moment. Long enough for it to get awkward. Dave bristles, his shoulders hunching reflexively under the sustained scrutiny. John breaks first, though. "Doctor Lalonde, I'm not gonna lie. I'm pretty mad at you right now, and when this is over, one way or another, I'm coming to see you. You have some explaining to do about how you justified abandoning Rose like you did."

You fuckin' tell her, John. Dave nods slightly. He doesn't even know this Rose chick, and he can still see that elder Lalonde fucked up somewhere along the line. Seriously, when your kid ends up possessed by raving tentacles gods from beyond the stars, something is seriously fucked about how you raised them. Or failed to raise them, as the case may be. Hell, Bro might be a shitty example of guardianhood, but at least he's always, you know. Been there.

Doctor Lalonde flinches, closing her eyes. "Yes, we do owe you children some answers, don't we?"

"Speak for yourself," Bro says.

"But not now." The doctor shakes her head and opens her eyes. "The Horrorterrors will not leave the city. I did not realize why, at first, when they'd already proven capable of devastating a straight line between here and Albany, but it's clear they have some design on the city. Literally." She reaches into her pocket with the hand not occupied with a flask and holds up a photograph. "This is the last image of the city a helicopter crew was able to obtain before being shot down. Ambrose, I'm certain you recognize the pattern?"

Dave picks out the pattern immediately, though he doesn't really know what to call it. Half of the overhead view of the city is full of looping curves and rounded triangles, like a huge-ass stylized flower or a star. It is elegant, precise, and ominously familiar, causing a sickening lurch in Dave's gut that he can't explain, all of it carved straight through to the earth below without a care for buildings or roads that get in the way.

The other half looks like a preschooler looked at that elegant, spiraling star, and began to fingerpaint the same design using broken fingers and a very sketchy definition of straight lines. Several ends trail off into the water without connecting properly to the rest of the design, and a large, wriggling line cuts right through the middle, at a right angle with the rest of the shape.

Overall, it's a pretty shitty design.

"What, did they drink a liquor store before they started?" Bro snarks. "No wait, that's something you would do, Lalonde."

The doctor ignores him, putting away the picture. She smiles with a distinct aura of pride. "No. I believe Rose is still fighting. If they're trying to complete a perfect spirograph, they have failed miserably. The Horrorterror's movements have grown more and more erratic over the past two hours, and they have made no effort to correct the gratuitous mistakes being made to the other half of the pattern. Rose has outwitted them, somehow. And I trust in her. Whatever the many-angled ones intended with this pattern, it will inevitably fail."

"They're not going to be happy about that, are they?" John interrupts. "Whatever the heck this thing does, when it doesn't work, they'll know who to blame."

"No," Doctor Lalonde admits. "They won't be pleased at all. Which is why it would be best for all involved if you three can help Rose before they try to activate that thing." She pats a large, grey container sitting at her side, and slides open a keyboard attached to the side. She keys in a code and
the container beeps. The top opens up with the whoosh of air entering a vacuum, to reveal a pair of metal bands encased in foam.

"And what do these do?" Dave asks. "Do we walk up to Miss Evil Congeniality over there and offer her the latest spring trend in accessories?"

Doctor Lalonde hiccups, and drinks from her flask again before she answers. Seriously, this woman must have the liver of a fucking Russian sailor to still be coherent after drinking all morning long. "These are restraints of my own design," she slurs afterward, leaning a little heavily on the container. "They are imbued with several elements that have proven efficacious in suppressing the whispers of the Furthest Ring in the past. Rose has taken medication with the same properties to assist her in meditation all her life, though I should have anticipated that she might stop taking it in my absence. All you really need to do, in essence, is get close enough to attach these. However, the problem is the approach. The Horrorterror will fight you every step of the way, unless you can reach Rose somehow and have her assist you from within."

Bro has the cuffs in his hand between one second and the next. He stares at them hard behind his shades, before raising his head to stare at Doctor Lalonde. "A'ight," is all he says.

Doctor Lalonde facepalms. "Just say it, Ambrose, I know how you think. I know what you're going to say."

"Fine, woman. Just how do cuffs imbued with the essence of nothingness help suppress 'emissaries of the Void'?"

"That title is a common misconception, one I would be happy to explain to you at our leisure after Rose is no longer wreaking havoc on New York," Rue snaps. "You may not care about her wellbeing after all these years, but she is still ou-"

"Okay, okay, fuck, Lalonde, we're going." Bro raises both hands as though to ward off the doctor's ire.

John, meanwhile, has one eye scrunched up, clearly thinking hard. "How do you imbue something with nothi-"

"Not enough time." Doctor Lalonde snags the cuffs from Bro's hands and holds them out to John. Dave blinks. Did - did she just steal something from Bro? Did Bro...let her? Or was she really that fast?! Because holy shit. "Rose is likely to let you get closest, Heir," she says. "She barely knew Dave as a child, and her memories of you are more recent, and more positive. Just remember - it has to be both restraints. One will weaken the grimdark significantly, but the two is the only thing that can shut the Horrorterrors down long enough to get her to an isolation tank."

"So. If this half-assed, really vague plan works, where exactly are we taking Little Miss Sunshine?" Dave asks. "Do we just drag the ticking time bomb out and toss her on the private jet?" Seriously, why does he have to ask all the important questions, here?"

"I thought I'd fly Rose out if she can't move afterward," John admits, shrugging as he stuffs the restraints in the inner pockets of his costume. Those pockets are never going to be the same. Dave can see seams tearing from here. Urghh.

"Fuck, just for that, you get to carry her, little bro," Bro adds.

"That is a good question," Doctor Lalonde says. She looks almost...approving? Huh. "I have recently enlisted a new friend who will drive a safe van for you to transport Rose in. She delivered a
letter to Rose at my request that may have...helped trigger this incident. She was only the Messenger, but she has insisted on serving as your Personal Motorist on your way out of the city as a way of restoring her honor."

Oh man. John and Bro's expressions don't change - like Bro's expression really ever changes, anyway - but Dave recognizes the emphasis on those capitalized letters. "She a carapacian?"

Doctor Lalonde outright grins at that. "Very perceptive of you," she murmurs. "Yes, PM is a pale carapace, and has proven very reliable thus far. Her priority will be on escorting you three and Rose out of the city. Is that all?"

"Yeah." John opens the palm of one hand, and a whistling wind begins to pick up around him as he yanks up the bright white hood of the suit jacket. Every trace of that goofy kid from Pesterchum is gone, and even in red, black, and white instead of grey and blue, this is Heir. "Let's go."

Heir flies them to New York City. It's a fucking weird experience, and Dave doesn't like it. Yeah, he basically trusts Heir not to drop them or anything like that, but the winds kicked up by Rose's rampage fight Heir at every turn, which makes everything kind of wobbly and really fucking nerve-wracking when you're flying three thousand feet in the air, just below the leading edge of a pitch black thunder cloud. Seriously, flying from the grey cloud cover over Newark to the grimdark storm over Manhattan and Brooklyn is like crossing into the Twilight Zone or some shit.

Heir keeps flying them lower and lower, closer to street level as they draw nearer to the purplish, thorny lightning that occasionally lights up over Central Park. The western half of New York City falls under the messy, preschool half of the design, and it looks like the Horrorterror is still hard at work carving its messed up spiro-thing into the Upper East Side and the waterway between that and Astoria. Midtown is a fucking wreck when Heir has them touch down on Fifth Avenue. The people apparently had time to clear out, but there aren't that many bodies lying around, but there are more than a few smoking, overturned cars here and there with splatters of - yeah, that's blood. Dave has to look away. Blood isn't his thing, okay? Unless it's, like, the righteously spilled blood of his enemies. Jeez.

Bro has been taking this whole flying-thing like a fucking champ, jaw clamped shut and katana at the ready the entire time Heir insisted it was the quickest way to reach Manhattan, and while Dave needs to wipe sweaty palms on his pants, Bro looks as chill as ice cubes. Dave just can't match the guy in terms of net coolness. He's fucking inscrutable, even as he flips off his shades to reveal a pair of sicknasty orange-yellow eyes. That's Dave's cue, so he loses his shades as well. It's so fucking dark under the cloud cover, being outside doesn't even make his eyes water as he adjusts. Oh my god, he relocating to fucking Canada or something, this is so much better than running around Houston in the sun with his eyes aching all the damn time.

"Alright, you guys. What's the game plan?" Heir asks, studying the dark tentacles of power that eat their way up to the sky in the distance. "Doctor Lalonde seems pretty sure these grimdark things are going to try to kill us, even if I do manage to get through to Rose. Should we just try to distract her from finishing that spirograph -"

"Yeah, no. As fun as relying on the power of heart sounds, I think I'll pass." Lil Cal wraps itself over Bro's shoulder, and Dave shivers against his will. Fucking fuck, he'd hoped Bro had left that puppet asshole back at the apartment. Out of all of Bro's puppetkind, Lil Cal has won the prize for 'most likely to come to life in the middle of the night and stab the shit out of adorable, unsuspecting little brothers' every year since Dave came up with the award. "You can talk at her all you want, kid. I'm going in for an all-out beatdown. Cuff her if you can, but I'm not standing around while you try
talking to someone who might now be there anymore."

"Doctor Lalonde thinks she's in there," Heir argues. "And she knows more about this than we do."

Bro shakes his head. "We can't dick around, kid. People have been dying out here."

"You think I don't know that?!" Heir yells. Then his face goes pale, and he grabs at his chest and oh my fuck it's finally happened. Bro has given John a rage heart attack. "Will you just stop -" he wheezes out, as Dave flashsteps to his side, internally freaking the fuck out because what do you do when a hero has a heart attack? Dave's first aid training does not extend to rage aneurysm and that kind of bullshit.

Then Heir vanishes, just as Dave's about to grab his shoulder and try to snap him out of it.

What.

He pops up again right in front of Bro's face, eyes gleaming blue and one fist raised. "You dick!"

Bro catches the fist and tosses Heir over his shoulder. The wind catches the kid before he hits the ground and Heir stays hovering on his back for a moment before landing on his feet, rubbing at his chest with a weird expression. "Seriously, can you stop doing that? How do you keep pissing me off so much that - that happens?"

Bro smirks. "It's a talent. Now, stay angry, kid. Your little party trick will come in handy."

"Why do we always choose the path of most asshattery?" Dave demands, throwing both his hands up. "Oh my fucking god, Bro. Bro. Seriously. You couldn't just say to the guy, hey? You know what would be good? If you remember that when you Hulk out you start teleporting and shit. And. You know. That would be a useful skillset to have. Can we just communicate like sane people for once in our lives? And not give people rage heart attacks? Just, you know. A fucking suggestion."

"No," Bro says bluntly.

Well then. "Oh my god, fuck all this," Dave mutters to himself, and then he flashsteps down the street, racing around piles of vehicles and shattered pavement.

He can't even handle these raging asshole shenanigans anymore. Cannot. Even.

He's crunching over a block of broken glass when his keen Strider-senses notice Heir has caught up. The other hero is flying ten feet above the ground on the other side of the street, soaring right over all the masses of debris Horror-Rose has kicked up, and he nods when Dave catches his eye. He looks drawn and pale, possibly from the recent ragefest, but also determined. Bro is nowhere in sight, and right now, that's exactly how Dave likes it.

The most unnerving part is the silence. Aside from the faint rustle of Heir's breezes and the sound of Dave's own buzzing, raspy breath echoing from the collar on his throat, there's no sound; even as Dave darts across glass shards and jumps the wide crevasses the grimmdark has carved into the road, he doesn't make much sound as he moves. He's not on Bro's level, but he's as stealthy as he needs to be.

But you'd expect with a giant tentacle monster in the body of a teenage girl rampaging around the city, there'd be more noise - eldritch chants, the screams of innocent victims, a really badass soundtrack. Instead, there is the silence, and every so often, the faint rumble of thunder overhead that sounds, in the back of Dave's mind, a little like the ocean.
To be honest, it makes him feel a little sick. The closer they get to the dark tentacles arcing out over
the park, the more the pressure in the air rises, pressing in against his skull, as though they're
underwater. It doesn’t make any sense, but hell, does anything about this trip make sense?

They're about on level with the Metropolitan Museum of Art when the writhing grimdark overhead
shudders to a halt. Dave freezes in place, ready for an attack.

Without any sound or warning, the entire clump of tangled thorns in the sky lashes out, stabbing into
a building up ahead. It appears that the Horrorterror in little Lalonde has taken offence against the
Guggenheim, as the tangle of grimdark proceeds to rip at the swollen roof and curved walls of the
building, with bolts of dark thorns and white fire firing off at random. Jesus Christ, is not even art
sacred anymore? What next, the Louvre?

"Shit. Flashstep, hey. Shit. Dave?!

Dave snaps out of it. What a time to zone out. Heir lands next to him, staring at the Guggenheim
with horror. "Yeah?" Dave says, wanting to smack himself. "Sucks, man. I never even got to visit
that place. NYC is kind of out of my jurisdiction, but hey, I at least thought I'd try to drop by at some
point. See all the pictures and shit."

"Dave, that's not what I'm talking about. Can you hear that?" Heir is starting to float again, his whole
body going tense.

It's contagious - Dave is starting to freak out now, too. "Hear what?" he asks, his skin crawling as he
tries to hear anything over the crunch of tentacles slamming into rock.

"PULNYESLESHLINGS"

And oh fuck he heard that shit shit shit -

Dave claps his hands over his ears, but it doesn't do shit. That voice pierces into his brain, an
absolute whisper that bursts into dark thorns behind his eyes. He's thought he'd had headaches
before, but they're nothing compared to the ice picks being drilling into his skull with every word that
broken, cold voice speaks.

Beside him, Heir winces, but then recovers. Fuck, how can he stand hearing this godawful noise? It
seems like it's barely affecting him.

"Dave, I hear screams," Heir says. "I think there are still people in there!"

Well, fuck.

"We have to get them out!" Heir shoots forward, flying right at the grimdark thorns. Yeah, that's
Dave's cue to move. He rips his hands away from his ears - it's not helping anyway - and runs after
Heir, just barely able to keep up with flashsteps. As they get closer, he starts to hear multiple high-
pitched screams, something separate from the constant white noise of the grimdark muttering in his
head.

Oh hell, it's kids. Evil-Rose has a bunch of kids pinned down in that museum.

"HMMEWHEREDIUYYOU*G*Ω?WO*N*TYOÜCO**M*E*BA*CK*À*MD*E*MY*FR*S?" There is an unearthly shriek of rage (finally!) and the thorns
explode outward, tearing the whole roof off the building in one go. Dave has nearly caught up, and
Heir is already on level with the grimdark tangle, darting to get between it and the interior of the
museum in a flurry of wind. Dave can only assume he's trying to distract the Horrorterror from the
kids, wherever they ended up -

Later, he can't say what made him stop and look to the side as he comes up next to the Guggenheim. A lot of this time travel shit is full of weird coincidences and happenstance like that, and it annoys the hell out of him. All he knows is that he looks to the side for the briefest moment, and catches a flare of crimson from the corner of his eye. He stops and looks again properly.

A future-Dave lurks in the shadows between one building and the next. And he's really recent too, because his outfit is basically the same as Dave's right now, without even any damage or tears or anything. His upper lip looks messy with blood.

Oh. Great. Now he's going to have to deal with goddamn fuckass time shenanigans in the middle of a goddamn crisis? It's like Christmas came early. "What now?" he hisses at other-him.

Other-Dave holds up ten fingers. "Go. Like, right now, bro. Ten minutes, send them out the back door along East 88th and tell them to go around on Madison Avenue. Do not fuck around, do not pass Go, just - go."

The problem with time travel is, this all means that Dave has to obey, even though future-him is the shittiest explainer ever. He is actually ashamed that he is going to be that uninformative in ten minutes from now. "Sorry, Heir," he mutters, and then he brute-forces his way into his time powers, narrowing his mental focus down from stop to reverse.

As always, there is a brief moment of inexplicable, overwhelming pain, as his throat seizes up and he gasps for air that can't reach his lungs, a white-hot line of pain running through his throat right beneath the collar.

In that moment, he sees the figures moving behind future-him, a group of tiny little midgets running through the alley and taking off away from the grimdark disaster.

Hang on. Wait. Hold the fucking phone. They aren't midgets -

- rescue the little shits!

That thought finished, Dave checks his surroundings, trying to orient himself. He's come out ten minutes ago in the same place he left from, but the museum before him is no longer in ruins; several windows are shattered, but the roof and everything else is still in tact. As he takes a measuring glance behind him at the park, he can see that the grimdark tangle is still in the distance, working its way across the park's reservoir. Without Heir's influence, the wind is at gale-force again, and Dave has to blink and shield his eyes when he gets a faceful of dust and debris. Fucking fuck. Shaking his head, he runs for the front door of the Guggenheim. Time to get the kids out of the fucking line of fire.

The front doors are gone. He spies them lying on the floor in the center of the lobby as he rushes in. He's flashstepping to wring the most movement out of every second that he can, but this museum is huge. Scanning up the levels of ramps visible from the lobby, he grimaces and cups his hands around his mouth. "Hey! Kids! Small human beings! Yo! I am here. You could in fact say that I am here to save you!"

Nobody answers. Dave is painfully aware that if he has to spend the next eight minutes searching the entire museum for wherever these little shits have been hiding through the entire attack, he's going to be cutting this escape pretty damn close. The evil-Rose is gonna lay down some unholy wrath on this
place in five minutes, at the least.

He has the small measure of security in that he has already witnessed the children successfully escaping behind his future self. But that doesn't really help him right now.

He starts running up the ramp, the collar around his neck heating up steadily as he is forced to continue to shout. Fuck, he hates yelling. "Come on, you have to get out of here! Fuck, do you not have adult supervision or something? You have to come downstairs, we're going out into the street on the side - I know you're in here!"

"Who are you?" a voice demands. It isn't a little kid's voice either. Up ahead, a woman in thick glasses peers out of an exhibit hall.

"The asshole who's here to save you, obviously." Dave skids to a stop in front of the hall. At first he can't see the kids - then he's sees that they're all huddled up against an inner wall, underneath a bunch of tables that look as though they've been dragged from all over to form the shelter. He rounds on the teacher. "Look. Lady. The great big evil - uh, thing is coming to tear this building apart. In like. Two minutes. So we really need to hurry this up and get the shrimps out of here."

"The streets have been too dangerous!" she protests. "Most of the bridges to the mainland are too damaged for my students to cross."

"Well, fuck me sideways, lady -" says Dave, gritting his teeth. The timer he has counting down in his mind isn't looking too promising.

"I mean it, there's not going to be a building here really soon, so however dangerous the streets are, you have to risk it. Alright, so can we go now?"

"I suppose -" the teacher begins shakily.

She never gets a chance to finish.

With an enormous thunderclap, grimdark tentacles smash through the glass ceiling of the lobby. Dave shoves the teacher forward, away from the ramp that runs in a spiral around the interior lobby as glass and tentacles rain down. Then, in a rush, the tentacles rip back up, missing Dave by mere feet that he flashsteps just in time, taking part of the exhibit hall's roof with it. Suddenly, with the upper floors and roof torn away, he can see the sky above, the heavy thunder clouds now centered over the museum. He can see the grimdark cluster as it slowly descends to hover above the gaping hole in the roof.

And for the first time since they arrived in New York, Dave sees the thing inside Rose Lalonde, face-to-face. It is far worse than it appeared on the grainy video footage. The thorny tentacles have grown so thick over the past few hours that her form can barely be distinguished from the grimdark wrapped around her. White fire bleeds from her eyes, but there is something behind the blaze, something bloody and dark and writhing and aware -

"PU'N Y LITTLE F'REE SHITNGS" she says, smiling with an open mouth and bared teeth. The pain is unbelievable, even worse the second time around, perhaps because this time Dave is actually part of the group she's speaking directly too, rather than just overhearing the words from a distance. He feels blood start oozing out of his nose.

He already knows she's going to speak once more, and then begin ripping the building apart in
earnest.

They need to be gone. Now. And they can't go down the interior ramp.

"Emergency stairwell. Now. Right the fuck now," he rasps. He yanks time to a stop and grabs the teacher.

As tenta-Rose lifts a hand, sickly purple light gathering in her palm, he has the teacher at the back wall, by the students. The children are all screaming, have been screaming all through the destruction to be honest, the noise that drew Heir's attention earlier/now.

Thank god they're at the back of the hall. Thank any god listening they're all huddled right next to the emergency stairwell. Between each time stop he grabs as many kids as he can carry, yanks them out from under the tables, and starts throwing them down the stairwell.

Hey, Bro threw him down the stairs all the time as a kid. Kids are resilient, right?

Okay, yeah, he probably shouldn't have thrown them. Oops. Too late. "Go go go, lady," he yells grabbing the teacher by the shoulder and pushing her into the stairwell, too. Most of the kids are running down the stairs already - thank god, they're little shits, but they're little shits with self-preservation instincts - and Dave grabs three who are sitting around crying and carries them down himself.


He nearly drops a kid, but no one is watching so it doesn't count. All he can think is 'five, four, three, two, fuck -'

This time, the eldritch shriek of rage blasts his eardrums, and he barely flashsteps to the ground floor before he collapses forward, clawing at his ears. He drops the kids, but this time they don't have all that far to fall. The roar stops echoing in his brain after an eternity that, according to his internal clock, is really only about three seconds. Holy fuck, he's not sure how much more of this grimdark bullshit he can take. When he wipes at his face with the back of his sleeve, he can feel even more blood gushing out his nose, a proper nose bleed. He probably looks like hell warmed over between his creepy red eyes and the new face paint.

When he looks up, fifteen small children and a frightened teacher stare at him, wide eyed. One of the little girls he had to drag downstairs is still kneeling next to him, tugging on his arm. "You're Flashstep, aren't you?" she says in what she probably intends to be a whisper, but echoes in the stairwell. "Are you okay, Mr Flashstep?"

"...Been worse," he manages, grabbing the railing and dragging himself upright. Thirty seconds. Heir is probably already flying at that thing alone, and Dave still has to give his past-self the cue to go back in time. Fuck, no wonder he was so pissy with himself earlier - he can travel through time at will and yet somehow he's always racing against the clock. "Okay, everybody, out we go."

She nods at him, picking up two of the slow kids from earlier with a grim expression. "Good luck," she says.

"...Thanks."

He doesn't even know her name.
"Come on, kids. Stay with your buddies," she whisper-yells, waving all the little kids out the door before running after them. Dave flashsteps out the door and watches them all race in a straggling line away from the grimdark zone. Then he turns around and waves a hand at past-Dave, who is just now running past the entry way to this side road. That must be what got his attention before, because past-him does a double take and stops, frowning at him.

"What now?" Past-him demands, and jeez, why are all of his different time-selves so pissy all the time. Oh right, because they're always in the middle of a crisis. That's why he generally doesn't get into arguments with himself - he's clear-headed enough even in the middle of these stupid shenanigans to realize it's just a shitty situation for everyone involved.

Anyway. He flashes other-him ten fingers to indicate ten minutes, and tells himself, "Go. Like, right now, bro. Ten minutes, send them out the back door along East 88th and tell them to go around on Madison Avenue. Do not fuck around, do not pass Go, just - go."

Past him glances up at something - Heir in the sky, probably, and mutters under his breath before vanishing.

Yeah. Finally, all caught up on the time loop. Speaking of Heir, Dave should probably -

"O H A T IS?"

Oh shit. Dave gasps, his eyes watering with the sudden pain. He yanks out the sword he put away to carry the kids and stumbles a bit as he flashsteps forward.

Then he looks up into the sky and realizes grimdark Rose is staring right at him.

"No!" he chokes out, ripping his gaze away from the mocking white eyes above. He draws his second sword and raises it, getting up on one foot and one knee in a half-assed guarding stance. It's not real, it can't be real, he won't let it be real.

He dodges the first tentacle of grimdark power that stabs at him, while the grimdark above laughs and laughs. He cuts into the tentacle with a slice of his sword, a clumsy swing that barely connects. Dark purple blood pours out, and the Horrorterror wails.

The shriek of pain is distracting enough that Dave never sees the second thorn coming. It stabs out from the slice he made in the first tentacle rather than from the main body above, and stabs at him.
And he -

He can't move in time.

---

He has had no time to observe the grimdark's powers in action. He has seen it committing random acts of gratuitous building demolition and tearing up the streets, but he hasn't seen it fight anyone. So he's basically flying in with no background knowledge, no real plan on how to fight this thing, and no guarantee that the wind will even be able to protect him throughout the fight.

The wind is...balking. It's reluctant to listen to him. The only instinct it appears to want him to follow through is the instinct to get the hell out of New York. And the breezes that aren't urging him to fly in the other direction are the ones that are somehow...hostile. John can smell sea water and blood in the air, thick enough that he can almost taste the flavor on his tongue. The grimdark is more than something possessing Rose - it feels like it's slowly permeating the air, like evil humidity.

If they get out of this mess alive, he is using that metaphor in front of Dave. Evil humidity is something Dave would get a kick out of, right? Right.

Focus.

The screams have died down by the time Heir flies between the transformed Rose and the museum, and he doesn't want to think about what that means. "Rose! Rose, listen to me!" he yells.

To his relief, the cluster of grimdark tentacles opens up, and the thorns stabbing down into the museum pause in their violent outburst. Rose's angular features are greyed and framed by dead-looking hair, but it is still Rose's face that tilts to the side, studying him, maybe even recognizing him?

Lizard-quick, the face jerks to the side, an unnaturally twisted smile parting Rose's face. It's horrifying. ""OH! WHAT IS THIS?!" the Horrorterror says, the sound of its voice grating and cold in John's ears. Dave had almost collapsed the first time they heard Rose speak, and Heir has no idea why - it's unpleasant, but it's not debilitating. Whatever has gone wrong, he just hopes the other hero can still fight. Bro is nowhere to be seen, but even between Heir and Flashstep, he is pretty sure they can handle this grimdark thing long enough to get the cuffs on it, even if Rose...can't answer Heir right now.

Heir is cautiously optimistic, right up until the Horrorterror stabs Dave.

A tentacle lances out – but it doesn’t come at Heir, which is what he’d anticipated, is what he’d directed the winds to defend against. Instead, it stabs down and to the right, and Heir whirls to see that Dave has ended up on a sidestreet below, next to the caved-in museum. The other hero is crouched on his knees, clutching at his head, and barely manages to dodge the first strike by falling sideways and slicing with his sword, nicking the tentacle. “Dave!” Heir yells, but the other hero doesn’t respond even to that name. Heir can just barely make out the blood pouring out of the other hero’s nose.

And the sight of Dave bleeding from the nose makes Heir’s skin crawl because it means something is wrong. He can’t tell what it is, but it triggers every internal alarm he has. Why is the grimdark affecting Dave like this and not Heir?

He brings down a blade of his own, a slicing gust of wind that he directs with his good arm, and
hammers all of its force down like a hammer on the section of the thorny tentacle next to him, trying
to distract it from Dave. He wishes he had Casey – hell, any hammer would do, or even something
with a real blade.

He hacks the tentacle in two just as Dave lets out a yell of pain that ends in a choked gurgle, and the
grimdark laughs.

Then Heir starts to freak the fuck out.

The only explanation he can give for the rookie mistake he makes next is that he’s still not used to
working in tandem with another hero. He and Hemogoblin have only really worked together once,
and those hadn’t been the best circumstances either, but at least then it had been Heir who was hurt,
not his partner. Now, instead of keeping his eye on the grimdark tangle right in front of his face, he
looks down. “Shit! Dave!” He can’t tell how bad the damage is from up here; all he can see is the
bright, arterial splatter of blood that has painted its way up the wall, and that Dave is gone. The
tentacle Heir cut hits the ground with a thud, a secondary thorn having jammed itself into the wall
opposite where Dave had been. It too is speckled with blood.

Heir is not prepared for the gut-wrenching fear that hits him at that moment. Dave is
gone.

He is also really not prepared for the giant evil space tentacle that slams into him from behind while
he’s distracted.

Reeeally should have seen that one coming, he thinks gloomily as the wind wraps around him and
stops his uncontrolled arc. He flips himself around to face Rose again properly. The winds defending
his body caught that blow before it could actually hit him, but the wicked point on the thorn that
writhes in the air where he’d been hovering means the Horrorterror fully intended to catch him in the
center of his back. That would have been a cripple or a kill shot if just a little more force had
overpowered his shields.

And if it’s trying to kill Heir, where exactly did it hit Dave?

“Rose!” he tries again. “Rose, please! I know you’re in there!” All the while Heir begins to
desperately plumb the depths of his connection to the wind, drawing every scrap of moving air in the
area to his side. Between the hostile, grimdark humidity soaking into the air and his own thrumming
adrenaline, he strains to keep the restless winds from launching into a full-blown tornado and
spinning out of his control.

“YOU’VE TRULY THINK YOU’RE ON TOP OF US?” Rose’s twisted voice cuts through
the rising howl of the wind. The Horrorterror smiles, mouth gaping and cavernous with more of the
white, sickly fire that bleeds out from its eyes. “SHE CAN’T HEAR YOU.”

“I think she can!” he fires back, spreading his hands wide. “I think Rose is still fighting you in there.”

“ROSE IS DEAD. WE’RE LEECHING HER!” Still smiling beatifically, the Horrorterror raises
its hand and begins charging some new purple spell in the palm of its hand. The crackling energy
writhes with worms and thorns.

No. No. “You’re lying!”

Heir loses control of the wind in that brief moment of disbelief, and the breeze slams into the
grimdark tangle at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

It knocks the tangle back maybe a foot. The Horrorterror just laughs and stabs tentacles directly
down into the ground below, anchoring itself. This thing can take a beating. “I KNOW SHE’S	
It knows his name. His heroic alias, anyway. “And how would you know my name unless she’s still in there? I know Rose – she’s been psychoanalyzing the heck out of every hero in the US since I first met her! That’s not something a crazy space alien would know, that’s Rose!”

The Horrorterror has replaced Rose’s eyes with streaming white trails of energy. It still, amazingly, manages to give the impression that it is rolling its eyes. It flicks a hand at him, and three whips of grimdark power lash out at Heir at once. “I’voir A’re’n’t’noh th’a f’t’yo’u w’r’ro’n’t’g’.”

He barely hears it. With all the distortion in evil-Rose’s voice, it’s hard enough trying to understand when the Horrorterror is shouting, let alone the faint whisper between the words. Heir shoots up into the sky, dangerously close to the underside of the thunder clouds, and the tentacles arc up with him. God, is he lucky there’s no natural lightning in the storm. Spinning, he lets himself drop. The tentacles have replaced Rose’s eyes with streaming white trails of energy. It still, amazingly, manages to give the impression that it is rolling its eyes. It flicks a hand at him, and three whips of grimdark power lash out at Heir at once. “I’voir A’re’n’t’noh th’a f’t’yo’u w’r’ro’n’t’g’.”

The wind cuts through all three tentacles, spewing dull purple blood across the debris on the street below. John’s collarbone screams. He’s been ignoring it all this time, minimizing his movements on that side, and now he feels every damn hairline fracture that grenade explosion left in the bone. Gasping, he stuffs his hand into the jacket as a makeshift sling, trying to give it a quick break from the strain. He doesn’t know if he can pull off a maneuver like that again.

Only after he’s taken careful of does he fully realize what he just heard.

Not Heir. John. “Rose!” John calls back, hope squeezing his heart as he begins to duck and weave between the secondary thorns that erupt from the severed tentacles. He guides sharp slices of the wind with his free arm, but the throbbing pain distracts him more than he likes. “Rose, was that you?”

“SH’É IS jōh n’ p’lé a’su’ e’su, t’op mé G’O’NÉ.”

The Horrorterror grimaces. The tentacles chasing John falter as the grimdark tangle wrapped around Rose’s slim frame huddles in on itself.

That is definitely Rose. And however she’s managed to start talking, the Horrorterror doesn’t like it. Which means, obviously, that John wants her to keep doing it. He has no idea where Bro has fucked off to, and Dave is presumably out of commission. As far as he can see, he has to distract the Horrorterror and cuff Rose, all by himself.

Heir may not be able to do this. But John can, because Doctor Lalonde was right - John is the one Rose knew. Still knows, even now, after all these years. “I can hear you, Rose! I’m right here!”

“Y’O’U’ HEAR’ N’OT’ H’N’ G’.” Two purple spheres of lightning launch from within the tangle, and John drops beneath them.

Then he realizes they’re still following him, turning much more quickly than the tentacles could. The spell squirms like a bundle of iridescent worms as he narrowly ducks one that aims for his face. He heads up again, trying to get the advantage of height, but he can’t help that he’s limited by the murky cloud cover. He doesn’t even want to know how saturated with grimdark the air inside the thunder storm would be. One sphere vanishes into the clouds when he turns sharply, and he drops again.
He’s keeping an eye on the Horrorterror, but she doesn’t seem to be giving chase herself.

By this time he’s over buildings rather than the street, and he rounds the corner of the ninth floor of a building as tightly as he can, his arm skimming across the glass as he uses the wind to hug the curve. He knows he succeeds when the sphere can’t turn tightly enough, and slams into the corner instead in its haste to reach him by the quickest route possible. The sphere explodes against the side of the building. Cracks of dull purple eat their way up the windows before, with a twist, everything explodes outward. The wind whirs most of the resulting shrapnel away.

At least now he knows that works. John touches down on the ground, eyes on the sky, and feels the crackling hum of the second explosive spell as it rockets down through the clouds to divebomb him. At the last second, he jumps to the side, and the spell collides with the pavement, shattering the road.

It’s only then that he sees Bro Strider. In the seconds before the tentacles crash into the roof where he’d been standing, John catches up to him (and yeah, if John can and John is pretty sure even someone as skilled as the Puppeteer is probably gonna be slower while hauling around the dead weight of a teenager. When the Puppeteer leaps into the air, letting the tentacles slam into the roof where he’d been standing, John catches up to him (and yeah, if John can

Suck it, Dave’s Bro! Suck on the power of friendship!

Then he hears what the Horrorterror is muttering to itself, and he tenses up again. “\text{\textipa{\textbf{THANKFULLY}}; \textipa{\textbf{WE\’VE}}; \textipa{\textbf{I\’VE\’D}}; \textipa{\textbf{AWESOME}}; \textipa{\textbf{H\’S\’VE\’D}}; \textipa{\textbf{OPTIONS}}.”

Wait, what the heck is that supposed to mean?

The Horrorterror roars, with a piercing note within the rumble of thunder that shatters what few intact windows remain on the buildings around them. Three more tentacles lance out from the main tangle, aimed not at John, but at the rooftop of the nearby building –

It’s only then that he sees Bro Strider. In the seconds before the tentacles crash into the roof where the Puppeteer is standing, John realizes who is slung over Bro’s shoulder.

\textit{Dave is okay.} Well, he’s not moving, and there’s an awful lot of blood painting the back of the Puppeteer’s white polo, but Dave hasn’t just vanished into thin air – he’s still \textit{here}.

An iron band around John’s lungs falls away, and he feels like he can breathe again.

Of course, now the Horrorterror, for whatever reason, has decided to fixate on the other two heroes, and John is pretty sure even someone as skilled as the Puppeteer is probably gonna be slower while hauling around the dead weight of a teenager. When the Puppeteer leaps into the air, letting the tentacles slam into the roof where he’d been standing, John catches up to him (and yeah, if John can
see Bro moving, he has definitely slowed down) and waves his arms frantically. “I can carry him,” he yells over the continued, rolling roar of the sea that echoes out of Rose’s mouth.

All he gets is a stolid nod, and then suddenly Bro throws Dave’s (please be unconscious) body right at him and draws a katana in his freed hand. John dives forward, yanking his injured arm free of the suit jacket, and catches Dave under the armpits, the other hero’s weight barely jolting him. In fact, even if Bro doesn’t have John’s weird extra strength, should carrying Dave have slowed him down that much? Gritting his teeth, John decides to set Dave down somewhere in the park, away from all the falling buildings and debris the Horrorterror keeps blowing everywhere.

“Ù̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̲̩̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀̀}
Someone – the Puppeteer, obviously – has wadded up bright blue fabric the color of Lil Cal’s shirt and tied it down with a larger strip of cloth to stem the blood that still sluggishly pours out from the tear at the side of Dave’s throat. The thorn must have just barely clipped Dave on the neck and shoulder rather than punching through either, but it still managed to scrape right up against his carotid, if the amount of blood is anything to go by. John is willing to bet that if that metal collar hadn’t been there, a lot more damage could have been done.

More worrying is the blood still trickling out of Dave’s nose, and the fact that Dave is still unconscious. Objectively, John knows that a little nosebleed pales in comparison to the gaping wound on the side of Dave’s neck. But it – it’s just too familiar, and that familiarity is horrifying because John has never seen Dave’s nose bleed before.

“FOUND YO U!”

Shit. John turns to see grimdark Rose hovering outside the office, grinning madly. “FOUND YO U’ it sings, almost bursting John’s eardrums.

“No!” he replies, grabbing Dave under the arms again. This time, it’s almost like he walks right into the anger, welcoming the pain as he teleports three buildings down, onto the same roof he’d seen Bro last. The Horrorterror shrieks in rage behind them, and Dave’s whole body jerks, more blood trickling out of his nose.

Yeah, Dave can’t afford to lose much more blood like this. John lays Dave down and turns to face the grimdark tangle as it claws its way up into the sky and screeches at him, flinging itself in their direction. “Rose! Try to keep her still, just for a few seconds!” he calls over the rising wind.

He tries not to let it discourage him that he hasn’t heard Rose in…quite a while. She can do it! This is Rose we’re talking about! No creepy void-tentacle-many-angled bag of dicks is going to beat her! John just has to get close enough to the center of the tangle before he can start to help Rose fight back in earnest. Sucking in a breath of sea-salt air, he launches himself at the tangle and begins to beat it back away from Dave with swathes of air. "Hey! Pay attention to me! I’m the one you’re fighting, here!” he shouts when the grimdark tangle attempts to break away and swarm underneath him in a mass of tentacles.

Apparently, while he’s not making much of a dent in the ever expanding array of tentacles that encase Rose’s possessed body, he does eventually succeed in pissing off an eldritch abomination enough that it screams in outrage as he forces down the street again, and a flurry of thorny tentacles shoot John all at once.

Uh. He probably could have thought this plan through a little better. Welp, he starts weaving through the fray, slicing when he can get his good arm free to manipulate the air.

He misses the exact moment the Horrorterror decides to change its tactics, which was…probably the point. It was trying to distract him, and it succeeded. The wild barrage of thorny vines stops, and John is left twisting in the air. He keeps his head low as he rolls upright, expecting an attack to surprise him from behind, but he’s perplexed to see he is now alone in the air.

He turns to see the Horrorterror peeling off away from him, yanking itself between buildings and using its tentacles to throw itself bodily at the office where John left Dave. “No!” John yells, flinging blades of wind ahead of him in an attempt to cut the grimdark and catch its attention again.

Mid-leap, the Horrorterror flinches back, shrieking, before it’s even a few hundred feet from Dave. Adjusting for the abrupt halt, John flips backwards and slams both fists down on the tentacles over
Rose’s head. It screeches and crawls backwards, wavering on its tentacles, and John sees that someone has cut a wide, bloody purple gouge through nearly all of the tentacles that had been reaching for Dave.

Bro Strider leans at a cocky angle against the edge of the hole in the office wall, a shirtless Lil Cal sitting on his shoulder. He has put the katana away already, and is inspecting his nails without a care in the world. “Bitch, please,” he drawls absently. “You should just listen to the kid and stand still. Go after my lil bro and I’ll fry you like fucking calamari.”

“MEWLIN’GLANDET” the Horrorterror shrieks.

“That’s hemoracist!” John yells back. He thinks maybe the relief is making him a little hysterical, if that’s the best comeback he can think of. “So! Rude!” He raises his hands up and slams down another hammer of air down on top of the Horrorterror’s head. It’s a testament to how much the grimdark has been distracted that rather than anchoring itself and withstanding the blow, it topples over sideways, crashing into the building opposite.

John presses his advantage and flies after it, winding up to throw a punch as he flies at the Horrorterror’s face.

Er. On second thought. Maybe he doesn’t want to punch Rose in the face. It's still her face, after all. Instead, he skids to a halt before the hollow in the thorns where Rose’s possessed body sits, clutching at its head with grimdark claws. He grabs her by the shoulders instead. "Give Rose back, you alien racists!" he yells at her face, shaking her hard.

Thorns surge inward to meet him, but the gamble pays off. For a brief moment, the eyes staring back at him don’t writhe with worms and tangles behind the white fire, it’s just a familiar, probing gaze –

And all the tentacles arcing in to stab him freeze in place. Crowing in triumph, John slaps a cuff down on Rose’s outstretched wrist and feels it click shut and lock into place.

Unfortunately, he only manages the one restraint before it’s the Horrorterror’s turn to lose its shit. “NO!” it shrieks, and a pair of tentacles wrap around John, crushing in tight until he can’t even slip a breeze between them and his skin to ease the pressure. There’s nothing left of Rose in those eyes, just an absolute, multifarious rage.

Oh, fuck. He’s fucked.

“NO!” someone else screams. John’s ears have grown so used to the ringing shrieks of the grimdark that Rose’s high, thin voice, gone hoarse with pain, sounds distant and far off.

But it’s Rose who looks back at him.

“Rose,” John says, grinning. He can’t help it.

Instead of tearing him apart, the grimdark tosses him aside. Rose’s hoarse shout can barely travel through the thick air. So yeah, he’s still getting thrown around, but who cares! Rose did it this time! That’s awesome! John catches himself with ease, the wind stirring with new energy as his joy leaks through.

“WE’LL KILL ALL O’Y’OU”!!!” Rose bellows, and oops, no, that’s not Rose anymore. Dammit! The Horrorterror stumbles along like a drunkard, slamming into a building facefirst at one point (which is hilarious and really shouldn’t be, but whatever), but still making its way towards Dave again. Darn!
"Give 'em hell, Rose!" John yells, pelting after her. He catches up, and he knows the grimdark must be so very distracted from the inner turmoil Rose is stirring up because it doesn't even glance his direction. It's too desperate to reach Dave and ditch Rose's internal rebellion to consider him a threat. "You are a strong independent woman who does not pander to insane murder-alien shenanigans!"

"STOP ME," Rose gasps again, wrenching her face sideways to look at him, pain wrinkling her forehead. "DON'T LET ME REACH DAVE."

"You got it!" John slides in close and buffets the Horrorterror in the side, knocking support tentacles out from under it and driving it steadily to the side, back toward Central Park.

"A W_A Y!" He thinks it's still Rose talking, though the distortion has returned. He doesn't heed the warning in time, and a tentacle snags the wrist of his bad arm, bringing him to a painful halt. John brings his other hand around to stab at the offending vine.

The tentacle moves first, yanking his arm back and up.

There is a sharp pop as his arm dislocates.

"Fuuuuuuaaaaghhhh!" John swallows down the rest of the scream, hissing through his nose. All of the pain in his collarbone and shoulder has begun to meld together into a white-hot agony centered on his upper left side. He can't panic, he can't panic, he chants to himself, focusing on a short blade of air that slices through the tentacle before he rips the section curled around his wrist off. His left arm hangs at a horrific angle, twisted completely out of joint. It's not as bad as it feels; he just needs maybe ten spare seconds and he can pop the shoulder right back into place. This isn't a crisis. Not yet.

He hears the last few reassurances in his dad's voice. It helps a little.

"jOHN."

He meets Rose's eyes, and tries to grin for her. The grimdark has frozen up once more. "You've got this, Rose!" he says, probing at his shoulder in the brief interlude Rose seems to have won.

"I'm sorry John," Rose says, panting. "I require your assistance. I can't move, you see. But you - you would be able to. And once you get me loose - I believe I can take it from there."

"And I can't explain the process right now." Rose holds out a shaking hand, the one that's not cuffed. He hadn't seen in the heat of battle, but the gloves of her transformed costume have been singed through to reveal her grey, burned palms. That Horrorterror threw out some serious fire power. "This restraint helps. Hurry up and get the other one finished, and then get inside my mind."

"What?! How? Why?" John protests. He has to let go of his shoulder and hover closer to Rose; the dislocated shoulder can wait. He digs into his inside pocket with the good arm and slots the second restraint onto Rose's arm.

"Now then. I intend to settle this once and for all. Just get me out of this damned corner, John." Rose raises a hand that shakes a little, her color almost peachy. John goes cross eyed looking at it, opening his mouth to explain that no, their plan actually involves restraining the Horrorterror and then getting the hell out of Dodge.

She taps him on the forehead before he gets the words out. To his relief, the sparks that result are not
sickly purple but a feeble, greyish gold. Not exactly good, but not likely to kill him either.

Or so he thinks, before his eyes roll back in his skull and both he and Rose begin to topple to the ground, two hundred feet below.

Like mother, like daughter, John thinks to himself, blacking out. Neither of them can be assed to explain things properly the first time around. Jeez.

- 

John thinks, dimly, that he can hear the ocean. The scent of blood and salt permeates the - is that air? It feels more like sludge, as though the air has finally surpassed Houston and achieved 100% humidity, thus winning all of Dave's shitty awards. Everything is pitch dark, and there is a distinct lack of pain in his shoulder and collarbone.

This indicates that Shenanigans with a capital S are occurring. Blinking and squinting in the darkness, he attempts to regain his bearings. This proves difficult; the darkness does not abate no matter which way he turns, and all he can really distinguish with his hearing is that somewhere, far below him, an ocean rumbles with the tide. And, if he tilts his ear down and listens carefully, underneath it all he can make out a low murmur, an arrhythmic chant, one that repeats, screeches, and then repeats again, as though being played on a broken record player.

With that super creepy soundtrack muttering in his ear, John decides to descend. Rose had said something about him getting inside her mind to help her out with - something? She hadn't exactly been very clear.

Well, the solution is obviously to find her.

This is easier said than done, and for a long minute John flounders in the dark, hearing the ocean grow steadily louder beneath him as he casts about for a light. When he gets close enough to feel the spray kicked up by the roiling waves, a cold drop of water hits his face. It burns, and he wipes at the spot frantically with the back of his sleeve. The spot continues to burn, and he has to rip off the end of his sleeve and toss it away when that begins to burn as well. He can't see the sleeve as it drops into the ocean, but he can imagine what would happen when it hit the surface of the waves.

The entire ocean is full of burning acid.

And this is what has invaded Rose's mind?

He is struck momentarily by the horrific certainty that this dark expanse of cold water goes on forever, endless and churning and eternal. John shakes himself and flies up a bit to get out of range of the acidic spray. He doesn't question how he can fly in Rose's mind; the explanation will probably involve either psychology or magic, and he'd rather Rose explain it herself than he try his hand at her arts.

He floats forward for a while. He doesn't dare turn away from that single direction - he's probably already hopelessly lost, and he'd rather not end up going in circles on top of that. His best hope for getting out of here is to find Rose and help with her plan for - for whatever the heck the new plan is.

He wanders long enough to start worrying about his and Rose's body. They had kind of been in the middle of falling from a pretty good distance when he passed out. All he can really do at this point is hope that the Puppeteer left Dave's side long enough to maybe catch them both. ...Yeah, Bro is kind
of a dick, but John doesn't think he'd let them fall to their doom. Hopefully.

(john, john, over here, john.)

He's so caught up in these musings, he nearly misses Rose's thready whisper. The harsh murmur of (disor'd' er'di s' al ign'd' ist' or' te) sounds...really, creepily similar to Rose's distorted voice earlier, so it almost blends into and obscures her voice.

(john, i swear, if you absent-mindedly wander right past my location in the middle of this unmitigated disaster, i will unleash such fresh vengeance upon you, there will not be enough of you left for a funeral.)

Oh. He heard that one. "Rose? Where are you? I can't see a thing!" he whisper-shouts, still not entirely sure just where the Horrorterror might be hanging out. The cuffs are supposed to suppress it enough for Rose to keep control, but the grimdark is still here.

There is a long pause, and he stops dead, afraid he actually did manage to float right by Rose and miss her completely. (yes, i suppose it would be rather impenetrably dark to one unused to dealing with the darkness of the Furthest Ring) Rose whispers at last. (i am directly to your right. you will know me when you see me.)

John turns slowly, staring helplessly out into the endless field of black. It all looks exactly the same. "Wher..." A flash of light catches his attention. Well, more like it blinds him and he has to bite back a yelp of pain. After so long in the dark, the tiny, flickering beacon that appears on the indistinct horizon feels like staring into the sun.

(oops. please make haste, john.)

"Not exactly the most reassuring thing to say, Rose," John hisses, flying over as quickly as he can in the thick air. "What exactly is the game plan here? Because I didn't sign up for an adventure to the center of your mind this morning, and I'm flying blind here."

The light eventually resolves itself, directly in front of him, yes, but also below him, closer to where he thinks the surface of the ocean lies. He begins to descend, cautious. The last thing he wants is to get caught in a wave of grimdark acid.

(if you could help me out of here, i would be greatly obliged.) The flickering, pale, faded outline of Rose Lalonde rests her head on a tiny lantern, her pale purple eyes gleaming in the reflected light. The rest of her trails off into the dark ocean. The faint light of the lantern doesn't even penetrate the grimdark submerging the her body.

John hesitates, then shakes himself vigorously. This is Rose! He puts out both hands and a pair of transparent hands clasp his back. It burns for a moment with the acid Rose has been lying in, but he grits his teeth and tightens his grip on her. "Don't worry, Rose. I won't let you go. What do you need me to do?"

Rose smiles. Maybe. It's hard to tell when most of her face is kind of...smudged and see through. (i would greatly appreciate a lift. once i am free of this grimdark pit, i have a bone to pick with the Honorable Horrorterror who dares presume to take over my mind.)

"It's as easy as that?" John asks.

Rose raises a single elegant eyebrow. Seriously, all of his friends seem to have this mysterious eyebrow thing down. When John tries it, both his eyebrows go up at once. Karkat, Dave, and Rose can all manage it. Maybe it's like how all of them ramble when they talk - John must really have a
type when it comes to his friends!

Focusss!

(easy for you, john. The lion's share of the hard work rests with me, this time around. this is my mess. and I assure you, i intend to clean it up.)

John nods, and yanks Rose upward out of the acid sea. There's a surprisingly amount of resistance, and he looks down to see tendrils of grimdark clinging to her ankles. His whole body jerks downward as the ocean tries to swallow her up again. "Oh no, you don't!" John snaps. He feels Rose's nails dig into his wrists as he drags them both up. With a sound like suction cups popping loose, the miniature tentacles release Rose's lower half. John isn't expecting it, and they both fly up with the recoil, which he is totally okay with. The further they get Rose from that gross stuff, the better.

"You okay, Rose?" he asks, once they're hovering a safe distance above the ocean.

She squeezes his hand, smiling. He realizes, suddenly, that he can suddenly see a lot better. The darkness still continues on in every direction, but -

"Are you glowing?"

(it has been far too long since someone shed some light on this situation. i fully intend to do so posthaste.) It is very reassuring that Rose's mental whisper can still sound as dry and snarky as her usual tone, even after all this time. Meanwhile, the pale yellow light that fills in her outline slowly begins to ripen to a warm, goldenrod hue, and the light illuminates more and more of the darkness. (it will notice me and arrive soon, actually. right about -)

- G OUT OF MIND!

(- now) Rose finishes.

And then the Horrorterror looms out of the dark.

It is an incomprehensible being. His mind tries to comprehend it anyway, and he suspects those two irreconcilable concepts could drive people mad when they look upon the many-angled ones. Most of the impressions he gets, before he has to tear his eyes away, his brain burning as though splattered with more acid, is that of a tangled bundle of intertwined tentacles, with multiple gaping, beak-like mouths that drool inky black ooze and dull purple blood. It is larger than the space they are in, larger than the endless ocean, and rises up before them until all John can see is the writhing mass of thorns that make up the bulk of the Horrorterror.

Rose is unaffected by the sheer scale of the monster. She drops John's hand and floats forward under her own power. All the while, she shines with brighter and brighter light.

(how dare you. HOW DARE YOU) she says, her voice quiet and cold as it echoes throughout the darkness. The Horrorterror stutters to a halt, its massive tentacles actually drawing back away from the aura of light Rose is putting out.

John doesn't blame the Horrorterror one bit. Once Rose is truly riled up, she's a force to be reckoned with.

It's been three years since he last spoke with Rose Lalonde, and before today he never knew she was a hero, never knew she was the Seer of Light, with all the powers he's read about in the newspaper reports. And yet, he still instinctively knows exactly what is about to happen. He grins so hard, his
lips feel like they're going to crack.

Because today, the Horrorterrors made the worst mistake possible.

They pissed off Rose Lalonde.

And now -

(this is MY MIND. MINE.) Rose spreads her palms outward, floating upward as two white-hot stars light up in each hand. She is no longer a fragile, immaterial outline, worn thin by the acidic grimdark tide. She is supersaturated, burning so bright John can see every thorn lining the Horrorterror's chaotic tentacles, the diminishing flow of the ocean tide below, and the stars that gleam in the night sky overhead. (GET YOU HENCE. YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO DWELL HERE NO MORE.)

The Horrorterror writhes, shrinking back from the light. It almost looks like it is draining away in an attempt to escape, down into the dwindling ocean below.

No wonder it had to keep Rose submerged in that ocean. Now that she's free, it doesn't stand a chance.

Rose sniffs, and combines the two lights in her hands into one that she cradles before her chest, a miniature sun. (ALLOW ME TO PUT THIS AS BLUNTLY AND CLICHÉLY AS I CAN. AFTER WHAT YOU HAVE PUT MY CITY THROUGH TODAY, I HAVE EARNED THIS LINE.)

She pauses for dramatic effect. John approves. Seriously, this is some excellent heroic monologue execution. Comic book writers could learn a lesson or three from Rose Lalonde.

(LET THERE BE LIGHT)

John closes his eyes just in time. The radiating light still burns through his eyelids, lighting everything up until there is nowhere left to hide. When he blinks his eyes open at last, seeing afterimages everywhere he looks, the Horrorterror is gone. Rose continues to burn like a torch, surveying the evaporating ocean beneath them. John hovers up alongside her and touches her shoulder gently. She meets his eyes, and smiles. "Your thoughts, John Egbert?" she asks, and her voice is no longer a half-heard whisper in the dark.

"That was basically the most awesome thing I've seen all year," John tells her, meaning every word. "Seriously, I'm pretty sure nothing is going to top that."

Rose shakes her head, her smile rueful and quiet before it falters entirely. "People have died, John. My city is in ruins at my hands, by the will of an abomination I allowed into my mind." She closes her eyes, the light dimming slightly. "I am not sure you're quite justified in praising me for anything I have done on this day."

"I don't believe that," John says. He folds his arms over his chest, then thinks better of it and just hugs Rose. She's skin and bones and golden light, and her forearms are too sharp when she hugs him back. Yeah, he doesn't care what Doctor Lalonde's excuses are, she is getting a very stern lecture when they get Rose to safety. "Yeah, people are dead, and let's face it, the clean up bill for New York is gonna be awful. But come on, And you're not allowed to think for a second this is your fault. I'm pretty sure at some point in every hero's life they have to deal with a super-powered dark side. It's like, a universal law or something."

Rose snorts into choking, inelegant laughter, shaking so hard as she tries to repress the laugh that
John nearly takes a forehead to his chin. "I will do my best to take your view on the subject into account, then, John," she says bemusedly, releasing him. "You are, after all, the resident expert on heroism. Now then. Let's get you back into your own skull, shall we?"

"That would be awesome," John says. "I - uh, not that your brain isn't cool when you're not all possessed by evil and all that, but the last time I checked, we were kind of falling to our deaths. So. We should probably wake up soon. And not die."

"Oh, of course," Rose agrees, that snarky smirk back in its rightful place as she raises a hand to tap on John's forehead. "Thank you, my old friend."

He might have imagined that last part. It's the faintest whisper, and then he's occupied with blacking out -

- 

John wakes up flat on his back.

Bro Strider is hunkered to one side, leaning over John, and he raises an eyebrow when John mumbles something incoherent. "Welcome back to the land of the living, kid," is all the Puppeteer says. "Should I be concerned? Any new fresh hell on the way?"

"...Magic," John manages by way of explanation, sitting upright and regretting it immediately. Out here, his shoulder is still dislocated and ow ow ow -

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"...Magic," John manages by way of explanation, sitting upright and regretting it immediately. Out here, his shoulder is still dislocated and ow ow ow -

Bro's eyebrow goes a little higher; then he shrugs and leans over the limp form of Rose Lalonde lying to John's right. "Is Dave alright?" John asks, twisting around and trying to figure out where they are. It looks like they're on a roof - seriously, what is it with Striders and roofs? - and they're all huddled by an air conditioning unit. Dave is propped up against the unit itself, his head still hanging forward and unmoving.


"You're a fuckin' liar, Bro," Dave says, his words slurred. He has his shades on again as he raises his chin by way of greeting, revealing the collar once again on his throat. It is battered and twisted, and John could swear he sees what looks like exposed wiring along the right side, where someone has reconnected the ends of the wires in a shitty patch job. He wonders what exactly the collar does that someone - presumably Bro - bothered to fix it in the middle of a battlezone. "John. Fuck. Man. Next time you say we go on a road trip to fight your evil temporarily possessed best friend - no. Just. No. Not even once. I am so in charge of our honeymoon, I swear to god, EB, fight me, you are forbidden from ever choosing a destination ever again."

There's something really weird about Dave's voice. John has noticed sometimes he can hear a faint buzz under all Dave's long, rambling tangents, but he's only really been listening to the guy speak out loud for a prolonged period of time for the past night and day. Now, at the end of sentences, his voice will trail off and drop to a whisper, or his voice will crack and shoot up a register.

Then John is ready to slap himself on the forehead. Dave still has a massive makeshift bandage sopping up blood on the side of his throat - of course he's going to have trouble speaking after taking a tentacle to the carotid and having his own collar nearly crush his trachea. Urgh. John is an asshole.

"I surrender all future vacation planning to you, Dave," John says, rolling his eyes as he flops back on the roof. "Are you okay? What happened to you?"

Dave is silent for a long moment. "Hell if I know," he says at last, his voice outright crackling with
the strain. "One minute I'm rescuing the shrimps from the museum, the next tenta-Rose is all over me. What can I say. Even tentacle aliens can't get enough of my sick fires. They are just lining up to bask in the presence of my righteous bod."

"Oh, good! You got them out!" John sighs with relief. In the insanity of trying survive the Horrorterror, he hadn't had any opportunity to even see if the children he heard inside the Guggenheim had made it out safely. "Um. Bro? I'd ask Dave, but - can you get my shoulder? I don't want to fuck it up from this angle -"

Pain shoots through his shoulder as the joint and bone are shoved back into place and John kicks with one foot as he yelps, caught completely unawares. "Oh my god, couldn't you wait until, like, the count of three or something first! Agh!" he growls at Bro, who simply continues to hold John's shoulder in place until, with a pop, the pain subsides, leaving only the aching soreness of strained muscles and his extremely aggravated collar bone. John wouldn't be surprised if the break has worsened significantly after that dislocation, which means even more time in the sling than he'd anticipated. Gross.

The Puppeteer just shrugs, and slouches over to Rose again. "Deal with it, kid. I don't molly-coddle."

Dave and John look at each other and say "Such a dick," at the same time.

"Adorable," Bro says, smirking.

Yeah, John is just going to quit while he's ahead before he starting rage-teleporting all over the place. Clearly this is a battle that cannot be won.

Rose bolts upright a second later. "I require a waste receptacle," she says, gasping. The grey grimdark taint has vanished from her skin, though her clothes are still dyed black, and her hair sticks to her forehead in sweaty, strawberry blond streaks. If she weren't pale and going kind of greenish at the edges, she'd look almost normal.

Bro produces a trash can. John seriously needs to learn how the elder Strider can move so fast. "Your receptacle, Little Lalonde," he says, straight-faced as he holds it out for her.

"Oh, thank you. A moment, please." Rose swallows rapidly, leaning over the trash can. "Oh, this is going to be unpleas -" 

She begins to retch and vomit into the trashcan. The vomit is black and smells like blood, which is just, wow, the most disturbing thing John can imagine coming out of someone's stomach.

"Just let it all out," Bro says sagely, patting Rose awkwardly on the back. "Get that shit outta your system, kiddo." After a choking wave of black ooze, he actually starts gingerly grabbing strands of Rose's hair and pulling them out of her face, using his fingers like tweezers with an expression of utmost intensity.

"Oh my god, Bro being motherly. I've seen it all. That's it. I'm going blind. There is literally nothing else worth seeing in the world," Dave babbles. "Pinch me or something, John."

Yeah, this whole situation is just really fucking weird. John scoots over next to Rose too, and takes over from Bro. He's seriously concerned judging from the expression behind the Puppeteer's shades that the older man is about to give himself an aneurysm. He almost looks...concerned.

"We do not speak of this," Bro says, with the voice of a man prepared to enforce his words with a really sharp, pointy object.
John shakes his head wildly. "Nope," he agrees.

"I wish I had my camera. That was fucking priceless," Dave continues. "I think I actually feel a tear welling up. Finally, I have witnessed the mythological Bro Strider in parent-mode. Glorious."

"Kid, the only reason I'm not kicking your ass is because you're delirious from blood loss," Bro says wearily, pinching at the bridge of his nose. "Seriously. When we get home. Such an ass-kicking."

John just shakes his head again, and focuses on Rose. "How much of that gunk is in your system?" he wonders, bracing Rose's shoulders with an arm as a final retch wracks her too-thin frame. When is he going to stop talking?

The Horrorterror breaks down into mind-shattering giggles, and John winsces, covering his ears. It's Bro who finally says it. "Little Lalonde. Is your goddamn evil upchuck talking, or has Dave's unbelievable capacity for dumbassery finally driven me into insanity?"

Everyone freezes.

It's Bro who finally says it. "Little Lalonde. Is your goddamn evil upchuck talking, or has Dave's unbelievable capacity for dumbassery finally driven me into insanity?"

"I heard it too," John says quietly. He offers Rose an arm and she takes it, and they both crawl backward, getting some distance between them and the trash can.

"Well. No, it's not vomit, Puppeteer," Rose says, still eyeing the can with a practiced, analytical gaze. "Technically, it is a portion of the Horrorterror tangle that controlled large sections of my nervous system, ejected from my body by a cleansing spell. And I'm afraid that one portion is just as much a part of the hivemind as a full tangle."

"Oh, fan-fucking-tastic," Bro says, as Lil Cal crawls its way up his arm and onto his shoulder in jointed movements.

The grimdark begins to creep up the edges of the trashcan, and John tenses up, gathering in a breeze in case the tendril proves capable of more than just talking. "DO'N'T Y' O'U' K'NO'W? HE is c' o' ming...o r' m a 'y be'...HE is 'al' 'SUFE'R."

The Horrorterror breaks down into mind-shattering giggles, and John winces, covering his ears. It just keeps laughing and laughing, until finally -

"That is quite enough of that," Rose interjects. She snaps a finger and a spark of light appears above her hand. She shoves it into the trash can and grimaces as she holds it there in the middle of the writhing black tendril. A whine grows in pitch until, with an audible VWOMPH the trash can disintegrates in a burst of light. There is no trace of the grimdark tendril left as Rose delicately wipes
her hand on the gravel of the roof. "It feels good to be able to do that again," she says, sighing contentedly.

"Awesome." Bro whips a cell phone out of his pocket and hits speed dial, hitching a hip on the edge of the air conditioner by Dave's head. The puppet has already disappeared. "Siddown, kids, I'm calling the getaway driver. You three all look like shit, and I sure as hell ain't carrying you."

John doesn't have the strength to argue. Heck, he doesn't even know what he'd be arguing about at this point. He's really tired, that must be why he's stopped making sense. He leans back against the AC unit with Dave. Rose joins them a second later, staring off into the distance with an expression of intense thought on her face. Knowing Rose, John thinks blearily, she'll have figured out a working hypothesis for what the fragment of Horrorterror meant by all that bizarre chatter at the end, that stuff about a 'he' and 'suffering.' Rose is good at making sense of things.

Yeah. Important things.

He feels, vaguely, a heavy weight land on each shoulder as Dave and Rose slump against him. But by then, he's already halfway asleep himself, and he can't do more than let his head fall back to rest against the air conditioner.

It really has been a long day. They still have to get Rose to Doctor Lalonde, and at some point, John has to figure out exactly when he's going to be able to fly home to Seattle. He's been gone for almost a full twenty four hours at this point, and if nothing else Karkat is probably going to notice he's gone, soon.

He'll worry about all that later, though.

For now, he thinks he's earned some rest.

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"We left the plane in England!" Jade sobs, hugging WV, nearly choking him out in her distraction. "Oh noooo!"

They have relocated to sit inside the Sydney Opera House, which is currently unoccupied aside from a janitor who walks by the entrance to the main concert hall every few minutes to check on the distraught hero and make sure the hall is still in one piece. He knows better than to confront crying girls who look like they could floor him with their pinky finger. Jade and Bec between them have teleported all of the contents of the lab onto the stage, and Bec lies beside an uprooted spectrometer, silent and unconcerned in sleep mode, while Jade lounges in the audience seats and pouts over the loss of her nuclear biplane.

To be fair, it was a really awesome plane.

Having indulged herself for a good five minutes, Jade sits upright, a half strangled WV still tucked in a chokehold. "Well, we'll just have to keep going without it," she sniffs, patting the tiny carapacian on the head.

Unfortunately, he has had quite of this manhandling, apparently. When she goes to give him a noogie, he flails at her with both hands, irate exclamations escaping his throat. He manages to push off and land on his butt on the floor, and then he scurries off, his loud bursts of noise and the occasional crackle of green space-altering radiation echoing in the excellent acoustics.

"Oh no! Wait, Mr. V, don't run away!" Jade calls, zapping after him. She lands in front of him in at the top of the stairs running up to the back of the room, and clasps her hands together before
kneeling. "I promise I'll stop! I didn't mean to piss you off!"

He squeaks irately, then smacks his own head with his fists in frustration, probably at his inability to speak. Jade can't tell if it was her kind-of unorthodox method of stabilizing him in time and space or if he had some kind of preexisting damage to his vocal cords that has caused this muteness, but it's clear the Variable hates it.

"I mean it," she adds, pleading. "Please don't run away yet - I still haven't figured out your green thingy!"

WV hunches in on himself, spreading his claws before his face as though inspecting each finger carefully. From this close up, Jade can see the edges of wide scars that wrap along his claws. There's a matching triangle of scar tissue that cuts along the side of his smooth face, just barely missing his right eye, and she can see more markings on his legs. They look like old burns, but the shiny scars blend in so well with his already gleaming black carapace that it's hard to see them from a distance. She wonders what could cause such widespread scarring.

Shaking his head vigorously, WV lowers his hands and clacks them together, then flings himself at her. His head rams into her chest as he hugs her.

I guess that means I'm forgiven! Jade thinks cheerfully, hugging him right back and just barely refraining from giving him another noogie. It would be mean to keep doing it when it clearly bothers him so much, and she can't abide the thought of being mean to the little guy; he's just so adorable! She does wonder about his hands, though. Sometimes, usually after he goes all green plasma like Bec, he looks at his claws as though he'd like to cut them off, an old and weary fear creasing his face.

There's something up there, something weird, but WV can't talk, and if he's using a carapacian sign language it's not working because Jade doesn't understand it. It's all so frustrating. Ever since that impossible teleport from Britain to Australia, her head has been pounding in her skull.

Jade snaps her fingers. "Ohhhh! I know what we need, WV!"

He tilts his head at her quizzically.

"Food! It's lunch time! That's why we're both so grumpy and blah!" She picks him up as she stands, and he crawls onto her back obligingly, sitting on her shoulders like they're playing chicken. His carapace is too light and hollow for Jade to even feel like there's any weight there, and for a scary moment she has to look up and see WV's white eyes blinking down at her before she can believe he hasn't just disappeared again, vanished back into quantum superposition. Wouldn't that suck!

For a moment, she looks up at the lab equipment spread out on the stage of the opera house, and then she shrugs. "Into the sylladex with you all!" She opens up the pocket dimension and teleports onto the stage, WV squeaking and grabbing at her hair as she does, and then she begins to shovel delicate lab equipment into the sylladex. Nothing has ever come out of the sylladex pocket damaged or anything, so hopefully the breakable stuff won't be hurt either! Jade doesn't even understand half of what her space powers can do, and she's the one using them!

WV hops down off her shoulders and begins digging through the last of the equipment while she's shoving the larger pieces into the sylladex, nearly falling on his face as he digs through the pile of random lab stuff and emerges with a tiny squeak of triumph. In his hands he clutches a long tan metric ruler, and he gives it a few experimental swings and stabs before he trots over to her side. Apparently if Jade is a riflekind expert, WV likes rulers! How cute!
Once all her lab crap is stowed away, she stretches her arms and plants her hands on her hips. "Well, I don't know anything about Sydney. I guess we can just wander around until we find some place with lunch stuff. We're out of here, Bec!"

The wolf looks up from where it has sprawled out on its belly, and sniffs at her.

"That means he's ready to go!" she tells WV, chipper. She spies the janitor passing by the open door at the back of the theater and waves. "Goodbye, nice janitor man! We're going now!"

"Finally!" The man bursts into wrenching sobs. Jade has no idea what that could all be about.

They beam out in a wave of Bec's green fire. Left to his own devices, the janitor staggers over to the stage and weeps over the huge indents left in the wood by the hard impact of several thousand pounds of lab equipment. He has absolutely no way of explaining the damage to his supervisors, and expects to be fired over this incident within hours.

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They end up at a small café on Knox Street, a really tiny place with short tables and stools instead of chairs that are pretty much the perfect size for WV's legs! Jade is the perfect host. It is her. The food selection is kind of tiny too, but she's sure it will still taste delicious. They sit outside in the afternoon sun, and it's so warm it's almost like home.

Jade orders avocado on toast, curious, and then a giant-ass chocolate milkshake because heck yeah, milkshakes. Best thing invented by mankind. She doesn't know how she survived the first seventeen years of her life without trying one. WV frets over the menu as the waiter stares, fascinated, at the carapacian, and then finally WV starts stabbing at what he wants while Jade repeats the order aloud. She's really confused when WV starts flipping the fuck out and demanding five cans of TaB soda by holding up five claws emphatically, but hey, Jade has money to burn. If TaB is WV's thing and he hasn't been able to drink it in who knows how long, who is she to deny the poor deprived little guy.

The first sip of that milkshake is like having liquid, chocolatey happiness dancing on her tongue. Jade hums happily and proceeds to drain the glass. The resulting brain freeze is sooo worth it.

Her reaction, however, is nothing compared to WV's literal tears of joy when the waiter sets a tray of five soda cans before him. He doesn't even wait to pull open the tab; he just chomps down with glinting black teeth and swallows the chunk of aluminum whole before chugging the entire can's worth of soda in seconds. He nearly falls off his stool with excitement.

Whooo, boy. This is going to be one hell of a sugar rush when he's through gorging himself. Jade sits back and watches, fascinated, as WV loses his adorable shit over a pretty average soda brand. Soon he's tossing back two at a time, and she admires his ability to coordinate the flow of two different torn-open soda cans into one mouth. It's pretty impressive. The poor TaB never stood a chance against WV's onslaught. Her toast arrives in the middle of this sodasscre, and she munches on it. It is, indeed, delicious.

After nearly ten minutes of extreme soda drinking (there should be a game show for that or something, because WV would win hands down), the carapacian slows his pace, savoring the tenth can the waiter has brought over for him. He doesn't even wait to pull open the tab; he just chomps down with glinting black teeth and swallows the chunk of aluminum whole before chugging the entire can's worth of soda in seconds. He nearly falls off his stool with excitement.

All in all, it's pretty hilarious. Jade doesn't think she's ever seen anyone get that worked up over soda.
"So, I've been thinking," Jade says at last, as WV slows down the insane pace of his TaB consumption. "I intended to fly over to Washington to see John right after we finished up in the lab. I really need to knock some manners into that guy. So. Despite this detour, we could, theoretically, just catch a regular-people plane across the Pacific. It's too far for me to hop it straight from here to Seattle, even with islands along the way."

She doesn't mention the fact that it had been a further jump from Britain to Australia. She has no idea how that worked, and no way is she betting their lives on her uncertain new ability to cross half the world in seconds. Even with Bec helping, she'd be anxious about that kind of risk. The last thing they'd want is to end up stranded in the middle of the ocean.

Besides. Er. She has another idea.

"Or," she says slowly, tapping her fingers together as a grin spread across her face. "We could, you know. Go on a quick tour of South America, first. Reeeally quick."

Bec, as usual, has no response beyond wagging its tail. WV appears to consider the idea, and at last shrugs.

She'll take that as a total yes. Awesome! One last road trip with her oldest companion and her new best friend, and then she can finally meet John! This is going to be great! "Ready, WV?"

"Aaand, we're off!" Jade says, closing her eyes. In her mind's eyes, Jade begins to plan the series of teleporting hops they will need to make to cross the Southern Pacific Ocean, and after a few seconds, twists the space around her and makes the first jump.

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Cerro Azul, Chile

They touch down at around 35°39.0'S, 70°45.64'W, judging by Jade's internal GPS.

Jade realizes her mistake when this lands them almost right on top of an active volcano.

Clouds of ashy smoke billow out into the air above a tall, snowy peak, and a moment later the ground rattles and jumps beneath Jade's feet. She waves her arms wildly and manages to keep her balance, but WV falls backward, tripping over a tree root when he tries to regain his footing, and she has to catch him. Bec appears to be unaffected by the shaking of the ground, not even a single hair in its pelt trembling in the ashy breeze. Bec is weird like that.

"Wow! That looks like a doozy!" Jade exclaims, as another earthquake rocks the ground beneath them. With this much tectonic activity, the volcano that rears up into the sky above them must be thissss close to erupting! This probably isn't the safest place to be right now!

But, she thinks, switching out her travelling clothes for her hero outfit of the day, first she has to make sure any and all civilians get away too! How sucky would it be if she just took off and left anyone too close to the volcano behind to die? The answer is very sucky, thank you very much. Now clad in her hero-mode lab coat (the difference between this coat and her science work coat is pretty much zero. They are the same coat. Science is hero-work too!), Sharpshooter pulls on her gloves and spread out her awareness of the surrounding area.

She soon feels the movement and mass of a small village around the other side of the capricious volcano, but she needs to get closer if she wants to be able to sense more detail than that. "Come on, WV, we can't hang around here," she says, holding out her hand to the carapacian. He takes it, and she whistles for Bec to follow as she warps into a clear space in the center of the town.
It is about as chaotic as one would expect a town in the blast zone of a huge-ass volcano would be in such circumstances. Screams fill the air, particularly those of the small children who cling to their parents. The poor kids probably don't understand why literally everyone in town is rushing around piling carts with all their worldly belongings and high-tailing it down the dirt road out of town. As Sharpshooter watches, a slim troll woman dips down to scoop up a wailing little girl and begins to drag her family's cart behind her with a single hand, her human husband bearing two little boys on each hip as he follows grimly at her side.

And yeah, there are a good nine hundred people here. Sharpshooter lets go of WV's tiny claws and whirls around in trepidation, taking in all the movement with a keen eye. Even if she wants to just teleport everyone out of here, that's a lot of matter that would have to be shifted, and a lot of these people wouldn't be willing to stop moving in the middle of a disaster, even if they'd be safer for it. It has baffled Sharpshooter since she first started interacting with large groups of people on a regular basis, how stupid the combination of large crowds and imminent danger can make people. It seems to be a universal quality.

For a silly moment, she considers having Bec help her teleport the entire volcano and its contents into the sea. As fun as that would be, though, it wouldn't do anything about the simmering underground caldera full of magma that would then be exposed when it was previously contained under the weight of an entire mountain.

Darn! The science involved would have been so interesting! What to do now?

Oh well. If she can get one person's attention, she can use them to help her figure out how best to interact with the community at large. They don't have a lot of time, though; the earth continues to rumble and heave every few minutes, and the tremors seem stronger on this section of earth than where she'd landed. "Stay right by me, okay WV?" she says urgently. The carapacian nods vigorously and clutches at the tail end of her lab coat as she jogs over to the nearest house, tripping and catching herself as she goes every time the ground shudders. The man at work outside has gone grey with age, his face a mask of lines and wrinkles. He barely spares the arrival of a strange girl in a lab coat more than a second's glance before he begins throwing things onto the back of a rickety cart. Two domesticated llamas are already hitched to the front.

Sharpshooter clears her throat. "Excuse me, sir? You guys seem to be having some trouble. Do you need any help?"

The elderly gentleman shoots her a harassed look, tossing a chicken in a small cage onto the back of his cart. "No entiendo una palabra de lo que dices, niña loca!" He continues to mutter as he hurries back into the house, while Jade blinks after him.

Okay, that's weird, usually her automatic translator would have - oh! Right. Sharpshooter removes her universal translator collar from her syaladex, where she'd placed it while at work in Grandpa's lab. It's gotten a lot of use over the past year or so, as she's crisscrossed the globe! It really comes in handy. She knows a lot of French, Latin, Greek, Russian, and Chinese, but that was all she'd had time to master over the years in between all her training to be a crime fighter. She's still working on the Spanish module, and she doesn't want to mess around with her questionable speaking skills in the middle of what appears to be a volcanic eruption.

Once it's on and operational, locked around her neck above her vocal cords, she grins at the old man when he emerges from the house with a stack of canned goods and tries again. "Sorry! What seems to be the problem? Why is everyone running around?" This time, her words have an echo, as the translator analyzes her verbal sounds and translates them into Spanish.

The look he gives her now is even more unimpressed than the first. This guy just seems to be 120%
done today! Jeez! "El maldito gigante volcán va a entrar en erupción, niña tonta!"

Yeah, and okay, Sharpshooter understood that one. She does suppose that having your village be right downhill from an erupting volcano might put a damper on one's mood, but there's no reason for him to be ruuude! Silly girl, my ass!

"Well, I'm here to help out now!" she tells him. "Sharpshooter is on the job! Natural disasters, giant robots, and weird mutant monster attacks are my heroic specialty! Just tell me where you need me!"

The old man throws up his hands, and turns to yell in her face. "No tengo tiempo para sus preguntas. Tengo que sacar a mi familia a un lugar seguro!"

Sharpshooter pouts, folding her arms over her dark green catsuit. So he won't help her until his family is safe? That...makes sense, she guesses. "Too easy. Coming right up, mister shouty face!"

She analyzes the house and the people taking up space within the house using her spatial sense, and then nods to Bec. "Here boy! Can you take these guys to a safe place?"

The white wolf looks away from the smoldering volcano for the first time since they've arrived and teleports himself next to the house. "Oh, dios míos, ¿qué es ese monstruo! Mantenga ese infierno-perro lejos de mí!" the old man yelps, stumbling away from the wolf, who comes up to his waist and completely ignores his silly shenanigans.

"That's Becquere! It's my trusty dog sidekick!" Sharpshooter chirps, grinning at the horrified look on the man's face. "Watch! Bec? Rescue!" She snaps her fingers.

Bec erupts into green fire. The old man shrieks and falls to his knees as the house vanishes in a wave of crackling green flames. All that remains is a smooth patch of dirt and a single confused chicken that Jade must have overlooked. Oops.

Unfortunately, she probably should have explained what Bec was doing better, because she thinks she kind of freaking out of this poor guy! "It's okay, mister! Bec took them to the other side of thaaat mountain!" Sharpshooter tells him, pointing at a mountain far off in the distance, in the opposite direction of the active volcano. Even as she does, Bec reappears, tail wagging. "See! And now that they're safe, you can help me get everyone in the village to listen!" She beams at him.

He just stares up at her.

This is taking too long. There's something swelling on the edge of Sharpshooter's senses, a massive upwelling of magma that continues to press against the thin layer of rock between the volcano's interior and the open air. Any second now, that rock layer could crack, and all the pressure will explode outward. She grabs the man and shakes him. "Snap out of it, dummy! You have to help me get everyone else out of here, too! Pull! Yourself! Together!" She punctuates each word with a slap.

Naturally, he obliges, his eyes widening as he nods. Then she loses his attention again, his gaze drifting to the side, and she nearly facepalms until she sees who he's looking at.

The old man holds out his hands to WV. "Yo - Yo no puedo creerlo. Un caparazón! No había pensado en ver a uno en mi vida!"

Uh. Okay. At least he's not in shock over his family vanishing before his eyes anymore, even if he is looking at Mister Variable as though he's the second coming. "Yeah, me and WV here are bffsies! And we're totally here to save you guys, so you should really help me out here and focus. Right, V?" she asks, turning to smile down at WV.

The carapacian salutes her and trills an incomprehensible reply as he waves his skinny arms and his
new ruler specibus above his head. He really does do that a lot, and Sharpshooter has no idea what it means. Oh well.

She notices what happens next from the corner of her eye. It isn't a strange movement that normally would have triggered her defense protocols, so it takes her a while to notice. No, it's the absence of movement. This entire time, they've been surrounded and buffeted by the furious rush of an entire village racing to flee before the onslaught of a volcanic eruption. Suddenly, all that motion and activity has ceased, even as the ground rumbles ever more furiously beneath them.

The hairs of the back of her neck prickling, Sharpshooter slowly looks around at the village.

Everyone has stopped. Everyone. As one, they have all turned towards the small group standing before the empty spot where the old man's house used to sit.

But they aren't looking at her. They're looking at WV.

"Alabe los dioses dieciséis!" the old man says, reverent as he bows his head.

WV just looks up at her and shrugs. Apparently, he doesn't get what's going on, either. The only thing Sharpshooter is getting out of this is that apparently, carapacians are a really big deal? Maybe? Uh. No, she's mostly just confused. She shrugs back.

Because at least now, everyone is paying attention. And heck, that's all she wanted in the first place. Cupping her hands around her mouth, she shouts, "Oooookay, everybody! Now that I have your attention -" She hesitates, sees that only a few people have really turned to listen to her, and adds, "- I come in the service of the carapacian you see before you, as his voice and as his ally!"

There we go. WV glowers at her, tugging hard on her coat, but she ignores him and maintains a brilliant, too-wide smile as the villagers turn their eyes on her. Heck yes. She has this one in the bag. She is the loyal acolyte of WV. It is her.

"We are here to help transport you to safety. We have already begun with this man's family!" She gestures grandly to the place where the house used to be. After a pause, WV spreads his arms and gestures toward it as well, and a low murmur of awe emerges from the crowd more than a few heads nodding. WV puffs up visibly, not understanding the weird awe but certainly happy about it.

Sharpshooter claps her hands together to get their attention one last time. "All we ask is that you stay very, very still," she instructs, beginning to spread out her senses. Now that everyone has stopped, gathering in a huge crowd with WV as the focal point, she can get a grip on everyone's mass much more accurately. They just have to maintain this for a few more seconds. "Bec! Can you target everyone while I push us?" she asks, mind racing.

The wolf huffs at her, as though to ask how she could ever doubt it. As long as Bec can keep these people's mass and position locked down for her, Sharpshooter will be able to teleport everyone as far as they need to go. It's how they manage most mass transports. Sometimes Bec provides the raw power when they need to move a single heavy object, but the wolf is really good at linking targets, too!

"Alright then -" Sharpshooter begins.

That's when the volcano explodes. The burst shatters the air, as the ground below rocks continuously and refuses to stop. Sharpshooter looks up, and can see without her scope that enormous chunks of rock are flying everywhere, while rich red lava shoots forth in explosive waves.

The order and stillness caused by WV's weird aura of celebrity breaks down as everyone screams,
toppling to the ground as the earthquakes. People begin to scramble to their feet, clutching at their neighbors, but shit shit no she can't let them move, fuck it, they're doing this live -

She reaches out her hands and tugs.

She realizes too late that she can't feel the guiding influence of Bec's sensors, that there is nothing linking the targets together so she can ensure she's grabbing everyone.

It's too late. She yanks them all sideways, everyone she can cradle in her mind, and they land hard in a mountainside clearing tens of miles away from the erupting volcano.

The effort drains her, and Sharpshooter sinks onto her knees, panting. Bec appears a moment later, and she scowls at it. It is oblivious, and curls up on the ground beside her, unconcerned. WV sits up from where he landed, rubbing his head with both hands as bright green light flickers through his carapace before settling down.

Heart sinking, Sharpshooter reaches out to check the damage. How many people did she miss? How many bodies of mass did she accidentally drop on the way here because Bec failed to help her target them as one? Soon the people will begin to shriek and cry, cursing her for forgetting their loved ones in the shuffle, and she'll have failed them -

Her eyes fly open, and her heart stops for a long second. She can't really believe what she's feeling.

They're all here.

All eight hundred seventy three villagers are clustered around her in a wide spiral, shaking themselves off and practically collapsing into relieved embraces. A few shake their heads and point over at the volcano on the horizon as it puffs and erupts in the distance. "Mi esposa! Mis hijos! Mis llamas!" the old man cries, flinging his arms around his family, including the two very bored-looking llamas, still hitched to their cart.

She didn't miss anyone.

This should be impossible.

But then again, she muses, throwing her head back and laughing, soaking in the relief and happiness that fills the air, so was that strange trip to Australia all the way from Britain. Maybe her powers are still growing, in ways even Grandpa hadn't predicted!

She doesn't even care. Everyone is alright!

Amidst the frantic celebration and cries of relief, the old man breaks away from his family and takes Sharpshooter's hand. "Gracias, Francotiradora," he says, pressing his palms to hers. "Le debemos nuestras vidas. Pero usted también abandonó todo nuestros hogares a ser destruidos por el volcán."

Oops. She'd known she'd forgotten something. "I - uh, sorry. I think it's too late now. I didn't even think about your houses! I get kind of forgetful when there's a volcano exploding over my head."

He appears to think about this for a long moment, and then shrugs. "Sí. Yo comprendo."

Besides, it's too late now, Jade thinks, ruefully watching as debris from the volcanic eruption begins to reach the point on the slope far off in the distance where the village sits. But what really matters is that she got everyone out alive - buildings can be replaced. She sits down on the ground to watch the explosion from a distance, watching with interest as pyroclastic clouds of hot gas and rock flow down the sides of the volcano. If the villagers had still been standing on that mountainside when
those flows hit, they're have died in the rapid flow of 1,830 °F heated debris.

But they hadn't, because Jade had been there to help. A warm glow fills her belly at the thought. Sometimes, these incidents are the brightest moments she can think of - times when she arrives at a place purely by accident, and manages to save good people. It's the most fortuitous, hopeful kind of event, and it warms her inside and out.

After a few moments of sitting back and watching the villagers celebrate, Jade rolls her shoulders and sits up, stretching with a yawn. "Alright. Our work here is done," she tells WV, patting the little guy on the head. "Way to work the crowd, WV! My man!"

WV covers his face with his hands, blushing adorably. Jade just laughs and gets to her feet, brushing the dirt and ash from her catsuit and the tails of her lab coat. "Gotta run, mister," she tells the elderly man cheerfully, adjusting her glasses on her nose. "There's a guy I gotta go see. He owes me soooo many pesterchats! I can't just let him get away with ignoring me anymore. I'm glad you guys are alright."

The old man hesitates, looking at WV for a brief moment before focusing on Jade. “Buena suerte, Francotiradora. Alabado seas, Caparazón vagabundo. Espero que usted encuentre el niño que busca, y es posible que ambos levantarse.” The old man bows his head to WV again, and smiles hesitantly at Jade.

Even with the universal translator, Jade doesn't really understand the context of half of what the old man is saying. But she gets that he's wishing her luck, and so she smiles and shakes his hand in reply. "Glad we could help. Good luck with the relocation!"

WV grabs her hand before she even turns to offer it, and she smiles. He smiles back. Bec whuffles and lurches upright, at the ready, and Jade forgives the wolf in that moment for letting her handle the mass teleport on her own. Bec always knows what's best.

"Let's go, guys. Let's get this show on the road," Jade says, grinning.

All three vanish into thin air.

 Heck yes.

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Diamonds Droog detests the rain. One of her more loyal, trusted retainers holds a black umbrella over her head while she slowly types out a message on her phone, but that does not prevent the damp in the air from slowly undoing all that a regimen of hot curling irons, bobby pins, and hair spray worked so hard to achieve to keep her kinky black hair in a controlled chignon at the nape of her neck.

Britain, she thinks darkly, and then shakes her head. While the state of her hair is rapidly deteriorating, she has no more time to dwell on it. The intel coming out of New York City over the past hour has been most...enlightening. Official news reports remain as muddled and inaccurate as ever, but her little couriers have a little more context to work with than your average, fumbling reporter. She sent them in forewarned that they were dealing with children of extreme interest to the boss, and all but five have reported in thus far. Not a bad turnover rate.

All of her couriers have confirmed the presence of Flashstep and the Puppeteer, also known as the despicably elusive Brothers Strider, but only two have correctly offered speculation on the identity of the third hero to confront Dark Star and take her down.
To be fair, she did not share some of her more privileged information with them; none of them knew that Heir had been recently relocated to Houston. But only two of her birds managed to connect a flying hero in goggles with the Heir recently giving Hearts hell in Seattle? Clearly, she will have to put the rest of her couriers through their paces. They're getting sloppy, and Diamonds shall not abide sloppy work.

She reserves a private grimace for the name 'Dark Star.' Really, does the American media juggernaut have nothing better to do than creating sugary early morning talk shows and giving new superpowered beings ridiculously dramatic, inelegant nicknames? Surely they have more significant news to report, like the actual death toll from the villain's rampage, or the current price of wheat in Canada, or the recurrent political instability in the Novaya Ukraine?

When she finishes checking and rechecking the spelling and grammar of her electronic missive to the Doctor - it would not do to send anything less than a perfectly crafted message to the boss, after all - she breaks the disposable device in half and tosses it into a nearby trash can. The Doctor is always quite adamant that members of the Crew who travel abroad to Europe or Asia must follow the strictest security protocols. While the Midnight Crew may be slowly gaining infamy in the Americas, they are little more than a blip on Eurasia's radar, a faint whisper in the ears of the foreign black markets to which they provide selective goods, and that is just the way the boss likes it. They have never even made the international news, despite numerous intrepid crime reporters' attempts at writing exposés of the Crews activities. One of Diamonds's more tedious ongoing missions in life is the solemn duty of hunting down such detectives and ending their investigations rather abruptly - and permanently.

Unfortunately, her fellow Crew suit members do not make that task easy. Honestly, she swears, she is surrounded by dumb chumps. Jack Noir is easily the most competent out of any of them, and that's only because she's never seen or heard from the man in her life, and, in fact, for the record she would like to express personal doubt that he even exists as more than a figment of the Doctor's imagination, a horror story that lower ranking Crew gossip about when work is slow.

Hearts may be good for blowing things up and other brute force jobs like robbing banks and running stolen goods in and out of the country, but he's useless for more elaborate and subtle schemes. And then -

Oh, dear god. And then there's - urgh! She doesn't even want to think the name!

Diamonds shivers in her heavy, furred coat. Clubs.

And what's worse is, Clubs Deuce is the troll she has come to meet today. It is, in fact, his fault that she is currently standing on a London street enduring an unfathomably foggy spring day, her hair slowly springing outward into uncontrolled chaos as she waits on the arrival of the dimmest member of the Crew ever to make suit status.

"Oh! Diamonds! It's you!"

Balls. Speak of the hopeless little devil, and he shall appear, tripping over the too-long hems of his suit pants as he races across the busy street. Clubs Deuce is panting and waving, the tiny black club symbol on his lapel stitched haphazardly with large stitches that Diamonds can see from a mile away because he used grey thread.

She swallows back tears of righteous fury. She had learned years ago that yelling at Clubs did nothing to improve the situation. Nothing improves the situation. The situation with Clubs is beyond improvement, and may in fact function as a kind of black hole into which all hope of self-improvement is sucked and never seen again on this earth by sane men.
The problem with Clubs is not even that he is stupid, exactly. He certainly seems to understand orders, and he follows them through to the letter. He even, on rare and celebrated occasions, has demonstrated a single-minded talent for completing missions that no one else in the Crew ever deemed possible. But Diamonds prefers to assign the success of those missions to sheer dumb luck. The fact is, Clubs can take even the simplest of tasks and transform them into world-spanning missions that manage to end in impenetrably dull failures.

He is earnest. He is good-natured. And he is entirely unsuited to a life of crime. Diamonds is baffled on a daily basis by the short troll's very existence, and finds his strange, chipper enthusiasm for criminal activity to be completely at odds with a troll whose personality would be far better suited to work as a bumbling children's show host, earnestly teaching toddlers their ABCs.

Which is why, when he stumbles up to her, beaming with nubby teeth and squinting his dull brown eyes to peer up at her from under rounded, three-pronged horns, she can only heave a sigh laden with the resigned despair of those long oppressed by the fools that surround them. His suit is ill-fitting and cheap, and now drenched by the curtains of rain he just raced through without an umbrella to protect him. Clubs is not an inch over five feet tall, even including his stumpy horns, and Diamonds is forced to conclude that the universe laughed and laughed and choked on its laughter and died alone and unloved when it decided to make Clubs Deuce and Her Imperious Condescension herself almost the exact same height.

"How are you doing, Diamonds?" Clubs asks, bouncing up and down on his toes with unnatural good cheer. "What brings you to London, sir?"

"Ma'am," Diamonds corrects wearily. This is an old exercise in futility, but she lives in the hope that one day the lesson will sink in.

"Ma'am," Clubs says agreeably, though she knows he will forget the correction within moments. Clubs isn't offensive on purpose; he just truly is that absent-minded. "You just missed out on all the fun! Sharpshooter was here, but now she's in Australia! I was just on my way to the airport in hot pursuit! We're not sure how she got there, but I think maybe she's the Witch! Do you think so, Diamonds?" He gazes up at her earnestly, the genuine curiosity in his eyes just plain pitiful.

Oh, do not be perverse. Not the troll version of pitiful. She feels nothing but good, condescending, non-romantic human pity, thank you very much.

Diamonds rolls her eyes. "There is absolutely no doubt in the boss's mind that the child you have been wasting all of our foreign affairs weapons budget on is indeed the Witch. While I wish I could order you to cease making a nuisance of yourself, I have long since resigned myself to the fact that you are physically incapable of such a feat. And the boss...wishes you to continue to pursue the girl."

Clubs's eyes go wide. "Really?! You really mean it, sir?!" He clicks his heels together.

She must repeat: he clicks his heels together.

Diamonds just wants to cry at this point. But Clubs would only offer up a sodden handkerchief and politely ask what was bothering her, and the cycle of madness would continue.

If only he weren't so damn genuine! This would all be so much easier to bear if Clubs set out to antagonize her on purpose!

"Y-es," Diamonds grits out, rubbing at her temples with her fingers. She can already feel the customary Clubs-type migraine developing behind her eyes. "You are to travel to South America, which is where you would know she has already reappeared if you thought to check the memo.
updates for once in your short little life."

He doesn't even react to the cheap shot about his height, a last ditch effort by Diamonds to provoke some kind of negative reaction from the troll. "Sorry about that, Diamonds!" is all he exclaims, fiddling with his hat nervously. "If you say so!"

Show some backbone! she wants to shriek to the heavens. All she does is pinch the bridge of her nose and shake her head slowly. "In addition, the Doctor has altered your mission parameters. You are to take the girl alive and as functionally unharmed as possible, and bring her back to headquarters without delay," Diamonds rattles off. Her loyal retainer surreptitiously offers her a gun, but she shakes her head. The retainer is loyal, but he is new, and not yet familiar with the intricate dance involved in dealing with a mob of cultish lunatics and damned idiots on a daily basis.

Still, she appreciates any courier who keeps spare specibi on hand and knows when to offer them. Ten out of ten execution, Marlowe. You may yet be promoted from umbrella-holder to suit-ironer. Not many reach that level of trust in Diamonds's eyes.

"And are you going to help me, Diamonds?!" Clubs chirps. "Oh good! We haven't been able to work together in so long, sir!"

"Never again," Diamonds says vehemently, fighting the sudden painful flashbacks that threaten to overwhelm her. Oh, she remembers her last shared mission with Clubs, alright. She's still in therapy for the post-traumatic stress she developed due to the event. "And ma'am. Ma'am."

"Oh. What a shame, ma'am! Well, I suppose I should tell my guys we're heading to South America instead, before they all get on the plane and show up in Australia!" Clubs whips off the abomination of a hat Diamonds has been carefully ignoring for the sake of her already-bleeding eyeballs, and replaces it with something...that defies logic. Clubs's obsession with bizarre, elaborate headgear continues to baffle. This one appears to have been knitted out of a rainbow of coarse yarn thread, and comes to a haphazard point nearly a foot above where his horns end. "Do you think the boss will mind if I take the giant robot?"

Dignity. She must. Maintain. Her dignity. Even if everyone else in the world around her insists on unrelenting foolishness. She will maintain the dignity and reputation of the Midnight Crew single-handedly, if she must. "I am certain that the good Doctor will continue to fund your pointless exercises in tomfoolery until the day I die," she says, sighing heavily and staring off into the middle distance. "He seems to believe you obtain useful results, even if they are not necessarily the results you were sent out to achieve, in the traditional sense."

"That's great, Diamonds! What are you going to be doing, then? You didn't need to come all the way out here just to see me!" He beams at her. Clearly nothing would make him happier in this world than for Diamonds to replace her personality with that of an insipid, simpering little twit and tell him that yes, because they are just such wonderful friendcolleagues, she did come all the way to Britain just to see him.

Thankfully, she does not pander to the whim of buffoons. "No. I didn't. I have business of my own in Cairo. It was simply quicker to ensure you received your new orders in person than to trust in your dubious mastery of the group memo. Good day, Clubs."

"O-oh! Yes! Don't worry, Diamonds, I'll bring the Witch back in no time! You and the boss will be so proud of me!" Clubs exclaims. "Have fun in Cairo!"

Fun, he says. Well, yes, hunting down possible witnesses and beating the living shit out of them until they talk is rather fun, she supposes. But she understands that not everyone considers such
extracurriculars fun. "Yes. Fun," she agrees, smiling slowly. She even condescends to wave back when the tiny troll rushes off down the street, waving a farewell. Several raggedy Crew members intercept him and usher him into a waiting taxi. Clubs's men often act more as handlers than underlings. They try to control the situation until Clubs's innate incompetence renders their efforts moot. Poor souls.

"Come, Marlowe," Diamonds says as the taxi disappears in the grey fog. "I have no desire to fly out of the same airport as that fool."

"Yes, ma'am," the umbrella-holder replies. He maintains an unerringly steady grip on the umbrella all the way to the waiting black Porsche and holds it as Diamonds folds herself into the car - her legs are long enough that this is a delicate process if she wishes to keep from brushing her pants against the wet side of the car. "Shall I readminister the tranquilizers to our guest?" he offers, bowing slightly with a glance at the unconscious body laid out in the cramped back seat of the car.

Diamonds twists in her seat and raising an appraising eyebrow at the unconscious man. She peels back his eyelid with a fingernail and inspects his pupil. "Oh, I believe he should be alright until we reach -"

A phone rings, and she reaches into her pocket without looking, drawing out her next disposable phone. She answers, nodding at Marlowe to enter the driver's side, as she prepares to trace the call and hunt down the unknown caller. "However did you get this number, darling? I'm very curious. Not many can contact me so easily with such a secure phone," she drawls.

I know all of your numbers, Droog. It is one of the perks of being almost omniscient. I do thank you for obliging me by utilizing disposable devices while abroad.

Diamonds stiffens and sits upright, heart thumping at the unexpected shock. "Boss. I wasn't expecting you to call so soon."

She hadn't been expecting a call at all. The boss prefers emails filled with lines of impossible to read white text when he can't hold meetings in person. She'd anticipated an email in response to her recent report when she reached Cairo, and no sooner. This is...unusual.

And unfortunately, she knows exactly why it's happening. Wincing, she yanks the black sheet of cloth back down over the unconscious man's scarred, slack face, trying and failing to think of anything other than his presence in the back seat of her car. If she doesn't think about it, maybe the Doctor won't -

A valiant effort, Droog. But I knew about your little kidnapping attempt hours before you set it into motion. I only allowed you to take our good friend Stitch all the way to London because I require his services there, and by transporting him across the Atlantic in the cargo hold you saved on air fare.

Diamonds feels sweat drip down the side of her face. She laughs shakily, one leg jittering a little with nervousness. Damn her compulsions! The last thing she'd wanted was to antagonize the Doctor again, but how could she resist? "Please, sir. He's already done such excellent work on repairing some of my favorite suits. He is...indispensable. A remarkable talent. He is wasted in that foul green basement."

Be that as it may, I do have plans for our good friend Stitch. However much you may wish it, you cannot have your own personal entropy-reversing tailor, Droog. Simply be thankful that I take you three and your compulsions into account when I have Clover balance the books for the monthly budget review.
To be placed on the same level as Hearts and Clubs - *you three*, indeed! - is humiliating. Diamonds worries at her lip, head bent in shame. "I - yes, sir. I shall release him to your custody."

Oh, just drop him off at the train station on your way to the secondary airport. He has places to go when he recovers from the chemically-assisted kidnapping. Thank you so much for your cooperation, Droog.

"Yeah - yes, sir," Diamonds says. "Of course, Boss."

Do have fun in Cairo. You are correct that it is a good starting point to initiate your search. I won't spoil the surprise of where you'll have to seek out Spades next!

He hangs up on her.

Ass.

"Standsted airport, ma'am?" Marlowe asks, putting the car into gear. He has patiently waited for her call to end, picking up on the sensitive nature of the call. Another checkmark for you, Mr. Marlowe. Diamonds might not even have to whip out the cue stick today.

"Yes, Marlowe," Diamonds replies, eyeing the man in the backseat with wistful disgust. It truly was foolish of her to take him. But what can she say? Once she set him to work sewing some good quality suits instead of those felt green duds, he perked right up! A little kidnapping that hardly hurt anyone!

But she dares not disobey a direct order from the Doctor. He would *know*. He always knows.

It is a shame. Stitch is a truly excellent tailor, even if he *is* a member of the Felt.

"Stop by the first train station you see," Diamonds orders, folding her legs and switching the disposable phone over to the latest private Scofflaws memo her couriers are using to pool their nonstop flood of information. "It hardly matters which, it will be the correct station no matter where we drop off Stitch. Infuriating, isn't it?"

"May I ask how that is possible, ma'am?" Marlowe asks, timid, as he begins to maneuver through traffic.

"No," Diamonds begins texting out rapid directions to her couriers in Australia, who all need to be repositioned in more advantageous stations now that the country has lost its priority status. Running an international spy network is a complex business, and Diamonds is pleased to say that hers is one of the best in the world.

The fact that so much of the Doctor's activities slip beneath her radar remains infuriating. The man is inscrutable.

Hopefully, she will have a better time of it hunting down this Spades Slick character. He first came to the attention of her network when he began probing into Crew affairs several years ago, but has since dropped off the radar entirely.

He is, however, a carapacian. And carapacians are rare enough that he cannot hide from Diamonds forever. Once she spread out her couriers, seeking news of carapacians with unusual scars, more than a few reports had begun to trickle in from Egypt. So she will begin there.

And, apparently, end up flying elsewhere in her search. She grimaces, remembering the Doctor's offhand, smirking comment about Cairo only serving as a starting point. Whatever carapacian her
spies noted in Egypt, the news is clearly out of date.

No matter. She has worked with less, before, and still completed the objective promptly and with grace.

Oh yes. She will find this Spades Slick, no matter where he hides.

And she will make him rue the day he crossed the Midnight Crew.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Wow, the first major boss battle, and no one even died! We have enjoyed success all around, kudos guys.

Well, I say success, when actually Rose is going to need some major therapy, Jade's boss battle was a freakin' volcano, and Karkat's boss took off before the fun could get started, which just set us up for some major conflict later, but we'll sort it all out. Right now, I think everyone needs a goddamn breather. John just got blown up by a grenade, flung himself across the country, and then got Horrorterror bleedoff all over his brain in the space of like three days, and even he needs to heal eventually.
Weary of Days and Hours

Chapter Summary

I am weary of days and hours,
Blown buds of barren flowers,
Desires and dreams and powers
And everything but sleep.

Chapter Notes

Now, let there be pie and cuddles. Pie. And. Cuddles. Hemogoblin and Heir belong to Real Men Wear Tights. I just like making them snuggle. SUFFER, JOHN, SUFFER THE MOIRAIL ZONE. >:D

Shout out to the people who kindly point out when I make minor continuity/formatting errors and the like. :3 I have no beta and mostly edit myself as I go along, and I know I do a pretty sketch job of it, so I appreciate it when you guys chime in! большое спасибо!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a little after three in the morning when Karkat admits that the night has been a total shambles. He stops a few random muggings on his way back to the base camp in the library, keeping to the shadows so no one can get a good look at his fucked up costume and see the candy-red flush to his exposed gills, but aside from that he just heads straight back and changes out into his regular clothes in the circulation room.

He fucked up. His shitty temper ripped right through Hemogoblin's cool, controlled persona, and he fucking blew it because he's an impulsive, stupid shit when he's angry. Note to self, apparently being blown up turns Karkat into a rage-blinded worthless little fuckspoon. He'll make sure to avoid that in the future. By the time he collapses onto the back seat of the late night bus rolling back out to Maple Valley, he's worked himself into enough of a shame-frenzy that he has to stuff his hands into his hoodie pocket to keep from slapping at his head with his fists like a goddamn thirteen-year-old troll on a ragebender. The regular night bus driver already probably thinks Karkat's some kind of teenage drug dealer who commutes to the city to do shady shit every night, no need to make him think Karkat's completely pancracked on top of that.

His mood deteriorates further when his phone gets a signal again after the bus drops him off five miles from his house. He thumbs through both the text messages and the Pesterchum app with the faint, stupid hope that John will be awake for some reason and available to talk at four am. Even if he couldn't tell John any details about why he feels so fucking shitty, it would be good to just talk. But John hasn't said a word since EB: i'm sorry i caused you and my dad so much trouble! i'm going to be volunteering most of tomorrow to make up for how little i can do with this collarbone, so i might not see you until sunday. good night karkat! and great, now all Karkat's managed to do is remind himself that he probably won't see John all day today, either. What does that little shit think he's
doing, anyway, working with a royally fucked-up arm? What, does the community center use slave labor or something these days?

Karkat has the distinct feeling that he's being irrational again. He crawls over the fence into his backyard and scales the wall to his bedroom window to avoid walking by Crabdad, and dumps his backpack full of ragged neoprene and Kevlar on the ground. He's probably going to have to burn the ruined uniform or something - he can't just throw that kind of thing away in the trash for some crazy dumpster diver to find, not now that it has his blood crusted all down the side. Resigning himself to idiotic bonfire shenanigans, Karkat strips down to his shirt and boxers and buries himself in the recooperacoon.

All he wants to do is sleep. Unfortunately, his brain is a perverse, unreasonable little shitstain that decides that this moment. Right now. This very moment. Would be the very best moment to replay every single mistake he made trying to recapture Hearts Boxcars.

Groaning, Karkat gives in and pummels the back of his head with a frustrated fist, faceplanting in the sopor slime. He breathes out through his nose and tiny, sluggish bubbles form in the sopor. His face burns with a shamed, cringing flush, and he struggles to just put it out of mind. If he keeps harping on about his mistakes like his brain automatically wants to, he won't get any sleep at all.

Around seven in the morning, after a few fitful snatches of sleep here and there, he gives up. The insomnia isn’t going away any time soon, and his body has become so adjusted to staying up late and waking up early for school that his fuckass brain probably thinks right now is the prime time for the end of a sleep cycle he never got to have. He's tired enough that the exact details of the chase down at the dock is an unpleasant blur that he can skim over mentally.

It's a really shitty victory, but he'll take any success at this point, not matter how pathetic. Suck it, Karkat's brain.

He showers off the sopor and puts on his four-years old Batman shirt, a pair of sweatpants gone grey from being washed too many times, and a tired hoodie that's two sizes too large for him instead of the usual one size. He stills feels awful and claustrophobic and irritable, and fuck his day job, they can go without his superior managing skills for one day. He tramples downstairs and into the kitchen, not caring that Crabdad rises with an ear-piercing shriek from its pile at the sound of the commotion. There is exactly one thing that can possibly alleviate this mood right now, and it's buried in the back of his thermal hull. Crabdad scuttles in with a serious of obnoxiously loud, curious clicks, and Karkat grabs the last tray of iced roe and winds up, one eye twitching as he flings the tray. It smacks the lusus in the middle of its face hard enough to crack the plastic tray. Crabdad just squeals with ecstasy, racing off with its prize in one claw.

Good. Karkat has no intention of sharing the next food item he pulls out of the freezer. He hid it underneath a package of frozen corn, the one thing in the household Crabdad is basically guaranteed to abjure with all the disgust in its fatass shell. He pries off the plastic cover protecting the delicate confection within. Crabdad has no idea that this pie right here is the true prize of the hour. This fucker has two solid inches of fluffy white merengue, flaky crust that still looks fresh after being horded in a freezer for weeks, and a thick filling of chocolate fudge. Tiny chocolate sprinkles cover the merengue topping, and Karkat has it on good authority that the fudge contains not just chocolate chips but solid chunks of Hershey's chocolate and the crumbs of broken Oreos, duly sacrificed in the name of crafting the single most disgustingly unhealthy pie in the history of piekind.

"I call her 'The Chocapocalypse,'" John had said reverently, eyeing the pie embodiment of joy and happiness for all man and trollkind with all of the awe and respect owed to a truly godly pie. "Please don't tell my dad."
It’s not John himself, but it’s a really fucking close second, okay.

And he is going to sit on this couch.

And eat it.

Curling up into a ball of misery and fury on the couch with a blanket wrapped around him to complete his lazy day shame costume, Karkat settles in for a day of watching some godawful rom-coms and eating his feelings. He has spent the past year and half in intensive training to get into trim fighting shape, and fuck the haters he has earned this goddamn pie.

After the first bite, he regrets none of his decisions. None of them. This pie is fucking glorious. Licking at merengue that sticks to the corner of his mouth, Karkat digs between the cushions of the couch for the remote and turns the television on. Before he puts on a movie, he sits back to devour more of this pie, scooping up forkfuls of filling and merengue that barely fit between his jaws. Maybe John isn't as oblivious as Karkat occasionally curses him for being, he muses woozily as the chocolate buzz begins to set in. Because this pie tastes like a shooshpapping mixed with chocolate ambrosia, and Karkat hadn't even realized you could moirail long-distance through pie. Truly, John is a thoughtful and considerate palemate.

He’s so lost in a haze of chocolate that he's content to sit there listening to the news for a few minutes, rolling his eyes and muttering under his breath as the usual news blurb about the situation in Novaya Ukraine (shitty as per fucking usual) lingers on the screen. They have new aerial shots of the white sheen of toxic chemicals that apparently now covers the entire southern half of the old Ukraine, which, alright, is pretty fucking interesting, even if no one can seem to give a straight answer as to what the panwasted fuck the stuff is, but other than that they just report that eighty percent of the international task force sent in have officially been recovered.

They say recovered, but Karkat has frequented some of the creepier parts of the internet, and he's seen photos of what happened to some of the soldiers they sent in to stop the genocide, the ones who came back wrong. A lot of the time, what they claim 'recovered' isn't really human afterward. Whatever those grubfucking assholes did to create this toxic pollution in Eastern Europe three years ago, Karkat's just glad the entire oligarchy turned up dead so no one could recreate it. This planet is a fucking shitsack of a world sometimes.

Yeah, this is just getting him irritated again. He scrapes at the bottom of the tin in a section where he's demolished the majority of the pie and begins to reach for the remote again.

"...And we're bringing you the latest on the destruction in New York City, where we have just received word that three as-yet unidentified heroes appear to be confronting the villainess. Experts believe two to be Flashstep and the Puppeteer, heroes normally based out of Houston, but the third remains anonymous -"

Karkat chokes on his mouthful of pie and wastes a good minute not dying, unable to take his eyes off the screen as he jabs at the volume button.

It may be go-the-fuck-back-to-sleep o’clock on a Saturday here in Seattle, but in New York it’s almost noon. Of course, he can’t tell that from the video they’re playing because the sky has gone murky and purplish with heavy, low-hanging thunder clouds, to the point that it almost looks like night again. He checks the scrolling banner across the bottom of the screen to make sure, but yeah, the new crew is definitely claiming this is a live feed from New York City. Even as he watches, the source of the darkness, a cluster of pitch-black and sulky purple thorns tangled around a female human body, races across the screen, in hot pursuit of a tiny blur of crimson and white, shattering the sides of buildings as she slams through them to reach the fleeing figure.
When another camera view from a helicopter pops up, with a closer view of the two people flying away from the roaring tangle of thorns, Karkat is glad he's too distracted to take another bite of pie, because - because, seriously, what the actual ever-loving fucking fuck is he looking at here?! He cannot possibly be witnessing this miserable excuse for a hallucination!

That’s Heir.

The hero is in some bizarre red outfit, his goggles have black frames instead of the usual pale yellow, and there’s no sign of Heir’s signature warhammer. But no other hero in the states has that kind of control over the wind, darting through the air like he’s part of the breeze himself rather than just riding it. Karkat's obsession with Heir borders on the unnatural, and he knows that's Heir.

Jesus fucking Christ, he thinks distantly, no wonder Friday night had been fucking insane for Hemogoblin; Heir just somehow manages to show up halfway across the country with the Puppeteer and Flashstep to take on this crazy chick? How had Heir even known to be there?! Is there some kind of heroic grapevine Hemogoblin hasn’t signed up for yet? A mass fruity asshole rumpus memo they neglected to sign him up for? Hemogoblin had thought they were meant to be partners now, but Heir apparently feels free to drop off the face of the earth and hightail it to New York overnight without so much as a ‘fuck you very much.’

Seriously, what the actual blithering fuck?!

Karkat is so very, very torn because on one hand, the Hemogoblin part of his brain is pissed off beyond comprehension because three heroes decided to team up without even giving him a heads up. On the other hand, OH MY GOD HEIR HAS TEAMED UP WITH FLASHSTEP AND PUPPETEER.

It takes about two seconds for the nerd half to win out over the pissed half and suddenly Karkat keens loudly, setting a skree in response from Crabdad, and rolls off the couch, squirming forward with the blanket still wrapped around his legs to get closer to the TV. The pie somehow lands unharmed on the floor as he presses up close to the television and whips out his phone, breathing unevenly as he starts frantically texting John because holy shit that kid needs to stop this volunteering bullshit right now.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 8:13:01 --
CG: JOHN
CG: OH mY FUCKING goD JOHN GET YOUR ASS ON THE COMPUTER OR THE PHONE RIGHT NOW
CG: I AM HAVING A FUCKING CRIS SE
CG: I CAN’T EVEN FUCKING TYPE ANYMORE FOR THE LOVE OF TROLL JESUS
CG: IF YOU MISS OUT ON THIS INCOMPREHENSIBLE PILE OF EPIC CURRENTLY GOING DOWN IN NEW YORK YOU WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOUR SELF AND I’LL HAVE TO LIVE WITH YOUR GUILT-RIDDEN ASS FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES
CG: DBONSANV DSF DID HEIR JUST TELEPORT UFUCKING FUCK THE FUCK IS GOING ON
CG: JOHN, TURN ON YOUR FUCKING TELEVISION I’M GOING CRY LEGITIMATE TEARS HERE AND YOU ARE MISSNG IT
CG: THIS IS IT THE WORLD HAS JUSTIFIED ITS EXISTENCE. WELL DONE WORLD. YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO CONTINUE EXISTING. MY UNGODLY RAGE HAS BEEN FOREVER ASSUAGED.
CG: THAT WAS A FUCKING JOKE JOHN
CG: OH OF ALL THE TIMES FOR YOU TO GO COMPLETELY OFF THE FUCKING GRID
CG: SHIT I SET THE TV TO RECORD. IT'S OKAY, I HAVE YOU COVERED
By the time the news crews have relocated where Heir appeared and begun tracking the fight in earnest again, Karkat is literally rolling on the floor, the blanket getting more and more tangled around his body as he stares at the television screen from as many different angles as possible. Flashstep has apparently been out of the game for a while now, and the purple-and-black villainess, who the media reports keep referring to 'by the working name of Dark Star, until an official alias is announced,' uses that to her advantage, targeting the unconscious hero deliberately whenever Heir and the occasional flicker of the Puppeteer get close enough to take a slice at her. The villainess's shrieks are weirdly distorted, to the point that Karkat can't understand a word she's saying, and neither can the reporters, apparently. It's clear from some shots that Heir is trying to talk back, daringly moving in close to the wickedly sharp tentacles of darkness that writhe around Dark Star, but it's just as hard to hear his shouts with the poor quality of the video feed's audio.

Heir gets in a good shot, nearly toppling the tangle of thorns and tentacles over on its side. The villain must be getting tired or something, because her movements are getting progressively sloppy and slow.

Or at least Karkat thinks so, until, in a single liquid movement, a tendril of darkness wraps around Heir's arm and wrenches it backwards. Heir cuts himself free a moment later, but his arm hangs at a horrifying angle when he floats up where the helicopter cam can see him.

Karkat is so fucking emotionally invested by this point, his eyes are bugging halfway out of his skull, and he tears at the hair around his hornbed frantically. Oh my nubbing fuck, how he is expected to handle this kind of intense action sequence?! It's starting to hit him that he could very well be watching Heir be seriously injured any second now. That this is a villain who means business.

Aishgaosdnf, he is not okay, dammit!

The next part is blurred when the helicopter has to veer out of the way of a building, and the news channel has to switch to the godawful footage being broadcast by some lunatic filming on his camera phone from within the Met. Karkat is enraged by the lack of quality, and is aware that he has begun make a high-pitched whining noise in the back of his throat. Crabdad, who has joined him by the television for some reason and yet is somehow not being an annoying piece of shit about it, is making a similar sound, trilling occasionally and screeching at intervals. Karkat can't even bring himself to care.
The noise in Karkat's throat cuts off with a strangled gurgle as Heir and Dark Star freeze in place. The camera zooms in a little, but it's just too far away to see exactly what's going on, and Karkat is scratching at his skull now in frustration -

Abruptly, the darkness vanishes. Almost all of it - the clouds above remain, and the severed limbs the Puppeteer and Heir have been hacking off continue to lie in the streets, but the writhing tangle immediately surrounding the villainess, as well as the longer tendrils reaching up to the sky and down toward the ground, flicker out of existence as though they were never there.

The two figures hovering where the black thorns used to be fall to the ground, which doesn't make sense because one of them is Heir, and the only reason he'd fall, ever, is if he was unconscious or worse or -

Both falling bodies disappear. The phone cameraman, coughing and hacking on dust off-screen, frantically scans the area, and finally finds them again. The Puppeteer is crouched on the street with the two under his arms, one a girl in black and purple, the other Heir, who is still not moving. He stares at the camera behind his trademark pointy shades, and then disappears in a blur of movement. The news station fumbles for the next five minutes as both the phone camera and the helicopter above somehow manage to completely lose track of the heroes and the villainess.

It takes ten minutes before Karkat is willing to admit that maybe, just maybe, that's it. That's all the closure he's getting, and by closure he means fuck all. His stomach is clamped down, and the noise he's making may not be at a frequency audible to human or trollkind.

There's absolutely no way for him to find out if Heir even survived, or if the hero fell because he was dead – not unless Heir shows up on patrol whenever he returns to Seattle. If he didn't survive the fight, Karkat may never know, and the thought terrifies him, leaves him cold.

"IT CAN'T END LIKE THAT! NO. NO!" he screams. Crabdad shrieks back and pats him in what is no doubt intended as a reassuring slap on the back with a meaty claw, which naturally has the exact opposite effect on Karkat. "UNACCEPTABLE!"

After almost two hours spent frantically skipping between news channels, trying to suck the last drops of excitement out of a few different camera angles, Karkat has to admit defeat. It's noon, and he's probably starving. He says probably because he's still too worked up to feel anything but knots in his stomach. There is a brief moment of excitement that makes him drop a fledgling peanut butter and grubsauce sandwich flat on the ground when Karkat skrees and Karkat has to race back to the television. He's just in time to watch as channel 5 news plays the traffic cam footage from the road alongside Central Park, as four figures, two of them supported by the Puppeteer and Heir, all pile into one unmarked, nondescript van. They take off just ahead of the emergency crews, and after several minutes of absolutely appalling street racing technique they drive into an area where the traffic cams have been destroyed by Dark Star's rampage, and vanish for good. It's time stamped at two hours ago, and there's been nothing since then.

To Karkat's unending disgust, the news proceeds to dissolve into a frenzied free-for-all as reporters and hero researchers all scramble to analyze the fight and toss their opinion in the ring as to what the fuck had just gone down in New York. Karkat has to turn the television off after the fourth person speculating as to whether the ‘mysterious flying hero’ is a new member of the Houston team – obviously it’s Heir, come on, asshats! Are they fucking blind? This is just driving him batshit up the fucking belfrey.

Now he's just pissy, coming down off the high of watching the fight scene live on the television, and
a little more of his righteous irritation is starting up in the Hemogoblin half of his brain. Maybe not irritation so much as disappointment - but Karkat does disappointment like an enraged, pissy crab anyway, so there's effectively no difference. He's heard the 'crabby' pun enough from John (oh karkat don't be karabby :))) I SWEAR TO GOD JOHN I WILL RAIN VENGEANCE UPON YOU LIKE THE FURY OF 1000 SUNS. totes crabby :) that it no longer even bothers him. The unfortunate side effects of being raised by an insane, idiotic crab lusus - the puns flow like water, and after a while they wear away at your rageglands until you lose the ability to get truly angry about it.

Making a new sandwich and stuffing the remains of the last one in Crabdad's gaping maw, Karkat sits down to have lunch at around one. He checks his phone and frowns. He wonders if John even knows about the massive showdown that just went down - Karkat is nerding out massively, and while John is weirdly neutral about the Heir of Breath, he's a total geek for Flashstep, and Karkat can't imagine the fact that Flashstep apparently took one to the throat before the fight even really got started will stop John from voraciously hunting down every second of Flashstep footage available.

Still. John usually has his phone on him at the center, even though he can only spare a moment to answer during his lunch break, but there's been nothing at all from him since last night. And as Karkat slowly munches on his sandwich, mourning the unspeakably glorious chocolate pie that had been devoured by Crabdad in his hours of distraction, he can't fight the feeling, deep in his gut, that something is wrong.

In hindsight, something has felt off since Friday, when John’s Dad had called Karkat’s home phone and asked, his nervousness concealed behind a jovial front, if John had gone to Karkat’s house, as though Karkat hadn’t literally just dropped John off in front of his house and watched him walk inside. Yeah, that had been a little strange, and Karkat had flipped his shit really embarrassingly in front of John's dad for a while. But then John had texted Karkat around midnight to tell him he was fine, but wouldn’t be able to make it to anything all day Saturday, wanting to make up for his inability to work to full capacity. Not an unusual turn of events; this soup kitchen where John works has a fuckload of emergencies every so often due to low funding or some shit. But Karkat is irate, still wondering what kind of fuckpuppets would make a man work with a broken collarbone doing whatever the hell John actually does for these people on a regular basis.

Whatever. He'll give John until four, and by then the kid will probably emerge from his goddamn volunteering coma and realize just what he's been missing out on. Then Karkat will swoop in with his five hours of recorded news reports and ten tabs of YouTube videos to save the day. This is a fucking flawless plan.

No doubt this sense of wrongness is just Karkat's troll hindbrain getting all hormonal and bitchy again, pining for a moirail that can't be there every moment of the goddamn globefucking day.

Yeah. Right.

-

Five in the afternoon rolls around.

Karkat's rage has been steadily growing over the past few hours. Though he is aware that crashing around the house slamming cupboard doors and doing laundry with the kind of violence usually reserved for war arenas or troll football accomplishes nothing more than to aggravate Crabdad into near hysterics and piss Karkat off further, he can't seem to stop himself.

John's volunteering generally ends at four, and he's home by four thirty, sooner if his dad picks him up, and in the meanwhile he'd be texting Karkat all the while. There is still no sign of him on Pesterchum, and on a day in which apparently the entire continental United States (or at least New
York, the rational part of him whispers) has decided to go batshit insane, Karkat is Not Happy.

He finally snaps - not like that ever takes very long to happen. He picks up one of the dishes he's emptying from the dishwasher and launches it into the cupboard hard enough to crack it, and then whips his phone out of his pocket to dial John's number. He gets diddly fucking squat, and snarls when John's recorded voice chirps out the answering machine's message before hanging up. He tries the home number.

When no one fucking answers that, he forces himself to list all the logical reasons why both John and his usually reliable custodian would both have gone radio silent, again. It doesn't work, and by the time he’s out of the respite block he can barely put his phone down long enough to struggle into real clothes that aren't three fucking years old and falling apart at the seams, trying John on the Pesterchum chat app one last desperate time. His claws are almost too jittery to hit the keys, and his head throbs in time with his heartbeat. These are all probably symptoms of some kind of godawful troll disease slowly killing him from the inside out, but he can't even be assed to care anymore.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 17:25:11 --
CG: JOHN
CG: JOHN YOU ASS IT'S BEEN ALMOST 24 HOURS SINCE I LAST HEARD FROM YOU
CG: AND LET ME BE CLEAR ONE PISSANT TEXT MESSAGE OVER THE COURSE OF 24 HOURS IS A PRETTY SHIT RATIO
CG: YOUR DAD HAS STOPPED ANSWERING THE HOME PHONE TOO I SEE OH
THAT'S JUST FUCKING FANTASTIC YES THAT IS EXACTLY THE KIND OF RESPONSE THAT REASSURES ME THAT THE TWO OF YOU ARE STILL FUNCTIONING, BIOLOGICALLY VIABLE SPECIMENS OF THE HUMAN RACE
CG: JESUS FUCK JOHN IF THIS IS SOME KIND OF JOKE IT STOPPED BEING FUNNY APPROXIMATELY TWO SECONDS AFTER YOU GOT IT STUCK IN YOUR THINKPAN THAT IT WOULD BE FUNNY
CG: YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR IS AN INSULT TO THE VERY CONCEPT OF HUMOR AT THE BEST OF TIMES BUT CONGRATULATIONS YOU HAVE OUTDONE YOURSELF I WOULD APPLAUD YOU IF I WEREN'T BUSY NOT FREAKING THE FUCK OUT
CG: I'M COMING OVER TO YOUR GODDAMN HOUSE JOHN I SWEAR TO GOD IT BETTER STILL BE STANDING
CG: IF YOU’RE THERE PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE IMPELLING ARRIVAL OF MY RAGE-AVALANCHE
CG: IF YOU’RE NOT THERE PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE IMPELLING ARRIVAL OF SAID RAGE-AVALANCHE ANYWAY BECAUSE I WILL HUNT YOU DOWN TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH AND DRAG YOU BACK HOME BY YOUR PITIFUL EARS AND UNLEASH TRUE UNADULTERATED FURY UPON YOUR PUNY INCOMMUNICADO ASS
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 17:32:43 --

He receives absolutely no response. Karkat runs out of the house, then power walks to John’s house, refusing to let any prying neighbors see him distressed and racing off to John's house, again. He has a goddamn reputation to maintain, for Chrissakes, no matter how determined his moirail is to completely ruin him.

- Several minutes after Karkat leaves the house, the news station switches back over to the local news.

He isn’t there to hear the heated discussion of the Midnight Crew’s escape from lockup.
He doesn’t hear about the new evidence and blood samples detectives found on the top of the police station.

He doesn’t think anything of it at all.

-

The Egbert’s car is parked in the driveway, which is both totally normal and really worrying. The only good reason Karkat has for Dad Egbert not answering the home phone is because he got called into an emergency at his work place; but the car is here, which means Mr. Egbert should definitely be on the premises. Hesitating, Karkat scuffs his foot and ducks back behind a tree, calling the landline one last time in the hopes that maybe Mr. Egbert had just been unable to reach the phone in time.

This time, he gets a busy tone. Someone is at home, thank god. Karkat jogs the rest of the way up to the front door and knocks with more force than he usually allows himself too, shifting his weight restlessly from foot to foot as he resists the urge to kick the door in.

He can hear a faint murmur of voices from within, which means whoever’s using the phone is at the line right there in the front hallway. A low growl rumbles in the back of Karkat’s throat, the annoyance aggravating his already pretty fucking phenomenal temper to true form. Come on, all he needs is for John to open the door with that dopey, apologetic grin, and Karkat will give him the strongly-worded lecture of the century on how one does not blow off one’s troll moirail for an entire day without extensive prior notice, and then they can get back to their regularly scheduled Saturday afternoon activities.

Karkat is so far gone in his vindictive fantasy that the sound of the door swinging open surprises him. He gets his mouth halfway open, teeth bared, before he sees that Mr. Egbert has opened the door, not John.

Karkat has never seen Dad Egbert anything less than totally put together; the man cycles through any number of respectable, perfectly ironed and starched white suits combined with a completely proper and very nice hat no matter what day of the week it is, and he never has a speck of dirt or food on them even after he’s spent an entire evening baking assorted delectable confections. Even the night before, the man still had his button-up shirt on, though his hair had been ruffled.

So it’s like a sharp punch to the trachea when Mr. Egbert appears with his white suit jacket missing, the usually pristine undershirt wrinkled as though slept in, his face haggard and – holy shit is he unshaven shit fucking fucker fuck something’s wrong, John is hurt, John is sick, fuck, that’s the only reason why Mr. Egbert would look like today is the end of the fucking world –

John steps out from behind Samuel Egbert, and Karkat can’t stop the howl of pure fury that rips out of his throat as he reaches out with a hand and yanks John into a hug.

“Ahaha-ow, uh, hey Karkat!” John laughs, and Karkat feels a hand pat him awkwardly on the back. “What’s up?”

Karkat is too relieved and infuriated to answer. He eases his grip on John after that quick ‘ow’ and looks the dumbass over at arm’s length, teeth gritted as he takes in the still-present sling and the way John has to arch his shoulder a little to keep it at a comfortable angle. John can look as chipper as he fucking wants when he smiles at Karkat; he’s still got purple-black bruises under his brown eyes.

For an instant, Karkat feels disoriented, as though something about this picture is even more skewed than the obvious fact that his moirail is exhausted and injured and as dumb as a sack of hammers. But
he looks again, and it’s just John – dopey, confused John who is totally fine with Karkat giving him a thorough inspection with his claws clamped around John’s arms to keep him still.

“You are absolutely forbidden from doing anything. Just. Anything at all. Why are you even moving?!” Karkat demands, pushing his way into the house without looking Samuel Egbert’s direction. Yeah, he made himself look like a complete overprotective maniac yesterday, and today’s not exactly shaping up to give a much better impression. Too fucking bad. “What the fuck could those idiots have you doing with a broken arm that’s so strenuous that you can’t text me all day?”

John looks confused, and then shifty, and Karkat knows the next words out of this kid’s mouth are going to be complete and utter bullshit. Not outright lies, but John has this thing where if he thinks the answer will hurt someone, he’ll tone his words down so much that the answer turns on a diagonal and become unrecognizable. “And none of this ‘my arm isn’t all that broken, Karkat, and I only lifted like a couple thousand pounds worth of bullshit at work today’ dipshittery, John, I swear to god,” Karkat adds before John can even get started.

John blushes, abashed. Good. As he should be, Karkat thinks with a sniff of triumph as he ushers John toward the stairs. The front door creaks closed behind them, but John’s dad doesn’t say a word about the Karkat Invasion, just walks down the hall to his office with heavy footsteps while Karkat glowers up the stairs at John’s back, half-braced in case the kid collapsed or something unfathomably horrifying like that. “I left my phone at home again,” John says sheepishly. “Which was really stupid after I did the exact same thing after school yesterday, too. I haven’t even had time to sit down and look through all your messages. Don’t tell me, don’t tell me – I’m dumb. Soooo dumb.”

“That is, in fact, the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Karkat snaps, but some of the anger is already leaking out of him. Great, now he can’t even maintain a proper rage in John’s presence anymore; he’s getting all…leaky. Bleh. “Goddammit, John, sometimes I wonder how you wander around all day without me and still manage to survive. Seriously, where would you be without me? You probably totally missed out on New York, right?”

By the time they reach John’s room, Karkat’s tone has gone all gruff and weird, and he’s smiling a little as he shoves John around gently to start maneuvering around the kid’s messy bedroom. Weirdly enough, half the stuff on John’s desk is turned upside down, and his covers are piled up at the bottom of his bed, topped with half the laundry from the basket by the closet. Amazing. Even more chaos than usual. Who even knows what that’s all about. Karkat just takes advantage of the half-made pile and yanks the bedclothes and laundry onto the floor. He concedes for John’s injured sake that they need more soft things, but he also starts tossing textbooks onto his own side. He has an image to maintain, after all. He is a fucking badass, okay, he needs more pointy objects in his piles.

“New York?” John says, startled. He goes to grab a pillow from the head of his bed but Karkat flails at him with a glare until the human lets him take care of it. As though Karkat expects an injured moirail to overstress himself by lifting pillows and shit. What does John think Karkat is, a totally insensitive asshat? Honestly.

John has another weird look on his face when Karkat looks up, a cross between confusion and faint recognition. “Oh, right,” he says, laughing uncertainly. “Something went on over there, right? Wow! Talk about some shenanigans, am I right?”

Karkat glares at John and grabs him by the collar of his shirt, shifting him bodily until he’s lined up so Karkat can shove him backward into the pile without feeling guilty. “You’ve got absolutely no fucking idea what I’m talking about, do you?” Karkat says in disgust, rolling his eyes.

John looks almost anxious as he gives a halfhearted laugh, eyeing Karkat with trepidation. “Uh…”
Karkat flings up his hands. “There was a giant fucking showdown between three heroes and some batshit crazy lady that took out half the nookchafing city!” he yells, stomping over to the desk. “It’s basically the greatest, most epic thing to ever happen this entire bugfucking year, and you missed it, John!” He’s left his laptop at home with all of his saved YouTube searches, but he can remember most of the better quality links. He drags John’s computer across to the pile, the wires stretching to accommodate the move, and starts typing rapidly after John hurriedly logs in and closes all his waiting Pesterchum windows. Karkat’s block of solid grey text fill up pretty much the entire screen, but Karkat catches a flash of red and pale orange, and maybe even purple text before John closes out of the program. He doesn’t think anything much of it.

“I mean, Heir was there. Heir was in New York City!” He is babbling by this point, some of his disbelief and irritation at John’s unmatched capacity for obliviousness wiped out by the remaining emotions from earlier. He pulls up the phone camera feed – the quality is shit, but it also managed to get a more continuous stream of the entire fight than the helicopter, which had to keep fleeing and cutting out when the raging battle in the sky drew too close. The video already has a million views and counting; major heroic showdowns always get massive amounts of attention. “I mean, how? How did he even know to be there? That’s halfway across the country from where we are!”

“Wait, wha – how do you know it was Heir?” John leans forward as Karkat perches on the edge of the pile, balancing his injured arm on his knee with a faint huff. Without looking, Karkat reaches behind him into the pile and withdraws another pillow. He lifts up John’s arm gently and sets the pillow underneath without a word. “Uh, th-thanks Karkat,” John stammers out. Dope.

“Because I have a serious problem. It’s an addiction. You should probably hold an intervention for my own good, except don’t you fucking dare Egbert, there is nothing wrong with me.” Karkat sweeps the shitty quality video for when the Puppeteer first shows up, and then Heir a moment later. “Shit. Looks like this one doesn’t start until after Flashstep gets his shit wrecked. I know you’re a massive fanboy over that guy, but he only lasted like ten minutes, tops.”

“They got that on video?!” John says, genuine concern spreading across his face. Yeah, the news that Seattle’s resident hero has up and skipped out to New York barely fazes the kid, but oh fuck, Flashstep is in trouble? Crisis mode.Fuck, John has weirdass priorities.

“Not very well,” Karkat concedes as they watch the chaos unfold onscreen. “No one really noticed they’d showed up until after this maniac started tearing up the Guggenheim. And by the time they ID’d everyone, Flashstep was already out of the equation.”

The balance of the pile shifts a little too far forward, threatening to smoosh over to one side as John peers intently at the screen, his eyes glinting in the artificial light as he watches the fight. It’s less intense for Karkat this time around, but his bloodpusher still seizes in a dull panic when Dark Star and Heir, for whatever reason, fall together out of the sky, despite the fact that he knows the Puppeteer will be there to catch them. He shudders and leans into John’s side, trying to shove the morbid thoughts out of his thinkpan.

John shifts a bit, then sits back when the video cuts off, scrubbing at his face with a hand. When Karkat takes a better look at him, he can see John is exhausted, a faint twinge of pain tightening the corners of his eyes. “Were you seriously working all the fucklong day?” Karkat asks, kicking the mouse away from John’s hand when the kid goes to click on another video. “You do know that the goddamn arm will just keep bothering you if you don’t let it rest for once. Seriously, tell your job to fuck right off next week. You’re a volunteer, they can’t fire you. You’re going to hurt yourself more than you’re helping anyone at this rate.”

“…Look, maybe you’re right, Karkat,” John says, one hand still pressed to the side of his head.
Karkat wonders if John even realizes how tired and utterly fucking pitiful he looks like that. “But I already had to miss some…days over this stupid arm thing. I just hate that my routine is all messed up because of a stupid injury.”

“Too fucking bad. It’s only been like, three days. It’s going to get worse before it gets better, you dumb shit.” Karkat logs off the computer over John’s protests. “No, look at you, this is the most exciting thing to happen since the Scourge Sisters broke up and had a fucking blackrom free-for-all through downtown Chicago, and you can barely keep your eyes open.”

John mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like “But I have work tonight,” which is just patently ridiculous, unless he’s talking about homework or something idiotically Egbertian like that. Karkat pushes John backward out of his hunched over crouch and mashes the kid’s face into a pillow. John growls at him halfheartedly, but he keeps his face turned into the pillow, his eyes slow to blink and heavy in the light of the desk lamp. Karkat probably should have just made the pile on the bed, but the computer wouldn’t have reached them at all, then. Whatever.

Karkat makes himself comfortable, avoiding John’s broken collarbone but tucking his head against the hollow of the opposite shoulder, patting at John’s face with a hand. “Yeah?” Karkat mutters. He makes sure to keep the rising, clicking purr at the back of his throat muted. How fucking embarrassing would it be if he broke out into full-on palerumbles after five fucking minutes in a pile? Christ, learn some self-control, Karkat. “No, I don’t fucking think so. No work for you. Congratulations. I, your lord and master and moirail, fucking forbid you from anything even remotely related to work. Not even work’s creepy human-incest cousin, volunteering. Can’t do it.”

John squirms and an elbow catches Karkat in the side. Little shit. Karkat waits with the patience of a damn saint while John figures out how he wants to adjust himself, until abruptly said patience runs out because who are we kidding, the Karkat equivalent of patience is basically just a slowly increasing rage gambit. He pats at John’s face again and wraps an arm around his waist until the kid has no choice but to lie still and fucking relax.

Karkat honestly can’t believe he’s the one doing the calming for once in this relationship. The universe is probably slowly feeding itself into a supermassive black hole in a suicidal attempt to end this backwards land madness.

“Just go the fuck to sleep,” Karkat mumbles, sticking his nose into John’s hair. John even smells off, like exhaustion and ozone and bizarrely like the ocean, but underneath that is the usual chlorine and baked goods and shampoo and human sweat smell that is John, and that’s fine. That’s fan-fucking-tastic.

- By amazing (and by amazing he means disgustingly exasperating) coincidence, Karkat’s emergency ‘wake the fuck up you lazy shit you’re missing hero work’ alarm and Samuel Egbert’s hesitant knock on the door occur within seconds of each other. “MNAGH,” Karkat says coherently, narrowly avoiding being hit by John’s nose as he ducks his head to tear his phone from his pocket and crush beneath his heel. “Dad?” John says blearily, rubbing at the spot on his left temple that means he has a headache. “What’s up?”

“Ah. Karkat still in there with you, son?” John’s dad asks, and holy fuck how can he sound so fucking cheerful and upbeat when he and Karkat’s alarm are literally the devil incarnate right now. No one who isn’t working for some angel of double-death could possibly sound that chipper while waking Karkat up from a really fucking not-stressful cuddlenap, the first real sleep he’s gotten in days. Seriously, pretty much everything on this planet stresses Karkat out, and now this? In the middle of embarrassingly sappy palecuddles?
It’s official. The universe wants to murder Karkat Vantas slowly, with feeling.

The lamp is still on, though its dim yellow light may as well now be the equivalent of the white-hot intensity of the sun to Karkat’s sore eyes. Sleeping with the temporary contacts in and his glasses still on – the worst fucking idea. The worst. He finally manages to jab the alarm off, sees that they’ve only been asleep for about four hours, and raises his arm to fling the phone at John’s wall, teeth bared in a snarl. John catches him around the elbow before he can follow through, papping blindly at Karkat’s face with his eyes squinting. John’s glasses fell off at some point, and without them his face looks much younger.

And Karkat’s heart stops because he’s still half asleep and a younger john is walking down the corridor and he won’t listen, he won’t turn around, there’s blood dripping from the walls but john won’t stop -

“Oh, yeah, Karkat’s still here,” John calls back, fumbling through the blankets and pillows and comic books until he relocates his glasses and shoves them onto his nose. That breaks through Karkat’s moment of piercing horror, and Karkat starts breathing again, a little shaky. What the actual fuck?

“I see.” Samuel Egbert’s voice is totally neutral through the buffer of the door. “Is he staying overnight, then?”

“I don’t -” John breaks off and looks at Karkat, biting the corner of his lip. “Um. Karkat?”

Karkat takes a moment to answer, still thrown by whatever fucked up image just flashed through his mind. He can only imagine that his face has gone deathly pale, but hopefully John is still too disoriented to notice Karkat just nearly had some kind of horrorstroke. Has his thinkpan finally, officially cracked? Where the fuck had that come from?

There’s also the fact that he’s very aware that Heir is probably still not in town. Hemogoblin would be a pretty pisspoor hero if he didn’t patrol tonight to cover the slack from the other hero’s impromptu field trip, even despite the lingering fury over Hearts Boxcars’s escape. He can’t let his emotions overrun him as a hero. Last night made that pretty fucking clear. He flipped the fuck out in true Karkat-class and look at what it had gotten him – several lungfuls of absolutely foul bay water filtered through his shitty, still-irritated gills, and fuck-all to show for it. And emotions include the overwhelming desire to stay with John, to take just one night off. He shakes his head. “Nah. Crabdad is probably flipping his shit right now,” Karkat says, hoping John doesn’t probe any further than that. There’s also no reason for Crabdad to flip out – more than usual, anyway – if Karkat stays with John, but he’s still too woozy with the aborted nap to think up a concrete excuse to bail.

Disappointment flickers across John’s face before he smiles and scratches at the back of his head. “Aw. Okay. Should probably not make the poor guy worry. You only have a few weeks left with him, right?”

Karkat can feel an old migraine approaching. “It’s an it, John, not a he. It’s just a lusus. It worries when I so much as close the fridge door the wrong way, or leave the window cracked open at night, or if I fail to organize my rom-coms in order of the box’s color rather than actor or title, both of which would actually make goddamn sense, because it’s fucking senile.”

“Yeah, but he still cares about you,” John says, yawning so widely his jaw cracks. He gets to his feet and stretches, and Karkat reluctantly does the same, stuffing his satanic phone back into his pocket. “You’re his kid! You should definitely spend some of his last few weeks together!”

John just has this thing he does where he overpersonalizes lusii. He doesn’t get that custodians can
cycle through anywhere from five to ten wrigglers, depending on their lifespan, and thus there is no permanent emotional bond as there is between human parental units and their spawn. It is most likely a human thing, since their ancestral system is so much more direct and immediately accessible, as opposed to the incestuous slurry and centuries-spanning gene maps that link trolls. Karkat has resigned himself to it. Shaking his head, he steps around the abandoned computer and heads for the door. “Yeah, yeah, okay, John, I’ll pander to the fatass crab for what little time I have left to put up with it before I’m free at last.”

“That’s good. And we can get together and do something awesome tomorrow afternoon, okay, Karkat?” John promises as they stumble to the front door. “Like go to the park! The weather should be nice enough for the park, right?”

“You always think the weather is nice enough for the park. It could be negative fifty fucking degrees outside and we could piss ice in the open air and you’d still think there was a nice breeze going,” Karkat says.

John pouts at him, his eyes still all bruised with exhaustion and his shoulder hunched up. Fuck.

“Yes, fine, we can go to the park.”

Yeah, he’s having a harder and harder time telling John no.

-

Karkat goes to work that night, and he doesn’t think about what he saw when John’s glasses came off.

He doesn’t try to remember what he dreamed about during few fitful bursts of restless sleep he got in the ‘coon early Friday morning, what he saw in those last few confused moments of sleep after that nap in the evening.

He absolutely does not see flashes of the same images painted across the backs of his eyelids as he rides home at three in the morning, rainbows of blood streaking down the walls of the bus when he blinks and he jerks his head up, startling the nursing student who always sits across from him. It takes a moment to reassure himself that he’s awake, he’s fine, but fuck no, he’s not going to sleep well tonight, either. There’s a cold sweat breaking out along his skin that makes him tug down his sleeves and pat at his face surreptitiously with the inside of his sweater hood, to obscure any unnatural red tint that might seep through his skin.

He’d rather it just think of it as a new bout of insomnia. At least insomnia, he knows how to handle. He’s been handling his sleepless paranoia his whole life.

The dream, he can’t handle. He can’t.

-

Karkat dreams –

He stands in the center of a cavernous hallway, his eyes sliding over the words painted on the walls. He wants desperately to be able to read what they say, but he isn’t allowed to focus on them, his gaze drawn back toward the door at the end of the hall no matter how many times he tries to jerk his head toward the painted words.

He doesn’t feel time pass, but after a moment he is convinced, with that utter certainty that stems from the illogic of dreams, that a millennia has gone by. The hallway is unchanged because
everything here is sealed in against the threat of the vacuum of space. The construct is no longer in space, of course, but the filtering and preservation systems run steadily on and on. Even the bright color of the painted words remains unchanged. Motes of dust are sucked into air recycling units before they have a chance to form more than the lightest layer of dull grey on the floor. When Karkat tries to move his feet, he sees that he has left no footprint in the dust.

At the end of the hallway, there is a resounding clang. The door dents under a single blow, and then another, and another. Finally, the vacuum seal gives, and the door crashes open, fresh air blowing through the hallway for the first time in centuries.

John walks in.

(This makes perfect sense at the time, though later Karkat will be utterly baffled. Seriously, what the hell is the context of this dream?)

John has a giant, oddly shaped lime green hammer in his hand, but it vanishes a second later as he looks around the hallway, his face quizzical. Karkat is baffled, unable to place exactly what is so strange about his moirail until John wanders down the hallway and walks by Karkat as though he isn’t even there.

This John doesn’t even reach Karkat’s chin. He can’t be more than thirteen years old.

And his eyes are bright, clear blue.

Karkat can’t move to touch John, and he is absolutely certain even if Karkat could speak, John wouldn’t be able to hear him. There’s a sense of inevitability and Karkat is resigned to the fact that all he can do is watch.

That becomes a problem when John stops, considering the painted words on the wall with his head tilted to the side. He traces one of the grafitti’d phrases, underlining it with his finger, and then shrugs. He clearly doesn’t understand what the words say.

Karkat, able to focus on and read the words for the first time, can understand. It’s messy and the paint dried in smeared splotches, but it’s pretty basic Alternian script, and he doesn’t understand why John, who’s in AP Alternian Language this year, can’t read it.

you’re gonna die motherfucker

Karkat goes cold. John keeps one hand on the wall as he steps around fallen computer equipment and piles of broken dolls, horns, and machine parts. Gradually, more of the writing on the wall comes into focus as John walks away, out of Karkat’s reach, and each message frightens Karkat more and more, until all he wants to do is grab John and shake him and fling him back out the door he came in, because at least out there he’d be safe.

YOU REALLY DON’T WANNA DO THIS MOTHERFUCKER

if you keep going you’re not gonna like what you see

TURN BACK RIGHT THE MOTHERFUCK NOW

:o(

:o)

what are you MOTHERFUCKIN’ BLIND?
John, John look at me, Karkat screams internally. His oblivious moirail keeps walking away, his shoulders tiny and his thirteen-year-old frame skinny as a leaf, and he looks so, so fragile, even more frighteningly fragile than current-John with his battered arms and constant exhaustion.

He’s walking right into a trap.

Karkat can’t move.

As John passes over the mantel into the vast inner computer lab, he turns back, blinking over his shoulder, and hope jolts through Karkat with the thought that maybe one of his mental screams somehow caught John’s attention.

Blood trickles out of John’s nose, a thick red line that trails down over his mouth and drips off his chin. John stumbles and raises a hand to touch his forehead as he shakes his head, dazed, making no move to wipe at the blood.

Don’t go don’t go it’s going to kill you don’t go –

When John raises his head, he closes his eyes and starts walking again, his sneakers squeaking too-loud in the echoing, hollow space beyond the hallway. Soon he’s out of sight, and Karkat still can’t move, can’t chase down his moirail and drag him back to safety. He’s absolutely certain, with a sickening knot in his stomach, that John is not coming back from this.

The words painted in an arch over the doorway slide into focus.

he’s gonna tear you apart

HONK

honk

:o(

From the room beyond, a monstrous roar rattles the entire structure, and the sound of claws scraping against metal pierces into Karkat’s ears until they bleed.

And John screams, and screams, and screams -

-

Karkat wakes up.

He doesn’t sleep again that week, though if he asked himself, he couldn’t really remember why.

He just remembers there was so much blood.

---

The isolation tank is an exercise in futility.

Perhaps it worked once before, in Rose’s youth, to soothe her after that grimdark breakdown she can barely recall. But the grimdark event in her childhood had been no more than a fleeting moment of horror; like being pushed down by a wave on the beach, she had experienced a brief moment of breathless loss of control. Now that she is no longer a child – now that she has endured hours drowning slowly in that endless, crushing sea – there is no palliative balm to be found by lying in a lightless, soundless tank of salt water. There is no change in the darkness when she opens her eyes or
when she closes them, and the earplugs she wears to keep the salt water out of her ears renders her incapable of breaking the silence even with her own voice. The skin temperature warmth of both the water and the air around her renders the desired meditative state impossible; all she can focus on is sucking in breath after breath through her nose, half-anticipating that each breath will bring the scent of bloodbrine. How can she be expected to relax and meditate the last of the grimdark from her mind when every breath, every blink, sends her flashing back to that place where her mind had trailed off into the dark spaces between the stars?

She lies within the tanks for four hours, and only then does she concede that remaining within the tank may in fact be damaging her further rather than healing her. It is a difficult to admit such weakness, even to herself, but Rose has always prided herself on her ability to objectively analyze the psyches of those around her. She is painfully aware that she has already failed to apply this clarity of vision to herself thrice before. She failed to admit that her drinking was a problem; she failed to admit that she could no longer distinguish her own thoughts from the whispersong of the Horrorterrors; and finally, she failed to admit that she hated her mother for what she had done, until all three failures came crashing to a head.

Thus, as experience has proven, when Rose represses things, people die. She cannot afford to lose sight of herself again.

Once she has established that remaining in the isolation tank will only promote the encroachment of unpleasant memories and breath-stealing panic attacks that wring her heart and leave her hard-pressed to maintain her composure, she reaches out, trembling, to feel for a wall that she is no longer certain will be there. Perhaps she was never in the tank; perhaps she is still in that icy, grimdark sea with nothing to cling to but the tangle that burrows its way into the back of her skull, licking at her eyes and wrapping around her throat and –

Her fingers hit the smooth interior of the tank, and she is shaking in earnest now as she twists her body so that both hands press against the wall, fumbling and sliding along the smooth surface until she finds the panic button and mashes it down with the palm of her hand.

She is not sure if that last flash of panic had been simply her imagination, or a true hallucination. She makes a firm mental note to monitor any further such mental slips closely.

She must not lose sight of herself again.

When the lid clicks open and folds back, letting light spill into the tank, Rose feels tears sting at her eyes. She blinks them away before they can fall, and gasps for breath as she sits up and gets her feet beneath her, her movements sluggish in the dense, Epsom salt-laden water.

There is no one to greet her or assist her as she clumsily hoists herself out of the tank, water sloshing as she levers her legs over the rim. Monitor me only if you wish to be killed by me, she had told her mother, unable to look at Rue Lalonde’s face for fear that the surging hatred would clear a new channel for the grimdark. I am not a child, mother. I do not want your eyes upon me.

A crude warning, perhaps, but a necessary one. When the white carapacian calling herself the Personal Motorist had escorted them to the rendezvous in Newark, the sight of her mother’s angular frame and tailored white lab coat had caused such pain and fury to swell in her chest that she had been forced to bury her face in John’s shoulder as she clenched her teeth against something unspeakable. John, the same adorably naïve sweetheart that he always has been, even after three years of Rose thoroughly neglecting their friendship, had just hugged her again and asked if she was alright before frantically retracting the question. He is well aware that she is not alright.

And then, of course, John had been forced to leave. His elucidation of the situation had been jumbled
and full of John’s usual chattering tangents that occur whenever he confuses himself and continues to babble regardless, expecting Rose to keep up with his wild, mutable chain of thought. She has, naturally, gleaned that John is Heir of Breath, a hero based in Seattle whom she has psychoanalyzed in passing to spend the time in years past. (That much seems almost obvious, in retrospect, and Rose is not entirely sure how she failed to recognize John behind a pair of goggles and mask for all these years. Perhaps the same way John never knew the Seer for Rose when she waltzed about in broad daylight with no more than a thin mask.) However, John himself seems uncertain of what sequence of events could have caused him to arrive without reason in Houston, somehow meet up with Flashstep and the Puppeteer, and then convince the other two heroes to join him in a race to meet Rose in New York. The journey to Houston alone should have taken John hours, but he is quite clear when he says that it took him mere seconds.

She will simply have to pester him on the subject posthaste, once she has retrieved a new laptop. Her old computer no doubt still resides at the Lalonde mansion, if it managed to escape the explosion of power that had occurred when the tangle took over Rose’s body. She never had a cell phone, had not seen the need to purchase one while trapped alone in her house with no one but the Noblest Gods for company. Somewhere along the line, Rose had convinced herself that there was no point in communicating with old friends and colleagues, and slowly reinforced the isolation of the manse through her own lack of action. She could have reinstated the postal service to the mansion; she could have used any number of social media websites to reach out to John, despite not knowing his chumhandle.

Now, she can only wonder if the grimdark had already begun to seep, cold and subtle, into her skull as early as three years ago, directing her with subconscious urges to cut herself off from those like John and Kanaya who might have been able to ease her psychological distress. She will obtain a cell phone now, in addition to a new computer, even if she must submit to her mother’s disdainful scrutiny to do so. If there is even the slightest chance the Horrors of the Furthest Ring intentionally pushed Rose to isolate herself, she will do everything in her power to prevent repeating those mistakes.

She will not lose sight of herself again.

The air of the isolation room is unpleasantly cool against her bare flesh, and Rose shivers as she collects herself, sitting on the edge of the tank for a long moment to adjust to the dim light of overhead lamp. She plucks the ear plugs from her ears, and relishes the sound of her own panicky breathing. That is most likely a bad sign, and she makes another mental note of her symptoms. She must be vigilant.

There is a small shower in a corner of the room, with towels and a bundle of white garments folded up on a table to one side, the void restraints lying on top of the clothing. Stepping carefully with wet feet, Rose strides to the shower and twists the knob until steam rises off the hot water pouring out of the showerhead in thick waves. It burns her skin when she steps under the stream, hot enough to hurt, but it is neither the sticky, sharp burn of acid, nor the icy shock of dark water, and thus infinitely preferable to any other temperature. She rinses her hair with white vinegar from an ostentatious porcelain jar that rests next to the shower, persevering through the unpleasant smell and sensation in the name of removing the excess salt from her hair.

Then she is faced with the hospital gown that is all her mother has left for Rose to wear. Clearly, her mother’s design in providing these garish, shapeless white garments is to provoke a reaction from Rose. She can practically hear the taunt underlying the gentle suggestion in her mother’s voice even now – *let’s try to change our perspective a little, dear, perhaps something a bit brighter will improve your mood and help with that little anger problem, hmm?*
In retaliation, Rose pulls on the clothing without protest, not letting even a fraction of her distaste curl the corners of her lips. She folds the heavy white cloth over her chest and buttons it up the side of her leg and across the diagonal cut of the collar. For a patient’s gown it bears a remarkable resemblance to the angled jaunt and flare of her mother’s usual abominable dresses; just another gauntlet thrown down in the ongoing cold war between mother and daughter. The sleeves hang baggy and ill-fitting on Rose’s shoulders, and she takes deliberate, vicious delight in ripping off a strip from the gown’s hem to use as a makeshift belt around her waist.

The only problem is the very white, very fluffy slippers that sit on the floor. White or no, they are precisely the kind of luxurious slippers that Rose thinks would feel exceedingly comfortable right now. Her mother most likely knows that these slippers would appeal to Rose, and placed them here as yet another deliberate ploy. Unlike the hospital gown, which is something Rose would never wear even in her darkest hour, and was obviously meant to provoke her ire, these slippers pose the opposite kind of trap: they are intended to soothe, a peace offering of the most sickeningly refined brand of passive-aggression: here, my lovely girl, you can at least have these; you like them, don’t you? I knew you would. They look very...cozy.

Rose does not put the slippers on.

Rose stares at the cuffs for several minutes, weighing her options. Her mother is adamant that the entire laboratory complex is thoroughly shielded with her personalized Void technology – “to ward off the wandering eyes of certain undesirable malefactors, my dear” – and that shielding provides some measure of ambient protection against the grimdark. Even now, Rose can feel how the ever-present awareness of the Horrorterrors that resides in the back of her mind, much weaker ever since she threw off the tangle’s grip, is now suppressed completely, so that the only thing she can sense is her own mind.

But until she can meditate properly and shore up her shattered mental defenses, she cannot take the risk. She clamps the restraints onto each wrist. Anything that assists her in maintaining her individual sense of self and warding off the assimilation of the grimdark is desirable at this point.

Combing her fingers through her hair, she does not look in the mirror. Her mother and her lackeys have failed to provide any of Rose’s customary supplies anyway. Her face feels uncomfortably exposed as Rose goes out into the hall. Still barefoot, the intolerably appealing slippers hooked on the fingers of one hand to discard in the first waste receptacle she finds, she pads down the hallway and begins her scouting run.

She wants to know exactly what work could possibly have so damningly vital as to have driven Rue Lalonde to leave Rose without a word, without a note, for over three years.

She is intensely curious.

- Rue Lalonde has three doctorates. Rose knows her credentials by heart, because on the occasion of her mother’s birthday - oh, five years ago? How time flies - Rose had the certificates declaring the three degrees rewritten in Japanese calligraphy, framed in garish, bright orange frames and hung like family portraits over the hearth in the living room. It had been a glorious reposte in what had, at the time, felt like an endless but mentally stimulating war between Lalondes. And Rose therefore recalls quite clearly that Rue’s degrees are in astroparticle physics, unorthodox physical cosmology, and quantum mechanics.

Thus far, Rose has investigated an inorganic chemical lab, a room that reeked of burning plastic in which a troll used robotic controls to engrave grooves on a magnified computer chip, and a fully
operational surgical theater, empty at the moment but with an array of surgical tools lined up neatly on a rolling tray, apparently left over from the last major surgery. None of these disciplines lie within Rue Lalonde's purview.

This, then, is more than just her mother's new personal lab. This is a fully operational research facility, spanning more than a few thaumaturgic/alchemy fields and almost every branch of the sciences that Rose can imagine.

Rose has to sit for a long moment in the hallway, her legs crossed in a meditative fold as she leans her head back against the wall. When she has regained her self-control, she is able to acknowledge the fact that her mother has a life of her own, a successful one in fact, and that it is a life that has no open slot for a daughter to fill.

This epiphany simply wearies Rose. It is strenuous work to loathe and love and grieve for someone for three years, not knowing if they are alive or dead, and more arduous still to maintain that level of hatred after having the rage multiplied a thousandfold in a hivemind and weaponized by ravening eldritch abominations. No, Rose thinks she can look upon the face of her mother, now. The brief hours spent in the sensory deprivation tank did that much good, it would seem.

The clicking, rapid patter of feet on tile rouses Rose from her contemplation. She raises her eyes to see a familiar carapacian trotting down the corridor, the floppy grey hood of her neutral carapacian garb bouncing with each step.

PM: Oh! Hello Seer! You are awake!

PM: I'm glad!

"Personal Motorist," Rose says, smiling faintly. She, John, and Flashstep had all dipped in and out of slumber during the discreet egress from New York City, but Rose remembers the first few moments when the Puppeteer had bodily tossed the three of them into the back seat, informed them that 'seatbelts are for fucking pansies,' and then promptly buckled himself up in the passenger's seat and told PM to 'put the pedal to the metal.'

PM had, unfortunately, obliged. The first five minutes of the drive had been five minutes of high octane terror as the carapacian floored it, taking every turn on two wheels, barreling over any pile of debris that she couldn't avoid, soaring over an abandoned police road block by using the chassis of an overturned truck as a ramp, and executing one particularly flawless handbrake turn that had sent all three teenagers flying against the opposite side of the vehicle, screaming as the van skidded sideways for nearly fifteen feet. All the while PM had hunched over the steering wheel with her elbows out, squinting out from under the brim of her hood as she sought out the next most dangerous method of exiting the city.

John, still the most able-bodied person in the vehicle other than the smirking Puppeteer, had then taken matters into his own hands and forcibly buckled Dave and Rose in, just in time for PM to catch sight of approaching news crews and evade them with a violent bootlegger turn in order to peel off in the opposite direction.

It had been...an experience.

PM: Oh, no, Seer. I am not a Personal Motorist anymore!

PM: I am a Protégé M-Mediator! That is my usual title these days. Being a Motorist was a temporary designation.
"Ah. Of course. My apologies, Protégé Mediator," Rose says, rising to her feet. Rose herself is of average height, but the pale carapacian barely reaches her sternum, tilting her head back to look up at Rose with beady black eyes, her claws clacking together in the nonverbal portion of carapacian telepalogue.

PM: I wanted to seek your audience to apologize in person, Seer.

PM: It was I who delivered the Doctor's missive to you. And then I saw that when you opened it, a terrible thing happened! An awful thing!

PM: I was just so happy to be a Parcel Mistress again, I didn't realize you would be hurt! Please forgive me, Seer.

By the end of her apology, PM's face has fallen, and she clasps her claws together in jumbled shame. Rose shakes her head, somehow contorting her lips into an expression of forgiveness, when her instinct at the moment is to suppress all emotion until she can meditate in earnest. PM does not deserve to suffer undue guilt; Rose knows that there are only three beings responsible for her loss of control, and one of them is in fact an ageless, tentacled hivemind seeking nothing less than the entropic death and assimilation of all life in the universe. "Do not blame yourself for what happened, please. You have said yourself that you were only the messenger - you could not possibly have known what the letter contained, or that my reaction would be so...uncouth. There is no need for you to apologize."

The carapacian perks up visibly, her eyes crinkling in a genuine, whole-hearted smile.

PM: Thank you, Seer!

PM: You are quite right of course. It would have violated the sacred precepts of the M A I L for me to have read the letter before I delivered it.

PM: But I still wish that I could have spared you all that pain. If you ever require any assistance from a humble Protégé, please do not hesitate to ask! I would be happy to help!

"Thank you, PM. I appreciate that." Rose sees no need to turn down the offer. She is in the heart of her mother's domain, and she intends to accumulate every tactical advantage she can to preempt any unpleasant notions Rue Lalonde may get into her head concerning Rose's future. "At the moment, I seek a computer with external internet access. I wish to reconnect with a few dear friends who I owe...more than I can say, and the last computer I located seemed to be engaged in nurturing a fledgling artificial intelligence with only restricted access to the laboratory intranet. Would you be able to aid and abet me in this endeavor?"

The Mediator goes entirely still, as a dreamy, almost manic grin crosses her face.

PM: Oooooh! You wish to send...messages.

PM: Oh, yessss. Follow me!

From within her grey wrappings, the Protégé Mediator withdraws a battered, faded navy cap. She places it lovingly upon her head, and then points dramatically down the hallway before taking off at a quick trot. Rose follows her more sedately, unable to keep her forced smile from graduating into true amusement. It is hard not to be cheered in the face of such genuine, endearing enthusiasm. Rose is not certain what PM is training to mediate, but her Parcel Mistress roots are most evident.
The laboratory truly is a maze. In Rose's short wanderings she made sure to keep track of what turns she took so she could at least keep the isolation room a fixed point in her mind, but without PM guiding her she has no doubt she would have become hopelessly lost in the endless span of labs and offices. The fact that the complex is at least three stories tall, and delves who knows how far down into the earth, means that Rose could easily have ended up in another building in the complex entirely before finding herself in the computer café. PM presents the open doorway to Rose with a flourish of her claws, and Rose steps in to find herself in what appears to be a computer café. More than that, this is an outside room, with windows that actually open up on a view of the lake and forest beside the compound, and the moon rising above in the night sky. It is a refreshing change from the windowless, closed in anonymity of the artificially-lit hallways.

It is night, and yet Rose feels no need to meditate. For the first time in years, it seems, the Horrorterrors are so stymied by the Void restraints that they cannot reach out, not even to brush at her mind and lick at her sanity. It is...a welcome change.

Rose strides to the nearest desk and lifts the computer monitor, messing with the wires until she can haul it down onto the floor with a huff, setting up her new base of operations on the ground behind the desk. She sits ramrod straight with the desk pressed up against her back, a reassurance that she has something solid at her back, and boots up the computer. “Thank you, PM,” she murrums, watching the faint glow of the computer screen avidly. Unlike the artificial intelligence's incubator, the internet connection is unfiltered, though she suspects not unmonitored, and she is able to download the Pesterchum application in minutes. “Yes, this will serve well.”

The carapacian claps her hands together in delight, sitting down opposite Rose with a thump.

PM: Wonderful!

PM: May I ask who you are trying to message?

“You may indeed ask me such a thing,” Rose says, unable to resist. “Are you going to?”

PM just blinks at her quizzically, hands faltering.

PM: ?????

Rose takes pity on the carapacian. She doesn’t know how well admittedly trifling word play translates when one of the conversants makes use of a primarily telepathic dialogue system. “I am attempting to contact an old friend of mine, and a slightly newer friend who I have similarly neglected in recent months. You met John earlier – he wore a most magnificent pair of swim goggles.”

PM: Ohhhhhh. The Heir!

The Mediator nods sagely. Then she frowns, little furrowing cracks appearing between her eyes, and taps at her chin with a claw.

PM: That makes sense.

PM: It is good to stay in touch with your friends, Seer! Communication is very important!

PM: If the Heir was here, though, why didn’t he just stay? You al– friends are much stronger together than they are apart!

Rose raises an eyebrow. “Words of wisdom, PM, but I’m afraid John has an alias to maintain in Seattle,” she says, smoothly concealing the rest of her surprise. Could it be that PM here knows more
about what happened this morning than she lets on? Perhaps, if Rose cannot pry candid answers from her mother, she can probe PM’s knowledge base and see how much the carapace knows. It could, after, all have simply been an offhand comment, a pithy truism, and no more, but for that slip of the tongue. You all? “You may remain if you wish, but I will most likely be occupied with mending my rather derelict relationships for the foreseeable future. There’s no need for you stay with me if you have other business to attend to.”

Almost immediately PM springs up, claws clenched before her chest in excitement. Her eyes fill with far-off awe and respect, and she is clearly enraptured by something Rose can’t see.

PM: I should go see where my teacher is.

PM: You should meet her, Seer! She is very Wise! How do you say – she is my ‘idol’!

“That sounds lovely, Mediator,” Rose says politely, but her attention is now being drawn back to the Pesterchum app as she finishes logging in to her account. There is a single name in her chumroll, and instead of being greyed out as Rose had half-hoped it would be, it is currently lit up in jade green. Kanaya is online, then. Rose hesitates, the cursor hovering over the name.

She has not been good to Kanaya. Perhaps, with John, her neglect has been more prolonged, but Rose is hideously aware that Kanaya has been forced to witness Rose’s descent into willing alcoholism, to watch Rose slowly wear away at herself until nothing remained. The very thought of rereading the endless pesterlogs of green text begging her to see reason, fruitlessly offering personal assistance through any recovery process Rose desired, makes Rose cringe.

Truly, she is a coward.

A thin, clicking hand touches her arm. Rose jolts with surprise as PM thumps her heartily on the shoulder.

PM: Don’t worry!

PM: I am sure everything will be alright! I have faith in you!

Then, without waiting for a reply, PM scurries away.

Despite the encouragement, when the Mediator patters her way out the door, her telepathic hums of delight still echoing in Rose’s mind, Rose closes her eyes and shifts her cursor to type ectoBiologist in the ‘Find New Chum!’ search engine rather than open a window to pester Kanaya. Strange, that; she would have thought John’s tendency to use ghostyTrickster for literally every forum and video game account he’d made in their middle school years would have at least prevailed until the release of Pesterchum a few years ago. Perhaps he changed it at some point.

The fact that she is not acquainted with something as simple as the circumstances surrounding John’s new handle is simply another stone to weigh heavy on her chest.

At least with John, unlike Kanaya, Rose has the advantage that the hardest part is over. John has seen her at her rope’s end, and still been willing to take her hand and lead her away from the brink. He had told her his chumhandle frantically as he boarded the jet to rush home; when she had wondered aloud if he even wanted to truly hear from her, he had just knocked his forehead against hers, saying “Roooooose!” with a laugh.

Ah, the friendship rituals of the demonstrative wild Egbert. He hasn’t changed a bit, except in all the ways that he has.
She pushes through the last of her reservations and adds ectoBiologist to her chumroll. When the chat window pops up, she goes to type immediately. No matter what John may claim, she owes him a true apology, and a long overdue chat, and she is determined to fulfill that obligation. She owes him more than an apology in fact, but John is not in the habit of taking life debts seriously. He’s too good natured.

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 20:14:05 --
TT: John, I

Rose stops. The pink letters taunt her from the screen, and she feels bile rise up in the back of her throat. Pressing a hand to her mouth, she leans over the trash bin under the computer desk and rides out the empty spasms. She still has not eaten anything today, and nothing comes up but pinkish saliva, but the dry heaves wrench at her stomach painfully until eventually she is able to calm herself.

Well. Scratch that, then. Her first order of business will have to be the creation of a new chumhandle. She does not know what she was thinking when she chose a handle like – that, all those years ago.

She remembers queasily that she has used some variation of tentacleTherapist for all of her fanfiction and forum accounts over the years. Perhaps she had chosen it as a humorous, even tongue-in-cheek reference to the grimdark creatures she meditated away every night, in itself a most metaphorical brand of tentacle therapy; perhaps she had simply wanted to give them the metaphorical middle finger.

Whatever the case, the sardonic handle no longer amuses her. It just turns her stomach.

She chooses a hasty new handle, and restarts the chat window. There is no doubt John will have noticed her slip, but she can do nothing about that now. With luck, he will understand, and let it pass without comment.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 20:16:23 –
TT: Allow me to begin again.
TT: Nothing I say can truly mitigate the wrong I did to you.
TT: When my mother disappeared three years ago, she removed the house from all postal listings and municipal records. As far as the mail was concerned, my home became a nonentity.
TT: I could have remedied this situation any number of ways. I could have purchased a discreet post box. I could have relisted us in the records. I could have sought out your handle on any number of our old forums or contacted you on here.
TT: I did not.
TT: I chose to let our friendship cut off with no explanation, no farewell, no attempt to revive it. TT: I can only apologize, and assure you that it was no fault of your own. It was no mistake of yours that spurred this cessation of communication. Not in any way. I can in fact think of no logical reason to have isolated myself the way I did.
TT: This regrettably leaves only the illogical reason. The grimdark one.
TT: I tried to style myself a Seer of Light. And yet I failed to see how, slowly, the Noblest Gods encouraged me to cease communication with anyone who could have interfered in their grip on me.
TT: Naturally, I understand if you do not wish to revive our old camaraderie after I failed so unequivocally in holding up my end of the accord.
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
EB: hey rose!
EB: whoa, no, it’s okay rose i swear, i get it.
EB: i’m just glad that you’re alive! i mean for a while back then i thought maybe you got hurt or
something and that’s why you stopped answering. which would have sucked.
EB: i even made my dad try to get in touch with your mom one time, but all your guys’ numbers had been cancelled.
TT: I am not surprised, I’m afraid. If the house did not run on alternative, self-sustaining energy resources, no doubt she would have cancelled the electricity service as well. My mother has much to answer for.
EB: seeeriously! :( 
At least in the realm of exposing her mother’s faults, Rose is on familiar ground.

EB: she claimed it was because the midnight crew found you guys, but then she didn't explain why that bunch of thugs would be looking for you in the first place!
EB: she just said 'they want her power just like they wanted dave's' and none of it makes any sense rose! bleeerhhhh!
EB: i'm home now and trying to get answers from my dad, but he's being really weird about it
TT: I see. It would appear you possess considerably more information about the situation than I do. What ever would a widespread criminal enterprise do with a time-stopping hero and a girl with access to all the power of the Horrorterrors of the Furthest Ring?
TT: Oh wait.
EB: yeah, that's not a very reassuring thought either...
EB: did you know your mom knew dave's bro when we were little? apparently you guys knew the striders for like three years before the crew attacking them
EB: i guess he thought maybe your mom caused the attack? or that she accidentally gave their location away? idk no one will just explain what happened!!
TT: I see. The plot thickens.
TT: So from what you have pieced together, essentially, my mother and the Puppeteer knew each other, during a period in both my and young Dave's lives in which we would have little to no recollection of the event.
TT: However, my mother no doubt single-handedly caused a falling out between the two, somehow involving this Midnight Crew, under suspicious enough circumstances that the Puppeteer continues to mistrust her. She has a unique talent for that sort of thing.
TT: After which we eventually ended up in Seattle in time to meet you, John, yet another child who would grow up with a hero complex and rather unique powers.
TT: Does that summary seem to cover it all?
EB: yeah actually, that makes a lot more sense when you say it like that!
EB: oh, and the puppeteer gets really stupid about the midnight crew.
EB: it's basically how this whole mess started. :P he seriously pissed me off telling me to run away instead of confronting them, even though they're blowing up buildings in my city! he's super paranoid about it.
EB: i get that they're dangerous, yeah, but he really suggested i should just give up without even trying
EB: and that's how we found out i rage-teleport
EB: which, um. yeah, i guess - i'm sorry i never mentioned the whole hero thing? what exactly am i supposed to say?
TT: Oh, no need to worry yourself, John. As you can imagine, bringing up the fact that you possess unnatural reality-altering power and intend to use it to run around the city in a mask is hardly the way to set the tone of a potential friendship. I obviously sympathize. There was no reason to trust each other with such dangerous information when we were children, but the point is moot now.
EB: whew! thanks for being cool with it. we're both heroes, anyway, and i guess i just worry this will still make you a target. but then when i think about it apparently we're all targets anyway, so the worry is getting kind of dumb and redundant.
Rose opens up the Cetus internet browser and keeps her chat window with John visible to one side of the screen as she begins to search 'Midnight Crew' in Google. A crude method of obtaining information, clogged with the detritus of pandering, insipid news stations, but Rose has connections she can contact once she has a better understanding of the subject. Assuming they haven't forgotten her in the months she's spent a drunken wastrel, she will begin to research these Crew in earnest when she is no longer using a device no doubt monitored by her mother. No need to let Rue Lalonde know all of Rose's secrets.

Though Rose fully intends to familiarize herself with some of Rue's secrets. Her mother has much to answer for.

TT: Well, I shall attempt to draw out my mother's side of the story, though she will no doubt persist in this stonewalling that seems to characterize our guardians at the moment.
TT: But it is useless to speculate without further data. As intriguing as this is, let us put it aside for now. How have you been in my absence, John? I expect to have a complete psychological workup by the end of our session, naturally. Spill.
EB: haha, oh, wow. uh.

There is radio silence on John's end, long enough that Rose's quick glance at a police scanner transcript potentially related to Crew activity in Los Angeles transitions into a full-on analysis before she realizes John has been silent for nearly two minutes. Shaking her head, she hesitates and bites her lip before continuing the conversation.

TT: Unless, of course, you do not feel comfortable engaging with me as your unofficial psychotherapist anymore.

At the bottom of the chat window, the prompt command reads 'ectoBiologist is typing…' for another long minute, and Rose can imagine John on the other end, flailing and randomly backspacing as he fumbles for the words to let her down gently. She is surprised by how heavy the resignation feels in her chest; her pseudo-analysis of John's psyche has always been in jest, to watch John squirm and frantically deny all her accusations in good fun, but it had also been also one of the ways in which they genuinely communicated. The thought that she may have lost the right to that aspect of their friendship permanently by putting such insurmountable distance between them hurts more than she expects it to.

EB: no way! i just don't really know where to start.
EB: except i guess with total honesty! yeah! because if i know all about your secret grimdark unintentionally crazy, uh.
EB: i guess you deserve to know about my total mental breakdown?
TT: ...Come again?
EB: fuck
EB: i knew telling you about this would be a bad idea!
TT: Calm down, John. 'Mental breakdown' is simply an incredibly nonspecific term with no formal definition that could correlate with any number of extreme psychological stressors or events. I simply wish you to elucidate more specifically on the subject.
EB: no, i can tell i freaked you out! you always use way more weird words when you're freaked out! agh!
TT: John, breathe.
TT: Please tell me what happened. If you have experienced significant psychological distress, I wish to understand. Not for the sake of my curiosity, but because you are, and always have been, my friend, and now I am greatly concerned about you.
TT: Your silence would only worry me further.
She is making use of unsophisticated measures again, but John responds better to honesty and forthrightness than to subtler tactics. It is simply the kind of person he is.

EB: basically it was I guess two years ago? hadn't heard from you in about a year at that point, and i thought i was getting used to it
EB: and then i just
EB: school was hard. not like the classes were hard or anything, just that i would go in everyday and have to sit there for like six hours and there was no one to talk to.
EB: and then slowly everything started to seem like a huge federal fucking issue. like i couldn't work up the energy to really care for a while, and every time i went to class it felt like the ceiling was crushing down on me, until i almost just threw up in class one time because i was just so
EB: miserable
TT: Oh, John.
EB: and the work at night kind of made up for it, but then that started feeling really hard too! :/ i just kept thinking about how it was because i had the work i had no time for friends? and so that kind of felt like being trapped, too, even though i really like being able to help people all the time and get out in the fresh air! so after a while, i started to think it was just kind of hopeless, like no matter if i was flying or with friends i would still just couldn't win.
EB: we figured out later it was kind of this depression thing in my head, but at the time it was like everything was a great big ball of dumb and blah and i got so tired of being tired.
EB: and that's when i ran away to houston!

...And that is just enough of a plot twist to break Rose out of her stunned silence. Because, come again? That...that made no sense. John must have skipped over something rather significant, because why else would he aim for such a random destination?

TT: What.
TT: John, what on earth would possess you to go to Houston?
EB: i know, right? :P
EB: idk, i just kind of took off flying. my dad totally chewed me out for it later, but i had my goggles on and everything, i wasn't that stupid.
EB: and i considered flying to new york and checking out your house, but i had kind of resigned myself to thinking you'd want nothing to do to me? i figured you had other friends by then.
EB: so when i just started veering south i didn't really think about it, and then i ran out of energy by the time i hit colorado, so i started walking a bit until i could make it the rest of the way to houston.
EB: i totally punched out this criminal without realizing dave was like right there.
TT: And obviously, you two both being enterprising young heroes, you then proceeded to bond by arguing over jurisdiction?
EB: uh, no
EB: i kind of started crying all over him.
EB: it was embarrassing, and then i had to punch out the car-jacker again because he woke up while i was being all weird and depressed
TT: I see. I will admit, I did not see that one coming.
EB: well neither did i, and dave didn't get it either because striders aren't really all that big on emotions and things. but then we just kind of talked for a bit.
EB: and i started to feel a lot better! i guess i just really needed to get that stuff off my chest with someone who knew about the hero thing, too, someone who wasn't my dad. i mean dad means well, and he tries really hard, but he's also the one who trained me to be a hero, and i was being all weird and pissy about that too. dave was just this unbiased second party and that helped a lot.
EB: and even after i felt okay enough to come home, we kept talking a lot through pesterchum!

Rose feels a pang of jealousy, jealousy she does not deserve to feel. She buries it.
TT: I am sorry, John. I'm sorry that I was not there to help you through this. That my abrupt absence no doubt helped trigger what sounds like a significant depressive episode.
TT: I shall have to speak with Dave as well. It would appear I owe him my thanks for being there for you when I could not be.
TT: I am glad you found someone, John.

EB: agh, no rose, that's not how i meant it! you're always gonna be my first choice of psychoanalyst! dave goes on a lot of tangents about rapping and apple juice and weird mixed metaphors a lot, so it's mostly just that he's a lot of fun to talk to!
EB: and it's really probably not your fault, i'm sure of it! depression apparently has a lot of brain chemistry stuff too, so if it wasn't that it might just as well have gotten kicked off by something else entirely.
EB: and now i have a hero partner here in seattle and a friend at school, too. that seems to have helped a lot. and now you're back! :D
EB: so everything is fine! between all of us, we can tooootally handle the midnight crew no matter what bro says! right, rose?

Rose can only stare at the screen. She thinks her eyes may be too wet, but she cannot take her fingers off the keys to wipe it away.

Has John always sounded so...fragile?

She knows well that he tends to skim over darker emotions, downplaying anger and sadness in favor of maintaining an unfathomably cheerful disposition with flashes of sarcasm and overly-dramatic groans of annoyance that can be easily dismissed as jokes. She'd teased him about said defense mechanism more than once in their childhood. But this is - there is a note of almost desperation in the blue words on the screen. As though behind them John is one wrong word away from shattering.

And Rose cannot fight the feeling that her actions played more than a little part in driving him to this precarious state.

TT: Yes, John.
TT: Trust me. Now that I am aware that supposedly this Crew poses such a strangely targeted threat to us, I am most interested in assisting you in taking them down for good.
TT: I may not be at my best at the moment, but rest assured I am more than capable of researching these hooligans most thoroughly until I am assured of my control.
EB: horray! i knew i could count on you, rose! this is going to be awesome!

She tells him what he needs to hear. It also happens to be the truth, but she neglects to mention that she does not know when, if ever, she will have true control ever again. The worst case scenario is that she remains confined to the Void wards for the rest of her life, if she cannot reconstruct her mental shields properly.

And that possibility, no matter how horrifying, is more likely than Rose likes to think. She has never suffered such a complete incursion of grimdark before. It is possible that next time the Horrorterrors sing to her, she will give in even more quickly than before, made susceptible by her first descent into darkness.

John does not need to know such things. Not now, not when their relationship is still balanced on the knife's edge of both their sanities.

The door of the café is open, and that is how Rose hears the tell-tale clack of a too-familiar stride clicking against the tile floor of the hallway. It has been three years, but she still knows her mother by that confident stride. Time to bring her discussion with John to an end, then. She wishes she had more time to process this new revelation about her oldest friend, but there is no way her mother
would ever pass up a chance to mock Rose at a time like this, and she does not want John caught in
the crossfire.

TT: My mother approaches.
TT: It would appear that the opportunity to interrogate her is at hand. I trust you will be well if I
leave you for the moment?
EB: yeah, totally, rose!
EB: just, uh
EB: message me later, okay? :)

Rose closes her eyes and rides out the guilt that clutches and claws at her heart. Oh yes. John has a
right to be cautious about believing that she will contact him again. She deserves every modicum of
distrust after what she put him through.

TT: I shall. It is a promise.
TT: Shall I swear it on my family name? Perhaps not - I am not overly partial to being a Lalonde at
the moment. But maybe upon my light magic? Whatever would reassure you, John. I have no
intention of falling into that state of isolation again.
EB: oh man, rose, i think you've been reading too much over-dramatic wizardfic again!
EB: don't worry, i believe you! we can maybe even start a memo with dave and see what he can get
from bro! it'll be awesome! i think you two would like each other? or maybe just start arguing and
then never shut up, i can't decide which.
EB: talk to you soon!
TT: Farewell.
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has left the chat! --

The footsteps in the corridor have come to a halt, and Rose can hear the low murmur of her mother's
voice, and the sound of another person answering. Rue is not alone then, but once she has finished
that conversation, she will no doubt come to bother Rose.

Well. If her privacy is almost at an end, she has nothing left to lose. She doubleclicks Kanaya's
chumhandle and the window pops up.

TT: Kanaya.
TT: I do not have much time.
TT: I apologize. That was a lie. I promised that I would not lose sight of myself, that I would not lie
to myself anymore. That I would not allow my mistakes this past year repeat themselves. And so I
find I cannot lie and tell you that I do not have much time.
TT: I have a choice. I have always had a choice, and it took an unspeakable transgression for me to
realize that I had made the wrong ones.
TT: I am ashamed, Kanaya. Sometimes I do not know whether there is an end to the offences I have
committed against the two people I cared for the most, let alone what I allowed to be wrought in
New York.
TT: No doubt you have seen the news, and understand why I left our last conversation so abruptly.
Suffice to say that every light casts a shadow, and my shadows falls longer than most, to the point
that certain Horrors find it a most accommodating channel to work their ends. And because I did not
guard myself, because I did not listen to yours or my own better judgment, perhaps thousands have
died or been maimed. Millions are going to be homeless, at least.
TT: And so when I tell you I do not have much time, I do so because I am a coward, and I shrink
from facing the consequences of what I have done.
TT: I would understand quite well if you did not wish to hear from me again.
TT: But I have seen what occurs when I fail to adequately communicate with those other than the Horrors at the edge of my mind.
TT: And if nothing else, you deserve better. You deserve whatever closure or apology or revenge you require.
TT: I wronged you by dragging you into this. Perhaps more so than I have wronged anyone else.
TT: …
TT: Goodbye, Kanaya.

Feeling sick to her stomach, ready to throw up again but repressing the urge vigorously, Rose closes her eyes and peers through the desk behind her with a different type of sight. Her eyes sting with pain, and the sight itself resolves slowly into focus, but it comes nonetheless, and she is able to see through to the auras of the people who have just entered the room.

With a mental recoil, she recognizes the inherent lack that is her mother, the unsettling void rimmed by the faint haze of alcohol, the only real impression Rose has ever been able to perceive of Rue Lalonde with her magic. It plays a significant role in rendering Rue Lalonde so gallingly inscrutable in her whims: the doctor strides about in her alcohol aura and knows that Rose will never see through to the woman within, a perpetual advantage in their ongoing strife.

Beside Rue is the crackling, ticking pulse of Flashstep, the boy John had called ‘Dave’ without a care for confidentiality or secret identities. To be fair, Dave himself had seemed equally unconcerned. And Rose knows well enough thanks to the slight curiosity imparted to her by her youthful association with John, a major hero fanboy, that neither Flashstep nor the Puppeteer seem to care that they fight crime with their faces totally exposed.

She does not, however, sense the Puppeteer. Strange – when the elder brother had announced abruptly that he intended to have ‘goddamn words’ with Rue, he had seemed equally adamant that Dave not ‘dick around’ and hang around Rue unless –

Rose stills, twitching, and directs her extra sight forward.

Bro Strider is hunkered down right in front of her, leaning over the top of her borrowed computer monitor with his arms folded on the edge, unreadable behind dark sunglasses. She hadn’t even felt him enter the room, a remarkable feat in and of itself, but now that she can see him, she doesn’t know how he managed to conceal himself. If Dave is a strangely familiar, steady pulse of life, marred by the occasional skip where the beats don’t quite match up, the Puppeteer is a bright, intensely warm flare, fluttering along at nearly twice the tempo.

Rose suspects this blaze is just as much an obscuration as her mother’s unsettling vacuum. She can see nothing past the flare, can discern no details of Bro’s emotional state, his power levels, or his future intent. Even in the glow of his soul, the Puppeteer remains enigmatic and emotionless, the epitome of the impassive coolkid.

Too quick to see or stop, a gloved finger stabs out and flicks Rose in the center of her forehead, just short of bruising strength. Startled, Rose’s second sight destabilizes, and she comes back to herself. “Got a wandering eye there, little Lalonde,” the man grunts.

He has called her that before. Immediately after her breakdown, Rose had been too shaken and exhausted to register it. Now, with her wits mostly restored, she stiffens, biting back a furious snarl. Her emotions remain too volatile for her to trust them.

When the rage clears away, Rose can see that the Puppeteer is watching her intently. His body language is subtle enough to be nigh unreadable, but she can see the slight tension in his hands, the way they angle toward the sword he hides beneath his shirt, along his spine. Oh yes, he caught her
moment of blind fury, and he is prepared to counter it.

Rose is not offended. She is...reassured. Even as the rage fades, it gives way to something almost like gratitude. “Thank you,” she tells him simply, honestly.

The man’s eyes widen fractionally behind their concealing frames and he tilts his head to the side. “Nothin’ to thank me for, kid,” he mutters, and then he’s gone. When Rose logs off the computer and rises to her feet, dusting off her skirt and resting more of her weight than usual on the support of the desk, she sees the Puppeteer has wandered to one of the wide glass windows that line the computer café, staring out at the thick forest beyond.

Point to Rose, then. But her smile dies before it can really begin when her mother hitches a hip on the edge of another computer desk, studying Rose with her usual contemptuous, critical stare, the corner of her mouth quirked in a perpetual smirk.

Mother always knows best, after all. “Rosie,” she begins, folding her arms elegantly around her ribs, tapping long, manicured nails unsuited to a scientist who does real work against her coat. “I’m surprised, darling. I thought you’d need more of a rest after all that excitement earlier. Are you sure you’re feeling quite recovered?”

Rose wonders, with the vague weariness of having dealt with this simpering tone for a lifetime, whether Rue Lalonde was born with a unique talent for being this condescending, or if it was an art she had personally learned from the trolls’ great Condesc in some twisted, patronizing apprenticeship. “Quite recovered, Mother dearest,” she replies sweetly, the effect ruined by low, hoarse scratching of a throat shredded by the screechsongs of the Furthest Circle. She perseveres. The key to holding one’s own against Rue Lalonde in verbal strife is to never show weakness. This is, Rose finds, the key to holding one’s own in most any situation in life, really. “You couldn’t tell? It’s like you hardly even know me.” Rose slides smoothly into her next play before her mother can reply, turning to smile graciously at Dave. “Flashstep. A pleasure to meet you again, with both of us in a better frame of mind.”

“Fuck, why do we even pretend our names are a secret anymore. Why is that even a thing. Seriously, is there anyone in this room who doesn’t know my name by now?” Dave says, monotone, with any irritation he might feel hidden behind too-large shades. “Like fuck man, I need to start handing out business cards or something. Business cards with some kickass calligraphy for my name and alias. Can’t let anyone forget a name like mine, they’d waste away not knowing. Christ.”

Rose must be a little off her game. She can’t tell if she legitimately triggered some dormant irritation in Dave, or if he merely prefers to veer off into elaborate metaphorical tangents on a regular basis. She’d need further opportunities to observe him if she wants to gather the data needed to properly analyze him. “Dave, then. John and I were just discussing you. It would seem that I owe you a considerable debt.” It seemed to be a day for establishing these things, after all.

Dave freezes up. It is a fascinating process to witness because he is clearly fighting it every step of the way: his muscles twitch as he forces them relax back into a slouch, but he can’t stop the tension from stringing along his shoulders as he hunches them forward, defensive. His hand goes to the shape of a cell phone barely visible in his suit jacket pocket, though he stays himself before he removes it and stuffs his hand into his pants pocket instead. He is not nearly so practiced at emotional suppression as his elder brother, then. As much as he’d like to hide his reactions, he remains vulnerable.

“What. No, what. John what the hell. Talkin’ about me with random snarky broads,” Dave mutters, mostly to himself but loud enough for anyone to hear. “I don’t remember any of this. I was busy being unconscious this morning, passed out like a hella lightweight, dead from the goddamn neck up. The fuck have I ever done for you, Lalonde?”
“Do not call me that,” Rose cannot stop herself from growling, the sound ripping through her vocal cords raw and ragged and too close to horror for comfort. By the window, a puppet with gleaming blue eyes peers over at her from the Puppeteer’s shoulder, though the man himself doesn’t move an inch. The puppet itself is reassurance enough. Rose never thought she’d be so painfully grateful to have someone who could kill her in seconds, if the need arose, in the same room as her. She clings to that reassuring thought as she rides out the fury. Rose closes her eyes, breathes meditatively, and lets the tension flow out of her body. “I find that I would prefer Rose at the moment,” she says to the open air, careful not to look anywhere in her mother’s direction. She can stand to be in the woman’s presence, it seems, but clearly Rose’s assumption that she had grown too fatigued for anger has proven false. She must tread carefully.

Dave has his hands raised in some gesture meant to convey ‘calm the fuck down,’ no doubt. “Hell yeah. Rose it is. Ain’t no thing.” His voice is even, but Rose can see the wariness in him. Sensible of him. Rose is, after all, one of the terrible things.

“John and I have been catching up,” she continues, trying to brazen her way past her vulgar outburst. “He has informed me some of what went on approximately two years ago, and the circumstances that led you two to become acquainted. With John being John, I am certain he glossed over a troubling amount of detail to save me from the full onus of my neglect. He is foolishly kind that way. But he was quite clear when he said that you assisted him in dealing with certain consequences of my desertion. And for that I owe you more than you know.”

Dave relaxes minutely, and there is a moment, Rose thinks, of accord between them. The bond of having torn and mended John Egbert, respectively. Then he tenses up again, and she can just barely glimpse the slight hostility that grips him. “Yeah, whatever,” is all he says. “Guy needed a bro to educate him in the ways of cool; who am I to deny a supplicant when the dude comes to me on his hands and knees, all penitent and shit, requesting the humble privilege of studying under my tutelage. My tutelage is in high fucking demand, I’m telling you, but EB had true need. I still can’t break him of the goddamn unironic hero shirts. I think it’ll be my life’s work or some shit. Could write a fucking autobiography about my struggles with that kid’s hero fetish.” By the end acid almost drips from his tongue, and his hostility is clear on his face.

Ah. Rose is beginning to understand. Perhaps Dave would like to think he can obfuscate as well as his enigmatic brother, but the truth is quite the opposite. He can maintain that flimsy pokerface all he likes, but the key to Bro Strider’s stoicism is his relative silence, the choice manner in which he eliminates all non-necessary communication except through the medium of raised eyebrows, monosyllables, and truncated sentences. Because of this silence, he need never concern himself with Freudian slips or similar tells.

Dave might believe that his reflexive, rambling tangents produce the same effect, but he is quite wrong: Rose can read more and more of his emotions as time passes, plucking out his insecurities as he babbles frantically in an attempt to obscure them. It is a classic example of reaction formation: the coolkid persona is how Dave chooses to channel anxiety or any other strong emotion that he doesn’t want to acknowledge into an acceptable impulse. Being raised by a relatively emotionless elder sibling, Rose can’t imagine that Dave feels comfortable expressing any strong emotion at all. It can’t be a healthy state of mind.

They are, all of them, such broken creatures, aren’t they, Rose thinks grimly.

In this case, with the help of the prior knowledge she gained from her conversation with John, she can see clearly through the chinks in Dave’s armor, the unspoken challenge behind his words: John needed help, and somehow he came to me, and I was all he had. He was desperate and he felt so
much and I couldn't just tell him to change who he was and bury it; I had to acknowledge all those emotions people have and it sucked but then he was my friend and I couldn't leave him.

You weren't here, but I was. And I will continue to be.

There are inklings here of a fiercely protective friend. At least now Rose can be sure John has been in good hands, if not the most emotionally adept ones.

"John has been quite enraptured with heroes since we were both children," she acknowledges, raising an eyebrow and trying for a snarky smirk. She may or may not succeed. "In hindsight, I am unsure why I ever thought he'd end up pursuing any course in life other than hero work, powers or no. I'm afraid that it may indeed be the work of several lifetimes to ever bring irony and heroism together in his mind. I wish you the best of luck, of course."

Dave's eyebrow flies up in response, and she can see that he remains, if not hostile, at least still tense. She has most likely confused him by meeting his hostility with acceptance, but she has confidence that after giving it some thought, he'll figure it out.

I know John, have known John. I know how his mind works, and I can see that your friendship is valuable to him. He has chosen to befriend us both, and if you are willing to be quite civil, there is no reason we can work in tandem to keep him safe and sane and whole.

No need to elaborate further. She has said what she needed to say. By the end she feels stable again, as though the mere act of utilizing her analytical mind on the fly to read Dave has helped settle the rage that continues to plague her mind. Even when she turns to her mother and looks upon the impenetrably smooth, fine features of her face, she is able to control the anger. It might be safer for all involved if Rose took the time to properly meditate first, but Rue speaks before she can excuse herself. "Would you mind if I had a word with my daughter alone, Ambrose, Dave? I understand you intend to leave soon, but I would like to see you off at the runway when the jet returns. For old time's sake."

Typical. Of course Rue would want to keep Rose off-balance during this confrontation, even by such low-handed tactics as playing the game while Rose must work twice as hard to keep her emotions in check. How disgustedly petty of the woman.

"Ain't my fucking business, Lalonde," the Puppeteer mutters from where he is now leaning with his back against the window. "If you ain't there when we leave, 'm not waiting on you."

"I wouldn't expect anything else," Rue replies sweetly, with a note of that passive-aggressive hostility she usually reserves for Rose. Hm. Intriguing. John had said the two had a rather checkered past - now Rose is left wondering just what their relationship had been. "Rose, do come along, Ambrose, Dave? I understand you intend to leave soon, but I would like to see you off at the runway when the jet returns. For old time's sake."

Oh, Mother mine. If you believe you'll be the one controlling this conversation, you had better think again.

"Oh yes, Mother. Let us talk," Rose says, with a faint smile. "A pleasure, Dave," she adds as she walks by him follows Rue Lalonde out into the hall.

"That was rather rude of you, Rosie," Rue Lalonde admonishes the moment they leave the computer cafe. They are no doubt still within the Puppeteer's hearing at the least, and Rue knows that, which means that she is deliberately speaking so that Rose is embarrassed by it. As though that is a tactic
that works against Rose anymore, after all these years of inuring herself to its stings. "Snapping at the poor boy - it was unkind of you. Particularly for such a silly reason. I thought I raised a young lady."

"Well, three years is no doubt a long enough span enough to put paid to even the best laid plans, I suppose," Rose murmurs.

Rue just sighs, her heels clicking almost like PM's patter on the floor as she leads the way past yet another research lab. "It was necessary for your continued security, my dear. I apologize for being unable to explain beforehand, or contacting you until so recently, but I'm afraid our enemies have certain resources that even I cannot counteract consistently."

"Our enemies!" Rose snorts. Rue blinks and looks almost startled in the corner of Rose's eye. Excellent. John's forewarning of their guardians' strange obsession with the gang has already given Rose an advantage her mother didn't anticipate. "These Midnight Crew? I have read of their misdeeds. They are nothing more than a rabble of brutish thugs, a criminal syndicate of some skill but nothing so organized and targeted as an 'enemy.' Perhaps you have begun to grow paranoid in your old age, Mother."

"Ambrose Strider was only twenty one when they attempted to kill him," Rue says. Rose can see the way her fingers twitch as though closing around the stem of a martini glass, and is actually surprised that her mother hasn't already plucked a fresh appletini from some convenient counter throughout this conversation. In the old days, Rue Lalonde was quite literally never more than three feet from a source of liquor. "Dave was three, and from what we know now, he was the primary target. Three years old, Rose. What reason would a mere criminal gang have to target a child?"

"You are speculating," Rose insists. Not that she truly doubts her mother; it's clear enough that something is highly unusual about the Midnight Crew's shenanigans. But the more stubborn Rose plays at, the more secrets Rue will spill in an attempt to win Rose's belief. It is one of Rue's few weak points - she plays this game to win, and for a scientist, there is no greater victory than proving oneself right. Even at the expense of any pompous conspiracy she'd like to maintain. "I highly doubt that they would just walk up and announce that they wanted to kill a toddler before trying to complete the attempt -"

"They didn't try to kill Dave. They tried to take him." Rue clenches a fist, though she attempts to conceal it in the folds of her lab coat. "They attacked Ambrose only because he wouldn't stand aside."

Confirmation, then. The Crew wanted Dave, most likely for his rather unique time abilities. This fully correlates with what little John has learned. Now, Rose just has to root out why. Why on earth would a seemingly ordinary gang specializing in robbery and other mundane heists suddenly turn its attention, at least all those years ago, towards such a divergent goal? Could it really be so simple an aim as to obtain those time powers for criminal enterprises? Or is there something more, something all three guardians want to keep very well hidden?

Rose intends to find out.

They are now in a totally unfamiliar section of the laboratory complex, nowhere near either the isolation room or the computer café, and Rose activates some of her sight to better orient herself. She is very aware that in this complex, she is at the mercy of her mother's whims. The rooms around gleam with motes of light, other types of magic that Rose is familiar with from her studies. As far as she knows, her exclusive manipulation of light is unique among thaumaturgic styles, but the most basic shields and fortune-telling spells are quite simple for anyone with the mental fortitude and the correct teaching manual to utilize. It's just not common knowledge.
Rue doesn't speak again until they pass through a crowded, busy engineering lab, with a team of humans and trolls clustered around something behind a Plexiglas shield. Rose cannot see through to the object of their scrutiny, but she can feel the tingle of spells in progress, shields against possible radiation leaks and to promote quantum instability within a fixed point.

*This - quantum-level experimentation - is far more along Rue Lalonde's line of expertise. They must finally have passed through to her personal labs, the heart of this isolated forest sanctum.*

"I know you, darling," Rue says at last as she slides open the door to a cluttered office. The décor is the same functional, chic design as the majority of the labs' furniture, but the plush swivel chair behind the four large computer monitors is a fantastically vibrant shade of fuchsia. "For that matter, I know me. We could dance this way until the world burns around us. If there is something you mean to ask me, Rose, just ask, for once in your life. It has been three years since I've seen you and I would rather not play these games."

Rue is trying her best to sound sincere, but Rose naturally knows better than to trust her. Just enough condescension remains in the doctor's voice to verify that this is just a new brand of the same underhanded tactics as ever. Rose matches Rue, tone for tone. "Oh, of course, Mother," she drawls, folding herself into the chair on the other side of the desk, hands clasped in her lap. "Since you're so interested in clearing the air between us, then why don't we talk about John and Dave? Let's chat about how throughout the course of my childhood, you've managed to connect us to two other families with heroes, both of whom have had to or currently are dealing with said Crew? I'm so. So. Curious." She pretends to inspect her nails, but by the end her voice has gone totally flat.

"I knew them," Rue replies airily, picking absently at the strange model on her desk, her eyes hooded as she taps on one of the rings and sets the whole device spinning. Some of the hinged segments begin to weave in and out, and Rose sees at last that the model is of a series of spirographs, each layered within the other in ever smaller circles until the center, a tiny orb of metal around which the rest revolve and flip and dance.

Rose would have thought nothing of it – would not have even known the symbol's name – if not for the fact that the Horrorterror had been so obsessed with the design, and yet loathed it as well, the boundless hate only a hivemind can achieve. Even as Rose sweeps the room with her eyes, she catches a stylized spirograph emblazoned in the top right corner of a file folder stacked on Rue's cluttered desk. Perhaps Rose had simply missed it when they arrived – she had still been drifting in and out of consciousness when they arrived at the laboratories, after all – but she can see now that the ‘o’s in 'Lalonde Laboratories' are both tiny, simple spirographs on the header of her mother's stationary.

"Ambrose was an acquaintance even before he began to raise Dave, and Samuel Egbert's mother - John's grandmother - was one of my professors in college before she retired." Rue meets Rose's eyes, her eyelids still half lowered. She's concealing a lot, enough that both Rose and Rue are aware of how much is not being said behind such innocuous words. "Neither I nor Ambrose saw the attack on Dave coming. While Ambrose fled to Houston, I sought out my old mentor, only to learn she had passed away, survived by her son and grandson. Seattle seemed distant enough from Atlanta, and once there it wasn't difficult to deduce from Samuel's behavior that John possessed unusual powers. We guardians like to think that we're subtle, but there are tells that another such guardian knows to look for."

Rose does not give away her interest in the symbol. Bad enough that she must now so crudely extract answers from her mother, with no elegance or subtlety; no need to extend the torment beyond what is strictly necessary. If the spirograph is so significant a shape, Rose will surely be able to research it at her own discretion and find the answers she seeks. Certain other matters, however, may
be resolved only through a brute-force interrogation. There are too many blanks in the picture, too many spaces where the narrative does not run smooth upon a second review, and Rue Lalonde may hold all the missing pieces.

"Astounding. And you do not find it an amazing coincidence that you had these connections to them at all?" Rose says mockingly. She multitasks by attempting to read the names of the file folders upside down. She can pick out 'paradigm,' naturally, and the names of other scientists listed beneath Rue's own. But there is one word, one she just isn't familiar with, no matter how she squints at it. What on earth could 'Skaian' mean?

"Not at all," Rue replies, running a hand through her hair and idly adjusting the arrangement of her curls. "Ambrose and I were close enough when we began to raise you and Dave that it was inevitable that eventually one of us would catch the other's charge in the middle of power-related antics. And it is not as though I went deliberately seeking out other parents with empowered children. Two does not a pattern make, Rose! I have sought the answers to these questions and others like them for years, and found no real explanation beyond coincidence and chance. You may like to think me some chess master, manipulating you in some inexplicable cold war of wits, but I assure you Rose, I am no such thing. You ascribe too much foresight to me than I truly have, and it is blinding you."

Rose just smiles. Her sight is working in full force by now, and though her mother may be a void, Rose can see how the edges of Rue Lalonde's shields are wavering, thrown into turmoil by Rose's pointed jabs. Oh no, Rose is not blind. She can see, better than Rue will ever know.

"I think I ascribe just enough," Rose says. Her mother is growing truly impatient now, a flush of color rising in her perfect cheeks. Just a little more, and Rose will be able to strike at her real target, the one that plagues her more than any other query thus far, though it remains linked to her earlier questions. "Are you sure you're feeling well, Mother? You seem quite flushed. Perhaps I hit too close to home for your comfort?"

"And you, Rose?" Her mother's voice is outright harsh now, as she draws forth a flask from within her lab coat. Well, that much is new - but Rose supposes a flask is far more easy to conceal around a laboratory full of one's subordinates than a martini glass. "How are you feeling? That is, after all, why I wished to speak with you in the first place - out of concern for your wellbeing. You think I am oblivious after a few years' absence, but I know the isolation tank did nothing for you. Four hours? No, that's not nearly enough for proper meditation, which begs the question of why you left that tank?" Rue sips, a single gulp that remains neat and tidy despite the slight tremble of fury in her fingers. She swallows roughly and continues. "You've grown over-proud, daughter. Do you think you're still in control of them, Rose? How much longer do you think you can keep the voice of the gods out of your head?"

The words sting. But they are precisely the questions Rose wanted to provoke, no matter how painful. She grins ferally, because she has won this round. "Oh no – you’re asking the wrong questions, Mother dearest!" Rose closes her fist around the arm of the chair and feels it crunch beneath her grip. “The question is not how long I can keep the Horrorterrors suppressed. The question is, why can I do it at all.”

Rue Lalonde sits back, looking first startled, and then despicably pleased. It becomes clear she has misunderstood Rose’s vehemence when she proceeds to say, “Well, Rose, I have always hypothesized that your power of light-based thaumaturgy provides you with the clarity of mind needed to maintain your sense of self, even in the face of minds far more vast and multifaceted than your own, and utilizing that ability in conjunction with my Void -"
“You mistake the question yet again, Mother,” Rose says coldly, and the doctor’s mouth clamps shut, her red lips twisting. “I did not have the strength to remain distinct anymore. I was able to alter the pattern the tangle meant to complete, but then I resigned myself to assimilation. By the time we reached New York, they had sapped enough of my strength and claimed enough of my mind that I had no ground to stand on. I was dying.” She pauses, then shakes her head. “And then John arrived, and I was suddenly able to hear, to speak. I knew he was there not because the tangle recognized him, not because I recognized him through brief glimpses of a masked face, but because the light told me. The light that should not have been there.”

"You underestimated yourself, my love," Rue replies, shrugging smoothly as she reclines further in her chair. Rose can see the sharp glint of intelligence in her eyes, but also that of uncertainty. "You had that strength all along; you just needed to realize you could still access it. I knew that when you saw John, he would be able to reach you, to inspire you to fight back. You two were such good friends, despite how coldly you cut him out of your life -"

Rose forces it out. "Wrong. The moment John – and Dave too, perhaps – confronted the Horrorterror, I began to regain myself." She keeps her voice steady and collected. She cannot panic. Not now. "They did not inspire me, in some pithy burst of renewed hope, to try to reclaim myself. They simply arrived, and I could access my senses once more. After mere minutes, I was able to sneak in my own command prompts and speak to John directly." Rose shakes her head. “It should have been impossible. It is impossible. But his and Dave’s presence increased my own personal powers, in a way not even the grimdark could prevent. It was a measurable, distinct increase, an amplification of my magic that had already been consumed by the sea.”

She pauses again, gasping for breath. She is speaking too rapidly, and Rue’s face has gone frighteningly blank, but she can’t stop now, not when so much else does not add up. “And then I learned that all three of you – you, Ambrose Strider, Mr. Egbert – all three of you have known each other. Three random families scattered across America, and somehow you, Mother, managed to bring us all into contact. At the very least, the strength of my powers is directly linked to John’s. I cut him out of my life, and within a year he was teetering on the brink of depression. Who does he end up running away to? By sheer coincidence, Dave Strider."

And Dave, an emotionally repressed, untrained teenager obsessed with being cool, had been able to soothe John out of a full depressive episode in the space of a day. Real therapy took weeks, if not months, to take effect, and required more than just scattered pesterings at a distance to maintain. John's recovery is unrealistic, impossible.

Unless, as PM had almost said, you all are much stronger together than you are apart.

When Rose broke John, Dave picked up the pieces with uncanny ability. When Rose broke herself, John and Dave together had been able to empower her with little more than their presence. John had spent more of that battle in New York fleeing with Dave’s unconscious body than he had talking to Rose, and she had still steadily gained in strength, as though power had been flooding into her from an outside source, bypassing the Horrorterror entirely.

None of this is normal, and all of it is somehow connected to Rue’s antics in their childhood.

"Rose, stop." Rue crushes the flask in her hand, lurching up out of the chair and leaning heavily on her desk, her eyes haunted. "Rose, you -"

"If you think I cannot see there is a pattern here, you vastly underestimate me. And so I will ask you one time, and one time only. What are you not telling me, Mother?"

"Rose. Rose, breathe," Rue commands, reaching out to touch Rose's face with a seeking hand.
All Rose wants to do is tear that offending limb off and paint the walls with the blood that pours forth -

And -

I've gone too far.

The full weight of her rage smashes into Rose then, and she gasps with it, wrapping her arms around her waist as her stomach knots itself in unspeakable fury. It feels as though she's being torn in two.

She must leave, before she does something she will truly regret. Standing up so quickly the chair topples over backwards, Rose uses a wild wave of magic to slam the glass door of Rue's office aside, shattering the glass. The cluster of scientists beyond yelp and scatter as Rose half-runs, half-staggers out of the office, ignoring her mother's shouted, desperate orders. She is off-balance and lurching as she races through the labs and out into the main hallway, veering too close to walls and corners as she darts her way to an empty lab and closes the door behind her.

Her information gambit has failed entirely. She may have won a round or two against Rue Lalonde, but in the end it is clear the gambit falls to Rue by default. Rose cannot control herself enough to finish the game.

She stumbles into a corner, getting a wall to her back to lean on, and folds her legs, sucking in uneven breaths through her nose. Sweat plasters the hospital gown to her back, and she rests her head in her hands for a few long moments before she can sit upright. Everything feels tight and closed in, and she cannot distance herself from what she perceives - the cold of the tile floor, the whir of the fume hood running two labs down the hall, the rustling movement of the trees outside that she shouldn't be able to see from in here. The last of her filters and shields have cracked, and everything is a nonstop stream of light and information and incomprehensible gibberish. She cannot put this off anymore, not when all she wants to do is teleport back to that despicably cluttered office with its insipid pink chair and tear that woman apart, that woman who reminds Rose of herself in all the worst ways.

Aren't they, in a way, exactly the same? Isn't that why she and her mother clash so spectacularly - both of them striving and clawing and sniping at the other because they are the exact same?

Maybe that is why Rose hates so much. When it comes down to it, to the barest, basest, ugliest facts, Rose is no better. Because when John needed her most, she severed him from her life, lost in her waking nightmares and her delusions of heroism and her haze of prideful, spiteful independence.

She did the same thing to him that Rue had done to her, and she had not even spared a thought to the hypocrisy of it all.

Like mother, like daughter.

If this is some innate quality of Lalondes, some genetic proclivity for discarding old loved ones like so much cast-off trash, then she wants no part of it. If this is how a Lalonde loves, in fitful, stumbling, careless bursts that trail off into nothing, into a void, then Rose does not want to be a Lalonde anymore.

Swallowing another sob, Rose shuts herself off from the waking world, and plunges into the internal visions of her mind. With shaking hands, she forces herself to take up the trailing, unraveling edges of her shields, and begin to slowly, carefully knit them back together. The needles in her hands look like wands, and as she slowly sinks her mind into the shields and strings them around her mind, across the Void-blocked channel to the grimdark, she falls into the familiar pattern of meditation. Not
even the anger can reach her here.

And yet, she has never felt so lost before in her life.

One thing is quite clear. No matter how the Void of Lalonde Laboratories may ease the presence of the many-angled ones, Rose cannot stay here any longer. She cannot rest here, not as she needs to. And New York is no longer an option.

She will consider her options further when she is no longer on the brink of falling apart all over again. For now, she knits and knits in the corner of the lab, piecing her mind back together from the inside out.

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By the time they get home, the collar is completely fried. The exposed wires burn along the side of Dave's neck, right on top of the ever-present throb of the giant fucking hole the Horrorterror ripped through his neck and shoulder, and he endures it with a stoic face for as long as he can. Longer than a smart person would have, maybe, but no one has ever claimed common sense was Dave's specialty.

"Kid."

"I know."

"...Kid."

"I fucking know. Fuck."

He wants, more than anything, to still be with John. Heck, even that Rose chick would be great to hang out with right now. He just wants someone to fucking talk to, while he still can, but instead he's stuck with Bro in this shitty private jet. And of course this is Bro; the man thinks talking is so lame, speech deserves to be devoured by a fucking mountain lion in the name of natural selection. No way is he desperate enough to call the stewardess over and yap at her, though; he has standards still, okay.

Just. Fuck. It feels like his throat is going to catch on fire, and he hums to himself, staring out through the window and trying to think of a song, any goddamn song, that isn't by Katy Perry so he can sing or mix out loud or something without Bro giving him shit.

"You're gonna fucking hurt yourself, you dumb shit," Bro informs him. He's perched himself on top of the back of the seat across the row, and stares down implacably like a giant bird of prey. Lil Cal, perversely, is safely buckled into the seat, one floppy gloved hand wrapped around a glass of ginger ale. The level of ginger ale has been steadily decreasing ever since the stewardess delivered it, and that wouldn't unnerve Dave so much except that he can usually sense when Bro is manipulating his puppets, and Bro hasn't moved a fucking inch. Yet every time Dave blinks, watching this spectacle from the corner of his eyes, the glass empties more.

Yeah, he's basically shitting himself with terror over here. He has put up with that fuckass clown puppet for too long, and it's finally driven him insane. "Dude, I want that thing banished from our household, like, yesterday," Dave mumbles, sparks fizzling against the side of his neck. "Our ancestors frown upon it, and I'm pretty sure it's single-handedly responsible for the fact that all of our rice crops failed this year. Get rid of it or I fucking disown you and you can go join the army disguised as a man to support your sick homicidal possessed puppet fetish, alright? Are we clear?"

"Kid, you're not even makin' sense anymore." Bro adjusts his shades, but doesn't immediately move to ritually disembowel Lil Cal, which means he's being a rebellious daughter and needs to be taught a
lesson in Han dynasty respect. "You're trying to make Mulan ironic. Mulan is not ironic. Mulan is a piece of cinematic genius. Take off the collar, you're just being a stubborn little prick now."

"Oh my god. Fuck you. Wait, what else was I going to say? Right. Fuck. You." Dave digs into his empty glass of apple juice for one of the previously pointless ice cubes. He presses the ice to the side of his neck and nearly punches through the wall of the airplane to express his extremely manly, extremely stoic relief. Hell yes.

The next second, the ice has been ripped out of his hand. When he looks up, mouth open in a too-dramatic grimace, he sees Bro has confiscated the entire glass of ice as well and is now popping ice cubes into his mouth. "What the fuck."

"Stop swearing, you foul-mouthed barbarian. Do I need to rinse your mouth out with soap or some shit?" Bro places an ice cube by Lil Cal's hand. Dave refuses to look and see what happens to it. Enough of the puppet. He is so fucking over the puppet. "You heard litltl- Rose. Talks like a properly educated young lady. Where the fuck did I go wrong with your punk ass?"

Dave stares.

Bro stares back, completely impassive, as he loudly crunches down on an ice cube.

Dave can't even tell if this is irony anymore, or just some sick, sick game for Bro's perverted pleasures and they're all secretly on Smuppets Live, in which case, no. "Give me back my ice." When Bro raises an eyebrow and wiggles it, Dave grits his teeth and forces out, "Please. Oh my fuck never make me say that again."

"Don't get your goddamn feathers ruffled. You're not getting this back. It's mine now, little man," Bro says, still sticking his fingers into the glass of ice and come on, man, who even knows where those hands have been?!

(The answer is, they've been up puppet butts. The answer is promptly deemed too horrifying to contemplate further and is erased from the memory of paradox space.)

"Stop being a massive douchecanoe."

"No. You were letting ice water melt all over a bunch of exposed wiring, just how dumb of a fuck are you?"

Yeah, Dave honestly hadn't considered that. Well, shit. He can't back down now. "Just give it back."

"No."

"I will pry that glass out of your cold, dead anime gloves," Dave says, tensing. Are they seriously doing this here, thirty thousand feet in the air when they're basically thirty minutes from Houston?

Bro swallows an ice cube whole, apparently with the intent of eating the entire freaking glass and in doing so win the coveted title of 'World's Biggest Fucknugget.' "You could try, little man," he drawls.

Dave stops time and flings himself out of the seat. It's go-time.

Bro knows the attack is coming of course, and somehow prepares himself for the assault even before Dave twists time to a halt. This always fucking happens. When Dave is forced to let time go, his fist inches from Bro's face, there is a blur of movement and then Bro wraps an arm around Dave's wrist, tucking Dave's punch under his arm and bringing the attack to a dead halt.
Coolly pissed, Dave uses the rest of his momentum to slam a knee up into Bro's side during the next stopped moment of time. He thinks it connects, until time starts up again and he sees that Lil Cal has taken the blow and wrapped its spindly puppet limbs around Dave's leg.

He screams hoarsely, with a piercing note vaguely reminiscent of a little girl. He refuses to be ashamed of this, particularly not when he can blame the shitty sound quality on the collar currently burning a ring through his throat. He wastes his next free moment peeling the puppet off his knee. Lil Cal's blue eyes arrest him, and Dave can only stand there, motionless, one arm still pinned by Bro, and meet that horrific gaze before punting the puppet back at Bro's face.

Bro tosses Dave to the side. Dave skids, the flimsy carpet ripping up in a huge square under his feet. This time he aims straight for the glass of ice, which Bro still holds in one hand. Victory doesn't have to include punching Bro out for the first time in Dave's life; he'll take any kind of win at this point, before the pain of the collar fizzling against his neck takes him out of the fight. The burning isn't anywhere near as bad as the kind of havoc travelling back in time plays with his throat, but it's going to start doing some real damage, soon.

In one smooth motion, Bro tosses the glass of ice up in the air and tries to palmheel Dave in the nose. Victory doesn't have to include punching Bro out for the first time in Dave's life; he'll take any kind of win at this point, before the pain of the collar fizzling against his neck takes him out of the fight. The burning isn't anywhere near as bad as the kind of havoc travelling back in time plays with his throat, but it's going to start doing some real damage, soon.

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His back slams right into Bro, who has finally abandoned his perch on the back of the seat and waits in the middle of the aisle for Dave to bring the glass back to him.

The most humiliating part? Bro hasn't taken out his sword. He's not even taking this seriously. Nope, Dave's in such shitty condition, even Bro is taking it easy on him. Fucking *fuck*.

"Okay, you dipshits, we will begin our final descent at Hobby Airport in ten minutes, so siddown and stop tearing holes in my ship!" the pilot bellows over the intercom.

With a smirk, Bro shoves his foot down into the back of Dave's knees and reaches out with a long arm to yoink the collar off Dave's neck before he can react to defend himself. Dave catches himself and whirls to face Bro; Bro just twirls the crumpled piece of metal around his finger, raises an eyebrow, and kicks Dave in the chest so hard he goes flying ten feet through the air. Dave rolls awkwardly because the plane is tilting at an unholy angle by now and comes up in a fighting stance, sword drawn at last as he uses it to stab into the floor and halt his tumble. He's just in time to watch Bro down the last remaining chunks of ice in one ungodly chug. It looks like he swallows the ice whole.

Oh my god. Why. Dave could have gone his whole life without that mental image to haunt him. For a moment, Dave considers going back in time to steal the collar back. Bro, as though reading Dave's mind, proceeds to shred the wiring out of its metal casing with expert fingers. Dave breathes out hard, not quite able to process the act of desecration going on right in front of him. Bro then dumps the remains of the collar in the empty glass of ginger ale that sits before Lil Cal; the puppet is propped up in its seat as if it had never moved from the spot. This basically guarantees Dave is too freaked out to try to retrieve the parts. Not that he could have recreated the inner workings now that Bro's torn it apart, anyway - Bro's the freaky mechanical expert, not Dave.

"You're a fucking asshole," Dave goes to say, rubbing his throat and feeling the hum of his vocal cords beneath his skin. As always, there's that faint, stupid hope that this time it'll be different, this time, *it'll work* -

Nothing comes out of his mouth.
Dave doesn’t sign a single word all through the trip home from the airport. He can’t bring himself to admit defeat, not even to sign one of the choice sick burns directed at Bro that he’s steadily accumulating in his head. The urge to talk, on the other hand, lodges like a tumor in his throat, a constant pressure whenever he opens his mouth and then snaps it shut. Bro, being Bro, probably doesn’t even notice anything has changed as he leads the way back home from the airport – it’s not like he ever paid much attention to Dave’s rambling tangents in the first place. Dave catches the sideways looks he’s getting, though, and knows that Bro is thoroughly unimpressed by all this first-class, grade-A sulking.

Too bad. Dave is mute again for the first time in years, and he reserves to right to throw the mother of all silent tantrums when they get home. That collar had still been working perfectly fine before Bro decided to crown himself the king of all puppetfucks and rip it apart, and Dave is fucking pissed.

“Kid, are you seriously going to be a little bitch about this?” Bro says wearily when they reach the top floor of the apartment. Dave flashsteps right past him and shoulders his way into the apartment, keeping his head down and his eyes fixed on the floor. It’s three in the morning and he’s been wearing the same blood and sweat-stained outfit for the past nineteen hours, after jetsetting halfway across the country to get his brain chewed out by fucking tentacle monsters and his speech simulating collar fucked seven ways to Sunday. And. Fuck. He needs to claim the shower before Bro does or he’ll be absolutely foul by the time the man’s interminable shower ends.

A smuppet comes flying at Dave's head from a diagonal. It's an obvious distraction, but Dave can't handle taking a smuppet to the face even on the best of days, so he wastes precious seconds whipping out his sword and slicing the bright green plush abomination into quarters. Bro inserts himself between Dave and the bathroom, leaning on the door frame as he folds his arms and continues to stare pointedly at Dave.

“Get out of my way, Bro,” Dave tries to say. He fails miserably; his vocal cords flap, and air rasps out through his lips, but no sound emerges. There’s a faint, breathy hiss, and that’s it. Just. No. Fuck this. He stops time and ducks under Bro’s right arm, but before he can slam the door Bro hauls him back out by his shirt collar. Dave lets out a stream of curse words that don’t make a sound anywhere but in his head, and within seconds he just shuts down because what’s the fucking point.

Bro keeps a grip on Dave’s shirt, silent, and Dave tenses up under the scrutiny, staring at a shitty poster hanging on the wall instead of meeting his gaze.

"Fuckin' brat," Bro mutters after five minutes of silence.

Yeah, Dave doesn't have to put up with this shit. He rips his shirt out of Bro's grasp between one second and the next and huddles up his shoulders, slouching away as he heads for the kitchen. "Fine, have the fucking shower first," he wants to say, even though he knows that's not what Bro is on about. Fuck, can’t a guy just brood over the fact that he’s mute for two fucking seconds?

When he glances back from the kitchen, he can see Bro's hands moving. Dave intends to pointedly ignore the sign language, but he grimaces and ends up looking anyway, trying to hide it behind the cover of his shades. 'Look, I can get new parts in a month. I'll go hit up my dealer abroad,' Bro signs, the movements of his hands deft and sharp, like he's cutting the air with the signs. 'Stop dicking around and suck it up, you whiny little beanpole.'

"Don't pander to me." Dave shoves both hands through his hair, accidentally brushing his shades
halfway up his forehead as he does so. He's just wheezing and flapping his lips at Bro at this point. Not even getting angry can make the words audible, and he knows that, but he keeps trying anyway because he really is a dumb fuck who doesn't know when to stop.

'It's not pandering, dipshit, it's me making sure you haven't actually forgotten the fucking language you use when you can't talk.' Bro shakes his head. 'Sometimes I wonder about you, kid.'

Dave returns to ignoring Bro, shoving aside a pile of empty video game cases and letting them fall onto the kitchen floor as he hunts through the debris. He's so sick of Bro's stuff lying around everywhere (never mind that half the stuff is nominally Dave's, too) and is seriously debating the ironic merits of going on a soundless cleaning spree to usher in the new era of Silent Striders. It would be like taking a vow of silence and training in a mountaintop dojo to become some kind of badass ninja monk who uses cleaning techniques to shank people.

...No, he's not doing this, man. He's not making this happen. He's too fed up with fucking life right now to be that motivated, and where the fucking fuck is his apple juice.

In the space of five frenzied seconds and all the pauses in-between, Dave tears the kitchen apart. Bro could've stopped him at any point, but he just watches as Dave runs out of hiding places to search.

There is no apple juice. It's not in any of his usual stashes, or any of Bro's funky hiding spots. It hasn't even been poured out of its usual containers and poured into beer bottles just to fuck with Dave - he would know, he does taste tests. It's not anywhere.

The last of Dave's meager, childish hopes and dreams wither and die. Life is awful. All of the light has literally gone out of the world, as though the sun can never bring itself to shine on a world without AJ ever again. Or maybe Dave's just closed his eyes and started banging head against the side of the fridge. One of the two. He's willing to bet cold hard cash on it being the former. The absence of AJ is something to be universally mourned. The sky itself weeps and thunders out a booming elegy for the amber elixir - no, no, that's still just Dave pounding a new dent into the fridge with his forehead. Close enough.

"...Is that Morse code?" Bro asks aloud, sounding almost thoughtful. "For...AJ? Oh my god, kid, you have a problem."

Dave lets out a strangled wheeze of fury and removes his head from the side of the refrigerator, bypassing the bathroom entirely as he darts into his room. Bro could be signing any number of things at Dave as he stomps by, but Dave doesn't look up. He's not deaf, god fucking dammit, his voice may have pulled a fucking Ariel but his ears are working just fine. If Bro starts going around signing all the time out of some perverse desire to mock Dave's mourning (which let's be honest, is pretty fucking likely), the man's just going to have to deal with being ignored all the time. Bro might not say a lot, but when he does talk, he gets all pissy and bitchy when people ignore him. Too bad. Dave refuses to fall back on the old instinct to keep a person's hands in sight at all times except in combat situations.

He kicks his door shut. Bro probably has cameras in here but Dave stopped expecting personal privacy in this place way back in the infancy of irony. These clothes are so fucked, and he'd like to not get pulled over by the cops on the street, so he just strips as he goes and then pulls a dull red sweater over his head against the almost-cool night air drifting in through the hole in the wall. Pants are overrated as fuck, but he puts them on anyway. Oh, the sacrifices he's willing to make in the name of apple juice. He fishes his phone out of his torn work uniform's pocket and grabs his wallet before exiting the room. Still seething inwardly, he heads for the front door. He still smells like ozone and blown up buildings and creepy secret labs, but he can probably pass for normal long enough to retrieve the goods from the convenience store.
Commandment one of the Faith of Dave - thou shalt not suffer a dearth of apple juice in thy household. *It is law.*

'Where the fuck do you - Bro begins in sign language, then switches over when Dave doesn't turn to indulge Bro's weird new signing fetish. "-think you're going?"

*Out*, Dave thinks loudly. His throat scrapes dryly as he swallows down words, and he leaves the door hanging open behind him and flashsteps all the way downstairs. Bro doesn't come after him, which is - fucking typical. Sheesh, Dave's eighteen goddamn years old, he doesn't need permission to go out at night. Or three in the morning. Jesus fuck. And if Bro really wanted him to stay indoors, Dave wouldn't have even made it out the door.

He supposes he could also get some cleaning supplies while he's out. Showing John around the pigsty that is the Strider household had been more than a little embarrassing at the time, what with all the gross puppets everywhere, but of course that has nothing to do with why Dave would want to clean a little. No, this would be a purely ironic exercise.

...Yeah. Hell yeah. AJ and cleanliness. He's making this a thing, goddammit.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 03:21:30 --

TG: john
TG: i know youre missing me already
TG: like 'fuck, that strider guy'
TG: 'he was just too righteous'
TG: 'how do i go on without him in my life'
TG: 'hes ruined me for all other brohombres'
TG: 'that handsome asshole'
TG: im sorry john i cant help being such a liferuiner
TG: sorry im not sorry
TG: shit, no, that was lame
TG: fuck
TG: forget i said that i have a reputation to maintain
TG: i blame the internet they dont let shit die there
TG: that saying should be taken out back behind the shed and shot
TG: then we can stuff its rotting corpse and burn it in effigy
TG: its a fucking plan, my man, am i right? we can invite all our derpy little friends to the corpse party
TG: …
TG: why does this always happen
TG: why do we always end up here
TG: me pouring out my fragile, manly heart to you
TG: you ignoring my finely crafted overtures of brohood
TG: why must you string me along this way EB?
Wait. Shit. It's 3 in the morning here, which means it's 1 in Seattle, right? The last time he saw John, the kid had a new sling and massive bruises all up and around his shoulder; surely he couldn't have gone out and done the hero thing right after a tentacle monster smackdown?

Yeah, who is Dave kidding. This is John he's talking about. The kid doesn't have the common sense of a fucking red shirt, though so far he's got a better survival rate. He's probably trying to pitifully elbow some rando in the kidney with his crippled elbow. Dumbass.

TG: awesome
TG: ll have you know i can sense your dumbshit life choices from here john
TG: and i am stating for the record that any choice that does not involve talking to me is a shitty life choice
TG: but
TG: i am a generous brohort and i know that one day you shall return to my bosom
TG: shhh no words now
TG: just bosoms
-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 03:37:11 --

Yeah, he's just going to shut up while he's ahead. Yikes. Thumbing out of the Pesterchum tab, Dave looks up just in time to see himself slouching out of an alley up ahead.

Oh great. Time fuckery. Exactly how Dave wants to top off this shitty evening sundae, with the cherry of temporal inevitability. Now he's facing a morning that, depending on how far back future-Dave tells him to go, could very well end up lasting another twelve hours longer than it should. Time travel is all cool and shit in theory, but in practice, Dave has found it anywhere from baffling to tedious to outright stupid. But then, isn't that basically life?

The other-Dave is carrying a bunch of plastic grocery bags on his arms, so at some point Dave at least makes it to his intended destination, which is a fucking relief. Half the time these temporal tangents send him halfway across Houston and he completely fails to get his original job done. Future-him huffs and shoves the plastic bags up into the crook of his elbows to free his hands and start signing. Weak. Looks like Dave gives in at some point tonight, which is fucking dissatisfying. He is personally disappointed in himself; he's really let himself down this time.

'Oh my fucking god are we a whiny little shit,' other-Dave signs, glowering. His shades are off, hanging by one folded arm from the collar of his sweater, so the furrowed brows are really obvious and exposed. 'Bro is right. This is obnoxious. Stop that right now. Stop proving him right or so help me God I will punch us in the dick.'

He'd ask how future-him knows what Dave is thinking, but the answer is pretty obvious. "Go ahead," he mouths, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "You're the one who'll have been feeling it all night long."

Other-him grimaces. 'It's almost worth it. Almost. Whatever. If you don't shape up, BQ will think we're idiots and she won't let us all in on Operation Investigashenanigans and Detectevasion."

"There was a line. You just crossed." Dave rubs at his face with a hand, not quite a facepalm but pretty close because holy fuck, did they seriously just graduate to double portmanteau mission names? That's it. He is so done right now.

Future-Dave just smiles. 'Okay, first I was just going to not tell you because that was how I remembered it happening. Now, I'm just not gonna tell you because witnessing you boarding the struggle bus over something as obvious as those wordsmashes is almost the equivalent of that dick punt I seriously considered earlier.'
"Why. We swore, you asshat. We swore the struggle bus wouldn't become a thing." Dave pulls a facepalm 2x combo. "We fucking swore. Ugh. Everything about this morning is awful and it's barely three."

'Welcome to the struggle bus. Next stop, pointless agonizing over a shitty portmanteau like the little bitch we are.' If future-Dave could talk, he'd be using that flat monotone they use whenever they're maintaining a flawless pokerface. The execution is excellent, Dave will give himself that much. 'It's totally a thing now, man. And speak for yourself, I've had a fan-fucking-tastic morning.'

He doesn't need to take this kind of abuse from himself. "Just tell me how far back to go," Dave demands silently, almost managing to pronounce the vowels in a wheezy kind of way. If vowels sounded like angry breathing. "Let this end."

'Two hours.' Future-Dave shakes his head, hands still fluttering like birds. 'I like how I'm always so much more well-adjusted by this point. Past-me is always so pissy whenever we have to run loops, have you noticed that? Dude, just chill, they're not that bad.'

Dave has no idea what could possibly make him so disgustingly cheerful in two nonlinear hours from now, and he has no interest in having this obnoxiously good mood rubbed in his face while he's personally still 'pissy.' He turns away and heads for the alley, blatantly staring away from future-Dave's hands.

So he misses the warning signs before a hand lands on his shoulder. Dave flinches, nearly shanking his future-self by reflex. He really should know better than to startle himself when he's got a sword on his person. "Dude. What?" he doesn't say.

Future-Dave rolls his eyes and dumps a small container in Dave's free hand. 'For the road, man. You'll thank me later.'

Dave doesn't get it, until two seconds later when he does a double take and everything in the world fades away. His vision tunnels in on that precious green cardboard container resting in the palm of his hand.

...Oh my god. Future apple juice.

AJ.

From.

The future.

It's like a religious epiphany, dawning over an unseen horizon, and this. This is what enlightenment feels like.

Holy fuck, how the hell has Dave not been abusing this power to hell and back all this time? He could have built up a one-man monopoly on the import and consumption of apple juice in the Western hemisphere by this point, and he's been wasting time powers with useless shit like fighting crime? Fuck all this noise, he could have his own apple orchard by the end of the night if he plays his temporal loops right -

'Yeah, I'll get started on eBay when I get home,' future-Dave promises, a tiny smirk tugging at the edge of his lips. 'We're doing this, man.'

'We're making this happen," Dave agrees with his hands, too awed by this glorious new vision of the future to stay on the struggle bus. Because hell yeah, he'll sign if it means he gets to start his own
apple juice empire.

He has seen the future.

And it involves him owning a personalized apple juice company, goddammit.

- 

Thanks to the BQ’s whims, Dave has been out at night more than usual, but he’s still not used to going all hero mode when it’s dark out. This early in the morning, even Houston’s humidity levels have calmed their tits and sunk below 50%; Dave’s sweater almost tips the scales from painfully ironic to actually suitable for the current temperature, which is just weird.

Dave and the Badass Quandary don’t have a set meeting place or method of arranging their rendezvous. Dave had suggested it once.

Once.

BQ had just sneered at him, and began mocking him for his ‘utter incompetence in the realms of subterfuge and subtlety,’ which Dave felt was pretty fucking unfair. He is subtle, okay. He is like the sex guru of subtlety. Ninjas come to him for tips. Spies don’t have shit on Strider quality cunning, alright? He is stealthy as fuck. He just doesn’t think it’s too much to ask for a little goddamn order in the shitstorm that is his relationship with the Quandary.

He doesn’t even know what this dame wants. It’s been nearly two years since he first ran across her, and Dave still doesn’t understand what the carapcian gets out of this alliance. She has the whole enigma thing down; like shit, this woman could make Bro himself fucking work for it. For whatever obscure reason, she wanted Dave to time travel – she wouldn’t fucking shut up about how ‘pausing’ time was moronic and that he should be ‘working in quantifiable paradox loops, you damned fool.’ But after he nearly killed himself to get the hang of going backward in time, she just seemed smugly pleased, and then shut him the fuck down. And she did it in a way that made Dave look stupid for wanting to know the little things, like, you know, how the hell the BQ found out his regular identity anyway, or how she knew enough about his powers to encourage him to expand them past flashstepping.

These are pretty huge concerns, okay? But she just keeps putting him off with misdirection and condescending sarcasm.

So the apple juice only goes so far in placating Dave as he shuffles along the street two hours earlier. He sips it slowly through the straw, trying to savor the last dregs at the bottom of the carton. Meetings with the BQ are becoming pretty useless, and more than once over the past few weeks he’s wondered just why he keeps this up. If he can’t make any progress with the dame tonight, he decides, he’ll just cut himself loose. He doesn’t owe her shit if she can’t be bothered to make sense. He’s not in the mood to have another unfathomable authority figure in his life, goddammit.

He launches the empty juice carton at the nearest trash can with flawless accuracy. His skin prickles and before the carton lands on top of the trash within Dave has his shitty sword out, holding it at the ready as he scans the area.

The only thing he can detect on the road around him is a feral lusus, something beetle-shaped and clicking that is scrounging through the trash outside a Chipotle. Not exactly a normal sight – most rogue lusii get picked up within hours of losing their shit and running away – but not unusual enough to have triggered Dave’s internal alarms. Something is up, but he can’t pinpoint where the sensation is coming from.
Which means this is pretty much like every ironic horror movie he’s ever watched. Shit, does that make him the dumbass blonde who can’t see the fucking murderghost hanging over his head –

Dave looks up.

A smooth white sphere hovers five feet above his head. It looks, he thinks inanely, almost like a cueball.

…but it’s a fucking murderghost. Obviously. A flying cue ball would just be stupid.

“Oh, fuck,” he mouths. Not being an idiot, he then uses his badass reflexes and immediately flings his piece of shit sword (why the fuck did he leave the cold iron at home?!) at the unholy spirit like a spear up. He proceeds to run like hell. He does turn to see if the sword makes contact, but only after stopping and crouching behind a parked car so he doesn’t trip and lay himself out like a four-course Strider buffet for this ghostly fuckface.

The white sphere blinks out of existence before the sword can make contact, and the sword itself clatters to the street a moment later. It snaps in half like the piece of shit it is, naturally.

Dave very quickly does a 360 degree spot check. He refuses to relax afterward though, and continues to glance around until he realizes he looks like a twitchy, paranoid junkie and huddles inward, clamping down on his movements as he walks back to the sword. He kicks at it gingerly and flashsteps back, waiting to see if the broken metal has been contaminated with unholy spirit juice or some bullshit like that. It appears to still be just a regular old piece of shit sword, but he’s not taking any chances.

BQ: So, his eyes have found you at last.

Dave nearly climbs the nearest streetlight like a fucking cat, and in fact has on hand on the pole before he yanks himself to a halt. It’s just BQ. Shit. Fuuuck. He nearly gave himself a heart attack, Christ.

The Quandary steps a little ways out of the shadows, the beetle lusus scuttling out of the way of her arching heels. She’s as elegant as ever, with the clicking, careful grace of limbs that stretch just a little too much to match human proportions. Her narrowed white eyes glance over the spot in the air where the murderghost previously hovered, and she adjusts the folds of her dark trench coat with plucking fingers.

BQ: The Crew has been circling in, of course, for a while now. They’ve always known you were somewhere in the Houston area. But it would appear that whatever you thought to accomplish by flying off to New York, you have drawn down his eye.

BQ: What did you think you could accomplish there, by the way? I am dying of curiosity. Your stupidity has reached new heights, and I simply must know how you’ve managed it.

Dave opens his mouth and starts noiselessly wheezing, “That was not an eye, it was a murderous hellspawn come to target hot blondes like myself in the name of cheap jump scares and horrible sequels.”

The BQ stares at him, nonplussed. When her claws clack out the next message and her telepathic voices blooms in his head, she sounds completely put-out.

BQ: I…what nonsense are you saying now, boy?

BQ: That is not a human tongue. By the gods, have you gone eldritch as well? No, I would have
sensed that.

BQ: Speak English like the uncouth, mouth-breathing verbalizer that you are, child. You test my patience.

Well, fuck. Carapacians can’t read lips? Dave does suppose that a species that relies on mental communication, verbal clicks, and sign language in conjunction would probably have a bit of a cultural block when it comes to purely verbal speech – hell, BQ complains about English all the damn time – but he doesn’t know how that translates to an inability to read lips.

Guess he knows now why future-Dave was signing away like a regular little kiss-ass. Dave could walk away right now, but BQ would just shank him in the kidney for turning his back on her. Here’s to hoping she likes regular human ASL more than she likes English, then, because he knows for a fact that carapacian sign language looks fuck all like ASL. For all he knows she could be just as flummoxed by human sign language as by noiseless wheezing. Sighing, he clamps his jaw shut and reluctantly raises his hands. ‘Look, lady, I really hope you can understand this, because I have had a shitty day and this is all I got right now.’

BQ stills, the stillness of a predator catching an unknown scent, her head tilted to the side as her eyes glint with a rush of vulturine understanding. When she speaks again, her movements are slow and deliberate. Like she’s signing to a four year old.

BQ: …

BQ: Boy.

BQ: You are communicating with the silent tongue of American Signs.

BQ: Are you still able to understand my end of the dialogue?

‘Yeah, yeah, it’s like a goddamn finger fiesta up in here.’ Dave would have growled that. If, you know, he could still produce that kind of noise. Fuck, this is inconvenient. Most of the emotional nuances in sign language have to come across in body language and facial expressions, and naturally Dave has no intention of sacrificing his gorgeous pokerface just so the BQ can pick up on his sarcasm. ‘Fuck lady, I can still hear you in my head, I’m not incompetent. Just. Can’t talk at the moment. We’re not all weirdly arbitrary telepath people.’

BQ: Intriguing.

BQ: I did not anticipate that you would remain so damaged.

BQ: Paradox echoes are to be expected, but such a level of trauma would not normally manifest itself this obviously.

BQ: Truly, this is a new game we play.

He jabs a finger at her. The effect is lost when he immediately has to retract it and start signing. God, he feels disabled or some shit. 'See that? This game bullshit you keep going on about? Explain. Now. I am so over this and I am walking away right now if you don't start rapping out your secrets or something in the next five seconds.'

BQ: It is a metaphor.

BQ: Obviously.

'We agreed you'd never do that again. That totally fucking sarcastic deathlaugh. Stop it.'

BQ: And I am certain that I have, more than once, requested that you cease your inane tangents and focus on remaining hidden.

BQ: Yet I arrive this evening to learn that you have in fact rushed headlong to confront Horrorterrors in full view of the public eye.

BQ: Before making an utter disgrace of yourself in front of however many thousands of your human and troll brethren chose to watch the live footage of the event, and revealing yourself to the Midnight Crew long enough that they are now able to track you without Void interference.

'What can I say.' Dave shrugs. 'When a man's best bro needs help reeling in his tentacle girlfriend, you can't leave him hangin'. Even if it does mean taking a bunch of grimdark feel-good vibes straight to the frontal lobe.'

Not that he remembers that part much at all. After hearing his own voice distorted beyond recognition - something he doesn't really want to think about - when the grimdark Rose started talking to him directly, everything goes kind of blank. Which Dave is surprisingly cool with. Seriously. He'd be fine with forgetting everything about that embarrassing fight sequence entirely. Not recalling the exact, horrifying, no doubt painful details of having Horrorterror voices trying to 'pry their way into his brain,' as Rue Lalonde had termed it, is pretty much awesome with him. He is totes okay with this whole situation being wiped out of his memory for good.

BQ: Do not get me started on the sheer folly of the Heir's actions -

BQ: Wait, what did you say?

The Quandary has been wandering slightly, pacing in deliberate circles beneath the spot where the ghost appeared. Now she stops, and with a slow creak, cracks her head around to face him. Then in two swift steps she strides to him and clasps his chin between two pincer-like claws. Normally Dave would dodge that kind of move pretty easily, but the BQ is fucking fast when she wants to be, okay? You wouldn't expect it from such an elegant broad but she can fucking move. Then she uses her other hand's claws to yank Dave's shades up on top of his hair and jabs at Dave's exposed eyeball and holy fuck not cool not cool -


'Stop threatening my goddamn eye with your pointy goddamn claws!' he signs back, but he's pretty sure the carapacian dame is so all up in his business that she can't look to see his hand motions anyway. He's got his hands up in a guard that's a little shaky, but his hands waver before they can reach up to grab the BQ's wrists and rip them away from his face. He's too afraid to move in case the two claws delicately peeling his eyelids apart decide to stab forward and start puncturing vulnerable eyeballs. Holy fuck is this not okay. He's in serious danger of adding 'half-blind' on top of the whole mute thing. When a claw needles a little too deeply into the hollow of his eye socket, prodding at the underside of his eyeball, he starts to lose his shit. 'Augh! Get off!'

Eventually, the Quandary shakes her head and steps back, slowly curling her claws up as she goes. Dave nearly trips backward in his haste to get some space between them. He doesn't even try to hide his mild concern as he pokes at his eye to make sure everything is still in one piece before yanking his shades back down.
BQ: Unbelievable.

BQ: You appear to be untainted.

BQ: The luck of the stupid runs strong in this universe.

Dave grunts, and is inwardly pleased when the action actually produces a sound. It's not much, but it's something, alright? 'Tainted? Are we about to have another one of those conversations where you explain nothing relevant to the actual questions I ask?'

The BQ rolls the tips of her fingers along the palm of her hand in a clicking drum, closing her eyes for a long moment. The carapace of her smooth face is unnervingly blank without the dim light of those pale, narrowed eyes, broken only by the white scar running along her closed right eye.

BQ: The Horrorterrors are...unpredictable elements.

BQ: Once they were merely distant threats, half-heard songs echoing from the Furthest Ring.

BQ: Of late, they have been more - forward. Aggressive. As though they have been riled up by something, and now actively seek out victims.

BQ: You in particular would be vulnerable to their advances, though perhaps not so much so as the Seer.

BQ: She has had more prolonged contact with them, of course.

BQ: But you hear them more clearly than most, and once you hear them, they have a way in.

BQ: You do not want to let them in.

Dave's mouth drops. He puts a shaking hand to his lips, eyes widening as he pretends to simper and freak out. 'O-oh my god. You just answered a question. And the answer almost made sense. I - Am I dreaming?'

The BQ just scowls at him.

BQ: Obnoxious whelp.

BQ: This is not a subject I can afford to spare your negligible remaining sanity by judiciously selecting what information you can handle with your poor traumatized brain.

BQ: Horrorterrors are insidious, and they will do more than destroy you if they take command of your body.

BQ: Bad enough they were so easily able to take the Seer again. Can you imagine them with a Knight of Time immersed in their tangles?

Dave facepalms and doesn't respond. After several minutes, he motions with his hand. 'I'm waiting.'

BQ: ...For what?

Dave knuckles at his forehead. 'Further explanation. Like. Knight of Time? Congratulations, you have added Random Unexplained Topic #413 to your list of unexplained bullshit. I can't actually imagine some random ass knight getting all cuddly with tentacle monsters without this little thing called context. You can clear this all up any day now.'
BQ: My job is not to explain things to you.

BQ: You have no idea what function I serve, really, which is just as well.

BQ: I do not think it really applies anymore, anyway. This universe is despicably perverse.

BQ: You are a Hero of Time. Your formal title is Knight.

BQ: What a wonderful explanation I have provided, out of the generosity of my black heart.

BQ: Ha.

Dave nods, considers her words, and then shakes his head. 'You forgot to mention just who the fuck made up that formal title. Like. Are there more titles? Is there a system here? Who the fuck thought I would make a good knight? That's just stupid. Why am I not the Ninja of Time, goddammit?'

BQ: Ninja is not a recognized title.

BQ: And no one decided on the system.

BQ: It simply IS, and always shall be.

BQ: You already know other titles, anyway. The Heir and the Seer are far more in tune with themselves than you and the fourth, oddly enough.

BQ: The Seer is meant to understand, of course, but I cannot imagine how the Heir could have such insight into his true nature this early in the game. That is a far more intriguing line of inquiry than your idiotic questions about topics beyond the purview of your tiny mind at this point in the game.

No. This needs to stop. Dave can feel one of his eyes twitching, and he honestly wants to start banging his head against the pavement in frustration. 'Okay, no, this isn't working. I was wrong, I was so wrong, you explaining things really does just make everything more awful. Why do I keep putting myself through this. I am done. I'm out of here.' He shoves his hands into his pockets, then reconsider. He reaches up, fixes his shades again, and then gives the BQ a most lofty middle finger. Then he turns and starts walking away.

BQ: Then I suppose you are not interested in hearing about the secret mission?

…

Damn future-Dave. Damn him for making this inevitable, with his smug future knowledge of whatever the hell this secret missions might be. And damn current-Dave for being instantly, disgustingly intrigued. No, seriously, fuck both those guys. 'No, I don't think so,' he signs, but he has to turn to face BQ so she can see his hands, and he knows that's more than enough of an admission of interest for her to know he's paying attention. 'Sorry. I think I'll just grab my AJ and be on my way. It's been real, BQ, k thanks bai.' He has to spell out the last part with individual signs but it's so worth it to see the moment of bafflement cross the BQ's face as she struggles with the mild language gap.

They're both motionless for a long moment, and when Dave awkwardly finds he can't bring himself to continue walking away, a smile smirk eventually creases the Quandary's face. Yeah, fuck, she knows she's won. Dave's a sucker.

BQ: The eye of the Crew has only just now found you, but they have been in this city long enough to have an established presence.
BQ: They will wait to assess the situation, but they will begin to target you deliberately.

BQ: Unless, of course, we attack first.

BQ: If we can destroy the cue ball and infiltrate their base, we would not only root out the insufferable pests, but we may, in fact, also find answers to some of your questions.

BQ: You know, those interminable questions that you refuse to believe I can't actually answer.

BQ: ...Answers, child.

BQ: *Answers I say -*

'Okay, okay! Fuck, lady, you win!' Dave groans and slaps at his face, trying to ignore the BQ's triumphant, brain-melting laughter.

But seriously, with a proposal like that, how could anyone expect Dave to say no? Not only does he get to go on some sicknasty secret mission, he might actually get - gasp - answers?!

Not that he really believes her, of course. He's maintaining a healthy skepticism here. He is the king of skepticism. He's been burned before; he may never trust her promises of answers ever again -

Except oh god how awesome would it be to actually get a straight fucking answer for once.

Shiiit. He's so in. This is embarrassing.

'Where do we start looking?' he asks, before a thought strikes him. 'Shit. I need a new sword first. Don't worry, I can literally do this in two seconds.' He's never tried a time loop within a loop before, and for all he knows that kind of timeception could punch a neat hole through the fabric of paradox space, but this is worth it.

The Quandary shakes her head, and leans up against the same streetlight that almost served as Dave's escape route. She removes her weaponized cigarette holder, which makes Dave tense up even more than he already has, what with all this excitement. She proceeds to not flick out the thin blade, but to take an actual, legitimate cigarette from her pocket, followed by a match that she strikes against her own carapace to light.

BQ: Absolutely not.

BQ: Now is not the opportune moment to strike out.

Dave can't even believe this. All the tense excitement rushes out of him in a huff. 'You're kidding, right.'

BQ: I intend to begin this mission in approximately three weeks.

BQ: And to assuage your unending curiosity before you begin to plague me -

BQ: My reasons are twofold: first, I wish to scope out the situation alone, to determine the best method with which we may infiltrate their base. Second, I do not trust that you have emerged from the Horrorterrors unscathed. If nothing else, they have left their mark upon you physically, and that is reason enough to be concerned.

She gestures to his neck with the still unlit cigarette holder. Her hands have been too occupied with sign language to bring the flickering match to the cigarette. Dave instantly gets defensive (he refuses to think the word 'self-conscious') and hunches his shoulder up to block off the edge of the bandages
that peek out from the edge of his sweater, barely covering the ring of bruising that his collar left around his throat when the thorn ripped through. 'Fuck. I can still fight. This thing barely stings.'

That's lie, kind of. But Dave's just not so much of a wuss that he can't work through the throbbing ache of the wound - he's been functioning just fine all day since the doctors at the lab sewed him up, thanks very much.

BQ: It concerns me nonetheless.

BQ: Three weeks, Knight. Three weeks and we will commence this mission. This is not debatable.

BQ: And if you see the cue ball - try to make an effort to destroy it. I could not judge how strong its connection to its master ran before it vanished from sight, but now that it has noted your presence, it will be able to track you. Your generalized Void shielding will weaken steadily under its powers of observation. End its scrutiny if you can.

There's just so many questions Dave could ask. He could fill a fucking four-hundred page novel with all the questions he has. He only asks one, the most relevant. 'About that. What cue ball are we talking about?'

The BQ pauses in the middle of lighting up her cigarette, letting the pitch black match burn out against her claws without even a flicker of pain as she shakes her head at him.

BQ: The cue ball that you attempted to impale with a sword.

BQ: A goodly effort, if misguided. They are more vulnerable to explosives than to cutting implements, unfortunately.

Ohhh. She's talking about the ectoplasmic apparition that Dave saw earlier. He had thought it looked a little like a cue ball -

But honestly, that's still the stupidest thing he's ever heard of. A spying cue ball? Seriously? He shakes his head dramatically and shrugs his shoulders. 'Yeah, sorry. I'm pretty sure that was just a murderghost.'

BQ just stares at him. Her fingers twitch on the cigarette holder, as though she's giving serious consideration to the idea of whipping out the hidden blade and stabbing him in the eye.

BQ: What.

BQ: No, this -

BQ: No. I refuse to be caught up in your endless cycle of stupidity.

BQ: Trust me when I tell you that there is no such thing as...what you said.

BQ: I refuse to repeat it.

Time for some payback, goddammit. She practically walked right into this one. How can he resist such a sweet opening? He will have vengeance for his thousands of unanswered questions. 'Aw, don't hate on the murderghost. It could be the first of its kind you know. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it just wants to be loved. I shouldn't have thrown the sword at it; what if I hurt its feelings? Shit, I could be responsible for the world's first murderghost with self-esteem issues. I feel like a fucking dick now.'
The Quandary shudders and throws the ashes of the match away. Looking almost sick with disgust, she tosses the unlit cigarette away as well, stows her cigashank, and rubs at her temples with both freed hands.

BQ: Cease at once.

BQ: It is a cue ball. It serves as the eye of one who should not be named in an unshielded area. End of discussion.

BQ: It takes a great deal of power to destroy one, but I have faith in your ability to accidentally destroy things, if nothing else.

'Hey. That was a shitty sword, they snap like fucking twigs, okay -'

BQ: Three weeks. I will contact you beforehand. Until then, try to lay low.

BQ: Now excuse me. I have business to attend to. Business that does not involve continuing this cycle of self-flagellation that is trying to deal with questions.

BQ: Farewell.

She gets eaten by the thin shadow of the streetlight before Dave can even raise his hands to reply, which is her favorite method of ditching out on uncomfortable questions she doesn’t want to answer. She doesn't even try to be subtle anymore.

Dave steps on the cigarette the BQ never even got started on, and cracks his neck, smiling thinly.

Of course, if she thinks Dave motherfucking Strider is going to wait three weeks for her permission to do awesome spying shit, the BQ had better think again.

Smirking to himself, Dave starts off down the street as he begins to plot.

Fuck yeah, plotting.

- 

Having concluded his business with the BQ, Dave walks with a spring in his step to the convenience store. Outside the florescent lighting that pours out of the automatic front door, he considers his options, then takes off his shades and folds them up to hang on his sweater collar. Squinting in the harsh light, he steps inside.

Behind the counter, Gerald just sighs. "Kid, I don’t even know why you bother sometimes,” he mutters. Dave has no idea what he’s on about - Gerald is always mumbling about ‘useless disguises' and how 'it's so obvious, for Pete's sake,' but Dave thinks the old guy is just going a little senile. Yep. That's Dave's story, and he's sticking to it.

Anyway. Dave hefts a several containers of apple juice and flashsteps to the corner with his bounty in hand. Almost as an after thought, he adds a bottle of Windex to the pile, and Gerald gives him a weird look. Windex cleans things, right? Dave is sure he's heard rumors of that, somewhere.

Slowly, he puts aside thoughts of Operation Investigashenanigans and Detectevasion aside and begins to contemplate his future apple empire. He's changed his mind. Everything is no longer awful. Things are actually looking up. He continues to smile a little even as he heads to go meet past-Dave, cracking open an AJ for himself as he leisurely strolls through the streets instead of rushing along, for once.
Houston had better get ready.

Shit is about to get real.

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John sleeps straight through the five hour flight from Newark to Seattle. It's the middle of the day in New York, edging towards the middle of the morning in Seattle, but he barely has time to hug Rose and Dave goodbye before he's stumbling up the jet, wearily kicking off his shoes and buckling himself into a seat before passing out.

He wakes up with his face smooshed up against the wall, a little trickle of drool sticking to the side of his chin. He coughs and sits upright, trying to discreetly wipe the drool off on his sleeve, and looks around to see if the stewardess from earlier is around to see it. There's kinda sort of a line of more drool that runs down the wall from where his head rested, and he starts digging into the pile of napkins next to the glass of water someone brought for him and wipes at the drool furiously. He's kind of blushing too. This is so embarrassing! Bleh!

The air in the jet is recycled and tired, but it still ruffles through his hair when he gives it an absent tug. Grimacing, John rubs at his face and stands up to go to the bathroom. He feels grosssss. He's still a mess from the massive fight earlier, and his mouth tastes like pizza gone horribly wrong because that's all he's really eaten all day. His stomach would probably be making some noise about this, but sometime during that nap he shot right from 'grumbling hunger' to 'starvation mode,' which is when his stomach goes dead silent. Yikes. He makes a mental note to steal peanuts or pretzels or something from the back of the plane because wow is he hungry.

"We will be arriving in Seattle shortly," the stewardess mentions after John has finished splashing water on his face and trying to wake up properly. Her horns curve back with a slight hook, and she just hands him the entire basket of pretzel snack packs when he asks. "We'd have sandwiches and other food options, but we were not given time to stock the plane fully before being redirected to Houston," she apologizes. "Take as many as you like."

Yeah, she probably shouldn't have given him that kind of permission. There aren't even going to be pretzels left when John is through here. He sits down at one of the seats with a table in front and starts ripping open packages to dump their contents into an empty mug. "Who does this plane belong to, anyway? Is it Doctor Lalonde's?" John asks, glancing around. Privately he thinks there isn't enough alcohol present on the plane for it to be the doctor's, but that's just his opinion based on a pretty outdated impression of Rose's mom.

For example, if you'd asked him just a day ago, he'd have told you Rue Lalonde was sort of weird and should probably look into AA meetings or something, but was still a pretty good mom, no matter what Rose said.

Now, he's not so sure. He tries to reconcile the Doctor Lalonde he knew all those years ago, and the desperate, enigmatic woman who had abandoned Rose to a lonely, empty house to fend for herself without contact with the outside world, and he comes up totally blank. He just can't accept that ditching Rose was the only possible choice Rue Lalonde had, and somewhere inside, he thinks he's starting to hate her, a feeling like sour milk curdling in his gut.

He just keeps remembering how fragile and skinny Rose felt when he hugged her, the way she had collapsed inward into a quiet, exhausted jumble of thin bones and too-pale skin after she finished driving the last of the grimdark out of her head. Rose is so, so strong; she's always been one of the strongest, smartest people John knows. And now he thinks she might be broken inside, in a way that might not be fixable. And a large part of that is due not just to the Horrorterrors, but to Rue's neglect.
He hates hating people. He avoids it as much as possible. But Rose got hurt because of this. Thousands of people got hurt in New York because of this. It's going to take a while before he can judge objectively whether or not Doctor Lalonde made the right decision. Until then, he's just going to have to stay in contact with Rose (this time for sure!), and send the doctor some...very sternly worded letters in the event she starts hurting Rose again, even if it's just by accident.

"Oh, no. Doctor Lalonde simply has emergency privileges," the stewardess says, patiently waiting by the side of the table and sweeping each depleted pretzel package into a trash bag. John begins to stuff pretzels into his mouth while she continues. "We still serve under the Harley Foundation. Of course, there hasn't been much need for a private jet since our founder died under mysterious circumstances, but we freelance as transportation for executives and politicians."

"The Harley Foundation?" John repeats. He wants to say the name is familiar, but he can't place it at all. He focuses on not choking on the mugful of pretzels he pours into his mouth. Agh. So much salt! "Where have I heard that before?" he says, covering his mouth with a hand so crumbs don't fly out everywhere.

The troll stewardess eyes him appraisingly, her green eyes sharp. "Not many have heard the name at all," she admits, stuffing another armful of pretzel wrappers into the bag. "For the most part, the core foundation simply provides funding for several enterprises that caught the founder's interests in his later years - there is no real Harley Foundation brand, per say. For example, much of the funding for Lalonde Laboratories is drawn from the Harleys. Our founder was very intrigued with the doctor's work before his unfortunate demise."

"Doctor Lalonde's work? On what?" John finishes opening the last of the pretzels. Wow, that took him a grand total of five minutes. It barely makes a dent in the cavernous hollow that is his stomach, but it's a start, anyway. "I thought she did stuff with atoms?"

The stewardess just shrugs as she tucks the empty pretzel basket under her arm and walks back to the kitchenette. "I couldn't tell you, sir. I only know the old company byline, from when Mr. Harley was still around. He was very interested in the sciences. He'd promote anything from major research think tanks to individual roboticists if their work caught his eye." She continues to talk, even when she moves out of John's line of sight and starts dumping the trash bag into a disposal unit. "He was a nice old man. Very spirited. 'Lots of gumption,' is what he'd always say!"

John rests his head on his hand as he leans on the table, frowning. "How weird. I can't think of where I've heard that name before," he says. It's on the tip of his tongue; it's the most frustrating thing in the world, but he just can't figure it out!

"I'm sure you'll remember eventually, sir," the stewardess says. She sounds like she's just saying it to be polite, though. "You may want to buckle in -

"We are beginning our final descent into the Seattle-Tacoma area," a mildly irritated male voice says over the intercom. "Siddown and buckle up, pretzel murderer. Yeah, that's right, I saw that. Asshole. You too, Marie."

The stewardess just rolls her eyes. "He's always this grumpy," she whispers, winking at John with a faint smile.

John feels a pang in his chest, and he can only half-smile at the stewardess in reply before he lets it drop. He's just been reminded that he hasn't seen Karkat in, what - more than a day? Usually even when they can't see each other, they're texting all the time, and of course John hasn't been able to do that since his phone got left behind in his room. It's 4 in the afternoon now, and even if his dad is already at the airport to pick John up like he'd promised he would be, and if they don't hit any major
traffic on the way home, it'll be nearly 5 before they get back to Maple Valley. John's not even sure Karkat will be available for those few hours between now and when John wants to get out on patrol, no matter how much John kind of misses him.

It sucks. He couldn't help the circumstances that led to this (who could possibly have seen rage-teleportation coming?!) but he still feels like a sucky friend. He's the worst.

Not to mention the fact that John has no idea how his dad is going to react when John disembarks. Samuel Egbert has sounded tired and tense the few times John has spoken to him over the course of this little misadventure, and John has a sinking feeling that he's gonna be in a looooot of trouble when they get home. Like, actual 'you're literally grounded' levels of trouble. Head-exploding levels of trouble. Soooo much trouble. Augh.

By the time the plane taxis to a halt, John has such a headache.

Fortunately, this trip is a little more legal than the illicit run out of the Houston airport - instead of having to go full hero-mode and sneak off the busy landing strip past a bunch of guards, John is expected this time, the pilot having had the time to actually report their arrival ahead of schedule. He walks past the security guards and into the terminal, feeling dizzyingly out of place in his borrowed, too-fancy getup. He's ditched the really obvious suit jacket and everything, but he's still wearing most of the hero outfit Dave let him borrow (he hasn't even figured out how he'll return it all to Dave, yet - oops), and he fights the urge to pull on his goggles in the middle of the crowded mob of people that swarms through the wide terminal hall. That wouldn't solve anything at this point - it would only call attention to him.

He's feeling kind of light-headed, actually, and his breathing is erratic. He's freaking out a little yeah, because there's so many people and the crowd keeps jostling him as he ducks his head and heads for the exit, but he's so exposed in this eye-catching uniform and god he really needs some fresh air. Like. Right now. Right now right now right now -

The crowd diminishes slightly as most of the people clustering around him peel off to wait by the luggage carousals, and John pushes his way through the exit door with a gasp.

Thankfully, John's first, refreshing breath of brisk Seattle spring air clears his burgeoning migraine right up, as though the clean wind runs through his mind and drains the heat out of his pounding temples. After suffering through Houston's humidity, the bloodbrine of the Horrorterror's storm, and the recycled monotony of the airplane for the past day, John is relieved when he stretches his free arm outward and the breeze that wraps around him in greeting is sharp and clear, with the metallic hum of the airplanes taking off and landing around them to give it a little zest. He sighs happily, letting his head fall back so he can look at the late afternoon sky.

He has a sneaking suspicion that he'd nearly freaked himself out enough to teleport just then, right in the middle of a crowd of witnesses. The thought sobers him a little. He still has no idea what teleportation has to do with his usual windy thing, but it seems to be triggered not just by rage anymore, but by panic, too. The fight with a grimdark Rose had proven that well enough - he hadn't been furious at the grimdark tangle, just terrified it would snatch Dave away from him, and that had been enough to send him teleport-spamming all over the place. At the time he'd been too caught up in the fight for Rose's body and mind to really notice it; in hindsight, John realizes he's going to have to analyze this new ability with his dad pretty extensively. This is going to have a pretty big impact on his hero work, particularly if he can't get a handle on his weirdly volatile emotions. It'd suck hardcore if he freaked out while stopping a robbery or something and suddenly ended up in the middle of a house fire halfway across the city, after all!
He also wishes it would stop hurting so much. The intense, stabbing pain that wracks his chest is always gone afterward as though it never happened, and doesn't generally stun him for long, but while he's in the process of working himself up into a distress-teleport, it feels like he's actually, literally dying. That's a pretty big flaw in the way the power works. Like, seriously, is this going to end up giving him a legitimate heart attack? Should he be worried about this?

He stands there for a moment, enjoying the feel of fresh air in his lungs, until a honk breaks him out of his reverie. He realizes a familiar white car has pulled up to the curb before him, and through the barely tinted windows he can see his dad's totally classy fedora. Sucking in one last breath to try to steady himself, John bites his lip and walks over to the car. He opens the door and slides into the passenger's seat, staring at his hands in his lap for a long moment after he shuts the door behind him. Having braced himself, John looks at his dad.

There is a brief moment of limbo, in which Samuel Egbert is totally expressionless as he twists to face John. He's unshaven, John notes dizzily, and his eyes are almost as underscored with shadows as John's, and he doesn't think he's ever seen his dad in this bad of shape, not since -

Well. The last time John had taken off to Houston.

John's been so busy with all the frantic action, he hasn't really considered his dad's reaction to John vanishing again. Sure, he expected to get a good stern lecture because obviously running all the way to New York without permission was kind of dumb, but… Well, he just hadn't thought how this would look to his dad. How Samuel would feel, in those long, drawn out minutes between John disappearing and when John finally got his hands on a cell phone at the Striders'. How he'd been tricked into thinking that his own son could be anywhere, could have been kidnapped, or worse, could have legitimately run away again in another fit of depression, one he might not have come back from. How badly would Samuel beat himself up for thinking that he'd failed to see John fall into depression again? How well could John have expected his dad to sleep with all that on his mind?

Oh gosh. Shit. John is the worst son. The worst.

"John."

Oh man, his dad's voice is perfectly neutral, just like his expression, and John can't tell if it's a good neutral or a bad neutral. He hangs his head, but the car continues to idle in place by the curb instead of moving until John looks up and meets his dad's eyes again.

"How long have you been communicating with Flashstep?" he asks, his tone still too gently balanced for John to interpret any anger out of it, which just makes him more anxious. "Since...last time?"

John nods, fighting the urge to drop his head entirely and stare at his fingers. After a nod, his dad turns his attention to the road and John can drop his eyes with relief, turning them to face forward. The air conditioning runs over his face as they finally pull out onto the road and Samuel starts to maneuver their way out of the airport.

"I kept meaning to tell you," John says at last, swallowing hard. He lets his vision zone out as he stares at the spinning wheels of the car ahead of them in the right-hand lane. "But it was just - a really bad time. And then as things got better I started talking to him less and less, so I stopped thinking it would matter so much. I never meant to keep him a secret from you." He winces inwardly, because that's where he really went wrong with this - keeping secrets from his dad. That whole point in his life had been a mess of secrets and depression, and he's still riding out the aftershocks to this day. It just doesn't go away when you think you're better.
"I see. I still wish you had told me about him." Samuel signals a right hand turn with more force behind the tug on the signal handle than he usually uses. He sighs then, scraping at an unshaven cheek with one hand. Every move just makes John feel more guilty. "You told me over the phone that you were careful to keep your chats confidential, but it was still extremely irresponsible of you to discuss that kind of sensitive information with someone over the internet. We can't control what may or may not have gotten out that way."

"I know," John rasps. He clears his throat before he goes on. "I'll try to be more careful from now on."

"I'm not saying you have to stop speaking with him entirely. Far be it from me to come between you and your friends. But promise you'll only go on speaking with this boy if you've clearly thought through the consequences of your actions, and if you know you can keep compromising details out of the chat."

"I promise." John closes his eyes again. It's both more and less than how he expected his dad to react, and he can't fight the relief that seeps into him. He doesn't have to give up on Dave. "I'm also going to try to keep in contact with Rose, too," he adds, shifting in his seat. "The impression I got was that the reason the grimdark got such a hold on her was because she had no one to talk to. At all. Her mom just totally left her alone, Dad." This last part is said with more than a little pain in it, and he can't help darting a glance at the side of his dad's impassive face. At a personal level, that may have been the part of this whole ordeal that struck John as the most horrifying - that Doctor Lalonde, who had seemed like such a nice lady, could abandon her own child that way.

And it's stupid and dumb and irrational of him, but now he has a sinking feeling in his stomach, fueled by the kind of thoughts like 'if she could leave Rose why couldn't he leave me just as easily?' See? So dumb. So stupid. No matter how angry his dad got, there's no way he'd ever just ditch John! Yet he can't stop that primal, childish fear from churning in his gut - because surely Rose thought the same thing about Rue, and she'd been proven so wrong. So very, very wrong.

"Of course, that's fine too, John." Is that a note of slight reassurance in Samuel's voice? John still just can't tell. His dad sighs. "Rue called me and explained what she'd told you. I suppose you know by now that she knew about your powers when you were little."

In a way, it's almost more shocking to hear his dad admit it in such a casual tone of voice than it had been to hear it off-handedly from Rue. John freezes up with the shock, and then shakes it off. "Y-yeah," he says, looking at his dad properly. He and Rose both had sworn to question their parents about the circumstances of their meeting, but it appeared Samuel, unlike the enigmatic Rue, might be more willing to open up about it of his own accord. "Why? What made you trust her with that? And why did you never tell me and Rose?"

"To be honest, I didn't intend to trust her with anything," Samuel says, changing lanes. "You and Rose had only played together a few times in a controlled setting, and the next day Rue approached me and asked how long you'd been able to control the wind." He shakes his head, and John actually catches the faint hint of a smile on his mouth. John doesn't get what about this is amusing, but it's still better than seeing nothing but emotionless disappointment. "You can imagine the look on my face when she just burst out with the truth like that. I'd been supervising you two the whole time and never saw you break cover once. But Rue is nothing if not a genius, even when she's not sober. More than once I've underestimated her simply because she was drinking heavily at the time, but her skills at observation and inference are remarkable."

"And then?" John asks. This is pretty much how he'd imagined the explanation would go - his dad is
too much of a stickler for confidentiality and anonymity to have let the cat out of the bag for no reason, but Doctor Lalonde is definitely to type to swagger up to you with a drunken slur and inform you that of course she already knew about your fantastic grade on that English assignment, it's obvious from the way you're holding that pencil.

No, seriously, one time she knew John had beat Rose on an English essay before John had even said a word to Rose about it. It had been the one and only time John ever mysteriously beat Rose out in the realm of writing, but Rue had apparently deduced the slight smugness in John's smile barely five seconds after the two of them stopped by the Lalonde residence for cookies. Doctor Lalonde is scary good.

"She informed me of Rose's powers. We agreed to keep you both ignorant of each other. I thought personally that you were both too young to be able to keep that kind of secret together - you would be more prone to discussing it at school, around other children, if you got too comfortable talking about it with each other. It was too much of a risk." Samuel sighs. "Rue, on the other hand, was of the opinion that having an ordinary friendship to ground you both would be more beneficial for your social development while you were young. And...well."

The look how well that plan turned out goes unsaid. Maybe his dad didn't really mean it that way, but John hears it anyway, and he can't help the tiny inward flinch.

He can't deny it, though, can he? Rose lost her mind to Horrorterrors, and John lost his to depression. And maybe they're both recovering from that, but the fact is that neither of them turned out totally fine, did they?

All they can do is move on as best as they can.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Samuel speaks again. The faint note of amused reminiscence is gone, and he's totally neutral once more. "Let's talk about New York. Go over it with me, move by move."

And okay. John can handle this. This is a briefing, the standard post-rehearsal they go through after every night John is out on the job. His dad may still have bags under his eyes, and he may still be using that flat tone of voice, but this is routine. This is something familiar, and that means that no matter how angry his dad might be, it's not bad enough yet that he's going off script. John relaxes a little back into his seat, the fingers of one hand tapping along to the faint hum of classical music coming from the speakers as he begins to speak.

They merge onto the interstate and begin to make their way through the traffic. Samuel never drives too fast or too slow; he is always precisely at the speed limit, with effortless accuracy. Karkat, in comparison, drives like an old lady with all the inner rage of a troll-circuit WWE wrestling champion.

...Nah. Not even the humorous rage comparison is lightening John's mood. He still feels awful.

It's not until a half hour later, though, when they're driving along the familiar streets of suburbia, that John's dad breaks the really sucky news. He's probably waiting until the stern fatherly lecture sinks in before launching into something different, which John appreciates immediately when he hears exactly what happened last night while John was stuck in Houston.

"They did what?!" he yells, clapping a hand over his mouth when his dad raises a disapproving eyebrow. "They blew up the police station?!

"No one appears to have been seriously hurt," Samuel concedes, waiting patiently at a stop sign as a
mother with two children crosses the road in front of the car. He waves back with a faint quirk of a smile when one of the little kids waves at him frantically, in stark contrast to the grim tone of his voice as he speaks to John in an undertone. "They could have produced a much more destructive incendiary if they truly wanted to harm anyone, but the goal appears to have been to produce a smokescreen allowing Hearts Boxcars to escape. Some of the lower ranking members were recaptured a few blocks away, but there's been no sign of Boxcars."

John runs both hands through his hair, aware from the fact that there's a faint breeze stirring in the car that he should probably try to calm down. But holy crap, how did everything manage to go to hell in the space of one night? First Rose, now this?! Jeez! "And let me guess. None of the ones they captured are talking?"

"Not a one," his dad says, pulling forward. They're almost in their section of the neighborhood, and John automatically starts watching for Karkat's house in the corner of his eye. "Naturally, the police are a little wary about letting their legal counsel in after the last lawyer apparently brought in the bomb materials, but they can't deny them the right to legal representation entirely. My contact at the station says they're checking over each new lawyer thoroughly."

"I doubt they need to worry. Explosives seem to be Hearts's thing, but I doubt he'd send help for one of his underlings. Not when there's a good chance they'll get out on bail, again," John mutters. He leans his head against the window, his eyes flickering over the side of Karkat's house with considerably less enthusiasm than usual. Now he feels bad about that, too. Wow, and he'd thought this day couldn't get any more depressing.

A thought strikes him. "Wait, what about Hemogoblin?" he asks, whipping his head around to look at his dad again. "Was there anything about him in the reports? Do you think he'd get there in time to try to stop them?"

Samuel just shakes his head solemnly. "I'm sorry, son. If Hemogoblin was around, no one in the papers reported it. My police contact remembered seeing him after the explosion, but there's just no telling if he would have been able to catch up to Hearts in time. If he did and he was successful, no doubt he would have phoned in the capture already. I think we have to accept that Hearts Boxcars is gone for now."

"Or they could have hurt him," John mutters, gritting his teeth. It's a serious possibility, and he sees his dad nod his head in reluctant agreement. They still have no idea what the full extent of Hemogoblin's powers are, how well he can fight one-on-one against someone of Hearts Boxcars's caliber. The other hero is fast and flexible, but Hearts can hit hard. And there's also the high possibility that more grenades could have been involved in any ensuing showdown.

Yeah, that's a worst case scenario. John is definitely concerned about his hero partner, now. He's patrolling tonight no matter what; even if he didn't desperately want to get back into his regular routine and make up for missing Hearts's escape, he has to get in contact with Hemogoblin somehow and make sure the other hero is alright.

They pull into the driveway a few minutes later. After his dad parks John gets the mail by reflex before following Samuel inside. He's still kind of out of sorts, and the regular routine of little things like getting the mail seeming really...weird. Then again, when you start out the day by fighting an otherworldly horror, it's bound to make regular things like getting the mail a little bizarre in comparison.

"I'm going to get changed," he tells his dad, tugging at the shoulder of his slightly too-tight shirt with a grimace as he toes off his shoes. Everything he's wearing right now is still Dave's and yes, Dave is a skinny little shit. Seriously. Everything is too tight.
"Probably a good idea," Samuel agrees, hanging his slightly wrinkled suit jacket on the handle of the
closet where they keep the ironing board. He probably means to iron later - it looks like he's wearing
the same suit John remembers from yesterday (though it feels like a lifetime ago), and John feels a
renewed stab of guilt that his dad was worried enough not to put effort into his usual dapper
appearance. "Karkat will no doubt be over within hours," he adds, raising an eyebrow. "He is a
remarkably persistent friend. And just as remarkably observant."

John just rolls his eyes in agreement. But it's true. Holy heck, what if Karkat saw the fight in New
York on the television? He should have had work today, but Karkat has an uncanny sense for
finding news about heroes - Heir in particular. And while it's up in the air (hehe) if anyone
recognized Heir in New York, since John hasn't actually seen the news reports yet, if anyone would
notice someone resembling Heir in the middle of a major battle it would be Karkat.

"And son?"

John pauses at the stairs, glancing back at his dad. Something in his stomach tightens a little.

"You did very well today. You're growing up to be a one hell of a hero." Samuel Egbert smiles at
John, and then disappears into his study.

For a long moment, John can only stand at the bottom of the stairwell, eyes wide as he tries to absorb
what just happened. It takes a while, and then finally his brain offers up its gloriously intelligent
analysis: he's still proud of me.

We're going to be okay.

Grinning widely, John starts up the stairs two at a time, undoing the buttons of Dave's borrowed shirt
as he runs, and practically catapults into the shower still half-dressed to get all this grime and blood
off himself.

Karkat could be here any minute!

That night, after Karkat heads home, Heir goes out to patrol. It has been nearly three days since his
last night at work, and that had been the night he confronted the Midnight Crew and this tedious,
annoying cycle of injury and exhaustion had kicked off. John is determined not to let his broken
collarbone keep him out a third night, not when there is all the chance in the world the escaped
Hearts Boxcars may still be on the loose in his city.

…Yeah. That. That is a thing. That is still a thing that might actually be happening. Heir grimaces to
himself as he flies over the outermost streets of Seattle, ready to start his usual grid pattern sweeps.

Hearing about the explosion at the police station and the Crew’s ensuing escape from custody...had
hurt. Heir understands why his dad hadn’t mentioned it when they had spoken hastily this morning
before John went out to confront Rose in New York; his dad may have disapproved of the
unauthorized shenanigans John got himself into, but he’d still recognized that a crazed eldritch
magical creature tearing up New York posed a wayyy more significant threat than one criminal,
however dangerous, escaping police custody. By that point, John wouldn’t have been able to do
anything about the Crew anyway – he would only have been needlessly distracted by pointless guilt
while trying to calm Rose down, and they all could have died for it.

Now, though, he has to deal with the fact that while he’d been enduring stupid teleportation
shenanigans with Dave and his brother, three police and two civilians had been injured in the blast, and Heir hadn’t been around to prevent Hearts from making a clean getaway. He’s also worried about Hemogoblin, with whom he still has no reliable means of communication, and so cannot confirm hadn’t gotten caught up in last night’s chaos without Heir to back him up.

They really need to figure out a way of getting in touch that doesn’t rely on Heir’s connection to the wind guiding him to where Hemogoblin may or may not be. Seeriously. This is starting to get old. Maybe they can get awesome heroic walkie-talkies! That would be classic!

The thought manages to draw a chuckle of Heir as he tries to imagine Hemogoblin with a bulky walkie-talkie strapped to his waist. It would look totally ridiculous. He should suggest it just to see the outraged look on the troll hero’s face.

That is, at least, if Hearts Boxcars hasn’t taken advantage of Heir’s unplanned absence to take out the other hero. Instead of letting the wind waft him gently over the city and alert him to crime, Heir sends out a whisper of intent, pressing his need to locate Hemogoblin into the breeze until he’s sure the wind understands that finding Hemogoblin is a priority, too.

The response is surprisingly immediate. The wind buffets Heir in the small of his back in its haste to rush him over the roof of a sprawling mall complex, and though Heir keeps an eye below him for whatever potential crime could catch the wind's attention so completely, it soon becomes clear that his request has definitely gone through.

He ends up hovering over the Seattle Public Library. The area is dark and quiet, and Heir starts to get confused when he sees that the streets and alleyways are all relatively empty. The only sign of life he finds is a rat digging through a split open bag of garbage, which Heir absently levitates into the dumpster it fell out of.

Wait. Oh my god. Yes. It’s finally happened. Heir can’t believe it takes so long for this moment to finally arrive -

He is quite literally *cleaning up the streets of Seattle.*

Cackling to himself, Heir rises into the air again, just in time to catch a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye. The wind yanks him almost sideways, overexcited and enthusiastic in its haste to reach its target. Err, maybe Heir put a little too much spirit into that request to locate Hemogoblin; he doesn’t think the wind has ever been this forcefully earnest before, except in his defense. He hovers back over the street beside the library and this time, when he scans the seemingly-empty shadows, he spots a sleek form flitting between one shadow and the next, two points of luminescence just barely visible from here.

He does wonder what Hemogoblin is doing on the ground rather than on the roof, as he floats downward. But mostly, he's just happy to see the other hero looks to be in one piece! "Hello, Hemogoblin," he says softly, letting the wind drop him to the ground just outside the edge of a lonely street light.

The other hero presses a little further into the shadows, his candy red eyes widened a little more than usual under his mask, but other than that, he doesn't show any other sign that Heir's appearance has startled him. "Well, well. Look who came back to our neck of the woods. And here I thought you'd be occupied with things on the East coast," Hemogoblin murmurs, one hip hitching up slightly as he folds his arms.

Uh.
Ooooops.

John had been so concerned about Karkat having seen Heir on the news, Heir had completely forgotten that Hemogoblin is probably in possession of a TV, too. And totally not blind or stupid. Uh. Oh man.

"Ahahah?" he laughs nervously, and immediately wants to slap himself. Could he sound any more uncool?! Come on, pull it together! "Yeah, that was kind of an unexpected detour. Like, I honestly have very little idea how I managed to get there in time."

How does one explain that one's powers have suddenly extended into the realms of teleport-spamming that ranges across the country? Seriously, is there some kind of hero manual Heir can read about this sort of thing, because he needs to brush up on hero etiquette or something.

One foot is brushing the ground slightly, and the troll's eyes have gone slightly hooded. It's making Heir's mouth kind of dry, and he feels as awkward in comparison as ever. Hemogoblin seriously has this svelte, seductive thing down, and it's as intimidating as it is alluring. "You're telling me you ended up at the scene of some super villainous breakdown all the way across the country...by accident?"

Oh no. Hemogoblin is pouting, his lip just a little pursed. It is doing things to Heir. Auggghhh.

"It's a new thing," Heir hastens to explain. He's flailing a bit with his arms, and probably looks like a total spaz. Thank god his mask covers up the faint flush of embarrassment working its way across his face. "Uh, I don't know how much you saw of it - a lot of the news crews were getting wrecked before we arrived, and I don't know how technology really reacts to all that grimdark R-the villain was putting out."

Oooh man. He has no idea what people are calling Rose's super powered evil side! He nearly said her actual name! He really is off his game, here.

"They seemed to catch most of it," Hemogoblin says, raising a slinky eyebrow. Is everything about this guy...slinky? "After a while they started to avoid Dark Star's immediate vicinity, and the quality went down, but I saw enough."

Dark Star, huh? Well, Heir guesses if you had no idea for the context of how the Horrorterrors worked, it made as good a name as any. "Uh. Then you probably saw the uh" - Heir twirls his fingers in circles which has nothing to do with anything oh my god this is embarrassing - "teleporty thing?"

Hemogoblin's eyes light up, and his back straightens. "I might have noticed it," he says, staring at Heir intently. "I wasn't sure it was you, after that. Something new?"

Well, he can't exactly share all the details of his cross-country tour from hell, but he can give the barest details. Hemogoblin does deserve an explanation. Kind of. "Ended up in Houston last night," Heir says, shrugging. "I knew how to get in contact with Flashstep, so I hung out with him while I tried to figure out how the whole teleporting thing worked. And then in the morning we heard about uh, Dark Star, and we grabbed the Puppeteer and hauled ass up to New York. It was all really improvised - trust me, I did not intend to be out of town last night." He folds his hands together to make them stop flailing, and gives Hemogoblin the most apologetic look he can muster. "I heard about Boxcars and everything. Seriously, I am so sorry I wasn't here to help. Did you hear anything more about that?"

Hemogoblin stiffens up and draws back again, grimacing outright. "Yeah, that whole thing was a
mess. I managed to track Boxcars to the docks where we fought them before, but he got away on a
ship before I could catch him."

Heir shares a sympathetic grimace. It's both better and worse news than he'd thought he'd hear. "So
he's left the city entirely, you think? What are the odds he'll come back after all this mess?"

"No idea." Hemogoblin sighs, his claws drumming along the smooth plane of his arm. "After those
explosions at the station, I'm sure it'd be hard for him to keep a low profile if he were to come back to
Seattle. But there's still a few Crew members in the city, I'm sure, and who knows what they'll get up
to with him gone."

"Nothing we can't handle!" Heir replies, trying to drum a smile. "Now that we're both on the job,
they should be easy to pick off if they try to pull anything. It sucks that Boxcars got away, but if he
ever decides to show his face in our town again, we'll be all over him!"

Hemogoblin smirks a little in response, his eyes still troubled.

But. Hang on. Explosions, plural? "Wait, explosions? I thought it was just the one."

The other hero winces, his folded arms tightening almost defensively. "Ugh. Yeah. Don't remind me.
The media has just been lumping it in with the first explosion - but yeah, there were two. See,
Boxcars didn't know you were out of town, either. So when I realized there was trouble, I checked
the roof, since that was where they left a message for you, last time. I thought maybe Boxcars
couldn't resist one last taunt that might give away where he was headed."

Heir can see where this is going, and he doesn't like it. "And there was an explosion?! Are you
alright?" He scans Hemogoblin's body - not that way - frantically checking him over for some injury
Heir missed earlier. Surely even with the way Hemogoblin seemed to control his blood, he would
have taken some serious damage from a bomb!

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Hemogoblin says flippantly, his confident smirk returning to his face as
he gives Heir a knowing look. Yeah, he so noticed the onceover. But it was totally not sexual! That's
Heir's story, and he's sticking to it. "It slowed me down a bit, but I wouldn't be here if it really
worked me over."

"That's good," Heir says, a genuine smile creasing beneath his mask for the first time all day. Today's
just been full of weird mood swings and ups and downs, and to hear that his partner dodged a bomb
like this is a pretty good note to end it on, actually. He is totally okay with this turn of events. He
bobs back on his heels, which are still balanced in midair. "But again. I am so sorry I kind of ditched
out the night after we officially became partners. And then the night after that I ended up in Houston.
I can honestly say this is the first time in my hero career that this kind of thing has happened - I have
a much better attendance record, usually!"

"I believe you." Hemogoblin stretches a little, unfolding his arms and rolling his shoulders, his eyes
flashing as he moves in and out of the radius of the streetlight. It's kind of hypnotic but Heir is totally
not thinking about that right now. "I'm fairly sure having a major mob invade the city and start
bombing everything is a pretty unusual turn of events. And no one saw Dark Star coming, obviously.
Maybe now that Boxcars has left town, things will settle down a little."

"Hopefully," Heir agrees. "Alright. You like patrolling the east side of town, right?" He rises up a
little higher, feeling a faint tug from the wind. He's getting an inkling of some crime that is only
slowly becoming urgent. He's probably going to have to take off soon. The two of them can't just
stand around here all night chatting, after all! They have jobs to do! "I want to drop by the police
station, but then I can probably take the west."
"Sure. And maybe when we both have a spare moment, you can tell me about New York, and show me how this new teleportation thing works?" Hemogoblin arches an eyebrow, his head tilted to the side as he follows Heir's slow ascent.

"Oh. Alright," Heir agrees, shrugging. "I can't really do it on command yet, so I probably need to work on that, anyway." He'll probably want to practice in the privacy of the Egbert house, first and foremost, somewhere he can keep himself contained and where his dad can help him out with the fine details of how the power works. But after that, Heir's definitely going to put this new ability to use in the field -

"It's a date, then."

What.

Whaaat.

Heir's face explodes into a massive blush, so bad he can feel the burn in his ears and across his forehead. Oh jeez, his entire face is red. This is so mortifying! "Th-that's - uh, no, that's not what I meant," he babbles, his hands springing apart from the death grip he's had them laced into in order to resume their flailed, protesting gestures.

"Hmmm. Too late," Hemogoblin sing-songs, backing away with a full, luscious grin. "Mind giving me a helping hand, Heir?"

"Whaaat?!" Heir just smacks his hands over his mask, his fingers spread so they're covering his eyes as he fumbles to cover his blush. Ow! Fuck! Agh, he's such a klutz! "Mnagh?!"

Hemogoblin's smile couldn't get any wider as he juts his hip out and points a thumb up in the sky. "I could use a lift to get to roof-level. It would take so much more time if I did it all by myself..."

He winks.

Heir basically curls up inwardly and dies at this point. He's completely incoherent. "Y-yes, uh, sure," he squeaks, his hands actually jittery as he reaches out with his connection to the breeze and spools a second veil of wind to lift Hemogoblin, too. Luckily, the wind doesn't really get stuff like extreme sexy-overdoses, so it just raises both heroes smoothly into the air, responding to Heir's thought of 'up.' Once they're above the roof across the street from the library, Heir sets Hemogoblin down, too nervous about landing him fully on the ground in case he uses too much force in his mortification. Instead, he lets the troll drop a few inches above the roof. Hemogoblin lands delicately, taking the slight gap in stride. "I, I guess I'll see you around? Maybe?"

"Perhaps. See you later, Heir." With that and a final luminous crimson wink, Hemogoblin is off, taking a running leap off the roof. He actually does a backflip midjump, cutting it so close to the edge of the building that Heir raises his hands instinctively, a gale rising up to reach down and catch Hemogoblin if he loses his precarious balance. But the troll hero has absolute control of the flip and lands in a handstand on the next roof over, his body arching with amazing flexibility as he then kicks down onto his feet and takes off running.

Heir watches the other hero go far longer than is strictly necessary. With Hemogoblin's immediate, overwhelming presence gone, he can calm down a bit. Calm down a lot. Appreciate the view.

And yeah, he was a total spaz just then, and Hemogoblin totally saw the spazzing. It was a thing. But Heir regrets nothing about this last part of their meeting.

Nothing at allll.
John's arm and collar bone are aching by the time he calls it a night. His dad had gone over the muscles and tissue before John took off for the night, and declared the collar bone no better and no worse for the wear after the battle in New York. He'd been a little worried about the damage that might have been done by the Puppeteer's emergency field op on John's dislocated shoulder, but the fix had been done with such precision that Samuel could find no sign of deeper tissue damage. It's just the usual ache John is going to have to expect for the next few weeks as the bone heals, because he refuses to take off the time from work to wait for it to heal through rest. He's already going to have to skip out on swim practices for appearance's sake - that's enough of a break from his usual strenuous routine.

And tonight was a good night, anyway - it sucks that the Midnight Crew seems to have gotten away as they did, but on the other hand it means far fewer explosions in John's future, which he can appreciate for the sake of his poor city if nothing else. As long as nothing more difficult than the usual muggings and other petty crimes turns up, he should be solid.

When he climbs in through his window, he hesitates in the center of the room, the breezes that carried him home still tugging at the seams of his clothes. He pulls off his goggles and mask, pauses again, and tosses them on the bed rather than opening up the safe in the wall. He opens his door instead and tiptoes softly down the hallway, to where he can see a thin line of light under his dad's bedroom door. Swallowing a little, John knocks carefully on the door and whispers, "Dad? I'm back."

He gets nothing but silence in response for a long moment. He hears floorboards creaking under his dad's feet, slowly approaching the other side of the door. "Welcome home, son," he says at last, something more than pride muddling his voice.

John nods and blinks hard, his eyes kind of stinging, and walks back to his room. He thinks maybe they've reached equilibrium again, that he's been forgiven for all the shit he hadn't even realized he'd put his dad through yesterday. The bitter edge of guilt that's been gnawing at his stomach all night long eases at last. His dad doesn't hate him, isn't disappointed in him, and that means everything is going to be alright.

It's with a much lighter heart that John changes into pajamas. He's still got some energy from all the naps he's been taking over the past few days, so he boots up his computer and logs in. It's way later in Dave and Rose's time zones, but Dave at least has always kept the weirdest hours, staying up all night mixing music and making ironic comics, sleeping in until noon, and then (presumably) spending all afternoon as Flashstep patrolling the streets of Houston.

John winces when he sees the group chat with Dave and his brother is still open on the screen. His computer automatically goes into sleep mode after a few minutes of inactivity, which is why his dad hadn't been able to see the context of John's disappearance in the chatlog.

He doesn't know what makes him read the last of the chat before closing out the window to restart by pestering just Dave. Maybe it's the fact that he rage-teleported before he saw Dave and Bro's reaction to his total meltdown, and he can see that the red and pale orange extend past John's Karkat-style rage rant.

EB: I SWEAR TO ANY GOD LISTENING I AM GOING TO
TG: whoa what
TT: shit
TG: john you know caps lock?
TG: were those weird troll swear words because i got maybe half of that
John freezes, and then scrolls back up.

EB: WKSHRISEHSKW

Wait...what the hell? He never typed that! Dave's comment is right: it looks as though John just smashed a bunch of keys in his caps-locked ragefest...but John never did that! He just remembers being so angry - and then the pain had hit, clutching at his heart and clawing through his chest. In his shock, he'd been unable to finish whatever embarrassing threat he'd planned to fling at Bro (talk about awkward); instead, he'd wrapped his arms around his chest, certain he was having a heart attack of some kind, and pushed back away from the desk, staggering to his feet before the teleport hit and he suddenly appeared three feet above a pile of swords in Houston.

His hands had been nowhere near the keyboard. And there's nothing on the desk that could have fallen over and hit the keys in the wake of his abrupt disappearance. So what gives?

Shaking his head, John takes a screencap of the inexplicable extra comment and saves it to the desktop for future reference. Enough weird stuff happens to him that he doesn't really take anything for granted anymore. 'Don't delete anything' is kind of Dave's motto, and one he always badgers John about - but Dave has also been raised by the Puppeteer, who from the looks of their apartment is a total packrat when it comes to dangerous weapons, robots, and rainbow puppets with odd noses.

Anyway, if Dave had his way all the time, John would be carrying Casey along at all hours of the day, including to school. The Striders are just bizarre sometimes. But occasionally Dave gives good advice!

So! John pulls up a new pester window, and sees that Dave had already been talking in an individual chat window about three hours ago. John makes a face at the mention of a corpse party - seriously, Dave can be sooo weird sometimes! - and is chuckling quietly to himself by the end. He starts typing.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 04:13:01 --
EB: dude, as awesome as your bosom probably is, no thanks ;/
EB: and i don't know what you're talking about, man, i make great life choices! the best life choices!

Yeah, that's probably not true. At all. But he couldn't just let Dave go around impugning the Egbert life choice-making family honor!

TG: fucking lies man
TG: you totally went out heroing all night long didnt you
EB: so what if i did? :P that's my job!
TG: jfc john i swear you have no survival instinct at all
TG: rule one of strifing if your arm is fucked you dont go around swinging a giant goddamn mjölnir rip-off
TG: you sit at home and eat ice cream and watch ironic romcoms okay this is first grade shit EB
EB: hahaha, CG would probably be all for that plan.
TG: CG? oh christ
TG: it's the other guy isnt it
TG: that asshole who thinks he can steal my man
TG: screw chat initials tell me this guys name
TG: i have to evaluate this fucker
TG: see if hes worthy of my bros attention
TG: this is serious fucking business EB theres a whole interview process this guy totally skipped over
TG: like a group interview to weed out the weak followed by a background check and several drug tests and an essay
TG: i have yet to consent to this troll friendship business i did not sign off on this
EB: argh! dave, you type way too fast!
EB: and come on, whatever happened to confidentiality :/
TG: we screwed that one over the minute you decided to share the bed of one dave strider
EB: what.
TG: its too late man you have warmed my bed
TG: you have slept between the same sheets as me
TG: basically
TG: i own your ass now
EB: daaaaaaaaaave!!!

John is rapidly losing control of this situation. This always happens with Dave. Always. Must...focus…

EB: none of that has anything to do with CG
EB: and his privacy is important too, okay??? i can't just give out his handle to someone without telling him first!
TG: bullshit john
TG: i would be so discreet im telling you
TG: he wouldn't even know i was in his head until it was too late
TG: all of his secrets would be mine
TG: i wouldn't even tell him how we know each other if you dont want me to i know you get all bashful and shit man
EB: look. we're super awesome friends, dave.
EB: but there's just too much risk of cross-contamination if you and CG started talking.
TG: harsh man

Wait. Did that actually hurt Dave's feelings? John squints at the screen. It's too hard to tell when Dave is just being Dave and when he's actually trying to cover up hurt feelings by being even more Dave.

EB: i mean it would be soo awesome if you guys could be friends too!
EB: but i also think you might hate each other because CG just kind of pretends to hate everyone by default and you would probably think that's obnoxious
TG: what thats stupid
TG: does he pretend to hate you?
TG: if the fucker is making you feel all unloved and shit i will drown him in apple juice so help me god i have that power now
EB: yeah, this is going pretty much exactly how thought it'd go
EB: wait what apple juice
EB: dave, what are you doing...
TG: stuff
TG: things
TG: you know EB the usual
EB: wowwww, that's just vague enough to make me reeally suspicious.
TG: so much aj john
TG: so much
TG: ill send you a case when the brand label is finished being copyrighted so you can try some of this elixir
EB: i still have no context for this
TG: just wait man. ive been pretty fucking busy all night long running some time loops
TG: so many irons in the fire rn
TG: my empire will span a modest-sized galaxy

John is so confused. But if he's reading this right...

EB: i leave you alone for a half a day and you start an apple juice empire?!
TG: dont worry as my honorary first bro-husband in the strider harem youre first in line to inherit
TG: like fuck would i bequeath this empire to bro hed fuck everything up
EB: i
EB: you know what? okay. i accept. no take-backsies. time loops?
TG: fuck yes
TG: i mean wait uh
TG: yeah, i guess i didnt really ever mention that part, huh
TG: i can do more than stop time now
TG: i can go back a little, too
EB: really??
TG: been runnin some loops for a while now, getting used to it
TG: hurts like a son of a bitch before it works but it hasnt killed me yet so
TG: ive run through like twelve hours now tonight in the space of three linear hours getting this empire started
TG: so worth it
EB: that's so sweet dave! why didn't you try that in new york tho?
TG: i totally did bro
TG: got all those kids out of the museum
TG: just in time for tentarose to wreck my shit
EB: :(  
TG: not my proudest moment okay
EB: wait, you said it hurts?
EB: when did this whole thing start?

John is frowning again. I mean, wow, it's really neat that Flashstep will have a new power in his lineup, according to his inner hero nerd, but this is all kind of...weirdly coincidental? A new power, accompanied by sudden pain? Has Dave been having these weird pseudo-heart attacks too?
He also has two flashing Pesterchum windows in the bottom corner of the screen. One is thoughtfulThaumaturge, which is Rose's new handle, and the other is carcinoGeneticist. Jeez, everybody is up late tonight! John can't even imagine how Karkat could be up so late when he usually stops pestering John a little before 10...Maybe he got caught up in a movie marathon? It wouldn't be the first time.

But oh man. Managing three pesterlogs at once is gonna suck. John isn't used to being this popular! He has to watch himself with Karkat especially, because he's the only one of the three who doesn't know John is Heir. He can't afford to make stupid mistakes!

Biting his lip, John makes an executive decision. He'll wrap up with Dave before he replies to the other two. It's late, and he doesn't want to risk it typing in the wrong window.
TG: idk a little before you decided to drop by?
TG: time gets a little weird when you keep adding a few extra hours to your day
TG: there's like three different daves in this room atm helping me out at different points in the timeline
TG: and it feels like im getting choked out or stabbed in the throat or something
TG: its fucking annoying as hell but you get used to it
TG: except not really fuck that noise its not even halfway ironic its just stupid
EB: huh
TG: yeah enough of me being a whiny little bitch about this
TG: why do you ask
EB: it's just weird, that's all
EB: my teleporting thing hurts too!
TG: are you seriously saying we both got painful new abilities within like a week of each other?
TG: too real, EB
TG: our bond is transcendent
TG: now gimme his chumhandle i wanna interrogate this CG character

John's face slams into his desk. It hurts and when he sits up to stare at the computer screen in vague horror his cheekbone throbs. He can't believe this is actually still a thing.

EB: what no we're having a serious conversation here! i think this is really significant!
TG: i think your new biffle is pretty significant
EB: omg you have a one track mind
EB: did you just seriously say biffle?
TG: come on
EB: noppppe
EB: not happening!
TG: tell me
EB: no!!!
TG: goddammit man i am your internet husband tell me or i make lil cal my successor, god help me
EB: fuck you, you didn't put a ring on it dave so it doesn't count!
TG: …
TG: ………
TG: …………. 
EB: no.
EB: whatever you're thinking dave, no
TG: ringofirony.jpeg
EB: goddammit i'm not opening that
TG: do it
EB: no
TG: you're breaking my heart EB
EB: this is so dumb
EB: you need to go to sleep dude. i think we both do, this is the silliest conversation we've ever had.
TG: hellyeahmotherfuckingproposal.jpeg
EB: i am so not opening that one either
TG: you know you want to
EB: i really don't
TG: youreallydo.gif
EB: oh no

John opens them. In true Dave fashion, all three images are completely shitty, and John is pretty sure the hellyeahmotherfuckingproposal picture is just those two badly drawn characters from Dave's ironic webcomic with their hair slightly redone and set up as though the one in red is offering the
supremely shitty ring from the first image to the one in blue. It is, indeed, a motherfucking bro-proposal.

This is all incredibly stupid. John can't stop laughing. He starts wheezing as he crams half a fist into his mouth to make the horrible barking seal noises stop, his whole body shaking with giggles. The third image is of a jpeg face, scrambled with artifacts from being saved too many times, animated as a gif with one eyebrow going up and down in an 'ironic wiggle'. John thinks he's almost crying at this point.

EB: oh my god this is awful
TG: isnt it great?
EB: i think you broke me i cant breathe
EB: yeah it's definitely time to go to sleep
TG: fine EB go to sleep
TG: you opened it thats like a yes right there
EB: whateverrr dave :P
EB: don't stay up all night! your apple empire can wait until morning
EB: also i'm pretty sure you can't patent a label unless the patent office is open and its still the weekend
TG: what no that cant be
TG: fuck
TG: what is this shit i could have owned my own factory by noon tomorrow now youre telling me i have to wait until Monday to set these gears in motion?
EB: sucks man! talk to you later!
TG: what no you cant leave me in my time of need
-- ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 04:37:12 --
TG: god fucking dammit john

Yeah, conversations with Dave are kind of interminable unless you just cut your losses and run. John yawns widely as he opens up Rose's window. The sight of her pale purple text reassures him a lot, in the part of his mind that had been kind of morbidly convinced that once Rose signed off earlier in the day, he'd never hear from her again. But obviously that had been the irrational depressed part of his brain, and he tries not to think that way too much anymore!

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 04:26:32 --
TT: Ah, John. I see you have logged in.
TT: It would appear that neither of us are quite able to sleep tonight.
TT: And as promised, I will keep in contact with you, John.
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
EB: hey rose! you're back!!! :D
TT: Indeed. Unfortunately, my attempts at obtaining more in-depth information from my mother proved less than fruitful.
TT: She persists in the theory that the connection between our childhood and Dave is merely coincidental.
EB: really? blehhhh. it's kind of obviously not, doctor lalonde! :P i wish i could say my talk with my dad went any better. mostly he was just kind of disappointed in me for taking off to houston and then new york, which i guess i can't really blame him for.
EB: i think i'll have to try again when he's not so worried still. i really gave him a scare yesterday and i feel pretty bad about that :(
TT: Understandable. And it is not as though it is particularly urgent that we obtain these answers immediately. My attempt at interrogating my mother went poorly, perhaps because I attempted to rush it. In my haste, I nearly undid all of the work I did to recover this afternoon.
EB: oh no! are you okay?!
TT: Better, actually. I completed a proper meditation cycle and even ventured to sleep for a few hours. It has been a long time since I last slept. The nightmares were predictable, at least, and simple to manage.

EB: i, uh, guess that's good? :/ sorry you had nightmares though
TT: It is no less than I expected. If the grimdark hadn't been enough to provoke the terrors in my subconscious mind, the destruction I caused in Albany and New York City would have provided ample fodder.

EB: none of that was your fault rose! i told you before, i won't let you blame yourself for what a bunch of tentacle monsters made you do!

TT: I do appreciate the sentiment, John. It is just...difficult for me to accept that.
TT: And I fear that remaining here with my mother will only cause my mental turmoil to worsen. This is not an environment conducive to serenity, not when I still feel such rage towards her.

EB: you really hate her now, don't you? before you were always so mad because you thought she was all passive aggressive and stuff, but now i guess you really do have a reason to hate her.

TT: It is difficult to analyze myself objectively, of course, but I must keep up the attempt. I must not lose sight of myself again. And what I feel when I look upon my mother is
TT: Maybe if she could be bothered to explain herself properly, to provide the answers to the questions we so desperately want answered, I would be able to impartially accept that her actions were necessary, and work to restore our relationship at least to the point of our old standoff.

TT: But she refuses. She continues to sidestep me and treat me as though I am a child who cannot see through her pitiful fraud. And for that, I can have no respect for her. Simply being in the same room as her reduces me to the most vulgar, unfettered fury. Fury that I cannot afford to feel, not with my mind still so uncertainly balanced.

John pulls a face. His stomach is all knotted up in sympathy, but he doesn't know what words would make the situation better! Rose's relationship with her mom is all messed up now, and he's starting to think they're never going to be able to reconcile. When he tries to imagine being that angry at his own dad, even hypothetically, it just makes him heartsick.

EB: i guess i can't really reassure you that everything will be alright, cause i'm not sure it will be.
EB: but if you really think you can't stay around her anymore, you can always come here! there's no way my dad would ever turn you away, you know that!
TT: I...thank you, John. Though I'm certain your father would be a little more wary about welcoming me into the Egbert household after yesterday's events.
EB: no way! if he doesn't get that it wasn't you, i'll make him understand!
EB: i'm pretty sure he gets it, i spent all yesterday morning explaining it to him on the way to the airport :P
EB: but seriously rose, if you need a place to stay, come here!
TT: We will see. I may already have other contingency plans in place, but it may be a few days before I can set them into motion.
TT: I wished to get a better idea of what my mother is working on here, but I'm afraid my guide has gone missing, and I trust no one else to give me an unbiased account of the goings on in this laboratory complex.
EB: a guide? who?
TT: you would remember her as the Personal Motorist. She has assured me however that she prefers Protégé Mediator.
EB: ohh, PM! she was really cool! and an awesomely terrible driver! :D
TT: Quite. She was very helpful earlier in showing me to a computer room, but I seem to have lost track of her since I had to retreat into meditation. She said she wished to introduce me to a mentor of hers, and I have not seen her since.
EB: darn. i'm sure she's still around though! what are you trying to figure out about your mom's work?
TT: I am certain that there is something here she is hiding from me, something that concerns our pasts. Her work has always been focused on the quantum scale; I am curious as to why she left to take the helm of such an extensive research factory, with so many irrelevant scientific and thaumaturgic fields at play.

EB: i see. i wish i could help more from here. there is one thing, i guess

TT: Hmm?

John gnaws on his lip, then nods to himself.

EB: something the stewardess said on the flight back to Seattle. she mentioned that the company that owns the private plane, the harley foundation, also helped fund a lot of science initiatives, including your mom's lab!

EB: i don't know, maybe you can look around for clues about that to help direct your search.

TT: I'll look into, John. It is certainly more than I have managed to garner from my feeble attempts at questioning my mother.

TT: One last thing before I must tend to other matters - tell me, John, are you familiar with the term 'Skaian'?

John reads that word.

That word.

And then there's just PAIN -

Whatever the hell hits him just then, it royally flattens him. John is pretty sure he's only out for a few seconds, but he opens his eyes almost in tears, spots flaring over his vision as he pressed his hands to the sides of his skull. It feels like something is trying to claw its way out of his head, and he has to hunch his head forward and lean over his knees, sucking in breath after breath in an attempt to settle his racing heartbeat.

It's nothing like the pain of teleporting. His eyes have trouble focusing as he stares down at his legs, but he can see tiny drops of red dripping slowly from his nose onto his pants. He laughs a little, while his vision tilts sideways. This is wrong wrong wrong and god does he hate that word -

No. No, there's nothing wrong.

Everything is completely

and

totally

fine.

He skims over the word Rose has typed in her lilac font, absently wiping the blood off on his pants.

Nope. As long as he doesn't look at that (hateful fucking word) there's nothing wrong at all.

EB: i - no i don't think i've heard that word before

TT: ...John? Those were rather gratuitous typos.

EB: yeah, i know. i think i just need to go to sleep. all the new teleporting shenanigans are really wearing me out, i think

EB: you should have seen me and dave earlier. we were completely out of our minds by the time we stopped chatting, it was just absurd

EB: sorry about that word, it just doesn't sound very familiar at all! except maybe it sounds like that
one god from greek mythology?
TT: Gaia, the earth goddess. Mother of all. My thoughts exactly. But I can find no connection between the two words, and can find no etymology for something like 'Skaian' at all. Just another mystery I must ferret out in these labs, it would seem.
EB: good luck! i can ask my dad about that word too in the morning maybe :)
EB: night rose! er, or morning now, i guess
TT: Sleep well, John.
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 04:51:11 --

John shakes his head. There are some drops of blood on his pants when he looks down, and he touches his nose in surprise, coming away with little smears of red on his fingers. Bluh! How gross! He stands up real quick and stops by the bathroom, running some hot water to wipe off the blood. Jeez, when did he start getting such bad nosebleeds for no reason? He wipes at his face with a hand towel, careful to get the little smears of blood that just barely trickle out of his ears, and then he smiles at himself in the mirror.

It would be stupid to go to bed all covered in blood, after all! That task finished, he heads back to the computer, rolling his eyes over such a stupid delay.

And now there's just Karkat! By this time Karkat's probably been waiting fifteen minutes or something, which John would feel bad about, except he strongly suspects Karkat will have fallen asleep in that interval anyway. To his surprise, though, Karkat's name is still highlighted in the main Pesterchum app. Humming faintly to himself, John closes Rose's chatlog with more force than is probably necessary, and opens Karkat's window.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 04:31:06 --
CG: JOHN
CG: WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU EVEN AWAKE
CG: I CAN SEE YOU'RE LOGGED ON AT THIS UNGODLY HOUR SO EXPLAIN YOURSELF
CG: ...
CG: YOU SEE THOSE THREE DOTS RIGHT THERE? THEY INDICATE THAT I AM WAITING IMPATIENTLY ON THE EDGE OF MY SEAT FOR THE FORTHCOMING EXPLANATION
CG: YOU HAVE TO FULFILL YOUR HALF OF THIS IMPLIED SOCIAL CONTRACT JOHN OTHERWISE THE GOVERNMENT WILL REVOKE YOUR STATUS AS A CIVILIZED HUMAN BEING
CG: ...
CG: WHAT IN THE FUCKING FUCK COULD BE SO MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN PANDERING TO MY WHIMS JOHN THIS EXPLANATION HAD BETTER INVOLVE GODDAMN LASER SHARK TORNADOS CHAINSAWS AND PIE
EB: hey karkat! :D
CG: DON'T YOU 'HEY KARKAT' ME JOHN EGBERT. HOW THE FUCK CAN YOU BE SO CHIPPER AT 4 IN THE MORNING.
CG: WHY ARE YOU EVEN ON PESTERCHUM THIS LATE WHY IS THIS A THING

Oops. Better think of a cover. What would make John wake up and get on the computer at 4 in the morning, usually? Other than the hero thing. Uh...what would make a normal teenager stay up this late?

Come on, John, think!

EB: ahahahaha
EB: my uh
EB: my collar bone was just acting up a little. no biggie!
EB: and i thought some mindless internet surfing would pass the time until i felt tired again!

CG: WHAT
CG: WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU WERE HURTING
CG: WHAT IS THIS SHIT DO YOU NEED TO GO TO A FUCKING HOSPITAL
CG: WHERE IS YOUR GODDAMN CUSTODIAN WHY ISN'T HE TAKING CARE OF YOU JESUS FUCKING CHRIST FORGET HIM I HAVE A CAR I'LL DRIVE YOU MYSELF
CG: DON'T MOVE DON'T EVEN MOVE YOU DUMB FUCK I'LL BE THERE IN LIKE TWO MINUTES

No, what, no! That was stupid! Agggh! How did John walk right into that kind of set up?! It would appear he needs a distraction, or he's going to have a wild Karkat battering down the front door any second now. Quick, uh, what would Rose say?!

EB: whoa whoa karkat! i'm okay, seriously! i just needed to consume an analgesic before my shoulder would calm down
CG: WHY THE HELL ARE YOU TYPING LIKE THAT
EB: like what?
CG: LIKE A POMPOUS UPPER CLASS DOCTORAL CANDIDATE WHO'S READ TOO MANY SHITTY HIGH FANTASY NOVELS

...Okay, obviously John is thinking too much like Rose. Because wow, spot on, Karkat!

EB: because it's four in the morning and i'm medicated :P
EB: dude, you try typing normally when you're on the good pain meds. half the stuff that's coming out on the screen barely makes sense when i type it!
CG: THIS IS NOT REASSURING ME JOHN THIS IS THE OPPOSITE OF ME BEING REASSURED
EB: i'm about to fall right back asleep, trust me, the meds are working. they just made me kind of loopy for a bit.
EB: why are you up, karkat? this is really late for you too!

There. Flawless topic change.

CG: GODDAMN INSOMNIA CAN GO FUCK ITSELF RIGHT IN THE LOADGAPER
EB: aww, that sucks man :( i thought you said it was getting easier to sleep?
CG: WELL MY FUCKING THINKPAN DECIDED IT WOULD BE FUCKING HILARIOUS TO RENDER ALL THIS FUCKING SOPOR USELESS
CG: CONGRATULATIONS RECOOPERACOON YOU ARE HEREBY DEMOTED TO THE LOWEST RUNG OF THE ECHELADDER YOU ARE IN FACT THE MOST USELESS PIECE OF SHIT EVER CONCEIVED OF BY TROLLKIND
EB: i can stay awake with you until you think you can go to sleep if you want!
EB: but it might help if you know you actually put down your phone and put your whole head in the 'coon :P since that's kind of how it's designed to work.
CG: NO GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP IF YOU CAN, YOU PANADDELED DUMBBASS
CG: JUST
CG: JUST LOOK
CG: HAVE YOU HAD ANY WEIRD FUCKED UP DREAMS LATELY

Uh. Well, that one came out of left field, even for Karkat! John scratches at his scalp, trying to recall the last time he dreamed at all. It had always been the bane of Rose's psychoanalytic sessions that John never dreamed much, even as a kid. No nightmares, but no good dreams, either, leaving her
nothing to analyze for Freudian imagery. John can't help it though! If he does dream, he doesn't remember any of it when he wakes up.

EB: nope! why do you ask? did you have a nightmare or something?
CG: OR SOMETHING
CG: FORGET IT IT'S NOT IMPORTANT I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY I ASKED SUCH A STUPIDFUCK QUESTION.
EB: you toootally had a nightmare, i can tell. you want to talk about it? i'm not a super awesome therapist dream analyzer but i think i'm pretty good at listening?
CG: I
CG: FUCK
CG: LOOK I'M NOT TRYING TO KEEP ANYTHING FROM YOU
CG: YOU'RE MY MOIRAIL AND I TRUST YOU BUT FUCK
CG: I DON'T THINK I'M LETTING MYSELF THINK ABOUT THIS. I CAN'T REALLY REMEMBER DETAILS, I JUST KNOW I DON'T WANT TO GO BACK TO SLEEP AND SEE IT AGAIN.
CG: SO THIS IS IN NO WAY A REFLECTION ON THIS MOIRALLEGIANCE OKAY THIS IS A FACT THAT I AM STATING FOR THE FUCKING RECORD PLEASE BELIEVE ME
EB: it's okay karkat, i believe you!
EB: if it's really that bad of a dream it's probably natural that you don't want to go to sleep again. but you should try anyway, you probably won't have the same dream twice in a row! and if you do, you can call me! or something like that.
EB: and we can talk!
EB: uh
EB: that all made sense, right? i think i'm actually not making sense anymore. there were a lot of exclamation points involved...
CG: LOOK I'M OBVIOUSLY KEEPING YOU AWAKE WHEN YOU'RE PITIFULLY HALF-ASLEEP
CG: GO TO SLEEP JOHN
EB: are you sure?
CG: YES I'M SURE. I'LL SEE YOU TOMORROW AND WE'LL GO TO THE GODDAMN PARK AND EAT SNOWCONES OR SOME SHIT
EB: yay! :)
CG: YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN FROM TRYING TO CLimb THAT NOOKCHA FING TREE WITH A BROKEN BONE THOUGH I AM PUTTING MY GODDAMN FOOT DOWN
EB: yes sir! i'm not dumb karkat :P it's not like i'm going to look at the first tree we come across and think 'HAHAHA I MUST CLIMB THIS TREE RIGHT NOW' :P
CG: I KNOW YOU EGBERT. ADDICTION IS A POWERFUL THING.
EB: i totally only did that once! you're just paranoid karkat.
EB: see you tomorrow!
CG: ANYWAY
CG: …
CG: <>

Oh, no. Don't don't don't don't -

EB: uh
EB: <>

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 05:02:21 --

AUGH.
Kicking himself inwardly, John logs off the computer and bangs his head on the desk a few times.

The worst part, he thinks blearily, is that he really, really does like being Karkat's best friend. A lot! The only problem here is his stupid hormones, which would very much like Karkat to be something other than friendly, and John can't seem to shut them off. So every time John thinks he should maybe sort of mention to Karkat that, he automatically freezes up. On the one hand, he feels bad that Karkat thinks they're moirails when secretly John is over here totally taking advantage of all the cuddling for a different reason. On the other, there's no way he would ever want to risk losing Karkat's friendship entirely, and who even knows how Karkat would react to that kind of advance! He seems totally content with them being palebros, and John...John wants Karkat to be happy.

Even if that means being moirail-zoned for the rest of his life.

Confused and kind of just tired, John stuffs his uniform into the wall safe and goes to bed. He's got two hours to try to sleep through the quadrant confusion before it's time for his morning exercise routine, and he intends to make the most of them.

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Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

Jade intends to cross over into the US at the border between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. She could have asked Bec to help her coordinate jumps that would have brought her into the States within a few hours of landing in Chile, but it’s so much more exciting to be able to stop and meet people and eat good food along the way! And it’s not as though she has a set deadline for when she wants to meet up with John anyway, aside from the vague idea of meeting him before summer starts. So it’s taken her a couple of days to work her way up the backbone of South America into Mexico. Bec ends up with a poncho in bright green, orange, and rust red yarn somewhere in the mountains and it remains pristine even as they hack through some of the rainforests in Central America just for old times’ sake. It reminds Jade of the jungle back home on the island, and they have a lot of fun! WV seems to have slightly less fun, as he gets all huffy and crackles with green irritation whenever the undergrowth is too thick for him to scamper through as his usual speed, but he always perks up when there’s food involved.

It’s late in the evening by the time they arrive in town. The air is cool enough, with just the last remnants of the day’s arid heat lingering as Jade plants her hands on her hips. She had traded out her longer coat for a short sleeved uniform as they teleported from town to town throughout Mexico, but she’s still broken out into a sweat that clings to her forehead and chin. The air isn’t as muggy and thick with the scent of lush plants growth anymore, so she’s no longer feeling as nostalgic for the heat of her old island.

“You hanging in there, WV?” she asks, grinning down at the carapacian. She doesn’t worry about Bec – it can take the heat – but while WV seems to be alright with pretty high temperatures, he does get a little weird after a big teleportation hop. She’s not sure that it hurts him, exactly, and he can’t speak to explain why he sometimes has to curl up and breathe frantically for a few long moments after a major leap. It’s yet another reason why they walked a good part of the trip on foot – Jade still doesn’t know why stabilizing WV’s quantum state blew the three of them all the way to Australia, particularly when she wasn’t trying to teleport them anywhere. If WV starts to show signs of
regressing into an invisible half-existence once more, they may be forced to travel on foot the rest of the way to John’s city until Jade can find another of her Grandpa’s labs to run further tests in.

WV salutes her with a hiccup, his favorite meter stick still clutched in a rickety claw. His feet are flashing with green pulses of energy, but it doesn’t seem to be hurting him, which is good. He has a bright blue poncho on, one that Jade had bartered for along with Bec’s in Peru when WV had spotted the sky blue stripes and proceeded to totally flip out and try to tear it off the wall. The covering is a little too long on him, draped over his sharp shoulders and falling down around his bony shins like a cloak. Between the bright yellow ruler, the green plasma flares, and the blue poncho he’s a riot of very different, very bright colors, but she doesn’t have the heart to tell him he looks a little silly. Especially not when he still looks so adorable!

“Awesome!” Jade claps her hands together and whirls to glance around them. “Alright! This city can get pretty violent, so stay close, guys!”

The wall to their right explodes.

“Oh my gosh!” Jade yells, holding her arms out in front of her without thinking. At her side Bec is on its feet in a heartbeat. Jade feels the control of her impromptu teleportation yanked out from under her as Bec takes command, and she stumbles awkwardly when they land on the rooftop of the building across the street. WV lands hard as well, squeaking as he falls over sideways. She’d intended to jump them a few hundred meters south, but Bec seems to have other ideas. Righting herself, Jade rushes to the edge of the roof and looks over at the street below.

From up here she can see that it was not just the wall that exploded – the entire building has caved in, the walls blown out by the force of the roof collapsing in on itself. Some of the residents stumble out as Jade watches, but she can still sense movement in the breach. “We have to get them out!” She reaches out with her sense of space to try to pin down how many people are still trapped in the collapsed building –

Whoa. Uh. “That’s new,” Jade says, pulling her hands back hesitantly. Miraculously, she can’t feel any human sized bodies still taking up space in the wreckage, which means that somehow everyone got out okay. But the movement she’s sensing now is weirdly familiar.

It feels like one of Grandpa’s old caretaking and training robots from the Harley residence on the island – but bigger.

Much…bigger…

Jade’s eyes widen and her jaw drops a little as the giant robot straightens up, emerging from the billowing curtains of dust and debris kicked up by its harsh landing. It looks like a fairly standard bipedal model, with an enormous black club sign emblazoned across the chest plate and a strange addition to the head section that looks almost like a triangular hat with a circular pompom on top.

A surprisingly cheerful voice with the underlying gravelly rasp typical of a troll echoes over the speakers. “Hello, Miss Witch! I, Clubs Deuce, have orders to capture you!”

Jade blinks, and looks around. Bec is as silent as ever, but WV meets her eye and points at Jade. Jade quizzically points at herself, unsure, and WV stamps his foot, nodding his head violently.

Huh. How weird. But WV seems pretty certain. “Uh, I guess you’re talking to me, Mister Giant Robot?” she says dubiously, shouting to be heard. Her voice sounds thin and confused to her ears, and she clears her throat once before starting again in a much more determined tone. “But my name is Sharpshooter! I don’t have a magic theme! Soooorry!”
“I – uh – you don’t?” the voice says, startled. The giant robot begins to tilt slightly to the right, and Jade gets the impression that the driver within is too distracted to pay attention to what his robot is doing. That’s a good sign – for her, at least! Over the speakers there is a faint crackling sound, as though someone is frantically shuffling through a pile of papers. “What about space? Do you do the spacey thing?”

“I’m not telling you about my powers, stuuupid!” Jade sticks her tongue out at the robot, though who even knows how well the troll within can see it. “You totally just crushed that building with people still inside, and that means you’re a bad guy! I’m not telling you diddly squat!”

“Oh no,” the voice of Clubs Deuce sighs. “But you do look like the Witch of Space! And we tracked the spatial distortion all the way here. So I think that means you are her!”

Jade’s hackles go up, and she bristles, scanning the robot with her powers again. She’s not sure she can talk someone this dense out of a fight; she wants to know where any potential weak points in the hull might be. It’s not the exact same construction as one of Grandpa’s old devices, but the basic metal skeleton feels relatively similar… “I really don’t think that was me. I’m not a Witch! Your tracker thingy must be broken.”

Another pause ensues, during which Jade can hear more than one person muttering incomprehensibly on the other end of the speakers. Eventually someone exclaims, exasperated, “Sir! Sir, please, the loudspeakers are still broadcasting!” and the system clicks off with a flurry of apologies.

Jade trades a look with WV. He shrugs at her, just as confused.

Jade just knows that these guys are bad news. They know about her space thing, even if they got the name completely wrong, and she’s willing to bet that anyone with the funds for a space-to-ground missile launcher would similarly have the cash to burn on an awesome giant robot project. Jade approves of that last part, if nothing else. She starts to change out of her travelling and adventure clothes one piece at a time, pulling on her good fighting gloves and switching out her shorts for a battle skirt from the sylladex pocket that’s slit up the sides for freedom of movement.

The loudspeaker starts up again. “Ah, I think you’re trying to be sneaky! My associates tell me that the tracker thingy is not broken at all! All three of you are lit up like – like – like tiny green dots on my screen! And – hang on, did you change your outfit?”

“Yup!” Sharpshooter cracks her knuckles, and flicks a nice rifle out of the strife pocket. She lets her zoom lens fall over the right side of her glasses, and turns on one of the old mods from the days when she’d had to fight training robots all the time. “As cool as your giant mecha is, you still used it to flatten that poor house! I can’t let someone with such reckless disregard for public property and people’s lives wander around without facing the consequences!”

Aw yeah. Naaaaailed it!

“You want to fight?” Clubs Deuce’s voice sounds almost…disappointed? “Really? You seem like such a nice person though! Don’t you just want to – I don’t know, come quietly? I have a game of Parcheesi set up in the containment cell and everything!”

From over the loudspeaker, Sharpshooter is certain she can hear the sound of multiple hands slapping against multiple foreheads. She stares at the robot’s unmoving metal face, perplexed. “Why would you try to blow up my house, send crazy ninja bombers to attack me, and now bring along a giant fighting robot if you didn’t want to fight me?” She points an accusing finger at where she can sense the most human movement within the robot body.
“Oh, the missile was just to say hello. And now I’ve said it. Hi!” Clubs sighs. “And I couldn’t send actual ninjas to you – Diamonds doesn’t let me have clearance to use them, anymore. He gets so cross sometimes! Between you and me, sometimes I just want to give him a great big hug and shoo-”

“Sir! Stay on topic, sir!” someone begs in the background, sounding as though they are close to tears.

Clubs coughs, kicking up feedback on other end of the speakers. Sharpshooter winces, and Bec twitches by her side, its nose still trained on the giant robot across the street “R-right! Well! A fight it is then!” The robot straightens up and lumbers its way to the middle of the street, trailing clouds of broken concrete. “And Parcheesi later, I guess. If we have the time.”

"You guys ready?" Sharpshooter demands of WV and Bec. Bec whuffles through its nose and WV salutes again, a tiny frown furrowing between his eyes. It's a shame. She totally meant to officially induct WV in as her sidekick or something before their next huge emergency job, but it looks they'll have to put off the Awesome Supercool Induction Ceremony and Accompanying Fireworks/Dangerous Explosives Display until later!

A giant robot hand reaches out toward the rooftop. As though she'd actually stand still long enough for them to grab her! Sharpshooter launches herself through the air, a floating jump that sends her in an arc right over the Deucebot's hat. There is a crunch of rock behind her as the robot hand collides with the roof where she was standing. Chuckling, Sharpshooter lets herself fall behind the giant robot's back. She has faith in Bec's ability to get WV to safety at least, but WV's not too shabby either now that he has a body again!

Sharpshooter halts her descent somewhere around the side of the Deucebot’s knee joint, and ducks around behind the leg entirely as an enormous mechanical hand clumsily swats at her general location. Leveling her rifle, she fires five times in quick succession, letting the recoil send her tumbling backward through the air. Thankfully, the armor isn’t as thick as she’d feared, and Sharpshooter swings the rifle along her back to free her hands. Grabbing onto the leg, she rips the bullet-riddled panel off with her bare hands and thrusts her hand into a network of tangled cables and gears. She clenches a fist, and then opens it forcefully, and the space around her hand reacts. The inside of the leg explodes outward as the burst of space shoves all the inner parts away from Sharpshooter’s hand in a perfect sphere, and when she kicks off, teleport-hopping her way backward from the miniature explosion of circuitry.

The robot staggers, but doesn’t fall. Instead, it leans more heavily on the other leg, and veers around to limp toward her once more, arms reaching out with twin mechanical whines. Sharpshooter begins ducking and teleporting out of the way, searching for another opening with her rifle in hand. For such a large machine, the Deucebot has some fairly good reflexes! The SCIENCE part of Jade begins excitedly trying to calculate just how advanced the robot’s programming would have to be to command such large mechanical parts to move in tandem that quickly.

Bec is popping in and out around the robot’s viewscreen, green plasma flaring and pulsing in an attempt to disorient whoever is manning the robot’s controls. Over to the side, she catches a glimpse of WV as the small carapacian clings to one of the Deucebot’s arm guards. The arm attempts to shake him off. She can’t hear whether WV is squeaking in pain or panic or not from here – he’s just too quiet! – but when he balances himself with his stubby legs tucked into a section of the armor and begins to whack repeatedly at the elbow joint with his meter stick ruler, she decides he’s probably doing juuuuust fine! Even if he probably can’t do much damage with his cute little attacks, he’s distracting that arm from pursuing Jade, which is a big help!

Without warning, WV bursts into green flame all over. This time she hears his whimper of pain, and he begins to flail his arms, the meter stick flying away and spiraling down toward the ground below.
WV will fall next, if he doesn’t catch himself soon. “WV!” she yelps, yanking herself to a stop, her rifle spinning on its strap, and she reaches out to focus on snatching the carapacian to safety.

One of WV’s swinging limbs bangs awkwardly against the joint of the giant robot’s elbow. Sharpshooter’s ears pop with the sudden burst of spatial displacement that ensues, and when she blinks, the Deucebot is missing its elbow. The now-detached bottom half of its arm crashes to the ground with a resounding boom of metal on pavement. Sharpshooter feels exactly when and where the elbow and WV reappear – about ten yards to the right and up twenty degrees, on top of a roof. She glances up just in time to see WV yank himself up on top of the giant metal joint, his carapace back to its normal glossy black hue as he stares around in evident confusion. He spots his meter stick lying on the road below and claps both claws to the sides of his head, banging repeatedly in frustration.

…Whelp. That’s new. But hey, she’ll take it! Seriously, WV is going to make the best sidekick ever!

But distracted as she is, Sharpshooter fails to sense the rushing, incoming mass of the hand that comes at her from the side until it is almost upon her. Suddenly, the space to her right is completely occupied and she barely has time to turn her head and yell in surprise as a giant robot hand slams into her.

She’s more resilient than most people, but it still hurts when the hand knocks her down against the road. "Oof!" Her ribs creak dangerously and she barely manages to halt her fall before her head hits the ground too. If nothing else, the fact that the Deucebot doesn’t immediately crush her against the pavement confirms the fact that Clubs Deuce is trying to capture her alive rather than kill her. It takes a moment for Sharpshooter to reorient herself, her head spinning from the abrupt, unplanned change in altitude.

Then, with a blink, Sharpshooter growls and appears above the hand, levitating into an upright position before floating up along the robot’s arm. When she reaches the shoulder, close to where Bec is still putting on a strobe lights show, she swaps out the rifle for a grenade launcher, aims down at the shoulder joint, and pulls the trigger, before putting a good amount of air between herself and the explosion that ensues.

Heck yeah.

When the smoke clears, the arm is still attached but the metal is twisted and blacked, with raw, ragged edges. She drops inside and starts pulling at wiring and coil tubing at random, teleporting out vital pieces of the circuitry in wide swaths whenever she can get her gloved hands on them.

All the while, she keeps an eye on her secondary sniper lens attached to the side of her glasses. Even as she kicks out her feet and starts bashing the last twisted remnants of Deucebot’s shoulder joint off its hinges, the program running the data along the side of her vision finishes rendering.

A 3-D image of the Deucebot loads on the lens, with a two foot wide red sphere marked in the center of the giant clubs sign on the chest, encased in other moving parts.

It’s hard for Sharpshooter to pick out a robot’s internal engine when the robot is in motion, and all the parts are rattling along, creating aftershocks and vibrations that confuse her space sense. It’s a lot easier to just let her nifty 3-D rendering program map it out for her, and go from there. It takes some time to load, but it’s worth it! Zapping in front of the robot’s chest plate, Sharpshooter finds herself upside down, her hair falling over her face, but she doesn’t bother righting herself. Instead, she frames that blinking red sphere with her fingers like a box and tugs.

With a shriek of metal, she drags the Deucebot’s primary engine out through the chest plate. The
giant robot shudders to a halt - not that it had been able to do much, with both arms incapacitated - and, with a creak, topples over as its one remaining functional leg loses the power to make up for the knee she blew out. Bec teleports out of the way, and reappears on the street corner, absently sniffing the robotic fingers of the arm WV had detached.

Unconcerned, Jade inspects the engine in her hands, then dismisses it. It's a pretty sloppy engine, with none of the finesse she saw in her Grandpa's machines. There is no new SCIENCE to be learned from this piece of garbage. Shrugging, she tosses it over her shoulder and floats to the ground to inspect the fallen Deucebot's head. "That's what you get for trying to mess with me, you total dorks!" she informs it. No one replies, and for all she knows the lack of power has shut down the microphones that would have let Clubs Deuce and his friends hear her from within the cockpit. Ohhh well. "You should just stay in there until the police arrive," Jade calls loudly, giving the armored robot head one last kick for good measure, sending the whole thing rolling back into the house the robot destroyed earlier. There is no reply from Clubs Deuce or his cohort, but she can feel them moving around in there, so they're okay.

But she's dispensed her justice - a robot for a building is basically just, right? - and it's up to the police in town to arrest them if they want to. Maybe it's different for other heroes, but Jade just likes to knock the big baddies down a notch or two. Arrest records and incarceration don't mean much to a girl who grew up on a deserted jungle island. "Alright guys, let's blow this popsicle stand!" she calls to the sky. Bec appears by her side, but WV waves frantically from the other roof before running in a panic along the edge of the roof, trying to keep her attention. Smiling ruefully, Jade snaps her fingers and goes to retrieve the carapacian.

Crossing into the US after that is a cinch, of course. Grandpa always insisted that passports were overrated and dumb and only served to delay adventure, a delay which he of course refused to have any truck with. So instead of doing it the boring legal way, Jade just has Bec teleport them into the center of El Paso for their next jump, and viola! Problem solved. After WV stops crackling in a sympathetic reaction to Bec's powers and the galaxies sink back under Bec's white fur, Jade decides to celebrate their successful defeat of the Deucebot and their recent illegal immigration into the States by treating them all to midnight tacos.

Because they're worth it.

The tacos, procured from a run down Taco Bell with minimal effort, are delicious. Jade and WV finish off ten between the two of them, while Becquerel looks on with a blank stare until Jade fishes one of the last pre-irradiated steaks from her sylladex and tosses it for him to catch. She doesn't really see him catch it in the bright green light show that follows, but she feels the irradiated burp of energy that escapes the wolf's muzzle two minutes later. It's a good thing steaks are more of a treat than a form of real nourishment for the wolf; the plane with all her extra stuff is still safe in the airplane hangar back at the estate in Britain, but also inaccessible from here. Jade really wishes she had time to pop back over the Atlantic and save some of the perishable food that might or might not go bad in the hold’s pocket dimension, but she has a lot of her clothes and stuff in her personal sylladex, anyway! She misses her guitar and her squiddle plush collection, but it’s not like they’re necessities. She doesn’t want to backtrack until she has a chance to meet John for the first time!

She doesn't realize they're still being followed until Clubs Deuce flies in through the window of the Taco Bell. Why would she think anything of the random movement of people walking around outside the building? It may be past midnight, but Taco Bell is always open. Always.

So there they are, innocently devouring inhuman quantities of taco, WV practically inhaling them...
with his head tilted back so he can chug his standard liter bottle of TaB at the same time, when the window above the table beside theirs shatters inward. Glass goes flying everywhere and Jade, startled, holds up a hand, freezing the glass shards in place before they can go stabbing people willy nilly. Jeez! Talk about someone being inconsiderate!

She blinks at the squat, wide-eyed troll who sits up on the table next to theirs, where he landed after crashing through the window like a living cannonball. "Oh dear! That was exciting!" he laughs, sitting up and beaming at Jade. He waves at her frantically with a claw, his muddy brown eyes gleaming. "Hello, Witch of Space! Are you ready to come quietly, now?"

If the weird nickname hadn't been enough, Jade would have recognized him by the chipper, slightly confused tone of his voice. "Clubs?" she says incredulously, staring at his horns in a way that would usually have been a little rude.

But they're literally shaped like clubs! Like nubby little clubs from a deck of cards! No way that happens naturally! He has to have gotten work done.

"It is me!" he replies, grinning with all his teeth. He doesn't even look vaguely menacing, like most trolls would upon baring all their sharper incisors - he just looks weirdly happy and overly eager. "I told you we could track you, Miss Witch - you and your very scary wolf-beast!"

"Wowww, and that's not creepy at all," Jade replies, sipping on her soda loudly with just the corner of her mouth. She rests her hand on her chin. "Come on, mister, I already beat up your giant robot once, and it was a total letdown. Go bug some other space hero, I'm trying to eat tacos here."

Clubs just looks puzzled. "But I have orders to capture you and bring you back to base," he says slowly, his brow furrowing with deliberate thought. "So, I'm very sorry, but I think you have to come with me! Yes! That's right." His frown vanishes as he makes up his mind, and he nods deeply. "No other space witch will do. The boss told me that very specifically." He scoots his way to the end of his glass-covered table and stands up, coming over to fold his arms with a pout on his face.

"If you people are going to fight, please take it a la calle," the man behind the cash register says. He sounds just as bored as when he took Jade's taco order, and goes back to flipping through his magazine after giving his token warning.

Jade huffs, and swallows the last of her taco. "Noooo. We're leeeaving. Come on, Bec."

The wolf stirs where it has been lying beneath her's and WV's feet under the table, and Jade pulls down on her bottom eyelids to make a gross face at Clubs before Bec teleports them across the city.

She guesses they'll have to do some special maneuvering to make Clubs lose their trail. It'll be a pain, but hey, it's not like John is expecting them to arrive at a specific time. Sometimes Jade even wonders if John is expecting her at all! He's so bad about answering her pesterings!

- Four hours later, Jade is worried. Genuinely, truly worried. She's also absolutely starving. She worked off all those delicious tacos within the first hour of desperate teleportation, and she feels absolutely cheated because she didn’t get to savor the meal.

Because as it turns out, Clubs Deuce isn't kidding when he says he can track their space powers. If anything, he seems to be getting better at it with every passing minute. Jade had tried to lose them in El Paso, but he kept turning up around every corner! What's more, his lackeys are with him, and they have no qualms about enforcing Clubs's bizarre will by tossing the small troll bodily through
windows and blowing up walls whenever the three heroes try to hide in an actual building. Jade had tried resorting to the desperate option of having Bec dump all three of them in the middle of the desert, but Clubs had arrived in a helicopter a little under a half hour later, that damned tracking thingy humming away in his hands. Jade gave serious thought to teleporting the mysterious machine off the tubby little troll's arm, but when she reached out, wrapping her awareness around the device, she found herself unable to focus on it. It's almost as though the tracker is quantumly unstable; half the time, it feels like the tracker is actually a playing card, before it switches back into being a machine.

Soooo inconvenient!

Jade has tried everything. Even when Bec teleports them a few hundred miles back over the border into the Mexican half of the Chihuahuan Desert, Jade can only look at the green lightning that accompanies the jump with a vaguely queasy feeling in her stomach as she flops down on her butt to rest. Bec is tireless, of course, but it also puts out a lot more energy when it teleports them anywhere. Jade has jumped so many times on such short notice that she's starting to feel a little light-headed and dizzy. And the last thing she really wants to do is go messing around with the fabric of space when she's not all there, mentally.

She's also beginning to get an inkling of what they need to do to get this dumb troll off their butts, but she reeeeally doesn't like it. Splitting up the party is never a good idea - but when Bec gives another compulsive flash of green energy that sets off WV in turn, she makes up her mind. They need to minimize how much spatial distortion Clubs is tracking, and the easiest way to do that is to get rid of the atomically powered wolf leaving huge spikes in radiation whenever it teleports from point to point.

"Bec? Becquerel?" She kneels to be on the wolf's level, and scratches behind its fluffy white ear. She clasps the guardian wolf around the neck, hugging it. "Bec, you need to go," she whispers, scratching at the ruff of fur above the top of Bec's spine. "I'm sorry, but we need to try to confuse him. Can you head over into Arizona for me to throw him off the trail?" She kisses him on the nose. "Don't come back until I call you, okay, boy?"

Bec twitches its tail a few times, but makes no move to leave until Jade lets go of its neck and steps back. The wolf gives no real sign of acknowledging the order, but a few seconds later it hovers into the air, its fur going glossy and green in the darkness, and vanishes.

Separating from Bec feels wrong, but it's the only thing Jade can think of to do. "Come on, WV. Let's head north," she says weakly, her stomach feeling a little hollow. The carapacian takes her hand when it's offered, and they start walking along a dried out river bank, further into the desert.

What started as a single encounter with a crazy giant robot guy is rapidly turning into a nightmare. After Bec leaves there's an hour's pause in which Jade dares to hope they've finally managed to lose Clubs for good - only for him to tunnel up from beneath the desert in second giant robot shaped like a drill. After dispatching that robot with significantly more effort than the first one required and kicking the entire robot hard enough to send it and its troll commander blasting off into the distance, Jade resigns herself to another teleport, jumping her and WV back into Ciudad Juarez. They land in an alleyway, away from the main roads, and Jade leans over with her hands on her knees, closing her eyes against a tension headache knotting itself in her mind.

She's trying really hard not to think that things couldn't get any worse, for fear of jinxing herself, when WV collapses.
WV slumps against the wall, his pale eyes scrunched up with what could be exhaustion or pain or both; Jade is too stressed to tell. There’s a faint, sickly lime green glow pulsing along his arms, but it’s not the plasma lightning that usually crackles around him or Bec after a teleport – instead, Jade thinks she can see the outline of thin blood vessels through his carapace, which she is pretty sure is one of those things that is Not Good. At least she can still see him – she doesn’t know if she has the focus left to stabilize him again if he desynchronizes with reality.

Eventually she shakes her head. They’re going to have to walk again. The only way to really throw Clubs off their trail thus far has been to travel on foot, and even with Bec gone she gets the feeling that between her space powers and WV’s aura of distortion, the tiny troll will still be able to track them even if they stop teleporting altogether. They just give off too much natural distortion to turn it all off.

This totally sucks! Seriously, who is this guy, and why does he want to take her somewhere?! He throws missiles and giant robots around like they’re chump change and he’s disturbingly persistent, but he acts so innocuous and good-natured in person that Jade can’t imagine he’s actually the real villain in charge of these shenanigans. Someone is giving him orders, and she is really curious about who that could be. Whoever they are, she’s gonna owe them such an ass-whupping for all this hassle!

“Come on, WV,” she says, shoving her hair back with her hands and scrubbing at it, redoing the lazy pony tail that she tied the masses of hair into back in El Paso. She steps away from the wall and then pauses, looking back at WV.

He doesn’t stand up. Instead, wheezing, he squints up at her and shivers.

Uh oh. Jade squats down, hair sticking to her face as she presses the back of her hand to WV’s forehead. Generally, the carapacian is about the same temperature as Jade, if not a little cooler; now it feels as though she’s touching a hot water bottle, almost warm enough to burn. “Oh no,” she whimpers, grabbing a water bottle from her sylladex and twists off the cap to offer to the overheating carapacian.

Too late, she realizes what she’s just done. “Oh nooooooo,” she groans again, smacking her forehead. Using the sylladex dimensional pocket probably just sent out a huge wave of space distortion for Clubs Deuce and his men to track. Jade just uses these powers without thinking, and now it’s totally biting her in the ass every time they try to hide from him. “Come on, WV, drink a little water. Then we have to get moving again,” she says, coaxing the carapacian forward and keeping her ear tilted at the sky. Clubs seems to be favoring a helicopter at the moment, so she should at least be able to hear him coming.

Urgh. She just really doesn’t want to lead this guy to John! How rude would it be for her to meet her brother for the first time with some random midget troll villain harassing her?! Even when she’d knocked Clubs unconscious that one time, he showed up a half hour later as though nothing had happened!

WV reaches out and takes the water bottle with both hands, a little water trickling out the corners of his mouth as he gulps it as wildly as he would a can of soda. But even when he’s finished it off and lets the water bottle fall to the ground, he continues to wheeze heavily, green light literally burning beneath his carapace. When he goes to stand, his legs give out. Jade stumbles forward to catch him before he falls, patting at his head when he makes a noise of frustration. “Hey, don’t worry, I’ll get you out of here,” she promises, hoisting him up onto her back and then looking back at WV.
He needs an ice bath or something to lower this awful temperature, but they just don’t have the time or resources, and Jade doesn’t know what to do! Agh! Hitching her arms under WV’s shrimpy legs, she dashes down the alleyway and deeper into the city.

It’s only a matter of minutes before Clubs starts to catch up again. "Miss Witch," a by-now infuriatingly familiar voice calls from behind, still steadfastly calm and polite despite all the chasing and beatdowns that have ensued over the past several hours. "Please stop running! My boss is going to be very irritated if I'm late bringing you back to base!"

Jade picks up the pace, but she can still feel the too-familiar movements of Clubs Deuce as he scurries through the alleyways hot on their trail. Her spatial senses feel absolutely fried from being on high alert, and she feels every movement Clubs and his lackeys make run through her bones like tiny explosions. WV is burning a feverish streak along her shoulder, a tiny mumble of pain escaping his mouth. He's not sparking anymore, just smoking a little at his fingers, and Jade thinks that isn't a good sign. If something is up with WV on an atomic level because of all this teleporting around, it's her fault. She needs to get him into an ice bath or something to lower his temperature - can carapacian brains be damaged by fever? - but oh look, they're on the run in the middle of the night in Mexico.

Jade feels a little miserable as she ducks down a new alleyway, her head aching as she pauses to lean against the wall and adjust WV’s limp form in her arms. All the strength has gone out of his arms so he can't hold on to her neck anymore, so she hugs him around the waist and tucks his head over her shoulder. He's just light enough that she'll be able to carry him like this for a while, she thinks -

“Looks like you could use some MOTHERFUCKING ASSISTANCE, my little hero-sis.”

For a wild moment, feeling half crazy, Jade glances around.

The alley is empty.

Then she looks straight in front of her, and sees a troll peel himself out of the shadows.

He had not been standing there before. He can’t have been! She should have been able to sense him taking up space, at the very least, and the fact that she hadn't sets her on edge. "Who are you?" she demands, stepping away from him and clutching WV a little tighter.

His baggy clothes hang limply on a gaunt, long-limbed frame; he is taller than Jade by a good foot and a half, if not more, with another eleven inches of tightly wavering horns on top of that. For a moment she thinks his mouth is split up the sides in a ghoulish grin on a too-pale face – then she recognizes the face paint for what it is, a caked layer of greasy white that smudges and smears messily over the usual dark grey of troll skin. Perhaps at one time the paint formed a clownish mask, but it looks as though the pattern hasn’t been repainted in weeks, reducing the face to a pale, sickly blur. His claws are tucked into the pockets of low-slung, spotted pajama pants, but he has all the stillness of a stalking predator, and Jade gets the distinct feeling that with the length of his gangly limbs, she is still well within arm’s reach for the stranger. She fights the urge to instantly teleport away and get out of this guy’s range; she’d only give Clubs Deuce another wave of space distortion to track her down with.

But seriously, this guy is giving her the creeps!

“I know a little motherfuckin’ something that could WRECK THEIR SHIT if these MOTHERFUCKERS be botherin’ you,” the troll continues. There is something wrong with his
voice, something that sets Jade’s teeth on edge and prickles at her spine. She can hear an extra grate, something deeper than the usual growl of a troll’s voice. It’s almost as though, when the troll isn’t raising his voice to a startling, reverberating thunder, there are two voices emerging from his throat, and one voice is just enough out of sync with the other to strike a note of brain-melting disharmony.

“I think we’ll be okay on our own,” she babbles, wincing as she stutters over the first few words. This is not the kind of guy she wants to expose weakness to, but the longer they stand here in the shadows, the more edgy and apprehensive she feels. She can barely keep her hands from trembling, and she hugs WV closer to reassure herself he’s still there. “We don’t want any more trouble, thanks. If this is your territory or something, I’m sorry if we intruded by accident!”

“Ain’t no thing, my hero-sis. Not a single thing,” the troll drawls, with what he must imagine is a reassuring grin. He shows far too many teeth for Jade’s comfort, the sharp incisors flashing beneath the muted purple gleam of his eyes. She doesn’t think she’s seen such a dark, almost bruised-black purple hemotype in any of the trolls she’s met in the past year or so of travelling the world, and it unnerves her. “I’m all for doin’ favors for a sister in the business of doin’ the hero thing.”

A trash can topples over by the corner of the alley, and Jade whirls to see Clubs Deuce hopping over the fallen metal can. "There you are!" he says cheerfully.

By now, the sound of his voice is enough to send another spike of horror through Jade, and she almost whispers. Forget everything she said earlier, the scary clown troll is nowhere near as terrifying as this guy. Clowntroll just has unfortunate taste in makeup. Clubs, on the other hand, is an abomination. He just. Won't. Stop. "Just leave us alone!" Jade yells, grinding a palm against her temple. WV's head lolls against her shoulder, and remembering the pitiful state the poor carapacian is in because of Clubs's incessant chase just fires her up more. "I don't want to go with you or fight you or anything anymore! Congratulations, you're awful! You're the single most awful person I've ever met and I don't want anything to do with you! You are so frustrating!"

Clubs pouts. "Why are you yelling at me?" he asks, sounding almost timid.

"Why won't you leave me alone?!!" Jade shrieks. She flings up her only free arm and shoves. Clubs goes flying backward with his mouth gaping, and crashes into the garbage can again. She lives in a brief moment of hope that this time, he'll take the hint and crawl away back to his 'base' without her.

Two seconds later, Clubs rolls up onto his feet, shaking himself vigorously and ignoring the brand new tear Jade's latest attack has torn through his much battered, dust-covered, shabby black suit. "That wasn’t very nice, you know," he admonishes.

Jade feels like she is going to lose. Her. Shit. Deep down in her torso, it feels like she's going to explode. "Stop it!"

Abruptly, the tall, gangly troll steps up in the corner of Jade's field of vision, and she flinches away from him too. How could she have forgotten he was there? "Ain't cool to be all distressin' a chill heroína, MOTHERFUCKER," he says, blinking languidly at Clubs Deuce. It's more clear than ever from this perspective that Clowntroll is almost four whole feet taller than Clubs, not counting his horns, and the contrast between the two is bizarre. "I think you should listen to the girl when she MOTHERFUCKING TELLS YOU TO STOP."

"Oh - oh dear? Who are you?" Clubs says worriedly, clasping his claws together. He takes a little step back, clearly intimidated by the sudden appearance of a purple-blooded juggalo, but Jade can see Clubs's handlers rounding the corner now. Any second now she and WV are going to be outnumbered, because she doesn't count Crazy Clown as being on her side.
She doesn't know what teleporting again will do to WV, but she doesn't think they have a choice. Sobbing a little, she bites her lip and tries to focus on some other empty space in the city. They don't have to go far, just away-

Fear lances through Jade like a cold spike in the base of her skull. It abates a moment later, fading in her mind like the stain of an old nightmare that she can't quite remember, but she falls to her knees anyway from the shock. She drops WV in her panic, and he curls up against the ground with his own little murmur of pain.

*What the heck was that?!!*

A wide, skinny claw pats Jade on the back, jolting her forward. She jerks out of reach, panting a little with the shuddering fear that keeps building up in the back of her mind, but the clown-faced troll doesn’t even seem to notice or care. She follows the direction of his gaze, and can only stare.

Clubs Deuce stands transfixed where Jade had thrown him. His eyes are wide and rolled back, the brown of his irises completely hidden so that only the yellowish sclera are visible. The rest of the men and women in black suits that just turned the corner in pursuit are similarly frozen, and one female troll begins to froth at the mouth and tremble, her eyes still rolled back as she shakes.

Jade looks back and forth between the trembling group of thugs and the purple-blooded troll. And she knows, with another frisson of terror that combs through her skull, that the clown *caused* this.

This is some kind of power, but she can't say with any certainty that it's a heroic one. This is...terrifying.

Clowntroll just tilts his head at the transfixed shorter troll and smiles with lazy eyes, the eyelids so low and hooded that the purple of his irises is barely visible. He rolls his head to look at her after a moment, his tangled mass of hair hanging over his eyes as he smiles bemusedly in her direction. “All clear, hermanita,” he says. His grin is a lot easier to bear now that he’s not baring his teeth like a strung-out maniac. “The SHORT LITTLE MOTHERFUCKER will be occupied for a spell. If you’re gonna run, you better DO IT NOW.”

It's terrifying, and Jade can still feel the excess fear in the air bleeding into her own brain, but no way is she going to question the help of some random whimsical clown hero-villain who could probably incapacitate her with a thought. If he wants to help her escape Clubs, then she is tooootally not looking a gift-troll in the mouth. "Uh. Oh, uh, thank you?" she manages weakly.

"Don't forget the SHORT MOTHERFUCKER," the troll replies, jerking his chin slightly at WV’s curled up form.

"Ah, noooo, I won't," Jade says. She's still feeling kind of woozy as she scoops her arms under WV and hauls him up into a fireman carry. "Thanks again!"

Another member of Clubs's gang begins to seize up. The clown just smiles and smiles and smiles. "Not a problem, hero-sis."

And yeah. They are so getting out of here. And they're doing this properly. "Bec!"

The wolf reappears without fanfare. She genuinely wonders if it ever really went to Arizona as she requested, or if it simply hung around just out of her spatial range, carrying out its eternal mission to guard her. Whatever. "We're getting out of here now, okay Bec? One last jump, right to some place cold." She touches WV's forehead, and while he's no longer smoking and burning like the sun, he's still too warm. Jumping again will probably restart the fever, but this time, with Bec's help coordinating, she should be able to aim for someplace with ice. "A freezer room in Texas
somewhere, they have to have one of those in a restaurant somewhere. Can you pinpoint that, Bec?"

Bec huffs and then - freezes. Its head jerks to face Clowntroll, and Jade tenses in response. The troll isn't doing anything different now; he doesn't even look toward Bec, seemingly occupied with whatever he's unleashing on Clubs and his people. But by her side, Bec whines, and Jade doesn’t think she’s heard that kind of plaintive sound escape the wolf’s muzzle before. Bec doesn’t attack, and it doesn’t attempt another teleportation to whisk Jade and WV to safety, which would usually mean that the wolf didn’t consider the troll before them an immediate threat.

Now, Jade isn’t so sure. She has never once, in all her years, heard Becquerel sound afraid.

"Nos vemos," the clown says, apparently indifferent to Bec's whines of terror. He waves a slow hand at her, a farewell that would have been a lot less totally scary if his claws hadn't sharpened to a deadly edge she can clearly see outlined by the moonlight.

"Bec, let's go let's go let's go," she chants, until Bec rises up in the air and a bubble of green electricity envelopes her and WV -

And they are gone, gone, gone.

- They reappear in the freezer of a frozen yogurt shop, somewhere in Dallas. Jade spends the next few minutes calming WV and shoving him facefirst into a pile of ice to cool off the green fire on his head while he flails and squeaks in indignation.

She hooks an arm around Bec in greeting, and narrows her eyes as she watches WV roll around in the ice of his own accord.

"Yeah. Let's go visit John, boy. I'm sick of travelling and dawdling," she says, muttering against the wolf's neck.

In the darkness of the chilled freezer, a pair of green lights that might have been eyes gleam beneath Becquerel's eternal ruff of fur, and then darken again, though Jade does not see the strange transition. She has too much on her mind, and too little mental focus left to handle it all. She shoves Clubs Deuce aside for now - all she can do is try to put as much space between them and Clubs as possible, end of story. Nothing more or less. And the Clowntroll probably just happened to be passing by. Yeah. Totally. That was his territory she stepped on, and now that they've cross back into the US, she'll neeeever see him again, right?

The most she can decide is that their next stop will be Seattle, Washington.

After all these unnecessary shenanigans, Jade is quite ready to finally, at last, give John a piece of her mind!

- Prospyet, Kazakhstan

MP is tidying up the kitchen when the Midnight Crew arrives.

She is between names at the moment – though the man who lives above persists in calling her Ms Paint, it is an old name, a tired name. Sometimes she thinks even her initials feel ancient, old in the bones. They are the oldest and most sacred aspect of her identity, but is this not an era of change? If the White King himself can become a Grey Protector, a title so different as to be nigh
unrecognizable, might she not also transform herself to suit this new world?

Sighing, MP shakes her head softly and begins to stack the dried dishes on the counter. She is a carapacian once of Prospit, and they require less food than the humans and trolls that populate this planet they have found themselves on. But the man who lives above was human long ago and far away, and he still needs an unnatural amount of nourishment before he is at full strength. The kettle on the stove-top whistles, and she adjusts the tea set she has laid out on the counter before removing the kettle from the stove. After completing those finale preparations and wiping off her hands on a pink towel, MP adjusts the ring that hangs on a thin chain around her neck so that it lies flat and begins to retie her apron.

There is still a bowl of scotty dogs on the counter closest to the front door. They do not sadden her; they remind her of her love! How could that make her sad? Spades is far from home and roaming, and no doubt putting himself in simply idiotic amounts of danger, but she has faith he will return. And he shall have scotty dogs when he returns. So many scotty dogs.

If he doesn’t, of course, she’ll drag him back kicking and screaming if need be. She has lost more than enough dear friends to last a thousand lifetimes, and she will not let the one dearest to her spin off into the ether. She has seen the pale sheen of madness still tracing its way through Spades’s thoughts, the way a subtle poison might thread itself through a man’s veins before slowly inundating his heart. It has always been his way, to balance madness and greatness in kind. In one world, he built a civilization from the apocalyptic wilderness of a broken planet; in another, he laid waste to an entire portion of paradox space in a cancerous act of insanity. This incarnation holds the same worlds-spanning significance, balanced on the edge of a knife, whether he remembers it all or not.

MP likes to think she remembers more than most, more even than the Queens in their dance or the abomination plotting away in his new seat of power in the Americas. After all, the Queens only remember their endless games, and the faithless Doctor knows only what he needs to know to bring forth a new iteration of Skaia’s demise. For a being whose sole goal in life is to birth the Angel of Double-Death, that knowledge must seem like omnipotence.

He is wrong, of course. But there’s no need for anyone to enlighten him of that fact. The deeper the shadows in the good Doc Scratch’s memory run, the more MP will have to work with when the time is right. So much slips beneath the radar when you narrow your focus so assiduously and serve a creature that wants nothing more than immediate destruction, without end. MP learned from a far different mistress, and she knows the value of casting her nets wide. The Doctor can rush along to complete his fixed points in time, to fulfill his paradoxical inevitabilities and his elaborate schemes. All he has to do to win this game is check off all the correct boxes on his checklist.

MP, meanwhile, will work the rest of the system. If Doc Scratch thinks there is only one path to the finale, he is in for a rude awakening.

There is a knock on the door, and that means MP’s time for reminiscence is at an end. The man who lives above has been expecting these visitors for quite some time! Humming cheerfully, she tucks a cook spoon into her apron pocket and wears her best hostess smile as she trots to the door to open it.

MP: Welcome. How may I help you, ma’am?

A tall, lanky woman in a truly dashing black suit flinches back, startled at the door’s abrupt opening. Her hand is still half raised in a fist, in preparation to knock again, but she is in a fighting stance almost instantly. A man in a suit only a foot behind the woman lets a gun specibus drop into his palm where he thinks MP won’t see it, his eyes wary. They are not alone of course, but the three thuggish brutes that trail behind them, lurking in the shadows where the setting sun does not quite reach, are of minimal importance.
Both the woman in front and the man with the gun are battle-ready, but only the woman wears the diamond. MP never knew the old iteration of Diamonds Droog, but her aura of paradox significance envelops the well-dressed woman like a thick haze of roses and lightning. Diamonds has played both for and against the Doctor’s whims in the past, though generally in a minor role.

No, the one Diamonds has always owed the most consistent loyalty to is Spades Slick. And it appears she has come hunting for him at last. It certainly took her long enough! MP bows her head slightly and motions Diamonds Droog forward with a tiny wave of her claws.

MP: Come in, come in! The tea will oversteep soon! Come in, Ace of Diamonds!

The woman does not move forward, her darkly kinked curls bouncing slightly as she shakes her head. “You’ve been expecting me. How…interesting,” Diamonds says, her gaze sharp and piercing as she scans the kitchen. No doubt she’s looking for signs of a trap or an ambush. Such paranoia!

I mean really, as though MP would leave her weapons lying out in the open like an uncouth layabout! She’s even tidied up all of Spades’s spare knives and tucked them away in the back room for the sake of this visit. It doesn’t do to give a bad first impression to such a significant guest, after all! Ducking her head shyly, MP hurries back over to the tea set and begins to pour a single cup of powerfully spiced tea.

MP: Oh, yes, of course! The man who lives above has been rambling about it for weeks!

MP: He’s not as sharp as he once was, of course, but he can’t really help it.

MP: You’ve come looking for Spades though, haven’t you?

MP lifts her head from the tea set against her will, and blinks, a little put out to find the thin tip of a cue stick pressing upward against the underside of her chin. Diamonds remains at a safe distance, the cue stick fully extended so that the woman has only had to take a few steps into the building to threaten MP. She holds the weapon with practiced ease, and with the faint aura of barely restrained, brutal violence.

Oh yes, Diamonds is brutal. No matter how finely she dresses or how elegantly she styles her hair, MP has no doubt that Diamonds remains the single most ruthless, impulsively violent member of the Midnight Crew. Perhaps Hearts Boxcar could outdo her in pure strength, and Clubs in terms of sheer dumb luck, but Diamonds Droog could demolish either of them in a one on one fight. In another life, she served under Spades because she recognized the mad power to warp creation that lay within him, but MP would lay down money that in a duel the two would be evenly matched.

However, not once in a thousand thousand iterations has Diamonds fought MP.

This element of novelty makes the whole thing so much more interesting!

“I know he was here as late as this past month,” Diamonds whispers, the over-sharpened end of the cue stick pressing just enough into MP’s throat to draw out a trickle of blood. “Tell me, was he here for you? How…quaint.”

MP swallows hard. This is a delicate moment, and she does not want to lean too heavily upon a Diamonds who follows the Doctor and his Felt.

MP: Oh, Spades came here to lie low! I am simply a Medical Practitioner who cares for the man who lives above! He has been expecting your visit for quite some time.

The cue stick traces the line where a jugular artery would lie beneath the skin of a human or a troll.
MP, being carapacian, has no such analogous artery – the vulnerable points of a carapacian lie mainly within the torso and the skull itself, with blood vessels elsewhere shielded beneath the thick carapace of the joints and limbs. Their design is much less complex than that of player species, designed for simplicity of cloning and regeneration.

Diamonds does not need to know that, however.

“Then I don’t suppose this man will mind me paying that visit at last, hmm?” Diamonds purrs, eyeing the stairwell.

MP: Oh no, he wouldn’t.

MP: I would.

Diamonds pauses. As her attention had gone to the stairs that lead up to the darkened second floor of the home, the cue stick had lowered slightly, but when her dark eyes flicker back to MP they are just as bright and intent as ever. “You mind?” she says, one eyebrow rising up. “And he defers to your medical expertise, I suppose?”

MP: No, he doesn’t. He is a horribly stubborn man.

MP: But I will be leaving this place soon, and I refuse to let him invite yet more chaos into this house in my absence.

MP: Better you and I occupy ourselves here while I launch him into orbit.

Diamonds mouth opens, then shuts. “What,” she says at last.

MP smiles prettily, her head tilting to the side.

MP: Oh, I began the launch sequence shortly before you arrived!

MP: He has plenty of rations to keep him secure in geostationary orbit until the time is right.

MP: I even gave him a 640-crayon pack and some coloring books. He won’t even notice he’s left the upper atmosphere! Such a silly man!

“You’re insane,” Diamonds says, faint horror on her face. “This house isn’t large enough to conceal a functional rocket ship.”

As though paradox space itself wishes to prove the Crew member wrong, the entire house begins to rumble.

MP: The house is the rocket ship.

MP: I am a carapacian, my dear. Interstellar design is our forte!

Diamonds slaps a hand across her face. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The main thrusters activate. They are located on either side of the outer walls, of course, disguised as barrels of rain water, and the kitchen is shielded against the combustive reaction. Diamonds doesn’t know that though, and between one second and the next she has retracted the cue stick and darted out of the building, her shouted orders barely audible over the roar of the auxiliary engine.

MP simply braces herself with her back against the counter top, holding a handkerchief to her mouth to filter out the dust. She waves with one hand at the second floor of the house as it vanishes into the
evening sky.

Diamonds needn’t have worried, MP thinks, bemused as she brushes kicked up dust and debris off her apron. The kitchen remains mostly intact, though it is now open to the sky. MP had hoped to placate Diamonds with a nice, light tea, perhaps with some scones afterward, but it appears she underestimated the blowback from the house’s main engines. Everything is now covered in a thick layer of dirt. It would take weeks to get the place clean again, if MP intended to stick around. Alas. She yanks open the drawer nearest her and adds a spatula and a whisk to the pouch of her apron, then hikes up her skirt and exits the hollow shell of the building.

Diamonds is tracking the fading arc of the house-rocket’s trajectory with a keen eye. Her entourage puff themselves up as MP approaches, and the three lower-ranked lackeys step forward as though they could actually stop her. A glower pinches at the corners of Diamonds’s eyes as she lowers her gaze. “That was…inconvenient of you,” she says idly. “I can only assume this mysterious man who is now in orbit would have been able to tell me everything I ever wanted to know about Spades Slick’s whereabouts.”

MP: Oh, assuredly. He’s a bit dense, but he could have told you quite a lot!

MP: However, he’s a bit beyond your reach now.

MP: Sorry about the scare, but now we can talk like civilized people, without worrying that the poor man will rain down bizarre, nonsensically metaphysical experiences upon our head at any given moment.

MP: So tell me, what are your intentions toward my Spades?

“Nothing personal. And nothing I’m at liberty to discuss.” Diamonds picks a fleck of charred plant matter off her shoulder, grimacing. “I really did not need this today.”

MP: My apologies. I really did intend to serve tea to help soften the blow, but I’m afraid that’s quite impossible now.

MP: As you are unwilling to discuss what you mean to do with Spades, and I am unwilling to speak of him to you at all, I suppose there is only one option left to us.

MP: A calm and polite parting of ways.

“Oh no. I’m afraid you’ll be coming with us now,” Diamonds says, cracking her neck slightly as she appraises MP. The man with the gun he thinks is so well concealed imitates his boss’s posture slightly. He is the second-highest rank Crew member here, and it shows; he is far more in tune with Diamonds than the other three, who are mere blunt tools intended to enforce her orders. MP will have to watch him closely. “If nothing else, I suspect you’ll make a most useful lure for my target. Would he come running if he knew we had you? I think...yes.”

MP: I do not see why you would think such a thing. Spades has not been here in many months.

"And you still have a bowl of scotty dogs waiting for him," Diamonds laughs, gesturing at the now dust-smeared bowl of black licorice candy that sits on the counter back in the kitchen. "Oh, you expect him to return to you. It's obvious. I came here looking for a landlord, perhaps, or some other vague connection to a carapacian who has managed to evade me at every turn. But you - you're his lady love, aren't you? Kidnapping you is going to be both useful and a pleasure!"

Well, it had been worth a shot. No one can say MP hadn’t given them a chance to cut their losses and run. Time to get Diamonds onto the correct line of conversation. The less they speak about
Spades, really, the better for everyone here.

MP: Does he tell you much, your Doc Scratch?

All three minions flinch bodily. One of the trolls absently makes the sign of the Sixteen against his chest, and MP wonders if he even knows what the symbol means. Surely no follower of the Angel would knowingly make use of the symbol of his greatest enemies. Most likely these three are too low in the Crew to know the true nature of the beasts they serve; they know to fear the Doctor, to obey orders, and little else.

MP is, in fact, counting on that. Because she knows Diamonds Droog's old archetype – a vicious, brutish fighter in the guise of a dapper gentlewoman, a compulsive kidnapper with expensive taste, and above all else, a survivor.

A survivor who would, no doubt, object to any plan that involved the end of the world.

MP: Did he ever tell you his endgame? Why he has you chasing ghosts? Why he would want Spades under his control with no explanation?

“I’m not paid to ask questions,” Diamonds says. But MP catches the resentment that flickers in the woman’s face, the barely contained, cold anger of an old grievance. Diamonds has two modes of rage – the flashfires that result in sudden, impulsive violence, and the slow burn that she ignores until it overwhelms her. This is the barest edge of an old, old grudge. “I’m just paid to kidnap people,” she adds, a slow afterthought. The pause between the two sentences is palpable, though MP doubts the other four Crew members would know to listen for it.

All she needs is the right spark, and that slow burn won’t be contained by the cold façade anymore.

But MP can’t be the one to ignite this firestorm. Not here. Not yet. All she can do is begin to set up the groundwork.

MP: Perhaps you should ask more questions, Ace of Diamonds.

MP: For example, who told you about the scotty dogs?

“What are you talking about?” Diamonds snaps. “The candy was sitting right in plain sight -”

MP: Who told you the scotty dogs were for Spades? How did you know they were his favorite?

MP: No one told you, did they.

MP: You just knew.

She knows she has it right when Diamonds comes at her swinging. It was a gamble - MP has had little opportunity to communicate with Spades since he left, and perhaps his love of candy was in fact common knowledge among those who seek to capture him. But Diamonds almost howls as she whips the cue stick around at MP's face, a broken sound MP knows too well.

Remembering hurts, after all. And none of them are quite ready to remember.

And as cathartic as taking out her rage on MP would most likely be for Diamonds, MP has no intention of letting a child's temper tantrum harm her. Spades would be so irate! MP waits until the cue stick is a hair's breadth from her face, and then she sets herself into motion.

The spatula catches the tip of the cue stick between its slits, and MP twists her arm smoothly, her
other arm jabbing out with the wooden spoon as she spins inside the woman's reach. She whacks Diamonds in the eye, hard enough to bruise, and the woman jerks back instinctively, one hand clapping against the injured eye. This is enough of an opening for MP to finish yanking her spatula to the side; the cue stick goes flying, and Diamonds lets out a noise of pure outrage.

A strong hand grabs MP roughly by the collar, lifting her off the ground, and Diamonds flings the carapacean back bodily into the kitchen, a good fifteen feet back. She is physically stronger, MP thinks, tumbling along the dusty floor, and it is a good thing MP chose to disarm rather than attempt to outfight the woman. Hefting the spoon, MP staggers to her feet, slowly enough that the three thugs have time to surround her. This is their mistake; when MP straightens, she does so by leaning on the counter by the stove top and hefting the half-full kettle of hot tea water. She grunts as she brings the kettle sweeping up into the chin of the nearest troll. He drops like a stone.

Trading out her spatula for the whisk, MP catches the second man’s knife slash between the thin wires. It is almost the same trick she used to disarm Diamonds herself, but these aren’t exactly the brightest specimens of criminals, and MP is able to batter the man repeatedly about the head with the whisk after he drops the knife. She finishes him off with a flailing whack of the wooden spoon that breaks the poor kitchen implement in two with a resounding crack.

The last thug looks properly unnerved by the time she rounds on him. Good! As well he should be! It is quite rude to attack a lady in her own home and expect to get off scot-free! MP carefully considers her options, and then kicks him in the exposed male human reproductive organs.

He drops with a shriek to his knees, and MP shakes her head sadly before hauling back with the kettle in both hands to hit him in the temple.

The man with the gun, Diamonds's assistant, still thinks he is being quite sneaky by creeping up on MP from behind. She just lets the momentum of the swinging kettle carry her in a wild circle, until she smashes into him on the back swing. She is very off balance by the time she is finished, and it takes a few hopping steps and every inch of courtly grace she has accumulated over the years to salvage the landing.

Diamonds is the only one left standing of the Crew, and unfortunately by the time MP is finished with the rest, the woman has retrieved her weapon of choice. Some of the blind rage has left Diamonds by now, replaced by the clear glint of wariness and faint respect as Diamonds paces in a slow semi-circle. No, she won't fall for that disarming trick again, not someone as intelligent as Diamonds Droog.

This is no good. In a one on one strife, MP is rather certain Diamonds will have the upper hand. MP can defend herself adequately, but she is no good in a prolonged battle.

Perhaps what she does next is not very sporting. On the other hand, she is quite certain Spades would approve of such deliberately underhanded tactics. He’s charmingly quirky that way. MP calmly opens the drawer she is now standing next to and removes two small canisters. The timing on this would be a bit tricky if she didn't already know that Diamonds is still one wrong word away from another flare up.

MP: Doc Scratch is going to kill you. And you know it.

"Who are you?" Diamonds murmurs.

MP: I am a Memory Provocateur, at the moment. But I am rethinking my title.

MP: Also, I am very sorry, Ace of Diamonds. I could answer every question you have ever had.
She pauses deliberately, and sees the light of obsession burn in Diamonds's expression.

MP: But I will not.

"God dammit!" Diamonds yells. She raises the cue stick, just in time for MP to pop the lids off both of the salt canisters and start waving them wildly so that salt goes flying everywhere.

Including into Diamonds's eyes.

Before the woman can do more than scream and clutch at her eyes, MP sidesteps her rushing charge and brings up the spatula one last time. MP is short enough that her swing just barely reaches Diamonds's neck, but that's enough. The woman gags at the unexpected smack, and squints through tears to glower at MP.

MP: Goodnight, Diamonds.

Since it has been so very effective in the past few minutes, MP elects to put the kettle to use once more. She doubts Diamonds would feel very genial about future interactions if MP were to damage her face, so she aims for the back of the woman's skull.

Diamonds, naturally, does not reply. She lands face down on the kitchen floor, and does not stir.

They always underestimate the kitchenkind. Foolish of them. It is not even MP's preferred specibus, and she has hardly even broken a sweat. She is a classy Prospitian dame, but that does not mean she cannot defend herself quite thoroughly, thank you very much!

The work done, MP slides the spatula back into her pocket with a neat flip. She graces the broken spoon with a silent moment of mourning before tossing it into the trash can that still sits by the kitchen counter, and sets the kettle upon the stovetop where it rightfully belongs. Then she stoops over Diamonds, and draws forth a note from within her Prospitian wrappings. She reads through it one more time before riffling through the unconscious Crew member's coat and depositing the note in an inside pocket.

Yes, Diamonds will have to be part of the long game, for now. MP has more urgent matters to take care of. Once word reaches the Doctor of MP's presence, she won't have much spare time!

Of course, it wouldn't do to leave the five poor things lying out here unconscious on the hard ground for hours at a time. Humming to herself, MP removes some of the spare pillows she stockpiled beneath the sink for just such an occasion. She tucks one beneath the head of each Crew member, plumping up the pillows a bit, and then stands back to observe her handiwork. Not her best job at hospitality, perhaps, but she really must be off! Lifting her satchel from its hook by the empty frame of the front door, MP slings the bag over her shoulder and begins to hurry away.

Beneath the folds of her wrappings, a slim ring rests against her carapace, the tiny orbs of power that adorn the metal cold and dormant.

For now.

-  

DD: < Boss.
DD: > I must apologize.
DD: < We have been unable to locate Spades Slick at the house in Kazakhstan.
DD: > In addition, I am displeased to report that we have encountered unanticipated resistance.
DS: Allow me a moment to review your findings, my dear Droog.
DD: < Sir, I have yet to send you any -
DD: > I -
DD: < Very well, sir.

Diamonds Droog sighs when there is no immediate response. Resignation weighs heavily on her the moment, and she finds herself in the grip of a most indecorous ennui as she rests the phone against the bridge of her nose.

Diamonds Droog is not happy.

Not.

Happy.

Her eyes sting and she just knows the whites must be shot through with blown capillaries, painting her eyes a dull red. Every time she thinks the last of the sting has past, some fresh grain of that blasted salt will find its way from a traitorous eyelash into her eye itself, and set off the burning pain once more. She considers herself far too urbane and debonair for these kind of shenanigans, and the last few days have been particularly wearying.

Cairo, naturally, had been as useless as the Doctor had predicted, much to her increasingly fatalistic displeasure. It soon became clear that the reports of a scarred carapacian referred to a tall female member of the species missing part of her hand, as opposed to a medium-sized, perpetually angry male with a scar down one eye. More than a few of her Egyptian contacts had received a thorough drubbing for bringing Diamonds halfway around the world with so little to show for it, and she had moved on to the next few places where an unusual carapacian had been sighted. Some of the reports had been quiet whispers from the Novaya Ukraine, but she has standing orders from the boss not to go near there. He seems quite certain Spades Slick wouldn't have gone there, and sadly Diamonds has no reason not to believe the Doctor. He likes to claim that he does not need to lie, but even if he did lie to her it's not as though she would be able to call him out on it. He's always five steps ahead of her

Thus far, the one called Spades Slick seems to be flying beneath the radar, even of Diamonds's network. Her best hat just got crumpled up by the force of a miniature house-rocket taking off into orbit, and she has recently had her derrière handed to her by a small, matronly, pink-clad carapacian using kitchenkind, of all things. Diamonds wants to believe that it was a fluke, that she had been simply put off her guard by the carapacian's timid, polite, and unbelievably classy demeanor. But she is neither stupid nor naïve. This Mysterious Prospitian knew exactly how to play Diamonds, and manipulated her into a frenzy with true finesse.

Perhaps, when it comes down to it, Diamonds is simply tired of these shenanigans. Not even properly angry or annoyed anymore. Just. Tired. She nudges the still unconscious body of one of the brutes she brought along to accompany her and just shakes her head in disdain when the man mumbles and rolls over in his sleep. The other two are awake but thoroughly confused, and Marlowe is standing at attention by Diamonds's shoulder, his calm, efficient demeanor set off kilter by the glorious rainbow of bruises swelling up around his right eye where the MP clocked him with a tea kettle.

Her phone chimes like a grandfather clock, and she thumbs open the boss's reply.

Ms Paint. Intriguing.

DD: > I beg your pardon, sir?
The perspicacious Prospitian you encountered. They must have been quite well shielded by Void to have evaded my sight for so long. Even now she is just out of my sight. I do not suppose she allowed you to come into contact with the man who lived above?

DD: < No sir. I was not even able to confirm there was another living being in the house at all. For all we know, it could have been Spades Slick himself, and he is now thoroughly out of reach.

Oh, no, Droog. Our mutual friend Spades Slick is in New York City at the moment.

Trembling a little, Diamonds sets the phone down on the counter. "Ma'am?" Marlowe inquires, but she has no words at the moment. She pats at her hair instead, tucking stray curls back into line and readjusting her replacement hat to cover a particularly belligerent section that will no longer lie flat. The ritual soothes her, but only a little, and she is still shaking as she takes up the phone once more.

DD: > You are telling me.
DD: < That I travelled halfway around the globe.
DD: < Tracking down a target whom you already knew the location of.
DD: > A location that just so happens to be within the reach of our domestic division.
Yes. I knew simply that within the week you would end up in Kazakhstan in the nominal pursuit of Spades; it seems your presence was intended to trigger this sequence of events. Now all I ask is that you pick up Stitch on your way back to base. I have a new assignment for you, one that I am sure you will be pleased to hear does not require you hunt down a carapacian with a knack for evading custody.
Try not to pressgang Stitch into service again, dear Droog, he's had a very long day completing a tricky task in Britain for me. Another bout of chloroform may well damage his clever mind for tailoring entirely, and then where would you be?

Diamonds Droog stares at the screen for a long moment. She holds out her hand to the side. "Marlowe. I require your gun."

"Yes ma'am," Marlowe says, removing his pistolkind specibus from its holster. None of this chipper, gung-ho attitude now; he sounds just as resigned as Diamonds used to feel as he offers it to her obediently.

Used to.

6/10, primarily for effort, Marlowe - you're starting to slip.

Because like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Diamonds Droog can feel something burning inside her chest. There is a disconnect between the rising blaze and her cool exterior, though. Feeling distant and peaceably calm, balanced between the two extremes, she takes the gun that Marlowe gave her and sets the phone very carefully on the ground, nudging it with the toe of her polished boot until it lies perfectly centered in the middle of a square tile.

Smiling dreamily, Diamonds levels the pistol at the ground and empties the clip into the phone. Between sharp cracks and jolts that barely rock her shoulders, the bullets lodge into the casing of the phone, and its innards explode outward with bursts of sparks and smoke.

It is perhaps the single most satisfying act of destruction she has engaged in all week. Glorious.

By the time she pivots on a heel and presents the emptied gun to Marlowe, the bemused grin has left her face. It looked vaguely inane, anyway. She has an image to maintain, after all; she can't go wandering around grinning like a trigger-happy imbecile while on the job.
She has no time for despair. She has no time to dwell on the cryptic words of an insane salt-throwing maniac who barely came up to her chest. She has a mission, and she will complete it, for the sake of her sterling reputation for quality work if nothing else.

By all the gods, no one else in this organization may have a scrap of dignity left, but she does. Really, at this point, she has little else.

"Marlowe?" she says idly, rebuttoning her suit jacket as she grinds a scotty dog into the ground by the crackling remains of the cell phone that has caused her such aggravation. "It appears we are off to New York."

Screw the orders to return to base. Spades Slick had better hope she finds him dead. What she's going to do to him will be much less painful that way.

She pauses mid-buttoning when something in one of her pockets crackles. Diamonds is always meticulous in how she packs her belongings, and she knows for a fact that there should be nothing in that pocket but the emergency lock picks, finger gun, and spare tie pin. "Wake these buffoons up," she snaps at Marlowe, using the hand that Marlowe can see to draw forth her extra disposable cell phone. He notices nothing, though she knows he will be recording everything he thinks he sees to exploit for his personal advantage later. But Diamonds has been playing the game far longer than he, and while Marlowe sees only Diamonds taking out her cell to finished reporting to the boss, Diamonds types with one hand while tucking the folded paper note into the palm of the other. It is really all about misdirection, sometimes.

DD: < My apologies, sir. The previous phone exploded under mysterious and unfortunate circumstances.
I am aware, Droog. You are not to go to New York, remember - return to me, first. I do realize how doomed missions frustrate you, and Spades will have been long gone by the time you reached the city. It will be much more rewarding for you to return here so that I may direct you elsewhere. I do promise that this next mission will be more fruitful for you. A reward for your loyal service in the face of such unreasonable requests.
DD: > …
DD: < I understand.

Meanwhile, Diamonds reads the note. It appears to have been written on a section of paper torn from a drawing pad, in soft pink ink that curves and whorls in remarkably classy handwriting.

Dear Diamonds,

He will know when you intend to betray him unless you take the proper precautions. When the time comes, the man who lives above says that only Void will be able to shield you. I wish you the best of luck, and I hope that you see reason soon! I know Spades misses your old group of dastardly chums, whether he admits it or not!

In life and in light, I remain,

MP

PS - There is a bowl of Swedish fish in the cupboard with the Tupperware containers! I hope they cheer you up a bit, dear!

I do not know what this note could possibly mean, Diamonds thinks very loudly. She strides to the cupboards and begins to pull them open on autopilot, crushing the note in one hand. This note is utter
foolishness and could not possibly prove useful in the future, she insists mentally, and opens the door to a cupboard full of Swedish fish. I have a serious addiction that has nothing to do with this note, she finishes, setting the bowl at a jaunty angle in the crook of her arm as she straightens up. She pops four of the small candy fish into her mouth at once, along with the note, and swallows without pause. "It would appear this trip hasn't been a complete waste after all, Marlowe," she tells the man, granting him a fond smile when she sees he has finished kicking the remaining three hoodlums into consciousness. "Now, come along, you all."

The good Doc Scratch remains as impenetrable as ever, and Spades Slick can most certainly suck cue stick when Diamonds lays hands on him, but she finds herself a little more kindly disposed towards the MP.

After all, Diamonds does appreciate good advice and a sweet bowl of candy, no matter the source.

Chapter End Notes

...John? Uh, John, you're kind of still bleeding all over...you've got a little something on your...

...

...Shit.

This is going to be significant, isn't it.
Light and Darkness, Reconciled

Chapter Summary

But here, where light and darkness reconciled,
Held earth between them as a weanling child
Between the balanced hands of death and birth,
Even as they held the new-born shape of Earth

==> Be the Carapacian Paragons

Chapter Notes

This is the Intermission - look at all the shenanigans the carapacians are getting up to while the main five take a breather! Almost all of these chapters deal with events that happened before Rose’s grimdark breakdown. The BQ’s in particular happened several years ago relative to the main timeline, and the WQ’s a few months ago.

Fun times are had by all. Would I lie to you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC III - INTERMISSION

==> Be the Battleworn Queller

Cairo, Egypt

They have danced before, the elegant turns and dips and falls of an old game, perhaps the oldest Game. But this latest waltz is one the Battleworn Queller finds unfamiliar. She has avoided her oldest partner, her primal sister, for years, abandoning her people to the care of the one monarch who would never turn them away. The Wistful King of her youth has given up both title and Initials, abandoning the White heraldry in favor of a new Grey mantel, and she cannot bring herself to give more than a token sneer at his transformation.

They have all been transformed by this past Game. She can deny this no longer.

But now, circumstances have conspired so that she must seek the one she has always opposed. Well, not always, perhaps, but for such an interminable eternity that she can remember little else. She discards her usual garb in favor of black wrappings, the hood of a Dersite carapacian shadowing her brow and shielding her from the painful brightness of the too-close yellow star burning in the blue sky. Talons folded delicately into twined sleeves, she follows her mirror twin through the streets of Cairo. With her hands meshed like this she is painfully aware of the empty space where her right ring and smallest talons should be, the ragged scar that still oozes blood on the bad nights sensitive under the still-sharp talons of her left hand.
It is an unnatural disfigurement for a Queen, well-suited to an unnatural game.

Discarding useless thoughts of vengeance, she observes the figure just visible through the crowd. The Woeful Qasida floats sedately through the throngs of human and trollkind, unnoted and unremarked, with her snow-pale face turned towards the sun. She is robed in white cotton and silver-blue braids of rope where she once wore silk and gold, but she is no less beautiful for it. The carapacians have kept their secrets well; humans and trolls alike might notice that the carapace in their midst is more than usually tall and slender for a carapacian, but they do not know her for a Queen.

But the BQ knows. It has been centuries since their parting, but she knows her counterpart still, though neither Queen wears her ring.

As though the thought of a ring alone is enough to draw her attention, the WQ turns in a swirl of fabric, dark eyes meeting BQ’s with that benevolent wistfulness that once gave her King his title. Once the Battleworn had thought her royal sister could not become anymore despicably kind and wise. She has been proven wrong time and again.

After all, has the White Queen not sought out her missing sister without rest for all these centuries? Who else but the most atrociously compassionate monarch in all of paradox space would make and keep such a commitment to her oldest enemy?

Her crownless head bends in a slight, reluctant nod, and then the Qasida slips through the crowd, angling toward a café on the corner of the street. BQ follows, darting from shadow to shadow with some relief. Pretending to walk the streets as a normal being was beginning to wear at her.

She surveys the bazaar while the Qasida occupies herself with a human merchant, combing the crowded streets with a practiced eye. Kings are creatures of brute force and bold leadership on the field of battle; Queens are of a more strategic, subtle ken, and the Battleworn knows how to read a crowd for potential threats. Some games are more brutal than others, and she has had unending lifetimes to learn how to detect an assassin or a spy in a crowd.

Satisfied that for the moment they are not being followed, despite the WQ’s flaunting attire, she steps to the table without hesitation (never show a fellow Queen uncertainty), folding up her legs with jointed clicks as she sits directly across from the WQ. To her distinct lack of amusement, she sees that the table is laid out with the age-old pattern of the Battlefield, the Archetypal Roles mocked by carved figurines laid out on the side of the checkered board. Perhaps the WQ takes some ironic amusement from this mockery; the BQ sees only pitiful human and troll attempts at comprehending a concept that neither race has yet advanced enough to understand. She shoves the tiny pieces aside; a few pawns clatter to the ground, but she does not stoop to retrieve them.

Carapacians understand all tongues, in all possible worlds, but they cannot truly speak. As the two converse, they speak in the faint click and sigh of vestigial throats, and the smooth hand motions of a sign language older than time, augmented by the telepathic hum of minds barely a note off from synchronization.

WQ: It has been too long, old friend.

BQ: What are a few centuries to ones such as us? You would have done better to remain with your subjects, cousin-queen.

WQ: I have abdicated that title.

BQ: Yet your Initials remain, when even your King has become a Protector.
WQ: All the same. Neither of us wears a ring anymore, cousin. The ancient Game no longer holds sway, but I think I will always be a WQ, though I may never be Queen again.

A cerulean-eyed troll kneels beside their table, and the Battleworn’s hand caresses the blade at her side before she realizes the troll is merely laying out a series of cups and bowls, the teapot clinking heavily as she sets it down and ducks her head before rising to go serve another customer. When she returns her attention to the WQ, the BQ must sniff to hide her displeasure at the knowing look the WQ gives her. There is no shame in being battle-ready, even after all these years of peace. Still, bone-deep instinct urges her to make up for the slight misstep with retaliation tenfold.

BQ: And while we two danced our years away from our people, they died in the Fires.

WQ: I was there. I know you were as well. We pulled as many as we could from the crematoria. Do not think to provoke me with a tragedy we both bear as our shame.

BQ closes her eyes and cannot repress a click of old despair. Her twisted hand clenches on the table, stretching the old scars.

WQ: This is a new world with new rules, and neither of us have a ring to wear. We did all we could.

BQ: Once I could have lain waste to entire worlds. I could have wiped those genocidal abominations from existence for what they did to my court. Now there are hundreds of genetic patterns that may never be cloned again.

WQ: They have begun work in Prospit-A on reconstructing the ectobiological sequences -

BQ: We will cease speaking of this.

There is a silence. The Woeful Qasida parts her mouth delicately to sip from her cup of milky tea, the barest hint of her fangs visible in a jaw that, when fully parted, hinges far wider than either human or trollkind would find normal.

WQ: What brings you out into the sun, after all this time? Not memories of a failure we both wish to forget, I take it.

BQ: …

BQ: …

BQ: What do you remember of the Midnight Crew?

The cup shatters between the WQ’s talons. For a brief moment the Battleworn feels a jolt of sharp anticipation, old instinct stirred by the look of pure, incandescent fury and impotent pain that breaks across the WQ’s smooth face. It is like a brief glimpse of the Warrior Queen-that-was, before the great Shift that had swapped Queens from active combatants to the masterminds of entire armies.

Once, it had not been a King that would-be gods faced in the final battle, but Queens of unparalleled power. The Shift all those millions of years ago had left them with power surpassing that of their Kings, and yet no opportunity to use it on the Battlefield. They became trapped in the restricting pattern of double-cross and usurpation that became the normal method of taking out rival monarchs. The one aspect of the plebian interpretation of Chess that BQ can appreciate is how human and troll society retain the versatility and raw power of a true Queen.

If the Battleworn can induce the Qasida to once again take up that mindset of the ultimate champion, the gladiator, once more, it would be worth even the reappearance of the most repulsive repeat-
offenders ever to ingrain their pattern of mob violence and betrayal into the fabric of paradox space.

WQ: I know what it once was. And I know well the patterns and rhythms of paradox space. What it would mean if they exist once again, in this time and place.

WQ: You would only bring them up if-

BQ: Yes.

WQ: I thought them dead. I thought their genetic sequence was wiped from the Dersite hard drive, and the hard drive subsequently shot and dropped into the fires of Mount Nyamuragira. ...Tell me you did not –

BQ: Do you take me for a fool?

BQ: They have killed me more than once. Their last betrayal merely ensured my unending censure. No, somehow they are no longer carapacian. They have incarnated as humans and trolls.

BQ: And they…have expanded.

She neglects to mention the one member of the Crew who remains, beyond all reason and logic, carapacian, one whose genetic coding had been so thoroughly scrubbed from the records that it nearly broke paradox space, the sight of whom had awoken such dark rage within her carapace that the BQ had nearly descended then and there to tear into him and –

And –

- and she despises the part of herself who still does not know how to handle Jack Noir.

Thankfully, she despises him more.

WQ: …Paradox space. It always does find a way, doesn’t it.

BQ: Indeed.

WQ: Why have I not heard word of this before now? I would have expected my Protector to send word if –

BQ: Kings are all behemoths, you know that. I’m sure your Grey lummox means well, compared to the hell mine would have unleashed were he in command, but – they’re just not the brightest.

BQ: And our subjects are spread out across Eurasia and Africa. The Crew have taken advantage of this limited dispersal. They have based themselves across the sea, in the Americas. What few carapacians live there are too few and far between to have come across them.

BQ: But I have.

WQ: You’ve been in America? Truly, I lost your trail, old friend.

Even in the midst of her nervous fury, the Qasida laughs softly, disarmingly, self-depreciatively. It makes the Battleworn’s carapace twitch all over with unconscionable pity. Bluhhh.

BQ: You did not want to leave the place where thousands of our subjects were slaughtered. You wanted to remember them.

BQ: I, on the other talon, had no wish to walk the forests of Germany again. America seemed as
good a place to become truly lost as any. And while there, I found them. They work as boldly as you please. They are almost infamous within the Americas. But because they are so careful in their overseas activities, they never reach the international news that might have tipped us off.

WQ: This is troubling. Could you discern their aim?

WQ: They have always sought to dethrone you. You no longer sit a throne to be toppled from. They advise and sabotage players of the Game in equal measure. But there is no Game here, not a true one, at least.

BQ: They seem to have convinced American media that they are nothing more than a crime syndicate, with an unusually fanatic membership bordering on the…cultish.

WQ: The juggalo –

BQ: Appears to have no ties with them. But we have underestimated him before.

The WQ finally seems to notice the broken remains of the cup in her talons, the tea dripping onto the table. A rueful smile tugs at her thin lips, and she begins to pick up each shard one by one, placing them on the Battlefield. After a moment the compulsion overwhelms the BQ as well, and she begins to help, setting up the rank and file of the old order.

WQ: But you do believe that this organized crime façade is just that – a façade?

BQ: I am mistress of deception and sleight of hand. I survived even when the Ring itself was lopped from my hand. I know a cover-up when I see one. What’s more, I know why they have gathered in America.

WQ: Not just to avoid us? They know well that we would have stamped them out to prevent any...repeat performances.

The BQ laughs, and it is harsh and jagged and sharp like icy knives.

BQ: Oh, my sister.

BQ: We have waited all these years, and yet when they came, we were two continents and an ocean away.

That gets the Qasida's attention. BQ thought it might.

WQ: No.

BQ: Yes.

BQ: They have returned, my Qasida. They arrived years ago now, and ever since all records I can find point to the Midnight Crew coalescing in their general location wherever they run, harrying their guardians.

BQ: Our players have returned at last. And they need us now.

The WQ bows her head, her claws clenching against her stomach in tangled fists. The BQ knows the old wound that lies beneath the Qasida's robes, residual damage of the kind that mars her own right hand.

They were both of them marked by that fateful Game.
WQ: Then there is no need for further discussion. Will you walk with me, my sister? This time, if no other?

The Battleworn closes her eyes in reply, raising her broken claw to trace the old scar down her eye.

There. As the Qasida has drawn attention to her old wound, so the Battleworn has to her own. The WQ nods in reply. For them, such a simple gesture is more than enough of a reply.

The two queens rise together, the Battleworn reaching out automatically to clasp the wrist of her mirror. The Qasida returns the grip, dark eyes beady in the fading sunlight. The BQ thinks she can feel paradox space's tangled struggle, the way the world fractures and cracks as two old Queens dance out a truce that was never meant to be.

Well, paradox space can fuck itself with a cactuskind. The Battleworn is tired of pandering to the sick whims of this endless game.

They leave as one.

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====> Be the Wary Quarry

*Somewhere in Maine*

The fleeing Quarry can feel the cold air streaming against her face as she leaps over a fallen tree in her path, and through her skin she can almost taste the heavy white smudge of the snow and the sharp prickle of pine. She is not as affected by the cold as those chasing her, but the thick banks of snow slow her pace to a mere fraction of its former speed. Her carapace is light and near hollow so that she can skim over the surface of the snow most of the time, but every so often she trips and finds herself up to her waist in snow, her heart pounding loudly in her thoracic cavity as she grimly works to extricate her legs.

She is grateful that she left her Protégé in a place of safety. If her vassal had attempted this run with her shorter legs, she would have been overtaken far too soon.

The Quarry, on the other hand, has almost reached her destination. She ducks deftly beneath a low branch, her hood flying out behind her and exposing her curved pate. She can hear the sounds of her pursuers fumbling their way through the underbrush. No human agent could have matched the carapacian’s speed for this long of a hunt in such terrain; they are all trolls, all clad in identical black suits, and none of them will give up until the Quarry is taken or they are killed.

Such is the fanaticism of this Midnight Crew. She mourns for the loss of the people they could have been if they had not been so thoroughly brainwashed, but she has come too far in this course to turn back now. She has almost reached the critical point.

A shot rings out wildly, the first in a long time; they have been too busy trying to match her pace and keep track of her white form against the snow to fire accurately for a few hours now. Now the gap between them has diminished enough that she is in true danger.

Once a mere bullet from such simple strife specibi would have meant nothing to the Quarry. Now, ringless and alone, she can be easily hurt. Easily crippled. Easily killed. But if she can only make it a little farther -

Pain explodes in her right calf, and there is a sharp crunch as the bullet shatters through the thin armor of her carapace to the flesh beneath. Crying out wordlessly the Quarry stumbles and drags
herself upright with a hand on a nearby branch. When she tries to step forward and rest weight on her right leg the pain worsens, and she knows that she is finished. She hobbles forward a few more feet, then loses her balance when she runs out of branch and bramble to grab onto. She has reached the edge of a small clearing, she sees, and she lets out another whimper of pain as she draws her injured leg close, clasping it in her hands to try to stem the bright red blood oozing from the back of her calf. It does not seem that the bullet has punched all the way through – it had been fired from too far away - and she can feel the tiny slug imbedded in the muscle.

The Wounded Quarry can do nothing more than wait. She can flee no more. She draws an old, battered sword from her side and holds it before her.

Eventually the four trolls crash through the last of the underbrush, all of them with luminescent blue eyes ranging from cerulean to deep blue, the blood shades with the most physical stamina and speed on land. One barks out a nervous giggle, her eyes just slightly too close to outright purple for the Quarry’s comfort. She knew a troll once with eyes just a little darker, a dazed dreamer with a lazy grin, and the consequences of his actions reverberate through the fabric of paradox space to this day, consequences she does not yet fully understand. “Gotcha, little white grub,” the indigo says. “Sorry. No one escapes the Midnight Crew.”

The Quarry raises her chin, keeping her face clear of any emotion. The next few moments are key. If she is to have any hope of this plan succeeding, she must stall as long possible. She is sure she is in the right place, and that will help.

WQ: I am afraid that regardless, I shall not come quietly.

She drops to one knee deliberately and lashes out with the sword. Her leg gives a pang of protest, but all four Crew members jump back to avoid the wild swing.

WQ: It is simply not in my nature.

She can see what she has been looking for now, in the corner of her eye. One of the perks of having endured as many Games as she has is that the powers of the players become easier to perceive when you’ve spent so long observing and assisting them. The aura of Void that laces the building next to the lake is subtle, but in combination with the camouflaging mirrors that cover the exterior walls, the effect is enough that she doubts the Crew members have even noticed there are buildings not a hundred yards from where they stand.

And the woman who slinks out of the front door of the hidden building to observe the ruckus going on in her front yard is precisely the woman the Quarry wanted to see. She is not a player, of course, but she exerts enough self-control that no one else seems to notice her calm approach, or the way she manipulates Void to render herself unnoticeable.

Now, then, is the moment to throw the fight.

It is a calculated move. When the indigo blooded troll stamps down on the old blade, the WQ feigns weakness and pretends the force of the blow was enough to knock the sword from her hands. The sword vanishes into the heavy drift of snow, and one of the other blue eyed trolls snakes in with a strong arm to shove the Quarry all the rest of the way off balance. She tumbles obediently to one side, and raises an arm to catch the indigo's next blow before it can connect with her skull. She makes sure that her arm trembles beneath the blow, and cries out in surprise when the female troll twist the arm and drags WQ away from the outline of the sword in the snow.

"The boss man just wants you alive. He didn't say you had to be in one piece," the troll says, her claw latching onto WQ's wrist as she shoves a boot into the back of the carapacian's injured leg. It
sends a new stab of pain through her and the Quarry stumbles, half-kneeling in the snow as the Crew member laughs and begins to twist the carapacian's arm in one direction while pushing her body in the other, straining the brittle joint where arm meets body.

And oh, for so fleeting a moment that it hardly counts, she craves her old ring. She craves the rush of power, and the reassuring knowledge that, with a wave of her hand, she could have squashed these mortal beings, these non-players, like the lowliest of underlings. Not that she would actually use said power - she is simply unused to living without that buffering reassurance.

It is a bitterness that is new to her, and she quashes it; she is better than that. She did not lure these fanatics to this clearing simply to crush them with an ability she would never willingly use.

No, she brought them here so that this plan might succeed. And, judging by the new pair of legs she can see standing behind the indigo troll in a confident stance, succeed it has.

"And why the hell are you smiling, you fucking beetle?" the indigo demands. She yanks on WQ's arm with her palm still shoving into the Quarry's shoulder, increasing the pressure on the joint until WQ has doubled over, her face pressed against the snow to relieve the stretch.

For a more prideful Queen, such an action would have been unconscionable. But WQ laughs, snow kissing her lips, as she smiles up at the Crew member and signs as well as she can with one claw free.

WQ: Why, you ask?

WQ: I smile because Rue Lalonde stands behind you, you damned fool.

A heel slams into the back of the indigoblood's head, and the pressure on WQ's body relieves with most welcome alacrity. She rolls forward, away from the indigo troll, and folds her legs neatly in the snow, tightening her hold on the bullet wound in her calf so that she can watch the ensuing decimation of the Crews forces without losing yet more blood.

The troll catches herself and claws at the human female who has snuck behind the group, only to receive another foot to the face. Rue Lalonde strikes with incredible speed and regains her composure just as quickly, her hair swirling as she turns to keep all four assailants in her line of sight. Bundled in a heavy white coat, she simpers at the snarl the indigo troll lets loose, her arms folded across her chest as she raises an eyebrow at the four trolls. "So sorry, loves," she says, inspecting the pinkish-purple fingernails of one hand. "This is private property."

"And who the fuck are you?!!" the indigo howls. The Quarry can only hope Rue Lalonde is as strong as she should be, because the edge of madness is in the troll's voice; of all the bluebloods here, she is the one most likely to break into dementia mid-battle.

"None of your business, quite honestly." Rue Lalonde rubs her thumb over the tips of her nails, and, seemingly satisfied, curls both hands into fists. "And if you don't know, you're not high enough in the ranks to really concern me. Just a gang of punks harassing someone on my property."

"You don't want to mess with the Midnight Crew," one of the other trolls says, switching out the pistol in his hand for a whip specibus. "If you know what's good for you, you'll back right off, lady."

Rue's eyes go flat and hard, and she cracks her knuckles. "I think you will find I am disinclined to listen to anything a member of the Midnight Crew has to say."

When the indigo leaps, choosing to fight hand to hand rather than take out her pistolkind, the doctor is ready. She steps to the side and seizes the troll's wrist, flipping the assailant expertly over her hip
so that the indigoblood's momentum slams her into the palest blueblood, the one trying to sneak up behind Rue. As they crash together into the snow, the indigo snarling with outrage, Doctor Lalonde raises her hand to intercept the crack of a whip, waiting until it laces around her palm with a pained, furious grimace before yanking it toward her. When the whip-wielding troll stumbles forward, caught off balance, she socks him in the chin. He is dazed but not knocked out, and the fourth Crew member grabs the doctor from behind, hooking his arms under her armpits to pull her away. Rue smoothly kicks out and cracks the whipkind troll with the toe of her foot before she is out of range, and this seems to finish the job, as he slumps down in a daze.

"That's enough of that," the troll with the grip on Rue growls, dragging her back. Beyond them, the pale blue and the indigoblood have untangled themselves and risen up from the ground. WQ jerks forward, in an aborted move to assist the doctor, but Rue Lalonde lowers her head and then headbutts the troll viciously with the back of her skull so that he releases her with a cry. The human slams her elbow back into his face and then seizes him by the horns. He shouts in pain, startled by the obviously underhanded tactic, and completely fails to raise his guard as the doctor drags him down by the sensitive appendages so she can knee him three times in the face.

When she turns to face the last two, she yawns. "Clearly not very high up in the ranks, are you," she notes, smirking. "I'm only human, and this is pathetic."

The indigo lunges once more, all subtlety and skill she might have totally lost in her frenzy. WQ is by now almost offended that the Crew sent such raw fighters to chase her down, but then again, this is playing out exactly as she'd hoped it would. If heaven forbid the good Doc had sent a legitimate member of his upper ranks, like the Felt or the suit members, neither she nor Rue would have been able to take them in a fight. Almost lazily, Rue kicks the indigo in the bulge once she's in range, and the troll shrieks in pain. She doesn't double over in pain, too far gone into the dementia to notice what would usually be a rather debilitating pain, but she is once again enraged to the point that she punches at the doctor's face without finesse.

The punch scrapes the doctor's cheek, and WQ hears something creak dangerously - perhaps the human's cheekbone - but Rue Lalonde remains cool and collected, simply lifting her elbow and bracing herself as the indigoblood runs right into it, choking herself out. The troll gasps and begins to wheeze as she falls to her knees. WQ can make out the slight dent in her trachea. Disdain painted across her face, Rue plants her heel in the snow and drives the other foot into the troll's chin once more. Teeth crack and fall from the troll's mouth as she falls back, unconscious but still wheezing.

The pale blueblood blinks, looks around him at the unconscious bodies of his comrades - and turns to run. He makes it about ten feet before Rue tugs a slim pistolkind from within her coat and closes an eye to fire. It catches him in the calf, and he falls. The doctor strides over to him and swings the butt of the pistol against his temple.

There is a deliberate irony to the placement of that shot that WQ quite appreciates. She thinks she and this Lalonde will get along quite well.

She is a no-nonsense close quarters strifer, with brutal strength in her fistkind. But she has little staying power; by the time the last of the trolls drops, Doctor Lalonde is panting, a thin sheen of sweat on her face as she inspects her fingers. WQ can see that the skin has broken on all of her knuckles, though she had the skill and control not to have broken the bones outright, and she twists her lips as she gives a sardonic sigh, delicately reaching into her coat pocket to draw forth a phone. WQ remains kneeling, waiting for the opportune moment to make her overture. It would not do to accidentally antagonize this woman - the less of a threat she thinks the Quarry, the less likely it is she will question the WQ's ulterior motives for drawing the Crew to this place.
"All clear. Bring out the stretchers, there's a dear," the doctor says, a hint of an old British accent in her satisfied tone. She closes the phone and raises an eyebrow at the Quarry-no-more. "And who do we have here?"

WQ draws herself upright, her elegant stance ruined by the way she must sag to take the weight off her injured leg. She draws her hands together and clasps them, one set of claws folded over the other as she bows. This is a woman worthy of respect; anyone capable of raising one of the Four under the circumstances of this new game deserves recognition.

WQ: Merely a Wondering Querent, seeking your wisdom, Doctor Lalonde.

The mention of the woman's name must ping some defensive trigger in the doctor; she raises her chin slightly, her knuckles white as she slides the phone into her pocket. Freeing her hands for another potential confrontation, no doubt. It is wise of her, though of course in the state she is in WQ is hardly a threat. "I'm sorry; I don't believe we've been introduced," she says coldly, her lips drawn tight.

WQ: You do not know me. However, news of your research reached me through a mutual friend in the Foundation, and I knew that if nothing else, I might be able to provide insight into certain aspects of your work.

The Querent sees the exact moment the doctor relaxes, the tension leaving her fists as she brushes her hair from her face, considering the WQ with a much more intrigued expression. "Really? And how did you end up with a pack of these ruffians trailing you here, my dear?"

WQ sighs, and stares at the unconscious bodies in the snow ruefully.

WQ: It would appear that my inquiries into your research triggered...alarms. I realized I was being followed when I entered this country, and their pursuit became outright blatant when I passed into Maine. Are these common tactics for American thugs, then?

Better she not let Doctor Lalonde realize just how deep her knowledge of the Midnight Crew runs. The longer WQ can preserve the cover of an inoffensive Querent, the fewer questions she will need to answer. And it is best, for the moment, if she keeps her rather extensive insight well hidden. None of the players have properly risen, yet, and telling them the truth before the opportune moment would only trigger old traumas in their minds. From what little she observed of the Seer in New York before coming here, there are already many troubling paradox echoes at work. No need to complicate things before the time is right.

"Yes, they do enjoy badgering others," the doctor muses. Eight people emerge from the shielded laboratory complex behind her, with four stretchers between them. "I do apologize; allow me to make up for this rude harassment. I'm afraid I do not know exactly what of my research may interest you most, and I may not be able to share much without breaking a few of my rather stringent security protocols, but the least I can offer you is medical treatment for that leg, and some of my time to discuss our...mutual friend."

WQ: Of course. I would appreciate that greatly. There is one favor I must ask of you, though - I had to leave my young Protégé in New Hampshire when it became clear these thugs intended violence, for her own safety. May I send word to her that she may come here? I fear that she may be similarly pestered by this Crew when they realize they have failed to capture me.

The doctor hesitates, and then nods, putting out a hand that WQ gratefully accepts. "We have a secured phone line and Internet connection. You can send word to her either way."
WQ: Thank you. Thank you very much, Doctor Lalonde.

That settled, the doctor nods firmly and slings WQ's arm over her shoulders. "Take these punks up down to the neuroscience department," Doctor Lalonde instructs the eight scientists who scurry over. One of them fumbles his end of the stretcher and nearly falls on his face, but she ignores it with a perfectly professional straight face. "I know Kelly has been working on something that should get rid of the past few hours for them, so they at least won't remember chasing our guest here. But tell Carlos to run those MRIs first. I gave the indigo a good thumping before she went down, I'm afraid."

WQ leans perhaps more heavily on the doctor's arm than she needs to as they begin to cross the snowy stretch between them and Lalonde Laboratories, and celebrates her triumph only internally. Tonight, it seems she will have good news to report to her counterpart. She has successfully located the guardian of the Seer of Light, and when the time comes, the Wondering Querent will be exactly where she needs to be to help usher this new game along. One of the guardians will now be once again on the alert about the Midnight Crew after years of complacency, and will hopefully warn the others so that they may begin to prepare the other children.

This is not the kind of Game she is familiar with, but she knows her role. When they come seeking answers, she will be ready.

It will be good to see her dear Dreamers again.

Chapter End Notes

Shenanigans. (ʃɛnəˈnɪdʒz) /ʃəˈneɪɡənz/ •:*“✧
The Nightfall and the Light

Chapter Summary

And lo, between the sundawn and the sun,
His day's work and his night's work are undone;
And lo, between the nightfall and the light,
He is not, and none knoweth of such an one.

Chapter Notes

PM's section starts before the grimdark and runs to the present, while AR is totally current. Someone was wondering what's going on in the Novaya Ukraine, and everyone's favorite Armed Ranger is currently running around in the middle of it all, so we get to see what's going on there right now! Also, two people in this chapter speak Ukrainian. As it happens, I don't know Ukrainian, only Russian which is really not the same thing. Hover for a (hopefully accurate) translation.

And with the background provided by these carapacian chapters, hopefully some of the events in the main plot will become a little clearer. Or just more confusing. Either way. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

===> Be the Protégé Mediator

Years ago

The old Parcel Mistress probably chooses the wrong profession when she decides to join the Shatranj. She has always, first and foremost, been a Messenger, genetically designed to deliver packages and convey letters. But spying is just as much the art of obtaining and transmitting information as it is one of stealth and cunning, and somehow she makes it work.

It helps that the Prospitian concept of spying is extremely different from that of Derse and Earth. Where a dark carapacian might use their shadowy complexion to sneak in the shadows and listen in on vital conversations, or an Earth human would disguise themselves to break into a building to download military secrets, Prospitian agents tend to wander around until they happen upon something that seems rather interesting, and proceed to ask the nearest person upfront about the subject. There is a distinct lack of subtlety or secrecy involved, which lulls people into a sense of security. PM, as it would happen, is quite good at expressing natural curiosity and earnest sincerity, and at one point managed to sit down with a significant world leader after delivering him a memo and patiently wait while the man poured out his entire life's story over a cup of tea.

She didn't learn anything really significant, admittedly, but the potential was there! Her supervisor had nodded vigorously all through her lengthy report, awarded her a merit badge, and sent her on her way, adding the impromptu autobiography to the records for future reference. One never knows what could become significant, after all. Perhaps the rambling details of one man's foray into stock
market manipulation and secret space programs will one day be vital to decoding some unknown message! And then PM could deliver that message!

It is all so very exciting.

Still, PM works part time as a mail carrier, for old times' sake. The old ways of parcel delivery don't work quite as well in this strange new world with its federal post control and mailboxes that do not connect to a network of mail-delivering tubes scattered around the planet. There is no guarantee that a passing stranger will continue the delivery if a letter goes astray, in obedience with the will of paradox space; why, once PM witnessed an entire parcel fall off the back of a car, and the very next vehicle crushed it beneath its wheels! She had nearly had a panic attack over such horrifying disregard for the sanctity of the MAIL.

It is all very strange. But PM adapts. She loves the mail too much not to appreciate a new method of delivery. For example, this 'car' device is very intriguing - unlike the vehicles of the Battlefield, hardly any of them are battle-ready at all, and they traverse the landscape in set routes, rather than journeying straight to where the most urgent message needs to be delivered.

So, when she is assigned to wander the streets of Britain for word of anything that might prove of interest to the Reginae Absentes, she uses a job as a mailwoman to make an excuse for her rounds. It gives her a reason to wear her treasured cap as part of her nominal disguise, and also allows her to experiment with this new skill she has acquired called 'driving.'

And make no mistake; she drives like a complete maniac.

They call her the Psycho Mailcarrier, and she bears this new title with pride. Titles and Initials are harder for humans and trolls than for carapacians, but they really do make an effort for her! She makes a turn at about 140 kilometers an hour as she barrels through the town, whistling a little. Several police have informed her about something called a 'speed limit,' but PM has for the most part taken this limit as a sort of gentle recommendation, because how can anyone expect her to stay below 50 kilometers an hour when THERE IS A PACKAGE LABELED URGENT SITTING BESIDE HER?! It is IMPERATIVE that she deliver this package now, before any other letter may even be considered for delivery!

Old habits die hard.

Snarling, PM cuts across a street corner, narrowly avoids a troll on a bicycle, and makes the executive decision to drive through the dog park. This won't have been the first time she's made such a decision, and most likely will not be the last. She presses the accelerator to the floor and rumbles through the pre-existing hole that she punched through the chain-link fence nearly a week ago. Zigzagging between crowds of unruly barkbeasts, she launches the car slightly off a slight incline in the field and neatly through the exit hole. She slams the brakes to swerve to a skidding stop before the red brick cottage on the far side of the dog park. Throwing the gear into park, she seizes the package, stands up on her seat (she never wears that ridiculous seat belt thing) and flips out of the car, landing in a crouch on the sidewalk. She sprints the rest of the way up to the door and jabs a single claw on the doorbell button, glancing around warily for any interlopers who might dare try to steal such an URGENT and HIGH PRIORITY parcel.

Thankfully, before any such hooligans can tempt the wrath of the true Parcel Mistress buried deep within PM's soul, the door opens to reveal a tiny old lady in a red checked dress, who nonetheless must peer down to see the even shorter carapacian while adjusting thick glasses. "Hello, dearie?"

PM: Madam Josie.
PM: I bring U R G E N T tidings from your sister-in-law.

"Oh, why thank you, dearie!" Josie Anderson puts out a pair of wizened arms and PM gently deposits the package in the grasp of its rightful recipient. "These must be the new knitting patterns she promised me! How kind of you to deliver them to me in person, after she already had you running around last week with the fabric samplers!

Yet another glorious, glorious victory for the tireless forces of the MAIL.

PM: It is no trouble, ma'am. It is a matter of duty.

PM: Tell me, have you heard anything of significance recently?

Madam Josie chortles, shaking her head. "Oh, you and your spy games. Well, let's see - Maryanne and John from down the street are finally engaged!"

PM: It is about time.

"Isn't it just? Oh, and Ms Keelin by the other side of the park just adopted her third wriggler, but I hear tell that the lusii aren't getting along quite well at all. She's trying to keep it all very hushed up until she can see if she can keep him with the lusus so distraught, the poor thing. Try to keep that one quiet, dearie?"

PM: Of course, Madam. I shall be the soul of discretion on this matter.

The madam nods sagely, and then presses a hand to her lips, tilting her head to peek at something just over PM's shoulder. "Oh, but enough of my gossiping - I didn't realize you had a guest, my dear!"

PM looks up from where she has been taking extensive notes in her stilted writing on a tiny notepad, blinking in confusion. She brushes part of her greyed wrappings from her face, frowning.

PM: I'm sorry? A guest?

"The one sitting in the passenger's side, of course!"

As there was no one in the passenger's side when PM executed her flawless roll five minutes earlier, there is only one logical explanation.

Someone is trying to steal her mail.

Unacceptable.

PM: Pardon me, Madam Josie. I must go.

She is, of course, most subtle as she pretends to meander back to the car with her head down, eyeing the slim figure seated in her car with a glare while her head is tilted down as though to read over her notes. The pernicious snoop has its hands folded in its lap, and PM cannot see any evidence that the interloper has been tearing into packages or otherwise violating the sacred privacy of the mail, but there's no telling what this intruder has been able to hide in the precious minutes PM spent engaging Madam Josie for the latest gossip!

She has no real strife specibus equipped - a grave oversight, clearly - so the best she can do is to lift her mail satchel above her head as she very surreptitiously sneaks up on the intruder. In reality, she is quite exposed in the middle of Madam Josie's front garden, holding an overstuffed satchel in the air
where anyone could see her, but it's the thought that counts, right?

The person in the passenger seat turns toward her just as PM is prepared to bring the satchel crashing down on their head. Her face is not one PM could ever forget.

WQ: Ah, my old Parcel Mistress. It has been too long.

PM sags, exclaiming wordlessly in surprise, and accidentally overbalances. The weight of the satchel tips her backward, and she falls flat on her back. The satchel itself somehow lands on her face, and for a moment of scrambling and flailing, all she can see and smell is mail, which is - not an unwelcome state of affairs, really. Then she yanks the bag off her face and stares in awe at the royal personage who has taken up residence in her own passenger seat. PM gets to her knees hurriedly, making to bow to the White Queen who sits cross-legged and benevolent in the throne of the car seat.

PM: My lady! My Queen! It is an honor to see you again!

WQ: Not a Queen, not any longer, my dear. Call me a Querent, if you will.

PM fumbles, blushing, torn between genuflecting further and scrambling to pile some of the letters she dropped in her panic back into the satchel. The Queen - no, the Querent, she must respect her Querent's wishes! - unfolds from the car to assist her, calmly stacking letters and handing them to PM with an elegant hand. This only causes PM to panic more, really; she can't believe, after all these centuries of absence, that the old White Queen herself has appeared in PM's car in an unassuming human town! She feels a momentary pang of guilt at the grey of her wrappings, and for the fact that she is nowhere near presentable enough to be standing in the presence of royalty. But the Querent is, oddly enough, in neutral wrappings of her own, rather than the brilliant golds and blues PM can still faintly remember, as though witnessed in a dream.

PM: My Querent, then! How may I assist you?

The WQ straightens, all five foot six of carapacian nobility and grace, and she motions for PM to stand up as well. PM can only stare, taking in all of the smooth details of a queenly face she barely remembers, but could never truly forget. All Prospitians would know this face.

WQ: You have assisted me above and beyond the call of duty, and exceeded my expectations once before, in a far different game.

WQ: Tell me - how much of it do you remember?

PM must remove her hat to fiddle with it, running claws down the battered seams and along the black brim. It is an old memento, repaired many times over the years, and she strongly suspects it held significance to her in the last iteration, too. Her stomach twists a little, but she cannot lie to her old sovereign.

PM: …Not much, my Querent.

PM: Enough to know that I was present and incarnate in paradox space! And I do recall that we have spoken before. But the details are...difficult for me. There are others who recall the last round much more clearly than I.

WQ: I see. It is to be expected. Though there are those who remember far more than they should, in general most remember only that there was a previous round, and think no more of it.

The Querent's slender claws come to a halt, then, and she closes her eyes in a sigh. For the first time,
PM is able to overcome her awe to see the faint cracks at the corners of the WQ's dark eyes, and the way she braces one hip on the side of the car, as though to support herself in a moment of weakness. And in that moment, PM knows a dark foreboding that curdles in her belly, and she scans both of the Querent's claws with her eyes.

In theory, she was aware - everyone was aware - that the sovereigns had given up their rings and scepters. But to see the old Queen herself, ringless and weary, is almost frightening. Worse still, it pings at her memories, and she shakes the sensation away. She has a strong feeling she does not want to remember all of the previous session. Some carapacians dedicate themselves to contemplation and attempt to draw as much as they can about their past lives back into their conscious memory. Not so with PM - what few flashes of significance and recognition she does experience on a regular basis are more than enough to sustain her.

WQ: I would not, of course, seek to tear you from a job that you enjoy. However, though you may not recall it, you have a remarkable capacity for agency in the game we all play, an agency that I would like to see more of.

WQ: Tell me, PM - are you willing to assist me in seeking out the players once more?

She crushes the hat between her claws, and releases it just as quickly, scrambling to smooth out the kinks and ensure that the shape of the traditional Postal Millinery remains unchanged. Inwardly, all of that foreboding and a new burst of exhilaration mingle in a slurry that takes her more than a moment to decipher. After all, what carapacian would not want to meet the players of the game? They are heroes, nobles, even gods, whose coming is foretold even before the game begins!

Perhaps her apprehension and long pause come from the vague knowledge, within her soul, that this is not a true game. If it were, the carapacians would not have landed on this planet, so far outside the Medium; they would be on Prospit and Derse, where they belong, preparing for battle. No, she may not remember the previous session, but she knows something went horribly wrong.

And if she admits it to herself, she fears what she might find if they do locate the players. As much as she hopes it might be different, that they might have beaten the odds, she knows on a fundamental level that an unnatural game can result in...unnatural players.

Looking upon the form of her old Queen, PM realizes the choice has already been made for her. She cannot, in good conscience, allow her Querent to go seeking the players alone, not in this diminished state. For the sake of the sovereigns, PM has a duty not just as a member of the Shatranj, but as a carapacian, to assist the Querent in this duty.

PM: I am for you, my Querent.

WQ: Ah, you are? I see. Then I should like to deputize you further, my dear Parcel Mistress.

WQ: How would you like to become my own Protégé?

Yesterday

Nothing has gone right, these past few days, and PM can't help but wonder if it is her fault.

After all, she volunteered to deliver that note to the Seer, which no one has yet explained but somehow managed to trigger exactly what PM has always feared - an anomaly in the female player called Rose. Players in the game are always unique, and not just because they are the direct product of paradoxes at their finest. They are capable of feats both great and terrible, and while PM can't
remember much, she can clearly sense in the explosion of grimdark that follows that this was something significant, so significant that paradox space couldn't help reenacting it. PM knows even less about this player than she would others because the Seer is meant to be of Derse, but she can see that the darkness runs far too deep within this Light player.

When she next catches up with the Seer, the situation remains as confused as ever. PM is ecstatic when not one but three heroes flood into the back of the van, their raw power thrumming through her carapace as she wrenches around to see the Heir and the Knight have arrived as well. Even the Seer's corrupted power has settled, and in that fleeting time they spend escaping the city, the Motorist luxuriates in the presence of three players. She has little knowledge of the previous session, but the Querent has assured her that all four reached god tier before the end. PM would have been able to guess that much from the sheer influence these three exert on their surroundings. When they huddle together, the Heir with a protective arm wrapped around both Seer and Knight, they seem almost whole.

And then the Heir leaves. PM bites her lip as he exits the vehicle at the airport, but she shrieks inwardly in protest at this abrupt, unconscionable turn of events. They are not meant to be apart. They will not heal properly if they separate like this! But she cannot drag the Heir back into the car; she can only watch, despairing, as he vanishes into the flying device and into the sky. Everything about that is wrong - what kind of Breath player would choose confinement over the open air? Another anomaly, then, one more subtle than the Seer's connection to the Horroterrorrs, but no less debilitating. It is wrong, wrong, wrong, but all she can do is put the van in drive and trundle off, dispirited with this abrupt realization. The Querent had told her, if at all possible, to stay with the players on the way back to the Laboratories where the two carapacians have taken refuge. PM had not given the order much thought, believing as she has that the three heroes would not be willing to part once they were together, but now she can see why the WQ thought the order necessary.

No, she thinks, as she leaves Rose Lalonde to her electronic communications in the computer lab. No, they are not whole yet. It's not just that the fourth hero seems to be missing altogether, lost somewhere in this huge world so that not even the Querent and her secretive contacts have been able to pin down her location. These are indeed broken players. PM was right to join the Querent in her quest; the WQ seems to believe that she will be able to advise the Seer, at least, and fill her in on some of the key facts of this abnormal session, but PM thinks it far more likely that something will go wrong again. She may wear a cheerful front for her old Queen, but in the meantime she will keep her swordkind close and the Seer closer still.

She is a spy of the Shatranj, and her Queen's safety is too important to risk in these kinds of circumstances. It tastes like blasphemy, but PM will be ready to fight if the Seer goes mad once more.

For now, though, Rose Lalonde seems...calm. This could be misleading of course - it is harder for PM to read the emotions of humans and trolls than that of carapacians - but PM feels secure enough to leave the Seer to her own devices and report in to the WQ.

She finds the Querent in one of the labs deep in the heart of Lalonde Laboratories, where Rue Lalonde has allowed them to set up a makeshift camp. The WQ is insistent that they conceal their true intentions from the doctor until the correct moment arises, though she is unable to specify when that moment may be. Instead, they are posing as a fledgling carapacian scientist and her Protégé. Rue Lalonde offered them the use of the lab after WQ began to cautiously reveal her more in depth knowledge of certain aspects of paradox space relevant to the doctor's interests. PM has learned to read suspicion in human and troll faces over the years, so that she knows when to back off and when
to press for more information, and she can see that Rue Lalonde realizes she's being played. But WQ and the doctor seem content in their face off, neither one willing to admit that they are both fully aware that WQ and PM are here under false pretenses.

If PM were in charge, she'd just want to have everyone be honest with each other. All of this dancing and sidling around each other, with blank smiles and hidden intrigue, seems stupid and counterproductive. But this is politics, and she never did have a head for them. As long as Rue Lalonde isn't cutting them out or preventing them from watching over the Seer, PM is willing to play along.

When PM runs in, panting from having had to cross from one of the outer buildings to the center of the complex, WQ is working on their most recent project. It is a strange device, not one PM is familiar with. The control center is similar in design to the computer equipment she vaguely remembers from the ectobiological labs of her youth, back in Prospit-A, but over the past week the Querent has begun to build new additions for the structure, using her delicate hands to weld metal and string together the inner wiring and circuitry.

She tells Rue Lalonde they are building a paradox analyzer, a way to crunch raw data about spatial and temporal anomalies to find patterns that repeat on a quantum level.

When she and PM are alone, they call it a Queen's Hub.

What began as a simple computer station has evolved into a sprawling network of computer screens and thick cables covering the entire far wall of the lab, and now WQ is busily tinkering with yet another tiny gadget, a memory drive that hums and glows a faint blue as PM watches. WQ twists the screwdriver a fraction to the right.

It then explodes.

WQ drops the sparking drive and, when it bursts into outright flames, stamps on it with her foot in an attempt to put out the flames. PM seizes the fire extinguisher from behind the front door to the lab and yanks the pin. When she pulls on the handle, the force of the foam being expelled sends her flying back, and she rolls along a counter several times before she can release the handle and come to a stop. At least, she thinks dizzily, the fire is out.

WQ: Oh dear. Are you quite alright, Protégé?

PM: The whole room is circles.

WQ: I see. My apologies. It appears that I have once again missed some key component in this contraption.

PM sits upright and clutches her head until the walls stop spinning and her eyes can focus on one spot again. She lets the expended fire extinguisher roll up against the wall and jumps off the counter, staggering a little as she joins the Querent by the wall of monitors.

PM: I am sure you will get it right eventually, Querent. Look at how much you've completed in just a few weeks!

The WQ sighs, sliding down into at a stool to survey the mess of computers she is using to create some Queenly device.

WQ: If only our own devices had not been damaged in the crash. I became so complacent, so assured in the knowledge that each new session would bring a new Hub, I have forgotten the more minute details of each piece. And the technology of this world has not yet caught up all the way; we
may be able to make do with the adjustments I make, but it will lack the clarity of vision I hoped to achieve.

PM: As long as it works, it will be fine!

The Querent shakes her head a little and then smiles, tired. Her carapace clicks and creaks as she rises, and each sound sends a little stab of worry through PM. A Queen’s power and longevity are fueled by the ring. Though the Querent is as beautiful and regal as ever, how long is a carapacian noble’s lifespan without the assistance of the ring? PM just doesn’t know, and that lack of knowing frightens her. This is the price she pays for being the Querent’s Protégé all these years - she must endure this terrifying sensation of not-knowing on a regular basis, and she sometimes pines for the days when the worst she had to worry about was someone stealing the mail.

WQ: You are right, PM. It only has to work. It need not be perfect. I have questions of my own about that last session, and I will have answers.

PM: There is one thing though, Querent. The Seer is awake!

WQ inclines her head, a faint smile on her face.

WQ: This is welcome news indeed.

PM: Yes! She does not seem to be possessed still, and she seems very much aware. But I fear the Knight may be leaving soon.

It is another blow that adds to PM's private misgivings about these heroes. Heir is of Prospit, and perhaps that might have been the reason he was able to pry himself away from the other players in their time of need. It is a poor excuse, but it would explain the anomalies. But the news that the Knight and his guardian intend to return to this village called Houston is all the more troubling because the Knight and the Seer are more closely related.

They've been drawn together already once. Why in Skaia's name are they falling apart?!

WQ: I see.

She deliberates on this for some time, and PM waits patiently, taking a broom from within the supply closet and using it to clean the charred memory drive off the floor. It was a blank drive anyway, meant for recording new information, and it is not the first WQ has accidentally destroyed in her quest to recreate the components of the Queen’s Hub. For now, PM waits, secure in the knowledge that her Querent is sifting through all of the facts and coming up with their next best step.

WQ: It would be inadvisable for us to leave the Knight alone. My contact in Houston has been keeping an eye upon his progress and encouraging him, but I know for a fact that she means to open up a more...violent front in her confrontation with the Crew.

PM: What?!! Why would she do that? The players are barely awake!

WQ: Because it is her way. She prefers outright conflict to this course of passive guidance I have asked her to institute. I am more surprised that she went along with this plan for as long as she has - I expected her to make a move long before now. Soon she will begin to manipulate the Knight, to push him. It is her way.

WQ straightens and clenches a claw, drawing forth something from the pockets of her borrowed, too-long lab coat.
WQ: You must go with them, PM. When my contact's patience runs thin and she provokes war, it is you who must continue to guard the Knight.

She opens her claw, and PM inhales sharply. The Querent holds forth a ring. Not the ring, PM has been assured, but an innocuous double that the WQ uses to conceal her favored swordkind when passing through the security of the human world. The science behind it is complex, and far beyond a Parcel Mistress's pay grade, but with the correct gesture one can summon forth a pale sword in place of the ring.

And there is only one reason the WQ would offer such a priceless artifact to her Protégé.

PM: You mean for me to go alone.

WQ: I must remain here. The Seer will begin to look for answers first - it is her duty to obtain all the information necessary to prophesy the most fortunate course of action the heroes may take. I will guide her as best I can.

WQ: You have studied as my Protégé in more ways than one these many years. I have faith that you will be able to assist the Knight when his current mentor fails him.

It is an unspeakable honor, to be so trusted by the Querent. PM bites her lip, fighting back tears, because she cannot accept this honor. She can't.

PM: I must refuse, my Querent.

PM: I cannot leave you here, not alone, not with the Seer so unstable.

WQ: You can and you must, PM. You underestimate the Seer, I think.

She does not. The Querent did not witness the explosion of grimdark that PM did; she heard about the events in New York only by proxy. She doesn't understand how very easily Rose Lalonde gave in to the Abyss, and PM doesn't know how to make the Querent understand.

And she cannot disobey such a direct order. Closing her eyes, PM bows her head and cups her claws to receive the new sword.

PM: I will not fail you, Querent.

She sneaks aboard the jet when it lands on the private runway out back, mostly by wandering up to the cargo hold and walking up the ramp when no one is looking. Once inside, the hum of the jet's engines drown out all else. PM fights the urge to sneak right back out and return to the security of the WQ's side, and forces herself to locate a nice spot to bunker down for the flight to Houston. She tucks herself between a few of the large crates that have rolled to the back of the hold, brushes a hand against the ring she has strung around her neck, beneath the wrappings, and settles down to wait for the plane to finish refueling.

There is a brief moment of turmoil when the jet takes off, and PM goes flying, narrowly missing out on being crushed by a huge crate, but once they are properly in the air the ride is much smoother. A little more battered, PM sits down again and begins to eat some of the meal she brought along with her in the center of the dark hold. She has the light of her flashlight and little else, and already she longs to return to the Querent's lab.

It isn't until an hour later that she realizes she is being watched.
The sensation starts slowly, but grows more pointed until PM can no longer fight the urge to glance around the darkness of the hold, one hand rising up to grip the ring more firmly.

She doesn't ask if someone is there. She isn't stupid. Instead, she pretends to slowly rotate, as though stretching her legs, and scans the darkness with her tiny flashlight by pure coincidence.

A pair of bright blue eyes flash at her, and PM jumps back, squawking in a most undignified manner as she fixes the flashlight on the creature sitting atop the crate beside her. She catches only a glimpse of a frightful, murderous leer before the thing vanishes in a blur. She blinks hard, more than once, but the thing she saw remains stubbornly gone.

PM does not rest easy until they land with a painful jolt in Houston, but even when she kicks open the cargo hold compartment door and uses the light from outside to look around, she can find no sign of that horrifying face. She is alone in the hold, with nothing but the crates for company.

Uneasy, she climbs out of the cargo hold and drops to the ground, scampering toward the nearest building.

She can't help but feel that she dodged a bullet. A creepy, leering, puppet-themed bullet.

- WQ would probably wish the Protégé to follow the Knight back to his home and make the proper overtures of friendship to him.

But PM is taking a little...initiative. WQ frequently encourages her to take initiative, so PM believes she would approve of this alternate course of action, regardless. Eyes narrowed with concentration, she makes her way through the Houston downtown area, whiling away the time until the sun begins to rise and the air heats up. People begin to swarm the streets in their cars and on foot, and PM settles back, waiting for the opportune moment.

After all, if she is to defend the Knight from the Midnight Crew, she might as well use some of her skills as a Shatranj agent to figure out exactly where the Crew have decided to base themselves. Thus far, her interaction with the criminal group has not extended beyond a brief, heart-pounding encounter in Vermont, before she and WQ split up to enact their plan to gain entrance to Lalonde Laboratories, and the scraps of information she and the Querent have picked up through their contacts over the years. They have always been focused more on locating the players than being overly concerned about the Crew - at least, PM has - and she intends to remedy that today.

Finding the Midnight Crew is easy. A member of the Shatranj becomes used to picking up on the little details and spying unusual people in the crowd, and PM is no exception. Perhaps an unsuspecting human would look upon the bustling morning crowd in the center of downtown Houston and see a mass of workers and office drones suited up to go to work. PM sees the ones who break the pattern. Her eyes scan the crowd from beneath her wrappings, and she pauses momentarily every time she comes across a suit that is too black for the summer heat. She counts three members of the Midnight Crew at this intersection alone, and she shivers. WQ's mysterious contact had said that the Crew had infested Houston; PM is left wondering just how the Knight and his guardian have remained free for so long when they flaunt themselves before such a heavy concentration of the Midnight Crew.

Or perhaps this high number of Crew members is a new development. PM simply has no way of knowing. All she can do is proceed to stage 2 of her mission.

She chooses a short, green-eyed troll in a shabby suit as her target. The other two Crew members
seem to be loitering around the crosswalk, their eyes scanning the road and the skyline shiftily, while this troll hurriedly crosses the street with a hand in his pocket, clearly on his way to some other destination. It will be much easier for PM to go undetected if she and her target are in motion, as opposed to her standing around waiting to be noticed by one of the loitering Crew thugs. This decided, she tugs her wrappings further down to obscure her carapace - no need to tip anyone off that a rare carapacian is wandering the streets of Houston - and proceeds to follow the troll around for the rest of the day. It's really not difficult, and she is certain she gets more than a few odd looks by the end of the day as she follows the Crew member into cafes and shady back alleys. Whenever the troll enters some unorthodox establishment, PM patiently waits outside and glares at anyone who looks at her oddly, before resuming the hunt when the troll emerges.

One would think the troll would become suspicious after a while, but PM must be getting much better at this sneaky thing! When the troll rushes off one final time into a relatively abandoned part of town, PM pulls back a little, ducking behind street corners as the troll becomes more and more careful about checking behind him for followers. Finally, he stops outside an old, decrepit movie theater, and knocks on a boarded up section of a door.

PM, who stopped to purchase some delicious Korean barbeque at a bus vendor a half hour earlier (one can't trail a criminal fiend all day without nourishment, after all!), squats down behind a rusty garbage can and continues to shovel delicious barbeque into her mouth as she narrows her eyes at the troll. After a brief pause, the greenblood lifts up the lower half of the boards and enters the building. There is no sign that anyone let him in, so PM waits a good five minutes before sprinting after him, throwing away her trash as she goes. She skids to a stop before the old theater and prods at the wooden boards experimentally. Glancing this way and that, she lifts them up, cautious. There is barely a creak as the boards lift, a sign that they are used regularly, and so with one last look around, PM peers into the room beyond. It is dusty and dark, barely lit by the evening sun, and she can't see anyone within.

She's not too worried about losing the trail, though. From this low vantage point, she can see the hundreds of footprints in the dust on the tile floor. Even if the place was frequented by the homeless or teenage vagrants on a regular basis, she highly doubts they would all have been wearing the kind of standard, heavy boots the Crew seems to prefer as part of their uniform. Oh yes, this is a major hub of Crew activity, or PM will eat her hat.

(That is a lie. She would never eat her hat. Never.)

She creeps inside, pulling up her wrappings to cover her mouth as well while she rolls dramatically across the floor to duck behind an overturned, spider-webbed square table. Dust motes hang in the air, kicked up by her shenanigans, and she tiptoes toward the entryway to the back of the theater. She can only wonder why the troll had felt the need to knock earlier; there's no sign of a guard or a doorkeeper as she glances around the ticket-taking podium. Shrugging, she steps out into the hall, looking around for any lights beneath the doors of the defunct movie theater rooms.

"Gotcha!"

Her knee jolts with pain as something slams into her from behind. It all happens quite quickly after that. PM shouts wordlessly and whips the swordkind ring from off her neck - only for a claw to wrap around her wrist and crush it, hard enough to make her carapace creak and threaten to crack. Gasping in pain, she feels her claws open against her will and the ring drops to the ground before she can activate the swordkind. She snarls and lunges at the green-eyed troll, the one who has seized her wrist.

A second blow rains down and just barely scrapes by her skull, slamming into her shoulder instead.
It drives her to her knees, and within moments two bodies pile on top of her, yanking her wrist from the troll's grip. Beneath their weight, she can't breathe for a horrifying moment, until the two - a troll and a human, both female - pull her upright, the female troll's curvy horn angled outward so far that it nearly presses up against the side of PM's head. They pin her arms quite effectively behind her back, and despite how PM stamps at their feet and yanks on her arms, the most she can do is strain her own shoulders.

This can't be happening.

"Lemme see her face."

PM kicks someone behind her in the kneecap, and they grunt with pain, but her head wrappings are pulled back all the same as she squirms and bares her teeth at the man who crouches down before her.

If being captured wasn't the first sign that something had gone horribly wrong, PM knows that she has made a mistake when she sees that the man before her is not wearing a midnight black suit. He has a sharp chin and a square jaw, a felt green suit and a rusty maroon hat, and is basically in every way the exact opposite of what a member of the Midnight Crew should look like.

PM's heart plummets further when he accepts the sword-ring from the green eyed troll and tucks it into the front pocket of his lime suit. Not only has she been captured, she has lost the Querent's treasured swordkind!

"Not one of Snow's," he says, tapping at his chin. "But definitely carapacian, ey? How did you wander into a shady place like this, chickadee?"

PM: I - I will tell you nothing!

But with her arms restrained as they are, PM is fairly certain nothing more than a vague shout will have translated into the man's mind. He raises both eyebrows, then lowers them into a bored stare.

"Bah. I don't got time for this right now. The boss man is callin' in a tick, and I need to not miss that kinda call."

"What should we do with her then, Crowbar?" the greenblood asks, bouncing on his heels. "She's been stalking me all day, as though I wouldn't notice a beetle of all things following me on my rounds."

Another blow. PM flinches, lowering her head. It is beginning to occur to her that perhaps a Prospitian's idea of spying does not work well in practice when the party being spied upon follows other rules.

She may, in fact, be in quite a lot of trouble.

"Put her in with the other canary." Crowbar snorts at some in-joke, and a few of the Crew members chuckle along. "We can get 'er talkin' when I'm finished up with the bossman. Until then, don't anybody touch her." He straightens up, tugging at his bowtie with a grimace, and heads down the stadium steps to the front row of the theater. She finally catches the shape of a crowbarkind specibus slung into the man's belt loop before he flops down in one of the seats. The projector screen has lit up with a dull grey light, flickering in the darkness of the theater, but PM is dragged out before she can see more than that.

The greenblooded troll seems to feel the need to supervise as the two other Crew members yank PM along the main hallway to yet another theater, his forest-green eyes flashing in the half-light as he
sniggers. "You really shouldn't have crossed the Midnight Crew."

PM: Eat my fists of righteous fury, you asshat.

Once again, she is fairly certain that the message does not get through, or there would have been more of a reaction than a furrowed brow from the troll. "Weird ass alien," is all he mutters, before peeling off to head into the restroom. The two thugs holding PM by the arms finish dragging her down the hall, and one of them shoulders open the door to the new theater. PM raises her head, and squints against the faint, rusty red light at the other being chained to the space where the projector screen would have been.

What she sees is not possible.

PM: Y-you cannot be here! I - you're not - what are you?!

The door slams shut behind them.

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Officially, the War for the Novaya Ukraine ended on paper five years ago, when the countries of the Caucuses were finally forced to admit that they and the refugees from southeastern Europe faced a common enemy, and the civil war became a united front.

The problem is, no one is really sure what that common enemy is. When the sticky white tendrils of thorns and poisonous pale tar began to extend their reach beyond the decimated ruins of the old Ukraine, and the things began to crawl up from the water to drag the living back down into the grimlight, centuries-old rivalries suddenly seemed a little petty, and few thought to question exactly what the monsters were.

These days, the official war is over. UN forces withdraw their troops steadily with each month that passes, quietly shuffling the soldiers and medics and technicians who come back wrong into private hospices in the countryside to be forgotten. The old southern region of the Ukraine is a lost cause, tainted with old bloodshed and polluted with lusus-white goo, but at least, the authorities whisper, most of the people have been evacuated to the Novaya Ukraine. At least the spindly, creatures with seething dark eyes, overstretched limbs, and hollow, hungry mouths have stopped scuttling up from the Kakhovka reservoir. At least the Sea of Azov no longer churns and froths with a tangle of pale, colossal intelligence.

As far as the public records are concerned, the Armed Ranger’s unit of ammunition suppliers withdrew to the safe zone almost a year ago. But AR knows better. There is still a need here in the east of Europe, and he is dedicated to his duty. He will defend the citizens under his protection, whether the law recognizes the ongoing guerilla war or not.

It is a cool spring night, made humid and stagnant by the reek of salt and blood that rises up from the slick, iridescently white puddles pooling along the sides of the path. Everywhere the goo sinks into the earth, plants have withered and almost melted into sludge, and the trees whose roots are affected weep droplets of pale tar from their leaves and the splits in their swollen bark. The wetlands are toxic in the worst possible ways, and only rangers on a hunt would dare venture so far south.

AR and his most recent recruits, twins from the town of Oster, wade carefully between the pools, their thick boots already steaming a little as the damp earth eats away at the soles. They have told him they grew up in the Chernihiv Oblast, along the banks of the Desna River, and they have been
fighting the war since the grimlight first assimilated the reservoir ten years ago. It’s hard to remember
their names – AR has always been unable to fathom how humans manage themselves when they
keep only one name their entire lives, and refuse to respond to a name with similar initials that more
accurately describes their state of being and profession at that particular moment. He keeps meaning
to call them Volunteers, but they insist that they are Mykola and Olena Vynnychenko, and refuse to
respond to orders with anything but sighs when he tries to refer to them by other, more fitting titles.

They are close to the new shoreline of the Sea of Azov, in the toxic wetlands that crept over the
mainland when the incursion began, and the Ranger insists that they stick to protocol. He appreciates
his Volunteers, he really does, but they keep insisting on making unauthorized detours into the
woods and skirting too close to the opaque puddles of toxic waste. They are cocky and young, for
humans, and do not take to orders very well, so the most AR can usually do to assert his authority as
the party leader is to furiously sign at them to cease and desist whenever they prod at blancmange
pools in a haphazard attempt to provoke their quarry into breaking cover.

“Розслабтеся, трохи панцира. Я знаю, як полювати на монстрів,” Mykola laughs, scratching at
his strange brown human face-fur as he adjusts the straps of his heavy metal arm guards. He is short
for a human, barely two feet taller than AR, but broad with muscle and the heavy weight of his
armor. “І ми не повинні втрачати час - ми повинні вбити цю мерзоту, перш ніж він вбиває іншої
людини.”

Across the road from her twin, Olena tosses a stone into a tarry pool and tilts her head to the side as
the gloop ripples slowly in a delayed reaction to the impact. The stone slowly sinks into the viscous
slurry and vanishes from sight. “Якщо ми не будемо рухатися далі, ми не будемо знайти монстра
перед бурею починається. Чи не байдукувати, Микола.” She says it lazily, but her eyes are keen
as she scans the darkness ahead.

AR huffs at them both and hops over a thin trickle of grimlight, the ammunition clips and guns slung
over his shoulders swaying with the motion. He's been ranging the edges of the Novaya Ukraine for
years now hunting monsters, but he has only crossed into the truly unsafe Staraya Ukraine once
before, during the original war. The grimlight may have died down, and these rare stragglers like the
one they are hunting now are few and far between, but he still feels apprehension clicking along his
carapace, and can't help but wish his Volunteers would take this mission much more seriously.

AR: He who licks knives will soon cut his tongue.

It’s one of those proverbs in the area, a saying he’s picked up on and started to use himself. The
people who still live in this area are used to a total absence of carapacians – Prospitians and Dersites
and Villeins alike tended to avoid Eastern and Central Europe long before this War, still haunted by
the memories of the Second World War and the genocide that ensued when Himmler chose to add
carapacians to the list of those to be gathered into the camps. Because of this, the Ranger is even
more of a rarity here than anywhere else in the world. He’s done what he can to pick up the
vernacular and try to ease his way among a people made jittery and suspicious by years of twisted
horrors hunting them by night. He can only imagine how a Prospitian with a pale carapace would be
-treated in this kind of atmosphere; people tend to shoot first and ask questions later when they see
something pale and inhuman running in the dark, and the corpses of innocent lusii are a common
-sight closer to the settlements of the Novaya Ukraine proper.

AR also carries a lot of heavy artillery. But that’s because he has a small tendency to accumulate
weaponry with uncanny zeal. Addiction is a powerful thing.

Olena tosses back her head and laughs, a low chuckle that she shares with her brother. “То це
dobre, що я жінка!” she says, bowing slightly to unseen applause.
Something leaps out of the pool she disturbed and launches over her head, just barely clipping the back of the woman’s skull. If she hadn’t bowed at that very moment, she wouldn’t have had a head left. A spray of blood goes flying through the air as Olena gasps and drops to the ground, one hand grabbing at the damp mess of red bleeding into her long hair, and everything after that happens too quickly for AR to see how bad the damage might be.

It lands in the center of the path, right in front of AR. It is humanoid, just as the reports claimed, with jagged claws that drag through the dirt as it twitches around to snarl at the carapacian, but no sign of troll horns. The place where it used to have a face is a smear, the left eye and cheek smashed up against the right. Dark tears bleed from its mangled eyes and drip onto its scarred, tangled flesh as it shrieks and squats down on warped knees that bend backwards with the crunch of bones cracking in two. It reaches out with darting claws for AR’s face as it launches forward.

He levels an oversized rifle at it - most rifles are oversized compared to your average carapacian - and fires. He aims for the head but the bullet lodges in the monster's rib cage. But hey, at least he managed to hit it, right? The force of the shot slows the creature, jerking it to a halt mid-leap, but it just snarls and catches itself on its backward-hinging knees.

Another shot rings out from the left, followed shortly by a burst of staccato fire from Mykola's machine gun. "Ти помрєш, діавол!" Olena yells, her bloodied hair spilled around her face as she rises from her crouch, incensed. Her lone, precise shot catches the creature in the cheek, just barely missing the skull, and passes through its elongated jaw to ricochet off into the side of a tree. This yanks the monster's head to the side, just in time for Mykola's barrage to pepper the thing's torso with holes that drip thick purple blood. It claws at its injured side with tapering claws, opening up new wounds on its own body as it shrieks with dismay, and then bares its fangs at them before bounding off down the path. It no longer runs like a bipedal creature; it must lurch heavily forward and leap with every step to accommodate its unnaturally mutated leg joints.

AR is pretty used to unnatural creatures flying at his face at this point. Years of grimlight mutants attempting to claw at his carapace have left him rather unmoved when faced with yet another encounter with the horrors that stalk the Novaya Ukraine.

AR: Olena, are you well?

The woman grimaces and spits as she sweeps her hair back. "Я в порядку. Ми не можемо дозволити монстра піти." When Mykola comes to her and dabs at the back of her head, she swats his hand away and begins to race down the path after the monster.

She’s right, of course; the monster has already killed five others back in Oster, and if they lose it now it could disappear into the waterlogged wastes of the Staraya Ukraine and resurface elsewhere to plague another town. This is their responsibility, the duty AR has taken up to the neglect of all else. The civilians of the Novaya Ukraine are under his guardianship now, and of course he must enforce all efforts to ensure their safety. His weapons clanking and clattering against the brittle curve of his back, he scurries after the twin Volunteers, keeping up with their longer strides as they race after the pale, scampering form of the murderous creature.

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A half an hour later, AR knows they have gone too far.

The dying, melting forest around them no longer buzzes with the faint hum of insects, and the sky overhead is no longer impenetrably dark. Everything has gone silent except for the plinking drip of the ooze that falls from the sagging trees into vast sheets of grimlight below. The pale pools inundate the ground around them, gleaming with a sickly radiance that illuminates the area. The light is not
Reassuring in the slightest, and AR would almost prefer the dark of the thick forest they left behind. The Ranger's feet have begun to sting within his boots as the acidic ground eats at them. At this rate, even if they turn around now, they won't make it back to the safe zone with their shoes intact. AR would last a while, but human skin is more vulnerable than carapace, and the Volunteers will surely lose toes, at the least.

And still, the monster leads them on a merry chase. It turned and screeched at them with the voice of the Abyss once before, but sprang back into motion before Olena and AR could do more than fire off two shots, too far away for even Olena to aim accurately.

They are far too deep into the Staraya Ukraine. The wetlands threaten to turn into a true lake, soon, and then they will be at the new edge of the Sea of Azov. The last reports from the UN's air drones showed the Sea's tangle had died, or at least stopped raising up new monsters, but AR knows the true nature of the thing that took up residence there. He spent years of his old life listening to the delirious songs of the Furthest Ring, and while he may not know the full name of the Horrorterror that was summoned into the Sea, he knows that very few things in this world could possibly kill it. No, he doesn't trust that the tangle is dead. Dormant, perhaps, and uninterested in continuing to actively poison the earth now that it has set up its own personal, grimlight-tainted territory, but alive nonetheless.

AR: We need to turn back.

It will hurt, of course. AR is proud of his impeccable monster-hunting record, and will be disappointed to see his hunting streak broken. But he would prefer that they live to fight another day, not die pointlessly in the name of killing one solitary mutation.

"Ми не можемо," Olena snaps. He can see the way her face has taken on a deathly pallor in the last few minutes. She consented to Mykola roughly bandaging her head to stem the bleeding, but she still should not have been running around all this time with a head wound. "Ми повинні продовжувати йти," she argues.

AR: We do not have a choice. We have to let it go and get back to the safe zone.

Thankfully, Mykola chimes in to agree with the Ranger. "Він правий, Олена. Щось не так у цій ситуації."

They are all three of them tense and on high alert. The seaside is nowhere near as clear as the Novaya Ukraine; the area surrounding the Sea itself could well be infested with thousands mutations still, and no one would ever know. The region is a dead zone. And Mykola has voiced exactly what AR has begun to worry about - something is not right about this situation. Ordinarily when confronted or chased by hunters, a mutation would turn and fight, overwhelmed by its own hunger for human flesh. They are not intelligent monsters and instead rely on unnatural strength and speed to kill, aided by their prey's instinctive fear of their distorted, uncanny forms.

This feels like more than a regular chase. This feels like the monster is leading them somewhere - it could easily have outrun them and disappeared into one of the deeper pools, but it taunts them from a distance, slowing its leaping bounds so that they can keep up. And he does not like that idea.

Olena sighs and jogs to a stop, staring yearningly into the distance as the last sliver of the mutation's arched back vanishes between the trees. "Добре." Touching a hand to the back of her head, she shakes herself vigorously and turns.

Without a sound, an enormous tendril whips up from the ground, where it had been concealed by a sheen of white ooze. It wraps around Olena's waist. She flinches, and has time to look up at Mykola
with wide eyes before the grimlight tentacle rips her back, snaking along the path in the direction the original monster has been leading them all along.

"Олена!" Mykola yells. There is a short cry in reply that cuts off too quickly, and a crunch that jolts AR's belly with a painful twist. He knows the sound of bones breaking, and that - that was a lot of bones. He can see the motion of the white tendril as it drags Olena's broken body back through the trees, though he can't see her anymore.

Mykola roars, and lunges forward. AR grabs the man's arm, but he just yanks it free and hares off in pursuit of the grimlight tendril.

AR: She's gone! No, Mykola, she's gone, she's - Agh! Come back!

The Ranger jumps over the pool of grimlight and takes off after Mykola. The tendril that took Olena has already receded through the trees, the white of its flesh blending into the dead forest and shining pools. But Mykola keeps running, screaming Olena's name at intervals, his voice already broken with sobs.

And AR can't leave them here. Even knowing they're already too close to the Sea, that the pools around them have finally merged into a vast lake that slops over the edges of the raised path, that he can hear the faint shrieks of other mutations crowing into the dead air, AR keeps going. Mykola brushes a low-hanging branch in his furious, grieving haste, and the Ranger can see poisonous white slime smeared all down the man's arm. But Mykola doesn't do the sensible thing and rip off his guards and jacket; he seems to be too blinded by the chase to realize his arm may begin to melt in mere minutes. AR puts on an extra burst of speed, ducking under that same branch, and swears under his breath. Mykola won't turn, won't be able to hear AR as more than a vague, indistinct murmur in his mind unless he turns to see AR's claw signals, and thus won't heed any warning about the acid unless AR catches up.

He's not going to catch up in time. The trees are thinning too fast, and the ground beneath his feet froths and slips, more sand than solid earth. They are nearly to the beach, the one place in this godsforsaken wasteland that AR will not walk.

AR: Mykola, stop!

The Volunteer does not turn to look, no matter how loudly AR attempts to shout in his mind. The burly man crosses from the path to the beach in a single stride, and then he is gone. AR jerks himself to a halt right at the boundary between the two, skidding slightly in the roiling sands.

He goes cold when he realizes what he is seeing.

The swollen Sea laps against a bone-white beach, leaving iridescent trails of lustrous white pollution along the shore. The tendril of grimlight that snagged Olena holds the woman aloft, long enough for Mykola to shout her name once more and charge toward it, before slithering beneath the surface of the waves. The Ranger screams mentally, but he thinks that perhaps Mykola ignores him on purpose. Twins are funny, that way.

But what truly terrifies him is the way the water stirs as Mykola stops by the edge of the surf, falling to his knees. True, some mutated creatures can grow and twist and stretch longer than houses, but the ripples that spread outward in the tainted water stretch as far as AR can see, and he knew it, he knew this tangle wasn't dead -

And -
And AR can't just *stand here.*

AR: Mykola! Get back from the water!

He runs out onto the beach sands and immediately feels the flare of pain from his feet. Through the tough shell of his outer carapace he can feel the grainy, searing surface of the beach on his bare feet, and he knows his boots are gone. The acid is much more concentrated here, and he can only imagine what Mykola's feet and knees will look like now. The human may never walk again, if he survives to leave this place.

When he is still yards away from Mykola, the first monster, the one they followed all the way into this trap, tackles AR from the side. They roll a few times before coming to a stop with the twisted mutation pinning him to the sand. AR screams, feeling the grimlight soak right through his outer wrappings and burn at his back. He fumbles on the trigger as the humanoid abomination bares its teeth, ripping the sides of its broken mouth apart so that it can fully open its jaws. Desperate, AR turns the rifle in his hands and begins to bash at the thing's head vigorously. He stuns it temporarily, but he doesn't have the strength to crush the monster's skull in, not from this angle.

From this distance, at least, it doesn't matter that he can't aim worth a damn or not. He flips the rifle, jamming it up into the creature's blackened eye socket, and pulls the trigger. A clot of purple blood bursts out from the back of the thing's head and trickles down the barrel, and with a warbling cry the monster sags forward, quite dead. The connection to the original grimlight tangle, after all, requires a functioning mind to host it. AR kicks the dead body off of him, rolling to the side with his arm wrappings scraping against the sands, and lurches to his feet once more.

Another tendril of grimlight erupts from the Sea, and this time AR sees the enormous mouth that emerges from the water as well. Endless rows of teeth line the circular maw as deep as AR can see, and there is something more - the sense of being *watched* and *seen through,* as though the tangle of hunger and horror within the Sea could strip him to the bone, flense his mind and swallow it whole like he was nothing more than a morsel of meat to be assimilated.

To be fair, that's exactly what a Horrorterror *would* do.

The sensation is too much; old instinct kicks in and AR begins to scramble backward. It's too late. It's too late, and he can't be the hero. It's far too late. The tentacle snaps around Mykola and pulls him into the surf.

Just before the end, Mykola sees AR, and the Ranger can see the resigned horror on the man's face twist into one final expression of determination. "Тікай, маленький панцир!" And then Mykola is gone, vanished into the gaping purple maw of the Horrorterror.

AR's first instinct is to charge in, guns blazing. He makes an aborted move forward before scrambling back into the tree line. His feet ache and his back burns and he can feel his eyes have begun to sting with tears, too. He should never have allowed them to wander this far. His Volun- his Vynnchenko twins are dead, and soon their bodies will be prowling the Staraya Ukraine, doomed to wander as twisted abominations wherever the grimlight directs them. He stumbles further into the trees, fighting back tears. He cannot afford to rest here, not with the tangle so very much alive. If it senses him, it can most certainly still reach him without even leaving the Sea -

Light flares from the sky, and he is momentarily blinded. Naturally, he freaks the fuck out and crouches down, arms over his head as he whimpers and blinks frantically, trying to see again. When he can finally make out the shape of the trees around him and assures himself that he isn't about to be confronted with yet another monstrous abomination inches from his face, he squints upward, past the hard glare of the spotlight training itself on the beach. From the Sea, he can hear the throaty, psychic
warble of confusion that the Horrorterror lets out, and feels a trickle of blood run from his nose at the sound.

A crimson red airship hangs in the sky, a familiar insignia painted starkly in white across the belly. AR trembles behind a bush, careful not to brush against its sickly pale, oozing leaves, and watches as a petite female troll leaps down from the vessel. She stands hard, and the sand around her actually crumples and caves inward with the force of her impact. Bracing herself on a golden culling fork, she straights. She is short but curvy, and her fuchsia-black hair tangles and writhes down her back in an wild mess of kinks and snarls. The resemblance between her silhouette and the shadowy form of the Horrorterror's tentacles beneath the surface of the Sea is...uncanny.

"Eyyyy, Gl'bgoylb. Long time, no cull, squidbitch," Her Imperious Condescension says, standing with her hip jutted out as she faces off with the city-sized Horrorterror. "Still having a glubbin' one-lusus murder party over here, you outraybeous bitch?"

More of the tangle heaves itself up above sea-level, and AR cowers, clapping his claws over his ears as the Horrorterror rumbles, a shrieking song that makes his ears bleed. He has the benefit of once being a Dersite, genetically cloned only a few rings in from the Noble Circle, and thus an inbred immunity to the worst of their cries. Any human or troll would normally have been incapacitated by the voice of the Abyss, spoken by a true Terror incarnate, but the troll doesn't even flinch.

"Fuck you. Fuck. You," the Condesce snaps, jabbing her 2x3dent at the massive Horrorterror. AR can only look on, fascinated. He has never before witnessed a troll that could somehow speak to something grimlight without immediately being attacked. This should be impossible. "N'if you think I couldn't glubbin' tell you had to be involved with that attempted salmoning in New York, you're needta coddamn think again!" The angrier the troll gets, the more fish puns she seems to use. AR can barely understand what half of the puns mean simply because he has no context for this bizarre, one-sided conversation. "You're the Emissary, and I warned you - you can wreck shit over here all you like, but if you step outta line, I will prawn yo ass into the next motherglubbin' session!"

Gl'bgoylb writhes in its Sea, tendrils lashing but never reaching out to embrace the Condesce. AR watches with a bile fascination, ignoring the way his feet ache and weep blood into the soil. He has lived near grim creatures all his lives, and never once witnessed one that treated a mortal being as anything but prey or a nuisance, good only for assimilating as a tanglebuddy. For the fuchsia troll's impudence alone, a Horrorterror should have shredded her mind on principle.

"Ha ha," the troll snorts, placing a fist on her hip. "Your mouths keep flappin', but all I hear is 'glubglubglub.'"

The grimlight Horrorterror slams a tendril down against the water. It kicks up a wave, but the water doesn't splash down anywhere near the Condesce, so it's not as much an attack as a...mild threat? A stern rebuke?

The Condesce raises a middle finger in response. "Blow it outta yo blowhole, bitch, I'll talk however I want. I know you hiveminds are always in cahoots." She taps her foot as the pale monster screeches and murmurs incomprehensibly back, nodding as though she can understand the words between the unearthly screams, and then raises two middle fingers. "Too glubbin' bad. For New York, you just lost your murder privileges over here. #DWI"

The Horrorterror tries to raise its volume. There's a strangling gurgle as it opens its jaws, and then a pop, and the whole enormous tangle shudders, drawing back a little as though in pain. The Condesce snorts. "Scream all you want - the old Doc's got your Glub on lock. That asshoal may want you squidbitchez hangin' around still, cod knows why, but if you tank that'll save you, you're wrong. I know you been rayling up the heiress, getting' her all uppity and finking she can step to me. One
more tentacle outta line and imma cull you myself."

Gl'bgolyb murmurs once more, tentacles sinking back beneath the waves. "I heard that!" the troll yells back. "Yeah, yeah. You better clamscry!" The troll slings her culling fork over her shoulder, scratching at the bed of her horns as she cracks her neck to the side. "Overbearin' deathbitch," she mutters. Tapping one of the golden bangles on her arm, she says, "Beam me up, snowflake. M'glubbin' starfin'. #wouldkrillforasnackeralrightnow"

The spotlight is replaced by a crackling beam of red, and the Condesce sits back as she is lifted back up to the ship, her legs crossed as she inspects her claws. AR can't see where she reenters it, but the light shuts off soon after, and, as silently as it arrived, the airship floats off, disappearing into the cloud cover without a sound. A stealth vehicle, then, rather than a personal ship, but that is all AR can really say about it - his specialty was always weaponry and regulations, not space or aircraft design.

When he looks back at the tangle in the water, he is in for an even stranger sight. The water ripples out from where the Horrorterror is moving beneath the waves, and it takes a moment for him to discern that the ripples are moving south, away from the beach. The water level begins to sink as AR watches, fascinated. If he's right, the Horrorterror that has occupied the Sea of Azov for so long is...leaving. Without its massive bulk displacing all that water, the shoreline might even creep back to the original water line.

He doesn't know how one troll - even a troll as powerful and illustrious on the global-scale as the Condescension herself - could have such power to threaten one of the grimlight many-angled gods! This is highly unusual!

It appears the Ranger will have to abandon this country. He's known this moment would arrive, eventually, the time when his oldest duties and loyalties would call him away from his chosen cause. He may not have understood a great deal of that conversation between troll and monster, but he knows that what he just witnessed was...significant. It is something that his old Prospitian contact will most surely be interested in hearing of - she is a member of the Shatranj, and while once they might have worked on opposing sides of an endless war, the old Parcel Mistress of his youth is in contact with the only Queen who still occasionally reaches out to her carapacian subjects. This might not be what regulation states AR should do, but he has been making up his own protocol for some time now, actually, and there is no one he trusts more in this world with this new information than the Protégé Mediator.

That is, at least, if he makes it back to solid ground before his carapace melts away. He begins to hobble-run away from the beach, back to the relative safety of the living forest miles to the north.

Before he can leave the country, however, he will have to report the twins' deaths, and the thought crushes at his heart with renewed grief, a new weight that he must endure. He runs and runs, and he tries not to think about the twin humans suffering within the pale grip of the tangle, their minds melting away into the sinking bloodbrine Sea.

Chapter End Notes

Oh jeez, PM, what have you gotten yourself into? ...Oh, right, the main Dave plot. Silly me. Let's play a game called 'how much more complicated can I make this fic in the space of one Intermission chapter', where the points don't matter and nobody wins.
Nobody. Not even me.

And now the Condesce is running around with her own agenda. Whether that agenda lines up with Doc Scratch's is another matter altogether (she told him that she was going to deal with her heiress, not go on a crazy roadtrip to Europe, after all).
Or By Day

Chapter Summary

Do the stars answer? in the night
Have ye found comfort? or by day
Have ye seen gods? What hope, what light,
Falls from the farthest starriest way?

Chapter Notes

One last short chapter to wrap up the carapacian Intermission arc! Herein Spades Slick stabs things, animate and otherwise, because that’s just what he does for fun, and WV is officially inducted as Sharpshooter’s sidekick, whether he likes it or not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Be Spades Slick

Fuckin' typical.

Spades pulls the brim of his hat down low and falls back into the shadow of a ruined statue, glaring at the obnoxious, neon yellow uniforms of the humans and trolls scurrying around the plaza. Every time he tries to so much as cross the street in this hellhole of a town, they're on his case. He's behind the eight ball here; one look at him and they'll know him for the carapacian he is, and he knows from previous experience that a carapacian in the Americas gets noticed. And anyone could be a member of the Midnight Crew.

Once, that kind of thought would have made him almost not-irritated. His own dreams of expanding the Crew never really went anywhere, what with all the dyin' and the timeline baloney. Not even Diamonds, who refused to ever be confused by time-traveling nonsense with a stubborn, cold fury that Spades would never admit he admired, had been able to survive the chaos. Now the thought of a Crew that spans a continent or three just turns Spades's stomach, because they're not his Crew, not anymore.

All he wants to do is blow this joint and get outta town before another crazy dame with death tentacles starts wrecking the place. He had only just arrived in New York City when everything went to absolute shit, and he's been bunkering down in a nice underground tunnel ever since.

He survived, obviously - if there's one thing Spades is good at, it's surviving - but his timing for his escape has clearly gone wrong; there are emergency crews everywhere, milling around and generally being useless as they search piles of debris and clean up bloodstains.

His first instinct is to jack one of their vehicles and floor it until he's past the barricades, but that would get him noticed just as easily as if he whipped off his hat and suit and did a fucking pirouette off this goddamn horse statue. As much as he despises it, his best option is to stay here where no one has yet seen him and wait for the coast to clear up -
"Hey, sir? Sir, are you alright?"

Spades facepalms with both claws as a troll with sharply angled horns and a forest green uniform jogs over to him, having apparently seen through Spades's clever plan. He should really learn to keep his thoughts to himself; paradox space *likes* fucking with him, and he *always* falls for it.

SS: Bluhhhhhhh.

"Sir, this area is still not cleared - we need to get you to a safe zone -" the troll chatters, and then quite abruptly he's all up in Spades's personal space and the stab that ensues is basically reflex. He was just right there, his ribs utterly exposed, alright? Spades's blade darts out and slips into the troll's side like a sigh, cutting off that incessant chatter instantly as the troll jolts to a halt and stares down at the pale green blood that trickles out and coats Spades's claw. "You - you *stabbed* me?" the troll says faintly, sounding almost faint. It's a nice change, almost, except how it's not - Spades is used to stabbing people who either deserve it or who get more irritated than frightened, and come back fighting. This kid just looks like he's gonna puke. Spades snorts, retracting the blade and shuffling it away in its holster.

SS: Kid, if you can't take the occasional friendly shank in stride, you need to work on your game face. I barely even nicked yah.

"You don't just go around *knifing* people in a disaster zone!" the troll protests, trying to stem the meager trickle of blood with both hands. Spades shakes off the instinct to flashback to another time and place, to another troll who had a much more interesting reaction to being stabbed. He's has to get going, before this chump actually attracts attention with all his dramatic wailing.

SS: I do.

Popping the collar of his suit to hide the gleaming, scarred black of his carapace, Spades makes his decision, and races across the plaza, crossing at the point with the least amount of exposure before rolling around the corner of a building into a new alley.

"He - he went that way! He's crazy - he just stabbed me, out of nowhere -"

Spades curses vehemently as he hears the troll rat him out to someone - cops, probably. Fuckin' pansy ass narc. The carapacian glances around, taking in his new surroundings, but the alley behind him is a dead end.

Shit. He can't afford to be arrested again. The last time this kind of thing happened, it was in Malmö, Sweden, and he'd only been incarcerated for two days before both a man in a midnight black suit and a pale, baby-faced little Prospitian who looked like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth showed up outside the slammer and tried to weasel their way in to interrogate him personally. He can't blow his cover this deep in the Midnight Crew's territory; they'd probably seize him even before the police could.

The only way out is up. Muttering to himself, Spades hauls himself on top of an overturned dumpster and makes a running leap for the fire escape across the alleyway. He succeeds, barely, hooking both arms over the railing and crawling over to land on his feet with a clang. All of this would be so much easier if these American shits weren't so goddamn inconsiderate. Everything is built on a scale designed for humans and trolls; for a carapacian of a slightly smaller stature, even pushing the buttons in an elevator is a nightmare.

But he can't just cool his heels here. Snarling at the sound of heavy boots as the cops rush toward his alleyway, Spades starts up the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time. Really, these people overreact
to the littlest things. If Spades had really wanted the chump dead, he certainly wouldn't have stopped at one measly stab wound.

The shouted orders and confused shouts recede beneath him as Spades climbs upward. But as he nears the roof of the building, he picks up on quiet murmurs coming not from the ground, but from above. Alerted, the carapacian crouches and lifts his feet with care, stealthily crawling up the last few steps and narrowing his eyes at the two figures who stand on top of the building.

Neither are in a uniform he recognizes, though that does nothing to ease his suspicions - he's a suspicious guy, alright? He isn't about to be taken in by a cop in plainclothes just because he's getting sloppy. The crowd below all wore navy blues and forest greens and occasionally bright yellow, but these two are in something completely different.

One is a robot, but it's not until Spades automatically looks over it for its weak points that he realizes it's a cyborg. It is built like a human man, and cloaked in dull green, and he can still make out the strips of dark, vulnerable human flesh that remain. It's perhaps ninety percent mechanized, but it hasn't switched over entirely, which means - if Spades's hunch is correct - that there's probably an equally squishy human brain resting in that robotic chassis. He alters his stabbing plans accordingly; if he does have to fight through these two dupes to get to the next roof over, a human brain in a robot body will be much more unpredictable in a scrape than a plain old robot.

The other is a much shorter, plumper human female, with a pale blue shawl and a head of cropped, white hair. She has one arm hooked around the mechanical elbow of the robot in what is no doubt some weird human-robot friendship action, and her voice is so low a murmur that Spades can't make out the words, even from here. When the robot says something in a louder, artificial voice, though, she laughs obnoxiously loud, tilting her head back to the sky and smiling so widely her whole face creases. Humans age so damn weird.

Spades doesn't have the patience to wait for their damn pow-wow to finish up. He could probably get away with just stabbing the robot and moving on; older humans are less of a threat, he's found, and even he would have a slight misgiving about stabbing a fragile old lady. Thankfully, before he has to make that call, the woman hoots with laughter, a note of finality in her tone as she draws back from the robot.

"You go catch up with Jade, dear. Lord knows that girl's been hopping all over the place." The old woman stands up on her tiptoes, and the robotic man leans down obligingly for her to plant a kiss on his cheek. It leaves a smear of lipstick behind, which Spades nearly vomits at, but the robot obviously doesn't have the nerve endings left to feel the smear on a cheek of steel. "And keep an eye on you-know-who for me while I'm gone."

"Will do, old friend," the robot agrees, patting the old woman gently on the arm. He then un hooks his arm from hers and activates rockets in his feet, arcing away into the sky with one last wave, heading west toward the setting sun.

Left to her own devices, the old dame hums, smiles to herself - and then meets Spades's eyes, winking broadly as she chortles. Spades jerks back, whipping out a knife and nearly falling on his ass, but she simply waves at him and continues to shuffle away toward the inner stairwell, drawing her shawl tighter around her shoulders when the wind picks up.

She knew he was there all along.

And alright, it's not as though Spades was exactly being a master of subtlety when he first started up the emergency stairs, but still. She hadn't even been facing his direction while he crouched there. He'd been so convinced neither she nor the robot noticed him; she played him like a goddamn fiddle.
Wary, Spades waits until she vanishes into the building, shutting the door behind her with a final chortle of laughter. Checking and rechecking the roof for any more strange human broads and their robot chums, the carapacian shuffles back and forth, and at last hesitantly steps out onto the roof proper.

He receives a faceful of pie and cream for his caution. It comes outta nowhere, giving him no time to defend himself.

SS: BLUAAGH!

Spluttering, he claws at his own face. By mistake, he opens his mouth and sweet, fluffy whipped cream drips onto his tongue.

SS: MNNAAAAAGH!!!

He spits violently (though that really is a most delicious taste) and scrabbles at his face with renewed vigor, falling to his knees and remaining there until he has wiped away the last of the treacherous human baked good from his brow and smeared the whipped cream and tart cherry filling all over the rooftop. His claws are stained with the red of mashed cherry filling, and it is not satisfying in the slightest.

A note drifts across the roof and sticks in the filling. Still panting with fury, Spades picks it up gingerly between two claws and reads it.

_Eavesdropping isn't very polite, dearie! Hoohoohoo!_

_J_

SS: ………

Fuckin’ old lady tricksters and their fuckin’ piekind strife specibi. That's it. He's hightailin' it out of this dive of a town before someone else decides to work their decrepit old pranksters' gambit out on his sorry carapace. Shredding the note between his claws, Spades heads west, trying not to think too hard about the fact that the robot headed that same direction.

He can't think what a strange robot human would want with a dumb, angry little shit like Karkat Vantas. All he can hope is that the fact that they're heading in the same direction is a horrible, horrible coincidence.

Somewhere inside himself, though, he's resigned to the fact that yeah, paradox space is just pissy enough to make that happen.

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==> Be the Wonderful Viator

Being quantumly unstable is hard. It’s hard and no one understands.

No, seriously, no one understands. Even when the Variable tries to talk, no one can seem to hear him! It's really inconvenient. He's mostly been getting his point across to the space girl with gratuitous amounts of hand gestures and wild flailing, but even then she hardly ever understands his advice! He can't tell if it's because he's just not good at this, or if she's just stupid. But she procures wonderful things for him, like TaB and nice blue shirt-blankets and green food things, so she can't be _that_ stupid.
He thinks it's because he can't make the clicky sounds anymore. Everything is still a little green and fuzzy in his brain sometimes, but when he goes to speak to the space girl he always wants to use his hands, his voice, and his mind to communicate - and only his claws seem to get with the program! When he wants to click and hum and trill, all that comes out of his mouth are faint squeaks and gasps. It isn't normal, and he doesn't remember why it's not normal.

Sometimes, he thinks he should remember more. He looks at the Bec-beast and knows it's familiar, but he doesn't know why he knows. At night when Jade camps out under the stars and WV tries to fall asleep, it's the eyeless, featureless shape of the strange creature's head that follows him into his dreams, the electric green plasma painting his thoughts with lime-scented fire.

Today is one of those days that WV wishes he remembers more - or at the least, that he could figure out how to talk! Because no matter how much he protests, the Jade human insists that they must complete the mysterious Sidekick Initiation, and he does not know what that entails. He has been blindfolded for the past hour, and whenever he goes to remove the blindfold or otherwise wander around blindly through the caves, there is a flare of green light and either Jade or the Bec-beast zaps him right back to where he started with the spacey thing.

Theoretically, he could do the spacey thing himself. But he doesn't know how to control it, and anyway, ever since that rather stressful incident in the place called 'Texas,' his scars tingle and burn whenever too many space shenanigans occur. He rubs at his cheeks with both hands and pouts, sitting down heavily in the corner and kicking his legs out to wait for whatever it is that the Jade human finds so important that she has kept them sitting in one place for hours. She's been very quiet and worried about that sort of thing lately, insisting that they take loud noisy bus things to transport them from place to place, never staying still for long - but today she woke up much more cheerful, like her old self. WV is of course very pleased by this development, but now he's also concerned, because any plan that involves him being blindfolded while Jade teleports around like a maniac is generally a Bad Idea.

He had decided to stay with her mostly because she was green and interesting things happened to her constantly and he owed her rather a lot for making him real again. In hindsight, this may not have been the best basis on which to start a friendship with a flighty space dame.

"Alright! Everything's ready!" A ringing clap sounds through the cavern, and WV jumps a little, glancing around blindly, moving to rip off the blindfold, and he huffs with frustration when it just gets slapped back down over his eyes.

With a whomph of displaced air, a bowl of green fire appears in the middle of the cave, hovering about four feet in the air. Even from here, he can feel the heat radiating off it, though there isn't much
smoke, despite the enclosed space. Now WV can see the space girl just beyond the fire, but she's not in her usual catsuit or lab coat or shooting vest, all of which she generically refers to as her 'work clothes' depending on her mood. Instead, she is in an unfamiliar cloak with the hood pulled up. The wolf sits beside her, as usual, but somehow she has finagled it into a cloak as well, its pale muzzle sticking out from the dip of the hood.

The overall effect would normally be ridiculous, but her mouth is flat and solemn, and with her eyes hidden beneath - is that her aviator mask? why is she wearing that now?! - WV is apprehensive about what exactly this crazy lady has planned. He scrambles to his feet when both girl and wolf remain silent and unmoving by the green fire, and slowly, gingerly, he begins to edge toward them, folding his claws together nervously as he does.

"Okay, Mr. Variable! Tonight...is the night!" The Jade human spreads her arms wide, and makes no move to take off that ridiculous aviator mask. WV jumps back at the suddenness of the motion. "Tonight, we officially induct you into the Honorable Guild of People Who Do the Space Thing! Name pending until I can come up with something better than HGPWDST for an acronym."

*Look here, Jade human, I do not understand why we are doing this!* WV insists, signing frantically in a last ditch effort to get his point across. *Also, I am fairly certain it is still day outside, we have not been here that long -*

But it's just no good; Jade plows on ahead as though he hadn't attempted to speak. "This is a very special night," she says, her voice lowered in a dramatic whisper. He can hear the faint hint of a giggle that perpetually underlies her words even at the most serious of moments, and feels a little reassured; the Jade human may be unpredictable and overly exuberant, but he trusts that she would not be deliberately malicious. "A night dedicated to honoring the newest member of our tooootally exclusive organization of humanitarian super-powered beings, and bestowing upon him an awesome new title!"

He is beginning to get very nervous. Uncommonly nervous. Worryingly nervous. *Of what use are these ceremonies? I believe we should cease these activities and get milkshakes. Celebratory milkshakes. You like milkshakes, Jade!*

His words go unnoticed, and Jade dramatically flings a handful of powder into the fire, which flares up to three times its original size. The flash of pale green almost obscures the electric crackle of Bec rising up into the air, its pelt melting into a green galaxy.

Abruptly, they are outside. WV’s scars tingle unpleasantly as he looks around, taking in the evening sky around him.

*All around him, in the most literal way possible. He lurches forward and barely catches himself, arms pinwheeling frantically as he balances on a tiny square foot of wood. He lets out a high-pitched keen as he squats with trembling knees to get a lower center of gravity. The small square of wood is somehow attached to the very tip of an enormous pine tree, overlooking the forested, mountainous region of Colorado that they located their base cavern in. But this...this was not here earlier in the day, when they first arrived at this place! How long have Jade and the Bec-beast been working on this nightmarish contraption?! Jade, I am not fond of this height... he tries, using great caution as he makes his claws jab and twist into the symbols that ordinarily would have helped him communicate. Even with his deliberate care, Jade hovers before him and ignores his plea, green static flickering in her hair as she holds herself in midair and rips off the aviator mask. She has a large bucket in her hands, and she raises it over her head, a disturbing grin twitching across her face.*
WV is significantly alarmed by this. He flounders for a moment, and nearly falls off this precarious perch. Good grief, Jade human - you will put me down at once! Desist!

Jade upends the bucket over his head, and WV braces for impact, cowering with his arms over his head.

A few seconds later, nothing has happened. Blinking, he looks up, just in time for the first gloop of honey to run down his face. His mouth opens reflexively in horror and he barely closes it before the rest of the bucket sluices down in an amber tidal wave, sticking all over his head and the wrappings around his shoulders. It soothes the burning in his scars, even as it drips into his eyes.

He understands now, in an apathetic horror, why Jade insisted he take off his nice blue shirt-blanket. H-honey? Why, Jade human, why?!

"Bec! The sliced avocado!" Jade commands, snapping her fingers. The universe tilts around WV, centered on that pernicious, traitorous Bec-beast, and he ducks his head this time rather than look up like a fool. Tiny slices of avocado patter onto his head in a pale green rain, sticking in the honey and slowly tracking down his face.

It just keeps happening, and WV is coming to fear that this entire episode is entirely pointless. He is covered in honey and avocado and he doesn't know why this is happening.

"And now, for the finale," Jade says, drawing out a significant pause as WV wipes at his face in a desperate attempt to clear his eyes of honey. When he peers blearily up at the space girl, she holds a pumpkin. This would be strange enough to fit the theme of the rest of her food-based assaults, if not for the large black and white photo taped to the front of the hollowed gourd.

Wait. Is that...John Cusack?

"Behold! The ceremonial gourd -" Jade begins, before, without even a flash of green light, the pumpkin vanishes. John Cusack remains, and begins to flutter toward the ground without the pumpkin it was taped to. WV, who has already crouched in preparation for this last assault, looks to Bec, but the beast has not moved, unaffected by the gourd's abrupt disappearance. Jade opens her mouth and closes it a few times, levitating the photograph of John Cusack back into her hands. "Why does that always happen?!!" Jade wonders aloud, shaking her head. "Oh well. Behold! The ceremonial Cusack!"

Seizing the photo, Jade slams it against WV's forehead, nearly flinging him off the square platform. He bends back and wheels his arms and barely manages to stay upright. John Cusack sticks to his forehead, the honey soaking through the paper as WV goes cross-eyed trying to eye the picture.

There is really only one correct response to this indignity. He falls to his knees on the platform and clutches at the air. Noooooooo!

Jade is beautifully oblivious, off in her own little carapacian-torturing world. "Now then." She clears her throat, and raises her hands to either side. Her eyes close, and a faint smile forms on her lips, and like this, she looks almost benevolent. "Do you, WV, so solemnly swear that you will uphold the creed of the Heroes of Space: that you will serve the worldwide community as a force for good, justice, and SCIENCE, and that you will do everything in your power to kick bad guy butt?!!"

She is mad. He has volunteered to follow the command of a complete maniac. I - Yes? Yes! Just remove me from this unsafe vantage at once, you mad woman! With no other method of communication at his disposal, and seeing only one way out of this situation, WV nods his head vigorously, saluting so hard he smacks himself in the John Cusack.
"Really?! Eeeeeee!" Jade squeaks. Her hair sparks with even more green as she laughs with excitement. "Then I now pronounce you the Wonderful Viator! Wonder Vi, for short! Carapacian hero and official sidekick in Team Space!" Jade claps her hands together. "You may now bathe in the river of JUSTICE!"

The clap takes them somewhere above a river. WV knows this only because he lands in the water a second later, spluttering and flailing frantically because he cannot swim. His feet find purchase easily, however, once he stops panicking, and he flounders upright to shiver, rubbing at his arms and face with the chill water. The photograph of John Cusack sags and falls from his forehead, floating away along the current. Though he is no doubt a wonderful and under-appreciated actor, WV is not sorry to see him go.

Never...again...

At last, he feels clean enough to haul himself over to the bank of the river and drag himself ashore. Jade is waiting there, humming until he rests his head on the grass, glowering at her accusingly. Then she grins at him and whistles, the usual signal she uses to recall the Bec-beast, who has not followed them. "This is sooooo awesome! Just wait until you see your awesome new duds! Hang on - I have them right here!" Jade grunts, her entire arm vanishing into the invisible pocket of her sylladex. Her tongue sticks out between her teeth as she rummages around.

The wolf appears a moment later, landing neatly on the far side of the puddle of water spreading out around WV. *Were you forced to engage in such a perilous sacrament as a means of establishing your loyalty as well, Bec-beast?* he demands sourly, at least in the privacy of his own head. The wolf yawns and lays down with its head in its paws, just as oblivious to WV's ramblings as Jade. *...No, I thought not,* WV thinks at last, flopping over on his back. There is still sticky honey goo on his carapace in places he had not thought goo would fit, and he can only rub at it ineffectively.

Still, despite the strange nature of the ritual he just endured, he cannot help a small feeling of warmth from spreading within him. *What a time to be alive.*

"Found it!" the Jade human chirps. From within the sylladex she draws a draping, lime-green shirt-blanket. In bright block letters across the front, it reads 'WV,' and WV can see the sizable hood that flops down the back of the poncho. "Weeeellll, WV? Do you love it?!" Jade waggles an eyebrow up and down, shaking the poncho at him enticingly.

He can only stare at the green cloth for a long moment. It is glorious. But he does not wish to give in to Jade's whims so easily- *Oh just give it to me, Jade human,* he orders, irritated and grateful in equal measure. He takes the uniform from her outstretched hand and hugs it, not even caring that he is no doubt getting the new treasure all damp.

Jade whoops and snags him in an exuberant hug. She drags the wolf into it a moment later, and WV almost sneezes all over everyone when she squeezes them with unnatural strength under her chin. "This is going to be so much fun," she says, the motion of her jaw sticking her chin in a dollop of honey from WV's head. "I can't wait to tell John! I can't wait to see him!" She grins so hard WV can feel the movement on his carapace.

He can't help but agree with her sentiment, though.

*It will be good to see the windy boy again.*

Chapter End Notes
I’ll be honest, guys, I have absolutely no idea what kind of drugs Jade was on when she came up with that initiation ceremony. It's like she tried to look up ‘secret superhero initiations’ and came up with weird hazing rituals instead...
Chapter Summary

For if sleep have no mercy, and man's dreams
Bite to the blood and burn into the bone,
What shall this man do waking? By the gods,
He shall not pray to dream sweet things to-night,
Having dreamt once more bitter things than death.

Chapter Notes

Anyway, back to your regularly scheduled heroic antics, with Karkat (as Hemogoblin) framed for arson, Rose running away from home, Dave meeting the Midnight Crew ahead of schedule, John trying to figure out how to deal with this accusation mess when he can't be objective about Hemogoblin's booty, and Jade fighting her way up to Washington. She has to meet up with John sometime this year, right? Right?! /eye twitches

And remember - Hemogoblin and Heir belong to Real Men Wear Tights. I'm just twisting their characters to suit my cruel, cruel whims. Seriously, how much more emotional trauma can I put them thro- A LOT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC IV - ACCUSATION

TEN DAYS LATER

When his body hits a certain level of exhaustion, Karkat has no choice but to pass out cold, whether he's in the recooperacoon or sprawled out on the couch. This time he slogs into the house with the skintight costume still sticking to his skin beneath his much-battered hoodie and crawls onto the couch. The television is still on, the volume low as the screen lights the living room an eerie blue. It's four in the morning, and Crabdad is snoozing away on its back in a pile of discarded packaging and cardboard, one claw draped over the sink. Karkat can't help it; dragging the couch cushion sideways and punching it halfheartedly, he curls up and lets his eyes fall shut, the commercials still playing on the television and blaring light through his eyelids. He wishes he could avoid this, but he also knows when he's beat, and he can't avoid this anymore -

Karkat dreams -

Everything is a brilliant, molten gold. The towers around him rise up in elegant lines, fractals and whorls carved into the floors and the spiraling walls. Glittering arches and walkways crisscross each other at sharp angles and merge into smooth curves, a maze of potential paths. When he looks up, rubbing at his sore eyes, he can see an enormous golden planet on that fills the entire skyline, and he
knows with that sick kind of knowing that he's gotten used to over the past few weeks that he's on a moon, looking down at the center of the planet the moon orbits.

A faint breeze runs through the spires, ruffling his pajamas. They're golden, too, an obnoxious bright yellow with white embellishments, something he'd never wear in his right mind. Only the shoes are right, a pair of scuffed, torn up grey sneakers that he remembers from - god, was it five years ago? He reaches down to feel at the seam where the canvas meets the rubber sole, and traces the thin line of stitching where he tried uselessly to rescue the damn things because he'd been a stubborn fuckface back in the day, and determined not to lose his favorite pair of sneakers to something as dumb as a hole in the instep.

If he looks behind him, he'll see something he doesn't want to see. In this case, he has a little leeway; he doesn't have to turn if he doesn't want to, goddammit. As he gets to his feet his eyes feel heavy, as though he's only barely able to keep them open.

By now, he's resigned to the dull dread that soaks into his bones, into his blood, a steady pulse of inbound horror that increases with every breath of clear air he breathes in. He shoves his claws into his pockets and waits, shoulders huddling up as he stares around miserably, gloomily trying to predict what form this latest nightmare will take.

Fuck, he just hopes it's not John. The last four nights out of five involved John in some way, and he isn't sure his heart can take that again. Whatever hidden shithole in his thinkpan these nightmares are clawing their way up out of, it must get some sick kick out of forcing Karkat to watch John walk into danger just by being his usual oblivious self. Way to fucking go, subconscious-Karkat.

Maybe if he could just close his eyes and wake up, he wouldn't have to deal with this sparkle gold pajama glitterfuck nonsense or the impending terror. But now that the dream has caught hold of his mind, he can't let it go.

Against the gold-and-black backdrop of the sky, an enormous chain clanks in the wind. It is wider across than Karkat is tall, and each link is as tall as a house, heavy and ponderous as they chain the moon to the golden planet below.

He's in the middle of speculating just how the fuck a structure this huge composed of gold can possibly exist - seriously, where would you get enough gold to sculpt an entire planet? It's a pretty tiny planet, but it's still a planet - when it hits. A rattle shakes the ground beneath Karkat, and he drops to his knees. He thinks, as long as he doesn't look behind him, he'll be okay.

The planet below erupts with green fire. It should be too far away for him to hear the screams, but he hears them anyway, the shrill mental cries of thousands in pain and panicking. The fire solidifies into tendrils of green light that swell and stab into the panels of gold that make up the planet's surface, uprooting enormous towers and crushing them before flinging the debris into space. More fires start wherever the green light passes, with explosive results.

This is not normal, something whispers in Karkat's mind. This is not the purpose of the Game. This is destruction, destruction without cause or meaning or end, the product of a mind deranged, in the grip of a power that cannot be contained. Karkat can only witness it, and each explosion is another stabbing pain in his heart.

He doesn't see the tiny dark figure in the midst of the green flames until it's far too late. The moon rocks again, and Karkat falls to the side, his eyes tracing the length of the golden chain until he sees the winged figure that raises a blade and slices through the thick links as deftly as though slicing through warm butter. For a moment, Karkat is weightless, and then the chain snaps entirely, with a shriek of metal that grates through the void and into his ears with the finality of a death rattle.
That's not what happened, he thinks to himself, vaguely, even as the winged creature raises a fist and another explosion of green blasts up at the moon. Karkat ducks, covering his head with his arms, but it's no use; when the blast hits, he goes flying, flung back against one of the spiraling towers with enough force to drive all the air out of his lungs.

He wheezes and strains, clutching at his chest because he can't breathe, and blinks through the golden dust kicked up by the explosion. He can feel how the moon has tilted sideways, but it's not until the ground lurches up beneath him and he slams hard on the golden plane, scrabbling at the angled floor to stop his roll, that he realizes the moon is in fact in pieces, and hurtling through space toward - something he cannot bear to look up at. He's on a relatively intact portion of the moon, but it soon begins to spin and rattle, and he can see the glorious golden spires above begin to peel and crack as they pick up speed. They're going to crash, he thinks dimly, and he almost wastes his hard-won breath by laughing at the stupidity of it all. At least John isn't here -this nightmare is almost bearable, except for the fact that Karkat doesn't see how it will end in anything but a really, really painful fall -

A hand claps on his shoulder, and for a moment he can't move. The fingernails dig into the silky fabric of these stupid fucking pajamas; he can only stare at the hand until, with a muffled yell, the hand's owner wrenches Karkat around to face him.

"Karkat! Karkat, we have to go!" John screams, shaking Karkat by the shoulders. His face is soft and young, a thirteen year old's face, and his glasses are wrong - they should be those dorky rectangular, thick-rimmed frames John wears with no irony whatsoever, not oval in shape with thin frames, almost sliding down his nose because they don't fit him properly. Whose glasses are those? They look like a woman's glasses, a girl's, even, and it's just weird on the shape of John's face -

"Get up, get up, get up," John chants, yanking on Karkat's arm with clutching hands, and Karkat through some miracle stumbles upright, just in time for the moon to rock beneath them again. John grips his hand and starts running, dragging Karkat along behind him. "We can't stay here, we have to move -"

"There's nowhere to go," Karkat replies, feeling dazed. Part of the enormous chain tumbles past them, a stray link of gold that slams into a broken tower and rotates the ground they're standing on another fifty degrees. Suddenly, they're falling forward, not running, and Karkat has to squeeze his eyes shut because he can't bear to look at what they're falling toward.

"Karkat, you have to get out of here! You have to wake up!"

"I don't think I can anymore. I think it's too late." Karkat can feel his legs dragging, but he can't make them move. He opens his eyes when he feels their trajectory shift again, and he looks up at John. John is half floating in the air, straining to float away from the tumbling heap of debris they're falling alongside, but he can barely move with Karkat weighing him down. Karkat would be wondering how they're levitating at all, but since when have these dreams made sense? "This isn't what happened, John. This isn't right."

"None of it is right!" John whirls around, his eyes that strange, unearthly blue that they always are in these nightmares, like a piercing reminder that this John is altered, unfamiliar, but no less precious. It's still agonizing to know this will end with him dying. Whatever the setting, whatever he looks like superficially, John is Karkat's moirail, and he can't stand this. "None of it is right, and that's why you have to wake up!"

Karkat feels his heart throb. John looks desperately earnest, and this is the first time Karkat's been able to interact with him so directly in one of these fucked up dreams. Usually, Karkat can only stand in one place and think frantic pleas at the oblivious dream-John as he walks to his doom; he doesn't
know why they can interact this way in this particular nightmare. "John, I -"

The black sword comes out of nowhere. Maybe it's because Karkat has been so focused on not looking up at the thing they're falling toward, so caught up in trying to make sense of this conversation with John, that he just fails to see it coming.

It catches John right through the heart. Something hot and wet splatters down Karkat's face and pajamas, and he looks down to see the spray of bright red blood that paints a line across his chest. He looks up, mouth moving wordlessly, to meet John's eyes. Thirteen year old John simply looks puzzled, raising both hands toward the new stab wound in his torso. His face doesn't even crease in pain. He dies too fast for that. The blade tugs out, flecks of blood spraying outward as John clasps a hand over the hole in his chest. The human opens his mouth, and more dark strings of blood spill out, as though he coughed up a whole mouthful at once.

"Not again," John chokes out, sounding resigned. Then his eyes roll back and he topples forward.

Karkat catches him wordlessly. Well, that's not true. There's a faint, high-pitched whine emerging from between his lips, a sound that hurts his own ears to produce, and he gulps several times in sobbing hiccups, trying to repress the instinct to cry out. He feels light-headed, feeling more warm blood soaking through the front of his disgusting golden shirt. John is tiny and light, a child, and that doesn't make it any less real. He's seconds from breaking out into a full mourning keen, the sharp agony ripping through his chest, when he sees the creature that hovers in front of them, the thing that stabbed John.

He hiccups, shaking his head, and sees the thing that he shouldn't see on the backswing.

Everything else stops mattering.

Compared to the flickering rainbow of colors that eat up the entire horizon, the dark, wolf-headed creature snarling before him hardly seems worth notice. Karkat's brain shudders to a stop as he stares, horrified and fascinated in equal measure, at the static flashing on and off in the distance. They're falling right toward it, hurtling so fast he can see the white strips of nothingness between the static, and he can't look away. It's hypnotic, a wall of nothingness and color that consumes the black space around them.

When the winged wolf stabs him, he doesn't even feel it. His head is swirling and muggy with the flashing static, and he lets his head drop forward against John's hair. Vertigo swamps him as they tilt one last final time, and he -

- wakes the fuck up.

"- still reeling from the recent tragedy in New York City. Though the death toll comes out in the low hundreds, the damage to the city itself is extensive. Emergency teams and members of the Federal Villain Response Team continue to search for anyone who might be trapped in the wreckage of prominent landmarks, such as the Statue of Liberty, which sustained severe damage during the attack. -"

Karkat groans, tasting blood in his mouth. For a moment he panics, heart skipping a beat, before he licks at the blood and realizes at some point, during the nightmare, he bit his own tongue. He resists the urge to spit it out - he can't risk leaving a tell-tale candy red blood stain anywhere in the living room - until he rolls to his feet. His back aches a warning in retaliation for falling asleep twisted up on the couch like that, and he stretches his arms over his head as he pads into the kitchen. He steps
over one of Crabdad's twitching legs and spits into the sink, running water to dilute the bright spots of red as they disappear down the drain. The TV continues to drone on behind him, having switched from terrible infomercials to the early morning news at some point. Going by the sliver of sun burning its way across the sky, Karkat would say he got maybe two hours of sleep - just enough to trigger one massively bizarre dream.

He's also managed to work himself up into a fear sweat, and he grimaces at the thought of how much time it's going to take to wash his Hemogoblin costume properly. Even his gills rub uncomfortably when he goes upstairs and starts stripping everything off. Everything is just shitastic, as per usual. Just in time to get ready for school.

- Karkat drives to school in a rare temper. Crabdad hadn't even had to harass him into leaving early; after he'd scrubbed himself down in the shower, adjusted his colored contacts over his irises, and stuffed his homework and textbooks into his waiting backpack, he stomped out the door with his keys in hand, ignoring the lusus's curious screech when he slams the door shut behind him with a bang. The shower did nothing to improve either his mood or his continued exhaustion - two hours of sleep outside of the replenishing embrace of sopor slime, plagued by the clusterfuckery of that nightmare, did not make for a restful night, alright? He pulls into his claimed parking space at school at a wild angle, growls and tears at his own hair, and then has to back up and pull in again.

This time, the car inches over the near side of the parking space, the wheel right up over the white line, and Karkat wants. To. Scream. Objectively, he can tell he's being more than a little compulsive, getting so wound up over a fucking parking space, but all he can really think is holy fuck Karkat you bulgefaced globofondling putrid bucket of failure and fuckmaggots why can you not get this one thing right?!

Bile rises up in the back of his throat, and he swallows hard, feeling close to just - just - fuck. He hasn't slept right in ten days, and it's starting to wear at him. He's not normally the picture of mental health and emotional stability, but right now he just wants to claw at his own temples until he scratches through to whatever glands are in charge of being the most useless shitstain on the face of the planet and rip them out, right along with the section of his thinkpan that produces those dreams.

Fuck. Fuck. Just calm the fuck down, you raging idiot.

Karkat hiccups a few times, flexing his claws as he waits for the wave of shocky fury to run out of him. The gulping hiccups help a little, breaking his ragged breathing out of the rage-pants, and he feels himself start to settle down. He can't rely on John to calm his ragetits all the time. Sure, they're moirails, but Karkat's had so many minor meltdowns in the past few weeks that he'd just feel like even more of a dick if he kept begging for shooshes 24/7. That's what moirails are for, technically, but John is human, and Karkat is painfully aware that he's been the one who's leaning heavily on the needy side of the scale, not John. John still has that air around him sometimes, that quiet depression that tinges his smile at the oddest moments, but as far as Karkat knows the lowest John felt recently was a single quiet moment Tuesday night, when they'd both piled in Karkat's room. John had that twist to his expression that said he was overthinking something and needed a good shooshcuddle before Karkat let him go, and Karkat had naturally obliged.

Since then John has seemed relatively level-headed. Humans don't need moirallegiance as fundamentally as trolls do to maintain their stability, and Karkat can't help but remember that whenever he feels his bloodpusher working up into a new frenzy.

He just needs these dreams to stop. He is utterly convinced that if he could just get back to his old
pattern of mild insomnia and dreamless sleep, he'd be a whole lot more stable, instead of running around all the time shitting miles of paniacsnes whenever he has to watch John die in new and more creative ways at night. The fact that it's his moirail who keeps dying in his head is clearly aggravating the situation.

Karkat is early enough that the hallways are deserted, and half the automated lights haven't been triggered yet. The janitor raises an eyebrow at him and nods, because as sad as it is, this isn't the first time Karkat has shown up so early. Hell, this is almost a regular occurrence. He doesn't even want to know why the school's staff thinks he shows up this early every day.

He hides out in the theater room, adjusting set pieces and cleaning up some of the mess the imbeciles from seventh period left behind for the morning classes to deal with, until it's not an ungodly hour in the morning, and he starts to hear the murmur of voices and the screech of sneakers on tile through the door. Retrieving his backpack, he tugs on his rust red and black hoodie and ventures out into the hallway. He keeps his head down until he reaches his locker and then sags against the wall, shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He glowers when a pair of girls - sophomores, he thinks - struggle to set up a folding table by the hallway entrance; not that he's actually pissed at them, but just to have something to glare at. Also, because with the way they're positioning that goddamn table, they're going to cut off half the hallway and make the congested traffic of students even worse during passing periods. One of them tapes a handmade sign with 'New York Relief Donation Drive!' in huge letters onto the wall, while the other ducks into a nearby language classroom to steal a pair of chairs.

He's only surprised it's taken them this long to put this kind of thing together. He knows at least three churches in the area have had similar canned good drives and donation rackets running for the past week, with their collections going to the Red Cross to pass on to refugees from New York City.

Sure enough, as first period draws near and more people begin to funnel into the halls, yelling to be heard over the general hum of the crowd, the presence of the table sticking out into the middle of the hall fucks with everyone's routine, and more than a few people push past the table, exasperated, without looking at the sign. After a few minutes of answering shouted questions, the two girls just look chagrined. Karkat rolls his eyes at the stupidity of it all. At least this brand of stupidity isn't too rage-inducing, though; as long as he keeps his head down and his mind on the fast approaching arrival of John and a thermos of delicious, delicious coffee, he can keep himself functioning.

A few minutes later, he feels a prickling along his spine, and he looks up, unerringly, to see John's head of messy black hair appear in the muddle of trolls and humans. John is looking down at something in his hands, so Karkat takes the opportunity to turn around and unlock his locker, pretending to busy himself with reorganizing it.

A minute passes. Two. Frowning, Karkat peeks over his shoulder at where he saw John last. He knows that was John - it would be impossible for him to mistake anyone else's hair for his moirail's - John is standing awkwardly a few feet from Karkat, gnawing at his lip as he squints down at his phone screen, and taps quickly on the keypad. The blessed thermos of hot coffee is pinned between John's arm and his side, and Karkat starts to instinctively salivate at the sight of it.

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His intense, renewed desire for caffeine, however, doesn't distract him from the fact that John is really, really engaged in whatever the hell he's doing on that phone. Which is - downright bizarre. Karkat has caught the guy checking his phone more often at lunch these past few days, but he's never been in a texting frenzy like this, to Karkat's knowledge. And John isn't much of one for playing game apps. Curious, Karkat takes the initiative, slamming his locker shut and stomping to John's side. "Gimme," he mutters, prying the thermos out of John's grip.
John obliges, his dark brown eyes flickering to Karkat behind his nice square glasses frames. He smiles, and then his eyes are instantly drawn back to the lines of red text that mysteriously flood his screen in that moment's pause. "Yeah, no, enough of that," John mutters, clicking out of the Pesterchum app and sliding his phone into his pocket. He rolls his eyes at Karkat and grins with more enthusiasm. "Sorry about that, Karkat. How are you today?"

As always, John's smile is like some corny, poetic sun, warming up Karkat's thoracic cavity and getting his pale glands all tingly. Already he can feel some of that earlier panic leaching away, the claustrophobic pressure eased by the sight of his moirail whole and smiling and very much alive. If they weren't surrounded by a mob of witnesses, Karkat would lean in and hug John, just to have his heart beating close enough that Karkat could feel the pulse in John's blood, reassuring him with every beat that it hasn't stopped.

But it doesn't make him forget that red text. He thinks vaguely that it was kind of familiar, but he can't place it. Maybe he only saw it briefly before? Whatever it is, the conversation was clearly significant enough that John had been thoroughly engaged even after approaching Karkat.

Karkat shakes off the urge to hug John and shrugs. "M'fine," he manages, the most he's really willing to say without significantly more coffee in his system. To remedy the deficit, he takes a long pull from the thermos, nearly tearing up a little at the deliciously hot rush of liquid that runs down his throat. "Something urgent?" he asks afterward, tilting his chin toward the phone in John's pocket.

And okay, if the incessant texting hadn't been uncharacteristic enough, little warning bells go off in Karkat's thinkpan when John jumps, the faint hint of a blush heating up his face before he claps a hand over the phone in his pocket. "What - oh, that chat? No - nothing urgent," the human says, his smile one-sided and nervous when he tries to beam at Karkat. "Ah, just a friend."

Karkat has the thermos to his lips again, and after that little comment he nearly spits coffee everywhere, his mouth hanging open a little too wide as he squints at John, dumbfounded. The next word out of his mouth make him sound like the most insufferable, jealous, overly-protective moirail in the history of pale rom-coms. "Who?!"

He almost slaps himself, cringing inwardly. Jesus fucking Christ, Karkat, you don't need to know every detail of the guy's friendships, the rational part of his brain yells, except the rational part of his brain can go fuck itself with a rusty fire hydrant because it completely failed to prevent the dream section from foisting a bunch of fucked up nightmares onto Karkat in the first place.

But seriously. Karkat can literally count with one claw the number of people John has outright declared to be his friend - one claw, and only one. Rose Lalonde has come up a few times recently, because she and John are apparently trying to rekindle their old friendship after that weird three year gap - but Karkat has seen the tail end of John's pesterings with her before, and he knows for a goddamn fact that her text is a pale pinkish purple.

Red is totally new. Hey, he's a little justified in being curious, right?

"Ahhh, some kid on Pesterchum," John says, a weird note in his voice. "His name is Dave!" Then, taking advantage of Karkat's pause to sip at his coffee, John speeds right along into, "Also, my dad totally wants you and Crabdad to come over for dinner tonight. Do you think you guys can make it?"

Karkat nearly breathes pure coffee, and struggles to keep from choking on it before swallowing quickly. "Fu- Yeah, probably," he gasps. "Let me guess - some kind of informal 'your lusus is retiring at last' celebratory party?"

John frowns at him reproachfully. "No, some kind of informal 'oooh noooo, your lusus is retiring, we
should all say goodbye properly' party that's not celebratory at all."

Karkat snorts, leaning against the wall while John sorts through his textbooks. "Fine. You and Dadbert can mourn the impending retirement of the screeching custodial crab monster. I'll even make some disgustingly unhealthy pie so you two can eat your feelings while I set off the commemorative fireworks in the backyard."

"I'll hold you to that! Uh, but not the fireworks thing. I think my dad might not like that. By the way, I like your hoodie - Deadpool!" John grins toothily, going through his own locker hurriedly as the hallways begins to clear up. "Come on, we better hurry."

They are pushing it a little; generally they're both the first ones in their respective classrooms, but Karkat is going to need to hurry if he wants to make Theater on time.

Of course, just because John thinks he has successfully sidetracked Karkat does not mean he's letting this Dave thing go. "Yeah, fine. Have fun with that quiz second period." Karkat flaps a hand at John, waving him off.

John pulls a face, but he's still laughing a little as he heads off down the hallway. As though John has ever worried about quizzes a day of his life. Rolling his eyes just because he has a reputation to maintain, damn it, no matter how much friendship with John has tried to destroy it, Karkat walks in the opposite direction, back toward the fine arts hall.

But at least now he has something to take his mind off the nightmares. Maybe he's overcompensating a little, but he is genuinely curious about this new red-text-Dave-human, and he runs through a mental checklist of the Daves he can think of who attend their school. He's coming up blank for any that he might have seen interact with John recently, though. When he figures it out, rest assured he will be interrogating this son of a bitch thoroughly.

Because Karkat had thought John was exaggerating a year and a half ago, when he apologized for his overenthusiastic friend-making attempts with the excuse of having never made a friend before. But hell if Karkat hasn’t slowly come to the conclusion that it’s all too accurate an assessment. Apparently John Egbert, winner of the most disgustingly, sincerely nice person on the planet award nineteen years running, has had a grand total of two friends – one of them Karkat, so he really got the short end of the horns there (ha fucking ha), and one of them the Rose girl he’d known in elementary school who had moved across the country years ago before cutting John off completely. If John didn’t have the buffer of the swim team, whose members sometimes welcome him to eat at team lunches, he would literally have no social life at all outside of Karkat.

And he’s okay with that. The idiot smiles at Karkat when he asks about it, and says he understands. He has some fucked up idea that just because he has a packed schedule so full of volunteering and swim practices that makes it difficult to plan afterschool excursions, that this somehow excuses the entire rest of the world for being fuckfaces unable to perceive and appreciate the glory that is Friendship With John. John has a sense of humor, looks, and enough sappy kindness to smother even the obnoxiously hateful of trolls. Karkat’s experienced the John phenomenon for himself, after all.

And yet, somehow, John has no other friends.

It’s maddening. It makes Karkat’s bloodpusher skyrocket dangerously, makes him want to find whatever sick power decided John Egbert deserved to be lonely and throttle them until they explode in a satisfying pop of internal organs and righteous vengeance. He barely restrains himself from royally losing his shit whenever one of the fuckwads from this miserable excuse for a high school has the nerve to approach John so late in the game; how do they think they’re deserving of a
goddamn catch like John when they’ve ignored him all these years?

So yeah.

This Dave guy?

He's got some explaining to do.

--

detoBiologist [EB] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 15:19:54 --
EB: you know i was joking, right?
EB: you don't actually have to make pie. like, seriously, we have more baked goods in this house that we could ever eat in a million years.
CG: SHUT UP JOHN, NOW IT'S A MATTER OF PRIDE.
EB: ...this is going to be hilarious, isn't it. :D
CG: I SAID SHUT UP AND GIVE ME THE RECIPE.
EB: allllright, you asked for it!
-- detoBiologist attached file 'applepieforkk.pdf' --
CG: ...
CG: WHY THE HELL IS THERE ALL THESE EXTRA STEPS?
EB: it's for the crust! :P
CG: WHAT NO I HAVE PREMADE CRUST NO WAY DO I HAVE TIME TO MAKE THIS GODFORSAKEN ABOMINATION IF I HAVE TO MAKE CRUST TOO.
EB: karkat vantas
EB: take out that box of premade blasphemy and look at the label
CG: THE HUGE BLUE GODDAMN CIRCLE THAT SAYS 'PILLSBURY'?
EB: exactly!
CG: I DON'T FUCKING FOLLOW JOHN WHY IS THIS SIGNIFICANT?
EB: do you even know who owns pillsbury??
CG: GENERAL FUCKING MILLS -
CG: OH MY THROBBING PHLEGM LOBE NO THIS ISN'T ABOUT BETTY CROCKER AGAIN IS IT
EB: of course it is! don't you know that general mills owns the betty crocker label?! they're practically the same thing! :P
EB: pillsbury bravely opposed them for years before they got totally bought out in 2001 or something.
EB: the batterwitch has her evil claws in everything, karkat! you have to be more careful!
CG: YOU DO REALIZE THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A BATTERWITCH, RIGHT? THE CONDESCE BASICALLY OWNS ALL THE STOCK OPTIONS, BETTY CROCKER WAS NEVER EVEN A REAL PERSON.
EB: you're right.
EB: she was more than that.
EB: she was a symbol of pure, unadulterated evil in pastry form, someone who transcended mortal bounds in her diabolical quest to corrupt all major baking brand names.
EB: the condesce is just the latest in a long line of figureheads who will no doubt be sucked dry by the demands of the batterwitch’s legacy.
CG: ...YOU HAVE A SERIOUS PROBLEM, DON'T YOU?
EB: just make the crust, karkat ;/
CG: FINE, BUT ONLY BECAUSE YOUR BETTY CROCKER-PHOBIA IS THE MOST BIZARRELY PITIFUL THING I'VE EVER HEARD OF
EB: keep me posted!
CG: YEAH, YEAH
Karkat shoves his phone to a safe corner of the kitchen counter and surveys the mess of ingredients he's pillaged from different hidden corners of the kitchen. He glowers wistfully at the blue box of Pillsbury pie crust mix, before kicking it off the counter with a roundhouse, so hard it slams into the wall opposite and slides to the ground. As tempted as he is to just use it and not tell John, he knows better; John and his dad are absolute fiends about baked goods, and while John may not eat half the cakes and cookies his dad puts out on a daily basis, knowing the two of them they can probably identify premade pie crust with a single bite. In Samuel Egbert's case, Karkat would just put it down to a discerning taste born of personal baking talent and years of experience with taste-testing his own creations; John, he's pretty sure, is just paranoid out of some misplaced survival instinct that has caused him to abhor and abjure anything even vaguely related to the name of Betty Crocker.

Anyway. He's going to have to fly through this stupid excuse for an experiment if he wants to finish on time. The recipe John sent over just says the pie needs to bake for about fifty minutes, but that doesn't count all the prep time that goes into it before it's even ready for the oven.

And Karkat has a unique obstacle that he's going to have to fucking deal with all the while he's trying to cook this thing.

A quizzical skree echoes down from above, and Karkat shudders. Crabdad has been on a cleaning spree all day, which for the lusus means rampaging around the house with a broom and smacking the walls and ceiling in an ill-fated attempt at...something. Karkat's just always called it 'cleaning' for lack of a more accurate word for 'stupid jackfuckery.'

For now, he just needs to keep the lusus from gorging itself on the ingredients before Karkat even finishes making the damn pie. Crabdad might prefer iced seafood, but it will quite honestly devour everything in its path like the stark raving insane sea monster that it is, and that includes stuff like flour and entire plastic jars full of nutmeg.

Soon, he won't have to deal with this anymore. John can pity the giantass crab all he likes, but Karkat is going to be fucking ecstatic to have this place to himself, without the lusus to embarrass him all the damn time. Sometimes Karkat wonders what asshole in the grub care facility matched him up with a goddamn sea lusus. He speculates it was probably the same dick he's grudgingly grateful to for covering up Karkat's true hemotype when filling out his certificate of pupation, but seriously, it's a known fact that sea lusii are twice as much work to deal with compared to land lusii. Not only that, but it stands out that such a lowblood has a traditionally aquatic lusus when they're generally reserved for seadwellers by the coast, and he's actually had to field awkward questions about it, questions that always make him snap and lay low for a few days before daring to go out in public again. Maybe it had been intended to pander to his creepy mutant gills, but Karkat does not appreciate the sympathy, not in this case.

He drags the table over in front of the entry to the kitchen and sets an open jar of almond butter where it will be the first thing Crabdad sees when he is drawn downstairs by Karkat cooking. He used to have regular peanut butter, until one day John decided to reveal the TOTALLY RELEVANT FACT that he was DEATHLY ALLERGIC to peanut butter. Karkat, who had just taken the jar of Jif's out of the pantry, literally flung the peanut butter jar out the closed window in a fit of panicked rage, shattering the glass and setting off Crabdad for a good hour. Karkat had hyperventilated for a good fifteen minutes and then scrubbed the entire pantry down with bleach even after John assured him the allergic reaction only really kicked in if he accidentally ate peanut byproducts, which wasn't reassuring at all because what if Karkat had fucked up and made shitty peanut butter cookies and accidentally killed his moirail by not mentioning the peanuts?!
Yeah, he's a little neurotic. He doesn't even try to hide it anymore.

He starts flinging the extra crust ingredients into a bowl first, giving the oven a few good kicks until the piece of shit starts heating up. The crust alone requires a fuckton of flour and butter, and he starts angrily mashing things together with a spoon, flicking through the tiny sideways view of the instructions on his phone. He hears, rather than sees, Crabdad slip and fall down the last five stairs, the lusus shrieking and clicking as it scrabbles to get purchase on the smooth wooden floor of the entryway. They've been in this house for nearly two goddamn years, and the insipid, brainless excuse for a custodian has yet to master something as simple as stairs. The frantic skrees transition into peals of delight when the lusus discovers the jar of almond butter. Karkat turns and grimaces, just in time to see Crabdad try and fail to jam its entire fat head into the jar, clicking desperately at the butter within.

But at least that will keep the dumb shit occupied for a while. Covering the crust mix with a towel and shoving it as far from the edge of the counter as possible, Karkat starts in on the filling. This is the part that involves all the spices and slicing the apples, and Karkat is absolutely shitty at slicing things when he has to use a knife instead of a sickle, and oh shit Crabdad got sick of the almond butter. An enormous white claw looms in his awful peripheral vision and Karkat shrieks with rage, whacking the claw with the butt of the knife. Undeterred, Crabdad seizes a dark bottle of vanilla extract and scrapes at the twist lid with its other claw, chirruping inquisitively.

Karkat is just horrified. "Wha- NO. NO. BAD CRABDAD, BAD!” He snatches the bottle back just as it begins to slide out of the lusus's clumsy grip. Crabdad shrieks in response, raising its pincers, and no, no, no, this is exactly what Karkat wanted to avoid. The last thing he wants right now is to start some strife with his fucking custodian while he's trying to concentrate! Crabdad thumps him one in the chest, a playful blow by giant crab standards, and Karkat nearly plants his hand in the bowl of pie crust dough when he falls backwards.

"NO, FUCK OFF, I MEAN IT!” Leaning hard on the counter, he kicks as high as he can and clips Crabdad across the nose. The lusus barely seems to feel it, because it's a fucking monster, dammit. Karkat can take down adult trolls all the way up to paler bluebloods with a single well-aimed blow, but he can't even manage to stun Crabdad. Fucking sea lusii and their fucking nigh-invulnerability and their fucking fuck fuckery he does not have time for this.

Feeling around on the counter behind him without looking away, Karkat seizes his backup weapon, shaking the package enticingly. Crabdad perks up instantly, shocked out of strife-mode by the sound of food. "Look, you see the frozen corn?” Karkat asks wearily. The lusus whines. Karkat lobes the entire package over Crabdad's head; it lands somewhere with a thump in the living room beyond. Being an idiot, the lusus jerks around, instantly drawn to the nearest moving foodstuff, and flails after it, claws clacking together as it shuffles away.

"Go get it!” Karkat yells encouragingly, before sagging back against the counter. Weary and exasperated, he turns back to his work.

CG: HOW BAD WOULD IT BE IF I MURDERED MY LUSUS BEFORE THE GOODBYE LUSUS PARTY?
EB: karkaaatat
CG: HYPOTHETICALLY, JOHN, I HAVEN'T FOLLOWED THROUGH YET
EB: i'm not helping you decide whether or not to attack your totally nice custodian just because he annoys you a little.
CG: OH, HOW LITTLE YOU KNOW, JOHN. HOW WELL THE MONSTER CRAB HAS BLINDED YOU TO THE TRUE DEPTHS OF ITS IDIOCY.
EB: haha, karkat, ha. ha.
EB: how's the pie going? do you need any tips? :)
CG: IT'S BASICALLY
CG: DONE
CG: IS I THINK THE BEST WORD FOR IT
EB: ???
EB: whoooooa
EB: so your oven didn't explode or anything? the apples didn't disappear mysteriously into a giant crab-shaped black hole? :o
CG: YOU'RE A FUCKING COMEDIAN, JOHN
CG: MY KITCHEN LOOKS LIKE A WAR ZONE AND I HAVE FLOUR WHERE FLOUR WAS NEVER MEANT TO GO
CG: THIS IS WORSE THAN THE GLITTER. AT LEAST WITH GLITTER YOU FUCKING EXPECT IT TO GET EVERYWHERE. I WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THIS, JOHN
EB: ahhahahaha, hang in there karkat.
CG: WAIT HOW FUCKING FORMAL IS THIS
CG: BECAUSE I'M NOT KIDDING HERE I'M LEAVING IN FIVE MINUTES AND I KEEP FINDING FLOUR CAKED ON MY HORNS.
CG: IF I SHOW UP AND YOU'RE IN A GODDAMN SUIT I AM SO DONE
EB: don't be dumb
EB: i mean yeah, my dad is in a suit
EB: but he's literally always in a suit
EB: i did change tho
CG: WHAT.
EB: i just didn't want to still be wearing all the chemicals from last period all night long!
CG: HEHEH. THE BRIGHT PINK EXPLOSION WAS WELL WORTH IT.
EB: true. we're just lucky ms keene likes us i think.
CG: WE'RE THE BEST FUCKING STUDENTS SHE HAS IN THAT ENTIRE LAB, IF WE WANT TO DO STUPID SCIENCE EXPERIMENTS AFTER WE FINISH THE BORING ASS LAB WORK WE CAN DO WHAT WE WANT
EB: still pretty sure that's not how it works
EB: except yeah totally :)
EB: anyway yeah, i just have like a flannel shirt on it's not that big a deal karkat
CG: FLANNEL. IT'S THE FUCKING BLUE AND GREY AND GREEN ONE ISN'T IT.
CG: FINE. I CAN DO THAT.
EB: …
EB: how -
EB: never mind :/
CG: HA. IF YOU THINK I CAN'T PREDICT WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO WEAR ON A GIVEN DAY YOU ARE DEAD WRONG JOHN EGEBERT. YOU UNDERESTIMATE THIS STRANGE TROLL DISEASE CALLED MOIRALLEGIANCE.
EB: ...seeeriously, that's uncanny, man!
CG: ANYWAY, FINE. WE'LL BE THERE IN TEN.
CG: BUT ONLY IF CRABDAD COOPERATES. FOR ALL I KNOW THIS FUCKASS COULD TAKE OFF INTO THE NIGHT AND RETIRE EARLY
CG: IF I COULD ONLY BE SO GODDAMN LUCKY
EB: bluh. see you soon.
CG: <>
EB: <> and be nice to crabdad! :P
-- ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 17:10:54 –

Karkat stares in tired horror at the giant crab currently trying to claw at the cardboard box he stuffed on top of its head, and covers the pie with one last protective layer of saran wrap before shaking his
head to go help the imbecile get ready to go out in public.

- By all rights, dinner should have been an unmitigated disaster. It's not like Crabdad has any kind of self-control; from the moment Karkat herds the lusus down the street and through the Egbert's front door, Crabdad is in ecstasy. It had obediently followed Karkat to the Egbert house after hearing that John would be there, but everything falls into its usual crab-induced chaos when John opens the door, grinning widely, and Crabdad tackles him with a greeting screech. John takes it like a fucking champ, somehow *not* falling over under the crab's enthusiastic charge, and giggles like an idiot when Crabdad starts trying to groom the poor guy with its meaty claws.

By the time Karkat pries the fatass off John, the kid's hair is even more of a wreck than usual, and Samuel Egbert has somehow emerged from the kitchen, removed the offering of pie from Karkat's free hand, and greeted him before sailing away back toward the dinner table, as unruffled and classy as ever. Those two days nearly a fortnight ago, when Karkat had seen John's dad slightly less than put together, seem more like some weird hallucination he had than anything else.

Everything tastes delicious, as usual. It's hard to tell who manages to eat more, Crabdad or John; seriously, John can sometimes give the lusus a run for its money, but because Crabdad gets an entire side of the table to itself to make room for its flailing antics throughout dinner, Karkat can't get an accurate estimate on how much it eats. He's too busy fielding awkward questions from Samuel, constantly checking his automatic foul mouth so he doesn't start swearing like a fucking sailor in front of John's dad *again*. He has to make up for Crabdad's nonexistent manners somehow. John, of course, can sense every time Karkat has to censor himself an ungodly amount, and starts coincidentally giggling like a maniac whenever Karkat stammers through another sentence. He tries to cover it up with a cough, but it's just as fucking obvious that he's laughing when he coughs all through Karkat's accidental tirade about the state of the comic selection at the new place that opened up downtown.

The problem is Karkat can't even get properly outraged about it. It's all just fucking endearing. Fuck, John could be the most giggly little shit on the face of the planet and Karkat would still want to snap at him and then wrap him in a blanket and pap his face until the derpy laughter stops.

Thankfully he only gets stupid like this when Karkat tries to restrain himself, which doesn't happen often. John's habit of finding Karkat's enraged rants amusing may be mildly infuriating, but at least he's usually civil about it. Karkat rants, John is good-naturedly earnest, and together they're paler than the driven snow.

Pale serendipity. Bluhhhhhh.

...Shit. Now John has Karkat thinking that dumb sigh, too. It just keeps happening, and he is perversely both annoyed and ridiculously happy that it does. Like fuck if he'll ever admit that out loud, though.

"Yeah, I think we can just skip this part," Karkat starts babbling when Samuel Egbert tries to bring the apple pie over. "Just feed it to Crabdad, seriously, it's been after the damn thing all night long anyway -"

"Nonsense, Karkat!" John's dad says, with a brilliant, understanding smile that Karkat has seen on John's face enough to recognize it as the standard Egbertian 'let's tease Karkat' grin. Agghh. "There's more than enough for everyone to try it, even if we do give a half to good Crabdad, here." He turns that hospitable smile on Crabdad, who naturally realizes that someone is talking about it and food in the same sentence and skrees in eager reply.
"I want it on fu- on record that I am totally opposed to this plan," Karkat insists, eyeing the slice Dad Egbert passes to him with a wary glare. "Seriously, I don't bake all the time like you guys, and knowing me I've managed to f- mess up the most basic recipe John could come up with. Just - shit, please don't judge me based on this, Mr Egbert, I never meant to inflict my cooking on you guys."

"Relax, Karkat, it's probably fine," John says soothingly, one foot kicking at Karkat's under the table. Karkat feels the impending attack of self-deprecation ease off almost immediately, and he taps John's foot back to let him know the moirailing on the fly was appreciated. The way John always manages to balance him out is amazing.

"Of course, a first attempt at a pie always has some room for improvement," Samuel adds, placing a forkful of pie into his mouth. Karkat tenses up so fast he nearly falls out of his chair, staring in horror as the elder Egbert chews and swallows without a word. All the elder human does is hum, nod to himself, and take another bite, with no visible reaction to tell Karkat if the pie was awful or not.

John just rolls his eyes when Karkat stares at him beseechingly, shoveling a heaping forkful into his mouth with less decorum. He tilts his head to the side, then grins. "See? It's totally fine, Karkat, jeez!"

Karkat slumps back against his chair, nearly tipping it over backward. "Yeah, right," he mutters, burying his inner relief somewhere deep down where no one would ever see it. Ever. He prods at his own slice with a fork, but doesn't really have it in him to taste it. He knows nothing he made could possibly match up to the majestic works of art John attempts to feed him on a daily basis. Instead, he lets his mind drift a little, just glad that the pie didn't poison the Egberts within the first ten seconds of consumption.

The teal-blooded newscaster has been cycling through the usual spiel about New York. The Egberts always seem to have this news channel on lately, apparently because the Rose girl John knows lived just outside the path of destruction Dark Star carved down the middle of the state, and they want to keep up on the progress of the reconstruction efforts. Usually, all three of them tune it out, though, once the reports shift into bland repetitions of the same facts everyone's been hearing about for weeks. It's not until the newscaster's tone suddenly raises slightly, with renewed interest, that her words break through Karkat's food coma and draw his reluctant attention.

"And in local news, after almost two weeks with no word from the Seattle PD about any leads in the ongoing investigation into the explosion that injured five officers and three civilians at the police headquarters, Deputy Chief Frasier has called a press conference to discuss new evidence that may shed light on the identity of the perpetrators -"

"Oh, are they talking about the breakout again?" John says, twisting in his seat to look at the screen. His mouth turns down at the side though, a twist of resignation and bored, and Karkat knows exactly how he feels. Every since Hearts Boxcars's escape from Seattle, there's been at least one news segment every night, sandwiched between reports about New York, on how the police have no leads on where the escaped Crew member has gone, nor on the identity of the supposed lawyer who brought the bomb materials in the first place. After all this goddamn waffling, Karkat can't really bring himself take some random press release seriously. Hemogoblin saw the lawyer's face, of course, during that stupid scene by the docks, but he hasn't seen the man around the city at all during his rounds.

"Looks like," is all he mutters, letting his head fall on the curve of his arm as he leans back against the chair to watch the uniformed human that walks up behind a shitty podium. The deputy chief tugs at the collar of his starched shirt, and Karkat snorts when he sees the man is already sweating profusely. He's got a lot of respect for the police in general - and a healthy amount of apprehension,
too, given his mutation would be grounds for arrest at the very least if discovered - but on an individual basis? The deputy chief gets a lot of air time, seemingly because he's the only one on the force willing to sweat his way through an interview without caring that he looks like he's about to collapse dead of a stroke at any given moment.

"As a representative of the Seattle police department," the human begins, swabbing at his forehead, "I am pleased to inform the public that we have a suspect that we will be pursuing henceforth as the investigation into the explosions continues -"

It only catches Karkat's attention because he's become so used to the media referring to the explosions that night as one singular event; raising an eyebrow, he wonders if they got the evidence to identify a suspect not just from the eye witnesses for the first explosion in the holding room, but from the rooftop one as well. He sips at his water, trying to think whether Hearts or the lawyer would have had the time to set up that pipe bomb, anyway, or if they'd have delegated to another Crew lackey...

A picture of someone weirdly familiar appears on screen. It takes five long seconds, and John shrieking, "WHAT?!" before Karkat realizes he's looking at Hemogoblin.

He's looking at himself.

He chokes on the water properly this time, his throat seizing up as he coughs, smacking at his own chest as he stares at the television screen, horrified. It's one of the grainy, blown-up pictures from the newspapers, with half of Hemogoblin's profile in shadow as he turns a corner, but it's still him and holy fuck they can't possibly be saying -

"Numerous police accounts place the vigilante called Hemogoblin near the police station shortly after the initial explosion," the deputy chief continues, drawing out a tissue to dab at his face. "In addition, blood evidence found on the roof of the building has been confirmed to be a sample of mutated troll blood, with levels of soporific residue that would be atypical in a human blood sample, indicating that this Hemogoblin was present for the second explosion as well -"

"What the ACTUAL FUCK?!" Karkat yells hoarsely, slamming his glass down on the table.

"Language!" Dad Egbert says, but his voice is just as disbelieving as Karkat's and John's.

John is the one who lunges for the remote control on the back of the couch and dials up the volume, as though hearing this condemnation any louder will make it go away. There's no way this is real, Karkat thinks, shoving back his chair and joining John by the couch. This is just - how on earth did the fact that Hemogoblin got fucking blown the fuck up somehow make him a suspect in said explosion?!

But with a sinking sensation in his gut, Karkat is already starting to realize he made more than a few horrible mistakes that night. He had been so furious, so caught up in recapturing Hearts Boxcars, that he hadn't even thought about all the blood that might have been left behind on the roof, all the incriminating mutant troll blood he just left lying there for everyone and their nublicking mother to find.

Fuck, fuck, he fucked up, he's fucked up so bad -

Oh fuck, he's gonna be sick, but no he can't, not in front of John and his dad. For any normal person, this news bulletin would be weird and worrying, not grounds for nausea and horror, and Karkat wouldn't be able to explain why he felt that way. Karkat sways, his throat working as he swallows rapidly, trying to hold the bile back as he presses a hand over his mouth.
"In the spirit of cooperation, we are asking that Hemogoblin turn himself in for further questioning, so that we can get the truth of what happened that night out to the general public," that panmelted imbecile of a deputy chief continues, oblivious to the fact that he's a raging moron. "Hopefully this all turns out to be a misunderstanding. No, this does not in any way reflect on how the Seattle police department deals with Heir."

John is shaking. Karkat is freaking out but he can still feel that John is shuddering next to him, his hand crushing the remote control as he stares at the television screen. And yeah, shit, John is a massive Hemogoblin fan, god only knows why. Karkat can't handle imagining what it would be like to hear Heir had been accused of this kind of bullshit, not with his head so full of panic and disbelief, but he can pull his head out of his nook and grab his shaking moirail around the shoulders. He swallows and has to lick his lips a few times before he can make actual words come out. "John. John, hey, you alright?"

There's a delay before John answers, shaking his head slightly and rubbing his eyes, tearing them away from the TV. "I - yeah, I just - what the hell?" he demands weakly.

Karkat laughs just as pathetically in return, the sound so painfully forced that he winces and has to fight back a new twist of nausea in his stomach. "Un-fucking-believable, I know. What are they thinking?"

"John," Samuel says from somewhere behind them, and Crabdad gives a wondering, worried skree. At his dad's stern tone John stiffens in Karkat's arms, facing Samuel. "Karkat," the man says next, and Karkat reluctantly turns to look, too, certain that the guilt and despair are written all over his face. Samuel Egbert stands at military attention by the table in the kitchen, his eyes sharp with something unreadable even as he smiles at Karkat. "I understand that this is unexpected, Karkat, but I think it's time you got Crabdad here home," he says, gesturing at the lusus. In the two minutes Karkat looked away from the damn thing, it has begun to stuff the Egbert's table cloth into its mouth.

Karkat has to swallow again and count to ten under his breath before he feels calm enough to answer without screaming. "I - yeah, fu- I'll get it out of your way," he says, his mind still reeling. John is finally hugging him back a little, his hands on Karkat's waist, but this - this isn't something his moirail can shoosh away. This is a crisis he can't even talk to John about, no matter how much he wants to rant about it. "This is - yeah, John, I'll text you when I get Crabdad back, okay?" he asks.

John nods faintly, still looking as pasty and sick as Karkat feels, and agh fuck, Karkat hugs him hard, gripping the back of the kid's neck and humming a shoosh under his breath. God, the last thing he needs hanging over his head right now is the thought that he might fail as a palemate just because he fucked up his own alter ego's life and can't concentrate right now. John's grip on his waist tightens momentarily, and Karkat leans on him for a long moment before letting go. At least now he feels steady enough to make it back to the house with Crabdad.

He wishes he could just stay and pile it out with John. But a much bigger part of his mind is urging him to get the hell out of there before he really does puke. It's nearly seven o'clock, and he's suddenly faced with a night of being considered a suspect in a criminal investigation.

He needs to think this through, and he won't be able to do that if he's all wrapped up in John, like he wants to be. "Y-yeah, I'll get him out of your hair," he repeats, smoothing John's hands when he tugs his waist out of the kid's grip. "Come on, Crabdad, stop wrecking their things. We need to go home now."

Crabdad looks up from its impromptu table cloth feast and almost has the decency to look concerned when it skrees. It obeys when Karkat drags it away from the table, and only ruffles John's hair once before Karkat drags him out the door and into the evening air.
When they get home Karkat ditches the lusus downstairs and slams the door behind him, letting out the panicked hiss that he's been sitting on this entire time. Frantic, he tears his flannel off and runs to the ablutions block, twisting the knobs on the sink until the water is ice cold. Removing his glasses with unsteady hands, he sticks his entire head under, gasping and spluttering, his gills protesting at the action as he inhales both air and water. When he emerges his hair is plastered to his face and his horns, and he has to comb it back, scraping at his own skin with his claws in his shaky haste. Wiping at his face, he walks back to the bedroom, trying to get a hold of himself. The cold water shocked a little bit of the blind panic out of his system, but he still feels sick to his stomach.

He doesn't know what to do. This is completely beyond the scope of what he'd anticipated for his tenure as a hero. I mean, come on, I've only been on the job a few months! he thinks, yanking his costume out from under the floorboard and shaking it out. The line of blood that forms the cross of the H on its chest jolts him - *John's blood is everywhere and he can't think, can't breathe* - and then he shakes his head. He tries to think it through rationally, like a sane troll, instead of just shredding the incriminating costume, which is his hair trigger reaction after that unpleasant flashback.

The problem is, he knows he can't trust comic book logic here. In fiction, heroes can clear their name simply by catching the actual perpetrator - but real life doesn't actually work like that. Karkat knows just from the mess when Hearts Boxcars was released on bail the first time Heir caught him that the Midnight Crew doesn't just admit to crimes when they've been caught. He's going to need hard evidence that he was totally uninvolved in the explosions - evidence he doesn't have. The hazards of being an anonymous hero.

Heir has never been accused of something like this, to Karkat's knowledge - he started young, maybe twelve, too young for people to ever believe he'd commit a crime on purpose, and by now his reputation for good is so established in Seattle that the question of the legality of Heir's crime-fighting never really comes up. Some heroes like Flashstep and the Puppeteer just ignore accusations and act as full-fledged vigilantes, never confirming or denying or even responding to allegations of criminal activity, at odds with their local police. But Hemogoblin can't afford that kind of negative press. Hell, he can't even afford* this* much negative attention. Being announced as a suspect in what is probably labeled as an act of terrorism? Fuck, the counter-terrorism fuckwads could be all over him within a week, swarming the city and making it impossible for him to do hero work. And with evidence that Hemogoblin is definitely a blood mutant, not just faking the candy red for the aesthetic -

His breath catches.

He has to prove his innocence, and he has to do it without turning himself it to the police. That's just - not even an option. Not now that Hemogoblin's blood is on record.

But how?

Huffing, he yanks off his pants and steps into the uniform, his hands fumbling several times as he pulls it on.

If he tries to lie low and skip out on hero work until this dies down, it'll only make him seem guiltier. And there's only one person in the city who might be able to help him sort this whole mess out, who Hemogoblin can possibly ask for advice.

That is, if Heir doesn't just arrest him on sight…

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Rose finds herself in a rather exhilarating new position.

She is remaking her mind.

It is a daunting task, to be sure, but one that she has deliberated and meditated upon extensively over the past week and a half. She has come to the conclusion that it is necessary, unavoidable, even. The only question that remains is whether or not she can do this here and now.

As she closes her eyes and peers inward, she can still see the blasted wreckage left behind by the Horrorterror's incursion. For as long as she can recall, her mind has been structured the same way - a pristine white structure, balanced over the dark precipice that is her link to the Furthest Ring, a connection she has never been capable of destroying or filling in, a sucking hole in her mental space that erodes at the foundations of her sanity and allows that thin trickle of colddamp and grimdark to taint the trailing edges of her thoughts.

She has always accepted that this mental design as the only viable option, the only way to preserve her sense of self. Every night she would sacrifice sleep to mediate with the Horrorterrors, to shore up the corroded base of her mind palace and usher the tendrils of grimdark back into the abyss.

Now, the acid of the sea that swallowed her mind has torn it all down, and the swilling tides of the grimdark have ground down the gleaming white pinnacle of her mind into rubble, leaving only an iridescent beach of white sand and lingering streaks of black tar, as far as her eyes can see. Thanks to the void-infused bracers on her arms, the corrupted pit of grimdark is muffled and numbed, though it remains a bruised purple hollow into which the grains of sand fall, crumbs of her sanity falling away into the black. Over it all shines the brilliant star she created to drive back the Horrorterror in New York, a steady, luminous shard of light that requires surprisingly little effort to maintain. All the more confirmation of Rose's hypothesis - that John's presence in her mind, even for so brief a time, infused her with strength she would not normally have been able to muster. It is a hypothesis her mother stubbornly refuses to speak of, even now.

It is no good. She looks around at the fragmented remains of the mental framework Rue Lalonde taught her all those years ago, and her desire firms. She will not turn to the same structure as she rebuilds herself. There were too many flaws in the design, too many cracks and crevasses and vulnerable points where the many-angled ones could slip in with their haunting songs. Having taken the past week and a half to consider her situation, Rose has a much better idea in mind. She has not consulted with her mother on this - but then, she does not intend to consult with Rue on much of anything at all, in the future - and none of her colleagues and friends have the thaumaturgic experience that would be needed to understand the finer details of the transformation Rose intends.

That's fine. She has sent warning texts to both John and Kanaya, in the event that her efforts go awry, but she does not anticipate failure. And this is something that needs to be completed as soon as possible, before she loses even more of herself in that slow trickle of sand. She will no longer be a solitary tower, braced over the abyss by the weak ties of family and stubborn pride.

Instead, she reaches up with one hand and gestures the bright sun out of the gleaming sky. By the time it reaches her palm and rests there, humming with power, she has compacted it to the size of a softball, and it burns all the brighter for being condensed.

The next bit is the trickiest part, the one most likely to go wrong, and so she intends to get it out of the way first. If this part fails, there would be little point in having completed any of the other steps first. She has been able to maintain the strength of the sun, yes, but she has not actively tried to manipulate it this way before. For all she knows, changing her mental image of the spell could cut it off from whatever wellspring of strength it draws on, that hidden power triggered by John's visit that she does not yet fully understand. But she will never know until she tries. Placing her other palm
over the sun, she presses her hands together, flattening out the light until it is a horizontal plane.

The fact that it does not explode instantly is a very promising sign. Very promising indeed.

An incredibly strong desire for a celebratory drink slams into her out of nowhere.

That is a lie. She knows exactly where the desire comes from. It pierces up from the sand beneath her, a straggling, tarry line that wraps around her mental image of herself and licks at her throat. Rose has to breathe steadily for the next few minutes before she can swallow without that intense, craving thirst drying out her tongue, and then she is able to tear the line away, letting it drift before her in the air. She can see the way the black, sticky line trails away into the sand, and she raises one hand, the plane of light balanced on the other, to slice at the dark rope.

The tendril of her alcoholism that reached up to slather across her mind detaches from the rest, and she closes a fist, incinerating it. But even as she watches, the rest of the filth retracts into the sand, sinking into the mess of memories and emotions, where she can't sense it. No, tackling her drinking problem won't be so easy as that. She's gone ten days without drink, and everyday she wakes with that same hollow in her throat, a thirst that she can't allow herself to ignore. Just one drink, that niggling voice whispers in her mind, just one, and Rose often can't discern whether or not there might be a tinge of grimdark to the voice. She has only her suspicions after all, and nothing more, when it comes to speculating on what parts of her mind have been subtly altered by the Horrorterrors. The smaller changes are more difficult to sort through in the face of her mind's total destruction.

It doesn't help that Rose is very much aware of the cabinet of vodka and rum and assorted other hard liquors that Rue Lalonde keeps behind her desk. The only reason she hasn't broken yet is because her hate runs deeper than her alcoholism. She will not take anything from Rue Lalonde, not again. She wants nothing more to do with her mother, and that includes acknowledging and partaking in the alcohol Rue keeps in her office.

She despises the thought, but she may have no choice but to integrate that hatred into her restructuring. It is simply too much a part of her current mental state for her to ignore it, and as caustic as the emotion is, it is strong. And right now, she needs that strength.

Making a mental note to root out more of that crawling desire for alcohol before she leaves her mind for the day, Rose descends toward the grimdark abyss, the sun panel gleaming in her hands.

The nearer she draws to the darkness, the more numb she feels, her vision blurring under the influence of the void. These bracers may suppress her connection to the Horrorterrors, it's true, but it also numbs her own focus. It will be difficult to work with them still attached to her, but she needs to get used to it. She has resigned herself to keeping these cuffs even after leaving Lalonde Laboratories. She may not want anything her mother has touched, but they are too useful, and Rose no longer trusts in her ability to mediate with the grimdark. Better this aching, numb void in her mind than bloody whispers that she can't distinguish from her own thoughts.

She reaches the point of no return, the line where the channel between her mind and the Furthest Ring begins. It is dry right now, where for years it sloshed with the barely-restrained waters of the ocean, threatening to swallow her whole. She does not know whether the Horrorterrors pulled back because of the void bracers or out of fear of her sun - so, she will combine the two. One can never be too careful, right? Lowering the panel of sunlight beneath her feet, Rose spreads her arms and expands the panel until it stretches all the way across the abyss, a gleaming pane of gold. The channel is not a perfect rectangle, of course, and she spends the next few minutes subtly altering the edges of the panel, rounding out the corners until all she can see around her is the pane of light. Now that the source of the illumination has changed, her mind is no longer so blindingly bright, and she
can already see the sandy beach has begun to spill out over the panel rather than falling into the sea.

Underneath, of course, there is still the ever present channel of darkness, but now she has a more permanent shield to ward off the grimdark, as opposed to simply pressing down on the Horrorterrors with only her will and hoping for the best. Before, they were always present, an oozing sore in the depths of her mind. Hopefully, with this makeshift bandage in place, she may begin the work of healing without the sore breaking through again.

Now, to deal with all the sand clogging up the place. Rose floats upward, shaking off the film of exhaustion that already weighs down her eyes. She raises the sand up with a scoop of her hand, rounding it all up into one place so that it doesn't coat the floor of her mind at random. Turning the grains of her memories in a slow whirl, Rose sighs. The work of years of meditation - gone; all her old organization and structure ground into dust. It will take more time than she currently has to mold her mind into a new form. Now that she has seen exactly how completely the old structure has shattered, she knows she can do no more than set up the barest outline of her future pattern, for now. Rushing this would only invite chaos, which is the last thing her mind needs more of right now.

She molds a clear bowl out of the air, and pours the sand into it. As the granules sift through her mental fingers, she strains through it all, hunting for those black strings of that long for alcohol. Though she finds and incinerates three more trails of ooze, she knows still more slips beneath her radar. Even when she focuses with all of her power, the alcoholism is insidious because it is a product of her own mind, rather than a foreign body. Even her superior powers of perception can barely distinguish between the craving and the regular background of her mind.

Then she molds a Tupperware lid on top of the bowl, because who said that mental images had to be old-fashioned? There is still room in her mind for growth and for new memories to accumulate in a new pattern, but for now the old data will have to be stored here, sealed against spillage until she can find the time and peace of mind necessary to reintegrate it all. She can still access it, though it will be a trial.

It will suffice, until the time is right.

Rose resurfaces hours later to the faint buzz of the phone alarm, having accomplished far less than she would have liked during her mental restructuring. She set up the preliminary pattern she intends to use to knit her mind together, but with each passing moment she could feel herself falling into a true sleep. When she found herself knitting a small, cat-sized sweater out of rainbow yarn, she realized she was dreaming, and carefully disconnected herself from the mental workspace so she can sleep without accidentally unraveling anything. If she's reached the point of dreaming, she can't trust herself to focus anymore in her mindscape.

Now she feels refreshed and a little more in control as she sits up, stretching her arms above her head. Even those few hours of work have worked wonders, and she feels almost sane again as she bends over to yank her duffel bag out from where she's hidden it beneath the bed.

She has patiently bided her time this past week, sailing frigidly through the corridors of her mother's dominion, maintaining a flawless mask of elegant indifference when Rue's underlings ask about her health and try to make her feel at home. With her extra sight active almost constantly throughout the day, Rose can sense who among the scientists and lab interns welcome her in order to curry favor with Rue (ha!), and who genuinely want her to feel at home. The latter are convenient in that she can ask them to obtain certain items for her without worrying that they will flock to Rue's side an hour later to try to impress her with how they've most recently helped Rose with some little problem.
No, it will be much easier for all involved if Rue doesn't realize Rose has left until it is far too late. This way, they can skip straight past all the tedious debates about how Rose is being hasty and cannot be trusted alone in the world just yet, and Rose will not have to point out Rue's blatant hypocrisy in front of a crowd of witnesses. Instead, Rose will slip away into the night with no one the wiser, and Rue need only make token protests for the sake of her image before once again quietly leaving Rose to her own devices.

After all, she has abandoned Rose without a word once already. Surely it is time Rose repaid the favor in kind?

She does not have much, beyond the duffel itself and the bathroom supplies she has pilfered from the locker rooms. As loath as she is to take more supplies that nominally belong to Rue, Rose won't let her stubborn hate prevent her from escaping this dreary place. She can discard the last pieces of clothing given to her by her mother once she has reached her destination, and no sooner. It is a matter of practicality, and she won't let her pride overwhelm her good judgment again.

Tucking the last of the plain cotton blouses provided for her into the duffel, Rose takes her borrowed phone out. This part will prove the most difficult, because she knows - she knows - that by doing this, she will be hurting John.

But it would hurt him more to simply break off communication without a word. She fully intends to resume it at a later point, when she has reached her intended destination, but no amount of promises are going to fully assuage John's natural disbelief. Since New York they have not been out of contact for more than a few hours at any given time, even if their interaction extends to little more than wishing each other a good night.

Rose has no choice. Thanks to her mother allowing her the freedom to explore the many and varied labs within the complex, Rose has used her sight to identify more than one apparatus, thaumaturgic or mechanical, that most likely would allow her mother to track spatial and magical distortions. No, if Rose intends to reach her destination without being followed, she cannot teleport using her magic, and she cannot risk using a phone or computer along the way. She must do this the old fashioned way, and that means discarding the cell for the entirety of the she estimates it will take her to reach Philadelphia.

TT: John, are you there?
TT: Please. It will be better for you to hear this now than to come back to a vague and no doubt dissatisfying warning.
EB: agh, hang on rose! a lot of weird stuff is happening right now, just give me a sec!
TT: Weird? Do tell, John. You have perked my interest.
TT: Very well. I can wait a little longer, but not much. Please hurry.
EB: aaagggh, i'm back, i'm back! sorry about that.
EB: how did your brain thingy go?
TT: Quite well. I am pleased with the results of the first attempt. My subconscious harbors no end of hidden pitfalls and psychological snarls, but I believe that I have lain down the groundwork for making progress in future sessions.
EB: that's good :)
EB: but, uh, what's that about a warning? another one? are you doing another really dangerous mind thingy so soon after the first one? :/
TT: ...I believe that can wait a few minutes more. First, tell me of this strangeness on your end. I am intensely curious. Don't you know better than to leave a girl hanging, John?
EB: uh, well, i'm pretty sure you guys wouldn't get seattle local news there, even if you did have a tv, but i'm sure you can hunt it down on the internet soon. you're good at research like that, and i just
know it'll be all over the comic forums soon…

TT: ?
TT: Something to do with a particularly engrossing development in one of the Ancestors comics?
Really, John, is such a thing enough to delay conversation with me for even a moment?
EB: ahhahaha, no, i promise it's not that, rose!
EB: it's something pretty serious actually, and it could potentially suck really hard.
TT: You may or may not have 'fangirled' to me on the subject a few times over the past week, yes.
TT: Something about him 'having da booty' was mentioned, as I recall.
EB: well, like a few hours ago the police just announced that they suspect him for arson and almost terrorism! it's awful, rose!

TT: Do you have reason to believe he could be involved in those sort of crimes?
EB: no way! or at least, i don't want to think he would...
EB: plus, the whole thing is a lot more complicated because the explosions they suspect him of being involved in are the ones hearts boxcars set off to escape that one night!
EB: which means the whole accusation totally reeks of the midnight crew :(
TT: I see. That does complicate the situation immensely. Do you have any other information? Have you communicated with Hemogoblin himself?
EB: no, but i'm obviously gonna try to find him tonight. he's my partner, we have to figure this whole mess out asap!
EB: my dad has been grilling me for ages trying to figure out if hemogoblin's somehow related to the midnight crew, but i just don't believe it! he nearly got blown up in that last explosion! but that means my dad's totally on my case now too.
TT: I would advise you locate this Hemogoblin character soon, then. It would appear he has some explaining to do.
EB: i will, trust me
EB: i'm about to take off early, actually. what were you going to tell me?

For a brief moment, Rose contemplates not telling him. If John is heading out on the job early, he will no doubt be preoccupied with the Hemogoblin scandal well into the night. Perhaps, if Rose has planned this night well enough, she might even reach her goal before John notices she has gone radio silent.

But no. No. That kind of thinking, that lapse of communication, is what led her down this road in the first place. Shaking her head, Rose begins typing again.

TT: I am leaving my mother's laboratories tonight, and will not be able to retain this phone much longer. I have no doubt that she is capable of tracking its signal.
EB: waaaat.
EB: you mean you won't be able to text anymore?!
TT: The break should hopefully last only until noon at the latest, when I hope to have arrived at my intended destination. I promise, John, before anything else, I will insist on the use of a computer with an Internet connection. I will not disappear.
EB: i, uh
EB: that's just not really reassuring me all that much rose :( 
TT: I know. I know, and I'm sorry, John. But I must minimize the ways my mother would be able to locate me, and this cell phone simply must go. I will purchase a new one as soon as I have the funds to do so.
EB: is this even safe to do, rose?? what if the voidy things stop working halfway there? i totally don't know how i feel about this anymore…
TT: I have implemented new mental defenses these past weeks. Between that and the bracers, I have
confidence the grimdark will not resurge.
TT: All I can do is ask you to trust me.
EB: i
EB: yeah, okay. i trust you, rose.
EB: i trust you!
TT: So you have stated.

But it feels good, just reading those words on the screen. No matter their questionable sincerity through the emotionless medium of text, they are the words she needed to see. Her grip on the phone tightens, and she coughs a little. It certainly does not resemble a sniffle in any way. She has more control than that, these days.

EB: but you have to pinky swear you'll pester me right away, the minute you get to this place, or else!
TT: Indeed. A pinky promise it is, then.
TT: Now, off to work with you. Between this intriguing scandal and school, you won't even notice my absence.
EB: i always notice when you're gone, rose! you're my friend!

All right, now they are just straying into the realm of the downright sentimental. John is painfully earnest, sometimes, almost embarrassingly so, and she suspects that a childhood immersed in the stilted dialogue of every comic book known to man and troll alike may be to blame. She never really has the heart to reprimand him, though.

TT: Thank you, John. I will speak with you soon.
EB: i'll hold you to it! bye rose! be safe!

Before she leaves the lavish room appointed to her during her stay, she makes sure to remake the bed, remove any hair she may have left behind in the shower or sink by burning it in a single burst of targeted light (no need to give Rue any DNA samples with which to enact a magical means of tracking Rose), and generally leave the room as pristine as when she first arrived. There is no need to be a rude guest, after all, and perhaps this will get the message across to Rue more effectively than mere words. It is the truest form of passive-aggression, after all - she will leave no trace she was ever present in this place, to make it quite clear that she never intends to be present ever again.

She and Rue have never communicated well. This is the most effort Rose is willing to expend on this woman. With any luck, she will never have to concern herself with Rue. Ever. She thinks, as petty as the thought is, that a total estrangement might please her most of all. Certainly it would help mute this hatred that flares up every time they are forced to engage face to face.

Scrubbing beneath the void bracers one last time, layering her sleeves beneath them to ease the chafing against her boney wrists, Rose slings the duffel bag across her back. She then begins to unspool the layers of spells she has been knitting together this past week and a half, the painstaking work that is the true reason she has waited so long to leave this place.

It is a spell she stole directly from Harry Potter, and she has absolutely no regrets. Wrapping the light around her and the duffel until it meets her satisfaction, Rose snaps her fingers, and becomes effectively invisible. The thaumaturgic principles behind the spell are fascinating, and involve refracting and bending the light in such a way that none of the waves can bounce off of her form; instead, the light should, hopefully, reflect only her surroundings, and nothing more. Rue may be able to track magical anomalies, but Rose need only maintain this until she has exited the laboratory complex. Scientists either work on a mysterious rotating schedule, or they do not sleep; she has been
unable to ascertain which is the case.

Closing the phone, she sets it on the bedside table, adjusting it a little compulsively until it is perfectly in line with the edge of the table before, with a flick of her pinky nail, she spins it at an angle, ruining the elegant lines of the elegant bedroom.

Yes, she thinks she has achieved exactly the effect she wished to achieve. Smirking to herself, Rose leaves the room, pulling up the hood of a borrowed hoodie that is precisely the opposite of anything she would normally wear. Once she is on the road and drops the disillusionment spell, the best way to avoid detection by anyone seeking to follow her on foot will be to disguise herself in more mundane ways. Rue will no doubt direct them to look for a girl in proper makeup and a dark, tailored skirt. Rose has wiped her face clean for the first time in years, and her hoodie is a ratty, oversize grey thing, shapeless and formless.

Hopefully, it will all be worth the temporary sacrifice of her dignity, in the end. For now, her mild distaste is overwhelmed completely by the urgent need to be out.

Rose becomes aware that she has an unexpected follower when she is already a mile from the lakeside compound, and her skin prickles at the realization that they must have been following her for at least the past fifteen minutes, without her noticing. She cannot even fool herself into thinking that perhaps it is simply coincidence, that one of the lab interns has decided to go on a late night stroll that Rose never witnessed in her careful observations of the laboratory's daily schedule; she waits a few more minutes, zigzagging through the undergrowth in deliberately wide sweeps, and can hear the person behind her follow the zigging path - not something someone on an innocent walk would bother with.

Using her sight, she looks behind her, and is surprised enough to halt in her tracks, hesitate, and turn to face the pale carapacian who has somehow trailed her all this way. "Wondering Querent. It is rather late for anyone to be out in the woods. May I ask what brings you this way?"

Several factors about the WQ have given Rose reason for further scrutiny of the carapacians. First and foremost, she is almost certainly the Wise one Rose vaguely recalls PM mentioning before her impromptu disappearance - carapacians do love their Initials.

Second, the WQ is a rather unusual specimen of her species. It is rather basic exobiology: carapacians on average do not exceed five feet in height, with three and a half feet being the species average according to a census in 2000. The WQ, however, is a rather respectable five foot six, nearly of an eye with Rose herself, with slim dimensions and an air of quiet elegance that cannot be denied.

However, for the entirety of Rose's stay at the Laboratories, she has only directly interacted with the Querent once, when wandering the labs, to introduce herself. The Querent had been consumed in a strange project that Rose could not make heads or tails of, and Rose had politely excused herself before the carapacian could be too distracted by her presence. The WQ had seemed quite eager to speak with Rose about said project, but by that point Rose had been far more preoccupied with finding someone who could provide her with a pair of sweats - not the kind of garment a carapacian would generally wear.

Of all the people on Rue's payroll, the Querent is not the one Rose would have considered likely to track her down.

WQ: You, of course, my lady Seer.
WQ: Please, I do not understand. Tell me where you are going?

Rose sighs gustily, wishing she wore makeup for this. The WQ simply exudes a level of classiness that makes Rose feel vastly underdressed. "Away. I am afraid that if I told you more, it would inevitably reach my dearest mother's ears."

The WQ's claws rise and fall, and the impression of disbelief appears in Rose's mind. She grimaces. The sensation of carapacian speech, with its vital mental component, is really the last thing she needs to have muddling about in her fragile brain, but it seems it is unavoidable for now.

WQ: I - I see.

WQ: I had hoped that -

WQ: Perhaps it is too soon. You are not one of my own dreamers, after all. I am unused to such direct dealings, as well. I may have overstepped myself.

Rose has absolutely no idea what is going on here. Even when she widens her inner eye and scans the carapacian's aura, though, she sees nothing but honesty and sincere kindness, and a quiet sort of confusion that gradually folds itself into acceptance. The WQ has a most benevolent, radiating kind of soul, slower and more deliberate than the quick eager flutter that is all Rose recalls of PM. But there is nothing malicious in the Querent, at least, and Rose thinks she can convince the carapacian to return without alerting Rue to her absence, if she plays her cards right.

"I am sorry. I would prefer my mother not know I am leaving her smothering sphere of influence," Rose says pleadingly, widening her eyes and letting her lower lip tremble slightly. "I assure you that I am not wandering without purpose; I am going to a friend's home. It is all quite safe. I would appreciate if you would not tell Rue, if possible."

There is a long pause, as the WQ presses her claws together in silence and appears to think intently, her coal-black eyes half-lidded in the twilight. When she meets Rose's eyes again, she seems to have come to a decision.

WQ: I have been hasty, it seems. But I understand.

WQ: It is not my way to prevent a dreamer from pursuing the path that Skaia guides them to.

WQ: Simply remember me, Seer of Light. It is all I ask. If you ever need ask a question, I am at your disposal, always.

WQ: I wish you luck on your quest.

"Thank you," Rose replies, bowing her head slightly. She has the strangest urge to curtsey; alas that she is clad in baggy sweatpants rather than a proper skirt. Bowing with one moon white claw pressed over the upper left of her thoracic cavity, the WQ smiles wistfully and turns to go back to the laboratory complex. Rose pivots as well, readjusting her duffel bag so that it will not press so heavily at the base of her spine -

Wait.

Wait a minute.

*Did she just say Skaia?*

"Wait - Wondering Querent, wait, please. A moment of your time!" Rose whispers as loud as she
dares, stumbling back through the dark after the WQ. The carapacian turns at once, her head cocked to the side with open curiosity. "There is just one thing I wish to ask, before I go," Rose says, resting a hand on a tree. "Do you - are you familiar with the Skaian Paradigm?"

The smile that creases the WQ's face is, if possible, even warmer than before, and Rose is struck by the uncomfortably strange sensation, radiating from the Querent's expressive soul, that the carapacian is proud of her. The sensation edges too close to motherly, and Rose brushes it aside, tuning her sight slightly so that she can ignore the maternal warmth the carapacian seems oblivious to.

WQ: A most excellent first question, my Seer.

WQ: And one that I would be most happy to answer.

WQ: Skaia is...a dormant crucible of unlimited creative potential.

WQ: It is the first and final battlefield, the center of the great Game.

WQ: As the good Doctor Lalonde would think of it, it is the catalyst for change and rebirth on a universal level, and she researches it seeking a method of learning all of those possible transformations and their cumulative effect on the world in which we live today.

WQ: Hers is truly a fascinating area of study, one I would not have thought possible this early in paradox space. But she seems to be having promising results in her studies, at least on a quantum level. I do what I can to assist her.

Rose processes this influx of information for a long moment, but what the WQ just suggested is - too much for her to handle right now, not when she is already wasting precious time needed to reach the I-95 and start heading to Philadelphia. From her initial consideration it sounds like the Skaian Paradigm is almost something philosophical, perhaps even a religious concept that Rose is somehow unfamiliar with, but that does not match up with the WQ's claims that Rue has scientific evidence for whatever it is. This is still more than Rose has been able to learn in the past week of thoroughly snooping through Rue's offices, and she appreciates it. "Thank you. Farewell, Querent."

The carapacian nods deeply, and steps elegantly back toward the laboratories, her carapace glowing with an unearthly pale limning beneath the full moon. To Rose's other sight, she seems almost to have sweeping wings that fade back into the regular outline of her aura before Rose can say for certain they were there at all.

Enough of this. She has a late night bus to board soon, and she is still miles from where she estimates the bus station will be.

Without looking back, Rose disappears into the woods.

Even as she walks, she thinks she can hear the faint murmur of grim voices, free at last from the void-shields of the laboratories to whisper and hum, and she shivers, clamping down with the gleaming sunlight of her mental wards until the songs fade away.

Ten hours later, Rose feels like utter shit. She tore her regular circadian cycle in two in order to sleep all the previous day and stay awake all night for this little venture, and now she is paying the price. The sun rose several hours ago, but not even the influx of power and diminishing of the Horrorterrors that she associates with the dawn can make up for the fact that she has been awake for ten hours, surviving off trail mix and jerky, and somehow, in some horrible act of stupidity, forgot to pack a toothbrush. There is a thin veneer of greasiness in the strands of her hair when she runs her
fingers through the bob in an attempt to regain some kind of order in her life, and she grimaces. Her face feels sticky and her mouth tastes like a rotting corpse, and dear god there has to be a better method of travel than this plebian bus.

The bus shudders to a stop at last, and Rose disembarks, feeling scruffy and downright grungy as she pulls up her hood to obscure her face once more. Her stomach makes its opinion known, but she ignores it even as she steps into the McDonalds across the road. The scent of fried breakfast pseudo-food makes her stomach clench, and she sidles around the long line of the breakfast rush to slip into the bathroom. Not the classiest or cleanest of boudoirs, she thinks, but it will have to do. She has no intention of having her second meeting with a good friend occur while she's in borrowed men's sweats and unwashed, particularly not a friend with as stunning a sense of style as this one.

She strips off to her undershirt, ignoring the titters and loud chatter of women and trolls as she uses a rough towel to press at her face with cold sink water and sponge at her arms and neck. There is little she can do for her hair - shampoo had not been on the list of bare necessities she put together for this excursion - so she ducks her whole head under the sink and scrubs as best she can, so that at least her hair won't smell of gasoline and stale food later on. She holds it back off her face with a headband and tries not to micromanage the tiny strands of hair that fall out of line. She folds the hoodie and sweats away into the duffel, just in case, and slips into the white skirt and pale golden sweater once again provided by her mother. Neither article of clothing fits quite right, but the colors appeal to Rose more than she's willing to admit; dark purples and inky blacks make something within her mind twitch, and she fears that if the sensation persists she may have to alter her wardrobe plans to account for it.

And perhaps it's not a bad thing, to wear more of the Seer's colors in her everyday life. When (if, something whispers quietly) she takes up that mantle again, she will need to design a new costume - the old outfits presumably lost to the explosion of grimdark at the old house - and until then it might not be bad for her to keep some light in her life.

When she emerges from the McDonalds restroom she feels marginally more like a functional human being, though only just, and strides out of the dingy restaurant with more confidence. She is not at her best, no, but she is at least presentable, and that will have to do. It is already near 9 in the morning, and the sooner she reaches her destination, the sooner she can rest without her mother and her own twisting thoughts weighing upon her mind.

She crosses town on foot, until she is west of Washington Square and must ask a passerby for more specific directions. She makes it to Locust Street and then allows her other sight to activate in full force. She knows the aura she's looking for, and it should stand out like a torch against the dull background glow of the other inhabitants of these apartment buildings -

Ah. There she is.

Rose climbs up the front stairwell and presses the buzzer. It takes a moment, and then the intercom fritzes. That voice, heard only a few times, perhaps a year ago, murmurs almost urgently, "Rose?"

All the air rushes from her lungs. Rose has to swallow hard. "Kanaya."

There is no response, and Rose waits while the intercom crackles with static. She hears the pound of high heels on stairs from within the building, and she smiles to herself. She is certainly not tearing up a little when the front door is yanked open with unnatural strength by a very familiar troll with jade green eyes, and she does not cry at all when she is pulled into a most welcome embrace.

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"Dave."

Reflexively, Dave wraps his arms and legs around the crate of apple juice like a koala. He bares his teeth and hisses up at Bro. Ironically, obviously, but also in complete seriousness because like hell is Bro getting his anime gloves anywhere near this crate of ambrosia.

Bro had been taking one of his impossibly long showers when the delivery was scheduled to arrive, and Dave had foolishly hoped he'd be able to cart this thing into his bedroom with his brother none the wiser. He'd only set off one standard smuppet trap on the way down the stairs to the first floor, and none at all on the way back up with his prize in hand, which is usually a sign that Bro is too preoccupied with whatever the hell he does in the shower (no seriously, what the fuck does he do?) to mix things up a bit and catch Dave off guard.

Now, though, Bro is standing in the middle of the living room, his hair dripping wet with nothing more than a towel slung around his hips. Dave has to unlatch his arms from the apple juice in order to sign a reply, which is still annoying as fuck. 'Dude, put some fucking clothes on. You're gonna give some little old lady a heart attack. Seriously, you're going to be responsible for that? Old lady heart attacks? Is that really what you want out of your life -'

"Kid, if I want to wander around in the goddamn nude in my own fucking apartment, little old ladies are not going to stop me," Bro says flatly, folding his arms. He has his shades on, but Dave can't see any watermarks on them, so the age old mystery of whether or not Bro showers with his shades on remains unsolved. "Now fucking look me in the eye and tell me that's not the tenth box of apple juice you've ordered in the past four days. Tell me, you little shit."

It's not. It's the fifteenth. Bro does not need to know that, though. 'It is not,' is all Dave signs, trying to reach for the sword across his back as discreetly as possible. The new delivery guy stopped giving him weird looks for running around armed, like, months ago. 'Back off man, it's just AJ.'

"I raised you, I can tell when you're not looking me in the eye. I will rip those shades off your face, I swear to God," Bro snaps, legitimate irritation bleeding through his poker face. "Look, we can talk about your raging apple juice boner, or we can talk about your late night time travel antics that you thought I wouldn't notice. Choose, little man."

Fuck. An impossible choice.

'Fuck you, I am a legitimate business man,' Dave signs, slowly unlatching his legs from their death grip on the crate. He needs to get this thing to his room; he's way too vulnerable out here. 'These are just the latest product samples from the factory.'

"Bullshit." Bro scratches at his weird stubbly goatee thing, one of the few open signs of exasperation he has. Or at least, it's the only one Dave knows about. "The fact that you have a factory at all is part of your problem. I've seen your profit spreadsheets, I mean, fuck, kid -"

Dave nearly drops the apple juice, and his heart rate shoots up 'What. What. Why were you going through my finances, you nosy dick?!'

"I go through them because they're spreadsheets, I mean what is this, the stone age? Who uses spreadsheets anymore? I thought you were some child of the Internet age, where did you even download a fucking dinosaur like Excel '03?"

'We're not all computer freaks with the physique of a bodybuilder, a'ight?' Dave keeps his head ducked as he tries to edge his way through the kitchen with the crate under one arm. Bro just reappears leaning on the fridge, light glinting off his pointy shades. 'Some of us are just trying to
build goddamn apple juice empires. God. I know it's not creepy puppet porn, I just didn't know that was a disowning offence. I'm just not cut out for the family business - sewing robot-puppets, filming puppet porn - not my thing.'

With this clearly devastating comeback, he pauses time and sprints past Bro. He makes it all the way to the sink before a grasping hand catches him by the collar and flings him bodily back into the kitchen. Bro has to grab the edge of his towel before it falls down, but other than that there's no sign that keeping up with Dave's flashstepping cost him any effort at all. "Stay right where you are, little man, this is a motherfuckin' intervention," Bro says, tying an extra knot in the towel at his hip.

Dave feels his shoulders hunch, and forces them back down. He really needs to stop doing that, it makes him look all insecure and shit. Which he is so not. 'In a towel?!' he demands, trying to keep this conversation from derailing into an actual, legitimate heart to heart talk. He does not have a problem, after all. He could shut down his apple juice empire whenever he damn well wants. He just. You know. Doesn't ever want to. Ever. Does Bro even appreciate how hard it was to negotiate with apple orchards and grocery store suppliers when Dave had to do everything by email and they kept demanding phone calls he couldn't physically give?

"Kid, I can take the goddamn towel off at any time. Do not tempt me." Bro smirks a little, but then he's right back into nosy asshat big bro mode. "I mean it, Dave. Does this face look like I'm fucking around here?"

Dave studies it carefully. 'Yes?' he tries.

"Wrong answer." Bro vanishes and Dave at last manages to stop time before the elder Strider can complete his latest impossible feat of ninja-like speed. Bro is left frozen - on the ceiling.

Dave stares up in horror at his brother, who was apparently going to attack Dave from above like a goddamn spider, Jesus fucking Christ who even does that?! Where did Lil Cal come from, and why is the puppet's arm wrapping around Bro's ankle? How is his towel staying attached - oh fuckity fuck, there are just so many questions Dave wants to ask but can't, for the sake of his already dwindling sanity in this insane puppet house.

Seriously, sometimes he thinks Bro doesn't explain shit not because he's a cagey asshole, but because if Dave honestly got straight answers for once he'd probably flog himself raw with his own brainstem to make the knowledge fuck off right out of his brain again.

Unfortunately Dave is so caught up in these horrified internal ramblings that he runs over the limit of his time stop, and Bro snatches the apple juice crate from his arms without delay. 'Bro, I told you not to dick around with my apple juice!' Dave signs. He is seriously just one more puppet from doing an artful triple backflip out the window and into a swimming pool of apple juice. He has a time loop waiting for him to finish the circle back in his room, and then he needs to get out on the streets to continue his secret spying missions.

See, he doesn't spend all his time mindlessly building an apple juice monopoly by buying up small independently owned juice manufacturers - he also spends nights beating the shit out of criminals. Yeah, he rarely has time to go out during the day and fight ironically at the same time Bro does, but fuck, Dave has the right to change his hero schedule whenever he wants. He is a strong independent time traveler who don't need no overbearing big bro.

"When is the last time you went out and did that dumbass hipster photography thing?" Bro says, setting Lil Cal on top of the crate, which is actually a pretty good way to guarantee Dave will be too freaked out to go near it. Damn. "The past ten days, you've been working on this apple fuckery nonstop. Time for a break, kid. Go remix something, dammit."
'Look, if you're just pissy that I skipped out on working with you yesterday, I'll go tomorrow or something, Ambrose.' Dave spells out that name with extra emphasis on each letter to get his point across. Surreptitiously, he drops one hand to check his pockets. He thinks he has a few novelty ninja stars in there somewhere that he might be able to use to knock Lil Cal off balance without actually having to touch the possessed thing. 'We can go beat up drug dealers, that's always hilarious. It'll be a suuuper fun bonding activity, and then you can go back to the puppet thing and we'll forget this ever happened.'

"Should never have let you talk to older Lalonde," Bro says, his lip curled down at the mention of his real name, which will never not be hilarious. "Kid, if you don't lay off that name and trash the apple juice in the next five minutes, I will give you such an ass-kicking. I indulged your obsession for the past week, and I am officially past the indulgent parent stage."

'Hero-work isn't exactly a paying gig, Bro,' Dave fires back. 'Gonna need some cash flow when you get all old and decrepit and can't make puppet porn anymore.'

"You have a problem."

'You have puppets!'

"Yeah, and maybe I was somehow hoping I wouldn't fuck you up so bad while raising you that you'd turn out like me!" Bro yells. His volume actually goes up, and Dave is so shocked by the sudden noise that he almost misses the words themselves. "But look, great, we all have the same addictive personalities. I keep you away from the alcohol, and you just fixate on apple juice instead, like a demented four year old. Awesome, I managed to raise the exact opposite of a well-adjusted kid, well done me." Bro rubs at his eyes under the shades, pinching the brow of his nose. "I swear, with my genes and Lalonde's, no wonder you both ended up so -"

Bro realizes he's fucked up long before it clicks with Dave, clamping his mouth shut and flinching. Exactly ten seconds tick by in Dave's head before his brain kicks into gear, and he switches from being confused by Bro's silence to being confused by WHAT.

'What - did you just say?'

"Fuck." Bro takes a step back. "Fuck, kid, you didn't hear that." He grimaces, and Lil Cal wraps around his neck, like a defense mechanism got triggered. "Uh. I swear, if I left my jeans at Lalonde's -"

'You know, all the backpedaling and trying to cover your ass? That's making me the opposite of suspicious, clearly. Ha, ha.' Dave hacks out a gasping cough that's meant to be a laugh, but then his hands just keep going, and the question spills out, 'Did you just imply that Lalonde and I are siblings?!'

The silence that ensues lasts too long. The only noise is this high-pitched wheezy whine that kind of wobbles, and Dave doesn't realize he's the one making it until Bro raises both hands in a conciliatory gesture, Lil Cal crawling off to whatever dark corner it inhabits when Bro isn't using it to freak people out. "Dave, breathe."

"Eeeeeeemnaagh?" Dave wheezes, gasping in a breath of air, wanting to smack himself for making such a completely uncool sound even as his hands get into gear. 'This is a joke. This is some new level of irony that I can't even comprehend. Awesome, good job, I bow before your superior coolkid gambit. Truly, your mysterious ways transcend irony.'

"Irony! Yeah, that - about that," Bro says too loudly, hitching his towel up awkwardly and oh fuck
he's still grimacing. Bro has held an expression for more than thirty seconds. In fact, according to Dave's impeccable sense of time, Bro has looked like he's about to crawl under a box and hide there for nearly a minute and 26 seconds. Finally, the elder Strider shoves his hair back, drops of water still running down his temples. He just looks tired, now. "This is the part where I tell you that - no. No, that wasn't irony, Dave."

Dave's vision narrows down to a blurry tunnel, and all he can see is that crate of apple juice that has suddenly lost all appeal.

He - he needs to get out of here. Hooooly shit, he needs to get out of this apartment because it just him or is it really kinda claustrophobic in here? His lungs are working too fast, and the whining has started up again, and pain stabs through his throat in a jerking spasm that feels like having his throat cut before, in a panic, he twists time backward.

-He's probably making a huge fucking mistake, but the panic is too much, cutting right through all the careful control he usually exerts over the agonizing time travel. When he rips himself out of the sensory fugue, he falls to his knees, breathing hard still.

His internal clock says he's about thirty minutes ago, which isn't all that bad, considering how very uncontrolled that jump was. He can hear the shower running in the bathroom, which means Bro is still in there at this point in time. The major problem, and the one that slams right through the tangled panic of I have a sister?! is that no future-Dave set up the loop. It's one of Dave's most stringent rules: thou shalt not dick around with the time stream unless a future-Dave confirms the end of the loop. He'd been two seconds from finishing the earlier loop off right before Bro decided to pull some kind of Star Wars 'you have a long lost sister routine'. He remembers a future-Dave visiting before he left his room earlier, but surely even a notoriously reticent other-Dave would happen to mention something as fucked up as this.

But yeah. He needs to get out of here before Bro notices there's two of him wandering around the apartment again. It's pretty much an unspoken fact in the Strider household that Dave time travels on a regular basis now, but Bro has never actually said out loud that he knows about the mess of loops Dave handles all the damn time. It's just assumed, and Dave does his best to follow made-up time traveler etiquette by having only one or two Daves in the apartment at a time. He starts flashstepping out of the apartment. He hits every trap on the way down the stairs and absentmindedly clearing the path for the Dave who goes down to pick up the apple juice delivery in thirty minutes.

Fuck, time travel is weird.

Suddenly having a possible bio-sis is weirder.

Like. Shit. Are Dave and Rose even the same age? Are they actually twins, not just creepy mystery siblings? Dave is shit at judging people's ages, but there can't be more than a year's difference between him and Rose, tops.

Does Rose know about this?

...One way to find out. Nursing a massive post-time travel throat and headache, Dave massages at his trachea with one hand while the other flips out his phone and opens Pesterchum.

TG: lalonde
TG: fuck, you dont like that name please dont murder me with magic tentacles
TG: anyway
TG: tell me you didnt know about this
TG: because fuck
TG: if you knew about this before this is the kind of thing you dont just sit on
TG: shit shit shit
TG: of all the times to go radio silent
TG: did john know
TG: no fuck john cant keep a secret to save his life the adorable bastard
TG: this is serious business i need you to tell me this isnt true
TG: are we siblings

There continues to be an extremely persistent and totally unfair silence on Rose's end of this conversation, and Dave is freaking out, trying to run through the evidence in his head and somehow disprove this insane load of horseshit. So what, they're both blonde, but it's a totally different kind of blonde, right? Dave's working the whole nearly-albino angle, and Rose is some kind of pale golden blonde. To put it dorkier photographic terms that Dave would never speak aloud, even if he could speak, she's just more saturated than him. Crazy evil grimdark Rose had hair even whiter blonde than Dave's, but obviously those were extenuating circumstances. His skin is darker from burning and tanning all the damn time in the Houston sun, and she's got the deathly pallor going on.

They don't look similar. They can't look similar. Dave stops dead in the middle of the street and actually slaps his face, messing with his nose and the sides of his face in a way that probably looks utterly uncool to anyone passing by. But he has to try to feel out his cheekbones dammit. He pats at them in uncomfortable silence, and suspects that what he is doing is in fact incredibly stupid. Lalonde has cheekbones like a goddamn knife, you could sharpen diamonds on those suckers, and Dave would definitely have noticed having a second pair of really sharp objects on his person when he looked in the mirror this morning, so their facial structure is different, too -

"Dave."

Oh hell. Dave rips his hand off his face and signs off Pesterchum with a last message.

TG: oh fuck me bro caught up
TG: answer me rose

Then he puts the phone away and stops time, flinging himself down the nearest alley. He's under no illusions that he's faster than Bro - how did the guy even know to look for him outside? Dave's been wandering for nearly fifteen minutes, stupidly wasting time he could have used to hide out somewhere, while Bro would only have been searching for five minutes, from his perspective - but maybe if he just keeps walking away Bro will take the hint and back off.

Yeah, right. Like Bro's ever known when to back off in his entire life.

Ten minutes later Dave is leaping across the rooftops. He's still got his shades on, which is dumb, because he's usually good about switching over into Flashstep mode when he's doing random rooftop running, but like hell is he exposing his face to Bro. He knows Bro is around here somewhere, keeping pace with Dave.

Now that he's gotten some fresh air, Dave feels a little steadier. Maybe. Enough to want more answers, anyway. He skids to a halt, using an arm to brace himself as he slips in the gravel on top of the roof he choose to stop on.
'Will you stop stalking me!' Dave signs to the empty air, when all he wants to do is flip the fuck out and scream. Of all the times to end up mute, it would have to be the month he gets hit with this bombshell.

It takes a second, but then Bro appears. At least he put on clothes instead of stalking Dave around Houston in a questionable towel. "It's not stalking, it's parenting. So help me god, I will ground you from time traveling if you don't siddown and talk this out with me like a fucking adult."

'Make up your mind - either you're still parenting me or I'm an adult,' Dave signs bitterly. Another thought comes to mind, a complication Dave's never really concerned himself with before. Bro is Bro. Except now… 'Wait - you told me I was adopted! Now suddenly I really do have your creepy puppet-genes?! Are you my brother or my dad or my niece or what?! Seriously, you need to clear this up right now.'

Bro is quiet and unreadable for a long moment, before looking off to the side. "...It's complicated."

'That is bullshit -'

"Genetically, yeah, it's a parental relationship," Bro blurts out, rubbing his face with a hand. "In words you would understand - I am the father. It is me."

That's kind of... not what Dave expected. He wants to rip at his hair, but he can't show emotion right now. He's already been pissy enough, and he needs to regain his chill. He will be chill about this. So chill. Ice cubes will be jealous. 'I mean, how would that even work? Come on, I thought you were gay. Or puppet-sexual.' That last one requires some creative hand signs to get across, and Dave's hands feel unclean afterward. 'And what - so, you and Lalonde -'

"Eurrrrgh, no." Bro still hasn't removed his hand from his face, and Dave has to wonder if maybe this conversation isn't equally awkward for both Striders involved. "Not ever. Look, it involved science. Science, and several meteorites, and probably someone, somewhere, being profoundly stupid." His lips quirk. "And that's how you were born, David."

...None of that made sense. But now Bro is looking at Dave with an expression close to relief, as though that actually did make sense to him, and Dave is just too dumb to understand. And like hell is he going to admit to confusion now. The last thing he needs is to show any more weakness in front of Bro. 'Alright. Meteors 'n shit. The usual,' he replies, wishing at the least that he had his collar back so he could lather on the sarcasm. Fuck, he hates how this mute thing ruins the tone of his sick burns.

That alone time is sounding better and better right now; Dave is still flying blind in terms of time-travel tonight, but he fully intends to go to that spying shindig at some point. He needs to ditch Bro and think this news that he has a meteor-sister over until he can get in touch with Rose herself. Also, at some point, he needs to blab to John because holy shit.

The main problem with all of this is that Bro is a total bastard. Dave is going to have to travel back in time again if he really, for sure, wants to stop Bro from following him around town out of some misplaced brotherly - fatherly?! - concern. Striders don’t show affection and concern like normal people, and Dave has no patience for Bro's devoted stalking tonight.

Maybe if he gets to beat up some members of the Midnight Crew, it will help him work through these new emotional issues that he's not in any way admitting actually exist. 'Cool. Awesome. Later,' he signs, saluting Bro with flawless irony before turning to walk away.

''And where do you think you're going?" Bro asks.
To his immense frustration, Dave has to stop marching away and turn to sign his reply. 'Out!' "You dumb fuck, we're already outside. Where out here are you going?"

'To see a movie!' Dave lies blatantly.

Bro just scratches at his chin and maybe - maybe - shrugs his shoulders just a tad. His body language is back to its usual bare minimum, now that he thinks they've gotten through this uncomfortable episode. "Just as long as you're not about to freak out and be an idiot about this -" he begins.

'We're cool,' Dave interrupts. He freezes his entire face so nothing leaks through. He has no illusions that he can out-pokerface Bro; he just needs to convince the guy Dave is totally on board with the meteor-baby thing and then Dave can jump back in time again and freak the hell out more privately. Maybe, if he's feeling really uncool, he can even find a dark alleyway and have a nice quiet meltdown. 'And look. Fuck. I'll get rid of some of the AJ when I get back.'

He didn't mention he'd get rid of the apple juice by drinking it. That much was implied.

Bro sniffs, like the whole apple juice debacle no longer matters. "Whatever kid. Just be up early tomorrow. We're bonding."

'Sure.' Dave is probably too terse, but he's always a bit more laconic when he's forced to rely on his hands, so hopefully Bro doesn't notice the difference. 'This was a shitty intervention, I hope you know.'

"It was a fantastic intervention, brat. Just tell your sister I said hey." Bro grins like a cocky cock and vanishes, leaving Dave to his new emotional trauma.

Goddammit, Bro. Too soon.

- 

He's halfway to the movie theater in a more rundown part of town when the cueball shows up. Again.

It's been doing that on and off, lately, appearing in midair above him and generally acting like the creepy murderghost it secretly is. Sure, the cueball hasn't tried to actually murder him (yet) but it is definitely racking up a creepy X10 combo. The Quandary told him to blow the thing up, but Dave has been kind of busy being the Steve Jobs of apple juice, so he hasn't really thought about purchasing explosives too much.

Dave stops and waits for a good five minutes, checking his phone while he waits to see if the creepy-ass spying eyeball is going to float down to his level where he can try stabbing it without flinging swords around like a shitty circus freak. Neither Rose nor John have responded to his kind of really urgent pesterings, while is kind of a bummer, but he just has to remind himself that John is probably already doing the hero thing at this time of night in Seattle. The kid starts early. He doesn't know what excuse Rose has, but he doesn't know her as well as he knows John. Before this, he's literally only texted her maybe once? And that was only in response to some kind of weird mutual contract she proposed that had to do with watching out for John. Yeah, Dave didn't really read the fine print there.

Oh god, Rose is his sister. Fuck. Why the hell did Bro need to vomit up that little tidbit? Of all the things in the world Dave would actually have been totally okay with not knowing, this pretty much tops the list. Seriously, what shitty hero comic did he pull the 'long lost sister' plot line from? Bull. Shit.
And - and - wait, is that a spider with hot choclety milk? Dave snersks and then slaps a hand over his mouth before realizing **holy fuck when did he open Tumblr**. He closes out of the app, gasping as he puts the phone away. That was too close for comfort. That site is a fucking blackhole, and seriously, he has no memory of opening it up. The last thing he remembers is Pesterchum, how does this kind of shit even happen?

Where was he? Fucking focus, Strider. Coughing, Dave scans the air around him until he finds the cueball again. It's at a diagonal above him now, hovering in lazy loops around a street light, and seems content to watch him from there. He sighs and pauses time, flashstepping up the side of the light post and kicking off with his sword drawn. He slices through the air where the cueball should be, but hits nothing. He falls through the transparent cueball and lands in a crouch, looking up just in time to see the white ball flicker and vanish.

He's beginning to suspect the Quandary was full of bullshit when she explained this thing. There was a lot of talk about 'observing you' and 'blow that shit up' from what Dave recollects, and none of that matters because the cueball doesn't even seem to be a solid object. It watches him, sure, but he's starting to think the real cueball is hiding out elsewhere, and all he sees is some bizarre projection of its ungodly wandering eye.

He'd say murderghost again, but that's getting kind of old, and now that the image is in his head, all he can think of is the eye of Sauron being replaced by a giant white cueball.

…Not that he's watched those movies or anything. Or read the books. Or anything like that. He has way more cool things to do with his time, and if he ever cracked open one of those high fantasy books, it was done solely in the interest of high irony, thanks very fucking much.

Anyway. Yeah. Back on track, here. Dave plays it so very cool, glancing up at the night sky so he looks totally inconspicuous as he wanders further down the street. Now that the sensation of being watched constantly has faded with the cueball's disappearance, he's feeling almost normal again. Less paranoid, anyway. If there's one thing Dave is good at, it's letting his mind run off on random tangents until he can forget the things he doesn't want to think about. And he doesn't want to think about anything to do with potential siblings at all.

He halts by an old unused mailbox, scuffing his shoes against the curb as he pretends to be absorbed in the boarded up windows of the old pharmacy across the street. It looks like someone was eating barbeque here, and the food they dropped has been rotting for about a week, being torn at by insects and rats and whatever the fuck else likes running around in the dark.

Really, though, he's thinking about the movie theater just down the road. From out here, it looks like your pretty standard Cinemark gone wrong, the bleached sun marks where the letters of the sign used to be still legible. The little windows where they hung up posters of the movies that were currently showing were emptied ages ago, leaving the place anonymous and nondescript.

It wouldn't be any different from the other abandoned businesses along this particularly unlucky street, except for the fact that Dave tracked a member of the Midnight Crew back here and set up surveillance for an entire night using a future-Dave so he could scope out the situation. It's not like he was going to run in there half-cocked, okay? The BQ might be an evasive dame, but she was right - he can't just barge in and start beating the shit out of them. Having talked with John more over the past few days than he has in months, he's pretty much got the lowdown on these guys, enough to know that they can be pretty nasty when crossed. Maybe not enough to earn the irrational, uncharacteristic fury they seem to rouse in Bro whenever the Crew gets brought up in casual conversation, but dangerous enough that Dave took fucking precautions, all right?

But yeah, there's a reason he didn't want Bro knowing where he was headed. As in many respects,
Bro's hate for the Crew is just a bizarre new potential trap Dave has to avoid triggering. Besides, no matter how much Bro might advocate running as the solution to a Crew infestation, Dave is more of the 'run them out of town' mindset. It certainly seemed to have worked out just fine for John, the last time he checked.

And now, it's time for some more in-depth recon.

He has changed into a nice dark suit just for the occasion, too, with a fucking sicknasty scratched record sigil on the lapel. He's torn for a moment about maybe taking off his shades to go into full-on hero mode, but he decides against it; if the Midnight Crew really are sniffing around being dumbfucks to try to find the Flashstep, there's no need to go flashing his handsome mug for everyone to admire. If anyone asks, Dave is currently in super-spy mode, and he is going to totally blend in with the real Crew members in the building.

This plan is goddamn flawless.

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Dave takes a deep breath and lets the last of the tension unknot in his stomach, walking toward the movie theater.

Time to be suave. As. Fuck.

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The minute Karkat and Crabdad are out the door, a hand descends on John's shoulder with the weight of an anvil. He's shocked enough that his dad wheels him around with ease, Samuel Egbert's icy blue eyes tense as he watches John. "John? John, look at me, I need you to focus."

"Y-yeah," John replies weakly, but he can feel himself tailspinning on the inside. There's an inkling of helplessness trying to gnaw its way into his head, and he quashes it as best he can. But he's not a magician like Rose; he can't go into his own head and remake everything so it works better. He's stuck with this shitty depression that rears its ugly head at the worst possible times, a constant murmur in the back of his mind.

You should have known better than to think you'd get to keep him. Being partners with some random hero you picked up off the street was doomed to end in catastrophe, and it's your fault you didn't see this coming -

The only really useful thing he ever got out of those official therapy sessions though, is the knowledge that the depression isn't logical. It fucking sucks, and it's hard, but John forces himself to think through it and nod at his dad. "Okay. We go over it, step by step," John rasps, holding himself together through sheer force of will. If he and his dad can get through their usual play-by-play, he's sure they can sort this out, and once they do John can shove the hard, solid, irrefutable facts at his dysfunctional brain until it can't keep up that litany of self-deprecation anymore.

It helps - it really does - that John painfully, intensely, wants to believe in Hemogoblin. No way does John intend to give up trusting his fellow hero until the moment he finds hard proof that Hemogoblin actually was involved in - in -

"Start simple. Start with the facts. What did the first report say about the explosion at the police station?" his dad says. His voice is like a lifeline, firm and unyielding and familiar, and John grabs hold. "You remember this, John, I gave you the copy of the official report. Run me through it."

"A man claiming to be the legal representative of Hearts Boxcars entered the station," John rattles off, closing his eyes and trying to picture the scene in his mind. "He had a briefcase that was not
inspected like it should have been, and demanded a private session with his client, during which he and Hearts constructed a functional bomb and used the ensuing chaos to make their escape. Eyewitness accounts generally agree that the perpetrator was a man in his late thirties with darker hair but no real distinguishing marks."

"Not a troll, then," Samuel states. "Could Hemogoblin have snuck into the precinct to assist in delivering parts for the device at any point?"

John's whole mind revolts at the thought. But he knows what his dad is doing, and he knows they have to consider every angle, question any possibility. "He could have done it out of costume," John says, counting backward from ten in his head. "The report states that only the human lawyer and Hearts were in the holding room itself, but a...potential accomplice could have snuck in with other parts of the bomb and passed them on to the lawyer."

"There's no evidence that that was the case," Samuel says, his voice still level. "I can request more information from my police contact, but in a room filled with at least twenty five people, more than half of them police, none of them mentioned the lawyer interacting with anyone but the officer behind the desk, the escorting officer, and Hearts Boxcars. Even a brief interaction with a young troll would have been noted."

"He could still have done the same thing, but before the lawyer even arrived at the station," John realizes. By this point Samuel has drawn them both back over into the kitchen, where Samuel can pace and John can lean one hand on the table to support himself. John can vaguely remember a time when they'd always gone to his dad's office to discuss this kind of thing, but those interactions had been tainted by John's breakdown, and they switched to the kitchen in the years since. He hasn't actually been in the office in...ages. "He helped fight Hearts Boxcars, but that would easily have been a front."

"But the police would have no reason to suspect him if such an interaction took place so long before the explosions. They wouldn't even have been aware of that kind of scenario. We can't speculate that wildly; we'd run ourselves senseless." Samuel shakes his head, his hands locked behind his back. "No, it's this blood evidence that has me most concerned," Samuel says, still pacing from the kitchen table to the fridge and back with tight strides. John understands the impulse to move; he thinks if he tries to move from this spot, he'll scream and set off an accidental whirlwind in the kitchen. Which would be kinda not cool and would definitely cause a lot of trouble for his dad.

But wait. There was something - "The blood evidence?" John says. He presses at his eyelids with the heels of his palms, and remembers. "Hang on. Hemogoblin said he got caught in the secondary explosion on the roof, but that the damage wasn't too extensive. Otherwise he wouldn't have been out fighting the next night." Hope springs up because that - that's plausible. "If he lost blood during that, it's possible the police just picked up on it, and jumped to conclusions." By the end of that, John is talking at twice the usual speed, his eyes wide as he realizes that yes, this is a totally logical sequence of events. There is the possibility, a very strong one, that Hemogoblin just goofed after nearly getting blown up - which is totally understandable! - and didn't suck all the blood back into his body to heal an injury, like he had with the cut on his cheek. John doesn't know how all the troll's powers work, after all.

"The explosion meant for you," his dad murmurs, eyes pained. "I really don't like this, John. I don't like just how rapidly this Midnight Crew has escalated to targeting you directly. And where does Hemogoblin fit into all this?"

They're still mid run-through. Time to finish it out. John could almost cry with relief right now, having found such a simple explanation for why the police would consider Hemogoblin a suspect,
"He could have lied. You have only his word for it, after all. And by falsifying that kind of information, he could convince you to trust him all the more," Samuel points out.

Oh, no. John gnaws on his lip, hard enough that he forgets himself and actually draws blood. "True," he has to concede eventually. "But I also don't think it would make sense for him to fake it and then end up in a position where the police would consider him a suspect. That just causes unnecessary trouble for him; this could all end really badly if he actually gets arrested and unmasked."

"The only way to get a better sense of things -"

"-is to ask him myself," John finishes.

And. Actually. Wow, it really does make a lot more sense now. John's no longer close to blacking out from hopeless panic, and he blinks, surprised.

His dad nods, a smile at the corner of his lips. He's no longer pacing back and forth, and in fact he reaches the table and begins picking up the dirty dishes still leftover from their abruptly ended dinner with Karkat and Crabdad. On autopilot John makes a move to help clean up, but Samuel shakes his head. "It's a little early in the night, but you need to keep on top of this," he advises, running water in the sink. "After that news report, Hemogoblin will be feeling the pressure, whether the accusation is true or not."

"Good idea." John turns, and then hesitates, turning back toward his dad with his arms folded. "You thought that was what happened from the start," John huffs, but his frown is good-natured, a smile tugging up his lips so his teeth show. He gets it. His dad might be duly suspicious of Hemogoblin, as an unknown element who could at any moment prove to be a threat to John's hero work, but he's also aware of just how excited John is about their partnership. In a situation like this, Samuel is way more neutral and objective than John, and he used that to talk John through a near meltdown.

His dad is pretty freaking awesome.

"I had a hunch, after the initial shock faded," Samuel admits, his eyes crinkling up in an answering grin. He pats John on the shoulder before sobering. "Where this Midnight Crew is concerned, I don't think we can afford to underestimate them. The fact that the police department jumped straight to seeing Hemogoblin as a suspect, rather than a potential victim caught in the crossfire, seems a little fishy to me."

John grimaces. "We already knew when Hearts got out on bail earlier that they have connections in the legal system. Pretty strong ones, too." He straightens up, his eyes already flicking towards the stairwell. "If Hemogoblin is being framed, he could end up in a whole lot of trouble, really fast. Ohhh man."

"Go, go," Samuel says, waving a hand at him. With all that finally settled, John hurtles up the stairs. It's early in the night, but the sky gets dark pretty early still, so he should have enough cover to get out of his room without being spotted. Taking down the poster on his wall, he uses both keys to unlock the safe and pull out Heir's costume, and starts kicking his jeans off, hopping in place. The instinct to hurry thuds in his chest, and he nearly falls flat on his face before the wind catches him and shoves him upright again.

He's so used to discarding some of the more extraneous sensory input he gets from his power, it takes
him a moment to register his dad's breathing, the slight stirring in the air that means Samuel is standing in the doorway of John's bedroom. John stiffens and turns, the darker half of his brain already whispering that something else must have gone wrong, has to have gone wrong, because his dad hasn't seen John off for patrol in - years, it must be. Since he first trusted John to fight crime solo, even.

Baahhhh. He needs to stop thinking so negatively! All this drama is cramping his style! Dave would totally not approve, John decides, and he brightens a little before pulling up the straps of his goggles to snap them on. "Yeah, Dad?"

John's attitude does little to alleviate the tense wrinkles still crunching at the corner of his dad's eyes. He steps further into the room. "John. Are you sure you can handle tonight?" Samuel grips John by the chin and makes him meet his gaze.

John still feels a little off, yeah, but he's no longer spinning in the blind, helpless panic from before. He's got his center back. Seeing his dad's reassuring concern just solidifies that. John may be air, but his dad is bedrock, grounding him even when everything else seems to be falling apart. "I've got it," John replies, smiling back. For a moment, he is absolutely crystal clear, balance and centered and whole. Then his dad releases his grip with a proud nod, and John slings Casey onto his back.

His dad is still watching as Heir tips out the window, the air whisking him up into the sky before any of the neighbors could see anything suspicious. Grim and worried, but no longer breaking, Heir urges the wind onward with a murmur and streaks toward downtown Seattle.

Either Hemogoblin has been framed, in which case he needs some serious help, or he really was involved in one of the explosions, and he needs to be caught. Heir has to brace himself for either option.

But he knows which one he desperately needs to be the case.

- 

Hemogoblin, however, is as elusive tonight as he ever was those first few weeks the troll hero started working. No matter how Heir frets at the breeze, it whirls around him in confusion and pulls him toward the scene of another minor crime. And yeah, it's not like Heir is just gonna fly away from a crime in progress! But after the fourth mugging, he's getting antsy again. This kind of crisis can't afford to wait; he needs to meet up with Hemogoblin, like, yesterday! Arghhh. Of all the times for the wind to waffle over Hemogoblin.

Heir is wondering, though, if it's not secretly his own fault. The moment that thought hits him, he jerks to a halt midair. He's somewhere near cloud level, just beneath the looming puff of a misty grey cloud, illuminated by the light of the city below. He flattens out on his back and closes his eyes, forcing himself along that train of thoughts.

The connection he has with the breeze has always been a little obscure, even to John. Sure, he can throw air around in blasts and summon hurricanes, but he's just as much guided by the wind as he guides it. Someone like Rose would probably analyze the ability until she understood every aspect of how it interacted with his mind, but usually John just accepts that it works. If the wind disapproves of an action, or senses some danger it thinks he can't handle, as it had the night of the bank explosion, it makes its opinion very clear, to the point of nearly dropping John altogether to make him listen.

But the fact is, John's emotions and thoughts affect the wind, too - when he was little, even the slightest burst of laughter or tears could whip up the air around John into a frenzy, probably one of the first signs his dad probably had that he wasn't exactly dealing with a normal kid. His training
since then has helped repress some of that seamless flow of sensory input between him and the air - if he walked around with an open channel between him and his powers, he probably would start floating everyone at school out of sheer exhilaration, just like Dave is always teasing him about. No, his dad taught him control for a good reason.

But still. Emotions do continue to slip through John's tight grip on the connection. And right now, while John - Heir - may feel the pressure to find Hemogoblin right away, he's also painfully anxious and worried about it. If his nervousness is strong enough, it's no wonder the breeze is getting confused, torn between two conflicting impulses.

Safe up here, facing the clouds, Heir pulls down his mask and gulps down as large a breath of air as he can. The cool night air shoots straight to his brain, dissipating the last of his nervous fog, and he firms his mouth in a frown before tugging the dark mask back up over the lower half of his face.

"Take me to Hemogoblin, now. We need to settle this," he tells his personal breezes, the ones who always tend to cradle and wrap first around his body when he leaves the house.

This time, the response is immediate and decisive, and he knows acknowledging his nervousness helped clarify his intent. An excited gale loops around Heir's waist and tugs at his wrist like an eager puppy, and he lets it usher him into the night.

- 

Heir loops low over the rooftop. He knows he spotted someone moving fast across the roofs in this general area, and the breezes are quite sure this is the place to be if he wants to meet Hemogoblin. They're overly active still, whipping at his jacket and sneaking up the hems of his pants' legs, and Heir knows he needs to tone them down for the sake of his own sense of control, if nothing else. Instead, he directs them to spiral outward gently, so he can trying to sense the breathing patterns of anyone who might be hiding out up here - hopefully Hemogoblin.

"Heir! Heir, hey!"

Or, uh. Hemogoblin could just...run right up to him? Heir blinks and twists, still hovering in midair, and spies the other hero at last. He's three roofs away and moving fast, dashing toward Heir's position with none of his usual flips and aerial acrobatics mid-leap when he jumps the gaps. John curls one defensive wind around his body, just in case (Hemogoblin is running really fast, okay?), but otherwise he lands on the surface of the roof, waiting as Hemogoblin lands in a roll on this particular roof.

When the troll straightens up, Heir immediately shifts his evaluation of this whole mess more firmly into the 'Hemogoblin was framed' box, because Hemogoblin looks apprehensive, something like more like fear in his red eyes as he hesitates and takes a half of a step away from Heir. It's hard to tell with the clouds blocking out a lot of the moonlight, The troll falls into a pretty flawless approximation of his usual seductive posture, but for right now Heir is toooootally immune. They've got too much Serious Business to discuss, and Hemogoblin knows it too, judging by the paleness of his face. "Hemogoblin," he says, pushing his hood back up - it had flown back from his face at some point during the flight over. "Dude, please tell me you've got an explanation that makes sense because holy shit, man."

"I know," Hemogoblin replies, grimacing. "I've been trying to catch up with you all night, but I kept losing track of you. You move fast."

Oops. "My bad. I've been trying to find you too and kept getting sidetracked by work. Sorry." It's the truth, at least on one level. Hemogoblin does not need the dissertation on Heir's mental issues with
"Yeah." Hemogoblin draws a shaky breath. In the state of nervy anxiety that Heir can still feel coloring his thoughts, he's more aware of that breath than usual, and can almost follow the breeze right down into the troll's lungs, which is just plain disorienting. "Look, I have no idea where this is coming from. I just - saw the press conference, and holy fuck, look at that, I'm a suspect for arson. And when I tried to punch out a guy at a gas station robbery, he tried to call the cops on me."

Heir winces because yeah, that would suck. "Do you know how they might have gotten you as a suspect? All you told me about that night was you got caught in the second explosion. I thought you weren't hurt all that badly."

Hemogoblin flinches and oh man that's not the reaction Heir wanted to get. It means something's up. "I...got some injuries from the shrapnel," he says, not quite meeting Heir's eyes. "I healed it, naturally, but I was in a hurry to catch up with Hearts. I didn't even think about the blood I got all over the roof in the process of getting shredded."

And yeah, there's something Hemogoblin is sitting on, Heir can tell. Now that Hemogoblin is standing right in front of him, Heir's not getting any kind of bad vibes from him at all - the wind is interested but not aggravated or defensive. He'd generally take that as a good sign that Hemogoblin could be trusted, but he's also aware that he really wants to believe that to be the case, and his emotional bias has affected the wind already tonight. This sucks. He can't trust himself to be objective half the time when Hemogoblin is involved. "Is there anything else you remember?" Heir urges, spreading out his hands. "Like, did anyone see you on the roof? I don't think there would be any camera up there, unless they were watching the stairwell, and it's sounds like the blood evidence is the only thing they really have on you."

"I don't know," Hemogoblin says, sounding frustrated. He's still not quite meeting Heir's eye. "I - I talked to an officer on the ground right after the first explosion, to figure out what was going on and see if you'd already been around. I didn't know you were gone that night, yet."

Shit. That little trip to Houston keeps coming back to bite Heir in the ass, and he winces inwardly. If he'd only been here that Friday night, maybe they could have caught Hearts together and prevented any accusations whatsoever. "I should have been here. I should have," he repeats, guilt-stricken. "I'm sorry -"

"It's not your fault/ I fucked up, okay!" Hemogoblin yells, running a claw up under his hood to tug at his hair. The motion tugs at - something - in Heir's chest, something really weirdly familiar. The troll finally meets Heir's eyes, and there's some kind of desperate fury in his expression. "I got all pissy and stupid over being blown up, and like a fucking moron I just took off running after the only lead I had at the time. I fucked it all up, and now this. Just - can you help me? Please. I know you have no reason to believe a word out of my fucking mouth, but I don't know what to do."

Another familiar crack in Heir's chest and - wow, all of a sudden, all he feels is sympathy for the troll in front of him. Hemogoblin looks absolutely miserable, and any lingering doubts Heir has kind of sweep to the back of his mind, where he can deal with them if and when he needs to. For right now, all his protective instincts just got flipped on. "It's okay, man," he says, trying to smile reassuringly in a way that's clear even behind his mask. "We're going to sort this out, one way or another. You didn't do the thing, so we've got that in our favor already. We just need to prove that you weren't anywhere nearby the station when the first explosion broke out, I think. They can babble all they want, but all they have is the blood from the roof, right? And I'm pretty sure they can't prove anything with that, since like you said it had to have come from an injury. You'd have no motive to blow yourself up on an empty rooftop."
It almost works. Heir can feel Hemogoblin's unsteady breathing start to settle back down, though the troll continues to fidget near the edge of the roof, ready to jump to the next at any sign of trouble. Their partnership is just still so *new*, Heir thinks. They don't have the kind of total trust they'd need to be comfortable with each other right now, at such a critical moment. "How do we convince *them* of that, though?" Hemogoblin asks. "It's not like I can walk up to them and announce 'hello police, I'm here to turn myself in.' They'd have the mask off in seconds, and I know you understand that's not an option." He looks up at Heir from under lowered eyelids.

"I do think we need to talk to someone from the station, though," Heir says, holding up his hands when Hemogoblin takes another step back. "We need to know how serious this accusation is, and exactly what they'd need to believe you weren't involved. When the Midnight Crew is involved, things are bound to be more complicated than we think. If Hearts or his fake lawyer left something else in the old station connected to you, it could be a pretty serious frame-up. We need all the facts, and we're not going to get them - or prove your innocence - unless we talk to a legit police officer. You need to be seen cooperating as much as you can."

"I can't just waltz into the station right now, Heir," Hemogoblin says, his voice strained. "You're human and more distant from this kind of thing, but trust me when I say it was bad enough that the police thought I was faking the red eyes. Now that they have proof -" the troll breaks off, miserable hatred contorting his face so quickly that Heir barely catches it before it is gone. "-proof that I'm a goddamn freak of nature, trust me, the troll cops are going to be gunning for me, regardless of this whole mess."

"You can't really think that," Heir says, wishing he could give this guy a hug. He looks worn out. Like seriously. The eye slits of Hemogoblin's mask are cut wide enough that Heir can see the dark shadows underlining each perfectly shaped candy-red eye. But he is not getting sidetracked by Hemogoblin's really pretty eyes at all *oh come on*. The point is, despite the fact that Hemogoblin is still *really attractive agggh*, he looks just as stressed as Heir would be if *he'd* just been accused of this kind of thing.

"I know it," Hemogoblin replies, folding his arms and looking out over the city. He looks like he's trying to hug himself now and Heir is giving serious thought to that hug thing *no no stop that* before the troll continues. "People can claim all the hemotype-blindness they want - when mutant-bloods show up, they don't generally last long. Human cops won't give two fucks, no, but trolls...I've got two different targets on my head right now, Heir. Even if I thought I could testify on my side of the story without risking being unmasked, I'd still be in the middle of a station full of skittish troll cops and Legislacerators."

Heir sighs heavily, still kind of skeptical - he's aware that there's at least a few cops on the force who must be corrupt, for the Crew to have won bail, but he thinks there would definitely be a bit more of an uproar if troll cops went around killing people willy nilly because they had a different blood color, from the human police at least! But he's not the candy-blooded troll here, and if Hemogoblin thinks this is too dangerous, he would probably know more about this particular situation that Heir. "Alright. New plan," Heir corrects himself, folding his arms too, to resist that hugging instinct. He most certainly does not want any excuse to touch dat banging bod- *nooooope*. "I know a contact in the station who sometimes passes stuff on to me. He'll probably be willing to come out on the roof of the new station to talk, and you can hang out somewhere out of sight until I can get him somewhere private. He's, uh, human, so the whole blood color thing won't be an issue, right?"

Hemogoblin relaxes a little, loosening his death grip on his own arms. Heir can see little indents in the troll's exposed grey skin, little crescent moons of red where his claws dug in that close over in a few seconds. "That should work," Hemogoblin concedes, still trying for that confidence nonchalance. It's ruined when he pauses again, his eyes flickering downward shyly. "Thank you.
"Don't worry. You're my partner," Heir says, grinning crookedly. "I, like, have to give you the benefit of a doubt before I start jumping to conclusions. Also, you're totally a newbie, I can't just let you deal with this by yourself!"

"Alright," Hemogoblin replies, the first hint of a real smirk finally appearing. Success, Heir thinks. "Mind giving me a ride?"

…

…No, going by the absence of the usual super-seductive look on Hemogoblin's face that he always gets when he's teasing Heir, he just imagined that one. Yup. Moving right along… "We're going to sort this out. Definitely!" Heir claps his hands together and mentally urges the wind to lift them both up. Still rough and a little frisky from Heir's high-strung emotions, the breeze that handles Hemogoblin plucks at the troll's hood and strands of his bangs. When Hemogoblin frowns and pulls the hood further forward with a slight pout, the wind whistle loudly and pulls him upward at the same time as Heir with force that blasts them wayyyy higher than they need to go. Hemogoblin raises an eyebrow at Heir and all he can do is blush furiously and try to soothe the twitchy winds without physically miming shooshpaps with his hands to accompany the soothing. He blames Karkat for that impulse.

When some of the gales come to sulk around Heir's ankle, he sees that the winds still wrapped around him and Hemogoblin are much less snarled and rambunctious. Good. Maybe he can even go through an entire night of working together with Hemogoblin without making himself look like a total dork, this time!

"Ready to go?" he asks, remembering his manners at the last minute.

Hemogoblin's face is set in a solemn frown as he glares out over the city. "Ready," is all he says, and then they're off.

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Idaho

Okay. Jade can explain.

See, Utah was boooring. So boring. Mostly because she spent half the time they were in the state paranoid because the Midnight Crew finally caught up. It seems whatever the creepy Clowntown from Mexico did to Clubs and his men wasn't permanent - which she is kind of grateful for. She'd been preoccupied with WV's mysterious collapse at the time, but she would have felt awful if she found out he'd given them brain damage or something with those weird fear powers.

Anyway, because Clubs mysteriously arrived, riding on a tricycle, along the banks of the Great Salt Lake, Jade had to cut their time in Utah short, and they detoured far to the east, way over into the Dakotas, just trying to put some space between them and Clubs. It's been about two days since the Crew last showed up, but Jade's not taking any chances. She 'commandeered' some supplies from a local university, created a localized spatial anomaly, and then had Bec teleport the container around the States while she and WV walked west. Bec left the anomaly somewhere in Carthage, Missouri, and when he came back Jade did her best to order it to tone down the radiation it gives off naturally. Bec usually seems to understand orders well enough; the problem is whether or not the wolf is actually capable of turning down the power it gives off. Jade thinks they've succeeded, at least temporarily.
But anyway, they ended up having to travel west the norrrrnormal way again, which meant they passed through all of Montana (which was gorgeous, with lots of neat people with guns Jade got to chat up along the way!) before Jade decided to divert them sharply south. Because she would have to be dumb as rocks to walk in a straight line to John's place so Clubs could follow her all the way there! So they end up looping through southeast Idaho.

And how is Jade supposed to resist the opportunity to visit the Craters of the Moon national preserve?! She can't, that's how! They just had to make a pitstop!

During the day, this place looks like a craggy, blasted wasteland, with the crumbly dark flood basalt leftover from past volcanic activity dull and dark. But Jade has made WV sit with her a few hours, and now it's sunset. Most of the other visitors to the nature preserve have either hightailed it for the visitor's center or headed back off to their vehicles, so they have the place mostly to themselves. Bec is curled up by her feet, its white body a circle on the dark earth, and WV is next to her. Now, Jade is just waiting for the sun to hit just the right angle, so she can see if it really -

The field before them begins to glitter in the slanting light, a glazed surface of the rock now wavering with a kind of silvery sheen. The more the sun sinks, the more the fragments reflect the light at odd angles, until the sun slips away and the effect is lost.

Short, but worth it, she decides. As the sky darkens and the moon takes over, a similar effect occurs, with a more bluish silver hue playing across the wavy surface of the basalt.

"Science," Jade breathes, resting her chin on her knees. She's more of a physics and space kind of gal, of course, but volcanoes and the like will always have a special place in her heart; it's hard to grow up right next to a semi-active volcano and not get attached! "You know, they have the same kind of flood basalts on the Moon, WV," she says, nudging the carapacian with her foot. "They call them the maria though. All the dark splotches are old volcanic floods."

The moon is out up above, having risen while the sun was still in the sky, and WV looks up obediently - politely, she thinks. It's hard to tell if any of this science stuff actually interests WV when he still can't talk, but he always listens and nods carefully to her explanations before going back to whatever game he's playing, off in his own little world. Right now he still has an empty can of Coke Zero and is busily working the can-opening tab off by wiggling it between his claws until it twists off. He then drops the tab into the empty can and shakes it. He'd been a little depressed upon learning that Jade couldn't locate any TaB today, but he seems to have recovered somewhat from the disappointment.

"Come on, we can go check out the lava tubes now. Though it might be too dark for that, actually" Jade says, patting the carapacian on the back. He's looking downright spiffy in his new sidekick duds, if she does say so herself! He's got the blue poncho folded up somewhere; he's really attached to that thing. "Probably just go get something to eat..."

WV perks right up at that one, and Jade smiles. She pulls her phone out of the pocket of her coat and holds it up, waiting for the signal to kick in. She's on a special plan put together by Grandpa that has complete coverage throughout 'all of time and space,' though she can't imagine when she'd ever need to worry about time! Biting her thumb, she gives the phone a jolt of power so the battery won't crap out on her while she's using Pesterchum.

It's really getting down to the wire, John! If he doesn't shape up soon, Jade will already be there by the time he answers all her emails. She's seriously starting to worry John won't be expecting her when she gets to Seattle. What if he and his guardian don't have room at the house? What if Jade is an inconvenience?! Oh no, she's getting nervous again…
Bluh. She'll just yell at John for being a dumb butt for a bit, and then call it a day.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering ghostyTrickster [GT] at 19:20:45 --
GG: joooooooooooohn~~~
GG: ughgh, i don't know why i always get my hopes up :(  
GG: i gonna put you in a chokehold until you apologize the minute i see you!  
GG: and then we can hug! not before. after.  
GG: it's a sacrifice i'm willing to make :/  
GG: i heard there were a lot of explosions over there recently tho - are you okay?  
GG: bahahaha! of course you're okay! you're my baby brother, i'm sure you did just fine. :)))  
GG: ...  
GG: it would be a lot easier to be an awesome supportive big sister if you would answer, yah know :P  
GG: even though it's just a few month's difference  
GG: ahhhh! i'm getting excited again! i can't wait to finally meet you in person!  
GG: i know you're just gonna love bec, too  
GG: grandpa always said bec was programmed to protect me, but i totally bet it will like you too, just like it likes wv  
GG: oooooh yeah! did i tell you?! wv officially joined team space!  
GG: i know you're not a spacy person really, but you can join too i bet.  
GG: because family totally gets a pass!  
GG: :)  
GG: well, i just wanted to tell you you're a total dumb butt for ignoring me all these years  
GG: or maybe that's just some traditional brother thing here in the us? grandpa never mentioned it, but he was british anyway.  
GG: is this a hazing thing :O how mean john!  
GG: ahaaha, i'll be there soon! and we can swap manly stories and talk about science and paint our toenails and beat people up!  
GG: i think that's what siblings do, anyway  
GG: it'll be AWESOME  
GG: good luck at work tonight, john!

Jade closes the phone and picks up WV under his arms, swinging him around in a wide spin that has him squeaking with surprise before hauling him onto her shoulders. He grips her hair like reins, scolding her with a crackle, and she laughs. "Come on, WV. We're on the homestretch!"

-  

Somewhere in the continental United States

It's a pretty damn rare occasion for all the members of the Midnight Crew to be in the same room at once, Hearts Boxcars muses, gnawing on the end of his cigar. Fuck if he doesn't wish he could light this sucker up, but he's too terrified of the possible reaction, if any, he might get from the Boss if he got smoke all in his fancy office. The Boss is unpredictable; yah never know what might set him off.

Diamonds is lounging up against the wall by herself, tapping away on her phone with that tense posture she gets when she's busy orchestrating shenanigans in a different time zone. Judging by the faintly dreamy look in her usually scornful eyes, it must be one of her ransom demands coming to fruition. Probably the senator's daughter she kidnapped sometimes last week. Hearts knows the look because he makes the same gleeful expression when he gets the opportunity to rip a bank vault's door off its hinges with his bare hands or a well-timed explosive.
Still a little weird to see Diamonds wearing makeup so openly and think 'she,' even years later, but hell, Hearts ain't judgin' anybody. And basically nothing about Diamonds Droog has changed, either - she's still the same uptight, snarky suit-obsessed maniac she always was, and he's gotta lot of respect for a dame who can beat the shit out of him in a fight. He knows he could overpower her in terms of sheer strength, but Diamonds is also perpetually angry and that kind of brutal rage is hard to argue with.

Meanwhile, Clubs is of course as all up in Diamonds's business as he conceivably can be, his short legs swinging over the side of the lime green table he's sitting on as he leans over to try and get a look at Diamonds's phone screen. Clubs is just someone whose existence Hearts is utterly resigned to; a bumbling troll who gets results on occasion, but whose function is generally a mystery. Diamonds gets the worst of it, anyway. The most Hearts has had to suffer through is the occasional drunken, sniffiling conversation over a drink with the little guy about how Diamonds ignores him. Yeah, he doesn't even wanna know. Phrases like 'WHY WON'T HE SHOOSH ME BACK' get thrown around too often when Clubs talks about Diamonds, and nope. Hearts is not touching that one with a thirty foot car antennae. Not ever. Relationship issues are not his department.

He just hopes the Boss gets around to explaining this little shindig before Clubs starts embarrassing himself. Hearts has so many better things to do with his time than cringe over incompetent paleflirting.

Like getting back to Seattle. There are two little shits over there he owes one helluva beatdown for all the bullshit they're putting him through, and he's still pissed the Boss pulled him before he could make sure they learned their goddamn lesson.

Now then. Shall we begin?

Hearts straightens up and adjusts his hat as the Boss turns away from his weird chess sphere at last, his gleaming white orb-head cushioned by the high back of his green armchair. Hearts's jaw works as he glances around at the other two Crew suit members, trying to tell if they know why they were all called here, either. He's not the best at reading faces, a'ight, but Clubs at least is an open book, and the troll looks as bemusedly confused as ever. Diamonds simply tucks her cell away in a pocket with a sigh, tilting her head as she catches Hearts staring. She smirks and looks to the Boss, and Hearts hastens to do the same.

The Boss folds his fingers together in a steeple.

In light of recent events, you all may be aware that I pulled you away from assignments rather abruptly. Rest assured that in actuality, this exact sequence of events was planned for quite a while ago. There was an element of the unpredictable due to the confounding nature of this universe, but it was only a matter of time. I owe you an apology in particular, Droog; I know you do dislike missions that never reach a conclusion, but I'm afraid I trusted you most with ensuring that certain game pieces moved into the most opportune position for the next move on the board.

Diamonds shifts slightly, and looks somewhat mollified. Hearts hasn't taken a slant at her latest mission reports, mostly because there were about six of them over the course of the past few weeks, all irritably labeled 'INCOMPLETE,' waiting in his email inbox and he's not all that good with the email app yet, alright? And Diamonds always formats her shit with the smallest possible font so that Hearts has to squint to make the fuzziness go away. It just gives him a headache.

"You did promise me something a little more concrete, boss," Diamonds presses, her voice a low murmur with almost all of her sarcastic edge repressed. "I trust I can still be of service?"
I did, didn't I. And I am of course a man of my word. First, though, Boxcars - would you care to give a brief overview of your work in Seattle?

Hearts startles, coughing awkwardly to cover his dismay as he adjusts his hat again. He can't bring himself to look at the Boss directly anymore - it's too unnerving - and Diamonds is judging him silently with a raised eyebrow as usual, so he focuses on Clubs's open, baffled face. At least Clubs doesn't fuckin' scare the hell outta him, even if he is an idiot. "Went into Seattle to set up the usual supply line," he grunts, clearing his throat again. "Got tagged by some windy kid hero on our first major heist. Him 'n his surprise partner did a number on the grunts, and we got evac'd from the lockup by one 'o Diamonds's. Thanks for that, Di."

Diamonds just shrugs bonelessly, flipping a hand to the side in dismissal. "Yes, I have Critchton working a misinformation racket as we speak. He's mildly competent with such matters."

When Diamonds says mildly competent, Hearts knows, she really means this Critchton character is one of her handpicked recruits, like that infuriating Marlowe chump who's standing outside the office doors right now on lookout. Hearts doesn't need much brains in his division of the Crew - he just needs guys and gals who can throw a goddamn punch and don't mind getting' in a tussle if a shipment goes awry. Clubs seems to have accumulated a team divided up into a mix of handlers who try to manage his more inane capers and nutjobs who like building giant robots and encouraging said capers. Diamonds has the most diversified division, covering everything from strategic kidnapping to targeted assassinations, and Hearts doesn't envy her the time-consuming task of managing all of her hyper-competent, overspecialized operatives.

I am familiar with Critchton's work. I'll leave the results of his little scheme a nice surprise for you, Droog. In the meanwhile, Droog, I'd like you to take over in Seattle shortly.

"What?!" Hearts and Diamonds shout in unison. Clubs squeaks and falls forward off the table.

"Sir, setting up new satellite camps is more Hearts's specialty than my own." Diamonds continues, kicking at Clubs impatiently when he timidly reaches out to pap at her ankle. "I - dammit, Clubs! I had hoped you would allow me to continue my pursuit of this Spades Slick."

"I can fucking handle those two hero fucks," Hearts then breaks in, his fists clenched. He should have pulverized those two punks the minute he laid eyes on 'em, not gone easy on the windy kid because he was just a kid. "Ave I ever let yah down before, boss?!"

Calm yourselves. Shhh. Help yourselves to some delicious candy.

There is a bowl of red wax lips candy that Hearts has been steadfastly ignoring on the fireplace mantle to his left. His mouth begins salivating at the very thought of hoarding some away for later, but - shit, he can't let this distract him from the fact that the Boss is trying to pull a fast one here! "Candy ain't got nothing to do with this, boss!" he insists before breaking down and shoving a handful of red candy into his free pocket. "I'm beggin' yah, let me handle these twerps!"

Eat your candy, Boxcars. Rest assured, you will have another round with the Heir and the Knight before long. But for now, I require your services elsewhere.

"The Knight?" Hearts asks weakly, but he gets the feeling he won't get much explanation here, either. That sort of thing infuriates Diamonds to no end of course, because she's an anal-retentive bastard, but Hearts is just kind of used to it. As long as he has something to smash, he's alright with coasting along. "I thought the Knight was the one in Houston? The one who's not actually calling himself a Knight, either, like with the Witch. I ain't met the time one, boss."
Not yet, you haven't. Though in this case, I am afraid the one calling himself Hemogoblin is a Knight as well. It is difficult to tell from your initial report, but he demonstrates enough mastery over blood to exploit it and weaponize it, as a Knight would. Whether he is a full-fledged player again or not remains to be seen.

"And yer sending Diamonds to see," Hearts repeats, eyeing Diamonds.

Oh no. It's not all that urgent a task. Even if he is a Knight, the Knight of a session twice-removed from the current one should be no trouble. I am sending Droog not just to attempt to elicit more data on that subject, but also to complete her earlier task. You see, I have few doubts left that Spades Slick is indeed heading for Seattle. And you will catch up to him, this time.

That gets Diamonds's attention, and Hearts withers inwardly at the gleam of interest that sparks in the woman's dark eyes. Fuck. Sounds like this Spades guy really has gotten Diamonds's attention, if he keeps evading her precious spy network. And if Diamonds agrees to go along with this transfer onto a mission that should have been Hearts's -

"Then it would be an absolute pleasure to pay a visit to the Northwest," Diamonds purrs, almost simpering as she smiles at the Boss.

Thank you very much, Droog.

- then Hearts has no chance at all of winning back his commission.

Motherfuckers.

The rest of the meeting passes in a blur, Hearts lost in a haze of red fury that he sits on until they are dismissed. Clubs has some shitty job, checkin in on the Scratches, which the troll is obviously ecstatic about because - well, he gets excited about everything. He's ignorant of the rising fury boiling up in Heart's corner of the room, and skips down the hallway whistling a familiar theme song as he heads up to the helicopter pad. The Scratches are housed relatively close to base, so Clubs won't have far to go.

Unlike Hearts, who suddenly finds he's been assigned to drive out to Virginia. While Diamonds, blast her mission-stealing face, gets to fly up to Seattle.

Hearts makes it down one flight of stairs, stomping hard on Diamonds's heels, before he loses his cool. He shoves Diamonds up against the wall. It doesn't cost him nearly as much effort as it should, which means Diamonds didn't try to resist him at all. Instead, she just cocks her head to the side, smiling at him infuriatingly. "Problem, Hearts?" she asks delicately, lifting a hand to inspect her fingernails.

There are any number of things Hearts could yell at this point. He could also just try to throttle Diamonds instead, but that would end in miserable defeat. So somehow, in his spitting rage, he plucks out the primary objection he has to this bullshit. "They're mine. Those two little fucks - Heirbear and Hemogofuckyourself - they're mine, Diamonds. Those fuckers cost me my operation, and I'll be the one to make them pay."

Diamonds wrinkles her nose. "Crude, Hearts," she hums, rolling her shoulders. "Try to have a little more professionalism, please. You wrote in the report yourself that it's 'Hemogoblin.' And I can make no promises, unfortunately. Orders are orders."

Hearts shoves Diamonds a little further up the wall. Hearts is taller than her, but only by a few inches when she's wearing those damned heels, and she can still nearly reach the ground from here. "I mean
it, Diamonds," he says, punching a hole in the wall beside her face. Diamonds just looks bored. "Leave the Heir to me."

"Put me down before I break your arm in three places," Diamonds drawls, faking a little yawn while her eyes keep dancing with silent laughter. She is mocking him, goddamnit. "Fine, fine. I'll try to leave some of the windy kid so you can have a piece. I am meant to be focusing on our fine and upstanding young troll hero, after all. But if either of them gets in my way, I won't show them mercy. You'll just have to hope you can fly up in time for the party."

Smirking like the smirking, sarcastic bastard she is, Diamonds pats Hearts on the cheek and knees him discreetly in the groin. He lets go reflexively, keening slightly, and she just pats him one more time before tucking kinks of her curls back up under her hat and striding away through the lime green foyer to the rest of the stairwell down from the penthouse. Members of the Felt's accounting team scurry out of her way like she's a goddamn force of nature.

Blinking hard and trying not to just fall over from the pain in his balls, Hearts braces himself on the wall to recover, and only slowly becomes aware that someone is watching him. He glares out over the Felt workers, but none of them seem to be the culprit. Slowly, apprehensive, Hearts realizes the sensation of being stared at comes from above, and he swallows back the pain one more time before twisting to look up the stairs they'd just descended from.

What he sees doesn't make sense. It's…

Clubs?

The small troll squats at the top of the stairs leading up to the roof, glaring down at Hearts with a look of unmitigated animosity. Hearts hadn't even known Clubs could be that kind of angry. The fury is practically physical, and Hearts suddenly feels a little alarmed. I mean, Clubs is a tiny little brownblood, but he's still a troll, and they can pack a goddamn wallop. And thanks to Diamonds's parting shot, Hearts is more painfully aware than ever that Clubs is at a level to do some serious damage...

"He shooshpapped you," the troll breathes, incensed. "Diamonds - chose you?! How could you do this, Hearts, I trusted you!"

Oh for fuck's sake. Hearts slams his head against the wall.

It's gonna be a rough week for everyone. He can feel it.

-

*Somewheege in the Atlantic Ocean…*

An abomination is uncurling its way along the Gulf Stream. It is trying to minimize its impact, a dismal attempt at hiding its tracks as it unspools through the ocean, but it can't help the natural acid it exudes. It taints the water, leaving a trail of gasping fish and rogue deep-sea lusii behind it. This far beneath the surface of the ocean, there is no light but the pale luminescence of the Horrorterror, and so the pathetic, mortal sea dwelling creatures flock around it, gulping down poisonous bloodbrine with the typical ignorance of the nonsentient.

The Horrorterror, meanwhile, is muttering to itself. The musical discord of its voice is just loud enough that yet more of the sea life in its path succumbs; for some it is a quick death as their tiny brains implode, while others ooze out blood as their internal organs melt under the psychic pressure.
Gl'bglyb snaps a tentacle out and wraps it around a frilled shark, whipping the creature into one of its many mouths. It tastes like nothing, a mere morsel that does nothing to satiate Gl'bglyb's hunger. The Horrorterror has grown used to feeding itself over the years, an inconvenient action made necessary when it became clear that Tethys Peixes had no intention of fulfilling her duties as Gl'bglyb's chosen. The city-sized lusus had waited patiently in the deeps of the Furthest Ring, calling out to its troll and asking that she prepare the way for Gl'bglyb to come through to the physical plane, only to receive a resounding 'glub you, bitch' in reply.

That had been several hundred years ago. Since then, Gl'bglyb managed to find others willing to accommodate its need for a spirograph to come to this world, and has waited restlessly for a new heiress to back and retaliate against the one calling herself the Condescension has proven so resistant to negotiations. Something about 'killin' them all doesn't put yah on my good list, you murderous tr'aytor.' Gl'bglyb usually manages to psychically suppress and train that kind of sentimental grudge for something that happened sessions ago.

Honestly. It was only one small universe full of grubby little trolls that the Condescension would have eventually driven to their deaths all of her own accord! She is simply being petty about it, now.

It has been content to allow the Condescension to believe she is in a position of power above the Horrorterror, biding its time in the Sea of Azov. All the while, it has waited for the new heiress to come to the age of majority.

If 'in there is he as he has power to res is is M E l he en's he has risen above' n' r p l a r e.

It can be said to see the Condescension is in a position of power above the Horrorterror, biding its time in the Sea of Azov. All the while, it has waited for the new heiress to come to the age of majority.

Crossing the Atlantic takes relatively little effort. Hankering down upon the continental shelf, Gl'bglyb entrenches itself on the seabed and raises its muttering whisper just a smidgeon, just enough of a rasp to reach shore.

A school of fish bursts in tiny clouds of red that it absently waves into its maw, and the aquatic lusii in a nearby retirement community develop minor aneurysms. Gl'bglyb has no sympathy for lusii - though it has played the role of custodian before, true lusii naturae have never been more than food.

It lets the words reverberate through the water, until it feels the faint psychic response that is the mind of Feferi Peixes. The tyrian troll is still far off, somewhere on the Pacific coast, but Gl'bglyb can sense the scarred mind that resides near Feferi, and all of its mouths curl with glee as it insists mentally that Feferi abandon that far coast and come to her. Yes, that is the same mind one of its fellow tangles so brutally tore into, and even now Gl'bglyb can reach out through its connection to the Furthest Ring and contact the remnants of that same tangle with a faint query.

It would not be polite to interfere in the mind of Eridan Ampora without permission, naturally.

It will take time to obtain a response from that particular tangle, but Gl'bglyb is patient.

Unfortunately, it should have known better. A few days later - barely a blink compared to the lifespan of a Horrorterror, an unwelcome former acquaintance oh so politely responds to the mental whisper meant only for Feferi's ears. When Gl'bglyb recognizes the voice crackling throughout its
Dear Gl'bgolyb. It has been far too long since we last chatted. I'm surprised; and here I thought you content to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting inhabitants of Eastern Europe. What brings you into my new domain?

You again. Pa'h.

Now, now, Gl'bgolyb. No need for that. You played your role quite beautifully last time. And now I can only assume you are here for the dear Feferi. Do try not to damage Tethys overmuch - she has her own role to repeat for the sake of this new game, before you can indulge your heiress.

Perhaps I might interest you in a proposition.

If Gl'bgolyb had lips to curl, it would. However, it is a Horrorterror and therefore infinitely superior to any being that would require lips, and so instead it weaves its tentacles in a complex cat's cradle that would generally signify a middle finger.

A green mental sigh.

Oh dear. The Condesce seems to have no such compunctions about working for me again. And you should know by now that I never lie. I have no need to. It would be unsporting of me. I approached your hiveminds with all honesty and earnest, and you received exactly what I promised you in return.

Gl'bgolyb lashes violently, clawing at the seabed with old stubborn fury. It knew that Tethys had chosen to serve the infuriating Doctor once again, of course, but it still can't understand why, not with all the power in its grimlight minds. A good third of the things the Condesce seems to hold against it can be traced directly back to this infuriating vermin, but then, logic has never weighed heavily in Tethys's mind. Gl'bgolyb would know - she helped mold that overactive, violent mind into the shape Doc Scratch requested. A grave mistake, in retrospect.

Ah, well, what occurs beyond the end of the universe is beyond my purview. I'm afraid I simply had no idea that the chase would cause you such distress.

Are you quite certain -

If another hivemind and your whims. We would prefer to L'1'V'e.

Because that is the crux of it, the point upon which Gl'bgolyb suspects it will never see eye to eye with the creature called Scratch. While others in the Furthest Ring might twist their angles into knots over the chance to experience the touch of their own death, the end of their time, Gl'bgolyb is far too attached to its own multifold sentience for a repeat experience. And while the Doctor may hem and haw all he likes, it knows the nature of him now. He is the kind of thing that leads all that follow him into death's arms, his darker intentions concealed by the bland nature of his demeanor.

He can kill as many of the quick-lived mortals as he likes. It is when he infringes upon the Further
Ring and inflicts damage upon Gl’bgolyb’s hive that they will inevitably find themselves at odds.

No. Better to stick to its own plans and not tangle with the Doctor. That is one mind even a Horrorterror has no interest in assimilating…

Very well, then. I thought I'd at least make a token offer, though naturally I already foresaw the outcome of this conversation. I will check with others of the Ring, then. I am sure Malā’ikah would enjoy a chance to collaborate again.

Se e’ that yo’ u’ don’t.

Good luck with your own endeavors then, Gl’bgolyb. Farewell.

With a crackling pop, the abominable little cueball detaches from Gl’bgolyb's streams of consciousness. Irritated still, it smooths over the parts of its mind the annoying Doctor stirred up.

It is unfortunate that Scratch has managed to reincarnate in this session as well. Gl’bgolyb may have to consider relocation once again. It is so very over Scratch’s antics. Horrorterrors are meant to be beyond the petty, contradictory antics of Skaia's will, wild cards left to their own devices in the Furthest Ring, whispering to those of Derse only for their own amusement. The fact that the last few games went so very wrong, Gl’bgolyb privately believes, is because the Eldest Gods became too entangled with Scratch, and with the players. It was a mistake.

So instead of interfering in his plans, it will ignore them. Even if fools like Malā’ikah remain damaged enough in the hivemind to make dealings with the devil, Gl’bgolyb will not. It will concern itself with its heiresses, and no more.

Chapter End Notes

Half of this fic is really totally serious drama and then the other half is Dave hugging apple juice like a koala and I just can’t apologize for that, guys.

Also, for the record, Rue Lalonde, Bro, Grandpa, and Nanna were/are not this AU’s versions of the Alpha kids. I have…plans for those dorks. No, Rue and the rest are OCs; though obviously they’re pretty close to the pre-scratch guardians personality-wise, they’re not going to mirror the Alpha kids exactly. Rue in particular can do voidy things for a reason.
None of Them Clear

Chapter Summary

I have put my days and dreams out of mind,  
Days that are over, dreams that are done.  
Though we seek life through, we shall surely find  
There is none of them clear to us now, not one.

Chapter Notes

John is up! Search 'John realizes' to jump to his section if you missed it. Updates will definitely slow for now as the school year kicks off in earnest, though.

Now shit, y'all, let's be detectives. Need to sort this mess out before Hemogoblin gets run outta town or something…

Heir and Hemogoblin belong over at realmenweartights.tumblr.com. Molte grazie to them for letting me borrow them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hemogoblin is exhausted, and it's barely midnight. He's been slowly worn down over the past week with his shitty sleep schedule; of all the times for it to start catching up with him, it would be right now, while Heir is giving him a lift to the police station. As long as he was running around town and leaping off tall buildings, trying to keep up with Heir as the other hero darted at random through the sky, the adrenaline had kept Hemogoblin going in a semblance of energy. Now that he's off his feet and relying on someone else to move him along, his eyes feel like leaden weights.

Fuuuuck. He refuses to fall asleep like this. It would be so unbelievably unprofessional, he might well vomit in his mouth and toss himself off the nearest building.

But not even the lingering terror of possibly being hunted down as a mutant arsonist can keep his eyes open all the way, and they keep drooping lower. At one point, Hemogoblin is vaguely aware that one eye is open more than one of the others, and he pinches himself on the arm, biting down on his tongue with enough force to draw blood. The sharp taste of his own candy-red blood in his mouth jolts him a little, and he straightens his shoulders again. He's a little disoriented when he surveys the city below them, and his stomach drops out when he realizes they're already hovering somewhere over the neighborhood where the majority of the Seattle PD relocated while the old building is still deemed unsafe. He always underestimates just how quickly Heir can swoop down out of the sky - his flight is truly an amazing ability.

The familiar, old pulse of admiration wakes Hemogoblin up a little more because fuck, Heir is right here. Willing to help Hemogoblin and trust his word, even when they've barely been partners and known each other for a few weeks. With his profile cast into sharp relief by the glow of the city below, Heir looks just...amazing. His jaw is set and serious, and in the air, even more than when he's fighting on the ground, Heir is in his element. His hood has blown back, and his hair is flying around
everywhere like a dark thatch of cowlicks. He looks, Hemogoblin thinks vaguely, like he could use a haircut.

Which is the kind of dumbfuck thought he expects from his shitty thinkpan after days of panmelting, horrifying, completely unnecessary dreams.

"Okay, we're here," Heir murmurs, and whoa why is his voice right up along Hemogoblin's ear, a warm sigh of air that tickles at his earlobe. Hemogoblin nearly flinches out of his skin, jerking around as best he can while floating in midair, half-expecting (anticipating) Heir to have somehow drifted closer while Hemogoblin was lost in thought, the other hero's mouth right by his face. But no, Heir is still separated from Hemogoblin by a good three feet, his eyes a brilliant, gleaming blue as he meets Hemogoblin stare for stare. Heir just looks quizzical, and Hemogoblin nearly smacks himself. Heir controls the (wait for it) air; it's probably no big deal for him to whisper things from a distance.

Hemogoblin is just so goddamn slow on the uptake, and it's becoming a legitimate concern - if it comes down to it, will he be able to fight at full capacity when he's currently working with all the problem-solving ability of a three year old hyped up on Pixie Sticks?

Fuck everything about this. He just wants to go home and crawl into John's lap and complain about the costume designs from the latest Marquise v Redglare blockbuster. He wants it with a twisting pain in his chest that's pale as frost and spun sugar. But he can't afford to think about John right now.

"Ready," he replies shortly, though he doesn't think that's exactly the response Heir is expecting. Heir, being mentally stable, unlike certain troll heroes in the vicinity, just takes it like a fucking champ and nods, offering a hand.

Hemogoblin takes it, mystified, and Heir lets them drop the last few feet to the roof. The landing is perfectly smooth, the wind setting them down without missing a beat, and Hemogoblin doesn't even have to bend his knees to prevent a jolt. Not that Heir has ever dropped him hard before, but this is much more of a precision landing.

Ah. So that's why the handholding.

"What a gentleman," he teases, smirking. Heir flushes deeply all along the thin strip of skin exposed between his mask and his goggles, as adorably easy to fluster as ever, and retracts his hand with some babbled excuse. For a hero who is always so professional and straightforward, he's awfully ease to tease. And even half out of his mind with sleep deprivation, Hemogoblin is a little sorry Heir let go after only a little hand holding. Oh well.

"Does this contact know we're coming?" he remembers to ask. What he really wants to ask is 'does this guy know it's that wanted arson troll coming to see him?' But he's trying not to act like a raging paranoid dick. He has to trust that Heir knows what he's doing. "Probably a good idea to give him a warning before you spring a wanted suspect on him in the dark of night. You know, maybe."

Heir wrinkles up his face and shakes his head. "Probably not. I'm hoping I can just jump right to where his temporary office space is and get us both out before people notice."

Hemogoblin frowns. "You...are kidnapping a police officer."

"Borrowing! Borrowing a police officer!" Heir insists, fretting. "I'll stop by an empty closet or something along the way to ask permission and explain what's going on! But I can't just hang around the station in costume for however long that takes."

Okay, fine. This whole thing is a mess anyway; it's not like Hemogoblin really has any better plan at
this point. "Borrowing it is, then. Jesus fuck, I hope you know what you're doing."

"Vaguely. I'm mostly just going with my gut." Heir barks out a laugh at the face Hemogoblin must be making, folding his arms behind his head as he laughs. "Sorry! But really, this kind of thing is new for me too. I'm just doing it on the fly."

That was a pun. Hemogoblin is one wrong move from being fucked in the ass with a cactus for the rest of his miserable life, and Heir is making puns. The universe is officially a dick.

"You're using the teleporting thing? How will you know where to aim?" he asks. They haven't had a moment to spare this past week for Hemogoblin to really get an up close and personal demonstration of Heir's new talent, and honestly he's still trying to figure out how Heir does it. Karkat geeks out privately about it all the damn time. It's beyond awesome, yeah, but also not really a typical air hero thing. "Don't you need to visualize the room? The coordinates?"

Heir looks weird, and fidgets a little. Hemogoblin waits, then squints, tilting his head to the side as Heir presses his fingers together. "Uhhhhh, noooo," Heir says at last, his voice lowering to a mutter. And that is the most fucking suspicious thing Hemogoblin has seen all night. Like. Wow. "Heeeeeir," he says warningly, crossing his arms. "What the fuck aren't you telling me?"

Heir is looking up at the dark, clouded sky, his eyes no longer burning blue now that he's not flying them around. He looks like a wriggler caught in with a nub in the cookie jar. "Uh, I don't really think it works that way. I just seem to kind of...do it."

Hemogoblin stares uncomprehending. Heir launches into some kind of wild miming, his usual fallback method of emphasizing his words, but it doesn't help clear anything up. "I - the past few times - I just kind of thought about a person really hard, and then I was there. I had to be really angry the first few times, but then in New York I started popping around everywhere without being mad, just, you know, freaked out. I don't know about all those coordinates and things, uh - but I'm sure this is going to work! I've been practicing on my own!"

Hemogoblin gives in. He slaps a hand across his face. How is it Heir is such a badass in a fight, and such a total dork about everything else?! And this is the guy Hemogoblin is relying on to help clear his name? Should he be fucking concerned?

"Agh! Uh! Don't worry! I'll be back in a minute, I promise!" Heir adjusts his hood so it hangs over his face, casting his eyes in shadow. So it's all the more obvious when his eyes blaze. Hemogoblin jerks back, blinking back the sudden glare as it nearly blinds his sensitive eyes. Heir's face twists like he's about to cry and he vanishes. The darkness is so sudden Hemogoblin can't see a damn thing. He wipes at his eyes and rubs his eyelids, pale pinkish tears watering at the corners until the glare recedes. Wow, a little warning next time, Heir?

And okay. That was just plain weird, and Hemogoblin is a little dazed before he ducks behind a spotlight, trying to conceal himself. He's gotten used to rooftops again this past week, but being on a police station roof - even when it's just a repurposed office building - brings back bad memories.

Now though, he's distracted by what he just saw. Usually when Heir is flying or using the wind in a fight, Hemogoblin has noticed the blue of his eyes gleaming, with a luminescence almost like a troll's. He's never thought anything of it before. But that light just now was way brighter than anything Heir's ever had before - like looking into the headlights of a car. Hemogoblin can only wonder how much more power this teleportation requires. The fact that Heir is jumping around everywhere without knowing how he's flinging his powers around is kind of...strange. Heir always seems to be so in control when it comes to hero work. This whole execution of this plan seems kind
of reckless. Like he's winging it even more than Hemogoblin knows.

That is the opposite of reassuring.

Abruptly two people appear in the center of the roof. For a moment they look almost fuzzy along the edges, outlined in blue, and - part of Heir's leg isn't there.

Hemogoblin blinks and Heir is whole. He shakes his head hard, wishing he had a glass of cold water to dump over his head. He can't be starting to see things. He *can't*. Yeah, that sometimes happens when people don't get enough sleep, but fuck, he'd thought he could still hold out for a while longer...

"Heir," the shorter man hisses, light casting his face half in shadow. "This is extremely unorthodox - what the hell, where are we-?"

"On the roof," Heir says. Hemogoblin stifles a burst of inappropriate snickering. He hasn't really noticed that Heir's voice changes pitch, until now; he's clearly deepening his voice and faking a stern tone to talk to the cop, and the switch is hilarious. "Please, just hear me out."

"How did you even - look, Heir, if this is about that Hemogoblin character, I can't affect that accusation. It's not my case." The officer adjusts the collar of his button-down, which has been blown up around his ears by some windy force. "They're serious about this line of investigation, and I'm nowhere near it."

"I'm not asking you to make it go away. I'm just trying to figure out the truth." Heir's toes are barely skimming the rooftop, and he doesn't seem aware of it. Hemogoblin shifts behind the skylight, pressing his back all up along it, and hopes he's actually hidden at this angle. His false horns angle forward in a way he's not used to; as Karkat, he's never really appreciated the hell some trolls with larger, more elaborate horns must go through trying to deal with clothing and recceopacoons and shit, but as Hemogoblin he's had to completely relearn his sense of balance when he bends and kicks and runs. Seriously, he's never going to envy someone with actual horns instead of little mutant nubs ever again; he clearly got the better end of the draw of the genetic lottery.

He's sure Heir will give him a signal when he should reveal himself. Or he can just choose the most dramatic moment. Whichever comes first. It might be stupid, but Hemogoblin likes having a flare for the dramatic as part of his persona.

The officer sighs. The light shifts a little, and Hemogoblin gets a glimpse of a man in his late forties, his face lined by stress and his hair gone grey and white in that strange way elderly human hair tends to change. "I can't tell you much. What do you want to know?"

Heir crosses his arms. "Look. How did we jump from Hemogoblin getting almost blown up, to everybody suspecting him of blowing himself up? I mean, you guys find evidence that he was *bleeding* everywhere, clearly badly wounded, and the officers in charge somehow jump to 'he did it'? That's really, really weird," Heir says flatly. "For that matter, why do they think he's involved in the earlier explosion? None of this makes sense!"

...That was...not subtle at all. Guess they're not beating around the bush here. Hemogoblin fidgets, trying to get at an angle where he can see the officer's face, to better judge his reaction. One of his feet slips in the gravel and skids, so he ends up with one leg splayed out, but luckily no one seems to notice him bumbling around like a fuckwad.

The cop mumbles something Hemogoblin doesn't quite hear over the skidding gravel, but if he has to make a guess it would be something like 'shit.' "You know for a fact he was caught in the blast,
then? The one on the roof, at least?” he asks, loud enough for Hemogoblin to hear.

"I have a pretty good idea, yeah. After all, he is my partner.” Heir sounds almost offended, and Hemogoblin preens inwardly at the fact that Heir just officially announced their partnership to the police.

Even it is shitty timing. And only one cop is around to hear it. *Fuck* yes. Despite everything, despite the fact that Hemogoblin is suddenly at the center of a raging shitstorm of go-fuck-yourself, Heir is still willing to claim him as a partner.

Then he realizes he's missing the perfect cue. His reaction time is shit tonight. Pretending he didn't just nearly fall flat on his ass in the gravel, Hemogoblin stands up and peers around the skylight, tilting his head so his eyes flicker red when he leans on the light, waving a greeting to the cop with a flutter of his claws.

"Oh for Chrissakes, you brought him *here*?" The police officer groans, rubbing his temples. "You do know I should be arresting him now, right?!

Heir bounces on his heels, grinning like a little shit under his mask when he sneaks a look back at Hemogoblin. "Yeah - but you won't, right? Besides, we're just trying to cooperate with the investigation as best we can. You know what it would mean if he actually got arrested, Officer Ellard."

"Unmasking." The officer pinches the bridge of his nose. "Which means you two won't just come down and explain this to my superiors instead of me?"

"That would be a no," Hemogoblin says, shrugging apologetically. "But trust me, I'm not interested in being at odds with the police. I just want my name cleared so everyone can get back to catching criminals instead of wasting time on *me*.”

Ellard is giving Hemogoblin the eye. Hemogoblin ignores the adrenalin humming through his blood, sour in his mouth, and stares back, raising an eyebrow. He's innocent, and that has to count for something.

The problem is, he still has so much to hide.

After what feels like minutes, but was probably only a few brief moments, Officer Ellard stops searching Hemogoblin's face and sighs, looking sidelong at Heir as he begins to pace. Hemogoblin shifts impatiently, feeling really fucking exposed out here on a roof where any moment another, less forgiving officer might emerge for a smoke break, but Heir waits quietly, so he follows the more experienced hero's example.

Ellard finally casts a glance over his shoulder at the stairwell and folds his arms. "Look. The only reason I'm telling you this and not arresting your partner here on sight is because I've thought something was shady about this whole investigation from the start," he says in a low voice, still glancing around him. It's almost like he thinks they're being watched, which just makes Hemogoblin's skin crawl with renewed paranoia. He touches the edge of his mask almost unconsciously, the old urge to hide behind contacts and glasses making a comeback.

"Shady?" Heir prompts, landing on the roof properly at last. Hemogoblin hesitates, and then slinks up to stand by the other hero's right shoulder, keeping his head down and stepping lightly enough that he doesn't make a sound on the gravel. "What does that mean?"

"It means the counter terrorism unit is inserting itself into the investigation, despite the fact that these
recent explosions have yet to be declared terrorist activity" Ellard snaps, his work shoes crunching on the roof as he paces a little faster. "One of their agents, some guy named Crichton, has been all over the deputy chief ever since the attack on the old station. All this past week they've been holed up together in his office, while everyone else on the case was busy trying to track Hearts Boxcars and his crew. We all thought they'd be the ones officially accused, and we'd be forced to call in the port authorities to try to track them down. Then suddenly, yesterday morning, the deputy chief announced that press conference was going to take place, and told everyone to focus their efforts on tracking down Hemogoblin. It came out of nowhere."

...What.

No, really. *What.*

"Wait," Hemogoblin interrupts, before the officer can do more than try to start a new sentence. He has a brain full of fury and a mouth set permanently on 'no filter' and he's just sleep-deprived enough that not even Heir's frantic headshake can't stop him now. All aboard the fucking ragetrain. "Wait a fucking minute. You're saying it wasn't - the actual police in charge of the case weren't even investigating me?! This is all because of one fucker chatting up your boss -"

A really strong breeze brushes across the front of his face, and the rest of his rant gets abruptly cut off. He starts when he hears something in the distance, as though someone is shouting from the roof across the street.

...Did Heir just censor him by drowning him out with the wind? Hemogoblin throws a wounded glare at the human, who is holding up a palm and frowns right back. "Dude, calm down. Pull it *waayyyy* back," he whispers from a distance, so Ellard probably can't hear.

It doesn't help. The words sound hesitant and soothing and he *doesn't want soothing from anyone but John*, dammit. All it does is enrage him further. "This is fucking ridiculous," he hisses back, turning so he can't look at Ellard's judgmental face while he loses his shit. "On what *planet* is this how the legal system works? If this keeps up they could literally get me *killed* over this fuckery and it's all because the deputy chief is an impressionable douche?!"

"Please, Hemo, we need to *not* offend the police officer helping us by bad-mouthing the police," Heir says, still watching Ellard through the corner of his goggles as he touches Hemogoblin's shoulder. "I know this is a really, incredibly stupid situation, but we're gonna figure it out. I promise. And now that we know this, we'll know how to counter it. Just - just breathe, okay?" Almost timid, the hero pats at his shoulder and *oh fuck no* that's a pap.

Hemogoblin wrenches away, clawing at his own hood and scraping a claw down the side of a prosthetic horn because he can't reach his hair and the last rational part of his brain is screaming *you can't hit Heir you stupid fuck* even though the rest of him is ready to throw a full on temper tantrum. Better he accidentally damage part of his costume than start a stupid fucking fight with Heir for doing something the human probably doesn't even realize he's done. He swallows back a growl of rage and restricts himself to snarling, "You are *not* my moirail! Hands fucking off!"

Heir was reaching out again, trying for another very unwelcome shooshpap; now, he jerks back his hand like he touched fire. His eyes go wide and almost horrified behind the goggles. Hemogoblin just focuses on his breathing, inwardly grateful that apparently Heir has some idea of what kind of offense it would be to try to moirail someone already in a quadrant. Humans are usually good with the concupiscent quadrants, but it's just generally accepted that clubs and diamonds are more of a grey area for them, simply because they don't *need* conciliation that way.

"I'm sorry - ugh, oh man - uh, look I mean this in a totally platonic way, but you *have* to calm
down," Heir babbles, his hands reaching out as though the fucker doesn't know how to keep them to himself.

"Are you two alright?" That's the police officer again and fuck, fucking fuck, Hemogoblin is making himself look like a complete maniac in front of the man.

Heir is right; he needs to back off and breathe. It would be so much easier if John were here, he thinks with an ache in his chest, and then he nods at nothing, closing his eyes so he can calm himself down without having to make himself paranoid about Heir's wandering hands. "Shit. Shit," he says to himself, shuddering through a breath until he starts hiccupping, bent half over with the ache in his stomach. It's humiliating, but it works to interrupt the impending rant that's sitting on the tip of his tongue.

Heir crouches down at his level, and he's still too fucking close. Hemogoblin shudders again but somehow doesn't shove the human away. He's already screwed this whole meeting up with his sleep-deprived troll hormones; no need to alienate his only ally completely.

Heir's voice is still way too conciliating, too, when he starts murmuring at Hemogoblin's bowed head. "Look, I don't know much about how moirails work for trolls. But...I'm pretty sure you need one. Like, really badly. The hiccupping thing is a bad sign, right? Will you be okay for the rest of the night?"

He understands, and that's the last thing Hemogoblin wants to hear. To his rage-twisted thinkpan, anything would have been better than that, even Heir just yelling at him in public for his stupid outburst. "I'll be fine," he grits out, kneading claws into the shoulder fabric of his costume. "Just give me a second."

"Yeah, you got it. Just take your time." Heir finally stops looking at him, and Hemogoblin nearly sags with relief. "Anything else really weird about this case?" the hero directs at Ellard, clearly trying to steer this conversation in a more productive direction and avoid awkward questions about why his partner is a total headcase. Smart move.

Hemogoblin can't see the police officer's face from his hunched over position, but he can hear the uncertainty bleeding through as the man starts talking again. "Well, even that blood evidence is sketchy. They've got no real proof it's his, you see. The chief and the counter terrorism guy would have to be assuming that because it's an atypical shade of troll blood, it must belong to the only troll with unusual eyes that's been flaunting himself this past month. Even then, it was dismissed by the detective in charge because, like you said, it could easily be explained by him being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyone with basic anti-terrorism training would know nothing about this fits the MO of a suicide bomber. But the fact is, unless they found your blood on record or obtained a sample from you in custody, they have no evidence definitively linked to you. Nothing. Announcing it to the public like that wasn't the smart thing to do. If Hemogoblin here is proven innocent, the deputy chief will look like a fool."

Heir hums, and rests his chin on his fist. "It's...it's like a publicity stunt," he finally says after nearly a minute's pause, suddenly enough that Hemogoblin looks up, surprised. He's feeling more stable now, and the sight of Heir's speculative face almost helps. "Worse than that - it's like propaganda. It was a big, attention-grabbing event based on little real evidence, without consulting the experts. They just wanted to smear your image by having everyone in the city think you've been seriously accused of arson," he adds, looking at Hemogoblin when he notices the troll has recovered. He smiles a little reassuringly, which twists Hemogoblin's stomach in a distinctly neutral way - both red and black. Fuuuck, no. He does not want to add quadrant flipping to his flushcrush. He hiccups again. "It does nothing for the police, nothing for you, nothing for this Crichton guy. So who wins, here?"
"The Midnight Crew," Hemogoblin mutters to himself. Heir looks at him sharply, and he's forcefully reminded that the other hero can probably hear a lot more than people give him credit for. It's the kind of super power that isn't very noticeable unless the hero goes around explaining it, which Heir never has.

"You think it's possible this Crichton guy could be a Crew member? Or are we just starting to see them everywhere because we're paranoid?" Heir whispers back. Shit, he's actually taking Hemogoblin's half-sarcastic suggestion seriously.

On the other hand...maybe they should be taking it seriously. It hits Hemogoblin like a brick, and he feels his stomach drop out.

Because he's been so stupid. He's spent all this time beating himself up about all the Crew members getting away, when he had literally watched that fake lawyer, the one who drove the car that got Hearts Boxcars to the dock, who then ordered Hearts to leave, drive right back out into the city. And he hadn't even given that man a second thought, lost in his rage over getting dunked in the ocean and fucking up his gills for days.

"Someone from the Crew did stay behind when I followed them to the docks," he says, and Heir's eyebrows fly up. He...probably should have mentioned this earlier. "He drove Boxcars to the container yard, and then told him he had orders to make sure Boxcars left the city. I thought he was the lawyer who delivered the bomb parts, but then he took the car and drove out when they realized I was there trying to capture them. I forgot about him entirely trying to catch up with Boxcars. Fuck. I didn't even think about him."

Heir's eyes narrow and light with understanding. "Hey, one of the Crew members - the lawyer - might still be in town. You know if he could somehow be connected to this counter-terrorism guy?" he asks Ellard. Then he hesitates, and frowns. "But if he was the lawyer, they must have his face on camera from the first police station explosion. People would notice him wandering around…"

"Not necessarily," Ellard says. It sounds like he's admitting that only reluctantly. "There was damage done to the cameras in the halls and lobby during the explosion. That normally wouldn't affect the tape that was already recorded on a server, but...they're not working right, either."

"What do you mean? What happened to the tapes?" Heir asks. And yeah, Hemogoblin is just going to stand here and keep his mouth shut, because he obviously can't be trusted to talk without flipping out. Especially since this sounds like the police have fucked up again and contributed somehow to this accusation. He should have let Heir handle this from the beginning, and just stayed behind to weep softly against his nice skylight.

Ellard fumbles for words, and then scratches his head. "It'd probably be easier to just show you than to describe it, really. But that would be very much against protocol. We'd have to get you two past five floors of rather jumpy police officers." He jerks his chin at Hemogoblin. "Heir might make it, maybe, but you wouldn't get more than ten feet before all hell broke loose. And the last thing I want is a riot in my police station."

Before Ellard finishes his sentence, Hemogoblin looks over at Heir. The hero is doing something beneath his mask - maybe biting his lip? - and his forehead wrinkles as he thinks. Hemogoblin sidles in as close as he dares when his claws are still shaking, and mutters, "Can you teleport there?"

Heir rubs the back of his neck. "Maybe? But it would definitely be a lot easier if Ellard went down first, so I could focus on him. I don't really know how well I'd be able to aim for an empty room. Not to mention someone else might already be in there who could report you if we just jump without warning."
He nods, his eyes still glittering with sharp curiosity when he looks at Hemogoblin. "Give me fifteen minutes, in case someone pulls me aside," he says. "By then I should be in the records room. This time of night, the security guard will be out patrolling, not reviewing tapes. I presume that trick of yours will work again, Heir?"

"It should," he confirms. "Thank you so much for this, Officer Ellard. We owe you one."

The man just sighs. "You do enough for this city that we should owe you, not the other way around," he says quietly. "Here. I'll meet you down there. Remember - second floor."

"Got it."

Hemogoblin finishes the process of calming down by the time Officer Ellard vanishes into the stairwell like a normal human being. If he lets himself feel it, he'd probably fling himself off the side of the building with embarrassment. It's one thing to lose it a little in private where John can shoosh him before it escalates, another to freak out on a thug like Hearts Boxcars, and some new, fresh horror entirely to have a meltdown in front of his fucking heroic idol. He just needs to. Not think. Just. Shut off his entire thinkpan. He's blushing like a fire hydrant when Heir looks at him, and not even in a seductive way. Just a miserable way.

"And now we wait!" Heir modulates his voice to total neutrality, probably trying to avoid provoking another burst of irrationality from him. It doesn't make Hemogoblin feel any less embarrassed; Heir just sounds awkward and unfamiliar. Had he really freaked out that badly about a totally platonic shooshing? Fucking hell, only a total moron like him would assume everything was about conciliation.

"Sorry about that," Hemogoblin says in a rush, skimming his hands over his arms. "You're right. I should have visited my moirail before I came out tonight. I saw the press release, panicked, and ran out like a grub with its head chopped off to find you instead of making sure my head was in the right place."

"It happens to the best of us," Heir replies, hooking his thumbs in the loops of his belt. A little of his usual dorky grin appears at the corners of his mouth, which is nice - it means Hemogoblin hasn't scared him off with his crazy. "When I first started, I did some reeeeeeally dumb stuff! At least you have a good reason for getting mad! The more we hear about this, the more it just seems like someone trying to make your life suck. Just try to remember Officer Ellard isn't the one who DID it. And the more cooperative we all are with each other, the faster we can figure out why this Crichton guy wants to pin this on you so bad."

"I get it. Trust me. I should be good for a while now." Hemogoblin hesitates, then reaches out and taps the other hero on the shoulder. Just once, barely a graze. Heir flinches and twists his neck all up to stare at his own shoulder with comically wide eyes. "But seriously. We're alright?" Hemogoblin demands.

"We're alright," Heir says slowly, and his grin is almost infectious. Almost. Hemogoblin keeps it down to a small smirk. He's going to try to keep the emotional responses minimized for a while, until he's more sure of his self-control tonight.

They wait out the fifteen minutes in companionable silence, and Hemogoblin can almost forget he's supposed to be berating himself for being a complete asshat. Almost. It doesn't help that sometimes Heir reminds him weirdly of John. He seems to have a type - disgustingly sincere dorks. Maybe that's why the near-moirailing incident triggered that desperate meltdown.

Hemogoblin will just feel a lot more better if he can keep his Karkat and his Hemogoblin feelings
separate, so he doesn't accidentally get pale leanings in his flushcrush. He is loyal to John, god dammit.

He doesn't understand the multiple looks Heir sends his way; the furrowed brows don't mean anything to him. Heir is just probably seriously debating the wisdom of having a partner with severe rage control issues. No big fucking deal.

That's all it is. That's all.

They wait an extra five minutes, just in case, and then Heir looks questioningly at Hemogoblin. Hemogoblin nods permission, and Heir rests a careful hand on Hemogoblin's shoulder. He's less startled this time when Heir nearly sobs with pain, the human's free hand grabbing futilely for his chest as a spasm wracks his body and fuck this, that can't be normal. None of Heir's other powers seem to hurt him, so why is this one so different?

He realizes this was a stupid fucking idea when suddenly all the blood is gone. He can't feel it, and it's like having his eyes carved out of their sockets or his spine ripped out through his neck; something vital is gone like it never existed. The always-present thrum of blood running through him, sometimes welcome, sometimes hated for its mutated tint, but always a reminder that he is alive - stops, and it jolts him right back into being Karkat because Hemogoblin has just put up with too much shit today, thank you very much.

If there were a way to describe the current situation, Karkat would have to say they've turned into air. Literally. They're the air. He has no idea how to process this; he thinks he can see and hear and smell but he's not solid and when they start to spiral toward the stairwell he has no control over the process; some other intelligent force is moving him along even though he doesn't think he really has a form to move.

Karkat fights it. He can feel Heir - he thinks it feels like Heir, anyway - twisting through the air as they flow beneath the door Ellard used and then blast down the stairwell. Exhilarated glee runs in a frisson from Heir to Karkat and it conflicts with the instinctive panic clawing at his incorporeal throat. How is he even feeling anything? They're air. They're barely even real anymore. Heir might be getting his kicks out of somehow transforming into his element incarnate, but Karkat's panicglands are busy scheduling a crucial date with a pneumatic drill so he can bore a hole into the center of his forehead and try to forget this uncontrollable joyride ever happened. This isn't fascinating or breathtaking like flying with Heir; this is just not okay.

But even as Karkat tries to wrench himself out of whatever fucked up power Heir is using to let them blow past an entire floor of cops, unseen and unfelt as anything more than an impossibly fast breeze, the pulse of twenty heartbeats and the blood in their veins beats through Karkat, and he thinks if he reached out with whatever passes for claws when you're the wind, he could feel every molecule and chemical running through their circulatory systems, down to the tiniest capillary. It's nearly reassuring, and for a moment he forgets that he's supposed to be terrified. A twitch of his fingers, and he could clear that clot forming in the troll lieutenant's heart, he thinks, stupefied, or help filter the toxins from that woman's kidneys.

He's never felt this much potential in other people's blood before, and it's happening while he's not even in a meatsuit of his own.

What the hell is this?
With a gasp they slip beneath another door and Karkat can sense the exact moment that the wild, carefree joy that inundates Heir's part of their wind tunnel vanishes. No, that's not right, he thinks, reeling again; it doesn't vanish, the mood just swings straight from joy to terror and pain, a total 180. *Oh fuck oh fuck, we fucked up*, Karkat thinks giddily, trying and failing to once again pull out of this weird incorporeal state, but this isn't his power, and whatever Heir did to make them part of the windy thing instead of physical bodies has left Karkat without any of his own blood to manipulate. Heir is panicking too, and at this rate Karkat had no idea whether this panic and pain are a normal part of the teleporting process. They could be stuck as minds on the wind forever, unless Heir gets it together.

They resolidify three feet above the ground and after that strange sensation of feeling Heir's emotional whiplash by proxy, there's no way Hemogoblin has the reflexes to get his feet under him. He hits the ground flat on his knees and feels them split open through his costume on the tile floor. "Fffffffuck!" he spits, and shoves all the confusion and residual panic away to fall into the pulse of his blood. It's a beautiful relief, like curling up in a pile with John and letting all the tension run out of him; he savors the rush of blood that is gloriously corporeal. He doesn't rush it like he did on the roof that night; he's in the heart of the new police sanctum, like fuck is he leaving more blood splattered everywhere. He reaches out with the dull red of his connection and coaxes the blood back into the veins, slathering on heavier scabs across each knee than he really needs, to use up the excess.

"Ack! Hemogoblin, did I drop you?" Heir is fretting somewhere over his head, and when Hemogoblin looks up he sees Heir still had a solid foot of air between him and the floor. The wind stirs up all the papers on the desk beside them, and Hemogoblin is no windy guy but he'd bet that's yet more residual terror from whatever the hell freaked Heir out.

"What happened?" he asks, still dazed as he widens his focus back out of his blood. "You freaked out, Heir - did something go wrong at the end?"

Heir holds out a hand, and Hemogoblin takes it so the other hero can pull him upright in a burst of surprising strength. "I don't know what you mean. Everything seemed to go as smoothly as ever," Heir says with a shrug, "I mean, we ended up where we wanted to go! That's the most I ever hope for!"

...Is he seriously going to fucking pretend that didn't just happen? Wind is Heir's thing; for all Hemogoblin knows, his blurred and confused perception of that teleport only got half of what really happened to scare Heir. But something definitely happened, something that flipped Heir from pain to joy and back to pain again.

And for that matter... "It's not really teleportation though, is it?" he says, frowning at Heir. "We didn't move from point to point instantaneously. We became air, and you were fine right up until we came in here to change back."

And Heir -

- shuts down.

The wind goes totally flat and the room goes unnaturally still. Even the faint gust that Hemogoblin sometimes catches ruffling Heir's hair even when he's not in motion cuts off. The residual flare in Heir's eyes from the power exertion needed to fly them down here so quickly dims to the point that the eyes behind the goggles look almost black. Hemogoblin can only stare; Heir stares back mutely, his mouth parted, but doesn't say anything at all. It's like Hemogoblin somehow managed to hit the guy's pause button. And oh fuck, does he regret it, because Heir looks *broken*.

He broke Heir. Congratu-fucking-lations, Hemogoblin, this tops everything you've accomplished
thus far tonight in terms of spectacular fuck-ups.

"Something wrong, you two?" Ellard asks. Hemogoblin had honestly forgotten the point of the teleport had been to catch up with the police officer. Now unable to break this staring contest with Heir, he can't bring himself to glance at Ellard or open his mouth to answer.

Heir, impossibly, responds as though on autopilot. He doesn't even look like he should be standing, with that much miserable despair crushing him down, but he blinks and turns haunted eyes on Ellard. "We're fine. You wanted to show us something, right?"

How Ellard doesn't see the horror in Heir's eyes, Hemogoblin will never know. The man doesn't even flinch as he shrugs and turns back to the computers. He's logged onto some kind of database, and begins filling out the search engine. Hemogoblin slinks closer, peering over at Heir cautiously when he reaches the officer's other side.

Heir looks...normal. At least from the side. Some of the pallor has left his face, but he still is determinedly avoiding Hemogoblin's eyes, focused instead on the computer as though it holds the answer to all of life's mysteries.

Shaking his head to clear it, Hemogoblin swallows hard and looks at the screen. For a moment everything is fuzzy and the room rocks around him, but then he jerks upright and shakes his head with more vigor, waking himself up. He can't fall asleep standing up.

"This is the clearest feed we have left over from the hall that the holding room was located in." Ellard double-clicks with a bulky mouse on a link on the screen, and a tiny black and white video appears in its own separate window. They have to wait nearly two minutes for the computer to process it and begin the playback, two minutes that have Hemogoblin staring at Heir almost nonstop in a distinctly not romantic or teasing way. Heir finally notices and smiles at him hesitantly.

Somehow, all the blankness has left his expression. Hemogoblin's jaw pops open and he must look like an idiot until Heir shrugs, smiling a little wider, and looks back at the computer screen.

He has no idea how Heir just...switched back. That kind of broken, haunted despair is the kind of thing that doesn't just melt away like that. But it seems Heir has decided to pretend it never happened.

Oh, Hemogoblin is going to give this guy such a talking to. Before he can open his seedflap and demand answers, though, the video finishes loading and Ellard starts it. Grumpily, Hemogoblin watches.

On the grainy footage, a man in a suit strides past a police officer in uniform who is escorting a teenage boy in the opposite direction. The officer and the boy are facing the camera so their faces are clear, but the man strides away, accompanied by a different officer. They both stop at a door and the officer knocks, opening the door. They both file in, and a moment later, after several long seconds of jittering, boring footage, the officer emerges and walks away, too.

Any second now, Hemogoblin suspects, the entire picture is going to be a rush of smoke and fire as the lawyer and Hearts Boxcars finish piecing together their flash bomb and their secondary incendiary for the lobby within the privacy of the unattended room.

He's wrong.

His heart beats a little faster as the seconds tick by - and tick by.

"...What the fuck are we looking at, Ellard," he says flatly after almost five minutes. "We couldn't
fast-forward this little show so we're not standing here with our thumbs up our asses?"

"This is all there is to look at, Hemogoblin," the officer replies. He sounds kind of sarcastic. Fuck, Hemogoblin's driven a cop into the arms of sassiness. What the fuck next? "As far as our cameras are concerned, both in this hallway and the lobby later on, there were no explosions the night of the breakout. For that matter, neither Boxcars nor his associates are ever filmed exiting the station. If we were to present this in court, the jury would think we should technically still have them in custody."

Alright, that's - that's a pretty good excuse.

"Someone looped the camera feed," Heir suggests, but he sounds uncertain, leaning in to peer at the screen. "Or something like that?"

"We can't figure out exactly how, but something like that, yes," Ellard agrees. "The old records room was unguarded when the building was evacuated, but this kind of deception would have to have taken place before the incident altogether. And because of this, we have no way to definitively identify the lawyer. He wore that hat low and had a thick beard according to eyewitnesses; just enough to obscure his face."

Hemogoblin shakes his head, replaying his own memory of that night. "He didn't have a beard by the time I got to him. I would definitely have noticed something like that. Must have been a false beard."

Heir smiles at him again. It's still unnerving. "Good. That means if he is somehow related to Crichton, you can identify him!"

"You two really think this all has something to do with counter-terrorism?" Ellard asks, spinning his chair around to look at them both. On the screen, the seconds continue to tick by, even as the time of the explosion comes and goes, with no change.

"Not reeeeeally?" Heir says, shrugging. "It could just be this one guy. But this Crichton is definitely worth a look, if only because he seems to be the one who got the deputy chief on Hemogoblin's case."

"Oh, yes. He and I are overdue for a nice long talk." Hemogoblin glowers at the screen, and has to turn away before he punches through the useless camera feed with a sickle.

Someone is doing everything they can to make it extremely difficult to tell who may or may not have been involved in the initial explosion, and if this case against Hemogoblin goes much farther? It could work.

- 

"Well, I guess the next best thing we can do is wait for this Crichton guy to arrive."

They've relocated outside. Having bid hasty farewells to Ellard, who checked that the coast was clear, Hemogoblin had elected to sneak out through a back window in a men's restroom rather than allow Heir to pull the windy thing again because seriously, just, fuck that all over the place. Heir looks almost hurt when Hemogoblin turns him down, but he can't even feel sorry about it; even if Heir wasn't acting like half his brain didn't quite know what happened in that last so-called teleport, the sudden loss of his ability to sense his own blood has turned Hemogoblin off that method of transportation unless it's some kind of emergency. Heir floated down to meet him after he reached the alley below. The sky overhead is still a muggy greyish purple, and it's barely two, but Hemogoblin started out the night on the brink of collapse, and he's no less exhausted now.
Heir makes a face, pouting his lips as he thinks intently. He's leaning up against the wall across from Hemogoblin, totally lost in whatever madcap idea he's distracting himself with now.

"He won't get here until six," Hemogoblin says wearily, wishing he could rub at his eyes, and maybe just close them, and then lay down and -

No, no, no. Sleep is not an option right now. He thinks if he starts sleeping now, even a quick power nap, he might really just pass out for the rest of the night. And the following day. All of it spent in nightmares, no doubt. So he props his eyelids open and tells his thinkpan to just fucking deal with it. He is one hundred and fifty percent done with tonight. "I don't know about you, but generally I have to call it a night by four or so. It's a school day."

That's safe enough to use as an excuse, anyway. He, and everyone else in the city with a calendar, knows that Heir always curtails his crime-fighting hours coincidentally when the school year starts, and Hemogoblin figures it's an anonymous enough detail that he can let it slip that he has school, too. It's not like Heir would have any idea what school he attends.

"I know," Heir says shortly. His eyes squint up all the way as he thumps his head back against the wall. The war hammer clanks against brick too. When the hero folds his arms over his chest, with his eyes closed so the shadows are less noticeable, he almost resembles one of the posters Karkat does not have stashed under his bed where John can't tease him about them. "But I...I think we might have to stick this one out. I just don't see any other way we can do this!"

Maybe it's just Hemogoblin, but did Heir just seriously suggest that they - "You are serious," he realizes, raising an eyebrow. Or maybe both eyebrows. He doesn't have a lot of his fine motor control left, okay? "You want to hang around here - what, until all hours of the day? I'm pretty sure people will notice us when the shadows are gone, Heir."

Not to mention John would most definitely notice if Karkat completely failed to show up for school in the morning. Shit, he doesn't even have his cell phone on him. He couldn't feed John a line, even if he really thought they were following through with this.

"We can spend the rest of the night on patrol, as usual. Though I guess you should probably noooot call the police a lot," Heir says, wrinkling his nose. "But. Ugh. I just think we need to talk to this Crichton guy yesterday. I...I think it's worth missing school to get him alone and talk to him properly until we can figure out what his connection is to the Midnight Crew. And if he is the lawyer from the bombings, can we really, in good conscience, let him keep waltzing in and out of another police station when he could have even more bomb parts on him?"

Fuck. Put it that way, and suddenly Hemogoblin's hero hindbrain pings him with little alarms. Shit fuckery.

Is this a thing that's actually happening?

"I probably shouldn't be making decisions on this little sleep. But fuck it. If you're holding out for dawn, I'll stay too. Someone needs to watch your back," Hemogoblin says, rubbing his eyes again.

"Really?" Heir clenches both hands into fists of victory, his eyes shining when Hemogoblin nods. "Meet back on the roof across the street before dawn?" He suggests, tugging on the strap that holds the war hammer along his back. He's grinning as widely as ever, and Hemogoblin searches uselessly for the broken man who had looked at him with hollow eyes in the camera room. As far as he can see, Heir just totally reset himself back to his usual goofy self, and seems determined to forget that weird, flat despair and the ensuing nosebleed ever happened.
...It's too much. He can't do it. Hemogoblin files that entire episode away in his brain to think about later. Turns out he can only handle one life-threatening crisis at a time, and he just needs to step back and ignore Heir's new problem until he finishes fixing his own. If he tries to balance both issues at once, his brain will probably explode into little candy-red chunks all over the place, and wouldn't that be fucking disgusting and inconsiderate of him. "Yeah, sure. See you around," he replies, nodding when Heir takes off into the sky.

But he can't help thinking, as he darts into the shadows and heads for the library, and for his hidden phone, that he's not the only one here who is in desperate need of a moirail.

Because if something is wrong with the Heir of Breath, then they are both fucked.

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Kanaya's apartment is familiar to Rose, but only just. She visited just once before, what seems like an age ago, but she can still see the subtler changes in decor, the pieces of furniture and knick knacks and fabrics that have accumulated in the ensuing months. Kanaya has an eye for the tasteful and the refined, and she has veiled the walls of the loft with swathes of heavier cloth, in reds and blues and the occasional, startling yellow-green. The window has been left open to allow in the cool morning air, with the faint smell of brick stone and asphalt that is quickly covered by the fragrance of peach tea. Rose perches on the very edge of the sofa, drinking in the sight of the antique sewing machine, the dress patterns splayed across the work table, and the grey bookshelf, nearly concealed by a swoop of purple fabric, that houses both romance novels and various treasures Kanaya has gathered over the years. A recooperacoon hangs in the corner from the ceiling, an unusual arrangement.

She recognizes the cupboard over the refrigerator, and knows that behind the smooth exterior lies an ice box filled with delicate bottles and plastic packets filled with an assortment of rainbows. Kanaya's rather unique condition grants her preternatural strength and astounding regenerative capabilities, but Rose knows that the troll also struggles to assuage the accompanying thirst, for fear of drinking the blood of criminals in addition to meting out justice. Rainbow drinkers are rare enough in the world that being outed as one, either as Kanaya Maryam, seamstress, or the Malachite Sylph, Philadelphia's elegant enforcer of justice, would gravely compromise Kanaya's secret identity.

And since the Sylph continues to insist upon utilizing a chainsaw as her primary weapon, Kanaya must always exert totally control over her thirst. Blood gets everywhere if and when she seems such justice necessary, rather than just using the chainsaw as a means of intimidation.

By the warm light of the overhead lanterns, though, Kanaya's condition is not immediately obvious. The sclera of her eyes when she pivots to face Rose lack the extra luminescence they gain in the darkness, and with the flawless perception of her sight Rose can see the faint brush of tinted makeup along Kanaya's cheeks and arms, concealing the unnatural pallor.

"Feel free to the food of my table," Kanaya says, setting the tea tray on the low, dark mahogany table before the sofa. "It is good to see you in person, Rose."

"It's good to see you as well, Kanaya," Rose replied, resisting the urge to smooth at her skirt. It would only draw attention to the ill-fitting lines. Kanaya has already given her a disapproving onceover. "Thank you for letting me in on such short notice. I'm sure you had other business to take care of today."

Kanaya flicks a hand, shaking her head as she seats herself on a cushion beside Rose. "Not at all. I need to take in the waist of a dress, and hem something for Ms Poulter. That is nothing. Business has been slow these past few days."
She smells like a heady perfume, one Rose cannot identify, along with the ever present scent of cloth and blood. It's mildly intoxicating and Rose has to lean over to pick up the teapot and pour a cup for herself and then for Kanaya. It helps her hide the faint reddening of her cheeks until the flush clears and she can present the cup to Kanaya with a bland smile. "Slow? You're still having trouble with vandals, then?"

She can never explain what it is about Kanaya. Kanaya is both beautiful and caring, and packs a mean right hook, and apparently that's all Rose's foolish hormones need to send her stuttering into the throes of more amorous inclinations.

Kanaya accepts the cup with a nod. Her expression goes grim and cold at the mention of vandals though, which is really all the confirmation Rose needs. "Unfortunately, yes. They tend to strike while I am out on patrol, and I cannot afford to neglect the rest of the city simply to protect my own interests."

Rose grimaces in sympathy, letting the tea cup warm both of her hands. She is always so cold, of late. "I still don't understand what they have to gain, harassing you this way," she murmurs. "Simply because you chose to be a seamstress. It is...so unreasonable."

Kanaya shrugs, the pale lilac fabric of her sleeveless dress draping over her as she leans back a little against the back of the sofa. It's a subtle hint, and Rose relaxes at last, settling herself back against the cushions rather than hovering like a skittish cat on the edge. "They fear what they do not understand."

Rose snorts derisively. "Such a hackneyed excuse. What is so difficult to understand about a choice of vocation that differs from the norm?"

Kanaya laughs a little and shakes her head. Rose has a very strong impulse to caress her bob of dark hair, which she tucks away into the structure of her developing mind, filed under 'a grand idea, but wait until later.' "There is a short list of occupations society considers acceptable for jade bloods. Bad enough to choose not to bond with one of the mother grubs and serve as a Nurturer - I could have become a nurse, a caregiver, a surrogate custodian, even a teacher, and received more acceptance."

"Imbecilic," Rose sniffs, and then sips at her tea. It is warm and the taste of peach suffuses her senses. Perfectly brewed. "It still gives them no right to obstruct your business this way. It is your life to live."

"Rose," Kanaya says gently. But there is something else there that gives Rose warning, a note that mingles stern caring and gentle warning, a tone that Kanaya has mastered. "We have had such a discussion of the unfairness of institutional hemoism before, and as ceaselessly relevant to my interests as the subject is, it is not what we should be discussing at the moment. You are stalling."

Rose clenches her hands on the tea cup and slowly lowers it from her lips. She cannot look Kanaya in the eye, and chooses instead to apply her focus to the potted fern that takes up the opposite half of the table. "I know. I know," she says quietly.

"Perhaps you may wish to wait a little longer, and if so I respect that you may still require time to gather yourself," Kanaya hastens to add. "But you said that you could not recover fully under your mother's roof. My only condition for your staying here is that you promised to speak with me. To let me help you heal. I will not permit you to fall back into yourself again, Rose."

Rose's heart throbs and she has to hide her face once more, bending her neck so her hair falls forward, staring down into the light tea so Kanaya can't see the faint terror in her expression. It is quite one thing, she thinks wryly, to psychoanalyze others, and to rework my own mind. It is
apparently quite another to consider letting someone else in to analyze me.

It was a vulnerability she had not been able to expose in front of her mother, or even reveal to John via Pesterchum. As deeply as she adores John, she remains aware that he has darkness of his own, a clinging pain that he has buried deep and proceeded to ignore blithely with a smile on his face. No, the last person who needs to be burdened with the full details of the many ways Rose is broken is John. The most he is aware of is that Rose has begun to set up new methods of defending against the grimdark. Any more than that, and Rose might risk ripping through John’s fragile persona to the pain underneath.

Helping John will have to wait until Rose is in a fit state to even help herself, though. And speaking to Kanaya - not just through the medium of the Internet - is the one outlet Rose could think of. There are simply too many compromising details about Rose's hero work inherent in the narrative for her to turn to a professional with her issues.

Swallowing proves difficult, and Rose has to try a few times before she can look up and meet Kanaya's eyes. "I appreciate this, Kanaya. More than you know, and more than I will be likely be willing to admit once we actually begin to talk about this," she admits, laughing faintly.

Kanaya smiles back, her lips painted a shade darker than the purple of her dress, and her eyes glint with understanding. "As long as we know where we stand," she says, raising her own cup and sipping. The troll winces, her lip tugging to the side, and then stands. "Pardon me a moment. I'm afraid this tea needs a little extra kick."

Rose laughs, startled, and she catches the merry, tricky grin on Kanaya's face before the troll sashays away. Kanaya is ordinarily so serious and chic, she can fool even Rose into forgetting her sillier side. "Do you have anything for those of us less inclined to the more sanguine fluids?" she retorts, crossing her ankles. Just a drop couldn't hurt - just a sip...now that she wouldn't have to owe another debt to her mother for a taste...

Kanaya smirks as she unlocks the ice box and, humming, selects a clear bottle of bluish blood. "I'm sure I can hunt down something," she muses, unstoppering the bottle and adding a judicious dollop of blood to the tea. "Bring me yours."

Rose raises an eyebrow and obliges, leaning over the island between the main room and the kitchenette, as Kanaya drinks her tea, nods, and replaces the bottle in its sealed cupboard. Then with a flourish the troll bends and opens a cupboard beside the sink. Within, to Rose's sudden thirst, she sees a neat row of five bottles, not a garishly bright rainbow of blood but darker, warmer blacks and pale ambers.

She hasn't had a drink in nearly a fortnight. Something close to actual, aching pain claws at her throat, and she feels utterly parched.

"Peach schnapps, do you think?" Kanaya proposes, withdrawing a thin bottle of nearly clear liquor. Rose just shrugs, though she inwardly tries to think whether adding peach to peach would work, or simply make the drink too sweet. Well, the only way to know was to try it.

Kanaya holds up the bottle, looks over at Rose, and sighs. The merriment is gone from her face. "I'm sorry, Rose," she says quietly, and then she uncaps the peach schnapps and upends the entire bottle of pale pink alcohol into the sink.

Rose goes cold. "Kanaya," she says, her voice cracking a little. Why -

"I thought so." Kanaya sets that bottle aside with a clank on the counter-top, and reaches beneath for
a slimmer, darker bottle of cognac. "This will have to go, too."

Rosie's stomach twists and knots into a hard tangle as she realizes what's going on. "Kanaya, don't, you don't have to do that because of me-

"You have a problem, Rose," Kanaya says serenely, uncorking a bottle of red wine and mournfully closing her eyes before letting it drain away down the sink. "It caused me grave concern even before it became clear your alcohol intake was contributing to your difficulty in maintaining a healthy standard of living. You agreed yourself that the alcohol may have enabled the Horrorterrors to find new weaknesses in your mind - what happened to that, Rose? Have you forgotten? Or allowed yourself to forget?"

And oh, it stings. "I am guarded against further such incursions now. A little alcohol won't sent me off in another fugue of festerbrood rage, Kanaya," Rose tries, aware that she is near babbling. She has taken her hands away from the tea cup now, her fingers clutching at the edge of the island countertop, and that isn't right, that isn't her.

"Rose. Listen to yourself, please. You have studied psychology all your life, and you cannot recognize the terminology of an addict? An alcoholic? I refuse to believe you so blind." Kanaya pours out the last bottle without taking her eyes from Rose, until at last Rose is forced to look up and meet her gaze. What she sees there is fierce and intent and lovingly stern, the expression Kanaya has no doubt worn a thousand times in her quest to play auspistice for the entire bloody world. This is not just Kanaya Rose is dealing with, then.

Well. Kanaya had, after all, promised to protect the world from Rose, and Rose from herself. It is only fair that it is the Sylph scolding the Seer, now.

She is being unworthy of her name. She shudders with disgust at how quickly and quietly the craving for alcohol had slipped back into her mind, coaxing her back to her old mindset.

In fact -

"A moment, Kanaya," Rose says, straightening her back. Her heart thumps with something new now, as she realizes the opportunity she now has. "Just pardon me a moment -"

She closes her eyes and looks inward. She does not ease herself into her mindscape through meditation - she forces the insight and then she finds herself in the world of her own thoughts. The container for her old mind fragments remains balanced in place above the sun panel, but she narrows her eyes at the lid she used to seal it.

From beneath the lid, writhing and reaching up toward her like tangling strings, is the black tar of her alcoholism. She hasn't seen it this clearly since she dumped the sand of her old mind here, but now, with the greater body of the craving trying desperately to wrap around her conscious mind as well, she is able to reach out with hands that burn with the light of the sun and slice the tendrils where they have exposed themselves. She cuts ruthlessly and reaches out to torch the stranded black goo where it hovers in her mind. She burns and strips it down and burns again, her eyes blazing with light as she seeks out any scraps that might seek to hide elsewhere in her blasted mind.

Glaring, she looks down.

And yes, there it is. One last black, oozing string reaches down toward the sun pane, dripping tar over the shield that holds the grimdark back.

Rose seizes the tendril in a fist, smirks as it writhes and tries to rip free, and twists her hand, sending
a line of bright gold fire through the craving that tried to reach out to the Furthest Ring. She maintains it until all that remains is ash. Rather than sweeping the ashes into her container, where the last remnants of the addiction probably still reside, she gathers it all together and vaporizes it in a hot blast. It pricks her skin with the beginnings of a sunburn, but she's used to light in all its forms.

She closes the eyes in her mindscape and opens them in the physical world. Kanaya leans with a hip hitched on the counter by the sink still, all smooth lines and graceful curves, right down to the wrinkle of worry between her thick brows. "A rousing success," Rose reports, unclenching her hands from the countertop. That craving for alcohol that had gripped her so suddenly has eased, though she still tastes phantom wine on her tongue, but now she has regained her clarity. It is obvious how unhealthy the craving is, and how she knows she would not be able to stop with just a 'taste.'

She has already gone ten days sober. That was, in fact, most likely the hardest part, and she spent much of it so immersed in her own mind's defense and her last war with her mother that she missed the immediate aftermath of her abrupt sobriety. She has effectively 'dried out'; all that remains is a lifetime of maintaining that.

It will most likely never stop, of course. Considering Rue Lalonde's own alcoholic inclinations, Rose most likely has a genetic predisposition to this kind of addictive personality. She will need to refresh her memory on alcoholism and addiction, it would seem. The circular logic that overwhelmed her just now was too easy to give in to. She needs to arm herself against further relapses with knowledge.

"Are we of one mind, then?" Kanaya asks quietly, tilting her head to the side.

What on earth did Rose do to deserve such a perfect friend? Abruptly, she blinks, and feels a tear run down her cheek. "Oh my - y-yes," she stammers, brushing at her face with a hand, her breath hitching. Then, she realizes - why not? She closes her eyes and lets the next sob rock her. "Oh, Kanaya. I'm a mess," Rose gasps, laughing breathlessly. There are still tears prickling at the corners of her eyes, and she wants to laugh and sob in equal measure. "A well-played intervention. Really, truly. It was Oscar-worthy."

Kanaya drops a half curtsy, bowing with her hand pressed to her chest, that tricky smile back on her face. "All of my interventions are Oscar-worthy. I was particularly proud of the peach schnapps. I do not know why I have yet to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize."

"I shall remedy this at once. The word of the Seer of Light should surely be enough to have you considered by the committee." Rose sets her elbow on the countertop and uses it to rest her cheek in her palm, wetness still dampening her face as she smiles at Kanaya. No doubt her ridiculously flushed adoration is radiating from her downright goofy grin, but she doesn't care. She doesn't have to hide it, here. She is not at war with Kanaya. Here, in this space, she is not constantly judged and found wanting. "Oh, Kanaya. What are we going to do with me?"

"You will stay here," Kanaya says briskly. She begins to gently set the empty bottles of alcohol in the trash can, dusting her hands off as she does. Then she begins to stride around the island toward Rose. "And you will heal. And what you cannot heal alone, I will be here to help you with."

"Thank you," Rose says, wiping at her eyes one last time. She could at least try to look presentable for this next part. Even through the relief and the weariness and the happiness, she is a Seer and she knows that look in Kanaya's eye. And she approves.

Kanaya just nods, because obviously, and places a claw under Rose's chin. "May I?"

"You may," Rose replies, and so she smiles widely through the kiss that Kanaya presses to her lips.
All she can offer is a rueful laugh in response to Kanaya's raised eyebrow. "My apologies. That was not up to par at all, was it?"

"It is understandable. You have been through a grave trauma," Kanaya snarks back. "Of course, I am here to help with this as well."

"Thank goodness." Rose reaches out and guides Kanaya down into a proper kiss this time, one hand on the nape of her neck. And then, because it is a grand idea, she runs her fingers through Kanaya's hair.

"And," Kanaya adds after they break apart, drawing back to inspect Rose appraisingly, "we will get you a new wardrobe. Rose, darling, this skirt - what were you thinking?"

Kanaya wields her pins and clips like precision instruments, and Rose would not be surprised to learn that Kanaya has a sewingkind strife specibus on the side for the occasions when she might not have access to a working chainsaw. In the flurry of Kanaya overruling all of Rose's half-hearted protests, Rose nearly forgets that she promised John to pester him as soon as she arrived. "Kanaya, may I borrow your computer first?" she cuts in when Kanaya begins to mutter something about cotton weaves and snaps out her measuring tape. "I swore to John I would keep in contact with him, and it is already well past the time I intended to message him."

"Go ahead," Kanaya says around a mouthful of pins, waving at the computer in the corner with the tape. "If you think I cannot obtain accurate measurements while you sit, you underestimate me."

"Oh no, never," Rose says, smirking as she goes to the computer and settles herself on the backless stool. Kanaya approaches a moment later, as Rose waits for Kanaya's slow Echidna wireless connection to start up so she can open Pesterchum, and presses cool hands to Rose's back while she measures the length of her spine. "Dearest Kanaya, why you persist in using this ancient service provider and web browser remains a mystery when compared with your usual cutting-edge fashion," she murmurs.

Kanaya ruffles the back of Rose's hair. "Hush. Only Sollux is allowed to demean my poor internet decisions. Besides, I enjoy Echidna. There is none of this newfangled tab nonsense yet."

Rose just shakes her head and logs out of Kanaya's Pesterchum handle, typing in her new handle and password and waiting patiently for it to log in while Kanaya stretches the measuring tape across her shoulders. "Sollux?"

"An old friend. Or acquaintance, perhaps. He lives in Toronto, and often seems to despair of my technological prowess when I contact him."

"Hmm," Rose says, eyes lighting up when her chumlist appears at last. It is nearly eleven by now, and John should be in class by now, but he will no doubt have his phone on him. His handle isn't currently lit up, but she opens a chatlog anyway.

TT: John, this is simply to inform you that I have safely arrived at my companion's home, and once again have access to a computer.
TT: It may still be some time before I have reliable access to a phone, but I am here.
TT: Let me know when you receive this message, please.
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 10:52:34 --
"Is that all?" Kanaya asks, her tape measure wrapped around Rose's waist.

"Ye- no," Rose corrects herself, frowning as an alert for an older pestering appears in the corner of the screen. She apparently missed this during the night, but it seems to be from turntechGodhead - Dave Strider. Hmm.

She can think of only one subject of conversation that might spur Dave to pester her directly after their awkward discussion a week ago. John. She clicks open the window, and adds turntechGodhead hastily to her chumroll to see if his handle is active.

Then, she actually reads the chatlog.

It is when she reaches one line in particular that she nearly chokes on her own spit.

TG: this is serious business i need you to tell me this isnt true
TG: are we siblings

"What in the name of god am I reading here?" she wonders aloud. After the initial jolt, she rereads the entire chatlog with a frown, while Kanaya sets aside the measuring tape and leans over her shoulder. "David, what on Earth would make you think such a thing?"

But there is no further explanation forthcoming from Dave, at least not on this chat window. After a few more lines he logged off, sometime last night while Rose was hitchhiking her way through Maine, and it would appear that he has not logged in yet this morning. It's more difficult to read Dave through text alone, given she doesn't know him but it's clear he was having a minor existential crisis over whatever the hell led him to believe they were related.

Kanaya, having read the text as well, sucks in a breath just about Rose's shoulder. "Do you believe his suspicions valid?" she asks quietly. "This turntechGodhead?"

"He is Dave - ah, Flashstep, from Houston," Rose corrects herself. Not that the Striders seem very concerned with keeping their given names private, but Kanaya would be more likely to recognize the hero name. "And this is...well, let us just say it would be very unusual for him to expose this level of concern and confusion openly, even in a private chatlog, if he wasn't truly shaken by the news. Strange. I wish he could have given more detail about where he might have heard such a rumor."

TT: I received your earlier messages. However, I would require further information on how you came to believe this familial tie might exist between us, and any other relevant facts you may have on the matter, before I would be able to make an educated guess on the subject.
TT: I have not previously been given reason to believe I had any siblings, but my mother has proven her tendency toward lies and deception on more than one occasion, so I cannot give a definitive 'no.'

"I don't know what to think, really. I wonder if he's spoken to John about this." Rose eyes the window she opened with John, then decides against it. Until she has more information to work with, speculation is futile, and would only work John up over potentially nothing.

Kanaya is rummaging around behind Rose somewhere now, humming over fabrics and pacing the room. "I may need you to stand for proper measurements of your legs," she says.

Rose smirks and raises an eyebrow, but before she can say anything and log off, a third chat window opens. Strange. Both John and Dave's handles are still dark, so it can't be them; but the two of them and Kanaya make up the whole of Rose's chumroll. "A moment more, Kanaya," she says, dragging
the window to the middle of the screen.

Curious, isn't it?

Rose frowns. This pesterling...should not be possible. When she checks the subject header of the window, there is no description; the standard black text of the notification is absent, and the text itself, an obnoxious difficult to read white, has neither a chumhandle nor initials associated with it. Rose is not a technological genius, of course, but she is fairly certain all of this runs counter to how Pesterchum is designed to function.

TT: So sorry, I do not believe we are acquainted. Pesterchum appears to be malfunctioning. You are?
You recently began using a server that my own methods of communication can connect with. A most fortuitous turn of events.
TT: For whom? You? I fail to see how being contacted by an unidentified personage through the dubious whims of the Internet benefits me.
Oh, for us both, I am quite sure. Is this not a most expedient means of exchanging information?
TT: It still rather escapes me how such an arrangement would benefit me in any way, especially when you failed to provide your name.
Really? I am surprised, Ms Lalonde - I thought you quicker on the uptake than this.

He knows her name.

No, Rose realizes in a haze of fury, raising a glowing hand, he knows Mother's name. Not mine. Not anymore.

"I would appreciate it, truly, if you refrained from blowing up my computer, Rose."

Kanaya's voice breaks through the instinct to annihilate the source of the text that would so foolishly call her Lalonde, and Rose clenches her hand in a fist, breathing steadily until the urge has passed. No need to get so irritated about an annoying little man with a suspect Internet connection. He isn't worth it - if, indeed, it is a he at all. "Of course not. My apologies," she calls back to Kanaya, and then she sets her fingers to the keyboard once more, intending to give the unknown sender, if not the explosion she wishes she would unleash, then at least a stern talking to.

TT: I no longer choose to go by that name.
TT: And the fact that you know it at all leads me to be even less inclined to trust in any information you may wish to provide.
TT: I recommend you cease contacting me -
Or do you prefer Dark Star, now? It would be inconsiderate of me to use any name other than the one you prefer, after all.
Well, Rose?

The computer begins to rattle in its frame, and Rose barely hears Kanaya's concerned voice as she drills into the computer screen with her other sight, wishing she could see through to the truth of this mysterious being with her power. She shakes right along with the computer - and the desk it sits on, and the potted orchid that adorns the bookshelf beside it - even after Kanaya leans in to read the chatlog.

This is a total compromise of her identity. Whoever this person is, they know Rose, in all of her various states of mind, and have connected all those aliases in order to contact her. They know who she is.

Kanaya says it first. "I would recommend in that engaging, timeless human and troll pastime," she
says lowly, gripping Rose's shoulder. "Lie."

"Quite," Rose replies, reeling, and she begins to do so.

TT: No, sorry. You must have contacted the wrong person.
TT: Understandable, given your grasp of technology does not seem to have kept up with the present. Do try not to be afraid or intimidated. I assure you, I only ever want to help you along your path. You do fascinate me so.
I am sure you have a rich assortment of questions, and whether you trust me when I offer you answers is entirely up to you.
TT: I have not admitted to being this Rose, yet. I believe you would do better to offer your services elsewhere.

How does he know about the Horrorterrors? How, how, how?

She can't afford to ask that, though, to demand the answers she craves. How he knew her chumhandle, her aliases, that little tidbit that once, long ago in her childhood, she had taken up the violin and sobbed as she played. She needs plausible deniability, but she is playing from a position of strategic disadvantage; this nameless pesterer knows too much about her, while she knows nothing at all about him.

TT: This conversation is at an end. Please refrain from contacting me again.
Oh, how rude of me. No doubt you require some time to absorb this latest news. You seem quite distraught, really. If you don't stop shaking, your computer may not work much longer. Is it really my humble offer that disturbs you so, or the news that you have a brother?

Rose closes the chat window. She shoves back from the desk and whirls, but the only person in the room is Kanaya, who nods at Rose with haunted eyes that have begun to shine yellow with tension. The troll darts to the windows and slams the open panes closed, untying heavy drapes from their hooks and yanking them to cover the windows so that no one can see in anymore.

"Kanaya, please cover me," Rose asks, and the troll finishes up with the last window, striding back to Rose's side with a firm nod, sliding her arms around Rose. Rose closes her eyes and doesn't feel it when her body slides to the ground, though she is quietly certain Kanaya has her.

Instead, she brings everything she has and funnels it into her sight. Light it up, she commands, a whisper that sends a shudder through her mind.

Slowly, Kanaya's apartment blazes up in a wave of light. Bright sparks mark the blood behind the cupboard door, and outline Kanaya by her side like a star's solar corona. Several of the treasures on Kanaya's bookshelf also burn brighter than the background, including one that makes Rose's bones hum when she sweeps her gaze over it, but instead Rose hones in on the computer, stripping away the dull glitter of the monitor and the chips and the circuitry, trying to find anyway a practicing thaumaturge might have been able to see through the computer, to sense the shaking generated by Rose's fear, to read the message from Dave that had been sent hours ago.

Nothing. Kanaya doesn't even have a web cam that could have been activated by an outside force. There are no hidden cameras in the apartment itself, not even when Rose nearly cracks the computer monitor with the force of her sight and a window shatters under her gaze. She will have to replace that, she thinks distantly. When Rose casts her vision outward instead, sweeping the city block around them in a mile-wide radius, she can find no one with eyes that meet hers, no one focused upon her but Kanaya. They hadn't been watching in person, then.
Frustrated, Rose snarls and tears at her other senses with less finesse than she really should have used until they start up again, and her vision fades back to normal. It burns when her sense of touch returns, and her ears are deaf for a moment before she fumbles with the mental controls and restores them.

"Anything?" Kanaya demands, her arms momentarily too hot as Rose's nerves misfire.

Rose can only shake her head, though it comes out as a diagonal shake, and she hunches forward, pressing the heels of her palms to her eyes until the light dims enough to see. "However he is observing us, it is by no means that I can See," she says, curling a hand around Kanaya's wrist. "It - it is possible it was a purely mundane hacking. I wouldn't be able to detect that."

There is a second possibility, of course, someone whose powers would not only explain Rose's inability to detect the mysterious typist's origin but also how they would have knowledge of Dave's suspicions. They would have more than suspicions, in fact.

*If my mother is using her void technology to bedevil me, in some new phase of our war, I will end her,* Rose thinks, in the privacy of her own thoughts.

Kanaya's expression is thoughtful as Rose's vision clears of sunspots. "I believe I shall contact Sollux. It would not be safe to do so with the computer if it has been compromised, I presume, but I believe my phone supports text messages, though Pesterchum is beyond it."

"And he could trace this?"

"If there is any troll in the world who can, it would be him," Kanaya replies, giving Rose one last squeeze. "You will be well?"

"As well as I can be after that little stunt. Go," Rose says, shooing Kanaya toward the kitchen, where her ancient flip phone is charging. Rose waits for the last of the strain to ebb from her mind, and makes sure that the container of her thoughts remains balanced and not upset by her abrupt, reckless activation of her full sight. Everything seems to be in order, and she rises to her feet, eyeing the computer.

Another chat window has popped open in the interim. She hesitates, debating the merits of using the Pesterchum app at all when it may well be compromised.

But she needs to, at the very least, warn John and Dave. And if it is either one of them pestering her with answers to her earlier queries, they deserve a response, however brusque. She approaches the computer and does not sit down; instead, she bends over the keyboard to read.

Her heart sinks; it is another blank window, with a few lines of obscure white text on a white field that she must highlight to read with a feeling of dread.

I assure you, I have everyone's best interests at heart, Rose.
I am quite certain the information I can provide for you would prove most useful.
Until later, Rose.

Rose does not reply. She hesitates, and then minimizes the window rather than closing it. She knows little of hacking, and it could be that this Sollux will need the window as a way to track it to its origin. After all, it is not as though she has a chumhandle for this strange white-text man that she could offer up as a clue.

(Do not trust him) something mutters in her brain.
something else insists, with a distinctly different shrieksong. A third voice sighs resignedly, with a whistle that could shred the ether and shatter diamonds. Rose, distantly, thinks that it's strange - the Horrorterrors may be a hivemind, but she's never heard so many different voices before. They have always sounded a little like Rose gone wrong, and that was why they slipped so easily into the fabric of her mind before, wearing away at her by subtle assimilation of her mind. These voices...they sound nothing like her at all. They're painfully different.

Then she realizes exactly what she's hearing.

*The sun pane. I fucked it up.*

Rose's eyes roll back in her skull as she bursts into her mindscape like a sun, shoving her way past the burgeoning structure of her new mind, into the numbed area affected by the void bracers still on her arms to get a better look at the sun panel below.

It is whole, from this perspective. But that is impossible. Rose knows what she heard, and like hell is she going to allow her mind to confuse her into believing that the voices of the grimdark and the cold damp are hers. They are using some illusion to fool her again; the only way they could begin to whisper in her mind once more is if the panel has cracked, and the void bracers have ceased to be enough on their own. Intently, she scans the flattened pane of sunlight, running mental fingers along every inch, looking for the weak point.

She can find none. Confused, Rose draws back hesitantly, looking over the entirety of her mind. But there is no sign of a new channel to the Furthest Ring, and the current channel remains sealed over. Putting out a hand, she pours a new flood of pale orange light into the original sun panel, drawing on some of her newly reaccumulated personal power. The pane brightens, and faint wails echo from beneath.

(ơh rơse)

(so cruel, so cruel, so cruel...) But none of them make an effort to resist her; nothing even reaches up through the channel to shove at the sun panel. She gives it as much power as she has, and then kneels back.

Everything is silent in her mind. There is not even the quiet slosh of the bloodbrine sea that used to eternally echo in the old structure of her mind.

Perhaps the sun panel simply needed reinforcement? None of her wards seem to have degraded, and even the earlier damage from the alcoholic craving seems to have done more than left stains on the inside of the Tupperware container of her memories.

Crisis...averted? A little put out, Rose opens her physical eyes again. She remained aware enough to keep standing, but Kanaya is still leaning her back against the sofa when she comes to. "A mild incursion of certain unspeakable voices," she informs the troll wearily, leaning her head back against the cushions with relief.

Kanaya's eyes sharpen with merciless intent. "A problem?"

"Apparently not," Rose admits, pinching her nose.
"Your nose is bleeding," Kanaya says with considerably more alarm. Rose's eyes pop open and she claps her hand over her nose and upper lip. They stare at each other for a moment, before Rose bursts out laughing. "It is hardly a laughing matter, Rose," Kanaya says, pouting a little.

"You had a shot in your tea, I know you're fine," Rose says, waving a hand flippantly. "Your self-control is impeccable, Kanaya." She laughs one last time before sighing, and shakes her head. "I merely had to reinforce my shields, and the voices of the Abyss went silent. It was...interesting. I do not think I have ever had such total silence before all my life. I can't tell if they're weaker, or if I'm stronger...or if they've just lost interest."

"Given you up as a bad investment?" Kanaya asks dryly. "You did say you had already sabotaged them in New York quite successfully. Perhaps they have realized they cannot control you, and are stuck with a connection they can no longer use."

Interesting speculation, thought Rose. It is true that the ways of the many-angled gods are...many-angled. Their interest in her always predicated on their ability to manipulate her for their own ends. After the failure in New York, perhaps they really did deem her too much of a hassle for their wider plans.

"I don't know, Kanaya. I don't know," Rose says, pressing fingers to the blood leaking from her nose and inspecting it for any sign of dull purple. "My diverting all of my energy into that search for the typist may have simply drained the sun panel accidentally. It all happened too quickly for me to analyze it properly."

Now that the immediate panic has passed, she is almost...nonplussed. But one thing is clear.

She must get in contact with John and Dave.

And if the computer is compromised, she needs a phone. Soon.

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Dave thinks that maybe he should have put a little more thought into this.

From the outside, he looks stone cold, like a goddamn iceberg, floating around the inside of this shitty movie theater so smoothly none of these suits notice he's got like ninety percent of his mass hidden beneath...the surface.

That shitty metaphor didn't really pan out, but he's actually getting kind of stressed, okay?

See, he had really wanted this to just be an in-and-out, and thought that he'd be able to scope out the place with his fucking fantastic disguise and then ollly out like a total badass before anyone even noticed his suit had a higher threat count than all of these guys' rags combined. But now that he's in here, it's kind of hard to do the spying thing when everyone is in motion.

He is really curious about an array of computer equipment they have tucked away in one of the projector rooms, for example. Glancing around, using his shades to cover his shifty look, Dave sidles closer and goes to poke at one of the screens. When he shifts the mouse, it lights up and he scrolls through row after row of meaningless gibberish. It's all graphs and charts and maps, but none of it is labeled. Seriously, what kind of disorganized fucks are these guys? How do they keep track of everything if they don't even save their files with names? When he clicks through to the hard drive, it's just a mishmash of anonymous numbers. If you don't go into this system knowing exactly what you're looking for, you won't find anything at all. If there are charts Dave would find useful, he just doesn't know where to look.
"Hey? What are you doin' here?" a voice growls behind him. Dave stiffens and feels his shoulders hunch, and he has to grab his own wrist with his other hand when it tries to fly up and whip a sword out of its hidden sheath. He hasn't blown his cover yet, and he is not going to start swinging sharp objects around in the middle of an enemy hideout unless he's totally lost control of the situation. Instead, he straightens up slowly and turns, shoving his hands in his pockets where he can prod at the stupid ninja stars there for luck.

He shrugs. It's all he can do. His mouth wants to let loose a stream of excuses, but he can't. Fucking Talk. The silent pause that ensues stretches on and on, the time ticking as always on a metronome in his skull, and he starts to sweat because he has to use that time, why is he wasting it with this useless silence. At least when he's talking he's moving, not standing here fidgeting under a suspicious gaze when he just wants to slide back against the wall and pretend he's invisible. Even with the shades between him and this nosy asshole's stare, he feels exposed.

At last, the guy just snorts. "Whatever. If you think you can make sense o' that crock of shit, go right ahead. Just don't come cryin' ta me when Crowbar catches you dicking around." Rolling his eyes, the man stalks away, back down the stairs to the first level, where all the actual theater rooms are located.

Dave doesn't sag with relief. He has been cool as a goddamn icicle this entire time, dammit. He doesn't wipe sweat off his hands while they're still in his pockets, and he most certainly doesn't give the computers a wounded grimace as he shuffles out. He can come back here later, maybe, and click around some more, but right now he can't risk that guy coming back with someone who actually will notice that Dave doesn't exactly belong here. His hands come up, fall, and then come up again as he struggles with indecision, and then finally he reaches up and yanks the bowtie until it comes undone. His totally non-existent sense of style had caused him to rock the crimson red tie for the sake of livening up this drab black on black the Crew have going on, but it's too much of a risk. He folds the bowtie away and stuffs it into his pocket, leaving buttons on his collar undone. He can't look so put together. These Crew guys may wear suits, but they don't do it well, and the less put together Dave looks, the longer he's going to go undetected.

So even though it feels like blasphemy, he leaves his collar in disarray and follows the other man down the stairs at a discreet distance. The other projector rooms were either empty and abandoned still or full of trash and discarded food wrappers, including an entire hellhole dedicated to empty pizza boxes. Dave had such powerful war flashbacks upon seeing a rat crawl up onto the peak of the pizza mound that he had had to slam the door and wheeze quietly to himself in a corner. Yeah, back in the day, the Strider apartment hadn't been the comparatively spotlessly clean pile of smuppets and swords it is today; there had been...darker times. He likes to pretend they never happened, and Bro obliges.

Anyway. He needs to be more careful. He can't let himself be alone in a room with a Crew member again; it's too obvious that Dave can't speak when he's one of only two people, and if he breaks out into sign language they're probably going to be pretty fucking pissed.

He coughs silently into his sleeve when he troombs down the stairs and stirs up a cloud of dust that prickles his throat, and then he turns to slink right along the wall, keeping his head down so none of the Crew members rushing by can see his face. Fuck, he is moving so damn slow. He just wants to be able to flashstep and stop wasting time, but instead he's stuck moving at the same half tempo as everyone else in this crapsack building.

Spying may not be his thing. Maybe. Possibly.

But fuck, he can't back out now. He's here to get the answers the Badass Quandary has always
denied him, and if that means he has to sacrifice his dignity right now for the chance to see her shocked face later when he lays down some sick beats on all the incredible intel he's uncovered, then fine. He can do this. He is Dave motherfucking Strider and he is going to keep his impeccable reserve intact until this mission is complete.

Dammit.

A group of three Crew members hustles by, all of them muttering to themselves. Dave presses himself into an alcove next to the shattered remains of a poster display that might have once advertised a Back to the Future showing (the irony is deliciously sweet. Fuck. Yes.) and tries to listen in. All he can catch before they turn to head out into the front lobby and leave the building are the words 'fuck sobriety' and 'with only one hand!', neither of which make any sense to him.

Anyway. Scanning the corridor, Dave sees the coast is relatively clear. He checked all the projector booths first because there looked like there were fewer people on that floor, but now it's time to man up and look through the actual theaters. He's snuck glances through the projector booth windows, but most were too filthy and cracked to get a good look down below.

He can do this. He has totally got this in the bag. This is basically him shoving this operation in a sack and tying off the opening so it can never leave said bag. A quick look around each theater, and he can get the fuck out of here and regroup for a second run-through later this week. It would be quicker if he could use all the time at his disposal, but he just can't risk being seen mid-step and having the entire fuckwad brigade descend on him at once. Breathing in deeply, he keeps his head down and nudges his way with tiny steps through the double doors to the first theater.

This whole movie theater is a mess. If this were another time and place, and the whole thing weren't infested with mobsters, Dave would give serious thought to maybe taking pictures of the rows of dust-coated chairs and the ragged but still plush curtains that hang limply on either side of the main screen. It would be fucking ironic, okay, making fun of all those hipster pics with their commentary on the quintessence of dust and shit. Bro is right about some things, on occasion; Dave hasn't rigged up his impromptu dark room in too long. Not since before John popped down for a visit by accident, anyway. He should fix that.

This room has been relatively cleaned up, though, he sees. The front five rows have been dusted off, exposing the sad zigzag pattern of the chair fabric. This was also the room with the cleanest window in the projector booth above, Dave recalls, but there doesn't seem to be much here. He hugs the wall as he goes up the stairwell, twitching like a goddamn rabbit whenever he hears another sigh or creak from the ceiling or the walls, and tiptoes all the way up to the top row before conceding that this room seems to be empty. Even when he bends low and checks the floor for anything incriminating someone might have dropped, the floor is almost clean, aside from the footprints in the ever-present dust. It looks like someone has made an effort to clean up this room and its projector. Hell, maybe even a bunch of raging cultist gangsters need a movie night sometimes? Dave ain't one to judge.

But anyway. This room is a resounding waste of time. Shoving his shades up his nose, Dave shrugs and pushes himself up off the ground, brushing his hands off with a grimace. They're coated with dirt and god knows what else from getting to second base with the floor, and he doesn't really want to even stick them in his pockets, now. Seriously, his suit never asked to get mixed up in whatever fucked up affair his hands and the floor were having. Letting them hang awkwardly by his sides, feeling like he probably looks like his arms are sticking out from his body at an angle, he trots down the stairs and back out into the main hallway.

A woman in black rushes by, her sleeve actually brushing against his nose when he doesn't backpedal in time to avoid her. She is gnawing on a pencil as she passes by him absorbed in her
armful of papers. He has no idea what they are; he just thanks them mentally for taking up all her attention so she didn't notice the near-Strider encounter that almost just ended with them both crashing to the floor. His heart doing a good impression of a remix, Dave cracks his neck and pretends he totally meant for that to happen. Then he walks as normally as he can down to the next set of doors.

He looks in, does a double take, and then nearly flings himself bodily away from the door. The entire theater hall is crawling with Crew members, nearly a dozen of them, and at least two look up with frowns when Dave aborts that little excursion. Yeah, no, he's not stupid; he's not going anywhere near a large group of those guys. Sweating a little now, he hustles to the next theater, feeling as though eyes are giving him a lookover from behind that is very much unwelcome. But when he works himself up to glance backwards, casual as anything, the corridor is empty. No one is looking at him, not even the mysteriously-appearing cue ball. It's just his imagination being a dick and trying to psyche him out. Way to be a douche, Dave's brain.

At least, he thinks, putting a hand on the next set of double doors and doing one last spot check on the hallway, he hasn't run into any future-Daves. He has it so that, for tonight at least, he's reserving time loops to be used only in the event he totally fucks this over. No superfluous time travel allowed past midnight. He also doesn't want to take the chance his time shenanigans can be tracked; Rue Lalonde seemed sure the Crew could hunt down Rose when she went all grimdark and gruesome, and who knows if they've really started tracking Dave again. It's just another reason why he's stopped flashstepping too. He can get through this without the super powers. He is a strong independent - oh, forget it. He barely opens the doors a crack, more wary after nearly slamming his way into a room full of Crew, and slides inside through as narrow an opening as he could manage. Suck it, John, skinny shoulders are good for something.

When he looks up, he realizes he's made a mistake. A different kind of mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

He seriously should have put more planning into this little outing. Because never in all this past week would he have expected to stumble upon a frickin' dungeon. These guys have actual prisoners.

Fuck. Oh, fuck. Dave slips into the shadow corner by the double doors, making himself as small and unassuming as possible by ducking his head and staring at the two people chained to the projector wall opposite through the corner of his eye. Wow, when did the Midnight Crew graduate from petty crime and arson and smuggling to kidnapping people? This is so not what Dave signed up for, and he has no idea what to do.

Well. Rescue them, obviously. He is the hero. It is him. The question is how the fuck is he going to manage that when he's mute in a theater full of criminal mooks who would definitely want answers as to why he's busting these two poor suckers out of the hoosegow.

He presses his whole back up against the wall and edges sideways. He is a master of stealth, okay? Okay. He creeps closer to try to survey the entire theater without breaking cover, in case someone is loitering in the top row where he can see them around this corner. His eyes keeps being drawn back to the two figures chained to the wall. Because, weirdly enough, one is a carapacian. After a whole lifetime of only seeing them in history textbooks and on Internet articles, suddenly he's found a second carapacian out of bug fuck nowhere. It's not a Dersite like the BQ, though; this one is stocky and has a pale carapace, her bald head nodding forward as though she's about to pass out. The other guy has a burlap sack tied over his head, and isn't moving at all. There's something pinned to the ground to either side of him, two piles of more concealing tarp that tremble and twitch every so often. More prisoners?
Fuck. The more people Dave has to get out of here, the harder it'll be to stay below the radar. And like fuck is he leaving anyone behind.

But there's no sign of a future-Dave, at least. Apparently he can still handle this mission without time shenanigans, so maybe he's stressing out over nothing. Maybe the Crew will go out and get drinks at a bar, or a convenient distraction will get their attention, and Dave can walk right out of here without missing a beat.

He finally works himself up to peeking around the corner. He whips his head around and then yanks himself back around against the wall.

He pauses. Uh. He looked too fast to actually, you know. See anything.

How embarrassing. Wow, he's just going to forget that ever happened. Manning the fuck up, Dave grits his teeth and looks around the corner, up the stairs to the top of the stadium seating.

There's nobody there. He relaxes minutely, and throws a last look over his shoulder at the double doors before he darts up to the front stage area, where the front seats come to an end. The closer he gets, the more confused he is; if those two other tarps are covering other prisoners, why are there only two sets of chains? The Crew wouldn't just leave people lying around unguarded unless they were secure, right?

Trying not to think about it too hard, Dave kneels by the carapacian and tries to figure out how the fuck he's going to bust these people out. The carapacian has cuffs on each wrist, but they're clearly not built to hold the tiny segments of a carapacian wrist; someone has taped up her claws with packing tape so they're too thick to slip out through the too-loose cuffs. She stirs and mutters while Dave inspects them, but doesn't wake up. He'll have to watch it, though, because if she wakes up and screams at him they'll have Crew all over them faster than you can say 'this was an incredibly stupid idea.'

He thinks that if he can just slice off the tape, she'll be able to pull loose, no problem. He has the dexterity with a sword to pull it off. He just needs to wake her up quietly so she knows what's going on. He sneaks another glance at the guy with the bag on his head, and decides to wait until he's handled this potential shitshow first. He covers the carapacian's mouth with a hand and then shakes her by the shoulder.

She jerks awake, moving so fast she slams her cranium back against the concrete wall. Her taped up hands lift to pat at her skull as she shakes it woozily, and Dave grimaces as he has to keep moving his own hand to follow her weaving mouth. Unfortunately, his antics finally get her attention, and she glowers at him, eyes bleary.

Without much warning, she bites down. Sharp, tiny little teeth needle right across Dave's knuckles and he wheezes out a gasp of pain that makes no sound, yanking his hand back. Her jaws part a moment later, and he leans out of her range, waiting for a scream.

Nothing happens. When he looks away from his fucked up hand to see what the goddamn holdup is, the carapacian blinks at him, her mouth agape. She doesn't look freaked anymore - no, that looks more like...recognition?

…Huh. Wait a minute, have they met before -

'It's you! The shrimpy one from the lab!' Dave signs as it hits him. Twisting his hand for some of the signs stings, but he can still make them. 'The one who thought hiding behind a glass wall would hide her so she could spy on that conversation with the Lalondes!'
The carapacian blushes and stamps a heel as best she can. Her claws fumble in the chains as she makes a weird noise. Dave rubs his temple as a headache blooms in his skull, but she has to bang her taped up hands a few times before he gets it. She needs her hands free to communicate. Oops.

Drawing his sword at last, he cuts her hands free in two quick slices, his sword a blur, and then he helps her peel the tape off. As he thought, the cuffs simply fall to the floor with a clank when the carapacian flexes her joints and launches into babbling speech.

PM: I do not know what you are talking about, Knight! That was not a thing that ever happened! Ever!

PM: I am a simply Parcel Mistress and nothing more! Definitely not a spy!

Oh good. This one understands irony. They're going to get along just fine. 'Yeah, well, how did you end up all the way here in Houston, little miss Perfectly Mundane?' he asks, checking over his shoulder again. Someone is going to walk in here eventually; whoever's on guard duty won't be long now, not unless the Midnight Crew has gotten really fucking cocky about their secret hideout.

PM: Shhhh! You didn't see me! I'm not here at all!

He rolls his eyes behind his shades and doesn't comment further. If the lady doesn't want to talk, then the lady doesn't want to talk. 'Well, I'm getting you out of here,' he replies, shrugging. 'Whether you're actually here or not. Now, what about these guys?' He gestures to the people covered in burlap and tarps. It's kind of weird, but the two huddled on either side of the bagged man don't really...look like people. Uh. But maybe he's just seeing things.

PM: There is only -

PM: Oh no! You shouldn't - you won't want to see him yet -!

The warning shriek comes too late. Dave has already reached out with some of his usual speed and tugged the drawstring keeping the bag knotted over the man's head. For a moment, he wonders gruesomely if maybe PM is trying to warn him that the man is already dead, if they covered his head to hide the onset of decay.

Shit, that was morbid. He needs to stop doing that. The taxidermy collection is already bad enough.

Then the bag falls all the way off, and what he sees doesn't make sense.

The guy's covered in feathers.

Not all of his face, no, but his hair is thatched with them, several broken pinions sticking out at odd angles from his blondish hair, and the bright orange grooves of potential feather follicles frame his face. He's the color of an orange creamsicle and not even in the troll way, where their hair and veins and sometimes their cheeks sometimes gain a faint tinge of their blood and eye color as they age. No, this guy is straight up orange, a color Dave can't even remember seeing very often in trolls themselves, ranging from gold-streaked hair and honey-yellow feathers to a mouth the color of a tangerine.

And when the bird guy rolls his shoulders and blinks at Dave with confusion, the tarps on either side of his body shudder, and part of the left tarp falls off to reveal the bend of a wing, the covert feathers in disarray.

Oh. Uh. So, two for rescuing, then. That's good.

Yeah, no, Dave's losing his chill and oh man just don't freak out - HE HAS FUCKING WINGS?!!
"The fuck are you?" Bird guy croaks. He doesn't really sound like a bird, just a really pissed off teenage guy, bristling and glowering with pale orange eyes as he squints in the half light. If Dave ignores all the gratuitous orange and the feathers, he'd say the guy is around his age, even.

'Rescue party. You can pay homage and sacrifice virgins in my name later.' Dave pulls the tarps the rest of the way off and yup, those are most definitely wings. But his stomach turns painfully when he see's the wing on his left, the bird guy's right; it's been broken messily, with deep orange scabs where the broken skin tried and failed to heal. If he looks closer he thinks he'd see bone sticking out. He's seen enough birds and wings in his time to see exactly how someone would have had to hold the wing out and still, and then maybe brought just a well-placed boot down in the middle of the radial bone -

That's never going to heal right. Even if it had been set immediately after the injury was inflicted, that kind of damage to a hollow bird bone doesn't mend without consequences. If this guy ever flies again - can he fly? Is the wingspan wide enough to support his body? Dave can't tell if the numbers would work out, he's not a fucking bird-kid expert - it'd be with a severe cant to one side, and the wing will be weak structurally for the rest of his life.

Bird-kid seems used to the scrutiny of his wings, or maybe he's still out of it. Instead of calling Dave out on the uncool staring, he moves restlessly and says, "Dude. I don't know what the hand flapping means. Like. Seriously, English, man, do you speak it?"

Oh. Dave freezes, focusing on the sharp crack where the ulna and radius have both been snapped nearly in two instead of cussing himself out inwardly. Why had he expected this rando to understand sign language? Dave's been getting complacent, used to hanging around Bro and carapacians who understand ASL, and typing messages over Pesterchum that don't require a voice at all. It's not like he has much of a social life aside from that, after all.

Well, shit. He looks at the guy, deliberately meets his eyes, and mouths, "Still not gonna work all that well. Sorry."

The gasping, pathetically noiseless wheezes that emerge prove his goddamn point. The bird guy lets his mouth snap shut, and looks suitably guilty. His throat tight, Dave bends to inspect the cuffs on the bird guy's wrists. He can't help but notice that feathers line his arms, too, pale orange pinions like those that contour his wings, and the hands and wrists in the cuffs are more clawlike than human, strictly speaking. The feathers that march up from his metacarpals are short, lengthening out as they continue up his arms.

How bizarre. Exactly who designed this guy? More importantly, did Dave remember to bring his lock picks? He usually has an emergency sewing kit on him, just in case, and that would do in a pinch but he'd rather not start snapping his good sewing needles off in these shitty locks. Yeah, he should focus on that instead of giving the bird guy an unintended onceover. He's not a total dick.

Speaking of. Bird guy twists his wrists when Dave tugs on them for a better look, and ducks his head while he mutters, "Uh. Fuck. Sorry. I'm guessing you're that hero kid they're looking for?"

He might be blushing, but it's hard to tell when everything is orange. So much fucking orange.

But wait what. Dave jerks, twitches his hands intending to sign a 'what the fuck, they are looking for me?' before recalling the guy wouldn't understand.

Then he smacks himself on the forehead and turns to the obvious translator in the room. 'They're looking for me, then?' he signs at PM grimly. Then he pulls his sewing kit out of his inside pocket and starts working at the guy's chains.
PM, who is rubbing at the scrapes on her own thin wrists, nods.

PM: They have sought you in earnest apparently since your actions in New York. They do not speak as much in front of me as I might have wished, but I know they took - this one captive as well during their hunt for you. Whatever void protects you from their sight does not seem to extend to this one.

PM: …

PM: ...You are not hurting, Knight?

Dave raises an eyebrow, and silently mourns the loss of an old friend as he crooks a needle slightly to suit his needs. Before he starts working again, he replies, 'No idea what you mean, dame. I'm fine. You all right?'

PM nods hesitantly, her dark eyes flickering back and forth between keeping a wary watch on the double doors and scanning Dave's face for - something.

PM: I am fine. I was simply under the impression...that you would react more negatively to this revelation. Bleed from your nose, even!

PM: You are indeed a most stoic warrior, Knight!

Oh, man. Do all carapacians take BQ's strategy of enigmatic obfuscation as gospel? Because Christ on a tortilla, no part of that little spiel made sense. None of it. And he's figured out from years of dealing with the Dersite dame that it's easier to just shrug and nod when they get like this, so that's what he does before digging into the locks again. Bird guy is staring at him, horrified by something, but wow does Dave not care at all. Eventually the horror abates and Dave can work without worrying about that baffled, searching look the bird guy keeps throwing at him, for whatever reason.

Time is ticking away. Sweat runs down the back of his neck, because even with PM keeping watch he's paranoid as fuck. Bird guy shifts in his chains and stretches his left wing cautiously, looking much more alert now that he's got the bag off his head. And no, Dave is not going to waste brain power wondering if the hood had convinced the bird part of his brain to think it was night all the time, like when you hood a hawk and - nopenopenope.

The first cuff springs open at last, landing on the ground with a clank that makes Dave wince. Bird guy yanks his claw back and flexes it. Dave can still see the painful orange scabs running all the way around his wrist where he probably freaked and yanked on the cuffs at some point, and even a thin trickle of yellow-orange that looks fresh. Now that he's got the hang of it, Dave launches his assault on the other lock and nearly snaps his last pin in two with his haste.

"Any way to speed this up?" Bird guy has the nerve to ask, and Dave stops entirely to look up, keeping his face totally blank, and give him the middle finger. "Oh, ha fucking ha, like no one's ever flipped me the bird. Really fucking classy pun, jackass."

Actually, he hadn't even considered that one. He decides to just focus on his lock-picking, trying not to think about the fact that John's awful puns are starting to seep into his subconscious.

The last tumbler clicks into place pretty much at the same time PM lets out a warning yell.

PM: Knight? There is -

"Hey - what the fuck are you doing?!" a harsh voice demands, and Dave knows their cover is blown. He gets up from his knees and nonchalantly shrugs at the troll in the suit who is staring at him, the double doors still flapping behind him. The troll's disbelief is quickly melting into a fury, so Dave
doesn't have long. That shout alone probably gave them away.

No reason to dick around in slowtime anymore, then. Drawing his sword, he crosses the theater floor in a second and slams the hilt into the side of the troll's head. The guy drops, easy, but yeah. Time to fucking blow this joint. 'We're out of here,' he signs to PM.

The bird kid whistles, and Dave feels a sharp pang of jealousy. "Not bad, man." Mr Creamsicle gets to his feet (are they feet? Dave didn't even think to look for more claws) and then nearly topples over backwards, staggering against the concrete wall. PM is closer and grabs one of the bird claws to try to steady the guy.

PM: Sir? Sir? You are not well!

"Can't help it. The wing ain't gonna get any better here. Time to blow this joint," the bird guy grunts, pulling himself upright.

Dave is struck with the weirdest sense of déjá vu. But hey, it's a common phrase, right? That was just a freaky coincidence. Besides, obviously he and the bird kid are in agreement. He nods firmly and waves frantically for PM and Feathers to join him by the unconscious troll. While he waits for them to catch up, running the slow way with the bird guy limping with every step, Dave flashsteps in and out of the theater hall, scanning the corridor. Unfortunately, between one second and the next, he can see a huge crowd of Crew members pouring out of the theater where they'd all been having their weird powwow, blocking off the nearest exit.

He wants to say they have to fight their way out. But honestly, it will probably just be Dave fighting, he thinks, eyeing the carapacian and the bird guy as they draw to a halt behind him. PM looks a scrappy little fighter, maybe, if a little fragile, but just crossing the room seems to have made Feathers pale in the face. The broken wing is dragging mostly on the ground, and it can't be good for the break for him to be moving it at all like that without a splint. But they don't have time for even a temporary fix.

Almost unconsciously, Dave starts a beat in his head. It's fast and smooth and nameless, and he starts to absently tap his finger against his leg as he signs one last thing to PM. 'You guys, stay behind. Try not to get caught again; we have to fight our way out.'

PM swells up, glaring indignant even as she translates, but Dave doesn't hang around to wait for the creamsicle's protests, too. He flashsteps out into the hall and stops himself in the middle of the corridor, flipping his sword jauntily in one hand as he waits indolently for the Crew to take notice of him. He takes a mental count in his head, and gets seventeen, maybe twenty depending on whether any other have reentered the building or are still busy upstairs. The sounds of a real fight will draw all the fuckers out of the woodwork, no doubt.

And to think, he'd wanted to avoid a fight. This was supposed to be a cool, super-secret spy mission, and look how well that turned out.

Oh well. 'Smoke 'em if you got 'em,' he signs to the uneducated morons, and smirks when nearly five rush him at a time, the others still milling about in confusion.

Dave draws a second sword, and lets the beat of the metronome take over.

The secret is to take them one at a time, never forgetting that there's more that aren't waiting in the wings like video game enemies, but actively trying to get past his guard with little regard for taking
turns. Dave just lets them come and spins around them between the pitiful seconds they have to work with. He has so much more time to set up his moves that they just can't keep up, for the most part. A few come close to laying hands on him, but he always has that flashstep to let him sway out of the way, sticking out a foot with a lazy smirk to trip them when time starts for them again.

He has two swords out at once, and though he's generally better working with only one at a time, he needs the second to act as a parry whenever he can't dart out of the way. He has to press his advantage whenever he can, aiming to disable or incapacitate as many Crew members as he can, and that means sometimes stepping into a clusterfuck of weapons and opening himself up to retaliation he can't avoid. So he catches someone's clawkind along the edge of his blade and holds them there, gritting his teeth, as he socks someone else in the square in the throat with a fist closed around the hilt of his other sword. They drop, gasping for air, and Dave allows himself a near-maniacal grin at the glorious, perverse justice of it all. Then he whirls on the woman with the claw specibus and sets to work on knocking her unconscious.

He sees PM punch a green-eyed troll square in the nose. It's a fucking good hit, too, and the troll stumble back with a squawk. The lean carapacian leaps onto him and latches on like a fucking spider, clawing at the Crew member's face and then delving her claws into his pockets. She trills with triumph when she holds up a golden ring and punches the troll in the face one more time for good measure. She jumps off him and - Dave misses what happens next, as he falls smoothly to his knees and rolls backward to slice through the staff of a woman behind him, cutting her strife specibus in two - then suddenly, with barely a flick of her wrist the carapacian is wielding a fucking sword.

Well. That was unexpected. She doesn't hold it like an expert; the balance is totally wrong for her short frame and spindly arms, but she knows enough not to stab herself as she waves it angrily at the Crew members trying to close in on her so that they're forced back.

Dave loses track of her again in the fray when he needs to turn and slice and dip and cut again. Bro may be a stronger fighter, but like this, in a fight against people who aren't overpowered puppet freaks, Dave is more aware than ever that maybe he actually is a good fighter. Every move feels natural and each time stop sets him up exactly at the correct angle for a precise strike, and the blows fall on the right beats and it's flawless, it's a motherfucking symphony. He slices through someone's Achilles tendon and pivots with his shoe planted on their face in the next moment, kicking off backward.

When he has a rest in the song before the bass drops again, he seeks out Feathers. It's not hard - he stands out like neon orange flame in the swarm of black suits around them. Assessing him on the fly, Dave thinks he's most likely a way more capable fighter when he's not trailing a hugeass broken wing behind him. It's a huge disadvantage, and even though the guy is giving as good as he gets, fighting solely with his closed fists and the occasional bat of his functional wing, more than one hit lands when three Crew members gang up on him at once. There's blood streaming from Creamsicle's nose by the time he shoves one man into the wall and trips up the other with his good wing. The hoarse cry he lets out sounds almost like a bird shriek, and he flings himself at the third Crew thug with abandon. Clearly, he can hold out for a little longer, but the fact is both PM and the bird guy aren't in any shape for this kind of crowded melee.

It really starts to go sour when his shitty sword breaks. Sure, he still has one left, but the jarring rattle of slamming the sword up against a man's pistol that's just too thick to slice through is the last straw for the metal. No sword lasts forever, and this one shatters right by the hilt, leaving Dave with nothing to even stab with. He falls back, and now he's off beat, and he grimaces.

And then the boss arrives.
All the Crew freezes in place when someone yells from beyond their ranks, nearer the exit, and Dave is thrown off beat again when no one surges forward to take advantage of his broken sword. Through the crowd he can see another beacon of color that leaves him nonplussed. There's a man glowering through the bodies, eyeing Dave, and for once he's not wearing a midnight black suit. This one is a disgustingly sickly green, but everyone in the crowd is angled toward him now, which is all the clue Dave needs that this guy is Serious Business.

"The hell is going on?! Twenty of you can't take care of this?!” the man in green demands. Dave does not like the fucking look in the man's eyes; it's cold and calculating, and the Crew members who are still standing straighten up after the scolding, then shift back into battle readiness when before Dave had hoped he was wearing them down. Whoever told this guy felt green was a good color for his skin tone was a fucking liar, but he seems to be in charge, and Dave can tell, with a sinking feeling in his gut, that they're not going to be able to do this. There's just too many Crew members still standing for Dave to cut down, and John had told him to watch out for Crew bosses - Hearts Boxcars at least was a formidable hand to hand fighter. Dave can't tell what this guy is supposed to be, but he's not taking chances, not when he still has his two rescuees to consider, whose strength must be flagging fast.

He freezes in place completely, and the beat shudders to a stop in his head. The Crew members hesitate too, even with the man in green egging them on, clearly thinking he's up to something. It buys him time to think. He can't fight the instinct to whirl around, snarling when he sees there's still no sign of a future-Dave. Maybe he has no choice. Maybe he just has to take them back in time, but future-him can't make it back to the theater to give himself a heads up. Either way, he's out of options. Slicing out with his one unbroken sword, Dave flings the broken hilt at the nearest troll, scoring a direct hit between the woman's brown eyes, and flashsteps back until he runs into PM. The little carapacian is still kicking wildly, the ringsword clasped in one hand as a taller man tries to manhandle the weapon away from her. Dave kicks his legs out from under him in a time stop and grabs PM around the waist himself, hauling her up so she grabs him around the neck in a chokehold on instinct.

He can't give Feathers any warning, as both he and PM have their hands silenced. The bird guy does see Dave coming, and punches one last Crew member in the face before Dave grabs him by the shoulder and reaches deep inside himself for the agony.

Something goes wrong, and for an aching second the three of them are paused there. Dave fumbles and twists at his power, but it keeps sliding away between his fingers. He gags on the sharp pain that stabs through his throat, prolonged by this unwanted delay, and he panics, clawing at the power with his mind. Something is off, something about one of the two people he's trying to pull back in time with him, and he can't tell in the pain of the moment whether it's PM or Feathers - it's not like he's ever tried taking anyone but the occasional mugging victim back in time with him before, and who fucking knows, maybe his power discriminates against carapacians or orange bird people like a raging racist douchebag.

Abruptly, he twists, and the power clicks into place obediently. He's gotten better about thinking his way to the general time he's shooting for, but this time the shift is out of his hands, just like the first time he'd time traveled.

One last spasm of pain, and they're gone -

The wrong way.

They don't go backward, they go forward -
- and wow, at least Dave knows, when he hits the ground hard to throw up all over the theater carpet, why he never saw a future-Dave to give him warning. Bile burns up along his throat, drowning out the memory of the initial pain as his entire body cramps up to protest whatever the fuckity fuck just happened.

"Jesus fuck!" Feathers yelps, and Dave wonders vaguely why the bird guy knelt down beside him until he realizes, woozily, that he must have dragged both PM and Creamsicle down with him when he collapsed to get his pukefest on.

They're in the same hallway as earlier, of course, but the place is dead empty. When he looks up, panting and wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand, shaking, he sees dried blood everywhere he took someone down earlier, but no sign of the unconscious guys themselves. The air is still and quiet, and not even the walls are creaking, so it would seem the Crew has cleared out in...however long they were spiraling forward in time, rather than backward.

Dave closes his eyes, even when PM tugs on his sleeve insistently, and senses what time it is. How far did he bring them?

Three hours. It's three thirty in the morning of the same day he left, and he's never felt more relieved in his life. The last thing he needs is one day slip, either backwards or forwards, lose control, and then end up years displaced from his present. He isn't sure how that just happened, but then, he doesn't know fuck all about time travel anyway, and he's been doing it for months.

Sitting up, still riding the last nauseous twist of his stomach, Dave signs at PM wearily, ignoring the bird kid's continued muttered on his other side. 'There could still be some Crew hanging around, but I think we're in the clear. Let's get the hell out of here with the bird kid.'

PM gives him a strange look, but relays the message, leaving out 'bird kid.' Like the guy hasn't heard weirder in however long he's had wings - maybe even a lifetime of it.

PM: Your help was appreciated Knight - Dave. Yes, let's get out of here. I don't like this place. It is not fun anymore.

He's not even going to ask. Nope.

"We're going outside?" Feathers dithers for a minute when Dave raises an affirmative eyebrow because duh, and then he limps his way back into the theater they just left. Dave has enough time to exchange a confused look with PM, who just shrugs her thin shoulders, before the bird guy hobbles out again. His right wing is still dragging, but now he's got one of those tarps from earlier draped over the wings, mostly hiding them. The left one is almost completely tucked in and hidden, but the right end feathers are visible. The guy shrugs. "Best I can do. Don't really want to wander around in public like this," he mutters, his shoulders hunched and his wings following suit, all crowded up around his ears. The image is bizarre, but Dave doesn't really want to walk around town with a really eye-grabbing orange bird guy anyway. He shrugs and leads the way down the hallway, PM trotting at his side with her frenzied energy and Creamsicle lurching almost in step with him.

They get out of the theater with no further trouble. The boards on the front door that Dave had to duck through to sneak in have been torn away, as though the Crew left in a hurry and didn't want to dick around with crawling out one at a time. Dave cracks his neck as he looks around, but the streets are relatively deserted. If anyone stuck around to watch for them, he can't sense them.

PM and the orange kid follow, and Feathers sighs openly, tilting his head to bask in the tepid Houston morning air. "Thanks," he says shortly, like it has to be dragged out of his throat, and Dave knows the feeling. He could have done without the gratitude anyway. Well, who knows how long
he's been stuck in that theater, anyway - since New York happened, maybe, which would suck. Dave isn't judging. The bird guy's holding up pretty well, considering he just endured actual imprisonment by a criminal outfit. Hasn't even started crying or anything shitty at all. Kudos, man.

Oh, right. He should probably get the guy's name. Figure out where he lives and get him to a bird hospital or something. He signs, 'Yeah, yeah. What's your name anyway? I can't keep calling you bird guy in my head.'

Dave doesn't mention the other nicknames. No one need ever know about that one time he christened a guy Creamsicle.

No one.

PM stops mid translation, then closes her fists, widening her eyes at Dave intently. Dave raises an eyebrow, and she just looks more perplexed. She restarts, not even finishing his question for him.

PM: Dave, you...you don't know who this is?

Feathers starts, and then renews his baffled, disbeliefing stare at Dave, who is really starting to feel out of the loop. "Wait, what. You're kidding, right? You seriously can't look at my face and realize something is fucking wrong? I'm not familiar at all?"

Dave's insides do something unacceptable. He shakes his head, feeling uneasy all over. "You're a fucking bird, it's kind of distracting. Should I know you?"

Great, now both PM and Feathers are looking at him like he's the one who's completely insane. PM translates in fits, her movements getting more and more wild as she goes along, like she can't believe the stupidity coming out of Dave's hands. Seriously, what the actual fuck?

"You can't possibly be this dense!" the bird guy bursts out, his brows furrowed with frustration. He finally flings an arm up in the air exasperatedly, the other one still holding the tarp up. "My name is Dave, you douchebag! We're both named Dave, I heard the lady here say it herself! Do you seriously not see it, yet?!"

To be fair, Dave didn't see it before. At all. Maybe it was the feathers; maybe it was just Dave's own finely honed ability to intensely deny reality in favor of irony. But this time he looks, he really looks, at the bird kid's face. It's not the face he sees in the mirror, but it's his face, dyed orange and studded with feathers, his hair laced with 'em, even his body in baggy clothes with holes ripped down the back so the extra wings can stick through.

That's when Dave gets it. The sensation in his stomach is, he thinks, a little like the one he got that day his future self pushed him out a window to make him time travel; sick and hollow and lurching.

'...Well, welcome to the motherfuckin' club,' Dave signs for PM to translate; she flushes and complies with a censored version that still gets the point across. 'Membership used to be a lot more exclusive but hey man, the world works in mysterious ways, right?'

First Rose is his sister, now he has a bird twin, also named Dave. Fucking hell, new Striders are just popping up like daisies. He just - how is this even a thing?

Bird-Dave tugs at his feathery hair, his face a strange mask of emotion that Dave's totally thrown by. This guy isn't wearing shades, and he's not trying to hide his emotions very well either, and the resulting disconnect is almost as unnerving as the fact that he's basically looking at himself. How the hell did he not notice this before?! He's seen other-Daves all the time, so why did this one not compute? "That's it? That's really all you have to say?" he demands. "I mean, fuck, I'm freaking out
here - there's a non-mutant-freak version of me and I'm flipping my shit, but all you have to say is 'hey'?!"

Hey. This is the kind of contest Dave can win, the kind Bro has been training him for all his life. While on the inside the exact same kind of freak out is brewing, outwardly he has control, and he just shrugs with a stoic expression. 'Cool? What do you want me to say, man? I'd rather we just went home so we can stop worrying about the Midnight Crew catching up. You need to calm your bird-tits.'

PM censors him again with a scolding look, and adds her own commentary.

PM: I would much prefer you two wait to discuss this later, too. Dave - the Knight is clearly as much of a fool as I suspected! I have many ME S A G E S to send on the results of my not-mission, and I do not trust you not to spy on me. Go to the Knight's base or so help me I will drag you there myself!

She jabs a bony claw at Dave's chest, hard enough to startle him. He rubs the spot and watches the carapacian trot off, yanking her hood wrappings up as she goes. Doesn't look like she's giving any sign of coming back, either. Well, she's a trooper; being broken out of jail barely seems to have fazed her sassy attitude. Dave tilts his head back and stares up at the lightening sky, wondering just what the fuck to do now. Is he seriously taking bird-him home? He doesn't know what to think of all this, can't even process it.

But he nearly sick with curiosity, and when he chances a sidelong glance at the other Dave, he can see the same curious yearning written much more plainly on the guy's face. Jeez, he should stop and get the guy a pair of shades; this kind of emotion is like walking around fucking naked for a proper Strider.

And yeah, this guy is a Strider already, in Dave's head, so that resolves that question really. Rule two of being Striders - don't ever leave a brother behind. Unless he's being a bratty little fuck, but Dave is pretty sure that's just Bro being facetious.

With PM gone, he doesn't really have a way to communicate 'Come on, man, you are officially Striderkin; it is you. Now hurry up so we can get you some cold hard AJ and do something about the fucked up wing' so he just signs it, sighs at the confusion that muddles across bird-Dave's face, and grabs the guy by the arm to start dragging him along in the right direction.

"Hey, fuck - leggo of me, I'm coming, I'm coming," bird-Dave yelps, pulling his arm free. He follows behind Dave, though, clutching the tarp over his wings so he looks like a demented orange turtle with a black shell, and Dave allows himself a small smirk as he turns to face forward and lead the way home. Wow. Does he have a fucking story for Bro, today. He wonders what the Strider protocol is for introducing your bird-hybrid twin maybe-clone person to the family, if there even is one.

...Probably best to just bring Dave 2.0 home and pretend everything is totally normal. That generally seems to work out well. Bro does that all the time, bringing home new and more outlandish puppets and leaving them scattered around the living room until Dave gets used to seeing them. This is basically the same thing, right?

John isn't going to fucking believe this.

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For the second time in less than a month, John realizes he's going to have to miss school.
He hates breaking up his routine. Absolutely hates it. He doesn't know if it's the familiarity of the routine - school, homework, hero work, sleep, and school again, like clockwork - that he likes, or if there's actually some mental stability at stake, but he's had basically the same routine ever since he officially started going out on patrol all those years ago, and messing with it in even the smallest ways completely throws him off balance. Becoming friends with Karkat had necessitated a massive change, but at least it had been a change John welcomed; by that point his depression and subsequent breakdown had proven that in some vital way his routine had become unhealthy. Welcoming Karkat into his life was worth the few weeks of discomfort.

This unplanned extension of his patrol hours, on the other hand, sets John's skin crawling. Red and orange light has begun to thread the sky around him, and several times in the past half hour he has accidentally tried to turn in midair and nearly been blinded by the rising sun. These goggles are tinted, after all, so now all of a sudden he has this new problem of trying not to veer east without bracing himself.

He's been patrolling for almost a full ten hours straight, and honestly, he feels fine, aside from that lingering doubt and discomfort as the sky continues to brighten and the clouds clear away. After he and Hemogoblin temporarily split up to occupy their time until Crichton is due to arrive, he'd flung himself into the wind and let it guide him all around the city. Once he thinks about it, he manages to focus on the wind's intent, and use that to center in his teleportation. One moment he hovering near the police station; the next, he finds himself above a mugging in progress. The wind had reached down with Heir and helped him pull the mugging victim to safety before he laid into the mugger himself with some well-timed fists.

The more ways he thinks to use this new skill, the more versatile it is! He starts getting sidetracked, wondering about just how far his range is - he already knows jumping as far as Houston isn't a problem - and then he stops himself before he runs down that tangent and listens to the wind again, waiting for it to press against his back or tug at his wrist in the direction he needs to go.

But he doesn't think about what Hemogoblin said about the teleporting. He doesn't, except he totally can't stop thinking about it, at all. After zip-tying the mugger's hands together, Heir waits, patting the weeping victim on the shoulder awkwardly until the police sirens get closer, and then he's up in the sky again, and he's back in a John mindset. He keeps flip-flopping back and forth between thinking like John and thinking like Heir, and yet neither mindset seems to be able to get on top of this. Because he's totally mystified! Hemogoblin seemed so sure that they'd turned into wind for some reason, but all Heir can remember is blacking out and reappearing in the records room with Officer Ellard.

It just doesn't make sense. Hemogoblin has no reason to lie, especially not about something like that, but on the other hand, why would Hemogoblin be able to sense something about John's powers that John can't? He just manipulates the wind, he doesn't turn into it! And neither Officer Ellard nor his dad mentioned anything like that; he's been practicing with his dad in the basement all week, making sure it's really safe to teleport with someone else, and his dad's observations have always matched John's own. Samuel Egbert didn't feel that sharp pain, no, but he experienced the bounce from point to point as momentary darkness, just like John.

Weeeeeeird. All of this is so weird. It's just a weird night, okay?

And now it's going to be a weird morning. Urrgggh. He's the one who suggested this stupid plan to Hemogoblin, and he doesn't think he can back out at this point. Besides, Hemogoblin is his partner; he can't leave him hanging with this accusation still unresolved, just because the John part of his brain is spazzing out over running out on Karkat for the second time in weeks!
A few minutes before he really needs to get back to the station and meet up with Hemogoblin, Heir makes up his mind. He drops to the ground in a rush of air, faster than he generally would move if he had a passenger to worry about, and then he walks to the nearby payphone. People have begun to dot the sidewalks, and a few cars motor along the road beside the payphone booth as John sheepishly takes out his coin stash - the one he always uses to call in the authorities if a victim or a criminal he's caught don't have a cell phone he can use - and thumbs quarters into the slot until the phone clicks and a dial tone rings in his ear. He shifts his weight back and forth in his boots, suddenly very uncomfortable in his Heir costume. The lighter the sky gets and the more people throw him strange looks, the worse it gets. This is why he works at night, okay? Too many eyes on him. Dave and Rose are crazy for fighting in the daytime.

A woman in a deep blue suit walks by as John leans against the phone booth and enters his home number. His dad must be frantic by now. John is waiting anxiously for the call to go through when he realizes the woman in blue has stopped, backed up, and is now staring at him blatantly from two feet away. Confused, John looks from side to side, but yeah, she's definitely looking at him. Uh. Awkward. He tentatively waves a hand at her, trying and failing to maintain Heir's confident smile, and she jumps, flushing as though embarrassed about being caught staring (she didn't even try to hide it though!) and marches away without another word.

The phone clicks and John jumps back to attention when his father's voice starts. "Egbert residence. This is Samuel."

John winces. Even with the crappy phone connection, he can hear that his dad sounds strained. "Dad, it's me," he replies. His own voice comes out a rasp, and he clears his throat. "I'm still on patrol. Look, something's come up."

"John," Samuel hisses out, and John hears something thump on the other end of the line. "You were due back in four hours ago. Do you know what I thought, when I realized you hadn't just slept in -"

"I know! I know!" John says, closing one hand around the spiraled phone cord. His nails dig through his gloves to his palm, but he can't seem to loosen the grip. His stomach feels tight, like it always does when he's disappointed his dad. "This thing with Hemogoblin needs a few more hours before we've run down all the leads, and then I'll be back. I think I can even make the second half of the school day if I push it."

He really should have called his dad earlier, but he hadn't wanted to worry Samuel with this in the middle of the night. He just knows his dad would have stayed up all night as well if he'd known John was staying out as Heir past his usual hours. There's a fine balance between keeping Samuel Egbert up to speed and not worrying him unnecessarily, John knows, but he just can't seem to find it. Like. Ever. And it's only gotten worse as John gets older.

There's a lengthy pause, then a sigh. "...I don't like this, John. I agree that Hemogoblin needs some assistance with this, but I don't know how I feel about you letting his problems encroach on your life," Samuel says. "I need you to tell me honestly; is this really the only way you can think of to help him? There's no other way to deal with this?"

"We met up with Officer Ellard and now we've got a better idea of how the police started to think Hemogoblin was a suspect." John keeps his voice lower, and faces the phone booth rather than looking up. It would be a real achievement to read his lips through his mask, but he's not taking chances. "There's this really shady guy Crichton, who's been coming in every morning and talking to the deputy chief, and he's been saying some pretty interesting stuff, apparently. The whole case against Hemogoblin mostly hinges on whatever he said to convert the deputy chief; no one else even suspected him before that! Don't worry - me and Hemogoblin are going to talk to him and then we're
done. I promise!" He shoots as much optimism into his voice as he can.

"I think you should tell him something's come up," his dad says, quiet and reasonable and ohhh man does John's brain hurt. "You need to balance your work and your daily life, John, you know that, and this isn't going to help you. You don't owe him this much. It sounds as though he could easily question this man by himself, and now that Ellard knows him he can make his own connections in the police department. You're no longer necessary to the process."

"It's not about owing him anything; it's about the fact that he's a new hero and he's freaked out and I can't just leave him to handle this on his own," John argues. The wind runs restlessly in a little whirlwind around the phone booth until he pulls it back under control, twining it around his hands and wrists. He's probably getting even more weird looks now, but he just keeps his head down. Nothing to see here, just a local hero making a phone call home. No biggie. "Besides," he adds, struck by inspiration, "you're assuming Hemogoblin is totally in the clear, but we still have nothing but his words on that, really. Do you really think I should leave him alone with a key suspect?"

Wow, that was some Rose-level logic, there. He's actually impressed by himself.

"I know that, John," Samuel says, and the worst part is how patient and reasonable he sounds. It just makes John feel worse about how stubborn he's being about all this. It must be some kind of parental super power - insta-guilt. Blargh. "But it's just a risk you have to consider taking. The way you're behaving is making me question whether this partnership was a good idea at all. You know how important stability is, and if you're slipping, it's still my duty as a parent, even now, to be your second opinion."

"It's fine. We're fine," John says tightly, and he has to unwind his hand from the phone cord because it's not satisfying enough. He closes the hand around the edge of the metal booth and squeezes, probably hard enough to bend the metal itself. Oh well. It's already pretty beat up, anyway. "Dad, please don't make me break this up. Please."

Shit. Oh man, he can't handle this right now. His eyes are burning, and he's all wound up on the inside.

Because this wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fucking fair, and life's not fair but this, at least, would be unnecessary unfairness, and John can't stand it. If his dad does insist on Heir ending his partnership with Hemogoblin, John doesn't know what he'll do. Obey him to the letter? Or maybe, just maybe, fake it? Pretend to end it with Hemogoblin, but continue the partnership without his dad's knowledge or approval? Both options make John feel gross; he would prefer to be up front with his dad, but he also doesn't know that he's capable of giving up the partnership completely.

On the other hand...how much longer will he spend listening to everything his dad says? At what point does he have to start think about setting out on his own, and act as a hero under his own direction, independent and alone?

His mind revolts from the very thought, and he can feel the panic tightening around his lungs like an elastic. Nopenopenope, he's not ready for that. His dad is his dad, and just thinking about not having him around to go to for advice is...unthinkable, really. John shoves it right out of his mind, jettisons it, and the panic eases.

Somewhere along the line, his dad started talking again, and John thinks in his panic that he might have missed some ultimatum. Wiping at his eyes and wincing at the handprint he left on the phone booth, he tunes back in.

"- However, you're old enough to start making your own decisions and judgment calls," John hears,
and he nearly collapses against the booth with relief, letting his head and goggles knock forward against the side as he smiles to himself, a gloved fist pressed to his lips.

*Still okay.*

His dad is still going - he's really on a roll today! "I trust that you're smart enough to know your own mind. All I can do is offer my advice, and ask that you remember - Hemogoblin is your partner. That's all. I know it seems like a significant part of your life right now, but you can't let it consume you. It doesn't mean you can pour all of yourself into this. At the very least, you have to think of Karkat."

"I know. I know that!" John hastens to assure him, his fist pumping absently with victory. "As if I would ever forget Karkat!?" On that note, though… "Oh! I have to call him, too! If he stops by, will you keep him from worrying too much again?"

He hates how much he has to hide from Karkat. Maybe one day, it won't have to be like this, John having his father deceiving his best friend all the time. But it's not today.

His dad heaves another quiet sigh, but there's a hint of pride in his voice again when he speaks. "Of course, John. Be safe. I believe in you, son."

John hangs up first, and starts pushing more quarters into the slot with fingers that are still kind of shaky with tension. He dials Karkat's number and closes his eyes when it rings, trying to recollect himself. Conversations with his dad have been shakier and shakier ever since New York, particularly phone conversations, as though any moment Samuel expects John to go haring off on another random adventure. It's not like that one was his fault! But apparently their trust has been shot, no matter how Samuel tries to frame it, and it makes John feel small on the inside. He keeps doing all he can to meet his dad halfway, but then stuff like this comes up.

Maybe this is a teenager thing. He's almost through with school after all, and aren't teenagers supposed to be rebellious and all that? John would never do stupid things like partying and drugs and stuff - his dad made it very clear that that kind of behavior is ill-befitting a hero, and John definitely agrees wholeheartedly on that point - but when it comes to Hemogoblin there's a new gap between John and his dad, and he doesn't see how he can fix it when he doesn't think he's wrong.

John frowns, because he's had far too much time to ruminate on this stupid, unsolvable problem. Karkat should have answered by now, or at least Crabdad should have. The phone clicks and his heart thumps, but then the infuriated, near-sobbing tones of Karkat screeching out the answering machine blurb over Crabdad in the background starts up. John actually pulls the phone away from his ear, stares at it, baffled, and then hangs up. He tries dialing again, with the same result.

...That's really weird, actually. Crabdad likes kicking Karkat out early on school days, but generally he should still be at home around this time. John dumps out the last of his coin supply, knowing he's going to have to get change from the bank or something to replenish his stock, and tries Karkat's cell number. Maybe Crabdad was just really finicky today?

Karkat has never set up an answering machine greeting for his cell, so it's just the generic voicemail greeting, with a muffled, growly, 'Karkat Vantas' when it pauses for his name. John, stunned, leaves a quick message saying he might be out sick for the first half of the school day, and then hangs up. It could be that Karkat is driving to school and being his usual stubborn self about not texting and driving (Karkat is nearly manic in his paranoia sometimes about literally everything on the planet), but something just seems...off.

Nah, John's just being dumb. Karkat would be more likely to answer a text even at the best of times,
but John doesn't carry his cell to work. His friend's probably just driving to school. It sucks that John couldn't talk to him in person - Karkat has been really easy to freak out lately, and with that crappy message Karkat might panic and go around to demand answers from Samuel Egbert again. But it's too late to fix it now; his dad will know how to sidetrack the troll, and then John will get home when this whole Hemogoblin mess is fixed and shoosh the angry dumbass himself.

...Wow, he's really getting infected with this moirail thing, isn't he. Not that Karkat doesn't still make his heart do funny things - it's just getting all mixed in with the cuddling and the shooshpapping and bluhhhhhhh.

Love is hard. Especially when you've got to deal with all the troll love things, too, and all of it feels the same to your dumb human brain hormones. No wonder Rose just laughs at John when he complains to her about feeleeelings.

Hanging up one last time, John shrugs and tries to think himself back into being Heir before he ducks into the alley and takes off. Flying in daylight - urgh. Everyone and their cataract-ridden grandmother is going to be able to see him in the sky; his suit is designed to blend in with the night sky, not broad daylight on a clear day. There aren't even many clouds for him to take cover in; it's a disgustingly nice day.

Heir steps away from the phone booth and realizes someone else is staring at him. Blinking, he looks to the side, but no one is there. The breathing he can sense is -

Oh. He looks down and to the left, and sees the seven-year-old kid gazing up at him. She's clutching at her father's hand as they wait for the intersection light to change, and she looks half asleep; it's way too early for a little kid to be awake! But when he smiles at her and waves a little, sheepish, her eyes go wide and her mouth makes an 'oh' of shock. She tugs on the sleeve of the hand she's holding without looking away, in total awe. "Daddyyyy!" she says in a little kid whisper, which is nearly a shout for normal people, "Daddy, it's Heir! I told you it was him!"

"It's just someone in costume, sweetie," the man says absently, not even looking up from his Blackberry. "Remember what we said about strangers, alright?"

"But Daaaad!"

"Hush, sweetie." The man clicks off his phone, throws Heir a look that is one part apologetic and two parts condescending, as though judging Heir for being in what he thinks is a cosplay outfit, apparently. "Sorry about her. She gets so excited about these heroes and comics and things. It's a little early for her."

"Oh - uh, n-no problem," Heir replies, stuttering a little as he tries to swallow laughter. This guy has noooo idea. When the man answers a phone call, Heir hesitates, then makes a snap decision. The little girl looks dejected and disappointed, her lower lip pouting out, so Heir crooks a pinkie finger. Reeeeeeally discreetly. A light breeze fluffs up her mop of curls and she perks up instantly, staring at him with her mouth agape. Heir puts a finger to his lips, hushing her, and then winks and takes off right then and there. He doesn't bother getting under cover; he just floats right off the ground and waves at the girl one last time.

The look on her face is priceless. She waves back with furious abandon, eyes shining.

Other people no doubt noticed Heir's impromptu take off, but he tries to put that out of his mind as he flies upward, not daring to look down again.

The wind up above the buildings is even friskier than usual. He hasn't flown regularly in the daytime
since he was what, five years old? Long enough ago that he only really remembers it because his dad has so many horror stories about what a little shit John was about staying on the ground in public. Now, of course, Heir can't even imagine floating without at least two layers of costume and a mask on to conceal himself; it's unthinkable. Feeling more like a target than he has in ages, Heir heads back to the police station.

He doesn't teleport there. No need to give Hemogoblin a reminder of whatever scared him so much during that strange, blank period that Heir can never recall.

-  

Heir and Hemogoblin are making out by the police station when dawn rolls around.

Sorry, excuse me, no, that's *stalking out*. They're staking out the police station by the time dawn rolls around.

Hemogoblin loiters on the roof of the building opposite where they'd agreed to meet, so Heir spots him from a ways away. The sun is almost completely visible on the horizon, casting long shadows that Hemogoblin takes advantage of, despite the fact that the roof is high enough that few people could look down and see him from here. Heir is, obviously, the exception. When Heir lands soundlessly, opening his mouth to say hello, however, he sees that Hemogoblin is propped up against the wall with less than his usual seductive swagger, his upper body kind of crunched over with his chin slumped against his chest. It looks like his forward-curving horns might even be weighing his head down, and his eyes are flickering behind his thin grey eyelids, eyelashes fluttering in time with REM movement.

...Did he fall asleep standing up?

For that matter, if he *is* asleep, is Heir really willing to wake him up? He's gotten some practice with sleep-deprived trolls thanks to experiencing Karkat's on-and-off insomnia secondhand. Waking up a sleeping troll, especially one that isn't immersed in sopor, is pretty much at the top of John's newly revised 'Stupid Idea' list.

On the other hand, he needs Hemogoblin to identify if this Crichton guy is their man or not. Ellard had been able to give them no more than a license plate number and car make to watch out for; counter-terrorism is apparently leery about posting photographs, even in the police database, because Ellard has never even been able to find the guy's profile or employment records. All of that smells really fishy to Heir, and he'd asked Ellard to look into whether any other members of the CTU were similarly blacked out. For all they know right now, Crichton might not be a member of the Seattle PD at all, but an imposter posing as counter-terrorism, sequestering himself with the deputy chief so no one from the real CTU notices he's running around impersonating one of them. For some reason, no one has thought to question him, but why would they? The force is more focused on identifying and recapturing Hearts Boxcars, not suspecting their own members. And from what Heir knows now, the Crew would certainly have the connections necessary to pull that kind of scam off.

Heir can grab the guy for a chat himself just by knowing the car, but Hemogoblin's the one who'll have to confirm if he's the false lawyer who delivered the bomb materials, and thus connected to the Crew. So maybe Heir can afford to let the other hero doze for a bit. He looks like he badly needs the sleep.

Before Heir can do much about it, Hemogoblin jerks awake himself, his feet twisting so he trips over sideways when he startles and finds himself at a bad angle. The other hero catches himself of course, and regains some of his usual grace, but when he looks up and sees Heir watching, his cheeks flush a bright red. "You didn't see anything," the troll says, straightening up and coughing slightly as he
adjusts his gloves, fixing the fabric where it had twisted in mid-nap to hide his wrists.

This close up, Heir doesn't bother hiding his curiosity; he tries to see where the sickles might pop out. There doesn't look like there are marks from having blood emerge as weapons all the time on the troll's dusty grey wrists, but Hemogoblin does have a presumably impressive healing factor. Particularly if he got through a bomb without a mark on him - that Heir can see, at least.

Speaking of. "Nothing," he agrees, though a smile tugs on the corner of his lips. "You're really okay, right?"

Hemogoblin just huffs and looks affronted. "I'm fucking fine. I'm not going to lose it again, if that's what you're asking about -"

"Ah, no, no!" Heir backpedals, shaking his head. "I meant - the bomb thing. You said you were okay the first time I asked, but then they found blood everywhere. So I just...you're not trying to hide something serious, are you? Because you look exhausted, and it's not good to sit on that kind of thing when it could hurt your fighting abilities."

Hemogoblin's eyes are lot less startlingly red in the sunlight, when troll eye luminescence always fades a bit, but they're still sharp and cutting as Hemogoblin starts to regain his poise, eyeing Heir sideways. "I told you, it was nothing I couldn't handle," he drawls, striding to the edge of the roof as though to remove himself from the temptation of the wall. "Some shrapnel got me in the side. I only rushed the patch up because Boxcars was getting away; otherwise, there wouldn't have been nearly as much blood left behind." Heir spies the edge of a grimace twisting the troll's face. "I fucked up. I admit it. But as soon as this fuckery is sorted out, I'll be just peachy."

"If you need to rest more, I can keep watch a while longer. We have a few minutes," Heir suggests, tentative. He's not an expert on moirail boundaries by any means, and from the sharp look Hemogoblin throws him that advice might have edged the line. Again. Agh. He doesn't mean to do it, okay, but being around Karkat all the time has him stuck in soothing mode when it comes to angry, tired trolls, apparently. How is he supposed to have actual crushes if his totally platonic concern keeps getting misinterpreted?! It's not always pale to worry about people's well-being - especially not when it's his possibly injured, sleep-deprived hero partner!

"Trust me, Heir. Sleeping would only make the problem worse," Hemogoblin mumbles. His expression is totally flat, maybe even afraid. "I shouldn't even have been slacking off there. I don't have the best dreams."

"Oh? Yeah. I'm sorry," he says automatically. Seems like everyone has sucky dreams lately; he's glad that's not a problem he has!

He's not looking down, either, he's totally not, because that would be unprof- okay he's looking down.

Dat ass.

Shit. Hemogoblin must have self-confidence like whoa, because in the morning light it's astonishing how formfitting that uniform is. Like, Heir is self-conscious about his costume right now, and his getup is wayyyyy looser than what Hemogoblin's rocking. And the troll doesn't even seem to notice it as he leans to peer down at the parking lot the police have requisitioned below.

There is something weird enough to draw Heir's attention away from other matters, though, and he can't help but frown at the troll's horns. Maybe it's just less noticeable in the dark, but from here at least the horn on the left looks...off balance. The crimson red, so unusual compared to the usual
candy corn yellows and oranges of troll horns, is duller in this lighting, and Heir is reminded, fiercely, that most troll heroes he knows of, even in comics, obscure their real horns. There's just too much risk that they'll be a unique enough set to give away their identities. He's never really given it much thought, but Hemogoblin's horns are probably a false set, too. The real ones are either similar in shape or thinner, or such a dramatic forward curve wouldn't work.

He's so engrossed in not doing his job that he almost misses it when Hemogoblin stiffens up and says, tersely, "License plate is 4CU-DR00, right?"

Allllright. Focus time. Heir drifts closer to the roof's edge and joins Hemogoblin in surveying the lot. The Dodge Charger is a discreet black, but that means nothing, even as its driver guides it smoothly into a free parking space. John is secretly impressed; he has his license, nominally, but he's never really going to need a car in his life, so he hasn't exactly practiced since he was...gosh, fifteen? He can tease Karkat about being a paranoid old grandma driver all the time, but he'd probably crash anything he tried to drive faster than thirty miles an hour, at this point!

After a moment, the driver emerges. He's is a darkish suit, but if Heir squints he thinks it almost looks navy blue - not the distinct, straight up black of most Midnight Crew suits. Of course, an undercover agent wouldn't wear the gang's dumb dress code while wandering around a police station. It's going to come down to Hemogoblin's call. The man has his head down for the most part as he strides to the back of the car and pops the trunk, and Heir catches the faint noise of frustration Hemogoblin makes as he cranes his neck trying to get a look at his face.

"Not the same car as that night, but I doubt he'd keep it anyway, if it is him," Hemogoblin mutters, and wow, he's really close. Like right next to Heir, which is okay probably Heir's doing, mostly. Ahahaha.

"No, he probably ditched the original vehicle the same night," Heir agrees, staring intently at the back of the man's head as he continues to dig through the trunk of his car. It looks like Crichton is talking on the phone at the same time. Inwardly, Heir starts to think himself into that mental space where his powers are, and to delve into that pain where the teleportation starts. It hurts to hold it like this, but he bites his lip and sucks it up. "Should I -"

"Hang on," Hemogoblin interrupts, holding up a claw. The other claw tenses on the edge of the roof, scraping at the stone through his thin gloves as he leans forward further still. "If it is the lawyer, trust me, you don't want to jump down there underestimating this guy -"

Crichton turns, slamming the trunk door shut. Hemogoblin stills, then snarls with blooming fury. "That fucker."

That's all Heir needs to hear.

"I've got him. Be ready," Heir warns, and he shoves all of his focus into zeroing in on Crichton below until, with an agonizing tear, he goes.

They'll need Hemogoblin to take a better look up on the roof, but that was enough of a confirmation that Heir shifts gears mentally. He's not dealing with a potentially shady counter-terrorism agent with criminal leanings; he's up against a Crew member, someone with at least the borrowed authority to order Hearts Boxcars out of the city. Not someone to goof off against.

By some miracle, Heir blacks out and reappears behind Crichton's back. The element of surprise doesn't do much, unfortunately; Crichton whips around immediately, jumping as though stung, and grimaces at Heir. "Should have known," he says mournfully, and he whips a hand at Heir.
Almost too late, Heir realizes the man threw something with uncanny precision. He hadn't even seen the guy draw his knifekind, and the blade nearly slices through Heir's right shoulder before the wind reacts, wrapping around the weapon and halting it with the tip just barely pricking the skin of his shoulder. Heir lets out all his breath in a whoosh, his heart missing a few beats at the scare. This guy is good.

He's also trying to run. Instead of pressing that advantage, Crichton turns on a dime and races away. His run is all precision, with no wasted movement, but that doesn't exactly help him. Aware that he's fighting a nominal police officer right in front of the goddamn station, Heir ducks down before shoving both hands forward and then tugging them in as fists.

In response, the winds around him lash out, kicking up trash and debris from under the bumpers of the cars around them, and then slam around and into Crichton's shins. The lawyer falls - and somehow flips it into a summersault, rolling neatly back onto his feet with barely a misstep.

…Wow! That was actually really cool! Like, dude!

Wait, he's still getting away. Right. Heir shakes off the delighted admiration and shrugs, rising to his feet. He nudge the wind and just grabs the man bodily off the ground, tossing him up in the air with far less consideration than Heir usually shows when he lifts Hemogoblin, per say.

Crichton's legs stop kicking, and he tries to twist in the wind to face Heir. There's a glint of metal in one hand, and Heir frowns and jerks his hand, twisting the second knife out of Crichton's grip by slamming into his hand with all the force he can muster with a breeze. Heir just waits patiently while Crichton snarls, floating himself off the ground and flying them up to the roof. He'd wanted to teleport them up more discreetly, but that would involve touching Crichton directly, and he'd rather not get all up close and personal with the knife-happy guy with really fucking good reflexes; he could have more knife specibi in places Heir can't see from here. No way he's risking it. Instead, hoping no one sees them and reports them to the cops across the street, he takes the long way up.

Hemogoblin is pacing back and forth along the edge of the roof when Heir arrives with his suspect. Heir is forced to keep his eyes on the captive man though, still wary of more knives, instead of looking to see if Hemogoblin is still holding up alright.

"They always try to run," Heir sighs loudly, dumping Crichton on the rooftop a little ways from Hemogoblin and pressing down with the air so the man can't just stand up and start running again. Crichton squirms until he's sitting upright, but that's as far as Heir lets him go. It's harder to make the wind stay still than it is to use it in motion, but Heir clamps down as best he can so the breezes hold the man's arms where he can see them. "Anyway. This is definitely our guy?"

"Yeah, it is," Hemogoblin says, folding his arms and sauntering over. He glowers down at the lawyer-turned-counter terrorism agent. "Long time, no see, you total dick. Thanks a lot for setting half the cops in Seattle on me. Except fuck you. Fuck. You."

"Yeah, it is," Hemogoblin says, folding his arms and sauntering over. He glowers down at the lawyer-turned-counter terrorism agent. "Long time, no see, you total dick. Thanks a lot for setting half the cops in Seattle on me. Except fuck you. Fuck. You."

"I'll go a lot easier if you just tell the truth," Heir adds, biting back a comment about Hemogoblin's language. It's kind of unprofessional, but hey, they're pretty much off the books here anyway, and the troll's having a sucky day. He's let the language slide so far, and it's not like he can enforce his personal philosophy about swearing on the job for someone totally different. "For example - are you the same lawyer who broke Hearts Boxcars out of police custody?"

Crichton flips his hair back out of his face with a toss of his head, his eyes half-lidde as he looks up at both heroes. Heir can practically see the calculations going on in the man's head, and he represses
a shiver. This guy is way smarter than the Crew goons who had been doing all of Hearts's dirty work two weeks ago, he can already tell. He and his dad had been wondering how such brute force-favoring thugs had spread their criminal enterprise across the country with such finesse - clearly, though, there's more to the Crew than just arsonists and gunmen.

"Alright, boys," the man drawls at last, cracking his neck lazily. "Guilty as charged. Anything else I can help you with?"

Heir flinches. Wait, what? That was...way too easy! What the heck?! "Hang on, did you just confess?" he asks, baffled.

"Seriously, what the actual fuck?" Hemogoblin demands, circling around Crichton's back. His eyes reflect more of the rising sun as he does, and the light on his face throws his features into high contrast. "What's the point of this whole nookstain of a fiasco if you just confess like that?"

Crichton rolls his eyes, and it grates on Heir's nerves to see the man so lackadaisical about this questioning. This guy has fooled all of Seattle PD and the deputy chief into believing he's law enforcement; that kind of acting is impressive, and the amount of effort he'd have to put into this astounding. Why would he simply give it all up when Heir hadn't even, like, pretended to intimidate him or something? "I have my orders. My assignment was only to get the rumor started and perpetuate it until caught."

"An assignment?" Hemogoblin kneads at his eyes, and when he recovers he practically spits on the next part. "And you're just...done?! That's it, that's really all the effort you're willing to put into it?!"

Crichton stares at Hemogoblin witheringly, raising a thin plucked eyebrow. "So sorry to disappoint you, but you're really not all that interesting. Getting the deputy chief to buy that sad little story with hardly any evidence? Too easy. Bit of a waste of my talents. Maybe now I can get my exit clause fulfilled..."

Hemogoblin starts laughing and oh no, that's hysteria. That is definitely hysterical laughter, shaking Hemogoblin so much Heir can see the trembling from here.

Crichton barely looks miffed. "You can laugh all you want, you mewling fool. When my Lady Droog arrives, you won't laugh for long. She will tear you limb from limb." He smiles off-handedly.

It takes Heir a second to realize - what the heck did that last sentence say? "Tear us - okay, back up, when did this become the plan?" Heir demands, stepping closer to the man. A separate skein of wind is twining around Heir's body the more nervous he becomes, and he welcomes it because what the heck?! That escalated like whoa. "I mean it. No funny business, or I just knock you unconscious and dump you in the middle of the station myself."

"Droog," Hemogoblin says, and Heir looks up. The troll's expression hardens with recognition a moment later. "Ah. The one who sent you to break Hearts Boxcars out, too. I remember you mentioned a Droog. Who the hell is she?"

And oh, oh dear. The grin that cracks across Crichton's face is legitimately terrifying, because Heir has seen it only a few times before. It's the cheshire grin of a fanatic, the glazed devotion of a zealot, something he's seen only in comic books, splitting the faces of archetypal madmen like the Joker or Subjuggulator. It burns into his mind; he hadn't even thought a human or troll face could physically recreate that kind of expression, had thought it something forever the result of artistic license.

He hates that he was wrong.
"Lady Droog," Crichton whispers faithfully, "is the Diamond. She is perfection."

Fuck. "...You mean the Diamond suit, don't you?" Heir says grimly. "There's Hearts for the heart suit, and now you're talking about someone named Diamond."

Crichton lurches forward, moving through the wind before Heir has time to readjust and push him back, and Hemogoblin jumps out of range. Blood arcs out of his wrists and becomes sickles in a little under two seconds. But Crichton has no eyes for the troll - he reaches for Heir. Heir yells in surprise and closes a fist. The air whips back and slams the man down, though he continues to struggle. A quiet, cold fury crinkles around his wide eyes, his mouth parted as he pants slightly. "You do not have the right to speak my Lady's name," he hisses, writhing. "Let alone to blaspheme by saying it wrong. She is our Lady of Diamonds and you will show respect."

Okay, wow, so - that was new. Heir nods slowly, hands still outstretched to manipulate the wind again if necessary. He's sure he looks just as freaked out as he feels, and when he exchanges a glance with Hemogoblin he sees the same kind of mix of realization and horror on the troll's face. The sickles retract, but they're both on their guard, now.

This isn't like the blind obedience Hearts Boxcars's lackeys demonstrated, as muscle hired to carry out grunt work. This is...the kind of fanaticism you'd expect out of a cultist or something. That, combined with the intelligence Heir saw in Crichton's eyes, is flat out terrifying. This is the kind of man willing to live or die by Diamonds Droog's whim.

No wonder experts described the Midnight Crew as having near cultish loyalty. Heir is seriously starting to wonder if maybe, at least for parts of the Crew, that may well be the case. He'd been furious when the Puppeteer suggested he flee Seattle from the Midnight Crew. Now, he's starting to wonder if the elder Strider brother might not have had a point. These guys are totally fried in the thinkpan!

"Diamonds Droog," Hemogoblin repeats, and Heir brings himself back to the present. Hemogoblin sounds like he's tasting the word on his tongue. "And she's the one who gave you the orders to frame me as a suspect?"

"She did," Crichton confirms with a sigh, his eyes flipping from righteous, religious fury to that distant adoration once more, so quickly Heir feels queasy with the implications. "But now that you know about me, my part is at an end. And she will come for me."

"But what was the point?!" Hemogoblin's voice cracks. Heir twitches, and the urge to hug the troll is back in full force. Hemogoblin just looks confused, all his usual bravado and confidence wiped out as he stares hopelessly in the face of Crichton's devotion. "Why all the effort - why me?!"

"The point is whatever my Lady wishes it to be. I did not ask, and she did not feel I needed to know," Crichton replies primly. "You can do whatever you wish to me. I'll even confess to the police themselves, if you think that will help." Crichton sighs and relaxes, nearly slipping loose from Heir's wind chamber again. But he doesn't draw blades, doesn't even try to run away or lurch at one of the two heroes again. He just...gets comfortable. "Lady Droog will be here soon. She will come for me."

"You're going to prison for this," Heir says, but the words feel hollow in the face of Crichton's faith. And when have any of the Crew stayed in jail, anyway? All these shenanigans are really setting a bad precedent for the police department's ability to be trusted with these guys... "Do you not care?"

"Soon you will know the wrath of our Lady. That's all the comfort I need." Crichton closes his eyes, and smiles faintly again. "No one can withstand the Lady Droog."
Hemogoblin sums up pretty much exactly what Heir is feeling, shaking his head. "Fan-fucking-tastic."

Hemogoblin gives him a weird, calculating look when Heir teleports back above the roof. Heir steadfastly ignores it. "Ellard has him, and I trust him to keep Crichton in custody long enough to get a confession on tape," he reports, rolling his shoulders. "Even if the Midnight Crew has legal connections, I doubt he'll make bail after admitting to conspiring to blow up a police station in front of a room full of police officers."

Hemogoblin saggs visibly. "Then I'm in the clear."

"Yup, basically. I don't know that they'll make an official announcement at a press conference, but that's because the deputy chief is going to be embarrassed enough by this fiasco as it is, and he's going to be a butt about it." Heir shrugs, then yawns widely. His jaw cracks a little, and he grins sheepishly at Hemogoblin. "Time to call it a day?"

The troll nods back, his smile shakier and more contemplative than teasing. Now that the action is over with, he looks utterly worn down again, "Mind giving me a lift?" he asks. He's favoring one side, leaning with an arm pressed with what he probably thinks is subtlety against his side.

But Heir doesn't comment. He wants to ask, but it's just not worth risking provoking Hemogoblin again. "No problem." The winds respond sluggishly, picking up on his own tiredness, but they lift both he and Hemogoblin readily enough, and they sail across the sky with the usual speed Heir uses for when he has passengers.

He's still a little worried about the troll as he sets the other hero down in his usual area of the city, and he watches as Hemogoblin darts away to wherever he goes to conceal his trail back to his home after work. It'll be more difficult to be discreet in broad daylight, but Heir knows Hemogoblin will be fine. Hopefully.

Besides, maybe now that this crisis has been resolved, Hemogoblin will be able to relax and recover. His reputation took a blow, no doubt, but with the real person responsible in custody and confessing all over the place, at least the cops won't be actively trying to arrest him or anything else that could have happened if the issue had persisted. This was a win, in Heir's book! And now all that Heir can do, he thinks, is go home. The sun is well in the sky now, and the reds and pinks and oranges of the sunrise have refracted into a vibrant blue. It's a beautiful day out.

Heir just feels tired, though. Getting through the second half of the school day after being awake for a full twenty-four hours is going to be awful.

And now he has something new to report to his dad and his hero friends - he's going to need every one of his contacts on the line.

He's determined not to be blindsided again. He's going to find out all he can about this Diamonds Droog.

He's going to be ready.

---

They end up rerouting (agaaaaain!) to Salem, Oregon in the never ending saga that is trying to dodge the Crew. Is it really so much to ask that we get to move in a straight line? Jade thinks grumpily, slurping on her soda with such force that she nearly snorts up carbonation when WV tugs
on the hem of her coat and squeaks a warning. The carapacian has ranch dressing smeared all over
his face from trying to eat onion rings, and before Jade does anything else she unfolds a paper
napkin and dabs at the ranch. WV squirms in protest, and flails until the napkin gets knocked out of her
hand. Sighing, Jade jabs a finger sideways without even bothering to look up from her crispy
crunch chicken sandwich. With her sense of space, she already knows about the dumb butt Midnight Crew
members who are trying to sneak up on her.

Well, let's be honest. They're not sneaky at all. They walked in through the front door, and two of
them walked right over to her, while the third walked over to the counter and began...placing an
order?

Sighing, the one in front rubs the back of her head and shrugs. "Are you willing to come with us,
now?"

"No!" Jade glares, then raises an eyebrow. Over the past week or so she's come to recognize the
main three lackeys who hang around Clubs Deuce, at least in terms of their faces, and so these guys
are pretty much familiar by now. But Clubs himself is missing. "Huh? Where's Clubs?"

"He got called back to base," the woman says gloomily. "And with him went our entire budget."

And your motivation, Jade thinks. The troll in the back has unbuttoned the top of his suit and begun
to fan himself with a clawful of paper napkins, looking supremely unconcerned as he stares out the
window at the passersby. "Why didn't you go with him?"

"Clubs has a policy that the mission isn't over until it's over, even when the Boss says that the
mission is...over. So he has us here to keep tabs on you until he gets back." She shakes her head,
hungrily eyeing the onion rings WV hasn't finished until Jade nudges the basket away from the edge
of the table with a jolt of green power. There's no point in trying to hide the spacy thing anymore;
they caught up again. Apparently, having the uncanny ability to track down Jade when she's trying
to get some peace in quiet is a talent Clubs passed down to his minions. And like heck is she letting
them yoink some of their onion rings!

"If you're so tired of chasing me, just go!" Jade has absolutely zero sympathy for these guys
anymore, jeez! "Seriously, nothing is stopping you, and I'm like two seconds from zapping you to
New Mexico, anyway."

The Crew woman actually perks up, and then just as quickly sags. "No," she drones, pulling a pair
of handcuffs out of her back pocket. "We have a job to do, and we'll do it. Mister Clubs will get in
trouble if we take off out of the blue. So. Please put your hands out?"

"That's never going to work, Lila," the female troll behind her mutters.

"Absolutely not," Jade informs this Lila, sniffing and picking up her sandwich again. Maybe, just
maybe, without Clubs to incentivize them with his impossible, jovial persistence, these guys really
will just give up and go home.

The troll snarls and yanks a gun out of the inner pocket of her suit jacket, leveling it at Jade.

Uh, wow. That was actually somewhat unexpected! Under the table, Jade feels Bec perk up its ears,
the soft white fur rubbing up against her shin. The gun looks a little bulky, sure, and she tenses,
because anything that makes Bec pay attention is worth being a little worried about.

"I am sick of this hogwash," the troll woman continues, her cerulean eyes glinting with more than a
little madness. Ceruleans tend to lean that way. "I am a giant robot mechanic, not some - some -
child stalking moron! This is not what I signed up for when I joined the Crew. We are ending this charade now or so help me I will shoot everyone in this entire restaurant, including you!"

Jade puts down her sandwich. Hoooo, boy. Looks like she's not the only one that's cranky about this whole massively unnecessary chase sequence. She doubts anybody around this table has gotten much sleep, what with all the sneaking and running and chasing and fighting that's gone on.

But of course, Sharpshooter is always in a butt-kicking mood, especially when a bad guy just threatened to open fire on an entire Chik-fil-a! That is totally on the not-okay list! "If you reeeally want to fight, we are taking this outside," she insists, shaking a finger sternly. "No way am I letting you start shooting people! Watch it, lady!"

The ceruleanblood shrieks. "Why, you obnoxious, snarky little - UGH!" She pulls the trigger.

Sharpshooter feels the energy that builds in the weapon before she realizes what's going on. That's not a bullet, that's a *lasing medium* Sharpshooter is sensing in the butt of the gun, and the atoms are already in an excited state when the Crew member laughs and a thin beam of light blasts out of the barrel.

"Wh-whoa!" Sharpshooter yelps, teleporting WV and herself outside the Chik-fil-a. She peers in through the window in time to see the light beam hit the back of her now-unoccupied chair. It blasts through before the energy peters out, and the chair swings around with a twitch of Sharpshooter's hand so she can see the small but singed hole that has been burned right through the cushion and the plastic backing. Bec hasn't moved from under the table, from what she can sense, but the one named Lila has both hands on the troll Crew member, yelling something indeterminate as she shakes the troll's shoulders.

Without warning, the gun comes up again and the ceruleanblood snarls, shoving the butt up against Lila's shoulder and pulling the trigger again. Sharpshooter raises a hand uselessly, but the laser charges and fires again, drilling through the other Crew member's shoulder. Lila falls back against the table behind them, blood splattering across some poor random family's food. Screams are erupting throughout the restaurant, and Sharpshooter can already see that the ceruleanblood is whirling, narrowing her eyes and snarling in Sharpshooter's direction through the window.

She just shot her own teammate. Holy crap! Sharpshooter yanks down her goggles, her heart racing a little with renewed interest, because that isn't a pistolkind - that's a goddamn *laserkind*.

And she *wants it*. For *Science*. Also, because no way can she leave that kind of deadly weapon in the hands of a crazed criminal who seems to have gone off the deep end!

"WV, this one is too dangerous! You have to go hide!" Sharpshooter says, locking on to the troll with her senses. The carapacian is still huddling by her leg though, frantically waving his claws about something in that sign language that just doesn't quite translate, and she shakes her head. "I'm sorry, you have to be safe!" Waivering, she teleports the Vi on top of the K-Mart across the parking lot. Only then does she close her fist and mentally picture herself dragging the ceruleanblood through the window with her telekinetic fist of JUSTICE.

Glass flies everywhere as the troll crashes screaming with rage through the window, and Sharpshooter has to let the Crew member drop to the ground and halt the glass before it can impale anyone walking or driving nearby. The other Crew members are moving within the restaurant - Sharpshooter has been tracking their movements through space - but she keeps her focus on the ceruleanblood because if she has one laser, she could well have other tricks up her sleeve!
The troll lands hard, rolling on the pavement, but then gets to her knees, her hair hanging in her face as she waves the laser gun wildly. "Enough of this! We will capture you! And then we can all go back to doing our real jobs!"

"Petran, where did you even get that?!” the male Crew member staggers to the hole punched through the window and yells, the woman who'd been shot sagging against his shoulder. Blood stains the front of her scruffy black suit. "We don't have that kind of budget to spare!"

"It's comin' outta my own salary, dammit!” the female troll snarls, leveling the laser gun at Sharpshooter again and noooope, Sharpshooter is so over that.

Unlike some of Clubs's more unusual weapons, this one does not waver between quantum states, and Sharpshooter can focus on it with ease. She backflips lightly over a car trying to pull into the Chik-fil-a drive thru, stays hovering in midair, and pulls on the ray gun intently with a grunt. Mid-teleport, she twists her hand and adds an extra boost to the laser's trajectory through space. It pops out of existence and presumably reappears within her sylladex, but she'll have to check on it later - she's never captchalogued something that didn't already belong in the sylladex like that before!

"Give that back!” the Crew member says, one eye twitched up more than the other.

"But I have to study it!” Sharpshooter protests, though she's aware that she's a little more Jade in mindset at the moment. "I mean, how did you even get an energy source compact enough to fit in a hand-held specibus?! That's beautiful engineering! I'm a riflekind usually, but this is SOOOO COOOOOOOOL!"

"I am sick of this! First you destroy three of my prototype giant robots, and now you take the laser? Is nothing sacred to you fucking heroes?!

"I reserve the right to confiscate awesome stuff from criminals whenever I want! So there!"

Thankfully, the other two Crew members stagger out together and Lila grabs the female troll's collar with her good hand even as she lunges at Sharpshooter. Not like she could have reached Sharpshooter, anyway; she's floated pretty high up so that any surprise new laser blasts would end up shooting the sky if she teleported out of the way in a hurry. "Calm down, Petran! We have to capture her alive, don't you remember?"

There is blood dripping from the ceruleanblood's nose now, and she is physically shaking so hard Sharpshooter can feel it from here which is - kind of concerning? Really weird? Both? Yeah, both. She didn't mean to give the troll lady a rage nosebleed...just piss her off a little… "Alive is a word with variable definitions!"

"Still debatable."

...Are they seriously going to start arguing like this? Sharpshooter scratches her nose, frowning down at the three as they bicker, the shot woman looking paler and paler by the moment.

After three minutes, it stops being even a little amusing, and just goes right back around to being annoying again. Sharpshooter waves both arms at the group, but they don't even look at her!

What a bunch of weirdoes!
"If our suit member weren't a complete doofus, we wouldn't even be here -"

"All right, that's it!" Sharpshooter yells. She plants her fists on her hips and glares down at the Crew members until they all look up at her. The male looks a little sheepish over having presumably forgotten they were here to fight Sharpshooter at all, and Lila may or may not have passed out at some point, but the ceruleanblood just looks incensed, blue smeared all across her upper lip and chin from the nosebleed.

How rude!

"I am so out of patience!" she continues, green sparks crackling through her hair as it starts to rise up in the waves of distortion pouring off her. "You guys just earned yourself a one-way trip to Area 51!"

"Hospital?" the male says hopefully, jostling the shot woman with a hopeful look on his face. It is only now that Sharpshooter sees he successfully obtained an entire bag of Chik-fil-a at some point between the Crew walking into the restaurant and the troll named Petran going toooootally bonkers. Yeah, these guys definitely deserve Clubs's weirdness. Seriously, they can complain all they want, but they're just as bad!

"...Okay, fine! Hospital! But one that's reeeally close to Area 51!" Sharpshooter amends, locking on to all three Crew members at once, and then she whistles. "Beeec!"

The wolf lands on the ceruleanblood's head with a huff. It's a really awkward landing and of course Bec weighs a ton, so the troll keels over, and the white wolf ends up sitting itself on her chest, panting with its pale green tongue lolling out of its muzzle as it waits for a command.

"Good boy! Best friend!" Sharpshooter laughs, floating down closer to the ground. "A hospital in New Mexico...we walked by a Presbyterian hospital in Albuquerque, right boy? I target, you push!" She closes her eyes, humming a little as she pulls up that instinctive knowledge of the coordinates in space that hospital had been at across the street nearly four days ago. When she reaches out with her power, she feels the raw, electric force of Bec respond in kind, wrapping around all three. Bec shakes itself bodly and stands up, its paws not really touching the ground.

Everything should be going according to plan.

But when Sharpshooter raises a hand and snaps a finger, teleporting the Crew members away with the power of her mind, her entire body bursts into pain and -

*It burns it burns it burns* -

Jade realizes something has gone wrong when she's abruptly standing in the middle of a jungle. For a moment, she breathes in the heady perfume, the slight undertones of rotting fruit and damp earth, and basks in the fact that there is no pain. Her reaction slightly delayed, she smiles and falls to her knees in the moldering leaves that cover the ground. Everything is a wash of deep greens and for a jolting moment Jade thinks she's gone home.

But home doesn't exist anymore, and the space is all wrong in her head, and when she reaches out, dazed, for WV's hand to reassure herself, she freezes.

WV's not here. Bec isn't either. She's alone, and her entire body sings with the knowledge that she's in Brazil. Not Oregon. Not even close to WV or Bec or John or anyone at all.
And that's - that's -

That's the exact opposite of where she wants to be.

"No." She grips at her hair, tearing at it with clenched fingers. "No, no, no! I am not backtracking. Not. Again!"

She is just so angry, and when the pain comes exploding through her body again she rides it, her mind expanding outward on a wave of fire and pain until she can feel too much. She can feel everything between here and Vancouver, and there's too much motion, too many lives, so many people she has to keep safe. She can't possibly save them all.

That's why I need John. Duh!

Jade doesn't hold much truck with existential crises or sulking. Besides, Grandpa always told her if she couldn't handle something alone, she should always ask for help! And John would totally help her!

"That's why," she whispers, hugging herself, "we're going back to Oregon. Right now right now right now -"

Her body follows her mind, and then she's gone.

It's a lot easier to handle all the sensory input after that. She isn't distracted by all the remembered pain and can focus on where she's trying to go. Bodies are overrated anyway, she thinks, when you can just be space. Why has she never tried this before?!

Both WV and Bec are beacons against the backdrop of the ceaseless flow and sigh of movement along the West coast. There is someone who burns almost as brightly just a little to the north, and Jade knows with more than a little glee that that's John. He's right there, almost in her regular range, and that's awesome.

She gets the feeling, while she's drifting along incorporeally, that she could bounce right to where John is right now. Skip the short trip between Salem and Seattle entirely, and go see him immediately. The Crew certainly won't catch up for a while, not with their budget and their leader both off Jade's case.

...But, nah. She's not gonna backtrack or fiddle around anymore, no, but she needs to pick up WV and Bec, first! Poor WV's been stranded on that roof for who knows how long, now! No way is she leaving her little buddy stuck like that.

In the moments before she pulls herself together, Jade can feel the atoms vibrating around her. People think the empty air is just that - empty - but it's really not. Right now most of her mass is converging above the position in space where she left WV, and as she settles back into the mold of a body she can feel the extra atoms all shivering through her, until she sorts them out and shoving them back out into the air where they belong. They seem weirdly overexcited, though, bouncing around even more than atoms generally do when they're in a gaseous state.

And then, in a rush that nearly yanks Jade along for the ride, all the surrounding air whooshes out, pelting northward like a stream of motion that she extricates herself from before it scatters her entirely. Whirling and dizzy, Jade urges herself back together, and pops back into solid existence a couple of miles about where she intended to land. She yelps when her hair is immediately flung wildly into her face, her coat cracking and whipping about in the breeze. If she didn't have her goggles on still, her eyes would be watering. She's in the middle of some kind of wind tunnel, and
when she opens her mouth to complain, she gets a faceful of dust that the air kicked up at some point, and has to hack for a minute before she realizes she could just, you know, float downward out of the crazy wind's path. She does so, combing her fingers through her hair. But it's useless. The coarse brown-black hair has knotted beyond repair, tangled up in huge loops and sticking up with nearly a dozen tiny cowlicks when she runs her hands over the crown of her skull.

Bluhhh! She's gonna need to hope for a miracle, or she might have to actually...trim it. Shuddering, Jade puts such a terrifying thought out of mind and pouts up at the wind stream. It's nearly visible, which is kind of weird. There's not that much dirt in it - in fact, aside from that unfortunate faceful, the wind is relatively clear. She's high enough up that the air is thinner and purer, so she squints at the wind, trying to figure out why it stands out so distinctly, and why it's busily rushing away to the north, rather than following a normal wind current -

Oh. Ohhhhh.

It's John! It must be John doing the windy thing! Jade laughs, startled, and claps her hands together, laughing against her fingers. This wind continues to stream away for another moment before dissipating, but she can still sense the tail end of the breeze as it is drawn steadily northward, the faint vibrations of John's power visible as a blue tinge that stands out even against the clear blue sky, once she knows what she's looking for.

But this is amazing! John is definitely in Seattle, but he's pulling on breezes from as far away as Oregon - maybe even farther. And they respond when he calls, on an atomic level, even! Jade wishes Grandpa had been able to tell her more about how the windy thing works before he died; she can't tell if he's calling wind from this far away on purpose, or if that's just a normal part of his powers, drawing on winds that would best help him with a particular task.

Oh, she and John are running sooooo many experiments when she finds him. He owes her for all these years of being a dumb younger brother who can't even bother to write back!

Jade bubbles down to WV's level in considerably better spirits, and in fact nearly lands upside down when she teleports down to the roof. WV takes advantage of that, of course, in all his tiny, squeaky rage as he bats and flails at her face while it's within his reach. He's clearly mad about getting accidentally left behind, and he hiccups a crackle of green lightning when Jade reaches out and hugs him in apology. "Sorry, Wonder Vi. I still don't know how that happens," she admits, patting him on the head absentely. "This long distance thingy is just so random. At least I figured out how to get back." She keeps patting him as she floats to the edge of the roof and looks over at the street below.

In the maybe ten minutes she spent in Brazil and then drifting along with her atoms scattered throughout space, a fire truck has arrived, as well as several police vehicles, their lights flaring as they huddle around the window Sharpshooter broke.

More than a few of them are setting up strips of yellow police tape in a wide circle around Bec, which is still waiting where she left it on the sidewalk where the Crew members had been sitting. She wonders why he didn't get yanked along to Brazil, too - did the Crew even end up in New Mexico after all that ruckus? - but then shrugs. The ways of Bec are strange and mysterious, even to her. Below, the wolf sniffs the air and vanishes. Jade smiles widely when it reappears by her side, sitting at attention. She sets WV down on the wolf's back, which he protests about, but the last thing she wants to risk is her ending up in China or something all over again if that long distance whammy hits her again. Better the carapacian stay safe with Bec - when Jade gives the wolf construct coordinates, it's basically guaranteed to end up there. When she gives the word, they're off.

Later, she just chalks the entire incident up to being tired and grumpy and having all that pent-up energy from having to walk around everywhere trying to avoid the Crew's sensors.
And she pushes that pain, and the memory of a similar agony back in the old lab in Britain, to the back of her mind.

For now, she likes to think she can pretend to be fine. She is fine! Totally fine! And when she gets to meet John at last, things will be even better!

- 

The stop in Portland, however, is all Jade's idea. At this close a distance, they could probably have hopped straight to Seattle with Bec's help. But ever since El Paso and that initial, kind of scary mess with Clubs, before Jade got resigned to the Crew following her everywhere, she's been really careful about WV. She doesn't jump the poor guy around too much in quick succession, and she has tried to minimize how much power Bec puts into their teleporting jumps. WV got really shaky for a while there, even after they dunked him in a couple of ice baths, and she still catches him getting flinchy and green around the claws by the end of the day. She just can't risk him getting seriously sick, or messing up his insides with some weird side effect of the spacy powers the carapacian doesn't yet know how to control. She can't even tell if he's always had these uncontrollable powers that occasionally let him make random jumps through space, or if they're a side effect of Jade using her own powers to stabilize him on a quantum level. Either way, WV's body hasn't adjusted well to it, at all, and she's always gotta consider him before she makes a decision.

So they make meter-long jumps instead of one huge one, and when they land in the middle of a busy intersection in Portland, Jade decides they deserve lunch, part two.

Partly because of WV. Partly because she never got to finish her crispy chicken sandwich, and now she's tired and kind of hungry. Eheheh.

A car's brakes screech and someone slams on the horn, and Jade rolls her eyes before bouncing the three of them out of the middle of the road and onto the street corner. "But where to eat?" she wonders out loud, whirling around in a circle with her coat flying out around her. She catches sight of herself in the reflection of the building next to her and grimaces, tugging at her hair again until she can at least pull it back in a wild pony and it's not sticking up everywhere.

She doesn't know what it is about the stand that catches her eye. There's a man leaning on a wobbly stool by a rack of newspaper stands that have been repurposed to hold a wide assortment of posters. Jade is only a few steps away, so she half-spins to go look at them, her good mood restored by this point. "Hey mister, what kind of posters are these?" she asks, pushing up the folded over edge of a poster that has been blown over by the wind. "Who are they of?"

She doesn't really need him to answer, though, because when she smooths out the poster and her eyes land on that face, she knows.

It's.

John.

Even with the goofy yellow goggles and the admittedly really cool mask and the fact that Jade has never actually met him in person (yet!), only ever seen pictures, it's sooooooo obviously John! She can't believe it - this is so cool! John has his own posters!

"'S the Heir of Breath, kid," the man says too late, chewing on the unlit cigarette in his mouth and raising both eyebrows at her. "You from out of town, then? He's a pretty local one, doesn't get out of Seattle much. You probably wouldn't have heard of him."
"Heir," Jade whispers to herself. It's one thing to know the name in theory, and another to hear someone say it aloud, for the first time since Jade left the island. "Air. Heehee." She may be feeling more than a little giddy. This is soooo cool. So cool. "How did he get posters made of him?"

The man snorts, pulling the chewed-on cigarette out of his mouth and using the not-spit-covered end to tap on the corner of the poster Jade clutches in her hands. "See the watermark in the corner? Means it's a fan work. Heir doesn't have a PR rep, so most of this shit is just unofficial merch off the web. I just sell it."

Jade deflates a little. But it's still a really cool poster! John is posing all cool and awesome with a giant hammer and smirking like a big dumb goof and hey, she has to be a supportive big sister, right? Even if it's not an official poster, it still counts! "Can I have it?" she asks the man, crushing the poster to her chest.

The man snorts, but he eyes the now slightly-crumpled poster with a wary eye. "Twenty bucks, kid."

"Yayyyyyy!" Jade squeals, palming money from her sylladex while she pretends to dig inside her coat pockets. "Thank you so much! Seattle is my next stop! I'm so excited!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure thing, lady," the man mumbles, taking the twenty dollar bill after Jade inspects it to make sure it's not in francs or any of the other denominations she has in the sylladex that sometimes get mixed together. Money is weird. It all just feels like paper and thread to her senses. But she got it right!

A shrill, demanding trill gets her attention. Jade blinks and looks down. WV glowers right back up at her, tugging on the skirt of her lab coat and holding up another poster, one his claws have nearly punched holes through. "Ohhhh! It's him again!" Jade exclaims, kneeling to see it better. This one is more obviously a drawing, but it's really good artwork, too, and recognizably John in his kickass hero costume. WV waves the poster insistently in Jade's face, and she laughs. "You want one too, Vi?"

The carapacian nods furiously, jabbing at John's drawn face with another claw before trilling at her meaninglessly again.

"And that one, too," Jade tells the man, and when he holds out his hand for another twenty she slaps it down with a wide, toothy grin. She maaaay have accidentally used a little too much of her strength; the guy whips back his hand with a wince and stuffs the money in his pocket while he stares down at his reddened palm with surprise. Oops. Jade really needs to work on not accidentally breaking people with her extra strength.

But she's just so close! Kneeling, she grabs the ecstatic WV in a headlock, closes her hand on a ruff of Bec's fur and lets her eyes flash bright green at the poster vendor before she winks and, cackling, sends them rocketing toward Seattle.

It's time.

-Rue Lalonde does not respond. She sits quietly behind her desk, staring at the plain, functional cell phone that rests atop a pile of file folders that she shoved out of the way. Years of graduate school and work in labs did little for Rue's organizational tendencies; she has an order all her own, and can instantly recall which file goes where and cross-files with which headings, but to the untrained eye
her desk would look like glorious chaos.

Right now, she is busy feeling nothing. Before the intern arrived and began whispering through the open door, Rue had almost felt like nothing at all, adrift in the void. Only the fizzle of the martini in her mouth really brings her back to the present.

"In a moment, Dana," she murmurs in reply, closing her eyes.

"I - yes, Doctor. I'll...come back in five minutes."

The faint tap of the intern's Oxfords heads away from the office and into the hallway. Dana is a member of the medical intern corps - neuroscience specialization, if Rue is correct. Usually she has more of a head for names and positions, and can name all of her subordinates and fellow researchers on the fly, but tonight her mind is not...focused.

Her computer pings, and the sound is unfamiliar enough to stir her from this fugue. Her intra-office email account chimes like a clock when a new email arrives; the calendar application warns her about critical meetings and deadlines with an alarm buzzer. The ping takes a while to recognize, so she clicks on the mouse and enters her password. Her desktop appears.

The background is a picture of Rose. She clicks hastily on the blinking window in the corner and maximizes it. Because she is a coward.

To her surprise, the window is a massive, brazenly golden Pesterchum chatlog.

She honestly has no idea why she has a Pesterchum account. She thinks, at some point, she considered utilizing the tool to contact her daughter and break her unfortunate silence. But then her computer division had deemed the application too easily hacked; the plan to contact her had been scrapped (again).

In hindsight, Rue wonders wearily how many times she miscalculated. How many times she saw the opportunity to reach out to Rose, to care for her daughter, if only at a distance, and told herself (again and again and again) no. It's easy to say that every choice she made that took her farther from Rose was a poor one. But that is too sweeping a generalization: at the time, they had been necessary. It doesn’t matter how she tells herself that even the most discreet communiqué could have led the Midnight Crew to her daughter again, how she did it in Rose's best interests. It is becoming more and more clear, as the hours pass and the cell phone remains silent, that all Rue has managed as a parent is to implement a regimen of neglect so complete, it not only destroyed Rose, it may have destroyed any hope of reconciliation and healing between them.

And if the person who has pestered her is who she believes he is, judging by that familiar yellow-orange, then Ambrose Strider has chosen this moment to drive that failure home.

She supposes if anyone has the right to denounce her behavior, it would be the man who provided the other half of Rose's genetic sequence. Draining her martini without even tasting it, she responds.


TT: gallifreyan? really lalonde?

TT: it's fucking official

TT: dave gets his secret nerd angst from your side of the family

-- tartGallifreyan [TG] has changed handle to tartGuardian [TG] --

TG: Not now, please, Ambrose. I am working my way up to a most thorough bender, and I shall not stand for this monastery.

TG: *mockery
TT: starting early, huh
TT: well shit, what's got your english knickers in a twist, lalonde?
TG: Rose has left the laboratories.
TG: According to a Querent attached to the labs, she left of her own volition, remarking that she
could stay here no longer. She has already been missing for nearly a day, if my timeline is correct.
TT: yeah, kinda noticed that when she logged in from a computer not in fucking Maine

Rue nearly chokes on her martini, and has to set it aside momentarily while she coughs and sputters.

TG: You are tracking her?
TT: she's half mine, of course i'm keepin' track of her now
TT: no offense lalonde, except total offense - you fucked up all over downtown New York City
TT: when it turns out parental unit one has let the kid turn into a goddamn tentacle demon, it's
generally a sign parental unit two needs to get his head in the game
TT: so shit, here i am
TG: Then you know where she is now?

For a brief moment, hope bubbles up in Rue's throat like fine champagne. It goes flat a moment later
with a furious wave of text from Ambrose. He has always tended toward short, truncated sentences
when communicating, and her heart sinks as she realizes he becomes more verbose the angrier he
feels.

TT: yeah no fuck that
TT: jfc, lalonde, what, you couldn't keep track of your kid for more than a week?
TT: and you all thought i'd be the one to accidentally drown dave in a bowl of cereal or throw him
off the roof or some shit
TT: well look at us now - old man harley dead, nanna jo dead, you drunk while your kid is halfway
across the country
TT: at least with dave the worst i managed to do was get the kid hooked on aj and swords
TT: that shit's not even unhealthy it's literally apple water
TT: pretty sure i win the fucking 'guardian of the century' award by this point
TG: Good lord, even reading your text is giving me a premature headache. Please desist, Ambrose,
dear. I am well aware of my many shortcomings as a guardian, and I am attempting to drink myself
into the void until I forget them.
TG: If you do not intend to disclose Rose's location to me, I will simply locate her myself come
morning with my own resources. We both need time to cool down, first, it would seem.
TT: i'm just sayin' lalonde
TT: this is the last straw
TT: the last fucking straw in this entire fucking bale, as dave would say
TT: i ain't on your side here - i'm on the kids.
TT: sentimental as fuck, but there you go, i goddamn said it

In her buzzed state, Ambrose's admission is enough to draw a low chuckle out of Rue, even as she
hiccups. The intern is hovering outside her office, and Rue waves her off again. Really, whatever
could be so urgent with medical at this time of night? She'll go check in, of course, but only after this
rare conversation with Ambrose. He is always so delightfully abrasive, but his soft spot for the
children is obvious. And perhaps some part of her perversely welcomes the painful scolding. She
deserves it.

TG: I assure you, I am on their side as well. Am I not also a guardian?
TT: and you know all i'm hearin'?
TT: how you plan to ignore her a-fucking-gain
TT: you see this 'time to cool down' bullshit you typed up there
TT: fuck that
TT: how about you finally take a step up on the guardian echeladder, put down the alcohol, and go talk to your kid instead of pretending she’ll talk to you first

By now, Rue feels sick. Something is not sitting well in her stomach, though she can't imagine what. She tries her best to black out the nausea, drowning it in the numbing swill of another appletini. Her fingers are a little jittery on the keys. She really should not be getting so drunk, not when she still has work to finish. But Rose is gone, a separation chosen of her volition rather than Rue's, and apparently that is enough to make all the difference in her mindset.

TG: Rose is perfectly capable of making her own decisions and knowing her own mind. She would only become irascible and distance herself further if she felt I began to infringe upon her agency. That may well be why she ran away in the first place. She has always sought to establish herself and her independence.
TT: bull. shit.
TT: she knows her own mind so well she went full grimdark
TT: she's a teenager, they're all still teenagers, which automatically makes them all stupid little shits who think they know what's best for them
TT: newsflash lalonde, no they don't
TG: Dave and Rose, at the least, somehow share the genetic inheritance of a physicist and a robotics genius. I hardly believe you can deem either one 'stupid,' Ambrose. They are intelligent, almost painfully so, and with that intelligence come minds of their own. Would you really have me trample upon Rose's free will in order to enforce an authority she barely recognizes?
TT: again with the sidestepping
TT: just fucking admit you're scared to confront her about this and get over it
TT: every goddamn day dave gets more antsy and confrontational and pissy and do i ignore it and hope he'll handle it on his own?
TT: no, i kick his fucking ass, and i'll keep doing it 'til he can kick my ass

Rue wrinkles her nose. If nothing else, Ambrose Strider's idea of how to raise a child is remarkably...hands on. Perhaps that is why he is so in favor of direct confrontation, rather than choosing solutions that require more circumspect planning.

TG: Charming.
TT: fucking effective
TT: last warning, lalonde
TT: either you talk to your kid for once in your life, asap, or i tell you-know-who to cut off your funding
TT: i think when certain people hear just how low you've sunk trying to be even more of a fucking child than your kid, they'll listen to me
TG: You would not dare. This is childish and pointless in the extreme, Ambrose. And besides that, Harley is dead.
TT: yeah but his foundation is still being run by living people last time i checked. your funding is not automated
TT: think they'd object to sending paychecks a lady who likes neglecting kiddies?
TT: i win?
TG: You win.
TG: I am forced to admit you may have a point. I have been neglectful, and foolish besides. Well played, Ambrose.
TG: Since you are clearly the only expert child-rearer between the two of us, and Samuel still refuses to acknowledge my calls, what advice would you suggest? I shall follow it religiously.
TT: finally
TT: drop the booze like it's hot, track down your kid, and siddown with her until you've had real talk, not just those passive-aggressive snarkfests that make you all tingly on the inside
TG: I shall endeavor not to disappoint you again, then. I do hate it when we're at odds, Ambrose dear.
TT: fuck your passive agressive name-calling, my work here is fucking done
TT: now excuse me, i have a new birdson to conduct the formal strider initiation rites upon, and i can't remember where i left the bloodstones and the cowboy chaps
TG: Wait what.

"Doctor Lalonde, Doctor Marion says that this is really important," Dana says feebly, practically hanging onto the edge of the office doorway to support herself under the pressure of trying to speak up to the head of the research facility. Rue shakes her head, setting that last strange part of the conversation with Ambrose aside to speculate on later. She has quite enough to think about: for one thing, she will have to contact the computer systems department, and set them to tracking Rose's known online aliases. Ambrose may not have intended to help her locate Rose directly, but he'd already disclosed that he found Rose via the Internet, and Rue can work with that.

"Alright. Let's go," she commands at last, standing up. The wheeling chair slams much too forcefully into the bookshelf behind her, and she winces. As Dana frets and trots out of the office, Rue follows her, wishing she had a mirror to reapply her makeup with. No doubt her face is a wreck right now.

But then all of the department heads already saw her distraught when the news of Rose's grimdark break was confirmed. Seeing Rue upset will be nothing new to them.

"Run and fetch the Querent," Rue remembers to murmur to the intern once she realizes exactly what medical will want to show her. It only took her so long to piece it together because she wasn't at her best, and because the inciting incident had occurred weeks ago, when there was still snow on the ground. "She should still be in the quantum labs right now. This may interest her."

"Y-yes ma'am!" Dana replies, and she rushes back out through the double doors.

Doctor Marion waits patiently by the second set of swinging doors, so Rue can scrub her hands in the sink and pull on a bulky blue surgeon's gown over her dress. "Trouble with the kid again?" he asks wryly, passing her a set of gloves.

"Something of that nature," she sighs, snapping the gloves on. Her nails press the latex dangerously thin; she'll have to trim them later, before going to find Rose. "I've been inspired to handle it sooner rather than later. But tell me what you've found, first."

Marion looks troubled, and Rue begins to realize that the intern's upset might have been due more to whatever troubling news the neurology department has uncovered than due to speaking to Rue. "Well, the leader - that indigoblood? - won't speak at all. She's got it the worst, and she's in the early stages of coldblood-type dementia besides," Marion explains, kicking the doors open and leading Rue through the steel blue halls of the neuroscience and neurology department. Empty MRIs and other imaging devices are visible through the frosted, reinforced windows that make up each door as the two scientists sweep by, including the occasional thaumaturgic ward that Novitiate Halburn requisitioned to help him enter mindscapes. "I recommend we outsource her to a facility that
specializes in that kind of volatile mental illness. We have to keep her sedated at all times, but we just don't have the resources to care for her long term. Patient care is not our job - we do research."

"I understand. Have Fredyn make the arrangements, I'll sign off on whatever you need." Rue narrows her eyes at a still active CAT scan machine, and she makes a mental note to scold whoever is on record as having used it last. "But you wouldn't have called me down for just that."

Marion hesitates. "No," he says, drawing it out slowly, as though testing the word on his tongue. "It's taken us a while to understand what we were seeing. If you had asked me just a week ago, I would have told you that all of the Crew members we have in custody are suffering from brain tumors in their frontal lobes. Every single one of them."

Rue's jaw drops, and she whirs on the man. "Why was I not informed of this," she demands, disbelieving. This is the sort of thing one informs one's superiors about, something Marion seems to have completely disregarded.

"Because we assumed there must have been a mistake, of course!" Marion exclaims, spreading his hands apart and shrugging helplessly. "How likely do you think it was for us to find not one, not two, but four trolls, all with near-identical tumors in such a vital area of the brain, and yet displaying no symptoms of brain cancer?! As though we were really going to report such poppycock! We ran the tests again!"

Rue sucks in a breath, then nods. "Point taken. I still expect to be informed of such a drastic result in any future research you run, related to this case or not. Are we clear?"

"...Yes," Marion sighs, rubbing a hand through his greying hair, over the bald spot. "Clear, Doctor Lalonde. My apologies. I'm a little worked up because it took us so long to realize what these tumors actually were."

"Not really tumors, then?" she says.

He shakes his head, and faint hatred flickers across his face before he schools it. "We needed Halburn to look into it, eventually," Marion spits. His rivalry with the thaumaturgic mentalist is quickly becoming a pain in Rue's neck. Marion is just old enough to have been raised in the school of thought that mixing magic and brain chemistry was dangerous and stupid, and that mindscapes should be considered on a separate level from neuroscience. Halburn, of course, is one of those bright young up-and-comers Rue sought out for her thaumaturgic research specializations, and much of his experiments in combining magic and neurology have been quite promising in their results. The hate is all one-sided from Marion, of course - Halburn lets his work do the talking for him, and reserves any smirks or snide comments for when Rue is out of earshot. "We had confirmed the absence of a high white blood cell count or any other signs in the blood work that would normally indicate such extensive cancerous growth, and isolated the tumors entirely on the scans, but couldn't figure out what they were made of without extremely invasive brain surgery - which would have required patient consent. None of them were willing to give it."

"Naturally."

"So we had Halburn take a look, since magical brain scanning without consent is still mysteriously not a crime," Marion snarks, until Rue frowns at him sternly. "What he claims he has found -"

"Doctor Marion."

"- sorry Doctor Lalonde - what Halburn believes he has found is not a tumorous growth in their
They have arrived at the holding rooms at last. Rue barely has time to scan the four trolls all chained to hospital beds before Marion finishes dropping his bombshell. "Parasites?" she murmurs, eyes flicking to the neurologist and then back to the unconscious trolls within. The warmer blues are in the usual type of hospital restraints intended for dangerous patients; the indigoblood writhes fitfully with an extra set of restraints, her mad eyes closed but her mouth still opening in silent snarls as she arches her back and tries to claw at the ceiling. Highbloods are notoriously difficult to tranquilize once they fly into a rage, and those who develop the permanent dementia found only in cooler blooded trolls are even more resistant to sedatives. Rue makes a mental note to have the indigoblood shipped out as soon as possible; the last thing she needs is a rogue indigo with fistkind and clawkind tearing a bloody streak through her laboratories.

"Parasites," a third voice confirms. Rue acknowledges Halburn's arrival with a nod, and the young troll shoves his glasses up his nose as he nods back, halfway to a bow. He has hair down between his shoulders in a coarse braid, eyes just this side of violet, and a pair of horns that angle back before curving under in a slight hook. "To be precise, mindgrubs."

Rue, as much as she is loath to admit it, has no idea what those are. She'll have to study up at some point in the midst of her rather busy schedule. Perhaps during the flight out to wherever Rose may be. "And they…?"

"- Are used in computers," Marion interjects before Halburn can do more than open his mouth. "They have no place in a brain, and I believe Halburn's speculations are groundless."

"Marion, you will be silent," Rue says, feeling cold as she rounds on the doctor. He clamps his mouth shut, looking pale. Perhaps he is recalling what happened the last time a rivalry between two scientists in this lab got out of hand. They never did find all the pieces. "Halburn, what speculation? In fact, just give me a full overview of what these mindgrubs can do, and how they would end up in four trolls' brains."

"With pleasure, Doctor Lalonde," Halburn replies, maintaining a smooth, expressionless demeanor as he waves a claw toward the window. "As Doctor Marion so accurately informed you, mindgrubs are most commonly found in some troll computer systems, particularly those of hackers. They swear by them because mindgrubs can biologically simulate common software bugs and proxy servers without leaving evidence behind for security systems to identify or track down. They're rare, and actually quite illegal to grow and harvest in the United States. These particular models in the Crew members' mind are specially modified - it appears they have only one command running at a time, but they are secreting some kind of substance into their frontal lobe that affects a significant portion of their brain chemistry. It's not cancerous, obviously, and the good Doctor Marion has found no evidence that it's killing them or putting undo pressure on the thinkpan. To be quite frank, Doctor Lalonde, it's all very...disturbing."

Rue has already figured it out by the time Halburn reaches the part about biological simulation. Her mind lines the pieces up and draws the same disturbing conclusion Halburn has no doubt reached. "Mind control. These mindgrubs are altering how their brains work, chemically - brainwashing them."

Halburn nods, the blood draining from his violet-tipped ear fins. He looks as pale as Rue feels. "So I believe, Doctor Lalonde. I can't discern exactly what the command is - that's just not something I can analyze with the magic at my disposal, no matter how targeted my search. The only way I could think of to download the command prompt would be - well."

"He's suggesting we perform that illegal, dangerous, life-threatening brain surgery anyway, when the
only reason we called him in on this case at all was to avoid doing such a thing," Marion growls, folding his arms. "None of them will consent to this, and you know it, Doctor Lalonde. They don't even consent to be here - they're prisoners."

"Can any of them consent?" Rue murmurs, pressing up closer to the window. As though sensing her, the indigoblood beyond lunges upward, one leg slamming down against the bed, only to be jerked to a halt by the restraints. She looks vicious and wild and now Rue is left wondering - is it dementia, or is it something far more insidious? "If that thing is in their heads, no doubt it would wish to protect itself. Force them to say no to any procedure that might damage the grub. Hmm."

For most, it would pose an ethically perplexing dilemma. Rue already knows the answer though. Perhaps it is not the morally right answer. But she swore long ago to oppose the Crew for the threat they posed to her children, at any cost to herself and her morals. Such outdated things.

Yes, she knows exactly what she will tell Marion to do next.

WQ: Pardon me. You wished to see me, Doctor Lalonde?

Rue extricates herself from her thoughts, and turns to smile faintly at the slim white carapacian clicking her way sedately down the hall. The Wondering Querent would like Rue to believe she is a simple philosophical mind, but both of them are balanced in a silent dance, as the WQ continues to work on a project in her labs beyond anything Rue has ever dreamed of, and Rue continues to feign ignorance of exactly how far beyond the philosophical the Querent's expertise extends and allows the carapacian and her now-absent Protégé to remain here. Sometimes, silence is the best policy for mutual assistance.

But her smile fades quickly. "Tell me, WQ," she says, running a finger down the window. "Did you know that every single one of the trolls from the Crew who followed you here were under the control of illegal, modified mindgrubs?"

She watches the carapacian's reflection in the mirror. WQ merely looks uncomprehending at first. Then, slowly, her dark eyes widen, and she lets her own claws clack up against the window, peering through with horror on her face.

WQ: They would not. How - why -

WQ: This is not the way the game is meant to be played!

WQ: I cannot believe he would do such a thing, again -

The carapacian seems to have realized she has gone too far. She presses her claws to her mouth, falling away from Rue with a gasp. She regains her composure a moment later, when Rue remains motionless and quiet, merely meeting her gaze without a sound. What did the Querent think, that Rue would attack her for a misstep in their dance?

Rue already knew about the game. She may only have had the scraps of information left behind by Joanna Egbert to start with, but she has been investigating Skaia long enough to know that there is always a game. She only wishes she had more than those scraps. Jo 'Nanna' Egbert had always remembered the most, out of all the four guardians, and her death had been a heavy blow to bear, particularly when Rue realized Samuel had inherited none of Jo's inborn knowledge. They have struggled on blindly ever since, raising children with powers beyond the pale.

The only question is -

"Again?"
But she already knows, before the Querent's expression smooths out and the carapacian shuts down, shaking her head with her claws clashing together in a silent refusal, that she won't receive a response. The WQ is not the first carapacian to betray knowledge of the game, and none of the others had been willing to discuss it further, either.

Rue can only wonder what inspired such raw fear in them, that the terror of the game lingers to this day.

"Marion? I want those grubs out. I want them out now," she tells the neurologist, and she strides out. The Querent remains motionless in her wake, the carapacian seemingly dumbfounded by the four trolls and their parasites beyond the window.

She has a daughter to find.

Chapter End Notes

Well done, Rose and Kanaya, you guys have accomplished in the space of one chapter together what John and Karkat have not managed in THIS ENTIRE STORY. Fucking suuuuccceeeeed. /adds Rosemary to the relationship tags

But Davesprite, seriously bro, where the fuck did you come from. YOU WERE NOT IN THE ORIGINAL DRAFT OF THIS CHAPTER. WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH YOU NOW?!
The Stars and The Winds

Chapter Summary

For the stars and the winds are unto her
As raiment, as songs of the harp-player;
For the risen stars and the fallen cling to her,
And the southwest-wind and the west-wind sing.

Chapter Notes

Anyway, time for everyone to try and sort out their emotions AGAIN. I've been looking forward to this chapter for a while. You'll know exactly why by the end. I couldn't put it off forever, after all…

Hemogoblin and Heir belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com, and Sylph's design (Bananaramses) can be found under the RMWT concept tag, but as should be clear by now I intend to traumatize them beyond all reason. Karkat, at least, will hit his breaking point soon - and when he does, all hell breaks loose. Boy, you can't dick around when Diamonds Droog is in town...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karkat dreams -

He doesn't think it is really possible for the dreams to get much worse. Seriously, how does it get worse than your moirail dying nightly in front of your eyes?

He learns better after he dumps himself in the recooperacoon and unintentionally opens the flood gates on every nightmare he's been holding off for the past twenty four hours. Three such dreams pass by in rapid succession, a tangled mess of blood, pain, and a too-young John who suffers and suffers until Karkat is worn utterly ragged.

But it gets far, far worse when he realizes he's in the wrong body.

Normally in these nightmares he plays himself; sometimes he's paralyzed, sometimes he can interact with his surroundings, but he never has the power to just reach out and drag John to safety, which would be the fucking useful thing to do. But now he can feel exactly what has gone wrong this time; his body is off-kilter, and his bones and blood weigh heavily in him, a wrongness that inundates him completely. His hand rises up, and though it feels like Karkat lifting his hand, he knows he's not the one controlling it. Not to mention the hand is the wrong color completely, an olive brown, ending with blunter fingers instead of claws. He views everything through glasses frames that are the wrong shape again, oval-shaped and dorky, but the prescription is close enough that his vision is clear, as though the person they really belonged to were his twin, and oh fucking fuck.

He's John.
He's John in someone else's glasses, and he can already tell this is all going to end in fucking tears.

John is lying on his back, looking up at the sky. It's not the same black sky from that golden moon; swirling, outlandish white clouds shuffle across a much more reasonable blue sky, marred only by an enormous stream of black smoke. It seems to be coming from John's left, but Karkat can't turn his head to look at the source of the flames; it's up to John, and John, for some reason, seems completely uninterested in the potential fire hazard. After lifting his hand and inspecting it, John lets it flop back down, and huffs quietly to himself. He sounds tired, like he's only just woken up, and more than a little confused.

There was something in his hand, but Karkat couldn't see it. He tries the usual tactic of screaming at John mentally to look at it it's important, come on John you dumbass! But John just plants both hands flat on the ground and starts to sit up.

Pain lances through his ribs and he shouts with pain, wrapping an arm around his ribs. He's in those yellow pajamas again, dusted with ash and flecks of debris. John shakes his head, and raises a hand to press to his temple. The pain from his chest is all mixed up with a throbbing in his brain, which Karkat feels as a dizzy inflammation in the blood vessels. There's a hemorrhage at the back of John's head that he dabs at gingerly with his fingers, but it's not too serious from what Karkat senses, just painful.

"Mnnaggh. Jade?" John mutters, his throat dry. He coughs and it wracks his body, making him tighten his arm around his torso. It's doesn't really help the pain of what feels like more than one broken rib, but it seems to brace John enough that he is able to finish sitting upright and look around.

They're sitting on something Karkat can't look at. He can't. But John seems to be unbothered, and when he shivers at the sight of the enormous pile of golden wreckage to their left, it's just because he is deservedly worried about the fact that an entire moon has crashed beside him. The issue with the thing below them is all Karkat.

Also, who the heck is Jade?

John's hand crushes the thing clutched in his palm, as he gets to his knees, swaying slightly as he looks around some more. Karkat senses the blood before John sees it, though, and so he's already sick to his stomach by the time John sees the body crushed beneath a chunk of golden building right beside him. The blood is cooling already, spreading out in a red pool, and a dark brown, slim hand is still visible, where the building didn't quite crush it.

"Jade?" John says, his voice shaking. He sags forward onto his hands, sobbing. "Jade, nonono, Jade ."

Oh fuck, whoever this is, John knew her and she's about as dead as it gets. The agonizing grief flares through John and Karkat feels it all second hand, as though it's him shaking with sobs, struggling to comprehend the broken body he knows is lying under the debris. He can't even reach out and try to soothe John because in this dream, John is alone, and Karkat doesn't have his own body. John is miserable and Karkat wants to scream because he can't do anything at all to help.

And over it all, echoing through John in pangs of agony, is the knowledge that it's his fault.

Karkat just can't think why.

"Why couldn't you just wake up?" John demands, talking to himself. He shoves up his borrowed glasses with his hands clenched into fists, scrubbing at his tears. "Why?!"
He's been telling Karkat to wake up in an earlier dream, Karkat recalls vaguely. But he can't figure out how all of this is supposed to fit together. If these nightmares have a point (which he sincerely fucking doubts) he's not seeing it.

On the other hand, John has survived what feels like the first five minutes, hey, look, that must be a new record.

John stiffens, and Karkat hears the sound at the same time, his stomach sinking. It's the crackle of green lightning, the whorp of plasma sloshing in midair before it solidifies. Turn around turn around turn around Karkat chants, and - for once - John responds, or at least Karkat's instincts finally align with the dream logic. John whirs around to see the creature floating in a writhing mass of green fire. It has the smooth black shell of a carapace that gives way to the snarling muzzle of a wolf, and it already has that black sword in claw. Karkat can't imagine why it hasn't stabbed John already. It's just hovering there, puzzled.

John doesn't run away - or float away, when the fuck did they start floating? Karkat was distracted - like a sensible being. Karkat can feel their facial muscles move, but he can't interpret John's expression just from that, not when inwardly his emotions are a riot of grief and fear and fury and pain. John pats at his pants instead, as though looking for pockets that aren't there, with more and more panic souring in his mouth as he begins to back away from the green-and-black abomination.

It's still just staying there. It has its head cocked to one side, its white eyes slitted as though in curiosity. Karkat can't see what's holding the thing back; last time it certainly didn't fiddle around before blowing up a moon and stabbing John in the chest.

Finally, John seems to give up on finding anything in his pockets that might help in this kind of life-and-death situation, and, his heart thumping loud in their chest, he opens his hand and looks down at the thing that's been clutched there since he woke up.

It's a ring. It sits there in his palm, ringed with four tiny orbs, and totally innocuous, worth none of the buildup that Karkat has created in his own mind.

He doesn't do the logical thing, which would be to put the ring on. Karkat has no idea what it would do, of course, seeing as how it's a fucking ring and probably completely useless, but that's what people do with rings - they wear them. John, however, inspects it for a long moment, mouthing something to himself that Karkat can't interpret. A little bit of the blind panic is gone now, but they're still just hovering there like a wide open target.

John grins, and that emotion is easy enough to feel, a wide, uninhibited grin splitting their face. He holds the ring out to the side, and twists his hand.

A giantass fucking hammer appears. It's way too huge to be practical, appears to be made of solid gold and thus useless for actual hitting anything for shit because gold is soft, and the actual smashing end is decorated with an entirely frivolous crown.

Oh, sweet, sweet nookchafing fuck. If Karkat weren't stuck in John's head, he'd slam his own head against the nearest available wall. He honestly thought the dreams could get any weirder but they prove him wrong every time because he has no idea what in the name of the Mother Grub is happening.

As though to take that massive cosmic middle finger and shove it right into Karkat's face, a soft but undeniable voice echoes overhead. 'Attention - an error has been detected. The heir has been crowned.'

Seriously, can Karkat get a fucking refund on the whole unwanted Ominous Dreams and Assorted Mindfuckery package? Because this is some grade-A bullshit and none of it makes sense. None of it. It's all way too abstract. Heir to what? Is John royalty now? What the blithering fuckity fuck.

'Please wait. Rerouting...' that same genderless voice announces coolly, and John is still just hovering there.

But on the other hand, so is the giant winged hellbeast. They're both stuck, and, struck by the thought, Karkat falls into John's blood as he usually would his own. It's different, a thinner consistency with more iron and less of the sickly-sweet tinge of sopor, and it's surprising how much difference that makes to Karkat's perspective.

Enough that he can feel what he couldn't before, most likely because it wasn't something affecting the rest of John's body, which is all Karkat has access to. If John can feel the ponderous lines of power currently plating the walls of his veins and laying down tracts in his bone marrow, he's not bothered enough by it that Karkat would have noticed without his powers active. But Karkat can also feel how it roots this body in place, paralyzing them so subtly it doesn't even hurt as all that power floods in.

John's body isn't meant for this kind of power; it's too much, too bright and white-hot, racing through his arm and up to his heart like liquid fire, and it wants to pour through channels that John doesn't have. That's why it's funnelling through to that hammer - it's a stopgap measure, the weapon that John's mind automatically chose for whatever reason. But even this little power is too much. How long until John just burns out? Until the power explodes out and takes him with it? At the very least, he'll lose the arm; Karkat can feel John's blood burning even now, until his powers recoil from the heat and he snaps back into John's head rather than his blood.

Never mind. Putting on the ring would have been a fucking stupid idea. Karkat is a dumbass, and nightmare-John wins this round.

'Emergency protocol activated -' the voice says at last, calm and collected. 'Queens of Unorthodoxy - engage.'

Whatever held the winged wolf back before vanishes and in a flare of green fire, it's upon John, teleporting with a snarled roar.

John's not fast enough to block it, of course; Karkat's too startled to even think of moving, and he has way better reflexes than John; he waits for the sword to come crashing down on their shared headspace -

The hammer comes up unerringly and slams up into the sword from beneath, shoving the blow away with brute force. Their arms scream with pain, and Karkat reels because how the hell did they move that fast? The burning creature seems almost as surprised, yelping with affronted rage, and stabs forward again. John's arms both ache now, but the hammer comes up and deflects the blow again. Whatever foreign power that ring is channeling through John, it can move.

And John just rolls with it, not even trying to fight the wild swings of the hammer. If anything, it feel like he's the one guiding it, exerting strength no human's supposed to have. The wolf howls with frustration when John just won't die.

Being a pathetic excuse for a rational being, Karkat momentarily hopes this will end differently.
But not too much hope. He's learned his lesson.

Then, in the heat of the moment, when the wolf lunges in close and brings the blade ringing down on John's guard again, Karkat tries it - he jumps his focus onto the wolf's blood and tries to sense what he can, to understand just what the *fuck* this bizarre creature his thinkpan's constructed to kill John twice is actually made of.

It's a mistake. It's a horrible mistake. There's not one but *two* fires boiling in that creature's veins, scalding Karkat before he shrieks mentally and tears himself free, slamming back into John's perspective and cuddling there, barely registering the fight as it rages on around him.

So much power. How could one person *stand* it?

They can't, he thinks vaguely, staring at the wolf as it tries and fails to teleport behind John and the hammer swings around to meet it. The madness was a palpable taint in that hellbeast's blood, a poison that oozes through wherever the green fire and the black power spiraling up from the creature's *own* ring, the one clamped firmly around its dark claw, clash. They're not necessarily opposing powers, but they don't mix *well*, and the sheer overload has driven the beast completely bugfuck crazy.

No, whatever that hellthing is, it's not the one built to wear that ring - but it's close. Close enough that it can channel way more power than John can. It burns like the sun to Karkat's senses already, yet more power just keeps frothing up. Then John has to fling himself backward again, and Karkat loses that momentary glimpse into the abomination's bloodstream.

But it was enough. With a sinking heart, Karkat realizes what's going to happen.

John is the one who falters first. Whatever the source of the power in that ring he's using as a hammer, it's just not enough. Or more accurately, it would be enough - but John wouldn't be able to handle it. When the winged wolf brings its sword down, John barely catches it along the handle of the hammer, and when the abomination teleports again, it's too much. The power of the ring sizzles and John falls. They're a good twenty feet above the ground that Karkat can't look at, by this point, and John barely catches himself before he hits the ground. He pants and lets the hammer drop, clutching at his knees as the hammer turns back into a ring and clinks on the ground below. John's palm burns from the inside, and Karkat can feel the power retreating already from his blood vessels.

When the wolf pops in behind John, they don't even get the chance to turn before the sword slides between John's ribs. Karkat sobs in time with John, as the human falls forward, one hand pressed to the gaping wound that cuts neatly through their heart, the other barely managing to support their dying body as they slump over. The pain is agonizing and total and so *this* is what this nightmare is all about: knowing through exquisite firsthand experience exactly how much terror and agony John feels as he dies.

And John is muttering something, and Karkat just barely catches it before the pain sweeps him into consciousness -

"This isn't *how it went*. Why can't I remember it *right*?"

-

And then Karkat is awake.

-

It makes the morning news, somehow. Heir had seemed cautious about believing that the news
would run a big story about it, but someone on the news crew must have been a Hemogoblin fan boy, because when Karkat crawls miserably out of his recocoon at noon, after a mere three hours of troubled sleep, he turns it on to see the huge scrolling banner at the bottom of the local news, playing repeats of the eight o'clock news stories for the lunchtime crowd, reads

'HEMOGoblin EXONERATED; SUSPECT CONfesses TO POLICE STATION EXPLOSIONS; A MEMBER OF SEATTLE PD'S OWN COUNTER TERRORISM UNIT

Or maybe it's the scandal of having a supposed member of the force turn out to have been a plant all along. Karkat shakes his head, and hopes this doesn't go any farther than the local news. The last thing he needs is more publicity, really, good or bad. He just wants Hemogoblin to lie low and get back to work.

He has three phone calls from John and a voice mail, as well as five texts asking where Karkat is sent only a half hour ago. Karkat grimaces and doesn't listen to the voice mail; he focuses instead on showering off the sopor slime and making himself presentable as quickly as possible. He nearly stabs himself in the eye twice with his claw, trying to stick the fucking contact lenses in. He'd rather hurry up and see John in person than hear his moirail in some distress that Karkat himself caused with his absence. He can't even stand the thought, not after that nightmare. He just needs to get to John and hug him. Now.

Crabdad had thrown the mother of all temper tantrums when Hemogoblin stumbled in at around eight in the morning. The lusus is kind of aware that Karkat is Hemogoblin, or at least that he goes out at night pretty regularly; it goes through Karkat's stuff too regularly in an ill-fated attempted at 'cleaning' for that to have stayed a secret, and since then it has simply fretted at him and screeched obnoxiously whenever Karkat gets home in the early hours of the morning. Apparently today it had been convinced, in its tiny sushi brain, that Karkat had returned home and gone to school at the regular time; having Karkat sneak in partway through the school day with his uniform still on under his clothes had nearly given the fatass an aneurysm in the middle of the living room. When Karkat tramps downstairs, Crabdad wails with distress, and Karkat is treated to the age-old offering of a questionable brown bag lunch lobbed at him by a sobbing lusus, something he'd thought he'd trained Crabdad out of years ago.

On the other hand, it's not like he has time to pack his own lunch, anyway, and lunch period will be over by the time he arrives at the high school. John is probably having an aneurysm of his own, and Karkat is almost surprised Dad Egbert isn't over here checking in like a concerned secondary guardian. His luck is still holding out, it seems.

He batters Crabdad over the head and kicks it aside so he can shut the front door and hurry out to the grey state-issued car parked outside. The neighbor across the street is outside mowing the lawn like the disgustingly wholesome retiree he is, giving Karkat a strange look as he races across the front lawn. Karkat represses a middle finger with unholy effort, focused more on stuffing toast in his mouth. It doesn't have butter or almond butter or anything by way of toppings, and tastes like sawdust in his mouth, but after that bad dream his digestive sac twists and knots at the mere thought of eating anything sweet like jam. He trips over the edge of the curb when he fumbles for his keys, and catches himself on the roof of the car.

...Is it even safe to drive when he's this tired? Too late now; he's committed. Starting the engine takes two tries because the key misses the slot the first time, and Karkat bangs his head against the steering wheel, letting the horn run until someone - probably obnoxious neighbor #213 - yells wordlessly in protest, and he's forced to bend to society's whims and ease off the horn to drive to school.

The parking lot is totally full, and Karkat cusses out every single underclassman who might have taken up the rows closest to the school's back door, like the little fucking shits they are. He doesn't
know all their names, no, but by god it's implied. When he finally finds a spot wedged between a Range Rover and a douchey Mustang convertible (what fucking high schooler can afford that?!) near the back of the lot, he then has to hightail it to the door before a passing security guard can drive by.

The door is, of course, locked. Karkat smacks his head against it twice, growling. Someone busted this door nearly a year and a half ago, near the start of last school year. Since then they've had an extra remote-controlled lock installed that only unlocks during short periods of time before and after school, and Karkat has blown right past that critical period and pissed on its grave. And if he goes through the front office it'll just be a hassle and a half.

...There's still five minutes left in the last lunch period.

He can still make it. Everyone who has that lunch time will know his shame, but who even fucking cares. The cafeteria is closer to John's math class, anyway; Karkat can catch him right when the bell rings. This plan is actually not all that mind-blowingly stupid, and he's proud of himself for defying all possible expectations in terms of his usually negligible brainpower. Pushing off the door with a hand, Karkat hugs the side of the school building and rushes around to the side area where people are allowed to go outside and eat. He gets a faceful of some random gust of wind that messes up his hair and pushes his crappy rip-off Heir hoodie back while he's running under That Goddamn Tree, the one John always insists they sit under when the weather isn't total shit. A few kids are outside, thankfully, so when Karkat sneaks in behind them, just as the bell to signal the end of the period rings, no one even looks at him twice.

Fuck yeah. Now to intercept John before the kid skips out on school or, worst-case scenario, starts freaking out. Karkat has never seen John cry, but the image is surprisingly easy to call up. John can smile all he fucking wants; the underlying sadness is still there, a mournful layer of melancholy that Karkat has barely begun to coax out into the open during their feelings jams. It's Karkat's own fault for being a raging fucktrumpet these past few weeks with his rage hormones. He really needs to sit them down and have a proper paledate, get John in a pile and pick up the moirailing slack.

Yeah. It'll be a thing. He'll suggest it right away, when he finishes shoving his way through this crowd of total assholes to reach the math hall. "I will shit on everything you love," he swears under his breath, shoving one kid so hard in the oversized backpack she nearly faceplants in a short troll's set of horns. Oops. His motor control is just so fucked right now. But apologies are for the weak, and for people not making a beeline for their moirail, so Karkat presses on.

"John!" he calls when he finally spies the back of John's head in the masses of people, and if he acts like an irritible little bitch when he elbows one last interloper out of his way, so be it. John's head perks up instantly and a wide, relieved grin spreads across his dumb face as he waves in Karkat's direction. He looks kind of tired, but otherwise fine. Good to know there's something Karkat has yet to fuck up in this world. Making John actually cry would probably be a culling-level offence. "Come here, you complete dumbass," he orders, and when John gets close enough Karkat thinks, fuck them, and hugs his human. John is warm and just a little bit taller than Karkat which will never stop pissing him off, but whatever. When he hugs back he nearly chokes Karkat out, and that's fine too. It's all fine.

But also, John's chocking him out, so Karkat's getting kind of light headed. Maybe he'd usually be able to handle John's ridiculous swimming arm chokehold, but right now he's already dazed enough without the help. "Lay off, you ludicrously overpowered dumbass," he croaks, papping at John's ear. Or at least he thinks it's an ear. He might have gotten caught on the kid's glasses, too. "Some of us need to breathe."

John chuckles, the sound muffled with his face stuck in Karkat's hair, and his nose brushes the edge
"Shut up, Karkat, this is payback. Where were you, this morning? Everyone's been saying you weren't here at all for theater, and I know you would never miss that!"

Ugrghdgaldskfuck. Karkat makes a face, because he is not looking forward to talking his way out of this one. At all. This is the problem with micromanaging your schedule like an obsessive fuckwit; when you break the pattern, everyone and their mother knows. One time he skipped out on training to hang out with John for the afternoon, and John had nearly freaked out, thinking Karkat was missing one of his fake job shifts. "Slept in. Like, I goddamn slept in. It was the shittiest experience of my life, and I think the next time I look at a recoperacoon I might just vomit everywhere and go be an insomniac on the couch for the rest of my miserable existence."

"Really? Jeez, Karkat!" John breathes out a sigh of relief that nearly rocks them both, one hand papping at Karkat's hair, and Karkat reluctantly unwinds himself from the embrace because wow, they are in public and this is getting really pale, really fast. Like, he does not want the entire troll population of this fucking cesspit gossiping about the exhibitionist pale action going on all up in the middle of the hallway. Most potential witnesses have already cleared out and fucked off to class, but there's such a thing as propriety, okay?

Also, there was something wrong with that relief. Something about it that hits the wrong note in Karkat's twitchy thinkpan, and so he draws back, inspecting John's face with a frown. What he sees isn't reassuring at all. Hoo, boy. Karkat adjusts his timeline of events because holy fuck, John looks shaky, his grin barely sticking to his face as he scrubs at his messy hair. The shadows under his eyes seem to sink deeper now that Karkat's getting a good look at them, and there's a pallor to his skin that shouldn't still be there. Yeah, John had been almost as shocked as Karkat by that accusation against Hemogoblin blared all over the evening news, but there's no reason that should bother John so much now, after the accusation has been cleared up.

Unless John hasn't heard? Well - "You heard? The police are backpedalling like crazy, over that whole Hemogoblin thing," Karkat says, playing it as smooth as he can when he feels like shit, arching an eyebrow that might just end up being both eyebrows, because his fine motor control is basically shot. "Some nutjob came forward and confessed."

"Oh - yeah, I heard!" John replies, brightening a little. "It was all over the Internet this morning. Way to jump the gun, right?"

" Seriously. That was stupidity of apocalyptic proportions," Karkat agrees, searching John's face. No good - John looks better on the surface, but he already knew about the Hemogoblin exoneration, so that wasn't what had been bothering him in the first place. If anything, after the initial flicker of a grin, John looks even more exhausted afterward. He's just trying to cover it up more, now.

They need a jam. From the looks of things, they needed the jam yesterday, but John can be pretty good at sitting on this kind of thing until it becomes a Federal Fucking Issue. Where Karkat couldn't repress his fucked up, spontaneous ragefits if he tried, John is too good at it. His ability to hide his deeper emotions masquerades as functionality, and Karkat thinks if he doesn't yank this out of John right here and now, it'll fester and entrench itself further in his idiotic human thinkpan, where not even the best of Karkat's abilities will be able to shoosh it out into the open.

The last thing John needs is another open wound like the one that Rose woman left, an oozing sore that John will ignore and ignore until it rots through. Karkat will be damned before he lets his moirail work himself raw over something Karkat's done. He seizes John's wrist with his claw and drags him into the nearest male-identifying restroom. There's a green-eyed troll by the sinks who looks up from rinsing his claws and lets out an 'eep' of terror when Karkat snarls at him. "Karkat, what are you doing? We're going to be late," John protests, still with that light, joking note in his tone, as the
greenblood grabs his backpack and scurries out without daring to even look at the two of them.

Too bad. If John thinks he can laugh this one off, he's got another thing coming. And any self-respecting troll would recognize an emergency moirailing when he sees one, and know to back the fuck off. Karkat spins John so Karkat is between him and the exit, and only then releases his clamp on John's wrist. He folds his arms, then has to unfold them slightly to adjust his crooked glasses. Honestly, he's lucky he remembered to put on his contact lenses and glasses at all, after the night he's had. "Spill it, John. I can tell something upset you. What happened while I was gone?"

John shifts, clearly uncomfortable, his eyes darting back and forth from the mirror off to the side to the door over Karkat's shoulder. He adjusts the strap of his backpack where it's slung over one shoulder, but merely shrugs and says, "I'm fine, Karkat. Jeez, I was just wondering if something was the matter with you...you got me kind of worried, that's all!" He firms up his toothy grin, having not yet caught on after a year and a half of friendship that Karkat can tell it's a fake. He'd be insulated at the thought of his palemate trying to hide emotions from him, except that's just how John works. That's his dysfunction. It would be like John being insulted by Karkat's freak outs.

"Yeah, I know, I fucked up, what else is new," Karkat says flatly, twisting his lips down. "Apparently last night I left my phone, and thus my alarm, down in the kitchen with Crabdad, and passed the fuck out until noon. Yay me, the one day my overly attached lusus decides to let me sleep in is a random weekday during the school year."

"At least the insomnia is better, though?" John laughs, and okay, that was a little more genuine, but Karkat's still not fooled. John's shoulders have relaxed because Karkat gave a reasonable explanation for his absence, but he still looks off. So it is something to do with Karkat. "Seems like you more than caught up on your sleep! That's good, right?"

Ha. Karkat wishes he could make up sleep like that. If only insomnia were the problem, not just the shitty solution he's found for the nightmares plaguing him. He grimaces and shrugs, though, because this is the best cover story his tired brain could think up on the drive to school. "'Good' would have been not missing half my fucking classes over it, but whatever. I'm here now. So why did me skipping get you all twitchy and triggered?"

John flinches again, so there goes his little happy mask. He stammers, trying to cover it up, but Karkat has gotten better at peeling back John's layers after all this time, and he has no intention of letting John bullshit him over this. "I don't know. I just thought..." He breaks off, easing his weight from one foot to the other as he stares determinedly at a corner of floor tile rather than meet Karkat's gaze. "It's not a big deal, Karkat, you're here now!"

Oh, man. Karkat can already feel the pinched, silent bleed of pain that John's giving off, whether he knows it or not. It's obvious in the hunch of his shoulders, the way his hands shove into the pockets of his cargo pants (so Karkat can't reach out and grab them), in the sheepish and too-wide grin, a peace offering that doesn't quite conceal the anxious pain throbbing underneath the surface when John finally looks up again. Whatever this is, John thinks he's being stupid about it, which will only make him want to hide it more. The adorable dumbass is his own worst enemy.

"Spit it out, Egbert, just looking at you makes me want to gag myself with a rusty fork," Karkat snaps at last, rolling his eyes. They're officially missing their next classes right now, but wow, if John can have that kind of pain on his face after all this time, Karkat hasn't been holding up his end of this relationship at all. He feels twisted and sick on the inside with all kinds of pale knots, but shooshing John won't work until John actually admits there's something to be shooshed about.

He's got a sinking, stupid idea, though. Because John of all people knows that the person most likely to know Karkat's whereabouts would be...John. So why was he going around asking other people?
They share a class in the morning, so John would have known it wasn't just a matter of them somehow missing each other in the halls. "What, did you think I was avoiding you?" Karkat blurts out, like the dumbfuck shitpanned fucking *fuck* he is, and John shuts down right before his eyes. All the lights go out. John looks *worse* than anxious; he looks *broken*, all that lurking insecurity and pain ripped up and laid out bare.

Even if having John admit to this sort of shit is part of the process of *dealing* with it, that doesn't mean Karkat's heart doesn't break, because John tries to smile after that bombshell, and that smile is everything that could ever be wrong in the universe. "Ahaha, no, that would be dumb, Karkat!"

Karkat lunges forward and grabs his stupid, stupid human by the stupid face, and he's babbling all over the place because he has literally no filter left at all, not where John is concerned. "You stupid stupid stupid dumbass I'm right *here*, I didn't leave, you little shit, look at me."

John almost shakes him off before meeting Karkat's eyes and freezing up. Lost confusion darkens his eyes. That's okay, because for once Karkat knows what he's actually doing. Karkat tightens his hold, his claws clutching at the wind tossed mess of John's hair, and keeps up the stare until it clicks in John's brain. This close up, the slight widening of John's eyes and the way he sighs hard, like the air has been punched out of him, are all the signal Karkat needs. He breaks the stare and wraps both arms around John's neck so he can be the one choking the kid out. He can feel the pulse point under John's jaw even though there's still space between them, and it soothes the last of the upset in his own scrambled brain.

A little noise emerges from John's throat, somewhere over Karkat's ear, and Karkat tightens his arms. "I didn't leave. I didn't leave. I'm still here," he mumbles over and over. There's a slight shake to John's shoulders; he pats at the space between the kid's shoulder blades until the twitching goes away. "I'm okay and you're okay, I'm fine and you're fine. We're both here."

And okay, maybe Karkat needed to hear those words too. It would be awesome to hear it from John, but Karkat can say it enough for both of them, until they both believe it.

God, they're a pair of fucking idiots. Both of them with thinkpans primed to assume their moirail could vanish at any minute. No wonder they deserve each other.

John wriggles out first, but Karkat doesn't let him go very far, so John kind of sways at the edge of Karkat's reach, still trying to regain his composure. Karkat can still feel the instinctive urge to shooshpap in his palms. It's hard to ignore. John's eyes look a little swollen, and his nose is all blotchy, even though there aren't any actual tears.

This could have been a lot worse. Karkat hates to think what could have happened if he hadn't made it to school today at all, what could have festered in John's thinkpan. John is built of dangerous contradictions, cheerful and quietly unhappy, spontaneous but careful, physically strong and yet emotionally a total clusterfuck who likes to *fixate*. And to think, Karkat had been fucking *pissy* when Crabdad made them move out to the suburbs. Now, he just wonders if he was always intended to find John because *fuck*, how would this kid have survived without him?

Serendipity. What a strange, wonderful concept. Karkat walked out into the night, nearly got shot, and somehow found the other half of his life in the aftermath, and he is so very, very okay with that.

At least it's not something new. This is just that same, old pain that John likes to pretend he doesn't carry, the scar left by Rose leaving abruptly and never speaking to him again. Karkat has never even met the girl, and he thinks he hates her, a crunch of pure, unadulterated loathing that has a special place of residence in the pit of his stomach. Seriously, Karkat knows hate (he hates practically every annoying fuckwad on the planet, okay, he *knows*) and this disgust is almost painfully personal. John
would probably scold him, but fuck that. Anyone who can carve such a lasting mark in John's psyche that the stupid dumbfuck thinks his moirail would ever, ever leave him deserves the purest form of odium Karkat and his finely honed rage glands are capable of producing.

Seriously, it was just one morning of unexplained absence on Karkat's part - that's a pretty sensitive trigger if John could be set off by it, and that's a really fucking bad sign. Trolls with that kind of sensitivity would know to avoid the trigger for their emotional upset at all cost, but of course John wants to be friends with this Rose chick again. Now is not the moment to try to talk him down from that shitty idea, though. Karkat can wait. He can be patient about this, dammit.

John laughs weirdly, rubbing at his eyes. "Wow. Uh. Sorry about that. I don't even know happened there!"

"You fucking liar," Karkat says, rolling his eyes right back at him. So his moirail is in denial, what else is new? When John opens his mouth to make some kind of protest, Karkat flaps a claw at him. "Just wash your dumb face, John," he orders, resting his head on his claw as he leans against the wall. John nods and dumps his backpack on the counter, his cell phone sliding a little as he turns on the cold water faucet and splashes his face. Karkat is tempted to follow suit - maybe then he'd feel a little more awake, and a little less exhausted - but his gills would probably throw another bitch fit at the mere thought of water up his nose. Apparently nothing attached to his autonomic nervous system reacts well when he's sleep-deprived; showering has become a hassle and a half.

John's phone vibrates, and Karkat looks down absently.

He freezes when he spies the little banner of a Pesterchum alert, and the color of the text for the chumhandle. John has the message preview function off, but the handle is still there, in disgusting bright red.

And Karkat may have been distracted all last night with that little crisis with the law, but he hasn't forgotten that he has some words for this mysterious Dave person, who thinks he can just up and become John's friend out of bugfuck nowhere. He plans to do more recon this afternoon, hunting down the two Daves that he knows of who attend their school, but he strongly suspects that it's not a local Dave. Neither of the two here share any classes with John - one is a freshman, for fuck's sake - and Karkat spends every spare minute in passing periods glued to John's side, so it couldn't be then, either. No, this Dave human should have come up on Karkat's radar before now; the fact that he hasn't is a huge fucking warning sign.

Especially if it's some bullshit, like this Dave doesn't want to be seen interacting with John in public. As though that would be some kind of embarrassment. That would be the ultimate insult, and Karkat would probably have some kind of totally legal justification for ripping the fucker's head off in a fit of rage.

...Well, what John doesn't know can't hurt him.

Karkat memorizes 'turntechGodhead' and looks away from the screen just as John yanks his head out from under the faucet. His hair beads with water, and a trickle sluices down the side of his face. He grins at Karkat, and at last there's none of that hidden anxiety muddying the expression. He's clear and bright and free, and Karkat can't repress the grin that twitches onto his face in reply. There. Balance is restored to the universe. You're welcome, universe.

He furrows his brows to try to cancel it out with a properly annoyed frown, but John just laughs and grabs his phone and backpack, nudging Karkat with his shoulder as he makes for the door. "We are so late," he says, faking a mournful tone, and Karkat rams him back with a sharper elbow in retaliation.
"Like that even matters, you dumbfuck. Has no one ever drilled it into your skull that you're more important than school? You'd think your guardian would be all over that fruity self-esteem boosting nonsense. He's always so proud of you, it's just bizarre."

John opens his mouth, then shuts it as they walk out into the empty corridor. It's a little creepy how quiet the hall is, without the incessant roar of voices that usually echo in the terrible acoustics. Karkat rolls his shoulders and tries not to think about the history class he's missing. He honestly has no idea what's going on in that class this week; the only class he's on top of is chemistry, and that's mostly because John is there with him to keep his sleep-deprived ass in line. If these nightmares keep up, it's going to start hurting his grades.

Wow, fuck, this is not what he wants to be thinking about right now. But of course, his brain being a perverse sack of shit, he starts thinking about it more. He grimaces. By this point his homework is in a deplorable state. He...didn't work on it at all yesterday, and hell if he can remember what is due today. Or even earlier today. If he doesn't start working to catch up now, he'll probably hit critical mass by Friday, and then he'll be completely fucked. It's times like these when moonlighting as a hero really cuts into his everyday life, and it looks like the rest of the week is due to be hellish.

Fuuuuuuuck.

"Still, I think this is the first time I've ever just been late to a class," John laughs, his usual oblivious self. "And I should probably mention it to him anyway, so at least he hears it from me. Eurgh, this is going to be awful, Karkat!"

Karkat snorts. "Or just, you could just not fucking tell him. It's not like the teacher is going to call him and personally demand to know why you missed the first half of class." Karkat rolls his eyes when John just chuckles sheepishly. "Human parent-child relationships. How do you even put up with all that constant interaction."

"I don't know. I kind of tell him almost everything." John shrugs. "Don't you confide in Crabdad about anything?"

"Oh, fuck no. Never. Don't even talk that way, John. As if Crabdad could ever keep a secret."

"No one but you even understands him, Karkat!" John shakes his head, and Karkat realizes he's fallen out of sync with Karkat's stride when Karkat has to actually twist his upper body to see him. Oh. He's dawdling because they've reached his classroom. Right. "She won't call my dad, no, but she'll definitely call me out in front of everyone," he continues mournfully, and Karkat has to put his thinkpan through some rigorous exercise before he remembers they were discussing not just guardians but teacher reactions to their tardiness as well. Which is just really sad, because Karkat can usually keep up with conversations that twist and bend like this on the fly. This shouldn't be hard, so why does thinking feel like paddling his way through molasses?

He prods John in the upper arm, so the kid blinks and pouts at him over the jab so Karkat's amazing patented eye roll gets across. "She'll probably think your absence was only a product of her imagination," he says, raising an eyebrow. "After all, there's no way the incredibly punctual John Egbert would ever be late for class without an excuse note, right? Just sneak in and act like you were there all along."

"You're awful, Karkat," John says, grinning wide. "Playing a trick like that on a teacher? ...Heck yes."

"Make me proud, you dumbass," Karkat orders, pivoting on his heel to start heading for his own class. He still can't remember what homework was due today, but he's got his moirail all sorted out
and that's basically the day made, right there.

"And Karkat?" John calls, a little too loud. Karkat winces and looks back reprovingly, because how does John expect to pull off these pranking shenanigans of his if he gives himself away by yelling right outside the classroom door? "Thank you. For uh. That." He stumbles over the last sentence. It's a fucking train wreck. John's face burns red as he stares at his shoe, toeing the ground because he can't look Karkat in the eye, again.

He should not look that huggable. No one has the right to look that stupidly adorable. Karkat can practically feel the diamond lodged in his throat as he swallows and blushes in sympathy. Fuck fuck fuck. "Yeah, well, that's why I'm here. Because I - fuck, because we're moirails, now go the fuck to class," he mutters, his voice doing something downright embarrassing. That sentence is supposed to go something like because I adore you, you hopelessly frail creature, let us shoosh again, but Karkat does not have the balls. He just doesn't. He ducks his head and stalks off down the hall without looking to see John's reaction. Because Karkat is a cowardly fuckwit, okay, and there is no way he's perpetuating that cycle of awkward fuckery that he knows they would have fallen into.

Alright, so. Pale declarations - not their forte. But hey, no relationship is perfect. And the awkwardness of the whole thing just pulls the huge knot that has taken up permanent residence in Karkat's chest even tighter. That's not even fair, dammit.

Of course, once he's turned the corner and John is totally out of sight, Karkat feels the post-jam slump hit him, and he stumbles forward. Fuck, he thinks dizzily, shuffling to the side as a wave of exhaustion ripples over him. His eyes feels dry and gritty as he leans on the row of lockers to his right for support. Panic breaks through the vague tiredness before he can pass out, fortunately, because holy fuck his contacts. The last thing he needs is for them to dry too much and just pop off his fucking ganderbulbs in the middle of a classroom, which is pretty much the last thing he needs today. He rubs at his eyes with a claw, pushing his glasses up as he does, and he can feel the way the lenses don't sit quite right over his iris. Shit shit shit.

Great. If this lack of sleep has reached the point where his eyes are bugging out, how long will it be until he starts getting shit on with some of the more serious side effects? He hasn’t had a real bad bout of true insomnia since he was a wriggler, but he knows hallucinations can be involved.

He might not have a choice; at some point, he needs to hit up his old stash of sleeping pills and suck it up for a night of hardcore nightmares in REM sleep. It would mean missing out on a night of work, which his stomach automatically revolts against, but he also can't afford to hallucinate on the job.

Blinking dry eyes, Karkat passes his claws over his face and heaves a sigh. How did he let himself fall apart this fast? A few weeks of nightmares and one shitty run in with the police later, and he's about to pass out in the middle of school.

Deal with it. Fuck sleep. Sleep is overrated, anyway. Who knows what kind of fresh hell could go down if you let yourself fall asleep.

...That sounds like sleep-deprived logic, and Karkat has to sit down on his haunches when a fresh wave of dizziness hits him. Is he giddy? He can't tell if it's just light-headedness or if he's actually having some sort of breakdown.

The smart thing to do would be to march right back to John and interrupt class to get his emotions soothed out. But when has Karkat ever done the smart thing? He straightens his back and swallows hard, letting out a shaky breath as he forces his eyes back open. They smart and sting in the open air, but he still has options. After a moment of consideration, he glances around and, sure that the coast is clear, bites down on his tongue with an incisor.
Blood wells up from the precise hole in his tongue; it tastes sharp and slick with pain and a rush of endorphins. The buzz has to shove its way through the thick smog of exhaustion encasing Karkat's thinkpan, but when it finally hits him, he wakes right the fuck up. He's dizzy as he climbs to his feet, hooking a finger through the link of someone's lock to help himself up, but what his regular senses lack in terms of clarity, his sense of his own blood more than makes up for. An injury generally means he's in danger; he keeps gnawing at the tiny wound with his tooth and the blood keeps trickling down the back of his throat like syrup. His every instinct rebels against it - he's spent a lifetime avoiding injuries like this, for fear of discovery - and by the time Karkat lurches to his next class he has enough adrenalin and endorphins shooting through his veins that it almost simulates wakefulness. There's a headache coming on, a throbbing at the base of his skull and behind his eyes that threatens to converge into one magnificent migraine, but he holds it back through sheer force of will. All his body wants is sleep? Well, he and his body are going to have to agree to disagree, for now.

Much better. It's not a permanent solution, but it'll hopefully get him through the afternoon without him falling asleep and drooling all over the desk.

And then he can launch Operation Daveterrogation, and hopefully take his mind of the wretched state of his mental stability.

- 

He doesn't really remember class. Which, wow, is a really bad sign. Karkat nibbles at his tongue until the pain receptors stop responding altogether and he reluctantly uses his powers in class to scab the wound over. It's in his mouth, it's not like anyone can see the blood anyway. He thinks more than once as he tears a new hole on the other side of his mouth that he's being unbelievably reckless, and that it's probably the sleeplessness wearing holes through all his inhibitions, but it's just so hard to make himself care. He's devoting all his time to propping himself up in class; worrying about shit like the color of the blood in his mouth just feels so fucking pointless when his eyes keep blurring and slanting sideways, and he has to shake himself all over before he falls off the chair.

By some miracle the teacher doesn't call on him to speak, so he never has to worry about the blood that might stain his teeth. He waits until everyone else races out into the halls before ducking out. He thinks he hears the teacher call his name and he hightails it the fuck out of there because he's not wasting precious John-time mincing words with a nosy teacher.

The fact that said teacher probably has a justifiable reason for wondering why Karkat showed up fifteen minutes late to class does not faze him in the slightest. He stumbles flatfootedly through the halls until he nearly rams into John as the kid rounds the corner. Convenient. "You. Me. Denny's, after school. Don't even think of skipping out," Karkat says, before John can get a word in edgewise. Karkat thinks his weariness might really be starting to shine through, because John actually frowns and opens his mouth like he might protest. Karkat puts up a finger and presses it to John's mouth because nopppe. "No. Nope. No words, John. Just you and me and pancakes. This is a non-negotiable paledate." He hesitates, squinting, but he's fairly sure that's all he wanted to say. Fucking hell, he's tired. "You don't have swimming after school, do you?"

"...Karkat, I meant it, are you alright? Because I think sleeping in made you even more tired or something. You look awful!" John says. "And no, no swimming today. We have the bio club, remember?" He claps Karkat's shoulder with a hand that is way heavier than it has any right to be, dammit, and Karkat nearly just slumps forward against John to sleep here and now. It's so tempting. Fuck.

"Napping is for morons who like sleep. Sleep is so fucking overrated, John," Karkat tries to explain,
clutching at the air with his claws to demonstrate...something. He's pretty lost. "Pancakes."

"Sure, pancakes. I'm totally in," John says. His face is twisted with concern, and Karkat thinks his eyes flicker blue when he steadies Karkat by the shoulder -

Karkat twists away. What was all that he was thinking about hallucinations earlier? he wonders. "See you in chemistry," he says, raising his hand in a vague wave that trails off as he is jostling and bumped along through the halls.

Just two more classes. Just two more -

- He doesn't have the brainpower to contribute to the latest random experiment in the biology club, anyway. Instead, Karkat whips out his phone and thumbs up the brightness of the screen until it blurs white and gold in his smeary vision and he can't ignore it. Squinting clears the features of Pesterchum up a bit, though his contacts ache and scratch with the strain. Eventually Karkat muscles John into position at the back of the classroom the club has commandeered for meetings this year. John has decided on bemused concern, apparently, smiling with a raised eyebrow while Karkat settles them on top of a table and pushes John's shoulder down until he can rest comfortably in the crook of the human's arm. He needs a headrest by now, dammit. His head kept bobbing throughout chemistry, and he's not sure how much longer he's going to make it this time before he just falls over. His recovery time is decreasing rapidly the longer he tries to go without a full night of sleep.

"Karkat, you can just nap if you need to," John whispers anxiously, but Karkat waves him off, jutting his chin into John's collarbone in an absently reassuring nuzzle before turning to conceal his phone screen from John and the rest of the club's prying eyes. He doesn't know how to explain that napping is the opposite of what he needs right now. Napping with John might help a little, but he'll suggest it later.

Right now, he has one last order of business to tend to before he gives in and lets his brain ravage him with nightmares again.

CG: YOU.
CG: DAVE HUMAN.
CG: WE NEED TO HAVE A FUCKING TALK.
TG: oh good the pestersmut request finally went through
TG: at last i can get my mad dick pic fix
TG: lay it on me bro i have all day

Karkat shakes the screen, squints harder, and then closes the app and reopens it.

The window is still there. The red text still has the same obnoxiously creepy reply.

...Well. Alright then. The gauntlet must be thrown down, no matter how little sense this Dave is making. Karkat is on a mission, dammit.

CG: WHAT NO, THAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT WE'RE DOING HERE.
CG: THIS IS ME, DEMANDING ANSWERS OF YOU CONCERNING ONE JOHN EGBERT. YOU DON'T GET TO ASK THE QUESTIONS, DAVE. THERE WILL BE NO 'PICS' INVOLVED.
CG: IF YOU COOPERATE LIKE A COMPLIANT, PENITENT LITTLE RED TEXT FUCKWAD WE CAN GET THROUGH THIS MUTUALLY UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE
WITHOUT ME PHYSICALLY REACHING THROUGH THE SCREEN TO STRANGLE YOU UNTIL YOU TALK.
TG: just what i have been missing in my life an angry bdsm rp
TG: go ahead man i am all ears over here
TG: and other organs

Wait - no, this doesn't make sense either. "Urghhh," Karkat mutters, and John nudges him lightly, shooshing him right in the ear. John tries to peer over at the screen - Karkat can feel him moving - and Karkat hunches over the screen with a bleary eyed pout that he directs at John until the human rolls his eyes and good-naturedly turns back toward the teacher. The burgeoning frustration melts a little as Karkat pulls himself together again. No matter how many times he reads this Dave kid's responses, it seems he's determined to not go along with the script for this little interrogation. His counter-interrogation tactics are quite effective, mostly because Karkat is furiously annoyed and unable to get the conversation back under control and seriously how did this guy immediately jump to sex? That's not normal.

Or maybe Karkat is just not getting his point across. Maybe he is coming off a little bla-

Oh, fuck. He may not be functional enough for this kind of confrontation. John, what kind of freak is this guy you've been talking to? he thinks with a silent snarl, typing with clumsy claws. Every text takes a painful age to finish typing because he keeps having to backspace and correct dumb spelling errors.

CG: THAT DIDN'T EVEN MAKE FUCKING SENSE STOP THAT.
CG: THIS IS NOT A ROMANTIC OVERTURE IN ANY WAY SHAPE OR FORM AND ANY HATE I MAY DIRECT AT YOU IS A PURELY PLATONIC STRATEGY USED TO EXTRACT THE ANSWERS TO MY QUESTIONS.
CG: THIS IS A FACT THAT I AM STATING FOR THE RECORD YOU BLITHERING BONEBULGE
CG: NOW START FUCKING TALKING WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS TOWARDS JOHN
TG: wow defensive much? i am not sensing any latent hatemance here at all
TG: anyway how does an angry hate-sexting troll come to inquire about my beloved john
TG: my curiosity is boundless man really

...Beloved?!

Karkat grits his teeth against a howl of protective outrage. Calm. Caaalm you ragemonster, fucking calm. At his side, John jerks and then leans over to drag his backpack up from the ground where Karkat kicked both their bags, unzipping the front pocket, no doubt in response to some new idea from one of the other biology nerds in the club. At least that will keep him distracted from trying to get curious about Karkat's actions. Especially since Karkat is two seconds from throwing a miniature bitchfit to himself.

Seriously, is this what John has been putting up with this entire time? Why. Just. Why. How did John's ideas of friendship become so skewed, that he has been texting this creep on a regular basis? Is the beloved thing a serious romantic claim or more of this human's seemingly incessant, perverse irony? Karkat can't tell.

He just remembers how John flushed and stammered when Karkat first asked about his intense conversation with this kid yesterday, and how John had barely given away the name Dave before changing the subject.

He's gorged himself on too many rom-coms not to have a very, very bad feeling about this.
CG: IF THIS IS HOW YOU TALK TO JOHN I WILL TRACK YOU DOWN AND BAN YOU FROM EVER CONTACTING HIM EVER AGAIN DO YOU UNDERSTAND.
CG: WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN BELOVED EXPLAIN NOW
TG: means john is my hubbie obvi where have you even been
TG: there was a proposal and everything it was so legit
CG: STOP FUCKING AROUND, I WOULD FUCKING KNOW IF JOHN WERE MARRIED ALRIGHT. IF YOU THINK YOU CAN TROLL ME LIKE THIS YOU MUST THINK I'M A PANMELTINGLY STUPID IDIOT AND YOU WILL DIE WITH MY CLAWS THROUGH YOUR TRACHEA, I SWEAR TO GOD
TG: shit man if i knew i would have chalked you one up for part of the bridal price
TG: i think i still have some cattle tribute up on the roof hang on
TG: what exactly is your relationship to john nwy gotta know so i can judge how much of a cut you get here compared to the dadbert

He knows John's dad's nickname. This is serious. How serious, though? John makes a noise like a stifled laugh at his side, and Karkat hunches his shoulders more in response, but he darts a look over his shoulder and John is still occupied with something else.

CG: I HAVE NO INTEREST IN YOUR PLACID HERDBEAST TRIBUTES BECAUSE I KNOW YOU'RE DICKING AROUND, YOU FUCKASS
CG: TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY DAMMIT I WANT ANSWERS AND I WANT THEM NOW
TG: oooh yes mr angry troll order me more
TG: youre so hateful and shouty, mas por favor
TG: the yelling gets my non-existent troll hateglands all tingly 'n shit
TG: don't leave out the part about the mouth-watering mass of powerful spunk hammers thats the shit i do like
CG: OH MY GOD
CG: OH MY GOD MAKE IT STOP
CG: I THINK I NEED TO GOUGE MY EYES OUT AND CAUTERIZE THE OPTIC NERVE, HANG ON, I KNOW THERE'S SOME BLEACH AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE
CG: YOU ARE SICK YOU ARE FUCKING SICK YOU SMUG FRUITY DICK-OBSESSED DOUCHEWAGON WHY THE HELL IS JOHN FRIENDS WITH YOU
TG: wait
TG: those dulcet tones
TG: the excessive overuse of the word fuck and the equally excessive insulting metaphors
TG: oh hell yes
TG: you're the angry one
TG: the one john wouldn't give me the chumhandle for
TG: karkitty we meet at last
CG: WHAT

Beside him, Karkat is aware that John is occupied with something, muttering to himself, but Karkat is too absorbed in this bizarre and complete not-what-he-wanted clusterfuck of a PesterSpm. Upon further thought, he suspects that he should have waited until he had more brain power to handle this kind of important conversation. But it's too late. He's committed. Back down now and this abomination of a human being will never take his demands seriously, ever.

But has John been talking about Karkat with this guy? In what context? What is happening agh -

CG: LOOK. HOW DID YOU EVEN BECOME FRIENDS WITH JOHN? WHERE WERE YOU ALL THOSE TIMES HE WAS ALONE? THAT'S ALL I WANTED TO FUCKING KNOW. WHY IS IT SO HARD TO GET A STRAIGHT ANSWER FROM YOU.
TG: oh hell. motherfucking. yes.
TG: you have wandered right into my waiting arms douchetroll
TG: we must embrace as comrades in johnhood
TG: no more hate its gonna get hella friendly in here come on
CG: STOP IT. JUST. STOP.
TG: you and me were gonna be best friends i can feel it in my man gut
TG: anyway i know john because were totes bffsies 5ever
TG: there i answered now spill how do you know him give me all the details john is such a confidential dumpass about this shit
TG: telllll meeeeee
CG: NO
CG: FUCK NO, THE ONLY ONE GETTING INTERROGATED IN THIS IMPOSSIBLY STUPID CHAT IS YOU
CG: DON'T THINK YOU CAN TURN THIS AROUND ON ME. IT WON'T WORK. I WILL SHIT ALL OVER YOUR PATHETIC HUMAN ATTEMPTS AT EXTRACTING INFORMATION FROM MY THINKPAN
TG: this is amazing
TG: i dont even have to say anything you just do it to yourself
TG: like a one man monologuing machine
TG: amazing this must be what john always feels like when i go off
TG: hang on i can totally channel my inner john
TG: lay down some sicknasty egbeats in here ahem
TG: hey karkat! how are you today? :D monologue at me more!
CG: I THINK I MAY LITERALLY VOMIT ALL OVER MY PHONE
CG: FUCK FUCK fuCK
TG: oh nooooo karkat, your quirk! DDD:
CG: FUCK YOU JOHN WOULD NEVER TYPE THAT FACE I AM GOING TO FEED YOU YOUR OWN SHRIVELED HUMAN GENITALIA WITH A PAIR OF CHOPSTICKS YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE -
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has joined the chat! --

What.

TG: ooooooh, shit is going down
TG: whos john again, the blue one? i think im missing some of the context here but damn son this is one hellacious smackdown
TG: is this how we spend our spare time in this household, i can be down with this
TG: oh wow no we are not doing this right now
TG: youre interrupting his hilarious mental breakdown go bother bro or something and stop saying hellacious thats not even a thing
TG: ive been reading this over your shoulder for like ten minutes now i reserve the right to totally crash this party
CG: ...
TG: i think you broke him, i am actually impressed m not gonna lie
TG: its an art form dont worry well teach you the secret ways of the clan later but right now i need to finish this off before john gets pissed at me
TG: fucking a, man, take it away
TG: yo kitkat dont shut down were not finished here
TG: is this a motherfucking shouty troll challenge you wanna duke it out over john
TG: i am so down with sharing my main bro man aint no problem on this end
TG: but if you got beef
TG: then lets make brisket
TG: well man is this going to be a thing?
Karkat frantically clicks out of the chat app. His hand flops into his lap, the phone screen flat against his thigh as he stares blankly at the wall.

…

It's a really nice wall, he decides, floating in a bubble of complete incomprehension. Nothing makes sense, not even the poster advocating the use of safety goggles in the lab, but that's okay because the rest of the world has apparently decided to throw in on the USS Lunacy right along with Karkat. So at least they're all on board with it, right? They're all going to ram into the iceberg of Complete Irrationality and swan dive into the crazy and there's nothing Karkat can do to avert the impending stupidity. Nothing at all.

Okay. Clearly contacting the Dave human was a shitty decision. He'd gone in planning to vet the guy for suitability to be John's new mystery friend, but honestly he has no idea if the bugfuckery he just participated in was a legitimate interrogation, or just Dave running circles around Karkat with flagrant black flirting and deliberately infuriating taunts.

No, that's a lie. He is totally aware that the entire chat misfired from the first line. At no point had Karkat been able to stay on top of the conversation. He just got completely and utterly destroyed.

Little specks of light float around his field of vision. Oops. This must be what going mad feels like.

He doesn't realize he says it out loud until John pats him on the shoulder. "Karkat? I don't think you can really handle Denny's right now. Hey, Karkat, come on, talk to me."

The words just kind of come out. "I have made mistakes in my life, John, but I think that was one of the worst. I don't think I can recover from this." Karkat shakes his head, mouth opening and closing wordlessly for a moment afterward before he clamps it shut. The classroom is basically empty, he notices - the meeting must have wrapped up while Karkat was ensconced in the newly discovered tenth circle of hell - so at least no one is here to see him officially and completely blown away.

"Yeah, Dave can have that effect," John says, with all the appropriate sympathy.

Wait.
Karkat jolts in horror, jaw dropping as he spins to face John. "You - how did you -"

John holds up his own phone, shaking it a little and tapping the darkened screen. The Pesterchum window that appears is full of blue and red text, and oh my fucking god that son of a bitch ratted Karkat out. "Dave is insanely good at texting two people at once," John continues, oblivious to the stupefying rage that leaves Karkat frozen. "He says it's some kind of Strider family secret technique but I think he just says that about anything he doesn't want to admit is just really super nerdy. If you were really so curious about him, you could have just told me, Karkat! He takes a while to get used to!"

Caught. Caught in the act of such a damningly pale overreaction, Karkat can't even try to hide the depths of his mortification. He facepalms with both claws anyway, wishing he could claw the horrible, burning blush out of his cheeks, because he doesn't even have the focus to pull his blood back out of the capillaries anymore. He's drained, emotionally and physically and mentally.

A hand tugs on his wrist, but he resists it. "Leave me alone to die of humiliation, John. This is it. This is the end," Karkat drones, flopping backward on the table with his hands still over his eyes.

"You're being overdramatic, Karkat, it's not that bad!" John says. At least he's not laughing. Karkat cannot handle laughing right now. He can't even handle existence right now. "I know you do the thing where you like to scare off potential douchebags! I promise Dave is usually a lot better than that; I think you startled him. I'm just surprised you figured out Dave's handle so fast!"

It's even worse. John undertands, because of course he's seen Karkat's overprotective hindbrain kick in before, whenever some random fucker approaches John after school or at swim meets and tries to sneak into one of the oblivious dumbass's quadrants. "There was suddenly two of him, John," he tries and fails to explain, lifting his claws and gesturing vaguely at the ceiling. "I just. Why was there two of him?"

John very gently pulls Karkat upright, and Karkat lets him. John somehow ends up with Karkat's backpack as he leads Karkat out of the classroom. Karkat follows. The paint of the lockers is too bright and the patterns on the floor blur and waver in squirming lines that not even repeated blinking clears up. One of John's eyes is a brilliant blue that doesn't go away no matter how much Karkat squints.

Well, at least he has a convenient excuse for why the conversation didn't go as planned. His thinkpan isn't even trying to work right anymore. It threw in the towel, and Karkat just kept barreling on of his own accord.

"Don't worry, I'm sooo going to chew him out later." John keeps supporting Karkat as they exit the building, and gently removes Karkat's keys from his claws when Karkat goes to unlock the car. "Dave can be...hard to deal with. He doesn't really make sense half the time, and you look like you just got overdosed on super irony."

"That's one way of putting it." Karkat bats at John's hands as the human ushers him to the passenger side door. He finally realizes that John is trying to land himself in the driver's seat around the moment John firmly puts the seatbelt in Karkat's hand. "Oh, fuck no, John, you haven't driven in - ever," he protests. "Do you even have a license?"

"Of course I do! I don't have it on me, but we're just going to my house. And this is an emergency." John jogs around the car and sits in the driver's seat. Karkat shakes his head to clear it and stares, torn between bemusement and horror, as John sits on the edge of the seat, the seat pushed in way too much as the human huddles over the steering wheel and pokes at the dashboard tentatively.
This is an awful idea. But he strongly suspects that driving himself could be an even worse idea.

"Don't let me fall asleep," he says. It comes out a lot more pleading than he intends, but his head is already lolling against the headrest in a way that's frankly embarrassing. Karkat leans forward, his head heavy on his palms, and holds his eyelids open. Every breath in takes immense effort, and every breath out is a deep sigh. "Don't lemme fall asleep until we're in a fucking pile at least. Please, John?"

"Do you feel sick? Do you think you're going to throw up? You're really pale, Karkat." The back of a hand presses up against Karkat's forehead, mussing his bangs, and Karkat lets his forehead lean even more weight forward because John. "I think you have a fever, almost. How long have you been feeling this sick?"

"I just wish I could fucking sleep," Karkat says. It's not a whimper, it's not desperate, and John's hand doesn't brush his hair back with infinite care, soothing and dry and cool. "God, I wish I could sleep," he realizes. A hysterical laugh tickles in his throat that he suppresses through the last shreds of his self-control. He wants sleep and he wants to never sleep again.

"You can go to sleep when we get home, okay? It's gonna be okay, Karkat." The car starts with a rumble that rocks Karkat; he can't even work up the energy for apprehension about John's questionable driving skills anymore. There is some nausea as the car slowly inches out of the parking lot. He swallows hard, repeatedly, and remembers he never actually ate his lunch. Has he had anything but toast since this morning? Since last night's dinner, the memory of which is so faded and uncertain that it feels like a fever dream?

"No hospitals," he rasps.

Then he's too far away to hear John's response clearly. His entire head fills with muggy haze and cotton, dark and heavy and pounding with the too-loud thrum of his heartbeat. Even his blood feels foreign in his body, a sensation that leaves Karkat totally disconnected. He closed his eyes at some point, so he can't see John.

Everything is wrong and everything hurts, and he can't even begin to imagine feeling better.

He's fucked up once again.

---

By ten o'clock, they have established that there is nothing more they can do. Rose rigorously applies every filter to her sight that she can, trying and failing to see the white-text being, until her brain aches in protest and she must sit down for a few minutes sipping at water to regain herself. Kanaya contacts her hacker comrade, this Sollux, and every so often her flip phone explodes into an ancient text alert jingle. Each time Kanaya laboriously scrolls through the texts, however, she raises her head and shakes it at Rose - no luck. "He is quite irate about the whole affair," she says after the fourth such outburst from the phone. "I do not believe he is used to coming up against a challenge like this."

Rose raises an eyebrow. "If it imposes on him too much -"

Kanaya merely flips her hand, eyes sparking with amusement. "Oh, no. A good, rigorous challenge will be good for his constitution. He has become far too complacent with his skills of late."

Now, Kanaya sews at her work station, her body an elegant curve in the light of the candles, cloth flung in disarray over numerous surfaces. Rose sits cross legged on the floor and practices a light meditation. She has cleaned up the last of the scattered memories and impressions left over in her
mental space, tipping them all into storage to make room for her new structures, and shored up the
sun panel that forms her new foundation with thick layers of alarms and wards. She thinks she has
them tuned to detect those strange, corrupted Horrorterror voices, but there always remains the
potential for a voice to so closely mimic her own that she once again loses sight of herself.

They are no closer than before to knowing how the white-text being not only knew Rose's name and
new location, but was able to observe the effects of her unstable temper without being in range of
their rather specialized senses. But Rose has calmed herself enough to see that there is not as much
urgency as her moment of panic. Yes, there is someone out there who knows far too much; however,
they seem content to ply this knowledge for their own ends, rather than exposing her to the public.
For now, she will simply have to be patient.

She used to be so patient. She could listen to John chatter for hours on end, nodding along as she
ticked off the boxes in her head, or sit listening to the rain patter along the roof of a still, empty home
while she filled the silent beats with the haunting refrain of an off-key note on her violin.

She misses those days with an ever-present ache. The comfortable companionship of being by
Kanaya's side eases that seemingly endless frustration and tense anger that fills her mind, but in the
calm left behind, Rose is more aware of the aching voids in herself, those hollows that the anger
concealed with its tangled ire.

She misses John. She communicates with him, but they still dance around each other; John is
understandably wary, and Rose is...herself. The worst part is that she has no idea how to bridge the
gap. It seems as though the answer should present itself immediately, a simply solution she can
implement that will erase those years of silence and pain. But she doesn't know John well enough for
that sort of instinctive leap anymore, and so she continues to miss him even as she enters his
chumhandle into the new phone she has acquired and sends out the warning she didn't dare send via
Kanaya's compromised computer.

Even after the application loads all of Rose's chatlog archives, though, she sees that John has yet to
respond to her messages from this morning. It is not like him to leave a message unopened for more
than a few minutes, in her experience. But perhaps the app simply didn't register them before Sollux
remotely took command of Kanaya's CPU to begin his investigation. After all, with a glitch in the
program allowing a person with no chumhandle to initiate pesterlogs, there's no telling how else the
white-text being could have interfered with Rose's account.

TT: John, I am afraid that something has come up once more. It would appear that someone overly
familiar with my identity was able to trace my use of Pesterchum on my companion's computer. As
such, I had to obtain a personal device, and it took longer than I anticipated.
TT: If you responded to my earlier messages, it doesn't appear to have transferred over. Please resend
anything sent from this morning on.
TT: In addition, have you heard anything from your 'bro,' the infamous Mr Strider? He seemed to be
having some sort of crisis earlier in the day, for which I received very little context, and he does not
seem to have responded either.
TT: ...John?

The silence that ensues confirms all of Rose's quiet fears. She waits and waits, and though John must
surely still be at home right now - it's hours earlier in Seattle, after all, and far too early for him to
have gone out on patrol - he does not respond. Kanaya looks up more than once with unreadable
eyes, and Rose knows her poker face must be slipping.

When he does not respond within the next ten minutes, Rose sets the phone aside, feeling oddly
hollow. She leaves that chat open. John will answer, she is sure. John is not the type to vanish without a word. John, after all, is not a Lalonde. No, if he ever intends to cut her off, John would be straightforward and leave no ambiguity. He is both cruel and kind that way. Perhaps the situation with Hemogoblin is still occupying his time; Rose has yet to have the opportunity to look at the Seattle news to see how that had played out.

Speaking of Striders, though. She supposes she may as well try for Dave again; she still has no answers for him, of course, but perhaps he has calmed himself and applied logic to whatever situation led him to jump to such a radical conclusion.

Or, perhaps, he has received confirmation. Rose tries not to think about that possibility, though. When she views herself objectively, she can see that the strain of healing her mind and her relationship with John is more than enough to stretch her to the limits of her strength. Any time she attempts to juggle more than that, such as dealing with her mother's antics or hunting down the white-text being, she risks sending her mind tail spinning into chaos. Without the benefit of her mother's powerful void shielding, the Horrorterrors are never more than a whisper away from the sun ward. Until Rose can consolidate further, she doesn't know that she can handle the kind of mental gymnastics that would be involved in accepting she might have a brother.

It is tiresome. But healing is a slow process, particularly when one is recovering from the festerthroes of a full-fledged grimdark tangle carving out a sea in one's mind. Rose will most likely bear the mental scars forever; it is something she still catches herself struggling to accept, at times. She wants to believe that she can smooth over all the scalloped, bleached-white patterns carved out along the walls of her mind by the bloody brine and the acid waves, but no matter how she sands at the ragged edges, she will eventually have to paint them over and move on.

There is also, she has found, an enormous half-melted spirograph pattern spanning the outer ward of her mind, the space where she tugged John through to help her muster the strength needed to banish the tangle from her mental space back to the Abyss. She cannot remember where the pattern the Horrorterror used to plan its path of destruction through New York City ended up, but it would appear the symbol itself left an imprint across the outer layer of her mind. It does not hurt, and she cannot think of how to remove it without taking down her outer wards entirely, which is simply not an option.

She has so much to heal. So many different concerns that clamor for her attention. For now, she takes up her phone again, breathing in the bracing scent of the candles filling the air and listening to the faint chatter of the sewing machine, and opens a chat with Dave Strider.

If it becomes too much and threatens to overwhelm her, it is not as though she is under any obligation to keep up the conversation, after all. The odds are they are completely unrelated. He is simply an odd new addition to John's social circle, someone Rose must maintain cordial relations with solely for John's peace of mind. Nothing more, nothing less.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 22:30:12 --
TT: There were technological difficulties on my end, which may have deleted any messages sent to me between this morning and now.
TT: Tell me, Dave, are you still gripped by this fanciful notion that we are related, or has a third party assuaged your fears?
TG: oh fuck i forgot about this conversation
TG: awk
TG: uh
TT: Your eloquence never ceases to amaze, Dave.
TG: i will eloquent all over your fucking sass woman
TG: yeah we're related

"Kanaya, would you mind reading this message for me? I require secondary endorsement," Rose asks, striving for idle languor, and achieving it. Kanaya sits up from her work, rolling her wrist absently, and holds out her hand for the mobile device without really looking up from the swathe of fabric and neoprene that consumes her desk.

Rose sets the phone in the palm of Kanaya's claw and waits while the troll taps at the screen.

"Should I congratulate you on the news that you possess a human genetic sibling, or is that not the correct sentiment for the occasion?" Kanaya says at last, genuine, polite curiosity in her tone as she passes the phone back over.

"Oh, I'm sure congratulations of some sort will be in order, once I get some evidence," Rose murmurs, resuming the chat with a flurry of her fingers.

TT: That is...not the response I anticipated.
TG: you probs deserve to know we have a clone bro too
TG: not sure but original bro may be hinting were all test tube kids
TG: so
TG: welcome to the clan where everyones a fucking science baby
TT: Another brother? As distinct from the elder sibling known as Ambrose?
TG: fuck this is confusing
TG: yeah his name is dave too were trying not to think about it
TT: Ah yes, the age-old strategy of gratuitous denial and blithe avoidance. I would applaud if I didn't require my hands at the moment.
TG: might have to stop using bro unless its actually bro
TG: you have no idea how this cuts in on my flow rose
TT: Truly, your struggle is genuine.
TG: no just no dont do that
TT: All aboard the group transportation vehicle of futile exertion.
TT: My apologies, that was inexcusably silly. Extrapolate further. Can your elder Bro provide any hard evidence for these supposed extravagant cloning hogwash?
TT: I am of course well aware that my mother would never have made the time commitment to carry me herself, not when it would have taken time and concentration away from her research pursuits, but I assure you that this revelation that other children may have been produced at the same time is...troublingly novel.
TG: hey unlike you and john and your weird guardians bro doesnt lie
TG: a lot anyway
TG: hes enigmatic like a fucking enchilada in soviet russia but this whole situation is so far past irony weve warped right back around into serious business
TG: look when he says something like this i believe it he wouldnt dick around here
TT: So he has provided no hard proof that we may share DNA and a lab in common? You are taking this on faith? I find this difficult to accept, Dave, given I have no reason to believe a word your brother says.
TG: look i am currently staring myself in the orange creamsicle face and trust me cloning was a thing
TG: bro has no idea where dave 2.0 came from but he says for sure he had me and you tested separately back when everyone was partying in georgia i guess
TG: dont really see the point in comparing me and me because hello

Oh. Oh. Rose swallows hard, and tastes the absence of alcohol like a physical scrape.
Not just one brother, then. Unless Dave has descended into outright falsehoods for some unfathomably ironic purpose - which she cannot rule out as an option - it would appear that...

No, no. She will be rational about this. She - she will not jump to conclusions.

Even if somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind, a tiny snarl is howling for Rue Lalonde's blood once more.

TG: he may or may not be rage-spamming bio-mom lalonde over the second dave thing
TG: hes been holed up in the puppet den for literally hours since we swore him in and hes got the locks on which means either smuppets or rage
TG: orange me i mean
TG: i wait hang on
TG: goddammit

TT: May I request that you pass these DNA results on to me before you become mired in the struggle of utilizing unspecified male pronouns in a three-male household? My only computer appears to be compromised, but a PDF file will load on this brand of phone. I wish to see this for myself, with my own eyes.

TG: fine lady strider you got it
TG: one fine ass DNA comp chart shall be conveyed to your hella sweet mobile shortly
TG: specimencomparison413.pdf
TT: My thanks.

She does not comment on the moniker Lady Strider. That is one of those shrieking thoughts that she lays to rest simply by ignoring it. She opens the file instead. It takes quite a while to load the entirety of the file through the spotty data connection that covers Kanaya's apartment complex, but eventually Rose has a miniature view of a chart with not the usual four main columns, but five. Two columns have been labeled 'child sample' rather than just one, and Rose scans the alleles that were called for this long ago test.

She scans the numbers herself, and if there is any doubt about her interpretation, the fifth row confirms it all. The locus for physical gender is different - color-coded a garishly stereotypical pink and blue that alternates across each column - but that is really it. Occasionally the female and male child samples swap numbers, but those genes always correspond to alleles carried by the parent of the opposite gender.

DNA reports never simply state the result outright, of course, and this chart is all the more complex because the two children, each with their unique blend of the parental genetic source material, do not match exactly. They're not identical twins. But by the end, the text states that the 'alleged relationships are not excluded.'

Under the assumption that all the DNA samples involved belong to the people Ambrose claims they do (and that is quite the assumption), Rose must accept that either someone mocked up a very good DNA test to fool her and Dave into believing this, or they are in fact siblings.

There is, however, one final note beneath the statement of results.

'Unknown ectobiological contamination in (4) of 4 samples tested. Retesting recommended.'

A flood of relief mixes into the disbelief circulating in Rose's mind. That line is just suspicious enough to cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the whole venture.

TT: And this ectobiological contamination? Why on earth would this be present? Ectobiology is a matter of carapacian reproduction, not human.
TG: hell if i know
TG: bro just grunted at me when i asked which means he doesnt know shit either but i bet my fucking turntables its our powers
TT: Pardon?
TG: you do the lighty thing and the tentacle thing and i do the time thing you really think that doesnt harsh on our genes?
TG: bet you its all an alien conspiracy secretly were all homegrown in carapacian space labs
TG: this is more plausible every time i think about it what a fucking awesome origin story
TT: An intriguing hypothesis. And how do you explain the contamination seemingly present in our...genetic donors' samples as well?
TG: i am totally willing to believe bros puppet thing is a thing
TG: no man is that emotionally invested in mechanical plush rumps without some kind of psychic connection
TG: youve never noticed anything weird about your mom like whoa hold your horses thats not a normal human thing my weird-shit-o-meter is off the charts?

Shit.

Don't believe anything until you can test the hypothesis yourself, Rose chants inwardly, focusing on her breathing until the potential panic is under her control again. This PDF means nothing ultimately. If she chooses to follow up on this, she will obtain her own DNA samples and find a lab unaffiliated with anyone connected to her mother, and only then will Rose be willing to accept all this as fact.

Breathe. Breathe.

And don't think about the hollow void that is Rue Lalonde's soul, a black hole that is the opposite of a 'normal human thing' according to her weird-shit-o-meter.

TT: I will have to get back to you on that, though I have zero intention of speaking to Rue Lalonde ever again. If you wish to investigate this further I am willing to offer my own assistance. This is a matter in which I obviously have reason to be concerned.
TG: fuck man and i thought me and bro had a shitty relationship
TG: but now here we are all holding hands and singing disney songs over a bloodstone altar like one big happy family while we induct orange me into the fucking cult
TG: everything tastes like soap and regret and i think bro made new dave chug like half my apple juice supply
TG: its not natural dammit
TT: How wonderful. I am sincerely pleased that you seem to have achieved balance with your delightful Strider clan over this new addition. My congratulations.
TG: wait was that you being mad i cant tell
TG: you and bio-mom is this some serious shit like
TG: if you
TG: shittt
TG: if you need a place to stay
TT: I am quite fine where I am now, though the stumbling offer is appreciated. I am as far from our mother as I needed for my peace of mind.
TT: And I see that you have regained your own stability. At the least you seem to have adjusted to the notion that you have two new siblings with alacrity.
TG: dont see the point in letting this shit get to me anymore
TG: i kind of lost my shit for a while there but fuck that noise i am so chill right now
TG: i am so unbelievably well-adjusted rose you have no idea
TG: have to set an example for new striders amirite cant let dave 2.0 out-straight face me when he doesnt even have the inaugural shades yet
TG: and of course johns troll issue apparently got resolved which is a fucking relief because he nearly had a hero crisis over there at the same time and i dont think the kid is handling all the stress very well

Damn.

Damn.

TT: John has been in contact with you, then?
TG: he hasnt with you?
TG: well shit
TG: there was some shit with the hero partner and the shouty troll friend one right after the other
TT: I am familiar with the Hemogoblin situation as it stood last night, before I departed from our mother's company. As I said, technical difficulties since then have prevented me from getting back in contact with John. Something was wrong with Karkat?
TG: heh
TG: okay i was the douche responsible for that last one
TG: it was me
TG: but hey in all fairness he came at me first
TT: I thought John had determined it best that we not involve his moirail in this heroic coven of ours, given he has no idea what John is?
TG: the moirail is the diamond one right
TG: fucking trollmance no wonder john got all defensive
TG: seriously tho he pestered me first i just engaged in conversation like a totally normal human being would because he started asking questions about john
TT: And you two naturally bonded over your many interests in common, including but not limited to friendship with John, and participated in the traditional 'bro fist bumps,' correct? That is the only way I can see this scenario playing out well.
TG: what no
TG: where do you even come up with this shit is this a tentacle woman psychiatrist thing
TT: Dave.
TG: look long story short other me got involved
TG: dude was not prepared for a 2xstrider combo and got all fainty?
TG: so Johns a little pissy about the whole thing but the kid doesnt really know how to hold grudges so im in the clear for now
TT: Karkat fainted? John has never given the impression that his inadvertent pale interest was prone to such things.
TG: kid couldnt even throw down properly he was so tired
TG: he didnt really do a pirouette off the handle as much as flail wildly and flop over like a dead fish
TG: dont tell john but i think his troll guy is just a drama queen who cant argue for shit
TT: Ah, so your latent jealousy over the fact that this rival for John's brotonic affections overwhelmed your better judgment and you proceeded to antagonize him to point of collapse? How mature, Dave.
TG: that is so not what happened okay
TG: i told you he yelled at me first and i gave him the standard rage-anon run around until i realized who he was
TG: which was apparently too late oops
TT: I will have to make my own inquiries. If John is still speaking with me, that is.
TT: I did not intend to extend my silence by another twelve hours, but the situation was unavoidable. Our relationship is tenuous enough without these breaks...
TG: look if john aint answering hes still probs dealing with the karkat thing
TG: sounds like he and the blood guy were out until late in the morning fixing that whole explosion
thing and by the time he got to school he was too distracted to answer messages so it's not anything you did
TG: probably
TT: I see. That is more reassuring than you know.
TG: well not like i can just leave a strider sis hanging like that when john is in the wind
TG: g2g now though i have a carapacian dame i need to finally rip some answers out of
TG: its like a perverse obsession now i know she wont give a fucking straight answer but i just keep asking.
TT: You go, Dave. You lay down those phat beats.
TG: please never do that again
TT: You cannot handle what I am throwing down, Dave? Perhaps I should redeem Karkat's honor, in John's name, by quite thoroughly putting you in your place. Do you believe that would get me in good with John's 'posse,' then?
TG: fuck im outta here

"Rose. It is done." Kanaya's voice comes soft and low, as careful as always about interrupting a conversation, but Rose is quite content to let Dave retreat with his tail between his legs. She looks up and smiles in acknowledgement. Kanaya raises the cloth in her claws and nods Rose over with a dip of her chin. "Come here."

Rose puts the phone down and obliges, padding over to Kanaya's side and draping herself across the troll's shoulders as she takes in the orange and gold, the stylized suns that emblazon the sleeves. Parts of the ensemble are still buried beneath the jacket, but she can see where Kanaya is going with this.

She had known from Kanaya's choice of patterns and hastily altered seams that it would not resemble her old costume. Kanaya had sewn this in the space of an afternoon, so this is only a rough product. But Kanaya had also been the one to design Rose's original outfit; to her, crafting a uniform that is simultaneously a work of art and a defensible outfit suited to a night of strenuous crime-fighting is simple.

No matter how it fits, it will do for the night.

"It is a change from your old style. But I thought perhaps you might like to turn over a new leaf, at least while you spend your time here," Kanaya says carefully, tugging and smoothing at the hem of one sleeve until it lies the way she wants it. "There was no time to integrate the Kevlar as I envisioned, so the lines may not lie right with the vest separate. But I will not have you wander the streets without it."

Rose hums, biting her lip, and then smiles. "Mmmm. Alas. Let me change, and we'll see if your fashion sensibilities can stand the small defects." She pressed a kiss to Kanaya's cheek, the faint scent of sealed face paint coming away on her lips. "Your judgment will not doubt be as impeccable as always, Kanaya. Time to shake things up."

Kanaya's grin has some bite to it, and she snakes an arm up around Rose's neck. "Let me help you change?"

Ah, the welcome hazards of sleeping with a seamstress.

John never does text her back. She worries.

- 

Rose has always hunted in daylight. But she no longer reserves her nights for mediation with the
Horrorterror; that truce has been shot, its carcass left to rot in the streets with the rest of the bodies they no longer show on the news reports, and her new policy of outright denying them a place in her mind has completely readjusted her sleep schedule.

Still, she thinks, as she buckles the Kevlar vest into place, fighting crime as the Seer of Light once again will be an...interesting experience. She won't have the same advantage of having the sun in the sky, but the sun has never been that critical to her powers. She is fully capable of generating her own light sources at will.

Or at least, so she hopes. It has been weeks since that day in New York, and this will be the first time Rose sets out to do more than utilize her extra sight. The first time she accesses her lighter magic in the name of justice since she so horribly violated her precepts in New York City. She has no way to predict how her mind will react to this. But she does not intend to stray far from the Sylph's side. This is, after all, Kanaya's city; the last time Rose visited, she always made sure to stay close out of respect for the Malachite Sylph's territorial claims.

The shoulders of the burnt orange jacket don't sit quite right when she shrugs it on over the vest, which she knows will bother Kanaya to no end. But everything else fits perfectly, from the high-low hem of the golden skirt trimmed with orange to the thigh high stockings that end just inches from where the shorts under the skirt cut off. There are tiny suns on the upper sleeves of the jacket, and a larger insignia across the back, flipped so that it is centered where the sun used to be on the front of her old uniform. She highly suspects that Kanaya has had this costume in the works for far longer than she has been letting on; Rose knows that while Kanaya plies her trade in her everyday life tailoring mundane clothing, heroic fashion is far more her forte, and she no doubt has designs for every major hero in the country lying around here somewhere.

The last item is a mask. Though Rose hesitates, stroking a thumb over the front of the fabric, she can already tell why Kanaya provided this. This doesn't resemble the flimsy strip of golden cloth that obscured her eyes previously. This is a mask that will cover her whole face, thin enough for her to breathe but quite obviously a modified ski mask. It has little of Kanaya's trademark elegance in design; this is meant for functionality alone.

Kanaya wants to hide Rose's facial structure, because the tangle everyone calls Dark Star rampaged through New York with its face completely exposed. The distortion from the grimdark aura and the way its power had burned through Rose's stolen eyes and mouth gave her some leeway, in that no one has yet connected the tangle to the Seer, but it would still be only a matter of time before conspiracy theorists realized just how similar in body type and face New York's defender and destroyer were. They already wonder in public forums why the Seer did nothing at all to rescue civilians that day, and why three out-of-town heroes had to intervene while New York's heroine was conveniently absent. Anything Rose can do to minimize that risk of discovery is a grim necessity.

She pulls on the mask, her hair plastering to her skull in a thoroughly unpleasant, tight cap, and she draws up the hood of her jacket to hide the singularly unattractive mask. There are paler, thinner diamonds of fabric over her eyes so that, with the aid of her extra senses, she can see as clearly as if the mask weren't there at all.

Kanaya's jaw tightens the moment Rose steps out from behind the cherry wood changing screen, and she strides forward to pluck at the sleeves with a snort of fury. "That vest," she growls, her eyes gleaming more yellow than green. "Oh, there are so many adjustments this needs -"

Rose places a hand over Kanaya's, squeezing it gently as she steps into Kanaya's personal space. "Hush, Kanaya. Not right now. This is just a trial run, anyway," she says, smiling. Then she realizes that with the mask, her expressions will be nearly unrecognizable, and the smile drops. Her face
already itches with prickles of sweat as she tilts her head to the side and worries the edge of the mask with her free hand. She debates whether or not to take it off.

Kanaya just sighs and tugs Rose's hand away from the mask with a reproving shake of her head. "If I can put up with this catastrophe of a jacket, you can put up with the mask."

"Agreed," Rose says. She turns Kanaya's claw over and kisses the palm. The brush of fabric on skin is completely unsatisfying. "Shall we?"

Kanaya grins. Her smiles have grown progressively more feral and aggressive over the course of the evening, and Rose gets the feeling that she is most certainly dealing more Sylph than Kanaya at the moment. Kanaya is nothing if not an avid auspice when night comes; by now she must be eager to get out and start smacking the criminal deviants of Philadelphia until they stop trying to victimize everyone else in the damn city. At least, that is how Rose has always envisioned Kanaya's thought process works. "Oh, let's."

The Sylph exits her apartment via the roof. She does not live on the top floor, so they take the emergency stairwell rather than the inner stairs to avoid crossing paths with Kanaya's neighbors. When they reach the roof, a gust of cool night air billows through the open front of Seer's jacket, and she shivers. Thinking about the breeze makes her think of John, but she sets the pang of regret that stirs up aside for now. Seer has never worked with Heir. If she can just fall deeply enough into the Seer mindset, she's sure she can cast a veil over the many, many issues currently troubling her everyday self.

The Malachite Sylph is nearly radiant, her sealed daytime paint exchanged for a much lighter hue that almost exposes her too-pale skin. It's just another way she differentiates herself from her day-to-day persona. In sharp contrast to the pearly grey of her paint, Sylph's jumpsuit is a dark black-grey, the color of freshly charred ashes, the sleeves and corset lined with a shade of green that is just a shade darker than Kanaya's true blood color. Yet another subtle way of disorienting anyone attempting to piece together her identity. Her gloves and snug leggings that finish out the ensemble are a violent shade of electric purple - very avant-garde. Her horns arch up through slits in the dark grey hood, but a seamless prosthetic is attached to the tip of each, altering the shape so that Kanaya's single hooked horn matches the other and hiding the asymmetry that is almost as rare in troll horns as jade blood itself.

She also has a cape. Rose has never quite understood the inclination of some heroes who favor capes (hoods are another thing entirely), but for Sylph at least, it serves as a fashion statement. It is a dramatic look, but she can pull it off with perfect grace and poise. Rose made an argument for the inconvenience of having one's cape used against one in the heat of battle, in a strictly hypothetical context, once.

Once.

"Anywhere in particular you would like to begin?" Seer asks, wishing she could visibly raise an eyebrow. "Perhaps we could stop by the shop, and run off any vandals before they can work themselves up into a hemoist frenzy."

Sylph stands still, motionless in a way that always sets off an inkling of wariness in Seer's hindbrain, the stillness of a predator with her head cocked to one side, scenting the air. With Kanaya, it is easy to accept her rainbow-drinking tendencies because she medicates herself, always lacing her teas and lattes with the blood she needs to sustain her as discreetly as possible, and hones her perfect awareness of her body into a confident, sleek poise. The Sylph is the one who channels all of that
latent power, the strange vampiric instincts born of her blood mutation, into action. It would never do to forget that the woman by her side could, in another time and place, have easily chosen to hunt the streets rather than clean them up.

Kanaya trusts Seer to keep her in check almost as much as Rose trusts Sylph to restrain her.

She doesn't understand why they don't work together more often. She vaguely recalls her own drunken, sloppy arguments to the contrary, but it is still difficult to extricate which arguments were hers and which stemmed from the shrieking voices she could no longer discern from her own.

"No," Sylph says at last, her shoulders shrugging as she cracks her neck with a twist of her jaw. She lets a claw trace the outline of a dark green lipstick case strapped to her upper thigh, but shakes her head again. "No. I have already removed most of the more valuable items to my home, and the place is already in shambles. One more night of their hooliganism will not do much more damage. I don't intend to replace everything until the insurance comes in later, anyway."

Something in Seer itches for vengeance. It's not fair that Kanaya faces this sort of treatment, that she always puts on such a stolid mask while trolls tear her down again and again for loving what she has chosen as her life's work. People are fools if they can't see how hypocritical it is to claim that hemoism is dead when someone as hardworking and good as Kanaya must replace the windows of her shop on a near weekly basis over the color of her blood.

But vengeance is one of those emotions Seer can't afford to let loose in her mind - it calls to the faint murmurs of the Furthest Ring, perking their interest. She turns it aside gently and funnels it into the storage box until her mind is silent and balanced once more. The void braces under the sleeves of her jacket (yet another addition that had made Kanaya gripe) weigh as heavily as ever.

"I profess that I am curious, however," Sylph continues, stepping up to the edge of the roof and surveying the city. "Generally I wander as needed. But I know you use your sight to determine which would be the most fortuitous patrol path at any given moment. Can you still do that, without the sun?"

Seer smirks and steps beside the troll hero, looking out over the lights of the city with nothing more than her regular vision.

She raises a hand and snaps her fingers, and bright sunbursts of light overlay the darkness of the sky. Her breath catches in her lungs; her eyes burn, unused to the strain of activating such a complex spell after weeks of slacking off.

But the Horrorterrors do not stir. Her mind remains balanced. And she knows with effortless intuition what type of crime and the degree of urgency that each shade of light indicates as she scans the town.

The Seer of Light is back in business.

"Hmmm. Which would you like?" she pretends to muse aloud. "The robbery four streets over, or a mugging to the south of the university?"

Sylph laughs, just a hint of Kanaya's sillier giggle mixed into the smooth, low chuckle, and that's when Seer knows they will fight together just fine. "A robbery? In my neighborhood? How rude of them." Sylph flips her hand with a flourish and offers it to Seer, her finely honed claws still half-curled until Seer accepts it with an answering grin. "But of course - why not both?"

"Both is good. Both would be excellent," Seer laughs. Knowing that the Sylph prefers to traverse the city under her own power, she then releases their clasped hands and stands back to watch as the troll
leaps from a standstill, easily gliding from their roof to the next with her cape flaring out behind her. Seer waits, and then closes her physical eyes altogether. With the fine weave of the mask over them, they can't do much, anyway.

Trusting to her other sight, she focuses in on that starburst of a robbery in her mind, and murmurs the teleportation spell.

And then she is gone.

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Her estimation is a little off. She excuses the lapse in that she isn't as familiar with the layout of Philadelphia as she is - was - with New York City. The robbery is occurring more like six streets over, near the hospital off 9th Street, but the Sylph catches up within moments of Seer sending up a short signal flare. Malachite Sylph makes no comment, simply nodding when Seer murmurs an apology, and together they look down at the pharmacy below. Seer squints into the blazing glare until she slaps herself inwardly and switches back to a lower power level, shutting down the glare that only she can see and illuminating the street below with a flat light.

"Three heartbeats," Sylph reports, kneeling as she tilts her head to the side, her gaze distant. "All of them elevated." She sighs. "I'd need to be able to smell them directly to get an idea of their exact blood color - but at least one human, one colder blood. The third is indeterminate enough to be human or midblood."

"That's enough to work with," Seer says, flicking her fingers and opening the storage in her mind to draw forth more of her spells. The light magic should be safe enough to start layering into her new mental structures, but she carefully leaves anything related to explosions and blasting buried deep in the sand. No need to tempt any lingering triggers in her psyche with the spells that the grimdark tangle most perverted to its own ends. But those old spells for corroding iron and disintegrating wood fall under the heading of neutral magic, the kind of spells anyone with the talent and a grimoire could attempt.

"Leave the coldblood to me. It'll be the one most likely to require...extra force," Sylph continues, thumbing at the lipstick pocket again. Seer can practically feel the urge to whip out the makeupkind that radiates off the other hero, and - she worries.

But she trusts Kanaya. And she trusts in the entire bottle of dull orange-brown blood Kanaya downed before they left the apartment. The Malachite Sylph has been defending the streets of Philadelphia without slipping up and biting anyone for the entirety of her heroic career; of the two of them, Seer is the one at risk of losing control.

"I'll take the human, then," Seer says, lifting her hands from her sides. The gleam of a corrosion spell rests in one palm, while the other readies itself to help cast the teleportation spell again. "And the first one to the indeterminate blood type wins."

"Agreed." The Sylph tumbles off the roof in a controlled flip, her legs arcing out through the air as she catches herself on the pharmacy sign, landing noiselessly in a crouch when she lets go.

Then she kicks out with her boot and smashes in the front window. So much for the element of surprise. Seer facepalms, because she knows Sylph and yet she still somehow failed to anticipate the fact that while Kanaya may be the picture of demure elegance, the Sylph enjoys chainsaws and dismantling the hemohierarchy in four inch heels.

It's pretty much the basis of their relationship, after all.
Seer snaps in and lands two steps from the counter. This isn't a pharmacy in a convenience store, so the space is much more enclosed, but as she scans the room she sees two of the robbers have moved to the back room, while the third is standing guard. It's a troll whose glittering teal blue eyes widen as Sylph punches him in the face with a hissing roar. He topples over backwards, slamming into the counter and scrabbling to catch himself, knocking brochures and a jar of pens over. Sylph follows him down like a glowering one-troll thundercloud, cracking him across the jaw with another right hook and then punctuating her rage with more punches. "WE! DO NOT! ROB! STORES!"

"M'sorry!" the troll yells back, his nose quite thoroughly smashed with the force of the Sylph's strikes and one horn punching through the cheap material of the counter. They have slid to the ground completely, surrounded by fallen pens, and little flecks of blood from his nose have begun to speckle the ground. He looks quite justifiably horrified.

"SORRY IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!" Sylph shrieks, snarling with all her teeth and punching him in the stomach. She then seizes him by the hair and head-butts him between the horns, a typical ashen gesture weaponized. "YOU MUST PROMISE TO ALTER YOUR DESTRUCTIVE PATTERN OF DEVIANT CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR AND COMMIT TO REHABILITATING YOUR LIFE FOR THE GREATER GOOD!"

"Oh god my eye!"

"YOUR BLACK RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD IS UNHEALTHY FOR BOTH OF YOU! DESIST AT ONCE."

Shooshing and papping and softer feelings jams are reserved for the pale quadrant. In the arena of auspisticizing, on the other claw, Sylph has mastered the more ashen technique of punching someone in the face until they stop being violently irrational idiots, and applied it on a city-wide scale. Her preternatural strength and speed granted by her rainbow-drinker blood condition allow her to implement this strategy even on higher bloods who would usually be able to fend off ashen interventions from a middle green blood like Kanaya.

She really only breaks out the chainsaw when someone truly tests her patience.

But of course, Seer has her own work to do here. And Sylph's characteristic violence always draws attention, she thinks, smirking as a human and a squat troll with yellow-green eyes run out from the back of the pharmacy. The human has a pistolkind specibus clutched loosely in one hand, as he surveys the room to find the source of the commotion, but Sylph and her temporary ashen quadrant are concealed by the counter, so his eyes meet Seer's instead.

She casts out a hand and corrodes the pistol before he can do more than gape at her like a stunned fish. She can't see any weapon in the troll's hand, extra sight or not, so she focuses on the human for now. Raising both hands, glowing with the light of spells, Seer curls her fingers. "Well?" she asks. "Trust me, you're not getting away with this. Will you surrender?"

The human raises his hand, and only then realizes that his gun is slowly flaking away into rust and corroded, cracked chunks of metal that disintegrate even as he flings it away. It's not as though the corrosion spell affects human flesh, but he doesn't need to know that, now does he? "Who the hell are you?!!" he demands, taking a step back toward the back room.

"The Seer of Light." Seer teleports forward. It's a reckless gesture, but she's flying high now, the thaumaturgic buzz humming through her veins, and she has effortless control of where she lands, total comprehension of where she should be for the best possible outcome. She clenches a fist and releases it before the human's eyes, holding the other out to the side and letting loose a flare of light from both, bright enough to blind. Both human and troll robbers scream and clap their hands to their
eyes. She didn't emit enough light to blind them permanently, but they're quite incapacitated, now. The troll in particular, with his superior night vision, bends over double, clawing at his eyelids.

"Your shit is wrecked," she adds, and then she kneels the troll in the face. He was just so conveniently placed. She kicks him backwards and seizes the human next, bringing up her hand in a palm heel to shove precisely into his solar plexus. It only takes another filter on her sight to highlight all the pressure points in his body, after all.

She has a stunner incantation on her lips before she even realizes what she's muttering.

She reaches the fifth syllable before she realizes that isn't a stunning spell, that's not a spell at all, what am I saying -

"Fuck," she spits, and then she shuts it all down. The light, her extra sight, everything. She doesn't know what fresh hell she was about to unleash with those garbled words that hadn't been a spell she recognized, but it stops when she clamps her mouth shut and hunches forward, head spinning at the sudden loss of perspective.

It sounds like a child now, curious and ingenuous.

Seer swallows down the helplessness that rises in her throat. This is not going to stop. This is never going to stop, is it? She's known that since she was small, when her mother first sat her down and explained why Jaspers wouldn't wake up - this connection to the Horrorterrors is simply a part of her. She can't even feel the bleed of cold, damp horror that must surely be trickling into her mind, not without shutting down her outward senses entirely.

But she can't just leave Sylph fighting alone, and she can't leave herself unconscious in the heat of battle when there are still two criminals up and about.

If she wants to continue on the path she has chosen for her life's work, she has to learn to fight in spite of this.

"Enough," she says through gritted teeth. She rips the appropriate words for a true stunning spell out of storage with deliberate intent, slicing into her own mind with exquisite pain as she cuts everything away but the words of that spell and that spell alone. Nothing can interfere with it now.

Her problem was her haste. She reached for the stunner without even pausing to consider the action, and so the grimdark had been able to slip other words onto her tongue. When she presses a palm with cautious care to the human's forehead, her breath shaky and panting, he drops like a stone. Easy, she thinks, stepping over his unconscious body to check his pulse. Easy. Be slow when you need to be, or all is lost.

She must always be in control. She must always think first, consider all of her options, and ensure that her thoughts and intuitions are her own before acting on them.

She must never lose sight of herself.

A voice whines, and she feels the touch of grimdark on the sun panel like slime sizzling on the surface of a stovetop. It gives a wail when she breathes in, flares a beacon in her own mind, and quickly steps back out of the mental landscape before her muscles relax.

She has to agree though. She is tired of this.
The troll has begun to recover from the shock and swear at her - he has no creativity at all. Again, Seer coldly slices away the rest of her own mind before pronouncing the stunning spell and touching her fingers to his head. His eyes roll back and he slumps over backwards, landing half on the human robber with a thump.

A quarantine system, then, she thinks, closing her eyes and looking inward. All is quiet, and the sun panel burns along the floor of her mind, cutting off the ebb and flow of the grimdark tide. There is no sign of tendrils or contamination anywhere that Seer looks, but she patiently scans it all anyway.

The only wounds are those she inflicted herself, the sharp edges where her new mental structures were cut loose and shoved aside to clear a quarantine zone for the stunning spells to filter through. She'll have to build around that, now, and healing the damage she did herself will be the work of hours of meditation.

But on the other hand, nothing blew up.

This is quite possibly the lowest Seer's standards for performance while on the job have ever fallen.

But nothing blew up. Neither of the robbers are seriously injured, taken down with all of Seer's usual finesse in spite of her momentary pause.

Sylph rises up from in front of the counter a moment later, not even bothered by the flecks of teal streaking her sharp cheekbones. "He has agreed to testify against his former companions in a court of law, and to dedicate his life to community service for the next five years," she informs Seer, tugging on the front of her corset to adjust it.

"Thank goodness," Seer replies, smoothing her face over so the last of her panic is hidden. There is no need to worry Sylph unnecessarily, not when Seer regained control so quickly. She can do this. She can. "They were clearly enabling his injurious relationship with society."

Sylph nods sagely, and then peers over the counter. "Ah. I thought they smelled too calm to be conscious."

"And I win the first round this night," Seer says, stepping away from the two unconscious robbers. There is a phone on the wall behind the counter, and she lifts it, dialing 911. "2-1. Better watch out."

Sylph sniffs, lounging with her elbows on the counter, arms crossed. "This is my city, Seer."

"Oh, I know," Seer agrees, smiling as the phone rings. She holds the phone out. "Which is obviously why the duty of speaking to the 911 operator...should fall to you. I would never think to impose..."

Sylph makes a face that is distinctly unheroic, and it is Kanaya who sticks out her tongue before taking the phone. "You are awful. Why do I love you?"

Seer looks away, bending to zip-tie her downed criminals' hands and claws together in an intricate knot. All the better to hide the faint blush flushing her cheeks. "I haven't the faintest. I strongly suspect you only want me for my body."

"Oh, obviously." The sarcasm layers heavily in Kanaya's voice. Seer just smiles to herself, and hums when Sylph abruptly drops the flirting and monotonously informs the 911 operator about a break-in and attempted robbery.

She thinks they're going to be alright.

-
The rest of the night goes without incident. Seer pinpoints each crime and they deal with them based on just how violent and urgent each flare of light feels to Seer's senses. Occasionally she can sense that Sylph wants to take off and take care of an incident on her own, split the two of them up so they can cover more ground, and normally Seer would be happy to oblige.

But after that slip earlier, she thinks it best to stay near Sylph. Even when the other hero thumbs longingly at the lipstick case, Seer doesn't say a word, and they continue on together.

After extricating a pair of teenagers from an alcohol-induced crash that could have ended a lot worse, they agree to call it a morning. The sky is still a rich, midnight blue, but Seer can feel the sun's light burgeoning just below the horizon, and Sylph has a refined sense of when sunrise is. Her paler makeup is fine in the night, when it lends her an aura of mystery, but Sylph doesn't fight during the day without far more precautions about her identity.

They stop by Kanaya's shop front along the way. No more damage has been done since yesterday, but Rose cringes to see the ceiling tiles that have been torn down, and the shattered glass that still litters the floor from the broken front windows. The door barely hangs on its hinges.

People are cruel.

They go home and within minutes have collapsed, asleep. Kanaya sleeps like the dead, but Rose is dozing, still unused to being awake so late, and perhaps that's why she doesn't feel rested at all when she feels her mother arrive a few hours later.

At first, Rose isn't sure what it is she's sensing. There are certain souls her mind can recognize and track anywhere, regardless of her mental state - John and Kanaya being the only examples who come to mind, really. Perhaps she will have to meet with Dave in person, if only because some part of her, the portion of her mind most convinced by that flimsy DNA report, insists that she know the soul of her brother. After all, who knows what kind of stupidity he could get up to without her guidance and forbearance - he seems like an impetuous piece of work.

But what wakes Rose early in the morning, after merely an hour or so of drowsing slumber, when the sun is still low and Kanaya's shallow breathing stirs the sheets, is something that is not. Rose lets her eyes slide open as she zones into that other sight, groggy enough with sleep she's not used to getting that she has to shake her head to stop drifting back to Kanaya's brilliant flare. There's someone outside, someone who is nothing more than a hollow outline of crackling darkness and the faintest whiff of alcohol gone stale -

The hatred hits seconds before the realization, a snarl of raw fury that rips through Rose as she shoves the vision away. She kicks her legs free of the disordered bedclothes, one of the blankets slumping to the floor, and has to sit there for a moment, panting with the rage that threatens to overwhelm her.

Her antics wake Kanaya, naturally. The sheets twist and the faint gleam of too-bright flesh flashes in the quiet light of the morning as a claw rests on Rose's arm. "Rose?"

"My mother," she says, forcing her voice to settle into a manageable, light sort of dispassion that reveals nothing of the turmoil raging in her mind. Everything is in chaos, now, and she doesn't know that her new mental structures will survive this tempest. "She appears to have found me sooner than I anticipated."

That's wrong. Rose closes her eyes and hisses out a breath. Tell the truth. Don't lose sight of it. "That's not right. I didn't expect her to come at all."
Kanaya hums, a low vibration of apprehension and suppressed, cold anger on Rose's behalf, and her grip tightens on Rose's arm. "She is your ancestor," the troll offers lightly, though the normalcy has already left her tone. "It is only logical that she would seek a wayward descendent, whether you appreciate it or not."

"Logical for any other guardian, perhaps." Rose extricates herself from the last of the blankets, setting her bare feet to the floor. Kanaya maintains her hold, but has to shift to follow Rose when she turns. "Rue, however, has proven perfectly willing to leave me to my own devices for years on end. I had thought."

"You thought the trend would continue." Kanaya keeps that hand there, her shaped claws pricking at Rose's skin in a way that is not unpleasant. The other creeps up to squeeze Rose's shoulder, while Kanaya presses up against her back, her chin edging in the crook between Rose's shoulder and neck. "Understandable. Personally, I'm rather at a loss in matters concerning the bond between humans and their ancestors. But perhaps she simply wishes to act as a proper custodian, now, in some misguided attempt at correcting for earlier deficits."

Rose snorts, but she clasps Kanaya's creeping hand firmly. She remembers Kanaya tipping over a pale bottle at the sink, and the resurgent desire for a drink spikes. Gods, the last thing Rose wants to deal with while sober is her mother. No doubt Rue Lalonde is well on her way to pickling her liver, this early in the morning, and will be boisterously tipsy just to mock Rose's desperate thirst.

But now that she's here, Rue won't back down. She approached Rose for this confrontation, no matter how content she seems at the moment to hover by the front door, not bothering to ring the buzzer. Since she initiated, she won't be able to back off without losing face. Rose could let her stew there all day, conceivably, and the thought is tempting.

But not meeting her mother's challenge would be just as much an admission of defeat. And Kanaya doesn't deserve to deal with Rue Lalonde staggering about on a bender outside her place of residence all day long. It would be unseemly. What would the neighbors think?

"She merely wishes me back under her thumb, no doubt," Rose sighs, letting her head roll back and to the side as Kanaya nuzzles at her neck, the faintest bite of fangs on her skin. "My leaving must have been too much for her. It would have been another matter altogether if the situation were reversed, and she left me."

It hurts to say. But it is what it is.

"How charming," Kanaya murmurs. "Mmm. I have a proposition which may interest you."

"Do tell."

"Of course, I am certain that by the terms of your ongoing strife, backing down or ignoring this challenge altogether would be objectionable." When Rose nods, Kanaya smiles against her neck. "The key then, is to cause her to wait just long enough that she understands it is a deliberate insult. I believe I have some idea of how to pass the time."

Rose's breath catches. "That," she says, "is not objectionable in the slightest." As she turns to Kanaya and hooks an arm around her neck, Rose thinks that yes, Rue Lalonde can wait. Rose wants nothing to do with her; she wants Rue to be less than nothing to her. And the first step towards that will be forming new bonds, so that she can sever any that might still exist between her and Rue without looking back.

One day, Rose hopes she won't even need the void bracers on her wrists, these last chains binding
her to Rue Lalonde's good graces. She wouldn't dare test the sun ward on its own, not when she still understands so little about the source of its power, and how it links to John. But one day, she won't need it anymore.

She just needs this. Just this.

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Dave and Dave are halfway home when Bro finally shows his ugly mug.

"What the actual fuck," he says flatly, walking out of an alleyway with his hands in his pockets, as though he hasn't just dropped out of the sky with no prior warning. His hat is slightly off-center and that says a lot right here. "For fuck's sake, Dave, you can keep the apple juice, just tell me why you're walking home through morning traffic with a neon orange you."

"Great, more people in sunglasses," Dave-too mutters. Dave sees him drawing the tarp closed with the faint shuffle of feathers on canvas. Not that a flimsy square of fabric could hide a pair of huge-ass orange wings, or the orange tint to his skin, or the feathers sticking up out of his hair, or - no, seriously, how the fuck has Dave-too been laying low? Dave can't believe no one has ever caught sight of a creamsicle-colored bird kid and called the cops, at least. And with a police department as paranoid as Houston PD, a bird person would no doubt have been plastered across the evening news with a message begging someone, anyone to turn him in so the police could get on to dealing with regular crime again.

But on the other hand, hey. It would seem that for once, Dave is the one who knows something Bro doesn't.

Hell. Yes.

'This guy?' He tilts his head at Dave-too. He wishes he could nonchalantly hook his hands in his pockets to pull off the air of 'zero fucks,' but he kind of still needs them to talk. 'He's Dave. Something wrong, Bro?'

Bro's nostrils flare, which is basically the equivalent of anyone else flipping a table. "Oh my god, you're going to be a little shit about this, aren't you."

'I have a biological sister who turns into a tentacle monster that you only decided to tell me about yesterday,' Dave signs, allowing himself a small smirk. Inwardly, he is basking in the glory. Basking, dammit. 'See how it feels?' Seriously, he can't wait to pull this kind of thing on the Badass Quandary. At least Bro has been maddeningly, infuriatingly stoic Dave's whole life; the BQ's tight-lipped insistence on not sharing critical information is a recent annoyance, one that Dave has lost all patience with. Her comeuppance is gonna be fucking sweet.

"I legitimately have no idea what he's saying," Dave-too says to Bro, still eyeing Dave's hands with trepidation. As well he should, because Dave's hands are goddamn weapons of mass destruction, dammit. "Like, can you translate or something? He's been doing the sign language thing this whole time and it turns out I can't read lips for love or money. I mean, who are you, someone else in this family?"

"He's still being a little bitch about the tentacle monster thing. Which is insensitive as fuck. Don't call your sister a tentacle monster, kid," Bro says, aiming that last part at Dave. Dave flips him the middle finger with all the smugness of a righteous teenager. "And yeah. Something. Call me Bro."

"Tentacle monsters? Sister?" Dave-too repeats, sounding pained. "Jesus fuck, is no one in this family
normal?" He messes around with the tarp while he says this, and finally flips it up in a hood over his head so all the feathers are squashed down. He blinks out owlishly from under the edge of the cloth, and Dave can already tell the bird metaphors are going to get really old, really fast. He'll need to work on his material if he ever wants to throw down some rhymes with this guy.

But the poor, poor bastard. He has no idea. And Dave's not going to enlighten him. Let the poor kid have another half-hour free of that hair-trigger phobia of puppets that everyone who steps into the Strider stronghold inevitably develops. Never let it be said Dave is not a merciful twin-clone-brother, trying to spare him a lifetime of puppet fear. Puppetphobia? Is there a word for that? He's probably fucked if Rose figures it out; according to John, she has a thing for psychoanalyzing people.

He's getting sidetracked again. Why does this always happen? 'We are a picture-perfect cookie cutter 1950s household, I have no idea what you're talking about,' he deadpans, adjusting his shades on his nose. His brows twitch in a momentary frown when something about the shades feels...off. But then he shrugs it off. 'Like, shit, Bro breaks out the polka-dotted apron for cooking pancakes 'n shit every morning. It's fucking wholesome is what it is.'

"I am not translating your weird-ass metaphors, kid. Holy Santa Christ, how did I raise such a goddamn brat?" Bro asks the sky. He smacks Dave upside the back of the head before Dave can blink, a favored tactic of his. Dave whips out his sword and tries to slash the offending hand off, as per usual, but of course Bro is well out of range and acting like nothing happened by the time Dave has his guard up. "Stop being a little dipshit and answer me. What happened."

It's not a question, and the tone of absolute command grates at Dave's nerves. 'None of your business,' he replies, 'Like, wow, can't you just be happy? Our little family is multiplying. Soon we'll have a Strider in every major city in America. From there it's only one tiny leap to the White House -'

"No. The last time I let you get this kind of idea in your head, you followed through and started a minor economic bottleneck in the apple juice market in the space of five days. Just. No." Bro sighs, and his gaze turns to stare down Dave-too instead. The bird kid seems unaware that he's being watched from behind the pointy shades; he looks bored and intrigued at the same time as his gaze flicks between Dave and Bro with unsettling pale orange eyes. "Look, he's being a little fucker. Are you going to talk?"

Dave-too stiffens up, aware that he's under scrutiny now. Dave watches, fascinated and kind of freaked out by the way the other him hunches up his shoulders in a familiar gesture, made foreign by the rising wings behind him. Dave is used to other Daves by this point, but they're all him - their actions and thoughts eventually become his own, and he understands them. This is someone he assumes is totally unrelated to his time shenanigans, someone with his face and some of his mannerisms whose mind he'll never know, different enough that it's downright uncanny to watch him move.

And he can speak. Dave can admit he's a little jealous.

"Look man, all I know is a bunch of freaks in suits picked me up on my way through town a week ago, and kept asking me weird nonsense questions," Dave-too says, terse. "Then this Dave showed up and viola. You now get two Daves for the price of one. One can even pass for a normal human being. Yippee-kayay, motherfucker."

Oh fuck.

Ohhhhh, fuck.

Bro rounds on Dave. Dave catches a glint of pale, yellow-orange eyes over the brim of the angled
shades, and knows that *oh shit he is fuuuucked*. 

"You went after the Crew," Bro says, his voice completely flat. There's no emotion in it at all, not even the edge of condescending amusement that Dave's learned to overlook all his life; he starts glancing around for the nearest escape routes because Bro could be about to flip his shit. Bro is hard to read like that - he could try to whup Dave's ass right here and now, or he may well hold off on the retribution until Dave least suspects it. "You rebellious, obnoxious fucker. Going to a movie theater, my ass."

Lil Cal appears, one boneless leg hooked over Bro's shoulder. And wow, Dave only has the one piece of shit sword left to defend himself with. If Bro's main puppet is already out, he could be in for a world of hurt. 'Hey, I went to a movie theater. It's the fucking truth, just ask him.' He points at Dave-too. 

"Yeah, it was a movie theater," Dave-too is already saying, almost before Dave finishes signing. Bless his avian heart. "All nice and sketchy and grimy as hell. And man, I'm only following him because...fuck, they took my shit when they picked me up. I just. You don't have to fucking put up with me long, if I can just get a goddamn shower real quick. I'll be gone before the neighbors can pitch a fit."

His voice is strained and tense, way more than Dave would ever let him own. Dave-too may never have practiced emotional suppression in his life, which is just bizarre to think about.

Then he realizes what Dave-too just said. 'Wait what. No, you can't take off,' he signs, but all he gets is a tired sigh in reply from bird-him. And yeah, they'll have to beat the knowledge of ASL into Dave-too if he's going to hang around from now on - but that's the point. He can't just take off, not when there's so many questions left unanswered. Deep and meaningful questions, such as *why the hell is there a bird kid version of Dave and why is he orange*. Seriously, Dave's not crazy, right? It's a legitimate question!

"You're not going anywhere, punk," Bro replies, shades glinting in the morning sun. Dave nods vigorously in solidarity. "I'm still lookin' to find out why the hell you look like Dave in orange bird drag. Because I've seen his time bullshit before, and none of the other ones have ever looked like they've been dunked in orange juice and left to dry."

'I've been wondering the same thing,' Dave signs, keeping the hand motions short and small enough that Dave-too probably doesn't even register them. 'This guy came out of nowhere. If he knows anything, he's not talking to me at least.'

Bro's lip twitches downward in acknowledgement, and that's enough for them to be going on. There are advantages to having a clone-twin version of yourself who doesn't know your second language, Dave thinks contemplatively.

Then he remembers Bro is like, one twitchy eyebrow away from reeducating Dave on the meaning of pain. Time to stop drawing attention to himself. Again. If he can get Bro to focus on Dave-too, maybe he can dodge this unwanted asskicking before it begins.

"Been like this all my life, Mister Bro," Dave-too drawls, a little bit of an unfamiliar accent coloring his sarcasm. Dave can't place it though - he's usually pretty good at identifying sounds and accents, but Dave-too barely has one at all. "Right down to the amazing pair of shirt-ruining chicken wings. Yes, they work, no, I don't fucking lay eggs, and no, no touching the goddamn wings, that - yeah, no. So as to why there's suddenly some kid with my face running around -" he jerks a thumb at Dave "- your guess is as good as mine. Maybe the Dave Depot had some spares, and you just happened to
pick up my slightly less attractive lookalike."

A knot ties itself in Dave's stomach, an inkling of unease that makes him squirm a little. He looks at Dave-too and realizes - to the other kid, Dave is probably the one he's thinking of as Dave-too. From the other Dave's perspective, Dave is just as much the bizarre, freaky doppelganger who appeared, dispelling a lifetime of optimistically believing he was the only one in the world wearing his face. My face, Dave wants to claim, but really, who can say which Dave came first?

Whoa. That is way too fucking meta. Dave needs to stop thinking about that now, before he gives himself an existential aneurysm or something.

His head throbs a little and he shakes it, hiding the motion as best he can as he regains his awareness of his surroundings. His internal record has skipped a little; when he feels for the time, he sees he lost a few minutes to that tangent. He really needs to work on not zoning out like that. He gets the feeling it's not healthy, and Bro will kick his ass if this keeps up and he doesn't argue his case.

Chances are Bro will beat him up regardless, but hey, that's life.

Anyway. He tunes back into the conversation.

"Well, fuck me sideways," Bro is saying. There's a disconcerting moment when someone behind his back trips over the curb and nearly runs into him, but Bro is too cool for someone to just run into him like that. He dodges the person's stumble and then dodges back into place so quickly he leaves as afterimage. Dave is used to impossible shit like that, because Bro can deny it all he wants, but he's a show off. Dave-too's eye twitches. Dave starts an internal timer, wondering with a perverse glee when Dave-too will do a double-backflip off the metaphorical handle. "I am going to murder Lalonde."

And oops, looks like Dave zoned out in time to miss something really important. Faaaaack. What the hell has Dave-too been telling Bro that they've ended up back on Rue Lalonde? He can't exactly ask Dave-too repeat everything, he'd look like an idiot. 'What do you think she's done now?' he signs irritably.

Bro signs back, which Dave takes to mean this next part stays strictly between original gen Striders. 'Clones, you spacey brat. Quantum mechanics specialization, my ass, she's the only one who would have the time and mad science brain to want to make more copies of a dumbass like you.'

'Dude, why did you even agree to make clone-spawn with her if you didn't make sure to watch how many babies ended up rolling around the lab,' Dave demands, rolling his eyes hard. 'Like, 'oh, look, Doctor Lalonde mixed up an extra tube of baby juice, maybe I should look into that!"'

Bro actually grimaces - his facial muscles actually move - and looks off to the side. 'Never said I agreed to anything, kid;' he signs; then he clenches his hands into fists as he switches back to verbalizing without missing a beat. "Me and that woman are going to have words."

...So, is Bro going to try to skip that part where apparently he had no say in the whole Rose-and-Dave debacle? Dave's jaw drops, and for a moment he has no idea what to do with his hands. 'Bro. Dude. Did she make non-con clone babies with you?' he asks, feeling kind of queasy. 'I'm not exactly a Ph.D. in cloning ethics 101, but I'm pretty sure that's on the list of things that is not okay.'

There are a lot of things Dave has never bothered to question in his life - why he considers Bro his bro, even knowing they're not technically brothers; why he is just so fucking awesome at ironic selfies; why their apartment is a hellhole of puppets and taxidermied animals and goddamn katanas. Okay, that's a lie, he questions the puppet thing every fucking day of his miserable life, but that's
beside the point.

He's never questioned that Bro wanted him. Hell, maybe it's weird that a badass DJ/swordsman with a multi-million dollar puppet fetish empire wanted to raise a kid at all, but Bro is the kind of person who wouldn't do something if he didn't want to. If Dave were just some random kid that got dumped on him, Bro would have tossed him at social services and moved on with his life. No matter how much they bicker and strife and torment each other, Dave is safe and centered with the knowledge that if a Strider can love, Bro loves him. They look dysfunctional as shit to other people - they are dysfunctional, by any normal definition - but even when Dave is straining to break out from under Bro's shadow, they're okay. They're just. Okay.

'Shit is complicated. Lalonde didn't know half of what was going on then, either. Just lemme deal with Dave for two fucking seconds before you go goddamn postal.' Bro sticks his hands in his pockets, a luxury Dave doesn't have, in a gesture that means he is done with pandering to Dave's bratty whims. It takes Dave a moment to realize he's talking about the other Dave. Trust Bro to not differentiate with the names at all. At least Lil Cal seems to have scuttled back off to wherever it stays when Bro isn't about to unleash a righteous beatdown on Dave.

But he's not dodging this one like a dodgy son of a bitch. Nope. Not today. Dave steps in front of Dave-too, who makes a noise of confused protest that Dave ignores, and begins to sign. 'This isn't that hard, Bro. The hard part was Rose, and wow, congrats, you lived through that. Stop dicking around and tell the truth. There's nothing stopping you anymore, the clones are out of the bag.'

Bro starts talking over his signs, which is rude as fuck. Seriously, way to be a basic bitch, Bro. Dave forges on while Bro talks likes the insensitive dick he is. "Shit. Is. Complicated. It's not as simple as just suddenly babies. Me and Lalonde heard about a lot of stuff secondhand - the two people who knew the most about it all up and died, so sometimes when I don't tell you shit, it's because I don't know the shit."

'I can't believe you!' Dave can't do the stoic thing anymore. His face must be a goddamn mess by now, all jumbled with impotent frustration and that incensed fury that flares up out of nowhere. And when he gets mad, he gets embarrassingly teary. There's a reason he and Bro don't show emotion. Like. At all. 'Do you seriously think I buy that? You and BQ both, you're so full of it! Who were the two people? Why were there two other people at all?! Just tell the whole story from the beginning and I wouldn't have so many annoying ass questions!'

Bro snorts. "Like fuck you wouldn't. You would just ask why you didn't have any questions. You can't just let things be. Like. Calm your tits, little bro, no need to scare off Dave here with all our issues." He raises an eyebrow, and Dave knows he's being mocked.

And he deserves it. He's broken the cardinal rule when it comes to dealing with Bro - he's lost his cool. But he can't help it; the guy is infuriating.

"Can we not bring me into this?" Dave-too interjects. Without looking back, Dave steps backward onto the guy's foot until he yelps and shuts up, muttering mutinously. Dave ignores it. He also ignores that the toes he could feel through the thin soles of his shoes had an extra bump to them; the guy has bird claws for hands and feet. So what?

'I am calm,' he insists. He's not, he's really not, but faking it is half the battle. 'I am chill. So. Fucking. Chill.' He signs the last word with such force his hand cramps. Fuck that noise. 'I just find it hard to believe that this is what I'm reduced to. A neurotic who can't get a straight answer from anyone. Tell me.'

"I ain't telling you fuckall with this kind of audience. Have no idea who could be listening or
watching." Bro juts his chin not at Dave-too, but at the busy street beside them. Which Dave has sort of forgotten about, but whatever. Bro shakes his head sagely when Dave's mouth involuntarily twists downward, and shrugs, looking at Dave-too over Dave's shoulder. "Sorry about this. Kid's a handful."

'This is not over.'

Bro breaks off, sighing heavily. Side effect of raising a mostly mute kid - he has to pay attention to Dave's words or he misses key signs and the whole method of communication falls apart. "Enough," he says, and then Bro grabs Dave's hands, locking him down in a vice grip.

And -

Dave freaks.

The noise that he makes scrapes his throat raw. Dave wrenches his hands and when he can't pull free, brings his foot up and plants it in the middle of Bro's chest, barely aware as he does it that time has stopped. He kicks and kicks and kicks and somewhere in his panic, his heartbeat throbbing in his ears in doubletime, he holds the time stop too long.

He wakes up when his head cracks against the sidewalk. The painful firework of pain from stopping time too long sparks in his brain, and he barely catches himself on his elbows, tearing holes in his sleeves. BQ would say he was using his powers wrong, again, and he's started to see her point over the last year.

But his hands are free. Bro has backed way the fuck off, nearly ten feet between them, his posture tense. He's not panting or anything, and gives no indication that Dave's kicks did any damage, but his expression has gone entirely flat, a total blank slate.

"Should I just go?" Dave-too demands. Dave has landed almost on the guy's crappy sneakers, and when he winces and starts to sit up, Dave is surprised to feel a hand grip his collar and help yank him upright. Dave-too lets go before Dave can turn around and raise an eyebrow, but still. What a remarkably not-douchey thing to do. You can tell this kid wasn't raised by Bro.

"Stay," Bro says, and that's all. He's freaked out, too, then, if he's shut down all non-essential conversational skills. Bro is weird that way.

But good. He fucking deserves to feel guilty. That was a fucking bullshit move and he knows it. Dave meets his eyes and they stare at each other for a good minute. 'You shut me up,' he signs at last, but seeing Bro flinch doesn't make him feel any better.

Because Bro didn't mean it. It's been years since he had to worry about Dave's hands, ever since he finished assembling that collar and Dave could start yapping whenever he wanted. But he still went to mute Dave permanently, like Dave was five years old again. However temporarily, he forgot that Dave can't even handle that anymore. At all.

'I did,' he acknowledges at last. 'And I shouldn't have. I fucking up.'

The knot between Dave's shoulders loosens a little, and he feels a little less queasy. He ducks his head to finish. 'I shouldn't have been an annoying shit. But you still shouldn't have done that.'

'We're clear?' After Dave nods a reluctant affirmative, Bro hesitates, starts a sign, and then flows into, 'And I will explain. After I get answers from Lalonde. Sometimes I just legitimately don't know things.'
It's no different from what he claimed before, but right now it sounds a lot more reasonable. Ugh. Dave doesn't even know anymore. But he can't work up that flare of anger anymore, not when his heart is still off-beat and his head hurts like a motherfucker. So he lets it go. Like the gracious, blessed saint of the lord that he is, goddamnit. Honestly, if he didn't have the patience of Mother Teresa he doesn't know how he'd get through the day without cutting a bitch.

'Punkass brat.' Bro shakes his head, and switches back to words. "Why do we always end up goddamn arguing? I'm not actually out to get you, you damn punk."

'You raised me by whacking me with a sword from the time I was like two years old. Our entire relationship is based on strife, you shitty guardian,' Dave signs wearily.

"...Fair point." Bro leans a shoulder on the stoplight pole beside them, his arms folded. It's an obvious gesture of reconciliation, a signal that Bro's not going to try to reach out and silence Dave again. It's also pretty fucking useless, because Bro is fast enough that folding his arms means nothing. But. Dave gets it. "Shouldnta grabbed you," Bro says, his words clipped. He's looking away behind the shades, clearly uncomfortable with the whole situation, but especially with the need for emotions and apologies and all that other messy shit. Dave understands completely. "Not used to the sign language, yet."

"All of this is goddamn fascinating," Dave-too drawls, and Dave starts. Okay, he didn't really forget the kid was there - kind of hard to miss him, actually - but Dave doesn't think he himself could ever stay that quiet through an entire Strider-class emotional crisis without making some kind of snarky remark. Looks like Dave-too lets the sass build up until afterward. Just another way they're not actually the same person, thank God. Dave still gets the willies looking at the other Dave's bared face. "No really, I'm sure no one cares that you're having some kind of violent broment right in the middle of downtown in your weird shades, but I'm pretty sure someone is going to notice me, so can we hurry this up?"

Aha. Ha. Ha. Dave-too is worried about people noticing him? Dave has lived in Houston for his whole life, except for that part where apparently they lived in Georgia and no one thought to goddamn mention it to him. He's just gotten used to the passive way the general populace reacts to Flashstep and the Puppeteer. Hell, he and Bro strife it out on the rooftop all the time and the worst they've ever gotten was a makeshift spear lobbed at them by the irate woman whose window they broke a couple years ago. She had made it out of a shower curtain rod and a butcher knife, and Dave is pretty sure Bro still has it stashed away somewhere as a trophy because he's creepy ass packrat like that.

But aside from that crazy lady, Dave knows that people just really do not give a shit. Sometimes he slips up and he visits the same convenience store twice in the same day, once in costume and once out, and all the guy behind the counter does is sigh and give him the same discount on the Strider family CVS card. He normally wouldn't use it while acting as Flashstep, but discounts, alright?

In retrospect, he's not really sure he has a secret identity at all. Oops. John would disapprove so much. But as long as no one narcs on them to the police, does it really even matter? It seems like other heroes go through so much shit keeping their identity secret, but hell, Dave has an entire shadowy criminal organization chasing him and they have yet to catch on. A med student (they breed like flies around here) throws them a harassed look as she ducks past to reach the crosswalk, but that's the extent of the attention anyone pays to them. Dave and Dave-too are standing there covered in blood and bruises - Dave-too has wings - and no one has fucks to give.

Houston is just weird, okay?

"Fer chrissakes," Bro mutters. He pinches the bridge of his nose, breath hissing out. He's the picture
of Strider exasperation. "Yeah, yeah, show's over. Come on, you two. Home. Now." And then he's gone, and Dave catches a glimpse of him already halfway up the side of the building beside them before he takes off across the roofs. God damn, is Bro fast.

"Thank god," Dave-too says, hitching his shoulder and hobbling along, walking right by Bro in a huff, despite the fact that he has no idea where the Striders live. He's limping a lot more now, and Dave winces when he realizes why and starts after the guy. He forgot about the broken wing entirely, he can admit that. Which kind of makes him and Bro a pair of inconsiderate douchenozzles. Depending on how long it's been broken, Dave can't even imagine how godawful the pain must be after fighting the Crew and walking through Houston traffic.

He still lets the guy wander around until he realizes he doesn't know where they're going and glowers at Dave. Because Dave is kind of a dick that way. Eheheheheh. He smothers the smart ass smirk and shrugs at his double before leading the way.

- 

Bro vanishes into his room and emerges with several familiar objects. One is the first aid cart (now with wheels on which to roll it around the apartment) and the other is a pair of bright pink cowboy chaps. He dumps the chaps, as well as assorted other items that give Dave war flashbacks, into the sink under a pile of smuppets, fast enough that Dave-too doesn't see them. Bro gives Dave a little one-sided smirk and taps a finger to his mouth, and Dave rolls his eyes in response. "Siddown and let Dave fix the wing," Bro says aloud, digging through the fridge for a moment and emerging with a rare beer. Having seen Rue Lalonde's functional alcoholism in action, Dave can kind of see where Bro comes from all the time, worrying about addictive personalities. That kind of shit can be genetic, right?

Not that Dave has never had beer. He just has a greater and truer love for juice, dammit, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Dave-too picks his way between the assorted piles of stuff and things that litter the apartment, his face unreadable as he finds a clear space on the couch and sits. Sitting is an affair for him - the wings bunch up and the unbroken one lifts out to the side so he doesn't sit down on them, and once he's sitting they lower again, a maneuver Dave can't even imagine pulling off if he suddenly grew a pair of wings. Dave-too stands out like a bright orange figure on the shitty couch, looking around the room speculatively.

Welp. Time to do something about that wing, anyway. If nothing else, they can't leave Dave-too hobbling around like that, even in the questionable security of the apartment. Too many traps. 'What happened to hooking me on AJ instead of beer?' Dave asks wryly, walking around the couch in a wide circle. He's procrastinating because he doesn't really know what to do here. Hypothetically, he knows how to set bird wings; he's done minor amateurish restructuring of bird wings for his more morbid home taxidermy projects, and fixed up some of the asshole crows who occasionally invade his room. But these are hugeass orange wings on a human scale. It's a totally different situation, and if he fucks it up Dave-too might not just fly a little wonky, he might suffer chronic pain for - well, however long bird-people live. 'Setting a bad example for the newbie, Bro.'

Bro cracks open the beer with a single twitch of his finger, sipping before the foam has even died down. His free hand flips a middle finger until he finishes chugging it. "Shaddup, brat. I need less sobriety for this." His arm blurs, and Dave pauses time to recognize and snatch the apple juice jug out of midair. His head protests, but like hell would he ever let apple juice go to waste.

Wait. This isn't one of Dave's newest products. This is a monstrous bottle of Motts Natural 100% Super Fucking Delicious Apple Juice, the kind of gallon jug people who aren't a teenager guy and
his bachelor guardian buy at grocery stores like Kroger or HEB. Dave hasn't drunk this in - fucking years, ever since he realized how much more irrationally hipster it is to purchase apple juice brands no one has ever heard of and never will.

The fact is, as far as Dave knows, there shouldn't be Motts AJ in this apartment. He would know; he keeps tabs on the State of the AJ in the Household. Which can only mean -

'You keep a secret stash of apple juice?' he demands, stunned. 'Oh my god why does no one tell me these things? This is like. Life changing. How much more of this is there?!

"Kid, sometimes I legitimately worry you have a physical dependence on that piss-water," Bro grunts, which doesn't answer the question at all. "Just chug it and hurry up. The wing ain't gonna fix itself. Dave, you want something?"

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine," Dave-too says. He's muttering again, with his shoulders up around his ears, so Dave pretends he didn't hear that.

Instead, he nods, cracks open that jug with a satisfying creak of plastic, and takes a swig. Then he rolls his shoulders and orders himself to man up and inspect Dave-too's wing properly. He jostles the guy until he sits forward on the edge of the couch, and then Dave sits on top of the back rest of the couch, so he's got some perspective on these things. He sips at his apple juice like a contemplative goddamn scholar, and takes in the damage.

Bro vanishes in the meanwhile, no doubt to pick up more of the items necessary for the clusterfuck he's planning.

If possible, with the tarp discarded outside, the wings look even more disproportional. Dave knows bird wings, knows them as elegant, sweeping curves, the product of millions of years of evolution knitting together the genes for a slim chassis held aloft by feathers and song. Birds are time's triumph, and wow Dave refuses to ever think something that corny ever again.

Compared to that, it's clear that Dave-too's wings are...weird. The left one, the unbroken one, is matted with dirt and orange blood. Dave thinks maybe after the guy showers or something it'll look a little more natural, but for now it's in ragged disarray, ruffled and fluffed up defensively.

The right one is worse. The way Dave-too hunches over, it looks both too small and too big at the same time. It's bulky compared to his skinny frame, but when Dave prods near the break in the bones, the whole wing shivers and tries to draw in close to his back. The wince Dave-too lets out seems to be more caused by the way the wing wants to fold in but can't, with the radius and ulna both snapped.

"Why is he doing this, anyway? Like, no fucking offence, but you seem kind of more - yeah, just why is the mute guy with the sword dicking around with my wing. Can you just take over or something? I am not cool with this anymore. I was never cool with this," Dave-too babbles. Bro has wandered back in by this point, but Dave doesn't look up, engrossed in figuring out exactly how he's going to need to maneuver the bones before splinting everything and taping it up. He trusts his instincts, honed by years of training, to tell him that Bro is dicking around in the kitchen, opening and closing the fridge with a dissatisfied snort.

"If it were a stab wound or something, I'd be all over there getting my help on," Bro says absently, opening a drawer. "But hell if I know anything about wings. Dave here's the one with the dead animal thing."

Oh, come on. Dave flips Bro off. Again. This is becoming a pattern. He starts to sign a correction
when Dave-too wrenches around to stare at him, horrified, because *he does not have a dead animal thing, okay*, and then he remembers the whole language barrier thing. He smacks his face instead, shaking his head in negation. Dave-too settles back and turns around when Dave pushes on his shoulder, but Dave can tell he's still uneasy by the way his wings are drawn even tighter.

Okay. He has a plan of action. Sort of. But it's going to suck for everyone involved. 'How blackout drunk can we make him?' he asks, wondering if they even have the kind of hard liquor they'd need to do this quickly. If there's only a couple of beers in Bro's stash, they might have to do this dry.

Bro purses his lips and shakes his head. 'Yeah, no.'

'Why not?'

'We have no idea how he's put together biologically. Do you really want to give a bird kid alcohol poisoning and shoot his liver? Tell him to suck it up.'

...Point taken. They could just *ask*, probably, but fuck it, it's probably smarter to have Dave-too awake and sober so he can scream coherently if Dave bends a bone the wrong way without realizing he's fucked up.

"Can you not do the sign language like that? Like you're talking about me deliberately so that I can't understand," Dave-too says, shifting.

He has no idea.

Dave starts slow, dabbing at the dried blood in the area around the break with a damp towel. It comes away with flecks of orange, which is just strange. He is hyper aware at all times that there is a human-scale orange wing under his hands, and that if he hits some kind of pressure point Dave-too could smash him off the back of the couch reflexively. Bro won't condescend to work as a translator while he's busy setting up a spirograph in bloodstones on the kitchen floor, so Dave has to mouth the question 'how long ago did they break it?' five times before Dave-too loses his uncomprehending stare and answers with a "Two days ago." It's both better than Dave expected, and worse than he would have preferred.

When all the coagulated blood is cleared away, he feels a little better. Blood, even orange blood, always unnerves him a little. And now he can inspect the breaks properly. It's a clean snap, right in two, and he thinks it only broke the skin because the radius and ulna are thisclose to the edge of the wing. What complicates the whole mess is that there's two bones involved, both of them fragile, skinny, finicky little bastards. Only the radius broke the skin, but the ulna is a broken line just below the surface, where the feathers smooth out into secondaries. He has to line them both up, stitch the break in the skin, bandage it (which will be a goddamn party with all these feathers), and then tape the whole thing up against Dave-too's back so he can't jostle it.

He lays out all the supplies he's going to need on the couch, and then he undoes his belt and holds it in front of Dave-too's face. It's for a good cause. "You've got to be kidding me," Dave-too says flatly.

He changes his tune after Dave shrugs and begins Extreme Surgery, Strider Edition. He pauses time, and between one second and the next he presses the ulna back into alignment. The bone creaks terrifyingly under his hands, even through the layers of thick orange feather and skin. It's not at all as stick-like as the bird bones he has worked with previously. This is like grabbing a human humerus, judging by the width of the bone, and muscling it back into place.

And of course, a second later, he has to let time go again. Dave-too takes the abrupt pain about as
well as he could expect. "Ow! Fuuuu-son of a fuck- stopstopstop! Shit!" he yells, and the unbroken wing spazzes out, shoving a pile of dirty laundry off the armrest. He kicks out with a foot too, and raises a hand to his mouth to chomp down against another yelp. Thank fuck, he somehow manages to keep from moving the broken wing, too, or they would have considerable complications here.

If his hands weren't occupied, Dave would sign, 'Too late for that, bro.' Dave-too hisses a whine of pain and then bites down on the belt. There's a terrible sex joke in there somewhere, but hell fucking no. Dave refuses to think sex jokes about another Dave. Yeesh. Instead, he concentrates on holding the ulna in place while switching his focus to the radius. He keeps mashing the time-stop button in his brain, so he has as much time to consider his options as possible. In the end, though, all he can do is press that bone down, too. The bones haven't fragmented at all, which is a small blessing, and realigning the ulna had started to pull the radius into place as well. Dave-too punches the couch and snarls around the belt, but that's all the reaction Dave gets this time.

When the bones are as lined up as Dave can manage, he coughs loudly. Bro steps up, his old hat on so his stupid pointy hair is pulled away from his shades. He puts his hands on top of Dave's (Jesus fuck, why are his hands twice the size of Dave's? That shit ain't natural) on the exposed bone so Dave can slip out and start winding it all together. Dave makes a last minute call and doesn't stitch anything - he bandages it instead. Bro's hands move in sync with his to free up space while Dave weaves the bandages around the whole damn wing in an X shape. The coverts bend awkwardly, but it needs to be done, and as long as the feathers themselves are in order they won't break.

Dave-too lets out a shaky breath through his nose, pain evident in the way he claws at the couch with too-sharp fingers, his legs braced against the bottom of the couch. *Just a few more seconds*, Dave thinks. He's rushing this as fast as he can, but it still feels like he's dragging it out. Without a word, Bro removes a hand - it's not needed anymore, Dave has the worst of the wayward bone tucked into place - and grabs the guy by the head, tugging him back despite Dave-too's protest until his orange head of hair is leaning on Bro's shoulder. Dave-too's eye twitches as he flings a desperately confused look at Dave, but all Dave can do right now is start cannibalizing the arm braces they have in the first aid bucket to help support the wing.

It's the same kind of hold Bro had on Rose on that rooftop in New York, his fingers threading between hair and feathers with no regard for the difference as he rocks Dave-too slightly with mechanical, soothing precision. Eventually, the bristling distrust leaves Dave-too's stiff posture, because Bro has this shit down to a science. Dave remembers that day through a haze of near mindfuckery and delirium, and he'd been sure he'd only imagined Bro's mysterious burst of parental shooshing while Rose puked the grimdark out. But John had confirmed it, and Bro got all pissy when he brought it up, so yeah. This is actually a thing.

(If he strains himself, he thinks he can recall brief incidents in childhood, before Dave became less shitty at strifing, when Bro might have done the same for past-Dave, stroking his hair while he stitched up some new sword cut on Dave's arm. But obviously Dave is way past the point where he'd need or want that kind of coddling. *Obviously.*)

"Done," he tries to say at last, out of reflex, and sucks in a breath at the strangled noise his vocal cords make. He leaves the wing a neat, packaged bundle of bandage strips. 'Just need to cut off the shirt and bind it all to his back so he can't move it around,' he signs to Bro. It's standard operating procedure for taking care of a bird - wrap bandages around the whole body so the injured wing stays still - and he figures it's their best option here, too.

"Shirt off, kid," Bro orders, pushing Dave-too away with no finesse. "Do we need the scissors?"

Dave-too unclenches his jaw from the belt. Dude must have some sharp teeth, because when Dave
picks up the belt there are holes gnaws through from the pressure. "Probably. Usually I cut the slits wide enough to fit the wings through if I do it right, but - yeah, fuck, that's not gonna work," he gasps, his breath hiccupping a little with every tiny tremor that runs through the bandaged wing.

It had been hidden under the tarp, but there are two huge cuts down the back of Dave-too's baggy, filthy sweater. Dave wants to scream at the ragged way they've been cut - whoever did this used regular old scissors or something and didn't clean up the edges or hem it at all. It's a travesty, and deserves to be put out of its misery.

"Sorry. We don't have scissors," Bro finishes, setting it up perfectly for the moment when Dave draws his sword.

Dave-too nearly has a conniption fit.

They get the shirt off eventually, though Dave-too is a little bitch about it. With his torso exposed, Dave can see the huge, purpling bruises all along the guy's ribs, and a dark blotch of blue-black over Dave-too's lower back. So they did more than break the wing, then. He's skinnier than Dave, which is saying something because Dave is built for speed, here. Dave-too folds the broken wing in gingerly for Dave to tape the whole thing to his body, and Dave takes a lot more care than he would have if this were Bro or something. His spine is a defined, ridged line down the center of his back, and the muscles of his shoulders and upper back have Definitely shifted to compensate for the wings. Feathers continue from the crest of the wings and speckle the back of Dave-too's neck before disappearing back up in his hair.

He's so human, except for all the ways he's not. Dave really hopes Rue Lalonde didn't do this, because he thinks from the look on Bro's face that she's in for one hell of an ass-kicking if she did.

'Done. Don't pick at it,' he signs at last, even knowing Dave-too won't understand. He did a kickass job, considering he has no idea what he was doing the whole time.

Dave-too twists and curls forward, testing the amount he can bend, the bandages. The way the wing has to curve with his body draw him up short, but his grimace is only a little pained by the time he sits up. "Okay. Let's never do this again," he says, standing up and putting some distance between him and Dave, which Dave is a-okay with. The bird kid stands there awkwardly, the shredded remnants of his shirt slung over one arm as he glances around the room. Looking for exits. "You're an awesome mutant freak doctor, I'm impressed, but no, never again. Ever."

"Dave?"

Both of them look up as one, and shit that's going to get so confusing.

Bro is standing in the kitchen. He has a party hat in one hand. It's My Little Pony themed, and most likely the work of the devil. Shit's serious, then. Dave starts cleaning up the first aid stuff, stuffing it all back into the cart. "Time for the initiation."

Dave-too takes a step back. "What."

'Sorry, man. It's a tradition,' Dave signs, shrugging with a smirk when Dave-too glares at him.

"Like we'd really just toss you out on the street with a fucked up wing," Bro drawls. "You can at least stay here until we sort this whole mess out."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm fine." Dave-too eyes the exit, and shuffles to the side. He thinks he's being sneaky, clearly, but this is a Strider household, and he doesn't quite meet Strider standards.
"You're amazingly less than fine. You and Dave are both stubborn fucks, aren't you," Bro observes. "Just stay on the couch, kid. If the Crew are running around picking up Daves off the street, this is the safest place in the city to hide."

Dave sees the exact moment that argument wins Dave-too over. His orange eyes are easy to read. He pauses, clearly considering his options, and then slowly nods. "Fine. But only until they fuck off. Then I'm gone," he says, folding his arms over his chest. He looks thin and self-conscious, and Dave feels uncomfortable just looking at him. It's like Davebarrassment by proxy. Eurgh.

"Good." Bro holds up the party hat again. "And now we can induct you."

"Let's not and say we did."

"Terms of getting rights to the hide-away bed in the couch," Bro says. Wow, he's driving a hard game today. He must really want to see how far he can push Dave-too before he throws a fit. Dave would have stopped putting up with Bro's bullshit like, two minutes ago.

"I don't suppose we can just skip this?" Dave-too says mournfully.

Bro snaps the strap of the party hat. "No."

"Can I at least put on a shirt?" Dave-too asks. Ah, to be so young and naïve again.

"No."

A party hat should not look that ominous.

What ensues is a top-secret, unfathomably stupid initiation ritual handed down from Strider to Strider over the course of - well, two generations. Eh, fuck it. Dave just sits back and is glad he's not the one being subjected to the hazing, right up until Bro sets Lil Cal on him and starts baptizing him with hand soap and maple syrup right alongside Dave-too, both of them hanging half off the edge of the roof, where they migrated at some point. Cardboard boxes and the ritual sacrifice of a bright orange smuppet are involved. Everything is awful and wonderful and deliciously ironic at the same time, and Dave may or may not still be enjoying himself a little, but he will never admit that to Bro's face. Never.

And afterwards, of course, the kitchen is a shambles. John would probably burst out into manly neat-freak tears at the sight of it.

"I will never be clean again," Dave-too says gloomily.

Dave scowls in agreement. Maple syrup, glitter, and for some reason smears of avocado streak his kickass Midnight Crew costume, and none of it is coming out. The suit is ruined forever. He might have to burn it in a funeral pyre up on the roof later, but he could tell from the glint behind Bro's shades that this surprise re-initiation may be the only reason Bro postponed the argument about going after the Crew until later. This is the price Dave pays for successfully hiding something from Bro and screwing up the post-shenanigans coverup.

...Still worth it. If only, he thinks, because if Dave hadn't gone into that movie theater, there's no telling what the Crew would have done to PM or Dave-too. The carapacian seemed to be fine enough to tell Dave off and trot along to do her own thing, but Dave-too is covered in bruises like
they tried to kick something out of him. Maybe trying to figure out where Dave was? Who even knows.

He grabs Dave-too by the shoulders and angles him toward the bathroom door. It's a sacrifice, but Dave has business to take care of before he really needs to use the shower anyway. He's wiped off his face as best he could in the kitchen sink, and sadly, this is exactly the state he'd been in when he went to close the loop with one of his past-selves. Which means he can't shower and change, or he'll screw up the past.

"You sure?" Dave-too asks. Dave just gives him another shove, since he wouldn't comprehend the signs for 'I need to go back and kick past-me out, I left him hanging long enough' anyway.

He endures the pain of turning back time and steps through the door. "Go downstairs. The package has arrived. Don't even ask," he says, feeling weary and old as past-Dave perks up from his work at the desk, cradled by gratuitous amounts of apple juice. Poor past-Dave. He has no idea how exhausting tonight and tomorrow morning are going to be.

At least now current-Dave won't have to live through all that time again, either. If he can get a handle on that travelling forward thing, anyway. And the only way to test that is by practicing in situations just like this, rather than doing stupid stuff like experimental time travel in the middle of battle with two passengers. That had just been dumb.

He swallows around a sharp spasm of pain in his throat, and twists his sense of time...diagonalways. It's not exactly the opposite of how he usually imagines his powers working, just at a weird angle. Does that make sense? He draws it out, sweating a little at the stabbing ache that throbs again and again in his throat as punishment for being patient about this, and winds the clock forward to fifteen minutes after he left Dave-too.

It works, of course. Dave is a fucking genius. It is him. He can't wait to rub this one in BQ's face.

The shower can be heard through the wall. To while away the next five minutes (shit, what if Dave-too has a Bro-level shower addiction?), Dave removes an ancient button-up from his closet, an oversized shirt that never fit right, black with 'DRUGS' printed in grey across the front, slashed out with a backslash-circle sign in red, and mangles it in the name of wings. Unlike Dave-too, he trims the edges and makes sure both slits are even. Because he is classy as fuck, goddammit. He adds sweats to the pile and then, hesitating, stares at the set of drawers with an arched eyebrow.

Is it weird to give other-you boxers?

That's...not something Dave has ever wanted to wonder about.

Torn between perverse curiosity and horror, he eventually opens and shuts the underwear drawer, and swears never to think about this again. Ever.

He waits until he hears the sound of the shower shutting off in the next room over, and flashsteps to the door. He'd entered the room in the past and come forward still inside, so the door is shut again. He pulls it open to let in Dave-too right as he hears the click of claw-toes on floor just outside. 'Didn't break the shower, did you? Bro will freak if he can't get his forty minutes in,' he silently comments.

"Puppets. Puppets everywhere," is all Dave-too has to say. He shakes his head silently, then catches himself zoning out and shrugs. "Uh. Shower's free."

Well, at least now that he's starting to be properly traumatized, he can start progressing through the stages of Puppetophobia Recovery. Dave is stuck on unreasonable horror, but there's no reason Dave-
too won't beat the odds. Tossing the guy the pile of clothes, Dave sprints to the bathroom in record time. He has no illusions that he could really beat Bro there in a true contest, but Bro seems content to let him have this round. More likely, he's busy ragespamming Rue Lalonde.

He showers in record time, but even that's not quick enough to evade the wrath of Bro. Bro surprises him with a secondary shower of smuppets anyway when Dave is halfway through rinsing his hair, and he winds up getting soap in his eye. "Son of a fuck!" he fails to rasp, clapping a hand over his eye.

The water turns ice cold, and then abruptly soars up to temperatures approximating the heat of Mount Doom. Which means Bro just used his speed to yank the faucet handle around to fuck with Dave and drive him out.

Whatever. He is so over this shower. Daveseizes the towel and hauls ass out of there before anything else can try to kill him. He'd normally be ashamed of walking around in anything less than pants and a long-sleeved shirt when they have company around, but he figures hey, it's me, but with wings. So he ended up bringing pajamas because like hell is he doing anything but sleeping today after a night like that. In an old record shirt and boxers, Dave kicks his bedroom door in and strides in, making sure his shades are in place.

Dave-too hovers by the hole in the wall, the borrowed shirt loose on him like a fucking robe. Even when Dave nods and heads for the computer, Dave-too stands there, at a loss for what to do with himself.

Dave gets it. This whole situation is too weird.

'I'm probably going to pass the fuck out. You can do - whatever. Couch is outside, most of the video game consoles too. Just don't touch the turntables. Or open the fridge. It's a fucking death trap,' he signs.

None of this gets across, clearly. Dave-too facepalms just as Dave was about to, which makes Dave's hand slap back down against his side like fucking magic. Dave-too fidgets and then, horror of horrors, starts trying to make small talk. "I wasn't going to ask about the puppets. I was going to ask about the - wait, is this a dead baby?"

"No," Dave snaps, and the word almost comes out with a recognizable grunt of "Nnnagh!" with his emphasis. He flashsteps and hunches up over the jar of pickled dead thing. Shit. He had dug out all his completely ironic dead things after John went home, and everything had gotten stuck on top of apple juice crates when he kind of zoned out about the whole AJ empire thing. But from the horrified look Dave-too is giving the taxidermied crow above the computer - oh fuck oh fuck oh fucceccccck -

Dave yanks time to a standstill and freaks the fuck out, darting around the room in controlled bursts as he clutches anything even vaguely bird-shaped and/or dead and shoves it all into the closet. Dave-too is trying to say something, but Dave can't really make it out with all the forced pauses between the syllables, so he concentrates on sweeping the most incriminating crap under the bed before dropping back into time, clamping his mouth shut so he doesn't start panting at the sudden exertion.

God, why didn't he think to take care of this shit while he was wasting time making wing-slits all nice and neat?!

Cool. Play it cool. 'Why no, bird-me, it's a fucking meerkat,' he finishes at last. If he puts out a hand to support himself on the turntables, he totally plays it off as leaning jauntily. For ironic effect. 'You can't just joke about dead babies, dammit, it's insensitive.'

Close one.
Dave-too gives him a side eye, and it's wayyyy too similar to that look Rose not-Lalonde (he still can't decide whether she'd want to be a Strider, given her balls-to-the-walls overreaction whenever Dave calls her Lalonde) got that one time she was getting set to totally call Dave on his bullshit. "I have no idea what you're saying. But I'm pretty sure it's bullshit. You should probably think really hard about this dead thing you have. I'm pretty sure it's not healthy. Like, mentally and all."

So this is what happens when a Strider is raised away from the clan. The Lalonde half shines through. Dave suppresses a shudder of terror, and sits at the computer. As fun as having Dave-too tell him how weird his dead-thing collection is, he still means to check up on John before he passes the fuck out. Last night, the kid had been in some kind of crisis mode.

Unfortunately, his handle isn't highlighted in Pesterchum. Dave starts typing anyway, ignoring the faint huff of Dave-too's breathing as the guy shuffles around behind Dave's back. As long as he doesn't bust the turntables, Dave could care less.

TG: john
TG: eb
TG: bro
TG: angelface
TG: sugarmuffin
TG: my main man
TG: my sweet bushel of yams
TG: fuck ive never eaten a yam are they sweet
TG: dammit man this is your fault
TG: yams
TG: shit thats not going to be a thing i s2g

"Who is that?" Dave-too asks. Dave spies the bird kid looking around surreptitiously, hooking a bare claw-foot on the side of a spare concrete block and sliding it over the floor. He sits on the very edge of it - Dave refuses to think the word 'perch' - with his feet tucked right up against the base. It's too short to be a seat of any kind, really, so his knees stick up at awkward, gangly angles.

Yep. That's perching. So much for not stereotyping the guy.

He also has to wonder just how much he's willing to share with Dave-too. Bro seems to be all for inducting him as a Strider proper, and Dave doesn't disagree. They're a rare breed of ironic masterpieces, after all. But he also knows John would be pissed as fuck if Dave went around outing his hero identity, even if just to a secondary Dave. Dave tugs a notepad out from the shelf and finds the stash of pens and pencils he keeps tucked into the hollow space of a concrete block, and begins scribbling. His handwriting sucks, and he huddles over his hand to hide the contortions he makes, trying to works the developing cramps of a night of hardcore strifing and signing out without Dave-too noticing. Eventually he gives up.

DS: my main man john

Dave-too is clearly over exaggerating when he squints and has to mouth the words before he can translate Dave's scribbling. Clearly. Because sometimes Striders are dramatic fuckwads, okay, and there's no way Dave's handwriting is actually that bad. "Whatever. Looks like your boyfriend isn't online. Or do you just pester him until he answers anyway?" Dave-too asks, sounding dubious.

And yes, in fact, Dave has pestered John until he answers on more than one occasion. But whoa there, Dave-too, hold the fuck up.
DS: what no our brohood is eternal and transcendent

DS: there is no boyfriend thing here at all

Dave-too rolls his eyes and rolls his free wing dismissively. Maybe. Dave isn't exactly up on the nuances of wing body language. "Dude, it's right there on the screen. If you're not trying to mack on him, aren't you coming on a little strong?"

That is just. Ugh. The opposite of what should be going on here. What kind of Dave would ever suggest such a thing.

DS: you need remedial irony lessons

DS: like really this is an embarrassment to striderkind what even are you

DS: these are clearly terms of broearment

Wait. Typing is so much faster. Dave facepalms. He hooks the pen on the side of the notepad and tosses them both over his shoulder onto the bed. When Dave-too gives him a judging look, Dave maintains a straight face so as to keep the moral high ground in this conversation, and opens a Notes window on the computer. He starts typing, and jabs a finger at the text so Dave-too knows to read it. He repeats everything he wrote before.

"Broearment. Jesus Christ, you like puns," Dave-too mutters, rubbing his eyes. He looks as tired as Dave feels, which is pretty damn tired. "Now what?"

DS: dont get your feathers in a knot im just switching to a faster interface

DS: we have the technology

Of course, now he's typing on two different windows at once, so it's only a matter of time before he fucks up and mistypes a message for one person in the window for another. Thankfully, John doesn't seem to be online yet - they're two hours behind in Seattle, which means John is still in that grey area between when he usually gets back from hero work and when he wakes up to go to school and starts pestering Dave again. Dave has no idea how the kid functions on so little sleep, but around now is when John can be generally counted on to be dead from the neck up for some solid shut eye.

With John, he cuts it short. Dave-too's words unnerved him.

TG: whatev
TG: just checking in
TG: lemme know how blood-guys thing went i guess
TG: also i have an orange clone bird brother
TG: #sunnydunleashthepowerofthesun
TG: lataahz


If that doesn't get John frantically texting Dave by the time he wakes up, nothing will.

"Wait, did you just - did you just tell your creepy internet boyfriend about me?!" Dave-too yells.

DS: totes not my bf

DS: stop yelling im going to sleep now
DS: if you wanna use the comp just dont look up puppet porn that shit is off limits

"You compared me to Sunny D!"

...They're going to have trust issues, aren't they. Two Daves, both alike in dignity, and they're going to argue about stupid shit like this before poisoning each other's apple juice. Dave heaves the sigh of the damned, and rubs his face. While he fields Dave-too's irritation, his mind is more on sleeping, and planning for the future.

Because tonight, he's going to find BQ.

They're going to have a talk.

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John doesn't know why, but sometimes his friends can be kind of huge assholes. Like, seriously, all of them!

He's working on zero sleep here and he's definitely grumpy, but hey. He went to school. He helped exonerate Hemogoblin. He even finished a surprise quiz in AP Alternian, and he thinks he might even have passed by the skin of his teeth. He's not used to the unease of not being fully prepared for something at school; he tries so hard to keep on top of everything so that he never has to worry about his hero work infringing on his school grades. His dad would only give him a stern look if John complained, though. He chose to stay out late into the morning, and he has to deal with the consequences. He is totally okay with all of this.

So why, why, why did Dave suddenly have to go full Strider on Karkat? Even John can't always handle a fullblast of Dave's patented ironic buttface spiel, and he likes Dave! Karkat had gone in apparently trying to figure out who Dave was and why John had been texting him all week, in his usual overprotective fury-mode, and Dave had just as badly overreacted. Both of them were at fault (no matter how much Dave wants to say Karkat started it, John knows Dave gives just as good as he gets), but Karkat is the one who ended up in some kind of fainting haze of sleepless delirium on John's living room floor!

John pours another mug of hot chocolate, ignoring the buzz of Dave's barrage of pesterings coming from his phone, and crosses from the kitchen to the living room, where Karkat has taken up grumpy residence. After the troll nearly passed out in the car, he had woken up with a shout when John brought the car to a shaky stop outside the Egbert house. The troll twitches and jitters all the way into the house, scrubbing at his arms as though he's cold even through his layers of hoodie and long-sleeved shirts.

As John walks by, he spots his dad giving him a look from the study. Yeah, they need to talk at some point - John took off in a hurry to school, without their usual debrief on how the night went, and then he had to take care of Karkat. He'd also driven a car after years of not practicing, which he's tooootally going to get chewed out about later.

Everything just happens all at once, okay? He thinks about that fortnight of relative peace and quiet after returning for New York with vague longing, and wonders why he and his friends can't go more than a week without weird stuff happening.

More importantly, he wonders just how he's going to convince Karkat to go to the hospital.

Yeah, that. That's a thing.

Just the thought of confronting Karkat about this makes John's stomach try to dissolve itself. Karkat
has a serious thing against hospitals and doctors in general. Like, he offered to drive John to the emergency room in fits of panic while John's collarbone was still fractured, but his relief when John lost the sling had actual, physical force. For whatever reason, Karkat despises hospitals, and John strongly suspects that he may well have gone his entire life without setting foot in one.

But Karkat is pale and shaky in a pile of laundry and couch pillows, and that's a huge warning sign. Trolls like piles with substance - they toss in things like books and video games and cookware and basically anything they can get their claws on, and then they pile in it. Karkat always adds a pillow or two when he's dragging John into one of those pale jams he's always on about, out of consideration for the fact that John doesn't think his back could survive lying on a mound of hardcover romance novels.

Today, though, Karkat hadn't even made it to the stairs before he started feverishly clawing a pile together. While this pile slumps up against the sharp corner of the coffee table, it's still mostly made of soft things, which means Karkat must really feel bad.

And the last thing John wants to do is argue with Karkat when he looks ready to fall over if someone looked at him funny. But John can't in good conscience let his friend pretend he's not sick! He seemed fine when John first saw him after lunch, but by bio club he was already a wreck, and now this!

"Here you go," John says, crouching by the pile and holding out the hot chocolate. It's the only offering Karkat has said yes to - not even coffee had gotten more than a mumbled swear word.

After a pause, the pile trembles. The upper layer of John's recently dried, color sorted laundry shifts a little, and the sleeve of a red-and-blue Superman hoodie lifts up. A rusty red eye peers up at him from within the pile, the yellow sclera so bloodshot it can't possibly be healthy. His glasses sit somewhere on the kitchen counter where John had put them when Karkat flung them off, and his eyes look more unfocused than ever without them. A pair of John's boxer shorts, which he has been determinedly ignoring and not blushing about Karkat touching for the past ten minutes, rolls off the pile as Karkat extends a claw out and takes the mug. "Uh, are you sure you can -" John begins, and then he shuts up as Karkat disappears back into the heap of laundry. So much for asking him not to spill hot chocolate on anything. This has so much potential to go horribly wrong.

Yeah, Karkat's not on top of the pile anymore; he's buried himself in it. John looked that up on his phone while the cocoa heated up, and wowwwww, surprise! That's a really bad sign, too. It means Karkat is trying and failing to create a suitable sleeping environment in the absence of a recooperacoon; other sites hinted that a lot of the dizziness and fever could be the result of a troll with high tolerance for sopor slime going through the initial stages of withdrawal, on top of the insomnia that would result from deprivation. There are some trolls who eat or shoot the stuff to get high, and their reaction to withdrawal can be scary violent. But all trolls raised with recooperacoons develop that tolerance to the soporifics they ingest through their lungs and skin on a regular basis, and by puberty need it to sleep through the night.

John is starting to get a sickeningly suspicious gut feeling. Because the problem doesn't seem to be that Karkat's body can't sleep. In fact, all signs show that his body is so ready for sleep, it's willing to drop Karkat where he stands. He's so frazzled John is pretty sure that Karkat would have fallen apart today regardless of the Dave Debacle, which is the only reason Dave is just getting the silent treatment right now.

No, the problem is Karkat. Karkat complains about insomnia all the time; it's why he always looks so exhausted, with semi-permanent shadows under his eyes, and it's apparently bothered him all his life. But John has never questioned why the sopor wouldn't be working if Karkat slept in the 'coon like
he's supposed to, never even really thought about it.

But if Karkat has been purposely starving himself of sopor slime, for whatever reason -

It would look like this.

Well. They're not getting any younger here, and Karkat's not really getting any better. Time to man up and cajole Karkat into listening to reason. "Karkat?" John clears his throat, hearing the faint slurping noises from within the pile pause. "Hey, Karkat? I think we need to, you know. Talk."

Another pause that stretches too long. John has never known Karkat to be at a loss for words, ever, in their entire friendship - well apart from that one time John had clumsily stitched together an Heir-themed cat doll for Karkat's wriggling day. Karkat couldn't speak English for nearly two hours, rocking back and forth on the floor clutching the doll and clicking in rapid-fire Alternian while Sleepless in Seattle played in the background. That had been hilarious, and John feels a pang of sadness, thinking about how happy they'd been back then. How had he let Karkat get this sick?

He's an awful friend.

Urgh! No time for a pity party! Not when Karkat needs him to be the voice of medical reason!

"Yeah, John, what is it?" Karkat slurs at last, burrowing through the clothes to stare at John with an eye so dark it looks like someone punched him. "If it's about anything but pile and copious amounts of chocolate pie, I will - I - I don't even know what. Nnngh."

He can't even finish a metaphor. This is serious.

"I reeeeally don't think chocolate pie will help right now, Karkat." John hesitates while the goldenrod yellow mug moves within the pile and Karkat slurps noisily. "We need to talk about maybe going to the hospital. Uh, maybe?"

"What. That's a fucking stupid idea, why would you even say that?" Karkat snaps immediately, the hot chocolate slopping a little as he sits up. John winces, trying not to think which of his shirts just made the ultimate sacrifice, but at least Karkat moved! "Oh my fucking god, is this because I fell asleep in the car?"

"Karkat, you didn't fall asleep, you were unconscious!" John says, gripping his knees. The kneecaps creak a little under the force of the grip he can exert, but he doubts the sound is as loud for Karkat as it is for John. "I checked your eyes, and you wouldn't respond when I flicked you on the cheek -"

"Flicking me -" Karkat shifts inside the pile again, but there's too many layers of laundry and blankets for John to discern what he's doing. "I'm just a little tired, John. You worrying dumbass, if you were sleeping, I would let you sleep."

John can't restrain himself anymore. He yanks off the top of the pile. Karkat hisses. Like, a legitimate hissing noise that John thinks he's only heard a troll make once or twice before in his lifetime. Karkat yanks one of John's hoodies over his head and hides his entire face under it. "Because if you flick near enough to the eye, your reflexes should have kicked in. People don't like things hitting near their eyes, it's totally an evolutionary thing! You didn't even twitch when I opened your eye, Karkat!"

John had nearly veered into a stop sign when he realized Karkat wasn't responding, his heart pounding a tattoo against his rib cage until he realized Karkat was still breathing. Yeah, he isn't ever going to mention that, ever. His dad and Karkat would both have heart attacks if they knew! Sometimes it's just better to keep things quiet, like when John occasionally flies to school against protocol. As long as no one is hurt...
"Because I was asleep, you panmelted, paranoid suburban bumpkin," Karkat says, sniffling. "As much as the sympathy is appreciated, it really wasn't all that big of a deal, John." He mashes the hoodie against his face with both hands, and oh no. Ohhhh nooo. John can't see the hot chocolate mug. Oh, his dad is gonna be so maaaad… "Hang on, did you wash these?" Karkat demands, pulling the hoodie off his face.

"Of course we did, that's the dry laundry," John makes a face. "Hang on, why? What's wrong with that? People tend to do laundry an awful lot, Karkat…"

"Doesn't smell like you. Ugh. Everything is awful, John." Full of righteous outrage, Karkat lets his arm fall to the side and covers his face with just a claw, the hoodie discarded. Without the concealing bulk of the laundry pile he looks like…a total trainwreck. John thinks it's that same hoodie they got coffee all over nearly five months ago in a post-chemistry experiment gone horribly wrong, an ancient and ratty article of clothing that should have been consigned to an incinerator ages ago, and in hindsight he can't believe Karkat in his right mind would ever wear it out in public, let alone to school.

It's really cute. Which - ack! No! John shakes his head vigorously, recognizing Karkat's ploy before it can send him off into seriously inappropriate daydreaming. "Everything is awful because you need to sleep, but you aren't letting yourself, are you? This isn't just insomnia anymore, and it's hurting you, Karkat! Please let me and my dad take you to the hospital."

Karkat raises a middle finger, then twists it around at some weird angle. He says he does that to give it that extra pizzazz for a particularly eloquent 'fuck you.' Soooo rude. "Sleeping is the problem, not the solution," he growls, which doesn't explain anything because Karkat is a total BUTTFACE. "I'm...fine...I just…"

The middle finger hand wavers, and then topples over. John squints, and his mouth falls open when he hesitantly reaches out to poke Karkat's cheek.

This time, Karkat flinches appropriately when John's finger prods too close to his eye, spluttering. But did he just fall asleep mid sentence? "Cut it out, Egbert!" Karkat says, covering his face defensively. "It's called shooshpapping and not 'poke your moirail's eye out' for a reason, you know."

Oh man. John folds his arms and leans back, because he doesn't know how he feels about this whole moirail thing when Karkat is still reeeeeeally attractive in other ways, but he is aware that if he lets himself, he'll start shooshing Karkat just to ease the troll's distress. But he can't do that - shooshing is only a stopgap here, and if he calms Karkat down enough he'll just continue to insist this isn't a problem. "Fine. I won't shooshpap you, either. At all. Not until you listen to me!"

Karkat gives him an affronted look that has none of his usual bile. His eyes just look too tired to pull it off anymore. "I'm listening," he croaks. "I just don't need to go within a mile of a hospital. You're overreacting."

John wants to facepalm. But he needs to focus. Karkat could fall unconscious again any second. "Will you at least explain why sleeping is the problem? It's really hard to know what to do when you won't tell me what the problem is!"

Karkat kicks his feet deeper into the pile of laundry. John thinks he might be getting ready to rebury himself. "Sleeping is a fucking travesty. Why the hell did our species evolve to need sleep. It's idiotic."

"That doesn't explain anything, Karkat. Why do you hate sleep-"
"Because when I sleep, I see you die!" Karkat explodes, sitting all the way up. His eyes are wild and the claws he's digging into the pile just tore a hole straight through something plaid. "That's why, okay! You just - you die, over and over, and I don't want to have nightmares about that! Nothing is worth seeing that!"

Well.

Wait.

...What?!

John may or may not have said all that out loud. He really can't tell. He's just kind of - yeah, he has no idea what to feel right now. "Karkat, what the hell?" he says at last, rocking back on his heels. "How long has this been a thing?" He's got an inkling, but it was so long ago and he was tired himself at the time, with a fucked up arm, chatting with Karkat and Rose and Dave at like four in the morning after -

"Since - two Saturdays ago? Fuck, maybe, I can't keep track of the days anymore." Karkat mashes the heel of his palms against his eyes again. "At first I thought it was a one-off thing and then suddenly every night, and fuck everything about that. I just - fuck. I need you. I need you to be okay. You have no idea-"

"I am okay, Karkat, I'm right here!" John can't help it; he unfolds his arms and lunges forward, tugging Karkat's wrists away from his poor eyes. Karkat blinks at him, furious and teary and haunted all at once. John can only think back to all the minor blowups over the past few weeks - all those 'ragefits,' as Karkat called them - and smack himself inwardly for not realizing there had to be some underlying cause. Karkat has a temper, yeah, but before all this (before New York, he thinks uneasily, before blowing that thought away, too) it had never been so bad that Karkat couldn't function without John shooshing him down to a standstill. All of those meltdowns had been part of this, and John had to have been so blind to miss it.

Karkat is right - he really is a dumbass. John pulls him into a hug, rocking when Karkat snarls and yanks him down to the pile with grasping claws. "I'm here, Karkat, I'm right here,;" he repeats, because repetition works wonders when Karkat is freaking out. "I'm sorry, I should have asked you if the nightmares were getting worse. You could have just told me what they were about -"

"And sound like even more of a freak?" Karkat hiccups. He's swallowing and hiccupping in huge gulps, which is a Thing he does sometimes, in a desperate attempt not to cry or scream or something. "God, John, I just - don't want - to sleep -"

John can feel his heart breaking into little pieces over this. It aches. Karkat shakes in his arms, his body fever-hot and strung too thin. Karkat's not small, not really, but he feels like it right now. "But you need to sleep," he says, because he can't forget the point of this conversation. "If you've been trying not to dream - when's the last time you spent a full night in sopor?"

"...You know I can't answer that." Karkat shudders. "It's supposed to take care of dreams. What's the point of it if it doesn't work?!!"

Bingo. Ding ding ding! Now, if only the confirmation that John's frantic Google searching had been right about this wasn't tainted by the fact that wow, this is just a shitty situation overall. "The point is, your body can't handle just being cut off like this. It's too much," John says, trying to sound really calm and sympathetic to soften the words. "And now you're fainting all over the place because your brain needs sleep, Karkat. I get that the dreams are awful, but you have to go to the hospital and get medicine or something -"
Karkat pulls away. John has to catch himself before he face plants on the pile. "No. Hospitals." Karkat's voice is final and unyielding, in spite of the hiccupping desperation. He sounds like he's about to sob. "And for the last time, I'm fine. This is fine. Sleep can suck my bulge. I am completely functional." Karkat turns over and buries his face in the laundry. He clearly thinks that this conversation is over, despite the fact that nothing he's said was a valid argument. Karkat in his right mind could shout down a lawyer; sleep-deprived Karkat doesn't seem to even realize he's not making sense anymore.

...Time to break out the cheap shots, then. "Will you do it for me?" John asks.

"What are you even fucking talking about, John?" Karkat says, groaning and massaging his bloodshot eyes, his back hunched up. It just calls John's attention back to how sickly Karkat looks, drawn in and flushed and so tightly wound he could snap at any moment. The sight just reaffirms John's resolve.

"I'm asking you to go to the hospital. Please. For me." Time to throw down the gauntlet. John steels himself for the dick move he's about to make. "Because seeing you hurt is hurting me."

Emotional blackmail at its finest. John feels shitty, so shitty, but he doesn't know what else to do! He looks at the boy he loves falling apart, and he finds that even doing this - playing on Karkat's pale instincts, using this weird relationship that John is still only half-okay with to manipulate him while he's sick and in pain - is something John is capable of.

It's an astounding act of assholery. Not even all that positive self-affirmation training the therapist taught John is going to a dent in the self-loathing that smears through John's mind as the words leave his mouth.

But his muscles are corded steel, his teeth grit past the despair that makes him want to burst out into tears, and his mind whisks the self-loathing away on a gust of air to the back of his mind to deal with later, because he is doing this for Karkat. He can hate himself all he wants later, but he won't let the depression drag him down for a nice pity party. Not until he knows Karkat is okay.

More and more, he thinks, he just loves Karkat. He'd compromise everything he is for Karkat to be happy and safe.

_Dad won't like that, at all._ Compromising everything he is...he thinks that includes some of his most important precepts as a hero. If Karkat asked - if Karkat knew what John was, and wanted him to stop being Heir - John thinks he would agree. And there is no way that syncs up with the code of honor his dad has instilled in him over a lifetime of training him to use his powers responsibly and well.

But then again -

_Dad doesn't have to know._

It's amazing how simple moral dilemmas become when you're too busy worrying about your moirail to waffle around. After all, Karkat _doesn't know_ about John's powers, so the question of Karkat asking John to stop will never come up. John marvels at how easily his mind is able to shove that guilty, traitorous thought to the same dark place as the self-loathing when Karkat lifts his head full out of the pile to stare at John with a haunted, stricken expression.

He can do this for Karkat. He can be strong for Karkat. Even if it means Karkat hurts a little more in the meanwhile.
"It's not - what?" Karkat sounds small and confused, and that's John's fault. Blarhg.

(Like that's anything new.)

John looks down and to the side, letting all of the sick ache ease through the winds that are blowing most of his emotions to the back of his mind, so that some of his inner pain is visible on his face. "I hate that these are nightmares about me. I don't want to be the reason you're hurting yourself like this, Karkat. I'm sorry. Please?"

He hits just the right note of pleading that Karkat flinches physically and sits up. His expression is a lot less hazy now, as though John's words induced a little more clarity in his fevered brain. Which means no matter how shitty John feels, it's working. Karkat might actually listen to him, now.

John plows on ahead. "Either you go to the hospital, or you sleep in the recooperacoon for seven hours. At least."

He resigns himself to the fact that this is probably the best he's going to be able to do. He desperately wants Karkat to agree to see a doctor about this, but Karkat will never be willing to do that. He didn't know about the really specific, really weird nightmares when he thought this plan of attack up, but he'll just have to flow with it. Karkat, above all else, needs to sleep. Dreams or not.

"What -" Karkat shakes his head. "That won't help anything -"

John keeps going. "I know," he says quietly. "It won't help the nightmares, and I know you want to avoid them. But all this - the reason you can't even sit up straight? - it's because not sleeping and not getting sopor combined is killing you. The reason you feel so bad right now, like everything is awful, is at least partially withdrawal. Karkat, you haven't even been trying to sleep anymore, have you?"

What he does next probably crosses the line. But he can't let up. He sends a mental breeze sweeping through the dark part of his mind and deliberately pulls. The emotions he's looking for are recent - after all, Karkat had only just soothed them this morning. He injects all that hurt and stupid, irrational agony into his voice and deals the finishing blow. "You - this morning, you lied to me when you said you overslept and that was why you were late. And that really sucks, Karkat."

Karkat reaches out. His eyes are huge and round and he shakes his head, papping at John's face. John wants to dodge it, but also that would be kind of rude when Karkat is clearly distressed and John caused it on purpose. "No - fuck, fuck, fuck, John, that's not - I was trying to sleep, I swear, but I kept waking myself up all morning long and I didn't want to worry you more - you're okay? Are you okay? John, look at me, please -"

That's the thing about Karkat. Even when he's a feverish wreck in a pile of laundry, barely able to move without passing out, he's still worrying about John. Karkat is half out of his mind with sleep and sopor-deprivation, and he can still worry about John being a pathetic sack of shit this morning.

(John doesn't deserve that kind of love, ferocious and single-minded and protective. He doesn't know what to do with it.)

This is the single most unforgivable act of douchebaggery John has ever engaged in. This is something he doesn't think he can ever forgive himself for.

But he can do this for Karkat.

He presses his cheek against Karkat's palm and closes his eyes, resting there for a moment. It makes him feel better, but not by much. He doesn't think he'll feel better at all until Karkat goes to sleep. How is he supposed to feel okay when one of his best friends doesn't? "Please sleep?" he asks
simply, opening his eyes and smiling.

And Karkat's resistance melts. John can see the exact moment his emotional blackmail accomplishes what reason and logic never could; Karkat lets his head fall forward with a groan of defeat. "Fine. Fuck you, John. Fine," he mumbles into John's chest. "I'll go the fuck to sleep."

Success.

John rubs both of Karkat's arms with his hands, very aware of the faint shakes that make Karkat's hands tremble. "And if I stay with you, will you be okay? Even if you have bad dreams, I'll be there. And you'll know I'm okay, and that it was all just a dream, and you can sleep some more."

"I...that would help," Karkat says, reluctant, and he lifts his head to palm his face. "Oh my god, I'm being a shitbrained moron again, aren't I? I'm sorry you have to put up with this." He laughs wryly. "Did you know, I just wanted to spend the afternoon making sure you were okay? Well, I took that plan and shot it in the face, didn't I?"

"I'm fine when you're fine, Karkat," John says. "And if you promise to sleep from now until - lets say 10 - we can go out to Denny's tomorrow instead. Since you seem to have some weird craving."

"I'll hold you to that, you manipulative moirail." Karkat still won't open his eyes, even when he knocks his forehead on John's shoulder. "Thank you for putting up with me," he says, so quiet John almost can't believe it's Karkat talking. There's just a general shouting volume that Karkat never quite dips below when he's talking, and hearing him anywhere near a regular whisper is...weird.

"I don't put up with you, Karkat. You're my friend. I just want you to be okay." John pats Karkat on the back. He doesn't get a response. When he blinks and pushes Karkat's head to the side, the troll just rolls with it.

Asleep again, hopefully. This way he can't go and change his mind before they get to his house! John scoops up Karkat with an arm under the troll's knees and has to shake away a flashback to the first night they met. He had rescued Karkat as Heir and flown him up to safety in much the same kind of hold.

It's still hard to think that if he hadn't been there to save Karkat, they might never have met. Crabdad would never have moved Karkat out to the suburbs in a fit of paranoia, and John would never have been friends with the troll.

He can only imagine how crazy he'd have gone in the past year and a half. Would he even have been sane to deal with Dark Star in New York without his friendship with Karkat to stabilize him through the school year? It's not something he likes to speculate on; it means acknowledging just how badly he had broken down before he met Dave, and John is sooo not in the mood to handle that kind of thing. He toes his shoes on in the front hall, fully intending to carry Karkat home, since it seems necessary.

His dad meets them there before John can fumble the door open. John looks up and smiles ruefully, trying for normalcy and failing because there's an unconscious troll in his arms while he leans back against the door to meet his dad's eyes. "Dad? I'm taking Karkat home, alright?"

"I can see that, John." His dad frowns at him sternly, arms folded. "No driving that car."

John rolls his eyes. "I won't." At least his dad isn't forbidding him from taking Karkat outright.

Parental authority established, Samuel lets his stern gaze soften, and he lowers his voice, eyeing Karkat with sympathy. "Anything I can do to help, son?" he asks. "I really am concerned about all
John grits his teeth, because it's tempting. Really tempting. Karkat is sick and withdrawal isn't something to fool around with.

But he also knows Karkat would never forgive him if they took him to a hospital without permission. Karkat is a stubborn butt that way. "I think it would just make him more upset, and that's the last thing he needs right now. I'm going to stay and make sure he stays in the recooperacoon, but it's not like I can stay here all night, anyway."

His dad shoots him a warning look, but Karkat's totally out of it, and John lowered his voice already. They're fine. "Good luck, then," is all he says. "Don't stay too late." Then he chuckles, and winks. "And if Karkat tries to get out of this, tell him there will in fact be a chocolate pie in it for him if he promises to take better care of himself."

John laughs too.

Then he blanches in horror. "How did you know about that?!" he asks, realizing that his dad knows about the Chocapocalypse pie oh god he's screwed.

His dad smiles, shaking his head. "Son, I know everything that goes on in my kitchen. Especially when I find Oreo packages in the trash." His grin freezes. "And if you ever eat one of those yourself, you will be attending swim practice on a far more regular basis again. I trust you to make good health choices, John."

Oops. With that parting shot that somehow manages to combine pride and admonishment in a way only dads seem to master, John's dad strides away toward the study once more, humming around the unlit pipe in his mouth.

...John decides not to tell Karkat about that offer at all. Perhaps it will be best for everyone involved if the Chocapocalypse never sees the light of day again. Shuddering, John adjusts his grip on Karkat - the troll's not all that heavy, not for someone as strong as John - and opens the door by pushing down the handle with his foot. He hops outside and shuts it again, and sets off down the street.

He just hopes this works, and Karkat doesn't really need to go to the hospital. John starts jogging. He doesn't think he can get Karkat in a recooperacoon soon enough, at this point.

Crabdad is awesome. John loves the lusus to pieces because he's a riot! But when he descends upon John and Karkat in a flurry of waving claws and piercing whistles, it's kiiiiinda inconvenient, because John has his arms full and he can't fend the crab off. "H-hey, Crabdad!" he laughs, while Crabdad taps him on the head with a heavy claw that would probably have knocked anyone else flat. "Yeah, it's good to see you too! Just hang on, I need to get Karkat -"

Crabdad was going to notice eventually, of course, but John slaps himself internally for actually drawing attention to Karkat's less than conscious state. Crabdad reeks back, whistling in distress, and his enormous eyes blink rapidly as he falls to his knees and shakes his claws at the ceiling. He then reaches out and tugs at Karkat's free arm with a claw, skreeing inquiries at John.

Oops. Karkat isn't waking up with all this screeching, and he's the only one who can interpret Crabdad. John adjusts his arm around Karkat's shoulders and grimaces apologetically. "I'm sorry, he's just really tired," he says, making sure to enunciate clearly and loudly. Crabdad chirrs at him, which means nothing to John, but he thinks it means 'tell me more human child.' "Yeah, he hasn't
been sleeping well so he kind of fell asleep at school. No big deal!"

Crabdad clutches his head with his claws and lets out a despairing screech. Okay, John should stop talking while he's ahead; who even knows what Crabdad is hearing! Lusii are weird in that they vaguely understand languages, but their own individual sounds are a more reliable method of communication. For all John knows, Crabdad has just inferred that Karkat's going to sleep for a hundred years or something, which is soooo not what John intended. Ack. It's a good thing he's learned over the past few years never to tell Crabdad the gritty details about things - Karkat may not be very nice to his lusus, but he's right in that Crabdad has a tendency to overreact.

On the other hand. This...could be hilarious. John can't help the prank that springs to mind, and before he can really stop himself he kneels down next to Crabdad, angling Karkat awkwardly. "Crabdad?" he says solemnly. "I don't know if you understand that you're leaving soon, but...do you...want to put Karkat to bed?" He would say 'tuck him in,' but that's obviously a human thing.

Crabdad's reaction is everything John ever wanted in life, and more. The lusus tips back his spiny head and lets out an ululating screech unlike anything John has ever heard, and Karkat wakes up with a spasm of panic. "What - no - NOOOO!" Karkat yelps as Crabdad reaches out and scoops the troll into his waiting claws. "JOHN, WHAT FRESH FUCKERY HAVE YOU WROUGHT - I THOUGHT YOU LOVED ME YOU BASTARD -"

It continues even as Crabdad scuttles up the stairs, ignoring Karkat's flailing attempts at escape with the single-minded determination of a lusus on a mission.

Glorious. Karkat's parting shrieks only make the victory all the sweeter. Truly, the pranksters gambit belongs to John. He wheezes with laughter on his knees for a moment, before clearing his throat and pulling himself together. No need to have a laughing fit in Karkat's entryway with the door hanging open. Karkat's neighbors already know Crabdad is weird, but John still tries to keep up the façade of normalcy. You know. Sometimes. He gets to his feet and shuts the door, still grinning wide, and follows up the stairs to Karkat's room at a more sedate pace. The urge to fly himself up is almost overwhelming, his temporary good mood infecting the wind, but he quashes it, as always. He's almost as comfortable in the Vantas household as he is in his own home, which is always awkward when his control slacks off.

Repressing the urge to fly just reminds him of why he's here, though, and his smile falters. Crabdad's antics still amuse him as the sounds of a struggle continue in Karkat's room, but John shuts down a little. His worry for Karkat casts a pall on everything.

He steps into Karkat's room. It's no more of a mess than usual, which is to say, it's basically spotless. Karkat is better about John about keeping his room in order, but hey, Karkat doesn't wake up with the wind trying to tug him off the mattress for an early morning flight! There's a neat pile of old comics and textbooks in the corner, and the hero posters on the walls are pristine compared to the battered mess John's accidental power misfires sometimes make of his own.

The recooperacoon, however, has obviously tanked. There's green sopor everywhere, and droplets of ooze fly up to coat the ceiling as Karkat raises a foot to plant it repeatedly on Crabdad's face. It's not a bad kick, actually - how did Karkat even kick that high? Like, wow, not bad! - but Crabdad claims victory in the end, aided by Karkat's poor mental condition. With a skree it shoves Karkat all the way down into the 'coon, sickly green slime overflowing onto the carpet.

Crabdad 1, Karkat -9000. In a contest of sick child versus concerned lusus - well, it's just not really a contest at all, John has learned.

"John, you traitor," Karkat grumbles from within the 'coon, heaving himself up with difficulty as
Crabdad whistles and tries to shove the troll's head back into the slime. "You unleashed this. Why am I even friends with you. Why."

"Because I blackmail you into sleeping when you're being a dumb butt!" John replies as cheerfully as he can, walking over to stand by the 'coon. "Just give in Karkat. You cannot resist it! It's for your own good!"

"Damn you two and your unholy human-lusus alliance," Karkat says, rubbing his temples. He has green slime slathered all over his claws and up the arms of his hoodie, so he smears some on his temples and hair without noticing it. John coughs through another laugh. "I can't wait until this fatass retires. Cannot. Wait."

John decides not to comment. Crabdad doesn't seem to notice Karkat's negative sentiment, and Karkat is sick, so he gets a pass on the whole bullying Crabdad front. John is such a good friend! "Yeah, well, for now you're stuck with us. Just go to sleep, Karkat."

"I will, once this asshat stops - furgh -" Crabdad shoves Karkat under the slime again, cutting his words off in a gurgle that John interprets as Karkat inhaling slime.

"I think he's okay now. I'll watch him," John says to Crabdad. The lusus looks up from his loving care and skrees quizzically until John repeats his words. Then, grumbling and ruffling John's hair with a slime-covered claw (oh, grossss!), Crabdad waddles out of the room, his feet clicking on the stairs as the crab retreats, his duty complete.

John touches the sopor in his hair and pulls a face. He's gotten sopor slime in his hair by accident before, and it takes three rounds of shampoo before it comes out of human hair. Eurgh.

"Karma," Karkat says, spitting a mouthful of green sopor slime out as he emerges from the 'coon again.

"Get back in there," John says, rolling his eyes. He stays out of Karkat's reach nonetheless, because Karkat in a vengeful mood wouldn't hesitate to try and yank John into the slime with him. "I'll be right here if you need me."

Karkat is quiet for a moment, and John looks at him. The troll has his head resting on his arms, all of him sticky and slimy and kind of gross, but he frowns at John (oh shit, John left Karkat's glasses on the counter at home, didn't he. Oops…) with a tired kind of consternation. "You can relocate the pile if you want," Karkat mumbles, his eyes already half-lidded and blinking slower and slower as that lungful of sopor starts to seep into his system. John is probably an expert on how sopor slime works after all that Googling, which is something he never thought he'd be able to put on his resume!

"Don't have to sit on the floor. Don't give me that look, I know you and you would totally sit there like an idiot, John. My pile of random shit is your pile."

John hums and smiles. It's an incredibly stupid, dopey smile - he knows this because Karkat rolls his eyes with extra intensity. "Alright, I'll do that. Now. Sleep!"

"Fine, fine," Karkat grumbles, and he closes his eyes. It's not as much that he slides back into the sopor slime as he falls asleep again, and the sliding back happens totally by accident. Also, John gives his forehead a poke to start the process, grinning as Karkat vanishes into the slime. There's a twinge of anxiety at the thought that Karkat might not be able to breathe, which is so stupid it's hard to believe John was the one who thought it. Sopor slime is designed so trolls breathe it in, after all. It only unsettles John so much because he can't feel the air that usually rushes in and out of Karkat's lungs, a regular metronome that has ordered John's days since he first became friends with the troll - it's all replaced by the slime medium, now. John doesn't know how that doesn't feel like drowning. A
breeze plucks at his hair, stirred by the moment of heart-thumping worry, and he sends it away.

Now, though, he has a good six hours he has to while away. The smart thing to do would have been to bring his backpack and homework along with him to work on, but as has been established, today has been kind of hectic. John hesitates, then texts his dad rather than calling him - Karkat seems down for the count, but he doesn't want his voice to give the troll an excuse to escape the 'coon again - asking him to bring his backpack of textbooks over.

He receives a text in the affirmative a moment later, his dad as punctual as ever in promising to drop the bag off downstairs with Crabdad in an hour, along with a reminder to clean up the pile in the living room before heading out to work tonight. Just another thing for John to remember to do. Bluhhh.

He pauses, closing the text window to stare at the golden blob of the Pesterchum app. It's been buzzing nonstop since he started ignoring Dave in favor of taking care of the Karkat situation, but it went quiet a half-hour ago. Not, of course, before Dave seems to have racked up a grand total of 143 alerts, at which point he must have stopped just because Dave is a weirdo that way.

...Does John really want to scroll through all those messages?

He sighs, and opens the app. Dave is his friend. And, well, he can't give Dave the silent treatment forever. For one thing, Dave is the kind of person who, if ignored for long enough, would probably pick up and fly out to Seattle just to spam John in person in the name of irony (and because Dave can't just admit he's worried, like a normal person). Besides, John hadn't actually seen the conversation, other than the parts Dave had copy-pasted for him, gloating, and for all he knows Dave wasn't actually all that much of a butt to Karkat in context. With Karkat as sick as he is, he might have collapsed regardless of whether Dave provoked him or not. So maaaybe Dave deserves a response, at least. Since John is obviously the responsible friend this afternoon, he opens the near-permanent chat window with turntechGodhead.

Oh god. So many messages. So many. He's not reading all of this. He scrolls as fast as the phone will go, catching glimpses of such choice phrases as 'frothing pimpjuggler' and 'a meteoric shindig all up in here' and 'had no idea i could be such a walking feathery asshole i swear,' but he figures if he asks Dave can just give a summary at the end.

TG: and then they make out
TG: come on man i know youre intrigued now
TG: you cant resist this kind of mad gossip
TG: i hear things man
TG: …
TG: im here all week folks
TG: stay tuned next for loud shortwave radio squelches
TG: before i proceed to drop the bass
TG: and cry into this tainted jar of dead baby meercat
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
EB: omg dave, 146 messages.
EB: i think that is actually legitimately a new record!
TG: what can i say i was inspired
TG: also ive been blasting podcasts for the past two hours to drown out bro hes been yelling at doc lalonde
EB: wait, your brother can yell?
EB: i just kind of assumed he didn't have that ability…
TG: you and me both john
TG: secondary dave stole my ipod and dr dres but i forgive because i am benevolent as fuck that way and i think hes homeless
EG: is he really orange? :0
TG: like pumpkin pie filling fresh out of a can
TG: but yeah today we learned bro can yell im wondering if a celebratory strife is in order

Trust Dave to be more concerned with learning Bro Strider can raise his voice above a gruff mutter than with the fact that at some point he rescued a winged version of himself from the Midnight Crew. John just shakes his head and sighs. It seems like no matter how much research he does on the Crew, there's more and more to dig up beneath the surface, weird things that don't match up with the typical activities of a criminal organization. Case in point, attempting to kidnap Dave and Rose at some point in their childhood, before the two would have even been old enough to pose a threat to a bunch of lowlife criminals.

From the impression Dave gave at lunch, before the Karkat debacle, Dave-too seems to have been totally unrelated to the Crew before being mistaken for the real Dave. But that still leaves the question of where a human-bird hybrid of Dave would have come from at all.

So confusing!

EB: i'm a little more interested in the fact that you have an orange bird twin who apparently appeared out of nowhere. i didn't really read everything, were you arguing with him at some point?
TG: hey davetoo is pretty chill
TG: some hiccups at first but now hes passed the fuck out on the bed so hes almost tolerable
EB: that's because he's not conscious, dave
TG: exactly
TG: also just fyi i need you to pass on a message to your trollbro
TG: since i am being respectful as fuck of previous requests that i not get in the guy's face again
EB: siiiiigggghhhhh
EB: thank you, i appreciate that.
EB: does it involve boners or a really long rap because i would just copy-paste it at that point, i can never remember all the lyrics, and he's asleep right now
TG: what no
TG: def no boners here
TG: short and to the point just tell him i am not down with the kismespades thing
EB: ...kismesissitude?
EB: ...
EB: oh god, please tell me you didn’t come on to karkat while he was having a mental breakdown!
TG: dont be ridiculous it was before i realized it was shoutytroll
TG: since you know a certain beloved bro of mine didnt want to share his chumhandle with me
TG: thought it was some shitty anon so i went for an ironic blackrom anti-troll scenario
TG: but since karkles wasnt in his right mind i figure it should be established for the record that that was not a thing
TG: i dont do the hate square i swear
EB: yeah, yeah, i believe you :P anyway, you're too much of a softie for blackrom, dave!
TG: what
EB: i mean, come on! you can hide it all you want, but you and i both know the truth!
EB: you just don’t do rivalry very well.
EB: i mean, you get mad at Puppeteer all the time, but you can’t stay mad either because you love each other!
TG: i have no idea what's going on help
TG: have you and rose been in cahoots again jesus fuck
EB: i'm just saying, you're secretly a really nice guy.
EB: like, genuinely nice, not even ironically!
EB: deep, deeeep, deeeeeeep down!
EB: which is why i know you'd never hurt karkat on purpose!
EB: you are the kindest strider. it is you.
TG: i think im gonna cry
EB: see, you're a sensitive soul. here, have a bro hug \o/
EB: don't worry, i want you to know - i am here for you, you brave little soldier
TG: john what is happening john make it stop
TG: is this some kind of revenge im sorry im so sorry
EB: alas! you are too precious for this world!
TG: …
TG: wait
TG: no
TG: thats not
TG: not possible

And that, John thinks, spinning his phone in his hand with a satisfied smile, is how to outtalk a Strider.

TG: …
TG: you motherfricker
TG: you just quoted supernatural
EB: i admit to no such thing. :P
TG: holy shit
TG: you had me going
TG: w2g john you have successfully outdone the master i resign the post forever
TG: i cant believe a hero-nerd like you would ever watch supernatural solely for the purpose of irony
like that is some serious commitment man
EB: youtube is our friend, dave
TG: still
TG: oh my god i think i nearly had a goddamn heart attack you little shit
TG: me a sensitive soul i nearly stroked out
EB: there! and now we're even for karkat! :) 
EB: and thus our broship may recommence!
TG: like it could ever be stopped this shit is like a runaway train
TG: god i just need to get you a pair of shades and a nice sword and well make an honorary strider of you yet
EB: the highest compliment i could ever receive! :P
TG: obvi
TG: i like this adding on to the clan hell yeah
TG: bring on the clone people and the adoptees we need to up our numbers
TG: we shall be legion
EB: i think your bro is going to start objecting if you start inducting new family members over the internet…
TG: idk what youre even talking about bro would be so down for this
TG: he loves kids he wants to hug them all
TG: he can act stoic and shit but he was all parental and sappy over davetoo earlier i know what i saw
TG: the mans heart is three sizes too big he wants all the kids
-- temperedTitan [TT] has joined the chat! --
TT: motherfucker, don't make me come over there
TG: sorry bro these sick beats cant be tamed
TG: he just wants to hold all them
TG: but he cant
EB: cant hold every kid?
EB: wait please don't kill me mr strider!
TT: …
TT: you get one pass, kid.
TT: one.
EB: yessir!
TG: you done yelling at old lalonde now or are we still pulling the 'no answers' card because my patience is at like 110% done
TT: goddammit, this again
TT: sorry john, dave is overdue for an asskicking
TT: go take care of your troll or something
TG: see he's totes worried because your bf is sick even tho he doesnt know the guy
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has joined the chat! --
TG: the yelling stopped, does anyone care
TG: hang on, why was i not invited to this, you assholes?
TG: wait is that the blue one
EB: wait, is that the orange one? :D
TT: okay thats it you little brats
TT: everybody out
-- temperedTitan [TT] blocked turntechGodhead [TG] --
-- temperedTitan [TT] blocked theandricGriffade [TG] --
-- temperedTitan [TT] blocked ectoBiologist [EB] --
-- temperedTitan [TT] has left the chat! --

...Well. That's one way to cut a conversation short! John raises an eyebrow at the phone screen, half expecting Dave to pop back up in a new window any second now, but the radio silence continues for a good five minutes. He can only assume Dave is getting his ass royally handed to him on a silver platter.

Karkat whimpers in his sleep. John puts away his phone and focuses on taking care of his best friend.

He doesn't think to check for any other pending Pesterlogs, despite the alerts still pending in the application. He just assumes they were all from Dave.

He regrets that, later.

- Karkat wakes up screaming four times over the next six hours. Like, actual screams that bring Crabdad bursting back into the room, like clockwork. John has always read somewhere that people don't really bolt upright after a nightmare - the body is paralyzed during REM sleep to prevent that kind of thing when they wake up suddenly. But Karkat screams into the sopor like a choking gurgle, and after a moment of thrashing, sits up to fling himself half out of the recooperacoon and grab for John's hand. John dragged the whole pile up against the side of the 'coon after the first time it happened. He'd just come up the stairs from picking up his backpack and Karkat's glasses from his dad at the front door and Karkat had sprinted across the room to tackle him. He calmed down and stopped swearing and hyperventilating after a few minutes with his claws pressed down on John's wrist, over the pulse point.

Then, of course, John has to talk him back into the 'coon, which eats up precious time before John
has to leave. Between bouts of screaming and homework, John power naps, because the way this day is playing out, he won't have slept since the night before last!

For a while, after the first few terrifying outbursts, John debates skipping work tonight. He'd hoped for some reason that Karkat would improve over time, as his subconscious realized John hadn't even left the room, but that's not the case. But that's because John is a stupid, naïve dumbass, as Karkat would say, and he has too much optimism. Karkat needs him to sleep again after the nightmares, and John would have to be a total asshole to leave him alone with such fucked up dreams.

Of course, there's still the question of why Karkat's brain decided to fixate on John dying at all. That's more than a little weird, but no way is John going to pull a Rose and psychoanalyze Karkat when he's like this!

When ten o'clock rolls around, though, Karkat won't hear anything of it. "No. No more sleep," he says. John makes a noise of protest when the troll sits on the edge of the recooperacoon and starts peeling slime residue off his horns. The shadows under his eyes have lightened, but the yellows of his eyes are redder than ever, bloodshot something awful, and he keeps rubbing them. It's kind of an improvement, except not. "Agh, shit. I need eye drops. Just go home, John, you wake up too early to stay up much later doing homework."

At least he's talking in full sentences again! "If you think you can sleep more, I can stay -" John begins.

"Absolutely not. I have filled the sleep quota for the day, dammit." Karkat waves him off, cracking his neck to the side with a pop. "Go home. I need to shower, I'm absolutely disgusting right now."

"We're doing this again tomorrow, if we have to," John says warningly. When Karkat bares his teeth in a snarl, John frowns right back. "Try to get to sleep again at some point tonight, but I'm totally instigating mandatory naptime until this whole thing blows over." He catches Karkat's eye, and sighs gustily. "Don't you want to spend time with me, Karkat?"

There is only one correct answer to that, of course. Karkat rubs his face and staggers to his feet, hardly swaying at all. Progress! "Yes, I do," he replies, palming his face with both hands before glowering at John. "And you know it. Dammit."

John swings the backpack over his shoulder and leans over to hug Karkat one last time. His shirt is already covered in sopor, anyway; he's resigned to it being a really gross hug. "I'm glad you're okay," he says. Something sticks in his throat when he swallows. "So stay okay, got it?"

"Got it, you sappy fuck."

Letting go is hard. Really hard. He somehow does it, anyway, and walks out of the room. He waves to Crabdad on his way out of the house, smiling wearily when the lusus churrs at him questioningly, and then takes off down the street. The neighbor across from Karkat's house is outside for some reason, inspecting the tail light of his car, and watches John until he waves. The neighbor hastily turns back to the car after that.

He runs the rest of the way home surrounded by an insistent stream of air. The sky is dark and it feels weird not to be in uniform by now. The wind bursts out with an excited pop into the house when John opens the door and steps inside, his hair a total windswept mess already. "Hey, Dad! I'm home!"

He gets a vague reply from the direction of the study as he hurries up the stairs, his shoes thumping on the floor as he darts into his room. He needs a way to work off all the stress and worry from this
afternoon, and the best way he knows to do that has always been hero work or swimming. Once he gets his body moving, he won't have room to dwell on all that crud he shoved to the back of his mind while he was taking care of Karkat. The longer he can put that off, he figures, the better. Part of him longs to talk to Rose or Dave about it, but that would mean letting the dumb depressing thoughts out of their dark space, and he might not be able to go to work at all if Rose or Dave really get going!

Later! After work!

Plastering a smile on his face, John leaves his backpack beside the desk and opens the wall safe as quickly as he can, his fingers a little jittery. He changes hastily and in pieces rather than in his usual routine, stripping off his pants and lacing up his boots before realizing that he hasn't put on his uniform pants yet. His head is all over the place, tonight! The mask gets stuck over his entire face when he tugs it over his hair, and he tips over sideways a little as he manhandles it under the collar of his jacket. He runs his fingers through his hair, and grimaces at the gelled feel of the spikes where sopor slime dried in it. He ducks into the bathroom, snaps on his goggles with a manic grin, and turns on the shower, scrubbing at his hair violently until the worst of the slime washes out.

Even before he can grab a towel to dry it, the wind whirling around him dries his hair. By now, John can't deny that, for whatever reason, he is eager to get out tonight. His heart dances in his chest, and even that darkness in his mind doesn't feel all that heavy. Blinking, he reaches inward to his connection to the wind and tries to interpret the usual slew of impressions he gets from the air around him.

What he feels surprises him. Usually the wind lets him have insight into where urgent crimes are being committed, leading him to where he is most needed with a rising feeling of urgency. This sensation is similar, but it's not a bad kind of urgent. It feels almost like something momentous, something exciting is about to happen. John has no idea why, but the wind is sure of it, and it wants him to be there when it happens.

He shrugs. It's weird, but hey, the wind has never steered him wrong before! And he could use some good news, tonight! Heir straps the hammer to his back and slides the window open, ready to give himself over to the breeze when -

"John! Young man, the laundry!"

One foot on the windowsill, Heir freezes - and slumps forward. John tears off the goggles and tosses them on the bed. "Yes, sir!" he calls back, dumping Casey next to the goggles and yanking down his mask. Impatient and disbelieving, the wind wraps around his head and tugs him back toward the window. Every part of John is sooo ready to get out and flying, and in the end he just gives in, if only to keep the breeze from rising to an impatient gale. He takes a flying leap off the top of the steps and lands gently at the bottom, hovering slightly before dropping to the ground.

His dad taps a foot, standing by the pile of messy laundry Karkat left strewn all over the living room. John laughs nervously, caught in the act of flying in the house, and hurries to gather everything up and ferry it all to the laundry room.

Sitting on the floor in the exact center of the pile is the yellow mug, completely drained of hot chocolate. Karkat hadn't spilled a drop.

- He's late to work. Duh.

Well, Heir doesn't really have a set time that he has to start patrolling by. But still. Bluhhhh. He's
glad he napped with Karkat, or he wouldn't even be able to function. Working so late into the morning with Hemogoblin is biting him in the ass, now, and he can't wait for his schedule to get back to normal, again.

That being said, he meets up Hemogoblin almost immediately. It's close to 10:30 by the time Heir locates the other hero, but he wants to check in right away after the close call that was all of last night and this morning.

Once again, the wind guides him to the public library - what is it with Hemogoblin and this place? Heir stops himself from speculating on that, because he gets the feeling that the library must be close to where Hemogoblin's civilian self lives, or at least his base of operations. It's one thing to analyze Hemogoblin's powers and know how to beat him in the event the other hero goes bad; it would just be rude to go snooping around about his actual identity! Heir couldn't help finding out Dave's and Rose's, under the confused circumstances of their friendship, but he can at least try for some kind of professional courtesy with Hemogoblin, since he fights crime with the troll way more often than he sees Flashstep or Seer.

If, that is, the Seer of Light even still exists. John winces and pushes the fact that he hasn't heard from Rose since last night away so he can stay in the Heir mindset. Rose hasn't exactly been forthcoming on when she intends to take up hero work again, if ever. But Rose would never back down from a challenge, and John can't imagine she'd quit over something that wasn't even her fault! Yeah!

"You made the local news again," Heir says, dropping in after Hemogoblin reaches the roof. "Looks like that Crichton guy wasn't kidding about that confession. You're probably in the clear!"

"Thank fucking god," Hemogoblin says. Heir inspects the troll's masked face carefully - out of concern! Concern and no other reason, darn it! - and feels another minor worry unhook from his scrambled brain. Last night Hemogoblin had been waaaay stressed out over the accusation, but despite the sleepless night they both had, he looks a lot better. His eyes gleam like red lamps and his crooked grin looks much more effortless, not strained by the anxiety of being suspected of arson and near terrorism. "And maybe this time the police will actually bother to keep one of those Crew thugs on lock down. I can't imagine they'd even consider releasing him on bail." The sarcasm is back in his drawl, too.

Heir shrugs and sighs. He gets it. "That's just how the legal system works - I don't think they have enough evidence to deny him bail altogether, but who knows? Maybe he'll be low enough on the hierarchy that they won't send another bomb!"

Seriously, enough with the explosions! Three gaping holes have been blown in his city in the past few weeks, three husks of buildings that sit black and cold in a sea of bright lights when Heir flies overhead. Each one marks a sucker punch from the Midnight Crew, a grim reminder that Heir hadn't even been in town to prevent Hearts Boxcars from escaping the justice he so deserved to face.

And the last, clinging hope Heir had held, that Crichton was just a last gasp from Hearts Boxcars's group, died when Crichton had laughed, eyes wide and reverent, and promised to bring down the retribution of Diamonds Droog upon the city. He wishes he'd had time today to look into that name - according to Samuel Egbert's contacts, any suit member of the Midnight Crew can be considered a serious threat, but specific information about the four suits is hard to come by. News coverage doesn't dig deep enough when reporting Crew criminal activities, and the process of drawing more specific police reports from across the country could take months to obtain.

He'll feel a lot more comfortable once he knows what kind of damage Diamonds Droog will try to dish out, so they can prepare for her arrival. He's not letting another member of the Midnight Crew terrorize Seattle.
"As long as they don't bail him out, I'll be ecstatic," Hemogoblin mutters. The tiny crimson spikes on his costume shift as he stretches his arms over his head, one hand clasping the other wrist. The look he gives Heir has lowered eyelids and thick eyelashes and a slow wink that does funny things to Heir's insides. Like he swallowed air into his stomach rather than his lungs, and the breeze buoys him up further. "Hmm? What do you say? Want to spend the night together?"

That's innuendo again, isn't it. He can tell. It wasn't all that subtle. "I would be honored to kick criminal butt with you tonight, Hemogoblin," Heir replies, his grin irrepressible. He doesn't think he can match Hemogoblin for sheer flirtiness, so the best he can do be himself!

Heir feels happy. Giddy, even. None of this makes sense, but he can't seem to repress it. As long as it doesn't interfere with the job, he decides, it can't hurt that he's in a better mood than usual. Even the reactionary guilt over feeling happy when Karkat is still suffering at home can't beat him down as he grins widely at Hemogoblin and receives a sultry smirk in reply.

Seriously. Tonight is going to be awesome! He can feel it!

But even with all these warning signs, he is still completely unprepared for what happens next.

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Jade drinks her Slurpee and watches the skies. It's kind of chilly tonight, cool with a stiff breeze that whirls up her hair and nips almost like it's winter again. She shivers and buttons up her lab coat, which kind of ruins the dramatic billowy effect, but hey, this suit isn't really built for the cold. Also, the Slurpee probably isn't helping things, but it tastes like strawberries and angel tears, so bleh. Washington is a far cry from a tropical island in the Pacific, and she wonders how John stands it. Maybe he likes it? Weird people like the cold, right?

She huffs, and sits down, kicking her legs over the edge of the roof so she can swing them. Boooorrrred. "He's taking foreverrr," she complains to WV, who nods and goes back to patting Bec awkwardly on the head. Bec is taking it like a champ, and she's glad the two of them are bonding. She never really knows what's going through WV's head (except when he wants soda, in which case oh god does he let her know) but she knows that he isn't always comfortable around the wolf. Which is a shame, since Bec is such a sweetie! But WV is pretty short, so she just thinks maybe WV is justifiably afraid of an artificial canine that could probably swallow him whole. If, you know, Bec ate. Or did anything other than sleep and float around like the lazy bones it is.

Her teammates are just lucky they're her adorable best friends, okay? And if John doesn't hurry up and get his head in the game, Jade is just going to have to start doing the hero thing without him! How are they supposed to team up if he never responds to her messages!

Sighing pointedly, Jade hovers in midair and turns herself upside down. She takes out her cell phone and starts a very irate Pesterspam. Because John is sooooo cramping her style right now.


GG: this is sooo lame :

GG: the lamest, john!

GG: where are you?!

GG: i'm waiting~~~

GG: if you don't show up soon, i'm totally going to do the thing without you! i mean it this time!

GG: oh, hang on, someone's doing some crime thing like right under my building.

GG: so rude. sooooo rude.
"Hold down the fort?" Jade asks WV, and she receives a chipper salute in reply. "And keep an eye out for that big dummy!" Not bothering to right herself, she summersaults forward and over the edge of the building, teleporting herself down to ground level as she pulls her aviator goggles down.

"Not tonight!" she announces cheerfully, setting down behind the assailant. From the feel of things, he's working alone, at least, because no one else is moving in this alleyway that would indicate a secondary mugger waiting in the wings.

The man whips his knife around almost before he turns to face her himself, which is pretty unsafe! Not how you should handle a knife at all, if you know what you're doing! Just another black mark in his name that makes Sharpshooter fold her arms and pout at him sternly. "Back the fuck off, little girl!" he says harshly, holding the knife in a shaky grip that weaves a little, his thumb nearly slipping up onto the sharp of the blade itself. Yeah, this guy has noooo idea what he's doing. "The hell do you think you're doing?!"

"This!" Sharpshooter claps her hands together and teleports over the guy's head. She pulls the knife along with her, and then buries it in the side of the building, so deep in the stone it'll never come out in one piece. She lets the momentum carry her into a spin and kicks him in the side of the head. She throws out a "Hiiiiyah!" for fun because heck. Yes. He yelps and trips sideways, bringing up his hand before realizing that the knifekind is gone, and the blood drains out of his face when Sharpshooter continues to float there, grinning.

The look on people's faces when they realize what they're really up against? Priceless.

"Oh, fuck," he says.

"Basically," Sharpshooter agrees, and then she blinks out and lands behind him again, flicking a rifle from her sylladex as she knocks his feet out from under him. When he falls hard on his back, the air knocked out of him, she brings the rifle up and taps it against his forehead so he stops squirming, frozen. The safety is on, her finger is nowhere near the trigger, and this rifle honestly isn't even loaded - it's easy enough for Sharpshooter to load on the fly with her powers, so this gun is reserved for intimidation only. The thing with fighting regular people, of course, is that Sharpshooter can't exactly run in guns blazing. This is why she prefers giant robots and missiles, honestly - at least then she can break out the fun heavy artillery!

Still. It couldn't hurt to ask. Slinging the rifle over her shoulder, Sharpshooter nudges the guy with her foot and crouches down over him, poking at his cheek repeatedly until he responds with a pained, "What?!!"

"You wouldn't happen to own a death ray, would you?" she asks hopefully. "Or be secretly in charge of a huge criminal enterprise that has genetically engineered super soldiers on call? Or know someone with a playing card related themed gang -"

The look he gives her, rolling his head to the side, is not promising. "What? No! Are you insane?!" He flops his head back, grimacing. "Oh my god, I couldn't even get caught by Heir - I get stuck with some crazy lady!"

...Mean! "Well, it was worth a shot," Sharpshooter sighs, and then she knocks him the rest of the way unconscious with the butt of her gun, swinging it like a golf club. "Meanie."

"Th-thank you!" the would-be victim bursts out at last, still all teary and trembling from being
threatened by a guy who had no business wielding a knife specibus. "Thank you so much! I think I owe you my life! Who are you?"

"Me? Sharpshooter! I'm new in town!" She grins, planting a foot on the dumb criminal's head. Justice. "And I will so take that life debt! You can pay it off by telling me - how I can get in contact with, uh - Heir?"

The woman hesitates, lacing her fingers together repeatedly. To be helpful, Sharpshooter reaches down and levitates the poor lady's purse to her from where it fell in a gross puddle of rainwater and garbage. The woman thankfully doesn't seem to notice. "I - I'm sorry, I don't know," she says at last. "I mean, Heir just sort of - shows up, usually! He can't be everywhere at once, of course, but I don't know that anyone's ever flagged him down, either…"

Sharpshooter sighs. "Bleh. I figured as much. He's such a jerk! So hard to get in contact with, all the time! But thanks anyway! Do you need a lift anywhere?"

The lady swallows hard and clutches her purse a little tighter. She's kind of getting a gross trash-water stain down the front of her nurse scrubs, but Sharpshooter thinks this is one of those things it is Not Polite to point out in regular society. She's getting better about that, really! "The hospital is just up the street," she says, timidly. "I have a rotation, and I know I'm going to be late, but I have to help report this to the police, right?"

Oh. Right. Police and things. "Well, do you want to press charges?" Sharpshooter asks, kicking the guy's face again and eyeing him dubiously. "I'm totes going to dump him off at the police station, but I'm not all that fussed about evidence and convictions and things. Borrrrring!"

"Well, that's just how Heir does things, usually - him and Hemogoblin both, they try to have people wait to make statements, from what you hear on the news." The woman hesitates, then shakes her head, her expression firming. "I think I'll report this. Do - do you mind waiting with me until the police get here?"

Sharpshooter thinks about it, tapping her finger against her chin, but the choice is already pretty obvious, right? "Of course!" she says, smiling. "Can you call them? I have another text to send really quick."

"I can," the woman says, nodding. She takes out her phone from her purse with fingers that are still trembling with adrenaline, and begins to dial 911.

Jade, meanwhile, steps on the mugger's face absently, mushing his head into the wet ground as she flips out her phone again. Up above, she can feel the crackle of energy that means WV is throwing a hissy fit at Bec again for something, but she ignores it while she types at John.

GG: i'm all up in yo city
GG: savin' yo people
GG: teeehee!
GG: come on, i can't keep showing you up like this, john! it's embarrassing! ;D
GG: as soon as the police get here, i am tracking you down and we are doing the hero thing!
GG: the loser can buy the other a smoothie!
GG: (that loser would be you obvi ;o)
GG: and then i can meet your guardian and the blood troll guy who doesn't know how to spell hemoglobin and you can meet bec and wv and it'll be great!
"They, um, the 911 operator said they should arrive in a few minutes," the near-muggee offers when Sharpshooter finishes sticking her tongue out at the screen. "Thank you for staying with me."

"Nooooo problem," Jade replies, leaning back on her heels. By this point she's kind of forgotten Mister Mugger is under her foot, so he lets out this really interesting groan of pain when she sort of crushes his nose. Oops. "Helping people is my job! I'm not used to this nitty-gritty crime fighting stuff, but it's not all that different from the elephant poachers, right? Got to make sure they get locked up or they just start up all over again! Air-to-ground missiles, on the other hand, you just shoot them down and that's that -"

She gets a little distracted lecturing the woman on the different types of missiles, but the lady doesn't seem to mind, just nodding now and then with a dazed look as Jade gets really into it. She's a really good listener! But then Jade hears the sirens around the corner, and she has to cut off the lecture before she gets to the super interesting part about how rocket fuel actually works. Science is so exciting! "Oh look, they're here!" she says waving cheerfully when a black and white car pulls up at the end of the alley. "How are Seattle police, would you say? Because Russian police make you bribe them a lot if you're not careful, but in Japan they were nice and polite, and it just seems to vary by city here in the States -"

"I have no idea," the woman says faintly, waving at the cops as well when they step out of the vehicle. One is a female troll whose eyes flare bronze in the streetlights, and the other is a human guy. "Uh, you probably shouldn't have a gun out around police?"

"Oh?" Jade twitches. "Oh, right, yeah, that whole thing. Good idea." She tucks the rifle away. Police everywhere seem really paranoid about guns, but American police are the worst about it. Seriously. Texas had been kind of weird. She tried not to spend more time than she had to in Texas after the Clubs incident, but seriously, what a weird contradictory place. "Do you think I should say hi to them?"

"I...don't know?" the woman replies.

"Good enough! I like meeting new people, anyway!" Jade says, waving wildly again. "Hiiii! Nice to meet you all!"

"Are you the one who reported an attempted armed robbery?" the guy officer asks, raising a flashlight that is way too bright. Jade squints at it, shading her eyes.

"No, that was me. She rescued me," the lady says, nodding at Jade.

"I see. That was very brave of yo- oh fuck she's wearing a costume," the male officer says, a weird look on his face.

"That's right!" Jade throws up a salute, grinning. "I'm Sharpshooter! I might be here for a while, so I thought I'd introduce myself!"

"Wait, as in the hero Sharpshooter? The one who dropkicked Le Joueur into the Eiffel Tower? That Sharpshooter?" the troll officer demands. The man just looks lost. As though life has lost all meaning. Jade can't imagine why that would be! "What are you doing here?"

Jade shrugs. "Visiting family and stuff. Beating up bad guys. The usual. And hey, they totally fixed the structural damage to the tower. You can't even tell it was ever bent!" She's still feels kind of bad about that one, but she couldn't help it! Sometimes when you're busy aiming at a doomsday device of dubious viability's off switch, you can't avoid punting someone into the structural turrets of major landmarks! It's a thing!
"Great. Fantastic. Now there's three of them," the male cop mutters wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose. "At this rate, we won't even have a job left."

"Ooooh! Do you know how to contact Heir?" Jade asks, brightening. Surely if anyone would know, it would be the police, right? John seems to have a really good relationship with them! A few cities Jade stopped by in the past few years, they nearly ran her out of town for no reason! One village technically tried to burn her as a witch, which had been hilarious, but not really practical in the long run. But John's been working for, like, years with no problems, so he must have this down flat! "I've been trying to run into him all night!"

"Contact Heir?" the troll cop repeats, looking baffled. "I don't know that anyone ever has, really."

"Aggggggh! Come on, does anyone actually talk to this guy?! I'm not actually the only one he's been ignoring?!!" Jade throws her hands up. How is this even possible?! Joooooooooohn! "That's it! I'm tracking this kid down tonight, if it's the last thing I do!" She is floating slightly off the ground in her righteous fury, and the police are eyeballing her speculatively as she turns to the mugged woman. "You okay here?"

"F-fine!" she exclaims.

"Good!" Jade bounces out of there like there's no tomorrow.

She lands right in the middle of WV and Bec's latest feud. Bec is of course totally unaffected by anything, but WV is beating at the wolf with nubby fists, and crackling with green electricity and just generally giving it all he's got. When Jade teleports in WV hiccups with surprise and falls back, flailing wildly, and Bec flops over on its side, whuffling in reply.

Truly, their relationship is beyond Jade's comprehension.

But she has more important matters to deal with right now! "Well, you fly around everywhere, don't you, John?" she says to herself, hovering upward. "Fine! You must take up the most human-shaped space in the sky with the highest rate of velocity below the level of commercial aircraft and above the skyline! Easy-peasy!"

Logic is great. Closing her eyes, Jade focuses her usual sphere of awareness up and out. She blanks out the swarming streets below her and the bustling people within skyscrapers as she floats higher. The air is a lot easier to deal with in terms of sensory input, even when she stretches out to try and reach the whole city. The smaller points of mass she discards immediately - birds and insects and stray leaves don't count. Clouds are little harder to work around, but the molecules are spread out enough that she can ignore them, too. There's a helicopter at the nearby medical center and a few news crews in the air that nearly give her a moment's pause, before she presses on, grumbling under her breath with frustration.

And -

There.

"Two of them!" she announces, opening her eyes and nearly pitching backward with excitement. She fixes the two points in her mind's eye, those precise coordinates where the two fast-moving
bodies had been running along at roof level. One had been running and leaping, anyway - the other had been hovering somewhere above, not nearly as fast as Jade would have estimated, but obviously John is hanging out with that Hemogoblin character!

Which means not only does Jade get to meet John at last, she gets to vet this interloper at the same time, and discover whether he misspelled hemoglobin deliberately or if he's just a total dumbass!

"Succeeeeeeess," she hisses, landing on her heels. She fluffs out her hair, adjusting where the straps of her aviator goggles lie and where the irrepressible curls bounce and tangle. She undoes the buttons of her lab coat, which means she gets a fresh wave of chilly night air, but she needs the dramatic effect. Needs it. It's critical that John get the most badass impression possible! Before she punches him in the noggin for being a butt! "We found him, Vi!" she crows, and a shriek of victory bubbles up in her chest. She doesn't see a reason to repress it; she shrieks, and grabs WV's flailing claws in her hands when he rockets upright and squeals in earnest. Bec huffs, sensing their emotions, but doesn't move, but Bec is always a little party pooper!

And with a pop, Jade does two things at once. It's getting easier to split her focus this way. WV she sets down on the rooftop nearby her target destination, which makes him mad of course, but she's definitely not trying to juggle him in midair for this. Bec can take care of itself, but WV's powers are still too uncertain!

Jade herself steps out in front of the body of mass that's flying through the air rather than leaping, and she knows she's sensed the right person when she sees the steel grey uniform the boy is wearing. She doesn't realize Heir is facing backward until she's already tackled him, letting a whoop rip out of her as she spins them around, arms wrapped around Heir's neck. She narrowly avoid cracking her head open on that giant hammer thingy, and sticks her chin on his shoulder, still laughing wildly. His hair is a darker black than hers, windblown with the hood flopped over backward, and it smells like the night sky.

At last! At last!

"What the -" a hoarse voice yelps, and Heir twists in her grip, little gales of wind tugging at her insistently. "Let go!"

"Never!" Jade cackles, but she still obliges, kicking her legs out and hoisting herself up with her hands on Heir's shoulders so she can look down at him from over his head. He cranes his neck back to look up at her, his bright blue eyes all confused and wide and his eyebrow frowny. What a silly face!

Jade grins, and grins, and grins.

And then she boops him on the nose.

"It's so good to see you, little brother!"

- Diamonds holds out a hand for the scanner results even before Marlowe has finished tapping away at the machine. Clubs had his grimy claws on it last, so naturally Diamonds has no intention of carrying the machine around on a regular basis, but the boss had been quite insistent that she keep it around.

The reason becomes clear as she scans the rows of scribbles and wavering lines, hitting the highest possible amplitude the machine is designed to read at multiple points along the chart. "So, the Space Witch is here, too," Diamonds muses, folding the chart neatly and passing it back off to Marlowe to
She has allowed herself to unwind for the day; even criminals must sleep eventually, and she's been crisscrossing the planet with a vengeance lately. While Marlowe goes to file away that report, she is pleased to see that he also has the mug of hot cocoa cooling on the counter. The jet leg is an absolute nightmare, really, and she can only push through it for so long. Perhaps the boss intended her to confront Hemogoblin and Heir immediately, but on the other hand, the boss always knows what she is going to do before she does, generally, so he no doubt has 'accounted' for her delay right now as well. He's utterly infuriating that way.

Just once, Diamonds thinks, she might like to disrupt the Doctor's unnatural, placid calm. Whether by inserting an unforeseen wrench into his flawless body of works, or by introducing his faceless globe of a head to the business end of her cue stick. Either option would be most...satisfying. But she puts that thought away. Too risky. And besides, her recent...disquiet, let's say, has been assuaged by this much more promising assignment. Even if the boss persists in having her run around in circles trying to capture Spades Slick, this new task of testing Hemogoblin and confronting Heir promises to be most invigorating, and far more concrete. It's not often Diamonds is sent up against heroes - the Midnight Crew's activities, by and large, tend to fly below the radar where Diamonds's division is concerned, while Hearts has always borne the brunt of heroic interference.

Crichton had rung in his 'compromised' signal early this past morning, far sooner than Diamonds would have anticipated. But then, Hearts's usually blustering reports have provided details on only physical encounters with Hemogoblin and the one called Heir of Breath. Boxcars is a blunt object, and she couldn't really expect to gain a working estimation on how intelligently these two heroes work together without her own trial run. The results? They're competent enough, and they do seem to work in tandem, at least when one member of the partnership is directly threatened. She'll know more once she's extracted Crichton and received a full report. Crichton's specialty is starting the misinformation, not perpetuating it, and if the two hadn't ferreted him out in a few days she would have retrieved him anyway. He's disturbingly loyal, naturally, but also more than a little mad with it, as some of Diamonds's division lean toward.

(It hasn't escaped her that the Doctor is far more interested in the Heir. But if he wishes her to focus on Hemogoblin, her own, private investigation will simply remain...discreet.)

Sighing, Diamonds lounges back against the headboard, and drapes her tailored night clothes around her more comfortably, taking the mug of cocoa and stirring the blanket with her feet as Marlowe takes up his usual place by her shoulder. She trusts him enough by now to stand guard while she sleeps - but only just. If he falls asleep on the job even one time, she'll have to chuck yet another personal assistant. It would be a shame. Sipping on the cocoa, Diamonds takes up her phone and, sighing, makes her report.

DD: < The Witch's signature has been confirmed in Seattle.
DD: > Your orders?
Ah, it would seem Deuce's harrying was a rousing success. She's arrived much later in the game than I had reason to hope.
Her presence should not unduly hinder you. Carry on as planned.
DD: < I see. The addition of another unusual powerful hero will not impact my efforts to carry out this mission in this city at all?
I did say unduly. She may cause some concern at first, but the cage should be complete and shipped to your location within days. It would have been sooner, but even I cannot foresee all things, and my special guest has been less than cooperative.
DD: > Invigorating, sir.
Hush now, Droog, you're becoming quite tart.
Here, I will give you a small tidbit, to tide you over. Spades Slick will soon cross paths with the Knight of Blood. Make of that what you will - I know your little one-sided grudge has persisted. Ah, the stirrings of black romance, perhaps? Do try not to become hatefactuated with the enemy, Droog. I always find such a thing hideously tedious.

DD: < You are, as ever, completely off base in matters of romance, boss.
DD: > Let me assure you that I have no interest in such matters. This Slick character is a challenge that has been denied me for too long, and that is all.

Oh, indeed. Well, he won't be able to conceal himself forever, now that he is no longer on the move. I have the utmost confidence in your abilities, Droog. Do not let me down. I expect a most riveting report by the end of the week.

DD: < Of course, boss. As you wish.

And contact that agent. You know the one. Its target is clearly breaking free from the set parameters for its behavior, and I would like to know whether or not he can be trusted to move freely if and when the order comes.

DD: > You got it, sir.

And that's the end of that conversation. Diamonds is fluttering her fingers along the curve of her cue stick specibus by the end, and it takes everything in her to finish the hot cocoa like a sane woman, sipping it slowly, while Marlowe continues to stand, oblivious, by her shoulder.

He's a dear, but he isn't quite as good at picking up on her moods as old Portia was, but then, Portia had used that knowledge to try to double-cross her to the CIA.

Portia isn't around anymore. There hadn't been a lot left of her to bury, either. But it would have just been tacky to leave her pieces lying around where anyone could see them, so Diamonds had made the extra effort. Portia had been an object lesson - never keep an assistant who knows you completely. Hence why Marlowe remains, despite his occasional slips.

When Diamonds rises to her feet, sweeping the blanket aside, for example, he startles and has a gun in hand in moments, clearly expecting a threat. "My lady?" he asks, tense.

Diamonds just starts peeling off her night clothes. "Change in plans, Marlowe," she says idly, shrugging off the silky shirt and folding it crisply before lying it to one side. She swings open the closet doors and steps inside, humming as she runs a finger along the arms of potential suits. "We're going hunting tonight. Might as well meet up with Crichton, too, the poor thing is probably having a crisis of faith by now."

"Ah. Yes, ma'am," Marlowe replies, bowing his head. He adjusts to the situation with ease. "Which shoes would you prefer tonight? Dress boots or heels?"

"Oh, Ferragamo, I think, the plain toe Oxfords. I have had quite enough of this chase. This is a matter of business, now." Diamonds selects a suit and smiles in quiet approval to herself. "I'll save the heels for Heir and Hemogoblin. I could care less about any impression I give this insufferable carapacian."

She doesn't think that she'll catch Spades Slick tonight, not when there's still discrepancies in his hastily concealed trail. But a carapacian in America can't hide long. While he holed himself up in Asia and Europe, he had the advantage that humans and trolls alike have difficulty distinguishing between carapacians from lack of familiarity, even in countries where the alien race have enclaves. Now, in the Americas, any sighting of a Dersite carapacian will automatically ping the members of Diamonds's network who have flooded the city.

And when that happens, she will have him. She has some questions for this Spades Slick, questions she doesn't think about when the Doctor could be listening in.
Patiently, Diamonds begins the painstaking process of buttoning up her silken undershirt and plucking stray threads, while Marlowe slides a new pair of Ferragamo calfskin dress shoes out of their packaging and briskly polishes the calfskin and lizard flanking.

One must take pride in one's appearance, after all, and there's a reason Diamonds has so many operations running on the side, in addition to the Crew's mainstream activities. She has expensive taste, what can she say?

With an edged finger, though, she continues to tap away at her phone, using her teeth to nip a wayward thread free while she rolls her eyes at the screen. This particular sleeper agent has proven less than reliable in the past, his reports scattered and rare and always reeking of near-mutinous intent, but Doc Scratch insists they maintain him, and somehow that maintenance ended up falling under Diamonds's jurisdiction. At the very least, she always chuckles a little to herself at the thought of these mewling heroes the Doctor is so obsessed with trusting the one person in the world they should not.

Sometimes, one has to enjoy the little things, like mulled wine and a hot bath and a crisp new suit, and a well-placed traitor in the ranks of one's enemies. She shivers a little with delight just thinking about it.

DD: < I have arrived.
DD: > Reports indicate that your target is wavering beyond established parameters, and must be stabilized.
DD: < The boss is displeased. As am I.
DD: > In the words of today's youth - check yourself before you wreck yourself.
DD: < I have little patience for mistakes.
??: Of course. You have nothing to worry about, DD.
??: Is there any way I can assist you while you're in town?
DD: > You have your orders.
DD: < You need know nothing of mine.
DD: > Remember your place.
??: Yes, DD. I understand.

Lip curling, Diamonds smooths the front panels of her vest. It's not a flat black, as the uniform of the Midnight Crew generally requires, but embroidered with a damask print slightly darker than the fabric itself. She folds the suit jacket over top, and the pattern underneath remains her little self-indulgence, private and hidden. The suit hugs her perfectly, and when Marlowe approaches, head bowed, with the shoes to complete the outfit, Diamonds is more than ready for a night out on the town.

She grins widely when Marlowe looks up for approval, tapping him on the cheek with the toe of her shoe once he's finished lacing them for her, and she slides the spare cue sticks and knives and pistols into the many hidden pockets and holsters of her outfit.

It's a shame the Doctor would like Spades Slick back in one piece. Because that's just not the kind of condition Diamonds is envisioning for when she delivers that carapacian, at last, to her employer.

Spades will never know what hits him. And, she thinks, smudging her eye shadow in the mirror, neither will Hemogoblin. "Come along, Marlowe. You can be a dear and fetch Crichton from lockup for me, yes?"

Marlowe bows, his fist over his heart. "I'll bring him to you within the hour."

"Good. I'll be on the hunt." Diamonds draws on her gloves and flexes her fingers before sailing out.
the door of the hotel room, Marlowe hot on her heels.

This is going to be a fun week.

- The shadows in between the towering knowledge and potentials that fill the mind of one Doc Scratch run far more deeply than he is comfortable with. This universe is inundated with Void, a smothering blanket that leaves gaps of nothingness not even he can delve. It feels rather like having a toothache, a persistent throb that means something is missing, something is rotting, and he can't quite make out what.

Not that this is truly an issue, of course. Quite the opposite. He has been doing this for billions of years after all, including sessions in which he had even less to work with than he does now. As long as the paths that lead to his ultimate goal remain illuminated, fixed points in his mind, he can work around the scraps of darkness with ease and pleasure, even. That element of uncertainty is the spice of life.

But, he thinks, he is now one step closer to shining light on one particular dark void in his usually flawless foresight. His knowledge of the previous session ends after the usual fixed point that always serves as the termination of his role in the story as a free agent, that moment when his identity as Doc Scratch gives way to someone...else.

But he knows from the state of this universe that something went...awry. Something he could not have accounted for, lurking as it did in the space between sessions, that endless Abyss. The hazards of dealing with Horrorterrors, no doubt. Whatever the case, two sessions had collided in a way he had not controlled for in his calculations, and the ensuing Scratch that erupted had produced an unsettling reset before his eternal endgame could ensue. The Void is the least of his problems when the entirety of the carapacian race has decided to up and relocate from the Medium to the pregaming, and the heroes have retained their god tiering for no reason other than, seemingly, to be contrary and cause him untold stress trying to control their antics. Simply tedious.

But he will make do. He always has, and always will.

The Seer is vulnerable to him now, having refuted the Void that always hid her location in a fit of teenage angst, no doubt. There are advantages to dealing with hormonally unstable players rather than children fresh out of diapers; they are impulsive and reckless and they always know they're right, no matter the evidence to the contrary. The Witch remains at large, dark to his ordinarily all-seeing vision, but she is easy enough to track when she gives off so much energy so recklessly, tapping into aspects of her powers well in advance of the game proper. The Knight is still roving, but he grows clearer by the day, and the Heir - well, Scratch has the Heir well in hand, whether the child knows it or not. Skaia itself could try to intervene, and it would only succeed in making the boy's brains melt out through his nose.

A shame he needs all four alive, for now. That would certainly have been an interesting experiment to run.

And now, Scratch can begin to answer the question of just how significant the trolls will be to this session. He holds up the vial of blood obtained from the scene of a certain explosion in Seattle, and inspects the uncannily red liquid in the light, humming to himself as he considers the faint residue of power that still lingers in the blood.

Oh yes. Karkat Vantas. An old spanner in the works. Let's see how powerful he really is, two universes and a Scratch later.
After all, if need be, Diamonds Droog is already conveniently in place to eliminate rusty old spanners. Particularly ones who have overstayed their welcome in paradox space.

He sets down the vial and tilts his head to the side, walking to the balcony so he can look out into the night. He can sense the incoming mental intrusion coming from a mile away, and sighs, opening up a small portion of his vast intellect for the Horrorterror called Malā’ikah to slither in. Scratch had no hand in the creation of any of the Horrorterrors except Gl'bogolyb, his own personal universe-warming present to the inhabitants of a little world called Alternia, and so Malā’ikah's twining voices are nearly uncomfortable, whining and trilling and shrieking discordantly. A creature of the grimlight, it burns nearly pure white in his mind, a violent tempest of light and sound that rings out with none of the slurping wetness of Gl'bogolyb's waterlogged symphonies.

It is unpleasant. But Malā’ikah is in the unique position of being the only Horrorterror mad enough, apparently, to continue to respond to the Doctor's inquiries. The rest are still sore over that rather two sessions - something about tangles being severed and lost forever to the Abyss - and prefer to retreat to their Furthest Ring rather than reach out as actively as they might have in years past.

Ah. Malā’ikah. Your response, then?

S\textsuperscript{cR} \textsuperscript{a}Tc\textsuperscript{H} the blazing white voice replies, sing-songing and harsh. The tangle might almost have sounded beautiful, if its chiming voices had more clarity; the distortion and clashing notes that accompany its warbling screams ruin the effect, though. O\textsuperscript{u}R \textsuperscript{e}E \textsuperscript{s}P \textsuperscript{o}N\textsuperscript{s}E\textsuperscript{is}a\textsuperscript{n}\textsuperscript{v}a\textsuperscript{T}\textsuperscript{r}\textsuperscript{N}\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{t}\textsuperscript{i}\textsuperscript{V}\textsuperscript{e}. We\textsuperscript{W}\textsuperscript{il}\textsuperscript{P}\textsuperscript{A}\textsuperscript{y} \textsuperscript{Yo}\textsuperscript{Ur}\textsuperscript{G}\textsuperscript{i}\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{M}\textsuperscript{e} \textsuperscript{Ag}\textsuperscript{A}\textsuperscript{i}\textsuperscript{N}.

Oh, most excellent. Always a pleasure to have you. Not everyone has your...artistic touch.

The Horrorterror laps up the praise, of course. Most of the mad ones do. It sounds like quartz scraping against glass as the probing tendrils of grimlight try and fail to latch on to Scratch's mind. In any other eldest god, that would have been an attack or a grave insult. From Malā’ikah, it's merely a thank you - after all, what gift could compare to being drawn into the embrace of the Abyss?

Horrorterror logic, honestly.

You will seek out the Prince, then? Not that I would ever think to impose, but he does have the most raw power, if he is not thoroughly compromised in advance. I would like to know whether to implement my own solution. You have expressed interest in him before, and I would not dare come between you and an old...tanglebuddy.

Doc Scratch has found that a stream of endless, serene politeness is the best way to deal with every living being in creation. Occasionally, some require a quick rap of the broom to get them motivated, but all in all, not even a twisted hivemind from beyond Skaia's purview can resist an earnest entreaty.

Promising enough. Malā’ikah may be mad, but it can be relied upon to tell the truth. Most Horrorterrors can, perversely enough - like Doc Scratch himself, they don't really see the point in lying.

And this way, at least the Prince of Hope will be detained for the near future. Risen or not, Doc Scratch prefers to have heroes of Hope well under his thumb before they can become a threat. He prefers stringent preparation to hasty reaction.
However, there is still the matter of...well.

...And have you given further consideration to the juggalo problem?

The response is immediate and sharp enough to pierce even Doc Scratch's flawlessly crafted mental defenses. N’T’O.

A shame. It was the answer he expected, though not the one he’d hoped for. Gamzee Makara remains even more of a problem than the Prince, simply because no one, not even Scratch himself, can figure out exactly where the clown stands.

He has ever danced the line between a useful servant and an uncontrollable fool. If you could just -

Malā’ikah screams like a sob, and curls in on itself. Eurgh. It seems even a Horrorterror can be traumatized, and the fact that exposure to Gamzee Makara caused such instability in the hivemind merely ratchets up the troll’s threat level in Scratch's mental estimations.

The change in subject seems to do the job. Or at least, Malā’ikah allows itself to be distracted, leaving the section of its hivemind scarred by the destructive influence of the old Bard of Rage to wait to itself in the dark while the rest switches back into whimsical chimes.

Malā’ikah simply rumbles, a pleased note of whistles in its voices, and then moves off abruptly. It

...But then again, it is the mind of a Bard. Scratch sighs, and relents.

I shall handle him on my own, then. Never fear, Malā’ikah, you will not have to deal with the clown again. I do not suppose you have heard from GL'bgolyb recently? It is quite stubbornly refusing my calls.

The response is immediate and sharp enough to pierce even Doc Scratch's flawlessly crafted mental defenses. N’T’O.

...And have you given further consideration to the juggalo problem?

However, there is still the matter of...well.

It's just good business.
JADE HAS ARRIVED.

THE PARTY MAY NOW COMMENCE.

Now everyone, please proceed directly to the Troll Arc, contained in the next fic in the series. Some really plot-critical developments are contained in the mini-arc. Skip at your own risk!
Thoughts Grown Dangerous

Chapter Summary

I have so little slept
My lids drowse now against the very sun;
Yea, the brain aching with a dream begun
Beats like a fitful blood; kiss but both brows,
And you shall pluck my thoughts grown dangerous
Almost away.

Chapter Notes

The trolls now have their own separate AO3 story going, so before continuing on I highly recommend you switch over and read their mini-arc, the next fic in the series. Otherwise, more than a few developments here won't make any sense.

Heir, Hemogoblin, and the Kanaya design belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC V - DERELICTION

They're discussing current events when it happens.

No, really. This is what Hemogoblin has been reduced to. Chatting up Heir by talking about the recent explosions in Chicago, and the white dome over Los Angeles. Ostensibly, Heir's breezes are guiding them to some nearby crime, but it's close enough that Hemogoblin wants to test his legs out again. After a day of nightmares and John, Karkat has been groggy in the worst way possible - but to his surprise, he'd had no trouble keeping his eyes open and walking around the house afterward. Which means (and he fucking hates to admit it) that John was right. The nightmares may torment him and leave him feeling miserable, but not sleeping left him a complete shitwit. Seriously, ranting at John's Internet friend and worse, losing? Clearly not the actions of anyone with half a functioning thinkpan.

So he's going to have to suck it up and take the dreams as they come. He doesn't have any other choice right now, not when his physical health is so unstable that any moment he could lose the ability to function. Any more adenosine in his system, and he'll be drowsy and stumbling all over again.

So of course, he needs to keep moving. Get the bitter adrenaline flowing to counteract the build of other chemicals in his bloodstream, and shock his heart awake with every rough landing. He dips and turns and uses his awareness of his body to the fullest, but he doesn't dare pull any of his more extensive acrobatics because he's not a complete imbecile.

Heir, being a goofy fucking gentleman underneath it all, refuses to fly ahead. Instead, Hemogoblin works under the extra pressure of not fucking up a landing in front of his flush crush.
A flush crush who babbles theories about the Los Angeles incident in between Hemogoblin's landings.

"And of course, no one knows what happened with Cold Tide," Heir chatters, gesturing with his hands. "No news from him at all."

Unfortunately, Hemogoblin had caught the news on his phone while riding the bus to the city, too, so he has an equally nerdy theory to throw out there. Where does one draw the line, Hemogoblin wonders, between being a hero expressing reasonable concern about other heroes - and being a total nerd of the caliber only John and Karkat tend to achieve. Heir flouts that line - hell, he plays hopscotch with it.

At least that means Hemogoblin can probably be forgiven some slips into a more Karkat mindset. Particularly when Heir raises his eyebrows in askance at him. "Well, I agree that Nymph is obviously Lady Cascade. She didn't even bother to change her costume design. I doubt she and Cold Tide would stop communicating entirely, so she must have some idea of what's going on. But it still raises the question of why she relocated at all, and how it might be connected to the dome."

Heir nods grimly. "Well, Cascade - uh, Nymph - has always been a pretty PR heavy hero. I'm sure we'll hear from her eventually. But I definitely think the dome is worrying. The last I heard, no one could even call or message people on the inside. That's a whole city basically gone. And if they can't communicate through the dome, who even knows if Cold Tide can get any news out."

"Is this one of those secret hero grapevine things, where we all team up to go deal with the new problem across the country without telling the new guy?" Hemogoblin asks, wryly. That one still bugs him, but only when he's bitter and grumpy which oh wait is ALL THE FUCKING TIME.

"I swear, it wasn't intentional!" Heir says, adorably worried as he stops in midair and flails his arms a little. "Ack! Are you still mad! I'm sorry, really-"

Hemogoblin halts in the center of the roof and rolls his eyes. Heir takes things way too seriously, sometimes. "No, I believe it was an accident. I'm just kidding."

"Oh. Good!" Heir says, shoulders falling. He sighs with relief. Then he cocks his head to the side, his blue eyes gleaming in the darkness. "That's a thought, though..."

He doesn't elaborate. Hemogoblin waits patiently, except his patience is thinner than goddamn tissue paper right now, so he barely waits ten seconds. "Care to share?"

Heir startles, and then looks thoughtful. "I just wonder...the dome only appeared this afternoon, so I'm sure they haven't figured out if anything can break through it or not. But I wonder if my teleportation would be able to bounce me through or not. I don't know, it would just be interesting!"

_It would depend if the dome is permeable to air or not, wouldn't it?_ Hemogoblin thinks, but for once he manages to bite down on his tongue and draw blood, stopping the words before he can blab them out. They are still not talking about what Hemogoblin had experienced during that one teleport with Heir, riding as the wind, but Heir seems as oblivious to how his powers might work as ever. Karkat's head canons have spawned like mad, of course, thanks to his insider's perspective on Heir's new skill, but he isn't sure Heir would welcome them or if the other hero would just shut down again.

But really. If the dome allows air through - and he hopes it does, or how will the citizens of Los Angeles breathe? - then he suspects Heir will be able to slip through as literal air, depending on how the dome is being generated. Heir may or may not assume he's just teleporting from point to point, with no travel time in-between, but Hemogoblin knows the truth. Hemogoblin just doesn't know
how aware Heir was during that weird episode, before the terror hit and he clammed up

This is too complicated for him to worry about now. Ugh. Why can't things just be normal for once?

But Los Angeles is not their problem, and he says as much. "If anything, either Cold Tide or Nymph herself might feel the need to defend their city, wherever they've fucked off too. They'd just get royally pissy if we started dicking around in their territory. But it would be interesting to see just how many uses you can find for that."

Heir just laughs. "We'll see how it plays out," he agrees. Then his smile widens to the point of outright stupidity. "We? So you'd be interested in coming, too?"

Hemogoblin wonders just what he's gotten himself into, having a flush crush who's as fucking daft as - as John, for fuck's sake. "Always," he retorts, because it's the easy pun, and Heir's dark blush is his reward. "We are partners, after all."

Heir beams through the fog of embarrassment, because he's not an emotional fuckwit like Hemogoblin, and doesn't feel the need to hide it when he's cheerful about something. Hell, Hemogoblin has the fight the instinct to hide his own face so he doesn't have to witness that level of unconcealed exuberance. Karkat has learned to keep his head down and deflect everything off a sensible wall of rage, and it carries over, sometimes. The mask over his eyes is the only thing that gives him the fortitude to meet Heir's eyes and smirk back.

"Okay! I think we're almost there! The winds definitely think we should be headed this direction," Heir says, starting to glide away. Hemogoblin takes a few steps back before dashing forward, to get the momentum he needs to propel himself over the gap between this building and the next. Heir floats effortlessly backward, watching from over the breach.

So he doesn't see the dark figure that looms in the night sky before dropping on his head.

Hemogoblin does, though. "Shit! Heir, you-"

He fucks the landing. Of course. The shock of that figure draping itself over Heir from behind, with no prior warning, causes him to lose track of his leap. He hits the roof with plenty of room to spare, but his left foot shoots out from under him, slipping in the gravel that he normally would have accounted for.

He feels the bone creak, an ominous sensation this close to splintering, and twists himself into a forward roll, hissing as he comes up in a crouch. He keeps his weight off that leg as he looks up, scanning the skies with his bloodpusher thumping wildly. He trusts that Heir would never fall - the air protects him almost without his conscious thought, it seems - but if that shadowy figure had a weapon on him -

A bright, merry laugh fills the night air. Heir is still hovering where Hemogoblin last saw him (to his relief), his eyes flashing a brilliant blue behind his goggles as he drifts to one side. "Let go!" he yelps, one hand gripping the arm choking him out.

"Never!" the mysterious figure replies. Hemogoblin can barely see her - there are no street lights below, so the illumination is absolutely shitty, and most of her is hidden behind Heir's body at this angle, a deliberate tactical advantage no doubt. But the voice he hears most definitely sounds female, and -

Weirdly familiar? Not the sound of it, really, but the cadence, the way she draws out the word just a little too long...He doesn't know any females, human or troll, who talk like that (because to be honest
Karkat has a social circle of one), but he could never mistake that manner of speaking.

"It's so good to see you, at last!" the hidden woman sings, giggling some more. When Heir tries to whirl and grab at her for a better hold, she lights up like an electric green lamp, her long hair crackling with static while she floats a little above Heir's head.

Rather than attacking, she reaches down with a finger and taps Heir on the nose. "Little brother!"

She sounds like -

Wait. What did she just say?

Hemogoblin, who is ready to fling himself into the fight, veers to a halt.

Heir blinks and looks up into the woman's face, his mouth an 'oh' of perplexed confusion.

The woman smiles, and leans down to hug - because THAT'S A HUG GODDAMMIT - Heir around the neck again. Her feet remain at the same level though, so she curves at a weird angle to do so, banging her head down on Heir's in what would have been a seriously damaging headbutt if Heir weren't a total blockhead.

What fresh fuckery is this.

No really. What. The. Fuck.

Heir snaps out of it first. "Wha- lemme go!" He reaches up with both arms, grabs the woman by the shoulders, and yanks her forward. Instead of falling, like a normal human being, she somersaults through the air, legs kicking until she cartwheels into an upright position. She moves smoothly through the air as though weightless, her eyes flickering a luminescent green against the dark of her skin. "Who are you?" Heir demands, which is a fucking excellent question. Seriously, Hemogoblin nominates that question for a fucking Nobel Prize.

"I'm Sharpshooter, at the moment!" She spins, clapping her hands together like a gleeful wriggler. "And you're Heir!" Then she points at Hemoglobin, who flinches back into a crouch, but nothing comes flying at him. "And that's Hemoglobin-who-can't-spell-right!"

"It's a fucking pun, you moron!" Hemoglobin yells back, before he considers how incredibly stupid it is to yell at some unknown superpowered flying woman.

"Ohhh! As long as it was on purpose, that's fine!" She laughs again. It's infuriating beyond words, mostly because the part of him that thinks like Karkat can still hear John. It's not identical to his laugh; John does this weird half-hiccupping snerk sometimes that Karkat basically has memorized, while this lady just belts out nonstop, open-mouthed laughter with no interruptions. "I was going to have woooords with you if you just didn't know how to spell it right! As a woman of science!"

The problem now is that Hemoglobin does know the name Sharpshooter. And by the raised eyebrows that continue to creep up Heir's forehead with a vengeance, he can tell Heir is familiar, too. Sharpshooter is one of those oddball heroes who never seem to settle down: Karkat and John have never been major Sharpshooter fans, but that's mostly because she's relatively obscure and difficult to keep track of. She turns up in the most random-ass places on the globe, usually in connection to bizarre reports of giant robots and natural disasters, saves people, and then vanishes before anyone can really get her pinned down for an interview. Half the reports sound more like comic book fantasy than real life heroics, but what the hell does Hemoglobin know about real life when his partner turns into air and he's a fucking mutant?
And now she's - what? Claiming to be related to Heir?

It's too much. Hemogoblin can't even handle this level of mindblowing, bulgefondling insanity. At least Heir looks as confused as he feels because he is sick of being out of the loop on these things. Knowing Heir is similarly disadvantaged helps, but it would help even more if Heir would lure the crazy hero down to roof level. Hemogoblin can pull a lot of weird shit, but flying isn't in his amazingly varied repertoire, and the way Sharpshooter floats in midair, without even the constant thrum of breezes that accompany Heir's flight, is downright unnerving.

"Sharpshooter, I'm sorry, but you seem to have me confused with someone else," Heir says slowly. How he manages to be polite in the face of this is beyond Hemogoblin, but then, Hemogoblin is a ragey little fuck. Heir is a goof but he's a polite goof. "I don't have a sister. We've never met before - ever. It's nice to meet you, but you're seriously misinformed."

Sharpshooter folds her arms, lips pouting out. "No, I'm not! Come on, do I have to take off my goggles and prove it to you?"

"Wha - NO!" Heir says vehemently, holding up both hands and shaking his head, eyes wide. Hemogoblin's eyes bulge too because what the fuck. Did she just actually offer to unmask in front of two random heroes? I mean - does this woman not understand the definition of 'secret identity'?

"That's really not necessary." Heir stumbles over the words, floating backward to get some space between him and the woman. Hemogoblin heartily approves. Heir seems to have got with the program, descending slightly as he angles toward Hemogoblin's roof.

As discreetly as he can, Hemogoblin works the nail of one claw into the flesh of the wrist opposite, and starts drawing blood out into a sickle. Sharpshooter may be nominally a hero, but this whole situation is too strange for him to take any chances. If she tries to jump Heir again, with more sinister intent, he means to be ready.

She doesn't seem to be carrying a weapon of any kind, though - there's a strap across the front of her deep, blackish green jumpsuit and white labcoat, but it could suit anything from a riflekind to a sword - for some fucking stupid reason, Hemogoblin has never made an intense study of the different varieties of strife carriers on the market. Sharpshooter uses rifles, generally, but he hasn't forgotten the rumors that she unloaded a grenade launcher in Turkey. Like, what the fuck?

She follows Heir, oblivious to Hemogoblin's preparations. Good. Fucking swell. "But that would help, right?" she insists, blinking. Her eyes still radiate green light like headlamps. "Then you would know my face, and you could see we look alike!"

"I don't think that's necessary!" Heir says, his voice strained. "Please, like - I am really not interested in knowing your civilian identity! Really, not at all!"

"Oh." Sharpshooter halts, her lips a pout of confusion. "Why are you not excited about this?"

"Because you're crazy!" Hemogoblin throws in, being his usual helpful self.

"Am not~!" She sings it, and it feels like someone stabbing him and twisting the knife somewhere in the general area of his stomach. It's too much like John, and just different enough to make him feel sick.

"Look, this is just really sudden and out of the blue, but let's be reasonable here," Heir says, holding out both hands beseechingly. "Umm, welcome to Seattle, Sharpshooter. I don't know what brought you here, but it's nice to meet you. We don't have much going on by way of giant robots-"
"Yet," Hemogoblin mutters.

"-But you're welcome to hang around and fight crime if you want to. We're not going to turn down help, right?" Heir finishes, eyeing Hemogoblin and winking furiously like a crackpanned dweeb. Hemogoblin sighs heavily, rolling his eyes, and winks back so Heir will just stop.

"But you still don't believe me about us being siblings," Sharpshooter says, folding her arms. "Even though I know all about you!"

Heir is almost at roof level now, but Sharpshooter is moving a lot more slowly. She's wavering, and Hemogoblin feels spitefully gratified now that she's lost some of that boundless confidence. "I don't know what you think you know," Heir says, "but you really don't."

"Ugh, here! I'll prove it to you! Just listen!" Sharpshooter skips in close to Heir and grips him by the arm. Heir jerks, but she must have one hell of a grip. Heir looks wary as she puts her face right up against his, and for one searing, infuriating moment, Hemogoblin is sure she's trying to kiss Heir. Which would be weird (and, if her claims are to be believed, incestuous in that squicky way humans have) and would also probably cause him to spontaneously transform into a raving psychotic and tackle her out of the sky, teleportation be damned. The two inconsiderate flying douchebags are near enough to the roof that he could make the jump. But she just whispers in Heir's ear, her hair curling in the other hero's ambient breezes, and they're far enough away that Hemogoblin can't even hear a murmur.

But he sees Heir's eyes widen.

Heir's hand shoots out, and the wind shrieks, blowing Sharpshooter backward through the air with the force of a hurricane. It's so sudden and uncontrolled that Hemogoblin can feel wind streaming around him in wayward bursts. The whistling of the wind fills the air like a siren as Heir's eyes flare blue and the wind around him twists violently, one wrong move away from spawning a full blown tornado in the middle of Seattle.

What the fuck did she say? Hemogoblin crouches again because he has no choice, digging in his heels to steady himself against Heir's tempestuous whirlwind.

"How the fuck do you know that?" Heir says, his voice cold. Hemogoblin has never heard that kind of tone emerge from Heir, and it sends a shiver down his spine, more from fear than anything else. He's never feared Heir before. But that voice is...it barely sounds like Heir at all.

"How the hell," he continues, as Sharpshooter rights herself in midair, "do you know my name?!

Oh.

Oh holy fuck.

...They're fucked. Hemogoblin doesn't even think twice before including himself in that, dazed as he stares out over the space between the two buildings, where the two other heroes hang in midair. If his partner is out, he's probably just as fucking doomed. Because Sharpshooter might be completely bugfuck insane, but from the look on Heir's face, she has one hell of a blackmail tool to leverage here.

"I tooold you!" Sharpshooter complains, fluffing her wind-tossed hair with a careless wave of her hand. "I'm your big sister! Of course I know your real name! And now I'll tell you mine, since you're being such a dumb butt about this!"
She teleports again, but Hemogoblin's eyes are starting to adjust with the flickering pattern of her movements. Unlike Heir, whose teleportation on the video of New York was accompanied only by the flicker of blue light from his eyes, green light, somewhere between lightning and fire, outlines Sharpshooter whenever she vanishes in a snap of her fingers, and - Hemogoblin's eyes strain, but he's almost certain that the green fire appears before Sharpshooter does, a split second delay before her body zaps in right behind Heir. Heir turns on a dime, his palm shooting out to defend himself, but Sharpshooter catches it with her own hand and, when Heir blasts her with wind instead, and she clings to Heir's wrist so that the only thing that gets blown back is her hair. "Sooo ruuude!" she sings, and then she ducks her head in again.

Hemogoblin can only assume what she whispers next is her own name.

...Seriously. Did these two just reach first name terms after five fucking minutes, when Hemogoblin has been Heir's partner for weeks?

Fuck everything about that.

Heir yanks away this time, and finally - finally - gets his scrawny ass over the roof, where Hemogoblin can reach him if need be. "Why are you doing this? How did you know my name?" he asks, insistent and on the edge of desperation. Some of the (fucking terrifying) growl has left Heir's voice, and he sounds mostly confused again. Hemogoblin tenses as Sharpshooter follows Heir over the roof, her feet still skimming along through the air, circling around Heir with all of her focus on him. Hemogoblin might as well be part of the wall.

She's not paying attention to her surroundings - or perhaps she just doesn't consider Hemogoblin a threat.

She's mistaken, of course. It's the work of two quick steps and then Hemogoblin seizes that ridiculous, flashy lab coat and yanks her back. Before she can teleport out, he has the sickle of blood curved around her neck, just under her chin. "I think," he purrs, heart thumping, "you should stay very still."

"Hemogoblin," Heir says, his voice steady, and Hemogoblin looks up from under his fringe to raise an eyebrow at the other hero. It's not Hemogoblin's secret identity that's been compromised, after all. This is a clusterfuck of potentially greater magnitude than Hemogoblin being accused of arson - at least if all else had failed he could have retreated to a life as just Karkat. If this Sharpshooter wanted to, she could strip away all of that last-ditch security from Heir simply by releasing his identity to the Internet or the press.

The fact that she offered to even the score (and maybe, maybe did - there's no guarantee that whatever she whispered to Heir was in fact her real name) makes no impact on the fact that she has massive blackmail material to hold over Heir's head. And - weirdly enough - Hemogoblin's loyalty is to his partner.

If Heir doesn't think they can trust Sharpshooter to keep this a secret...well.

Sharpshooter shifts a little, and a sharp elbow digs into Hemogoblin's side. "Lemme go, dummy!" she complains, squirming some more. "Heeeeir, tell him to let me go or I'll kick him in the dick!"

"So you complain about me misspelling hemoglobin, but you flunked out of basic troll biology, huh?" Hemogoblin snarls back, trying and failing to not roll his eyes.

"Tentacles!" Sharpshooter sings out, and holy fuck even the sing-song has the same lilt. Hemogoblin can feel rage rising up that is purely Karkat, quite ready to lose his shit in front of Heir if it means
making this woman (unintentionally) mocking his moirail shut up. "It's a figure of speech!"

"You guys," Heir says weakly.

"Pardon me and my failure to have a human dick, you insensitive fuckwit!"

"Bluhhhh! So shouty! The only reason I'm not kicking your butt is because you're Heir's partner, mister!"

"...You guys?"

Hemogoblin flinches like he's been doused with a bucket of cold water. Even the way she draws out that 'bluh' sounds like a higher pitched John. Why did this have to happen when Karkat is still short on sleep and emotionally unstable? This wouldn't be nearly as infuriating if he were at normal rage levels, honestly.

He has to shake the irritation though. He has an image to maintain, dammit. Heir is right there, for fuck's sake. "You could try," he replies silkily, because Hemogoblin has this thing where he'd like to have the last word.

"Ohhhh, noooo, it is on, mister angry troll -" He has a faceful of crackling, green-sparking hair now, but he grits his teeth and doesn't let go.

"You GUYYYS!" Heir yells with more force. He's hovering a few feet from them, and Hemogoblin can't decipher his expression. Some of that desperation lingers, but it's mostly overwhelmed by a grimace of disbelief. "You guys, does this seriously have to be an issue? Like, really?"

"He insulted my capacity to kick ass!" Sharpshooter protests. As though she actually gets to make an argument when she's the interloper, here!

"And you've threatened my partner with potential exposure. Woman, I will cut you -"

"Why am I surrounded by unreasonable, confrontational assholes!" Heir demands, nearly hysterical. He claps his hands to his cheeks, squeezing his masked face with one eyebrow twitching. "Will everyone please stop arguing over stupid stuff and CALM DOWN!"

Hemogoblin calms down.

...

Wait, what.

He lets go of Sharpshooter when she tugs away in a huff, and pressing a claw to his chest, certain he must look completely baffled. His heart has stopped freaking out. He had been working up to a full-blown bitchfit right there, his head hazy with fury and his bloodpusher doing overtime to keep the adrenaline flowing. And now it's all stopped. His skin crawls with horror, and he takes another step back.

Did Heir just pacify him? There hadn't even been a shooshpap involved - all he had to do was order Hemogoblin to calm down and -

Nope. Nonononono. Absolutely not. It's a fluke, Hemogoblin thinks vehemently, but his heart can't work up more than the faintest hitch.

He is stupidly, idiotically, impossibly calm.
"Thank you! Jeez!" Heir says, oblivious to his own impossible feat. He flies closer to Hemogoblin and drops to the ground with a huff, as though he misjudged his own landing. That alone speaks to how thrown the other hero is. Hemogoblin just wishes he still felt confused; two words out of Heir and suddenly he can't even feel much above the level of 'idiotic contentment' and 'vague unease.' 
"Okay, clearly this isn't going to work," Heir murmurs, stepping right into Hemogoblin's personal space. Sharpshooter is complaining loudly off to the side, but just places her hands on her hips and whistles into the night air when it's clear neither Heir nor Hemogoblin are listening to her. 
"Hemogoblin - I hate to ask it, but will you be okay on patrol by yourself tonight? I...think I seriously need to work out what's going on with all this." His eyes are troubled, dark and verging on genuine panic.

"She really knows your identity then," Hemogoblin mutters back, raising an eyebrow.

"...Yup." Heir says. "I don't have a clue what's going on here, but I need to talk to her and figure out exactly what she plans to do with that." He claws the hair back out of his face, his hood already pulled down in the course of all these shenanigans. "I - oh man, I -"

"Go," Hemogoblin says shortly. Heir is very close right now, and Hemogoblin has to resist the urge to bury his face in the other's hero's shoulder. Not, for once, because Heir has a banging body that reduces him to a humiliating excuse for a lovesick wriggler, but because his brain has flipped the switch onto 'vacillation' and is intensely curious to see if Heir's smell would be appealing in a flushed way or soothing in a pale way.

Wow. Way to fuck up those quadrants. He slaps himself internally, and fully intends to slap himself in real life as well if he can't drag his traitorous thinkpan out of the pale gutter.

He will not cheat on John. He has no fucking idea what happened earlier, but he's not going to allow a repeat performance. If Heir wants to go interrogate this crazy broad on his own time, Hemogoblin actually welcomes it. The farther away the woman who sounds like his moirail gone wrong and the man who just pacified him against his will are, the better for his state of mind. One infuriates him in a murderously platonic way, and the other is a temptation he never thought he'd have to deal with.

"Seriously, go nuts. I can handle myself." He sniffs, brushing imaginary dirt - or Sharpshooter cooties, his mind adds spitefully - off his arms. He retracts the blood sickle when Heir eyes it sideways, and privately smirks at the awe that bubbles up in Heir's expression. It's so easy to get complacent with his own powers - Hemogoblin sometimes forgets that while he is rightfully awed by Heir's ability to fly, he has some cool fucking mutant powers of his own that impress people. Sure, if he's ever outed then they're a cull-worthy offence against the Condesce's unofficial cultural ordinances, but hey, he's been resigned to that since he went through his first pupation. "It's just one fucking crisis after another with us."

"Yeah. I don't know when life got so complicated," Heir says, rolling his eyes skyward. Hemogoblin can't help but agree. "Hopefully I can figure this out and get her out of town before more things start blowing up."

Hemogoblin snorts. "Oh, thank troll Jesus, we can finally start making bad jokes about explosions again." He steps away from Heir and tries to look for a nearby shadow to slink off into as discreetly as possible. "I'm out of here -"

"Are you guys done whispering?" Sharpshooter asks, whiny and irritating and grating at Hemogoblin's ears. "Come on, Heir, Bec and WV will be here any second, and I know WV has been looking forward to meeting you!"

Heir turns away from Hemogoblin, though one last rueful grin flickers across his face when
Hemogoblin heaves a much bereaved sigh. Hemogoblin smiles back - smirks, naturally - just as another flash of green lights up the rooftop and he blinks.

Two more figures have joined them, using that same teleportation power, and Hemogoblin is already two seconds from strangling the first person who tries to use it to sneak up on him. The first creature, a white wolf as high as Sharpshooter's hip, hovers in the air before lying down next to its mistress. For a brief moment, Hemogoblin thinks he saw stars and galaxies revolving in the mutt's fur, but he blinks again and the impression is gone.

The second is a carapacian. It's his first time seeing one in person, and he's resigned to the bizarre twists his life has taken, that he'd meet his first genuine alien in the middle of the night with a psycho space hero calling the shots. Fuck it, that actually makes *more* sense than just meeting an alien randomly in the streets - of course someone like Sharpshooter would have a side-kick from outer space. Of *course*.

The sarcasm is starting to rot his own thinkpan. He can feel it.

The tiny, compact, glossy black carapacian squeals wordlessly, tears off its green cloak to reveal a hideous blue poncho, and flings itself at Heir, with enough force to send them both toppling to the ground. Hemogoblin can't even ready himself for a fight; he can only stare with one eye twitching as the carapacian babbles in whatever weird alien language that is, and butts its head against Heir's chest in what can only be described as affection.

"Go," Heir says weakly, pinned under the weight of the Dersite carapacian. "Just - save yourself from this. Go do the hero thing, man." With that, Heir flops his head back against the roof and stares bemusedly at the carapacian bawling its eyes out all over his uniform.

Hemogoblin takes one look at the scene before him and, in a rare moment in which his entire brain comes to complete accord, thinks, *I'm not touching this one with a twenty foot long culling fork.* "...Yeah. Have fun with that," he says, and then he flips Sharpshooter a pair of middle claws and takes off before Sharpshooter can summon yet another rare alien species to try and tackle him. As long as they're not actively trying to hurt Heir, he figures he should cut his losses and try to salvage what's left of his already-questionable sanity without an audience.

"Bye!" Sharpshooter calls after him, and he picks up the pace before she can change her mind and try to drag him back into the fray.

Why can't his life just be normal?

- His first instinct is to run to John. Literally, just, fuck the costume and his secret identity, Karkat wants to race home and skip the bus ride and kick down John's door and tackle the kid into the nearest pile until all thoughts of weird hero shit is driven clean out of his brain.

Only his sense of duty keeps him patrolling the streets. With Heir dealing with *that* crisis and probably out for the night, Hemogoblin is probably the only hero at work tonight. At least this time, he's aware of it, and not just running around oblivious. He tracks down a pair of dealers in the west part of town, a little out of his way, and then starts wandering outward in a grid. The streets seem weirdly empty tonight - or maybe he's just gotten used to Heir's uncanny ability to use the wind and locate criminals without needing to hunt for a crime scene. Hemogoblin has no such power, so it's really up to chance and his own keen eyes to spy potential hero work down in the streets below.

It doesn't help that said keen eyes aren't all that keen, lately. This past week has been a nightmare of
blurred vision and gritty, sore dry eyes, even after he takes out his contact lenses for the night and looks at the world without their distorting influence. But tonight he only needs to stop three times to huddle down and let his eyes rest, which is actually a new fucking record, one that he can only attribute to John's enforced nap time.

He needs to not think about John, though, or he's going to lose all this mysterious heroic resolve and high-tail it back home. He needs to not think about Heir pacifying him with a look and a plea, or the implications of that act.

Oh fuck, who is he kidding. He can't *stop* thinking about it. He's obsessing over it because that's just what he does, the part of his mind that is Karkat keeping up a nonstop, ranting chorus of *OH SHIT OH SHIT OH GRUBFUCKING SHIT WHAT HAVE I DONE WHAT HAVE I DONE*. And underlying all of that, like the tolling of a doom bell, is the sickening, sticky sensation low in his gut, the inevitable thought that *of course this would happen, of course you would fuck this up. You're Karkat Vantas, and you are the Hero of Fuck Ups.*

He loves John. He somehow managed to scrape together a pale quadrant that *wasn't* a dysfunctional mess, with someone who's ridiculously dumb and disgustingly endearing in all the ways that make Karkat's heart pump sucrose, and wow, look at that, it wasn't Karkat's incessant rage trigger or his fucked up nightmares that interfered - the two things he'd always, in the back of his mind, assumed would eventually drive John away.

On a more objective level, Karkat's aware that he might be overreacting. Possibly. Maybe. It was just one incidental implied shoosh, right? He's just reading into it too much because of that near-moirailing incident before they caught Crichton. Heir is human, humans do not *always* associate calming with romance, and this has been quite thoroughly established. Hemogoblin had shut that down, had made himself look like a total fucking moron in front of Heir in order to *prevent* any kind of pale situation between them. Though to be fair, he'd been sleep-deprived and apparently going through withdrawal at the same time, so he can't blame all of his idiocy on his tendency to overreact.

He's just paranoid. That's all.

But the fact is that for nearly ten minutes after Hemogoblin left Sharpshooter and Heir alone, he felt...calm. Unmistakably, unbearably calm. The part of his brain that's only supposed to be soothed by John had fallen all over itself, sobbing like Heir was the second coming of troll Will Smith. It's only now, after a few hours of working himself up into a proper frenzy with crime-fighting and internal screaming, that Karkat is even able to work up a proper rage meltdown.

Which means that all he needs to do is take a deep breath, suck it up, and act like a grownass troll instead of losing his shit over nothing.

...No, no, he's still freaking out. *Fuck!* He kicks someone in the face and, for a panicked moment, can't remember if he was aiming at the mugger or the muggee.

This is probably an object lesson in *not* kicking people in the face when you're distracted by your own failings as a moirail.

"Are you okay?" he yells, still not entirely sure who he just kicked. The man on the ground just groans and clutches his face, curled up in a little ball.

"Um. Are you talking to him, or me?"

Karkat - no, Hemogoblin - no, fuck, still Karkat - whirls around so fast the other man flinches back against the wall. "...You were the one getting mugged, right?" he asks. He doesn't care how stupid
he sounds, he just needs this to be established for the record.

"Uh, yeah?" The amount of sarcasm encompassed in those two words could probably decimate a small village.

Awkward. "Oh. Uh. Good." Karkat coughs and clears his throat, trying to regain some semblance of dignity.

"Kid, you need to drink less or something." Shaking his head, the muggee takes out his phone and eyes Karkat sideways as he edges away, like Karkat is the crazy one here.

Fair enough.

Hemogoblin would stick around and zip-tie the mugger's hands - Karkat just digs the cuffs out of his pocket, hands them sheepishly over to the muggee, who takes them with a roll of his eyes and a sniff, and then hightails it back onto the roof before he can make himself look like even more of an idiot in front of the general public. He can't just call it a night, though. He needs to persevere. Keep his personal issues separate from his work life.

...Or he could go home, wake John up, and they could eat ice cream.

Both of these are viable options.

But if he goes to John now, with all of these problems he can't just tell John about, he'll just end up feeling like even more of a guilty sack of useless shit in the morning. So, sighing, Karkat takes a moment to sit down on the edge of the roof, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and gnaws on the nail of his claw until he feels more like Hemogoblin again.

??: Hey. Hey. Kid.

Or not. He's sure his face switches from 'the fuck?' to 'fuck me' to 'what the fuck could possibly go wrong now?' before settling on the usual 'I've quite literally run out of fucks to give' as he looks up, trying and failing to summon his sense of professional decorum.

That's when the carapacian standing before him stabs him in the arm.

"Oh, WHAT THE FUCK!" Karkat kicks out and shoves the stabby asshat away from him, grabbing at his own arm in shock even as he starts to compensate, yanking the blood back into the open gash and coagulating everything until a scab forms. He does a rush job instead of healing it seamlessly, falling back into a fighting stance to confront his Surprise Stabber.

SS: Oh relax, kid, I barely scratched yah.

Karkat doesn't know what he expected out of tonight before it all went to hell in a rocket-powered handbasket, but meeting his second alien of the night by way of surprise stab greeting didn't even make the top hundred of his list. Like the one who had teleported in with Sharpshooter earlier, this one has the black shell, from head to toe, of a Dersite carapacian - the shady-ass ones, in other words. But that's where all similarity between the two ends. Karkat's aware from the rudimentary units in history class on carapacians (and one long research binge, fueled by root beer and gratuitous quantities of popcorn, during one of his moodier sulks back in the seventh grade) that most of them cap out at around three feet in height. The one that tackled Heir had been even shorter than that, petite and stupidly energetic. This nubfucker curves like a blade, spindly and lean, not an inch over four feet but no less intimidating for it. He meets Karkat glower for glower, one eye squinted and almost-sightless beneath a thin scar that skims his eyelids and must have just barely spared the eye itself.
Even if he hadn't just stabbed Karkat, he'd look like a threat. The Surprise Stabber continues to toy with his knifekind, inspecting the red blood on the blade with a sour look. But even though Karkat is on his guard, he doesn't seem inclined to attack again; the knife slices and glitters in the half-light as the carapacian grumpily begins signing again.

SS: Look, you mouthy brat. We don't have much time.

SS: I hate you, you hate me, we're all one stabhappy candy-red family.

SS: But that traitor is nipping at my heels, so we got to save the idiotic reunion bullshit for later.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, you insane piece of shit," is all Karkat can think to say. Somewhere low in his gut, he is struck by the horrible sensation that he has become the victim of some universally constant tendency in which mysterious shadowy figures are physically incapable of giving straight answers. But that's a stupid, baseless sensation no doubt rooted in his own innate paranoia, and therefore easily ignored. The important thing to mention, he thinks, is: "You fucking stabbed me!"

SS: Kid, I stab a lot of people. Bleed me a river. Build a bridge. And get over it.

SS: I...ugh, you have no idea how much it pains me to say this. I...came to help.

"Help with what, the ignominious end of my lasting record of not hemorrhaging from multiple orifices?! By stabbing new holes in me?!" Karkat demands. He's not sure why he isn't kicking this guy's ass yet - possibly because he's still getting over the shock of his first real knife wound. He's been tossed around a bit (and blown up on one notable occasion) but never legitimately stabbed. It's the kind of thing he's avoided his entire life, trying to keep from being culled, and the instinct had carried over to Hemogoblin so he's dedicated a lot of his training to evasion just to prevent prolonged knife fights. And then this fucker had to just walk up and stab him like it's the alien equivalent of shaking hands. Like, seriously, fuck this guy.

SS: Yes. That.

SS: No, you dumb fuck, I'm here to help you with your Midnight Crew situation.

SS: I shoulda known you'd be the one to try 'n mess with a bunch of traitorous dogs like them.

SS: Now here, take my card and go fuck off and do whatever it is you crazy troll kids are up to these days, while I try ta lose DD again.

With that, the carapacian digs into the scruffy pocket of his threadbare, ill-fitting suit. Karkat tenses, ready for the guy to pull another knife specibus - because at this point, he thinks the paranoia is warranted.

He pulls out another knife. Ah, the sweet, sweet taste of vindicated parano-oh fuck he pulled another knife. Karkat flinches, but the carapacian just grunts, flicks the new knife between his fingers, and digs some more before withdrawing an innocent-looking business card. He holds it out toward Karkat with a grunt. As both of the Stabber's hands are currently occupied with a knife, this equates to yet another stabbing attempt and Karkat recoils out of range.

SS: What a wuss. Remind me to whip yah into shape later, this is just sad.

The carapacian flicks the business card toward Karkat, and it lands on the roof by his feet. All Karkat can make out, eyeing it while simultaneously trying not to take his eyes off the menacing carapacian before him, is that the card is pitch black, with no words or symbols that he can make out.
SS: I'm outta here. I suggest you blow this joint too, before he shows up. You ain't ready to handle someone like Diamonds yet.

With that, the carapacian tips his battered hat forward over his face, almost like a gesture of farewell - and stabs Karkat in the other arm. Karkat had been fucking waiting for it, and yet the carapacian darts in like he doesn't even have his guard up.

"SON OF A-"

SS: LANGUAGE!

Karkat's mouth snaps shut.

SS: Seriously, kid. You 'n me, we're gonna chat. Give it a few days until Diamonds gets over this latest murderspree and then look me up.

Wiping his knives off absently, the carapacian turns away and tries to shuffle off in a hurry, scurrying across the roof with remarkable alacrity for someone who refused to straighten his posture.

...Karkat should probably stop him. Hadn't he said something about stabbing a lot of people? Like, was this guy actually a Serial Stabber on top of everything else? "I don't know who you are, but if you seriously think you can just walk away from this, you've got another thing coming."

But he hesitates. He's torn between arresting this guy and interrogating him, because did he just mention Diamonds Droog?

Unfortunately for the side of the law, his curiosity wins out. Also, his fledging grudge against Diamonds Droog over the whole 'masterminding a false accusation plot for no fucking reason' thing might weigh in more than it should. He heals the new wound in his arm without moving forward to catch the carapacian. Instead, he calls at the alien's retreating back, "What do you know about the Midnight Crew?"

The carapacian glances back over hunched shoulders, teeth bared in a permanent grimace.

SS: Enough to make it worth your while, kid.

SS: Don't you remember? I founded that traitorous, faithless pack of dogs.

SS: Then they went all human and troll on me and sold out. Inconsiderate fucks.

The carapacian sniffs, and then vanishes into the night.

Karkat would make more effort to follow him, but all he can really do is stand there, mouth agape, and try to remember how his jaw works.

This night cannot get any weirder. Karkat's weird-shit-o-meter has officially leveled up and ascended to a higher plane of existence, leaving him with no other choice but to handle this shit, so he closes his eyes, massages his temples in a self-applied shoosh, and basks in the relief of having abandoned all hope of a normal life or hero career. Heir has a sister and a potential identity crisis in progress; Hemogoblin has a psychotic, stab-happy carapacian who claims to have intimate ties to the most obnoxious gang in America.

He calls it a night before the universe decides to prove him wrong and serve up a new, steaming hot pile of weird shit to him on a platter. If some fresh fuckery wants to find him, it'll have to confront him in the security of his own home, where no one will be able to witness the last of his sanity salsa-
dancing out the door.

Before he leaves, though, he stoops over and picks up the business card his mysterious assailant tossed onto the ground. He flips it over, but both sides are black and seemingly unmarked. It's not until he snarls and angles it in the light from the street below that he sees the slightly raised surface in the center of the card. He traces it with his claw, squinting, and can just barely determine the shape.

He freezes with one foot on the edge of the roof.

Hold the fucking phone.

Non-fatal stabbings. Aggressive offers of unsolicited help. An off-hand (yet succinctly worded) "I hate you, you hate me"? And now, a card bearing the unmistakable shape of a spade?

...Did Karkat seriously just get caliginously hit on by a Surly Suitor?

He sleeps. At this point, the nightmares can't possibly equal his waking What The Shit quotient. He needs to be unconscious in some form or another before something else happens that makes him question the point of being a rational being in a world determined to blow its nose on the flimsy tissue that is his sanity. The nightmares are fairly standard by now, upsetting and panic-inducing and heart breaking all at once.

The fact that Karkat has become jaded about this kind of thing is legitimately sad. He wakes up in the 'coon a few hours later, when his tolerance for psychological torture runs out, and utterly refuses to reflect on the exact contents of the latest dreams. He has too many other things to dwell on like the angsty teenager he fucking is; for once, he has the right combination of external drama he needs to process and gogginess that he can stonewall the memories and focus, over his half-toasted toast, on the fact that he has absolutely no idea how Heir may or may not have resolved that whole situation with Sharpshooter. Crabdad screeches loudly from the stovetop, and Karkat somehow fails to notice that the imbecilic lusus somehow managed to turn the damn thing on until after the crab presents him with a plate of fried eggs that are both runny and yet unpleasantly crunchy at the same time. After chewing out his custodian and removing the knobs from the stovetop, again (he mentally checks off another day until he's free from this hell at last), Karkat scrapes together all of his books and sails out the door.

The difference between this drive to school and the one the day before is embarrassing. Really, it is. Karkat feels a little ill when he realizes how clear his vision is, even with the shitty contact lenses that make everything blurred, compared to the dull fog he was driving around in yesterday. How did he not wrap his car around a telephone pole, with the state he was in? His bloodpusher warms considerably when he remembers how John had driven him home, because John really is a far better moirail than a fuckup like Karkat deserves; the thought is sappy enough that Karkat can almost skip over the requisite angst over whatever the fuck happened last night with Heir.

No, really. Too much bullshit. Not enough coffee.

After he parks the car, he stomps into the school building and makes a beeline for his locker with the full intention of crawling inside it and not thinking about anything at all; he doesn't have enough time before John's scheduled arrival to hide out in the fine arts hall and actually get shit done to distract himself, but if he stewed about his issues any more, he might just keel over where he stands. He shoves all of his textbooks into the locker and - because Karkat is actually physically incapable of letting things go, even when he orders his brain to stop obsessing - takes out his phone and starts Googling Sharpshooter. There's nothing about her mysteriously appearing in the skies over Seattle,
but then again, there's rarely any solid news about her whereabouts. She has a pretty dedicated fanbase, but even when Karkat lurks through those forums, not even the truly obsessive Sharpshooter devotees have ferreted out much solid intel. There's an active board dedicated to predicting her next moves - Karkat snorts when he sees that their latest predictions had Sharpshooter either in the middle of Canada or making a beeline for Alaska in order to cross to Russia and finish her 'world tour.'

...He can't resist.

-- carcinoGeneticist has joined the forum! --
CG: MY MONEY'S ON SEATTLE, FUCKFACES
-- carcinoGeneticist has left the forum! --

Karkat cackles in a sleepy way, and leans an elbow on the inside of his locker while he blinks at the screen. He's probably going to regret that kind of impulsive, dickish decision later, but there's nothing like a good-faith trolling effort to take the mind of CREEPY STABBY ALIEN COURTSHIP -

John is here. Karkat would know that pulse anywhere. He tilts his head back, sensing John coming up the stairs, and then smacks himself on the cheek and clicks out of the Sharpshooter tab to pretend he's only just arrived. He actually takes the textbook he needs for class and stuffs it into his bag again, counting down silently in his head until John's arrival. He owes his moirail, like, a thousand pancakes for how much John's put up with, lately.

When John is immediately behind him Karkat turns and presents both claws for the inaugural coffee. John does not disappoint, because John is the best moirail. The best. "Morning," Karkat attempts to say before sipping that sweet, sweet caffeinated elixir.

"Good morning to you too, Karkat," John says. Karkat closes his eyes and rocks forward a little, while the combination of coffee and John smoothes away some of the jagged edges in his mind. Well, if nothing else, at least Karkat's hormones haven't gone completely bugfuck insane and forgotten just who his actual moirail is - not while John is right in front of him, anyway. But thinking about that just makes him feel a little sick again, and he refuses to vomit coffee all over John's shoes, so he stops thinking about it at all.

"Yes, good morning, good morning," John continues, in a weirdly high-pitched voice. Just like that, some internal switch flips, and the voice is annoying as fuck. Karkat nearly chokes on his coffee in horror at the sudden vacillation, wondering just why the fuck John's voice would suddenly sound so -

He stops drinking.

He opens his eyes properly.

No.

No.

She's not wearing the goggles, but her electric green eyes aren't exactly subtle. They might as well have hidden nothing at all, with how easily Karkat can recognize her features. Even as his grip on the thermos loosens, the girl's entire face lights up with recognition, and Karkat can only meet her gaze in abject horror.

He recognizes her. And there is no doubt in his mind that despite everything, despite every precaution he's ever taken, there is no way he could possibly have concealed his identity from the
maniac standing by John's side, grinning like a lunatic.

Sharpshooter waves at him, laughing gaily. "Hey! Good to see you~! So your name is Kaaarkat!"
She winks and shoots him a pair of finger pistols. "I'm Jade!"

On that day, Karkat Vantas received a grim reminder -

He can't run from the weird shit.

It will always, always find him.

---

Rose places one of the cushions from the couch onto the floor and settles herself on it, with a faint pang at the thought that all of her old meditation materials - the incense, the teas, the cushions - are gone. The loss of the Lalonde manse weighs on her, lately. It might have become a dark, stale prison for Rose's tormented thoughts, and the site of her descent into alcoholism, but it had still been home until her grimdark self broke free.

And that was only a small tangle, one that had spawned itself from Leviathan expressly for the purpose of twisting Rose's mind and occupying it once her anger and hate destroyed her own wards. She shudders to think about what Los Angeles looks like under the opaque dome. The fear crawls up her spine and lodges in the back of her mind - which is the last place she wants to have uncontrolled emotion collecting. She burns it away with a ray of light, and tries to lay her fears to rest. She shouldn't dwell on thoughts of the manse like that. Or on the memory of the locked door to her mother's study, the one that Rose had jimmed open whenever she needed to quench her thirst.

She swallows over the ache in her throat, and passes the time by texting her comrades in arms. Their circle of heroic camaraderie has grown by one, and John has, naturally, worked himself into a proper meltdown over the fact that yet another person is aware of his secret identity.

Rose itches to sit down with John and a hot cup of tea, and listen to his troubles in person. After years without communication, she becomes more aware with each passing day that John has changed, and communicating with him through the medium of text is getting them nowhere at all. It's too easy for John to redirect the conversation, or cop out altogether with a flimsy excuse. There are days where Rose is certain that John only replies to her probing messages because his insecurity won't allow for radio silence on her end.

Rose struggles to reconcile the exuberant, irrepressible John she knew with the apprehensive, overly defensive John who closes himself off out of paranoia with a smile on his face. Perhaps superficially he's the same, all laughter and pranks. But it has only taken one off-kilter twenty-four hour cycle, in which he has been slammed with both a surprise sibling and severe health issues on the part of his moirail, to throw him into complete turmoil. He cannot handle himself, mentally or emotionally. Jade Harley upset his equilibrium today, and it has thrown all his neuroses into stark relief. What is truly bizarre, however, is that John is becoming ever more paranoid not because this Jade raises his suspicions, but because he trusts her.

According to his reports, the trust seems instinctive, the same kind of unthinking faith and acceptance that Rose recognizes because she experienced it herself when they first met. John had befriended her without a second thought, and she has no doubt that if their respective parents hadn't encouraged their useless secrecy, they would have been fully aware of each other's hero work from the beginning. Terrors only know, John is clearly awful at keeping such things on the down low.
TT: Have you considered that trusting someone might not be as terrible an outcome as all that? While I admit that having a healthy caution while dealing with the situation would be advisable, Jade seems benevolent. Charming, even.

EB: it's just - agggghh!
EB: i don't know why i trust her and it freaks me out.
EB: also, do you know how little she cares about keeping our secret identities secret?
EB: let me give you a hint - NOT A LOT. :/
TT: Not at all, perhaps?
TT: I doubt that she would gain anything from betraying your interests like that, though. As long as you have clearly established boundaries on what is and is not permissible while she resides under your roof, I cannot think she would deliberately out you.

EB: i'm not even worried about her doing it on purpose!
TT: Oh?
EB: my dad is all worked up about her, and i can see why…
EB: but...
EB: i feel like i’m nicolas cage in national treasure
TT: Oh dear.
EB: and i want to trust sean bean i really do
EB: but any second now he could turn on me, steal my meerschaum pipe, the only clue i have to the greatest treasure known to man, and blow me up in a long lost ship stuck in a remote section of the canadian arctic.
EB: with my explosion track record THIS IS TOO LIKELY TO RISK ROSE!!!
TT: John.
TT: I understand and respect that you have no doubt begun to develop a severe potential for PTSD over recent events, one that I would like to discuss with you at length.
TT: But that notwithstanding, I am afraid I must inform you that your sister is not, in fact, Sean Bean.
EB: haha, rose.
EB: i am being so serious right now.
EB: sooooo serious.
EB: i’m pretty sure she could teleport us to the canadian arctic in like two seconds.
EB: it wouldn't even be hard for her.
TT: Fair point. The advantages of possessing the power to manipulate one of the fundamental aspects of reality must be taken into account.
EB: exactly!
TT: If it would assuage your fears, I could make my best efforts to See further into her motives from afar.
EB: really? thanks rose, you're the best!
TT: Regardless, my sight is most effective when within viewing distance of a target. And I would like to see you. Kanaya and I will be in the area, and she can perhaps be persuaded to visit Seattle for a day, before we attempt the dome.
TT: There is no pressure, of course.
TT: ...
TT: John?

John doesn't drop out of conversations so abruptly unless Rose has truly pressed him too far. But from her past observations, she should still be in safe territory. Kanaya's sewing machine hums and whirs in the background while Rose strokes her thumb along the side of the phone, feeling a fresh buzz of anxiety until blue text appears on the screen.

EB: do you think it would help you with your whole recovery thing too?
EB: because i'd really like to see you too rose!
EB: you and dave really but dave has his hands full with orange-him...
EB: and if this would help keep you sane and stuff then of course you should come visit! that is totally a thing that should happen!
TT: I -
TT: Yes. Yes, I believe it would help immensely. Not only that, but I would be able to assist you in vetting your newfound sibling. Between your instincts and my perception, surely we can ferret out whether she can be trusted or not.
EB: yeah, you're right rose!
EB: i don't know why i didn't think of that!
TT: You've been under a lot of pressure lately. But you mustn't forget that you are not alone in this.
EB: ehehehe, i guess i'm still not used to having other people to fall back on.
EB: i really need to shape up!

She wants to hug him. Sometimes, the absence of John feels more painfully real than anything else in the world around her, and Rose has to scour her mind for any sign of interference in her perception, grimdark or otherwise. But she has yet to find any. Worse still, the more she speaks with Dave, teasing him and attempting to pry him out of his amazingly convoluted psyche, the more she wants to find him and embrace him as well. She wants to explain it away as curiosity about having a sibling, but it rings false.

One explanation has presented itself to her, and she is uncertain how much stock she can put in it. But Kanaya had been the one to suggest it, and that lends it more weight in her mind than if it had been Rose's own suggestion.

Serendipity.

It is such a fundamental aspect of troll-related romance that the platonic aspect of it is often overlooked. It's so basic, in fact, that it's taken her this long to recognize the compulsion for what it is. She scrolls through her conversation with Jade Harley from earlier, casting a discerning eye over the archives, and feels another golden burst of certainty illuminate her mind.

GG: heheh! its so good to get to pester everybody like this!!!!
GG: nice to meet you rose!
TT: It is good to meet you as well. Ms Harley, I presume?
GG: yup! :D
GG: just jade though!
TT: A pleasure. Is it not obscenely early on the West Coast, still? John has been pestering me as well, but John keeps absolutely abhorrent hours sometimes.
GG: i hear that!
GG: he woke me up at dumb o'clock for school or some darn thing!
TT: Well, no one has ever claimed John was an excellent host. He gave you this chumhandle?
GG: noooope!
GG: i took his phone and yoinked yours and daves handles
GG: john doesnt seem to know anything about anything, it makes him such a stick in the mud!
TT: Pardon? What does John not know about? I am afraid I may still be missing context.
GG: willllll
GG: i knew about you all, duh!
GG: but grandpa only knew johns chumhandle and it turned out john wasnt even using that one anymore so bluh! :P
GG: and now he keeps spacing out when i ask him about the Important Things…
TT: Alas, I am afraid I must confess a similar ignorance. Would you care to enlighten me as to the nature of said Important Things? I can only suppose from the significant capitalization that they may be of some consequence.
GG: oh nooo
GG: dont tell me you dont know anything either! :(((
TT: Neither John nor I - nor Dave, from what I can make out between the rap sessions - have had the luxury of overly truthful guardians. There is a most pernicious dearth of open communication at times. If yours has shared any measure of information, I would be most happy to hear of it.
GG: oh man where do i even start!
GG: do you at least know the world is about to end?

Rose has to take a moment to squint at the screen, refresh the Pesterchum app, and then blink at the message again. That was...not what she was expecting.

TT: …
TT: No, that one seems to have slipped past the radar.
TT: I am certain that this is going to look profoundly stupid the moment I finish typing it, but I must try: in what possible way did your grandfather speculate would the world hypothetically end in the near future?
GG: meteors
TT: Meteors?
GG: yeah a whole buttload of them!
TT: Forgive if I am a little skeptical. I can have my companion's hacking contact look into sealed government records in the event such an obvious extraterrestrial threat had been detected by space agencies and subsequently covered up for the sake of public appearances, but I really think that if a 'buttload' of meteors were in fact aimed in Earth's general direction, there would be far more widespread panic.
GG: well its true!
GG: theyre going to arrive in a couple of weeks!!!
GG: and then the earth goes KAPOW!
GG: :( 
GG: which is really dumb and stuff but i dont think theres much we can do to stop it
TT: Naturally, no.
GG: its all reeeally complicated and grandpa couldnt explain it all to me in time
GG: but he left a bunch of files and papers so i would know to follow his plan for survival
GG: and you guys and your dossiers were in the papers!
TT: Are we somehow instrumental in the planet surviving this imminent catastrophe then? John is no doubt having conniptions over the potential for a Superman-style blockbuster on the topic.
GG: nooo
GG: we just kinda...live through it! is the plan
TT: And everyone else on the planet? Are they so much chopped liver in this scenario?
GG: you think i dont worry about that too?
GG: i spend a lot of time saving people and i look around and see so many wonderful things and people and places
GG: if i thought about how they could all be dead soon i dont think i could get off my butt in the morning!
GG: but grandpa just didnt know how to pull it off!
TT: ...This is disheartening.
TT: And here I was advising John to calm down and deal with you in a rational manner. I don't know how to break it to him that you may well be acting on the dubious orders of a long dead elder convinced that Doomsday is nigh.
GG: well he got a lot of it from johns nanna because she knew the most
GG: but then she died first! its totes inconvenient
TT: Fascinating. And yet another problematically dead prophetic figure enters the scene.
GG: rose!!! are you making fun of me?! :(
TT: I am not, I assure you. I am simply reviewing the theory you have laid out before me with a keen eye, and finding the evidence...lacking.
TT: That is to say, I am taking this meteor apocalypse theory with a grain of salt, much as I would the debatable content of Dave's confused ramblings. A prodigious spoonful of salt, even.
GG: oohhh! evidence! i can do that!
TT: Can you.
GG: of course! are you a scientist too now like your mom?
GG: because i can appreciate another science sis! :D
TT: Psychology is more my realm of expertise. But evidence would be universally delightful, yes.
GG: well the easiest way would be to run an ~ath simulator on the estimated deathdate of the earth but not a lot of people can program that kind of thing!
GG: theyre super surreal abstract paradox constructions after all! you need to be able to code at least sixteen cuil levels removed from real life which is pretty fancy!!!
TT: I'm sure I could ask around.
GG: but what about you rose?
GG: youre the seer right?
GG: how far ahead can you see?
TT: Hm. John is correct, it would seem. It is disconcerting that you know that without having been told. And yet...
TT: Foresight is not necessarily my forte in that sense. I am quite good at identifying potential crimes from afar, and judging the content of those crimes in terms of danger and risk. I am also able to measure the potential fortunes of myself or my comrades, depending on the decisions they may make. I cannot simply look into the future.
TT: Unless something in your mysterious dossiers suggests otherwise, and I am unaware of it myself.
GG: well light is about clarity and luck so i guess that makes sense
GG: i dont know!
GG: grandpa always told me id be able to see this for myself one day in my dreams
GG: but my dreams are just regular dreams i think
GG: besides im much more a scientist of action these days!!! it would be boring to get all my answers from dreams!
TT: And yet dreams can be most informative as to the state of one's inner psyche.
GG: seeeeer talk :P
TT: Perhaps.
TT: Until I can independently verify this claim of potential apocalypses, let us table the discussion.
TT: I am far more interested in whether or not your grandfather's Important Things contain any relevant details on the Midnight Crew, and their possible connection to our childhoods. Dave, John, and I have all learned that we knew each other from a young age, and we must confess a measure of incredulity that not only did three superpowered children know each other from a young age, but that a mysterious criminal organization might have taken an impromptu sabbatical from ripping off museums and arms dealing solely to target us.
GG: well its all connected to the end of the world thing obviously!
TT: How could I not have realized.
GG: :PPP
GG: i told you!!!
GG: we four have the ability to survive the end of the world!
GG: but the guy in charge of the midnight crew is involved in starting it because hes the bad guy!
GG: we should all have been working together since the beginning but then johns nanna died and everyone stopped trusting each other and stuff
TT: 'Stuff' I take to mean the incomprehensibly stupid way in which we have all been deprived of relevant, life-threatening secrets concerning the origin of our powers, etcetera.
TT: I hate to say it but this is almost insane enough that it seems to wrap back around to become plausible once more. But I would be the first to admit that my mental state isn't exactly the most
conducive to logic at the moment.

GG: thats the spirit! :D

TT: Can you think of any particular reason the Crew would target Dave in particular? John and I have been no less open with the use of our powers - John in particular has been gallivanting about the country and I have been...compromised of late. Yet Dave is the one who was almost kidnapped as a child, and who has recently rescued a doppelgänger of his from members of the Crew claiming to look for the original copy.

TT: Their pursuit of him seems more persistent, while they are content merely to harass John by blowing up buildings in his heroic territory to warn him away from their more mundane criminal enterprises.

GG: if i had to guessssss~~~

GG: the time thing!

GG: it probably gives off a ton of energy you know so its easy to track

GG: my space thing is the same way!!! i had suuuuch trouble reaching john because this short clubs troll guy kept bugging me

TT: Clubs Deuce? Intriguing. He is the one member of the Crew it seems we haven't encountered of late. Tell me, how much of a threat does he pose?

GG: he acts all polite and goofy but i think he nearly gave my sidekick a teleport aneurysm! :( 

TT: I see.

TT: If you have any further information on the Crew and their internal infrastructure and goals, we would greatly appreciate complete disclosure. Perhaps a group memo is in order.

GG: i will but i have to go to school with john now!

GG: its been really nice to talk to you rose!!! we should stick together!

GG: and tell dave to stop ignoring meee! :P

TT: Ah, has Dave gone shy again? I'll give him a stern talking to. As his clearly elder sister.

GG: yayyyy! thank you rose!

-- gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 08:54:00 --

Jade is...interesting. Rose remains skeptical on the whole apocalypse story, but she often used to commune with extra dimensional creatures of mind rending implication and quite frankly the apocalypse is a lot more likely than most people would like to believe. Meteors are new, though. Rose always morbidly assumed the world would end in bloodbrine and darkness.

But the girl herself is cheery enough, even more so than John of late, and the promise of clarification on certain points in their shared history is tantalizing. Rereading the conversation, as confused as it was while it was in progress, is enough to make Rose smile to herself. John may not have had luck with obtaining information from his father, but it would seem his sister can more than make up for it.

Jade's existence - and Rose's emotional response to it - only further confirms her theory of serendipity. For whatever reason, she is utterly convinced that the three of them - four, perhaps, if her initial impression of Jade Harley bears fruit - need to be together to be whole. They're meant to be together.

If she and John had stayed together, perhaps New York would not have happened. Perhaps John would never have sunk into what, after several impromptu therapy sessions, Rose has deemed to be not pure depression but more of a generalized, mixed anxiety disorder. He claims to have felt sad, closed in and constantly uneasy, as though he couldn't breathe unless he was working as Heir, with obsessive thoughts that vacillated between wanting to float to the ceiling during class and being terrified of being caught doing the windy thing by his peers. It stinks of a minor depressive spell that latched onto John's pre-existing (if justified) paranoia about his secret identity, and lathered him up into a restless anxiety attack that propelled him into running from the home where he felt smothered and lonely. Meeting Dave might have calmed him down enough to get the depression treated, but Rose wouldn't be surprised if John is just so used to working through the anxiety that he hasn't
noticed it still impacts his behavior.

"Rose? I am finished."

"Just a moment," Rose mutters.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 09:24:33 --

TT: Dave.
TG: two words
TG: hell
TG: no
TT: Dave.
TG: i am rethinking my life choices rn rose
TG: you need to support me in my existential crisis
TT: Your current state of philosophical despair has nothing to do with Jade, and everything to do, I suspect, with your recently doubled brother complex. Try not to take it out on her.
TG: sorry im all tapped out on the crazy front
TG: also fuck that i do not have a complex
TG: were not all crazy people rose
TG: hard to believe i know
TG: feel free to cling to me for moral support while you deal with this heartbreaking news
TG: because i am the supportive sibling
TG: i am the most goddamn fineass pillar of support in the sacred temple that is our fucked up friend group
TG: john makes periodic sacrifices where is my tribute rose
TG: my coffers are not self sustaining here
TT: Ah, of course. How foolish of me. Here, I present to thee a goodly tribute of grain-fed oxen freshly culled from my own personal stables, and my favored mount, the blessed Maplehoof.
TG: how many oxen
TT: At least three oxen.
TG: …
TG: fuck man ill take it
TT: Excellent.
TT: Jade could potentially be a veritable fount of information concerning our pasts. A fount which we need to partake of. You will assist me in this, David.
TG: yeah yeah
TG: once im done with some other shit ill get right on it
TT: You could just try speaking to him forthrightly, you know.
TG: and were done here
-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 09:30:50 --

"My friends," Rose says to Kanaya, "are occasionally impossible."

"You worry about them too much, I think," Kanaya replies, standing up from her sewing desk with fabric folded over her arm. "I recognize the trap for what it is - I've fallen for it myself. You cannot let them so consume your time and attention that you forget to take time for yourself, Rose."

"But their neuroses are so interesting." Rose accepts the fabric from Kanaya, and nods at the burnished sun that covers the back of the orange jacket. "Everything is in order, then?"

"We'll know when you try it on for one last fitting," Kanaya says, settling herself on a cushion across from Rose. "Let us deal with this, first. But I assure you, we will not be exiting this building unless that vest is perfectly concealed."
"With luck, this will only take a moment." Rose refolds her legs and centers herself on the cushion, setting the uniform to her left. "And then we may be on our way."

The closer they get to the grimlight dome over Los Angeles, the less Rose predicts she'll be able to control and stabilize her mind. Grimdark has always been more her division, but psychically speaking the two are merely different shades of the same mind-altering, many-angled horror. She wants to have faith that her defenses will hold against any grimlight bleeding off the dome, but meddling within the minds of others, let alone her own mental construct, would be inadvisable as they drive west. She can't even sense the dome itself, or the elder mind behind it, from the room in which they sit, which gives her some modicum of comfort - perhaps sensitivity to one breed of Horrorterror need not equate to sensitivity to the other.

But if Rose is to determine whether or not this tangle in the City of Angels is related to the old monster behind the Novaya Ukraine incident, she'll need to get a taste for it from Kanaya's memories, and she'd feel safer if they do it now rather than later. She reaches out to press her fingers to Kanaya's forehead, steadies herself, and slips in.

Kanaya's mind is a forest. The tree trunks are spikes of thin metal, with loops at the top where vast curtains of fabric flutter out on the breeze. The earth beneath Rose's feet is covered in a shallow lake of clear water that stretches across the forest floor and reflects the low sky above like a clear mirror. But this is not Rose's mind, where the presence of any water at all would be cause for extreme concern; the mental images here are guided by Kanaya's perception, and Kanaya does not necessarily associate Horrorterrors with acidic, flesh-eating water, as Rose has trained herself to do. Rose walks beneath the alternating shade of the wide drapes and the light patches where the heavy red sun shines through, letting her Sight guide her toward Kanaya's manifestation of herself.

She finds the troll sewing in an alcove between two needles, stitching together a cloth full of stars and dark spaces. An red obelisk with the head of a frog towers above them, swaddled in lengths of red and blue fabric. Rose can only speculate as to why.

"It seemed like the thing to do, at the time," Kanaya says without looking up, intent on her work. Her skin is exposed here in the sanctity of her mind, with no grey paint to conceal the white gleam that radiates from her arms, hands, and face. Clutching the shroud of fabric in her claws, she stands to greet Rose, her eyes fixed on something in the distance. "Here. You may want to wear this."

Rose accepts it. Kanaya's mind, Kanaya's rules, after all. But the moment the cloak swirls around her shoulders, Rose can identify the faint aura of power woven into the cloth. Kanaya is no magician in real life, but within the space of her own mind, she has power. Waves of protection and concealment ebb and flow through this cloth like vibrating strands of intent. "Any particular reason for the extra protection?"

"We are going into danger. These memories are not ones I would normally peruse, and they concern creatures of less than benevolent intent," Kanaya says, still gazing off over Rose's shoulder. "And from what you have told me of the more insidious effects a Horrorterror can have on the mind, I would not be surprised to find that there is more hidden within the recesses of my memory than I can perceive under my own power."

Rose hums, neither an affirmative nor a negative, and follows Kanaya as the troll begins to traipse through the lake toward a break in the needle trees. The smaller needle in Kanaya's hand vanishes for a moment, and reappears as a chainsaw. Most things tend to default to chainsaw where Kanaya is concerned.
The break in the forest opens up around them, and Rose winces as the water around their heels transitions into sickly white sludge, thick like treacle. The cloak that Kanaya bestowed on her ripples and wraps around her legs more tightly, in an attempt to insulate her, but Kanaya has no such extra protection. "Kanaya?"

"It is always like this," Kanaya sighs, lifting her boot with a downturned lip and inspecting the white film sticking to the leather. "If and when I must relive the war, I always have to slog through it."

Rose tastes bile in the back of her throat, and she raises a fist that shines with light. There is a single needle tree in the exact center of the taint, but the cloth attached to its tip lies slack along the trunk, weighed down with more viscous goo. The metal of the needle itself has begun to warp and bend toward the ground. Rose closes her regular eyes entirely to focus her extra sight and forces herself to be calm. Her fingernails dig, too sharp, into the soft flesh of her palms as she scans the mental representation Kanaya has for her memories of the war in the Ukraine.

After a tense moment, Rose sighs with quiet relief, and feels her shoulders sag. Kanaya has no inborn predilection for the many-angled ones, no permanent channel carved between her mind and the hiveminds of the Noble Circle. Nor, Rose suspects, did the troll ever come into direct contact with the tangle itself during the war. The contamination here is far too mild. "If you want, it would probably be for the best if I burned this away," Rose says, blinking her focus away so she can take in her surroundings again. "The corruption is slight, and you've contained it well, but it is corruption nonetheless."

"The memory first," Kanaya says, staring up at the filthy, bedraggled curtain. "Then you have my leave to torch it all. If I had the power with which to cut off this accursed section of my mind, I would have done so long ago. The Novaya Ukraine brought nothing but death and horror for me, and the memories plague me."

"Well, we will see." Rose raises a hand and slices through the pale muck, cleansing a path for them to the memories. "A single memory should suffice. One in which you came in contact with the tangle's subsidiary offshoots. The Horrorterror's signature should be distinct enough once I have it in my sights."

"Urgh. I can already tell this is going to be unpleasant," Kanaya says, her voice dry, and she pincers a section of the curtain between her thumb and her foreclaw. Grimacing, she revs the chainsaw and slices off the scrap of fabric. Rose would almost think a chainsaw overkill when fabric scissors would have worked, but then Kanaya hands her the memory and she feels the texture of the cloth. It's chilled and smooth, like a thin section of flan or custard that leaks more of the same white taint that has infected the clearing. The film drizzles over the sides of Rose's palm, and her stomach turns.

"I am sorry, Şahin." Kanaya is taller and heavier than Rose, and the change in perspective throws her for a moment before her vision settles. The chainsaw barely registers in her palm, a feather-light weight that might as well be an extension of her arm. She falls to her knees, acid burning through the much-abused fabric of her Medicull unit issue pants, and ducks under a pair of enormous jaws.

The abomination that used to be Private Şahin is all mouth and little else. It lacks any limbs that Rose can see, and has instead attached itself to the trunk of a tree so ravaged by the grimlight influence that the inner rings of heartwood and phloem have bent like melted plastic. But the mutation still has enough height to blend into the trunk and the stringy branches and snatch up any unsuspecting passersby.

Kanaya is not unsuspecting. She has hunted the rest of her Medicull unit relentlessly through the contaminated zone, ignoring the growing burn in her throat and the empty, panging hollow of a stomach newly adapted for the ingestion of blood. Not much can hurt her anymore, though her
injuries are healing more slowly without fresh blood to increase her healing factor. As the memory reconstructs itself around Rose, her impressions are augmented with Kanaya's own hindsight - tiny whispers that say Şahin was the last, before Kanaya had to struggle back to civilization and deal with her newborn rainbow-drinking tendencies for the first time.

But at the time, Kanaya is deep in her avenging rage and single-minded in her purpose - to give her old comrades the grace of a clean death and set their bodies free from the grimlight. She shoves the chainsaw up with one hand, thrusting it like a drill through the soft flesh of Şahin's chin. Dark, sludgy blood, more black than purple, disgorges over her head and slathers her eyes, but Kanaya is beyond appearances. She has traversed the wasted forests in pants that grow ever more tattered and acid-splashed, and her uniform jacket fell to pieces during the fight with a twisted Lieutenant Abascal.

Right now, nothing matters but the fight. Kanaya shrieks with wordless fury, her jaw aching as she bares her teeth, and she seizes the chainsaw in both hands and drags over her head in a downward arc, splitting the length of the monster's distended belly. Coated in blood and slag, Kanaya shoves the sagging body off her and raises the chainsawkind to aim for its exposed brain -

Rose reaches the end of the memory scrap, and wrenches back into her own perspective. Kanaya watches her with careful jade eyes, one claw squeezing Rose's shoulder in solidarity. "I have obtained the impression I needed," Rose gasps, letting the memory slide off her palm and into the slop around their feet. Her hand throbs, and she shoves a light cleansing spell through her skin without pausing to think about it.

Kanaya wraps an arm around her waist, and considers the needle of similarly horrific memories before them. "Please, do not attempt to complicate this moment with half-hearted efforts to convey how burning away this may strip the details from a significant chunk of my memories, and may have adverse psychological implications in the future," she says gravely. "If the curtain should unfortunately burst into all-consuming flame - well, I am not overly attached to it. Once we reach Los Angeles, I will have more than enough experience to fill its place."

Rose smiles, and snaps her fingers. "As you wish."

- 

She vomits salt water in a rundown gas station bathroom just outside of Chicago.

Kanaya wants to press on and attempt to reach the center of the city and prevent another night of widespread property damage and the questionable use of streetlights as multipurpose bludgeoning tools. Rose scrolls through some of the news reports on the damage, and is legitimately impressed at the sheer chaos the Scourge Sisters have managed to rack up over the past few days of their kismesissitude. But the nausea builds up over time, her head aching in time with a far-off pulse.

At first, she attributes it to being unused to car travel after several years of teleporting and walking everywhere. She can't recall much by way of motion sickness during the escape from New York City, but it can develop over a lifespan, surely. She sips cold tea from her thermos to settle her stomach, cranks back the seat of the rental car so she can watch the ceiling rather than the road, and meditates to herself for internal balance. Her mental reconstruction of her mind is almost complete and self-sustaining, but her defenses require continuous maintenance.

But as Kanaya roars under the pale green road sign that announces they have reached Chicago, Rose's throat chokes up. For a panicked moment, Rose thinks she's about to throw up while lying down, and she shoves herself upright while her throat convulses, yanking at her seat belt to lean forward. The noise she makes is most undignified. "Rose?!" Kanaya says, alarmed. The car slows,
but the rocking of the deceleration still churns Rose's stomach. "Rose, what is wrong?"

"Kanaya, stop the car now," she begs, swallowing between every other word. Her mouth is dry, and as Kanaya veers across three lanes of traffic to reach the highway exit, Rose rolls down the window in the event of total disaster. The blare of multiple irate cars honking at their antics accompanies them as they fly down the ramp and into the parking lot of the nearest gas station. Kanaya does not bother to park in a spot - Rose shoves the passenger side door open with her shoulder and stumbles out right as the vehicle screeches to a stop feet from the station door.

Her stomach flips and sloshes as Rose tears through the aisles, utilizing all the focus she can spare to guide her way straight to the facilities, but even as she ducks around a woman and her child with an inaudible 'pardon me' she can tell, with the sense of imminent foreboding that always hits when your luck has run out, that she's not going to make it.

Blast. Rose stoops over a foot from the first stall and feels her whole body spasm. Another inconceivable noise horks its way out of her throat as salt and bile flood her mouth and she foolishly attempts to swallow it back again. This is clearly a horrible mistake and not one she will repeat in the near future, because the taste only sends her gag reflex out of control. At last, instinct honed by several months of alcoholic binges reasserts itself, and Rose tosses aside the last scraps of her dignity in favor of getting her head over the toilet and

After New York, vomiting up leftover corruption with her then-unknown elder brother-father at her back, Rose had been too emotionally blasted and hollowed out to properly appreciate the unique humiliation and lack of control inherent in throwing up. She had, after all, just suffered a much more in depth violation of her free agency. Anything else had paled in comparison.

But right now, emptying her stomach of tea that stinks of the sea, she is exquisitely aware that on the list of experiences she would have preferred to never endure in her lifetime, this quite trumps the previous heavy weight contender of vomiting alone in her mother's disused bathroom as Haydn's Creation oratorio waxes eloquent in German in the background, with a new martini just waiting for her beside the sink when she's quite finished. Mostly because a few seconds after the first wave of dry heaves subsides, Kanaya rips the door off its hinges and strides in, and witnesses Rose's next wrenching gasp of spit and salt water. "What can I do?" she asks, because Kanaya does not mince words in the middle of emergency situations. Not that this is an emergency. Not at all. This is in no way, shape, or form, an emergency. Rose knows an emergency when she sees one and clearly her new penchant for vomiting spontaneous saltwater is something else entirely. Anything but an emergency.

"A fresh bottle of water would be most appreciated when this has passed," Rose says, wincing as she waits for another twist in her stomach to pass, tucking her hair behind her ears and out of her face. "And a shot of tomato juice. But I don't know that I would trust anything of that nature that a place like this could offer, really."

Kanaya looks Rose up and down, and folds her arms. "Rose."

"I - am fine," she groans. She wants to rest her head against something, but she's not touching the toilet seat for love or money. At least she doesn't have the headache that would have accompanied this moment if it had been the result of a spectacular hangover. "If this were serious, it wouldn't just be water. The gas station plumbing would never be the same again."

"That is the exact opposite of reassuring," Kanaya says snippily. "I could detect no trace scent of that saltwater on you before. You would have had to have imbibed a quart of it, from what I can see. Where did it come from if not from some influence of the grimlight? We should have known it was too much of a risk -"
"You want my honest opinion? I have no idea," Rose interrupts, kneading her forehead. The last of the heaves seem to have passed, and her stomach feels peculiarly, achingly hollow from the wracking muscle spasms. "Allow me a moment of contemplation, but I have been meditating all the way here. My defenses are quite in order. It must be something else." Her arm bracers clank against the side of the toilet as she reaches up to flush the vomit away.

"I will return posthaste. Do not move," Kanaya says with steel in her voice, and she strides away, her high heels clicking out the door. Rose closes her eyes and reaches down to pull her phone from her pocket, trying not to swallow as she rests her head on her hand and texts John. She must not lose sight of herself.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 19:45:06 --
TT: As promised, I am keeping you up to date on recent events.
TT: I have begun to vomit sea water. This is obviously a terrible sign, and yet one I am not familiar with, and thus may or may not be related to certain grim events half a continent away.
TT: Upon further inspection, the stalls of gas stations outside Chicago offer an absolutely intriguing assortment of unique mold growths.
TT: Perhaps I missed my secret life's calling as a mycologist. The world may never know.

Keeping John abreast of all recent developments has proven to be a surprising source of relief. Rose has never been the most unguarded, candid of people - she prefers to listen to the troubles of others than deal with her own issues, let alone obtain an outside perspective on them. Obviously, this is no longer a viable way to handle herself, and this new alternative has not been...unpleasant. And now if something untoward does happen to her, there will be someone in the world who has a definitely timeline of the symptoms that preceded it. Everybody wins.

Problem?

Rose thumbs out of the Pesterchum window so quickly she nearly jabs her thumbnail through the screen. The click of heels striding over the threshold and past the broken down door echo as Rose turns the phone off and slides it back into her pocket, heart thumping. "You may wish to contact your Captor," Rose says, her voice hoarse. "Whatever software defenses he installed into my phone's messaging application, it has lost its efficacy against the white-text individual."

"Damn and blast," Kanaya murmurs, sweeping into the stall and bending to pass an uncapped bottle of water to Rose. "He will be irate to hear it."

Rose takes the water and swills her first sip around her mouth before spitting it out to get the taste of salt and bile out of her system. "Oh dear. How ever will his constitution hold up under all this stress?" she deadpans.

"Sarcasm is laborious, Rose. I do not know how you manage to maintain it all the time." Kanaya quiets, and fabric rustles beside Rose until she looks up from her water. Kanaya is elegance incarnate, her skirt dipping into a puddle of something unmentionable on the floor, and Rose has never felt more lacking. "Rose. Why did this happen?

"I can only speculate," she cautions, resting her head against the side of the stall. "I can hear nothing but my own voice, and my shield over the link to my particular brand of Horrorterror is in place, but..." She stops. "Oh, damn. I didn't even think to check .."

"What?"

"Not me," Rose activates her sight and stares at the air around her. Light overlays everything, and
she examines the auras and energy around her. It takes a moment for her focus to adjust itself, so that she is not seeing precise details, but the general haze of magic around her. Kanaya gleams quietly with passive magic, which may or may not be related to her rainbow-drinker status - Rose has not been given permission to pry into it - and Rose can make out the edge of her own aura, golden and flickering as she emotionally recovers from the stress of vomiting.

But when she looks across Kanaya's shoulder, toward the wall, she spies it. There is a minute amount of magic in everything of course, and the air itself tends to hum with blue when Rose bothers to look at all. But now there is a faint, pale film, and when Rose tracks her gaze across the wall, there is a sluggish delay before her Sight catches up with her sight. "Of course. Ambient interference."

"I have absolutely no idea what that means." Kanaya's brow furrows.

"Magic is tricky, or anyone could manage it," Rose decides she is quite finished throwing up, and braces herself on the wall to rise to her feet. Kanaya stays close as she walks to the sink to scrub at her face. "Most of the power has to come from within oneself, but one must also be aware of external majjyl influences. One person's spell can easily upset the pattern of another's. That's why practicing magicians and the like, as rare as we are, tend not to cluster together. It's not unlike static interference between two stations on a radio. The stronger a person's majjyks, the more they can disrupt the spells of those around them."

She pauses to splash water on her face, feeling her lipstick run a little down her chin as she wipes carelessly at her mouth, and Kanaya must take the moment to follow Rose's train of logic, her face creased and thoughtful in the reflection. "How strong are grimlight creatures?" Kanaya asks at last, arching an eyebrow.

Rose nods approvingly, seeing that they are on the same track. "Strong enough, apparently, that the interference can reach magic-users from this distance. My powers are starting to be agitated by the summoned creature's aura, and will no doubt produce more interesting side effects the closer we get to the source. I should have anticipated this sooner."

"The creature in the Ukraine -" Kanaya begins, but Rose knows where she's going.

"Was an ocean and all of Europe away from me. Quite far enough that I never noticed side effects." Rose tears a paper towel off the roll and roughly wipes away the last of her lipstick. It's pointless to keep up appearances at this point, anyway. "But you couldn't have found a vedma in a hundred mile radius of the Staraya or Novaya Ukraine if you paid them. And in New York, I was the source of the interference."

Kanaya bites her lip with too-sharp teeth, the yellows of her eyes glittering a little too brightly for regular troll eyes in the terrible lighting. "I think I need blood," she says abruptly, her voice taut, and she touches Rose's elbow. "Do not feel obligated to leave the restroom if you believe a repeat event may be imminent, but I need to return to the vehicle or I will start nibbling on the unfortunate cashier."

"No, go," Rose says, smiling. "I'll join you shortly. I think this particular interference event has passed." She presses her hand to her forehead and tears another sheet of paper towel off the roll to dab at a fresh stain on her skirt. Now that she has drawn her attention to it, the frisson of interference in the air overlays her Sight like the head rush from standing up too quickly, and she sighs. If she wants to prevent another fit like that, she may well have to start policing her own aura, keeping her majjyks tightly bound to her skin to prevent it from crackling against the grimlight oozing through the air. Just another burden she needs to keep balanced, on top of everything else.

Kanaya is chugging from a suspect thermos when Rose exits the station, her throat exposed and with
each swallow as Rose opens the door and settles herself in the passenger’s seat. At any other time, Rose would have been highly tempted to lean over and lick a path up the curve of Kanaya's neck, but right now her breath stinks of bile and cheap gum, and she feels like she just biked a three kilometer race. In comparison, when Kanaya takes her mouth away from the insulated flask of blood a blot of deep blue smears rakishly up along her left cheek, and Rose can only be suitably impressed by the fact that Kanaya can pull off anything, even blood streaks. Kanaya shakes her head when Rose goes to buckle in, though. "Go to the back and lie down, Rose."

"That's not necessary. I'm fine," Rose protests, pursing her lips.

"Regardless," Kanaya says with infinite patience. "You should rest. If you have recovered sufficiently by the time we arrive at our destination, we will see about confronting the Scourge and Justice tonight."

Rose's spine stiffens like a rod of iron has replaced the bones and nerves out of a growing sense of outrage. "I have recovered," she says, which is mostly not a lie. The shock of vomiting has faded, and there is only a lingering ache that will be quite easily remedied with tea and a light meal.

"I remain very tempted to turn this car around and drive you back to the East Coast," Kanaya threatens, mild and sweet and with steel under every word. "You forget, Rose, that you trust me not only with your own safety but with that of everyone around you. What if something else occurs that you fail to anticipate?"

"You are not my keeper, Kanaya," Rose snaps, feeling her temper fray.

Kanaya stares her down. "Must I be? May I not simply be terrified that my lover could be lost to powers beyond my comprehension because neither of us are able to anticipate the warning signs? Should I see you suffer, or others suffer, because of it?"

This is how she and Kanaya are unnervingly similar, Rose thinks, snapping the seat belt off and sliding into the back of the car, next to a duffle bag full of their miscellaneous road trip snacks and supplies. They are both right at the most infuriating moments, and win arguments over the most irritating things. Sometimes, when that skill is turned against her with Kanaya's utter surety, Rose doesn't know how John puts up with her. "I wish it stated for the record that I do so under extreme protest," she drawls, waving her fingers at Kanaya in the rear view mirror superciliously.

"It is thus noted. For the record," Kanaya replies, a hint of a grin tugging at her lip, and Rose settles back as the car starts, unable to keep up the effort needed to stay angry in the fact of Kanaya being so very Kanaya. "Rose?"

"Mm?" Rose murmurs. Her eyes slide shut as she begins to tuck in the lazy edges of her magical aura.

"Why do they affect you so? The one in the Ukraine had to be summoned into this mortal plane. Why can they reach out to you so easily without such prior measures?"

Rose's jaw clamps shut, and she takes a long moment to think her words through before it unlocks. Because isn't that the million dollar question? "They don't always need to be summoned, in my experience; sometimes they are just...always there," Rose says at last, swinging her legs up on the seat next to her. "They have always been in my mind, whether I invited them in or no. Whether my infant brain was capable of inadvertently recreating a summoning ritual and producing the necessary sacrificial ingredients remains up for debate, but I'm sure I was a resourceful tot. My mother could or would never explain it to me, and none of the resources and libraries I have perused have ever been able to explain the kind of link I possess to the Furthest Ring."
Kanaya sighs. "Sometimes it seems like everything should be impossible ends up at our doorstep, in one way or another," she says.

Rose rolls her eyes, and rests her head on the duffle bag. Immediately she bangs her head against something smooth, hard, and round, and she lifts her head with a frown. She does not know what makes her look inside the bag, rather than simply setting it on the floor of the car, but she does. She lays hands on the lump and withdraws it from the bag before settling down again, this time without further discomfort. The round object is a white cue ball, a little larger than normal, that rests heavy in Rose's palm. She turns the smooth white orb over and over in the palm of her hand, and narrows her eyes at it. In the back of her mind, Rose can vaguely recall seeing the artefact before, sitting on a shelf in the corner of Kanaya's apartment, but she had dismissed it earlier as a trinket. Now, though…

Now she senses - not power. Not outright power, anyway. But a kind of untapped potential. Like a rock balanced at the brink of a cliff, or a spell whose words dance on the tip of one's tongue. She felt a similar potential in her old needlekind specibus, through which she could channel more precise spells, before it had been...well. Rose smooths a thumb over the cue ball, and considers how she might tap such an interesting new instrument of foresight. Perhaps this will be how she occupies her time on the road trip to Seattle.

Assuming, of course, that they survive a night against two of the most violent anti-heroes in America.

She doesn't think to wonder how Kanaya came to acquire such an object, or how it came to be accidentally thrown in with the rest of their hastily packed belongings. She fails to mention the cue ball to the troll at all. Instead, she tucks it against her side, curls around it, and falls into a peaceful doze.

In the fading evening light, the cue ball gleams a brilliant bone white, and reflects none of the reds and pinks of the tinted sunset. It sparks with neon green for a brief moment, but Rose's eyes have fallen shut, and no one else in the car would be able to see through its white shell to the vision within.

Finding the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice is not a difficult task. The signs of their ongoing rivalry are carved into every major building in the downtown area, by now, and the local Legislaceration task force has barricaded off entire streets in the downtown area in an effort to prevent people from entering the main danger zone. Kanaya had tried and failed to properly research the two anti-heroes and their identities on the Internet at some point, but the printed out paper copies of the research that she gives to Rose are riddled with s's replaced by 2's and doubled i's, the mark of a very different quirk that Rose strongly suspects belongs to one Sollux Captor, the hacker Kanaya tends to turn to when it comes to matters of technological prowess. She doubts Kanaya would have been able to obtain the two women's Pesterchum handles without his assistance.

Now, of course, the point is moot. Both the Scourge and Justice's identities have become headlines thanks to the efforts of the Chicago branch of the Bureau of Legislaceration. One Vriska Serket, coffee shop barista, was outed as the Indigo Scourge the night before all hell broke loose. Since then the prominent absence of Neophyte Terezi Pyrope, fledgling Lacerator, from the ongoing investigation has made it quite evident why Blind Justice chose to pattern her uniform in the style of a classic Legislacerator costume. But even with an entire city's police and Bureau force hell-bent on their capture, the two are more caught up in outdoing one another than they are in dealing with the consequences of their actions.

"I am informing you right now that if, perchance, we were to meet Profiler Will Graham during the
course of the night, I am required by my calling as a psychologist in training to obtain his autograph in my copy of *The Dynamics of Abnormal Psychology*, come hell or high water," Rose informs Kanaya while they are changing into their costumes. "That troll is a legend."

Kanaya loses the ensuing staring contest. "If you must," she sighs, lacing up her boots. "If you attempt to fit that ponderous tome into any of the pockets in that jacket, however, I will never design you a costume with pockets again. Ever."

Rose lays down a spell in chalk sigils on the surface of the bedside table and sets the textbook in question in the exact center. "I can teleport it in if the opportune moment arises. My jacket shall live to see battle another day."

"See that it does," Kanaya replies. She is sitting on the hotel bed, situated at the perfect height to reach over and begin critically tugging on the high-low fall of Rose's skirt. "This is still not hanging correctly. I should have stuck with only the shorts, and not combined the two. But the silhouette of a skirt suits you so much better…"

"In the midst of a fray, I doubt anyone will notice," Rose assures her, zipping up the Kevlar vest layer and closing the jacket over top of it. "Now, help me with this mask."

Kanaya rises, the thick soles of her boots giving her an extra inch over Rose that is truly unnecessary, and assists Rose in securing the three-quarters face mask. She fluffs Rose's hair out from under the straps as the mask settles heavy on the bridge of Rose's nose, conforming to the shape of her face in pale gold. Only her eyes and her mouth and chin are exposed.

"And our battle plan?" she thinks to ask once they've reached the top floor of the hotel (through the gratuitous use of powers for the less than legal purpose of bypassing a locked emergency exit door). "I understand that you wish to auspice the two of them, but if they resist your grey charms?"

Kanaya as the Malachite Sylph cracks her neck from side to side, looking out over the night sky with her nostrils flaring, as though trying to scent the blood of her two wayward grey prospects from this distance. The sirens wailing to the north set Seer's teeth on edge. "I will handle the Scourge," she says, tapping a claw to one of the makeupkind strapped to her leg. "She has far less inhibition than Blind Justice, and is far more likely to resort to extreme violence or maneuver bystanders into harm's way in order to achieve her goals. As a rainbow-drinker, it will be far more difficult for her to extract concessions by trying to harm me physically, as I cannot be killed by ordinary means." Sylph adjusts her gloves and smiles with a sharp edge. "In addition, she will respond best, I think, to a more...violent means of pacification. Justice may listen to you; if you pose a rational argument that appeals to her sense of justice, she may snap out of it."

Seer looks up at the Sylph's feral not-grin and furrowed brow, and cannot help herself. She steps in front of the other hero, twines a gloved hand in her short hair, and pulls her down for a kiss, tasting the raw edge of exasperation that still seethes in Kanaya's aura at thoughts of both Justice and Scourge. Auspisticism may be the more conciliatory of the obsidian quadrants, but Kanaya in her auspicing element is damn sexy. Rose licks far enough into Kanaya's mouth that neither of them are wearing lipstick by the time she pulls away; most of it smears right off onto Rose's inconvenient mask. Sylph sighs at Rose's waggling eyebrows, barely visible above the edge of her mask but still getting the message across. "Put those back down at once," she orders halfheartedly, and she pulls out a facial towelette - because even as Sylph Kanaya would never be caught dead unprepared to touch up her appearance at a moment's notice - to wipe the makeup off and restore Seer's look.

"They cannot be tamed." Seer presses a hand to her chest and heaves a dramatic sigh. "These eyebrows. They must be free to rise and fall at their leisure."
"Your brother is an abysmal influence on you," Sylph says, reapplying her lipstick with a weaponized strife specibus. "I wish you luck. I have seen the Strider eyebrows. They are...frightening. What if you should develop similarly magnificent appendages under their guidance?"

Rose shudders inwardly. On Dave's face, the eyebrows work. She doesn't want to even contemplate the idea of her own spontaneously doubling in breadth. "We do not joke about such things, Sylph," she says primly. She offers the troll hero her arm, and Sylph accepts it. "Straight into the middle of the fray, you think? Trying to run past all those well-meaning Lacerators would be much more trouble than it's worth."

"I couldn't agree more," Sylph says. "Let us engage in the highly coveted, incredibly perilous 2X2 Showdown Combo."

The last thing she adds, before Seer raises her hand and teleports them into the center of downtown, is, "Sollux would be delighted."

After that, of course, they have effectively teleported into a miniature war zone, and they stop talking in order to deal with the shenanigans at hand. Seer and Sylph planned out their arrival on a map ahead of time, based on Seer's sense of which position would lead to the most fortuitous outcome. They teleport to the corner of State Street and Madison, just inside an unmanned barricade the T.J. Maxx on their right riddled with pockmarks from minor explosions. Even with all the shouting and small fires clamoring for her attention, Seer can detect the absurd scent of Dunkin' Donuts emanating through the smoky night air. A wide-horned troll ducks out of the Sears on the left with something tucked under his arm; he glances at Sylph and Seer and yelps, dropping the box and racing away down the street. It would seem that in the light of both of Chicago's local anti-heroes' declining into black rivalry, looters have come out to play.

Seer opens up her Sight and hones in on the two vortexes of light duking it out a few streets away. She is thrown a little when she realizes that while the aura she would associate with Blind Justice is the teal she expected, though a lighter shade than normal, the blaze of light that marks the Indigo Scourge is nothing like the troll's hemotype. It's not a definite rule, of course - trolls and humans alike can range anywhere from generic white light to hot neon pink in her Sight (though she would definitely take the latter as a sign of something gone horribly awry), but trolls trend toward auras within a few shades of their blood color. It is a matter of how they perceive and think of themselves.

The Scourge burns like a golden star. It's as far from any shade of blue as one could possibly imagine. Seer shakes her head to clear it, and nods in response to the Sylph's questioning look. Sylph whirls and darts into the shadows along the right side of the street while Seer takes the left, and together they both run up the street until they reach the site of the main conflict. A group of teal-and-red Legislacerators retreat down the center of the road but pay the two heroes no heed, too caught up in carting the body of a troll in full Lacerator uniform to safety. They leave a trail of olive blood behind them.

There is a new line of defense set up near the Macy's and Seer snaps her fingers, activating the spell to direct light away from her body and conceal herself from their sight. She ducks under the police tape and strides past the battered vehicles and shouting law enforcement without pause. Sylph has her own methods of sneaking through the line. At the intersection of State and Washington now, Seer can see the smoking remains of one of the Great Clocks mounted on the side of the Macy's building, a pale turquoise, cast bronze structure with a smoking hole where the clock face used to be.

Ah, and there they are, she thinks, swiveling to face the right. Oblivious to anything but each other, a troll in a sharp red jacket and teal catsuit squares off against another in black and blue. Justice has her
red blindfold and teal green hood in place, but her trademark red cravat has vanished, and her skirt is in tatters. The Scourge's appearance, however, has deteriorated even further: her pirate coat is gone, leaving her in only a Kevlar vest patterned with a vast spider web. Her dark blue neoprene suit is armless, but while the one arm is bared to expose a white-ink sleeve of a web tattoo, the other is encased in a metal gauntlet. Even her mask has been stripped away to reveal a livid snarl and an aquiline nose.

Seer jolts when she realizes that the tattoo around Scourge's mutated left eye is the same sun symbol that adorns Seer's back. It would never have been visible before, given Scourge's tendency toward full-face masks; not even fan works on the Internet have ever had a clear idea of what the cerulean-blooded hero looked like under her heavy garb, though they're no doubt getting an eyeful now.

But...why? How long has Scourge - or at least, Vriska Serket, the troll behind the mask - possessed a tattoo of a symbol made famous by Seer's appropriation? Who used it first? Seer doesn't know whether to be flattered or concerned.

"Hey! This is a restricted area! What are you doing?" someone screams from behind Seer, though she doubts it's aimed at her. Her eyes flicker to Sylph instead, who has emerged from the shadows, radiating a faint light even with her pale grey makeup on as she gazes down the street at Justice and Scourge.

"Auspicizing," Sylph calls back, her voice carrying in the dry air, and then she stalks toward the two anti-heroes with both fists clenched. Seer hangs back, still invisible, maintaining a discreet distance at all times. If and when Sylph makes the call that her formal auspicism has failed, then Seer will join the fray. Until then, she will watch and wait.

And, she thinks, smirking, she will keep the Legislacerators from intervening. Seer raises her other hand and casts a more general light deflection spell, so that all of the police starting to approach Sylph become disoriented, unable to see anything in the heroes' general vicinity.

Amazingly, Blind Justice and Indigo Scourge fail to notice Sylph's ominous advance. And that's the main issue with their blackrom, Seer realizes. No concupiscent relationship should be flaunted like this in such a public setting, but the fact that it's a black rivalry only spells terror and destruction for Chicago. In their nonstop duel to one-up and outdo each other, both combatants have lost sight of anything but themselves. A rivalry like this is too volatile and unrestrained for heroes to engage in. But they have, and thus, for the sake of everyone around them, auspicism into the grey quadrant or a full-on forced breakup may be the only chance for the two heroes to come to their senses.

For Kanaya's sake, Seer hopes the former works out. Kanaya's conciliatory irritation toward the two is on a whole new level from her usual tendency to play auspice between criminals and the world, and if the troll gets her clubs broken over this, Seer will show them no mercy.

"Blind Justice! Indigo Scourge!" Sylph shouts sternly, placing her claws on her hips as she draws within a few yards of the two. "Desist at once!"

They continue to ignore her. Scourge levels the gauntlet at Justice's face and slams her fist down on the mechanized arm. There is a notable delay before it fires off a stun grenade. Justice dodges with ease, cartwheeling out of the way with her canekind splayed out against the ground. "You have to be quicker than that, Scourge!" the tealblood taunts, her teeth bared in a laughing smirk. "Or are you getting tired?"

"You wish!" Scourge stamps her foot, banging on the gauntlet eight times, thoroughly incensed. "Agaaggggh, this piece of shit!"
"You are being foolish and wantonly destructive, and it will stop," Sylph continues, "right now. Your relationship is injurious for everyone around you."

"Maybe if you hadn't pissed off your mechanic and then tried to fix it yourself!" Justice cackles, leaning both hands on her cane. When Scourge screeches in fury and lunges at her, the nimble tealblood sidles out of the way, whacking Scourge's shins with her cane. "I can't even see and you can't keep up! Do I detect a whiff of defeat in the air?"

"You smell my dice in your face!" Scourge raises her bare hand with only four dice tucked between her fingers and tosses them over her shoulder before Justice can whip her canekind around for another blow at Scourge's back. Somehow, she gets in a lucky shot, and one of the dice smacks against Justice's left arm, shocking the troll with a jolt of electricity.

"That. Is. Enough!" Sylph explodes. She stomps forward and seizes both heroes by the back of their suits, lifts them bodily into the air with an infuriated hiss, and knocks their heads together. Repeatedly. Seer looks on, raising an eyebrow, before putting out a hand to gently guide a wayward Lacerator back toward the barricade. When she looks back, Sylph is head-butting both trolls at once with her teeth bared. She then gives them one last brisk shake and dumps them on the ground. Both Justice and Scourge land on their posteriors, their heads tilted back to gaze (or smell) Sylph's towering form in confusion.

Well, at least they've snapped out of their blind rage. But now they have focused on Sylph; Seer circles around closer, still keeping a little distance between herself and the ongoing auspicism, but close enough that if the two rivals should choose to gang up on Sylph, she'll be in position to assist. "This black fling is at an end. You will listen to my counsel and settle into a more stable quadrant, or so help me I will help the police arrest you myself," Sylph hisses, cracking her knuckles. "You two are acting like wrigglers."

Scourge recovers first. "Oh, you're kidding!" the ceruleanblood spits, slapping her face with her palm. "You actually came?!! Such a meddler!"

"I encourage you to look at your surroundings and pay attention to what chaos you've managed to unleash on this city," Sylph replies, folding her arms. "Your identities are no longer a secret, and this entire square block is in flames! I would ask what you were thinking, but I believe it is quite clear that you were not thinking at all!"

"I'm trying to stop her!" Justice protests, leveling her cane at Scourge. "She's gotten completely out of hand."

"So have you!" Sylph says, exasperated. "You are both equally responsible for this!"

"You're over-exaggerating, as usual," Scourge says, getting to her feet and backing away. She rubs at the blue bruise swelling up on her forehead and grimaces at Sylph. "Okay, so maaaaaaaaaybe we broke a few street signs while we were busting that drug deal! Big whoop!"

"If you are referring to the drug deal in which four of the five criminals involved are now in critical condition in the hospital, you did considerably more than vandalize a few public structures! Those men may never walk again, yet there is no evidence left with which to convict them after your rampage." Sylph gestures at the barricaded street behind them. "In your efforts to surpass each other as heroes, you are hurting innocent people! Justice, that should at least appeal to your sensibilities as a proponent of lawfulness."

"Hmph!" Blind Justice rolls to her feet as well, her brows creased in a frown and her thin lips downturned. "In old Alternia, they could have been executed for less! Compared to that, I showed
them mercy! If you get in the way of that, you're obstructing justice!

Oh dear. Seer winces, and starts lining up spells in her mind's eye, because this is not going well at all. Yes, Blind Justice has always paying lip service to the original Legislacerators of the old empires, but she's never done more than use her freedom as a vigilante to do what the police could not and to rub her success as an impartial figure of justice in the Bureau's face. So this is what happens when a kismesissitude goes wrong - both of them have brought out the worst in the other.

"This is not old Alternia! We have developed as a civilization beyond such an outdated form of Tyrannical imperial law, and if you are truly idolizing it in earnest, I have no choice but to stop you." Sylph slaps the canekind down out of Justice's claws. "You will adjourn with me so that we may discuss your issues elsewhere like civilized trolls. If the fact that all of Chicago has turned against you cannot dissuade you, then I must make the attempt."

"Still doesn't mean you can just waltz in here like you own the joint," Scourge says, tossing her hair. Her seven-pupiled eye sweeps the street behind Sylph, flickering over Seer and the Legislacerators without flinching, and then she narrows her gaze at the jadeblood again. "You're in our city without permission. Talk about rude!" On the last word the ceruleanbloodpoints a finger of the gauntlet at Sylph, pressing a button.

The gauntlet fizzes, and then whines, without doing anything. Scourge howls with frustration, tugging at a couple of exposed wires to no effect while Justice tosses back her head and laughs.

"Ideally, you would have long since discarded this foolish mutual animosity and come to your senses," Sylph says. She kicks Scourge into a wall. "I see that I have been overly optimistic." She snatches the canekind off the ground before Justice can retrieve it, and breaks the specibus in two over her knee. Justice snarls, her mouth agape as Sylph tosses the broken weapon aside. "Listen to me and stop fighting, or else."

Justice and the Scourge look at each other. Or at least, Scourge moans and heaves herself off the ground to glower in her kismesis's direction, and Justice seems to sense the glare when she inhales deeply through her nose, angling her head in Scourge's direction.

"She kicked you into a wall," Justice points out, smirking.

Scourge falls into an inelegant fighting stance, teeth gritted. "I can still kick both your asses," she says, with eyes smoldering with black intent and fixed only on Blind Justice - until, suddenly, they're not. The Scourge's blue eyes narrow and her eyebrows shoot up in confusion as she looks over Justice's shoulder. "Wait, who the hell are you?"

Seer, who has just snuck on Justice, flinches. She can only speculate that the ceruleanblood's uniquely mutated eye must have tipped her off. Snapping her fingers, Seer lets her concealment spell drop, smiling as enigmatically as she can manage. "Sylph? Plan B?"

"So it would seem," Sylph says, sounding exhausted. Disappointment shadows her face, her eyes still burning with impotent irritation, but her steely resolves returns a moment later. "Perhaps after a good drubbing they will be more amenable to my reasoning. I would not lose hope yet. Carry on."

Blind Justice, meanwhile, whirls on Seer, visibly startled. "How -" she starts, but Seer does not let her finish. She taps the tealblood on the forehead and yanks them both away.

They reappear several blocks away from Scourge and Sylph, in the middle of Grant Park. They are now well out of the way of the main Legislacerator patrols, and far enough from the Indigo Scourge that perhaps Seer will have better luck in bringing Justice to her senses. She feels a pang at the
thought of leaving Sylph to fend for herself without backup against a maniac like the Scourge, but the cerulean-blooded hero hadn't been on top of her game from the looks of it.

The consequences of losing oneself in the throes of blind, obsidian passion, it would seem. Blind Justice is little better off. She stumbles upon landing, groping out with blind hands even as she backs away from Seer. The drastic change in scenery - and in scent - seems to have thrown her, which only works to Seer's advantage.

"What is that - oranges and lemon zest?" Blind Justice inhales, her nose twitching. "With a hint of black licorice! You can only be…" She points dramatically. "The Seer of Light! I should have been able to smell you coming from a mile away with a bouquet like that! Do tell how you snuck up on me! I'm impressed!"

"Perhaps if you weren't so focused on your atramentous affair, you might not have been so easy to surprise," Seer replies, laying a hand on her hip. "Certainly my powers over light don't affect your sense of smell. Of all the people back there, you should have been the last one I was able to fool. But you allowed yourself to be too caught up in the Scourge to care about much else this week, I suspect, Ms Pyrope."

Justice's face freezes. Seer presses on, relentless. "Oh? Does that surprise you, that I am aware of your identity? Has it still not sunk in that you are quite thoroughly compromised? All the world knows who you are. You were a member of the Legislaceration Bureau, no? Well, you will never rise above Neophyte now. You have been ruined as Terezi Pyrope."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Justice spits, reaching into the inside pocket of her cropped jacket and removing a backup cane specibus. She folds it out to its complete length and taps it hard enough against the ground to raise up a plume of dust. "Maybe we should talk about your negligence! Where were you when Dark Star attacked New York, hmmmmm?"


"Ha! A lie, a blatant lie!" Justice laughs. "I can smell your deceit! Like black pepper! Try again, Lady Seer!"

"Terezi," Seer says, shaking her head, "you are still deflecting."

Justice's smile vanishes. "I don't know what -"

"My absence during the Dark Star event has no relevance here," Seer stares at the brilliant light teal gleam that roils around Blind Justice, all that blind anger and rivalry that has nowhere to go with Scourge finally out of sight. Perhaps, perhaps…Seer may be no professional auspice, but she is familiar with Kanaya's methods nonetheless... "What matters is that you have forsaken your own code. Or do you think setting your own city ablaze is just?"

"Of course not!" Justice snaps, baring her teeth. "We'll clean it up, after I show the Scourge who is the real hero around here -"

"By committing yet more atrocities?" Seer asks. "By breaking more laws?"

"Argh! That's it, Lemon Zest!" Justice twists the cane and it splits into two halves, each with a sharp blade edge. Well then. "You know nothing about proper Imperial legal procedure. So I'll just have to teach you a lesson!"

"You have lost sight of yourself. I know what that feels like." Seer raises her hands, feeling the
warmth of twin orbs of light appearing in her palms. "But if it's a fight you want, then so it shall be."

When Blind Justice charges, the Seer is ready.

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"You sure about this, man?"

Dave surveys his closet, ostensibly in quest of a not shitty sword, but in reality trying to locate his oldest pair of jeans without looking like he's making a legitimate effort to plan his outfit. Years with Bro have made him sloppy; with a secondary Dave in residence, he can't afford to let his irony slack off.

Unfortunately, his sense of fan-fucking-tastic style skirts the edge between irony and sincerity, so this is taking twice as long as usual. One of these days, he needs to learn to stop second-guessing himself. Become one with the irony. Transcend this mortal coil.

Blah.

"No offense, but your brother seems like a fucking badass. Do you really want to piss him off?"

It helps that Davetoo doesn't have quite the same keenly honed sense of the ironic that he would have if he'd been raised a proper Strider. Little slips fall beneath his radar. But now it's a point of pride, and Dave has started mentally checking himself in a way he hasn't bothered since he was thirteen years old and stupid with the need to impress his older brother.

It doesn't help that he's caught himself making awful puns and nerdy references without being totally aware of it, and he is occasionally forced into making facial expressions in order to get his point across to Davetoo, now that he's been reduced to communicating solely by text. Friendship with John really has changed him if shit like this is difficult to keep up with. Locating the jeans under an old photograph developing tray, Dave keeps his hands in his pockets and continues to kick through the piles of gratuitous stuff he's hoarded over the years. The point is to keep his motives inscrutable and his actions unfathomably ironic. Bro would be proud.

Bro would also highly disapprove of Dave's plan of action for this evening. So. There's that.

Shit's complicated, alright?

"Also, your purple girlfriend is texting you. Seriously, how many hookups do you have? Does your fine blue-themed piece of ass know about this affair? I had no idea any version of me could be such a player."

Dave smacks his face, and grabs the jeans before he can change his mind, flashstepping out into the room to see what trouble his clone twin is causing now.

Orange-Dave sprawls out on his stomach on Dave's bed, one leg kicking absently while he fiddles with Dave's phone. Said leg ends in a foot edged with feathers and tipped with claws, but Dave is actually getting used to that. The orange is what gets him every time - the kid is like a walking firework, and whenever Dave catches sight of him in his peripheral vision it startles him. His free wing arches out, long enough that the very tips of the flight feathers brush the ceiling.

He doesn't look up from his diabolical machinations to read Dave's scribbled DS: stop that when Dave snatches up a notepad from the desk, so Dave bats at the kid's stupid orange face to get his attention. "Stop it, dick," Davetoo mutters, waving his hand to ward off Dave. He frowns, raising a lemon-yellow eyebrow at the screen. "Dude, you don't even have this password-protected. Also,
your girlfriend sounds way too smart for you."

DS: i will murder everyone you love give it back

DS: thats my goddamn sister stop assuming im boning everyone on my chumroll

Davetoo looks up, reads the order on the notepad, and snorts, rolling his eyes. Great, now he's getting all sassy. "Just messing with you, man. Can't you take a joke?"

He rolls over on his side away from Dave, who ends up sprawling half across the bed and reaching over a faceful of bright orange pinion feathers in an attempt to lay hands on his phone. His obnoxious bird self just braces his working wing like a fucking wall and ignores him, smirking. "Chill, I'm not interested in looking for your naked pics. Just fielding your incestuous tomfoolery for you. I won't even look up illicit puppet porn. Look at how considerate I'm being."

Fuck. Dave's forgotten how annoying it can get to have more than one Dave in the same room. Sure, this isn't a time-twin, but they're still similar enough that Dave is starting to bristle. He stands up straight and draws himself back in, forcing his shoulders to slump down in a careless shrug as he regains control of himself. He pauses time, steals his phone back, and swaps it for an empty juice box. By the time Davetoo recovers, Dave has barricaded himself in the closet to change, his phone clenched between his teeth while he pulls on a shirt he hasn't worn in - god, ages. All part of his latest unbelievably sicknasty plan.

That's another thing that still separates them, Dave reflects. Davetoo has no ability to flashstep, and the first time a future-Dave came back to warn them about the horrific consequences of his first escape attempt (clown snuff films had been involved) the bird Dave had started ranting about more clones and conspiracy theories and wanting to fly back home before the government descended upon them until Dave gave up and went to complete the loop. When he asked as discreetly as possible if Davetoo ever got distracted by the endless beat of time, he'd only received a confused look in reply. It seems that in this case study of two, Striders trade out time powers for wings - there is no in between.

He pulls his record shirt over his head. It's the first one he'd designed for himself, and the fact that it still fits now, all these years later, would probably make John howl with laughter - which is why John will never know of this. Ever.

He takes a selfie and sends it off to John anyway, in the spirit of good old fashioned hipster-phase irony.


TG: feast ur eyes eb
TG: thecamerawentoffbyitself.jpeg
EB: …
EB: dude, how old is that shirt?
TG: i have no idea what youre on about now john
TG: youre supposed to be fangirling over my impeccable sense of style not talking nonsense
EB: no, i'm telling you, dave, you sent me a selfie of that exact same shirt years ago!
TG: fuck
TG: what no i didnt
EB: i'm pretty sure i still have it saved on this phone…
TG: id be flattered that you kept it this long man
TG: if that were an actual thing
TG: which its not
EB: it totally is! see!
EB: vintagestriderswag.jpeg
TG: motherfucker
EB: i told you!
TG: god how long have we been bros
TG: clearly too long
EB: years, man, yeeears
EB: this is one of the first pictures you ever insisted on sending me, even though i kept telling you not to.
EB: and then suddenly i had all this picture evidence of your civilian identity.
EB: and it kept happening.
EB: siiiiigh.
TG: you know you love it
TG: but this is legitimately embarrassing i dont really know where to go from here
TG: fuck
TG: there are children in this world who are younger than our broship do you realize this
EB: ...omg
TG: yeah enjoy that early midlife crisis
EB: nice save! :O
EB: i am totally distracted from the fact that you, dave strider, still have your favorite record shirt years after you swore you would trash it!
TG: shhhh
TG: shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
TG: not a word out of you
EB: dave
TG: shhhHHHHHHHHHH
EB: okay now you're just doing that on purpose
TG: shooooooooosh
TG: there is no shouty troll here
TG: only you
EB: DAVE
TG: and me
EB: you're terrible :P
TG: shhh
TG: you have never seen this shirt before in your life
EB: bluh, fine
EB: now cut that out!

Dave just rolls his eyes and deletes the photographic evidence of his own forgetfulness from the phone, walking out into his room and very obviously ignoring Davetoo, who rolls off the bed and follows him out the door when it becomes clear that Dave Strider stops for no man-bird hybrid. No need to leave that kind of photo lying around for Bro or Davetoo to get their claws on it. They'd smirk at him for days, and he really needs to not be dealing with an apartment full of smug Striders right now. Tonight, he and the Badass Quandary are clearing up some of those titular quandaries that define their past interactions, whether the carapacian dame wants to or not, and he needs everyone on their goddamn game.

The only problem with this clearly foolproof plan is that Dave may or may not be under house arrest. Bro calls it 'being grounded for excessive stupidity.' Dave calls it 'unlawful imprisonment.' John had been singularly unhelpful when Dave had begged him for a teleport escape, a clear violation of their bro code, but then, John once again seems to have his own fresh crisis on his hands. It starts with a J and ends with a 'GG: Hiiii, Dave! My name is Jade Harley! We're going to be best friends! :D'.
At that point, Dave had just switched off his phone and rethought some of his life choices.

Dave suspects that John will eventually just embrace the weird, random shit and become some kind of Buddha figure who doesn't give a single fuck about such trivial concepts as 'weird' or 'uncanny,' wandering the earth and spreading his creed of total acceptance to the unsuspecting masses with a dumbass grin. John would just seem like the type, if he weren't so gungho about heroic duty and all that. That, or there is just something downright lysergic in Seattle's water. No one city could produce so much strangeness without a little chemical assistance.

(The jury is still out on whether or not his existentially enraged troll soul mate will eventually succumb to the John feel-good influence and accept his fate as the diamond waifu of a Freaky Shit guru, but Dave's putting his money on 'no.')

...Dave also gets the feeling that his metaphors got away from him, there. Just a little. That happens sometimes. He's sure no one noticed.

When he looks surreptitiously from side to side to make sure the coast is clear, Davetoo is eyeing him again. Seriously. This kid is all up on him. Couldn't he at least chill out in Dave's room instead of tagging along to witness the impending smack down? "Dude, you've been standing there staring into space for like. Five minutes now. Is this normal? Are you even listening to me?"

Frick. He needs to stop disregarding the giant orange goddamn albatross in the room when making these assumptions. 'You don't know my life,' he signs, just to see Davetoo sigh in frustration. 'Sometimes I commune with the spirits of Striders past and commiserate about the hassle of rehabilitating feathery assholes. Do you see me judging you for spending ten minutes preening your creepy hair feathers after dinner? No. So back off.'

Also. Right. Focus. The BQ and quandaries. That's where these obscene tangents started. Dave just needs to fight his way out of house arrest, and he's in the clear.

The only problem with this plan? He needs to fight his way out of house arrest, which is by definition impossible when one's jailor is Bro.

Dave has no illusions about this; he has never once beaten Bro in a straight fight, not even with all the time powers at his disposal, and the last time he was grounded - years ago, now, because Bro is actually a lenient bastard in his own way and Dave gets away with a lot of stupid shit - he hadn't succeeded in escaping until Bro let him escape, at the end of his sentence.

He has a backup plan. It's John's idea, seconded sarcastically by Rose, which means Dave has already been forced to rework it extensively, because John is a trusting, naive soul at heart whose guardian isn't a violent sword-wielding maniac. But he has it. As, you know. A last resort.

He just really doesn't want to admit that it would involve being a mature, rational adult about all this. 'Come on, chickadee, if you're gonna bear witness to my inevitable failure, we might as well get this over with,' he signs, opening the door to their shared room. He doesn't bother dropping back to retrieve his pen and paper, which would only frustrate him, or texting, because like hell is he giving Davetoo a second opening at reading his messages.

Davetoo just rolls his orange eyes and folds his claws over his chest, and when Dave draws his sword and prepares to cross the minefield that is their living room, his more avian half feels the need to offer some more unsolicited advice. "I know you have no reason to listen to a word I say. But I'd like to state for the record that this is still an incredibly stupid idea."

It really is.
Dave edges forward, and then back, squinting as he tries to determine where the first onslaught will come from. He steps on Davetoo's bare claw-toes and the guy yelps, but hey, he's been warned about riding a guy's ass like that.

...This is gonna hurt.

Raising his sword in a guard, Dave starts running.

- It takes them a half hour to reach the staircase; Dave blames this godawful time on the fact that he also covers Davetoo's ass, out of the goodness of his heart, when it becomes clear that Bro is making no effort to distinguish one Dave from the other in the punishing onslaught of godforsaken puppet grenades. Unlike Dave, who ducks and weaves and fends off the puppets to the best of his ability, Davetoo just tries to soldier through, his nose wrinkled up as he holds up his wing before his face and weatherings it all. So, chalk up a point for the defensive wing, but Dave now has bruises in places he didn't know could bruise from fighting for two.

Next on the agenda - train Davetoo in the art of shitty swordsmanship. If he has learned any kind of strife specibus, he hasn't shown it thus far, and what kind of Strider hasn't at least minored in swordkind?

'The stairs are going to be worse,' he signs.

Davetoo just shakes his head, uncomprehending, and shrugs his wing lopsidedly. Dave is struck by an intense wave of curiosity, a question he hasn't yet dared ask - can this guy fly? Because the one wing, at least, seems very, very functional. "Lead on, man. I'm not taking all the new puppets to the face for the sake of your quest."

Dick. Dave races up the stairs without helping him. He warned him, man, so it's not his fault if Sunny D falls prey to the stairway bombardment.

Naturally, when Dave happens to glance back in the middle of a desperate dodge, flattening himself against the wall, he sees that the puppets are avoiding Davetoo entirely. The bird kid stoically trudges upward, and the puppets part around him like the plush sea. Meanwhile, when Dave turns to face forward again, an entire small television set launches at his ribs and sends him plummeting back down the stairs to start over from the beginning. Davetoo actually ends up beating him to the roof, totally untouched, and smirking at Dave's deep breathing exercises.

That's...not even fair. That's favoritism, goddammit.

Having repeated the climb out of puppet hell, Dave casts aside the broken half of a sword that's all that remains after he stupidly tried to parry a satellite dish (it came out of fucking nowhere, okay?) with it, and pulls out a not shitty sword.

"Dude?"

'What?' He raises his eyebrows in a silent question to get the point across.

Davetoo smiles awkwardly. "Good luck."

But no, seriously. Dave gives a short nod and opens the door to the roof.

As per usual rules of Strider engagement, Bro is already waiting. He's leaning up against the radio tower facing the side, his hat tilted forward and his arms folded so he looks totally at ease. Totally
not-surprised by the appearance of two Daves. His creepy puppet cams would have kept him up to date on all of Dave's (slow) progress through the gauntlet. Back when he was a kid, it came off as prescience and it was fucking spooky. Now that Dave knows exactly how Bro manages half of his freaky tricks, it's...still spooky.

"Dave." Bro tilts his head to the side, still not looking directly at him. "And Dave."

"Oriole, actually," Davetoo says.

Dave turns to stare. Bro turns to stare.

Davetoo shrugs, and the wing moves with him. "It's just stupid, now. I hardly ever go by Dave, anyway, these days. You think someone like me lasts long under one alias?"

"A'ight," Bro says, shrugging. He thumbs the brim of his hat. "Oriole. You just here to watch the smackdown, or are you helping this little shit?"

"Watching. I'd have brought popcorn, but I'm pretty sure you people live in squalor unbefitting for even the most trailer trash of hicks, and that you've replaced all non-essential food items with fucking apple juice." Oriole smacks Dave on the shoulder. "Go have fun beating the hell out of each other, you insane dicks. I'll referee." He shuffles off, his splinted wing hitching up out of the way when he finds a patch of roof to sit down on. The free wing huddles in tight against his side, but it's still a bright orange flag. Not like anyone really cares around here though. The Strider household is widely regarded as a nexus of strange occurrences.

On a more irritating note, they are flaunting their ability to talk. Flaunting it. Dave grits his teeth and taps the hilt of his sword before swinging it up and signing, 'Bro. Strife. Now.'

'What, not even going to set down any terms?' The triangular shades catch the right angle and reflect the setting sun. 'And what happened to all your fancy digs, man? I mean, are those thumb holes in the cuffs? Working the middle school angle, I see.'

He could sign something like, 'give me liberty or give me death,' but the last time he tried to get smart like that Bro had taken the X-Box away for a week, and then nobody had been happy. Nobody. And if he responds to the crack at his 90's ensemble, it'll just confirm for Bro that Dave has a squishy underbelly where clothing is concerned.

Which. Is so not the case. At all.

So he just signs, 'Bring it on,' trying not to glance obviously at the holes in the cuffs where his thumbs do indeed stick through, and brings the sword up in a guard.

Bro just raises a fist, and then points his thumb down. 'Alright, little brother. Round three. Maybe this time you'll actually manage to impress me.'

The next thing Dave knows, he's being yanked forward by his collar and thrown toward the edge of the roof, his legs whipped out from under him. Bro's afterimage fades with his thumb still downturned as Dave flies by, and Dave curses himself out internally for falling for the obvious fakeout combo. He sticks out an arm and grabs a rung of the tower to stop himself before he actually takes a flying leap off the building. His ribs impact against the metal hard, and he lets out a huff that costs him valuable time. When something tugs on his ankle, suspiciously gentle, he drops to the ground and stumps with all his weight on Lil Cal's brilliant, uncanny grin. All he gets is the less than satisfying jar of his feet slamming into the rooftop, while the puppet scurries away in a series of twitchy steps.
Bro is out of sight, which is bad, bad like a spider crawling across the wall of your bedroom and then disappearing behind the bed levels of oh god fuck me. But Dave focuses on the puppet, because if Cal is around, Bro has to be somewhere nearby working the strings. Lil Cal may be freaky as fuck, but at least it's not mechanized like some of Bro's weirder shit. The puppet chitters its jaw in soundless laugh, twitching all by its lonesome while Dave works up the nerve to attack it. His palms may or may not be sweating, and has his puppet phobia thing always been this bad? He doesn't remember it being this bad. Shit, just go go go -

Dave flashsteps, sliding around Lil Cal in a circle with the gravel, so at least the thing can't smile at him while he decapitates it. That just wouldn't be cool. He swings the shitty blade down with both hands - and then turns on his heel, the thin soles of his sneakers letting him feel every sharp, digging point of gravel that he skims out of his way as he jabs at the lurking figure of Bro, who's trying to hang inconspicuously in the background. Maybe that worked before Dave got a handle on the time thing, but now he's in the rhythm of the fight. His sword stabs through thin air instead of clattering against another sword, but Dave follows the arc of the swing and twists around to slash behind him. He allows himself a tiny smirk as the four incoming, bright orange smuppets tumble to the ground in pieces, neatly bisected by the slice.

Lil Cal wraps around his leg, a plush, twining weight pressed up along his calf and knee, and Dave yelps. The puppet's mouth opens and it crunches down on the back of his thigh like a freaking zombie puppet motherfricker. Dave flips the sword into a backwards grip and stabs downward, holding time still just long enough to punch through the top of the puppet's skull, right through its obnoxious fucking hat.

He pays for it though, and that's always the problem - Dave can't help freaking the fuck out over Lil Cal, and Bro knows it. It distracts him, and in that moment when he should have been using his extra time to catch up to Bro's crazily fast fraymotif, a blurred, shadowy afterimage appears in front of Dave. By the time he sees it, of course, Bro is already long gone. The hilt of a blade cracks against his jaw, and he sees white. This isn't working. This never works. Dave spits at the ground, grimacing as he runs his tongue over his teeth to make sure none fell out. As he takes stock of the situation, there are four Bro-shaped afterimages darting around the roof in unpredictable patterns, and one Lil Cal beaming at him with all of its perfect wooden teeth bared, ready to chomp down again.

Shit. He's done. Dave snarls, and scrubs a hand through his hair. Bro has had all the time he needed to set up the roof for their millionth one-sided strife, with one inevitable conclusion: Dave buried in a clusterfuck of goddamn puppets, and Bro zooming off into the ironic aether on some rocketboard at Warp Five. But Dave just can't even deal with this shit right now. It's time to face the music.

...Worse. It's time for Plan Egbert-Lalonde.

God, this is such a stupid plan.

"Hey, Dave, kick him in the balls!" Oriole yells, his claws cupped around his mouth.

...Okay, that's a worse plan.

Dave flings himself forward, tossing his sword aside, and time obliges him.

He skips past all the afterimages of Bro's taunting form, crashes into one of Lil Cal's slaps and keeps going, and is rewarded by the sight of both Bro's eyebrows shooting up as Dave crashes into his chest. His actual chest, not just a shadowy feint.

He also takes a sword to the right side of his ribs. The sharp pain leaves him breathless, but it's
nothing new. What's the point of a lifetime of intense sword-fighting if you don't learn to take a stab wound or two?

This is the part where he has to hope Rose and John really are onto something with their unique combination of freaky mind-reading and naive trust in the goodness of humanity, because if this doesn't play out the way they think it will, Dave just left himself swordless and at the mercy of Bro, of all people.

"Shit!" Bro says sharply, grabbing Dave by the shoulders. "Dave, Jesus FUCKING Christ-

'Bro. I made friends with a Badass Quandary, and I need your help to interrogate her,' Dave signs. It goes against every instinct he has. But fuck it. Nothing else is going to work.

Why not try something new?

"You little shit, you did some time thing, didn't you," Bro snaps, ignoring him and the completely mind-blowing revelations Dave is attempting to communicate to him like a normal human being. He might be slightly distracted by the sword sticking out of Dave's side.

To be fair, that is mildly distracting. Hell, Dave is distracted by that, too. But they need to stay on topic, here. "Hold still and don't dick around, we need to remove that," Bro keeps blathering, and maybe it's all the blood rushing out of Dave's head but he sounds a little tense. Possibly even worried.

'She's a carapacian and I've been meeting her for - what, a year and a half, now?' Dave babbles, as well as he can using only his hands. He can't taste any new blood in his mouth, which he thinks is a really good sign; means nothing important got punctured. Moving still hurts, though, so he grits his teeth when Bro - gently - shoves him off his chest and makes him lean back. Everything is kind of dizzy-making, though, so he sticks to the Egbert-patented word vomit. 'She knew about the time thing and everything, and got me onto the whole traveling backward thing. Pretty sure she knows more, but I haven't gotten a single straight answer out of her in years. So. Here. All my cards are on the table. How's that for communication, you bastard?'

"Good god, I raised a fucking motor mouth who can't even talk. How is this even possible." Bro shoves Dave's hand aside when Dave goes to prod at the sword. "Don't pick at it, you'll lacerate your fucking liver."

'Dude, this is, like, a flesh wound.'

"If you start quoting that movie in a valley-girl accent again, I will murder you myself Dave."

"Should I call an ambulance?"

Oh right. Oriole witnessed that spectacular flying fuckup. Dave rolls his eyes back and to the side to squint at orange him, but to Bro it must look like Dave is passing out like a fucking wuss, so he smacks him across the cheek. "'Ey,'ey, kid, wake up!"

'I'm awake!' Dave snaps back, kicking on reflex. His one regret in this moment is that Bro somehow dodges the attempted nutshot. 'Are you looking at a word I'm signing, you insensitive fuck?'

"Of course I am, and we can discuss all that shit when you're not bleeding all over the place," Bro says. He sounds almost exasperated. "No, no hospitals, he's fucking fine."

"Except, you know, you fucking stabbed him!" Oriole sounds worried, but he's also mostly a tangerine-dyed smear in the corner of Dave's vision, even when Dave squints over the jumbled angle
of his shades where they hang half off his nose - so heck, he could just be concerned about the neighbors again. Dave would be oddly touched by the sentiment if it weren't totally misplaced. This rooftop has seen more accidental stabbings and near-dismemberment than probably any other roof in all of Houston. Even the neighbors who still give a fuck stopped calling in the cops after Dave turned eleven or something like that.

'Go hard or go fuck yourself,' Dave signs. He looks back down at his stomach and pokes at the sword again; Bro is distracted enough with something that he actually touches the sword, and pain flares up, blindsiding him. That side of the white torso of his shirt is now sticky with red, which is just never going to come out. There isn't enough bleach in the world.

Damn Rose and her conviction that appealing to Bro's nostalgic parental instincts was a good idea. Last time Dave takes advice from a tentacle headshrinker. Strange women distributing poor life advice that ends with people getting stabbed is a shitty system of advising and Dave should probably warn John. It's his duty as the best brofriend ever to prevent John from making equally shitty decisions, right?

And Rose already fucked John over once and -

When did the stars get so...dancy?

...He's lost a lot more blood than he thought he would, clearly. This is just sad. First time he's been properly stabbed in a long time, and he can't focus for shit.

'I think I'm gonna hurl,' Dave signs, pressing a hand to his side gingerly.

"Do it and the bird kid can carry your nauseous ass downstairs. God, next time you get fast enough to surprise me, don't." Bro shakes his head, his pointy shades swimming in Dave's peripheral vision. "Alright, Dave, prepare for consequences," Bro says, which is Dave's cue to grab onto something and not wimp out.

Unfortunately, the closest thing to grab turns out to be bird foot.

The sword actually hurts a whole lot more coming out than going in.

Dave doesn't puke, but he does yell loud enough that the crazy lady in the apartment complex next door flings open her window and shrieks unintelligible Spanish before tossing a barstool at them and that? That right there? That earns him a gold star.

- He wakes up ten minutes and four seconds later, on the dot. Groggy as fuck, Dave tries to sit up and realizes that was an unbelievably stupid decision two seconds too late. The last thing he remembers is grabbing Oriole's foot so hard he probably left bruises and took a bird claw to the face.

That, or he just whited out from the extraction of said sword. But 'curbstomped by bird-me' sounds marginally better than 'I passed out over one little stab wound, whoopdedoo,' and he makes the executive decision that when he updates John on the progress of Mission Total Disclosure (Rose's name, not Dave's), he will be liberally altering details to emphasize just how badass the whole thing was.

"...You didn't suck."

Speak of the orange devil. Dave reaches up and manually peels open his own eyelids. His shades have been removed, and he panics before locating them on the desk by the bed. He slams them on,
his body protesting with all the white hot intensity of a thousand suns, but it's worth it to have that dark, shading buffer between him and the orange, feathery asshole perched on his desk and watching him from above. Like an unwanted, feathery guardian angel, here to guide him along his quest into dipshittery.

Dave tilts his head down and grimaces at the bandage job. Definitely Bro's work, which means he doesn't even want to know where his shirt ended up. That thing was older than Christ, anyway. "Of course I didn't suck, I was completely on top my shit tonight," he wants to say, except oh yeah.

"I think you freaked Bro out, though," Oriole says, watching with really creepy unshaded eyes as Dave prods at the extra gauze padding over the vague area of his liver. "Like, the minute he finished patching you up he kind of threw you at me and olly outied like he couldn't wait to peace out. What's up with that?"

Dave snorts, picks up his phone, and texts the answer to himself before tossing the phone to Oriole to read.

DS: yeah bro gets like that
DS: he acts like hes tough shit but hes a total pansy with injuries and shit
DS: on other people anyway
DS: he went and acted all concerned and stuff in front of witnesses and now he must retreat from the world and cleanse himself in our hidden inhouse hot spring
DS: burn some sage incense to clear out his tear ducts
DS: meditate with some bloodstones
DS: cry to the blue corn moon
DS: the usual

"You guys are repressed as fuck, you know that?" Oriole says, tapping the screen with his claw.

'We seriously need to get all that Lalonde swag out of your system, it's freaking me out,' Dave signs. 'Must be a recessive gene. We can so fix that.'

He returns the middle finger he receives with enthusiasm. Sitting up hurts like a motherfucker, but he does it anyway, pushing through the pain with a stiff lip. His jaw clenches a little, but that's it. Awesome. His pokerface may yet be salvaged from the influence of the Egbro.

"Just take the phone back and text already," Oriole insists, holding out the phone as Dave determinedly shuffles by the desk to get to the closet. Like hell is he wandering around shirtless with a gaping hole in his side in a household full of secret puppetcams. And he needs to redo the bandages because Bro may be kickass at stitches, but he always wraps bandages too tight. How the fuck is Dave supposed to breathe? This is like a goddamn corset. He's going to swoon all over the place, and that's only funny when it's ironic. The rest of the time it's just a symbol of how unrealistic societal expectations for the human body lead to the rearrangement of internal organs, and Dave will have no part in such bullshit.

"Should you even be walking? You may have missed the memo, but you almost bled out up there. Great plan there, genius."
He needs a way to make this kid stop talking. Dave does not remember being such a chatty Cathy when he could still talk. He wants to cough out a hoarse, inaudible 'omfg stop,' but it would just be more trouble than it's worth.

He's starting to lose that instinct to talk first, sign later. It's been long enough since the collar broke (since Bro fucked it up, the irrational part of his brain mutters) that Dave can barely remember what he sounds like to his own ears. Even Oriole sounds different, because that's the problem with voices - between waves and pressure and internal vibrations, even the voice of a near identical Dave echoes strange to Dave's well-trained ear. The memory of his own fades more every day.

Plus, Dave is pretty sure his voice is a lot more chill than that. His own smooth voice brings the mellifluous flow in any poetry slam. Oriole's constant, vaguely scratchy throat must be a bird thing.

Speaking of.

'Corvidae.'

A faint grimace on his face, Oriole shakes his head. Dave huffs and starts typing on his phone, holding out the screen for Oriole to read at intervals before the text scrolls up out of the screen.

DS: not an oriole a crow

DS: pinions are all wrong bro

DS: streak-backed oriole would be almost the right color red-winged blackbirds epaulettes would be spot on but your feathers are too blunt at the tips

DS: clearly corvid not icteridae. raven wings would be longer and thinner with more slotting yours splay out at the end like fingers

DS: so crow

Oriole looks at him, and for once, his face is totally flat. On him, the expressionlessness that's so normal on Dave's own face in the mirror is...unsettling. Is that really what he looks like when he shuts down? "Dude, why the fuck do you know so much about bird wings?" he asks, thick yellow brows furrowing a little and breaking the weird flat aspect.

DS: werent you the one telling me my collection of dead things meant something psychologically significant?

DS: i taxidermy and take hipster pics in my spare time do the math

DS: also i know how our minds work because all striders are obsessive past the point of irony. you would have known about the wings, and we both know it

DS: you just pulled oriole out of your ass

The bird kid pushes a stray feather behind his ear, still unreadable. "Nothing personal," he says, with a deliberate casualness that Dave sees right through by virtue of experience. "Just don't need your bro poking around in my private life. You know he would."

At least Oriole - Crow - fuck, things were less confusing when he was just Orange Creamsicle - has caught on to Bro's shenanigans early. Dave still hasn't forgiven that guy for being an unreasonable dick while John was visiting.
DS: he totally would but dude just pick a name and stick with it.

"Oriole for now. Haven't been Crow in ages." Oriole closes his wing again, touching the broken one with a hand, and then looks away. "It was pretentious as fuck, anyway. Could only have been more pretentious if I just went and called myself Raven or some shit like that."

Dave smiles, just a little approval in his expression. Maybe. He could appreciate when a fellow Dave's sense of irony led him down a righteous path. He leans into the closet, resists the urge to plan out a new outfit, and grabs the first shirt that comes to hand before making a beeline for the bathroom.

Oriole follows him. Dave stops midstep, and turns, hands in his pockets with the shirt clutched in a fist.

DS: dude i know everyone is warm for the strider form

DS: but back off bro do we need to establish anti incest ground rules or something

"Wow, let's not," Oriole says, making a face. "Dude, I'm just making sure you're not going to faint all over the place. I don't know what kind of fucked up household this is where stab wounds are like a fucking papercut, but even your brother was kind of freaking out. So. Yeah. Just trying to treat this whole thing like a normal human being would. Do you need help walking?"

DS: oh fuck that

Dave stalks off, opening Pesterchum and ignoring the birdkid who trails after him into the bathroom - which is, for once, not tricked out with enough booby-traps to make a grown ninja cry.

TG: john
TG: am i or am i not a strong independent strider who dont need no man
EB: so you've said, yeah! :P
TG: so you respect my right to deal with stab wounds on my own time
TG: without feathery orange asshats trying to escort me around the house
TG: because i defy the victorian stereotype of the fainting blonde bombshell
TG: right
EB: omg yes dave.
EB: you are the independent dave, it is you.
EB: but what stab wounds?
TG: uh
TG: #missindependent
EB: dave!
EB: that's not funny! at all!
EB: don't make me come down there!
-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 19:26:10 --
TG: you would wouldnt you
EB: yupppp /\ now explain yourself!
TG: damn eb didnt know you cared
TG: and yet where were you before i had to enact operation oh goddamn i am making a terrible mistake
TG: my life choice bullshitometer just exploded
TG: you and lalonde sabotaged it 5ever
TG: i will never bring my family honor
EB: so you actually just talked to him about everything like we suggested?
TG: yeah and now behold i am slain
EB: HA HA, very funny.
EB: stab wounds are hilarious, i get stabbed all the time too.
EB: except OH WOW NO I DON’T
TG: nah bro
TG: youre the guy in charge of being blown up
EB: this is also true :/
TG: its an important job man good luck
EB: yeah, it's a blast...
EB: but you're okay?
TG: eb
TG: john
TG: egbert
TG: stabbing is to strider as puns are to egderp
EB: ...so being stabbed hilarious?
TG: oh right you actually like puns
TG: no being stabbed is an unavoidable part of life and sometimes you just have to soldier on through the onslaught like the badass you are
TG: in retrospect puns are nothing like being stabbed
TG: puns are the work of the devil
TG: puns are the tenth circle of hell
EB: what can i say, dave.
EB: i can see your point...
EB: but i can't help it.
TG: oh god please no
EB: it's a worldwide punomenon up in here!
TG: goddammit john
TG: people have been known to commit murder over shit like that
EB: so these puns are to die for?
TG: im going to go cry in this corner over here
TG: youve reduced me to tears again
TG: watch im going to go up to my bro and be all
TG: 'im glad i know sign language'
TG: 'its pretty handy'
TG: and thats it
TG: game over man game over
EB: well, that's when my life's work will be complete and i can retire to the country in peace
EB: jade likes puns too, you know!
TG: oh fuck me i keep forgetting theres two of you now too
TG: were you the one who gave her my handle?
TG: you did didnt you
EB: noooope! she's been teleporting my phone and stuff all day, it's really starting to freak me out.
EB: but she saw the screen i guess, and now she and rose are best buds!
EB: she's really nice though, i think you guys would get along if you unblocked her.
EB: also, i don't know how long blocking works on her, she's way smarter than i am...
TG: wait
TG: john the paranoid bastard
TG: john who wouldnt even walk around my house without a mask
TG: youre recommending heroes get to know each other
EB: …
TG: ...
EB: darn it! that keeps happening!
EB: agghhhghgh, don't be friends with her! because we don't actually know if she's trustworthy or not, even if rose likes her!
EB: but
EB: i don’t know!
TG: dude
EB: help me! i trust her and i don’t know why!
TG: probs just a sibling thing
TG: like why should i trust the orange creamsicle not to off me in my sleep aside from the fact that i could totally kick his ass?
TG: relatives man you feel me?
EB: i don't know, it still seems a little irrational???
TG: look my man just remember the golden rule
EB: what?
TG: no matter how hot she is
EB: dave…
TG: do not bang
EB: that's not the problem here!
TG: i mean it
TG: let not house of egbert become a couch for incest
TG: strider out
EB: you are the opposite of helpful.

"You've been texting your boyfriend for like, ten minutes now, and you look like you're about to fall over and pass out on the ground. God, dude, do I need to confiscate your phone?"

Dave emerges from his texting fugue when a bright orange hand reaches over his phone and tries to yoink it. He spins and puts his back to Oriole, tabbing over to an empty note page. Spinning is an awful decision that makes the mirror turn topsy-turvy in his vision, but Dave just closes his eyes, rocks back on his heels, and types without looking.

DS: you need to get over this whole klepto schtick man we are law abiding citizens in this household

DS: you keep mispronouncing brofriend btws

DS: oh god so much pun

"Look, can you just do whatever and then lie back down?" The birdkid makes another strike at the phone, and Dave has to painfully shouldercheck him on the side with the broken wing. This reminder that they're both in awful shape makes the kid flinch and back out of range, glowering at Dave sourly.

DS: dude why do you even care?

Oriole throws up his hands and wing. "I don't know. Fuck. Because you're letting me stay in your house without some hidden catch? Because you're my weird clone twin who miraculously missed out on the shitty mutation gene? Because contrary to popular belief, I'm not an unfeeling dick, and I would probably feel a tiny amount of guilt if you passed out and knocked yourself unconscious just to prove a point? Pick one, asshole, and then go the fuck to sleep."

Dave bends down, his side protesting all the way, and starts pulling the necessary first aid stuff out from under the sink, where Bro has tossed it so haphazardly that all the bandages and shit are in a
pile. The guy has no sense of organization. He hitches his hip up on the counter by the sink and starts removing all the tape and staples binding his ribs up like a goddamn mummy with a pair of fabric scissors.

"I like this plan. 'Undo all the bandages with a pair of hugeass scissors and see how many new holes you can stab in yourself.' Awesome." Oriole pinches the bridge of his nose, and the movement draws Dave's attention. Dave squints, and has to tilt his head sideways to be sure, but yup. The freckles that on Dave are barely noticeable are slightly darker on Oriole, burnt orange flecks that scatter across his cheek and nose.

Bird freckles. Orange bird freckles. There is nothing about that Dave can handle. He can't do it. So he ignores it.

DS: scissors are like swords but there's two of them and people never see them coming

DS: always keep a pair of scissorskind on your person dude what kind of unprepared dipshit are you

"The kind who has only managed to get stabbed once in his life, which is apparently a daily occurrence in this hellhole," Oriole says, leaning against the wall. "God, we look identical and I still think I'm the older one. There is a massive maturity curve here."

Dave raises an eyebrow.

DS: you've only been stabbed once good god what have you been doing with your life

DS: spill man tell me the sicknasty deets i need to use both hands for the next part

He's curious, now. Setting his phone down on the counter and dumping the wrinkled pile of used bandages into the overflowing trash can, full of empty toilet paper rolls and shampoo bottles, Dave grimaces as he applies pressure to the wad of gauze over the stab wound. He trusts to Bro's stitch work, at least, and he doesn't want to risk ripping any of it out by dicking around with it. Awkward but trying to play it cool, he bites down on a roll of bandage and starts unwinding it with his teeth. Like a badass.

"You should have been using both hands for all of this," Oriole sighs. "Fuck this, I've got at least two months of maturity on you. At least. It's the only explanation."

Dave just stares at him, his face the perfect wall, emotionless and uncaring. It's the only way to communicate how very few fucks he gives about his bird-twin's maturity complex. Which is total bullshit, anyway, because Dave is so mature. So damn mature. Seriously, the new and improved Dave Strider wears kickass clothes and doesn't keep secrets from his guardian, and that's like an A+++ or something on the maturity-echeladder.

"Yeah, well, turns out some people aren't as gung-ho about accepting mutations as your batshit insane family," Oriole mutters at last, shifting and breaking eye contact first. Dave smirks and celebrates another flawlessly executed stonewall. "After my first guardian took off for parts unknown, I had to handle myself. Human CPS wouldn't really know what to do about a ten years old with wings, no matter how well I was hiding them. So I ended up wandering a lot. Was on the streets for a while, and I got cocky in a fight and took a knife to the kidney. God, it was over something so unbelievably stupid. What the fuck were we even fighting about -" he breaks off, shaking his head. "Fuck it.

Okay. This has to stop. Dave tucks the end of the bandages under his arm, and starts texting again, because this seriously needs to be said -
Oriole pauses, then raises an eyebrow. "...Genius point to you, man. Bravo. I am indeed...orange." He starts a mocking slow clap. "Such cultural sensitivity."

Dave heaves an exaggerated sigh. At this point, flipping the bird isn't worth the satisfaction of the stealth pun - *oh goddammit John*. His ensuing message may or may not be more vehement than intended.

"Oh fantastic, you found the caps lock."

"Finish redoing your goddamned bandages," Oriole snaps, reaching under the sink and lobbing a roll of tape at Dave's head. "There's such a thing as makeup. And before you even move your goddamned hands, *I have seen your closet.*"

Dave's hands stop. He thinks about it.

"How did you avoid the system anyway"

"Pretty sure the gov would have noticed small orange bird child at the local hospital"

"But yeah they keep track of these things dont they"

"Men in black and superhero regulation and all that"

"Didn't come from a lab, if that's what you're implying," Oriole snorts. "I just remember my first guardian was some troll lady. She was the one who let me in on the little secret that wings weren't standard issue for most people. I guess she'd seen a lot of mutants in her day, but fuck if I know where she picked me up in the first place. Could have been a hospital, could have been a government..."
facility. I don't know and I don't care, as long as they don't come after me." He grimaces, scratching at the feather barbs that line his face at the hairline. "Honestly, that's what I thought the whole creepy kidnapping thing was about, at first. But they didn't know shit about where the wings came from, and then you guys told me it was all some gang thing. Thanks for making you and everyone who vaguely looks like you into a giant fucking target, btw."

DS: orange

DS: wings.

"Shaddup. Do you know how many years I've spent with these things taped down? Like. Goddamn. Here, kid, spend the first half of your life stunting your wingspan."

DS: fuck dude im not hating on the wing problems

DS: everyones life is shit this is basically a fact of existence

DS: calm yo birdtitties

Oriole stares at him in disbelief. "You guys really are that confrontational," he says. "It just magically spews out of your mouth, like a fountain of dicks."

Dave feels his shoulders huddling up. The kicker is, Oriole is pulling the same shit; Dave just takes a fraction of a second longer to realize it because he doesn't huddle his shoulders, he shrugs his wings up like ruffled orange banners. Even the broken wing makes a good faith effort.

...Is that peacocking? No, really. Are they both doing that? How long has this been a thing? Dave forces himself to relax, because he thinks in a contest over the most irrational display of Strider swag, actual wings probably win. He turns away and looks down, shrugging with both hands palm up. He stuffs all the medical supplies back under the sink, enjoys the simple freedom of breathing without restriction, and slinks out of the bathroom. No matter what Oriole is muttering about now, he isn't going back to his room. Bro has had maybe forty minutes now since Dave lost consciousness to start dicking around. And as loudly as Dave's instincts scream for him to go at it alone and keep his mouth shut about everything, he kind of shot that whole non-interference clause in the face when he blabbed everything to Bro.

Seriously, never taking advice from Rose and John again. Maturity is awful. Admitting he needs help with BQ situation is awful.

Growing up is a goddamn shitshow.

And now he has to deal with the consequences.

-

The consequences are worse than expected.

This is primarily due to the fact that when Dave rounds the corner to enter the kitchen, the sight that greets him is impossibly stupid. Oriole walks right into his back again, swearing creatively, and says, "What now?" before shouldering his way next to Dave so he too can look into the face of madness.

Dave just points.

The Badass Quandary looks up from her elegant sprawl, lounging artfully on the living room sofa, just in time for Bro to pass her a chipped mug. "Wait," Bro grunts, and then he takes the mug back.
He turns it over and three ninja stars fall out onto the floor. Then he hands it back to her and scoots the starkind under the sofa, so fast Dave almost misses it. "Little shits," Bro then says by way of greeting, nodding to Dave and Oriole as he stomps back to the kitchen and starts doing something unfathomable to a plastic electric kettle. "Act like fucking gentlemen and shut your mouth, Dave."

Dave shuts his mouth, but only because it wouldn't do him any good to try yelling, anyway. Not because Bro told him to. 'Why,' he signs, not even bothering with the question mark sign. 'Why did you do this thing.'

'Because I could,' Bro signs back, utterly without expression. 'And because you make everything more complicated than it needs to be. I swear to god, if there were a goddamn meteor about to collide with this house, you would dick around with your computer and run five time loops before just dealing with the damn problem.'

There is just nothing to say to that. Nothing at all. Dave flashsteps forward and starts signing at BQ instead, though he knows that Bro is probably still watching his hands, like the shameless spying asshole he is.

'What is this why are you here why is this even a thing.'

She cocks her head to the side, her glossy black carapace unnaturally shiny under the tacky indoor lighting. It's amazing how, other than that, she looks just as regal sitting on their shitty sofa, surrounded by ironic posters and puppet carcasses, as she would in film noir lighting on a street corner at dusk. When Bro approaches again, the carapacian holds up the mug with an elegant curl of her wrist for the elder Strider to pour something into it. Only then does she reply, sipping what smells like tea with her face in a polite mask. She signs one-handedly, her voice no less clear in Dave's head for it.

BQ: Apparently, Knight, you contacted your guardian and requested assistance in dealing with me.

BQ: Smart of you, honestly. You should never have trusted in your ability to deal with a carapacian of my caliber alone. Am I or am I not of Derse?

BQ: It would have been smarter if you did so years ago, but then, Knights were not made for perception.

'We were totally going to go confront you in the streets. It was going to be so fucking awesome,' Dave insists. 'Might even have gotten Orange-Me in on the strife action. But no, Bro asks and you just - show up?'

The carapacian rolls her white eyes, sipping on the tea again. He can't tell if Bro actually has some secret tea brewing talent he's been holding out on Dave about all these years, or if the BQ is just being flawlessly, impeccably polite about shitty tea.

BQ: Hardly.

BQ: Human beings are not supposed to be that strong. If I but had my ring -

BQ: But no. What's done is done. We made a mutual agreement that I would accompany him to the Knight's humble abode, and in exchange we would not destroy half the city in pointless confrontation.

BQ: And lo, here I am.

BQ: I even brought...company.
Her mouth twists down in a grimace.

Dave learns why when he notices the short, grey-swaddled figure sitting cross-legged on a pile of GameBro magazines. The Perfectly Mundane, 'totally-not-a-spy' carapacian looks up from her inspection of a game review at the same time Dave realizes she's probably been sitting there the whole time, watching him freak out.

…So, there really is something to that whole spy thing. Huh.

Realizing her cover has been blown, the PM launches to her feet and marches over to Dave, her frown stern as she digs into her messenger bag and whips out a thin slip of an envelope to flap at his face.

PM: Here, Knight! From my lady Querent.

PM: It is a DELIVERY of utmost priority. I only wish I had been able to deliver it when we met earlier, but it only recently reached me.

She shoves the envelope up against his sunglasses, standing on her toes to do so, and Dave finally takes it because that is embarrassingly adorable. She studies his face, gives a curt nod, and then stomps off like an alien dame on a mission towards the front door without a word.

"Leaving already, doll?" Bro asks, raising an eyebrow as she walks by him.

The pale carapacian frowns at him, her chest puffing up with righteous indignation.

PM: I have other M E S S A G E S to deliver, I'll have you know! My lady must be informed of recent events, and of the orange one! It is all very significant.

"I heard that," Oriole mutters.

"A'ight, little sister, I'm not stopping you. Take this." Bro holds out a brown paper bag. PM takes it and reads the black lettering on the side, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Whatever she reads, she flinches, eyes widening as she looks up at Bro.

PM: This is...addressed...to me?!

Bro smirks. From him, it's basically an indulgent smile. "Yup."

The carapacian clutches the lunch bag to her chest.

PM: M I N E ~

She beams up at Bro, tugs her wrappings back up over her mouth, and trots to the door, stowing the brown bag into her satchel with the utmost reverence.

'Team mom,' Dave signs. Bro - or a puppet - slaps him upside the head. By the time Dave recovers, Bro is waving PM out the door, his back turned and radiating innocence. Like he hadn't waved Dave out the door the exact same way all through elementary school.

Such a mom.

When the door closes, BQ sighs loudly in everyone's minds, a dark huff that blooms behind Dave's eyes.
BQ: She was...persistent.

BQ: Also, mail personages are terrifying. I would never dream of standing between one of them and their target.

BQ: But good Horrors above, I don't know why my counterpart insists on keeping such an...intense wildcard on the playing field.

'That?' Dave signs, irritable. 'That's why we're having this intervention you know. You and your inability to give a goddamn straight answer. I had to talk to Bro over this. It was humiliating.'

BQ: Your communication issues have nothing to do with me, Knight, and everything to do with your unique neuroticism.

"Everyone with the signing again. Dicks. All of you. Dicks," Oriole repeats, leaning against the wall dangerously close to one of the many sound systems scattered around the room.

BQ eyes the bird kid speculatively, and one eyebrow arches up.

BQ: Fascinating.

"Well, now that the little lady is off, let's talk." Bro closes the door and reappears squatting on the table in front of the sofa, his pointed shades on level with BQ's as she turns with deliberate calm to stare back. "We can start with why the hell one of you has been dicking around with my kid. Because I don't know much, but I know you shouldn't be here."

The Quandary sets the mug on the coffee table with a clink, and leans forward into Bro's personal space, lacing her fingers under her chin with an innocuous cigarette holder in hand.

And she smiles.

BQ: Oh yes.

BQ: Let's.

This is going to either be incredibly enlightening, or incredibly dumb on so many levels.

Dave can feel it.

---

John lives in a normal house.

It's amazing!

Jade has been around the world over the past year and a half, and often times people have offered to let her stay the night in exchange for her walloping the latest radioactive behemoth into space or deactivating a time bomb in the immediate vicinity. But there's a difference between sharing battle stories around a campfire and coming home! It's built to closely resemble the houses on either side, bland and quiet and unassuming, but John lives here, and that gives it, like, plus ten awesome points by default!

Plus, they get to fly in through the window! John flies down, still ignoring her because he has his 'intense-serious-face' on, and hovers by the open window, glancing around quickly before waving Jade down with a hand. Jade giggles and uses the top of the window as a hand hold, swinging WV in by the claw so he lands with a squeak on the bed off to the side, and then hops in herself. When
she whistles, Bec follows, setting up its usual guard by the door as it sniffs the air curiously.

So! This is the residence of John!

Jade inspects things while John takes his sweet time closing the window. Textbooks litter the desk in a messy array around the computer, and Jade lifts the front flap of one book to get a peek at what John is learning. It looks like basic calculus, and John hasn't made too many mistakes on the problem set when Jade runs a cursory eye over his work. His handwriting loops, neat but large, with lazy curves in the l's and wide e's; not at all what Jade had pictured, but actually almost similar to her own, which is neat. Humming, Jade picks up a pen and scribbles out a note in the corner, pointing out a logarithmic equation that's gone slightly wrong, and softens the blow with a cheery smiley face. Few things in life cannot be improved with a smiley face, in her experience.

"What are you doing?" John sounds different than she imagined, too. Jade turns guiltily, captchalogueing the pencil behind her back to hide the evidence, and clasps her hands at parade rest.

He's tugged his mask down at last, now that they're away from that shouty red troll guy, and she gets her first real look at her brother's face and -

He's a hottie! Jade approves! He must get alllll the ladies and the dudes! But of course, they do share genes - now, between the two of them, no one will be able to resist the Harley-Egbert siblings! Seattle better watch out! She giggles at the thought. "Oh, nope, not doing anything~" she sings, smiling. "It's so good to meet you, John! I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I," John mutters, setting the dark blue mask on his bed and reaching around to unstrap that giant warhammer. He must have been pitching his voice lower earlier, or else the mask covering his mouth really altered how his voice, because he's a lot more normal-sounding now!

Jade snaps her fingers behind her back, and reaches out with her mind to captchalogue the hammer for him. She sets it right back down on the bed next to WV, rather than tucking it in the sylladex, which would have been totally rude.

John jerks as though she'd slapped him and whirls, his hands up and his guard raised as he looks down at the hammer on the bed. "Did you do that?" he asks, cautious but not really angry.

"Yup!" Jade tilts back on her heels, bouncing with her hands stretched out behind her. "I can do a lot of teleporting things! You do the wind, and I do the space! Isn't it great?"

"It's - yeah, it's amazing," John says. He's not nearly enthusiastic enough about it, though, and Jade pouts. He shakes his head and faces her full on, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead so his bangs stick up at a weird angle. "Don't see the point in hiding my face, seeing as how you already know my real name," he says, grumpily. "But I wasn't kidding before. Are you really my sister?"

Well, duh! Doesn't he know this already? Maybe John is just making sure it really is her, and not just some fake Jade off the streets. Well, good! Jade can't be the only smart one in the family! "Yup," she replies, stepping forward. "I'm older, of course! Uh, what else...Yeah! Grandpa raised me out on the island, but I know that genetically he's more like our dad. And your Grandma, Nanna, right? She's genetically our mom."

"Wait." John holds up both hands, and Jade stops moving forward. "Hold up. What. Nanna is - what are you talking about?!"

...Doesn't he know? This is preeetty basic stuff. Jade raises both eyebrows, disbelieving, and bites her lip. "Obviously," she says, tucking her hair behind her ear. It's all fallen down from the pony tail - it tends to do that - and hangs almost down to her butt, which means she should probably cut it
soon. "We're the ecto-kids of Nanna Egbert and Grandpa Harley. Duh, John!"

Before John can answer, WV scrambles upright and tackles John from behind, with another high-pitched squeak of greeting. Jade kept him separated from John all through the flight here, but the carapacian doesn't seem to have learned that John is a little paranoid; he gets caught by a swirl of wind that twists around John like a whirlwind, and set back down on the floor as John eyes him warily. It had been more obvious during the flight over here, but even now Jade can sense the motion of air particles streaming in a constant dance around John's body. She can't tell if it's normal for him to have that kind of aura, or if he's being all defensive because Jade's arrival startled him.

Of course, if he had bothered to check his messages even once over the past few years, he would have known to expect her, the big dummy! She decides to say as much, because she owes John a piece of her mind! "Ugh, John, you would know all this if you'd just texted me back half the time! Why did you keep ignoring me?" She taps a foot, making her best stern, expectant expression, and waits for the logical and forgivable excuse John will no doubt give her.

John opens his mouth, shuts it, and then opens it again. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," he says.

Jade stares at him, and waits for the punch line. Nanna liked something called the prankster's gambit, right? Grandpa used to chuckle about it, before he died. Jade learned a love of science and really cool guns from Grandpa, so maybe John learned pranking from his Nanna, and is trying out a prank on her to see how she'll react. Like a rite of passage.

The silence stretches out too long.

"Oh," Jade says.

"...I think I really need to go get my dad," John says, scratching his head. He gives her an apologetic look, and goes to the door. It opens and shuts with a click behind Jade's back, but she doesn't turn to look. WV whines at her nervously, folding his claws together as he looks up from the floor with worry on his usually cheerful face.

Jade doesn't move for a long time.

Of course, by the time John wanders back in, his guardian in tow, she's is soooo mad.

"What do you mean, 'you didn't know about me?!'"

Jade flops over, kicking her legs up and hooking them over the back of the couch. She glowers at John and his dad upside down, because there is just no other way to express her complete irritation at this point. For emphasis, she starts floating, too.

They've relocated to the living room downstairs, where the lighting is apparently better. She made WV stay upstairs in John's room, where he seemed happy enough to start snooping around John's things and pushing buttons on the computer keyboard, but Bec came downstairs too, as a precaution. She trusts John, but his guardian is still a bit of a mystery; since he would rarely talk to Grandpa at all, she doesn't know much about him.

"Young lady, no floating in the house," Samuel Egbert says, arms folded. He's a pretty boss looking guy despite the fact that he's in a robe and slippers. He's an office worker, but the broad shoulders still make sense - her grandpa said John's guardian used to be in the military or something! His eyes are an icy blue compared to the sky in John's, cold and sharp and assessing, with whitish blond hair.
and skin that is wayyyy paler than both of the siblings. Which makes sense. He's more like their brother-cousin than an actual parent, genetically speaking, with none of the weird cloning genetics involved in Jade and John's creation.

Jade pouts, suspecting that Nanna would have let her and John float as much as they wanted, and settles back down on the couch with a huff. A tendril of her hair lands on her face, and she twitches it out of her eyes in time to see John shoot another look at his guardian before he speaks. "I mean, I've never heard anything about having a sister before," John says, sounding frustrated. "Dad, seriously, did you know about this?"

"Of cooourse he knows!" Jade interrupts, flinging her arms out. "Grandpa told me all about you guys before he died! Including how this guy" - she jabs a finger at Samuel - "stopped answering everyone's calls! So dumb! You didn't tell John about me at all?"

This is even worse than Jade had expected. At the least, she'd thought John knew about her like she knew about him, and that for some reason he didn't care enough about his sister to answer her every once in a while. Now, it really sounds like he never got the same rundown that Jade got. Grandpa had sat her down before he died and passed on all the Secrets to her, so that she'd know what to do after he left her alone. It's how she knows all the passwords for all the secret labs, how she knows eventually they need to get in contact with the others, and how she knew where to look for John in the first place.

"Your Nanna died before you were born, John," Samuel says, sighing heavily. He sounds weary, but that's most likely because the two of them woke him up so late at night. "She told me a little about what to expect in regards to your powers, but if she knew more, she just didn't have the time to pass it on. I've worked as best as I could to raise you since then -"

"But you did hear from this Grandpa person. You heard from all of them, didn't you." John is biting the inside of his mouth, judging by the way his cheek twitches. "From Dave's Bro and Doctor Lalonde, too. How does this keep happening?"

Jade's eyes widen, but she keeps her mouth shut, even though the name Lalonde rings bells. She wants to hear Samuel's explanation, first.

"Yes, both the Striders and the Lalondes made attempts to contact me, but I brushed them off when it became clear someone in their group was compromised. I thought I'd concealed us well enough, but of course, as you know, Doctor Lalonde tracked us down easily enough." Samuel Egbert sets a hand on John's shoulder, squeezing it gently in reassurance. "I considered moving us then, but - but you were so happy with Rose. You had a friend, for the first time, and I couldn't take that from you."

John's whole body language changes so fast, Jade blinks in surprise. One moment, he's tense and confused, the way he has been basically since Jade dropped out of the sky on him; the next, he's relaxed, his shoulders lowering as his eyes close. "Yeah. Thank you," he says, quietly.

He and his dad must really trust each other, and Jade feels a pang of old grief, something she hasn't felt in a long time, over the loss of Grandpa. Every time she thinks she's over it - well. She shakes her head, so vigorously her hair flies all over the place. "And what about me?" she says, rolling over onto her belly. She summons her best pout when the two Egderps look back toward her, startled out of their father-son moment. "I know my Grandpa contacted you, too, and you had to have known I was John's sister. He told me he told you!"

John sends another fleeting look her way, his eyes wide and troubled, but much less anxious than before. "And the Harleys?" he adds, turning back to his dad. Abruptly, something shifts in John's face, and he tenses again. "Harley, as in the Harley Foundation, Dad?"
Oh good! John does know about some things! Jade grins, relieved. If he hadn't known about Grandpa's company at least, she would have just given up and made Bec explain everything while she had a nice, relaxing fury-nap. Which wouldn't have helped because Bec can't talk, but it's the principle of the thing. "Got it in one!" she replies, even though the question wasn't really aimed at her. "So?"

Samuel Egbert just sighs again. He's been doing that a lot since he first strode into John's room, took one look at Jade's hopeful, toothy, 'meeting my ecto-brother's guardian for the first time' smile, and raised his eyes to the sky as though praying for the patience to deal with two superpowered teenagers at one time. "I was aware that someone named James Harley made wild claims that you might have a genetic sibling. However, Nanna never mentioned any such thing, and so I acted with reasonable suspicion and tried to remain detached. To be honest, I didn't believe it at all and saw no reason to even think about it after a year or so, but -" He meets Jade's eyes, silent for a long moment.

She meets him eye for eye and refuses to back down. He's not confrontational, not hostile at all, but Samuel Egbert is definitely sizing Jade up as a potential threat, the same way John did earlier in the sky over Seattle. His caution has influenced John, it's clear. Grandpa always taught Jade to be cautious but also to be confident; after all, adventure comes to those who bravely seek it out! The Egberts, on the other hand, seem to place more weight on the side of analysis and precautionary measures.

This is all so interesting!

"Well, at the very least, the resemblance is uncanny," Samuel Egbert finishes at last. His hand tightens on John's shoulder, which he hasn't let go of yet. "I'm afraid I may have done both of you a disservice because of my skepticism, and I apologize, John. Given the unique circumstances of how I came to care for you, it simply seemed impossible that near-identical circumstances could have occurred halfway across the word to produce a second child."

"Well, it is a pretty weird situation," John concedes, way too easily. Jade huffs, but hey, what does she know? This all seems normal to her, but she's learned that what she considers normal - being raised by fighting robots and a wolf on an uncharted island in the middle of nowhere with a rigged volcano next door - all sound strange to the people she explains it to. And their origin story is more obscure than most! Not even Grandpa knew all the details!

Jade is certain that aliens were involved. It's always aliens.

Samuel then nods to Jade. "I apologize to you as well, young lady. May I ask - how long has your grandfather been deceased?"

Jade flips a hand dismissively, even though there's still a little pang in her chest at the reminder. "Oh, for a while. Years. Bec takes care of me, now!"

"Bec - the dog?" John repeats.

"Yeah!" Jade clicks her tongue against the back of her teeth and Bec perks up, more because it can sense her intent than from any inherent meaning in the sound. It leans near enough for Jade to sling an arm under its neck and rest her chin on the top of its head, breathing in the crackle of electricity and fur. "It's a wolf, though. Isn't that right, boy? Best friend!" She smiles and hugs the wolf tighter.

Bec stares blankly with eyes that aren't there at John, and doesn't make a sound.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," Samuel says at last, and Jade looks up, confused, at his tone. He sounds horribly, horribly guilty, and his cold eyes have gone dark with something unnamable. "Had I
known you were out there, I should have at least tried to reach out to you. A child, living by herself -
"He breaks off, head low and his eyes wet. "This should never have happened."

Jade tightens her hold on Bec, her stomach knotting a little. Oh noooo. She didn't mean to make
John's guardian sad...What did she do wrong? "It was fine! And now I'm here!" she says, trying to
sound encouraging.

"I should still have asked for more information with which to make my decision. But my first instinct
is always to keep John safe, and not once but twice that has led to someone else's child being
neglected and abandoned." Samuel Egbert pressed a hand to his face, eyes closing. He's the picture
of despair, and Jade has a feeling she's missing some context here. Because really, it's not that big of
a deal that she ended up alone on an island in the middle of the world's largest ocean! Really!
Grandpa made sure she'd never really be alone, so it's not like she's got psychological issues over it
or anything. "I don't know that there

"It's not your fault, Dad." John touches his dad on the shoulder, more lightly than the hand Samuel
placed on John. He hesitates, but smiles wide when his dad looks up. "Really. We both should have
kept up with Rose, but we didn't even know the Harleys, not really. You can't blame yourself for
this! I'm the one who's supposed to be the downer all the time, right?"

"Son." Samuel grips John's hand, a quick squeeze before letting his hand fall.

...They're having a father-son moment, aren't they. Jade huffs, blowing her hair out of her face, and
waits for them to wrap this up. After a totally reasonable amount of time has passed, she interrupts
their heartwarming moment. "Well, that's all explained," she says, kicking her heels against her butt.
"But that still doesn't excuse yoooooooooou!" She jabs a finger at John this time. "After all, I kept
talking to you and you kept ignoring me, John!"

John shakes his head, looking confused again. She probably looks weird from this angle, but Jade
just makes herself comfy, crossing her legs and rearranging her lab coat primly while she waits for a
response. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm sorry, but we've never spoken before, ever."

Not from lack of trying! "I have too! I've been pestering you for years! Actual years!" Jade calls the
mobile phone from her sylladex and brandishes it without hands, green sparks crackling along the metal
as she switches on Pesterchum and flings it at John's head. She knows he has the power to catch it.

He does. She catches him wavering, though: John hesitates, eyes flashing, and only after a split-
second of unnecessary pausing does his hand shoot out so the phone smacks against his palm. He
turns it over in his hand, brows furrowed, and reads the screen, which she has set to the last time she
pestered him so he can see the evidence for himself. "What is -" he starts, and then his eyes widen.
He starts scrolling up, and Jade lets him. It's not like there's anything private on that phone, anyway -
she only ever used it to pester him, anyway - so it literally is all his business, things she's tried and failed to
communicate to him over the years.

"Oh. Oh, fuck." John claps his hand over his mouth and darts a look at his dad, looking guilty as all
get out.

"I see Karkat's influence has reached your vocabulary," Samuel says cryptically, raising a wry
eyebrow and smiling a little. "I always knew this day would come."

"Sorry," John says, still flushing, and he starts scrolling again, his hand lowering from his mouth as
he peruses the screen. "Oh, nooo...Jade, this is my old chumhandle."

Jade nearly slides forward off the couch. She blinks and teleports herself right-ways-up to stand by
John's shoulder and lean forward. Samuel flinches bodily in her peripheral vision, but she only has eyes for the phone screen, touching a fingernail under the ghostyTrickster handle at the top of one of her innumerable messages. "What are you talking about? That's totally your chumhandle!" she insists, tapping the screen so it zooms in. "Grandpa left it for me and everything!"

John shakes his head helplessly. "I changed it - gosh, that must have been around when Rose left. Before I met Dave or Karkat, even. Years ago. I've been using ectoBiologist since then. I thought after you switched handles, they shut down the old one entirely…I had to fill out my chumlist all over again after I changed it to the new account because nothing carried over."

Even as he talks, Jade watches while John quickly types in ectoBiologist in the app's 'Add Chum' tab, and the new handle loads in the permanent list of chums along the side. Unlike ghostyTrickster, this new handle lights up blue immediately, to show that the chum in question is online.

For the second time that night, Jade is left at a total loss. John hasn't read any of her messages? Has never even received them at his new account?

...She doesn't often feel like an idiot. But right now, she's starting to. She hates the feeling; it's stupid, and she wants it to stop immediately. Clutching her fists to her temples, trying to hold back an impending headache, Jade shakes her head. "Why would you ever change it?"

John shrugs, his face sympathetic as he closes the phone and passes it back to her. She takes it with a limp hand, still staring off at the wall opposite and trying to process this. "I don't know. It just felt like it was time for a change; I'd been using that handle for all my internet nicknames since, like, the sixth grade, and it was getting kind of old and silly. And after Rose left I was - kind of in a bad place. So I switched over." His shoulders hunch a little. "So, I'm sorry. But I really never have heard from you."

"No, no. It's not your fault." Jade hangs her head, and lets out a sigh that might as well have been her entire soul heaving itself out of her throat. Then she shakes her head vigorously, hair flying, and mentally orders herself to cheer up. Alright, so she made a dumb mistake! She was probably overdue for one, anyway, after all these years of being a total genius! She grins at John until she believes it herself. "Ahaha! Wow! Now I really am sorry for showing up with no warning at all! No wonder you flipped out earlier, I feel like such a dumb!"

John smiles back at her. It's remarkably reassuring. "We just kept missing each other," he says, and he gets it. Jade just has the unmistakable sense that John understands, and that's makes the whole thing a little less embarrassing. "It's nice to meet you anyway!"

"Yeah." There's something in her throat, and she coughs until it clears up before slugging him in the shoulder. John catches himself, and by the time he's recovered she's got it together again. "Don't worry, I'll catch you up on everything you've been missing out on! I've totally got you covered, little bro! We're gonna have so much fun!"

"Well, you are welcome to stay here until we can sort this whole thing out," Samuel says, graciously. He smiles, and it's tired and a little sad, but welcoming. "If you don't have somewhere else to go…"

Oh. Right. It's something Jade rarely thought about when she still had her airplane; it had most of her bed things in the expanded storage area. But that's still off in Britain where she left it, and so for the past few weeks she has mostly been camping outdoors, using her wilderness explorer skills. In South America it had been warm enough, but the farther north she's come, the less effect spring seems to have had on the temperature. Maaaybe she could have planned this trip out a little better, but to be honest, she'd been working off the assumption that John knew about her, even if he didn't necessarily like her or her messages. To think, this whole time she's been texting into the void - ugh! How inconvenient!
Now she feels a little bad about popping up out of nowhere, but her chest fills with warmth at John's dad's offer. Now that they're past all that (in hindsight, totally reasonable) suspicion, both Egberts are smiling at her, and it feels like having a family again. "I really don't. Ahahaha, I'm sorry to impose like this," she says, rubbing the back of her head. "I guess I didn't really think this one through...I was just so excited to finally meet John in person!"

"Understandably." Samuel adjusts his robe and cocks his head to the side, considering. "I'm afraid we don't have a guest room - I converted it into a study when we first moved in, unfortunately."

"I don't need a lot of space! I make my own!" Jade says hurriedly. She really, really doesn't want to impose now, after all this. Urgh! "Maybe I can just camp out in the backyard?"

"No, no, there's no need for that," Samuel says. He looks to John. "John?"

"She can have my room," John says, nodding as though in answer to a silent question Jade missed. "I'll be fine on the couch down here for a while." He rubs the back of his head, and then looks startled, putting his hand back down as though caught in the act. Jade can't imagine why - just because she did the same thing? She wonders if John is as fascinated by the weird ways they're similar, or if he's just getting more confused without all the context Jade has the benefit of working with.

"Do you have any idea how long you'll be staying?" his dad asks.

Jade winces, realizing there's yet another flaw in her plan. She kicks at the carpet, and rubs a thumb behind Bec's ear, biting her lip. "I didn't really have a timeline, y'know," she says. "I just knew I was going to find you, and then things would go from there." A lot of the things Grandpa had told her about didn't exactly have a set time limit, after all - she'd known to meet up with John, but she'd been able to take her sweet time getting here because there was no urgent deadline. She doesn't know when everything will start picking up the pace, but it doesn't seem to have happened yet.

"Well, we'll sort something out. In the meantime, you can stay in John's room until you have a better idea of your future plans," Samuel says, stroking his chin. "You caught us off-guard, but rest assured that you are welcome here, as John's sister if nothing else. All I'd ask is that you refrain from using your powers in the upper floors - even at night, there are still windows that someone could see through. There's a training area in the basement, but it's a little early in the morning for that. You two should both try to get some sleep for now."

"Yes sir!" John says, the words tumbling out of his mouth with the ease of old habit, and Jade salutes playfully to back him up. The Egbert household is apparently a little more strict than she's used to, but she's travelled the world for years now, and she knows to respect the culture of the people she finds herself in and not be an insensitive dork about it. Samuel nods to Jade, and walks down the hall, though Jade can't tell where he's off to. "Come on, he's right," John says. He heads for the stairs.

"Don't you need to go back to hero work? I could go with you," Jade offers, even as she takes the steps two at a time behind John. "You and Hemogoblin look like you were just getting started. I'm sorry for interrupting with all this baggage, by the way. Pretty rude of me."

"Not a big deal," John says, shaking his head. "By the time I flew back out there, I'd barely have any patrol time left, anyway. School nights are awful that way, I always have to cut it short." He opens the door to his room and they walk in together. WV squeals and falls off the counter, where he's apparently been inspecting the textbooks above John's desk. Jade catches him automatically, remembers Samuel's request that she not use her powers, and then shrugs, depositing the carapacian on the bed again with a flick of her finger. She'll just have to be more careful about that in the future -
it'll take some getting used to, not using her powers as often. WV, meanwhile, flails around on his back, tangling himself in the bed clothes. He's such a dork, sometimes, but that's why Jade loves him!

"I'll be on the couch downstairs if you need something." John's gaze flickers to a poster on the wall. "But. Uh. I need to change first. Do you mind…?"

"Not at all! Go ahead!" Jade says, smiling. John is such a polite guy. She might like him after all! She waits for him to start changing, hands in parade rest behind her back. She can change in a snap of her fingers, of course, but John probably doesn't have that capability.

He stares at her. Waiting for something.

She stares back.

If this is some pre-clothes-changing contest siblings engage in, bring it on.

"Are you going to change, or what?" she asks at last. Maybe that means she loses the silent staring contest, but she's just wondering. For future reference. She totally won't lose again!

"Not in front of - never mind, I'll just change in the bathroom," he says faintly, backing away. He looks at the wall poster again, then sidles to the chest of drawers and shuffles through the clothing until he withdraws dark blue pajamas and sneaks off into the restroom. He's acting very strange and awkward.

Of course, Jade extends her senses and feels behind the poster on the wall, after that little incident. Curiosity is heavy burden to bear. She can sense a hollow space - probably a safe or something - but it feels mostly empty, aside from hooks and a few shelves. She can't imagine why John was worried about it; it's not like she plans to steal his nonexistent stuff or anything!

Well, anyway. Now that the pre-changing stare off has come to an end (presumably by Jade conceding defeat), she blinks into her own night gown, her second favorite pair of pale blue slippers peeking out from beneath the hem of the long skirt. There's a blue, planetary model of an Rutherford-Bohr atom stitched onto the front, and when she gives a little twirl, the skirt billows out with a wide circumference. It's been a while since she felt secure enough to wear actual sleep clothes! Traveling the world requires precautions after all.

John changes really fast too, but he emerges from the bathroom slowly, sticking his head out first before stepping out. "Oh - uh - good night," he stammers, his uniform folded up neatly in the crook of his arm. One of the straps hangs down where he didn't tuck it in properly.

Jade reviews the interior of the hidden safe in her mind's eye, and puts two and two together. "Here!" she says, and helpfully teleports all of John's uniform - including the warhammer and the mask lying on the bed - into the safe.

"Where - Jade, what did you do with my costume?" he asks, looking around the room.

"I put it in your wall safe thing. That's where it goes, right?" she asks - just to make sure!

"Well, yeah, but…" For the first time, John doesn't look grumpy. Instead, his eyes widen a little; awe is a much more acceptable response, and Jade approves. "That's amazing, Jade. It seriously is! You don't even have to look inside the safe itself? How far can you send things?"

"My range is a couple miles - more, if Bec helps me out," she says, grinning back. "Otherwise it's harder for me to concentrate, and I could lose things along the way. I can totally show you later!"
"That would be - awesome. Yeah, definitely awesome," John says. He laughs, free and unrestrained, and it sounds so much nicer than all his hesitant, hiccupy laughs earlier. "I guess I'll see you in the morning."

"Yup. Good night! Heheh, thanks for letting me stay in your room," she replies.

"Good night," John says, stepping out of the room. He shuts the door behind him with an awkward wave, blushing, and Jade waves back before the door closes completely.

She can sense him moving down the stairs (how he resists just floating down them on the wind when Jade just wants to fly everywhere, she doesn't know), and the motion of Samuel Egbert somewhere on the first floor, but then she tunes them out, because it would be kind of rude to spy on them in their own home like that. Scratching her head, Jade makes a face at the mess her hair has become and nudges WV to the side with her butt so she can flop down on the bed next to him. "Be careful. We don't want to mess John's stuff up too much," she cautions when WV starts inspecting one of the posters on the wall with his sharp little claws. He blows a raspberry at her, and she rolls her eyes, giggling as she drags him into a headlock. "We finally made it." She pats WV on the head while the carapacian squirms. "Finally!"

WV kicks his feet and lays still, giving into the hug as always. He really is a rambunctious little dude, but as much as he fights it, he's always down for hugs, in the end. But now, more than ever, Jade wishes he could talk; she squeezes him, but the only sound he's capable of making is a faint huff of resignation. It's been fine travelling with two silent companions all this time, but now that she's in a house with two people who can speak, the two people who she'd been counting on to understand her situation, Jade feels a pang all the more over the fact that she can't discuss all these shenanigans properly with her two confidantes. Sighing, she releases WV so that he can go and fling himself into a random pile of sweaters at the end of the bed, and she ties her hair back into a braid so she can go to sleep. She was wired with energy when she and John first arrived, but all this explanation and exposition has worn her out! Sighing, she pulls back the sheets and lies down.

The pillow smells like pool. She has absolutely no idea why. What kind of weird shampoo does John use to smell like that? Maybe it's a guy thing.

At the last moment, before she closes her eyes, Jade remembers to whistle and call Bec to her side. She honestly thinks that the wolf would just stay wherever she last called it if she ever forgot it somewhere; it's perfectly content to lay down and nap until Jade is in danger or something like that. What a lazy, sleepy pet! When it pops up next to her, ears perked forward, she pets it with a few sloppy pats, and then lets her arm fall.

Maybe things didn't turn out the way she planned for her first meeting with John - but at least they're together now!

-  

The shower starts up at six in the morning. The sudden, shrill screech of metal and then the drum of water on shower floor startles Jade awake. "Wha?" she manages, before she flails and rolls to the side, disoriented, and she tumbles off the bed with a yelp. Green crackles in her field of vision, and she catches herself so that she floats an inch above the floor, blinking dazedly. She feels groggy; she'd need another half hour of sleep to match up with her natural sleep cycles, so her eyes stick shut again as she rubs them and squints clearly to the side. A thin line of light underscores the bathroom door, way too harsh this early in the morning, and makes her eyes hurt.

Her mind takes a good minute to realize it must be John. With that settled, Jade teleports the pillow from on top of the bed and mashes her face into it, groaning with early morning despair.
WV leans over the side of the bed and scratches his head at her before crawling back into his corner. Bec, as far as she can tell, hasn't even bothered to look up. Gosh, both of her sidekicks are so...unhelpful! Jade sits with her knees on the ground and stretches, switching her glasses out of her sylladex and onto her face while another yawn racks her body. Why on earth John is waking up this early, she really can't comprehend. She really can't. Folding her arms, she thinks through some partial differential equations in her head to get her brain up and going for the day, and waits patiently for John to emerge so he can explain why this had to be a thing.

She loses patience of course. After she hears the shower turn off, Jade gets to her feet and shuffles over to knock on the bathroom door. "Joooooohn~!" She yawns halfway through, and the sing-song ends on a sleepy note. "Are you decent yet?"

"Holy -" Something crashes within the bathroom. It sounds kind of like a teenage dude body slipping and catching himself on the counter at the last minute, if Jade's space sense is correct. She hums while she waits from John to right himself. She's mostly respecting his privacy. Mostly. "Uh. Hey, Jade. Just a second ."

"I respect your right as a person to shower in peace, but I'm also asserting my birthright as elder sibling by coming in anyway!" She rolls up her sleeves and gives John ten seconds. Because she's generous that way.

"Wait - what, no!"

Jade does the thing. She teleports into the bathroom, laughing at John's bright flush in the mirror. He's totally decent, he has underwear on and everything! She doesn't know what he's all embarrassed about! "Why are you up so early?" she demands, turning the water spigots in the sink with the power of her mind and waiting until the water is neither cold nor hot before splashing water on her face. It doesn't really help wake her up, but it's a thing that people do, right? "So early, John! We could still be sleeping!"

"...Remind me that we need to talk about personal boundaries later, okay?" John says, holding up a towel over his chest as he backs away from her. She makes a face at him in the mirror, and he blushes spectacularly. "I'm sorry I woke you up, but I needed to get ready for school, and I didn't shower when we got back last night -"

Jade freezes, her hands halfway between the sink and her face. "School." She grabs John by the shoulders so she can fully express herself without him moving around. "Did you say...school?"

John meets her eyes, the blush spooked out of him, one eye twitching as a drop of water falls from his hair to the corner of his lashes. "Y-yeah. School. I know you just got into town and all, but I can't just skip out -"

"Ohmygod, you go to school!" Jade claps her hands together, shrieking a little. Her heart can't stop pounding; this is amazing news! "I can't believe it! Real school, right?! With teachers and homework and stuff!"

"Uh. Yes."

"Can I come with you?!" She leans in closer, begging John with her eyes. He can't leave her behind, he just can't! If he's going to school, she totally has to seize this opportunity to see how he's been living all this time!

"I really don't think that's a good idea," he says, his voice cracking as he leans away, clutching at his towel.
"Nooooo!" Jade exclaims. "Come on, John, I'll be great at sports! What sports do you like? I'm just as strong as you, I bet, so we could do sports and science together!" She smiles the hardest she's ever smiled. There's no way John can resist her patented earnest big sister smile. Sure, she's never used it on him before, but she's practiced! He has to give in!

He caves. "I - okay," he says, and Jade pumps her fist by her side. Another hypothesis flawlessly executed. "But, look, there have to be some ground rules -"

"Yeah, sure," Jade says, flipping her hand at him. Mission accomplished, she turns back to the sink with her hands on her hips, mentally running through her captchalogued outfits. She needs something suitable for her first day of public school! "Your rules, I've got it. Whatever. Lemme use your toothbrush!"

John blinks. "Don't you have your own?"

"Let me borrow it anyway!" Jade puts her hand out to the side palm up, and waits. She can see the toothbrush sitting by the sink, but she waits for permission regardless.

John hands it over.

He's a nice guy, Jade decides. And maybe the pesterchum thing hadn't been entirely his fault. Any guy who would willingly (by a certain stretch of the word, anyway) let a near-stranger use his toothbrush on demand can't be all that mean, not on purpose. "I guess we'll talk about it with my dad," he says, shaking his head. He grabs a shirt off the counter, angling further around Jade than he needs to - she's not that in the way of his morning routine, is she? - and pulls it over his hair. He still holds up that towel unnecessarily until he has pants on. She's starting to think John's just bashful or something. "He'll need to okay it before anything else, so no promises. It might be better for you to keep a low profile if you're going to be Sharpshooter while you're in town."

"Of course I'll be Sharpshooter, John!" she exclaims, squeezing out toothpaste on the toothbrush. She continues to talk around the toothbrush, even as she scrubs at her teeth. "But don't worry, I'll totally be on my best behavior! I won't float at your school or anything!" She spits when she's done and rinses her mouth with water, bending to sip right out of the running faucet.

"That would be awesome," John says, relaxing again. He hangs up his towel and opens the drawer next to her. Jade brings her hair brush out of her sylladex, considers showering, and then just starts combing her hair regardless. She thinks she still smells fine, and that's the ultimate test of whether she's still fit for going out in public, after all.

Beside her, John brings out a contact lens case, and she frowns at him. "What are you doing?" He has glasses like her, they're like right there beside the sink, and she can't imagine why he'd need further correction on top of that.

"Putting in contact lenses. It's part of my civilian persona," John explains. "It's only really gotten bad recently, but my eyes glow when I use my powers, and sometimes even when I'm just feeling strongly about something." He keeps poking his eye and making tiny adjustments until the lens covers up his iris entirely. Grody! Jade sticks out her tongue, making a face.

When he's done, John blinks a few times and his nice blue eyes are totally eclipsed by brown. He puts on his glasses, which just seems excessive to Jade. "There," he says, stepping back.

"Boring, boring, boring!" Jade folds her arms. "You could keep them blue, at least! Blue is cool!" She opens the bathroom door so that she can lean out. "Right, WV?"
WV chirps his assent from the bed. Of course. Because WV is supportive that way. The carapacian then wraps himself up in a cocoon of John's blankets, cooing to himself wordlessly. For no apparent reason, the carapacian proceeds to flop over sideways and rolls under the bed, blankets and all. From the shadows, a meter stick ruler pokes out and prods at Bec's nose, while a pair of white eyes squint suspiciously from the huddle of cloth. Bec whuffles, sneezing on the ruler, and then turns its head aside, resting its muzzle on its paws.

Jade has learned not to ask.

"My face would be too recognizable, then." John adjusts his glasses and tugs on the hem of his shirt. "You didn't beat up too many people last night, right?"

"Nope! I barely got anything done before you showed up."

"Good. Then hopefully no one makes the connection when I turn up with a new sibling at the same time Sharpshooter arrives in town." John sighs. "Come on. Let's go eat breakfast, if you're really coming with me."

As if there's any doubt!

- "This is your school!"

"Yep! It's not very impressive, but this is it!" John replies, his teeth flashing as he grins and points toward the front door. "Come on, we need to give Dad's note to the secretary. Otherwise people might think you're a truant or something from another school."

"Really? How weird!" Jade says, hooking her arm around John's, the one that's not clutching a thermos of coffee like it holds the secret of all life's mysteries. He laughs ruefully, but hooks his arm in return enthusiastically, and they practically drag each other toward the front office. It's a wonderful day outside, and she's kind of disappointed when they end up inside, under the artificial lights. She thinks she would prefer to go flying with John, but they're already committed to this school thing, apparently. "Are all public schools this paranoid about people showing up?"

"Around here, they are," John says, shrugging. "And remember - no flying. Please. No floating of any kind. None of it. Secret identities, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever!" Jade rolls her eyes. John is so paranoid!

The large hallway they step into is relatively empty, and Jade wonders just how early they are. John said he needed to get here at this time, but she suspects school doesn't start for a while. What a nerd! He waves to the woman behind the desk, who peers up at them from behind red spectacles and smiles when she sees John. "Hi, Ms Ivanovich. Sorry to bother you!"

"Not a problem, Mr Egbert," the woman says, waving back. "And who might this be?"

"This is my - cousin," John says, and Jade hears the stumbling pause where he nearly forgets his own cover story. Bluh! He's the one who insisted they couldn't just tell everyone they were twins - which is the truth! - because of some nonsense about it being easier to explain an estranged, recently orphaned cousin than a long lost ectobiological superpowered sister. "Jade Harley. She's only just got into town recently, but she really wanted to come with me to school for the day."

"I've hardly spent any time with you, John~!" Jade sings, interrupting John's stuttering excuses. She widens her eyes and pouts a little, tightening her grip on John's arm. "Please, Ms Ivanovich? I won't
bother anyone, I promise." She crosses her fingers behind her back while she says it, though, because if even one of John's math or science teachers makes a mistake, she is gonna be all over them like honey on a hot biscuit! She'd given into the urge and pointed out all of John's totally minor mistakes in his calculus over breakfast, and if she finds out that any of his misconceptions came from faulty tutelage, she will chew them out like nobody's business. And then tutor John herself.

He's so smart - he'd only need a liiiittle help, really!

"We have a note from m-my dad," John adds, shuffling the thermos to the crook of his elbow and holding out the folded up square of paper for the secretary to read. "She'll just need a visitor's badge, right?"

"That's right," the secretary murmurs, pushing up her specs to read the note carefully. She nods, and starts typing rapidly on her keyboard. "Just a moment while I print that out for you. Everything looks like it's in order, either way. Welcome to Maple Valley, Ms Harley!"

"Thank you!" Jade hums happily and takes the sticker badge when the secretary passes it over. She rips off the backing, slaps it against the very center of her chest, and places a fist on her hip, waiting for John's seal of approval. He is the master of public school, after all!

He shakes his head, but gives her a smile and a thumb's up. She's in the clear! "Thank you again, Ms Ivanovich," he adds, nudging Jade in the side with their linked elbows and pulling them away.

They must not need to do anything else at the front desk then; Jade waves back at the secretary merrily and then skips while John leads her to the stairs. "What now, what now?" she chants, tapping her foot on the tile floor as she tries to absorb all the space around her. Lockers line the hallways, full of so many things that she just wants to run a mental comb through all of it, sort through all the minutiae of daily life that has accumulated in the corners and crevices of John's school. But that would be invading people's privacy - people who aren't John and therefore her little brother and therefore totally up for sooo much invasion of privacy. "When is your first class again?"

"Not for a half hour or so." They pass by a hall on the way to the stairwell, and Jade can sense a whole bunch of motion and movement and sound echoing down the corridor. "Mostly the only people here are band kids, but people should start pouring in at the last minute," he adds, tugging her away before the movement pulls her attention down the hallway.

"Are you in the band? Do you play an instrument?" Jade demands, almost squeaking with delight. She hadn't sensed any instruments in John's room, but maybe he practices somewhere else! "I play the flute! We could play together, it'll be so cool!"

John stops, so abruptly that Jade nearly gets yanked backward. He pauses on the first step of the stairs, and Jade waits for him to say something. She frowns at his face, though, when she sees the strange expression on his features. John is grimacing, his dumb fake-brown eyes squinted as he rubs at his temple with the knuckles of the hand with the thermos. "Do I play a..." he begins, and then he falls silent, his face spasming with confusion. "No, I don't play anything," he says at last.

"...Are you sure?" Jade has to ask, raising both eyebrows skeptically. That was really weird! How could John not remember if he played an instrument or not?

The grimace clears from his face as quickly as it appeared, and he brightens, meeting her eyes with a puzzled look. "Yeah, of course I'm sure," he says, nonplussed. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You seemed kind of - like you were in pain? You wayyy overthought that question, you big
dumbo!" Jade laughs it off, clapping John on the back with enough force that he lets out a surprised 'oof.' "Whatever, we'll have to teach you something. It is always important to balance the sciences with the arts for a truly Renaissance mind, John!"

"Like I have the kind of time to learn an instrument," John laughs, shaking his head and continuing up the stairs. "Come on, I have to meet Karkat before class. I don't how I'm going to explain all this to him…"

"Kar who?" Jade asks, as they reach the top of the stairs. John doesn't answer; instead, he picks up the pace and Jade has to hurry after him as he approaches a troll, thermos at the ready. The troll - Jade has to do a double take, because from this angle she's not seeing any horns - has his back to them and is muttering to himself rather loudly while he sorts through his locker. When John gets ten feet from the troll, this mysterious Karkat turns around without either of them saying anything, like they've gone through this routine so many times before that he has the timing down to a science - which Jade can respect!

"Mnagh," is all the troll says, before snatching up the thermos and slurping greedily.

"Good morning to you too, Karkat," John says good-naturedly.

Jade falls into place at John's left, hands in the pockets of her voluminous blue skirt. She's gone for a John theme, today. WV had been in ecstasy over all the blue. "Yes, good morning, good morning," she chimes in, bouncing up on her toes and then back on her heels, excited at the prospect of meeting one of John's friends - or at least his coffee lord. Who even knows.

The troll stops chugging long enough to complain, "John, you doltish excuse for a best friend, why the fucking fuck does it sound like there are two of -" One of Karkat's eyes pop open, and he squints at them over the thermos.

Ohhhh.

It's the shouty troll! The eyes are different, so he and John must do the same contact lens thing, and he's lost the prosthetic horns so all that are left are teeny tiny nub horns, but it's totally him. She'd recognize that irate glare anywhere!

"Hey!" Jade says. She waves, grinning widely, and can't repress a little laugh. John could have at least bothered to mention Hemogoblin hung out at the same school as him! "Good to see you~! So your name is Kaaarkat!" She winks and shoots him a pair of finger pistols. "I'm Jade!"

The ensuing splutter of coffee that emerges from the troll's mouth flies absolutely everywhere.

Sheesh, does this guy ever turn off the melodrama?

It's impressive how much air the coffee gets, actually; Jade feels drops of hot coffee splatter on her cheek. "Mnagh?!" Karkat repeats, staring at her in horror. He reaches out with a claw and clutches John's sleeve, backing away from Jade and dripping coffee on the floor. "John, John what is going on -"

"Ack! Calm down, Karkat!" John says, laughing with a weird, anxious hiccup. He goes along with the tug as Karkat yanks him around like this is pretty normal. "This is my cousin, Jade. Uh. Yeah."

"You really need to work on the shouty thing." Jade rolls her eyes. He really doesn't turn it off, does he? "That can't be good for your blood pressure."

...Heheh. Blood pressure.
She wishes she could have gotten a heads up that they were meeting Hemogoblin at school, though! She's got a few choice things to say to this guy, but John had been verrrrry clear: no talking about the hero thing at school. At all. 'Even if we're in private and totally alone and absolutely no one could hear us,' had been his exact words.

So she'll just have to wait until they leave to say anything! For now, she'll just bask in the look of abject horror on Karkat's face. Serves him right for being so rude last night!

Unfortunately, she never gets that opportunity. School is fun, even if all these teachers are preeetty sketch on some of the details of atomic-level physics, and Jade sits in the back of each class with John, swinging her legs and trying to understand how the public school system thinks they can possibly teach science effectively in a fifty minute period. Important stuff like electron configurations surely deserve more than one measly day! Jade spent ages learning Taylor series, but after that she had them down perfectly. She personally thinks that this system of forcing everyone to learn at the same pace is kind of stupid, but she's not gonna say that in front of John and make him think she's ungrateful! They'd had to really whittle his dad down to convince him to let Jade tag along, and she doesn't want that effort to have been a waste.

But then right afterward, when the last class gets out and she skips out into the hallway after John, Karkat descends on them with all the wrath a troll who's barely taller than Jade by two inches can muster. She's starting to think he's permanently stuck on the 'angry and twitchy' setting and just doesn't know how to turn it off. He drags John off through the crowd, and Jade rolls her eyes and tags along after them. Karkat throws her several glares over his shoulder as she follows, while John grimaces apologetically, and they disappear into a restroom.

If they seriously think the male-identifying sign is going to stop her, they have another thing coming. Jade strides in after them, tossing her hair over her shoulder and nearly clotheslining a troll who's just leaving.

"-please," Karkat is hissing as Jade strides in, his head low as he stares at his feet. He and John are holding hands, Karkat's knuckles pale grey with tension, and Jade realizes that maybe she should have given them privacy, because they seem to be in the middle of something. But if they needed to talk alone, they should have said something instead of just wandering off like that! Hellooo, she can't read minds!

Neither of them notice her walk in, though, so she just backs up a little, where she isn't reflected in the mirror and won't alert them to her presence. "I don't know. It would be kind of rude for me to just ditch her like that," John says reluctantly. He smooths his thumbs over Karkat's knuckles, until they relax a little. "I...don't know how smart it would be for me to leave her alone. And Denny's is far enough out of the way that I need to walk her back home first."

"Please. I just want a normal day. And pancakes. Just this once, without - people," Karkat says through gritted teeth.

Oh. They're talking about her, anyway. Well, they just lost their privacy privileges. And Jade, being the better person, can see where this is going anyway, because she is fantastic at reading between the lines. "It's fine!" she interrupts, walking forward to clap John on the back. When both of them look up from their feet and stare at her with remarkably similar, horrified expressions, she grins. What a pair of angsty dummies! No wonder they're partners! "I know the way to John's house. And I probably need to go back to John's house and make sure WV is behaving himself, anyway," she adds, shrugging. "He's so cute, but then he gets curious, and the next thing you know he's dismantling your computer to start constructing a miniature town so he can reenact a democratic
voting process and set himself up as the figurehead of a new world order."

Karkat's fakey rust red eyes go slightly cross-eyed as he inches away from her. Jade isn't sure if that's a sign of an impending aneurysm in a troll, though; she'll have to research it when she gets back to the Egbert house. "Great. Fucking fantastic," he manages.

She can't even imagine what his malfunction is, now. She just hopes he isn't going to let one first impression that went slightly bad color every interaction they have; that would be so awkward.

John turns to her, and she can tell the concern on his face is probably 75% directed at Karkat, because the rest is just his eyes begging her for understanding. "Me and Karkat just need to talk about something for a while. You're sure you can get home by yourself?"

Jade preens, winking. "Of course I can! I'm pretty good at space after all."

Karkat looks like he's about to faint. This is genuinely hilarious. All day long John has groaned at her awful puns and amazingly low-key references to the space thing, and generally taken it in stride, because they share the same punny sense of humor. But Jade is starting to get the feeling that the whole 'no referencing hero work at school' rule might just be to save Hemogoblin from a health crisis.

John just winces, and shakes his head with his nose all wrinkled up, which really is the most reaction he's shown all day. "That's great. I'm sorry for ditching out like this."

"No, seriously, no worries!" Jade says grandly, shrugging with both palms up. "He's not all up to speed on me, I get it. Just don't let him bother you into missing dinner. Your dad promised he'd cook something amazing, remember!"

Samuel Egbert had made breakfast for both of them, and it's pretty safe to say that Jade may never settle for her own terrible attempts at cooking ever again. The Egbert side of the family can cook like nobody's business!

"Thanks, Jade," John says. He reaches out, even with one of Karkat's claws still hooked on his sleeve like a life line, and hugs her. It's a wonderful surprise, and Jade hugs him back, squeezing tight in a way she never can with WV for fear of hurting him. John is her brother, and they both have this strength, and that's awesome. Everything about it is awesome.

"I'll see you at home!" she says, releasing him. "Byebye, Karkat!"

Karkat gurgles something as Jade flounces out of the restroom. A guy walking in looks at her and does a double take before walking facefirst into the wall, but she ignores him. She whistles, hands thrust in her pockets, as she zones out mentally and starts retracing her and John's steps in space until she's located the Egbert house in her internal map. Usually she'd follow that up by teleporting straight to the destination, but she's trying to be good today!

It sucks that she has to split off from John so soon, but this really does work in Jade's favor.

After all, Mr Egbert still has some explaining to do.

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There's just one thing Jade needs to settle. Something that's bothered her this whole time, and that she needs to have the record set straight on before she can stay in the Egbert house anymore.

She confronts Samuel Egbert in the living room. It seems like neutral territory, the place where both
Egberts had seemed most at ease during their first conversation, and so after her bright greeting draws Samuel Egbert out of the kitchen, Jade tilts her head to the living room and skips ahead, with the expectation that he'll follow her.

"Jade. Where is John?" he asks, wiping his hands off on a dishtowel and setting aside the bowl of flour he's stirring by the sink. His mouth is smiling, but his eyes are hard as he joins her in the living room.

"He and Karkat went on a date or something. I could get back fine by myself." She taps the side of her head. "Internal GPS and all." She whistles loudly, because she needs Bec for this conversation. Overhead, there is a faint thump - WV falling over himself, no doubt - and then Bec materializes beside her, still as a stone.

She decides to get right to it. "Why doesn't he know anything?"

Samuel Egbert sighs, the resigned sound of a man who has been expecting this. Good. She wants them on the same page of this serious discussion. "You could go ahead and mention Skaia to him if you really wanted to see how he reacts, though I'd ask you not to," he says, staring out of the window. "The first time I tried, John was ten years old."

Jade breaks first. "...What happened?"

"His nose bled for two hours, and he was comatose for nearly half a day before he began to react to outside stimuli again. I came this close to taking him to the hospital -" John's dad hesitates, rubbing at his face "- and when he woke up, he couldn't remember a thing."

A pit is starting to swallow all the space in Jade's stomach, and she feels kind of nauseous when she tries to breathe around it. "That's not - why? You've never run any kind of tests? That seems kind of -" she breaks off, struggling to process this. "Have you ever tried again?"

"Yes," Samuel says shortly. "It's as though his brain physically can't handle thinking about...whatever happened in that game. From what I can tell when he has an episode, it seems to be some sort of absence seizure. I've tried to speak with him about all this three times in the past few weeks, since the incident in New York. But he doesn't seem to remember any of those conversations when I question him later."

No really. She feels sick.

"He will agree that something is strange about his forgetfulness, and then within an hour have forgotten he was ever worried. I've found more bloody tissue in the trash this past week than I have in all John's years of crime fighting." Samuel meets Jade's eyes, and she can see the seeds of desperation there, the source of all that worried resignation she'd seen earlier. "Perhaps you can get through to him, but I never have been able to. He doesn't know half of what he needs to know, but everything I've tried to communicate it has failed. The best I could do was train him to fight, even if he has the wrong idea of what he's supposed to be fighting against."

Jade slouches down to bury her hands in Bec's ruff of fur. She grips a little too hard, maybe, but it's not as though Bec would ever complain; it just turns and sticks its muzzle on her lap, silent and still. "But that's no good," she mumbles, half dazed, as her mind runs through the possibilities.

She had thought - she had assumed, foolishly, despite all the evidence to the contrary - that John just had to know. Had to. Jade doesn't know how she could have accepted all of the strangeness in her life, the many ways her own powers defy all natural laws, without the massive paradigm shift Grandpa had taught her about - the Skaian Paradigm. She had spent months learning to accept that
things like ectobiology and paradoxifiers and temporal offshoots not only existed, but worked in spite of all laws of physics and biology to the contrary. Very few scientists in the world consider the idea of paradox space as even an interesting thought experiment - fewer still believe in it like Jade does.

Once she had accepted it, though, and learned to work within the context not just of this universe, but of all universes, those laws and patterns that define the paradox space and permeate everything around them, her powers had flourished. So many interesting new ideas to explore and experiment with! Grandpa had died soon after, and she had ridden out the guilt in a wave of furious training and research, and the assurance that somewhere out there her Grandpa lived on, though she might never meet him again. Paradox space was funny that way.

But this is - how does John explain his own powers? Does he just accept that he has them, without searching for an explanation as to why?

She swallows hard, tasting bile in her throat. If John has some kind of seizure whenever he tries to think about this kind of thing, maybe it's not that he just accepts it - maybe he has no other choice.

While she's still trying to deal with this, Samuel continues, as though one massive sucker punch of a revelation wasn't enough. "I know. I know. And nearly two years ago, he ran away from home. Not a note, not a word, just took off. Before that, he was barely even speaking to me anymore." Samuel shakes his head. He looks very tired, and Jade can't really blame him. "I somehow missed that my own child was shutting himself off, tearing himself apart fighting some enemy I couldn't even see. I found out recently that he ended up meeting with Dave Strider - the Knight, I assume you know."

Jade nods mutely. She knows about the others, and cool relief surges through her with the knowledge that she's not alone in that. John's vast gap of knowledge is just...unnerving. She even manages to summon a small smile for Samuel when he looks at her for confirmation. He smiles back, reassuring and paternal, and it soothes her even more.

"He seemed better after that. More stable." Samuel says. "I'll admit that I don't understand all the details about how you four and your powers relate to one another - a bit above my pay grade, I'm afraid! - but I do know that you seem more calm when you're in contact with one another. He could at least talk about what was bothering him, instead of hiding it from me and penning up all those emotions rather than dealing with them. And when Karkat came along, things improved even more." He sighs. "But the fact is that I can't tell where John's health issue stem from - if the depression is related to his inability to think about the game and these amnesiac spells, there's no way to tell. His mind can't even remember that it keeps resetting itself. This is something I don't know how to help him fight."

Jade gives in. She was really suspicious of this guy at first, if only because he wasn't an official guardian. In a perfect iteration of paradox space, maybe Nanna Egbert would have survived to raise both her ectobiological and her biological son, with all of the strange wisdom she and Grandpa had tried to pass on before their deaths. But it's clear that Dad Egbert is trying pretty darn hard to make sure John is okay! Jade does intend to test this claim that John reacts to the mention of Skaia with amnesia and seizures, because that is sooo not okay, and they need to get on top of it.

But it's nice to have a parental figure again, even if only by proxy! Everything feels a lot more...stable! Of course, that could just be the benefit of being near John, but if Jade spent all day trying to untangle the source of every emotion she felt, she'd never get anything done. Sometimes it's best not to overthink things!

"Don't worry, Mr Egbert!" she says, swinging her legs. She lets go of Bec and pats it with more enthusiasm on the head to let it know she's feeling better. "The only reason I was okay by myself for so long was because of Bec! But now that I'm here, me and John can start to sort all this out with you
together - I don't have trouble thinking about Skaia, obviously, so I can make up for John until he can catch up." She laces her fingers together, her lips a thoughtful moue. "We miight need to get together with the others first before we can make much progress though. If John's been having trouble while he's alone, the obvious solution is to get more of us together! That way he'll be much stronger!"

"Perhaps. I'll have to contact the other guardians and make arrangements for such a meeting," Samuel concedes, tapping a finger to his chin. "From what I've gathered, Doctor Lalonde and young Mr Strider have been less than forthcoming with their own charges, but I haven't exactly been up on the times, I'm afraid, so I don't know if they've been having similar issues. It's about time we sat you all down and spoke about all this candidly, though."

"Great!" Jade hops up and stretches. "I'm off! I need to do some research before John gets back!"

"I see. Let me know if you need anything. And try not to run John too ragged," Samuel says jokingly, and Jade calls back a wordless affirmative as she heads up the stairs, taking them three at a time and maybe floating a little to manage it gracefully.

Despite everything, she thinks they're going to be okay. She and John are together, and they're going to meet up with Dave and Rose soon - how can things not be okay?

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"But why did you take off your mask? Why did you bring her here?"

These are the questions that John has no answer for.

His dad is beyond frustrated by this point. John feels exposed in his pajamas, his knees curled up so he can hug his shins loosely. His dad had diverted him on his way down to the couch, and locked them in the study. John doesn't really have the heart to point out that Jade could probably just teleport right through it, because little things like walls and thick metal safe doors don't really seem to bother her.

Which is a disaster. Everything about this is a disaster, and has been ever since Jade leaned forward, a smile on her lips, and whispered his own name in his ear. This is the kind of threat Heir has never had to deal with before, a complete stranger with the power to blow his cover whenever she feels like.

He wants to look his dad in the eye and explain himself - but he can't.

How can he explain that being around Jade feels normal? How, looking back on the way the wind tugged him along, the breeze itself seems to have intended for them to meet? His dad has tried so hard to understand the exact relationship John has with the wind, but there's always that gap between them where they don't quite understand each other. All this incident has done is to widen the fracture between them again, to the point where neither can ignore it anymore.

John hasn't felt this miserable in...a long time. It feels like everything is piling on top of him again, until he can't breathe.

But his lungs are clear. The air whooshes in and out with ease, sinking into alveoli until the oxygen passes on through, into the bloodstream. What comes out is higher in carbon dioxide, but it's still air. If he concentrates on the air instead of his own guilt-laden thoughts, the amplitude and frequency of his breathing rhythm feels like a metronome, strong and unflagging with the measured regularity of sleep -
That's when he finally realizes he's feeling *Jade's* breathing.

His perception yanks back into the shuddering pair of lungs in his own body, sitting on the chair before his dad's desk, on the verge of hyperventilating.

*Jade's* breathing feels more familiar than *Karkat's*, than even his dad's, so similar to *John's* own that there might as well be no difference, and *he doesn't know why*.

"*I'm* trying to understand, son, I really am, but you have to help me," his dad continues, rubbing at the bare field of stubble begin to rise up along his jaw. He's gnawing on his unlit pipe, which is never a good sign. He'd given up the actual habit of smoking soon after *John's* sensitivity to the air became clear, but Samuel Egbert's collection of magnificent pipes remains preserved in the study. "*We* have a system. *We* have precautionary measures. *It* should never have come to this."

"*I know,*" *John* repeats, closing his eyes. "*But* she knew my name, and I overreacted too obviously - in front of Hemogoblin, even. *I* had to make a decision, and it felt like the only way to control the situation was to keep her where we could see her. As long as she's here and entertained, she's not telling the entire world about who I am. I don't really see how else we could deal with her."

He wants to float out of the window, so that the cool night air can cradle him until all the emotional gunk is vented out of his system. Worse, he wants to stop by his bedroom and grab Jade first, so they can wander over to *Karkat's* house and all three can fly under the stars. The sheer *irrationality* of the thought makes his head ache, because Jade is a stranger and *Karkat* doesn't know, but *John* can't help but want it anyway.

Hell, why not add in *Rose* and *Dave* for good measure? He wants all of his friends *here, right now*, so he can stop forcing himself to think that Jade is a threat when all of his instincts scream that she isn't. If they were altogether, everything would be alright.

Just another thing he can't explain properly to his dad. Another chink in their relationship, caused by *John's* own dumb brain. Because *John* can't pull himself together and act like a rational human being.

"...*I see.*" Samuel bites down so hard on the pipe that the polished wood creaks, but it's a *contemplative* chomp as opposed to the furious gnawing earlier, so *John* tries not to let it get him down. "*We* seem to keep coming up against situations that *I* just can't prepare you for in advance," he sighs. He sits on the edge of the desk, his shoulders slumped enough that he's no longer towering over *John*. It helps.

"*A space-powered super hero twin sister - I mean, who saw that coming?*" *John* says, trying for a joke, but feeling his momentum peter out.

"*Where you and your friends are concerned, I've begun to suspect that very few things are beyond the realm of possibility.*" Samuel taps a finger on his keyboard, and his desktop computer starts to boot up with a slow whine. "*Don't worry, I'll be getting in touch with the Harley Foundation. I'm sure if anyone can confirm Miss Harley's identity, it would be the people who should have been keeping an eye on the heir to the company.*"

"*If it helps, I can research Sharpshooter more on the Internet. I'm sure Karkat will be all over it once word gets around that she's in town.*" *John* can already picture it. *Karkat* never really got hardcore into Hemogoblin, but his enthusiasm for *Heir* still borders on the fetishistic. His reaction to Sharpshooter might be unpredictable - because *Karkat* either hates something or he becomes unnervingly obsessed about it, with no room for neutrality - but *John* can still feel an intense research jam session on the horizon. *Karkat* researches everything hero-related to point of obsession.
Samuel laughs, and removes the pipe from the corner of his mouth, setting it down on a spare coaster while he sits down at his computer. "You two are the experts at the Internet, of course," he agrees. "Just be particularly careful about how much you give away to Karkat with all this. The longer Miss Harley lingers here, the more likely it will be that people make the connection between her arrival and the appearance of a new hero, and Karkat is a sharp kid."

This is true. Karkat may be perpetually angry (and stupid about certain things, like getting a normal amount of sleep!), but John has also spent a good amount of the two years of their friendship struggling to stay a step ahead of Karkat's keen eye for all things Heir-related. Karkat is one of those people, the ones who overanalyze everything and have an impassioned theory for every minute detail of the television shows and comic series that catch his eye. Most of the time it's adorable, but sometimes it's downright terrifying how scary accurate Karkat's predictions can be.

"I'll do my best," he promises. "As long as Jade agrees to keep quiet about everything, I think she'll keep her word, at least for now. Whatever she wants, it seems to involve cooperating with us."

That's the key to staying objective. Just focus on the fact that Jade must have some kind of motive in being here. Maybe it's as simple as she claims, that she wanted to meet John because they were siblings. Maybe that's really it. And John would be okay with that, because having a sibling has the potential for some totally cool shenanigans! But also maybe she's here to commit some sort unspeakably underhanded, convoluted scheme and reveal herself as a villain.

...John needs to lay off the comic books, clearly.

"I want you safe," Samuel repeats, and there is a moment, however brief, in which John wants nothing more than to reach out and punch his father square in the jaw. He is so sick of being safe that it feels like more a cage than -

"And John?" Samuel is still talking, and John is dizzy with the need to move, to get out of this locked room and out into the night air. "If she's your sister, then that means keeping her safe, too."

Oh. John freezes - and then, slowly, he feels something in his chest unknot so his lungs expand. A little of the weight lifts, and it doesn't seem so urgent that he get outside.

That helps. Knowing that Jade is included under his dad's umbrella of safety, that helps a lot. It really shouldn't though. Oops.

- John lets Karkat hold his hand all the way to Denny's.

Well. Not like that's a hardship or anything! But John's hand starts sweating immediately because he's holding hands with Karkat and that's a huge deal, especially since they're walking into Denny's and all the world can witness their lascivious hand holding. Karkat does get clingy and feelsy, but only in the safe-zone of either his or John's house, where he doesn't have to maintain that patented Vantas perma-rage for an audience.

So the fact that Karkat clamps down like a vice and drags him into the restaurant with a clawed thumb rubbing circles along the side of John's hand really says something about Karkat's state of mind. He's clearly got no fucks left to give about public displays of affection. And Karkat can act like he doesn't care about the rest of the world, but he does. It's really, really obvious how much he cares, sometimes.

"You have a cousin? What the fuck, John!" is Karkat's opening whisper-yell, even as they wait for
the host to escort them to a table.

Oh yeah. All bets are off with Karkat, today.

John winces. Because for some reason, the universe has decided to hand him one more massive secret that he has to keep from Karkat at all costs, and he's sick of lying all the time! "Uh, yeah!" he laughs. It comes out shaky. "It's kind of a surprise to me, too - her guardian died reeeally suddenly, so she's staying with us right now!"

He laughs again. He's probably laughing too much, because Karkat is eyeing him suspiciously. That's a thing according to Jade, though John doesn't know how much credit to give her when they've only known each other for a day. Someone would have mentioned it before, right? His dad? Karkat? Anyone?

Karkat groans and lets his head fall forward, mashing a palm to his face. The host just ignores their antics and stalks off, and it's up to John to pull Karkat along until they reach the table. "And just how long is she hanging around?" Karkat asks, voice muffled by his hand.

"No idea," John admits, because he really doesn't know! Jade doesn't seem to have had any plan aside from meeting John - at least, none that she's talked about, anyway. It's easy, way too easy, for John to trust her, and he has to keep reminding himself of his dad's words of warning. They don't actually know this girl, and this irrepressible, instinctive trust should make John suspicious, too.

He takes a moment to silently hope that Jade and his dad get along alright in the house without John there as a buffer. He's never known his dad to be anything other than unfailingly polite, even in the weirdest of circumstances, but there's a first time for everything! And Jade isn't as much of a rule-follower as John, if her willingness to teleport at a whim is any indication. She has none of John's restraint, and if he's honest with himself, she has a lot more power to throw around. She moves faster than him with her 'spacey thing', which counts for a lot in a one-on-one fight.

Karkat mutters something to himself; it sounds like a truly magnificent jumble of swearwords, spiced up with vows to extinguish a certain someone's family line through sheer concentrated rage, so John just kind of tunes it out until Karkat's volume rises again. "I need so many pancakes after today, John. So many."

John sits across the table from Karkat, flushing when Karkat continues to squeeze his hand and the host gives them a patronizing raised eyebrow worthy of Rose. He and Karkat aren't exactly demonstrative in public, and PDA in Denny's really is a new level of weirdly embarrassing. "Then we will get you all the pancakes. All of them," he promises, wondering what has stressed Karkat out this time. It can't just be Jade, right? "And then you can nap again."

Karkat glares at him over his facepalm in progress. John meets him stare for stare, channeling his dad's patented 'stern frown' until Karkat groans and bangs his head against the table in surrender. "As long as your equally-bucktoothed cousin stays at least thirty feet away from my house at all times, no problem," he says vehemently, and John twitches at the venom in Karkat's tone. Karkat is unendingly irritated, yeah, but he sounds really...choleric. Choleric is a good word for it. "Seriously. I am so fucking serious right now, I could shit sincerity. I don't want her anywhere near me."

"Karkat, gross!" John wrinkles his nose and opens the menu. Not that he really needs to read it to know that he's going to get his usual indulgence of whole-wheat blueberry pancakes and a veggie-cheese omelet. "Did Jade really make that bad of an impression? She seems really nice!" A little over-enthusiastic, and kind of goofy maybe, but in a good way!

...No, stopppp, brain! John smacks himself inwardly. Suspicion! Healthy suspicion! He can't let
himself get so complacent!

"'Seems,' he says," Karkat mutters, letting go of John's hand to seize his glass of water and chug it. He slams the glass back down with a resounding clank. "Look, just, how well do you know this girl? You've never fucking mentioned her before, so where the bulgesucking fuck did she come from?"

John gets the feeling that Karkat has been sitting on these burning questions all day. The troll had sat in horrified silence while Jade dominated conversation with other members of the swim team at lunch, and then Karkat had cut and run early before John could say anything. John hadn't been all that gung-ho about eating inside the cafeteria, either, but Jade had pouted him into it. Karkat, who's even less sociable than John on his best days, had been lucky to escape. "I didn't know about her. Apparently my dad was never really close to her side of the family."

Every word of those sentences is true, and yet John still feels yucky because it's all in the service of the larger deception. He hates it, hates it, hates it! "But she's our age," he adds, scrunching up his nose, "so even if she ends up staying with us for a while, we won't all be in one house for long."

"Oh, fuck." Karkat sinks lower in his seat. He sighs and fixes his glasses, which sit halfway off his face from all his antics. "Look, she hasn't said anything...weird to you, has she?"

John tells the solemn truth. "Every word out of her mouth is weird. She's like weird embodied in human form. There isn't even a handle for her to do a pirouette off at this point - she is the handle."

Karkat, if it's even possible, sinks down further. His knees knock against John's under the table, and he sighs. "Why am I not surprised."

The waiter stops by, and John nudges Karkat with an insistent knee. Karkat flops over sideways, tugging on the strings of his hoodie until only his eyes are visible. It is the most furious pout John has ever been on the receiving end of, made all the more effective because Karkat's eyes are still swollen and dark with exhaustion, and John is a sucker for Karkat at the best of times. "He'll have a blueberry pancake breakfast. With hashbrowns." Karkat taps him on the ankle, and John sighs. "And eggs."

Karkat mutters a thank you after the waiter moves off, and is relatively silent for the rest of the meal. Which is really weird.

Like, holy crap, is this weird. Karkat hasn't been this quiet since - ever! A Karkat who's not keeping up a constant stream of swears and commentary is a Karkat John doesn't know how to handle. He chatters at Karkat nonstop, a stream of gossip and speculation on everything from the dome over LA to the new spate of furious battle royales between the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice that are tearing up the streets of Chicago on an near-hourly basis. He's careful to avoid mentioning Sharpshooter, even in passing, because he checked all the online news outlets today and found no mention of her arrival in Seattle that civilian-John could use as a cover. "'M just...fucking tired, okay," Karkat mumbles when the meal is over, and that's John's cue to flag the waiter down by waving at him across the restaurant. He may or may not stand up on his chair to do so, which is dumb enough that Karkat starts ranting at him in a low hiss about 'acceptable levels of dumbassery in a public setting.'

John smiles and sits back down in his seat, grinning broadly because as long as Karkat can rant coherently, they're okay.

John insists on driving again, since Karkat is so tired. This time around, however, Karkat is...well, awake.
"JOHN, HOLY SHIT USE THE BRAKES- AGH!"

"I know how to drive, Karkat!" John protests, slowing to a nice, gradual stop at the stop sign that he totally saw.

"YOU KNOW HOW TO COMMIT VEHICULAR MANSLAUGHTER, YOU ASS," Karkat yells, one hand gripping his seatbelt and the other clawing at the overhead handle like pulling on it hard enough will yank the car to a halt. His eyes skitter over the road, searching for any incoming vehicles as though he fears John will pull out into the intersection in front of oncoming traffic on purpose. "WHO THE FUCK LET YOU HAVE A DRIVER'S LICENCE, I WILL FUCKING MAIM THEM."

John's silence lasts too long. "Heheh?" he offers, smiling weakly, and then he whistles to himself, concentrating on the road while he applies the slightest pressure to the accelerator.

Karkat's jaw drops in utter horror. "JOHNATHAN EGBERT."

Ohhhhh, no. "No, I'm pretty sure I have one - maybe, it's been a while -" John says, digging one hand into his pocket for his wallet. He thinks he saw his license in there last...maybe...possibly...

"I DON'T BELIEVE YOU, YOU G- THAT IS A SMALL CHILD JOHN DON'T YOU DARE HIT -" Karkat lets out a strangled scream as John stops and waves the kid and his mom across the street with a friendly wave. The mother gives their car a strange look, and it occurs to John that having a raving troll throw a ragefit in the passenger's seat might not actually be as common a sight for other people as it is for him. "DO YOU THINK I WRIGGLED OUT OF A PUDDLE OF SLIME YESTERDAY?!"

"I swear, I just don't have it on me right now!" John gives up looking for his wallet, because he needs to pay attention to the road.

Karkat grabs at the steering wheel, and then seems to think better of it, letting go like he burned his claws. He switches back to the age old tactic of the Vantas clan instead. "LET ME DRIVE JOHN, RIGHT THE FUCK NOW. PULL THIS CAR OVER BEFORE WE DIE SOME HORRIBLY CLICHEDE TEENAGE DEATH!"

"We are so not going to die, Karkat! Trust me!"

"YOU ARE NOT PLAYING THE TRUST CARD. I ABSOLUTELY FUCKING FORBID IT. TRUST HAS NO PLACE IN THIS CAR WHEN YOU ARE BEHIND THE WHEEL OF OUR DESTINY."

"We're almost home, look!"

"FUCK. FUCKING. FUCK."

All in all, by the time John flawlessly parallel parks the car in front of Karkat's house, the troll has exhausted himself. John pats him on the side of the face with his best soothing expression of sympathy plastered across his face. Karkat rolls his head to the side, eyes squinted up with exhausted rage, and raises a shaky middle finger.

"That's the spirit!" John says, encouragingly.

Karkat glowers. "Take me to my room, and leave me there to die in peace," he grumbles, turning over in his seat. He refuses to undo the seatbelt, clutching at the strap with both claws, but John manages to extricate him and drag him into the house with minimal effort. Crabdad is asleep on a
pile of cardboard boxes in the kitchen which have been there basically since Karkat moved in, and they tiptoe past the entryway without waking him up. John feels bad, but Karkat's naptime is precious enough as it is without throwing another episode of 'Crabdad Throws a Hilariously Concerned Fit' into the mix. There's still sopor slime crusted on the carpet from yesterday, and he pokes at it with his toe. This is clearly a mistake, because even dried up sopor slime is apparently gross, vaguely moist slime, and he glances at Karkat's turned back anxiously before wiping his toe off on another section of carpet.

"I don't need you to watch me sleep," Karkat says.

John wonders, sometimes, just how long Karkat had to train to reach that level of moody, grumpy-faced denial. It must be like obtaining a black belt in karate or something - a lifelong effort. "I'll be here anyway," he says, shrugging off his backpack and digging out his calculus textbook. "Working on my homework. I don't really think that Jade would be conducive to studying anyway." John isn't entirely sure that Jade is aware of how homework works. She left corrections in five different kinds of ink all over his work from last night, and gave him a mini-lecture on quantum superposition theory on the way to school this morning. It was all supposedly vital to the story of how she got a carapacian for a sidekick, but John still has noooo idea where she was going with all that.

Whatever. At this rate, Jade would probably either volunteer to do his homework for him (which would defeat the purpose of it!) or insist that John needs 'more of a challenge' and start quizzing him on advanced differential equations without letting him use a calculator. Better to finish all the science and math stuff while he's here and Jade is far, far away...

Karkat stiffens, and then crawls into the recooperacoon. "Actually, I would appreciate it," he says, every word sounding as though he has to pry it out with pliers, "if you stayed. You know. Just for a little."

John blinks. "Well, good! Because that's the plan," he says. Karkat looks mollified, and sinks back into the sopor, muttering something that John doesn't quite catch.

John takes advantage of Karkat's marathon nap sessions to once again catch up on all his texts. He doesn't remember being so popular before! But now he's juggling not just Dave and Rose but Jade as well, and he looks back on his unthinking willingness to give her his real chumhandle with a kind of fond, distant regard for his unsuspecting past self.

Because Jade can talk. All of his friends are so talkative! John has to really apply himself to keep up with each pester log window, thumbing between them at intervals while maintaining three conversations at once.

GG: john~!
GG: :/
GG: are you and karkat done with your date yet???
EB: ack!
EB: it's not like that jade!
GG: of course it is, john!
GG: i am a well-travelled woman of science with a pair of functioning ganderbulbs in her head
GG: and you two are kind of obvious?
EB: it's just
EB: complicated, okay?
GG: complicated, shmomplicated!
GG: you two should both come here instead!
GG: and then we'd be 'in a secure place' and blah blah blah
GG: and we could all talk properly and wv can show you his latest invention! im so proud of him,
you have to come support his scientific endeavors!
GG: also i want to know why karkat is so grumpy at me still!
EB: haha, that's just kind of his default setting. most of the time he doesn't really mean it.
EB: well. he means it. buuuut...not in a bad way?
EB: just in a karkat way!
GG: he sounds prickly
GG: like a cactus!
GG: karkat cactus!
EB: ...
GG: ...
GG: *wiggles eyebrows*
EB: okay, you got me! :D
GG: yay! :D

It devolves into a rampant pun fest from there. John makes a mental note to spam Dave with some of
this choice wordsmithery, because Dave can deny it all he wants but John knows that deep down he
toootally likes puns, too!

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 15:07:45 --
EB: are you ready for some sweet puns, bro? :D
TG: john egbert
TG: please
TG: no more
TG: i surrender to your whims
TG: use me like generic store brand extra soft tissue paper
TG: throw me away like a rich ass millionaire tossing a couple grand at a hooker
TG: but please
TG: no more puns
EB: eheheh, i can't help it!
TG: she is an awful influence on you
TG: do you need an intervention eb?
TG: because im sure sunny d and rose strider would be down for an intervention
TG: it would get their creepy headshrinker glands all warm and tingly i just know it
EB: rose strider? is that actually a thing? :O
EB: i knew she was still mad about her mom, but is she really going to change her name?!
TG: no
TG: not yet
TG: but it could be
TG: im just converting all the ladies to striderism
TG: tell me john egbert can i interest you in a fine name swap today
TG: you will receive an honorary pair of swagtastic sunglasses and free swordkind lessons until you
reach the level of not suckage with a specibus thats not a giant ass hammer
EB: such temptation!
EB: think i can just tack it on the end of egbert-harley?
TG: absolutely not this is all or nothing my man
TG: have to keep the line pure
TG: besides if you keep that up suddenly youll wind up with something ridiculous
TG: like john egbert-harley-vantas-strider
TG: and nobody wants that bro
TG: nobody
EB: would that even fit on a driver's license…
TG: yeah no
TG: as if you'd ever get behind the wheel of a car that would be a goddamn shitshow
EB: you've never even driven with me before!
TG: i can sense it
EB: bluhbluhbluh!
EB: so have you given any thought to
EB: THE PLAN~~~
EB: :?
TG: yes
TG: and i have reached the ineffable conclusion that said plan
TG: is stupid as fuck
EB: come on, even rose approved it!
EB: just talk to him for once!
TG: no
EB: yes
TG: no
EB: yessss
TG: no
EB: yeeESSS
TG: no
EB: y~~~es!
TG: it doesn't matter how many different ways you say it
TG: absolutely not

Things continue in that vein.

Rose is heading off to Chicago for some vague, unspecified reason that has to do with her girrrrlfriend, a moniker that has John making raised eyebrows and winky faces all over the pester log as he tries and fails to tease Rose. But sadly, Rose is immune to his efforts to fluster her, mostly because she's way better at using her psychological thingy to turn all of John's remarks against him.

She also keeps asking him all these weird questions, lately, and he isn't sure how to respond to them. He's starting to anticipate the nosebleeds before they even happen, but that doesn't mean he understands why they're happening whenever Rose tries to talk about...certain things that John can't quite remember.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pesterig ectoBiologist [EB] at 15:04:32 --
TT: We're passing through Pittsburgh even as I type.
EB: really? what's it like?
TT: Fine enough from a distance, but subpar upon closer inspection. I would be perfectly fine with never returning.
EB: that's a shame.
EB: but you think you'll be in chicago by tonight?
TT: Kanaya and I hope to complete this particular errand post haste. And she tends to drive most dangerously when she has a goal to motivate her.
TT: Her reflexes are astonishingly fast, and yet I still find myself…
EB: terrified?
TT: That would be suitable descriptor, yes.
EB: aw, you'll be fine rose! just keep me posted!
TT: Of course.
EB: i still don't get why you guys are so interested in blind justice and scourge tho.
EB: i mean YEAH, you totally called it :P
EB: but why would kanaya be involved?
TT: I have discussed it with Kanaya, and she is fine with you knowing. As chance may have it, my companion is rather more familiar with the situation than I may have led you to believe. She has personal stakes in regulating the explosive black affair currently playing itself out on the unsuspecting streets of Chicago. She has been in contact with both heroes, but they have shut her out over the past few days. It only seems to infuriate her all the more.
EB: oohhh, so it's an auspice thing! that's neat!
TT: Oh? John Egbert, quelle surprise - I had no idea your moirallegiance would lead you to such uncharacteristic awareness of the four quadrants.
EB: karkat is secretly a huge romance movie fan.
EB: like omg troll sleepless in seattle is probably his favorite movie, even more than batman! it's crazy!
TT: And you've watched said films with him? If I had known your taste in movies could be coaxed beyond the niche of superheroes and Nicolas Cage, I would have introduced you to some of my more palatable post-modernist fare ages ago, John.
EB: oh man, rose!
EB: as fun as that sounds -
EB: no way. ever. :/
TT: I see. What a shame. Perhaps Karkat and I can form an alliance and persuade you on the subject.
TT: Have you considered my earlier proposition further? I understand that with your unexpected new guest, having two extra visitors descend upon your residence might not be easy to clear with your father. But Kanaya and I are more than capable of finding other lodgings to stay at. I only wish to see you in person.
EB: no, i haven't talked to him yet, but you know my dad won't say no to you visiting, rose! i want to see you too!
EB: you're right that we're pretty much out of beds here, though, and i don't want to stick you and kanaya on the couch or anything...that would just be mean!
TT: It truly is no trouble. We don't wish to impose on your father excessively, and with each passing hour I can sense that the probability of my mother making a repeat appearance grows ever more likely. She would complicate matters...unnecessarily.
EB: she still has some explaining to do...
TT: Nothing that she would be willing to explain, for whatever convoluted reasons she's justified in her own head. Sometimes I think she simply can't help it - like all of her research into the obfuscating effects of the void have simply taken an icepick to the part of her mind that would allow her to simply explain things.
EB: don't worry, i'll talk with dad about it before i go to work tonight, and maybe he and your mom can talk it out!
EB: i don't get all the void and magic stuff, but we'll be okay once you're here!
TT: Fair enough.
TT: Pardon me, Kanaya is attempting to merge onto a highway. This requires...foresight.
EB: go for it! good luck in chicago!
TT: Be safe tonight, John.
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] ceased pestered ectoBiologist [EB] at 15:32:01 --

Yeah. John can only imagine how that conversation will go over with his dad. But he shoves it to the back of his mind, where he has a good buildup of gross, depressing thoughts to deal with later. He hears a faint gurgle from within the 'coon, and tosses his phone out of the splash zone before Karkat emerges in a sputtering panic. He seize one of Karkat's claws right as it reaches out, and squeezes as hard as he dares so Karkat knows he's not alone.
"Ugh! John, you're too paranoid!"

Jade snaps her fingers, and is abruptly standing in the middle of John's room in full costume. John stares, nonplussed, but Jade keeps right on talking, as though she didn't just waltz out of the bathroom in only a towel and then switch over into a catsuit in the blink of an eye.

...Maybe she's a magical girl, and he just missed the flashy transformation sequence? Most likely it was some brand new bizarre aspect of her space powers, but when it comes to other heroes, and to Jade in particular, John has learned not to judge.

"But don't worry, we're going to get you to loosen up!" she says, combing her wet hair back from her face. She has a lot of hair, a curly brown-black tangle that crackles with green static electricity as she uses the towel to dry it. Even as John watches, the strands start to untangle themselves, limned with green, and arrange themselves into mess of braids to keep Jade's hair out of her face. "Tonight is going to be so much fun! So much! Maybe even Mr Grumpy Troll will cheer up!"

It takes John a minute to switch gears, from civilian life to hero work, and for a confused moment he thinks Jade is still talking about Karkat. "Oh, you mean Hemogoblin," he realizes, laughing. He takes out his keys and starts inputting the code for the safe in the wall, which he'd been in the middle of doing before Jade swanned into the bedroom. "He's not normally that edgy - he's had a rough week with some bad press and I guess it got him more wound up than usual. Normally he's a lot more…"

"...Grumpy?" Jade suggests, wiggling her eyebrow.

"Cool," John decides. Yeah. Hemogoblin is...so cool. John opens his safe in a daze and gathers all of his stuff into his arms, his mind occupied by thoughts both appropriate and otherwise. He tucks Casey under his chin and then shoulders the safe door closed.

Jade is still standing between him and the (relative) safety of the bathroom, which is the only place John can change as of late. She raises both eyebrows and keeps them up for a long moment, and then huffs, shrugging, and moves out of his way. "Ookay, I guess he is your partner. You probably know him better than I do. But if he gets sharpish with me again, I'll kick him in the booty!" She trots over to the bed and scoops up her carapacian friend, WV. The stocky alien spent all day digging through John's belongings and is now sporting a cape that John is pretty sure used to be his old pillow case.

WV is cute, don't get him wrong! But John's also concerned about having a mute, mostly powerless little dude tagging along for something as hazardous as crime-fighting. Only a few months ago John wouldn't have been so worried - but a few months ago, he hadn't had the Midnight Crew blowing up buildings all across his city! He's got to think about these things! "Should he really come along?" John wonders, shifting his weight as he looks between WV and the bathroom. "I get that he's your sidekick and all, but isn't it kind of dangerous?"

"Nah, I don't think WV wants to come along tonight. He's being feistier than usual," Jade sighs, even as the carapacian squirms around in her headlock and kicks her with a thin, pointy foot. WV can't speak, but a high-pitched whine of protest comes out of his mouth as he flails his arms and fights to break free. Jade pats him on the head, oblivious to just how little WV seems to like being picked up. "And I've been trying not to teleport him a lot. He got pretty sick a while ago, so for the first few nights he should probably sit this out. Is that okay with you, Vee?" she asks, looking down at the carapacian.
Having exhausted himself fighting her grip, WV punches Jade in the hip and jabs his claw at the ground. This time, Jade obeys and sets him down. He scuttles under the bed and starts chirping to himself. A single claw reaches up and starts dragging John's covers off the bed to hang as curtains over the gap between the floor and the mattress frame.

...It's a fort!

"Yeah, looks like he's making a fort town. We should probably leave him to it, or he might make us stay and participate in the democratic process," Jade says. She claps her hands together loudly and John jumps back. "Hurry up and get changed, silly! Let's go let's go let's go!"

"Ack! I'm going!" John yelps, and he runs into the bathroom. He fails to see Becquerel lying splayed out on its side just inside the threshold; only the quick intervention of the wind catches John before he faceplants on the tile floor. Floating there, John looks back, and sees Bec roll over onto its back, completely unbothered.

Too nervous to pick up the wolf and try moving it outside the bathroom, John closes the door on Jade's impatient face and tries not to think about the wolf's unseen eyes as he starts changing into his Heir costume.

Bec sneezes so hard its whole body lights up with a galaxy. John falls over into the shower.

- 

"Do you and Hemogoblin always travel separately?" Sharpshooter asks. "It seems like a lot of hassle when you could just fly him right over. I'm sure he'd appreciate it!"

Heir made the executive decision that the two heroes would fly out to Seattle tonight, as opposed to having Sharpshooter teleport them around everywhere. Sharpshooter had just laughed and started floating alongside him, lying on her back while she continues to chatter at him while they zoom over to the center of the city.

Even with Bec an ominous, hovering presence coasting along some hundred feet beneath for whatever reason - the blank faced wolf is inscrutable - Heir feels relaxed. He's spent years flying to work by himself, but having Jade (Sharpshooter, he has to correct himself, Sharpshooter) along for the flight is surprisingly not-annoying. She cuts through the air without being carried by it, but if Heir wanted to he could reach out and brush her arm with a hand whenever he likes, and her lungs inhale and exhale the air so evenly that Heir finds himself unconsciously mimicking her breathing rhythm.

It feels easy. Like coming home. Like lying awake at night in the hot, humid Houston air and listening to Dave's fluttering, too-quick breathing over the influx of air through the hole in the wall, or sleeping over at Rose's house as a kid and giggling together under blanket forts and stacks of heavy fantasy books, or even just sprawling out on a pile of random stuff with Karkat and letting the troll shoosh them both into some semblance of peace.

But with Sharpshooter, the line seems even thinner. Heir thinks it's really too easy for him to believe that she's his twin sister. In fact, whatever her motives, he does believe her.

"He has his own way of getting into town, I guess." He doesn't mention the fact that he has no idea where Hemogoblin lives; that much, at least, should be a given. "We're both pretty private about that kind of thing."

"So it's just one of those arbitrary things! Ugh, I don't know how you function with all these rules,
John!" Sharpshooter does a flip in midair, grabbing her own ankles and spinning forward so her lab coat flares up toward the night sky. "We need to get you a hobby that's not hero work or something~"

Wait - hold on - "Don't say my name," Heir hisses, the shock cold in his chest. All the relaxation rips away, and he's left tense and smarting as they fly over the lake and into Seattle itself. "Oh my god, no, no, Sharpshooter, we need to turn around right now! You can't say my civilian name out loud like that, shiiiit -"

"No one's even around!" Sharpshooter barrel rolls and tackle hugs him from the side, and Heir comes thisclose to tossing her off him in a frenzy. She hooks an arm around her neck and keeps propelling them forward, even when Heir asks the wind to drag them backward. "Okay, Heir! Heir, see, I said it! The Heir of Breath!"

"You could forget," Heir says, the scene playing itself out in his mind with unnerving clarity. "You might just slip up once, and that's it. Or what if I call you Jade?! Agh! I did it now, too! This was a dumb idea! So dumb!"

Sharpshooter laughs, and then reaches up and pulls off Heir's hood, slamming her knuckles down and giving him a noogie. "Don't lose it, Heir! Everything's going to be fine! Because I'm here!"

"Just. No names. None," he warns, tugging on the arm around his neck. "Not mine or yours or anyone's. Not even last names. Nothing."

"Yup!" she says, nodding vigorously. "You got it! Now come on, I want to race you! It'll be fun!"

He reaches over and messes up her hair with a blast from one of his trailing breezes. Sharpshooter giggles at him and kicks away to fly by herself, her hair blowing in the wind like the braid never existed.

- Sharpshooter drops on Hemogoblin like a satellite out of orbit, howling with laughter all the way. Hemogoblin dodges out of her line of fire, but Sharpshooter giggles and glows green just before she would have slammed into the ground. She vanishes and this time lands with an elbow digging into the troll's ribs. "Heyyyyy!" she says. "Are you still Mr Grumpy Bossy Pants, or are you in a better mood today?"

Hemogoblin turns to Heir, grimacing. "You kept her?"

"Rude!" Sharpshooter smacks Hemogoblin on the back. Judging by the look on the troll's face, she doesn't hold back, either. "I'm his sister, not his pet!"

"She wanted to help out, and it's not as though I have any right to tell her what to do," Heir says. Time to play damage control, before these two start trying to throw down again. He plants both feet on the ground - which requires conscious effort lately; he thinks Jade is already rubbing off on him more than he'd like - and walks forward, hooking his arm with Sharpshooter's to tug her away. She comes, but only with an impatient huff. He smiles apologetically at Hemogoblin, who looks like he's fighting off a major headache. "You two can play nice for now, right? We're all heroes here."

"Yup!" Sharpshooter agrees immediately. She nods, and her sincerity brightens her face. For a moment Heir can't even process it; from anyone else it might have been sarcastic or reluctant, but Sharpshooter schools her confrontational, bold grin into a true apology. "I didn't mean to cause all that ruckus yesterday, honest! I got over excited. So I'm sorry for getting all up in your face."
Hemogoblin looks like he's swallowing nails, his mouth twisted and working as though he needs to swallow down several choice comments before settling in what he's going to say. "Fine," he says. He taps a claw against the side of his thigh, his red eyes alight with something unreadable. Heir is very conscious of being the focus of that scrutiny, and he shifts his weight. "Can I have a word?" Hemogoblin says at last. "Alone," he adds, leveling a piercing glare at Sharpshooter. Sharpshooter plants a fist on her hip; Heir can feel it when she juts her chin forward in a challenge.

...Awk. Well, Heir couldn't have expected that to actually work the first time. He's probably not cut out for auspicing, anyway. "No problem." He lets go of Sharpshooter and steps away, eyeballing her until she sighs and smiles. "We'll catch up with you later!"

"If you can!" she cackles, tapping her heels together. She starts floating again, her hair crackling as she whistles. "I bet I can take down like five criminals while you two are blabbing again!"

"We'll see about that," Heir says, laughing. It startles him, bursting out of his chest without warning, and Sharpshooter disappears with a brisk salute.

"Sshrmtrnw," a dark voice mutters.

"Wha?" Heir blinks, having completely missed what Hemogoblin said.

Hemogoblin folds his arms over the red streak across his chest, glowering at the ground by Heir's feet. "So she's your new partner now," he says, his volume tenuous but rising with every word.

"What?! No!" Heir yelps, shaking his head. Thoughts of how well Sharpshooter is going to keep her word once she's out of sight and loose in his city fly out of his head. "No, she's - it's a really weird story, but she actually probably is my sister! So I kind of have to look out for her, now!"

"You're kidding," Hemogoblin says flatly.

"No, seriously!" Heir rubs the back of his head, drifting closer to Hemogoblin. "But it's not like I trust her or anything." He totally does. "She just shows up out of nowhere, after all these years without a word? Definitely fishy stuff, right?" He raises both eyebrows at Hemogoblin, because he can't move any closer without risking a repeat of that whole pacifying freak-out incident. He's just gonna...keep a respectful distance. "I mean, you'll help me keep an eye on her, right?"

Hemogoblin scans Heir's face, and Heir projects 'she's not my partner' as hard as he can with a hopeful look on his face. "Obviously." Hemogoblin unfolds his arms, a hint of a smirk in the corner of his mouth. "What would you do without me here to help keep your new stray in line?"

"I'd be doomed. So doomed." Heir ducks his head, smiling with relief.

Without prior warning, Hemogoblin takes a step forward, and whookay Heir was definitely not the one to initiate this kind of proximity. No way is this one on him. Hemogoblin leans forward, radiating body heat that Heir can feel because he is right there, like oh my god it's really hot out here isn't it? A few inches more and there wouldn't even be space between them. Hemogoblin tilts his head to the side; like, wow, he has long eyelashes. Just. Really pretty eyes. That's. Oh crap. Heir suspects he's blushing hardcore. "Any other unknown family members I should know about?"

Hemogoblin murmurs. "Long-lost cousins, perhaps?"

"Nope!" Heir's voice breaks twice in one word, and that's a feat he hasn't matched since he finished puberty! "Not that I'm aware of, anyway. But if I've had a secret sister this whole time, a whole other branch of the family would just be terrifying!"

Cold air washes over Heir as Hemogoblin spins on his heel and strides away. The sudden absence of *breathing on his neck* leaves Heir at a lost, and he only notices he's leaning forward at an odd angle, blinking, after Hemogoblin has put a good few feet between them again. He snaps to attention, shaking off his daze.

...He still feels like he missed half of that conversation. Maybe while he was *incredibly distracted* by a near-Hemogoblin encounter. But Hemogoblin seems to think the conversation is over, regardless of how more or less incoherent Heir might have been. "So you'll hang out with me tonight?" he asks.

Hemogoblin looks back, and grins long and slow. "Of course, Heir. As though I'd really let some space witch interrupt our quality time together." He hooks his thumb upward at the sky. "We should catch up and show her how a real team kicks some ass."

His cheeks still warm, Heir grins. "Hell yeah," he agrees, and he wraps the wind around them both to fly them above the rooftops. "Just let me know if you notice anything involving lime green and/or really loud puns," he says.

"Like that?" Hemogoblin points to the west. When he adjusts his goggles and squints in that direction, Heir can just make out the faint electric green glow of Sharpshooter's powers activating somewhere deep in an alleyway. "Sweet taintchafing fuck, does she have no idea what the word 'subtlety' means?"

"The dictionary definition, yes. Practicing it - highly unlikely." Heir twists his hand and guides them forward, the wind ferrying Hemogoblin along a few feet ahead so he can keep the troll in sight. For some reason, the winds bear Hemogoblin forward much more quickly than they do Heir. But they continue to circulate in constant motion around Heir, and that's why it takes him a few seconds to realize Hemogoblin is the only one actually moving.

He can't move forward.

Also, there's this *weird* hissing noise in his ears. It sounds distant, and Heir scratches his ear, frowning, half sure he's just imagining things.

"Heir? What's up?"

"I - wait a second." Heir feels his eyes start to burn, and he suspects they're lighting up a brilliant blue as he exerts more pressure on his connection to the wind, silently inquiring why he isn't moving. Rather than replying, a curl of air winds around his waist and urges him backward, ruffling the buckles of his costume and whistling in his ear with urgency.

For whatever reason, the wind doesn't want him to go that direction. Which is *weird*, because the breeze had been pretty enthusiastic about leading him toward Sharpshooter last night! What the heck has changed?

"I can't move," he tells Hemogoblin. To, you know, keep the other hero on the level. And just to see if Hemogoblin might have any ideas on how to unstick super powers that are being flighty. *Again.*

What is that noise?!
Hemogoblin smacks his own face. "It's just one thing after another with us," he say gloomily. "Are you broken? Warn me now, before I fall out of the sky."

"No," Heir says slowly. "No, this has happened before. The wind doesn't want me to go over there."

"…Can you talk to it, now?" Hemogoblin deadpans.

ssssshhhhhhhhh

Heir rolls his eyes. "Nooo. I just get impressions. But the last time the wind was reluctant like this, there was a huge -"

sshhhhhhHHHHBOOM!

Approximately a mile to the northwest - not the alley Sharpshooter's glow is emanating from, Heir sees with relief - a building explodes into flames.

Then the shock wave hits them, and he realizes that, yes, he is in fact getting caught the blast of an explosion. Again.

At this rate, Dave is going to start a betting pool, and that's just not cool!

Luckily, he and Hemogoblin are far enough away that when Heir raises both hands and brings the wind shrieking in a wide arc in front of them, the blast knocks them back a few feet, without doing much more damage. His left ear pops with a punch of pain, and Heir claps a hand to cover it, but he grits his teeth and keeps his other hand up, clenching his fist as the winds batter him in a frenzy, torn between protecting him, keeping both heroes aloft, and resisting the pull of the wind and sound that slams into them from the direction of the detonation. Sirens start up immediately, along with a flurry of faint screams that rise up from the street nearest the blast site.

"OH FOR THE LOVE OF THE MOTHER GRUB'S GAPING SEEDFLAP, I AM SO SICK OF EXPLOSIONS!" Hemogoblin screams. And goddamn, Heir's ears are ringing and he feels half-deaf, so the troll must have quite the impressive yell for it to register! "DO YOU ALL HAVE SOME KIND OF BULGE-FONDLING SICK FETISH FOR BLOWING THINGS UP BECAUSE FUCK YOU. FUCK. YOU. LEARN A NEW TRICK, ASSHATS!"

"Ja- Sharpshooter!" Heir shouts. He can barely hear himself, and his ear twinges again at the vibrations from his own mouth. He takes his hand off it, and grimaces at the line of blood oozing down the center of his palm. That's one eardrum down, then. But Jade had been just a little bit closer...

He casts out a breeze, urging it to carry his shout to Sharpshooter's ears, but before he can zoom more than a foot in Hemogoblin's direction Sharpshooter appears in a burst of light. "Heir! Hemogoblin!" she yells, flipping her feet down so she's mostly upright. Her hair, already in disarray before from the wind, is now a tangled, floating wreck that hangs around her like a shocky bush, and the white of her lab coat is speckled with debris and smears of charcoal. "What just happened?! Are you guys okay?"

"I just happened."

All three heroes stared at each other for a long second, and Heir can see the same mixture of confusion and dazed suspicion on both Hemogoblin and Sharpshooter's faces as they glance at each other.

Then, as one, they all look down at the roof beneath their feet.
Three people stand on the roof, their positions roughly corresponding with the three heroes' positions in the air. One of them Heir recognizes on sight, and he bristles; Crichton gazes up at Hemogoblin with wide, bulging eyes, laughing breathlessly as he grins with too many teeth at the troll. Hemogoblin snarls with rage, and the winds struggle to maintain their grip on the troll hero when he starts thrashing and trying to kick his way down to roof level. Heir doesn't oblige, keeping the other hero elevated so they can assess the situation better. "Oh, fan-fucking-tastic, it's you again," Hemogoblin says, lifting his wrist and digging a claw into the pale grey flesh exposed by the triangle in his gloves. "You fuckface, I should have recognized your unmistakable aura of putrid, lying bullshittery from ten excrement-paved miles away."

"My, such inventive language." The figure standing between the two black-suited men towers over them by a good foot, long and slim with legs that go on for days. She's dressed to the nines in a slimming black suit, an overcoat that buttons down the front at a jaunty angle, and an amazingly classy hat. It's actually difficult to assign a gender to her mentally, with the coat's clean, straight lines revealing nothing but the curve of her hips, but Heir takes another sneaking look and spies a pair of three inch heels. Not exactly a deciding factor, because dudes can wear makeup and heels too, but for now she's a tentative she in Heir's assessment. Unlike the other two, who are in the standard all-black uniform of the Midnight Crew, however, the newcomer has added a white tie to her ensemble, a pale spot that knots in the hollow of her throat.

She holds out a gloved hand, the motion efficient and graceful. "Marlowe?" The third man presents a mysterious device to the woman without comment, and she casts a dark eye over it, nodding. "As expected. Go on ahead and escort our good friend Crichton out of here."

"Can't I stay, my lady?" Crichton turns to the woman with wide eyes, falling to his knees. "Please, let me help deal with these blasphemous upstarts!"

"That will...not be necessary." The woman's lip curls. "Now, Marlowe."

The third man strides over to the kneeling sycophant, manhandling him into an upright position, and then drags Crichton away without ever having said a word. Crichton throws a ferocious scowl back at Hemogoblin, who snarls right back, but his last, lingering stare is reserved for the woman who now stands alone on the roof, her back straight and unbending. He looks at her like she's a god, but the woman doesn't spare her minions a second glance.

That's when it clicks. Heir scans the woman's coat again, and this time he catches sight of the tiny, stylized diamond embroidered around the top buttonhole. When she raises a hand and waves two fingers up at the heroes by way of greeting, a slow smile on her face, Heir exchanges a look with Hemogoblin.

Diamonds Droog.

"Did you say you did that?!" Sharpshooter bursts out, losing her patience. Heir gestures at her frantically to quiet down, but his sister plants her fists on her hips and glowers down at the incredibly dangerous mob boss. Heir is spreading out his sense of the wind in all directions, and hasn't found any backup goons with rifles - yet. He doubts Droog only brought two thugs along to a confrontation as bold as this. "You better have a preeeeetty good explanation for that, mister!"

"Ma'am," Droog corrects, almost absently. She taps a gloved finger to plum-purple painted lips. "Just wanted to get your attention, you busy kids. I'm not much of one for groundwork like Hearts, so I thought I'd defer to his impeccable judgment in how to flag you down." The sarcasm is so thick by the end of her reply that Heir wonders if anything this woman says is meant sincerely. "Mission accomplished, I see."
"You guys have seriously got to lay off the explosions. I think you broke my partner," Heir says, frowning. Hemogoblin, who is still muttering under his breath at what he probably thinks is a low enough volume that Heir can't hear, just throws him an aggrieved look and goes back to complaining about overdone, clichéd opening moves.

"Hearts is an ossified hoodlum. All brawn and brute force." Droog shrugs. "I assure you, I'm only in town to deal with you. You all got off on the wrong foot with the Crew, and I assure you, the blame most likely lies entirely with Hearts. Whatcha say, kid?" Her eyes glint in the light of the explosion. She tucks both hands into the pockets of her coat, smiling crookedly. "We can settle this like civilized people, still. I think you'll find me more amenable to compromise than a brute like Hearts. If you stay outta my way, I'll stay outta yours."

"Like that's ever going to happen!" Heir cross his arms.

"You just blew up a fucking building! What if there had been people in there?!" Hemogoblin adds, throwing up both arms. One wrist is now sporting a bloody sickle. "Fuck you and your sanctimonious compromise, you set that insane lying asshole on me! You're going to jail!"

"Oh?" Droog arches an eyebrow, and turns her attention to Sharpshooter. "You haven't noticed, yet? So much for space, I suppose."

"Sharpshooter? What does she mean?" Heir asks. He looks at Sharpshooter's face in time to see her blanche, all the color rushing out of her dark cheeks and leaving her pale. "Sharpshooter?!

The other hero gives a tiny shake of her head, her eyes distant and widened with horror. "Oh," she says in a small voice. "Oh, no."

"Hey, idiot, clue us in!" Hemogoblin snaps.

"There are people in the building," Sharpshooter says. "The one she just blew up. There are still people moving in there."

…

What.

"You blew up a building with people in it?!" Heir yells, the wind rising as he whirls on Droog.

"What the fuck!"

Droog sighs, but her smile is unwavering and unconcerned. "Of course I did," she says, fanning out her fingers. "Difficult to find a place that's still well occupied at this time of night. You birds keep late hours. Tut, tut." She shrugs. "But as luck would have it, call centers work around the clock. Plenty of potential casualties in a three story building like that."

It's like a smack in the face. Hearts Boxcars had been a violent, menacing asshole, but he'd at least had the decency to blow up empty warehouses. The sheer nonchalance on Droog's face as she discusses the odds that she's just blown up a building full of innocent bystanders takes Heir's breath away - and not in a good way. "You're a monster," Heir spits, fists clenched by his sides.

"I," Droog says, her voice cold, "am not Hearts. And I do not piss around, boy." She shakes her head, and when she speaks again her voice has returned to normal. "It wasn't all that significant an explosive device, but the building will collapse, eventually. If you want to rescue all your precious civilians, I would hurry if I were you." She laughs. "Between you and the young witch here, I have no doubt you'll be able to save them. You're a couple of capable young live wires, no?"
"And while we do that, you get away." Heir grits his teeth. The wind yanks on his costume, urging him toward the burning building in a complete turnaround from the way it had held him back from flying headfirst into the explosion earlier.

"Oh, most likely," Droog says, tucking a stray curl of dark hair back into the coiffe under her hat. Her smile has gone odd, but Heir can't place what's changed, not with the panic and fury that set his heart pounding.

"I'm going," Sharpshooter announces, her face still pale. "Heir, I'm going, I'll start teleporting people out -"

"Go!" Heir agrees, and Sharpshooter lets fly a high pitched whistle to summon Bec as she teleports, leaving Heir and Hemogoblin alone in the air.

They need to save those people. But Droog is still smiling up at them, the picture of composed elegance, and it grates on Heir, knowing that this smug bastard will walk away to wreak even more havoc, with even less restraint than it seems Hearts Boxcars had.

"Put me down," Hemogoblin says.

Heir glances at the other hero sharply. "You sure?" he asks, speaking so low that Hemogoblin only hears, the words carried on the wind. No way for Droog to overhear them.

Hemogoblin nods, cracking the knuckles of his free hand. "Amazingly enough, I'm the only asshole hero here who can't do the goddamn teleport thing. I'd be next to useless clearing a burning building. Let me handle this soul-sucking nubfucker while you two get those people out." He catches Heir's eye, his expression intense but no longer a mask of blind fury.

Hemogoblin looks...focused. Still angry, yeah, but Heir can tell the troll has got his head back in the game. And hand-to-hand combat is definitely more along the troll's line of expertise than mass rescue attempts. "Kick her butt, man. You've got this."

Hemogoblin grins, bright and feral. "Of course I do. Now put me down, you floating dick."

Heir flattens out his palm and asks the wind to lightly drop Hemogoblin onto the roof below. The troll lands in a nimble crouch, and stands before Droog, the crimson red parts of his costume bright like human blood against the backdrop of the darkened roof.

Then, sucking in a breath full of cinders and the heavy, stifling tang of smoke, Heir narrows his focus on the image of the burning building, and winds up his power until his chest screams with pain and he's gone.

Hemogoblin has had a very, very shitty day.

The kind of day where the universe spontaneously pops an inexplicable hate-boner, and decides to get its rocks off by tormenting some poor asshole. The kind of day that usually leaves the unsuspecting dumbass who ended up on the receiving end of all that fuckery calloused and broken, a shell of their former self.

Not Hemogoblin, though. He's lived through an entire day of Jade motherfucking Harley dangling his secret identity in front of his face and expecting him to grin and bear it as though nothing is wrong. He spent a whole fruitless afternoon napping just to keep John from being alone in a room with his new hellion of a cousin on the off chance that she might just decide to let it slip that Karkat
is Hemogoblin. He has blazed his way through a buck-toothed female human-infested hell and emerged fire-forged, with a new personal store of hatred no doubt potent enough to hate a hole through to the core of the planet. He could just unleash the hatepocalypse, but he is a merciful and benevolent tyrant, and John would probably disapprove of him annihilating the planet. Even hypothetically.

But no. All this hate can't go to waste. It still has to go somewhere.

Basically? He is going to *wreck this human's shit.*

"Excellent. Hemogoblin, yes?" Droog says, lowering her gaze to smile sideways at Hemogoblin after Heir hightails it to evacuate civilians. "I've been told you're new here. Heir, we have plenty of reports of, but you're still a novelty."

"What can I say, I like the element of secrecy." He grimaces. "Which you fucked up. Thanks for that." He settles his feet in a fighting stance, raising a sickle to point at her. He's got two formed now, one for each arm, the better to fight with. He always feels more balanced with a specibus in each hand. "Now are you going to come quietly or not, Droog?"

The woman shrugs, but Hemogoblin spies the flicker of movement as a wooden rod thumps into her gloved palm. She catches his eye and winks, flicking the weapon out to the side. It's a cue stick, carved of heavy dark wood, and Droog twirls it expertly in her palm as though it weighs nothing at all. "Come on then, boy. Let us see what you're capable of," she says, tapping the cue stick against her shoulder and gesturing with the other hand. "If it's a fight you want, I'm more than happy to oblige."

There's probably a way to resolve this without violence. Hemogoblin is *so not interested.* He drops low and runs forward, moving to kick Droog's legs out from under her. He raises the solid guard of his blood-fashioned sickle over his head in anticipation of the cuestickkind that lashes out to meet him.

It doesn't hurt, per say, when the sickle cracks. The blood doesn't have nerve endings to let him feel pain, after all. But Hemogoblin still feels the sickening crunch when the cue stick raps the sickle with enough force to make it splinter, and his intense awareness of the blood fragments as red chunks of dried blood scatter across the roof. He bites down on his lip hard against a yelp of surprise, and darts back out of range before Droog can land another devastating blow on something more vulnerable and squishy than the sickle.

Droog hasn't even moved from where she stood when Hemogoblin first struck. She just brought the cue stick down in one smooth motion, with no wasted motion or effort. The smile has left her face though, and her expression is impassive as she raises the strife specibus. "Mmm. Quick enough. But rather brittle," she comments, flicking the cue stick out again. "Come on, kid. Try again."

Okay. Fuck. Hemogoblin has a good idea of just how sturdy and sharp he can make those sickles - sharp enough to cut people, but if he went up against, say, a brick wall, he'd lose.

Apparently, Droog hits hard enough that the brick wall would probably tap out. Hemogoblin keeps his distance as he edges around the human in a circle, looking for a weak point. The problem is, she's got a longer range than him, and can probably pack a much harder punch.

When he thinks he has it, he moves in again. This time he waits until Droog has already begun her swing before he jumps up and over the cue stick, aiming a flying jump kick at her face. He connects and kicking someone in the face has never felt so fucking satisfying.
Then a hand clamps around his arm like a vice, squeezing so hard he thinks it might bruise through to the bone, and then she tosses him unceremoniously to the side. He rolls over onto his shoulder and skids to a stop, smirking at his moment of triumph.

Droog touches her cheek, drumming her fingers against the flat plane where Hemogoblin drilled his heel. For someone who just took a kick to the face, she doesn't seem affected. Her hat hasn't even moved out of place. "One last try." Droog steps back into her original place - he'd at least been able to knock her back a step, but he wishes she'd at least look a little pissed about the face shot. "Surely you can do a little better than that."

By now, Hemogoblin is fuming, but he also has two sicklekind again. His bloodpusher is working double time to keep up with the adrenaline, and he uses that to his advantage, layering more material than usual on one of the blades to see if he can build a less brittle specibus, one that can hold up under Droog's strength for more than a hot second. When he finishes, he attacks head on, slicing out with both sickles in an effort to cut that cuestickkind down to size.

Droog sniffs, and flicks her wrist. The cue stick flies out, and smashes through the sickle aimed at her arm without pause, like none of his extra effort at beefing it up did any good. But the second sickle makes its mark, and Hemogoblin hisses with triumph as he slices through layers of thick cloth to score a long line along the right side of Droog's torso. The human steps back this time; when Hemogoblin jumps forward to slash at her arm and (hopefully) cut her strength in half, she then steps into his guard and turns, coolly seizing him by the arm and twisting him over her hip. He lands on his side behind her, and drags himself upright.

"Alright," Droog says. Her breath is smooth and even, her chest barely heaving despite all the action thus far. She touches a few fingers to the cut in her side, fingering the shredded, bloodied folds of her coat before letting her hand fall. "I believe I've seen enough. You're good, boy. Most wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the ring with me."

"Shut up," Hemogoblin snarls, rolling back onto his feet. The sickle takes precious time to reform, but Droog doesn't press her advantage while Hemogoblin coaxes his pulse into a new weapon, a blessing he doesn't fucking question. "We're not done here."

"No. We really are." Droog fixes her hat. Curls have fallen loose on either side of her face, the only sign that she's shifted at all throughout the fight aside from the bloody tears in her clothing. "The boss only asked me to test you, see. The problem is, he was quite clear that play fighting like this wasn't on the agenda."

She moves too fast. Far faster than she has so far, and that's when Hemogoblin knows she really has been playing with him.

The cue stick imbeds itself through the right side of his torso and shoves out through his back. Hemogoblin stumbles back, staring down and grabbing the cue stick with a weak grip, stunned. The pain only hits after she rips the weapon back out. Hemogoblin stumbles back, yelling hoarsely, and presses both claws to the new stab wound he's obtained in basically the same place as last time.

First that carapacian asshole starts poking holes in him, and now this? Fuck this!

"He's far more interested," Droog continues, smiling, "in knowing just how much damage you can take."

And then she breaks out into a frenzy. The cue stick cracks against the side of Hemogoblin's head and slams him sideways; Droog follows the spin through and whips the weapon down in one smooth
motion. He throws himself out of the way, landing hard on the roof, and that's the only reason she
doesn't break his fucking shoulder, FUCK.

Droog doesn't wait for him to recover. All of her toying patience and elegant maneuvers are gone;
she barrels down on him with the cue stick already lashing out repeatedly, furious and unrelenting.
What the fuck did he do to piss her off like this?! He catches the next blow aimed at his head with an
arcing line of blood from his side, but then she kicks out with her high heel and shoves him down
with just the point of her heel so that he sprawls out on his back. He's almost got this goddamn
gaping hole in his side staunched, and after that he can start to fight back without his kidney and gill
filaments bleeding out everywhere. But the cost of this rapid healing is that he can barely see past the
red fog covering his vision.

It occurs to him that he may have severely overestimated how prepared he was for this fight. Like.
Holy fuck. This is turning into a painful shitshow, and how the fuck long does it take for two
teleporting dumbasses to clear a three story building?!

"Ah. Healing factor," Droog says, somewhere overhead. "How troublesome." Hemogoblin is too
sunk into his blood to focus elsewhere, but he has the sense to scoot backwards, trying to stay out of
her range. Just a little bit more -

A hand claws at the fabric of his costume and yanks him upright. Hemogoblin shakes his head and
snarls, leaving the wound half-healed so he can bring his palm up into the underside of Droog's chin.

Her head jerks back, but she doesn't even make a sound of pain. "Do you know what I do to boys
with a healing factor?" she asks, her voice soft and sweet as she smiles at him. Her eyes, though -

Her eyes are bored.

Droog pulls him forward - she's holding his entire body up with one hand, how the fucking fuck is
she this strong? - and when she whispers, her breath ghosts over his ear.

"I hit them," she says, "until they stop moving."

The fist that ploughs into Hemogoblin's stomach hits right in the stab wound, and Hemogoblin's
vision goes white with pain. "Fu-agh!" he bites out. His body tries to curl up and flinch away, but
she's still dangling him by the collar of his suit and there's nowhere to go.

Time to fix that, before she starts breaking more bones. There's nothing he can do to heal broken
bones faster, and his ribs are already screaming from those first few jabs. This woman is blueblood
strong, and that's not normal. Hemogoblin seizes her by the shoulders and drives his knee into her
stomach. His own stab wound rips open, and he can feel the blood draining warm and wet down the
side of his leg. If he can pull it back in and start weaponizing it again -

Droog punches him again, this time square in the center of his chest, and he feels the ribs break. It's
neat and simple and when he coughs explosively his lungs don't respond. Karkat hacks and punches
Droog in the face, but he can't breathe. His chest hitches again and again; maybe a little air gets
through, but the fact that his ribs are stabbing into his lungs puts the whole breathing thing on hold.

That's the thing about blood, though. If it's not oxygenated, what's the fucking point? Black spots
start to eat up Karkat's vision when the lack of fresh air starts to sink into his brain. Fuck fuck fuck
fuckkk -

"How disappointing," Droog says. She must let go of his collar, because Karkat drops to the ground,
too distracted with knitting up the holes in his lungs to feel his knees scrape against the roof. A fresh
starburst of pain slams into Karkat's shoulder, and then another pummels his right calf when he tries to curl up in a defensive ball.

And that's when he realizes she's systematically stabbing and jabbing at him, prodding at vulnerable points and laying out crushing blows to break bones.

With a goddamn cue stick.

"I'm not entirely sure what god tier is," Droog muses incomprehensibly. "But I'm fairly sure that you're not one of them. The good Doctor will be so...unsurprised, no doubt."

Karkat would have a few choice words about where she could stick this fresh mumbo jumbo. But he's also busy passing the fuck out from pain and lack of air, so fuck it.

But someone else picks up where he can't.

SS: Hey, Diamonds. Lay offa my stabkid.

SS: I've got a bone to pick with yah.

Karkat blacks out, but he's pretty sure that last part was a hallucination. Like, 85% sure.

(His nightmares rise up to greet him like an old friend.)

--

Spades Slick is not a hallucination. He is insulted by the very insinuation of such a thing.

Spades squints at Diamonds Droog, but he doesn't wait for her to turn and face him; he lunges forward quickly and gets in a quick series of stabs before scooting backward, his knifekind still at the ready. The woman presses a hand to the deepest of the wounds in her back, grimacing, but the light of avid hate burns in her eyes when she lays eyes on Spades. Behind her, a certain troll that Spades owes a certain unfortunate obligation to lies in a puddle of his own blood, which is not normal. Blood is that kid's thing, so why the fuck ain't he using it? What kind of hero lets a little thing like being unconscious stop him from doing ridiculous blood power things.

"Spades," Diamonds says, teeth bared. "After giving me the run-around all day and night, all I had to do to get your undivided attention was beat up a hero? If I'd known, I would have tried it sooner. You are testing my patience."

SS: Like hell I am, you barely had any patience to begin with.

SS: C'mon, you pansy, you and your new boss have been trying to track me since Kazakhstan - here I am!

Diamonds never could resist a challenge. She advances on Spades, her lips tight with the strain of maintaining her smooth expression. Spades will give her that - Diamonds may be a squishy human at the moment, but she's still got class. Her hat is as phenomenal as usual.

But hats ain't got shit to do with fighting. And it looks like Spades is gonna have to defend the goddamn Knight, which is messed up. Knights are defender classes - what was this dumb troll punk thinking, wandering around trying to defend only himself? Where in this forsaken Skaia-cursed rock was -

Two kids pop out in the sky above the roof, and one of them yells. "Hemogoblin!" They both
plummet to the roof behind Diamonds and kneel beside Karkat, panicking like the hyperactive kids they are.

Diamonds looks up, too and has to settle into a fighting stance that divides her attention between Spades and the two hero kids, for which Spades is privately grateful. He can't afford to let himself be so easily distracted when he's up against her. Diamonds always has been the closest to him in strength and fighting prowess, and a Diamonds fighting two fronts is all the more preferable.

It's the Heir, who Spades has heard tell of from as far away as New York, and, surprisingly, the Witch, who he hasn't even bothered to ask around about since he hitched a ride with her off that despicably humid island. Either one of them would have worked as a potential player to defend to give a Knight a boost in a fight - both on the field would have been more than enough to fend off Diamonds.

Dumb. Ass. Punks.

SS: Get him outta here, yah sorry excuse for an Heir!

SS: Diamonds 'n me, we still got a score to settle.

The green Witch reaches out before the Heir can reply, grabbing him and Spades's blood oath brother by the shoulder and yanking at the fabric of paradox space until they all three vanish.

Good. The oath stops nagging Spades right away, and he can turn to face Diamonds again without that load of crap weighing on his conscience.

"Shame they left without noticing," the human says, staring up into the sky as though she could track the progress of three people at the mercy of a space hero. Which she couldn't. Probably Spades certainly can't. "I would have dearly loved to see how they reacted to my little...adjustments."

SS: Tha' hell you talkin' about, dame?

He growls when she smiles, his shoulders hunching up. Well, he never has good posture at the best of times, so it just worsens, but to hell with that; posture is for fuckin' sissies as long as his darling isn't here to chide him about the state of his 'deportment.'

Diamonds just hums, and it's damn well unnatural how she doesn't need to use any hand signs, how the words that emerge from her mouth are wide-mouthed human babble instead of normal carapacian speech. The cue stick remains in one hand, coated with drying blood, while the other hand is occupied with holding something Spades can't quite make out. "Nothing. Just a little...costume change for our mutual troll friend."

The human smiles wider, and shit. She may not remember, but Spades does, and he knows that infuriating, taunting smirk. Diamonds's eyes gleam with amusement as she spins something around her finger and then, chuckling, tosses the object to the ground between them. Spades lunges backward, ready for an explosion or some other kind of attack. 'S the thing when you're dealing with a crazy, double-crossin' bird like Diamonds - the dame is scary good, and she's hitting on all six cylinders if her flawlessly executed beat down of Karkat is any indication.

But it ain't an explosive, or even a gun, and Diamonds makes no move to put space between herself and the thing, so Spades snarls at her and edges forward, curious despite himself. "Go ahead, look." Diamonds gestures to the thing with a careless hand, tucking one heeled boot behind the other as she stands there, serene. "It won't bite." She pretends to inspect her nails and adjust her (admittedly pretty damn keen) suit, smoothing over a tear that a wayward sickle cut through the fabric with a
downward twist to her mouth.

SS: What do I look like, a sap?

She's not foolin' him. Even transformed into a soft, shell-less human, Diamonds has kept all her old talent for swift, unpredictable violence, tempered only by a calculating, no-nonsense mind. She's a force to be reckoned with, and winning her - him, at the time - over to work for the Midnight Crew an age and a universe or two ago had been the most difficult task of Spades's recruitment session. Between his rather stab-happy nature and Diamonds's lack of motivation for anything related to teamwork, it had been annoying as fuck.

But now, Spades is facing the consequences of a Diamonds Droog who hasn't been won over to his cause, and it's damn unsettling. Grimacing, he edges closer to that crumpled item, craning his neck out so he can get a peek at it. Give enough ground and he'll be toast.

"Attaboy," she murmurs, and it twists like a knife in his gut to hear that old catchphrase. Spades's crew mighta been a pack of destructive morons, but they'd been his destructive morons, and seeing the many little ways Diamonds has stayed the same regardless of her new body leaves him cold.

...But no, seriously, what the hell is he looking at, here?

SS: What are you playin' at? What's this supposed to be?

On the ground, innocuous and tattered, lies a thin red mask.

SS: Woman, do I look like I give a flying fuck about that wet-blanket's godawful taste in fashion?

Diamonds doesn't pause to look perplexed - she's too good for that. Instead, Spades can see her process his announcement, turn it over in her head, and start in along a new line of inquiry. It's the arena where Hearts Boxcar failed, too slow on the uptake, and where Clubs Deuce was just too much of a moron to care: a flexible, no-nonsense ability to accept reality and damn all the obfuscating stupidity of their enemies. She'd been so damn good at murdering the Felt because she accepted their abilities and exploited their weakness without breaking a sweat. "I see," she says, sickeningly sweet as she spreads her hands to either side. "So, you don't hold truck with all this hero nonsense, either?"

SS: I think it's moronic. Every death would be a heroic one by definition. I'm gonna smack the kid senseless when I get the chance. But when the hell have these idiots ever listened to me?

"How delightful! Finally, someone who understands," Diamonds says with relish, her grin widening to the point that she's more baring her teeth at him than anything. Spades stiffens and scuttles back again, because whatever the fuck set Diamonds off, it can only be bad news if she's got her kill-face on. "I grow so very tired of pointless mysteries and withheld information. I am sick to death of challenging incompetent brats who would normally never interfere with my preferred line of work." She raises the cue stick and points it toward him, and he raises his own shiv on reflex. "And when I capture you and turn you in, I have been promised all the answers I could ever desire. And then I can move on with my life."

SS: Well shit. Nice to see you're as bugfuck crazy as ever. Really great way to start my night.

He reaches into another pocket of his coat and flicks out another pocketknife. This is a two-blade job, at the least.

SS: Look, Diamonds. You 'n me, we been through some shit together, whether you remember it or not. So you should know - this is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you.
Diamonds quirks an eyebrow, her face flat.

SS: Except not really, because you're also a smug bastard who sold out to the Felt after I turn my back for a few years, and I got a real thing for stabbing people regardless.

SS: So on second thought? Nah. This won't hurt me a bit.

Diamonds grins viciously. "That's more like it."

-\-

Clearing the building would be a lot easier if Heir didn't receive a faceful of fire every time he rounded a corner!

He coughs when a lungful of smoke gets through his circulating bubble of fresh air, but he can't help it - if he introduces too much fresh air to such a volatile environment, he could just set off another explosion! Air and fire are just a dangerous combination, and his dad drilled it into him how to handle situations like this.

Sharpshooter pops into the hall ahead of him, and he briefly extends his bubble of clean air to surround her as well. She can teleport without feeding the fire with a burst of air - and hadn't that had been the opposite of fun, when Heir first used his new teleporting ability around fire, and the ensuing flare of heat and light probably browned his skin further with a new layer of tan. But Heir can also breathe with less trouble in the smoky environment. It's a tradeoff.

"Pretty sure everyone is out now," she coughs, her green eyes barely open as she wipes her aviator goggles clean once more. "I can't feel anyone moving above us, and Bec has stopped snatching people from the rooms. If it's not sensing anyone, there's no one left...who's still moving." She swallows, and Heir squeezes her shoulder reassuringly.

"Then we should get back to Hemogoblin." Heir has been relying on Sharpshooter's keen sense of space to direct him through all this. With all the fire around, he hasn't been able to distinguish the subtleties of people breathing in such a volatile situation. So if she thinks the building's clear, he's inclined to believe her. He licks his badly chapped, dried out lips and continues, "I don't like that he's had to fight someone like Diamonds Droog by himself for so long."

Hearts Boxcars had already been strong enough that without Heir's control of the breeze, it would have probably been a close fight. And they don't know anything about Diamonds Droog or how she fights yet.

Sharpshooter nods, her expression solemn, and taps Heir on the nose. The fizzle of electric green feels like soda pop running down the back of Heir's spine; one moment they're surrounded by the blazing inferno of the office building, and the next, they're in the air above the roof where they last left Hemogoblin to face off with Diamonds.

And there is blood everywhere.

"Hemogoblin!" Heir yells, spying the red and black uniform after a horrified moment when he couldn't distinguish it at all. Diamonds Droog is still standing, and she looks up with an implacably arched eyebrow before turning her attention back to the Dersite carapacian who stands across from her, wielding a knife. It's not WV, which just honestly makes it all the weirder - how many aliens can there be in one city?!

*What the heck happened here?!*
Heir lands and falls to his knees by Hemogoblin's side, pressing his fingers to the troll's pulse point under the jaw with too much force, his heart stuttering in his panic. Oh fuck oh fuck, he can't find it -

The carapacian starts yelling, and the words are blurred until Heir looks up to see the hand signs that go along with them.

SS: Get him outta here, yah sorry excuse for an Heir!

SS: Diamonds 'n me, we still got a score to settle.

"I found it," Sharpshooter says, dropping to her knees with her lab coat splayed out around her as she cocks her head to examine Hemogoblin. "John, John, don't worry, I can feel his heart moving. His lungs are shot, though -"

"We need to go," Heir rasps, still not able to bring himself to look down at Hemogoblin's too-still face. He can't even be mad about the name thing, because oh god, how could he have left his partner behind to get hurt like this?! They need to be so far away from Droog, so far away - "The library, he hangs out there -"

"Going, going, gone!" Sharpshooter says, snapping her fingers. The blazing heat of the burning building a few blocks over vanishes, replaced by the refreshingly clear, cool air of a library gone dark for the night. After sucking in a breath to brace himself -

Heir looks down and -

His brain can't handle it. It's John who has to come forward, John who had already been perked up by Jade's use of his name in the wrong context, John who realizes what has happened. His hero mindset can't handle what he sees when he looks at Hemogoblin's face, because his hero mindset has nothing to do with his civilian life. Has nothing to do with Karkat.

With Karkat.

Karkat, who is lying under his hands, bleeding out all over the carpet of the library.

Karkat.

This is Karkat.

"I guess she took off his mask," Jade guesses, sounding totally calm about all this. John's ears feel like they've been plugged with cotton, because he can barely hear her. Maybe both eardrums gave up from the shock. Maybe his body has stopped working altogether. Maybe he's not even real anymore.

None of this is real anymore.

"It's Karkat," he says, with a weird, still space in the middle of his chest. He keeps staring down at Hemogoblin's unmasked face and seeing Karkat.

Karkat? That doesn't make any sense, though. That can't be right. Maybe it's just the shock of seeing Hemogoblin without a mask at all. He's hallucinating -

"Of course it is! Hello, earth to John?" Jade yells back. "He needs medical treatment!"

"It's Karkat," John repeats.

Jade opens her mouth. Then she closes it. And when she opens it a final time, her voice is too quiet. "Oh. Oh, no. You didn't know?"
"Forget me, how did you know?" John demands. He can't let it explode, though. His chest is clenched down tight and he thinks if he moves, even to reach over and shake Jade by the shoulders, he will lose it. He's taped together with nervous tension and disbelief, and if anything breaks this equilibrium he is going to freak the fuck out. He clamps down one of his hands on Karkat's because of all the times to suddenly understand exactly how Karkat feels when he has one of his uncontrollable ragefits, it would be the time when his moirail is down for the count.

*Hemogoblin* is Karkat.

It's still not computing.

Jade throws up both arms and rolls her eyes. "No offense, John, but they're both short, shouty, red-blooded trolls with anger issues who spend all their time with you. I love you, little brother, but do you have eyes?!

John wheezes in air. He thinks he forgot to breathe for too long, and when he looks down he sees Karkat's face twisting with pain. The troll gurgles and John feels for the troll's breathing instinctively, a rhythm that should be as familiar as his own, but Karkat's breathing has turned ragged and fluttery, damp with blood that shouldn't be filling his lungs.

"He needs a hospi -"

"No hospitals!" John's head won't stop spinning, and he presses a hand to Karkat's battered face when the troll writhes again, coughing so hard it wracks his whole body. Over and over again, like a condemnation, he can only think *Karkat, Karkat, Karkat, Hemogoblin is Karkat.*

He's been such a fucking idiot.

"Karkat would never go to one, and - fuck, isn't it obvious why? Shit!" John says miserably, combing the hair back out of Karkat's face. "Even if he had a mask, they'd try to take it off, and he's always been paranoid about this, god, how stupid am I -"

Jade reaches over and smacks him across the cheek. Just once, and his jaw shuts with a click. "So help me, John, I am your big sister, not your weird troll auspice, but this is me telling you to pull it together man!" She slips into a strange, hearty British accent as she sits back, holding up a finger. "As Grandpa would always say, 'Enough of this codswallop!' Get your head in the game so we can help Karkat!"

"Right." John nods dazedly, and then more firmly, gritting his teeth. "We need to get him home. Right now."

He doesn't know what they can do. He has no idea how far Hemogoblin - how far *Karkat's* healing factor goes, or why it would be failing right now. But he does know one thing.

His dad will know what to do.

He doesn't even stop to think before wrapping an arm around Karkat, reaching out a hand to Jade on autopilot. She grasps it, but she mouths something that John doesn't catch. Maybe it would be smarter to let the more experienced tele porter deal with this, but John doesn't feel very smart right now. He's already reaching out with his mind, feeling the wind rise up to accommodate him. His lungs feel so full he thinks he might burst. But he rises up above the usual burst of stabbing pain that accompanies his teleportation, his mind primed to focus on one thing and one thing only -

*Karkat, Karkat, Karkat.*
Chapter End Notes

I
warned you
about Diamonds, bro
I warned you
Chapter Summary

Night falls like fire; the heavy lights run low,
And as they drop, my blood and body so
Shake as the flame shakes, full of days and hours
That sleep not, neither weep they, as they go.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: People were complaining about the grimlight Horrortext font, so I changed it to match the grimdark one and left Eridan's different to distinguish their dialog. No matter what I do, using a distorted font means that someone out there is going to have a computer that doesn't understand it...

Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice concept art comes from Bananaramses, though they've been altered considerably by the events of Shit, Let’s Be Troll Heroes, while H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karkat dreams -

Jade Harley stands on a snowy hill, staring up into the black sky above. She's young, at least five years younger than she should be, her face still round with human-baby fat, and she has a giant fucking rifle slung over a dress the color of galaxies. Her massive white wolf lies at her feet, crackling with green lightning in time with its breath.

Karkat, who has become so used to his viewpoint gradually migrating until he was trapped within John's mindset during these nightmares, is surprised to find himself off to one side. When he raises a hand - and is surprised to find his body responds to his will - his hand is grey and tipped with yellowed claws, as it should be.

But if he's not John this time around, then where is that endearing asshat? John is always the center of the dreams. Karkat looks around, and out of desperation even looks up at the sky to see if maybe Harley has an eye on a mysterious floating John. He's dealt with mysterious floating Johns before.

But there's nothing in the sky but the blackness of space, the distant gold of a far off planet, and the immense sky blue static of nothing at all.

He remembers why he's not supposed to look at the sky as a headache lances through his skull. He closes his eyes and tries to forget the afterimage of flashing static that burns into his retinas.

When he opens his eyes, Harley is still standing there, a petulant child standing ankle deep in snow with an evening gown. John is still absent. With nothing else to do, Karkat steps over a frozen chunk of ice and shuffles up the side of the hill, his sneakers sinking deeper and deeper into the snow drifts
as he hikes uphill. But it doesn't feel all that cold - he's lived through enough Seattle winters to know what winter feels like, and this isn't it. He passes another frozen shape half buried in the snow, and can vaguely make out the form of a frog trapped within. He rolls his eyes at it and keeps walking. A tundra full of frozen frogcicles - why is he not surprised?

*Can you hear me?* he thinks dryly at Harley, but just as John never responded to his mental calls, Harley ignores him. She's worrying at her lower lip with repulsively familiar buckteeth, and talking to herself. Or maybe into the mouthpiece of the red-and-black headset she has hooked over her ears, but Karkat is still pissed that he's stuck with the imposter version of John in this dream and he is firmly ensconced on the spite train, a first class compartment reserved solely for him and his vast stores of unadulterated, irrepressible malice.

Oh well. Maybe this time, since it's not John, no one will die.

Yeah, right. Like the universe would ever give Karkat a fucking break. If he's a first-class passenger, then the universe itself is the grubfucking conductor of this runaway hate train and it shows no mercy on the resident commuters.

"Dave, are you sure? I can't see anything!" the girl chirps, shading her eyes as she scans the sky. "But maybe it's headed for the other side of the planet -"

Her headset crackles, and Karkat can just make out the reply. The voice on the other end grates on his nerves, a quiet but clipped Texas drawl. He shuffles closer so he can hear what the hell's going on.

"TG: will you just get out of there jade
TG: this shit is dangerous
TG: i dont know what went down on derse while i was passed out but that thing had wings
TG: the bqs coming right at you now duck and cover
TG: trust me we cant handle something with her firepower yet
EB: i don’t know what's going on, but maybe try to get to my gate jade!"

Karkat cranks his head around so fast he nearly sprains his own vertebrae, his eyes wide with horror. But then he realizes that John's voice came from the headset as well, though with such flawless quality that it almost sounds like John himself said the words while standing right the fuck next to them.

Harley pouts, folding her arms. "We only just finished with the paradox genetic sequencing!" she complains. The white wolf by her side whines and tugs on the hem of her green dress, but she doesn't pay any attention to it. "And then you took off before we could light the Forge, Dave! If it were that serious, wouldn't future you have stuck around?"

"TG: omg
TG: future me being a dick what a surprise
TG: jade just run
EB: jade, i can see something on my game screen when i zoom out all the way…
EB: ohhhh crap
TG: screenshot it or toss grist at it or something
TG: just distract it from jade while i figure out what future me is playing at
EB: is this what you saw dave?
EB: creepytentacrowharlecreep.jpg"

The voice that rattles off the image link sounds like one of those stilted, robotic simulations you got on voice mail, trying its hardest to imitate John and failing.
Harley tenses, laying a hand on her riflekind. Karkat looks up again, and this time he thinks he can make out something moving against the dark of space - a flicker of red, a scrap of yellow. Whatever it is, it's coming in fast. "Guys, Bec still isn't feeling well after teleporting that giant meteor out of the way of my house," she says, some of the ridiculous sing-song leaving her voice. "Maybe I should just try to fight it! I think it already saw me!" She sounds nervous now, and Karkat would cackle with petty glee if a sense of foreboding and horror hadn't just socked him in the gut. That thing flying down toward them...the shape of its body seems weirdly familiar…

"Too late!" Harley yelps, rolling to the side in a daring leap that sends her tumbling past Karkat, just in time for the black-winged abomination to hurtle out of the sky and slam into the snow where she'd been standing. Her wolf perks its head up - and then sets it back down, apparently too "tired" (read: too much of a lazy ass nubrolling fleabag) to do shit.

Karkat takes a few steps back, but the dark, winged creature ignores him just like everyone else. Something's wrong with its head - it doesn't exactly match the figure that's been haunting Karkat's nightmares and murdering John all the fucking time. Instead of a wolfish muzzle, it resembles a carapacian with a ragged crown slapped on its head, with the peaks of a jester hat sticking rakishly up at random angles. If Karkat weren't about to shit himself with fresh terror, this thing would have been almost laughable.

Harley's not laughing. Neither is anyone else that Karkat can hear. John and the Texas asshole's voices are yelling at the same time, too jumbled for Karkat to make any real words out, but they're both clearly frantic. The girl levels her strife specibus at the monster and pulls the trigger. The bullets explode outward in an obnoxious hail of gunfire, and slam into the thing's chest. It stumbles back, snarling, and raises a hand.

It doesn't even bother to yank the sword out from its bloodied torso. The two tentacles attached to its lower ribs snap out and stab through Harley like she's a piece of paper. But when they rip back out, reality sets in; Karkat may not like the girl, but there is a brief moment when she stumbles back, her expression blank as she raises a hand to the hole in her chest, where he is just flat out horrified. The riflekind falls out of her hand and she crumples in on herself.

The blood is really red against all the snow, and Karkat is way too fascinated by that. He stares at the snow instead of the way Harley twitches and claws wordlessly at her chest, blood burbling up in the corner of her mouth until she stops moving.

He feels her heartbeat cut out like it's his own bloodpusher slowing to a stop, heavy and too-still in his chest.

He doesn't even like her, he thinks helplessly. It doesn't make the pain go away.

Now, finally, the wolf notices what's going on. The white canine lets out piercing cry, so loud that Karkat slaps his claws to his ears to no effect. Its fur flashes an unearthly green as the mutt stands - and then falls back, the lightning fizzling out as the wolf limps. Harley hadn't been kidding when she
said the thing was tired, obviously. But it makes one last effort, pouncing on the harlequin monstrosity with jaws wide.

The carapacian tears the dog in two. Maybe any other day that weird lusus thing could have put up a better fight, but today it's no contest. The black carapacian's tentacles reach out and pick up both halves of the wolf. The canine bleeds yellow-green, charged plasma, but whatever the hell it's made of (because that wolf is not normal) doesn't dissuade the carapacian from unhinging its jaws and fitting the wolf's head into its mouth.

Well. That...was new.

And then it swallows. Karkat feels vaguely ill. The winged carapacian seems to be in even worse shape though, clutching at its skull as it horks down the rest of poor Harley's dog, but despite the pain it doesn't stop.

Like, for fuck's sake, when the fucking fuck did his nightmares switch over from soul crushing, grief-filled horror to weirdass dog-eating gore?

Karkat can feel consciousness starting to tug at the edge of his awareness, which, thank fuckity fuck it's about time. On one side he sees the winged carapacian fall to its knees and scream as its skull cracks audibly, and begins to reshape itself into a wolf's head, completing this latest cycle of stupidity and murder. On the other, he can still hear the buzz of John's voice coming from the headset that's fallen halfway off Harley's head. While he tries unbelievably goddamn hard not to look at the face of a very dead thirteen year old girl, staring up at the sky with open eyes, he can't help how his eyes go to the red of her headset, staring at the only definitive source of John in this entire nightmare as everything fades out.

EB: jade?! jade oh my god -
EB: JADE NO!
EB: oh god oh god oh god
EB: oh no jade oh god
EB: dave oh my god i think she's
EB: ...
EB: dave?
EB: rose?
EB: ...
EB: anyone?

There's still me, Karkat thinks. He takes a hesitant step toward Harley's body, feeling the cold of the snowdrift sink deep into his bones for the first time. There's always still me.

Crouched in a puddle of neon green blood, the winged creature punches the air with a claw, lightning beginning to crackle and expand around its fist in an orb of power. There is a massive WHOMPH, and a flare of green bright enough to wipe out even the rainbow static of Sk-

Karkat wakes up.

Everything hurts, and when he inhales he earns himself a lungful of sopor slime. Which, hey, yeah, the stuff is designed to handle troll respiratory systems, but he's pretty sure some of it just diverted into his stomach, and it tastes like pure liquid sugar mixed with paste. Absolutely disgusting. Slime is for sleeping in, not eating, no matter how dumbass slime-addicts might swear by it. He closes his mouth because he's not a mouth-breathing wriggler and his nostrils flare as he tries to crack his eyes
open without whimpering at the pain.

Also, how the fuck did he end up here again? Karkat pauses before he sticks his head out of the 'coon. He pauses a lot longer when he realizes that, no, actually, he has no memory of crawling into the recooperacoon last night. Or earlier this morning, as the case may be - fuck, what time is it? When did he get back home?

He makes the mistake of trying to sit up. Pain lances through his torso, and Karkat claws at the inside of the 'coon, his mind reeling as he struggles to breathe. It takes three breaths before the numbing effects of the sopor slime kick in again, coating the inside of his lungs with soothing fluid, but his bloodpusher races along too quickly for the soporifics to take hold of his mind. He welcomes it - encourages it even, reaching out with his mind to tweak his blood until just a little more adrenalin enters his system. He needs to be thinking clearly because his body is fucking wrecked, he has no idea where he actually is, and the last thing he remembers is Diamonds Droog smirking at him, smug, self-satisfied, and bored.

In fact, the more frantically Karkat sorts through his shitty recollection of last night, the more he suspects that he didn't make it home. At all. Recooperacoon slime is both calming and pain-numbing, which is the only excuse he can give for not realizing earlier that his ribs have been punched in. He's already halfway into his sense of his blood; he lets himself zone out completely, tracing his injuries in his mind's eye and trying to piece together how much damage Droog had done while he was out.

His ribs are fucked. Just...fucked. That's the worst sign, really, because his healing factor can do fuck-all about broken bones. Karkat's never had a broken bone this serious before (because he's not a moron and he goes out of his way to avoid injuries that might require hospitalization) but now he's down at least four ribs, all of them scraping at his lungs with every pained breath he sucks in. He can feel coagulated blood knitting together lung tissue that was probably punctured, but if he bled into his lungs or anything the fluid has fucked off back into the capillaries where it belongs. At some point he finished staunching that stab wound in his side, but the area is still tender. His collarbone screams with pain when he experiments with moving his arms again, his skull has a freshly scabbed over line just beneath his horns with a corresponding bruise along his hair line, and both his calves have bone-deep bruises that will take much longer to heal.

A massive bruise has welled up across the left side of his face where he vaguely recalls taking a cuestickkind to the cheek and jaw; it's gone unhealed while the rest of his body focused on dealing with all the internal trauma. Karkat rubs at the contusion with his thumb while he speeds up the process of fresh blood flowing through the ruptured blood vessels, using white blood cells to carry away all the damaged and decayed shit that makes up a bruise until he can move his face without wincing again. The last thing he wants is to emerge from the 'coon with a massive red-black bruise standing out on his face.

Karkat has never felt so painful grateful for his weird mutant blood before in his life. His ribs will have to heal the slow way, but everything else has been healing while he was passed out. Like. Fuck. Well done, mutant body, you managed to not fuck something up. The general consensus seems to be that, while he's most likely used up his entire quota of good luck for the entire fucking year, he might just survive.

And now, he thinks, too tired for sarcasm, to see where the fuck I ended up after getting my ass handed to me last night. Bracing his ribs with a hesitant arm, Karkat hoists himself up to the surface of the sopor slime and peers out. His eyesight is too clear, so he must still be running around with Hemoglobin-red mutant eyes all exposed. The 'coon is weirdly placed in the center of the room, instead of shoved in the corner like his at home, and yet - no, this is his recooperacoon, Karkat realizes, because he scuffed it up while practicing with his sickles and he can pick out the scratches
and scrapes all along the outside of the damn thing from here. Someone has been dicking around with his goddamn recooperacoon. He snarls, bristling with instinctive territorial irritation at the thought of someone messing with his respite block, and looks around to see what else has been moved. The curtains are drawn shut, but there's enough light seeping through that he can make out the outlines of a desk in the wrong place, a pile in the corner that should be thirty percent comic books, not a measly twenty, and a door that should be on the opposite side of the room, what the actual fuck -

Karkat swallows as his eyes adjust further to the darkness.

These are not his shitty posters.

This is not his shitty room.

This is his shitty recooperacoon alright, but this room is familiar for an entirely different reason.

...Why the fucking fuck is his 'coon in John's bedroom? I mean, talk about a whole new level of pale commitment he does not remember discussing with John ahead of time, holy shit.

Something shifts to his right, and Karkat flinches, leaning a little more out of the 'coon to peer in that direction and reach out with a tentative touch of his power to feel the blood of whoever is sitting in John's desk chair. They've pulled it over to sit right next to the 'coon, but they fell asleep at some point during their creepy vigil, judging by the slow, steady heart rate, their head tucked in against their chest and their hair in their face.

He recognizes that resting heartbeat though, and Karkat cracks his head against the side of the 'coon as he slumps over in relief. It's not actually a creepy vigil if John is the one doing it, after all.

...No, it's still fucking creepy. But it's a creepy that Karkat finds just as stupidly endearing as all the other shit John pulls, because Karkat is in fact a total panmelted sap over this kid. There's still the lingering question of how his recooperacoon ended up in the Egbert house, but at least John is here.

"John," Karkat hisses when it becomes clear that John is down for the count. "John, you dumbass, wake up and tell me what time it is." Slimes slops over onto the floor as Karkat gropes around at the awkward angle to try and flick John's forehead, but he grimaces and continues in his quest, because he refuses to take responsibility for the consequences of an impromptu 'coon relocation that happened while he was unconscious. "John!"

John snorts awake moments before Karkat can flick him. Not like he could have done much damage to someone with as thick as skull as John, but it's the principle of the thing. Rolling his eyes, Karkat flicks him anyway. John sputters and flails, barely catching himself on the back of the chair just as he's about to topple off the seat. "Karkat, you're awake!" he exclaims, grinning.

His eyes are a bright, vivid blue, so brilliant that they gleam in the half-light of the shuttered room.

Karkat stares, mystified, and -

- waits for the moment to pass. He's beginning to suspect that he's hallucinating again. John's eyes had done weird things while Karkat was in the throes of sopor withdrawal. It's the explanation that makes the most sense - if Karkat fucked up and skipped out on sleep again, it would be entirely plausible for him to have fucked up even more and gotten in a car crash or something while sleep-deprived, leading to a particularly vivid dream about hero work gone wrong and resulting in John enforcing naptime again for his own good.

This amazing and flawless explanation does him no good, however, if he has to keep waiting for
John's eyes to turn back to normal and they refuse to do so. Annoying fuckass hallucinations. Karkat blinks furiously, and squints, but his eyes keep seeing blue where they should see brown.

"I think I missed something," he says at last, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palm. *Does* he have his contacts in? His stomach drops out, because he's still pretty sure he doesn't - and equally sure that in his utter relief over seeing John, he just flashed his moirail with eyes like candy red headlights. Flinching, he keeps his eyes downcast. "How long was I out? Everything hurts like fuck," he mutters, still trying to keep his cool.

"Oh! Uh…" John says eloquently, sitting upright in his chair. He's got *that face* on, the look of trepidation he gets when he doesn't know what to say. Karkat rests his chin on his hand and drums his claws along the rim of the recooperacoon while John sorts out his frazzles thoughts. "Well, do you notice anything different about me?" John asks, his voice unnaturally high and strained. If Karkat wasn't worried before, he *definitely* is, now. "Like. You know...stuff? Things?"

"Stuff and things?" Karkat suggests, but he's too confused and borderline terrified to hit the right note of sarcasm. John's eyes remain blue. It's freaking him out. "I noticed that my 'coon is in your room, for one thing. I also noticed that I feel like I played tackle football with a semi-truck and the goddamn truck won. What hit me?"

John fidgets, bites his lip, and finally reaches out to pap Karkat on the arm. "Uh. Shoosh?"

...Oh, fuck. Preemptive shooshing? That is the opposite of reassuring. "John, what happened?"

Karkat demands.

"Diamonds Droog happened," John blurts out. Then he slaps his hand over his mouth, his eyes wide and blue like he can't believe what he just said.

Karkat can't believe it either. There's a moment where he feels upside down. Just. Upside down. There's no other way to describe it. All the blood in his head couldn't make the world sit right on its axis, so instead his pulse roars in his eardrums until the dizziness gets the better of him and he has to sit back. "What?" he repeats, still trying to piece together blue and John and Droog and how they all come together to put Karkat's recooperacoon in John's bedroom. "I mean - Diamond who?" he tacks on hastily, trying to remember what Karkat knows and what Hemogoblin knows and where the two shouldn't overlap.

"Diamonds Droog," John says. That is in fact a thing John says. Karkat can't even process what's going on anymore. "She, uh - she beat the crap out of you, man."

"Why would you know -" Karkat starts. He breaks off when John pats him on the arm again. He has to stand partway out of his desk chair to do so, and Karkat's attention is drawn to what John is wearing. His clothes are charred and singed at the edges, he stinks of smoke, and the goggles and mask are missing, but there's no mistaking the fact that John is dressed like Heir of Breath. It's a flawless costume, really. Karkat couldn't have put together a more realistic cosplay himself, because John has the swimmer's body for it, and for a moment he's struck by the horrible thought that perhaps he's been talking to Heir all along, calling him John like a complete crazy person.

But it's still John. John, who responded to John, and whose face looks like John's. John, whose heartbeat is more familiar than his own - definitely not the quick, hummingbird-fast pulse of Heir, who is constantly high on flight.

This, on top of the blue eye thing, is too much. "John," Karkat says, his voice cracking, clutching John's hand so hard it probably hurts as he tries to squeeze all the reassurance he can out of it. "What are you wearing?" When John hiccups again, a note of panic in his voice, Karkat clamps
down harder. "What Happened."

"Well, that depends," John laughs, so nervous that he hiccups, combing his fingers through his wind-tossed hair. His fingernails dig into the back of Karkat's hand with equal force. "What do you think happened?"

Karkat knows what he thinks happened. But the possibility is so impossibly remote that he tries his best to jettison the idea from his mind entirely, and scrambles for any other straw to draw on. Anything. Seriously. Come on. "...Cosplay gone wrong?" he says weakly.

John facepalms with both hands. Karkat wants to whine at the sudden space between them because he cannot handle this right now. "Ohhh nooooo," John groans. "Jade was right. We're both stupid. Hooooly crap Karkat, we are both idiots, aren't we? How did we not notice this much stupid before? Someone should have warned us about how much dumb was happening here!"

"Stop mumbling cryptic shit and start papping me again before I lose it, please," Karkat demands. His head aches in earnest at the mere mention of Harley. God, didn't he have a nightmare about her? But if she's mixed up in all this, it might explain why the tiny molehill of confusion piled up in Karkat's thinkpan has transformed into a fucking mountain of insurmountable stupidity. "Also, your cousin is bugfuck insane," he adds, just to cover his bases. "You should probably not trust anything she might have said to you. At all."

"Sister, actually," John corrects. "She's my sister, and she's Sharpshooter, and I know you're Hemogoblin, and everything is such a mess, Karkat!"

Karkat sinks his claws so deep into the rim of the recooperacoon he punctures a row of holes through the material. "You know," he tries to yell, but all that comes out is a sharp, choked off gasp. There's too much - it's - his chest feels too tight with pain and confusion and horror to sort out. John knows, and it's terrifying, but John knows, and that's a massive relief because John was always supposed to know everything about Karkat. Everything. He's been staggering under the guilty weight of keeping so many secrets from his moirail that the sudden lifting of that burden makes him feel sick to his stomach.

And on top of all that -

Karkat looks John up and down again.

And then again.

When he finishes processing the fact that he's not the only one keeping secrets and looks up, John meets his eyes. Karkat forgets about his own exposed eyes for a moment, because John's expression is absolutely miserable. "Ta-da?" the kid says, looking like he's about to cry.

"...You've got to be shitting me," Karkat says. "You're - the eyes - no. No fucking way. If this is some unbe-fucking-lievably stupid prank, John -"

John groans. "I usually wear brown contact lenses," he says miserably, curling up his knees and hugging them. "I swear, we wouldn't have ever tried to find out your identity on purpose, but by the time we got there I guess Droog had already taken off your mask, and you were so hurt, and I didn't know what else to do -" He breaks off with a tiny wail that Karkat thinks he didn't mean to utter, biting down on his lip. His shoulders are shaking.

Karkat needs to be out of this 'coon. He misses what John might have said next as he heaves himself up out of the slime. He curses his life choices when the stabbing pain of four broken ribs almost
sends him to the floor. He's not in the Hemogoblin costume anymore; someone has dressed him in his own pajama shorts and a throwaway 'coon shirt - but that doesn't matter anyway, does it, because John already knows. When he staggers forward to pap John on the face, woozy but determined, he can feel bandages wrapped around his ribs, holding him together.

Good. He kind of feels like he needs the help, right now, or he might just split in two at the seams. John is right - everything is a mess. But there's a solid, fixed point in all this, and it is the sight of John on the verge of tears, so distressed that Karkat's bloodpusher shoves everything else aside in a squeeze of pity."Don't cry, you fucking moron," he mutters, burying his face in John's hair and stroking his face with sopor-sticky claws. "Shoosh, dumbass, shoosh. You're not the one who got the shit kicked out of you, so no crying. I'm here. You're fine."

"You're Hemogoblin," John repeats, lost and panicky. "How did I not know? How did we not know?"

"Still trying not to deal with that," Karkat replies, riding the edge of panic and then quashing it by hugging John so tightly it makes his ribs scream in protest. "Not right now. Come here, you dumb fuck. Just. Breathe. I - fuck. I've got you."

In about two seconds, he's going to have to deal with the fact that his moirail is Heir, and all the fucked up, insane amount of secrets that entails.

But not now, not now, not now, he thinks, rocking John back and forth. Not while John needs him.

They end up dragging the pile onto the bed, the kind of fortuitous compromise Karkat thinks only happens because, for once, John is just as fucking messed up in the head as Karkat usually is. They spend a good ten minutes just lying there, because Karkat doesn't think he has the words to jam about this out loud. John grabs his pillow and tries to make Karkat lie back on it because of the whole rib thing, but when Karkat tucks his head against John's hair all he can smell on that pillow is not-John. Eau de Harley. The image of a younger Harley bleeding out in the snow burns in his mind, and Karkat can't settle down and stop twitching until John tosses the pillow on the floor and pulls Karkat against his chest. The sun burning against the dark blue curtains already told Karkat he'd been stuck in the 'coon for a good part of the day, but from this angle he can make out John's alarm clock. It's two in the afternoon.

And here's a massive fuck you, from me to you, he thinks in the general direction of the school. He may or may not have had a rehearsal to try and salvage in theater today, but the fuckwads under his command this year would no doubt have screwed it all up whether he was there to supervise or not. He props up one of his sore calves on the head of John's bed and closes his eyes, letting the calm of sprawling out next to John sink into his bones.

He thinks he's going to need all the residual soothing he can get. Eventually, they need to Deal With This Shit, and Karkat is...not looking forward to it, to say the least.

Because, being the magnificent fuck up that he is, Karkat's opening line in this feelings jam from hell ends up being, "Holy fuck, I made you beta-read my fanfiction."

John nods solemnly. "I know."

"It's like a whole new level of humiliation," Karkat marvels, gesturing at the ceiling as the true horror of it all starts to hit him. "Like, we have to invent a new portmanteau for this. Abhorror? Tormenthroes? Something that befits the raw, untamed nature of this fucking incredible
"I think Rose already called 'throes' for something, actually," John says, squirming around until he can adjust the arm that Karkat is crushing. "Festerthroes, maybe?"

"Do you know how many fucks I give about reusing words in a word smash?" Karkat grumbles. "Guess, John. Guess."

"Ignomiliation!" John says. Then he pulls a face. "No, I think you're right, abhorror fits better."

"I mean -" Karkat's claws spasm "- I have posters of you. I have unlicensed merchandise of you everywhere. How did you even handle being in my room all the fucking time?!"

"Don't worry about it," John says gloomily. "I haven't exactly been normal about Hemogoblin, either. I have a poster of you on my wall, Karkat!"

Karkat looks at the poster in question. "Yup."

"Argh!" John makes a weird, twisting gesture with his free hand, and with a flutter the poster falls to the ground, face down. The wind stirs the air around the room like a fan, and then settles.

Because oh right. John can do the windy thing. John has been able to do the windy thing all along.

Which reminds Karkat that - "Holy fuckmuffins, you saved my life."

"Well, no, there was this weird carapacian dude, actually. He distracted Droog by the time me and Jade got back," John babbles, and it takes a moment before Karkat realizes, with grim disbelief, that John is talking about last night. "He kept waving knives around everywhere… what a weird dude."

"No, I mean - the first time," Karkat says, trying to decide whether to be surprised that the Surprise Stabber had shown up to stab someone else. He stops thinking about it because the whole thing is fantastically pointless. "Before I even moved here. God, and I couldn't stop blathering about it for weeks. Fuuuuuuuuuuck!" He grabs his head with both hands and digs into his temples, feeling a rage migraine coming on. He takes a deep breath to start yelling with a purpose, only to be derailed by the flare of pain in his ribs. Which is all the more infuriating. "Stupid, stupid fucking - fuck fuck fuck!"

"Karkat, shhhh," John says, smoothing his palms on the back of Karkat's hands. Eventually he managed to pap them away from Karkat's temples, and Karkat's rage subsides under the weight of John petting his hair. "Uh, yeah. The time with the bank robbers, right? I remember."

"Fucking fuck, you must have thought I was a complete bulgehumping shitsponge. How could you even stand me?" Karkat hesitates. "Did you - fuck, did you think it was funny?"

"What? No!" John yelps, shaking his head furiously. He flails a little, which tends to be John's default setting when he gets flustered, but the movement is enough to jolt Karkat in the side. "No, it was - okay, kind of weird at first, but also flattering? I never met anyone I saved in person before, so it was interesting to hear the other side of it? Ah, but, uh, that's not why - I mean - and then you were a really fun person in general, and I - ack!" John knuckles his forehead, wincing in the corner of Karkat's vision as he flops back down. "I'm messing this all up, aren't I..."

"You're being a complete fucking goof about it. So at least you're consistent," Karkat says, elbowing John in the side and shoving his arm until Karkat can rest his chin on John's shoulder again. John takes the manhandling like a fucking champ, so Karkat reaches up and paps at his eyebrows and the wrinkles between his brows until they smooth out, feeling clumsy and heavy-handed as he does. He thinks is the single most reciprocal feelings jam they've ever had. John has been carrying Karkat for
so long that it feels downright bizarre to be on the other side of the pacification, for once. It only took a fucking crisis to get them on the same fucking page.

John is quiet for a long moment, turning his face slightly into Karkat's touch. "You don't know how much I wanted to tell you," he says. "Later, I mean. Suddenly we were friends and every time I had to back out of something at the last minute I felt awful. Lying is dumb. But - I always told myself that if you knew about me, it would only put you in danger." He laughs. "Only you were out there doing hero work too the whole time! So in hindsight I feel even more dumb!"

"Can we just agree that we're both equally lacking in any form of functional intelligence whatsoever?" Karkat proposes. John's tone is hitting a low note again, with the kind of self-deprecating, pained laugh in his voice that means he's in the deep end of the misery pool, and Karkat needs to steer them away from there before John really does end up blaming himself for something stupid. It takes a lot to hit John where it hurts, but Karkat thinks that it would be all too easy for the kid to twist things in his head so that his keeping secrets somehow directly led to Karkat walking into Droog's cue stick several times. "I've put up with your shenanigans for nearly two years, and never connected you to Heir. So much for being such a massive fan." Karkat snorts. "A pair of colored contact lenses beats your usual shitty disguises, at least. If you'd fooled me with a beaglepuss I would just toss myself off the Space Needle and call it a night."

John laughs again. There's still a weird snuffle in his voice, like he's on the verge of tears. Fuck depression. Fuck depression and the hoofbeast it rode in on, because Karkat doesn't know how to make it better. He only knows how to drag John back from the edge. "My dad has tons of embarrassing stories. If I didn't try to make Groucho glasses part of my costume when I was thirteen, I'll eat my dad's favorite hat."

...Holy fuck. John's dad. Dadbert. Dad Egbert with the baking obsession and the 9-to-5 job and the snappy fashion sense. Karkat has to give himself a full minute to process the fact that Dadbert is in fact the father of Heir. "Your dad," he repeats, trying to communicate the full extent of his idiocy in as few syllables as possible.

John gets it. Obviously. "My dad," he agrees, rubbing his eyelids with his fingers. "The worst part? He wasn't really even all that surprised when me and Jade brought you back."

Karkat has to sit up. It hurts, but he does it. The next few breaths sting at his chest and make his whole body hurt - but he needs to sit up for that. Because what. "He - wasn't surprised?! What the fuck?"

"He says he suspected you were Hemogoblin all along!" John shouts, throwing his hands up. He's pouting now, his lips twisted sideways as they exchange mutual looks of indignation. "But he didn't want to say anything and upset our friendship unless he was totally sure. And of course, with Jade she only needed to take one look at you! Karkat, we are so dumb!"

It's really starting to sink in, now. Karkat rests his head in his hands, and slowly shakes it back and forth. "Unbelievable," he says. "Un...believable."

"They're both downstairs, but who knows how long Jade can sit still once she realizes you're awake." John yanks on the buckle of his jacket absenty, patting Karkat on the back. "She doesn't understand things like personal space. Or privacy. Or not teleporting in the house."

"She's your sister? DNA and everything? Like the long-fucking-lost cousin story, but a sister?" Karkat asks, skeptical. Fuck Harley, for that matter, he may well have to check all of John's backstory because he can't even imagine how many half-truths and lies must have built up over the years. Karkat's only had to cover up a few months as Hemogoblin; John's been Heir for almost half
his life.

Well, at least it's an excuse for another jam session. He'll keep that one in mind.

John waves his hand through the air. "Long story. Apparently she grew up on an island in the middle of the Pacific, and her wolf-dog-thing raised her after her grandpa died." The look on Karkat's face must be priceless, because John snickers and covers his mouth to hide the obnoxious grin. "Yeah. Actual Jade Harley - raised by wolf. She's been travelling as Sharpshooter ever since she left, so I wouldn't be surprised if she founded a city somewhere along the line, too."

"Good for her," Karkat growls. "Do you know how close I came to having a heart attack when she started winking at me and making blood puns and shooting finger pistols all during the school day?"

"Everything is so much more horrible in retrospect," John says. At least he sounds more normal now, speculative and almost amused. "But also kind of hilarious."

Karkat smacks his face. "Only you would think this whole thing was hilarious."

"Better than freaking out about it any more than we already have," John says, shrugging. "I mean. We're out. No turning back now."

"No kidding." Karkat rubs at his sternum, which is one massive bone-bruise, and grimaces. "When do we have to deal with other people, again? Because I could fucking nap."

John sits up, worry flickering across his face. "Are you hurting again?"

"It never really fucking stopped," Karkat says, rolling his eyes. "What the fuck, did Droog fucking tap-dance on my chest while I was out?"

"I think my dad left pain pills on the desk," John says, untangling his leg from Karkat's and crawling off the bed. His first step is unsteady, but he walks to the desk without issue, so Karkat thinks he's fine. "Uhhh, yeah. I think these ones are safe to take after sopor."

"I give zero fucks about doubling up on narcotics and pain-killers right now." When John shoots him a grumpy, righteous pout, Karkat sighs. "Also, I have mutated blood powers that I can use to regulate the amount of chemicals in my system. Now, gimme, you taunting bastard."

John's eyes lighten. Literally. They gleam a brighter blue, the kind of luminescence Karkat would normally associate with a troll or, more recently, Heir with his powers going full blast. Because oh right. "Alright. If you're sure!"

He tosses Karkat the bottle, and it falls in a much slower arc than it should. Karkat's reflexes are absolutely shot, but when he winces and puts out both hands to catch the bottle, the air wafts it into his palm without missing a beat. John wiggles his fingers when Karkat raises an eyebrow. "Jade is encouraging bad habits," John says apologetically, though his shit-eating grin begs to differ. "Also, I don't have to hide the windy thing from you anymore! I'm excited!"

Karkat twists the cap of the bottle, scowls when it clicks around and refuses to pop off, and then digs his claws under the rim until the cap tears off. Childproof caps were never designed to handle trolls. Seriously, fuck that. He pops two hamnox capsules and dry swallows. "Mazel tov," he croaks. "Never leave me alone with a human wielding a cue stick again."

"Not a chance," John promises. "But, uh, you probably shouldn't have taken those on an empty stomach."
Karkat turns over with deliberate care and buries his face in a copy of Redglare #7. "No. I'll be fine," he says. "No. Fuck no."

John's footsteps pad over until he's standing behind Karkat, who pulls a discarded math test over his ears. "Come on, throwing up is the last thing you want to worry about with your ribs, Karkat," John says. "I'll handle them. You don't even have to talk if you don't want to. But you should eat something!"

"Oh, no. I'll talk, alright," Karkat mutters, wrapping John's sheets over his shoulders. "I have goddamn words for your sister, John. I will spew eloquence all over your fucking living room, I swear to god."

"Um, ew." John shifts his weight, and a hand touches Karkat's shoulder. "If I bring something up, will you eat it?"

Karkat relents. "Only because it's you asking. Don't take advantage of it, you asshat. And keep Harley on a goddamn leash. Please."

"I'll do my best," John laughs. "Do you remember where you left your phone? I bet I can send her off to get it for you, and that'll distract her for a while."

"In the library," Karkat says. Maybe he shouldn't have swallowed actual sopor earlier, because the medicine hasn't even hit his stomach yet but he can barely keep his eyes open. His head feels like it's spinning even with his eyes closed, but he's not nauseated. Not yet. "My backpack and - shit, it's probably still in the spare room. What if librarians steal my shit, John?"

"So that is your base," John says, snapping his fingers. "Called it. That should be enough of a project for her. We'll get your stuff back, don't worry!" His voice grows more distant as he walks across the room toward the door. "And I'll be right back with soup or something. Just hang out for a couple minutes, okay?"

The door creaks open and shut with a tiny click, and Karkat lets himself drift off.

- He has to deal with real life eventually.

If Dad Egbert and Harley count as real life, anyway. The jury is still out on that one. But Karkat loses track of time after John make him eat soup, and when he wakes up, having once again been dumped in the recooperacoon in his sleep, the sun is gone and Harley herself is spinning around in John's desk chair when Karkat emerges from his accidental hibernation. Her hair swings out in a thick braid and whips over her shoulder as she propels herself in a circle using, apparently, the power of her fucking mind. "Oh!" She spins, grinning. "Hey Karkat!" She spins again. "You're awake!" One last spin. "I'll get John!"

Karkat wants to know why the fuck John would leave him alone in a vulnerable state with a wild Harley running around ununchecked, but Harley vanishes between one spin and the next. The chair slows to a stop without her power to move it. Irritable, with the bitter taste of leftover chemicals on his tongue and a lingering ache in his ribs, Karkat crawls out of the 'coon and limps his way to John's bathroom to get a towel to sop up all the slime he managed to dump on the floor. There's already a (most likely) permanent sticky spot on the floor right under the entrance, which Karkat feels bad about. It's not until he bends over, realizes that's a fucking awful idea, and then chooses to drop the towel from an upright position and rub it against the carpet with his toe that he realizes he's being watched.
Slowly, he twists his neck to look at the bed.

A diminutive Dersite carapacian peers up at him from within the pile. It has John's sheets pulled up over its head like a cloak, and a pair of yellow goggles that bear a suspicious resemblance to Heir's strapped to its face. It chirps at him, waving a hand, and then burrows back into the pile, comic books and dirty laundry flying everywhere.

If that was supposed to mean something, Karkat didn't catch it. He waves in reply a minute too late, dazed, and then snatchs his hand back, snarling at himself. John bursts in through the door a moment later, paniting, and Karkat pretends nothing happened. "Sorry sorry sorry!" he says. He's in regular civilian clothes, now, one of his plaid shirts and jeans, but his eyes are still uncannily blue and Karkat can't get over that. "My dad wanted to talk to me and - are you feeling any better?"

"Better is relative," Karkat says, scratching at his face. Urgh. He can tell he's been in the 'coon all day; his skin feels downright sticky and his breath tastes like glue, which means he hit the upper limit and his skin stopped being able to absorb the sopor slime. Gross. "My ribs feel less like they're about to declare rebellion against the rest of me, but I'm also still drugged to my gills, so -" He stops, feeling a new potential hell opening up beneath his feet. "Wait, you know about those, right? Because if you let Harley anywhere near my naked, unconscious, injured body -"

"Yeah," John says, amused. "I tooootally let Jade change your clothes."

Karkat eyeballs him, considers treating him to a rant on how unfunny he is, and then lets it go. This is a mistake. John keeps talking. "No, seriously, we were worried about moving you too much, and she does this thing where she can change people's clothes just by snapping her fingers and doing the spacey thing -"

"JOHN EGBERT!" Karkat yells, clapping his hands to his ears. John doubles over laughing. "NO. FUCK NO. I AM NOT HEARING THIS. YOU STOP THAT RIGHT NOW." John just laughs harder, chortling and having himself a merry old time. Karkat reaches out and tries to flail at John; he ducks out of the way of Karkat's swipe. He snarls at John and tears at his own hair instead. "YEAH, YUK IT UP, ASSHOLE BEST FRIEND. HA. LOOK AT ME, I'M LAUGHING SO HARD, I'M BLEEDING INTERNALLY."

"The look on your face-!" John says, giggling. "It was great!"

Karkat stomps to the bathroom and slaps the water in the shower on. "I hope your next batch of cookies burns, John! I hope they crisp and your dad looks on in stern fatherly disappointment as the kitchen reeks of smoke and tears!" He ducks his head under the water.

John gives a mock-gasp, pressing his hands to his cheeks with his mouth an 'o' of false shock when Karkat looks up. "But Karkat, I thought what we had was special!"

"You brought this curse down on yourself," Karkat replies sourly, pressing his claws down on his collarbone as an experiment. The bone pangs, but then subsides. It's definitely a lot better off than the ribs - maybe not even fractured, just badly bruised, which Karkat can live with. His calves still hurt with bone-bruises, but he's healing those too, as quickly as his powers can manage when his focus is spread out across so many injuries. He hobbles to the mirror to poke at his face, where the last of that bruise has faded away.

His eyes are a sharp, jolting ruby red in the mirror under this lighting. Karkat flinches on automatic, averting his eyes down and to the side when he notices John watching him in the mirror. "I guess we had the same idea about contact lenses," he says, rubbing at his lower eyelid anxiously. "We really
"Yah," John boosts himself onto the counter by the sink, looking right at Karkat instead of at their reflection in the mirror. His face is weirdly intense now. The blue eyes without glasses or goggles make him look angular and more mischievous than Heir. But then again, Heir was just another mask too. If anything, he looks even more like Jade now - elfin and vaguely otherworldly, with power and laughter gleaming in his eyes. Karkat feels his bloodpusher squeeze at the thought that he's looking at the real John, maybe for the first time. John with nothing to hide.

...How much pain medication did he take, again? Because he's starting to think he might be mildly high. Just. Mildly.

"Yours look cool, too!" John says, nudging Karkat in the leg with his foot. When Karkat stares at him in confusion, John taps a finger to one side of his eye. "Your special candy cane red! You look sooo badass! Do you know why you got such awesome eyes instead of regular rust ones?"

...Okay, maybe really fucking high. It takes him a whole twenty seconds to make words form sentences that are suitably sarcastic enough to respond to that. His claws clench into fists. "Who even fucking knows," he says bitterly. "Maybe the mother grub was in a pissy mood that day. Maybe some asshole decided to toss a metric fuckton of radioactive waste into the incestuous slurry of life. Maybe I'm just fucked up."

John soberes up. "Karkat. You're not fucked up! You're just a cranky butt!" He paps Karkat on the cheek, and Karkat scrunches up his nose but lets him. "I mean, even if it is a mutation, it's a pretty badass one! I bet Dave would think it's cool too, and Dave is the expert on cool! The undisputed king of cool! He's downright frosty!"

"Dave can suck my bone bulge," Karkat hisses, folding his arms. "Why you text that dick I will never understand. His opinion is the exact opposite of the opinion of any sane person, and therefore shitty." He then realizes he's folded his arms over his shirt, and he makes a face as he pulls them away from the green-tinged black fabric. "Can I borrow a shirt or something? I assume I have to confront your dad at some point, and I don't want to do it covered in sopor residue."

"Of course! I went and got more of your stuff, since I figured you didn't want Jade teleporting all through your house again," John says, kicks off the counter and digging through a backpack on the floor that Karkat recognizes as his own. Harley must have been successful in her mission to the library at some point. "And yeah, Dad kind of wants to talk to all of us. He says he found someone who knows more about Diamonds Droog, so when we do have to deal with her again, we're not fighting blind."

"Halle-fucking-lujah," Karkat says. When John tosses him a pair of pants and his own ratty hoodie, he strips off so fast his head spins and his chest hates him. What else is new. "Also, you have a carapacian in the pile."

"Yeah, he does that. WV is pretty much adorable in all ways." Humming, John stands up. He tilts his head as though some thought just struck him, and says slowly, "Dave doesn't care about this kind of stuff. Like, at all. So I guesss it's safe to just tell you -" John nibbles on his lip, staring hard at a corner of the ceiling while he deliberates. Then his gaze snaps back to Karkat, and he grins. "Dave is Flashstep."

Halfway through pulling up his pants, Karkat looks up. John stares at him expectantly, and Karkat keeps his face purposely flat despite the horror within. "Welp. That's it," he says, gesturing with a claw at the ceiling. "Did you see it leave, John? That was the last of it, ascending into the ether. It can never be restored."
John frowns. "What are you talking about, Karkat?"

Karkat sighs. "My faith in the humanity."

The trepidation hits Karkat when John floats them down the stairs. John's excuse is that he doesn't want Karkat risking the stairs when he's in such bad condition; Karkat suspects that the whole 'Jade is a bad influence' bullshit might actually be a thing.

But about halfway down Karkat realizes he's about to see Samuel Egbert, and talk to the man. About...everything. With John, at least, there had been the reassurance that even with all these mind-blowing revelations going on, Karkat could still rely on John being his. They're still shaky on the details, and they need to talk a hell of a lot more about all this before everything is settled, but they're alright.

Samuel Egbert is another story entirely.

Karkat has always felt the traditional mixture of awkward embarrassment and awe that any friend feels toward their friend's parents, but as a troll he's also inherited a healthy amount of respect and fear for anyone taller than him who has finished growing. Adult trolls could be absolute monsters to wrigglers during the course of troll evolution; they had none of that mammalian instinct to care for young, and confronting an adult troll without a lusus custodian was a good way to end up culled before little things like laws and morals and civilization kicked in. Humans really lucked out on the evolutionary lottery there. Human custodians might not be an automatic threat, but that's not what Karkat's hindbrain tells him when he follows John into the living room and Samuel Egbert emerges from the kitchen, chewing on the stem of an unlit pipe. Despite the late hour, he's still dressed in a snazzy white suit, and he smiles wearily at Karkat as he removes the pipe from his mouth. "Karkat. It's good to see you up and walking, young man."

Karkat scuffs his feet on the carpet and ducks behind John on reflex, keeping his head down as he nods. "Uh. Thanks."

"You're just in time for the chat with Bro!" Harley says from the couch. She's lying on it upside down with her wolf sprawled across her stomach, waving her leg at them while her hair spills over onto the floor. "We should have popcorn or something! Mr Egbert, can we~?"

Mr Egbert chuckles, and smiles ruefully. "Please try to keep your feet off the furniture, Ms Harley," he chides. But he ruins the tiny glimmer of spiteful glee rising up in Karkat by adding, "John, would you or Karkat be interested in popcorn as well?"

"Sure!" John says, pressing against Karkat with his shoulder and leaving Karkat totally exposed in the middle of the room. "Want me to help?"

Karkat, who had come down anticipating some kind of reckoning, or at least a lecture on the hazards of secret hero work, is at a loss. Harley waves at him from the couch again and gesticulates in a serious of obscure charades - some fuckery that is probably meant to encourage him to sit next to her on the couch. Karkat tucks his hands into his hoodie pocket, hunches up his shoulders, and stays glued to John as he goes to help his dad make popcorn in a kettle on the stovetop. He is reluctantly lured in by the scent as the two Egberts add weird toppings like parsley, black pepper, and parmesan, and when John's dad dishes out scoopsfuls for each of them, Karkat's stomach grumbles in a reminder that he hasn't eaten anything but soup since yesterday evening. Not even the fact that Harley suggested the idea can stop him from inhaling the popcorn after that.
"Wait, Dave's Bro?" John says at last, once they've all returned to the living room. Harley scoots over and snaps her fingers until her wolf-thing reappears on the floor so that John can sit in the middle. Karkat eases himself back against the sofa with considerable relief; even walking around for so short a time reminded him that he had four very broken ribs. Dadbert, meanwhile, takes up his seat in the armchair, fiddling with the television remote with a good-natured confusion creasing his brow. "He's the one you contacted?"

"Indeed he is," Samuel Egbert confirms, turning the remote over. "Hmmm...Yes, I've been making more of an effort to regain contact with the other guardians, and I thought he might have more insight to share once I informed him that Lady Droog had taken a more personal interest in Seattle. He has agreed to speak with us via Pesterchum - I'm not entirely sure, but he gave the impression that he could do it from here...on the television...hmm…"

"Dave's brother?" Karkat mutters darkly under his breath. John snickers, and Karkat slumps over on him by way of retaliation, making sure his elbows go everywhere. He scrapes at the bottom of his popcorn bowl and frowns at it; he didn't mean to gobble it down like someone who was fucking starved. But he eyes John's popcorn anyway, since it's now in reach…

"The Puppeteer," John replies, in a similarly quiet whisper. Karkat nearly falls off the couch. "Yeah, it seems like everyone is related to or knows everyone. It's weird that way. But he's mostly a cool guy." John glowers. "When he's not being a dick."

Karkat raises his eyebrows, and steals some of John's popcorn in a fucking stealthy maneuver. "Enough to grind your rageglands? Wow, this I've got to fucking see."

"What are you two whispering about?!" Harley whisper-shouts, resting her chin on John's other shoulder, close enough that Karkat flinches. "Seeecrets?"

"None of your business," Karkat snaps. John sighs. "I'm just trying to be nice. Why are you so pissed off all the time?" Harley asks, sounding almost genuinely curious. Which, amazingly enough, only serves to piss Karkat off even more.

"Wow, what do you know, it's my default setting," Karkat replies scathingly. "Oh, and have a nice pile of go fuck yourself," he adds, throwing her the middle claw. "Because I don't need to explain myself to you."

"Cranky buttface!" Harley shoots him a pair of finger pistols, except she uses her middle fingers and she flips them right side up to flick him off properly, her eyes burning with challenge.

...He will admit, that is impressive. Karkat eyes her sideways, and pretends to yawn, stretching his arms out and inspecting his fingernails. He raises his middle claw, slaps his face as though in shock, and then holds it out toward Harley, wiping at his eyes and smiling like he's in tears at the beauty of the sight.

Harley narrows her eyes and mimes cocking and loading a shotgun with disturbing efficiency that would make Karkat extremely worried if she weren't unarmed at the moment. When she pulls the trigger, she whips out a single middle finger like a bullet, a wild grin on her face. Between them, John groans and flops back against the couch, rolling his eyes.

Oh, it's on.

"Children," Samuel Egbert says with a note of resignation, reminding Karkat that oh right John's dad is right there. Karkat sits up at attention, wheezing with pain, and sits on his claws so he can lean
against John without the temptation to flip Harley off again. "Do any of you know how this works? I can't think of how to connect it to the Internet. Young Ambrose -" ("Ambrose," Karkat repeats in disbelief,) "- seemed quite confident that he could make it work, but I haven't the faintest idea how…"

"Ooooh, let me try!" Harley says, her attention flipping from Karkat to the remote without warning. She holds out her hand and wiggles her fingers. "I'm pretty okay with computers, usually! How hard can a TV be?"

"Thank you, Ms Harley," Samuel Egbert says. Karkat, in the privacy of his own mind, is pretty fucking sure that this can only end in disaster, but before they have a chance to find out, the television switches on while Dadbert is in the process of handing it to Harley, neither of them with their fingers near the power button. John tenses all along Karkat's side, on the alert, but the screen has the orange-gold border of Pesterchum 7.0 and the tension drains away until Karkat is just slumped against a regular John again as orange text fills the screen.

-- temperedTitan [TT] began pestering SONYUNIT22AV6413 at 19:23:22 --
TT: a Sony
TT: well this is a first for me
TT: just talk at me bros i can hear you
TT: this is the Egbert television right
TT: that would be a fucking nightmare if i got the wrong serial number

"Uh - yes, we are here, Ambrose," Samuel Egbert says, clearing his throat. He leans forward to squint at the screen and speaks a little too loudly.

TT: oh jiminy fucking christmas not with that name
TT: just Bro, the last thing i need is another one like Lalonde lording it over my name choices

Lalonde? That sounds familiar - really familiar - but Karkat ignores that, because it's totally irrelevant to the conversation. He doesn't know what to fucking say, since this seems to be Dadbert's ballgame, so he kicks his feet up on the bottom rung of the coffee table and settles in to aim a neutral glare at the television screen, snuggled in against John.

"Bro," Samuel says graciously. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with us on such short notice. Things have gotten a little out of hand here, as you can imagine."

TT: i warned you, man
TT: well i warned the kid
TT: i'll tell you what i can about Droog but
TT: the MC are hardcore
TT: but all power to you i guess

"So what changed?" John says suddenly. His tone is harsh and strident, and he has one hand clutching at his pants in a tight fist, his knuckles white. With blue eyes he looks distant in his anger, focused narrowed completely on the screen.

TT: ...care to clarify kid?

"I came to you for information before, remember? You most definitely warned me. You told me to run." John's tone turns mocking, and Karkat catches even Harley staring at John in confusion at how bitter he sounds. "Why would you give a straight answer now, and not just repeat the same thing?"

TT: yeah and look how well that worked out
"I'm not mad at you," John says, closing his eyes. "I'm mad at me."

"What?" Karkat says.

"What?" This from Harley.

TT: what

There is only silence from Samuel Egbert.

John starts trembling in earnest and Karkat's moirailing instincts hit full throttle. He gingerly stretches his arm around John's shoulders, and once he's certain that his ribs and collarbone can handle it he holds John tightly, pressing his fingers into the dip of John's shoulders.

"You told me that if I stayed - if I tried to fight Hearts Boxcars - I'd get everyone around me hurt or killed." John's voice sounds raw. "Well, congratulations. You were right. I fucked up, I made the wrong call, and Kar- Hemogoblin got hurt. So. I'm sorry. I should have just listened to you in the first place." And oh fuck, oh fuck John is crying, that is a thing that is happening, oh fuck.

"John!" Karkat hisses, but Harley beats him to it, bursting out with, "That wasn't your fault at all, John!"

TT: eh, well, then yeah i told you so

"Hey, fuckface!" Karkat yells. "Why don't you take your cretinous thinkpan and shove it up your seedflap, asshat?!"

"Karkat," Samuel Egbert says, scandalized.

TT: oh wow
TT: that is one hellacious vocabulary you've got there kid
TT: color me impressed
TT: now calm down and let me finish
TT: John
TT: kid
TT: you got balls a'ight
TT: honestly when i said that shit i assumed you wouldn't make it another night with the MC on your ass
TT: but you kids ran Hearts out inside a week
TT: and from the timeline i've pieced together it was Hemogoblin who pulled that shit off while you were with us in NY
TT: serious kudos there
TT: i was wrong, too

Karkat feels...weird. A weird that is not angry. Instead he feels vaguely...gratified. Like he's received some uncalled for praise that he never expected to hear.

There is absolutely no need for this Bro character to know that Hemogoblin had taken a swan dive into the harbor more than he'd legitimately run Boxcars out of town. None whatsoever. Karkat sniffs,
and decides he can cut the guy a break. Just this once.

It helps that John steadies under his hands. His nose looks kind of blotchy, and a stray tear has escaped the corner of his eye, but he isn't actively crying anymore - just reading the screen with his jaw set in an inscrutable, thoughtful expression. Karkat wipes the tear away and John is almost as good as new. John looks at him gratefully, and Karkat has to swallow a purr of satisfaction because purring in front of witnesses would be fucking indecent.

TT: so yeah i'll help
TT: since you seem like you're gonna stick it out
TT: and Dave would probably cry if you got yourself killed
TT: he'd try not to cry
TT: and then he'd cry a lot
TT: so there's that
TT: but you're also fucked because Diamonds Droog is in town

"What a sterling vote of confidence," Samuel Egbert murmurs, steepling his fingers and resting his chin on his hands. "What do you know?"

TT: let's put it this way
TT: Hearts is a tank, the MC's muscle
TT: he sets up shop in new cities and starts up all their basic operations
TT: not too smart, but a lot of raw power, an army of thugs as backup
TT: man gets shit done
TT: Diamonds is worse

"No way," Karkat mutters, muffling his sarcasm in John's shirt. Bro either doesn't hear or is ignoring his smartass comments now.

"How is she worse?" Harley asks, bouncing in her seat. She folds her feet up to sit tailor-style, but she's floating again so that her feet don't touch the couch. Samuel Egbert just shakes his head at her. "Is she wayyy stronger?"

TT: worse
TT: she's smarter
TT: DD handles intimidation and special ops, with a specialty in kidnapping the loved ones of the rich and powerful and holding them for ransom
TT: there's a lot less intel on her cause she keeps her head down and her tracks covered
TT: people who report her to the cops never see their kids again
TT: 's probably why you couldn't find shit through your other contacts Egbert

John shudders, and Karkat can't blame him. He's feeling a little sick himself, trying to match the vicious fighter who beat the hell out of him last night with a criminal who could cold-bloodedly tear a child out of their family, and just as easily never return them.

...Actually, it's pretty fucking easy to fit that into his mental portrait of Diamonds Droog. No, that wasn't hard at all. Karkat thinks of the bored, cool interest in Droog's eyes as she stabbed him in the side, and thinks there isn't much that woman wouldn't be capable of, if she put her mind to it.

TT: but from what i know
TT: you need to be just as careful when it comes to her strength
TT: i mean it's not like anyone has ever filmed some kind of cage match
TT: Hearts and Diamonds going head to head - nah
TT: there's no way to compare the two in terms of mechanics
"How do you know?" Harley asks.

"Oh," John chokes, and Karkat does a hasty re-estimation of just how attached John is to that red-text asshole. In the armchair, Samuel Egbert flinches bodily, all the color leaving his already pale face.

"Yeah... she fights well. Hella well, one might say. Great technique, uncommon specibus. But it's when she loses it that you've got to watch her. Maybe I could have taken her if she'd stayed calm... but I held my own for too long. Cut her fancy ass suit too many times.

"What happened?" Harley says, her voice soft.

John frowns, looking up from his hands. "I - no, I haven't been checking my phone all afternoon. Why?"

TT: look i said my piece
TT: now i just have one question
TT: you heard from Dave lately?

John frowns, looking up from his hands. "I - no, I haven't been checking my phone all afternoon. Why?"

TT: nvm
TT: just if you hear from him
TT: let him know i owe him such an asskicking
TT: and John, Oriole says hi

"Oreo who?" John asks, blinking.

TT: orange Dave

"Oh." John shrugs. "Uh, hi to him too, I guess."

TT: enough of this i am not a fucking personal messenger
TT: later kids
TT: lemme know if you need something else Egbert.

"Will do, Mr - Bro," Samuel Egbert corrects himself, pinching the brow of his nose. "I greatly appreciate your candidness today. You have my thanks."

TT: whatever
TT: i'm outta here

-- temperedTitan [TT] ceased pestering SONYUNIT22AV6413 at 19:57:10 --

In the silence that follows, Karkat has the unique opportunity to witness every Egbert and Harley in the room look up, glance at each other, and make nigh-on identical expressions of rueful humor. Seriously. It's fucking unnatural. Over the course of one night and day, Karkat has landed himself in the middle of Heir's inner circle, which consists of his moirail, his moirail's insane sister and the unknown factor that is Samuel Egbert.

Harley sits down hard on the couch, her eyes alight with intent. “Let’s,” she says, cracking her knuckles, “get down to business.”

...This is going to be so weird.

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Between one strike and the next, the Seer reviews what she knows of the hero known as Blind Justice.

Blind Justice's style is one of precise movements and foresight; she is famed for her ability to plot and execute complex maneuvers that seem to take into account the reactions of her opponents before they can make a move, but her instinctive, spur of the moment judgments are not to be dismissed, either. She has a finely honed sense of justice, and the blades of her canekind are equally sharp.

None of that precision is evident now. Lost in the rage inspired by her kismesissitude, Justice lunges when she should sidestep, lashes out with a snarl when she should parry. Her rationality has deserted her.

And yet, Seer realizes, deflecting a blade away from her face by using the light that ripples along the flat of her palm, she is still a better close combat fighter, overall, than the Seer of Light. In an ideal world, Seer would rust the blades of Justice's canekind from afar, and knock the troll out with a fortuitously timed strike to the chin or a minor blasting spell.

But when Seer whirls out of the troll's range to collect herself, the rank scent of the sea wafts through the air, a smell so out of place in the middle of a park that she falters. Justice darts forward and slices open a cut down Seer's raised forearm, cackling as she does so.

Seer squeezes her palm into a fist and barely catches herself before she tries to rattle off a spell of blinding light. Trying to blind the troll would be redundant beyond all reason, and instead Seer jerks
back to put distance between herself and the troll once more.

It is unfortunate how many of Seer's usual tactics rely on blinding the opponent or otherwise disorienting them to give herself the advantage. All of them are useless here. She does not trust her mind enough to cast a blasting spell that wouldn't take out half of Chicago with it. And the lingering film of grimlight, permeating through the ambient magic around her, is simply the icing on the cake. Rose had been slow to sense it at first, more used to the grimdark aspect of such matters, but now that she is aware of the influence, she can't help but feel the taint like grime on her skin, eating away at her concentration.

Justice slices at her with both blades, her snarling mouth letting loose a growl of fury. There really is something to be said for a troll grow! - it is considerably more intimidating than any noise a human larynx could produce, Seer thinks, dodging yet again. She snaps her fingers, and her vision tunnels as she teleports behind Justice's back. The trick does not work so well this time; Justice's nostrils flare as she spins in a circle, catching Seer's scent again almost instantly. She brings one of the blades down in an arc, and Seer calculates, in a fraction of a second, whether or not it would be best to dodge again.

But she's not going to trounce a rogue hero by dodging and dancing around her. Eventually, she has to land a hit, or else disarm Justice entirely. Seer plucks a prepared rusting spell from her mind and brings it to bear in the gleam of her hands. Her Sight flares at the precise moment she needs to move, and Seer complies, clapping her palms together just below the cane's handle when the blade is inches from her face.

The sheer force of Justice has put into the blow drives the cane's blade perilously close to Seer's masked face; in the next instant, rust sheers through the blade at an accelerated rate, and Seer smiles as she twists out of the way. Justice steps in close again, but when she raises the canekind specibus, the blade that Seer touched snaps in two in midair. Flakes of rust are all that remains by the time the aged blade hits the ground.

"Bleh! Rust!" Justice spits, curling her lip at the broken weapon. "That won't work on me a second time! Now I'll see it coming!"

"It should not have worked at all," Seer corrects. She is still trying to marshal Blind Justice back into rational thought, after all. "If you were not so distracted by rivalry, perhaps you would be able to recollect exactly how my powers work." She spreads her hands to either side, still burning with power but trying to present a more...conciliatory posture.

Hmm. Perhaps she should have inquired more with Kanaya or John on the intricacies of troll pacification gestures.

Justice cackles, raising her second blade. "Pah! You really do talk too much!" She dives into a forward roll and Seer does not move swiftly enough to avoid the slice that digs into the side of her calf. Justice comes up on her knees, the blade held before her to ward off a counter strike. But that's just not in Seer's repertoire. She has to sort through her mind's storage for a minor healing spell to stem the flow of blood, and to buy herself time, she teleports out of the way again.

She feels a brief, distracting tug of regret that she has lost her knitting needles, and not dared to replace them. Kanaya no doubt possesses a spare pair of needles - her needlekind training lies more in the realm of stitch work than strifing, though Seer has no doubt Kanaya could managed quite well by improvising - but Rose had not asked to borrow them before leaving Philadelphia. With them, she would not only be able to focus her spells but use them for the needlekind specibus's intended function, as a short range stabbing strife weapon. Other magicians, sticklers for tradition, might claim that wandkind is the true specibus for any magic user, but Rose has always found the unique
capacity for both short and long-range attack capability to more than vindicate the use of needles.

But the last needles she used in combat were thorns, soon assimilated into the grimdark tangle that erupted around her body as the god in her head terrorized New York. Just another aspect of her life that the Horrorterrors had managed to corrupt. So the Seer grits her teeth, whistles the appropriate healing charm to seal her calf, and uses raw magic to deflect another slice at her stomach.

Clearly, shouting logic at Justice in the middle of the fray is not working. Even separated from her kismesis, she is not thinking clearly. But at this rate, the battle could drag on too long - it's only a matter of time before someone reports to the police or the Legislacerators that two heroes are duking it out in the middle of a public park. It won't matter then that Seer used to work in New York City, or is now based in Philadelphia, or what her motives are in fighting Blind Justice; in Chicago, all heroes are classified as 'dangerous vigilantes' and being caught now would most likely have Seer labelled a felon by the Bureau.

There is one tactic Seer has not yet tried. A quick, sharp jolt, however, might be exactly what Justice needs to shake her out of the heat of rivalry. Kanaya, naturally, had given her a stern frown when Rose proposed this plan, because Kanaya is perpetually convinced that Rose is on the verge of carrying out some reckless, dangerous, potentially-Horror induced plan. Which is good, because Rose needs that kind of check on herself - it is why she turned to Kanaya in the first place, trusting her to know if Rose has lost sight of herself again.

But this plan is neither dangerous nor Horror-induced.

(Hopefully.)

So when she sees her opportunity, she takes it. Gripping Justice's shoulder, Seer sifts through the film in the air and teleports them a few miles to the east, past Monroe Harbor, straight into the depths of Lake Michigan.

She plunges them straight to a depth of around eight feet: deep enough that Justice can't simply break the surface and breathe, but not so deep that their lungs or eardrums risk bursting from the sudden change in pressure. Seer's ears pop, but after a brief moment of pain it subsides, so she knows no permanent damage has been done. The abrupt temperature drop is the worst part, though; for Seer, if not for a coldblooded troll like Justice, the shift is unbearable and her hands and feet go numb almost immediately.

Tealbloods, however, are not anywhere near cold enough on the spectrum to develop aquatic respiratory systems. And Justice did not have Seer's advantage of foresight, so she did not know to hold her breath beforehand. Seer kicks a safe distance away, shivering, and observes from afar, relying more on her Sight than her eyes in the dark, icy water. The troll flails, the last half of her canekind spinning off into the depths of the lake as she claps her claws over her mouth in a futile effort to keep the bubbles of her air supply from escaping. She burbles incompressible garble. Her blindfold, loosened by the battle prior and the impact of teleportation, floats off to the side to expose eyes that have hazed over with the milky red glaze of troll blindness.

But Seer notes the exact moment that the full impact of their relocation hits Blind Justice - the moment the troll automatically tries to breathe in through her nose, and chokes on the water she inhales, her whole body spasming.

A violetblood or a simple shark might be able to detect scent markers through water currents and decipher them, but a terrestrial troll's nose, like a human's, has adapted solely to handle molecules in a gaseous form. However Blind Justice's sense of scent works - synesthesia has been tossed around on the online forums - it is of no use to her underwater.
For the first time in her life, Terezi Pyrope is truly blind.

Seer takes pity on the struggling troll after a few prolonged seconds. She counts her heartbeats - one, two, three, four, five -

And then her own air supply begins to dwindle - she's never been much of one for swimming - and when the tightness in her chest begins to squeeze a warning, she paddles closer to the troll and grips her by the forearm.

(Nɔ̀ nɔ̀ nɔ̀ nɔ̀)

For a moment, the back of her mind yawns, and she cannot distinguish between the water surrounding her and the great sea of bloodbrine that swills just beneath her shields. The moment passes, but she reels nonetheless before flinging them westward, back to the safety of the shore.

(Perhaps Kanaya had had a point.)

- Justice is no longer quite so vigorous in her attempts to fend off the Seer when they make landfall again. This time, Seer drops them even further from the ongoing fray by the Macy's Building, south of the commercial Loop area and well into the Near South Side. More specifically, Seer takes them to the Museum Campus, between the aquarium and the museum. The dome of the planetarium looms off to their right. The greenery and jogging paths of the campus are a far cry from the middle of Lake Michigan, but Seer shudders at a stiff breeze that picks up at the wrong moment. Kanaya had most definitely not designed the Seer costume with underwater escapades in mind, and she is soaked through.

But as cold as she is, rubbing through her sleeves and chafing at her void bracers, Seer is still in better shape than Justice. The troll must have inhaled a great deal more water than Seer thought, because she staggers and catches herself on a nearby park bench before lake water spews from both her nose and mouth. The troll gags, spitting and dry-heaving for a long minute before the last of the liquid clears her system. Despite the torn, drenched state of her suit, she doesn't shiver in the night air.

"Pickle juice," Justice sputters at last, wiping furiously at her running nose as she glares. She may be trying to glare at the Seer, but she directs her glazed eyes at a nearby lightpole, her senses apparently thrown off by inhaling water. "Pickle juice and rotten fish."

"Really? Is that what it smelled like to you?" Seer asks mildly, tilting her head to the side. "Because you know, the Great Lakes are freshwater, not -"

"I know what I'm about, Lemon Zest," Justice says, leaning her forearms heavily on her knees. The water she exhaled forms a damp spot on the ground, but it is already fading fast. "Euhrgh! That teleportation trick is pretty slick!"

"Thank you." Seer wrings out the bottom of her jacket with a grimace. Kanaya is going to unleash hell over this. "I do try. Now tell me, are you feeling more open to reasonable discussion of your life choices? Or is another dunking in order?"

"Water torture? Now you're talking! An old and venerable method of Imperial inquisition!" Justice spits one last time, horking up one last mouthful full of water from deep in her throat, and sits back on her haunches. Her confident, manic grin from earlier has faded, and her thin eyebrows furrow over her blind eyes, knotted with confusion. "I - wait - shit."
"Go on," Seer coaxes, settling herself on the bench. Her bottom is oppressively damp, but she
doesn't let the disgust show on her face. All of her senses are on the alert, her Sight combing through
Justice's aura from every angle, trying to see if her obsidian rage has settled. But as long as she
maintains her composure, she thinks Blind Justice might be open to persuasion now. Nothing like an
ice cold dip to clear one's head, after all. "Are you ready to talk?"

"No."

"Need a minute?"

"...Yeah."

Seer gives her more than a minute. Justice stays hunched over, swaying forward and back on the
balls of her feet, and massages her temples. While she thinks, Seer activates a slow drying spell, one
that starts a hot ray of light at her palms and works its way over her sleeves.

"...I think," Justice says at last, "I've been a complete sucker."

Seer nods, urging the light over her elbow. "Elaborate."

"Argh!" Justice scratches at her hair. The rough, wiry black bob is already drying in tufts around her
horns. "I can't believe this - I went in there planning to arrest her, and she - she just wouldn't stop
taunting me - this is unacceptable!" The frown of confusion loses some of that clarity, edging back
into blind fury.

Justice is getting off track again. Seer steps in, her voice soothing. "Focus. You need to focus." She
reaches out and grasps Justice's shoulder, forcing the troll to look at her instead of her claws. "You
went to arrest the Indigo Scourge, and she riled you up into breaking the platonic nature of your
rivalry. And since then, the two of you have been wreaking havoc trying to one-up each other. 
Please tell me you understand that this needs to stop."

"Yeah, yeah! I get it!" Justice levers herself up with the bench and collapses onto it, her lips pouting.
"Just give me a second to get my mind together. It feels like I've got a rage hangover or something..."

"Ah," Seer says. Or perhaps it is alright to be just Rose, for the moment. Justice's aura is no longer a
crackling blaze of teal light, ready to lash out at anyone who crossed her. With her uniform in tatters
and water sluicing down her nose, Terezi doesn't look like a hero - just a too-skinny troll, all bones
and joints and lean limbs, with her face exposed to the open air. Judging from the heavy teal-tinged
bags beneath her eyes, sleep has not been high on the Scourge Sisters' to-do list. "That is entirely
possible. I have it on good authority that rage hangovers are indeed a thing."

Terezi bares her sharp teeth in a hard grin - more of a grimace, really. "Is that a note of sarcasm I
detect? Or just more pickles?"

"I wouldn't know. I am not familiar with the finer nuances of olfactory distinction," Rose says
politely, folding her hands in her lap. "However, I am in earnest - a friend of mine happens to be in
an inadvertent moirallegiance, and the concept of a rage hangover has definitely been established as a
thing."

"Inadvertent moirallegiance? Ahahahahaha!" Terezi bursts out into laughter, her head resting on the
back of the bench. "What a dumbass! How do you even do something like that?"

"It takes a special kind of talent. However, that's not the point I was trying to make." Rose combs her
hair away from her face, feeling stray droplets of water crawl down the back of her neck. "You've
been in the throes of an overzealous, unnaturally volatile concupiscent rivalry. Humans have no
corresponding rage gland, per se, but it is obvious even to me that your hormones have been playing you like a poorly tuned fiddle."

"Last time I had a headache this bad was after Katz spilled a bottle of ammonia in the morgue." Terezi kicks her feet out and slouches, lifting her head to fold her arms behind it against the bench. "But I guess that's better than running around arguing nonstop with Vriska about who's beaten up more bad guys and decapitated more famous statues. That's the opposite of what justice is about."

"Statues?"

"It made more sense at the time. I think it's just one of those things where you had to be there. In the heat of the moment and all that."

"Hm."

They remain silent for a few minutes after that. It's a good sign, in Rose's opinion, a sign that Terezi has calmed down enough to sit still and put genuine thought into her actions. Terezi can take as much time as she needs to keep from slipping back into the blind passion of her hate.

But it also gives Rose time to worry about how the fight between the Sylph and the Scourge may be playing out. She has the utmost confidence in Sylph's ability to beat the ever-loving hell out of ordinary criminals, of course. But she's also familiar with the Scourge's tactics. The ceruleanblood takes risky gambles, and they have a tendency to pay off in her favor - an almost preternatural tendency, if Rose is honest with herself, one that she might wish to investigate further. And when she can't win through her own merits, and in the event her incredible luck fails her, the Indigo Scourge cheats.

"That's why you broke your initial partnership in the first place, isn't it," Rose muses out loud, almost before she realizes she's going to speak. Terezi twitches in her seat, nostrils flaring as she turns damaged red eyes toward Rose's side of the bench. "The Scourge cheats. She deliberately places innocent bystanders into the line of fire and breaks the law at her leisure if it means she wins. A complete lack of a moral compass, unless it suits her…Surely that should always have been at odds with your judicial leanings."

"It wasn't, actually," Terezi sighs. "I always knew the kind of person Vriska was. I thought I could balance her out. Keep her in line. We broke it off because she lied."

"About what?" Rose asks.

"About everything!" Terezi bursts out, snarling. "She lied and lied and lied, and when she couldn't lie anymore, she tried to pawn off all the responsibility by saying she was sorry. She thinks if she apologizes enough, it'll make everything better and everyone will conveniently forget what she did but she's wrong."

"An inability to take responsibility for her own actions?" Privately, Rose adds this confirmation to the on-going mental chart dedicated to her psychological evaluation of the Indigo Scourge. Before her grimdark breakdown, she made a habit of profiling most of the major heroes in the United States - a hobby and no more, considering that without personal contact with any of them, she could only speculate in the most general terms.

But the Scourge's idiosyncrasies are legendary and well publicized: her obsession with octets, her carelessness with the lives of civilians, her impossible gambles. Rose has theorized that the ceruleanblood at least has compulsive tendencies, if not an outright obsessive-compulsive disorder, but now she is tempted to consider a personality disorder as well - an impulsive type borderline,
Perhaps, or even extreme narcissism. Something in the dramatic cluster, at least. But Rose is getting sidetracked.

"Exactly!" Terezi throws her hands up in the air, gesturing with them avidly. Rose thinks this has been eating away at the troll for a while now. Good. She intends to untangle as many of the sources of Terezi's irrational black hatred as she can. The more potential irritants Terezi can talk out of her system, the less fuel she will have to feed this caliginous feud. "And it's so infuriating! It just - I just wanted to make her see that she's responsible for things! That she can't just sail through life without consequences! I don't know where I went wrong! I - I've been just as bad as her these past few days!"

"Would you like my honest opinion?"

Terezi wrinkles her nose. "Depends. This isn't some kind of strange human attempt at pacification, is it? Or some freaky fourway auspicism with Sylph? Because thanks but no thanks, Zest. That is sooo not my scene."

"My interests are purely platonic." Rose adjusts her jacket, shivering again in the cold, and crosses her legs at the ankles. Inside her shoes, her socks squish with water, and she makes the executive decision to dry those first, redirecting her warming spell with a click of her tongue. "Psychology has always been a source of immense fascination for me. If I come across as overly conciliatory, I assure you that it is unintentional. I only came here to stop you two from wiping Chicago off the map. Consider it a neighborly self-interest and nothing more."

"Haha! Then bring it on."

"You have had any number of opportunities to take Scourge into custody over the years, correct?" Terezi's responding nod is reluctant and augmented with a pout, but a nod nonetheless. "I suspect that the bonds of partnership between you have remained a source of affection and lenience towards her all this time. You considered her your sister in name, after all, and that kind of relationship is rare between trolls. When you finally discarded that sisterly affection, all that was left was the pure rivalry that had built up between the two of you during your years at odds - and when you confronted Scourge face to face, there was nothing to keep that in check, and you lost sight of your original goal in the instinctive wave of addling hormones."

Caliginous lust, as distinct from long-term, committed caliginous antagonism, is a well-documented phenomenon. All hormonally normal troll adolescents experience concupiscent crushes of both shades throughout their lives, as made infamous by the nightmare of lust-driven quadrant-vacillation known as Romeo and Juliet. Again, it is not Rose's particular area of expertise, but one that she is familiar enough with to make her point. It's part of the reason troll society most likely developed auspices in the first place - without mediators, widespread black infidelity would be rampant due to the territorial, spontaneous nature of troll rivalries.

"Your lecture-face smells like soap bubbles," Terezi remarks, which would have been a non sequitur in any other context. Rose doesn't know whether it is intended as an insult or a compliment - or perhaps simply a statement of a fact. "I think I can see how that makes sense. I guess I just always thought my hate towards Vriska was, you know, the humany, platonic kind of murderhate. I wouldn't let it be anything else. But of all the minds here, it feels like I understood my own the least."

"It happens to the best of us." Rose shifts in her seat again. Her shoes are almost dry, and her hair is next on the agenda. A man in a blue striped jogging outfit runs by them along the path at that moment, a dog loping by his side. Neither of them even look in Terezi and Rose's direction, but Rose
bites her tongue until they've passed by. "How did Shakespeare put it? 'Thus quadrants make fools of us all.' Or perhaps that was Thackeray…"

"Nnnrrnnghl," Terezi mumbles. "And now I've thrown my whole life away chasing her around downtown, haven't I? God - what Crawford and Starling must think of me right now…"

"Yes." There is no way to be delicate about this. Rose is no expert in the methods of the Legislacerators, but she can't imagine that Terezi has a home to go safely back to at this point. Cities are usually lenient about their resident heroes, with a few exceptions; unfortunately, Chicago is one of those exceptions. There will be no mercy for Terezi here, not when the Legislacerator Bureau has always blacklisted her for infringing on their ideals. Her heroic identity has been exposed not just to law enforcement but to every criminal who can read English or Alternian, borne internationally through the medium of the internet.

"I am not saying your caliginous relationship wouldn't have been viable under other circumstances." Rose gestures toward the fires blazing over the rooftops in the distance, and Terezi follows the sweep of her hand, smells the smoke on the breeze, and winces. "Every troll is entitled to a serendipitous kismesis. It is simply biology. However, you two are powerful heroes, and you catalyze more violent reactions in each other than a standard troll kismesissitude. If you can't keep your relationship separate from your hero work...well..."

"But the hero work is half the problem!" Terezi whines. "She has the audacity to claim she's better, and how am I supposed to let that stand! I am clearly the expert in enforcing the law around here!"

"Neither of you are heroes from what I see," Rose says. "Not anymore."

Terezi bristles. "Oh? And who appointed you the supreme justice in this courtroom, huh?"

The judicial metaphors are going to become quite tiresome, quite quickly. Rose can feel it. "You did, I'm afraid, when you and Vriska Serket engaged in a caliginous affair, terrorized your own city, and refused the mediating aid of an auspice perfectly willing to arbitrate between the two of you," she replies primly. "Your actions have consequences. Are you going to take responsibility for them?"

That reaches Terezi, and the troll snaps to attention, her back ramrod straight. "Of course!" she replies, her pointy chin jerking up in indignation. Then she crumbles again, her sightless eyes scrunching up with confusion. "But - I can't just stop hating her! She gets under my skin! She always seems to have just the right snarktastic comment with which to challenge me!" Terezi buries her face in her hands. "She's perfectly awful in all the most provoking ways! That sexy, sexy hornswoggler!"

Rose frowns at the troll's bowed head, and then looks down at her own hand.

In this particular moment, she finds that she can only ask herself one thing: what would Kanaya do?

The answer is obvious.

She takes her hand, swings it back, and smacks Terezi upside the back of the head. The troll lets out a surprised squawk. Before she can react, Rose plays her final card. "So will you continue to pursue this relationship? Even knowing that by doing so, you apparently go into a destructive rivalry-driven mindset that negates your treasured sense of justice?"

Terezi lets out another muffled groan. "You perjuring fiend. That was a mediating slap, wasn't it?!"

Rose inspects her fingernails and ignores Terezi's attempt at deflection. She's stopped shivering, and
that has done wonders for her composure. The costume's cloth still reeks of lake water, but at least she is dry now. "If you intend to revert back to your previous behavior the moment you see Vriska, or the Scourge, or whatever you want to call her, Sylph and I will have no alternative but to turn you over to the Legislacerators. It will be the end of you two as free trolls and the end of your rivalry. Think, Terezi," she adds. "I know you can."

Terezi raises her head a little and gazes out over the green, her claws folding before her mouth as she sits in contemplation. Good. Rose wants her to mull that last part over, because it is true. If they can't tame this caliginous rivalry, she and Sylph will have to stop Scourge and Justice. Permanently.

"Your threats smell like lime juice," the troll says at last. "With the apple crispness of truth."

...No, Rose thinks, blinking in surprise. It's not possible. There is absolutely no way Terezi just described a sour apple martini. She refuses to believe it. It is simply Rose's latent alcoholism trying to rear its ugly head. Not everything is about vodka, damn it.

"Besides, my lusus agrees with you," Terezi says, shaking her head. "This whole relationship needs to be adjourned. At least until they rebuild downtown!"

Rose arches an eyebrow. "Your lusus?"

Terezi grins. "Of course! She taught me everything I know. Strange that I couldn't hear her these past few days." The smile vanishes. "Just another reason this kismesissitude needs to tone it down, I guess. I don't know if I was ignoring her, or just...couldn't hear her over all that anger."

Rose just shakes her head, not entirely sure how much of her nonverbal communication is actually getting across, here. She knows even less about the relationship between lusii and their troll charges than she does about caliginous affairs, so she really has no further comment on the matter. "We should return to Sylph and Scourge now. I can only imagine their battle has been settled by now, one way or another."

Rose is fairly certain the Sylph will have won, but there is still that whisper of uncertainty in the back of her mind that says anything could have happened to alter the flow of battle after Rose left. Interference from law enforcement, an unexpected passerby wandering in under Scourge's influence...the possibilities are endless. She won't feel confident that her predictions have led Sylph to victory until she sees the results with her own eyes.

"And then what? If you're not going to hand us over to the police for all this shit we've pulled, what are you suggesting?" Terezi asks, tilting her head to the side. "Like you said, me and Vriska...we can't stay here. Not after all this. Our covers are blown. I mean, our faces must be front page news."

"Start over in Canada seems to be the general consensus," Rose says, stretching her arms over her head. "We have a contact there. You will need to change your names, and Vriska will need to conceal her more distinctive features better, but you could begin again. Even restart hero work separately, perhaps, though you will need a new theme and alias if you wish to risk that kind of publicity."

"Huh." Terezi nods slowly, looking surprised. What, did she think Sylph and Seer would leave two hazards like Justice and Scourge to fend for themselves after their hatred simmered down? "Anyway. Yeah. I think I made a huge mistake. So thanks, Zest. I owe you a life debt."

"You are quite welcome." Rose stands up, brushing grime off the seat of her pants, and extends a hand to Terezi. "You can repay that debt by promising to cooperate with Sylph when she tries to auspice the two of you."
Terezi waves the hand away. "I'm blind, not incapable!" she says, cackling again as she rises to her feet. "No need to mollycoddle me, Zest! I've been faking sight for years at the Bureau without a cane! And I become extremely sensitive about my disability when people treat me like a wriggler!" Her pout is clearly feigned, this time; Rose gets the feeling that this is an old joke for Terezi.

Rose retracts her hand anyway. "Ah. My apologies. I should have seen that you would be fine on your own."

Terezi flings a dramatic arm across her brow. "You should have...seen?!"

"Er..."

"You mock my handicap, good Seer! Even your alias is another stab at my disability!"

Rose raises an eyebrow. She's not buying it. "Quite unintentional, I assure you," she says in a droning monotone, rolling her eyes. "Oh, can you ever forgive me for this horrific oversight?"

Terezi has to sit back down on the bench to laugh that one off. Rose does not know what Dave is complaining about - John has taught her to recognize the most excellent pun opportunities.

That train of thought is abruptly derailed when the voice susurrating through the air around her slams into Rose's head with a shriek of terror.

That is when Rose collapses.

The trouble is not that the Indigo Scourge is a better fighter.

The trouble is getting close enough to lay claws on her.

The Malachite Sylph growls under her breath and puts on an extra burst of speed, chasing her quarry around the corner of Washington Street and snarling when her hands meet only air.

For several years now, since becoming a rainbow drinker, Kanaya has grown used to being much quicker than most of the people around her. She was always a cut above the rest - she would not have been able to join the Medicull unit if she let herself grow soft - but dying and being resurrected somehow granted her speed, stamina, and strength enough to face off against even the hardiest of bluebloods she has dealt with as a crime fighter.

But Scourge is light on her feet; she zigzags and darts just out of her reach rolling across the hood of a parked car with a grunt and laughing gaily as she makes for the nearest police barricade.

Sylph barrels after her, leaping up and landing on the roof of the car with enough force to dent the metal, and then lunges for Scourge again. She hasn't drawn her makeupkind yet, but she's giving it considerable thought, if only to extend her reach by the extra few inches she needs to close the gap. If the Scourge has still been wearing her usual ridiculous buccaneer coat, Sylph is sure she would have had the troll by now.

Instead, Scourge has room to spin on her heel and dart off in another direction, strands of her hair tearing out between Sylph's clawtips. "Owwwwwwww!" she yelps, clapping a hand to her hair and staring at Sylph with indignation. "You'll pay for that, Sylph!" She tears something from the side of her ruined gauntlet and whips it at Sylph overhand, and then takes off again.
Without waiting to see what it is the Scourge threw, Sylph rolls out of the way, putting the car between her and whatever new gadget Scourge has unleashed. A small magic 8 ball hits the street and rolls around in a circle before exploding in a burst of light and white smoke.

A diversionary tactic, then. Coughing once before holding her breath against the smoke, Sylph slides a tube of lipstick out of the holster at her thigh and activates the chainsaw functionality. She ignores the spots of glaring light that throb across her field of vision and pursues Scourge once more, relying more on her intimate awareness of the troll's fluttering heartbeat. Her legs strain with the effort, and the snarl that emerges from her throat is honestly more of a hunting growl than an auspicious chirp.

Sylph has been paying little attention to the law enforcement around them. Thanks to the lingering effects of the Seer's refraction spell, most of the police and Lacerators in the vicinity are too disoriented to draw near the two heroes. But as Scourge leads her a merry chase, weaving in between abandoned, overturned vehicles, in the direction of the barricades at the far corner of the block, more stray officers wander in the corner of Sylph's eye, and she catches the tail end of shouted orders. Perhaps if her focus weren't so single-mindedly focused, she would have realized what the flurry of activity meant. She was in the armed forces long enough, after all.

But she fails to notice as the police and Lacerator units begin to pull back, and make way for someone else to approach the fight.

The Scourge's luck runs out, regardless. She swears and rips at the exposed wiring on her arm gauntlet, attempting some new mischief, but the machine sparks at her and she stumbles over a piece of rubble. She catches herself immediately, all raw, animal grace as her back dips and she surges forward again, dragging herself forward on her hands to regain her stride, but it is all the advantage Sylph needs to close the gap. She falls into a crouch, balancing on one hand as she sweeps out with her leg and knocks Scourge's feet out from under her.

The troll hits her chin hard on the ground. "Shit!" she yelps, scrambling to get her arms under her. Sylph plants a heel in the center of Scourge's back before she can push herself upright, and the ceruleanblood flops back down against the ground with jolted huff. "Fugh! I think you broke my tooth!" Scourge spits, and vibrant blue blood spatters on the pavement, along with a chip of white that Sylph ignores.

"Desist in your attempts to evade me. This is for your own good," Sylph commands. She doesn't really expect it to work, and sighs when Scourge just wails without words and squirms an arm free to start pounding on her gauntlet again, as though through some miraculous stroke of luck the machine will work again. It is a relatively new addition to the Scourge's inventory of gadgets, and Sylph has no idea what it is intended to do when it is functioning properly; all the better that it isn't working, really.

"You need to get a life!" Scourge yells back, whacking her arm in sets of eight. "Go back to your own city, Meddlesome Mcfussyfangs! You're not welcome here!"

And with that, Scourge must manage to shove some key component back into place; the gauntlet starts emitting a high pitched whine that shoots straight to Sylph's head, as though a fishhook is tugging through the roof of her mouth. The frequency vibrates right through the core of her horns and sets her teeth on edge with a sharp, aching pain. Sylph flinches and presses a hand to her head, the other still occupied with her chainsawkind.

Thankfully, it hits Scourge just as hard - the troll clutches her own temples with less decorum, writhing, which only confirms Sylph's suspicion that this is not, in fact, an intended function of that infernal machine.
"I am going," Sylph says, teeth sore and her voice muffled, "to remove that inauspicious device."
She hefts her chainsaw and swings it up over her head. She is certain she can damage the gauntlet enough to remove it with necessarily removing Scourge's arm along with it.

But that's not high on her list of priorities. Back in the Novaya Ukraine, emergency field amputations had been Kanaya's specialty.

"Don't you dare!"

Sylph moves to bring the chainsaw down.

The goldblood comes out of nowhere. Or at least, that is the impression Sylph has at the time. He flings himself over the rubble next to them and collapses, cowering, over the Scourge's arm.

Then, at last, Sylph realizes her miscalculation. She redirects her chainsaw and drives the rotating teeth through the window of the car beside her, shattering it. Glass shards fly everywhere and the gears of her chainsaw specibus scream before she manages to turn it off.

"P-please don't kill me!" the goldblood babbles, his amber eyes wide and glassy, as though he is preoccupied with some internal turmoil. There is a silver colored star medal pinned crookedly to his pale blue uniform, the mark of a patrolman, and he can't be more than a few years older than them. His legs shake, and it is clear that it is only Scourge's influence pressing upon his brain that keeps him from running in terror. "I - I don't know what's going on!"

Scourge is not holding her temples because of the noise - she is doing it to command this poor troll to do her bidding. Sylph pinches the bridge of her nose, flipping her chainsaw back into a lipstick. "Send him on his way, Scourge," she says, leaving no room for argument in her tone. It is clear Scourge needs a firm hand.

"No! Like I'd seriously let you chop my arm off?! No thanks!"

"I will not remove your arm from your thorax. You have my word. This troll has no part in your infuriating antics."

Scourge spits up another clot of blood. The smell is...enticing. "I'm starting to think you're full of shit! I don't believeeeeee you!"

Sylph has to take matters into her own hands; she grimaces at the goldblood in a silent apology. "I am going to remove you. Brace yourself. You will be unharmed. Probably."

"Whoa, what -" he gets out before Sylph kicks him in the ribs. She does so with deliberate care, sending him flying in a low arc that carries him a good few yards away from the two heroes.

"No!" Scourge wails, reaching out a claw and clenching her fist. The goldblood jerks upright and staggers onto his knees, still dazed and under Scourge's mind control, and starts to hobble back toward them. Sylph tucks her lipstick away and brings back her closed fist, planning to introduce it to the back of Scourge's thick skull and stop this mental hogwash before more trolls wander into the ceruleanblood's range of influence.

"Hey - hey, can everybody just listen for five minutes!"

Sylph is arrested midstrike. The Scourge, her claws still outstretched toward the goldblood, blinks, and her attention shifts to the new troll approaching them from the barricade. The moment her extra-pupiled eye flickers away, the police officer slumps to his knees, panting, but doesn't move to run.
Sylph doesn't think any of them could move willingly by then. Why would anyone want to run away from the limeblood walking toward them with his claws out to the sides and his horns tilted back, open to embrace them all. She can sense his pulse from here and there is no fear, no bite of adrenaline flowing through his veins at the act of approaching two heroes locked in combat. Just a steady, smooth pulse that beats in her head like a soothing metronome. His blood would have none of the excess shock and tang of ordinary yellow-green hemotypes - it would be like sipping a nice cup of soothing green tea.

Kanaya snaps out of it a moment later, though the conciliatory pheromones fomenting in the air have become heavy enough that it feels almost humid. Her rainbow drinking tendencies may lend her some immunity, but she attributes it more to the indefatigable strength of her grey irritation. This can be only one troll - the limeblooded empath and so-called universal moirail, Profiler William Graham of the Bureau of Legislaceration, his unique identity as the first limeblood born in centuries obvious even in the uneven lettering of his chosen first name.

Damn and blast. She will need to obtain his autograph for Rose, now. How troublesome.

But if he thinks dousing them with pale scent markers is enough to distract Kanaya from her serendipitous auspicizing, he had best think again. Scourge gives a weak snarl, and Kanaya thinks that the fire of kismesissitude may be enough to blast the pacification out of Scourage's system as well. The goldblood is utterly lost though; he slumps over sideways and begins snoring faintly. The mere presence of Graham seems to have been sufficient to lull the troll to sleep, even in the middle of a battle field.

"That...is impressive," Kanaya admits aloud, raising her chin under Graham's piercing gaze. He shuffles forward as she speaks, everything about his posture meek and unassuming, the exact opposite of a threat. "You are a great conciliator, Profiler Graham."

"My reputation proceeds me," the troll mutters, sounding so doleful that Kanaya thinks the words were not meant for her, but he smiles with no teeth bared. He tips his head to the side, his eyes glittering an impossibly bright green behind thick, oblong tortoiseshell glasses. "Oh, I see. You're not affected, are you?"

"Not particularly." She adjusts the set of the foot that is not occupied with suppressing the Scourge's weakened struggles, so that she can face the new troll in a properly guarded stance. Just because he feels like pacification incarnate does not mean he isn't a threat in his own way. "I am quite comfortable with my current level of annoyance, and thus do not require pacification. Thank you anyway."

"Really? Because it looks like you're shading pretty grey for Ms Serket and her partner, here," Graham says, nodding at the troll beneath Kanaya's foot. "I could take that load off your mind, you know. Ease all that exasperation they've been making you vent."

"As mollification is to you, so auspicism is to me, I am afraid," Kanaya says. She realizes her fists are slowly unclenching, and makes a point of reaffirming her grip. She cannot let his soothing voice seep into her head. "I would not give that up for the world."

Graham sighs heavily, scrubbing at his face with a hand. He looks exhausted, but Kanaya suspects that he is playing it up: it would be hard for trolls with less self-control to resist the urge to try to comfort him after seeing the shadows under his eyes and the shabby state of his clothes. He is irredeemably pathetic. So, this is what it looks like when moirallegiance is forged into a masterful tool.

No wonder the fuchsia-bloods made such an effort to cull their genes from the Mothergrub slurries. It
was the one thing all tyrannical tyrants had agreed upon throughout history - the elimination of the hemotype that could disable their armies and cripples their empires with a shoosh and a sigh.

"Never been shooshpapped before? Ever?" he asks wryly, scratching around his horns.

"It has never been necessary. Unlike certain others I could mention" - she digs her heel into Scourge's spine - "I can control my irritation." She smiles beatifically. "That is my secret, I'm afraid. I'm always irritated."

Abruptly, the body beneath Kanaya's foot jolts, and a piercing whine breaks the tension in the air. "Oh, will you two stop with your fake hateflirting and get this show on the road!" the Scourge demands. "Good fucking god, Sylph, what do you eat?! You're crushing my butt!"

With that she tosses an object over her shoulder. It is an awful shot, from a terrible angle, stymied by the fact that Scourge's face is mashed against the road, but the new magic 8 ball arcs at Kanaya's face anyway.

Oh, shit. Sylph swears, and dives to the side just as the flash bomb explodes. She doesn't close her eyes in time and the white hot light makes her shriek as her too-sensitive vision temporarily fries. She lands hard on her knees and elbows rather than finishing her roll. From behind her, she can hear the scrabble of the Scourge's feet in gravel as the troll gets to her feet. Her eyes smart, but she forces them open anyway to squint back the way she came. She can't afford to lose track of the Scourge in a city this large.

"Nice try! You're not fooling me twice, shorty!" Scourge yells. Sylph can barely distinguish between the washed out blurs where buildings and people should be, but she thinks that grey and blue blob is the Scourge jabbing a finger at Graham. "What do you think I am, some dumb, flighty broad?! I don't need either of you meddling meddlers! I'm out of here!"

She flips both of them the middle finger with each hand, shaking her arms four times, and then sprints away. She vaults onto one of the green awnings of the Macy's, swings up, and begins to scale the side of the building like a spider.

"Well," Profiler Graham says at last, grimacing. "That was unexpected."

Sylph shakes her head, clearing the last of the afterglare from her vision, and digs into one of her pockets. She removes a piece of paper and rises to her feet, brushing dust off her knees. She strides over and offers the paper to Graham. "I would be much obliged if I could obtain your autograph. For my partner, of course," she adds. "She wanted it in one of her texts, but this will have to do. Pardon me."

The limeblood stares at the slip of paper over the rim of his glasses, and then nods slowly. "I take it you're not going to stick around and let me try to manage this situation?" he says, sounding resigned.

"No." Sylph feels her jaw clench. "I have a spider to hunt. She is not scuttling away without receiving a most stern talking to."

Graham raises both hands in surrender, shrugging. "Then hell, I won't get in your way. I'm not cleared to carry a strife specibus anymore, so if you're not pacified by now, there's really not much I could do to stop you."

"Just keep trolls clear of the building." Sylph pulls up her hood. "They will only be in danger if they approach Scourge now."

With a sharp nod, she races across the street, her breath huffing as she makes for an overturned SUV.
She vaults onto it, and her shoes pound against the underside of the vehicle until she can leap from the edge to the second level of the Macy's building.

She doesn't try to climb up the wall like Scourge; she just crashes through the window and makes for the stairwell.

"M'ust fin' e', m'ust fl' id e.'

Rose is more than a little perplexed to find that she is not the target of a surprise mental assault.

She drifts in her mental space, absentmindedly knitting new links for the strata of her mind, and listens with disturbed fascination to the mutterings of a tanglehorde apparently arguing with itself. She has never heard the voice of a grimlight monster before, having had no affinity with them like her connection to the grimdark variants, and perhaps that allows her some measure of protection from the Horrorterror's screaming. The majority of the horde chimes through her mind like a chorus of ghastly, horrific bells, but a lone voice, without the sonorous reverberation that the rest of the host possesses, argues back like bright licks of flame. Solitary voices in a hivemind are so rare as to be nonexistent; this is a phenomenon that Rose has seen discussed only in passing in the most arcane and obscure of her old texts, and she can't help being absolutely fascinated in spite of herself.

It is just not entirely clear if the Horrorterror has yet realized that everyone can hear it. Or perhaps it is only Rose. Either way, she keeps her ear tuned to the terrified ramblings, and prods at her mental shields. There is nothing to indicate they've weakened. In fact, after that initial mental shriek from the Horrorterror, the watery channel beneath the surface of her mind seems to have drawn back, wary, from the jangling symphony that is blasting its conversations for all of paradoxic space to hear.

No, this intrusion seems to be the result of that ambient magical disruption again - the tangle is upset enough that it broadcasts not just its aura but its own mental stream of consciousness throughout the western half of the United States.

Utterly fascinating.

Thus far, all Rose can really make out about the context of this strange mental breakdown is that the grimlight Horrorterror - if this is indeed the horde from Los Angeles screaming at itself from across the country - is facing a portending splinter event over some kind of carnival related incident. Hiveminds don't often disagree, but this one seems to have come to an impasse, and the longer the lone voice persists in speaking against the majority, the more certain Rose becomes that she may yet witness a hivemind bifurcation in her lifetime.
Rose's mental eyebrows raise with such force that they could punch through concrete.

Did that voice just...suggest a willing split?

This is madness. Hivemind bifurcation has always been theorized to be an inadvertent, highly traumatic event for a many-angled one. This...this is unprecedented! Mouth gaping, Rose raises a glowing finger and begins engraving notes on what she is hearing into the nearest surface. She could publish a paper on this kind of rare event, a case study in hivemind dynamics. If only she had her meditation equipment with her or a Necronomicon to consult -

She doesn't feel the tear itself as more than a vague twist of nausea that jolts her midthought, turning her attempt at labelling a flow diagram into a spiral that gleams with the golden light of her own magic. She thumbs it away, feeling dazedly through the medium around her to try and figure out what just happened. This is just not in any way her area of expertise.

When the tanglehorde speaks again, it is with an air of condescension.

And in reply, suddenly faint and quiet compared to its earlier volume, barely distorted at all by the hivemind's symphony, the lone voice says, "whatever. dont come crawlin back to me wwith your overwrought bullshit after i totally annihilate this juggalo fuck. there wwill be fuckin science magic firewworks an youre not invvited. dicks."

And only then does Rose realize what just happened.

That is not the voice of a new fledgling, independent hivemind, set adrift to accumulate its own bevy of tanglebuddies by an irreparable split with its old host tangle. In fact, the more the voice mutters to itself, growing ever more clear as the grimlight film is burned away by hot white fire, the more Rose thinks that the impossible has happened.

Someone has just been cut out of a hivemind with their mind and personality intact. Some poor soul out there, recently assumed into the horde, has just been handed a 'get out of eternal madness and despair as part of an eldritch abomination free' card, and they are maxing it out.

"okay thats it im gonna feed you your fuckin miracles through your squeal pipette clown i havve a giant fuckin laser beam an a hella lot of serious fuckin emotions ovver this"

"basically"

"run"

The voice is distinctly male by the time it fades out. Rose's sense of the grimlight Horrorterror's words has ended as well, and equilibrium reasserts itself within her mind. The realization startles Rose so badly that she slams back into consciousness without bracing herself. She is truly in for a riotous headache, when this is all over. Her mind is a delicately balanced construction, and all of this grimlight nonsense has been nearly as distressing as the grimdark.

Hard slats of wood dig into her back. Rose wets her lips, inhaling through her nose as she works herself up toward opening her eyes and acknowledging the outside world.

And of course, because the universe does enjoy its little jokes, the first voice she hears is that of the last person in the world Rose wishes to deal with - now, or ever.
"Go away, Mother," she hisses even before she opens her eyes. Rue Lalonde is a dark void to her Sight, but the woman herself stands out against the pitch black of the sky, her white lab coat pristine under the light of the moon.

Rose can't help but stare, though. She has never seen Rue Lalonde in anything less than unrepentantly drunk and meticulously put together, disguising her careless alcoholism with flawlessly applied makeup and a quiet smirk.

The Rue who leans forward, her gloved hand stroking Rose's bangs away from her face so she can press a kiss to her daughter's forehead, looks - haunted. Even after Rose's meltdown and the subsequent catastrophe in New York, the good doctor never seemed truly devastated or repentant. She smirked and feigned sympathy and played her usual games until Rose was well enough to remove herself from that unpleasant environment entirely. If she felt any flicker of the remorse she claimed to Rose's face on Kanaya's doorstep, Rue never actually demonstrated it beyond a token word of regret between martinis.

Now, Rue Lalonde's eyes are tired and bloodshot, her lips so pale that Rose cannot process for the longest time that she's not wearing any lipstick. Her hair has been yanked back into a harsh knot at the nape of her neck.

"My darling girl," she says, smoothing Rose's hair again. This time, as Rose shoves Rue's arm away in order to sit up, she feels the tremor running through Rue's hand. What on Earth could have put the doctor into this state? "I have missed you." Her smirk lacks its usual sarcastic verve - in fact, it almost superficially resembles a smile.

"Have you," Rose mimics, aware that she is being petulant. The headache she predicted within the bounds of her mind has begun to rear its head in the physical realm, and she has no patience for this right now. She had sensed her mother's interference at some indeterminate point in the future when divining the future for Kanaya, but she is far more concerned about Terezi Pyrope at the moment. Rue is nothing but a distraction.

True to form, even with her eyes distant and gripped by some inscrutable pain, Rue replies, in a murmur, "Oh, Rosie, do not speak so tastelessly, dear, not in front of company."

Rose shakes off the hand that Rue attempts to place on her shoulder, and grimly fixes her eyes on Terezi, who is lounging against the light post a few feet away. "Yeah? What from, Zesty?" the tealblood asks, rolling her shoulders and striding away from the pole, her every step measured. "You turned all slimy like snails, but also pale and pasty like powdered sugar - way too sweet! Something was afoot!"

"Rose, we need to speak. Urgently," Rue says, rising from her knees as Rose gets to her feet. "I know you have no reason to -"

"A magical disturbance in the air surprised me." Rose holds out her arm for the troll, turning her back on her mother. "But it has passed. We need to return to Sylph and Scourge immediately." She doesn't think that she'd been preoccupied in observing the Horrorterror's split for too long, but time does tend to run differently within the mind.

Terezi sticks out her tongue. "And what about her?" she asks, her grin widening as she points her chin toward Rue Lalonde. "Does your custodian always tag along after you when you're on the job in a strange city, Roooosie?"
"Mother, Rose thinks vehemently, you will pay for this new embarrassment."

"You're busy, dear, I know," Rue says. She steps into Rose's range of vision again, and it would be too obvious for Rose to look away again. "But I need to tell you - no." The doctor shakes her head, her eyes closing in a long blink before she tries again, her pallid lips trying for a halfhearted smile. "No. First, are you feeling well? When I noticed that you had collapsed, I couldn't stay hidden any longer."

Rose's shoulders stiffen. She keeps her eyes turned from her mother, counting backwards from ten in her head before she lets herself speak. "Don't strain yourself, Mother; your attempts at caring for me have always been lackluster at best. And I have stated that I have nothing to say to you. My health, mental, physical, or otherwise, is no longer your business. That is the end of the matter. Say your piece and have done with it, so I can return to my work."

Terezi whistles. "God damn! Shots fired!" She starts snickering, though she has the presence of mind to hide it by coughing into her torn sleeve.

Rue stands utterly still, the last of the color draining from her face. Rose's Sight blanks out and she jerks, disconcerted, blinking her real eyes until the fact that it is not her physical sight being affected sinks in. Rue Lalonde's lack of a presence blots out even Terezi's aura by her side and Rose's aura along her own skin, and for a giddy moment Rose is utterly terrified. The world looks far darker with only the black of a starless void in the air.

Not for the first time, Rose wonders what the hell her mother is.

"Of course," the doctor says at last, quiet and sad. It is, perhaps, even more perturbing than the void swirling around her. Rose does not think she has ever heard her mother so...so...She stops herself before she finishes the thought. "I merely wish to invite you to a meeting with...certain of your peers and their guardians. You know the ones I refer to."

Rose keeps her expression smooth. It doesn't hurt, she chants to herself. She doesn't matter, so it doesn't hurt. It never bothered me before when she didn't care - right up until it did. "Why."

"I have several significant pieces of information to share with you all, pertinent not only to the current affair with the Midnight Crew but also with...your origins," Rue says, lifting her head. A note of determination enters her voice, and some of that old, mocking confidence straightens her posture. She clearly thinks she is gaining ground, or she has simply grown tired of maintaining whatever charade of pathetic penance she's been trying to fool Rose with. "However, it would be inadvisable to speak of such matters in public. Anyone could be listening in. I can't disclose everything here -"

"No, you never can." Rose bites off the rest of the words that threaten to boil over, drawing blood from her lower lip that she sucks away impatiently. "Goodbye, Mother."

"I will defend you, Rose," Rue says, her voice dropping abruptly to a low note. "Even if - even if you do not wish to attend such a get-together, I will share this information with you. I would just...like to tell you. In person. So that, perhaps, I could convince you that I am in earnest. I can never repair the damage I've done, but I wish to reconcile. I am...selfish that way." She laughs, spreading out her hands with her palms up in supplication, and the laugh is a bitter thing, nothing like the banal, simpering titter that has always been Rue Lalonde's trademark. "More. I wish to atone. After all, a mother must always do what is best for her children - mustn't she?"

Rose seizes Terezi's hand, and snaps her fingers, and stops thinking about Rue Lalonde. Really. She reaches in mentally and stomps the flowing tendrils of Rue-related thought until they lie
limp, slices them off at the root, and stuffs them back into the half-empty storage container of her brain. The pain is too raw and fresh to deal with now and it hurts - she cannot - she just -

She follows the blaze of light in her vision that indicates where the greatest threat in the city is - at the moment, Scourge is a pyre of golden light. Justice teeters when they land, unused to teleportation, and Seer absentmindedly steadies the blind troll as she surveys where her spell has set them down.

The Macy's is dark and empty. Seer looks up, and is dazed for a moment by the shift in perspective as she stares at the spiraling blues and golds and reds of the glass mosaic that patterns the inside curves of the doomed roof with twining vines and interlocking circles. They stand in the center of a clear atrium, with the rooms full of mannequins and goods sealed off by security grilles on all sides, and the multiple floors of the massive former Marshall's Field building stretch up above them to frame the roof mosaic in neat rectangles.

Her view of the magnificent craftsmanship is disrupted without warning as a black and blue figure launches herself from the cast iron railing of the fifth floor with a whoop. The Indigo Scourge hooks an arm on one of the two yellow-and-orange glass pendant lamps hanging from the dome and swings recklessly through the air on the end of the flimsy light fixture. When she lets go, Seer's heart leaps into her throat, and Justice lets out a strangled cry that edges closer to shock than to anger. Letting out a merry laugh, Scourge sails through the air and slams with a clang into the railing of the floor beneath, opposite the side from which she jumped. She kicks a leg over the railing and vanishes onto that floor, still cackling hysterically.

The Sylph does not bother with testing her weight on the light fixture. A grunt echoes through the atrium as a green and black figure legs it over the railing and jumps the entire atrium with a single powerful leap. She even clears the railing on the other side.

Never let it be said that working nights as a rooftop leaping super hero doesn't do wonders for one's long jumping capabilities.

"I don't know about you, but that was the weirdest thing I've smelled all night," Justice comments. She sounds...queerly calm. Seer honestly would have expected the sight - well, smell - of the Scourge to undo at least some of the Seer's therapy, but Justice just lets a corner of her mouth tilt down, a half frown.

Seer does not realize that she has not let go of Justice's hand until the troll clamps down, hard enough that Seer's bones creak and shift under her skin as her thumb and pinkie are forced together.

Oops. Does hand holding count as an act of pacification? She really needs to consult John about this.

"Pine! Pine and plaid!" Justice hisses, her nose in the air as she turns from side to side, yanking Seer around by the hand. "That blasted limeblood has been here! I know that soothing stench anywhere!"

"Limeblood?" Seer repeats. "Lime, as in Profiler Graham?"

"Yes! Him!" Justice squeezes Seer's hand again. But her agitation is at least better than her blind rage. "Eurgh! It reeks of nice, warm snuggles in here! How dare he!"

Seer's mind is on a completely different track, now. "I require his autograph."

"Absolutely not, Seer! No time to waste! We're grabbing Vriska and Sylph and then we are out of here!" Justice snaps her claws, cups a hand around her mouth, and shouts, "YO, AMAZING INSUFFERABLE SPIDERBITCH! MOVE IT OR LOSE IT!"

The crashing echoing down from the floors above abruptly ceases. There is a scuffle, a loud yelp,
and then the Scourge appears at the third floor balcony, her hair a wild tangle around her face. "WHAT DID YOU CALL ME, YOU HIGHFALUTIN UPTIGHT LAW-ABIDING JACKASS?"

Seer reintroduces her palm to her face. Caliginous flirting, honestly.

"YOU SMELL LIKE A SPIDER DROWNING IN A BLUEBERRY SMOOTHIE - AND I HATE BLUEBERRIES, SO MOVE YOUR ASS!"

The Indigo Scourge shrieks with scandalized outrage. "WELL, YOU WEREN'T COMPLAINING LAST NI-"

The Malachite Sylph charges up to the railing and roundhouse kicks her in the head. Scourge jolts forward, bug-eyed with surprise - and then both eyes roll back in their sockets. "I appreciate the assistance, Justice," Sylph calls down in a more reasonable volume, seizing Scourge by the collar before the ceruleanblood can topple over the railing. "She is quite swift. But I only needed to lay claws on her one more time. Thank you."

Justice scratches the back of her head. "Well, I was just trying to piss her off until she came down where I could reach her - but heck, works for me." She grimaces. "We're probably better off if I'm not the one fighting her, anyway…that kind of thing tends to escalate."

"I can imagine." Sylph slings the unconscious ceruleanblood over her shoulder, and peers over the railing herself, clearly judging the distance from her floor to the atrium. "We will be fixing that."

Justice groans. Seer finally remembers to extract her hand from the troll's iron grip as the Sylph drops through the air and falls to the ground before them in a crouch. "Will Graham is here," Seer informs her partner, very aware that she is vibrating with the kind of nervous tension generated when one is within a few city blocks of a particularly adored childhood idol. "It will only take a moment -"

Sylph adjusts the body on her shoulder, digs into a pocket, and passes Seer a much crumpled slip of paper. "Already done."

Rose unfolds the note with shaking hands, reads the paragraph of scribbled iridescent lime green text on the paper, finds the classic, scratchy loops of a signature -

And beams.

Dawn burns in the east. Closer to Rose, within the confines of their crowded hotel rooms, the wards and disorientation spells she has cast on the wall burn almost as brightly, a tightly woven net that will prevent anyone from coming near their hideout until they are ready to evacuate Vriska and Terezi to Sollux's side of the border.

Terezi had scoffed and cracked sick jokes while changing into the clothes Kanaya had brought along for the new arrivals; the tealblood worked twice as hard to fill the silence left by Vriska's slumber, skittish and jittery but trying to conceal it, but now she has quieted. They all have. Rose's suspicions that neither Justice nor Scourge slept much these past few days, too busy running riot through the city streets (and if they ended up near a bed or a 'coon at all, opting to spend their time presumably tearing into each other as kismeses are wont to do), are confirmed when Terezi splays out on the couch in the tiny living room and within seconds passes out, her raucous snores filling the room without sopor slime to muffle them.

Kanaya keeps a vigil over Vriska in the respite block proper, the sliding door between the two rooms half shut. From where she sits in the armchair by the coffee table, keeping a similar eye on Terezi,
Rose can see Kanaya sitting in her chair by the side of the recooperacoon, sewing with her head bowed as she works to adjust the fit of the pants brought over for the ceruleanblood. However, Kanaya’s claws have ceased their deft motions, and her head had tilted back ever so slightly to rest crookedly against the back of the seat, and Rose takes a moment to tiptoe into the bedroom, drape a blanket over her sleeping lover, and remove the clutched needle and fabric from her claws to set them on the table. They all need sleep, really, after a night as long as this one has been.

But someone must keep watch, must ensure that Vriska does not awaken and pitch a fit, and possibly reignite Terezi's fury with inflammatory remarks. Until Sollux contacts them, they have to remain in this blasted hotel room and wait on his go-ahead. And so Rose makes herself comfortable in her seat, perching with her legs bent and her feet tucked onto seat beside her as she draws her phone out from her bag. If she cannot sleep, regardless of how heavy and dry her eyes feel and how comfortable her change of clothes feels after hours spent in a soggy, poorly dried costume, she may at least check in with John.

Rose hesitates, then reaches down and removes a plain white cue ball from the duffle bag as well. She has yet to mention the thing to Kanaya - hasn't really had the time. But she may be able to explore its secrets more thoroughly in these quiet hours they have before they need to move.

She does not know where her mother ended up. She chides herself for thinking of Rue Lalonde at all. *I could care less about that woman's whereabouts, as long as she stays away from me.*

The protestation sounds weak, even in the privacy of her own mind.

To her surprise, when she switches on the phone there are already at least ten messages outstanding. It is early still, and even earlier in Seattle, and Rose can't think of why John would be texting her during the hours when he is generally sleeping unless there is yet another crisis. They have moved past the point where they need to reassure each other by staying in almost non-stop contact, and Rose thinks that a tentative trust has been restored between them. The longer she goes without another grimdark relapse and manages to keep up her end of the line of communication between the two of them, the more she thinks she and John have regained their old friendship. The desperate, clingy tang of a relationship born of mutual panic and horror would never have sat well between them.

But what on earth could have gone wrong now? True, Jade is apparently prophesying some ludicrous apocalypse, but she still seemed like a perfectly nice girl and John hasn’t complained about any doomsday ramblings yet. Could something else have upset John already?

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 05:14:30 --
EB: rose oh my god!
EB: rose rose rose!
EB: oh no you're still working aren't you!
EB: crap!
EB: ohhh man…
EB: i'm freaking out rose!
EB: karkat is hurt and
EB: i don't even know where to start!
EB: this is literally worse than con air!
EB: where in the scenario where i am nicolas cage
EB: and karkat is my diabetic best friend/prison cellmate played by mykelti williamson
EB: and i'm supposed to protect him and keep him safe and get him insulin shots
EB: all while concealing my secret that i have been paroled from the prisoners around me
EB: but then he gets shot anyway just because he's my friend and i'm totally useless and i can't do anything to help him -
EB: oh god oh god oh god!
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has joined the chat! --
TT: John, John, slow down.
TT: What are you saying? Has Karkat been shot?
EB: worse!
TT: Oh my god.
TT: Wait, is being beaten up worse than being sho-
EB: but worse!
EB: he's actually hemogoblin!
TT: What.
EB: please tell me you didn't know and/or suspect this kind of thing rose because i am freaking out here!
TT: I… You never gave any such impression in any of our conversations, and I have never communicated with Karkat myself - I never really speculated about hero identities -
TT: You're positive?
EB: he was hurt so bad and droog unmasked him while he was unconscious!
EB: the lowest of tactics!

Well.

This officially meets the criteria for a 'royal clusterfuck.'

Rose bends over her phone, and begins to type. Cradled in the hollow space between the arches of her socked feet, the cue ball sits.

And it waits.

---

Dave ends up in charge of obtaining tacos.

This is both awesome and an ordeal. It gets him out of the apartment for the first time in ages, which is a massive plus. Like, sign him up for the food gathering party; he is so down with foraging for sustenance right now. Between BQ's simpering and hedging and Bro's impenetrable silence, the two of them are going to bluff Dave out of house and home. The atmosphere in the living room is downright toxic.

But obtaining tacos means communicating with the cashier behind the counter. Said esteemed and much beloved taco salesman does not know sign language and no way is Dave doing something as uncool as handing the guy a laundry list of tacos on a piece of paper. That shit ain't right.

So he ends up handing the list to Oriole instead. 'Make me proud, man,' he scribbles at the bottom. Oriole rolls his eyes at him. "This is incredibly stupid," he says, but he clutches the list, rereads it three times, and then stuffs his claws in his pockets while they slouch up to the counter together. Strider solidarity demands Dave accompany the newest clan member on such a momentous occasion. It's out of an ironic sense of moral support, okay? When the cashier's eyebrows shoot for the sky and he opens a mouth to comment on the fact that an orange dude has approached the till, Dave raises an eyebrow right back.

His eyebrow game is stronger. "How may I...help you?" the cashier says weakly, lowering his eyebrows right the fuck down back into their rightful place.

Oriole glances down at the list before crumpling it up in a fist again. "If you made these names up, I
swear to god," he mutters to Dave. Then he flashes an intense, absolutely terrifying grin at the cashier and says, "We need three Dirty Sanchez's, two Trailer Parks, one Fried Avocado, two Crossroads, an Independent, and one of whatever the fuck a Mr. Orange is." He shoots another look at Dave as he says the last one. Dave coughs into his sleeve, pretending to give serious scholarly contemplation to the baby devil mascot photoshopped into a piece of modern art that hangs on the wall over the soda machine. "Yeah. All of that. To go."

"Will do," the cashier says, but Dave is spacing out again. He has a healthy appreciation for this particular taco place. It strikes just the right chord of irony in his soul, from the mildly bizarre taco names to the abominably industrial decor. He always dresses like a hipster vagrant when he comes here just to mock the college crowd that surfaces in ravenous packs around meal times. Right now he's rocking skinny corduroys, a black peacoat trimmed with white, and a white scarf that it is way too warm outside for but fuck it, it brings the whole outfit together and Dave has never been unwilling to suffer for purely ironic fashion in the unseasonable Houston heat. Oriole looks like a grey and orange hobo in comparison, because the only coat in the house large enough to properly cover those fucking wings was a shapeless wreck Dave doesn't remember making the mistake of buying.

Fuck. Look. The point is, Dave ends up wandering over to the window, poking at his stab wound through the bandages, and surveying the students with their textbooks from a corner table. Oriole shuffles after him a moment later, hooking the tag with their order number on the stand in the center of the table before collapsing into a seat. "These tacos had better be worth it." He scratches at his cheek and his sleeve rides up a little so that a bright lemon yellow feather at his wrist puffs up. "Like. I think I'm getting paranoid. Look at me, I'm gonna start to fucking molting or some shit all over this fucking taco stand. Feels like I'm being watched."

Dave flips out his phone with a roll of his eyes and starts typing. The cheap flip phone Oriole picked up on the way here doesn't have Pesterchum or internet access or anything, so the best Dave can do is blow up his phone with old school text messages. The service is so slow that half the time Dave just turns his phone around so Oriole can read right off the screen.

DS: hate to break it to you man but everyone for miles is eyeballing you

DS: do you know why

DS: because youre with me and between the two of us weve pretty much maxed out this city's charisma gambit

DS: our animal magnetism is off the chain mostly because youre literally part bird but

DS: you know

DS: in a nonliteral way

DS: shouldnt you be used to this by now

"Okay. Yeah, totally. We are fucking awesome and all that. But being kidnapped and held hostage for days does things to a man," Oriole hisses, taking a napkin from the dispenser and shredding it into ragged strips. He starts laying them down in cross crossing layers, the kind of incessant, obsessive busywork that Dave recognizes because he does the same thing with turntable mixing. "Is it even smart for either of us to be outside the apartment with a bunch of asshat thugs waiting to jump our bones?"

Dave shrugs.
DS: i can handle them obvi
DS: and dont worry well put you through a training montage soon enough
DS: enroll you in the strider school of shitty swordsman ship
DS: it will be hella sweet
DS: sweeter than a goddamn baby rabbit in a tiny widdle sweater eating little cookies and shitting sugary pastel rainbow turds all over the place
DS: so fucking sweet

He then flicks a sugar packet at Oriole's forehead. It smacks him right between his eyes. Hell yes. He's still got it with the pseudo-throwing starkind. God, he hasn't practiced with that specibus in forever.

"Your metaphors are fucked up, man," the irritable asshole says sourly, picking up the sugar packet. He contemplates it, eyeballs Dave as though considering retaliation, and then adds it to the shredded napkin braid. He takes the entire sugar container and starts stacking the packets in two towers on top of the napkin, all with a straight face that does Dave proud. "Also yeah, I'm sure you walking around Midtown armed is doing wonders for our incogmoxie. Such subtle. Very discreet."

Dave shrugs again. So what if he's got two shitty-ass swords strapped across his back? No one has ever bothered him about it before. Except, you know, the police, but he's pretty sure that they don't count because he still believes that upon graduation from the academy all members of the Houston police department are issued a regulation standard cast iron pole and told to shove it up their ass.

Besides, the local college has its own police department that patrols the immediate area, and they give negative ten fucks about dealing with anything other than noise complaints and traffic citations. He's totally in the clear.

Something flickers in the air over Oriole's head. Dave is halfway to zoning out again, so it takes him a full five seconds to do a double take. A white cue ball bobs in the air, spinning on its axis like a tiny planet. When it stops, the back of Dave's neck crawls like someone is staring him down and refuses to look away.

DS: dude
DS: dont move theres a creepyass spying ball right on top of you

Oriole leans in to read that, and the cue ball follows him, whirling around before locking on the two of them again.

Oh, fuck. Dave seizes the salt shaker off the table and whips it overhand at the cue ball. In hindsight, not his brightest moment, because the quick movement rips his side around so abruptly he almost passes out from the pain, but tossing swords at the thing hasn't worked in the past. The glass shaker pings off the smooth surface of the cue ball with an audible, porcelain crack, and ricochets off toward the ceiling. Oriole flinches and covers his head at the sound, shooting a glance up.

DS: guy

Everyone else in the restaurant looks up too, but Dave shrugs that off. Seriously, fuck those guys, he's more concerned with the unkillable spy ghost ball. Instead of dicking around with the pepper shaker and repeating the cycle of stupidity, he freezes time and flashsteps onto the table, snatching the cue ball out of the air. His stitches shriek out a warning, Time starts again while he's still on the table, so he looks like a table-scaling douchewad, but whatever. He's done weirder in his life.
Down and to the right, Oriole facepalms. "God, I can't fucking take you anywhere, can I?"

'I got it, didn't I?' Dave signs back, before pressing a hand to his side and falling back into his chair with a pained huff. The pain abates after a good twenty seconds, and he can focus enough to inspect his sweet loot.

For a fucked up ghost thing that he's supposed to be trying to blow up, the cue ball is surprisingly heavy in his palm, but just as cold as he expected, like a chunk of ice. It's only natural that such a creepy fucking thing would be cold enough to make his skin crawl. He's tempting to set it in the middle of the table and eyeball it from a safer distance, but it could vanish at any moment, so he brings it closer to his shades, squinting, and sees...

...Nothing. It's just a stupid cue ball, after all. He turns it over, one eye twitching, but can't find any scratch marks or indents that would indicate this thing has a camera or anything like that concealed inside its impenetrable ivory curves.

So why does it still feel like he's being watched?

"Shit. Shit." Oriole's fingers dig into his arm, forcing the cue ball down, and Dave looks up, irritated until he sees the horror on the orange version of his face. Oriole has turned a sickly, pale carrot orange, and Dave tracks his gaze through the window to the street beyond.

It takes him a second. Then he picks out the first black suit crossing the intersection outside the restaurant, and all thoughts of smashing the cue ball with a hammer, John style, go flying out of his head. "Shiiiit," he says on reflex, but it comes out a wheezy "Shhhhhhh," as he yanks Oriole by the collar and drags them both under the table.

"I told you we shouldn't have been wandering around like this. Shit!" Oriole lets go of Dave's arm to seize the hood of his borrowed jacket and fling it forward over his face. They're both grown ass teenagers, so they don't exactly fit under the table all the way, and Dave ends up with a faceful of feather asshole elbow and his legs sticking half out into the aisle. "Fuck, how are we going to get out of here?"

The violent way, of course, Dave thinks, shrugging.

Just then, the woman at the table next to them leans forward and taps Oriole on the shoulder. Or the wing. It's hard to tell from this angle, but Oriole flinches away, looking alarmed, so his bet is on accidental wing groping. "Are y'all both alright?"

"Peachy keen," Oriole deadpans, before whipping his head back around toward Dave, eyes blazing. "I don't want to be kidnapped again, jackass."

Dave rolls his eyes so hard they nearly achieve escape velocity, and plants his foot on Oriole's shoulder to propel himself to the other side of the table. He squints out at the street from their new hiding place to try to see where the Crew goons ended up, but he can't see shit through the forest of table legs and chairs on the outside patio.

"Kidnapped again," the woman repeats, sounding vaguely scandalized in that way only someone from probably El Paso can truly manage. "Good lord, what on earth -"

Dave reaches up, feels around for the basket of food on the woman's table, and offers her one of her own chips, signing, 'Hush now lady. No words, only chips and salsa.'

She takes the chip bemusedly, lack of comprehension all over her face, but she also stops talking so mission fucking accomplished.
A bell chimes as the door to the restaurant swings open, and Dave spies at least three pairs of suit pants getting into the line to order at the counter. He can't see any faces from here, though. "They're coming in," Oriole says, yanking Dave's hand back down. He looks downright panicky by now, eyes wide and his face dead white. The effect is only heightened by the way his hair feathers have started to bristle and poof up around the edges of his hood in an orange halo. "What do we do?"

Dave starts reaches up, retrieves his phone from their table, and starts texting again.

DS: relax well just go back in time and sneak out before they even arrive

DS: classic loop just add time travel powers

Oriole sags with relief. "Awesome. Sweet. I am all for that plan. Let's go."

Dave grimaces. There's just one problem.

DS: the tacos aren't here yet

Oriole's incandescent glare could put a nuclear reactor to shame. "I am not getting kidnapped for the sake of your tacos."

DS: dude

DS: have you ever had these tacos

DS: one does not leave a taco behind

Oriole facepalms. "Unbelievable. Unbelievable. I will beat you over the head with your own damn sword, you cocky cock -"

"Um, order number 41? Is that you down there?"

Both of them look up at the same time. A pretty girl with blond curls in a long ponytail tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, balancing a massive brown paper bag full of tacos on her hip. Dave is suddenly very conscious of the fact that he is hugging his knees and has an orange bird kid muttering about cocks and practically kneeing him in the groin.

Without context this all looks...hella awk.

He flips her a thumbs up.

Hey, it always works for Bro, right?

"...I'll just leave your order here," the waitress says, with the tact of a woman who deals with college students on a daily basis, and then she backs away, leaving their taco bounty next to the stand, pocketing the ticket with their order number on it. The smell of tortillas, poblano sauce, and fried things hits Dave's stomach so hard he almost forgets that they're still mid-crisis. Shit son, tacos are a divinely inspired gift to mortals. Like, damn. He starts to drool a little, but that is so not cool, and he catches himself before the entire restaurant is introduced to his saliva, clamping his jaw shut.

"There they are!"

Both boys jolt, and whirl around. A troll in a shabby black suit has leaned around the partition between the cashier and the rest of the restaurant, one claw pointing toward the two asshats sitting on the floor. Dave chokes out broken fragments of swear words. He and Oriole have the same idea, reaching out at the same time to mutually haul each other up onto their feet. Dave locks his hand on
Oriole's shoulder, and is just reaching out for the tacos when -

"Ooof!"

A woman in a black suit with her skirt slit up the side vaults over the partition and tackles Oriole like a goddamn football player. Dave flails and stumbles backward against the wall, stunned, while the woman eating beside them screams and covers her face. The Crew member and Oriole, meanwhile, topple over backwards onto their table.

Right on top of the tacos.

Dave claps both hands to his face, his mouth a silent 'o' of horror. Oriole sums it up better when he notices what the woman has done, squirming under her grip. The taco bag gives a dying squish, the paper crackling. "Not cool!"

Dave pulls himself together and pauses time. He has to do it twice, because he wastes the first second staring in renewed dismay at the smashed remains of their tacos, and only on the second try does he grab the Crew member with both hands and shove her off Oriole. He takes in the scene around them next, trying to assess just how the hell they're going to rescue this situation.

Because by God, they are not leaving this restaurant without replacement tacos.

"Found you!" the woman says, catching herself before she hits the ground by grabbing the back of a man's chair. Everyone is staring at them by now. The other two Crew members, the greenblooded troll and a man with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, edge around to cover the exits, but make no move to come closer. The Crew woman fixes crazy eyes on Dave and laughs. "You're coming with us, kid!"

'How about no,' Dave thinks, drawing a sword and leveling it at her. Oriole has to roll off the table and onto his feet to get out of the way, and while the back of his jacket has been spared the worst of the taco carnage, the sight of the mashed remains of their feast just riles Dave's righteous fury all the more.

"And the bird one, too," the woman cackles. "Crowbar is gonna be so happy to see you again, Tweety!"

"Tweety," Oriole repeats, his voice totally flat. "Dave, give me a sword."

'Yeah no. You haven't had your training montage yet. Do you even have bladekind training?'

"You just signed 'no' at me, didn't you."

'Yep."

"Goddammit."

"If you just come quietly," the woman says, still grinning with an edge of madness, "we even won't have to break your mutant friend's other wing!"

Dave gives up trying to strategize. They don't have time to text some kind of plan, anyway. He resorts to shitty ass charades instead, digging his elbow into Oriole's side and jabbing a finger at the greenblood, then gesturing to himself and pointing at Crazy and Sleeves with two fingers. *You take that asshole, I'll take these two.*

Oriole holds out a hand and makes grabby motions like he still thinks he can get a sword.
Dave just raises an eyebrow at him.

"Dick."

With that pithy one-liner, Oriole rips off his coat with a flourish and tosses the billowing, oversized article of clothing over Crazy's head. Then, his good wing flaring out to its full extent, he darts sideways toward the front entrance where the greenblood is crouched, letting loose a battle screech that sounds more bird than human. Everyone else in the restaurant just scramble to get out of the way; more than a few whip out their phones and start taking video instead of clearing the goddamn battle zone.

Dave puts his back to the wall so that he still has a view on where Oriole is, and squares off against Crazy and Sleeves. Crazy has to fight off the huge coat, screaming expletives at him, but Sleeves narrows his eyes and - draws a sword.

Well, this shit just got interesting. Dave pauses time and kicks Crazy in the chest so she lands on a group of squealing college kids in a booth, and then swivels to parry Sleeves's first strike.

"Can you remake that order?!" Oriole bawls at the man behind the counter. He seizes a container of lemon wedges from the drink station and makes a good faith effort at bashing the green-eyed troll's face with it.

"Yes! Just stop damaging our property!" the cashier yells back. Then he yelps and is forced to duck as a rogue chair ricochets off the wall and flies at his face. "Give us five more minutes!" The waitress who brought them the ill-fated taco bag ducks back into the kitchen, yelling something unintelligible but authoritative that sets the entire kitchen into motion before the door swings shut again.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Oriole rips the lid off the container, and dumps it out over the troll's head. The lemons bounce off his blunt horns, but the accumulated lemon juice of a day's worth of restocking must reach the troll's eyes because he lets out a chittering shriek of pain and claws at them, staggering away from Oriole. "These had better be damn good tacos, Dave!"

'They are fucking glorious,' he thinks about signing, but no one would be able to read it anyway in the heat of battle. Instead, he flashsteps around Sleeves, smirking at the man's amateurish technique. Bladekinds are rare for a reason, and this guy is heavy handed and slow.

But then Dave stumbles to a halt and curses at the flare of pain in his side, and his attempt to disarm Sleeves flies wild, opening up a cut along the man's wrist. Why did he convince himself that getting stabbed was a good idea again? When was letting Bro fucking impale him ever a good plan? He powers through the pain as his stitches tug and ooze blood, and pauses time to center himself before nailing Sleeves's wrist again. This time, the man's flimsy grip on the specibus gives, and the sword clatters away across the floor, landing by the feet of some bystanders.

He flinches from the pain when he shouldn't, though, and gets blindsided by Crazy's next hurtling tackle. She slams him up against the wall, and it's around then that Dave catches on. She's not going to draw a weapon because she's using some kind of tacklekind, the kind of training you only see in hulking football players and fucking sumo wrestlers - and it fucking hurts.

And of course, with the worst possible timing, Dave feels his phone vibrate in his pocket. He would normally ignore that, because all incoming Pesterchum messages and texts have the same alert, but then the My Little Pony's theme song starts blaring from his pocket like hell itself has channeled itself through his phone.

Bro. Gritting his teeth, Dave slashes at Crazy's stomach and stomps on her toes, sliding out from her
hold in a flashstep while she's still paused mid-snarl and Sleeves has dived for his sword.

The ungodly song continues for a good three seconds after Dave hastens to unlock his phone, causing him to seriously fear that his phone has broken in the worst way possible and that he'll be subjected to this horror for the rest of his conceivable existence. Then he realizes the sound is coming from Oriole's pocket, and it cuts out when bird-him finishes beating the shit out of the greenblood with a napkin dispenser and flips out his phone, looking harassed as he reads the screen.

TT: okay you little shits
TT: you should have been back two minutes ago
TT: Dave you have taco retrieval down to a science
TT: who did you piss off now
TG: no one omg stop jumping to conclusions
TG: dude we have like three dudes in suits all up on our dicks
TG: shut up no we dont play it cool

The greenblood throws the napkin dispenser back at Oriole. When the bird kid ducks, wing flaring again, the troll jabs at him with a canekind in the middle of his chest. The impact startles him, and Dave goes to call out a warning except oh fucking wait, and by the time he gestures out a warning, Oriole is too distracted to notice the troll setting him up for a fall. Oriole grabs a metal pronged order ticket stand from the table and brings it around like a baseball bat, but the troll sweeps his feet out from under him.

Maybe the wings normally compensate for his balance, but it doesn’t work with one wing out of commission. With an irate bird shriek, Oriole trips backwards and catches himself on his elbows and wing, his head slamming back against the drink machine. The troll jumps him, silent, and shoves his cane up under Oriole's chin, forcing the kid's head back until it hits a soda dispenser and Diet Coke starts gushing out everywhere.

Dave is distracted shortly after when Crazy whirls and tries to charge him again. It helps that she yells when she tackles, so he hears her coming this time. He sidesteps her and sticks out his foot, smirking crookedly when she trips over it and collides headlong with the partition between the cashier and the tables.

TT: oh for fuck's sake
TG: nothing is wrong go back to your weird alien courtship thing
TT: i do not have time for your dicking around Dave

When the troll eases off the pressure on the canekind, Oriole writhes and bats him off with a stroke of his wing. He sits up, sputtering, his hair sticky with soda and his expression absolutely livid. "Caw caw, motherfucker!" he growls, seizing the troll by the shoulders and headbutting him right in the nose.

Headbutting a troll is basically the opposite of a thing that any normal human should do, for obvious reasons. Like a smart car hitting a semi truck or a wall meeting a wrecking ball, it's just always going to end badly. But maybe Oriole has some kind of super bird skull, or he manages to avoid all the reinforced bone spurs trolls have in their forehead to help support their horns, because it works. The troll sinks to his knees, and this time, when Oriole bashes him repeatedly with a container full of pale green avocado sauce, he stays down.

Dave deals with Sleeves, who has finally retrieved his sword. He plants a foot in the small of Crazy's back where she's sprawled out on the floor, and she yells as he uses her as a spring board to jump on
a table. He launches himself forward at Sleeves and opens up four shallow cuts on the man before time starts again. Dave lands in a crouch on the floor, sword still at the ready. There is a pause as Sleeves checks himself, clearly confused by the fact that he's not in a world of pain, but Dave just waits for it.

When the man turns and steps back into a guard, his pants fall down around his ankles - the belt holding them up at his waist was neatly snipped into pieces by Dave's strike. "Fuck," Sleeves bites out, going crosseyed as he shuffles back out of Dave's range to try and yank up his pants.

"Your order is ready!" the cashier screams.

TG: hang on how are you even messaging me on this
got this phone doesn't even have Pesterchum installed what the hell
TT: i have my ways
TT: now seriously do i need to come down there and rescue your skinny asses
TG: no i've got this

Crazy leaps off a table and lands on Dave's shoulders, beating at his head with her fists. 'Retrieve the goods,' Dave signs at Oriole in the most basic way possible - by pointing frantically at the new bag of tacos on the counter and shaking his head 'no' when the bird kid makes an aborted attempt to step forward and help. Then he raises his sword and starts waving over his head, trying to batter the woman's hands away from his face. She gets in a lucky hit and manages to knock his shades halfway off his nose, and Dave freaks, ramming backwards against the wall in his agitation.

But, of course, instead of obeying simple charade commands, Oriole walks to the counter where the cashier is cowering, takes out his phone, and starts texting away. Then, with the deliberate intent of someone who's not even trying to be discreet, he raises the phone and starts taking pictures of the fight.

He's going to murder that guy.

TG: i don't think he's got this
TT: do i need to be concerned
TT: holy mother of god and all her wiseass inbred nephews
TT: this is an embarrassment

Sleeves gives up on his pants and kicks them off, ruined belt and all, which means Dave's one on one with Crazy is almost up. And Oriole is still documenting this shit show.

So Dave gets his shit together. Or at least, future-him does. The hilt of a familiar bladekind comes down on the back of Sleeves's head, just when the man straightens up. A second Dave stands over the unconscious man and gives Dave a nod, tossing his broken sword from one hand to the other.

Dave drops his sword on the ground, reaches up with both hands, and bends forward, flinging the Crew woman off his back. She lands on her feet and scrabbles at his jacket to try to shove him around again. There is a distinct, metallic crunch as one of her feet hits the bladekind right at the shitty weak point and snaps it in two.

So Dave punches her in the eye.

He's got no official fistkind, so it's an absolutely shitty punch. But Bro's training regimen had some basic hand to hand training, so Dave hits hard enough that she stumbles back. He retrieves his sword, kicking the broken blade away from any prying hands, and takes a page out of future-Dave's book.
by punting Crazy between the eyes with the hilt.

She shoves him, and his side jars against a table which *shitfuckfirkifkrricker fuck!* Dave doubles over, and while he fights back the bursts of white hot pain ringing behind his eyes, future-him finally picks up the slack and whacks Crazy in the chin, whipping her head around to the side. This time she goes down and stays there.

TG: there see i have got this
TG: hey feathery asshole put the phone down and grab our tacos
TT: five more minutes or i bring the queen with me
TG: oh god please no
TG: shed never let me live it down

During all that chaos, it has taken Dave this long to realize he's lost track of the cue ball. He'd dropped it - somewhere. Probably around when they took refuge under the table to try to hide from the Crew. So it's with a certain wary surprise when Dave turns his head to the side and sees the cue ball lying on the ground beneath the table to his right. He's already bent over with the raw agony in his side, so he just kind of slumps the rest of the way onto his knees and grabs the cue ball. The cold chill sinks into his hand immediately, as though it never left.

So creepy.

'One minute back,' future him is signing when he looks up. Dave snorts, because obviously, and then shoves the cue ball into the pocket of his coat for safe keeping. Focusing around the pain from his stab wound - probably bruised, but possibly reopened - he twists time backwards.

Things always run more smoothly with the benefit of applied hindsight. Keeping his movements to a minimum, Dave runs through all the actions he just witnessed himself perform, and then hobbles over to the cashier's counter where Oriole is waiting. "I will never get used to the whole time thing," he says, shaking his head. Like the orange part-bird asshole has any room to talk. Glancing around one last time at the three unconscious Crew members laid out on the floor, Dave sighs and grips Oriole's shoulder. He raises a pointed eyebrow until the guy remembers to grab their tacos, and then Dave swallows around the throbbing ache in his throat to travel back in time again.

This time, he spins his mental clock back a good twenty minutes. Five minutes before past-Dave and past-Oriole are due to walk in, current Dave and Oriole walk out right past the cashier, who is too busy with the customer before them to even look up at the two people who just finished/will soon be annihilating his sales for the day. They put a block between them and the taco restaurant before really looking at each other. Dave's shades are still off-kilter, the buttons of his peacoat torn open by Crazy's last tackle, and his side feels like one open wound, while Oriole's wing and hair and hair-feathers are matted with sticky, tepid brown soda, his broken wing awkward and ruffled where it lies taped against his back.

"Dude," Oriole says, smirking.

Dave shoves his shades up before rolling his eyes. He has appearances to keep up, alright?

DS: lets just get back before everything goes to hell again

DS: bring the tacos padawan you shall have first pick for your deeds this day

"Oh hell yes."

And just to avert a potential crisis, Dave messages Bro. Because the last thing anyone wants is a
ninja puppeteer and a carapacian dame bursting into a taco restaurant five minutes late for the party.

TG: there mission accomplished
TG: everyone go the fuck home
TT: what the hell happened
TG: wait fuck
TG: ignore that
TT: hang on
TT: youve been dicking around with time havent you
TT: why would tacos require time travel
TT: so help me Dave, i will set off the pony alarm
TG: no oh jesus
TG: i fucked up i fucked up

Dave has a sneaking suspicion that he may have just inspired Bro's not-so-random texts about two minutes in the future.

God dammit.

"You guys have the most bizarre relationship," Oriole says, shaking his head. He runs his claws through his hair and frowns at the scummy soda that comes off on his hands. "Jesus fuck, I need a shower." They start walking again. There are sirens in the distance, but they're so close to the medical center that for all Dave knows it's just an ambulance and not the cops swooping in to fuck shit up.

DS: yeah well

DS: that’s unspoken ironic rooftop rapping ninja camaraderie for you i guess

DS: a lot of unprovoked puppet ass volleys and near death experiences in the name of training

DS: we used to have the most epic rap battles in paradox space but then uh

DS: look just be careful trying to go to the bathroom at night man the shit he pulls is fucked up

"...Fuck man, do I even want to know?"

DS: his custodial instincts have two settings which boil down to momma bear defending her young and oh lets toss babies off the roofs of thirteen story building the one that survives is worthy of my tutelage how could this possibly go wrong

DS: but seriously

DS: blenders are meant to stay in the kitchen lets just leave it at that

"I knew I didn't want to know," Oriole says gloomily. With that, his wing arcs out and huddles around Dave's shoulder, yanking him into a weird wing hug that stops them both in their tracks while Dave silently flails and tries to figure out what the hell is going on. He gets a mouthful of tangerine feather for his trouble, and Oriole slaps him heartily on the back with a free claw. "Poor traumatized other me. There, there. I am here. Like an angelic feathery guardian spirit animal. No blenders can hurt you now."

...His expression is too flat.
They reach the apartment without further incident. If this had been a taco run with Bro at the helm, they would have walked back in silence. Extreme parkour might have been involved. But Dave has a stab wound with ripped stitches and Oriole is flashing everyone with his giant wings, so they just take the Metro and call it a day.

'We went through hell for these tacos,' Dave signs the moment they're through the front door, huddling his shoulders as he follows Oriole into the kitchen. 'Hell.'

'I know. I have new pics for the photo album,' Bro fires back, holding up his cell phone between gloved fingers.

Oriole is a filthy fucking traitor but he's also the traitor who still has possession of the taco bag, so Dave refrains from taking vengeance. For now. After Oriole takes his tacos, Dave hoards two for himself and scurries away from the bag. He doubts he'll be able to see Bro when Bro takes his own tacos, but he knows to keep away from the danger zone when there is food to be claimed. Lil Cal is already lounging on the kitchen counter by the sink, its glazed blue eyes leering at the taco bag with the hunger of the damned.

"Taco?" Bro asks the carapacian on their couch. There is a stack of at least five empty tea cups on the table, and Dave decides not to question why they wouldn't reuse them because if there's one thing he's learned from BQ, it's to know when to pick his battles.

BQ: Oh, no. I'm quite alright.

BQ: Since we seem to be in a sharing mood, it would behoove you to know that carapacians are quite capable of subsisting on a purely liquid diet.

BQ: Food is superfluous.

Dave can't help it; he snorts. 'Wow. Of all the secrets I've ever wanted you to tell me. That's it. That's the one that makes it all worthwhile.' Dave pretends to wipe away a tear. 'It's okay. You don't have to say anymore. This revelation will sustain me for the rest of my life.'

BQ: Do not tempt me, Knight.

BQ: Helping you outright goes against everything in my nature. What little I have shared, I have done so only because this game has already been mutilated beyond recognition.

BQ: You should be honored by my consideration.

Yeah, yeah, Dave thinks, making a beeline for his room. After an aborted attempt to make the BQ share some of her information in front of Dave resulted in her clamming right the fuck up, as though silenced by an instinct she couldn't control, Bro had banished Dave from the couch of interrogation. Maybe Bro is having more luck tackling her alone, but Dave is so over those two and their secretive shenanigans.

Oriole beats him back to his own room and takes over the bed. He is eating his first bite when Dave enters, and freezes, looking up at Dave with gleaming eyes.
"These tacos," Oriole says simply, "are the ambrosia of the gods."

DS: hell yeah they are

"I'm gonna fucking cry."

DS: shit bro no

DS: be strong keep it together

Oriole lets out a croaking whistle that sounds distinctly like a crow, and tears into the taco. He hasn't even bothered to shower yet, he's so absorbed in the food.

Well, as long as he doesn't rub his soda hair on Dave's turntables, who cares. Rolling his shoulders, Dave sets his tacos on the desk and shrugs out of his coat. He doesn't remove the cue ball from the pocket, very aware that Bro's cameras are everywhere, and instead wads up the coat around the heavy weight of the mysterious object and chucks it under his bed to deal with later.

Yeah, yeah, two steps forward, one step back on the whole communication thing. But Dave can't seem to help it.

He then presses at his stab wound with careful fingers. There are splotches of drying blood all over the inside of his undershirt, but at least it's black so he'll be able to get most of it out without staining. The stitches themselves have stopped bleeding when he yanks off his shirt and the bandages to inspect them, but the stitched up wound is aggravated and reddened, puffy around the edges and bruised in a solid bar where he hit the table earlier.

The best he can do is apply more antiseptic with his lip clamped between his teeth and bandage it up again. Once that's done, he throws on a hoodie and slouches over to the computer desk to claim the spoils of taco war. The first bite of scrambled egg, fried chili, and guacamole nearly makes him tear up, so he mentally apologizes to Oriole for being a dick. These tacos are glorious and there is a damn good reason he refused to leave without them. Shoveling more taco into his mouth with one hand, struggling to keep all the toppings wrapped up in the flimsy tortilla, Dave uses the other hand to start his computer and start browsing.

But there's an open window on his computer that wasn't there when he and Oriole took off on their mission. Dave frowns and wonders if he zoned out at some point and missed it - that happens, sometimes - but then he reads the first few lines of fuchsia text, and his blood runs cold.

David,

I apologize for not contacting you sooner. I am afraid that I had to deal with some unexpected guests, and the time quite got away from me. I am sure you have never suffered from similar trouble, of course.

When you children came to us, as custodians we all mutually agreed to care for you all separately, and that is the only excuse I can give for not attempting to engage with you as a child. Nonetheless, ectobiologically speaking, you are my son, and I would not be adverse to establishing a line of communication between us so that we can get to know each other better.

As it happens, I have recently made a significant breakthrough. I know that you and my darling Rose have been seeking answers to several outstanding questions that neither I nor Ambrose could necessarily respond to. Whether you believe me or not, we two are simply not privy to all the secrets surrounding your birth and your powers. However, thanks to the efforts of a Querent, I now have the technology needed to discover exactly what Joanna Egbert tried and failed to share with us
before her untimely demise, and the ability to tell you all that you might wish to know.

I can tell you about the Game.

It would be best if I could share this with all four of you at once, naturally. I have contacted Samuel Egbert, but Ambrose is still quite cross with me over my recent failures and has not responded to my queries. If you are amenable, however, we could meet four days from now, at a location to be disclosed at a later point. Only say the word, and I would move heaven and earth for you and Rose.

Affectionately yours,

Doctor Rue Lalonde, Ph.D

...Oh, shit.

- He's still got Mom Lalonde's email open hours later. He's slumped down in his chair and hasn’t moved an inch, using his mouse to absently draw a shitty doodle of Hella Jeff in another window and refusing to let on that his gaze keeps darting back to reread the obnoxious fuchsia prose.

Oriole is passed the fuck out again on the bed, his wing feathers and hair ruffled by the faint, warm breeze that drifts in through the hole in the wall. Time has slowed to a protracted, sluggish crawl, one of those moments where, even to Dave’s impeccable sense of timing, everything feels slow and ten minutes of hardcore, mindless blog surfing feel like eighty seven fucking years dragging on and on. Dave chances a quick look at the living room, pausing time to see that BQ and Bro are still muttering to each other in some kind of weird, cagey cahoots, but doesn’t move his butt out of the chair.

I mean, like hell is he actually going to visit this crazy lady. That is not even on the itinerary for this evening. Or ever. He has so few fucks to left give about her and her weird agenda, he's going into fuck withdrawal. With a curtain drawn over the wall to block out the dying afternoon sun and the temperature perfectly stifling, he's halfway to napping himself. Motivation levels are at -10% and heading for a nosedive of epic proportions.

But before he can crash, he still has to consider forwarding this fresh bullshit to Rose. And that is not at all an appealing prospect, one that he keeps putting off by opening up new windows. He has three redundant Pesterchum tabs open, all of them in the same state of stagnant disuse. Jade and John have both been radio silent all day long, which is goddamn unnatural on so many levels, but Rose’s lit up chumhandle sticks in the corner of his eye like an afterimage from staring into the sun, mocking his procrastination.

Doctor Lalonde is more a mother figure to Rose than she ever has been to Dave, biological nonsense notwithstanding, but she has also apparently been even more of a fuckup on the whole ‘raising a kid’ front than Bro. And that’s saying something. Seriously, that takes talent. Bro’s idea of parenting involved gratuitous puppets and learning to mix sick beats before you can even walk, but at least he didn’t just cut and run after Dave hit puberty. Like, fucking hell, kudos to him for sticking around when he might have had any number of opportunities to set up shop as a robotic puppet/sword-obsessed ninja DJ with no asshat little brother to take care of.

But no, Mom Lalonde is one of those impossibly incompetent parents you see on shitty daytime talk shows like Doctor Phil (which Dave will never admit to having marathoned in the ninth grade, ever). You know, the ones who get so caught up in their work lives that they eat, breathe, and shit their latest quarterly report, and somehow forget they have children at home who might need little things like food and running water and emotional validation, and then act all surprised when they get called
out on national television in front of a live studio audience about their precious child setting Fluthulu loose on the other snot-nosed kids in their class and getting molested by intergalactic calamari with teeth.

...Okay, maybe that was a pretty specific example.

So under those circumstances, Rose might not be interested in ever dealing with her mom again, and Dave is completely in favor of that decision - but she also deserves to know that her custodifailure is up to new shenanigans, right? Right? That's a reasonable assumption to make.

Shit. Fuck it. Dave attaches the email to a Pesterchum message and sends it before he can talk himself out of it again.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 20:33:02 --
TG: yo heads up
TG: we have a situation
TT: I see. And what is "the sitch," brother mine?
TG: mothergothelintheclubgettingtipsy.txt
TT: …
TT: Ah.
TG: i repeat
TG: a situation
TT: I was not aware that Mother had made a new habit of actually keeping in contact with family members. How curious. Perhaps she likes you.
TG: what no
TG: ive barely spoken three words to her in my life
TG: this is first ive heard from her
TG: what do i do
TT: You are asking me? I assure you, Dave, I have never known how to handle our mother. A review of recent events should make it quite clear just how little we understood each other.

Well, he can't really argue with that logic, either. Any woman who thought leaving a teenage girl alone in a house with a hellaton of alcohol and instructions on how to summon tentabeasts from the netherworld clearly didn't understand the mind of a teenage girl, and vice versa.

TG: yeah but
TG: youre the headshrinker here
TG: lay down some of that psychic mojo for me
TG: give me a heads up tell me what im up against
TG: like should i even take this seriously
TG: or is she just bringing some mad maternal swagger to the table
TG: to test my worth in some weird crossbreed strilonde showdown
TG: like is this the equivalent of a faceful of puppet dong
TG: is what im asking
TG: or does she think im some gullible stooge who will walk into her creepy scientist trap
TG: should i just roll with it
TG: i need clarification dammit
TT: All of these are excellent questions. Particularly given the fact that she has recently made a similar overture to myself.
TG: what
TG: shes trying to get all motherly on you too
TG: that is so relevant to the sitch why did you not mention this before
TT: It is rather difficult to get a word in edgewise when you flip your shit so magnificently. You can
be quite eloquent when you hit your stride.
TG: so help me woman
TG: if that pun was deliberate
TG: i will grind the railing of this stairway to stupidity and kickflip off the handle of sanity
TT: One can only hope there will be a lavish puppet posterior conveniently positioned beneath the handle in time to break your fall.
TG: time
TG: did you just say time
TG: no oh jesus fuck no

All these puns just remind him of the nagging sense of anxiety drumming away in the back of his skull, that little ticking clock in his mind that he doesn't like to admit keeps a running timer on how long it's been since he last heard from John. He is not acting like some fucking needy tool who hangs onto John's every last word. He's just. You know. Very temporally aware. And it has been nearly eighteen hours, forty minutes, and thirteen seconds since John texted him yesterday, which is a whole new record for that kid. By now Dave would have usually initiated a full-on rap session in the kid's inbox to get his attention - a pesterspam of righteous beats to distract him from whatever weird shit John's brain gets up to when he doesn't talk to people - but he kind of lost the morning to tacos and the afternoon to dicking around on the internet.

He should probably message him. Make sure the poor kid doesn't waste away from lack of Strider in his life. See how the whole twin sister thing is playing out. He fires off a quick 'yo' and then refocuses on Rose's window, switching between the two every so often to fire off a new sick jams at John.

TT: Regardless.
TT: Yes, my mother has made another surprise appearance, and has in fact threatened to sit me down and give me a stern talking to. Allegations have been made implying that she may be willing to explain certain outstanding mysteries that have thus far eluded the illuminating efforts of my pending investigations, but only if we four are all in the same room together. I declined her generous offer, because I suspect her to be physically incapable of giving straight answers.
TT: Have you kept abreast with recent events in Chicago?
TG: last i heard you were laying down the law but that was last night
TG: howd it go'
TT: Yes, well, it went about as well as could be expected.
TT: That is to say, I applied my foot to an uncanny amount of derrière, and the Scourge and Blind Justice have been taken into custody. Scourge is unconscious at the moment, but Justice has seen the light and agreed to cooperate with us.
TT: However, Mother Dearest has been meddling with our efforts to expedite their exodus to Canada, where a friend has been able to secure them new identities. She believes this will force me to pay attention to her, no doubt. She has always been insidiously backhanded that way. Her passive-aggressive behavior has only escalated, and this appeal to you may well be an effort to further complicate the matter in her favor.
TG: well i wasnt planning on answering her anyway
TG: me and bro have the whole information thing under control now
TG: so yeah
TT: Ah. Then all went according to plan?
TG: oh hell no we are not going there
TG: look just mutual agreement im tossing this letter
TG: and we never speak of it again
TT: Very well, agreed. One day we really do need to sit down together over tea and discuss your brother complex.
TG: lets not ever
TG: like thats a hell no from me
TT: Oh, I'm sure it would be no trouble for me to pay a visit to Houston after I check in on John, since I appear to be making a grand tour of the United States anyway. My partner is more than capable of returning to Philadelphia without me if I were to tack on another stop.

Dave tries to picture Bro, the BQ, Oriole, and Rose all sitting around the same table, drinking tea of mysterious origins and waggling their eyebrows at each other.

He nearly has a brain aneurysm at the thought. He scrubs a hand through his hair and tries to wipe that mental image from his mind's eye.

TG: wow that is so beyond not necessary
TG: how is john anyway havent heard from him in ages
TT: Such a smooth segue. I am completely led astray.
TG: hell yeah you are
TT: Our mutual acquaintance has been relatively busy of late. You know nothing of what went on last night?
TG: no why what the hell is happening
TT: Hm. John has been in a bit of a state over it. I am surprised he hasn't contacted you yet. But then, even his conversations with me have suffered from hours-long intervals in which he fails to reply. I worry that his father keeps pulling him away for undeserved lectures, but I worry more that John is his own worst enemy, at the moment.
TG: could this get any more vague
TG: no really this is more ambiguous than a postmodern novel wtf is going on with john
TG: should i be concerned
TG: is it this jade chick
TG: do i need to punt a bitch
TT: No, it's - damn. Damn it all.
TG: what
TT: It's not my place to say.
TT: It involves the personal details of someone else in John's acquaintance, one who might not be comfortable with their private business being aired to all and sundry.
TG: what but its okay when john blabs it all to you
TT: Most likely not. But he was distraught at the time, and then had to wait for several hours for my reply, and this delay in communication led to more undue distress on his part. And aside from that, between John and I lies the deep and unbreakable bond…
TT: Of doctor-patient confidentiality.

Oh, she did not just go there.

TG: youre fucking kidding me
TG: you are a goddamn lying liar who lies youre not a doctor yet
TT: I have broken this confidentiality in spirit numerous times to consult with you about John, seeing as you have been pivotal to his recovery from the initial depressive episode, but I do not think he would appreciate me sharing this incident in particular without obtaining the consent of everyone involved. Suffice to say that John himself is unharmed physically, but has experienced an extreme upheaval in his personal and professional life that has unbalanced his mental state.
TT: I'd advise you to ask him yourself. He would be happy to hear from you.
TG: havent heard much from anyone at all today
TG: had a taco crisis and a visit from the mc
TG: yknow if anyone cares
TT: Oh good lord, everything really does happen all at once with us, doesn't it?
TG: it just keeps happening brosis
TT: You are alright? It does not break confidentiality to inform you that John's issues involved the Midnight Crew as well. Is it possible this was a concerted strike against both of you at once?
TG: dammit woman youre killing me with this
TG: i doubt it was related
TG: like whatever happened with john wouldnt have caused this
TG: me and bird me just fucked up and had to fight our way out of an ambush nbd
TG: for whatever reason they just cant wait to get their hands on this hot bod on mine
TG: i cant really blame them im hotter than ghost pepper chili but thats not the point
TT: I'm sure.
TG: look i need to talk to john
TG: i only wanted to tell you about momlonde how did we get so sidetracked
TG: goddamn
TG: have fun with spider pirate and dragon lawyer and chainsaw vampire
TT: Oh, I will.
TT: *waggles eyebrow in a suggestive manner*
TG: stop that no
TG: oh god

Dave does not want to know about his biological sister's weird sexual conquests. Or whatever the hell that was about. He closes that window with more force than is strictly necessary and knocks his head against the desk a few times, hard enough to rattle the stack of mix CDs beside the monitor.

But all of this nonsense has just confirmed his nagging suspicion that John's silence has the distinct air of 'freaking the fuck out' forgetfulness. Because when John is always at his most spacy when shit gets too real for him. John's an open book, until suddenly it's for his own good and he's suddenly a tough nut to crack. Go figure.

Tugging on his lip with his teeth, Dave turns his head to the side and brings his phone up, despite the fact that the computer is still right in front of him, to text a few more rapid fire lines at John until - finally - the kid logs on.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 20:45:04 --
TG: yo
TG: check it
TG: its time for dave strider to get you outta your seat
TG: my raps are replenished
TG: everyone knows that im a downright menace
TG: dominating these b-listers who need to step off my game
TG: they dream they have a chance before i drive them insane
TG: but they all can attest that they be downright distressed when i wrest
TG: the beat from their obsolete jams
TG: no contest
TG: cant hesitate as im scratch the record with my words
TG: leaving dead mics in my wake like a goddamn saboteur
TG: cos when i drop these bombs the damage is obscene
TG: been leveling the competition since i turned thirteen
TG: keeping time to the beat of your decline with this sick rhyme
TG: my bad did i say that out loud
TG: tough shit
TG: when the striders in the room yall know its devastating
TG: scald every track with the heat that i bring
TG: i cant cut any slack when i attack
TG: unable to retract there's no way you'll bounce back
TG: what
TG: are you in a hurry
TG: well shit son i won't show you no mercy
TG: crack open a cold one and sit your ass down
TG: armageddons on tap and i aim to school you clown
TG: why don't you take some notes while i work to astound
TG: cos the knight is in town
TG: and times on my side
TG: hit it
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has entered the chat! --

Flawless timing.

TG: oh hell yes
TG: perfect
TG: the mic is in your hands my man just let the sick fires flow
TG: …
TG: eb?
TG: shit bro rose didn't say what was up you need to talk to me
TG: like how serious is this shit on a scale of not serious to he fired the missiles thirty five minutes ago
EB: karkat is hemogoblin.
TG: what
TG: oh
TG: well frick
EB: oh my god I
EB: I'm trying to keep it together for him but
EB: I don't know what to do, dave!

This is all escalating very quickly. Dave rests his head on his palm and has to stare at the screen in horror for a few seconds before it really sinks in that, yes, John has in fact landed himself in the middle of a cheap comic book identity reveal plot twist.

TG: oh holy shit
TG: uh
TG: i have got to admit i did not see this one coming
TG: were talking about the angry troll diamond waifu right
EB: and he's hurt really bad and it's all my fault!
EB: i'm so stupid!
TG: oh shit john
EB: i fucked up oh god i fucked up so bad and now karkat can barely walk.
EB: i'm trash i'm literally the worst friend ever.
EB: if i'd just backed off like your brother told me to none of this would have ever happened!
EB: but now diamonds droog is here and she beat the heck out of hemogoblin and he's karkat and I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!
TG: i am right there with you thats rough buddy
EB: he should never have become friends with me!
EB: look at my track record first rose gets possessed and now this.
EB: and she keeps trying to tell me that has nothing to do with it but clearly being friends with me hurts people and i can't do anything to help them!
EB: i'm so useless!
TG: whoa we need to back this bad thought train right the fuck up
TG: okay like seriously breathe
EB: argh!
TG: yes good argh very good
TG: you with me here man let it out
TG: get some fresh air circulating in your brain because you're clearly not thinking straight
EB: ARGH!
TG: awesome now listen because I'm pretty sure that unless you physically picked up Droog's foot and whacked your weird troll bro upside the head with it this is not your fault
TG: also did you put the tentacle monsters in Rose's head no I didn't think so
TG: so both those are off the table
TG: it's just shitty luck bro it has nothing to do with you
TG: be cool
TG: breathe
EB: I'm trying!
TG: and trying is like half the battle
TG: seriously well done you

Dave presses the heel of his palm to his shades so that the plastic digs into his eye sockets. His stomach is doing some weird knot tango thing, his lower lip feels raw from how hard he's been digging his teeth into it, his eyes ache, and the worst part is that all of these signs add up to him feeling.

He rubs his hand over his entire face a few times, feeling an echo of a headache starting to thread itself in the creases between his eyebrows. He smooths his expression with some effort, snagging a bottle of apple juice from his stash tucked into the cinderblock by his feet, and presses that to his forehead so hard that the tepid bottle leaves a mark. Cool. He has to be cool. John is having a legit crisis here, and Dave needs to be the one holding their collective shit together because Rose has completely understated how bad the situation is.

Feeling. So fucking overrated.

TG: on the whole emotional composure meter you are clearly tanking out
TG: so talk me through it
EB: what is there to talk about?
EB: stuff like how did I not even realize that Karkat and Hemogoblin were the same person? When even Jade and my dad apparently knew??
EB: I am literally the shittiest friend :(.
EB: I'm supposed to be the more experienced hero here and I still let him fight Droog alone.
EB: so I'm an awful hero too what else is new
TG: look bro this is all the weird head thing talking not you
TG: did you take meds or anything today
TG: what with all the drama you might have forgotten
TG: shit why do I not know this are you still on any medication
TG: see you're not allowed to call yourself the shittiest friend anymore I don't even have this basic shit down
TG: I have snatched the crown right off your dumbass head and held my own coronation ceremony
TG: no take backsies
EB: eheheheh

Oh thank Santa Christ, the damage control is working. Dave slumps forward, resting his head on the apple juice container so all he can see is the glowing screen of his phone and the desk inches from his face.
TG: what was that
EB: shut up dave, you're not a shitty friend!
EB: and no, i dont have regular prescription stuff anymore.
EB: i only really took it for about a year after we met and then i felt pretty okay doing without it.
TG: you sure
TG: because that was some pretty not okay talk back there
TG: like
TG: fuck
TG: i havent heard you badmouth your fineass self like that in years
EB: bluhhh!
EB: everything's just kind of shitty right now i guess :P
EB: and it mostly seems like i just keep screwing up.
EB: like every time i get a handle on all this weird stuff happening something else piles up on top of that!
EB: like if i sit down to try to process everything at once it would just crush me into a blob on the floor.
EB: and i could never get up again!
TG: breathe man breathe
EB: urgh.
EB: oh man, you're right :(  
EB: this is exactly what happened last time isn't it!
EB: great, now even my brain is all messed up again!
EB: i'm so stupid!
TG: what no
TG: youre not stupid dude its brain chemistry
EB: maybe...
TG: is the talking not helping should i stop talking
TG: because you know that happens sometimes
TG: i just start going and dont know when to stop
TG: just keep mumbling to myself over here
TG: when i should totes just calm down and
TG: idk
TG: be silently supportive or some shit
TG: im doing it right now arent I dammit
EB: no, you're fine!
EB: it's just
EB: i am the problem, it is me.
EB: and karkat is hurt and you and rose are far away and i'm being all irrational and stuff about it.
EB: i just suck :(  
TG: rose is going to be in the area soon though right
TG: i distinctly remember that was a thing
EB: yeah, but i think maybe i should tell her to stay away
EB: i don't want her to enter the danger zone, not while she could get hurt!
TG: but it would help you feel not so shitty if she were there
EB: i don't know, maybe? urgh...
TG: im serious man do you need a brohug
TG: do we need to get up close and personal
EB: hahaha, you know i am always down for the hug of bros
EB: but somehow i don't think running away to houston will solve all my problems and i can't leave karkat while he's hurt!
...Well, Dave thinks distantly, sitting upright. He taps on the phone screen for a long minute, swallowing hard around a weird lump in his throat.

There's only one response to that.

TG: fuck houston
TG: ill be right there

He thumps off the Pesterchum app. Without looking at the computer screen, he powers that down too. There's a drumming in his head, a familiar beat like a grandfather clock banging out the hour. He's uncertain for a moment, his eyes darting from the open door to the orange bird kid on the bed and back to the phone in his hands.

He types out a message in the notes app, lobs the phone at Oriole's head, and slams the door shut between one second and the next while his clone splutters and rolls off the bed in a panic. Oriole yelps as his broken wing hits the ground at the wrong angle, and pulls a face when Dave rolls the computer chair over to stare down at the kid, his hands folded in front of his mouth as he waits for Oriole to read his message.

"Asshole," Oriole mutters, reaching out to grab the phone from where his flailing sent it skittering across the floor. "This had better be fucking important, or so help me we are going flying with one wing between us, see how well that works out for you -"

He shuts up as he reads the message on the screen. His mouth works, opening and closing without words in a way that gives Dave the worst kind of déjà vu, and then he looks up, eyes wide. "You're not serious," he says.

Dave signs, 'As serious as a monk on Christmas Day, my man.'

"I don't know what the hell that means. Your hands are saying 'haha, let's wave at the guy who doesn't know sign language,' but your face is saying 'yes, I am entirely serious about this.' Except your face always looks like that."

Dave switches to paper. If they're doing this, they need to avoid technology anyway. Bro has a bad habit of spying on everything lately, and he's no doubt noticed the closed door by now. It's only a matter of time before he ninjas his way in to demand answers, because Bro's a paranoid bastard.

Luckily, Dave has all the time in the world.

DS: bro can handle the bq

DS: johns having a goddamn crisis

DS: fuck only knows if rose will make it in time to help him what with all her shenanigans going on

"Even if you -" Oriole starts, his voice loud, and then he glances at the closed door and lowers the volume. "Even if you left right now, and you took like, a nonstop direct flight or something, it would take five hours to get to Seattle. Probably more. Don't you think you should think about this for longer than ten seconds?"

DS: if i stopped to think about everything there wouldnt be a new york anymore

DS: are you gonna help or not

Oriole groans, and flops back down against the floor, dragging the bed sheets down off the bed and
over his face.

DS: ill take that as an enthusiastic yes

"As your celestial orange guardian twin self, it is my duty to inform you that this is yet another incredibly stupid idea."

DS: shut up i bought you mcdonalds didnt i

Oriole shuffles his free wing forward over his arm, defensively clutching his Oreo McFlurry closer to his chest.

Escaping the apartment had been easier said than done. But technically, Dave is no longer under house arrest - lo, the perks of getting himself stabbed in an effort to facilitate healthy brotherly communication. When he announced that he and Oriole were headed out to get milkshakes, Bro had flipped him a distracted thumbs up which was basically a 'fuck yes' from anyone else.

The Badass Quandary had finally shifted from the couch, and was pacing in a tight circle in the shadowy corner of the living room, muttering into a cell phone tucked up against the smooth curve of her carapace. Dave was very aware that he was once again completely out of the loop where she was concerned - but fucking hell, that was basically the entire basis of his relationship with the alien dame, and he doesn't know why that would change now just because Bro is giving her the third degree.

All intel gathering has been put on hold anyway. He shoves all thoughts of Mom Lalonde’s suspicious as fuck letter out of his mind, to be dealt with probably never, if he has his way. He's more a dude of action; research and interrogation are not his forte, as can be seen from his complete failure to get anything of merit out of the BQ in all of two years. If Rose is still gung ho about figuring out all these mysteries surrounding their powers and their guardians and all the secret ectobiological clone twins showing up all over the place, all power to her. If she thinks Doctor Lalonde is lying to get a rise out of her kids, Dave is inclined to believe her.

And now Dave has an intervention to pull off.

It had been easy to drop a duffle bag full of clothes and shit out of the hole in the wall before leaving, and then pick it up on their way to the McDonalds. One vanilla shake and a McFlurry later, and Oriole had grudgingly allowed Dave to yank them back an hour in the timeline. It hurts like a son of a bitch, as always, which is why the shake does wonders for the stabbing pain in his throat while they ride the bus to the airport. Dave grimaces at the taste - he usually never drinks anything but the subpar apple juice from the kid's meal, and vanilla milkshakes from McDonalds taste like nothing at all - but the relief is too welcome for him to stop.

It also helps numb the renewed pang of feelings that ensues when he realizes with a sickness in his gut that he's not going to be able to talk when he sees John. Like. He's mentioned sign language, offhandedly. But. Never the actual 'I can't talk without that mecha collar thing because reasons.' John being the naïve, trusting bastard that he is, he probably thinks Dave learned sign language for fun or something.

"This is just dumb. What the hell is with you and impulsive decisions." Oriole hooks his leg over the empty seat in front of them, shifting his weight so that the broken wing, still bound up against his side, leans over the aisle. There's practically no one else riding to the airport in the middle of the afternoon, so they're pretty much free to do whatever. The driver keeps throwing horrified looks at
Oriole after he complains about the heat and shucks his newest coat to expose one massive bird wing, but he hasn't pulled over to call the cops yet so they're in the clear.

Of course, since Dave's phone has to be kept turned off to keep Bro from tracking it, he's stuck writing things out on this shitty notepad. It's going to be a shitshow. He slurps on the milkshake, rips off a new page on the pad of paper, and starts scribbling again. At least all this nonverbal communication has vastly improved his handwriting.

DS: just how i roll man

DS: thats how it works with all this time hero shit you have to do what feels right in the moment

DS: and right now it sounds like john is getting in heavy with the mc

DS: so thats where i need to be

DS: counting on you to hold down the fort while im gone

"Yeah, right," Oriole mutters, talking around a spoonful of Oreo chunks and ice cream. "And while you're gone I'll institute a new world order, have myself elected Supreme Rap Leader of the city of Houston, and bulldoze the local libraries to build shitty skateparks. Sound good?"

DS: im so proud

DS: my little orange chick is all grown up and using irony for good and not evil

DS: bless you child

"Whatever." They're nearing the terminal now, judging by the amount of taxis and shuttles started to congeal into a traffic nightmare the road ahead of them, and Oriole's lip twists into a frown. He pulls on his coat as they pass under a walkway. "If your brother doesn't kick my ass to the curb for helping you pull this shit, I'll probably just work on training so next time I don't get my ass kidnapped by those Crew dickweeds."

DS: bro is too soft on you to set you loose on the streets man

DS: im telling you kids are his secret squishy underbelly

DS: he just wants to hug them and train them to be deadly ninja warriors and stick his nose into their business all the damn time

Oriole snorts. "I'll believe that when I see it."

Dave snorts back, because he's put up with Bro's stoic weirdness all his life. He knows how to read between the lines, and has formed the hypothesis that Bro refuses to express emotions beyond disdain and sarcasm mostly because he's spent too much time around puppet robots and not enough around emotionally functional human beings.

DS: anyway before i take off into the wild blue yonder

DS: can we have real talk

"What the hell does that even mean?"

DS: means i have an outstanding question
DS: concerning your backstory

DS: which would be cool to ask about before I leave my sword in your craggy bird hands

Oriole shrugs his wings. "Dude, I don't really see the point in being cagey. Like, just ask me shit, and I'll answer. Also I kind of owe you a solid for the whole rescue. So fuck it, what do you wanna know?"

Dave hesitates, because what he's about to ask is going to sound stupid. It also goes against all of his honed instincts to keep his mouth shut and not ask obvious questions, so that no one can tell what he's thinking, but Bro's not here to mock him. If everything goes as planned, he might actually be free from Bro for the first time ever; in just a half hour his plane is going to take off and not even Bro can follow an airplane into the lower atmosphere.

(He hopes.)

DS: just

DS: look

DS: can you fly

"Of course I can," Oriole says, snorting. "What would be the point of keeping a pair of huge ass wings like this if I couldn't use them? Christ." He's silent for a moment, and Dave looks at him, the shadows of the overhead walkways flickering over his orange face as the shuttle rumbles along.

"Yeah," he says again, sounding almost lost. "I could fly."

Dave doesn't miss the tense shift. He bites his lip and looks away.

Their shuttle forces its way through the worst of the traffic congestion, coming to a screeching stop in front of the terminal; the driver cranks the door open and stares at them pointedly in the rear-view mirror. Oriole shoves Dave's shoulder. "Now, beat it. I've got your bro to keep from hunting your ass down, and you've got your blue-text boyfriend to go mack on."

Dave recoils.

DS: goddammit man

DS: we were having a moment

DS: and now this

"Hey man, I just call it like I see it," Oriole says with a shit-faced grin. "You're flying halfway across the country to go see some dude because he's having emotions."

DS: stop being insensitive

DS: just because were emotionless pricks doesn't mean were allowed to discriminate against the unenlightened

"Never. I don't think either of us knows how to stop being an insensitive dick. It's like. Hardwired into our personalities or something. A universal constant."

"Please," the bus driver interrupts, "get off my bus."

Dave doesn't have the heart to break it to the poor man that he's still stuck with Oriole for the round
trip back to the downtown area. 'Later, man,' he signs, slinging his duffle bag over his shoulder. He
takes the bladekind and scabbard from his back, the unbroken one he never got a chance to use
earlier, and passes it to the bird kid reverently, trying to make this a solemn moment. 'Knock yourself
out.'

Oriole turns the strife specibus over in his hands, squinting at shitty sword with his lemon yellow
eyebrows knitted together in an awed frown.

Which reminds Dave. He reaches up onto his face, plucks off his sunglasses, and shoves them onto
the bridge of Oriole's nose. He may or may not stab the kid in the eye on the first attempt, triggering
an outraged squawk, but then he gets it.

Then, naturally, he slides on his new pair.

What, like he was going to wander around basically naked in a public airport? No thanks, man.

DS: welcome to the family bro

DS: try not to die

Somehow, the cue ball in his pocket makes it through security. His assortment of swords pass, too,
but that's mostly because he flashsteps them through the security scanner before they can set off any
alarms.

Once he’s on the plane itself, he plugs his headphones in and cranks up the music.

Time to fly.

---

"Mother of fuck almighty, give me strength."

Nothing is okay.

"Whaat?! Come on, this is such a good plan! Don't get your horns in a knot, this'll be a piece of
cake!"

But John is dealing with it quietly.

"Yeah, okay, bring up the horns fuck you very much - but hey, remember that one time I got the shit
kicked out of me? Whoa! I remember that too! It's almost like it only happened a few hours ago!
Which means that plan is literally the shittiest piece of shit to ever hit the whirling device."

It helps, he thinks, that Karkat is up and moving and feeling well enough to cuss a hole though the
fabric of space/time.

"Yeaaaah, I know that, Karkat! So obviously you should stay here and rest up! And in the meantime,
me and John can go investigate! We can't avenge you if we don't know where Diamonds is holed
up!"

John shudders internally. Karkat is no longer leaning on him, instead having hunched forward to fold
his arms tight over his bandaged chest and argue with Jade in proper form. He has his nubby horns
tilted forward and everything, which is such an aggressive move, even for Karkat. They're not
getting along very well at all.

"Oh, helllllllll no. No fucking way is John going anywhere near that monster without me. Hell. No.
I'm his partner, and if you want to shove me out of this threeway nubfucking scuttlebuggy of insanity, you'll do it over my *putrescent corpse* -"

And now John's just kind of sitting here on his section of the couch and trying not to flip the fuck out.

He's not doing a very good job of it, he thinks, because everything has gone sort of fuzzy and close and tight around him, and each breath feels shallow and fluttering, as though his lungs can't expand to their full capacity.

At the same time, the conversation around him has shifted to other things. No one else seems to have noticed his internal struggle. But the sounds of their voices are so distant he can't focus on them. Maybe his eardrums popped. That doesn't happen to him very often, because the instinctive aspect of his connection to the air tends to adjust for things like barometric changes when he's flying at high altitudes or swimming in deep water, but -

Swimming. When is the last time he made it to practice? He can't remember; heck, he can't even remember if today is supposed to be a school day because the only thing in his brain was Karkat's blood all over his hands, everything is too close too close he can't breathe -

"Now Karkat, there's no need for those kind of language. Ms Harley, *please* stop floating in the house. Settle down, both of you. You three aren't going anywhere today or tonight, if I have any say in it - you need to rest and recover your strength. It might be for the best if you all tried to get some sleep for now, and we can discuss this further later on."

He has to stay calm. He has to stay calm.

He has to act *normal*.

"What do you think, John?"

...That is so much easier said than done.

"Son?"

A hand lands on his shoulder and his dad's voice cuts through the buzz of white noise in his ears. John flinches and looks up from the corner of the coffee table. He isn't sure how long he's been staring at it, which is probably a bad sign. His cell phone sits in his lap, his hands resting on his thighs and loosely cupped around the phone where he dropped it when Dave stopped answering.

That's when he checked out of reality, he thinks. Talking to Rose had helped get him through the long hours before Karkat woke up. Before she responded -

*(He's not thinking about it he's not)*

- he was a lot worse, pacing around his bedroom with the wind tearing at him, winding in an ever-narrowing circle around the recooperacoon until Jade had to yell over the roar of a minor windstorm and his dad had to trudge through the distraught breeze to pull John out of the epicenter. He can't exactly remember what his dad said to him - the words are a blurred mumble in his vague memory, half stern admonishment and half crushing sympathy - but it was enough to get him to stop agitating the wind and sit down to wait until Karkat woke up.

It did nothing, however, to settle his inner turmoil. That's not something he's ever been able to talk to his dad about, not really.
But he couldn't talk to Rose about everything. She's been trying to do her psychoanalyzing thing ever since they regained contact to help John sort out his dumb issues, but John's just not willing to unload all his crap on her when she's got so much on her plate already! That would be so not cool!

And because of that, talking to Dave is just...easier. Dave likes to pretend he's so cool and ironic and above it all, but he also never judges people, really. Yeah, he makes fun of John for liking comics unironically (john you are literally a hero already come on you have to admit thats just weird), but he's also the one who permitted a thirty-four minute, twenty-five second hug session the first day they met and his only reaction after John finally pulled his snot-dripping, wheezing self together was to adjust his shades, thump John on the back, and mutter something that sounded like, "Hug game too strong."

So there's just a lot less pressure, because Dave has a lot more personal experience when it comes to dealing with John's issues already, and John doesn't need to worry about Dave spontaneously getting possessed by tentacle monsters from the fifth dimension. Rose seems to be getting past that weird phase in her life, like finally overcoming grimdark-puberty growing pains, but it's still sort of a legitimate thing to worry about, you know?

But then Dave texted something weird and stopped answering altogether and John kind of shut down after that -

"John."

He lost track again. He's been staring at the wall instead of the table, this time. John shudders, his head rattling from side to side as he shakes it and then looks up at his dad, plastering on the brittle smile that's been carrying him all this time. It only needs to hold a little while longer. "What's up, Dad?" he asks, because he's kiiiinda been not paying attention at all.

Which is awful. He needs to be on top of things, here. They're supposed to be deciding what to do about Diamonds Droog and the Midnight Crew, and John is sitting over here brooding. There is no room for angst in a war room! Or a living room, whatever. "Sorry, I think I started zoning out," he adds, slapping his cheeks with his palms to try to make his brain restart. "What were we talking about again?"

"It's because you wouldn't sleep!" Jade thumps down on the coffee table in front of John, gnawing on her lip worriedly as she folds her bare feet under her. John can see his dad open his mouth - and then shut it again. Samuel Egbert knows how and when to pick his battles. "I don't know…if you're really that sleepy, maybe we should wait…" Her face is sad as she reaches out to poke his cheek. "Is your head okay still?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine!" His smile is reflexive but still weak, apparently, because Jade chews on her lip in a way that implies she's not buying it.

"Your head?" Karkat asks, his claws digging into his pants. His face is still scary pale, the grey of his skin almost translucent. Blood loss is not something Karkat needs to worry much about, for reasons that are obvious in hindsight and make John want to bang his head against the wall, but between his busted ribs and the brutality of Droog's smackdown Karkat still looks seven eighths dead. "What the fuck is wrong with your head? I thought you said you two got out of there okay?"

"Uh, nothing," Jade says, exchanging a significant look with John's dad, "John's just been getting some headaches and nosebleeds today."

And who knows what that's all about. Sure, John has been breaking out extra boxes of tissue because of all the gross, snotty blood threatening to run down the back of his throat (eurgh!), but
Jade has been majorly overreacting about it. You'd think she'd never had a nosebleed herself in her life, and now she's got John's dad in on it, too. John shakes his head. "No, I'm fine. Really! So fine! Probably just tired, yeah. A lot of stuff happened, and I'm just - yeah..."

Karkat looks at him, clearly skeptical, and shoves his shoulder against John's again, snorting. "Tell me about it," he mutters wryly, his hair wisping along John's cheek as he rests his head on John's shoulder. "Wow, fuck me, I've only been up for an hour, maybe? And I'm ready to pass out again. Because you just know my pathetic aggravation sponge needs its fury sleep."

"Very true," John agrees, injecting humor into his voice and hugging Karkat around the waist gingerly, taking absolute care to make sure he doesn't put pressure on Karkat's ribs.

It helps a little to have Karkat around. John doesn't know how their friendship and his crush and Karkat's moirail thing all ended up smooshed together into this weird incomprehensible smear that they really need to talk about at some point, but not even remembering that everything just became ten times more complicated can change the fact that touching Karkat makes him feel better. Reminds him that Karkat is still breathing, even when John is too out of it to focus on the air fluctuations in the room around him. He doesn't know whether this is supposed to be a regular crush or a pale crush or whatever anymore, because it has been two gosh darn years and he has finally begun to suspect that romance in general is dumb and too complicated and he doesn't want to think about it anymore. It just is.

He's not the expert on this stuff. Karkat is the one who marathons troll romances with thirty-word long titles in his spare time, not John. Maybe later, when everything has calmed down some more, he'll mention to Karkat that yeah, cuddlesnuggles are awesome and he is so down for them, but also he kind of wants to make out sometimes and maybe touch Karkat's butt, and then brace himself for the ensuing firestorm.

But right now, his relationship with Karkat is too critical to both of their continued sanity for him to risk it.

A tiny weight thumps on John's knee. He blinks, cracking open an eye that he hadn't realized he'd closed, and spies WV patting him with a tiny claw, his white eyes wide under an eyebrowless frown of concern. The carapacian seems to have taken a liking to John, or at least John's bed, and this is one of the first times John thinks the alien has willingly left John's room without pitching a silent fit. He hadn't even noticed WV creeping down the stairs.

"John, I'd like speak to you alone in the study before you go to sleep. It'll only take a moment," Samuel Egbert says. He's been standing behind the couch - John can't even remember him standing up from his armchair - with a firm hand on John's free shoulder, and only now does he retract it, pacing around the couch to smile at them wearily. "Ms Harley, I know you've been sleeping in John's room, but -"

"No way." Karkat bolts upright, and John has to yank his arm away before he gets hurt. "Absolutely not. I'm not staying alone in a room with her."

Jade rolls her eyes, and leans over to scoop WV up into her arms. "Yeah, yeah, shortstack! I don't wanna sleep near your slimy butt anyway! What if you sleep walk?" The carapacian flails at her as she sets him in her lap to use his head as a chinrest. "I can stay on the couch tonight - we can trade off, John!" Jade adds.

John just shakes his head and tries not to roll his eyes. At least Jade isn't willing to take shit from Karkat. If she couldn't give him as good as she got John'd have to feel guilty about how impolite Karkat is being. One would think he'd be used to Karkat's complete lack of a verbal filter by now -
and yet...

"Yeah. Sorry Jade, but I probably need to be around in case Karkat - needs something," he corrects at the last minute. Karkat would proobably not be happy if John started talking about his crappy nightmares in front of Jade.

Wait.


John makes the connection at last, and promptly eyes the wall with a haunted, longing stare, with the full intent of slamming his head against it repeatedly. Hemogoblin and Karkat have both been complaining about sleeplessness and bad dreams lately and Hemogoblin got all ragey and uncharacteristically furious during that arson debacle and how the fuck did John not make these connections.

How.

It had to have been some combination of coincidence and luck and trust and a lot of willful blindness, and John just can't figure out how he and Karkat managed to keep circling around each other without either one catching on. Either they were both way sneakier than they thought and could give, like, secret agents a run for their money - or they were just that dumb, and John isn't sure which option is more terrifying. If he keeps thinking about it, he's going to lose it again and he can't -

"Okay. You want me to help you get up there?" Jade offers, raising a hand with the thumb and middle finger pressed together and ready to snap.

"Nonono," John says hastily, before Karkat can do more than let out a high pitched screech. "I got it! It is okay if I float Karkat in the house, right Dad?" he remembers to ask his dad. He'd forgotten to ask permission earlier with all the confusion going on, but the rules are there for a reason!

"As long as you're sure you won't accidentally drop him!" Samuel chuckles. 'I'll see you in a few minutes, son."

Hoo, boy. John winces and then smoothes his expression as he hooks an arm under Karkat's to steady him as they stand up. Jade and Karkat don't know his dad like John does, so hopefully they don't notice that faint note of warning in Samuel's voice. Any conversation that a parent starts off with 'we need to talk' or some variation on that theme is bound to end in fatherly disapproval and awkwardness and regret. Mostly regret. And sometimes cake but the cake doesn't make up for the regret, okay?

"Do you even have a job?" Karkat thinks to ask as they waft up the stairway.

"Do you?" John replies gloomily.

They both sigh at the same time. Which pretty much answers that question. "I used to volunteer at the community center," John says. "Back in middle school, when I had more free time and stuff. But then high school started and everything, and I got too busy to balance volunteer hours on top of it all."

"We're awful. We're the worst fuckfaced liars I know. Either one of us could have called the places we're supposed to be working and found out right then and there, but through the miracle of modern technology we just texted each other instead of dicking around with the nonexistent middleman. Fucking incredible." Karkat sags when John sets them down on the floor, and they hobble together the rest of the way to his room. There is a rapid thud of feet on stairs, and John looks back over his
shoulder to see a tiny dark figure peeking around the corner at them with curiosity. When WV realizes he's been spotted, he squeaks and vanishes, and there is an even more rapid clatter as the carapacian flees back downstairs.

Seriously, that is adorable. Why do none of the textbooks tell you carapacians were adorable? It was all 'holy shit aliens,' and 'meteors of mysterious, untraceable origins,' and 'the xenocidal aspects of the Holocaust,' and no mention of the fact that WV, at least, is an armful of cuteness.

"My dad is probably ready to sternly lecture me on every single obvious clue I missed," John agrees, shouldering open the door. "He's been sitting on this one for ages, I bet. This might even be bad enough to warrant a BC baking session."

"A what the fuck?" Karkat asks.


Karkat stares at him in horror. "Holy shitbagels."

"Yeah, I know."

"You seriously hate Betty Crocker that much. Enough that your dad uses it as a form of custodial discipline?!"

"Betty Crocker," John says, nostrils flaring as he helps Karkat lean against the side of the recooperacoon, "is a plague upon this earth. Her goods are false, deceitful concoctions that come out of a box. Her dastardly red spoonkind is a symbol of lies and despair."

"This is not healthy, John. Addiction is a powerful thing."

"Did you know she makes Fruit by the Foot? Not even Fruit by the Foot is sacred, Karkat. " Dunk-a-roos are General Mills brand too, but John needs to save that one for later, in case his current argument doesn't win Karkat over. Betty Crocker hating is serious business and one day Karkat needs to believe. John once had to endure Karkat eating Dunk-a-roo icing right out of the plastic package without screaming at the horror before him.

Yes. Revealing the truth about Dunk-a-roos will be the weapon of last resort.

"Okay, that is a little creepy." Karkat pauses, tilting his head to the side and squinting at John suspiciously. "Wait. Do you just have, like, a fucking mental list of all Betty Crocker-owned products?"

Yes. "No, don't be dumb, Karkat!" When Karkat grimaces and rolls his eyes, seeing right through John's protest, John shakes his head sadly. "You watch Karkat. One day she'll turn out to be one of the twelve riders of the apocalypse, and she will rain shitty cupcakes and universe-destroying cancer tentacles from above."

Karkat raises a claw. Then lowers it. And finally blows air out of his nose and presses his forehead against John's. "I think we need to go the fuck to sleep. This is fucking stupid."

"Yeah, probably," John admits. He hooks his hands under Karkat's forearms when the troll leans more weight on him with a grumble. Karkat was trying to keep up with Jade downstairs, but he's too hurt to manage it here. "You can use the bathroom to change and everything, because Jade usually at least gives a five second warning before she jumps in."

"Wha -"
"I'll go talk to Dad, and then I'll be right back. Promise!" John flashes a brilliant grin.

Karkat sighs. "Good."

At this point, Karkat's eyes are scrunched shut and he's cycling through different frowns that are so distinctive John can feel the wrinkles against his own forehead. Karkat's claws dig into his left arm lightly, and he breathes out as the frown lines ease away.

It should be noted that his mouth like three inches from John. This is distracting.

John grits his teeth so hard he thinks his molars might be loosening in their sockets, and puts his head to the right, onto Karkat's shoulder. So smooth. He raises his head a second later, when that urge to kiss Karkat has mostly gone away, and smiles. Karkat snorts at him, and then John makes a beeline out of there before he can think too hard about what the heck he's doing with his life.

- 

He starts crashing again when he's three yards from his dad's study. It's always easy to shove his darker thoughts to the side when he's got Karkat to focus on. His brain goes on auto-soothe mode and there isn't room for angisting until Karkat is okay.

But John's phone is cold and silent in his pocket; Rose was busy with trying to get Blind Justice and the Indigo Scourge over the border the last time she checked in, and Dave is in the wind. Jade - he keeps making himself not trust Jade, so he forces himself to discard the thought of shaking her awake to talk it out. Without them and without Karkat, John's got nothing to distract himself. Which sort of sucks. A lot.

Feeling like his insides are being scraped over with a dull knife, John enters the study.

"John." His dad, wrapped in a robe, looks up from his phone. It's one of those clunky old square Blackberry phones that businessmen seem to prefer to more popular brands, and he sets it down on his desk with care before beginning the laborious process of plugging it into the charger. It is a fact of the universe that all dads are shitty at dealing with anything more technologically advanced than a lawnmower. "Excellent. Miss Harley has been making her attempts throughout the day, but I thought I would try a different approach."

John is just...confused. He stands in the middle of the study, rolling his eyes at the deck of playing cards left over on the bookshelf from one of his dad's old pranks, and scrambles to find his mental footing. "Jade? What has she been trying to -"

"John, we really need to talk about -"

- 

...TR: is it time yet?

...TR: but i'm bored bored bored! :B

...TR: what do i care? i know all this stuff already!!! pchooooo!

- 

When John wakes up, his head feels like it's full of fuzz, but at least the sensation is a familiar one. "You were trying to explain everything again, weren't you?" he says, touching a fingertip to the blood dribbling out of his nose. "Maybe we should just stop."
His dad is kneeling next to him, pressing his fingers to the pulse point in the crook of John's elbow with concern on his face. "This is the first time you've fainted in a long time," he murmurs, adjusting his hand so that he's gripping John for reassurance. "I was worried I'd triggered something worse than a spell of amnesia."

"Daaaaad!" John has way too much else wrong in his life to worry about this kind of stuff. There's just no more room in his brain for it. "You worry too much. It just feels like a headache to me. I'm fine."

"Hello, Fine," Samuel says with a perfectly straight face, "I'm Dad."

John groans and bangs his head backwards against the floor before sitting up. "That will never be funny, Dad. Urrrgh, I thought you were going to lecture me about Karkat, not make awful dad jokes..."

"Just trying to lighten the mood, son," his dad says, standing up with John and handing him a handkerchief to blot at his nose. "Never forget the classics!"

"Hardy har har," John says. "I think I'll stick to puns. But thanks for trying," he adds, wrinkling his nose at the dots of blood that come away on the cloth when he presses it to his nose. "I know you just want me to be well informed and stuff." About...whatever it was they were talking about. Bluh.

"Well, hopefully we can make some progress on that front in the future," Samuel sighs, walking behind his desk and shuffling through the papers strewn across the surface. "I have been speaking with Doctor Lalonde," he continues, holding up a sheet of printed paper full of fuchsia ink, flashing it too quickly for John to read the tiny print. "She is trying to put together a meeting with the others. However, such a meeting is meaningless if you can't hear what needs to be discussed without these debilitating side effects."

John's heart rate picks up, and he stares at that paper avidly, wishing he could reach out and flip it around to read it through. "Are you serious? But that would mean - me and Jade and Dave and Rose? All together in the same room?"

"That would be the idea," Samuel says, smiling. "Along with us guardians. I didn't know if it's safe for you to go, but on the other hand this may be an opportunity I had not thought we'd have again."

"So?" John didn't hear much beyond 'potential mass sleepover party including Jade and Dave and Rose and probably Karkat' and all the totally awesome shenanigans implied by that. He stares off into space, trying to picture it.

...It's fucking hilarious. He's not sure where they can obtain that much chocolate pudding or the key to the school's natatorium, but they'd be five super heroes all sitting around with presumably nothing to do and he's convinced that they can overcome these kinds of obstacles through the Power of Friendship.

His dad closes his eyes in sudden sadness, and John fidgets in his seat. "Forgotten again," Samuel murmurs, and then he focuses on John again. "She may be able to give us a better idea of what is going on with your mind when we attempt to discuss the Paradigm with you, though I would hate to have to resort to putting you through a neurological scan without knowing who could access the information." He holds up a hand to forestall John's automatic question, because what is he talking about? "Suffice to say whether we can trust the good Doctor fully or not, I don't think I can sleep through the night until we figure out why you can't remember this. We'll avoid neurological scans as much as possible, but we're cutting it rather close to the wire, here..."
"Sounds good," John agrees, because a tiny voice in his brain is shrieking something about paradoxes and nosebleeds, and he really doesn't want to bleed all over the carpet! He needs to keep it together! Keep this conversation on topic! Seriously, why do dads take so long to get to the point? "How *did* you know it was Karkat all along, by the way? What did I miss?"

His dad gives him a significant look, the kind that says, 'son, I would never call you dumb to your face because you are my favorite and only son, and yet the temptation remains.' Then he shakes his head. "They possessed a similar body type, though you would never know it from how many layers young Karkat wears - perhaps a deliberate ploy, in retrospect, to conceal the fact that his physical condition did not match up with his cover lifestyle. You always had swimming as an excuse. Karkat took a different approach. And there was also the fact that you fell into sync with him so easily, and became overprotective of Hemogoblin at a rate that did not match your exposure to him."

John's been thinking it, too. And he doesn't like it, because there's a difference in his mind between stupidity and accidentally-but-on-purpose stupidity, and he's starting to think this whole issue has partially been a case of the latter. "You're saying that the reason I wanted to be partner was because - what, I knew it was him? Like, subconsciously?"

"I'm saying that details of someone's body language - a person's walk or their facial expressions, for example - can easily slip beneath the conscious radar, but they are still a key aspect of how social beings identify with each other. And son, if you somehow *didn't* pick up on those cues, then I am quite willing to eat my favorite hat." He shrugs. "But on a conscious level, you were simply determined to take him under your wing, and who was I to question your judgment on such matters? He is, after all, your best friend. If pressing the matter would have risked your friendship, I - I couldn't do that. I couldn't see you hurt that way. And so I let the matter lie, and kept my suspicions to myself."

A good thing too - John can imagine what the past few months would have been like if he'd spent them constantly worried that Karkat and Hemogoblin were the same person, trying to discreetly investigate his own best friend's secrets with all the ensuing guilt turning his stomach. Finding out this way is almost a blessing - it's over and done, with no room for uncertainty or distrust to develop.

Still. John flops forward and thumps his head on the desk. A couple of glossy playing cards from the trick deck stick to his forehead.

"And no more tornadoes in the house, please!" Samuel shakes a finger at John in admonishment. "Three young heroes in one place, and suddenly it's a madhouse!"

"Aaaaaah! Yes sir!" John says, jolting upright and blushing furiously. He's been hoping he wouldn't get called out about the whole panic windstorm earlier, but he's man enough to admit that there's no way his dad would just let a loss of control like that go unmentioned. Extenuating circumstances or not, Samuel has always said that it's only one step from slipping up at home to slipping up at school, and *none* of them can afford that at this point! "It won't happen again, I promise!"

"Excellent." Samuel's smile is wide and knowing, with just a tinge of pride that makes John's spine
straighten and helps him breathe easier. "I'm proud of you, son. I know you'll do what's best."

- 

John hugs his dad hard, and then he scurries out of the study.

The door doesn't quite swing all the way shut behind him, and he loses his momentum the moment his bare foot hits the floor outside. John jerks to a halt, hesitates, and rubs his face with both hands. He breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth, shaky with relief.

That went...actually a lot better than expected. John gets the feeling something went over his head back there, but on the other hand, his dad hasn't been getting much sleep either, so maybe they're both a little delirious at this point.

The goal right now is to make it to Karkat before the bad thoughts hit again. He thinks he has the motivation to make it up the stairs if he pushes himself, if he just doesn't stop to think too hard. His feet feel like they're glued to the floor when he tries to take a step away from the door, but the breeze tugs at his sleeve a moment later, urging him along. He summons up the good humor to roll his eyes at it - he's been indulging it lately, and now the drafts and tiny winds that circulate throughout the house are all more active than usual. This is just the kind of unconscious slip in his power that his dad would want him to keep in check.

John hesitates when he reaches out for the core of his power though. He should just turn it down a notch. Not all the way, just enough that the breeze will stop hooking under his sleeves and around his calves to pull him toward the front door, and the promise of the open evening sky.

Longing squeezes him like a vice. John steps into the space between the living room and the front entrance, his eyes fixed on the window that shows the sky, streaked with the light of the late afternoon sun. Jade is quiet for once, asleep under the same four or five blankets John piled up on the couch so that not even a stray curl of her dark hair is visible, but John thinks she wouldn't be too difficult to convince to go flying with him. Heck, it's the kind-of random, kind-of dumb but also super fun adventure she'd be the one trying to talk him into! And they could stop at John's room and pick up Karkat -

Karkat, who is hurt.

That snaps John back into reality. Late night aerial acrobatics would hardly be in Karkat's best interests right now. He needs to sleep and heal even more than John does, and Karkat can barely manage a fitful, hour-long nap without the nightmares disrupting his sleep cycle.

He needs John to be there. And John has never known how to say no to that kind of thing with Karkat. With any of his loved ones, really.

But one last feeble gasp of air flutters his sleeve, with the same kind of instinct that always draws him towards potential crimes over Seattle. John bites his lip and wonders if maybe someone's house is being broken into or something nearby. That would explain a lot.

It couldn't hurt to check and see if he sees any suspicious activity going on in the street. Never mind that this suburb is so crime-deficient that the neighbors are barely willing to defy the homeowners' association - there's a first time for everything, right?

John crosses those last few steps to the front door before he can talk himself out of it, and he opens it.

What he sees doesn't make sense -
Until suddenly it makes way too much sense. He can practically *hear* the sharp crack that is his brain snapping in two, the pieces swinging around and trying to fit back together in a way that doesn't quite *work*.

He opens his mouth.

He doesn't bother to shut it, gaping.

Dave Strider is standing on his doorstep.

He has to repeat that: *Dave is standing right in front of him.*

Even then, his brain can't quite cope.

Dave raises an eyebrow, and waits. He fidgets, unable to stand still even with his hands tucked into his pockets, his shoulders working and his left foot tapping out a beat. When it becomes clear that John has lost upper brain functionality, the Flashstep shoves his sunglasses down his nose, exposing red eyes, and raises the other pale eyebrow to match the first. Then he pulls a phone out of his pocket and starts typing. In his pocket, John's phone begins to buzz and chime as Pesterchum struggles to handle Dave's rapidfire texting, and he takes his own phone out in a daze to read the messages.

TG: yo
TG: gonna invite me in
TG: because im pretty sure there's some supernatural etiquette thing here
TG: no one as beautiful and alluring as me can cross the threshold of thine eggy abode until you have prepared everyone to avert their eyes from my true form
TG: don't want to blind your new twin or the dadbert that shit wouldn't be cool
TG: the sight of me has been known to inspire spontaneous religious conversion and burn unshielded eyes out of their sockets after all
TG: why do you think I wear shades dude I could blind myself if I didn't take preca-

"Dave?" John whispers.

And yes, Dave is here. Dave, in a raggedy hoodie over stupidly skinny jeans, looking for all the world as though he just stepped out of his apartment for a couple of minutes to commit some random act of unfathomable coolness. He raises a hand, then yanks it back to hook a thumb in his pocket, his shoulders huddling defensively when John doesn't speak again - and somehow all John can think about is that last message almost a half hour ago, the one where Dave had said he'd 'be right there,' and how that hadn't made any sense whatsoever because Dave lives over two thousand miles away -

Dave is *here.*

So John does the only sane thing he can do, the only sane thing that's really left after the day he's had. He tackles Dave Strider, hard enough that they both nearly fall over. Dave staggers and plants his feet with a grunt, and John *does not let go.*

"Oh my *god*, Dave," he manages to say, gulping hard around a lump in his throat. His chest hitches like his body can't decide whether breathing or swallowing or crying is supposed to be the priority here, so his next words come out raspy and breathy and it would be embarrassing but it's *Dave.* "Dave, what even - what - you're here? How?!!"

His phone buzzes in his hand, and his fingers are so occupied with digging into the back of Dave's hoodie that he almost fumbles and drops his phone on the ground. Dave raises a hand to pat him on the back with that clumsy, fluttering hesitancy that Dave has about physical contact as John reads the
TG: im fucking time traveled yeah
TG: i just spent so many hours on a plane john
t TG: its been like what an hour for you but i swear by poseidons left nipple i will enter the throes of starvation all over this lawn if i dont eat something
TG: i spent the last six hours living off body odor and peanuts
TG: feed me and then you can have your wicked way with me dammit

John's brain blanks out again. It's been doing that a lot lately. But really, on top of everything else that's happened today, how is he supposed to process this? How is he supposed to wrap his mind around the fact that Dave would travel halfway across the country at the drop of a hat like this?

Dave isn't Karkat, who John could totally picture raging his way on foot across most of North America to help John if they were ever separated, come hell or high water. Karkat is Karkat and he can achieve through sheer unmitigated ragelove what most people could only dream of doing. But Dave fits into the neat mental category of 'best hero brofriend from another state,' and nowhere in that description has John ever thought to add 'is likely to spontaneously show up on doorstep because I told him I'm having an emotional meltdown.' Like, that's not a thing that happens in real life!

So how did this happen? When did he find a friend like this? How the heck does he deserve someone like Dave? Because he really doesn't deserve this kind of friendship, not at all, and because John is still all messed up in the head, all the shit he's shoved into the dark corners pouring back into the gaping hole where his self-control used to be, that last thought is enough to send him tipping right back into stupid, sloppy, messy sobs.

Talk about déjà vu.

"I ca-han't believe you're here," John says, hiccuping and sobbing with each breath. "And I'm sorry - I'm - I'm so-horry, all those times I said you wer-weren't cool, because you are so cool, I - fuck -"-

Dave pats him on the back again, nodding sagely as he loses some of that rigid tension that gripped him when John took him by surprise.

TG: well lets be fair
TG: my levels of cool are pretty unreal
TG: but now you accept it and have attained enlightenment welcome to the brotherhood

John hiccups one last time, reading that message on the screen. Typical Dave.

Then he frowns, because why is he reading it, again? "Dave? Dave, why do you keep texting me? You're standing right here…"

TG: uh
TG: about that

"John?" John's dad must have heard the door open, because his voice, full of caution and a steely veneer of normalcy, contains a note of fatherly concern and comes from right behind John. "John, who is this?" he asks. "A...new friend from school?"

John's body locks up, and he peels himself off Dave so fast that he does drop his phone and bangs his chin on Dave's shoulder hard when he looks down. Dave catches the phone though, so fast that his hand is a blur as he swipes it midfall and hands it back to John without moving another muscle. John's got sticky tear tracks all down the front of his face, and he can't quite look his dad in the eye
as he wheels around to face him. Samuel stands there, all of six feet and a few spare inches in his robe, his blond eyebrows arched high enough in disbelief that they would give Dave's eyebrows a run for their money. "Hey, uh - he's," John says coherently. He wipes at his nose, sniffling so loud it's humiliating, and then has to wipe at his whole face again before his brain clicks back into gear. "This is. This is Dave, Dad. Dave, uh, Dave Strider. Yeah."

Dave raises a single hand in greeting, a salute that falls short into a two-fingered wave. He types something on his phone, sending it to John on Pesterchum by the vibrating in John's hand, but he then holds up the screen for both John and his dad to read right out of the app itself. Which is really getting kind of old, but maybe it's some kind of obscure irony thing for Dave. John could totally picture Dave kneeling before his turntables and swearing an oath of monastic silence while visiting another person's house for the sake of his own weird, jackass sense of humor.

TG: yo mr eb
TG: sup

"Dave Strider," Samuel repeats, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "I see. This is...John? John, what is going on?" He sounds almost on the verge of fatherly hysteria. It's the kind of tone that heralds a stony silence and the purchase of a single red-lined box of befouled cake mix from the supermarket. "Have you invited another hero into our house?"

John is basically wondering the same thing, so he has no idea what to say to head off the impending Betty Crockpocalypse. Instead, he panics, and starts flailing his arms around, gesturing anywhere from Dave to the phone in his hand to the general direction of Houston, in an effort to underscore his stammering explanation. "You see - uh - I was kind of freaking out about Karkat - you know already know that, yeah, I know - but uh - after the whole tornado thing -"

TG: oh jfc what the hell did i miss
TG: its worse than i thought

"- I was talking to Rose, and then Dave too. No, not talking, I mean, messaging them on Pesterchum, and I was -" John stops and swallows, his mouth dry as he gulps repeatedly. His dad is still standing motionless, his mouth slightly parted with bewilderment. John can only imagine he looks like a total maniac right now which is probably not helping. At all.

"It helped," John stresses at last, stifling another sob that threatens to rise up. "It helps, talking to them, with everything that gets all dumb and blah in my head and then Dave said something - I don't know, but I didn't think he'd actually come, which is why I didn't tell you - I'm sorry -"

Samuel waves with a hand, motioning for him to quiet down, and John's jaw snaps shut. He can hear the faint wheezes of his breath, all disordered and hiccupy again, and he seriously wishes Dave wasn't here to witness this. His self control is so shot, John's surprised he hasn't woken Jade up with all the racket, yet. "I see. So in essence, young Mr Strider here...invited himself over."

"Kinda."

"From Houston."

"Yup."

A warm shoulder presses along the back of John's. Dave doesn't look at him, inscrutable behind his shades as he lifts his chin to survey Samuel Egbert. But he still doesn't say anything.

TG: you got it mr eb
TG: sorry about the short notice and shit i guess
TG: but my duty as a solemnly sworn bro of john kicked in
TG: since it seems like you guys are in crisis mode here
TG: i am here to help
TG: and be like
TG: the opposite of a problem
TG: hell yeah

Reading this string of words takes even longer, particularly when Samuel squints and has to lean in
further, clearly more used to reading off a screen with a larger font size, starting over from the top
and mouthing the words to himself without a sound. John hovers on the tips of his toes, tension
stringing him up along every bone, not even the faint pressure of Dave's arm enough to calm his
nerves before he bursts out, at last, "Dave, what - why are you typing everything? I mean, what's
going on?"

Dave steps back. His flat demeanor breaks as a deep grimace creases his face, and he looks down at
his shoes while typing, stabbing the keyboard with his thumbs and using a little more force than
before. John and his dad exchange glances, and John gives a tiny shrug to Samuel's quirked
eyebrow. When he's finished, Dave tosses the phone to John and steps onto the doorstep, teetering
on the slightly raised metal threshold and looking off to one side.

TG: yeah i was totes going to mention that
TG: at the opportune moment and all
TG: which would be
TG: now
TG: i guess
TG: uh
TG: i cant
TG: i cant talk

They haven't exactly been quiet, but apparently Jade may be preternaturally excitable and energetic
while awake, but after she falls asleep it would take a thermonuclear bomb detonating in the back
yard to rouse her. The curled up, blanket-covered lump on the couch breathes steadily and shows no
sign of waking up as John's dad relocates them into the study. Again.

"Let her get some sleep," Samuel Egbert says softly, closing the door behind them. "Now, what on
earth is going on here? John, is Karkat still awake upstairs?"

"Don't know," John admits; even when he feels for the air circulating in the house around them,
Karkat's breathing is unusually short and shallow because of his ribs, so it's hard to tell. Hopefully
he's at least trying to fall asleep by now.

Dave doesn't sit when John's dad gestures to one of the chairs by his desk. Instead, he stands stiff and
frozen with his shoulders hunched up next to John. He can probably sense the stern interrogation
they're about to face; his elbow jostles John's and digs into his ribs as they rearrange themselves.

The revelation that Dave is mute only complicates things further. The empty space around his neck
where that collar used to be looks weirdly naked, now that John has noticed the absence.

"And what brings you all the way to Seattle, Mr Strider?" Samuel asks, champing down on an unlit
pipe. His pale blue eyes are sharp and assessing, with none of the familial concern he shows around
Karkat and, more recently, Jade. This is hero business, as far as John's dad knows, pure and simple,
and any hero business that intrudes on John's personal life is something to be treated with suspicion and caution. "Or do you prefer Flashstep, in this instance?"

The fact that Samuel isn't aware of the extent of how deeply intertwined Dave is John's and not Heir's mental health is...probably John's fault. The gap between them yawns open, because this, all of this - Dave and John's dad and the depression and the lack of communication and the running away - is what created that massive hole between him and his dad in the first place. John cringes.

Dave raises one hand near the middle of his torso and shrugs, slashing his hand to the side dismissively. Meanwhile, his other hand is typing up a storm, and John shows his dad the screen.

TG: nah i barely even call myself flashstep
TG: just dave man mr strider is my brother/father
TG: goddamn genes and biology man
TG: that shit is messed up yo
TG: wait
TG: oh shit
TG: should i not be swearing
TG: shit
TG: i mean
TG: oh man

"If I can somehow survive Karkat without my ears burning, I think I can handle a little profanity on your part, Dave," Samuel says with good humor, smiling. "Let us just stay focused on the matter at hand. Does your brother know you are here? I had wondered, when he asked us earlier if we'd heard from you -"

He points a hard stare at John, and John winces. Ohhh man. He hadn't even put two and two together during their chat with the Puppeteer. At the end of it, Bro Strider had asked if they'd heard anything from Dave, but John hadn't exactly been in the most functional state of mind at the time. He hadn't thought - well, he just hadn't thought Dave's text had any meaning. He'd underestimated the mundane utility of time powers, he supposes. He'd severely underestimated Dave's impulsiveness and determination when it came to their friendship.

Dave just shifts his weight from one foot to the other, shrugging.

TG: oh heck no
TG: i had to take off before he could stop me
TG: not like we had anything major going on down there anyway
TG: if he told you some bs about me needing to be down there hes so bluffing
TG: i was twiddling my thumbs or whatever
TG: so i flew up and then turned on my phone to see what time i sent these messages that im sending rn
TG: to know exactly when to go back to
TG: viola instatime loop just add time powers

And John remembers with a sudden flinch that no, actually, Bro probably had a very good, very damning reason not to want Dave running around anywhere in Seattle.

Diamonds Droog.

If she'd been the one to try to kidnap him as a kid, and if Dave's been plagued in Houston by more amateur Crew members trying to track him down and targeting other Daves who vaguely resemble him -
Then what's to stop Droog from picking up where she left off?

From the worried glint in Samuel Egbert's eye, this entire line of thinking occurred to him waaaay before John got his shit together.

John closes his eyes, and chalks up another fuck up that's entirely his own fault. Yet another of his friends has walked right into what could turn out to be a massive death trap because John hecked up.

"We appreciate the offer of assistance. Truly, we do." Samuel pauses, rubbing his thumb along the rim of his desk, and appears to mull over his next few words, choosing them with obvious care. "More than that, I...appreciate what you have done for John. Not just now, but...in the past, as well. In many ways, you have been there for him when I could not." He shakes his head. "But I don't know that you should be here, particularly if your guardian feels it is not safe."

John facepalms. His dad knows nothing about Dave's weird relationship with his brother/father/hero partner, after all; no way he would have known what insinuating that Dave obeys orders from Bro could lead to. Dave's posture freezes up, and he starts typing in pissed-off mode again. John reads over his shoulder this time, so he sees Dave ranting in real time. The other hero types so fast his fingers blur, and even when he backspaces to replace a swear here and there it happens so fast John can only just catch the original word before it vanishes, steamrollered by Dave's texting savvy.

TG: what no
TG: what has bro said to you
TG: trust me the guy is just obnoxious and doing this on purpose because he overreacts to shit like this
TG: like trust me i have seen this guy sit back and drink orange juice straight out of a jug while watching me run through a death puppet gauntlet and rating dodges out of ten
TG: who even does that i mean what the hell other people might have wanted to drink that juice
TG: wait
TG: this is not the point
TG: the point is fuck that guy
TG: he doesnt own me and safety is generally the last thing on his mind

"Be that as it may," Samuel interrupts when it becomes clear that Dave will just keep typing regardless, "Diamonds Droog is not someone to mess around with. I agree that you children are stronger together, and in theory having more heroes in such a concentrated area would mean a lot more potential strategies for dealing with Droog's brand of villainy. But according to your brother, she was responsible for a kidnapping attempt on you when you were a child." Dave twitches, but his poker face doesn't express enough to tell John if it's surprise about the kidnapping thing itself, or about Samuel being aware of the attempt at all. "If I were to allow you to venture near her, knowing what I know...I could never forgive myself as a guardian for allowing one of my son's closest friends to walk into such a risky situation."

"I don't want to see you hurt, too," John rasps, barely above a whisper, but he knows Dave hears him. The mere thought of Dave being beaten or taken by Diamonds Droog is...not acceptable. A perfect nightmare that threatens to swallow John whole. He can picture it all too easily; he has memories of New York to draw on, after all, and the panic of trying to keep an unconscious Flashstep away from the Horrorterror's grasping reach still makes John wake in a sweat in the middle of the night.

But Dave's stoic mask is firmly in place - there's a witness around, after all - so John can't read anything but that faked, flat indifference. The gears are turning in Dave's head, but John can already guess what the other hero's response will be.
TG: serious business huh
TG: well bring it on
TG: this crazy ladys been messing with my bros diamondbro
TG: thats like basically extended family there
TG: and anyone who makes john cry is a fucking dick

They could have tried other arguments. Three or four fragments of potential arguments rattle around in John's head, any one of which might be good for talking Dave out of this. John is so excited Dave is here, don't get him wrong! But in an ideal world Dave would stay here and be safe and so would Karkat and okay, maybe Jade too, and no one would go anywhere near the Midnight Crew ever again. It would be entirely impractical, but what the heck.

They don't get the chance.

The door slams open and the books on the shelves rattle as a voice starts babbling from the doorway. "Okay, Mr Egbert, I didn't want to interrupt but you've had John in here for like -"

John and Dave turn at the same time to see who Samuel is raising an eyebrow at.

Karkat jerks to a halt with his foot still poised to barge into the study.

It only takes two seconds. And then -

"You," Karkat hisses, his eyes bulging.

Because Dave...let's be honest, Dave has never made the effort to keep his identity a secret. And Karkat is just as familiar with heroes as John, if not more so.

Dave arches an eyebrow, his chin jutting out in a silent and yet abrasive acknowledgement.

Oh man. This is going to end so badly.

"...Oh, no fucking way," Karkat continues, slowly gripping his hair in his hands. John takes a hasty step toward him, hands spread out, but Karkat just lets out a high pitched whine. "You insufferable shithead. You're here?!!"

"Now, Karkat," Samuel begins, in a cautious tone. John can see Dave already flipping his phone in his hand, head tilted to the side to consider Karkat with an unwavering, shielded stare. Then he shrugs dismissively, and starts texting. Karkat yelps as his phone starts to buzz and chime, and he slaps at his pockets several times before digging his phone out, his eyes alight with fury. John just leans over and reads off Dave's screen, since the messages weren't sent to him.

TG: hell yeah i am
TG: greetings angry windbag troll this is your god speaking
TG: recently descended from on high to help solve all of your problems and avenge your honor
TG: hold your applause

Karkat puts a claw up against the side of the doorway, one bright red eye twitching with increasing fervor as he scrolls down the screen. "Why are you here?" he demands through gritted teeth. "Oh my god, what is this, some massive fruity rumpus asshole party at chateau Egbert and everyone and their barkbeast is invited?!!"

TG: funny enough
TG: i did not bring a dog
TG: i brought a dragon
"What."

TG: jk jk

"Karkat, why are you even up and walking?" John intervenes. He elbows Dave in the side, hard, because Dave is smirking like butter couldn't melt in his mouth and that means he's antagonizing Karkat on purpose. *Again.* Dave doesn't even bother to dodge it; he just takes the hit and keeps smirking. These two are both *so dumb.* "Oh my god, did you get down the stairs by yourself?!

Karkat rolls his eyes and folds his arms of his chest, grimacing. "Obviously, John, come on, I'm standing right the fuck in front of you -"

"Nooo!" John charges forward and starts fussing over Karkat. He looks exhausted, and John feels a stab of guilt at the thought that if he'd just been paying more attention, maybe he'd have noticed Karkat moving around upstairs and doing risky dumb stuff like this! "Oh man! What if you fell or something?"

It works to distract Karkat, which is kind of the point. John doesn't like to think about how good he's become at calming Karkat down. The troll grunts, swaying on his feet as John pouts at him. "I'm injured, not fucking incapable, John. I'm fine, you worrying dumbass." Then he levels an evil eye at Dave. "So. It's come to this. You've come to make this personal, you incredibly condescending sack of shit?"

Dave rubs his temples.

TG: what
TG: the fuck
TG: are you talking about

"Karkat." John's dad has a nice fake, strained smile on his face, one that John recognizes because that's where he learned it from, and his voice is full of jovial false cheer. "I didn't know you knew Dave as well! Is there some...conflict between the two of you?"

Karkat snarls, with a faint click in the back of his throat that does *not* sound soothing. "This asshole has been talking to John! About *feelings!"

John freezes up.

Oh.

Ooooh shit.

Dave and Karkat had both given the impression that their argument had been about stupid things like Dave been an ironic jackass and Karkat being a sleep-deprived jackass right back. But Karkat is basically hardwired to associate feelings with feelings *jams,* and that is territory that Karkat would actually have a *right,* in his own mind, to get fucking pissed about.

Which makes John pouring out all his terror and depression and shit to Rose and Dave while Karkat was unconscious kind of -

Oh, *shit.*

John...John might actually be the asshole here. Again. A wave of nausea rolls through his stomach and he has to stumble away from Karkat. The only person who sees his face is his dad when John turns to swallow back bile and look at anything other than Karkat and Dave. Samuel Egbert glances
at John again sharply, but John gives a curt shake of his head, stemming any potential questions. He tries to say *later* with just his eyes, and he and his dad know each other's expressions well enough that Samuel subsides, eyes flickering back to the two heroes squaring off in the middle of his study with a guarded look.

TG: not this again
TG: someone really needs to talk to you about your paranoia bro this is unreal
TG: feelings are just feelings man you're allowed to mention them
TG: like yo i feel kind of shitty today
TG: and then the other person is like hey that sucks
TG: and that is not romantic and therefore not stepping all over your mad diamond turf that is just human brotalk
TG: okay

"I don't know what the fuck brotalk is, and I highly suspect that you're making it up! And stop that!" Karkat shoves his phone back in his pocket, pissed. "What the fuck, just *talk* - or are you too high and mighty to say this shit to my face, fuckcrumpet?!"

And oh man, Dave's lips tighten and he actually lets a frown through his poker face, which means Karkat has hit a nerve. John, who is once again struggling not to fly off the handle of sanity, scrambles and tries to gesture at Karkat with charades to *not mention the talking thing oh shit too late*. Karkat just eyeballs him uncomprehendingly, and throws up his claws with an infuriated snarl when his phone starts ringing again.

TG: oh my god you bitter jackoff
TG: i give you points for fuckcrumpet that is hilarious
TG: but
TG: i cant fucking talk im fucking mute
TG: congratulations here let me help you introduce your foot to your mouth

Dave takes a step forward. John would be entirely unsurprised if the guy tried to grab Karkat in a chokehold and, like, suplex him or something to try and manhandle his foot into his mouth. That's exactly the kind of weirdass thing Striders try to pull in the name of irony.

He needs to control the situation. Even with his head spinning and his heart sick. Control, darn it, control. "He didn't know, Dave," John says, stepping between them. Dave tips his head forward in a tiny nod, rolling his eyes at the right angle so that John can see it over his shades, and then sighs heavily, taking a step back.

"You've talked before," Karkat adds, accusation and disbelief dripping off his words as he folds his arms. "You just fucking ramble and mumble to yourself and refuse to shut up half the time, this is like a fact of the internet forums. I *know* heroes, and I know Flashstep can talk. If you're trying to annoy me, it's working!"

TG: yeah well im having technological difficulties
TG: now stop being all pissy
TG: i feel bad having to retaliate when you look like you're about to pass out all over this floor man
TG: so out of respect for the egberts lets not be enormous dickwads

"The only one who'll pass out is *you* when I finish kicking your ass for showing up to rub your flagrant passes at my partner in my face!" Karkat is wheezing now, hard enough that he presses a claw to his chest in pain. There's a flush in his cheeks, but it's the opposite of healthy against the pallor of his skin, and he looks ready to either cry ragetears or throw a chair - or a convenient Dave - out the window. "If you think the way to kick off a rivalry with someone is by having feeling jams
"Karkat," John hisses. He wraps his arms around Karkat neck, not daring to grab him near the ribs, and yanks the troll into a cooldown hug. Karkat's chest heaves in panicky, rage-meltdown snarls, but John buries his nose in the crook of Karkat's neck and whispers, "Shoosh," against his feverish skin.

The change is immediate. The quality of Karkat breathing shifts from yell-enabling but pained gulps to abrupt, hiccupping sobs. Hiccupping Karkat is always good, because it's some kind of instinctive wriggler thing that helps trolls calm down when they're panicking and freaking out, and it means Karkat's trying to calm down. Which is, like, half the battle right there. John stands there holding Karkat and nudges at the troll's feet until they turn slightly. This way, if Karkat is to open his eyes, he'll be looking at the wall and not at Dave or John's dad, neither of whom really need to see this. Once John spies Dave, though, he raises his head and starts flailing his hand around, trying to communicate that everyone needs to calm down right now.

And finally, finally, Dave seems to pick up on the fact that he needs to tone it down. He nods slowly, and starts typing again. Maybe John's frantic charades are working! Karkat grunts but doesn't scream or anything when his phone beeps, and he's slow to raise the hand with the phone in it.

TG: okay my bad
TG: no tears dude just let it out
TG: youre okay man like
TG: john is right there
TG: hugging on you and not on me
TG: though i can come over there and we can totally all hug this out together -

Karkat shrieks. John yelps as a set of claws digs into his back. "MY HATE FOR YOU WILL OUTLAST THE HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE!!" Karkat then dissolves into incoherent, mumbled but still audible mutters that sound a lot like, "mthrfrkkingerfukcufkkfuckerfak," which is Karkat-speak for, "oh dear, I have fucked up. I fucked up. I made a terrible mistake." Or so John thinks.

"Oh, good lord," Samuel Egbert mutters at his desk, his head sinking into his hands.

Dave flinches back, looking vaguely horrified, with both hands up in protest.

TG: no stop
TG: no no i said no hate square stuff and i meant it
TG: look dont you have other perfectly willing targets for your harshnasty troll ragelust thing
TG: this is like a statistical sciencey fact only like -2% of humans are down for that
TG: why me
TG: oh god do you have a human kink
TG: first john and now me
TG: please tell me thats not a thing

...Or maybe Dave is just a dick. John reaches over and holds down the power button on Karkat's phone until it shuts down, and then he covers Karkat's eyes with a hand to make him stop glaring at Dave. Okay, maybe he mostly just mashes his palm across Karkat's face in general, but the attempt is made. Shooshpapping at its finest.

Thankfully, John thinks he's got this whole mess back under control. Or at least, Karkat doesn't start yelling again. He quivers in John's arms with barely repressed anger, smoothing fingers over the pinpricks where he nicked John with his claws, but John's not exactly having to hold him back from tearing into Dave, either. When Karkat peels himself off John, wavering on his feet and hiccupping
angrily, he makes a deliberate effort to not look at Dave, just looks at his feet; John can't see the troll's expression from here, but at least the ragefit seems to have died down. "You good?" he asks.

A fond grin pulls weakly on Karkat's mouth in spite of his still wrinkled brows, a smile that makes him look stupidly adorable. "I'm too fucking tired for this shit. Amazing." He shakes his head, then winces, his teeth tugging at his lip as he wraps an arm around his middle. "Ow. I think I fucking pulled something..."

"Wait, seriously?!"

"No. I just yelled too loud." Karkat's face grows distant with horror, as he pokes at his ribs. "Oh god. I can't yell. Fucking fuck, John, who...what am I if I can't yell?!"

John claps a hand on Karkat's shoulder, smiling sympathetically. "Doomed forever."

"That smile is the opposite of reassuring, you know that?"

Dave gives a thumbs up. John's phone starts going off in his pocket, but he resolves not to show any incoming messages to Karkat unless they've undergone a thorough review for the sake of everyone's continued sanity. He can't even imagine what the neighbors think by now, what with all the yelling going on. How the heck has Jade slept through all this and not burst in to make everything ten times more chaotic?

"Dad? We're all going to sleep now," John says. He is taking charge here, like the awesome friend leader that he is, because clearly otherwise nothing is going to get done around here and as long as he's distracting himself with radiating good vibes for both Karkat and Dave to pick up on, he's not thinking about - other things.

"That would...probably be for the best," his dad replies wearily. He looks as tired as John feels, and resigned to having his house invaded by teenagers. "If Dave would like something to eat after that trip, don't forget to grab him something from the kitchen. Please, please, try not to wake up Miss Harley?"

"Will do."

"He can get his own food," Karkat mumbles. John rolls his eyes, hooks his arm through Karkat's, and drags him out into the hall. It's also to make sure he has a grip on Karkat in the event the troll has a dizzy spell or something, but for the sake of Karkat's pride and because Dave would never let him live it down, he tries to be discreet about it.

"Shhhhh," John says absently, tiptoeing past the couch where Jade sleeps, and motions Dave along in front of him. The other hero nods, on tiptoes as well, and they all three sneak into the kitchen without Karkat trying to kill Dave. Dreams can come true. He checks his phone and starts answering Dave so he isn't a totally awful host on top of everything else.

TG: crisis averted
EB: yeah, for now.
TG: something else up with you two
TG: because that kind of overreaction cannot be good for that guys heart
TG: like damn son
EB: i don’t know…
EB: it’s kind of just his basic personality, but made worse because he's in pain and tired and stuff?
EB: we've had a rough few weeks.
TG: tell me about it man
EB: but yeah, we have a lot of leftovers in the fridge that you can eat.
EB: the microwave is kind of loud though, it might wake jade up

Dave is at the fridge faster than John can track with his eyes. Oh jeez. His dad is gonna be sooo mad.

TG: oh my god
EB: what.
TG: food
EB: ...yep. :O
EB: shocking, i know.
TG: shut up i live in some kind of hovel obviously
TG: you have apple juice oh thank you john bless you

Dave removes the apple juice container from the fridge and sets the whole thing on the counter. He twists off the cap with a sharp crack, holds the jug in both hands, and upends it into his mouth.

And just...keeps drinking.

It just *keeps happening*.

John feels his jaw drop, and when he looks at Karkat he can see the same awe and morbid fascination there.

Dave chugs an entire jug of apple juice without pausing for air. When the container is empty, he sets it back down on the counter, wiping his mouth.

"Wow," John says reverently.

"You're fucking kidding me," Karkat says.

Dave stares Karkat dead in the eye, and John looks at the next text. He hastily shoves the phone out of sight when Karkat tries to snarl and sneak a peek at it, because no, they are *not* arguing without a door between them and Jade.

TG: this is
TG: AN EXTREME THIRST
EB: omg dave no
TG: show it to him come on
TG: you have no idea how annoying this not being able to talk thing is
TG: i swear it was not this bad being mute before
TG: come onnnn
EB: no! :/
EB: get some food and let's go!
TG: chill give me a second

Dave tosses the drained juice container into the trash can, which John thinks is amazingly considerate of him considering what the Strider apartment usually looks like when it comes to hording things. Then he shuffles back over to the fridge and starts cracking open tupperware containers full of leftovers.

TG: so what's up with you and the troll
TG: he's up and moving so he's recovering already
EB: blood powers apparently come in useful!
EB: but his ribs are busted up, and there's nothing he can do to heal that faster.
EB: he just wouldn't wake up and i worried he had a concussion, it freaked me out so bad…
TG: well we can shove him in a slime coon thing to heal and then talk
TG: would avoid another bitchfit
TG: because idgaf about the moirail thing hes too tired and shit to help you here
TG: that or youre just not telling him about it
TG: because you think hes too hurt to handle it
TG: and youre taking one for the team like the dumbass you are
EB: um…
TG: called it
TG: yeah were gonna talk kid
TG: holy shit you have
TG: okay i have no idea what the hell this is
TG: but it looks hella delicious
EB: i'm pretty sure that's stir-fry.
EB: like beef and vegetables and stuff.

Dave opens the tupperware lip a little wider, and sniffs at the food inside. John figures this is a survival mechanism born of growing up in a home where the fridge doubles as a sword storage closet and weeks-old pizza is a staple of one's diet. But apparently the stir-fry meets Dave's standards. He straightens up and kicks the fridge closed with a foot, clutching the food to his chest.

TG: mine now

"Do I want to know what he's saying?" Karkat asks disdainfully.

TG: you cant see it but i am projecting a massive telepathic middle finger in his general direction
TG: tell himmm

John looks up from his phone. "He was asking about the beef stir fry."

"If you think I can't tell you're censoring him, you are dead wrong."

John opens the drawer with the cutlery and passes Dave a fork. The other human inspects it like it's a foreign object, and then sticks it into the beef to bring upstairs with him.

TG: awesome food acquired
TG: alright now im going the fuck to sleep too because airplane sleep is not real sleep
TG: its lies and misery

"Yeah, sure," John says aloud. "Uh, but, we're going to need to dig out more blankets and find somewhere for you to sleep. Since somehow we ended up with three extra people in the house..."

TG: its fine
TG: i dont take up much space
TG: just like put me in a corner or something

"Whaat?!! No, Dave, that would be rude!" John scratches at his hair. His eyes feel heavy and gritty and he is so ready for bed. "You can probably fit on my bed with me if you don't mind it, and that way we don't have to bug Jade or anything."

...Jade. Something in John's mind flickers. Something about Jade...

"I mind," Karkat growls.

"- and we can have like a wall of pillows between us," John offers weakly. "Like, an indestructible
wall of Jericho!"

No, really, why isn't Jade awake right now? John throws a crooked frown at the back of the couch, which is all he can see right now.

TG: this is just hilarious
TG: seriously its wrapped all the way around from stupid to infuriating and right back to hilarious

"That would be...acceptable." Karkat eyes Dave with distrust. "I'm watching you, human."

TG: oh thats it
TG: hes asking for it

Dave slings an arm around John's neck, smirk out in full force.

With a smothered yell, Karkat lunges at them. John seizes them both by the collar, reaching out with unfailing accuracy to drag them apart as far as his arms can stretch.

But even as Dave starts making rapid hand signs that John doesn't know (but which are probably obscene) and Karkat tries to squirm out of his grip, John can't focus on their squabbling. He's feeling out the circulation of air in the house, his head tilted to the side as he does a mental headcount. Karkat's breathing is shallow and rapid, Dave's is low and steady but hoarse, his dad's is a familiar cycle, and on the couch Jade's...

That's not Jade's breathing. There's no way John is mistaking it, either, not with how similar Jade's breathing patterns are to his own. In fact, that feels like -

"Stop it, you guys!" he says, too loudly and maybe desperately. Karkat and Dave both look at him, equally guilty, and John holds his finger to his mouth. He lets go of Karkat, and nods his head toward the living room. Both of them stare, at a loss. John sighs and strides over to the couch. When he looks down, the pile of blankets is motionless, but now that he examines it properly, it's obvious that the curled up lump is too small to be Jade.

He yanks back the blankets, and his suspicions are confirmed. WV is curled up around a pillow that has been torn up and disemboweled by curious, questing claws, and is apparently so deeply asleep that the carapacian doesn't register the pile being dismantled.

Jade is gone, and she left WV to make it seem like she was still here.

"Daaaaad!" John yells at last. A faint crash comes from the study, and when his dad emerges, looking harassed and a little crazy-eyed, John just points at the sleeping carapacian. "Uh. Jade and Bec are missing."

At least, he thinks Bec is gone. He can't imagine Jade going anywhere without the weird wolf by her side, but since John isn't entirely sure the animal *breathes*, he can't tell if it's in the house or not.

And he can already guess where Jade will have gone. Gosh, no wonder she didn't wake up and interrupt all these weird goings on.

While they've all been running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off, she's gone looking for Diamonds Droog by herself.

...Oh, *come on!*

"Dad," John says, hesitantly. "We're not getting to sleep tonight, are we?"
Samuel Egbert stares. He closes his eyes. And then he strides into the kitchen, opens the cupboard over the fridge, and sets a large bottle of wine on the counter.

"And to think, I told Rue I'd never drink this," he says.

---

Today has been kinda weird.

Usually Jade is totally on board with weird. Weird things and events are so interesting to investigate, after all! But today’s weird was not fun at all.

Because people getting hurt is not awesome. Karkat might be a shouty butt in and out of costume, but even if Jade kind of wants to kick his ass when he acts all pointlessly angry and rude, she wouldn't want to see him bleeding out like that. If he didn't have those neat blood powers, he might have been dead before she and John came back to rescue him, and that's too close a call for comfort. It's all too easy for Jade's science brain to extrapolate twenty different ways Diamonds could have killed him on that rooftop. All the mobster would have had to do was crush his skull, really, same as any other human or troll on the planet, and he'd have been done. They seriously underestimated that lady, Jade included, and Karkat paid for their overconfidence. It makes Jade's stomach all twisty and sick with guilt, and so even when Karkat tries to draw her into a proper argument, she can't get the image of his battered face out of her head.

Of course, arguing seems to make Karkat feel better, so go figure. She lets him yell at her, rolling her eyes inwardly a few times, but lets him get it out of his system.

And then there's the whole secret identity thing - again, weird, but not the good kind of weird. Jade is still flummoxed as to how John could have missed something so obvious (duh, John, come on!), but it's clearly bummering him out; all day long he's been antsy and barely talking and staring at his phone, for most of the time that Karkat was unconscious. But even after Karkat woke up, John was tooottally spaced out and lost in his moody little world whenever he wasn't busy trying to soothe Karkat or deflect Jade's questions. He's been shaken up, bad, and Jade hates to see her brother so broken up and sad!

So there's no harm in Jade just tracking Diamonds down, right? The faster they catch Diamonds, the sooner Karkat will be safe and John will be secure and confident and happy again, and justice will have been served. Everything about that plan seems to check out okay! Perfectly logical!

So she snags WV from under John's bed remotely, shushes him through the ensuing fit of green fire and squeaking protests, and tucks the carapacian into the couch bed when John hauls Karkat upstairs. WV is tired from running around the house all day and entertaining himself in the basement while John paced around Karkat's 'coon. Jade had made herself scarce by working out down there when it became clear John needed time to himself, and even gotten some sleep, so it's not like she's completely stupid and sleep-deprived when she teleports out of the Egbert house and into the sky over Seattle. Just a little gross, because she sort of forgot to shower in all that angsty karate practice and emergency medical care and recooperacoon relocation - and a lot determined to make Diamonds pay for messing with her little bro and his best troll friend. She swaps her bodysuit for one that's a dark red with the pinpricks and swirls of a galactic nebula worked into the fabric, and goes to work.

There are a little over six hundred thousand people who live in Seattle. That's the census number, the rough estimate that doesn't take into account tourists, visiting relatives, commuters, the homeless, and the illegal. Compared to some of the massive cities Jade has visited, Seattle is teeny tiny. Hong Kong, Tokyo, Manila, Moscow, Istanbul - Jade has passed through all of them as Sharpshooter,
But she's never tried anything like this before. Looking for John was one thing, because John had powers that made it easier for her to narrow down her senses. But Diamonds Droog is a normal person! Well, apparently she's suuuuper strong and stuff, but she can't fly or anything - or at least Jade really hopes she can't! And that means Droog is just one moving body among hundreds of thousands of other bodies according to Jade's sense of the space around her. It's sooo frustrating!

But Grandpa always says that you need to be patient while hunting your prize, and he had like a bajillion years of experience hunting down poachers in Africa to go off of, so he obviously knew what he was talking about! And when in doubt, always start at the scene of the crime!

She's kind of mixing her metaphors here, but who cares! Humming to herself, Jade bounces across the rooftops of downtown Seattle in bursts of green. Bec appears at intervals whenever she stops to deal with some illicit activity in progress, watches eyelessly from above as she floats an old man and his shopping cart full of worldly belongings over a busy street. It's still early enough in the evening that cars are crammed in the streets and messing up intersections as the drivers try to leave the city after a long day, and the old man waves at her with a bemused expression as Jade bounces off again, and Bec vanishes from its perch on the lightpole.

Bec, sadly, is not a hunting dog. It could probably search the entire city if she asked it to, but she's not entirely certain it understands much more than coordinates and very simple directions, so asking Bec to look for a single specific person among thousands might just confuse it, or make it flop over and go to sleep on her for being a troublesome human.

After reaching the rooftop where Karkat got all beat up, Jade decides to try it anyway. "Hey boy? Can you take me to Diamonds? Diamonds Droog?" she asks, pitching her voice high to get the wolf's attention. "Yeah? You remember her? You know where she is?"

Bec's ears perk up and it looks at her avidly, head cocked to the side - and then it rolls over, tongue lolling from its jaws with a trickle of bright green drool as it wags its tail.

Jade smacks her face, and then sighs, stooping to scratch Becquerel's belly with both hands. So much for that plan.

Instead, she surveys the rooftop and the surrounding area, her lips a moue of contemplation. The wreckage of the building that Diamonds blew up last night to get their attention and distract them from Hemogoblin is visible in the cool evening light, a blackened, fragmented shell covered in scorch marks and shattered windows that Jade barely recognizes from the outside when it's not a bonfire. She wonders what the news has been reporting about that, vaguely - it's not like the police would be aware that there's yet more organized crime activity behind this recent spate of arson, not when neither she nor John has gotten around to telling them in all the hubbub.

Beneath her shoes the roof is too clean. When they teleported out of here yesterday, Karkat had been bleeding all over the place - it had been kind of gross, to be honest. But Jade digs her toe into the gravel and frowns, kneeling beside Bec and patting its belly one last time before putting her nose right to the ground. Her nostrils flare as the rank scent of bleach stings her nose. She turns on the UV filter setting after a moment, but other than a few faint shadows, the stains she can make out aren't nearly large or fresh enough to account for the total curbstomp that occurred last night.

Either Diamonds cleaned up, or by sheer coincidence someone else totally drenched this place with bleach for fun. Jade is betting on the first one. They even raked over the gravel so none of the footprints from the struggle remain. She can't imagine a classy lady like Diamonds getting on her hands and knees to scrub this entire roof down, so she must have had her goons do it for her to hide any evidence she was ever there.
Wow! Organized crime sure is organized! She shakes her head and runs a mental scan over the dimensions of the roof, trying to pick up on any tiny object or paper that might have fallen out of a pocket or been dropped by a Crew member last night that she could use to try to track them down. She doesn't need much to work with, just a little -

Jade twitches, and opens her eyes. She stares over at the far corner of the roof, where the knee-high wall that runs the edge of the building as a guard overhangs slightly and forms a sneaky niche. The pale moonlight isn’t enough, so Jade raises a hand and lets energy gather around her hand to light up the night. The light reflects off something in the shadows, and reveals three dark shapes tucked into the recess. Jade darts over and scoops the items up, flopping down cross-legged with her back against the guard wall and setting them in her lap for inspection. There is a thin-bladed knife with a dark wooden hilt, one which has been lovingly oiled and sharpened but also appears to be well used: tiny notches mar the blade and the hilt, crumbling blood flecks cover the edge, and a groove has worn into the wood where a thumb would rest. Her light reflected off the blade, Jade thinks, and she sets it aside, hesitating only to touch a finger to the small spades symbol carved into the base of the hilt.

The second item is familiar. Jade inhales sharply, and lifts up the familiar round, khaki-colored pith helmet. When she spins it in her hand and runs a thumb along the brim, she can make out the faint green letters stitched haphazardly into the cloth covering. It used to be a faded, greyish tan, but Grandpa had her help him redye it with tea, and for a moment it almost feels like Jade is back at the sink, standing on a stool next to him and giggling as the pith bobbed and dipped in the murky brown water, the scent of earl grey filling the humid tropical air. For camouflage and for luck, he'd said, and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head.

This can only mean one thing.

Grandpa has been here.

...Gosh! It's been so long since he died and implanted his brain in the robot body and gone off on his mission, Jade can hardly remember the last time they spoke! For a long time now Jade has simply been used to thinking of him as dead, tending to the taxidermied remains of his human body in the living room and hearing his voice only through mechanical recordings and by imagining his presence, reading aloud the many notes and files and training regimens he left for her to raise herself on in his absence and pretending to have loud mock conversations and strifes with his unmoving body. And maybe, as the years dragged on without word from him, her hope had worn thin and she had even begun to think with a pang that his robot body might be dead, too, and his human brain along with it.

But she'd never been sure, and that margin of uncertainty had always given her hope that somewhere along the way, her own world-spanning adventure would cross paths with his mysterious venture. That his hat should appear now, after so many years of silence, can only be a deliberate sign from him, left for her to discover! Excited, her heart thrumming, Jade eagerly unfolds the third item, a crumpled up note written on heavy paper, which Jade smoothes out and sets on her knee to read, Grandpa's helmet perched at an angle on her hair.

The note seems to have been written on some kind of thick parchment, yellowed and musty, but the ink is a pale, vibrant pink that's she's pretty sure came out of a sparkly gel pen. Jade's heart sinks a little, and she sighs, because that is definitely not Grandpa's handwriting or his signature ink color. Smoothing one of the creases through the middle of the page, Jade reads it anyway, hoping for a clue.

My dear,
I hope you have been well! I couldn't reach you myself, so I asked this kind fellow to deliver this to you! You are always running around in those scruffy clothes, so I thought a nice warm sweater would keep you warm even if it gets chilly! I made it with all the love in my heart!

Unfortunately, I no longer reside in Проспeт; do not look for me there. Our benefactor had to be prematurely evacuated from the premises when someone named Diamonds Droog came asking a few intrusive questions. It was all quite exciting!

I'm quite safe where I am, though, never fear. I can take care of myself for the time being, with the hints of the future that our benefactor shared guiding me, but I worry that it may be some time before we see each other again. The item that you left in my care is well hidden, too, and shall remain so as long as you wish me to keep it so. May it draw you back to me soon - I miss you quite terribly.

Remember, be polite, and try not to stab people who haven't consented to it! We're working on the indiscriminate bloodshed, remember?

Yours, always,

MS Paint

Huh! Jade turns the paper over in her hands, but the back side is blank.

She doesn't think the letter is intended for her, and judging by the crumpled state of the parchment, it has passed through quite a few trials along the way to its intended unnamed recipient. For all Jade knows, it could have been Diamonds Droog herself who dropped it - which would be quite a find! - but she doesn't think that a criminal as professional as Diamonds would have left this pile of very convenient items just lying around for anyone to find, in such an obvious hiding place. No, she's sure Grandpa is behind this! But she can't figure out why he would have left someone else's message and not one of his own. Could it be a code? Cryptanalysis has never not been her strong point, even though Grandpa always insisted a plucky adventurer should always have a simple secret algorithm memorized for emergencies. She'd had more of a head for chemistry and physics and weapons than for code breaking.

Buuut…Jade squints. She touches a finger to the parchment, running it over the light, faint pink cursive and tracing the shape of the letters with her fingertip. There's something - off. There are bumps in the parchment where there should be indentations, and at one point, in the middle of the word 'MP: benefactor,' a sharp groove presses through from the other side, almost deep enough to have scratched through the paper. It's almost as though someone had written something else on top of this letter, and the indentations from the other note have marked up this one.

Or…

Jade smiles, turning the parchment over once more, and raises her hand to her glasses to switch the UV sensitive filter back on. Green ink fluoresces under her gaze, and suddenly the entire back side of the note is covered in a wide, heavy-handed scrawl.

Grandpa knows her so well! Behold, the power of science!

The strokes for 't's and 'k's in particular dig into the page so deeply that she can see why the other side of the paper felt so bumpy and out of sorts. Each straight line strikes a deep mark in the parchment, as though it took real effort to get the pen to move as the writer intended. The handwriting is familiar but not quite the same, with more strikethroughs and blotches of ink than she's used to from reading Grandpa's files.
Well, it has been years since Grandpa died. She's not surprised his replacement robot body hasn't worked out all the kinks yet!

Right-o, my girl! I've piggybacked on this little correspondence of the MP's - she's assured me she could give two figs about it. Just wanted to let you know that I've kept up with all of your ripsnorting, capital adventures, and I'm very impressed! However, I have been meaning to inquire- are you certain that you can't lay your paws on a gun with a slightly higher caliber? It always worries me to no end when you leave the house without appropriately devastating armaments!

There are quite a few feisty felons running about this town who need to be given a good thumping, but I can't stay long. The Midnight Crew know me as Lieutenant Bailey, and I have been a prickly pear in their side for quite some time - it would not do for the Lady Droog to catch wind that I've popped by for a visit. I'll drop by to see you tomorrow, for through my robotic travails I have uncovered several outstanding mysteries that require further elbow grease and gumption to sort out, and have reconnected with a friend long thought dead.

I'd ask you to keep mum about this little note around young John and his guardian, for the moment. Samuel has always seemed like a gent worth his salt, but he's no Jo, and I think old Joanna would have a few choice words for him on the matter of how he's raised that boy.

It's taken real chutzpah for you to have made it this far, and I couldn't be more proud! I know you'll continue to use sound judgment as you grow into a strong, independent hero!

Lands' sakes alive, is that the time?

James Harley, Esq.

Jade crushes the letter to her chest, beaming. Grandpa hasn't changed a bit! She's so happy she could explode. She tucks the letter into her sylladex for safekeeping, and cartwheels over to Bec in midair, humming. "Grandpa's okay, boy!" she informs Bec delightedly, floating upside down and scratching its belly one last time. "Hurray! Get excited!"

Becquerel, surprisingly enough, manages to rouse itself from its lollygagging and rolls back onto all fours, the gravel of the roof pinging off its fur in tiny pricks of green light. Its ears perk right up, and Jade thinks it might actually be as excited to hear from Grandpa as she is. Bec's never really shown much attachment to anyone but Jade, but Grandpa is the one who designed the wolf and gave it life to protect and guard Jade. Surely Bec would at least show a spark of interest in that?

Then Bec's ears flatten back against its skull, and a rumbling growl rises in its chest. Jade frowns and scritches behind the wolf's shoulders, leaning her face forward to press against its fur. Meanwhile, without letting it show outwardly, she casts out her senses, feeling out the rooftops and the sky around her.

Bec's just gone into warning mode. Something's up, but Jade can't tell what it is. She captchalogues the knife and the helmet and stores them neatly away in her pocket dimension, and then flings back her arms in a stretch, clasping one wrist with the other hand. "Welp, back to work!" she says chipperly. She can't sense anything, but it's got to be there. Perhaps another orbital missile?

But a missile coming down on a major city? That would be seriously bad news! "Boy, can you lock on the problem for me, so I can move it?" she suggests in an undertone, still scanning the skies.

"Fetch, boy? You wanna play fetch? You have to show me what we're playing with?"

Bec whines and rises up on all fours, sharp white claws digging into the gravel and slicing through
the roof itself like a warm knife through butter. Jade flinches back, startled, as Bec whines and growls while staring up at her, kneading the ground with its claws with its fur coat standing up on end with static electricity. Something is wrong, wrong, wrong.

And then the wolf *barks*.

And that's when Jade realizes it's not staring at her.

Bec's staring at something *behind* her.

The stairwell door clicks open, and it is only then that Jade realizes she never thought to check inside the building beneath her feet. It's still too early and there are too many people still at work, and she’d dismissed the possibility of being able to distinguish a threat among the office workers. But she could have - and should have - noticed the motion of someone sauntering up the stairs to reach the roof.

She whips a riflekind out of her sylladex and holds it at the ready, but her eyes widen as she sees the person who emerges from within the building.

Diamonds Droog is in a completely different outfit from last night - which makes sense, considering how much of Karkat's blood got all over that thing. Her suit has a skirt now that cuts off perfectly just above her knees. Instead of a white tie, she has knotted a short white scarf around her neck and tucked the ends into the front of her suit jacket, but the hat atop her head is cocked at the same jaunty angle as before; if she replaced it, the new one is identical to the last.

Sharpshooter recovers, though. She'd thought hunting down Diamonds would eat up most of the night, but apparently the villains are just coming to her, today! "Just the person I was looking for!" Sharpshooter announces, planting her hands on her hips. "You really did a number on one of my new friends, you know!" Because yeah, Karkat is shouty and dumb, but he's also John's moirail thingy, so she has an obligation to have his back.

"And you are the girl who has been leading Clubs a merry chase from one side of the Atlantic to the other," Diamonds returns, sliding her hands into her pockets and shrugging. "Admittedly, he isn't the most intelligent when it comes to tactics, but tracking you down still ate up valuable time and money that should have been better applied to more viable operations."

"Well, he should have just left me alone, darn it!" Sharpshooter says, rolling her eyes. "I never messed with you guys until he shot a missile at me! That *was* him, wasn't it?"

She nudges Bec with her foot. The wolf stopped freaking out when Jade finally noticed the threat at hand, but it's still on the alert, vibrating with the force of the growl emanating from deep in its chest. She might need its help to get out of here. She'd only wanted to track Diamonds down, not provoke an actual confrontation without backup, but this…

This feels like Diamonds was *waiting* for one of them to show up! How suspicious!

Diamonds sighs heavily. "Don't remind me. I don't know who keeps giving him clearance for that. I have begun to think our employer just finds him entertaining. It's the only explanation." Her eyes narrow, and she steps forward. Bec's growls increase in intensity, but the mobster starts drifting around in a wide arc rather than drawing nearer to the hero. Sharpshooter takes a step back, to keep a safe distance away, but then she stands her ground. She doesn't know what this confrontation is all about, but she's sure gonna try to get more out of Diamonds about her goals for mucking about in John's city before high-tailing it!

"I, on the other hand, have no intention of doing such a thing," Diamonds continues, offering an
insincere, simpering smile as she slides the toe of her black high heels through the gravel. "I find my own hand-picked agents to be far more effective at accomplishing tasks than unloading a giant robot and pointing it at the nearest target."

Privately, Jade is disappointed. Giant robots are always a totally appropriate answer. "That's cool, I guess," she says aloud. "If that's your thing, and all. You're still a bad guy who wants to commit crimes and stuff, so whatever!" With that in mind, she decides to at least try to catch this lady. She levels her rifle specibus at the woman, mentally slotting rubber bullets into the chambers because she's not taking any chances here. "But, um, it would also be pretty awesome if you just surrendered right now!"

That spark of hope that maybe, just this once, asking politely might actually work, flickers out as Diamonds raises an eyebrow. "Such a simple life you must lead." Diamonds sighs. "Does it even concern you how I knew you had returned here?"

Sharpshooter bristles. Mentally, she's just sorting through her internal record of all the junk she keeps in her sylladex, and trying to recollect if she has some kind of recording device on her or not. If she could get a tape of Diamonds confessing to something illegal, that would go a long way towards getting a dangerous woman like this behind bars. "Not really! After all, I came looking for you!" She grins. "If you were really so smart, you wouldn't be here at all."

Diamonds blinks, and then resumes her pacing. It does not escape Jade's notice that occasionally the woman takes the time to pause and trace a tiny diamond in the gravel with the sharp, dark metal of her heel - like a tiny, compulsive calling card that she sweeps over with her toe on the next pass. "Don't really see the point of carrying the thing myself - that's why I've got my people."

When that vague, completely confusing statement just makes Sharpshooter frown with confusion, Diamonds elaborates. "Balls! How much more clear do I need to be? We can still track your powers, girl."

...Ohhh noooo! Ack! Oh gosh! Sharpshooter fumbles her rifle, horrified, as her mind flies back to all those times she floated around the Egbert house. The times she teleported in and out of the bathroom to bug John or used the sylladex to change her clothes on the fly.

She'd been worried about drawing Clubs down on John's head, but the moment she actually found John she stopped worrying about that tracking device completely! Oh man, she messed up!

Her silence must be explanation enough for the Crew boss, who pinches the bridge of her nose as she shakes her head. "Unbelievable. You passed into an area rank with void interference and we lost track of you, yes, but the moment you returned to the city itself the sensors detected your antics at once."

"Why, though?!" Sharpshooter still isn't getting it. At least it sounds like John's house is hidden, somehow. "Why are you guys so obsessed with us heroes? Why would you and Clubs even have that kind of space energy tracking stuff - that's just really weirdly specific and creepy!"

Diamonds gives a sharp bark of laughter, tossing her head back to expose the dark, slim curve of her throat and prominent Adam's apple. Everything about her movements are careful and deliberately elegant, as though the woman has practiced them so thoroughly that she can maintain perfect poise and dignity even when the wind picks up a little and flutters the brim of her classy hat and the hem of her skirt. It's all in stark contrast to the blood-covered figure standing over Hemogoblin's broken form Sharpshooter can still picture in her mind's eye. She can't let herself forget how paper-thin Diamonds's façade of reasonable sanity is.

"You're my employer's obsession, not mine, I can assure you of that!" Diamonds replies at last,
derision heavy in her voice. "But money is money, and he pays me handsomely whether the mission concerns my usual duties or more eclectic ventures, like this one." She rolls her eyes. "Incredible, really. I have spy networks that cover two thirds of the world, I recently orchestrated the failure of not one, not two, but three proposed bills by kidnapping the daughter of a key member of the US Senate - and somehow, this is the work that the boss has for me." Diamonds unfolds the scarf from around her neck and proceeds to retie it, obsessively smoothing the pale fabric into place. "When I must deal with crime fighters, I at least prefer to deal with those who can pose a significant challenge to my business. You children aren't exactly hard to dupe. One little explosion and you quite lose your heads!"

Just like that, Sharpshooter understands. "You wanted Hemogoblin on his own," she breathes. "You set that fire deliberately so Heir and I would be busy and couldn't help him out."

The woman gives a tiny, mocking bow. "Right on the money, kid. I have multiple on-going missions. Unlike Clubs, I am capable of multitasking, and dealing with your blood friend was only a secondary goal," Diamonds says smoothly. "My boss wanted me to see what the troll was capable of. Done. Heir's interference in Hearts' attempts at setting up operations here in Seattle remains an on-going issue - but you'll notice that Heir is not here right now." She spreads her hands wide, spinning to gesture to the city at large. "While he deals with his partner's injuries my operatives are hard at work finishing the job that Hearts started. Done and done."

When she turns back to Sharpshooter, her expression has reworked itself into a flat mask again. "But you. He promised me you would not unduly hinder my plans. Yet here you stand."

"Well, that sucks, lady, because unduly hindering evil plans is right up my alley!" Sharpshooter hooks a thumb at her chest, thumping it. "You're not getting away with eeeeevil! Even if Heir is on standby, I won't just stand by and let you get away with it!"

"Hmph. Don't worry your imbecilic little head about that." Diamonds cracks a small, cruel grin, throwing it over her shoulder as she pivots on a heel with a careless toss of her hair. "You should be far more worried about how I intend to deal with you."

Sharpshooter tightens her finger on the trigger and flicks on the targeting scope on her goggles with a twitch of power, just in case she has to start dodging all over the place and needs the assistance. "You could try to deal with me, lady!" she fires back, her hair crackling around her with the build up on energy. At her side, Bec presses in close, all of its protective instincts on overdrive.

"You see, I don't bother with flashy missiles or giant robots. When I come across a blood knight with a healing factor, I seek out the chinks that the healing does not cover. When I see a space manipulating warrior, I am capable of recognizing that brute force will solve nothing." Back and forth Diamonds paces. Back and forth, back and forth, but never coming closer. Always maintaining those yards of space between them. It feels deliberate, and it's making Sharpshooter's skin crawl, but she can't pinpoint why. "Do you really think I would simply stand around here and talk shop with a child who has been interfering with the Crew's plans? Do you really think I monologue without a purpose?"

This is all super ominous, and Sharpshooter does not like it one bit. "Uhhhh," she says, dragging the syllable out as she tries to think up a not-stupid answer. Come on, think Jade, think! "Uh, you seem...pretty chatty…"

Diamonds just sighs, shaking her head. "No, you silly child. I am a distraction."

And with that, something sharp and thin stabs into the side of Sharpshooter's neck. She yelps, clapping her hand around the spot, and yanks the offending object out of her flesh.
It's a tiny feathered dart, of the kind Jade has used herself to tranq criminals or rogue lusii, streamlined and silvery with a flawless balance. Grandpa drilled her on the different types of ammunition and such, so she can identify without further inspection that this is one of the long-range type of capsules, the slim ones with the percussion cap to give it that extra oomph when depressing the syringe and injecting the sedatives. The tip is slightly bent from her careless yank, however, and when she flicks it open with fumbling fingers, a faint roar that sounds like an ocean washing through her ears, she sees that the cartridge within has been fully emptied. She raises a hand again, and finds the tiny hole over her jugular. This tranquilizer is heading straight for her brain.

That is...an impossibly good shot. And Diamonds distracted her so thoroughly, Sharpshooter never even felt the tiny spatial displacement of the dart flying at her.

...Dang!

When she glances up, disbelieving, Diamonds has a finger pressed to her ear, head cocked to the side as she listens to someone else through an ear piece. "No, that will do, Marlowe. You may dismiss her. Thank you for your assistance."

Sharpshooter staggers. At her side, Bec whimpers, confused. Maybe if the dart had been aimed at it, the wolf would have teleported them both away from it, or let the attack pass harmlessly through the glowing transporting matrix of its gut. But its just not intelligent enough to have seen this coming. "You tranq'd me," Sharpshooter says aloud, still not quite processing this. I mean, talk about role reversal! "Why? Why'd you do that? What..."

Diamonds steps toward Sharpshooter at last, crossing that invisible line she had set for herself all this time. "The boss swore I would get to take Spades Slick captive on this mission. He got away yesterday with the help of that blasted robotic lieutenant -"

Grandpa!

"- but I have a tracking device on him now. Slick is only a momentary annoyance, a thorn in my side, and once he is captured I have no interest in him." None of this is answering Sharpshooter's question, so Jade pulls a few choice faces - or at least she thinks she does, but her face has gone kind of numb. Judging by the grimace of distaste that creases Diamonds's face, she gets her dam point across! "But there have been live capture orders out on you since England. Clubs had the commission first, but he's otherwise occupied right now. And if you so kindly place yourself in my way, why not indulge in a good old fashioned kidnapping?" Diamonds's expression can no longer be called a grin; she's gone feral, her eyes distant with some insane satisfaction. "It is one of the few pleasures I have in life. I shall deliver you to the boss man, and it shall be one more successful capture to my name."

Oh wow. Oh jeez, this all sounds really bad! Jade grabs the side of her head, wishing it would stop throbbing. It doesn't hurt, exactly, but everything is layered in a dense, cool fog that slows down all of her thoughts and when she takes a step backward the whole world spins, rotating on its axis in a way that twists her sense of space into a nauseous blur. She couldn't bounce out of here even if she tried.

But. But, but, but. She laughs, her head spinning, and falls to her knees. "You forgot one thing," Jade says. Her tongue feels thick and heavy in her mouth, a dead weight that barely responds by flopping around to imitate the noises of the English language.

Diamonds leans in closer, her smile condescending and bored in equal measure. "And that would be...?"
"You forgot my dog, you monologuing bitch." Jade spits, and through the miracles of space magic, it zaps across the intervening air between them to slap against Diamonds's cheek. "Bec! Evac, boy!"

Teeth clamp down on the back of Jade's collar, and the world dissolves into molten green. Bec doesn't release her until, with a crash, they reappear. A gust of night air catches Jade as she grabs a railing for support, and she shivers, looking out over the city.

They're nowhere near the burned building anymore, according to her fritzing internal GPS, and for a heart-stopping moment she wonders if Bec has teleported her all the way to a new city - after all the time and effort that went toward actually making it to Seattle in the first place! But through the blurring smear of her rapidly dwindling vision, the skyline is still familiar. Uh. At least she thinks so! It's kiiinda hard to tell.

"What do you think was up with that, Bec?" Jade's head is full of clouds, poofy and cottony and surprisingly heavy. When Bec releases its grip on her collar she slumps backward from the railing, jolting forward with surprise when her head hits the ground sooner than her befuddled mind anticipates. "Oh no! Oh manerlglll..."

Her head flops back against the new roof, and moving it, even to try and shake herself awake, feels like it would require a massive effort. Her muscles are way too tingly and heavy and slow to rouse herself from the impending chemical nap. This is so sucky! Thinking is getting harder to manage, but Jade wonders if she can mumble out one last order to have Bec take her back to John, or vice versa. They need to get to someplace less exposed than this random rooftop, but she...where...sleep just sounds really...urgggggh...

...And what is that totally obnoxious 'whub whub whub' cutting through the air? "Berce?" she manages, one eye drifting open. The wolf, oblivious to the fact that its human's nap is not normal, lies down and tucks its nose under her chin. "Noooot helpin'."

The sky overhead is grainy and dark, swirling around in very sick-making patterns, and she has to close her eye again before she actually does get sick. She groans and somehow rolls over onto her side. That expends the last of her energy, but at least she won't choke on her own vomit or something dumb like that. What a way to die that would be...

Whub whub whub whub whub

"Stoooooppit," she drawls. It doesn't work; whatever is making that noise stubbornly continues to make itself heard, which is just plain rude when she's about three seconds from passing out. Mainland people can be so inconsiderate.

Something in the back of her mind clicks, and Jade's eyes pop wide open.

A helicopter circles overhead. The blades whirring overhead could have belonged to any one of the emergency or news choppers over the city, but this one is carrying something low under its belly as it slowly edges over the roof, and there can be no mistake - it's so close to her that the noise becomes an ear-wrecking drone and her hair starts flying everywhere. For one delirious moment, Jade is sure it's going to land on her, that maybe Bec teleported them to some hospital's landing pad without noticing the danger.

Then, with a crash, the object attached to the underside of the helicopter disengaged and slams down on the roof around them, four barred walls that hum almost as loud as the helicopter rotor.
It's a cage.

They can track her and Bec's space powers, and Diamonds has been planning this for...who knows how long…

That is seriously something she needs to remember...next time…

Jade can't stay conscious anymore. Her eyes roll back and the darkness eats up everything around her.

She passes out with Becquerel's fading growl rumbling against her back.

Robin Marlowe waits for the floor of the cage to slide into place, and then nods for the tech to retract back up under the chopper. After the pilot has angled the chopper back toward back, Marlowe switches the frequency of his noise-cancelling headphones until he's back on his Lady's line, and tells her the good news. "Ma'am? We have her. And her little dog, too."

The reply is immediate. "Excellent work, Marlowe. Bring them in."

The unmitigated satisfaction that suffuses Marlowe's system just from hearing that is uncanny. Winning Diamonds Droog's approval is an honor; disappointing her, unthinkable. He's only been in Lady Droog's service for a few months, and it's unlike working for any other employer. There aren't many wholly discreet employers who offer pension plans to ex-Interpol operatives bold enough to advertise with promises of kidnapping, undercover operations, and blackmail, but then, the Lady doesn't advertise - she recruits. Marlowe isn't entirely sure what would have happened if he'd refused her (very generous) offer, but she'd come to his door in person, so it would no doubt have been bloody.

He can't remember feeling this loyal to any other employer before. But he can't complain, would never dream of it, because sure, the work he does is unorthodox - for example, he'd been given standing orders to remain in this helicopter over the course of the next few days, waiting to give the signal to a sniper half his age in the event the space witch were to show up - but it's fulfilling. He's no stranger to travel, but over the past few weeks he's covered more ground with the Lady than he ever did over years in Interpol. There's certainly never a dull moment in the business of criminal enterprise.

Nominally, he's down for tax records as a personal assistant to a nonexistent PR executive. He's not sure in what universe his Lady's work counts as public relations, but he'll make whatever excuses he needs to keep working for her.

"But keep the Scratch girl away from her," the Lady continues, her words sharp and clipped. Marlowe can make out the faint tap of her heels on concrete in the background, and knows she'll be on the move. "I don't want the two of them interacting in any way, shape, or form. Bring the cage to base and then escort the Scratch to her exit vehicle. I can trust you to handle this?"

"Of course." The call ends with a heavy clunk before he finishes the last word, but that's alright. He has his orders. And hell, anything that isn't sitting in forced silence next to a teen sniper for days at a time is fine in his books.

"You're heading back after this," he tells the sniper sitting across from him at a diagonal. "It should only be a few minutes, and we'll have you back to the drop point."

"And so the fieldtrip ends. Lmfao," the girl slurs, slumping back in her seat and sprawling out, her
legs splayed apart and her Needler rifle kind across her lap. "Les' just ship me back off to Dullsville, amiright?"

"Your services are appreciated," Marlowe says, but the girl just sighs and flings herself in another direction, resting her face on her gloved knuckles with a cheek poofed out. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat; he never had children, let alone a teenage daughter, and decides that managing the sulk of a mob sniper doesn't fall under his jurisdiction.

His Lady doesn't like the Scratches. Something about 'pretentions' and 'needless complication' and 'comic books.' It seems to be the principle of the thing, rather than any particular complaint about the quality of their work.

But this one in particular rubs her the wrong way. Marlowe only knows the girl's code name, Ranger Dras-ifeth, a language he isn't familiar with and which no one has offered to explain. But when the girl arrived at Droog's quarters insisting on "jusht Ranger, y'know," it became clear why she would offend the Lady's sensibilities. Ranger is one hell of a shot or the Lady would never have requisitioned her services to take out a sniper hero, but she wanders about in a state of affected, perpetual tipsiness, though Marlowe would swear up and down that the girl hasn't had a sip of anything vaguely alcoholic since they entered this chopper.

Faked or not, this kind of sloppiness is exactly the sort of slovenly behavior that grates on the nerves of a dignified lady like Diamonds Droog, and Marlowe feels obligated as her subordinate to disapprove of the girl as well.

The girl kicks her feet up as she rocks forward, her eyes flashing behind the black mask across her eyes. "Hey. Omg, dude, I just had the best idea. Lemme go out and talk to 'er!"

"Wha - no!" Marlowe replies, startled. The very thought of disobeying the Lady's order sends a bolt of agony through his brain, and he has to remind himself, shakily, that the Scratch girl hadn't been tuned in to hear his Lady's orders. It's a suggestion born of ignorance, not deliberate rebellion. He removes his hand from the pistol kind in his shoulder holster and reasserts himself. "Lady Droog was quite clear - you are not to interact with the prisoner in any way." He can't help adding, in a pained rush, "Why would you even suggest such a thing? You took down your mark. That was your job. There is no need for further interaction with her after that."

"I knooowww~" Ranger draws out the word, pouting and lolling her head back on the shoulder rest. She's almost managed to completely twist herself free of the safety restraints. She fiddles with the extra sniper scope attached to the rectangular barrel of her strife specibus, an oddly anxious expression twisting her sugar pink lips. "'n I feel kinda shitty about it! Like, c'mon, I'm not all fronting in your secret-y secret mission territory, but she was just standin' there, bein' all goofy and sciency. And I shot her! What's up with that? I mean, I don' wanna over-cerebralize it like Cogs but it's kind of a dick move?? Maybe??"

"You were following orders," Marlowe says. He can feel a migraine coming. "As long as you continue to follow orders, there is no issue."

"She's prob'ly down for the next few hours, anyway." The girl sighs. "It'd be like talking to nobody. Aw well, whatev. It was just a thought." She fidgets for a few minutes, until Marlowe is fooled into believing that perhaps they can go back to a tolerable, mutual silence. "Think I can grab a snack or something before I have to call it a night? They haven't let me out in ages!"

Marlowe stares at her unblinking, brilliant pink eyes, and the accompanying hopeful grin. He reaches up, shaking his head in silence, and flips the settings on his headphones until he's off the channel that the Scratch shares, before settling himself in with a wary eye cast out the window of the helicopter.
keep an eye out for potential aerial assaults.

His service under the Lady Droog includes many and sundry responsibilities.

Dealing with teenage villains is not one of them.

-Los Angeles-

After they generate a couple hundred or so angels, Eridan gets bored.

He's not built for this kind of sustained, obsessive thing, alright? He has other interests. Big plans. Not just wavin' his claws around so that Mal can cackle while it chews on some random asshole's brain and strings its victims out into acid-white angels.

Meanwhile, Eridan is over here, hanging out in the endless tangles of an all-knowing hivemind. And somehow…

Bored as fuck.

Eventually, he poses the best question anyone has ever asked, ever. "ωωȠςɿΗης," he complains, "ԲՑɿՈՍ-, We promised you a stunning sight, to prove that I'm your ruler!"

It takes a few tries. There are a lot of needless voices screaming in the chorus that is Malā’ikah, and Eridan's throat is hoarse before the attention of the horde centers itself on him. Privately, Eridan thinks Mal could be overdue for a hive trimming, because this shit is fuckin' ridiculous. He's the one whose body they're all using; shouldn't he be the one in charge of this? It's downright inconsiderate. Unconscionable is what it is.

But he gulps, and repeats the question, and finally the rest of the voices in this muddle pull their shit together to give him a straight answer.

"Ես պիչից մի քանի աստիճան գործունեություն, որոնք պայքար ունեն միջին համարը." We promised you a stunning sight, to prove that I'm your ruler!

They drop the newest angel in the middle of its transformation sequence, and Eridan watches with oozing black eyes as the human wretch falls out of the sky and into one of the lakes of grimlight that Mal has been spitting all over the damn place. Inwardly, Eridan might feel a twinge of minor guilt.

Like. A tiny one. Absolutely fuckin' miniscule, you understand. Not one that the rest of Mal listens to, anyway. High on a rush of power unlike anything he's been able to muster in his entire pathetic life, a lot of Mal's ideas about how to take command of his own mini empire had sounded like pretty legitimate plans.

Now he's...not so sure. They're hovering in the sky over LA, the dome sobbing and oozing acid over their heads, so thick that Eridan can't even tell by looking if it's day or night anymore. An angel soars past them, all smooth white limbs and sleek wings fanned out to beat through the dead, stagnant air.

But. Here's the thing. Eridan can remember making that one. He remembers how Mal reached out - how he reached out - and spread out the troll's skin in long, thin sails, twisted her legs together into a single snake-like tail, and then poured grimwhite like candle wax over her broken form until all the burns and melted flesh vanished under a smooth façade. Mal swallowed her up into the hivemind, and then she was off, a pair of wings in the service of the hivemind and its Prince.
...It's unsettling', okay? He's starting to not-like it, in a skin-prickling way that makes him squirm inwardly.

But the rest of Mal is kind of gung-ho about this whole 'snatch and assimilate' thing, whereas Eridan had kinda been under the impression they'd still, you know, have people to rule over when all this nonsense was done. 'The hivemind sighs, murmuring, 'Art e not the angel's we care at e to get them to support the se in your dream's?"

The thing is, when Eridan asks what angels - when he sifts through all the tangled knots and webs of Mal's hivemind complex - he can't find these angels they babble about. Like there are some things in this supposedly mutual partnership he's being kept out of the loop on. When he thinks about those messy few weeks after Fef left and he went off his meds, inviting in the hallucinations and madness of dementia, it's all a blur of angst and fury.

But he thinks he remembers something about killing angels. He remembers that distinctly, because Mal was the one who said it. He killed them all - but Mal survived? Mal wasn't an angel? Mal was an angel, but not the same kind as the ones Eridan slaughtered?

He doesn't understand. His tiny little portion of the hindmind cracks and spins and crazes, but it can't produce an explanation that makes logical sense. "Somewhere in this is better than not to know," Mal whispers, which is just about as far from reassuring as it gets.

Eridan isn't getting the whole story here. And to be honest, that, more than anything else in this weird, kind of fucked up situation, is scaring the hell out of him.

Because if he can't trust the symphony of horrors and voices he's impulsively invited to share his brain and body in a moment of rampant cold-blooded lunacy, he is royally boned.

B-but hey, maybe now that he can chat Mal up about the obvious perks of reconstructing this whole city in a more aesthetically pleasing image, and suggest the possibility of ruling over the lowbloods and humans with a shining fist (as opposed to EATING THEM ALL, FUCK), the rest of the chorus will catch on to the fact that he's not exactly down with this, and they can get back to ruling an empire that still has live people in it to subjugate an' bring Eridan tribute an' shit.

So Eridan throws all of his power behind this new venture, clawing up a thread of white-hot power from the diamond in the center of his chest and feeding it through to Mal so the angels can work their magic. The dark tar that drips from his mouth drools down the front of his shirt as Mal raises their hands, and the grimlight slathering the streets of LA rises up in sheets of slimey white. The hivemind showers the broken, fragmented shells of the buildings that Eridan shattered earlier in his power high, and greedily strips away the imperfections in the stone and brickwork and roofing until a glossy shell coats most of downtown Los Angeles. It eats through to the very structural supports of the building, and molds them in the image that springs forth, fully formed, into Eridan's mind.

They twist their one hand into a fist, and squeeze. The grimlight coating shatters, and cracks, falling away to reveal the shining castles and courts underneath.

Everything is a vision in monochrome, the contrast between black stone and hot white light lighting up the grey twilight of the dome. Eridan has always had kind of a thing for architecture, particularly as it pertains to rulers and kings and empires, and he can see the medieval theme is strong here. The moats run thick with pools of grimwhite, corbels curl out from the underside of balconies and battlements in tight whorls, and stone palisades spring up like road blocks around each grandiose castle, decorated with traceries of light like wings. Open arches form chains of columns around the ground floor of each outer wall, surrounding arcades floored with flat black stone, and the towers above reach up almost as high as Eridan's current altitude. From here he can see every empty
courtyard where there used to be a parking lot. Skyscrapers, office buildings - all of it refitted into a 
black and white field of castles.

It's all unspeakably familiar, but Eridan can't think why. It pings something in him he can't deny, and 
he bares his teeth in a grin, urging them down from their hovering position to land on one of the 
battlements. "ωωίςύδήληνκιήμυ" he demands, laughing.

"I'm... I'm glorious, ye s." The wings on his back fold in, and the twining tendrils of Mal's grimlight 
aura wrap themselves around a nearby turret to raise up their body onto a higher peak. "It p'lea ses 
'you, a n'd s'o w'e a' r'e pl'ea s'e c'q." A'il i's we'l.

Awesome. So Mal is down with the castle thing. Maybe Eridan can talk it into some kind of totally 
fuckin' badass throne, too. That should occupy for a little while longer, yeah? Like - like a floating 
throne or something. And then obviously they need some kind of water complex too, because he is a 
seadweller and he deserves good things like a medieval water fortress.

And if he can just keep Mal thinking along those lines, maybe -

Mal freezes, and when the hivemind jerks to a halt, Eridan's thoughts are roughly tuned back into the 
chorus. It bewilders him for a moment, like a splash of ice cold water across the face, colder than his 
blood, and all he can do while his individual personality sinks into the damp is let Mal think for him. 
"ωωιγιição..."

The angels ride Eridan's body up onto the very tip of a conical roof. They turn a thousandfold eyes 
toward the east, but Eridan fights it. He shouldn't - this is the fuckin' epitome of stupidity - but he 
swallows another mouthful of tar and nearly gags. He's been breathing grimlight and inky drool for 
days, and it hasn't bothered him before.

Whatever is going on, he doesn't like it anymore.

"Wh'al i's 'THA'T?!" Mal's voice tears out of Eridan's throat like a screech. It's done that before, but he 
can't remember it hurting so much.

Eridan, at last, has the opportunity to pipe up on his own, finding his voice and untuning it from the 
rest of the behemoth orchestra of wails and shrieks that funnels into Mal's horde. "ωωίςήζωωίςήπ?" he asks, blinking their eyes hard. They've been weeping black tar for the past few days, 
and he's not sure they've actually remembered to blink. At all. When he runs a claw down his sides, 
his gills are caked with the black film, and he shivers.

"Th'ere! Th'ere! W'e s'py i't there!" the rest of Mal insists, tugging at Eridan's mind and trying to 
shove the knowledge at him. When he doesn’t immediately sync with the rest of the mind, it shrieks 
at him, like glass scraping on stone, and his nose bursts into a flood of sticky dark blood.

"...ήμΩηςίζωωήλήμήήμήήή," Eridan whimpers through gritted teeth. When Mal 
shows no sign of healing the damage, as it always has before, he takes his own initiative, drawing on 
his internal power and pressing it through his nose. Mal needs his power not the other way around to 
stick around this mortal plane, after all, so he hopes this will work.

The nosebleed heals, and a flush of soothing warmth trickles through his chest like lukewarm cocoa. 
Sweet, sweet vindication. Eridan puffs up a little, and he would smirk with self-satisfaction at his 
own incomparable epic majjyk skills if he had more control of his face at the moment.

Lost in whatever has enraged it this time, Mal doesn't seem to notice that Eridan is making repairs of 
his own accord, without input from the rest of the asshats flailing around in this slipshop hivemind.
Seriously. Eridan is no longer impressed. "It's HR" O'U'G\H' the d'om_e, y'o'ü föz01!"

...Fuckin' incredible. Eridan rolls mental eyes at the hivemind so hard, it's probably visible from orbit.

This is some pretty basic shit and the fact that Mal is choosing now of all times to freak out just confirms more of Eridan's growing suspicions that he might've accidentally saddled himself with one hella stupid extradimensional bodysnatcher. "H i's th' e jug' gal o! T he B' ard!" it insists, and the terror that floods their shared brainstems is raw and unfiltered. Eridan catches a fleeting, fluttering glimpse of what Mal is remembering - a shore of colorful circus tents, the bright slick of green sopor slime, and the wrenching sensation of a hivemind in distress.

Ohemgee. He could give so few fucks about circus clowns right now. Whatever Mal's major malfunction is, he is over it. He mentally punts that (apparently traumatic) memory to the side with a mental flick of the power from his core, and grumbles to himself as he instead sorts through for other memories. He wants to know about the angels and the castles, dammit, not some juggafuck outside the dome.

In the meantime, he tries to keep Mal from breaking more of his body in its dumbass temper tantrum. "V u N R d K e h 1 U P N U. K h O K N U P !" "The B'ar'd w' ll h u rrt worse! It' s an ab' omsg at to m!' Mal repeats, agitated. It makes him raise a hand and flies them toward the edge of the dome at a breakneck pace. A stray servitor angel soaring by, minding its own business, abruptly explodes in an eruption of black tar and viscera. Great, now they're killing people even deader. Eridan is not fuckin' amused anymore.

There's something familiar about that explosion though. He thinks he's seen angels blow up like that before. There's a surprising amount of grim, personal pride attached to that vague memory, too. Huh.

They arrive at the edge of the dome in moments, and Mal lands them on a regular building that escaped the rebuild. The dome rises up over their head, a sticky, massive wall of grimlight that looks far too organic for Eridan's liking. He pulled it out of the sky himself, using his power to cut a hole in the fabric of reality so Mal could slide more of its mass through, and through the magical wonders of hindsight he's really wondering why the fuck he thought that was a good plan.

The hivemind scans the entire surface of the dome, snarling and shrieking as it seeks some kind of gap in the protection. It looks down, and down, and down, and -

Eridan rouses himself from his mental disconnect to experience the exact moment that Mal looks at the place where the I-10 intersects with the dome wall, and sees a single troll standing there.

Mal's perception has more built in settings than Eridan's regular old eyes, and it zooms in on the impossible troll that stands in a clear circle of road, oblivious to the fact that most other inhabitants of the city fled indoors or to the very outskirts of the grimlight influence in droves days ago.

It's a gangly purpleblood, all stringy legs and too-thin arms, in ragged clothing stained and faded by unbelievably subpar care. Like, Eridan doesn't think this guy has showered in...Quite some time, let alone changed his shirt. To be honest, he looks like the kind of strung-out sopor-suckers out on Skid Row, the ones Fef had one of her countless charities in the works to try to help get them to rehab
facilities before she up and ditched LA entirely. Honestly, this guy looks like he could barely stand
up in a stiff wind, let alone be the cause of unfathomable terror in a hivemind powerful enough to
warp reality as it wills.
Then the troll blinks up at them, lazy eyed and crookedly grinning, and raises a hand in silent
greeting.
̒
͆ wings. Eridan
ͨ massive
"N̐͑ͭ̓O
̓ Ñ̓ͨ̽O ̽ͮ̅̋̔̐ ṄO ͨͣ ̎ͨ NO!̎͊͊̔ ̔" Mal screams, each 'no' punctuating a beat of its
ͬ͗͗ͬ̈́
ͩ ͋
spirals out of control again as the hivemind fragments in a panic. "Muͨs͋t̓ flͬ̆͒̽ͮe̿̏e!͒̇
̑ ͨ̐"
Eridan doesn't know if this is going to work. But he's made plenty of other stupid decisions lately, so
what's one more? He reaches out with his own power and slams them back down against the floor.
Mal's pretty white wings crack and splinter, but it's surprisingly easy to let the impression of pain
wash around him.
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̔ the angels beg, writhing and squirming and sinking
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̏ ͐̊̋ s͗̽͒̈̊ t h̅̒i̾dͩ̀ͦͯ̿ e
acidic tendrils
into
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Eridan
has
clamped
down
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them.
"Mȕ
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m͑̈͊̈͗̌u̓ ͪs̄
̀ t̂ ̔ hi͋ͧd̆͆̅é̅̃ !"
Eridan shakes his head, and peers back over the edge of the roof at the road below.
The juggalo waves up at him, still silent, still smiling. It's actually creepy and annoying as fuck, but
it's not scary. "Ո !" he yells irritably at the rest of the hivemind, trying to reassert some of his
natural inborn superiority as the owner of this goddamn body. "
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қ Һɿɱ! Һ 'ς ʆυς
Բυ қɿՈ ς υƿɿძ ʆυ
Ն !"
He could probably spew some of Fef's old swill about how facing your fears headon was better than
running from them, but fuck, he didn't listen to that the first time anyway. No wonder she cut him
out. He was a class-A overwrought douche, and then he let an alien horror sweet talk him into
fiddlin' with powers beyond his comprehension.
Well. If Eridan has nothin' else left of his honor and dignity, he can at least say he's the only mind in
this entire fruitcake that's not afraid to take on one glubbin' shrimpy little purpleblood.
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"I͛̏͌fͤ ÿ́ou͗̂
̓ ͩ wi̽̿l̂l̽͆ͥ ́̎ ń̄̒ō͌t͐̄͆̾̊ c̃̔̓̇̅oo̓͂ ͋́ͥ̌̏̓p̑̌ͥe̐͑r͆ate
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no͋̅̎ť̈ ̑̋nëͨe͛d̐͆̈́̚ ̏ you!" Mal sounds almost like it's in tears, by this point. The strain of keeping his body
kneeling on the ground tears at Eridan's mind as the rest of the horde claws at him, but he sinks down, down, into the center of power where all this pearly light emanates from.
ძ ‫ ע‬υ Ր ც ɿՈ ωω ‫ע‬
ՆυცცɿՈ
ՐძՐ ɱ
ɿ
Һɿς," he grumbles, all the same.
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̒ f̈́̉aygͥ
"Wͥ̆e̒ͧ͒̃͛̈ ̄͒͋̚ ͑̔͊ͩ w̒il̊̌̈̚l ̽͗n̏
̍ ͗̋otͫͧ̐͗̓ ̔ fͪī̍͋̽g͌̔͂h̅͗̊̓́ t̓ ̊ ͫ͑tͨ̎he͋ͨ̌̿ ̀clo͛̂w͛͐̓ ͣ̍͌ ń̓ ̿!̚ ͌̐ ̏ Yoũ w̓̉ȏ̽ ͯ̀ͬ̋u͒l̽̋̒͗̅d b̂͑̊̒͋̚ŕ ̇͑͌̀̎̚ iͨ̓n͋̋ḡ tͮh́ͭe̿
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And that's it. Eridan is officially one hundred and fifty percent over this cowardly running away
screaming hivemind sack of seahorse manure. " Һɿς ω ς Һ ωω Րς Բυ қɿՈ
ძ
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υ
ςςҺ Ն ς," he yells.
And with that, he shoves everything back in the angels' face. He plants a metaphorical boot in their
toothy, lidless face, and starts laying on the fire, burning any outstretched tendrils that try to loop
tentacles around his mind until they're crispy. He's blind to whatever the hell is happening to his
physical body, but all he has to do is believe he's wielding a nice, heavy laser rifle, and viola. He can
unload the power of hope all over Mal's creepy fuckin' mug.


...Hope.

Oh fuck. Ohhhh, fishsticks.

How the fuck did he *forget* about the Ga-

"We're gonna eat!" Malā’ikah tears free of Eridan's mind.

It feels like having his internal organs ripping out through his throat. Eridan screams and chokes, arcing forward as the wings tear off his back, taking entire strings of nerve filaments and muscles with them, and a flood of black tar and white acid spews out of his mouth. All of it. Everything that Mal poured into him while it was occupying his physical body.

He hadn't realized just how compromised he'd been. Like, shit. By the time he vomits up the last of it, gagging and spitting up mouthfuls of acid that stings like it should have all along, he feels fuckin' *wrecked*, and he clings to that light in the core of his being because it's the only thing keeping him alive with half of his internal organs *shredded*. "We shall n’ o’ t part, a’ ke of th’ miracle elixir ‘today!’ Be gon’ e!’ Mal shouts, like he's the one leaving the body and not the angels, and then, with a final snap, it severs his place in the tangle horde from the rest of the hivemind like a pound of flesh.

And then Mal is gone. There is a sickening moment, as Eridan groans and rolls onto his side, that he can feel the grimlight trickling away into the ether, drawing strings of itself out of Eridan's brain that feel like threads of razor-sharp fiber glass, but then he wrenches himself back into his own body and -

He's alone.

For the first time in...fuck, ages, he's the only one in his head. His body feels flensed and gutted, but his mind is clear. None of that shrieking and jangling and nonstop noise. Just him, and the warm pulse of Hope throbbing in his chest.

And he remembers.

Oh, does he remember!

Eridan laughs. It hurts, until his lungs heal themselves with a pulse of light. Fuck - he spreads his claws over the old scars on his gills, from that defibrillator incident all those years ago, and he heals that too.

Why not? If he believes it, it is so.

The doctors talked him into believing he had coldblood dementia, and the horrors came crawling through the Void to oblige. Feferi convinced him he was weak and needed her help to cope, and he believed her. He believed he could remain distinct from the hivemind, and he did. He saw the hope around him dying as their Game session crumbled and burned, and he tore down what remained in a frenzy of white light and death.

It's always been him. He is the Prince of Hope, and it is his to destroy or command as he wishes.

And motherfucking *Gamzee* of all trolls is mucking around in his kingdom.

Eridan sits up, the gouges in his back healing over with a thought, and he spits one last time. Nothing comes up but violet-tinted spittle, just as it should be. "Whatever!" he yells at the sky, gleeful in his triumph. "Don't come crawlin' back to me with your overwrough bullshit after I totally annihilate this juggalo fuck! There will be fuckin' *science magic fireworks* and you're not invited!" After a pause to
consider, he adds, "Dicks!"

There. A fitting send off for a pack of raving insane angel-imitating Horrorterror fuckers. He's starting to think Kar was onto something with all his insane memo-spanning past-self hatred, because wow, past-Eridan was being an ignorant, stupid dumb fuck.

His vascular system feels clear for the first time in fucking ages. Eridan can only imagine what kind of liquid acid shit Mal had pumping through his body all this time, and he shudders at the thought.

Well. Fuckin' lesson learned, no more bargaining with space devils for world domination. He has power enough to manage that on his own.

Eridan rolls his shoulders, and cracks his neck. Everything seems to be in working order, but only because he thinks it should be. If he stopped believing he could heal himself, he's pretty sure it would all fall apart again.

What a shitty power.

…He's gonna abuse the fuck out of it.

"Yo, Eribro! You all gone and got your chill on up there?"

Starting, Eridan thinks mutinously, with the source of that incredibly dumb voice. Gamzee has always been a fucking weirdo with no sense of self-control, and now that Eridan believes he can remember the Game, he can recall just how much of a lame fuck Gamzee was. He couldn't even be bothered to fight the denizens of his own planet; he'd just gotten everything that got within gangly psycho clown arm's reach high as balls.

There's something Eridan still can't quite remember, tucked away in the back of his mind. But he remembers pretty much everything up until the point he fuckin' died, so he figures it can't be all that important. Because yeah, he was kind of asking for it at that point, and he totally understands where Kanaya was coming from with the giant chainsaw. He'd been a douche.

So he hauls himself upright and steps majestically up onto the edge of the building, looking down his nose at Gamzee, who has shuffled closer to the building while Eridan was busy pulling a coup d'état in his own mind. The dome is sloughing away in great sheaves now that Mal has hightailed to fuck knows where, and the acid pools have probably stopped growing. The taint remains, but without the main power of the Horrorterror present to keep up the pressure, eventually Los Angeles will be open to the rest of the world once more, and his reign will be at an end.

Well. He can't have that, can he? Eridan chuckles darkly, and closes his fist.

Light cracks through the grey sky. From the same spot he sliced through reality to open a gate for Mal's shitty-ass dome, he unspools his own power and scorches the dried up material of the grimlight dome with the light of his own dome. One born entirely of his own Hope, with none of those shitty additives that Mal kept polluting it with.

Almost an afterthought, Eridan reaches out to restore the flagging angels, too. He can restore them. He knows he can. And so he does. The minds of the people they once were are still tangled up in Mal's snarls, but he can get them back later. If he's in a benevolent mood. For now, he makes their insides match their outsides, smoothing them out until they're the angels he used to know through and through.

But they'll know better, now. They're done weeping and fighting him, and he's done slaughtering them. He made his point a universe or two ago, and now they will serve him, just as they would have
if the last Game hadn't gotten fucked the way it had.

Looking back at the center of downtown LA, where Mal so conveniently remade the buildings into black arches of stone and glass, it's like seeing LOWAA reborn. Eridan just smirks.

"Uh, my brother? That...was all kind of unmiraculous, you feel me?" Gamzee says slowly, frowning as the last of the grimlight dome burns away in the light of Eridan's far superior Hope-a-drome. "On account of, I was all hoping we would turn down the angel apocalypse miracles, and you 'n me 'n Tavbro could visit all our bitchin' friends. You dig?"

"Okay," Eridan snaps, unfolding his arms. "That's it. I'm gonna feed you your fuckin' miracles through your squeal pipette, clown." He holds out a hand to the side and summons the first thing that comes to mind. It doesn't occur to him that there are no sylladices - he wants it, and so the laser-gun from his internal confrontation with Mal slaps into the palm of his hand. It's a thing of elegance, dark violet with a tiny fuel cell foaming with Hope in the chamber, and Eridan strikes a pose with it before pointing it down at Gamzee's dumb face. "I have a giant fuckin' laser beam an' a hella lot of serious fuckin' emotions after all this bullshit, today. So basically? Run or eat Hope lasers, dipshit, 'cause I am so not in the mood. I have a glubbin' kingdom to establish."

Gamzee goes still. Eridan can't see very well from up here - where the fuck did Mal throw his glasses? - but there is a brief, confused moment where he can't see at all. Everything turns blurred and fragmented; static eats up across his vision. He winces, rubbing at his eyes, and wonders if this is some last issue caused by all the crying black tears nonsense. He wills them healed, and he blinks, squinting down at Gamzee.

Who is gone. The I-10 is empty once more, except for the crushed, melted slag of the cars that had rammed into the dome or become bogged down in an acid puddle before the drivers could abscond.

What. There's nowhere to go! However the fuck Gam got in through the first dome, Eridan is sure he couldn't have just fucked off through his own without Eridan noticing!

"My invertebrother," Gamzee's voice rumbles from behind him, "don't make me MOTHERFUCKING HURT YOU."

- It occurs to Eridan, at last, that the one thing he's forgetting about the Game might be the most important thing of all.

- :o)

- :o(

- He approaches the building with trepidation.

The sky bleeds overhead. He wants to say it's blood orange, but that just sounds fucking pretentious and even that joke is getting old. The street is pretty busy, cars stopped in deadlock traffic by an accident that's clogged up the right hand lane, and he gets a few odd looks from pedestrians as he mumbles and shoves and darts his way through the crowd at each intersection. Dust and scorch marks score the ragged bottoms of his pants and the heavy, dull red cloak that sweeps over his shoulders. He feels like he's been walking for fucking ever; his throat scrapes when he swallows and
he needs a shower like he needs air, but his internal clock insists it's only been a few days. Which isn't all that bad, in the grand scheme of things. Days are pocket change when you're playing this kind of game.

Climbing the stairs take more out of him than he likes to admit. With every step the blisters lining the back of his heels split and ooze, aggravated by all the grit and sand that snuck into his shoes, and the weight of the cargo he keeps slung over his back, concealed under the fall of his cloak, presses down as a reminder of just what the goddamn stakes are, here. He still has no idea how he ended up with this thing, but he's got to keep it safe.

But before he can hide this thing or find its real custodian, he has to take care of business.

He has to finish this goddamn loop.

Usually he'd worry more about potential pitfalls or traps as he nears the front door, but he knows this loop backwards and forwards by now, crisscrossed and diagonal ways, and he knows Bro won't have set anything up. By now, the word has cascaded through the guardian information pipeline that Dave Strider is in Seattle and that shit is getting mildly real.

Ha. To think, Jade going missing used to be the worst of their problems. He shakes his head at the thought. They have no idea. Past-selves are always so amazingly, stupidly naïve. Like cute little puppies who don't know when to stop chewing on a brand new sock because they're adorable and haven't learned better yet and fuck that. Fuck everything about that.

The weight on his back shifts, and he freezes midstep. The rough sling digs into his shoulder as the thing within it settles in a different position. Every time it does that, he has a miniature heart attack, and it's starting to give him an epic migraine. If this thing wakes up before he gets it to its keeper - Yeah, he's gonna stop thinking about it right now. The guy who tossed him the sling and its contents had been weird as fuck, but he'd made it very clear what the consequences would be if Dave fucked up.

So he's not going to fuck up. Obviously. Right now, at this very moment, he is doing whatever the opposite of fucking up is. He's going to be the hero and fucking succeed, dammit.

When the sling stops shifting, he nods slowly, shrugging one shoulder cautiously to adjust the weight. He has swords on swords on swords slung pretty much anywhere on his body there's room for it, and one of the straps lies right under the sling. He's gonna have sores there in the morning, might even have rubbed one open by now after all this travelling.

Whatever. In and out. He'll say his piece, snag some AJ, and jet off forward in time to where he'd left off. No problem. He grimaces, shoves his hood off his head so it covers the bump in the cloak where the sling sits. The last thing he needs is Bro sticking his nose into private business.

A faint gurgle rises up from the sling. The hairs on the back of Dave's neck stand up, and he swallows hard. Breathing out through his nose, the way John is always on Karkat about doing, he turns the doorknob and shoulders his way in.

A moment later, Oriole crashes into the wall to his left, spitting out muffled curses as he's buried under a pile of plush puppet ass.

Dave just stares, shaking his head with vague sympathy. Like, wow, fuck, Dave already knew that Bro started training the kid, like, an hour after Dave took off, but he really threw Oriole right into the grinder, didn't he? At this point, the bird kid still has a fucking broken wing - like, what the fuck?
Flinging the pile of puppets off him with the functioning wing, Oriole claws his way upright, panting and sweating and just looking like a total wuss in general. Makes sense - he won't reach the whole 'stone cold badass' stage for another two weeks or so, from the timeline Dave has pieced together. The guy raises a hand to shove his sunglasses up his orange nose - then freezes and looks at Dave, blinking. "The hell?"

Dave nods. "Yo, man."

Oriole shrieks and stumbles backward, holding his hands up defensively. "Oh fuck you can talk."

Oh. Right. Dave smacks his face, his fingers drifting down by new habit to curl a nail along the etchings on his collar. His vocal cords are raw as fuck from all the screaming and shouting and other nonsense he doesn't like to think about, but the quality of the sound from the machine itself doesn't waver. The wonders of modern technology. "Yup."

The metal collar around his throat is a burnished sky blue that doesn't match anything in his wardrobe these days. Rose had gone on and on about some bullshit psychological meaning and the creepy sweating horse guy had made stuttering insinuations that made everyone in the vicinity uncomfortable, but hey, all Dave cares about is the insane stat boost he gets from wearing it. How did Aradia put it? [I PLEDGE MYSELF TO THEE] or something like that. It's different for Karkat, whatever it is, so Dave tries not to sweat the details.

Because fuck. If he has to swear loyalty to every Heir and Prince in this godsforsaken game, he'll do it. He needs all the damage multipliers and speed buffs he can get. Grinding is for squares.

"Bro, I'm home, you asshat," Dave calls, sticking his hands in his pockets and crossing his fingers. "And I actually don't have time to dick around. Where the hell are you?"

"Wha - You were barely gone for six hours," Oriole says. He's waving his arms in the air, and the sword in his hand is slashing wildly, which is the kind of weapons safety training that explains all the Hello Kitty Band-Aids stuck to Oriole's face and the bloody bandages wound around his feather-studded knuckles. Dave takes a step back to save his hair from a (probably badly needed) trim. "Why can you talk now? And what the actual hell are you wearing? What. The fuck. Is going on."

Lil Cal appears before Bro does, which Dave knew to expect. A glint in his peripheral vision alerts him to the puppet leering at him from where it's been carelessly tossed onto the kitchen counter.

There is something seriously fucked up about that puppet. Dave has become more and more certain of this with each passing week, and coming back with that perspective in mind makes the fucker's creepy grin all the spookier. All the other puppets in Bro's arsenal are mechanized, but it's becoming increasingly clear that Lil Cal isn't. If Rose hadn't gone over the thing with a fine-toothed comb looking for majjyks and shit, Dave would still be convinced it was cursed. Even in the future Bro can't - or won't - give him a straight answer as to how the puppet works or where it came from, but Dave's seen what it can do, now.

And he's scared. Because whatever the hell Lil Cal is, the only thing keeping it in check is Bro's influence.

"From the future, then," Bro says, suddenly leaning on the wall opposite Dave. The brim of his hat has been pulled low, and his arms are folded across his chest. An eyebrow appears over the angled shades. He's probably eyeballing the collar, and wondering where the paint job came from. "Jesus fuck, how far?"

"A few weeks," Dave says. He's hedging, and Bro knows it. And Dave knows Bro knows it
because Bro is going to tell past-Dave about it in a couple of days.

Fucking time travel, man.

Instead of just accepting that awesome answer, Bro tilts his head to the side, still assessing. Makes sense. A random Dave shows up out of nowhere on an unspecified timeframe? That's suspicious as fuck, and Bro is a suspicious kind of guy. "Cut the crap, kid. You could tell me down to the millisecond how long it's been since it last snowed in Houston, and now this? You always know when you are. How far ahead are you from?"

"You really don't want to know," Dave warns. Once upon a time, he might have gotten irrationally pissed at Bro for stepping all up in his business and trying to baby him like this, or just shut down the conversation to sulk like a brat. He likes to think he's actually matured or something since then. Past-him was such an emotional douche. Bro didn't deserve half the tantrums Dave threw. He's an abrasive single parent who got slammed with a kid while he was barely out of his teens, and somehow that transformed him into an overprotective as fuck badass. Past-Dave couldn't get his insecure shit together without taking it out on the guy.

Well. He gets it now. And what a shitty maturity arc that had been. He'd hate to have to relive it or anything like that.

He sighs, and gives in. "Sorry to break up you and your alien secretmonger sesh, but I'm from four weeks ahead and we have shenanigans afoot." He claps his hands together. "Get up, bitches, you have a date with Doc Lalonde and you need to be in Washington with us by Saturday."

Bro snorts, which is his equivalent of, 'Yeah, fuck no to that.' Right, he's still pissed at Rue over the whole Rose thing right now. Goddamn, for such a stoic asshole, he sure knows how to hold a grudge.

"What? Why?" Oriole asks, all confusion as he folds his wing in close. "What's up in Washington? I thought you were just going to help out that John kid."

Unlike Dave, who has always made an ironic point of dressing up fancy to spar with Bro, Oriole has opted for changing into Bro chic - jeans that have been ripped up to the knees by all the swords flying around and a skinny black tank top with huge, sloppy cuts down the back for the wings to stick out of.

How plebian. Past-Dave's only been gone a few hours and already Bro is corrupting his bird twin with his fucking awful fashion sense; at least Dave knows in the future he'll head Oriole off from that appalling path and lead him back to way of righteous style. Bro would have the kid in polos with popped collars by next week if he had his way -

Wait. Dave squints and picks out the tiny white bird stitched near the hem of the ribbed cotton shirt.

Holy shit, Oriole went through *Dave's* closet for that one. Which is hilarious beyond reason, because Dave is pretty sure that's a female-style American Eagle tank top that Dave purchased during a really embarrassing emo phase that he doesn't like to discuss in polite company. He snerts, slamming a fist against his lips to repress a burst of laughter, and feels his eyes tear up a little.

Oriole must never know. Dave is taking this moment with him to the grave.

"More importantly, why would you wait *four weeks* to come back and tell me about a meeting that's a couple of days from now?" Bro says pointedly. Always asking the real questions.

"Shit happens," Dave says at last. He holds up both hands in defense when Oriole groans and Bro
knocks his head back against the wall with his mouth open in a silent sigh. "No, seriously, this is some Prime Directive level shit, man. If I tell you too much, heads will roll."

Well. There are a few things that he wishes he could warn them about. He has the power to prevent some fucked up stuff from happening. John, the whole debacle with the trolls, all of it...he could drop a couple dynamite hints and all that would be cleared up in the form of Bro losing his shit on the asshats involved.

But here's the problem. Those things have happened, because Dave remembers them happening. Aradia has made it quite clear that dicking around with shit like that just leads to dead Daves and deader timelines. He's always vaguely suspected that the reason he has this need to complete time loops was to prevent time itself from breaking down. Turns out, that's not all that far from the truth.

So as much as Dave wants to spare everyone from what happens next, he just has to roll with it.

Bro is silent for a minute or so. Oriole looks back and forth between them, chest heaving, and Dave waits. He has the patience of a goddamn saint, these days; has to have it, to deal with Karkat on a regular basis.

Oriole breaks first. "So what? We just hike up to Washington for shits and giggles?" he asks, frowning and scratching at a crooked feather behind his ear. "I mean, what the hell happened with the Diamond person?"

Diamonds Droog. Hell, the last time he saw her -

Dave closes his eyes, and tries not to think about the desert dunes stretching out around him for miles, all burnt umber and pale yellow, the color of maize. "Nah, bro. You hike up there to get all the answers you never wanted to all the questions we shouldn't have asked."

Bro appears a foot from Dave. "What."

"You heard me," Dave says, closing his eyes. "Rue's got some machine running that's filtered through all the cosmic static and pieced together the last Game." He juts his chin toward the door to Bro's room, which is still conveniently hanging open, though the shadows within are dark enough to conceal the alien dame he knows is loitering around in there. "She needs to come, too."

Bro's brain is probably going a million miles an hour. "Got that much out of her," he comments. If his eyes go toward the Black Queen huddling in her shadows, Dave can't see it through the shades. "The Queen's Hub, right? She told me it wouldn't be finished for years, if ever."

BQ: That is because it should be impossible to complete.

The dame herself slinks out of the bedroom. Her eyes are sharp and cold, and her voice isn't a blooming, inky black fire anymore; it's lightning, sharp and jolting and darker than the night. On Saturday, past-Dave is going to hear her and think his head's about to fry like a potsticker. Current-Dave is not impressed. From his perspective, the BQ turned off her telepathic camouflage weeks ago, and he's been adjusting to the pain ever since.

Queens are raw power.

But she doesn't intimidate Dave anymore.

BQ: It was badly damaged by the nature of our entrance to this iteration of paradox space.

BQ: I had thought her efforts to repair it in vain, and her desire to share whatever information you
children requested both asinine and completely in keeping with her kowtowing nature as a Prospitian. That was why I chose to pursue a more indirect method of preparing you for battle.

"Yeah, well, your methods suck ass," Dave tells her flatly. "Even when you're trying to help, you try to screw people over. On purpose. Don't think I don't know that by now."

Her smile is predatory, toothy, and completely unapologetic.

BQ: Oh good. We're finally on the same page.

BQ: It just so happens that we share a greater enemy in common. So I thought to push you into developing your powers. Only to make you a more useful tool, and a more interesting opponent, naturally.

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that already." Jesus fucking titty Christ, he's pretty sure this is word for word the same monologue she gave him three weeks ago in his personal timeline. He doesn't know why he expects more original monologuing from a self-declared NPC with a minor god complex, but them's the breaks. "Turns out when you stick a Queen and Rose's mom in a room together, insane science magic happens. And they may or may not have had some tech support." He still hasn't confirmed that rumor yet. He will. Aradia owes him. "But you're going to Washington too. I don't give a singular fuck whether you go with these two or do it alone. Just. You're there. On Saturday. Fuck you. End of story."

BQ: Lovely.

BQ: And yet. The opportunity to break one of your time loops... tempting...

This part is easy. Her threat is only halfway serious, but Dave fires off the bullet that will seal the deal. "Spades is there."

The Queen's entire body goes still, only her head clicking around slowly as she stares at him.

BQ: Say.

BQ: That.

BQ: Again.

"Spades Slick is there. In the lab in Washington." Dave rolls his eyes. These two are gross. "Uh. Being himself. Stabbing people. And you know. Whatever else he does in his spare time."

...What else does that guy do? Dave can't think of anything else except more stabbing. And talking to Karkat. And hatemacking on the BQ.

But mostly stabbing.

BQ: Stabbing. I see.

BQ: I shall endeavor to keep your timeline intact, then. It would be good to see my regal counterpart in person again, regardless of... whoever else is present.

BQ: (That vulgar impudent little traitor will -)

She's a fucking liar. Dave doesn't call her out on it. See, he's figured out how to be diplomatic and stuff. "Yeah, yeah. Do the shadow thing and skedaddle, we both know you're going to."
BQ: Maybe I will.

BQ: I certainly have other business of my own to take care of, and I've had quite enough of your custodian's hospitality.

In other words, she wants him to understand that she does it because she wants to, not because he told her she would. Dave could care less.

BQ: I depart. Perhaps I will grace you with my presence at a later time.

Yeah, duh, you will, Dave mouths to himself, but he doesn't say shit because he doesn't want her to kick his ass. She could probably still do that. Queens have a unique capacity for ass kicking. The shadows from Bro's room swarm around her a moment later as she steps into them, her eyes narrow with a sneer as she vanishes into the dark. The shadows calm down after about five seconds, falling back into their regular places. She can't use that trick often, he knows, but it's still impressive.

He's still not sure, even in the future, if she's genuinely helping out, or if she only coincidentally assists them when it serves her own secret, nefarious purposes. Past-him severely underestimated how evil the BQ could be. People say to keep your enemies close, but keeping the Black Queen too close was fucking stupid.

"Alright then," Oriole says, throwing up his hands in disgust. "That happened. And after all the shit you people went through to get her to sit down and talk, too. Remember the whole stabbing thing? Because I do!"

"I've got a rough script," Dave concedes, shrugging his shoulders. "Trust me, we couldn't believe half the stuff she says anyway. You guys all show up at Rue's storytelling time because future-me tells you to right now, and trust me, that's way more reliable than anything the Queen would tell you."


Oh thank god, Dave doesn't have a fight on his hands. That would be the last thing he needs - Bro being stubborn. "Awesome."

"That thing working alright for you?" Bro switches the topic without slowing for breath. He waves at the air in general, but the focus of his question is obvious by implication. "I only just got all the parts in to finish fixing it. I get it to you on Saturday?"

"...Yeah," Dave says. He starts eyeing the kitchen speculatively. Lil Cal is still between him and the fridge, but he doesn't think the puppet will cause him too many problems. Not right now. "Sounds about right. And good times are had by all. Now, I need to go before -"

Dave's cloak shifts. The warmth pressed up against the middle of his back squirms, and stretches, and then settles again. Dave's heart stops, and when he looks up two pairs of shades are trained on him. Oriole's mouth works soundlessly for a moment, though, because his poker face is still for shit. "Dave. What the hell is under your weaksauce cloak?" he asks at last. One of his claws moves so he's grasping the hilt of his sword with two hands. "Like, are you aware that there's something on your back?"

"Shit yeah, I'm aware," Dave grumbles. His fingers tremble a little, but he lets himself sag with relief after chancing a look at the shadows the Queen vanished into. At least she didn't stick around to see that, and he can probably talk his way out of this and go the hell back to his own time -

Dave's back gurgles, and then a faint, clicking hiss emerges from the sling.
Bro has it in his hand before Dave can react and that is annoying as hell, because he's supposed to have leveled up more than that, dammit. Bro is ridiculously overpowered. It's unreal. But Dave's at least able to put up a fight. After Bro grabs the sling, but before he actually yanks it over Dave's head, Dave tries to flash step away, and manages to hook his elbow through the sling. The force of Bro's grab yanks Dave along too, and they're halfway across the room before Dave can pause time again. "No," he insists, heart pounding out a drumbeat against the inside of his ribcage. The last thing they need right now is for whatever's in that sling to wake up, and all he wants is to yank time to a crashing halt so he can grab it and finish the delivery in peace.

Nothing he can do about that. The BQ hadn't been kidding when she said pausing the flow of time was unnatural. No matter how much force he puts into it, he can't check it, or destroy it, or create more of it. Not permanently, anyway, though some of his sweet new gear helps make it a little more malleable. He can only exploit what time he has left.

So he does the only thing he can do. He draws the sword from over his shoulder and slices through the straps of the sling. Bro reappears in the kitchen by the sink, a thick strip of cloth tossed to the side as he furrows his brows at the heavy package in Dave's arms. "Dave."

The cloth swaddling the cargo has fallen off, but Dave isn't concerned about that. He wets his lips and starts rocking to a nervous beat, shushing like he's John and the crazy 'rail is about to lose it again. "Don't wake up, come on, come on," he whispers, angling it away from the harsh overhead light. "Come on, shhhhh, don't cry. Don't wake up, don't cry -"

"Dave, what the fuck is that -"

"Shutitshhjusshuhuuuush!" Dave hisses through gritted teeth, desperately pressing a finger to his lips in the universal sign for 'shut the fuck up, asshat.' The thing in the blankets writhes again, but its eyes are still shut so maybe it's just stretching. He can't believe all that yanking around didn't wake it up. He doesn't know how to deal with this kind of thing, but he's pretty sure that's not normal.

Its lips purse, and its forehead crinkles with tiny frown lines, and the gurgle transitions into a cree of distress. Dave doesn't know what to do, fuck, should he be rocking it more? Less? What does it want? Shiiiiiiiiiiit -

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Dave, give it here." A pair of gloved hands reach out and scoop the bundle neatly out of Dave's hands. He just stares at them for a moment, baffled by the sudden absence of the weight he's been carrying all this time, and then looks up, speechless.

Bro cradles the thing against his chest, massaging its back through the fabric. He hums for a minute, varying the pitch and pacing around the living room area as he does so, his feet unerring as they step over discarded magazines and takeout boxes. When the noise doesn't subside, he stops humming and switches to clucking his tongue. "Little shit," he says, a weird fondness in his voice, "time for naps." He breaks off into a soft whistle, and that seems to do the trick, as the squirming dies down and the thing rests its head on his shoulder.

"Now I've seen everything," Oriole says. "Oh man. This is weird. This is so goddamn weird." He perches on the edge of the couch with his feet tucked up by his butt, resting his chin on his hand and cocking his head to the side. "Huh."

Dave flops down beside his bird twin, the air whooshing out of him with a huff. "Thanks, Bro. Damn. I owe you one," he says, scruffing his hair with both hands. There's still grits of golden sand stuck in there that he hasn't had the opportunity to shower out, and a thin trickle slips through the strands of his hair and forms a scattered veneer on the floor.
"Unbe-fucking-lievable," Bro mutters, bouncing the kid in his arms. The faint note of despair in his voice would be terrifying enough, but on top of that he drops his nose against its head and *nuzzles* the thing. "I literally cannot believe this."

"Bro, I can explain."

"I should have known. I was always a shitty role model, wasn't I? First I emotionally stunted your growth -"

"What? No, oh god, we're not getting into this right now, dude, just listen -"

"- and now you've followed in my footsteps and become a single parent," Bro says, his voice forlorn. "Well, at least you've got me to help; I didn't have anyone to fall back on when I found you. But shit. Raising another kid on puppet blood money. Looks like Jo and James win guardians of the year after all, and they're dead."

Dave is starting to sweat. Profusely. He claws at his hair, realizes that he's picked up that bad habit from Karkat again, and slams his hands down in fists by his sides. "Look, I swear, it's not mine!"

Because he's starting to suspect he's just launched Bro into a complete midlife crisis by making him a grandfather/uncle.

Bro snorts, but even that sound lacks its usual verve of understated condescension. It sounds more like a sigh than anything. "Of course it's not, Dave, that's pretty obvious. It's not even human. Meteor?"

"No, actually, some weirdass hobo hermit in the middle of a desert handed me a baby!" Dave snaps irritably. Even he can't tell if he's being sarcastic anymore. This situation has moved past the point from which humor might have been able to rescue it.

Bro sighs. "It couldn't have been a meteor? At least that would have been traditional. For fuck's sake, Dave, weird old men hanging out in deserts distributing babies is no way to start a family. I am *very* disappointed in you." He starts whistling again when the baby adjusts its spindly grip around his neck, and Dave thinks he sees tiny, pudgy baby claws grabbing a tuft of sandy blond hair that has escaped Bro's hat. "Wonder if I've still got that Stokke carrier...shit, yeah, I wouldn't have thrown that away..."

And with that, Bro wanders off into the kitchen. He kicks something on the floor with his heel, and an overhead crawlspace opens up with a clack. Then the man vanishes, baby and all, presumably up into one of his secret storage places in the ceiling.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," Oriole adds, shaking his head as he stares up from the couch. He adds his other hand and rests his face in both, his boney elbows digging into his knees. The sword lies, forgotten, on the coffee table full of junk. "You're from *four* weeks in the future? Dude, you got *busy.*"

"Not mine," Dave insists.

"*Hella* busy," Oriole says, lifting off his shades and nestling them on the top of his head. "Like, that is *not* a normal baby. Is that a wriggler? I'm pretty sure they're not supposed to leave the -"

"Look. Creepy guy. Desert. Surprise baby. That is literally the sequence of events," Dave says, gesturing with his hands to act out each sentence as a separate box. At 'surprise baby,' he adds in *jazz* hands to really bring the message home. "I don't know what it is, what it eats, or where it came from. I just really need to get it to its guardian before it wakes up. Like, yesterday."
"So this is temporary?"

"Yeah. I only stopped here with it because you guys told me I came with it." Dave grimaces. "Goddamn, you couldn't have been more specific about that part?"

Oriole rubs his eyes. "Wait. I'm confused. So in the future, do we tell you - the you that just left, I mean - that you show up with a baby or not?"

"God - just - no, don't," Dave sighs. His head is really aching now, a tiny current of pain that happens to stab into his right eye. "Don't fuck up the timeline. On Saturday, just tell me I came from four weeks ahead, and I have a 'special cargo.' That's how I knew to hold off on looping back to get you all these weeks, until I realized that this situation...kind of fit the bill."

"No kidding."

"Hell yeah," Bro says. Dave flinches, and Oriole yelps, scrambling around in his seat to look up as Bro reappears directly behind them. "Fucking flawless. Dave, stand up and take responsibility for your child, dammit."

"It is not my kid!" He stands up anyway, eyeing the heavy vest in Bro's free hand with trepidation. "The hell is that?"

Bro starts untangling the buckles on the vest. Upon closer inspection, it's some kind of harness with panels of cream white and tan polyester, with matte grey buckles and straps that have been dyed a familiar but faded crimson. "Baby carrier," he grunts by way of explanation. "Cape off."

Dave doesn't question it. He looks at the shredded remnants of the original sling, and he can already tell he's getting nowhere fast if he has to carry that thing around in his arms. He hasn't had any trouble so far, but once he's back when he needs to be, he's going to have to fight his way to the kid's custodian, and he's not looking forward to that if he doesn't have both hands free. So instead of bitching, he snaps his fingers, and the cape vanishes.

"So busy," Oriole repeats. He shuffles up off the couch a moment after Dave does, circling around to watch Bro from a safe distance.

Or not. Dave sees the light flash off Bro's angled shades, and the faint motion blur around his outline, but Oriole still isn't up to snuff. When the avalanche of pastel clothing and squeaking bells and whistles buries him, he can only let out a caw of protest before vanishing under a pile of baby toys. After a pause, an entire folded up baby stroller tumbles down and crashes on top of the pile. Oriole kicks a leg free in protest.

Seriously. Has Bro kept those since Dave was a kid? That is fucked up levels of hording, right there. There're TV shows and interventions dedicated to this shit.

"Learn how to dodge, kid. Lesson number one," Bro says, shaking his head. "Here, Dave, front or back, it works for both." He lobbs the vest at Dave and goes back to rocking and whistling at the baby, booping it on the nose occasionally when its forehead wrinkles. "Watch the lower strap - it digs in like a son of a bitch if it gets twisted up. Isn't that right, sweetpea?" He drops a kiss on the kid's forehead.

...That's just freaky. Dave yanks the whole vest over his head so he stops watching Bro being all parent-y, and becomes momentarily baffled by the myriad straps before he decides, 'fuck it,' and just twists the whole thing around until the support bands seem to be in the right configuration. He feels like he's being swallowed by the dangling straps, and he actually pauses time at intervals to hide the
fumbling as he struggles to tighten the straps from Bro-dimensions so they fit his own body.

When he's finally figured it out, he's pretty sure he looks stupid. Like wow, it's like wearing a turtle shell. Dave rolls his shoulders, and the heavily padded shoulder straps, surprisingly, move with him. Okay, not bad. Now that the carrier is actually on, he can see that there's not actually that much spare fabric; when he tests the give of it, the straps stretch and shift to accommodate him.

Makes sense that Bro would buy a baby carrier he could fight in. And, if Dave mentally counts this new addition as part of his ensemble…

He snaps his fingers again. The entire baby carrier vest turns brick red, blending into his shirt, and a large, bright red Time gear appears on the front of his chest. Once the kid itself is loaded up, he'll call the cape back too, for more concealment.

Hell yeah.

"I'm not even going to ask how you got magic fashion powers. Just. No." Oriole growls from below, shoving a bright pink kid's activity walker off his face, and sits up. He sweep the rest of the baby debris off himself with a bat of his free wing, looking harassed and scuffed and coated with crawlspace dust. "Also, fuck training montages. You people are insane."

The buckles on the carrier click, and Bro is standing behind Dave. Dave fights the instinct to whip around and clock him.

Heheheh. Clocks.

He's given up on fighting the whole pun thing. After the fish puns and the cat puns and the horse puns and the time puns and the air puns and the light puns - look. Just. It was either accept the puns, or go insane, and the last thing they'd really needed at the time was one more crazy person fucking shit up.

Instead, he waits with his back exposed, gritting his teeth as the kid's warm weight settles against his back again, and Bro snaps up all the buckles in a split second. "And then you pop the collar to guard its neck," he says, fiddling with something that Dave can't see. "Such a good baby. Hell yeah."

At least Bro didn't try to lob it off the roof of the apartment. That would not have ended well.

"Who is taking care of it after this?" Bro asks, reappearing several feet away. He pulls off his hat and runs his fingers through his mussed up hair. "Who are we trusting my grandkid to?"

Dave thinks about protesting that, but once Bro gets like this there's really no point. Hell, it's not like the clan isn't large enough already. What's one more honorary kid? "Someone safe. Someone pretty badass, from what I hear tell of her. This one time, she launched a guy into orbit. It was awesome."

Bro thinks this over, and then inclines his head gravely. "A'ight. Saturday. Where are we meeting?"

And now they're back in familiar territory. Dave can see why Bro's account of this whole meeting omitted the past five minutes because holy shit, and he's just relieved to be back on track. He needs to wrap this little detour loop up before all the displaced time energy gives him away to observers. "The Cascades. They're in the Northern Cascades, somewhere. But with all the voidy shit Lalonde has on the place, GPS coordinates don't really help. Just get to the Marblemount wilderness information center, and be obvious about it. Strife in public or sacrifice a cow or something. Ask about the lab. Her people will find you."

Bro raises an eyebrow. "They will, will they?"
"Trust me," Dave says, turning toward the door. He licks his cracked lips with a grimace, but doesn't turn back. Forget apple juice - he's still thirsty as fuck, but the whole baby thing took up too much time. He needs to get moving again, fast. "By then, they'll know you're coming."

"Dave."

Dave looks back, and he has to fling himself onto the ground to dodge the incoming container flying at his head. When it slams into the door and falls toward him, he snags it out of the air before it can hit the kid on his back.

"Later," is all Bro says. Then he's gone. Across the room, Oriole shrugs his wings at Dave, and fails to notice Lil Cal wrapping a plush arm around his ankles until the puppet yanks and the bird kid drops to the ground, scrabbling at the floor as he is dragged toward the stairwell, swearing at the top of his lungs all the way. It's like something out of the puppet snuff films Bro made in Dave's youth, and he shudders in sympathy. Oriole leaves the swordkind Dave gave him on the coffee table, but even as Dave watches, one of Bro's older puppets swipes it and vanishes under the couch.

Dave shakes his head, looks at the jug of apple juice Bro threw at him, and smirks. He tucks it against his side and shuts the door behind him.

Once he's outside, he sucks in a breath, and taps a thumb on his collar - a nervous habit that he doesn't remembering having all the years he wore the original collar, but which he apparently has now. He tries not to wonder if he'll ever see the apartment again. The endless desert rises up in his mind's eye, the deep dips between the dunes where the sand runs thin and the scabbed, craggy craters of blasted earth and rock broke the surface.

And he shudders. He wasn't lying when he said he was chronologically from four weeks ahead. That's the present, from his perspective, and he needs to get back there to finish what they started. But he failed to mention the fact that he'd skipped a week ahead of that before coming back to this moment. That technically he'd rewound five weeks, not four, to get here.

"Kid," he mumbles, snapping his fingers and pulling the hood of his cloak over his head, "you had better be worth the apocalypse."

The child on his back kneads at his shoulder blade with hooked claws, mumbles under its gurgling breath, and slips back into a deep slumber.

His memories are still spotty, but he sifts through his fraymotifs until he finds what he's looking for. [Take Your Time] throbs in his head with a wobbling bass line, the clack of something percussive that he's never been able to identify, and a slow, scratching rhythm with triple beats thrown in to keep him just slightly off tempo. A pair of turntables spring up under his outstretched palms, and instead of having to swallow around the memories of a cut throat, Dave travels forward with the correct procedure, the way he's actually supposed to time travel, instead of the fucked up way the BQ tried to slyly trick him into using all this time. Seriously, fuck that dame.

All he's got are a set of initials to go off of, and the pulse of the Beat thrumming in his ears. Hopefully that's enough to get him when he's going.

He needs to find the MP.
Also, Eridan is still crazy. In a psycho contest between him and Gamzee, it's a toss up. What else is new.

/wink wonk
The Whole Sky Shaken

Chapter Summary

The sound of a word was shed, the sound of the wind as a breath,
In the ears of the souls that were dead, in the dust of the deepness of death;
Where the face of the moon is taken, the ways of the stars undone,
The light of the whole sky shaken, the light of the face of the sun.

Chapter Notes

Basic summary of this story: things keep happening and I just kind of go with it??
Anyway, H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com

Die speaks Polish, hover for translations. Power anthem for Eridan’s coda is Counting Stars (OneRepublic). Also because I have nothing better to do in my life we now have an official crack'mix for whenever Gamzee and Eridan are within ten feet of each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It seems to be mutually assumed that Karkat is not going along for the rescue mission.

Karkat, curled up in a ball in a pile on John's bed, watching his moirail tug a mask and goggles on through heavy eyelids, ends up agreeing mostly by virtue of the fact that he's in too much pain to argue the point. Part of him - a large part - screams that he needs to be there as Hemogoblin, to have Heir's back if nothing else. But judging by the fact that most of his arguments get wiped out whenever he so much as breathes too hard and pushes his ribs too far, Karkat suspects that at this rate he'd only be a massive fucking hindrance on the whole Harley hunt.

Which is fine. Alright, he doesn't hate Harley - she's infuriatingly annoying, but apparently it's hard to properly rage at someone when you've recently had a nightmare in which their thirteen-year-old self died, bloody and alone. The guilt is just too strong. But he's certainly not concerned about her wellbeing the way John seems to be; that's a human familial bond thing, Karkat suspects. If Sharpshooter finds Droog and arrests her, fuck, Karkat is not going to be the one to stand in her way. John, his dad, and Dave all just seem worried that she's going to get hurt without backup, which is - yeah, a pretty reasonable concern. But Karkat's not going to pitch a fit about not getting to go along on this particular outing.

That doesn't mean he can't still gripe about it, though.

"I fucking hate sleep. Sleep is probably my kismesis. That makes so much sense," Karkat complains to the ceiling, one ear turned toward the general direction in which he's got a bead on John's pulse. "Ours is a bitter and desperate rivalry, one which will go down in history as the stuff of legend."

"Karkat," John says, yanking on one of Heir's shoes, "if you wanna be in a kismesissitude with sleep, I'm not sure I can stop you. But also no."
Karkat sighs gustily, rolling over and planting his cheek on a copy of Redglare #3 so he can get a better look at John. Seeing John in Heir's uniform is fucking unsettling, particularly when he's still got the goggles shoved up in his hair and the mask slack around his neck instead of concealing his face. He has begun to adjust to the uncanny blue of John's eyes, but the weird mishmash of John and Heir is just - no. His thinkpan can't handle that kind of load right now.

It can handle sorting through the past few weeks, and thinking of all those little moments where Hemogoblin nearly flipped his shit over Heir pacifying him by accident. To think, he's nearly worked himself up into a rage-induced heart attack on multiple occasions over the times Heir tried to pap or shoosh him and the way he calmed down against his will in response, but now he can only snort at past-Karkat's spectacular inability to put two and two together and get Heir is your moirail, you dumb fuck. Even with Karkat projecting a massively embarrassing mixture of hero worship and flushcrush onto the other hero, somehow the pale serendipity had shone through.

It's actually a huge relief. He no longer has to worry about having somehow emotionally cheated on John by being soothed by Heir the night Sharpshooter arrived in Seattle. All of that festering guilt and horror - gone. Karkat could almost cry with relief, but he swallows it down, because he's doing his very best to not drive himself into some kind of emotional breakdown when John is seconds from leaving to go hunt down his wayward sister.

A difficult task, but not impossible, as long as Dave Strider stays out in the hallway until it's time for the two heroes to leave. Karkat makes no promises once Flashstep is in the room. There's a lingering suspicion there just waiting for the chance to flare up again, a flurry of rage and mistrust and jealousy left over from that one time Karkat nearly went into full blown withdrawal and somehow ended up in a (completely platonic) Pestersmackdown against the red-text douche. That whole afternoon is mostly a ragey blank in Karkat's mind, but he remembers being incensed because he couldn't figure out why John would ever be friends with some asshole on the internet.

"Just don't let him shooshpap you while you're alone and vulnerable, John," Karkat says aloud. He mostly mumbles it into the pillow that his head is slowly sliding towards, but he catches himself with a jerk and raises his head again, blinking owlishly while wondering if that sentence even made any sense at all in context of their conversation. He's pretty sure it didn't.

Well, not very much makes sense at the moment. Dadbert is downstairs nursing a cup of wine and sternly lecturing someone from the so-called Harley Foundation on the necessity for an open dialog on the nature of Harley’s powers. Karkat doesn’t think he’s ever seen Samuel Egbert even mildly intoxicated in all of two years of practically living part-time in the man’s house. It’s been a weird day.

"Huh?" John asks. "What was that, Karkat?" He walks around the recooperacoon awkwardly set up in the center of his bedroom - and they probably need to teleport that back to Karkat's respite block at some point, fuck - and flops down next to Karkat on the bed. To Karkat's infinite disappointment, John stays sitting up instead of joining him in his half-slump over both pile and bed.

To be fair, the lure of cuddles with a complete fuckwad like Karkat is probably easy to ignore. But that thought is fucking depressing, and Karkat tries to ignore it. Just because John has long, mysterious conversations with Dave Strider over the internet doesn't mean that Dave's sudden real life appearance will mean John realizes the futility of moirallegiance with a fuckup like Karkat. Humans don't usually do moirallegiance at all - conciliatory quadrants aren't their focus when it comes to romance, particularly not between two humans. Maybe the whole bro thing really is just one of those weird human platonic variations on friendship, made suspect only because Karkat is a paranoid bastard who overthinks these things. He just has to stay positive.
...He's not good at positive. Karkat thinking positively is a contradiction in terms, and if he ever successfully pulls that off paradox space itself might well implode.

"If that asshole gets conciliatory on you I will wreck his shit," he still feels the need to insist. "Watch me."

John leans over and pats at Karkat's hair. "Karkat, I swear, Dave is so not trying to do the moirail thing!" he says. Karkat can feel John's heartbeat so deep in his bones that his own bloodpusher seems to slow down to match tempo. It's devastatingly soothing, and he sighs like some overwrought, pale-struck socialite out of a Victorian comedy of manners. "Dave and I - we usually talk about hero stuff, and all the weird things that go on with us, since, you know, I didn't think I could tell you all the hero-related things. Like, he has a bird clone version of himself." At Karkat's look of horror, John laughs. "And suddenly Jade!"

Karkat snorts, because that's the most accurate fucking description of the Harley situation he's heard all day.

"And if I -" John clears his throat. "If I...kind of freaked out to him about you getting hurt...it was not a romantic thing! None of the quadrants, Karkat, I swear! I freaked out and started telling about it with Rose, too! Nothing really calmed me down until you woke up!"

The smile he offers is shaky and faltering, and the uncertainty there wakes Karkat right the fuck up, enough that he frowns and somehow manages to haul himself up off the pile, clamping his hands on either side of John's face so he can't pull away while Karkat inspects him with a moirail's eye.

He trusts John, is the thing. Dave's motives might be suspect, because Dave is a pokerfaced dick that Karkat wouldn't trust as far as he could fucking throw him. If John says he wasn't truly pacified without Karkat, the least Karkat can do is fucking well trust him, no matter what his insecurities are babbling at him internally about humans not recognizing a fledgling moirallegiance until it paps them in the face.

But John is sitting on something again. Like the day Karkat missed half a day of school to catch Crichton - with Heir, he realizes, but he forces that thought and all it implies down to deal with some other time - and John had pasted on his too-bright, obviously false grin and tried to pretend Karkat's absence hadn't fucked with all of his old abandonment issues.

And when John goes into denial mode, everything suddenly becomes a fucking federal issue to extricate from his defensive thinkpan. It's not an attitude that's conducive to a feelings jam, and Karkat suspects that they wouldn't have time to properly suss this out anyway, not when John's already got one foot out the door to go looking for his stupid, stupid sister.

"I believe you, dumbass," is all Karkat says, resting his forehead against John's with care. He's still got that massive bruise in the bone of his skull that he'd prefer not to jostle. "I also, if you think I can't tell something's still eating at you, you are dead fucking wrong. Road kill is more goddamn lively than your current state of wrongness."

This close up, he can't miss the way John's eyes widen reflexively. Busted. "I just -"

"I don't want to hear excuses," Karkat interrupts, rolling his eyes. "We're talking about whatever the fuck it is, whether you like it or not. You've probably got it in your silly thinkpan that I'm too hurt to handle this -" John winces and that's admission enough right there "- but I am not made of fucking glass. We'll deal with this when you've corralled your wayward Harley."

Because John doesn’t want to burden other people. If there is anything Karkat has learned over two
years of dealing with this kid, it's that John will do anything other than talk about his problems and emotions if he thinks the other person can't handle the truth. He lets it pile up until the weight of it could smother a lesser man, lets it all sink in and molder like compost in the back of his mind, until it's developed into some kind of incestuously fertile breeding ground for the kind of pain and anguish that even John can't ignore.

Too fucking bad. Karkat doesn't have the best track record with handling his own fucking meltdowns, but he likes to think that he's at least proven he can guide John through his without fucking up too badly. That's the point of the pale quadrant - neither of them can handle their issues on their own. They help keep each other stable. By this point, Karkat's mental stability is so tied up in John's, unravelling their relationship would probably unravel his mind altogether.

"Just - can you keep your phone on you?" At the blank look on John's face, Karkat rolls his eyes. "Come on, dumbass, you need it so the fucking hipster can communicate anyway. And - fuck me - if you tell me what's going on and all that fucking codependent bullshit, it'll help me not think about the fucked up nightmares and probably prevent me from toppling governments and leveling city blocks with the force of my panic tantrum. Alright?"

"Of course! You've got it, Karkat!" John says, the vague daze of being on the receiving end of a surprise pale intervention blinking out of his eyes as he moves on autopilot to grab one of Karkat's hands and squeeze it. "Are the nightmares still that bad?"

"Bad enough," Karkat says, grimacing. He's slept practically all day, but for some reason being unconscious for extended periods of time apparently doesn't equate to actual rest. So while John is out doing dangerous things as Heir, Karkat's going to be forcing himself through a sleep cycle, and all the nightmares that has come to imply -

Wait.

Nightmares.

Certain key details of said nightmares -

"Oh my god. Oh my fucking - are you kidding me?" Karkat wails, and then he is forced to break off and let go of John's hand to hold his ribs together. "You're - fucking - shitting me!" he continues through pained, labored breathing.

One of John's hands squeezes his shoulder, and the worry that grips his face almost seems to make his eyes flash a brighter blue. "What, Karkat-?"

Karkat wonders how the fuck John ever managed to conceal that kind of thing. Contact lenses could only have gone so far, because John's powers seem to be directly linked to how bright the blue of his eyes starts glowing when he's upset.

The bright blue eyes that the young John of Karkat's nightmares has had all along.

...And he never once made that connection?! Seriously? "Are you fucking kidding me?!" Karkat stares off into space. He lets his head fall onto John's shoulder, but that's the only concession he makes as he drifts into a daze of horrified disbelief. "This is shit. This is complete and utter bullshit. No. Absolutely not."

"Karkat, you're not making any sense and it's freaking me out."

Karkat rubs John's back with a hand, and laughs hollowly. "No, no, don't mind me. I'm just going to spend the next few hours attempting to comprehend the vast, seemingly limitless depths of the ocean
of cull-worthy, pan-cracked stupidity from which I have been drawing over the past couple of months. You know. The usual.” When he lifts his head and sees that John's face is still - understandably - concerned, he laughs sardonically. "All those nightmares I've been having?"

"The ones where I die a lot? How could I forget?" John's nose wrinkles up.

"You've had blue eyes all along."

It's almost worth it, just to see that same distant realization dawning across John's face. "How?!" John repeats, which sums up Karkat's feelings pretty nicely.

But Karkat can't think about this anymore. He is perfectly capable of despairing over this for hours at a time, because Karkat's stupidity is one of his thinkpan's favorite things to fixate on endlessly, but he's too fucking tired to justify that kind of obsessive cycle right now, and that's saying something. "Go. Get your asshole 'bro' and take off," Karkat orders, shaking his head. "Get out of here and drag the gun maniac back home before she provokes Droog into blowing shit up again."

The mention of hero work snaps John back into alertness with unnerving speed. His shoulders straighten, and he frowns as his focus recenters on the whole Harley debacle.

Karkat's still adjusting to the way John can flip into hero mode at the drop of a hat - and what he's adjusting to, he doesn't like. John's face clears up, all that despair gone in an instant, as though it was never there.

And that confirms something that Karkat's been wondering about. Just how much of John's regular emotions does he shove to the side to make that shift in his mind set? They're remarkably similar in personality, now that Karkat can see the obvious parallels between the two, but Heir has an air of professionalism and caution John couldn't imitate even at his most serious. And with the way John tends to dwell on his issues and let them build up until the breaking point...

Karkat is Concerned. The capitalization is entirely deserved.

But...later, he tells himself. When they have more time and fewer missing people to worry about.

"We'll be right back as soon as we find her," John promises, standing up with the wind already swirling around him. "Hopefully the wind can guide us right to her, so we won't be gone too long, unless she gets stubborn about it and starts bouncing everywhere! Promise me you'll get some sleep, 'kay?"

"I promise," Karkat sighs, hooking his pinkie claw on John's little finger for a brief moment before waving him off. "Now let me crawl into my 'coon before you bring Mr Unnecessary Sunglasses in, so I at least have an excuse not to try to strangle him in a possessive ragefit."

John stifles a quiet laugh, helping Karkat haul himself off the bed with a tug that has far more force behind it than Karkat is used to feeling on John's end. Heir has pretty impressive physical strength, and Karkat can only wonder if that's why John is so good at swimming despite the fact that he doesn't attend practice half the damn time.

It only takes one shallow wheeze of sopor trickling into his respiratory system to make Karkat's eyes roll back in his head. The dull, consistently throbbing pain of his ribs washes away in bubbles of green, encouraging him to take deeper breaths and inhale more sopor, and he would almost think the nightmares to come are worth it as long as he doesn't have to feel his battered torso for a few blissful hours.

...
Almost.

-  

*Karkat dreams -*

There is a black winged hellbeast in the sky above him. Black smoke billows up and obscures the fluffy white clouds as they pass overhead, and the monster arrows down through the ashes toward Karkat and John.

Karkat recognizes it, this time. He's seen glimpses in the past, but he's never tried to make sense of the nightmares before. Nightmares are nightmares. They're fucked up. He sees John dying. End of story.

But now -

Now, Karkat stares up into the sky, and he recognizes the wolf-headed carapacian winging down towards him, because he thinks it's the same thing that killed Harley in that other dream, replete with the tentacles and the harlequin hat and the wings. The only thing that's changed is that now it has a wolfish muzzle grafted onto its face, and he's fucking astonished that even his shithive of a thinkpan didn't make the connection before this.

One simple addition, and Karkat can see that this is the same thing that's been consistently murdering John for almost as long as Karkat's been dreaming about the subject.

If he were to try to apply logic to these piece of shit dreams - which he is so fucking not - he'd be tempted to think that this indicates a rough timeline of events. But he's not tempted. At all. Nope. He refuses to buy into this shit even being in the same universe as logic. Logic is an alien species and cannot survive the atmospheric conditions of the planet that these dreams take place on.

He's distinct from John and Harley is nowhere in sight. So at least they're back to the old formula of Karkat standing by and watching helplessly while his moirail dies repeatedly. Because, you know, he misses all *that* like he misses being eaten alive by ravenous coyotes.

The *déjà vu* only hits him when Karkat looks down, trying to avert his eyes from whatever the winged wolf is about to do to John. He can't look at the static that buzzes and crackles where the ground should be; his eyes sting and his head shrieks in pain, so instead he squints down at the smoldering ruins of the golden moon. They're floating about twenty feet up, give or take, and so he can make out the pool of bright red blood rippling out from under a chunk of sunshine yellow wall. A tiny dark arm reaches out from the side, as though the poor sap crush underneath ten thousand tons of rock had been hit in the middle of reaching out -

*Harley*, Karkat remembers, the realization drilling through his skull like an ice pick. *John was crying about Harley.* Startled, he jerks his head around to stare at the baby-faced version of his John, who hovers in the air, too exhausted to move. John's eyes are a brilliant, vibrant blue, yet more proof that Karkat's subconscious really *has* been picking up on this stuff all along, and he's just been too busy being a complete fuckface to notice the subtle hints linking John and Heir, right down to the hammer John's been using to fight.

In fact - Karkat peers at John's eyes and - yup. *He's wearing her glasses right now. They switched at some point, for whatever brilliant fucking reason. The moon fell out of the sky and she was crushed, but John survived to fight - this.*

He can't believe it. He's already had this dream. He had this dream - shit, was it really the morning
after dealing with Crichton?

Which doesn't make sense, because he had that dream before they met Harley as Sharpshooter. What the actual fuck -

"I feel like we've done this before," John says beside him, ruffling his hair. He's thirteen years old and scrawny, and covered in tiny scrapes and cuts where the golden hammer couldn't parry the monster's blows in time. "But it wasn't right. I didn't remember it right." He shrugs, his smile rueful. "Might as well try again."

Karkat blinks.

What.

"Are you talking to me?" he asks. Even though that doesn't make sense. John doesn't interact with Karkat in these dreams. Karkat has tried everything short of painting messages in his own blood to try to get John's attention and prevent his moirail's death dozens of times over, and it has never worked. John just peddles on oblivious to the danger, off to be crushed or stabbed or eaten while Karkat looks on helplessly from the sidelines.

Except that one time. God, it was a while ago, wasn't it, but Karkat thinks he remembers - only the once -

(Everything is a brilliant, molten gold; the winged creature raises a fist and another explosion of green blasts up at the moon; a hand claps on his shoulder; "Karkat, we have to go!"

"Of course I am!" John exclaims, smiling and looking directly at Karkat with his eyes crinkled up in laugh lines. "But you still haven't woken up, have you?"

Oh, for fuck's sake. "There is a giantass barkbeast-faced monstrosity trying to kill you!" Karkat yells, seizing John by the shoulders and shaking him, reveling in the sheer wonder of at last having the power to get his message across. The last time John spoke to him in these nightmares, Karkat had still been too baffled and panfried to take advantage of it. He knows better now. "You need to run and get the fuck away from here, right now!" Then he pauses, and glares up at the sky. "Wait - how the fuck hasn't it reached us already?! It fucking teleports!"

"Talking is a free action." John cocks his head to the side, worrying his lip with his buckteeth, more prominent than usual on his young face. "Except when it isn't. This dumb Game is kind of arbitrary that way!"

Green fire blazes up behind John, and Karkat's stomach drops out from under him as the monster pops in behind John, sword at the ready. John, the doofus that he is, just smiles at Karkat, his blue eyes twinkling with all the merriment of ignorance.

Shit. Shit. Karkat does the only thing he can do. He shoves John to the side and flings himself in the way of the incoming blade. Because anything would be infinitely preferable to watching John die again -

There is a blur of white and red and black, and Dave Strider's sneaker slams into the side of the hellbeast's ugly mug. The sword inches from Karkat's chest retracts as the monster snarls and brings the blade up to deflect the swing of a bright white sword in Dave's hands.

"See!" John cries ecstatically over the metal crash of two blades colliding in midair. "I told you! It wasn't right! We were still missing Dave!"
Karkat's jaw drops. He can't be asked to fix that; he just watches in slack-jawed disbelief as the hellbeast grabs Dave's foot and tosses him over its head. Dave tumbles through the air, headed for the ground, but before he can make impact he twists his free hand and a flame-patterned skateboard appears to catch him. The rockets on either side of the board fire up, and Dave rises up to their level once more.

Absolutely nothing about that last sentence made sense. First Harley, now Dave 'Douchebag' Strider? What the fuck is going on in Karkat's head?!

This Dave is too young, too, Karkat realizes with a twinge of unease. His shades are two sizes too large for his thin face, and the white suit coat, black slacks, and blood red bow tie sit awkwardly on his skinny frame. Even the sword he's using, a far cry from the piece of shit swords Flashstep is famed for using ironically, is too large for him, broken off near the hilt but still heavy in the kid's tiny hand. The style that looks obnoxiously sophisticated (a fact which Karkat will admit only grudgingly, even in the privacy of his own nightmares) on a nineteen year old only makes thirteen-year-old Dave look like a little wriggler playing dress up, trying too hard to impress.

God. Fuck. He does not want to watch pathetic little kid Dave die. He didn't want to watch little kid Jade die, either. Karkat would like to personally extend two cosmic middle fingers to whatever asshole deity assigned these nightmares to him, and thus render him physically incapable of ever being able to disentangle his interactions with the real-life versions from the memories of their pitiful child corpses.

"Yo. So this is where the party's at, Egbert?" Dave mumbles - monotone and clipped, with a faint Texan drawl, but definitely speaking aloud. Karkat is not imagining that. "This's the SOB who iced Jade?"

"Yup!" John says, sounding way too fucking chipper, like holy shit. "Twice, actually! Or at least, I'm pretty sure he's the one who blew up the moon. I think I was asleep at the time. But the first time on her planet - yep. This guy!" He points a finger at the hellbeast, which has come to a stop and is eyeing them warily, seemingly thrown off by the addition of a third member to their little mid-battle soiree.

"And then it ate her barkbeast," Karkat adds, just to see if he can and if Dave can hear him, too. "And became a green fire demon."

Dave raises one impossibly thick eyebrow. "Jesus fuck. What the hell was she even feeding that thing?"

"Radioactive steaks!" John says.

"John, seriously. You need to stop being so fucking chipper," Karkat says. "This is an order from your moirail, because I cannot even handle you being high on life while said life is in immediate fucking danger."

John sticks out his tongue, nudging Karkat with his shoulder. "Make me~!"

Dave, meanwhile, shakes his head with a heavy sigh. "Always told her she oughtta take that hellhound out behind the shed for a one-girl Old Yeller reenactment."

"Gosh no, Dave, that part always made me cry!" John protests, clapping his hands to his cheeks.

"How the fucking fuck," Karkat interrupts, before they can go off on another insane dumbass tangent, "has that thing not attacked you two yet?"
It's unbelievable. The wolf-headed monster hovers ominously before them over the ruined landscape, sword in hand and green electricity swarming over its features, but it hasn't moved since it threw Dave, except to cock its head to the side and stare at them.

"Talking is a free action," Dave and John say in unison. "How do you think we always have time to pester everyone?" John finishes on his own, giggling his thirteen-year-old hiccupy giggle. It's despicably adorable and Karkat wants to hugsmush the giggles out of him because wasn't this supposed to be a nightmare? John isn't allowed to be this pathetically adorable and make Karkat's heart twist this way when any second now all hell could break loose.

Because it will. John may have been granted a reprieve thanks to Dave's appearance, but in Karkat's vast experience, that just means his subconscious is cooking up a new and even more traumatizing way to murder his palemate for no fucking reason.

"Jade is dead," Dave says, sounding grim, "and Rose is gone. Dream her is dead, at least, last time I checked. So I guess it's just us left." He pauses, then shrugs, cupping his hands around his mouth, and yells in the hellbeast's general direction. "Let's tear this clown fucker a new one!"

With a roar, the hellbeast lunges at them. Karkat flinches, startled and ready for the end, but Dave and John spring into action. The ring in John's hand, the one that he's been clutching since the crash landing for no discernable reason, sparks with a flash of light and flips into a hammerkind once more. Dave zooms around in an arc to come at the demon from the side, and the two humans strike almost at the same time.

Green light swallows up the demon, and it vanishes, reappearing behind John. Dave doesn't even slow up his momentum, zooming at John, catching him by the shoulder, and using him as a pivot to ram the rocketboard into the hellbeast's face. It yelps and teleports away to a point about ten feet below them, staring up with hate filled eyes, the fur of its muzzle singed and crispy.

"Do you have a fraymotif for this?" Dave yells, kicking off his board. It vanishes as he falls in a controlled descent toward the wolf's back, and the hellbeast barely manages to teleport away before his sword can slice through its wings. The board reappears just in time to catch him, and Karkat is seriously starting to wonder how he's doing that trick. Is his subconscious slurring Harley's powers together into Dave for one clusterfuck of a human being?

"A who what now?!" John yells back and oh thank fucking god, Karkat's not the only one who has no idea what Dave is on about.

"John, what have you even been doing on your planet?!!" Dave says, landing on the rocketboard and grabbing the edge of the board with his hand as he arcs up at a steep angle, hair flying back from his face. "How have you not been earning fraymotifs and abusing them all over the place?!!"

"I've been flying!" John grunts and takes the full brunt of the monster's downward swing on the balance point of the hammer's handle, one hand barely scooting up under the head of the hammer in time to avoid losing fingers. "And, you know - stuff!"

"Well shit." Dave scratches his head, and then yanks an entire new sword from apparently nowhere. "We can't pull a [Smashup Session] if you don't have any sickass beats for me to work with!" He flings himself at the hellbeast from the side.

"Ack! Sorry!"

One of the demon's tentacles lashes out and smacks Dave in the side. With a grunt, the kid flies off the board. John yelps and ducks under the monster's next blow, grabbing the rocketboard as he
makes a beeline for Dave - who is apparently the only one in this dream who can't fly. Even Karkat can float, and he's definitely not the flying hero type.

...Could he fight? He grabbed John, and that worked. Wary, Karkat stares at the wolfish demon, who has ignored him all this time, and wonders if he could just dig a claw into his wrist, form a sicklekind, and end this. End it before anyone gets hurt. Dave or John or both, it doesn't matter, but the thought of John in particular dying like this after a brief moment of hope is just - unthinkable. He can't let it happen, not again.

So Karkat leaps into the fray. He jams a claw into the skin of his wrist, just under the fabric of the golden pajamas' sleeve, and whips the blood out in front of him in a curving arc as he darts at the hellbeast, hoping against hope that he can surprise it.

No such luck. Before he can get within a foot of the monster, the hellbeast vanishes, swallowed by green galaxies -

And doesn't reappear. Karkat swings around, expecting it to have materialized behind him, as it tends to do, but there's nothing to see but John and Dave hovering back to back, looking equally confused. John caught Dave a foot or so above the static where the ground should be, and the time hero is on his rocketboard again, both of them hovering mere inches from the ground but battle-ready.

Dave swears avidly, with a unique fervor at odds with his flat expression, and it sounds just plain weird hearing that kind of language out of a kid with a voice that emotionless. When he switches back into non-cuss words, however, the kid sounds nervous. "Shit. Fuck. Where'd it go - I can't see it, man -"

"I can't see it either!" John reports, his back pressed up against Dave's and his feet barely scraping the ground. His face has gone sheet white, sweat streaking down his temples, and Karkat can see the intense tremors rocking John's arm, the one that held the ring. Under the fabric of his golden pajamas, his arm burns with white light. He looks like absolute shit, ready to pass out at any moment, and Karkat remembers, with a jolt of horror, the sensation of the power scorching John's veins during that dream when he shared John's perspective of this fight. John had fallen in the first place because the pain of wielding the Hammering grew too much for him to withstand, but Karkat hadn't even thought about the consequences of him summoning it again to fight beside Dave.

_Fuck._ How much longer does he have left before his blood just fucking boils?

As it turns out, Karkat doesn’t need to worry about that. He doesn't even have time to frantically try to piece together a blood-related counter, some way that his powers might be able to salvage John's arm.

The demon reappears ten feet from Dave. Karkat lets out a cry of warning, but it cuts off when he sees the look on the hellbeast's face. A sadistic smirk spreads across its muzzle, twisting its horrific visage into a knowing, secretive grin. The monster raises its sword before it, and Dave brandishes his in response, ready to parry -

And then, tongue lolling from its jaw in a silent laugh, the wolf demon stabs itself in the gut. The moment before the blade hits, its entire body jolts with white and green plasma that almost seems to circle around a hole in its stomach, and for some reason, Karkat thinks he can see something white looming in the strange vortex -

A burst of green appears inches from Dave, and the kid can do no more than gasp and look down at the sword that's just been teleported straight through the right side of his chest. It punches right through his ribs and out through his back, dripping with blood. The white of his suit jacket bubbles
up with red instantly, a damp stain that only grows larger when the demon retracts the sword from its stomach, barking a laugh as Dave stumbles forward, barely keeping both feet on his rocketboard.

But Karkat can't focus on that. He's too busy staring at John.

"John," Dave says woozily, clutching at the wound with a hand and trying to staunch it with the fabric of his suit, shuddering. "Oh shit - shit - it's the right side, didn't hit anything too vital, I can handle that - *fuck -*"

"Dave," John says. His voice is tight and strained and Karkat's bloodpusher breaks in two.

Dave just starts babbling as he turns, his sword still clasped in one hand as he grabs John's shoulder to steady himself. "Okay, that hurts like a mother*fucker, but I can still fight. Are you -"

Dave shuts up. Which is good, because in about two seconds Karkat was going to reach out and help him shut up.

John bends forward, and spits a mouthful of blood into the cupped palm of his hand. "Dave," he croaks, sinking to his knees on the ground, "your right - is my left."

All Karkat can hear is a faint buzz in his ears, and over that, a stuttering, slowing pulse.

*Th-thump.*

Blood paints John's mouth red as he presses his palm to the hole in his heart.

Dave's right, John's left, because they were standing together, back to back and a sword teleported through Dave's side would pass through John's heart and that's just -

*Th-thump.*

Karkat lets the sicklekind trickle away as John huddles in on himself, the hammer vanishing as he drops the ring to the ground with a clink. Dave is still standing there, and when he does sink to his knees beside John's crumpled form it's almost an afterthought, his mouth moving wordlessly as he touches a hand to the blooming red wound in John's back. "John?" he asks, lost and confused. "John?"

*Th-

"John, *no, I was there, you're not supposed to get -*" Dave breaks off, incredulous, and his hand clamps down on John's shoulder, shaking him. One arm wraps around to try to join John's hand over the front of the wound, but Dave's hands are shaking hard now, and John's pajamas are slick with blood. John collapses forward, and lies still, and Dave starts yelling, his voice hoarse and broken. "John, John!"

Karkat slumps to his knees, too.

*Thump.*

When the demon appears behind Dave, this time, Dave just looks up. There is a slight delay, as though for a long moment he can't bring himself to look away from John. His lips part slightly, and he wets them - and then, with a shake of his head, lets his sword fall from loose fingertips.

Karkat almost thinks Dave tilts his head back. Either way, the demon moves too quickly to be stopped, even if Karkat or Dave were in any kind of fucking shape to do anything about it. The
sword slashes across with brutal precision, a single clean slice that opens up Dave's throat in a curtain of red. Dave gurgles, his shades flying off his face with the force of the blow, and he falls over backwards, choking on the blood that wells up in the new hollow of his throat.

*Th-*

John turns his head to the side and there are tears pouring down his face as he watches Dave bleed out.

"This," he says, voice rasping, "*this* is what happened."

*Thump.*

And Karkat -

-

(finally)

-

- wakes up.

The clicking rainbow static of the ground beneath his knees swallows him whole, yanks him down, and the last image he has is of John and Dave lying in a pool of their own blood. Something drags him down and down and down -

Karkat sits up with a scream, his voice cracking, and he keeps right on screaming as he claws at the rainbow static around him. His eyes sting with tears and who knows what else, burning as he fights his way through the dazzling array of multicolored, flashing lights that try to smother him and drag him back down onto his back.

*Something is wrong.*

John's heart -

*Did you notice?*

Harley's chest -

*Hang on a second…*

Dave's throat -

*Oh shit.*

He'll bet his fucking non-existent life's savings on Rose being the fourth -

*You know, you could just...sort of reach over...and...*

"Oh, thit!"

What an obnoxious lisp, Karkat thinks, completely derailed from his previous train of thought as he tumbles free of the static. He hits the ground hard, still screaming right up until the moment he bites his tongue on impact. The ground feels cool and smooth under his claws as he continues to blindly crawl away from the flickering static, sobbing because *John is dead and they're all dead and he's not*
"Whoopsies! You're awake way too early, Karkat!"

An unfamiliar, horrifically cheery voice says that, and Karkat is seized by the instinct to throttle whoever would dare use such a bright tone when he's just watched John die again. He snarls, blinking his watery eyes in the hopes that the after glare of all the static will clear up. That way he can at least get some idea of his surroundings and which fruity asshole just volunteered for the emergency strangling extravaganza.

But the ground remains a stubborn golden blur beneath his hands, and his head aches fiercely with the kind of groggy migraine born of napping for too long in the sun.

"Back to sleep with you, alright? You're still much safer in there!"

A pair of too-warm fingers - goldblood or warmer, Karkat has time to think, seeing as how he runs at about human standard temperatures and these hands feel like fire on his forehead - brush against his skin, along with the soft click of beads that tap against his temple. He pulls back, lashing out blindly, but the voice just tuts and pats him on the head. "It's alright! Just give it a few more weeks, okay? Then you can wake up!"

Karkat summons up the single most eloquent response in his repertoire. It's beautiful, an ancient classic, and he puts as much reverence and hatred into his voice as he can muster, to truly do it justice.

"Fuck you," he says, smiling widely as darkness eats across his vision, and he -

(falls back asleep and)

-

- wakes up.

Properly, this time. Who even fucking knows what that last part was about.

Karkat propels himself out of the recooperacoon with force born of old reflex, feeling his skin crawl as he drags himself free of the sopor slime, and he almost makes it all the way to the toilet before he hurls.

He didn't have much in his stomach anyway except sopor residue, which tastes like bitter, tacky scum water on the way back up. It coats the inside of his mouth with a thin film of slime, and he gags on that too, because fuck his life. "Fan-fucking-tastic," he spits, scratching at the base of his horns as the last shivers of horror and grief run through him. The dream clamors at the front of his thinkpan, clamoring for his attention like a hellish symphony of 'what the fucks.'

Fortunately, before he can start sobbing grossly into the toilet and texting John, something else interrupts his impending bitchfit.

SS: 'Bout time you woke up, kid.

There are some voices you don't forget. Even faint and distorted, as carapacian speech tends to be when you're not looking at their hand signs, Karkat knows that voice. Something about the speaker stabbing him repeatedly kind of stuck in his mind, and he shoves himself back from the toilet with a gasp to stare at the Surprise Stabber sitting hunched over in the shadow of the recooperacoon, his scarred face half-lit in stark chiaroscuro by the bathroom light.
SS: Rise and shine, sleepin' beauty, you've got company.

He's also wearing a huge, shapeless grey sweater. Karkat stares, stupefied, and tries to process this. The knitting is uneven and the misshapen black spade symbol across the front most closely resembles a blob. It sags on the Dersite's spindly frame like a sack. "How the fuck did you even break into this house, you fuckfaced stabhappy lunatic?" he demands at last, flushing the toilet and staggering to his feet, because he needs to actually focus on what's important, here, and that's the fact that the Surprise Stabber is in John's house. "Fuck. Tell me you didn't fucking stab Dad Egbert." Generally he assumes that Dadbert could probably kick some serious ass - Heir has to have learned it all from someone, after all - but on the other hand who knows how alcohol could affect that guy's judgment -

The carapacian snorts, and rolls up the magazine in his hands, tucking it inside his sweater before Karkat can read the cover. But rather than standing up and stabbing him - fucking incredible, really - the alien remains sprawled out in the shadows, merely tilting the brim of his battered hat back to squint at Karkat with a sour expression.

SS: Look, chump. The name's Spades Slick. Did you even bother to read my card? Why do I even have those things lying around?

SS: And no, I didn't stab anyone to get in here, I'm disappointed to say.

SS: The window was open.

Karkat blinks and looks at John's window, which is still hanging open from when John and Dave bounced to Seattle on the wind. The curtains flutter in the breeze, mocking him.

...Well, fuck. Mentally cussing out past-Karkat for being his usual irresponsible fuck up of a self, Karkat casts a suspicious glance at Spades before stooping to gargle water from the sink. The water makes his teeth ache with cold, but it swills the foul tasted of sour sopor slime right out of his protein chute, which makes it all worthwhile. "So, can I ask why you're here, or would that interrupt your shanking agenda too much?"

He's resigned himself to getting shanked again at this point. His ribs have been fucked to hell and back in a tiny rocket-powered handbasket thanks to Droog, and his legs hurt enough that he's going nowhere fast. Even if he sees this nubfucker's knifekind coming, he doubts he'll be able to react in time to dodge it.

Surprisingly, the carapacian shakes his head - though not without a noticeable grimace of regret that bares viciously sharp teeth.

SS: We don't got much time. Diamonds is riding my ass and I can't shake her tails much longer, so we can't stand around chewing gum.

SS: I'm here because you've got yourself neck deep in a pit of absolute shit, and as per usual yah need me to bail you out.

Karkat snorts, wrapping an arm around his fucking useless ribcage and hobbling out of the bathroom to eye the carapacian from a safer distance. Spades lets his head roll to the side to keep eyeballing Karkat with a constant grimace, but hey, Karkat has a permanent scowl, too. So at least they have unceasing, cosmically ordained irritation on which to establish common ground.

And let it be stated for the record that yes, Karkat is very on board with any alliance plans that might be in the works, here. He has too many people to hate and not enough juice in his rageglands to hate them all equally. And if he pisses this asshole off, he gets stabbed. Any path that leads to 'not-
"Fucking fine," Karkat snaps, folding his arms. "Aside from the fact that I've obviously been on the wrong end of someone else's evil curb stomping spree, what the fuck do you think I need help with? And what in the nooksniffing fuck did I do to earn your help anyway?" He narrows his eyes. "What do you get out of this kind of cahootery? What's your angle?"

Spades's claws click against the smooth shell of his forehead as he smacks his face.

SS: For fuck's sake.

SS: I don't dick around with ulterior motives. We've gotta goddamn blood pact that's busting my internal genitalia, and until you're outta the woods it won't cut me a break. Been acting up for weeks now. Thanks for that, by the way.

"What? Blood pact?" Karkat admits defeat and sinks into the chair by John's desk, wincing as his ribs creak and press in against his lungs. Holy fuck, how long does it take until his insides stop feeling like a puzzle box with all the pieces rattling around loose inside? He sits on the chair backwards, hooking one leg absently around the swivel part of the chair, and leaning his elbows and chin against the top of the chair to glower down at the alien. "We've never even met before."

SS: Of course yah don't. Because that would be too easy. Just my fuckin' luck…

SS: Look, forget about the Game. Forget the pact. I'll just say, we agreed to help each other out a while back. Mutual toleration and back-scratchin', the whole kebab. But you don't remember enough to make it worth the time.

Karkat has no idea what he's talking about. "Done," he agrees, with just enough sarcasm layered in his voice to really punch his point home. "Skip to the part where you're making your no doubt unspeakably generous offer of helpful, friendly non-stabbing assistance."

SS: All you need to know is that Diamonds has a weakness, and you and your crew are finally set up to cash that in.

And that - that gets Karkat's attention. He stiffens, one fist clenching as he tilts his head to the side, inspecting the carapacian in a new light. "...I'm listening."

Spades grins. It's not a pleasant sight.

SS: Thought that'd perk your nubby interest.

SS: Listen up, y'hear? Diamonds is good. The man always terrified the hell outta me, and I was the
one who recruited him in the first place.

"Man?" Karkat interrupts, because things are already making less sense than Harley on a science bender.

SS: Not anymore. Used to be a shell like me, too. Shit's complicated.

"Oh." Karkat motions with his claw. "Carry on. I'm all auricular sponge clots, here."

SS: But there are two things in this world she can't resist.

SS: The first is Swedish fish. Fuck only knows why, but she can't get enough of the stuff.

"That, amazingly enough, is not helpful." Karkat tries to comprehend the fundamental stupidity that would be required to formulate a plan involving Diamonds Droog and vast quantities of Swedish fish, and comes to the vastly reassuring conclusion that not even his shithive thinkpan can process those levels of mind-numbing bullshit.

Besides, where would they even find a tanker truck big enough to hold that much candy?

...He's starting to think the Egbert prankster gambit is rubbing off on him. And not in a good way.

Spades shrugs with one shoulder, an unreadable expression crossing his face before he resettles himself against the 'coon.

SS: You'd be surprised. A little bribery goes a long way in certain situations.

SS: The second is that she's a professional. Even when she's in full on murder mode, she won't do anything that ain't classy as fuck. She takes pride in her accomplishments and her dignity. And that's how you fight her.

SS: You either appeal to her professional interests and hope she can't outthink yah...which she can. Trust me, you're all not that smart, kid, you're not gonna be able to convince her she should side with that pack of morons you run around with.

"Hey!"

SS: Or, you change something she can't predict.

SS: Diamonds is an ace at not getting distracted by stupid shit when she's on a mission. Time shenanigans, head games - none of that fazes her. But she tends to underestimate people after she thinks she's dealt with 'em once. She prides herself on 'getting the job done' the first time around.

SS: And she's primed to underestimate you in a major way. I saved your bacon last night, kid, you were doing absolutely terrible in that fight.

"That was you!" Karkat exclaims, straightening up in his chair - and immediately regretting it as his torso screams in protest. However short of a sleep cycle he got through, it's obvious that the lack of motion has set him back to square one on adjusting to the constant pain. Not even the pain-numbing effects of sopor make much of a dent in it now that he's out of the slime itself. "I thought that was some kind of fucked up death hallucination."

Then - "Hold the fuck up. Were you watching me get my ass handed to me?" he asks, folding his arms closed to his chest and glaring. "And you only decided to throw your hat into the ring after that?!"
SS: Actually, no, because I thought no one in their right mind would go up against a monster like Di without an actual fuckin’ plan.

SS: When I realized she’d let off chasing me and started dawdling around on a roof for no reason, I hightailed it over there to save your ass. You're goddamn welcome.

They sit there in aggravated silence for a few long moments before Karkat heaves a sigh and mutters, "Yeah, thanks. I guess." He has a strong suspicion that Heir and Sharpshooter arrived probably only a few moments after he lost consciousness, from the way John told it, but alright. Fuck. He owes the creepy carapacian a life debt or something. He's still not clear on the blood pact thing, and has no idea how this affects their potential alliance, but whatever. He's tired and feels like shit and he can't put any more thought into this than he already has.

SS: The point I'm try ta make here is, you need to reshuffle your deck and work with a new hand.

SS: I can't believe I've been reduced to card metaphors again.

SS: I'm no expert, but I've been staking out this place for a while, and the blond kid -

Karkat pinches the bridge of his nose. "Dave? King of all stoic hipster douchebags?"

SS: Bingo. He's a Knight too.

SS: You do know you're a Knight, right?

When Karkat widens his eyes pointedly and throws up his hands, the carapacian groans unintelligibly. "You suck at explanations," Karkat says, because it needs to be absolutely clearly who is at fault for the total clusterfuck this conversation is becoming. He's weighing the odds inwardly on how likely it is that this is just another weird nightmare, a product of his shithive excuse for a thinkpan's usual incompetence.

SS: Shaddup. If yah remembered like you were supposed to, you all wouldn't be such hopeless fucks. Everyone else understands.

SS: You're a Knight of Blood. He's got Time. That's what your powers are about. Is that so hard? Capiche?

Surprisingly enough, aside from the arbitrary Knight thing, Karkat thinks he's getting it. If he ignores the basically half of what the carapacian says. "Yeah, fine. Still not getting the Knight thing, but what else is new."

SS: All yah need to know about Knights is that they exploit things. You can't make blood outta thin air - that'd be a Maid thing - but you can use it to fight and patch things up, right? Any way you can get the most use out of it. And it works best if yah use it to defend others.

"That is incredibly arbitrary," Karkat hisses, feeling his head begin to pulse with a real headache, now. He is scraping the very bottom of a very small barrel of patience that he's been trying to keep in reserve, and without John here to calm him down he is going to lose his shit. "That doesn't - I - fuck - why do you even know something like that?! Who makes up a system like that?" Because the only thing he can think of is that this is some weird, sick way that aliens like carapacians classify random mutant super powers - some weird medieval hierarchy thing, maybe? Whatever the fuck it is, he wants no part in it.

SS: Just trust me.
Something in Karkat's thinkpan cracks. "No!"

SS: Whatever. It's the truth, whether you buy it or not, kid. Anyway, working with Witches is tricky and I wouldn't dick around with that load of hoopla until you all get your heads on straight.

SS: But Knights've got a simple work around. Primarily protective class, y'see. If you're working to rescue someone, the stats max out by default.

Karkat, with great care, lets his head fall into his hands, and closes his eyes. This means that he can't hear the telepathy as well, which is fine by him. "No, go on," he says when Spades cuts off with a menacing growl, and he waves his hand. "My thinkpan is just fucking **boggling** at the fact that someone who talks like a Prohibition-era gangster is pretending life is a fucking video game. Really. Go on."


SS: If you only knew.

"Wha -"

SS: Anyway, s'why I couldn't believe it when you literally shipped your Heir off to do goddamn grunt work. If you're fighting alone with no one to protect, you're pants at this hero gig. Yah really haven't noticed?

It takes Karkat a moment.

It takes him several moments, actually, and Spades starts tapping a claw impatiently on his knee, glowering.

But then, once it clicks, all he can think about is *that* night, over two weeks ago. Enough time has passed in a haze of nightmares and sopor withdrawal and panic that the memory is starting to grow distant, but Karkat could never forget the night Heir vanished, off on a country-spanning teleport spam to fight Dark Star, and Hemogoblin had to deal with Hearts Boxcars escaping all on his own. He'd been blown up, fucking bitten by an anonymous blueblood who had **better** not have been rabid or some shit, and then snubbed by Boxcars so hard the criminal had literally just dumped him into the bay rather than fight him.

Yeah. That kind of thing tends to stick in one's thinkpan, where one can mull over it and really let the failure rot and fester along with all the other screw-ups one has accumulated over a lifetime of fucking up.

Any other night, Hemogoblin would say he was pretty decent at kicking ass. Kicking is his specialty, right up there with sicklekind. But he hadn't been defending some victim from a mugger, shutting down a gas station robbery, or fighting in tandem with Heir - basically, nothing that would involve him acting in defense of someone else. It had just been him and the Midnight Crew, and while he'd done fine against the grunt level thugs, he hadn't even been able to lay hands on Boxcars.

...Seriously, is this some kind of weird alien psychological thing? Because it's fucking **scary** how Karkat can frame that situation to fit this weird Knight concept. The rational part of his brain is pretty sure there's a more logical explanation - something along the lines of 'Karkat Vantas is a professional fuckup' - but on the other hand -

It sounds...right. As half-assed as it sounds, the whole explanation sounds almost familiar. When he thinks about Karkat Vantas and the Knight of Blood at the same time, there is a brief moment when he thinks they sound like the exact same thing -
And nopenopenope. Fucking no. He's not touching that thought with a thirty foot pole, though he's not opposed to attaching a torch to the end of said pole and using it to set fire to the thought itself.

But apparently, the facial expressions he's making while undergoing that horrific paradigm shift are enough to make Spades think Karkat has seen the light.

SS: That's what I thought.

SS: Never mind the fact that an Heir 'n Knight protection gambit combo is one of the most game-breaking team ups ever -

SS: Oh, forget it. Just grab those asshat human players, put yourself between them and Diamonds, and enjoy the absolutely stupid amounts of carnage that will ensue. You're a Knight of Blood. Start acting like one.

Karkat waits. Spades seems to have finished up, though, and is arching a brow at Karkat as though awaiting commentary.

Slowly, Karkat brings his hands together and claps once. Twice. Three times. By the fourth Spades is on his feet, snarling, but Karkat just rolls his eyes and rests his chin on his palm, channeling all the righteous sarcasm his brain can muster. "As fun as that sounds, I somehow think the four broken ribs in my chest would probably resent me trying to do anything more strenuous than thinking and breathing."

Spades scratches his head with both claws, almost dislodging his hat as he does.

SS: Well, no shit. Don't yah fucking patronize me, kid, I was there.

SS: Shoulda thought of that one before you went and flung yourself into a meat grinder.

SS: But ribs? That'll clear up in, what? A week or two?

"For some reason I'm not up on the latest in carapacian biology," Karkat retorts, "but troll and human ribs can take at least a month to heal. So suck my fucking bulge."

He comes dangerously close to yelling again with that last sentence, and then his ribs start jabbing him with a vengeance, so he clamps his mouth shut and breathes through his nose for a good two minutes, focusing on tiny breaths. Absolutely fucking miniscule breaths. Anything that won't expand his rib cage past that critical point where everything starts to stab into internal organs.

SS: For a player? Nah. Don't know how you've gone your whole life without breaking a bone - unless you're even more of a wuss than I thought - but you've got perks.

SS: Besides, I can keep Di offa your back for a while. Buy yah some time while you get your head in the Game.

SS: And this is a Game. We never stopped playing.

"Good luck getting to Droog before Harley," Karkat mutters. He's still not over that. He supposes it's entirely possible that Sharpshooter went out with the intention of just teleporting Droog and her entire fanatical crew into a jail cell, but he also thinks that if Sharpshooter were the type to do the logical thing she wouldn't have spent the last two years crisscrossing the globe, kicking villains in the groin and shooting grenades at doomsday devices.

She's the type to make a stand on a snowy hill, and wait for a hellbeast to tear her apart in her utter,
irrepressible conviction that she can handle it but no, Karkat swore to himself he wouldn't think about that, no matter how much his obsessive, miserable excuse for a thinkpan might want to.

SS: I musta misheard you.

SS: You did not just tell me that the Witch went after Diamonds.

Spades looks around the room wildly, as though Harley could spring out of the woodwork at any moment. Which, to be fair, she probably could.

Karkat throws up his hands anyway, and feels completely justified in despairing over the questionable sanity of everyone in this fucking room. "Of course she did! Dave and J- Heir are out there looking for her already!"

It's occurred to Karkat that he should probably not be using real names here. This is very much a matter of hero work, and John at least wouldn't want his identity outed to some random stabbing asshat. Dave and Harley could probably muster up about zero fucks to give between the two of them, but John would care.

SS: Well, shit. They better hope I get to Di before they do.

SS: But first - gimme your hand, brat.

The carapacian lurches toward Karkat and clamps down on Karkat's wrist. Karkat yelps, yanking his hand back, but Spades hangs on with grim determination as he digs through the pockets of his pants to flick out a knifekind.

Jesus fuck. Karkat never thought it would end like this, getting stabbed to death by some alien asshole in John's bedroom for no fucking reason -

Spades deftly flips the knife specibus between his fingers and stabs himself in the palm. A deep, jagged cut cracks open his shell, all the way through his brittle carapace to the red blood beneath. Karkat can't help but be distracted; Spades's wound is bizarrely familiar, and Karkat's sense for blood ramps up instantly as he hones in on Spades's rapid, determined heartbeat.

Then Spades forces the fingers of Karkat's clenched fist open and stabs him in the palm. "Ow! What the fuck!" Karkat shrieks, kicking back in the chair and slamming back against John's desk. His body yells at him for the sudden jolt, and he accomplishes a grand total of nothing - Spades just follows him, discarding the knife on the carpet and dripping huge, round drops of blood from both of their bleeding palms as he mashes their hands together in some perverse hold.

SS: This would go a lot easier if you knew what the hell we're doing, but I need the boost more than I need to dick around explaining basic concepts to a chump like you.

SS: Repeat after me or I shank you again.

Karkat nods frantically, still trying to jerk the injured hand out of sight. But the carapacian's claws dig into his skin and wrap around his wrist like a steel vise, keeping their palms pressed together.

SS: And enunciate like a proper fuckin' gentleman.

SS: [My Oath Is My Bond]

Karkat's head buzzes, and his mouth forms the words without any real conscious input from his thinkpan. "[My Oath Is My Bond]," he repeats.
The resonance pulses through his blood like a roll of thunder, and for a moment he burns, lost in a red haze of blood as all of his focus gets sucked into an unfamiliar circulatory system. Bright red words appear in his head, limned in the color of his blood and sharp-edged with power, as though his own thoughts are reverberating like carapacian speech. His senses dip into a thin trickle of what feels like his own blood, seeping into Spades's body through the open, gaping wound where their palms crunch together - except fuck that, because that's not how transfusions work, so what the actual fuck is going on -

And then it's gone. Spades whips his hand back first, growling as he hunches over his bloody palm.

SS: There.

SS: 'Bout time I got some of those privileges back.

Karkat, panting, knits the cut in his palm together at last, drawing the drops up from where they've dribbled out all over his upper arm to form a thin scab. He opens his mouth, ready to let fly his full repertoire of rageisms on this fucker - because fuck that whole plan about not hating everyone in the universe, he is so sick of being cut up like this -

And then slams it shut, watching in silent disbelief as the cut in Spades's palm knits together. The carapacian grimaces, sticking out his tongue in a silent 'bluh' as a faint red scar fades in the center of his hand. It takes a lot longer than Karkat's quick healing job, and the wound remains swollen and sore in the center of Spades's chipped carapace, angry and almost permanent-looking.

It looks, Karkat thinks dizzily, like the line of blood in the center of Hemogoblin's costume. He hesitates, and then looks down at the closed up scab in his own hand. He can't tell if it's the same; he feels light-headed, like all the blood has drained out of his pan and left him scrounging to replace it. He slumps forward against the back of the chair, grateful for the support as he stares in wary trepidation at Spades.

Because if what Karkat thinks just happened, just happened?

Spades just stole some of Karkat's blood powers.

SS: Now I gotta blood bond with your actual body for this round.

SS: Good thing, too. Walking around with a pact to a half-dead man was giving me the heebie jeebies, with none of the power perks.

"What the fuck did you do?!" Karkat demands, horrified.

SS: Not me. S'all you, kid.

SS: Blood players. There's a reason I only ever try to get in cahoots with 'em and none of the others.

SS: Yah make a promise, and yah keep it.

The carapacian stoops to pick up the knife on the floor, wiping the blood off on the front of his pants before tucking it away in his nonsensical knitted sweater.

SS: I can't do squat compared to a player like you, but this'll at least give me something Di won't see coming, same as I had the last time I 'negotiated' with that pompous ass.

He taps the side of his temple, glowering at Karkat.
SS: Now piss off and get yourself back in fighting shape, yah useless sack of crap. Stop blubbering over a little blood oath; they're your specialty, Knight.

SS: I'm outta here.

Then, without another word, Spades Slick makes a break for it; the carapacian jumps onto John's bed and scrambles out the window inelegantly, and his snarls are audible as he falls all the way to the ground below.

Karkat stares at the open window.

What.

The fuck.

Just happened.

His head is still resonating with the pulse of whatever dark blood magic Spades made him an unwilling participant in, but at least it doesn't hurt. Karkat opens and closes his fist again, and the scab fades and peels away as he finishes healing it in a confused haze. He almost thinks he can hear faint jazz music, distant and muffled like ragtime being played on an ill-tuned piano in another room of the house. The only problem? The Egberts don't own a piano.

Karkat swallows hard, and reaches a hand behind him to flail around on the computer desk. Eventually, he finds his phone where he left safe from the sopor slime, and thumbs open Pesterchum with numb, trembling claws.

CG: JOHN.
CG: WE HAVE A FUCKING SITUATION HERE.

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They end up waiting for Kanaya's contact to arrive in Algonac State Park.

Kanaya drives them back along the I-94 East at a breakneck pace with no rest stops, reducing a four hour trip to a mere two and a half. In the front seat Terezi rolls down the window, nostrils flaring, and begins to cackle and chatter a million miles an hour about the blurred colors of the other cars driving alongside them, to the point where Rose has to knock Vriska unconscious again to keep the other troll from stirring at the sound. The ex-neophyte doesn't seem concerned about Kanaya's gratuitous disregard for the laws of the road, but Rose supposes that the most brutal system of federal law enforcement must be more concerned with major felonies than one troll going thirty over the speed limit.

They're trying to avoid notice. Terezi and Vriska have been so thoroughly outed that Rose has little doubt the Bureau of Legislaceration will be reaching out to branches in other cities to try to head off the two heroes' abscond attempt. Worse yet, when Kanaya tunes the radio to a news station, the hosts are discussing a recent petition put out by the mayor of Chicago to demand disaster relief assistance from the Federal Villain Response Team.

Since the FVRT is a joint branch of FEMA and the FBI's counterterrorism division, this would be a most unfortunate turn of events. If such a motion passed, the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice would be viewed not just as vigilantes gone wrong, but as villains, to be treated as potential terrorist threats.

Terezi goes silent after that broadcast. Rose turns her phone over in her hand, and Kanaya switches
to a classical music station.

The cue ball in her skirt pocket weighs heavy at her side, a constant source of fascination. Rose has only begun to scratch the surface of the object's strange mystical properties. But she scolds herself gently whenever her fingers dip in the fold of her pocket to draw it out. She needs to keep her mind on the more urgent matters at hand. The time to indulge in proper experimentation will come when Vriska and Terezi are out of the country, when John is no longer worried about Karkat and Jade, and when Rose's forum contacts can give her some solid information on what in the Horrors' names just happened in Los Angeles.

The radio stations in Michigan haven't picked up on the news yet, but Rose wouldn't have expected them to. Over the past few hours, the aura of the grimlight Horrorterror has been burned away, but in its place a new, electric force has begun to circulate through the currents of magic in the atmosphere. She has yet to attempt any kind of light spell in the face of this abrupt power shift, but she can't believe that the mind that splintered off the Los Angeles hivemind could be the source of all this. It doesn't taste grim at all...the opposite, in fact? Rather than making Rose feel nauseous, she feels almost hopeful. It would be all too easy to be caught up in the whirl of free, wild magic in the air, to scream at the dark between the stars and light up the night, just because she could and no one would be able to stop her.

If this is the aura of the person that broke away from the Horrorterror, she can't understand how such a powerful mind could have been assimilated in the first place. When she had told Kanaya the news, the jadeblood had been disappointed to learn that her opportunity to take vengeance on a grimlight creature for her experience in the Novaya Ukraine might have vanished, but had also agreed that a trip to Los Angeles was still in the cards, if only so that Rose can assess the exact nature of the new magical practitioner altering power dynamics across most of the Western Hemisphere.

In certain circles, however, it is clear that majjykal chaos has been unleashed.

-- ~ Welcome to the Divine Café ~ --
-- ~ 6 practitioners online ~ --

-- ~ ADVISORY WARNING: STRONG ESOTERIC INTERFERENCE DETECTED IN THE GREATER SOUTHWEST OF THE USA; MINIMIZE ANY AND ALL FORMS OF MAJJYKAL PRACTICE UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE!!! ~ --

Divine Café > Auras, Scrying, Divination > Major event in LA?? (UPDATE: INTENSE AMBIENT AURA SHIFT ACROSS THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE, PLEASE RESPOND!)

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [ TT ] has joined the memo! --
-- alternativeNewtonia [ AN ] has joined the memo! --
-- ведьмаГаля [ ВГ ] has joined the memo! --
-- ladyStardancer [ LS ] has joined the memo! --
-- necroMancer [ NM ] has joined the memo! --
-- huntersAnonymous [ HA ] has joined the memo! --
NM: Oh, fantastic. The hunter is here.
HA: shaddup.
NM: Don't you have a perfectly innocent corpse to salt and burn, a_______s?
HA: okay buddy, we burned one of yours once.
HA: ONCE.
NM: And ruined an g_______ experiment eight months in the making!
LS: are we really arguing about† †his again? *._* we're in †he middle of a crisis, guys!
AN: α- It really is becoming quite petty -Ω
NM: Hey, do you see these guys running around offing your g______ pacifistic wiccan covens, do you? It's necroism, is what it is!
HA: we thought it was ganking people at the factory! there was a ring of unholy ground around the
damn thing's grave, what were we supposed to think?!
NM: Of course the ground was f______ unholy, you imbeciles! How else am I supposed to raise the
f______ dead if I don't cancel out the f______ blessings?!

Rather than taking the interstate straight through to the border crossing at Detroit, they angle to the
north, skirting Anchor Bay and curling around to reach Algonac. Rose drapes a jacket over Vriska's
horns and face when they pass through a small town and have to stop at multiple crowded
intersections.

The ceruleanblood snorts in her sleep, kicks one leg on top of Rose's lap, and falls quiet again,
sprawled out and taking up as much space as possible. But at least she's unconscious and not
attempting to provoke Terezi or redirect the car back to Chicago for some fresh, self-destructive act
of insanity.

Some might call this kidnapping. Rose calls it transporting a particularly dangerous specimen of
trollkind over the border, where she can be Canada's problem.

Algonac State Park contains approximately half a mile's worth of unobstructed access to the St Clair
River. There are several mobile homes set behind a section of brittle fence nearby, each home
flanked by a pickup truck, but Kanaya pulls off the lakeside road onto an unused picnicking ground,
and the poor car comes to a stop next to a rusty outdoor barbeque grill in the middle of a field. Old,
browned leaves, still moldering from having been buried under snow, slip in the mud under Rose's
feet as she steps out, eagerly breathing in the fresh air. But the shrubs and trees that dot the
campground have begun to show signs of green sprouts and budding spring flowers, and even this
far north the night air is no longer chilly, precisely - merely mild.

"No sign of my mother," she murmurs to Kanaya when the troll comes to check on Vriska, leaning
in through the open door to adjust the restraints on the ceruleanblood's wrists.

"I must confess, that is a significant relief," Kanaya says, shaking her head.

Rue had tracked them down to the apartment where they were hiding out, and evading her in order
to escape to the car had been...troublesome. But the tell-tale alcohol-scented edge of her aura of
nothingness has mostly dissipated from Rose's limited foresight. She thinks that Rue has given up on
trying to intercept her on the way to Canada, and has moved on to some other focus.

Good. Perhaps having something else to occupy her time will keep Rue Lalonde from interfering
with Rose's business anymore. The doctor certainly never had trouble losing herself in her work
before Rose lost herself to the grimdark; most likely this recent bout of mocking interest in Rose's life
is only a temporary blip in Rue's life of martinis and science.

ВГ: Альтернативой Ньютон, вы добились никакого прогресса в построении графиков энергии
излучения? Мое устройство во Владивостоке обнаруживает резкий сдвиг в окружающей ауры.
Я боюсь, мои данные могут быть недействительные.
AN: α - Nyet, nyet. We've seen the same ambient shift here as far away as Wisconsin. All chaos-type
readings cut out abruptly several hours ago, and only non-significant trace influences remain. Still
working on an analysis of the new dome, est. 4+ hours to recalibrate my instruments -Ω
ВГ: Понимаю. Это соответствует шаблону из моих текущих данных. Мы не видим хаос-типа
аномалию, как и в новой Украине. Может быть, магия света? задумчивая Волшебница? Ваши
dомыслы?
TT: Galya, I can assure you that it is not a light magic of any kind that I have come across in all my
years of practicing the art. While the more negative side effects of the grimlight influx into the atmosphere have dissipated, the new ambient energy feels almost...carbonated. Overly excited.
TT: There is no clarity here, no elegance or illumination or structure. Just raw power.
AN: α- No kidding. Whatever we're dealing with here, it turned my electromagnetic field meter into a pile of slag. -Ω
HA: same here. we haven't been able to get a clear reading for days, but when i cracked open the old mp3 EMF this morning it had melted all over the place. we're in a total white-out when it comes to spiritual readings, which is just fucking peachie.
NM: Why the h___ do you think I'm here? I'm in North Dakota and I haven't been able to raise s___ for almost half a day now!  It feels like there's a sparkly-a__ wall between me and my children!
HA: the whole the dead are my children thing? still creepy as hell, man.
NM: They are my BABIES, you inconsiderate f___s!
"So. Canada." Terezi kicks open the passenger's side door with aplomb, her stick-thin limbs stretching as she twists from side to side and works out the kinks from sitting still for so long. She takes a deep whiff of the air, and releases it with a dissatisfied huff. "...I'm not very impressed! Where is the land of eternal snow and the stench of maple syrup that you promised me, Sylph?"
"We are not yet in Canada proper. Sollux should arrive within the next twenty minutes," Kanaya announces, looking up from her own phone after several minutes of painstakingly slow tapping away on the keyboard. "He is a high level psionic. He should be able to escort you and Vriska across the border with little incident."
"Yeah? Well, thanks, I guess," Terezi says, crawling up on the hood of the car with a grunt and swinging her legs. Her expression flattens out again, and she takes off her replacement pair of tinted glasses to rub at her eyes. "Canada," she mumbles, grimacing. "They don't even have a Legislaceration Bureau! Guess I shouldn't have tossed away my life's calling for a quick hatefuck. God! How could I have been so stupid!"

Rose and Kanaya exchange worried glances, Kanaya in askance and Rose in silent agreement. The longer Terezi spends without Vriska's input, the more she seems able to think rationally about her actions over the past few days, and the more her shoulders slump. It is clear to Rose's other Sight that the tealblood's aura is darkening rapidly, the pall of intense remorse and depression dampening her soul.

It would be easy at this point for Terezi to sink into a much more permanent form of self-hatred.

ВГ: Это беспокоит меня. кто-нибудь пытался подойти купол?
LS: Oh! Sorry, i† †ook a while for my †ranslator doohickey †o work! Yes, I did, Galya! Me and my coven are in Sacramen†o, you know, so we've been ge††ing †he wors† of i†! *o*
TT: You have managed to approach the dome in the past few hours?
LS: Well, nooo…But we did a ri†ual las† nigh† before †he shif†, and some really weeeird s†uff happened! I† ruined all our purifica†ion ri†es!
ВГ: Товарищ звезда-танцовщица, о чем вы думали?! Вы могли быть убиты!
TT: I agree with Galya - what in the name of the Furthest Ring were you thinking?! If I was experiencing negative interference and backlash from as far away as Illinois, I don't even wish to contemplate the amount of majjykal corruption that would occur in the same state!
LS: †ell me abou† i†! When my sis†er wen† to sanctify †he sou†h cardinal in our char†er circle, †his weird white ooze s†arted bubbling up everywhere! We lef† when i† s†arted mel†ing †he grass...
TT: Los Angeles lies south of your location. I'm not surprised. Did any of the substance touch you? Have you or your sisters been experiencing any auditory or visual hallucinations?
HA: never mind all that, jesus! just get out of there, lady! did you at least torch that sucker before you
took off?  
LS: Of course not! *-* We didn't know what to do, so we just grabbed our stuff and ran!

And so they wait. A few freight ships pass by on the water, sending out dark ripples that remind Rose of a lightless, bloodbrine sea. Terezi keeps her face turned away from the road whenever a vehicle trundles by, but otherwise remains on alert, moody but distracting herself by breathing in deeply whenever the wind changes.

Rose perches on a mostly rotted fence post, on the section most likely to sustain her weight until Sollux arrives. Kanaya opens up the trunk of the car and removes a packet of dark green blood from the cooler before joining Rose at the fence. Ordinarily, Rose knows, Kanaya would add the blood to tea or some other beverage to dilute the flavor, but their thermoses of tea ran out shortly after lunch, and so Kanaya pops a juice straw into the packet and sucks, the olive green staining over the jade green of her painted lips.

More tellingly, Kanaya does not move to fix said staining after she finishes draining the packet in one long gulp. Instead, the jadeblood mutely wipes the stray flecks of blood off her hand, and lets the packet fall into the trash can. She closes her eyes and remains as still as a statue, stiff and formal, without even reaching out to touch Rose or to fix the smear of blood and lipstick on her mouth.

Rose bites her lip, and then folds her hand into Kanaya's, squeezing and trying to communicate all the comfort she can. "You never know. Perhaps once they're in a different environment, they will accept your offer," Rose murmurs encouragingly, pressing a kiss to Kanaya's cheek. The sealant on Kanaya's makeup must be wearing off, because Rose's lips come away sticky with grey face paint; there is a too-pale mark in the shape of lips on Kanaya's cheek when she pulls away. "A long-distance auspicism is not out of the question. Not all is lost."

"It is clear that the force of my irritation was not enough to coax them from their rivalry, even when I was present to enforce it in the flesh," Kanaya replies, quietly enough that Terezi won't be able to overhear. She closes her eyes in defeat. "Perhaps there is an auspice out there for them, serendipitously chosen to quell their hatred and save them from themselves. But it would be foolish for me to perpetuate my own foolish delusions of auspicism when I have already proven unequal to the task."

Rose has no personal experience with heartbreak, let alone the pain of rejection in any of the other quadrants. The closest she thinks she has ever come would be those first few months after her mother vanished, before Rose learned that Rue Lalonde had removed their house from all official records and postal systems. Rose had thought John simply stopped writing for no reason. He had thought the same of her, as her own letters piled up in the mailbox with no one to deliver them. Perhaps she had never loved him in the sense of quadrants, but the stabbing pain of an inexplicably broken friendship, one that had sustained them both from childhood, had clearly left its mark on both of them whether John wishes to discuss it or not.

But she can recognize that Kanaya invested much of herself in the thought of auspisticizing between the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice, a much more personal interest than her usual tendency to play two-wheel auspicism device for the entirety of Philadelphia. This failure, after Kanaya chose to come so far in the burning certainty that she could win Terezi and Vriska over into a stable clubs triad, is a crushing blow, and now Rose's lover is in pain that words can't soothe.

Rose draws Kanaya into her arms and rests her chin between the troll's thin horns. They stare out into the dark across the river in silence while Rose's phone buzzes in the pocket of her skirt.

HA: well shit, lady, it's probably still oozing all over the damn place. we can make it to cali in a day, maybe, but you need to send us coordinates for that damn circle so we can kill it dead.
ВГ: Я соглашаюсь с охотниками. Не приближайтесь ваш круг без охраны. Это крайняя риск психического вреда. Я рекомендую сильный щит света. Волшебница, вы можете помочь?
TT: It may not be as urgent as it would have been if the grimlight had persisted, Hunters. Now that the main body of the creature seems to have receded from the physical plane, the incursion Lady's coven inadvertently summoned may have died off on its own. The remains should still be cremated to prevent soil contamination.
TT: Alas, Galya, I am also at least a day's journey from the location, and have other pressing personal matters to attend to.
AN: α- I've been keeping up with the liveblogs out Anaheim way, they're outside the dead zone. From the clips I've observed that the organic dome began to crumble and flake away, before revealing the new structure underneath. Perhaps the initial dome served as a chrysalis type structure? -Ω
AN: α- In addition there are unconfirmed rumors that several thousand text and Pester messages were abruptly received at approximately the same moment the original dome died. Officials have no statement thus far but at least 10 trusted sources have disclosed that they might have originated from the dead zone -Ω
TT: But the communication blackout has since resumed?
AN: α- Affirmative -Ω
TT: Curiouser and curiouser.
TT: The shielding must have faltered during the transition betwe-
"That is him," Kanaya says, her voice cracking a little before she coughs and clears her throat. Blinking out of her internet daze, Rose looks up and scans the Canadian side of the river, all of her eyes open.
Sollux Captor arrives in a crackle of red and blue psionic lightning, but to Rose's other viewing methods, his aura blazes a greenish-gold. He's almost as bright a force as Kanaya, but Rose's eyes shy away from looking at him for too long. There is a caustic snap to his power, like a bitter drink or a sudden shock from a power outlet, and anyway, it would be crass of her to stare too blatantly at someone who is doing them such an enormous favor.
"I have arrived. Thuck it, America," the troll proclaims, snickering as he touches down on the road on their side of the river. The psionics fizzle out as he walks toward them, shoulders slouched and a derisive smirk on his lips.
He is...not what Rose was expecting. For some strange reason, she foolishly thought that someone Kanaya considers a close personal friend - or at least, a friendly pen pal - would be more...stylish. Put together. Poised. But Sollux looks as though he fell out of bed and pulled on the first shirt he could find, which just so happened to be a black Toronto Argonauts hoodie two sizes too large for him. His hair is close-cropped around a dualed set of horns, but there are choppy layers around his face as though he attempted to cut his hair himself and failed miserably. He wears mismatched shoes, one black and one white, and neither has been laced up properly. Rose supposes that having the ability to levitate somewhat lessens the risk of tripping, but still.
The red-and-blue 3D glasses just confirm it. Sollux Captor is a fashion nightmare.
When Kanaya strides forward, none of her heartbreak is visible on her face, smoothed away beneath a façade of faint good humor. "Sollux," she says, smiling fondly. "It has been too long."
"Good to thee you too, KN - no, thhit, do not - agh!"
Kanaya keeps walking and plows into Sollux, hugging him with all the unstoppable inertia of a troll in motion. Sollux doesn't see it coming until it's too late, taking two steps back as horror dawns on
his face before Kanaya is on him. Kanaya is only two inches taller than the troll, but she manages to
lift him off his feet regardless. "Did you remember to take your medication today?" she asks him,
utterly serene, as the troll sparks and kicks in protest.

"Omg, yeth, now put me the fuck down! You are violating my perthonal thpace, woman!"

Rose presses her hand to her mouth to conceal a growing smile, and steps forward until she's abreast
of Kanaya again, folding her arms over her chest once her smirk gambit has lessened to acceptable
first impression levels. Terezi kicks off the car, keeping her head down under the turquoise hood of
her jacket as she creeps closer. Kanaya arches an eyebrow at them both, but continues to manhandle
Sollux, releasing him from her stranglehold in order to hold him at arm's length and inspect him with
a heavy sigh. "One day I will hold an intervention, Sollux. It will be for your own good. This is a
fact, which I am stating for the record."

Sollux scowls at her, pushing his mismatched glasses up the bridge of his nose with a jerk. "Thcrew
you," he says. "That will never in two million yeartth happen. Bethides, after this and the white-text
thing, you owe me, not the other way around."

Kanaya sighs.

"Were you ever able to trace those messages to their point of origin?" Rose asks. Sollux flinches
bodily as his eyes flick to her, as though he didn't notice her approach. "Rose," she adds by way of
explanation when he just stares at her. She offers a hand. "No last name, at the moment."

Sollux's hand gravitates toward hers like a magnet, and he eyeballs the wayward appendage like it
has betrayed him utterly by doing so. "Sollux Captor," he mutters, making a clear effort to pronounce
his first name without the lisp that seems to plague him. His claws barely graze her palm as they
shake hands, and then he whips his hand back to his side and shoves it into a pocket. "Tho, you're
the one who managed to piss off one of the most thtupid good hackerth on the planet?"

"He didn't really seemed pissed off, per se," Rose corrects, her smile fading further. "He simply
knew far more than he should have been able to know, and was not afraid to flaunt that knowledge
in order to provoke a response from me."

"He's thomewhere in the Thtates," Sollux says, grimacing. "But that'th as far as I've been able to
crack hith IP addrethth. He had that thhit proxied to Russia and back, but he'th in America. I can feel
it in my hacker gut."

Rose hadn't really considered the fact that through the power of magic and modern technology, the
person taunting her and Kanaya back in Philadelphia might well have lived halfway across the
planet. She's been working off the assumption that the white-text marauder had been physically
nearby at the time.

She decides not to mention this fact. Sollux's personality seems...abrasive, to put it delicately. She'd
prefer to stay aloof and not provoke his ire.

"We still owe you much for tracking him as far as you have," Kanaya says gravely, bowing her
head. "Your efforts are appreciated."

"Yeah, well, I am pretty fucking incredible. And like I thaid, dealing with your amazing Internet
fuck-upth giveth my life new meaning, tho what the hell." Sollux shrugs, and he looks at Terezi for
the first time. "What happened? I thought you wanted me to thhip two raging aththhats to the great
white north, not the one."
"Vriska had to be kept incapacitated in the car, lest she attempt to draw Terezi back into a state of berserk, unreasonable rage," Kanaya says, nodding back toward the open door of their car. "She has been unconscious for some time. I would recommend keeping her restrained when she wakes up; she will not be in the finest of moods."

"Eh, like I give a fuck about thome blueblood throwing tantrumth over having her little bitchfit shutdown hardcore. Besideth," Sollux adds, jerking his chin at Terezi. "She'th got red eyeth and the other one has blue. It'th perfect. I have to take both. It'th meant to be."

"Your blood says mustard," Terezi interrupts, her head tilted to the side, "but your eyes say appleberry blast."

After a beat, she grins. "I like it!"

There is a long pause.

"I like her," Sollux says, baring doubled rows of prickly teeth in a shark's grin. "Thhe understandth."

Terezi cackles. "High ten!" she demands, throwing both hands up in the air.

"Hell yeth, you crazy lawyer." Sollux meets her halfway. One of Terezi's hands goes wild, and only slaps half of his hand, but it seems to be the thought that counts.

If nothing else, Rose thinks, it keeps that near-suicidal despair from clouding Terezi's face, which is more than she or Kanaya have been able to accomplish over the course of the day.

"Now bring me the problem child tho I can get out of here," Sollux says. "If I'm gone too long who knowth what the fuck AA will get up to."

"AA?" Kanaya's eyebrow flies up. "My, my, Sollux, someone else has earned the nicknaming scheme? Do tell."

Sollux sniffs loudly, wiping at his nose with the back of his sleeve, and grimaces. "Her name'th Aradia. Trutht me, it took everything in my power to keep her from following me here. I figured thith whole prothess would go a lot more smoothly without the inthane apocalypthe maiden flying around like a manic death pixie and babbling about the end of the world."

"But you like her," Kanaya prompts, her eyes glinting with avid interest. "How intriguing."

"Shut up."

"The end of the world?" Rose says. She isn't entirely certain she is going to say that aloud, until the words have already flown from her mouth and drawn the stares of all three trolls, Terezi's unblinking, Sollux's blank behind his glasses, and Kanaya's mildly confused. "I'm sorry. It's just - this is the second time in as many days that I've heard something of the kind." She hesitates, and then continues, "Tell me, has she mentioned meteors?"

Sollux smacks his face with both hands. "Oh FUCK, not another one," he mutters. " Fucking incredible."

Rose swallows past a sudden wash of bile in the back of her throat. Twice, she reminds herself, is a coincidence.

"I am not particularly attached to the theory myself," she says, smiling. "But I profess a certain amount of curiosity, given the frequency with which I seem to be stumbling across doomsayers. Has
Miss Aradia given you a general timetable?"

Because that's the thing about coincidence. She has found that it does not happen to her. Fortuitous meetings, lucky breaks, auspicious chance - Rose sees them more than most, can see how they all tie together in her mind's eye to give her some idea of the most fortuitous future she can bring about. While under the influence of the Horrorterrors, that ability declined, but now -

Now, Rose does not like what she is beginning to see.

"I've got the fucking countdown going in my head all hourth of the day. FUCK yeth, she gave me a timetable," Sollux snaps, scowling. His arm shoots out and he grabs Rose around arm, dragging her in close. Kanaya makes an aborted movement in the corner of Rose's eye, but Rose shakes her head, holding up a hand to ward her off.

This close up, Sollux reeks of burnt silicomb and grubsauce and coffee, his lips are cracked and oozing sickly gold blood, and Rose can almost hear the clatter of pills in a bottle as her internal psychologist recalls Kanaya mentioning a bipolar disorder. His lisping slips of the tongue splatter her with trace amounts of spit as he hisses in her ear, too low and pissed off for Kanaya or Terezi to hear. "Becauthe ath it turnth out, thith whole mess is a mathematical fact. Plug it into any ~ATH calculator and it'll tell you the planet'ath got until 4:13 on the thirteenth of April before we all get blown thky-high by meteorth."

"The only reathon people aren't freaking the fuck out ith that no one'ath ever been thtupid enough to try to base an ~ATH program on Earth; you just don't."

Rose maintains her composure. "And you believe your Aradia?" she asks, her jaw clenched with the effort of not pulling away. "You believe this calculator?"

Sollux snarls, and for a brief moment, Rose almost thinks his aura is shot through with a dull, sickly green. "I believe numberth. I believe the code that I put together with my own two clawth. And I believe that I'd rather not get fucked in the athth for not believith when all the math tellth me that this is what fate has in thtore for this mitherable planet."

And with that, Sollux lets go, pushing Rose away with perhaps a little more force than is needed, as though he can't bear to be in physical contact with someone else for one second longer. "We're all doomed," he says, laughing a little hysterically. "It just dependth on how."

"You cut my matesprit," Kanaya cuts, startling Rose out of that intense space, where there was only her and Sollux and all the myriad paths that led to one immutable dead end. Kanaya's voice is clipped, and she steps at a diagonal, her shoulder between Rose and Sollux as she bends to inspect the cut. Rose knows the blood itself won't be a problem, not when Kanaya sated her rainbow thirst not twenty minutes ago, but the clipped edge of her words does not quite conceal the warning growl in her voice, the grating, guttural snarl of a troll about to go on the offensive over a quadrant mate. "Sollux -"

"Kanaya, it's nothing," Rose says, feeling remarkably distant from it all. She touches the scrape along the side of her arm, feeling as though she's observing it on the arm of someone in a photograph or a film rather than experiencing it in reality. This level of dissociation is a little abnormal, but she thinks it'll pass once she's finished processing this new revelation. "He did not intend it, I'm sure.

"No - thhit - WOW, way to go me," Sollux says, looking stricken. The intensity of his gaze fragments, and Rose thinks they're both coming down from the same strung out, tense high of knowing. "Fucking awesome. Fuck. Thorry, KN. I mean - thorry, RS."
"Not a problem," Rose says, waving a hand absently. "A small scratch like this will only take a moment to heal, when I have the time."

"Perhaps it would be best if you escorted Terezi and Vriska across the border, and were on your way," Kanaya says, her voice still short. When Rose gives her an appraising glance and raises an eyebrow, Kanaya relents a little. "I am...not angry. But the longer we delay, the more likely it is that -"

"Euuuuuuuuurgh…"

The loud, drawled moan fills the entire campground.

"The fuck?" Sollux says.

Terezi whips around, but Kanaya has an arm around the troll's waist before the tealblood can do more than widen her eyes and take a step back toward the car. Rose turns on her heel and can only stare.

"What?" Vriska groans, sitting up in the backseat of the car. Grunting, she hunches over with her masses of tangled black-blue hair tumbling over her shoulders. She rubs at her many-pupiled eye, and then squints at all of them, scratching a horn. She doesn't look manic or enraged or much of anything but flummoxed. "...Where the heck am I?"

"Damn," Kanaya says, locking a palm over Terezi's nose.

The tealblood yelps and kicks her feet out, writhing in Kanaya's restraining grip. "Hey! Let me go, you minty green apple! I'm fine, I'm not going to -" Terezi freezes up, suddenly, and takes such a deep whiff of air that Rose can hear the sniff from several feet away. "Why do your claws smell like bl -"

"Terezi!" Vriska says, sitting bolt upright. Without her glasses or a mask, the sun symbol etched around her eye crumples as her face twists into an ugly snarl. She digs her claws into the side of the car on either side of her and uses it to lever herself upright. "Let her go!"

And then, just as abruptly, Vriska slams back against the car. Her legs and arms go one way, while her head and torso go the other, and with a resounding metal thud, Vriska's skull bangs against the roof of the car. When she catches herself on the door handle, mumbling and blinking her eyes slowly in a daze, she merely looks confused. "Mnagh?"

There are bolts of discharged blue and red psionics still sparkling around her head.

Rose hesitates, and then turns to stare at Sollux in quiet judgment.

"Oopth," Sollux says, his tone completely bland. "Oh fuck. Whatever have I done."

"Hopefully, dazed her enough to at least get you over the border." When it becomes clear that keeping Terezi from interacting with Vriska in any way is a full time job for Kanaya, who winces and grimaces as she withstands the sharp, pointy elbows of a determined tealblood digging into her belly and ribs, Rose strides over to the trunk of the car, ignoring Vriska's bleary mutters, and removes the duffel bag full of the clothing Kanaya had brought along for the express purpose of clothing Vriska and Terezi. Rose tosses the bag at Sollux, and her guess is confirmed when psionics reach out to lace around the duffel, too. "I wish you all the luck in the world. You'll need it, to deal with these two."

"Only until I can foitht them off on thomeone in fucking Nunavut," he grumbles, drawing Vriska
toward him with a nod of his head. "Or hell, maybe AA has thome ideath. Hand her over, KN."

Kanaya nods, and lets go of Terezi. The tealblood splutters as she springs away from Kanaya, and then yelps as psionics pluck her off the ground as well. She and Vriska both wear identical masks of bafflement, and they glance at each other without even a hint of rage in their eyes.

Between them, holding out his hands to either side, Sollux smirks. "I'm out of here. America ith overrated, anyway." With that pithy remark, Sollux rises up into the air, the crackle of his psionics rising to a dull roar. One troll on each arm, he levitates them all over the road and the river, red and blue playing across the dark mirror of the water like fireworks.

And just like that, the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice have successfully escaped the jurisdiction of the United States.

"Well then," Rose says at last, when the three trolls vanish into the dark of the night and into the unknown, moose-infested wilderness that is suburban Canada. "That was…"

"An event," Kanaya finishes, sounding just as nonplussed. "That was an event which happened to take place in our lives."

"Indeed." Rose smiles crookedly, hooking her arm through Kanaya's. "I suppose we can only hope they do not end up tearing apart Toronto, next."

"I trust that Sollux would call for backup...well, perhaps not before the situation spiraled out of control in such a way, but at least a few minutes afterward, yes," Kanaya concedes.

Rose shakes her head ruefully, and lets it drop to the side, resting her head on Kanaya's shoulder as they stare meditatively out over the water.

After a moment, Rose cracks her neck and loops her arms around Kanaya's neck instead. "Now. Let's distract you from that temporarily broken ashen quadrant, shall we?"

"Please. And then Washington?" Kanaya says. It is not really a question.

Rose nods. "And then Washington."

- Divine Café > Auras, Scrying, Divination > A general inquiry as to the measurable length of the Earth's viable lifespan (URGENT)

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has opened the memo! --

TT: This missive goes out to any and all diviners, seers, augurs, oracles, prophets, and clairvoyants in the business of foresight and, in particular, the business of long-range predictions, dealing at least with month-long prognostication.

TT: Tell me.

TT: What do you know about 4/13 of this year?

- Kanaya does not sleep. This is, apparently, one of the perks of being a rainbow drinker. Rose has seen the recooperacoon that Kanaya keeps for show in her apartment, but she has never seen the 'coon's lid open, not once, and suspects that Kanaya stopped filling the tank with sopor slime ages ago. If she had any of the usual troll dependence on the substance before shipping out to die and be reborn in the Novaya Ukraine, she evidently staves off withdrawal through a regular diet of sopor-
tinged blood. Instead, Kanaya lies beside Rose or putters around the apartment in the hours in which they’re not on patrol, a silent and graceful predator who stitches evening gowns at the end of the bed.

This lack of need for sleep helps their progress that night immensely, as they find themselves retracing the same road that took them to Chicago in the first place. The backtrack to the Detroit area had been necessary, but still time consuming, and as Rose watches the same landmarks flash by through the window, she can't help the flicker of tired impatience that stirs her weary mind.

Kanaya has already asked if Rose would prefer to spend the night in a motel at least once along the two thousand mile trip to Seattle. But with every day that passes, Rose feels the ache of John's absence like a hollow in her stomach, cavernous and empty. If she allows herself to think too much about Dave or Jade, the ache seems to deepen, a crawling loneliness that twists her heart and dries out her throat, making each liquor advertisement they pass along the highway more and more tempting. At times, only the knowledge that she is heading to see John and Jade, and that Kanaya would never allow it, prevents her from opening her mouth to plead just one drink, just one sip, just enough to take the edge off this desperate thirst -

The distractions posed by the Scourge Sisters and the possible end of the world are just that: distractions.

However, she does have one other item of business that might take her mind off the need to be near John, and keep her from pestering him ceaselessly when he has an injured moirail and (in recent news) a vanished sister to deal with over the course of the night.

She has changed into a more comfortable sweater in preparation for a fitful night of sleeping in a car with the back of the seat cranked as near to horizontal as it can go, but her skirt is the same, and she dips a hand into her pocket to draw forth the cue ball.

Its aura of potential has only grown to her senses. Rose turns the cue ball over in the palms of her hands, inspecting it from every angle with every form of sight at her disposal. Beneath the smooth bone-white exterior, she can catch a glimpse of the power glimmering within.

It would be unorthodox, perhaps. But she thinks she can use this cue ball as a scrying tool. She tried with more traditional crystal balls in her troubled youth, of course, but had never been truly inspired by the art. She'd honed her talents for more active spells for teleportation and offense, and allowed her natural Sight to guide her on her way without aid.

Now, most of her offensive spells are off limits, vulnerable to the influence of the Horrorterrors' connection to her mind. The hero work in Philadelphia had made that very clear. But fighting Blind Justice had been an exercise in futility primarily because the troll's blindness rendered her immune to the bulk of Seer's remaining techniques. All she has are the chants and charms that can't harm others: the rusting spells that only affect metal, the shields that focus on protection rather than retaliation, and the spells that skew perception and mislead the eyes of those around her.

If so, then expanding on her current repertoire can only be a good thing. And is she not, after all, a Seer of Light? Perhaps she should have been honing her visions all along. Perhaps then the Horrorterrors would not have considered her such a delectable addition to their meal plan.

"What do you have there, Rose?" Kanaya asks quietly. They can sit in companionable silence like this for long stretches, content in each other's company for hours, and so Rose inspects the cue ball for a few minutes more before answering.

"An artifact from your home that I found in one of the bags," she replies at last, testing the material of the cue ball with a tap of her purple-edged nails. "I believe it can be used as a type of scrykind. In the
absence of a needlekind, I'm in the market for a replacement specibus. Do you mind if I test it?"

"Oh, not at all," Kanaya says, glancing at the cue ball with an expression of vague recognition. "Ah. That old thing. I can never recall quite how it came into my possession…"

"It has much untapped potential. I'm going to attempt to channel my usual extra sight through it, and see if that produces any measurable effects." Rose cups the cue ball in the palms of her hands, folding her legs up onto the seat in a cramped meditative posture and letting her hands rest in her lap. She flashes a smile at Kanaya. "I may be unresponsive for an hour or so, but you should be able to rouse me in the event of an emergency."

"We should be in Minneapolis in five hours," Kanaya says, her fingers drumming in deliberate strokes as she does a mental tally in her head. "From there, another five hours to Bismarck, nine to Missoula, and then a final six hour push to Seattle. At least, if I can maintain our current rate of travel."

Considering they're currently flying even higher over the speed limit than they had been with Terezi and Vriska in the car, and they're avoiding the notice of the police only through Kanaya's impossible reflexes and a streak of unbelievable luck, Rose has no doubt that what should be a 30 hour trip might well be reduced to twenty six hours - if she and Kanaya can both sit in this car for that long without going completely stir crazy. Both of them are calm and collected individuals, but they also share this little habit of going out at night to rove around the city beating up criminal scum, and Rose suspects that a pit stop in Montana might be necessary just to keep them from going stark raving insane. Sitting still for a full 24 hour cycle would be simply mind-numbing.

Well. Rose has something to stave off the madness of extended road trips right here in her lap. "Mmmm. Pardon me if I fall asleep immediately after this. Wake me up for breakfast?" She lets her eyelids fall shut as Kanaya murmurs reassurance, and she runs a last check of all the wards and shields and stitches in her mind. The sun ward is in place, the basis on which her sanity holds back the tide of the grimdark sea, and above it towers the crystal struts and spindly loops and whorls of her new mental structure. It has no definite shape yet that Rose can discern, no base attached to the ground that could be worn away by the ebb and flow of an acidic tide, and all she can do is trust in the instincts that are guiding her work as she knits her mind into being. The storage unit in which she keeps the silt and sand that are all that remains of her old memories has been reduced in size as she works the memories themselves into the new structures.

The black, tarry coil that craves alcohol remains twisted into knots at the bottom of the Tupperware container. One day, she will need to deal with that. But she would rather tangle with it when the most obvious and looming trigger point, the absence of John, Dave, and Jade in her life, has been eliminated.

Finally, she twists the void bracers on her wrist, one last comfort to tide her through this experiment, and allows her mind to reach out and delve into that core of potential within the cue ball.

- 

(Ah. There you are. At last. Well, let's give you a little something to tide you over with, shall we?)

- 

_Tell me about the future._ Rose says, pouring a ray of light into the cue ball. _Clear my sight. Show me my fortunes, and how I might attain them._

She'll save pressing questions about the apocalypse until she has a better grasp on how this scrykind
actually works.

The light catches on something within the dormant swirl of power in the center of the cue ball, and refracts, spinning out in her mind's eye in a new configuration. Curious, Rose shines more of her focus on the mysterious something, and can barely - just barely - make out a tiny shard of metal in the center of the orb. Magically speaking, it is serving as a refracting crystal whether the physical object is transparent or not. Whatever force imbues the cue ball, the piece of metal is the source of it.

Rose pulls back and considers the multiple rays of refracted light available to her. She could never have maintained the focus necessary to form several potential prognostications at once, let alone sustain them for this long without delving into what the present and future might hold. The scrykind holds true, however, channeling her power without the conscious need for her to support every single detail going into the visions.

So, curious, Rose narrows her mental focus onto a bright red stream of light, sinking into the vision her powers have discerned and deemed most likely to occur.

What she sees is the inside of someone's pocket.

Or at least, she thinks irritably, some article of clothing. From this perspective, all she can make out are the blotches of alternating shadow and light that shift whenever the person moves. The cloth is too thick to see through - perhaps if she were there in person and able to direct the full force of her gaze through it, but not in the dreamy half-light of a long-distance vision.

And this is a long-distance vision. She's not viewing a future event, but something remarkably current. She can tell the difference - there's none of the inherent mutability of a prediction, the underlying knowledge that just by seeing the future one can change it. This is happening, here and now, and cannot be altered.

It's only once she ascertains that she can't enhance her sight through the cue ball that she settles back and hears the sounds. It is easy for her to place less weight on the other senses, what with how much of her power depends on eyes both inner and outward, but this vision isn't quiet.

"Agh!"

"How did you even find - shit!"

"Where are they coming from?!"

Metal crashes against metal, and Rose listens to the sounds of someone - perhaps the owner of the pocket she's stuck in - dips and turns, wielding some sort of metal strife specibus to fend off what sounds like multiple attacks. The play of shadow and light that is all she can actually see implies that there is a lot of movement going on, and she's missing it.

How insipid. She receives a vision of some kind of sword strife, and all she can see is this shitty pocket. Not a most promising turn of events.

"Look out! From behind -"
rolls to a stop.

Someone lets out a strangled cry, with hardly any sound at all. Free of the pocket, Rose can turn her gaze back the way she came and-

Dave reaches out a hand toward her, rubble flecking his hair and the sunglasses hanging half off his face to expose muted panic in his eyes. He peels himself off the floor where he’s fallen, and ducks his head as another wall implodes, crawling over an unconscious body. His lips move, but nothing comes out except strained breaths. He can’t speak, she realizes with a jolt. Considering John only shared this news with her a matter of hours ago, it’s the only explanation that makes sense. Ignoring the inexplicable burst of green fire crackling smokelessly at the far end of the hallway, Dave scrambles right up to Rose’s source of the vision and closes his hand around it so that she gets an up close and personal view of his palm lines. Then it’s back in the pocket, and there's nothing more to see.

Rose extricates herself from the red light and stares at it.

Well then. Scanning the refracted streams of light again, Rose picks out the bright green of a new but unmistakable font, a darker green the color of jadeblood, a bright yellow blaze she recognizes as the Puppeteer’s impenetrable aura and a more muted yellow-orange like a creamsicle, purple that might match her own eyes, and on and on through a spectrum of blues and violets and rusts she can’t identify off the top of her head until - there. The deep sky blue of John's eyes, just as the red would have matched Dave's.

If Dave is currently in the middle of some conflict, when he and John were out seeking Jade, it can only mean something went wrong. Rose has to see if John is well, has to see it with her own eyes -

She doesn't get the chance. Something wraps around her mental image of herself, twining about her ankle and yanking her to a halt before she can dip into the blue light she’s sure would lead to a vision of John.

She has enough time to look down at her ankle and see the crackle of green energy locked around her in a death grip before the tendril of power jerks her sideways and down -

And into a stream that is the opposite of light. Opaque and shimmering with acidic iridescence, the stagnant river of white ooze swallows her whole, so viscous and sluggish that the surface doesn't even ripple as she is pulled down to see -

"รางยุค ฉันเล新浪财经ขึ้นมา คุณจะต้องรับประทานของอร่อยหรือไม่? บOWL มีอะไรให้เลือกในด้าน reunited.

DS: There, there, Malā’ikah. There, there. Would you care for a sweet of some kind? A bowl of delicious Squiddlesnacks?

Rose drifts with her eyes shut. If she allows herself to focus outward for too long, she risks being caught up in the panic attack racking her body. She curls up into as small a ball as she can manage, clawing at her own knees and shins as she presses them tight against her chest, a fist stuffed into her mouth to stifle the screams that wish to tear out of her throat.

She has only truly seen this place once before. All through her childhood, her interactions and mediations with the grimdark took place primarily in her own mind, or in the transitory, threshold
channel that linked her mind to the Horrorterrors. But then the sea had come surging in, bringing the cold damp and the grimdark and the bloodbrine, and her mind had been washed away to join the rest of the flood. If John hadn't raised her up, she would have trickled away to the source of it all.

She is there now. She can't tell if she's seeing it remotely, still caught in the cue ball's damning perspective, or if she is here in the flesh, dragging down at last to face the reckoning she should have known would come. Though she last glimpsed it in a feverish daze of madness and grief, she knows this place.

Light has no place here. There can be no clarity. This is the space between the stars, the place where space and time warp and slur and distort into a many-angled, endless expanse of non-Euclidean geometries. This is the ultimate contradiction: an endless expanse of empty space and shattered eons, redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from any definition of sanity.

This is the Furthest Ring.

I do apologize for the potentially triggering encounter with the clown who we shall not name, but I did warn you that he would need to be dealt with.

They are in a scraped out nest of flesh and bone and gore, and gelatinous grimlight oozes over everything in slow rivers of goo. The Horrorterror that presides over the nest looks nothing like Rose's old patron of the Ring. Leviathan had been a traditionalist, as far as the old Fluthulu research had been concerned, favoring an endless array of mouths and tentacles and thorns as a host for their many entangled minds.

This one has attempted to sculpt itself into an angelic form, but Horrorterrors both grimdark and light share a tendency towards chaos and distortion, and the resulting monstrosity is suitably horrific. Rose can't help but see the broken, gnarled wings that arch back from its center, the way the hivemind has jammed crystal and thorns and cold iron into the stringy white flesh to form pseudo-feathers. Its body has been molded into one long, snake-like tendril, covered in hook-beaked mouths that are open in endless, silent screams. The whole abomination is crowned with an armillary sphere like the old Ptolemaic models of the solar system, wheels within wheels that whirl and turn at different speeds around a core of tightly wound tendrils, rimmed with hundreds upon hundreds of eyes, all of them sightless holes that cry black ink.

Rose can't look at it anymore. She closes her eyes, whimpering as she casts her mind about for some way, any way, to return to the cue ball, and from there to her body - just any way at all to not be here -

"You cannot see exactly who the source of the green-and-white text is. There is no one else she can..."
see in this endless expanse, but the voice itself is far too sane and smooth to be a Horrorterror. The green lightning that edges its words stings, but the soothing tenor sounds almost human, and Rose's mind latches onto it as a fixed point in the madness.

She has no idea how she's going to get out of here.

The grimlight Horrorterror draws itself up, snarling and spitting at the air, but never snapping in Rose's direction. She can only take this as evidence that she is not truly here, that whatever twisted vision has led her here keeps her somehow safe from the notice of minds beyond mortal comprehension.

She just has to find the way out. But there is no channel here, and no sign of the green light that dragged her down.

Could it have been the green-and-white text voice? It feels similar. But what goal could the speaker have, to drag Rose into an unwanted vision of someone communing with gods of the Furthest Ring and - somehow - concluding what sounds like a business deal gone wrong without being eaten alive.

At last, the grimlight hivemind finishes posturing, drawing its broken wing into its side and curling up into a ring at the center of its nest. At the same time, the nest itself begins to recede, pulling away from Rose's perspective at a rapid pace. The god's words fade as it pulls away, though they are no less mind-wrecking for the decrease in volume.

The green-white text gives nothing more than a faint sigh, with a distinct aura of condescending appeasement that Rose thinks only she notices. The Horrorterror simply continues on its way, squirming away through the ether, and gives no sign that it noticed the faint, polite disdain aimed at its back.

And - ah! Of course, Leviathan. I have anticipated your arrival for some time.

Would you care for something to drink?

Rose turns.

Rose screams.

Leviathan rises up from the dark, and bares its teeth.

All of them.

"NO!"

Rose reaches out a hand, and knows there is no one waiting to grasp it. John's not here, John's not anywhere, and she wouldn't want him here, in the heart of all that is horror and chaos and insanity.

So she reaches out for the only other point of light here - the thing that brought her here. She slams her perspective into the green-white text with panic born of mind-rending terror, and shakes it as hard as she can, with all the power at her disposal. "LET ME OUT!"

Well of course, my dear Rose. You needed only to ask. Am I not, after all, the most gracious and accommodating of hosts?
Rose snaps out of the trance still screaming.

The tiny part of her mind that can think outside of the screaming worries that she may have just startled Kanaya enough to break her concentration and wrap their car around the nearest telephone pole. But she cannot stop, screaming soundlessly when her air runs out and she starts gulping uselessly. The cue ball rolls out of her hands to land with a heavy thud on the floor, and rolls out of sight.

"Rose!" And that is Kanaya, shouting to be heard over Rose's shrieks. A pair of claws land on Rose's shoulders and press hard enough to bruise, and she shakes Rose hard enough to rattle her bones. "Rose, you're awake! You're safe! Rose, breathe!"

It is only then that Rose registers that they're not moving. They never were. The persistent rumble of the car engine that she accounted for when initiating her meditative state has cut off, and they sit in utter stillness. In that respect, at least, Rose can be relieved; they're not about to hurtle off the highway while Kanaya is distracted by trying to calm her down. That frees up the rational part of Rose to focus on other, more pressing concerns, such as the strenuous business of deep breathing. She shudders and wheezes, struggling to find one of her usual rhythms, and swallows back the next scream that threatens to erupt from her throat with immense effort.

The image of Leviathan twines beneath her eyelids whenever they close, and her eyes stream with either blood or tears; it's impossible for her to say. She can't tell if there's anything left of her internal shielding in the wake of this fresh breakdown, either, but she's honestly surprised that the voices haven't already begun to whisper in her mind and plague her thoughts with thorns, reasserting themselves in their old home.

No, it's too quiet. Rose breathes and doesn't scream and latches her gaze onto the sharp curve of Kanaya's nose, the press of her hands, the weight of a palm on her knee, and the simple fact of her presence, reassuringly warm and real.

It is still too quiet, and the tangles should be heavy in her brain, attracted by the siren call of her emotions running rampant. But as she looks past Kanaya, panting, Rose realizes that they're not in the car at all. Kanaya could never have knelt over her like this in the tiny space of the car, even if she'd known somehow to pull over and stop the car ahead of time. The cue ball has fallen off the side of a bed rather than off the edge of the passenger's seat as Rose had thought, and it has disappeared from her side, oblivious to the mischief it has caused.

It's quiet and what's more, Rose can't feel the flow of magic around her. The grimlight, the white holy magic from Los Angeles, the regular ebbs and flows of energy that fill the atmosphere - none of it.

"How long?" she pants. Because they're not in the car, so they've stopped somewhere. The long window that stretches horizontally across the wall has been covered with blackout blinds and curtains, so she can't judge what time it is. The walls are a telltale shade of lilac, stripped bare of ornamentation, and even the bed sheets feel familiar, soft and worn with age under her fingertips as she clutches them convulsively. "Kanaya, how long was I out?"

"Rose…"

"How long?!" Rose recognizes the absence of sensation in the atmosphere for what it is, and struggles to take in her surroundings. She doesn't want to look away from Kanaya. Her mental wards are in tatters, but the grimdark has not taken advantage of that. Not even the void bracers hanging
loose on her wrists can account for this strange oversight.

No, this is -

Rose sobs in either fury or terror. The hand on her knee squeezes, trying to soothe her, but she can't bring herself to look at it or brush it off.

"I did not know what else to do!" Kanaya bursts out, gripping Rose's face too tightly with both hands as she searches Rose's eyes, on the edge of panic. "You would not wake, and then a day had passed, and she promised protection and medical aid -"

Rose closes her eyes and shudders once more, then goes still, her hair limp in her face. Breathing hard, she feels the bubble of disquiet pop in her chest. She's not really seeing Kanaya anymore.

She truly cannot blame Kanaya for panicking. Can't blame the troll for worrying when Rose's track record with ominous mental events has such a blemished past. Scrying is a time consuming art at the best of times, and the influence of the Furthest Ring would have distorted time for Rose even further, so that a few brief moments of horror for her spanned the course of a day for a fretting, terrified Kanaya.

But she'd imagined Kanaya would set up a vigil in a motel, or perhaps push through to John's house in the hope he might know how to rouse Rose.

Not this. Never this.

This kind of void shielding can only have been designed by one person.

But Rose refuses to believe it - not until, with a stiff neck, she looks down at the slim hand touching her knee. The fingernails have been filed down (for once) to a reasonable length, manicured but with deep welts where the owner has been gnawing on the cuticles with a relentless fervor. She follows the arm up to a trim dress, unbuttoned at the collar and cut in diagonals, and an aura that is a gaping, woman-shaped void, a distinct lack with the faint perfume of alcohol that turns Rose's stomach.

"Hello, Rose," Rue Lalonde says. She sits on the edge of the bed, and smiles, her hand never leaving Rose's knee.

"This is Seattle," Rose chokes out, desperate, because it needs to be Seattle, has to be, she can't have gone the opposite direction from John and the Lalonde manse in New York is a smoldering crater just the way she always wanted it and -

"Yes, it is," Rue agrees simply. "Maple Valley, to be more precise." She visibly hesitates, her curls bobbing as she presses her lips together and leans forward to press a kiss to Rose's forehead. "Welcome back home, my dear."

---

Dave wanders the house a little while John is settling down his troll boyfriend.

There's a distinct lack of shitty swords and snuppet breeding grounds in the Egbert household, but he still takes in the layout of the house with a keen eye, his mind supplying horrific visions of ways that Bro could boobytrap a house with this many rooms. He spies on things pretty blatantly, absorbing the novelty of having a washing machine and dryer in the utility room that look like they're actually used for washing clothes rather than emergency puppet storage. He combs through the kitchen again and sobs when he finds an unopened jug of apple juice stored on the bottom shelf of the pantry, along with several other inferior juices like raspberry-pomegranate and tomato and grape.
They clearly do not deserve to sit on the same shelf as the blessed elixir, and Dave fixes this by placing the apple juice in a place of honor in the fridge.

Speaking of. He takes out his phone and checks on the status of his business dealings, texting out orders to any of his future selves running around in the current moment so he can handle it later. While he's in the state, he might as well make the apple orchards of Washington his little bitch. There are more than 170,000 acres worth of prime real estate in the foothills of the Cascades alone.

They shall be his before dawn.

That taken care of, Dave lets his mind wander as he rummages through the fridge and pulls out another Tupperware container full of food to occupy himself with. This one is full of lasagna and he starts gobbling it down in double time like it could be snatched out of his hands at any moment. Which would be a perfectly understandable reflex in the Strider apartment, where the daily battle to obtain the choicest slice of pizza can be won or lost in a single critical moment, but which had earned him a few awed sideways looks from John and twitchy glares from Karkat when he demolished the stir fry in the space of seconds. The Egbert house is a goddamn promised land. Dave's gonna go into the basement and find, like, a land of blessed milk and honey or some shit just tucked away where no one can find it but the chosen few. It would totally explain why John's got fucking muscles like corded steel under his goofy-ass hero shirts.

With that thought in mind, Dave tucks the container of lasagna into the crook of his arm and creeps out into the hallway that links the kitchen with the living room and down the hall toward the study. There's a second door just past that, and Dave flashsteps past the closed study door when he hears the faint murmur of Dad Egbert's voice coming from within.

He does not want to piss that guy off. In fact, the less attention he gets from the older Egbert, the better, as far as he's is concerned. There's just something...off about the guy. John says it's the ex-military thing. Dave thinks he's is just too nice. The stern, polite fatherly shtick? Maybe Dave's just not used to parenting methods that don't involve excessive irony and sharp objects, but Samuel Egbert fucking unnerves him. It's freaking him out.

Shaking himself, Dave crosses to the second door and turns the door knob, swinging it open so he can peer down into the basement below.

Something flickers in the corner of his vision, and that's all the warning he gets before he takes a pie to the face at Mach 5.

In a way, it's almost worse than getting overly friendly with the rump end of a puppet, because when Dave opens his mouth to silently scream and flip the fuck out, he tastes the meringue currently slathered across his face and realizes it's delicious.

But it's also five seconds from dripping all over his suit, and he sidesteps blindly away from the boobytrapped door to lean over and wipe it off his face and onto the floor. He has his priorities, okay, and the cleanliness of the Egberts' floor is not one of them. He squeegees off his shades with a grimace and sets them back on his face before turning back to figure out what just hit him.

"Ah, Dave, my boy!" Samuel Egbert's study door is open, and the man himself stares at Dave with a rueful grin. There is a second pie in his hand that he sets on a shelf with care before continuing. "You startled me - I did not realize that was you down here! Something you need?"

Dave stares back; his fingers twitch for his pocket and he starts typing, not daring to take his eyes off Samuel as he types the words in his notes.
DS: holy crap
DS: i knew about the baking thing
DS: but you've actually weaponized that shit
DS: like is that piekind how does that even work

He then has to hold out his phone for Samuel to read and seriously? Fuck this system of communication. Fuck everything about it. If Bro doesn't fix his collar soon, he is going to flip his shit. He and shit are going to have a fucking divorce, and he's going to take it to court and demand alimony and child support and all its life's savings in the spirit of revenge. By the time he's through with it, his shit will be a shadow of its former self, a broken man left with only pennies to his name, children he sees only every fourth weekend, and the fading memories of a happier time.

"Jokerkind, actually, though I will profess a certain leaning towards artifacts of confection," Samuel chuckles. "My own mother taught it to me in the spirit of good old fashioned japery, and it has allowed me access to more than a few most useful specibi in a pinch. Alas, John prefers smashing things with a hammer."

DS: isn't jokerkind the one with the clowns
DS: god why is it always clowns

Samuel smiles, apparently choosing to ignore Dave's horror. "Ah, harlequins. Light-hearted, nimble, astute, and always in pursuit of the opportunity for a good practical joke. Did you know, I used to have quite the collection, but John made me tone it down when he was younger. He enjoys pranking as a hobby, but the family legacy of the joker never seemed to really appeal to him."

Dave sweats, tugging on his collar and eyeing the stairwell at the end of the hall with desperation. Remember all that talk about avoiding Dad Egbert? How the hell did he end up in a one-on-one discussion of creepy ass harlequins with the resident Stepford? He is noping out of here so hard.

Besides, he's trying to imagine a John who did get on with the whole family legacy, jokerkind and all; the end result is some kind of Heir of Tricksters and that shit ain't right.

DS: okay yeah
DS: cool story
DS: like i am fucking riveted here on the edge of my seat
DS: i could talk about harlequins all day its like my dream job
DS: but also i think i just heard john calling me
DS: so i gotta jet
DS: nicolas cage himself would be jealous of my flight capabilities
DS: yeah
DS: later

"Oh, of course," the man says, raising his eyes to the ceiling with his smile tugging further across his face. Dave gets the feeling he's not fooled at all. "However, there is one thing before you go."
"The point is that according to all of my sources - limited though they may be - Droog is the one who orchestrates all such kidnapping attempts. She came for you personally in Georgia, and that is not something a woman like her would choose to do lightly." Samuel Egbert rubs at his chin, which this late in the day has begun to show signs of unshaven proto-beard. But his eyes never stop assessing Dave, silent and judging, at odds with the stern concern the rest of his face is trying to convey. John's expressions are wild and obvious and make him an open book, but while Samuel may be no less emotive, Dave can't help but think the guy is hiding just as much behind this bland fatherly persona as a Strider. "Please, consider my advice. Contact your guardian before you leave on this outing. With Droog loose in the city, you are at risk, and potentially a high priority target for her."

DS: why do you even care

DS: im pretty goddamn sure not even bro would give this much of a fuck about my wellbeing

DS: i can handle myself why is this even an issue

Samuel's face closes off completely, and there's nothing left but a flat, emotionless stare. "Because John would not allow you to be taken," he says, his voice cold, and Dave takes a step back involuntarily, cussing himself out internally for the slip while Dadbert goes on. "He has already seen Karkat badly hurt. I know my son, and I like to think I know how his mind works - if not when it comes to his sadness, then when it comes to his protective instincts."

The man steps forward, and this time Dave takes two steps back, stumbling a little on the second. The aura of impending doom radiating off this guy is unreal; if looks could kill, Dave is pretty sure he'd have keeled over by now. Samuel's expression doesn't even have to change - the heavy edge of warning in his voice does the job for him. "John would throw himself recklessly into Droog's path if he thought one of his friends was in danger. I do not know the full extent of your relationship with John, but I will not see my son gravely injured under circumstances that could have been wholly avoided."

Dave doesn't know what it is about the situation - whether it's the stillness of the house or the fact that he was already kind of scared shitless of John's dad even before this - but his fingers jitter as he types his reply, and his gut is tight with the kind of tension that usually only shows up when he's about to fight for his life. It's taking years of training in emotional suppression to keep his mask from crumbling, and he's never been more grateful for the buffer of his shades as he holds out the phone for Samuel to read.

DS: yeah

DS: no problem

DS: ill get right on that mr egbert
"See that you do," Samuel Egbert says, with that fakeass smile pinching his lips together, and he turns to go back to the study.

Dave nods in quick jerks of his head as he processes this, and then he sidesteps around Samuel Egbert and darts for the stairwell, past the carapacian asleep on the couch without sparing it a glance. When he's halfway up the stairs and sure he's alone, he stops and hunkers down in a squat. His calves tremble with the effort as he slowly unclenches his gritted teeth and loosens his jaw one muscle at a time. His hand, which clamped down on the hilt of one of his swords the moment he stopped typing, takes a good thirty seconds to ease off.

And then he takes out his phone again and starts pestering Bro. This is not something he'd usually do willing, but *holy shit* Dad Egbert won that pissing contest by a good ten miles.

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-- turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering temperedTitan [TT] at 21:34:03 --
TG: not dead
TT: you little fucking shit
TG: christ on a buttered biscuit, i don't give a fuck what future you says, your ass is still mine to kick for pulling a stunt like this
TG: whoa a future me whos actually making himself useful for once im shocked
TG: but yeah i fucked up what else is new
TG: except oh wait i didnt fuck up because john actually needed me
TT: dave...
TG: no fuck you
TG: you havent seen this kids puppy face
TG: this shit is unreal man
TG: no one can resist him when he looks like that
TG: like someone gave him a chew toy and then ripped it out of his mouth and smacked him with it
TG: but he doesnt get mad
TG: just starts tearing up and denies the whole thing ever happened
TG: this is some serious kawaii bro you raised me to respect the kawaii
TT: i didn't teach you that shit, jackass, now stop abusing your emergency cash fund for impulse flights halfway across the country because some kid is giving you dokis
TG: i am a business mogul so fuck you i have my own money now
TG: i do what i want
TT: jesus
TT: fuck this is a new crate isnt it
TT: tell me you didnt put your face on the apple juice
TG: get out of my room
TT: if you plaster one of your ironic selfies on juice cartons across the nation you are never leaving this house again
TG: thats phase five bro
TG: my time will come
TG: soon the strider name will be synonymous with wholesome aj
TG: instead of creepy snuppet porn empires
TT: …
TT: …
TT: …
TG: stop that
TT: …
TT: …
TT: …
TG: fuck
Dave finishes climbing the stairs and walks until he's level with John's bedroom door. He can hear murmured voices from within - and by murmured, he means Karkat's perpetual half-shouting grumbles can be quite clearly heard through the closed door, but John's normal volume is muffled and indistinguishable. He could probably guess just from Karkat's half of the conversation what's going on, but he's pretty damn sure it'll just be a bunch of weird mushy nonsense and feelings, which seems to be half the point of the whole pale square thing.

Meanwhile, the ominous and deliberate silence on Bro's end keeps going on and on. Taunting him. Mocking him. Even the ellipses are deliberate, which means Bro is up to something Dave is basically guaranteed not to like.

TT: …
TT: …
TT: heheheh
TG: oh fuck oh fuck you typed a laugh oh fuck im fucked what did you do
TT: …
TT: …
TT: alsoyouregroundedforaweek.jpeg
TG: shit
TG: shit shit shit
TT: open it, kid
TT: or are you too chickenshit to face the consequences of your actions?
TG: shit this had better not be -
TG: oh god
TT: it is
TG: WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE
TT: heheheh

Dave can only stare. He can hear a weird, out of place whine, which he suspects is coming from him, but his horror is too great to be silenced.

It would be impossible to describe the horror of the shitty picture Bro has sent him. Suffice to say that yes, hell is real, and it is located in a dark corner of the Strider apartment where an entire crate of apple juice has been violated in ways that defy imagination.

Dave thinks he's going to be sick.

TG: oh my god
TG: my juice
TG: that is not okay
TG: how did you even fit that -
TG: NO
TT: apologize
TG: so much proboscis
TT: admit you were wrong you little shit
TG: shit fuck shitthishisslit
TT: oh look, another unguarded crate of apple juice
TT: it sure would be a shame if
TT: something were to happen to it
TG: im sorry oh my god please no bro i beg of you
TG: have mercy on my product what has that apple juice ever done to hurt you
TG: im the one you want
TG: not the customers
TG: not the juice
TG: take me instead
TT: i'll hold you to that on Saturday
TG: what the hell is on saturday
TT: meeting with Lalonde in Washington somewhere
TT: future you was here to get our asses in gear
TT: so yeah, you disobedient fucker, i'm not making you fly your ass back down here so i can introduce it to my heel
TT: Egbert will bring you to me instead
TG: gfdi future me you fucked up again
TT: and if you go within twenty feet of Droog the aj will have a starring role in my next masterpiece
TT: snumping it up with apple juice 2 - the reckoning
TG: jesus no
TG: whatever you want just leave it alone
TG: is nothing sacred anymore
TT: hell no
TT: now fuck off and deal with the blue kid before he blows another gasket and rageports to Antarctica or some shit

Dave can't even try to get the last word in. The moment has come and gone and Bro has fucked off to do god knows what else to the rest of Dave's belongings, and Dave is left alone with only his horror for company. He leans back against the wall and slides down into a crouch in horrified contemplation. His stab wound whimpers at him, panging throughout his rib cage, but pales in comparison to the mental anguish he’s enduring. The image of rainbow puppets and defiled jugs of apple juice has been burnt into his retinas, an evil combination that would drive most men mad.

"Uh, Dave?" There is a shuffle, and the faint creak of the door opening, and then the sound of John clearing his throat. "...Are you okay down there?"

Dave looks up and shakes his head in despair at John's curious, mild concern. The kid hangs out of his bedroom with a hand on the door, kicking one foot absently as he cocks his head to the side. He stares at Dave with expectation, and when Dave remains zoned out, he just shrugs. "Um. Karkat is pretty much asleep now, and Jade’s still not answering on Pesterchum, so we can go if you're ready."

TG: busy contemplating the futile and pointlessly cruel nature of the universe
TG: dont mind me ill be over it in a few seconds
TG: thought living with bro has mostly given me immunity to this kind of existential angst
TG: but wow he outdid himself there
TG: like damn i am impressed
TG: truly his irony surpasses the boundaries of human morality and common decency
TG: jesus

John takes one look at Dave's pesterings, rocking his weight back and forth on his heels, and rolls his eyes. "It couldn't have been that bad, Dave! What were you even talking about?"

TG: youaskedforthis.jpeg

If nothing else, their long and extensively ironic broship should have taught John better by now, but he still makes the foolish mistake of opening the attachment. His jaw drops and Dave has the unique opportunity to rest his chin on a fist and watch a small portion of John's basic faith in humanity and fundamental innocence die in the light of Bro's unspeakable creation.
"We're going to pick up Jade, now," John says faintly, his voice breaking and hitting a high note worthy of a soprano as he lets his phone drop to his side, loose in his hand. "I just - oh my god - no, we're leaving now and never talking about this again. Ever. Promise me, Dave."

TG: you got it bro
TG: this entire episode is going to be expunged from our collective consciousness
TG: only to rise up again greater and more terrible than before whenever we finally get to go the fuck to sleep
TG: but for now there is only the bliss of denial
TG: not even rose is going to be able to pry this one out of our heads
TG: you take that shit and you bury it deep my friend
TG: fist bump

Dazed, John presents a fist, and Dave taps it with his own in the solidarity of two bros sharing a traumatic experience. John then shakes off the horror like a champ, and Dave follows him as he turns on his heel and heads back into the bedroom.

Any way Dave looks at it, John's room is clearly the dwelling place of an unapologetic nerd. Unlike Dave's trashy cinderblock and taxidermy chic, John has actual normal furniture and strategically placed superhero posters at intervals along the walls. If it weren't for the fact that most of them are hanging off the wall and crumpled up at odd angles, he suspects the poster arrangement would almost be symmetrical. His desk is covered in textbooks and packets of homework, all hastily shoved into messy stacks that remind Dave that apparently this place was a wind tunnel no more than a few hours ago. One wall is taken up with a bookshelf full of comics and other books, next to a wire rack crammed full of DVDs. Dave doesn't even have to read the labels on the side to know that they would all involve either superheroes, Nicolas Cage, Liv Tyler, or Bill Cosby, because John has the shittiest taste in movies - that is to say, none whatsoever - and an unholy amount of brand loyalty to actors who have done nothing to justify that kind of obsession. Kick Ass, as both a hero movie and a Cage flick, resides in a place of honor at the top of the stack.

No puppets, no rows of clotheslines hung with developed photographs, and aside from the single carefully constructed troll pile that somehow survived the wind storm, no random heaps of junk swords.

Talk about culture shock.

The shabby purple recooperacoon in the middle of the room is a new addition, or so he's been told. Even as he eyes it, raising an eyebrow over the rim of his sunglasses, a bubble appears in the surface of the sopor slime and a baleful red eye glowers at him under a head of slimed black hair before Karkat submerges once more. Considering how scarce the guy made himself after his initial freak-out, it's like spotting the Loch Ness lusus. The rarely seen, elusive Karkat Vantas.

In person, the guy looks absolutely wrecked. Like, Dave had almost thought John was exaggerating Karkat's levels of universal animosity and the corresponding tendency to rant, but clearly John has been downplaying the whole downward spiral the two of them have been riding together over the past few weeks. He can only assume they've been functional over the past few years in whatever their weird trollmance is or John would have got in contact with Dave fucking ages ago, but their coping has gone to shit and it shows.

Whatever. Dave is here for sicknasty bro crime fighting times with John, and possibly emotional bullshit that he's not looking forward to dealing with in person but hell, like that's ever stopped him when John calls for backup in a time of need. Karkat's major malfunction is not even on his agenda, except for how it affects John.
And, of course, the fact that needling the troll into an incandescent rage is one of the funniest things Dave has ever seen. Like, holy crap, maybe there are people out there who can pull off that kind of spitting fury and make it look intimidating, but Karkat is not one of them. Between the huge bags under his eyes and the way he holds himself wound up tight as a spring, like a cat that's been spooked, torn between running and lashing out in desperation, he just looks kind of worn out. If the whole angry-at-the-universe thing is some kind of defense thing like Dave thinks Rose would call it, it's not working. Dave just thinks the whole thing is hilarious.

"Ready?" John whispers, which Dave thinks is totally unnecessary considering Karkat is clearly not asleep. But he shrugs noncommittally, and John takes that as a 'yes' regardless. The kid yanks up the mask that covers up the lower half of his face and then tugs down the goggles over his eyes. Dave would swear ten ways to Sunday that from the moment those goggles slap on John's feet don't touch the floor once; the wind snaps him up and wafts out the window, before Dave can text a word.

Throwing one last look at the 'coon full of irritable troll, Dave pulls off his shades and hooks them over the collar of his vest. He's barely crawled up onto the window sill and started to crane his neck up to see where Heir has fucked off to when the wind yanks him right off his feet and into the air. He flails for only half a second, thinking that he's falling to an incredibly embarrassing death, before he remembers who exactly he's dealing with, here. He freezes and his muscles lock up so he can stare at Heir with a complete and utter lack of amusement.

TG: if you say one word about a pranksters goddamn gambit
TG: i will end you

And then they're gone.

-

Dave's last memories of flying with Heir involve New York.

Needless to say, that shit was seven different kinds of fucked up, and he tries to think about it as little as possible.

But coasting along like this, when there's not a grimdark induced thunderstorm swirling overhead and whipping up the winds into an uncontrollable frenzy, is...fine. So fine. Totally fine. Hella fine.

Oh, who is he kidding he's freaking the fuck out.

But quietly. Never let on that you're freaking the fuck out - that's, like, rule number one of being a Strider, and Dave may be pissing himself on the inside but like fuck is he going to let it show in his face. He may be sweating a little, but he's pretty sure Heir can't see it so it doesn't count. His eyes ache with the effort of scrunching them up against the breeze, but he keeps his fingers away from the Pesterchum app unless he has an actual legitimate comment to add and not just a terrified screaming noise. Instead, he taps out a fast beat against the side of his pants, drumming his fingers and trying not to think about the drop.

This is stupid. He runs the Houston skyline on a regular basis and the heights have never fucked with him like this. He can only think it must be because he's not the one controlling this - Heir is. The wind might be calm and obedient to John's will, rather than fighting him every inch of the way like it had in New York, but it still feels like Dave is flying along by the seat of his pants and he is not about that life. John may be down with that life but Dave is so not.

He needs a distraction.
TG: so how are we gonna track her down anyway
TG: the amazing bouncing jade harley
TG: what's our game plan here

Heir tilts his head to the side as he reads his phone screen, one hand reaching out to the side. Dave catches the tail end of the breeze that wraps around Heir's hand with a faint whistle, and then it whooshes off into the night. "The wind is pretty good at guiding me where I need to go," he says, his eyes distant as they swoop past a lit up island in the middle of a lake. "Usually it just notices crimes in progress and stuff, but when I ask it to help me find Hemogoblin, it can take me right to him. Even if Sharpshooter is doing the spacy thing everywhere, I think we should be able to catch up eventually! Yeah!"

TG: hell
TG: better than the plan i came up with

"What plan is that?

TG: it mostly involved printing out missing posters and going door to door
TG: asking have you seen our harley
TG: usually seen with bonus wolf
TG: if found pls return to the egbert residence asap
TG: will reward with cake or shitty movie recommendations

"...That would be hilarious," Heir says, his eyes shining at the prospect. "That would be so stupidly great, I can't even imagine Jade's face!"

TG: there's always time to turn back
TG: we can fire up ye old printing press and have this shit banged out by morning
TG: old school moveable type and shitty ink and everything
TG: we could do this man we could make this happen

"With a woodcut carving of her and Bec at the top!" It takes a few minutes for John to stop giggling and slap his I'm-a-professional mask back on, clearing his throat. "But uh. We probably shouldn't mess around with dumb stuff when she could be in trouble. Let's just find her, first."

Dave shrugs as they skim over the first few skyscrapers.

TG: aight man
TG: anyway while the windy thing is looking
TG: do we need to have bro talk

John winces. "I don't know how good of an idea that is," he says.

What.

Nope.

TG: yeah no try again
TG: pretty sure that sentence was supposed to go something like
TG: why yes dave that idea is fucking kickass
TG: we should get right on that
TG: before yet more weird shit happens
TG: because you know it will
TG: shit just happens to us
"It's never really been a problem before..." John trails off, scrubbing his hands through his hair and knocking his hood off. The wind tugs it back up over his head a second later. "I guess, because I didn't really talk to you all that often, and I didn't talk to Rose at all, and Karkat was my only real friend who I talked to about stuff other than swimming. I guess I just never really had to worry about where the boundaries were when it comes to other friends - so somehow I have no clue what Karkat expects me to share only with him and what might count as almost cheating on him. Dude, quadrants are hard."

TG: huh
TG: and this is why i dont mess around with the four squares
TG: good luck with that but shit
TG: i said i wouldnt dick around with your relationship thing
TG: if he gets all pissy and possessive i want no part in that clusterfuck
TG: but also you need to talk about this
TG: like tough shit for him what if you talked to an actual shrink instead of just rose would he still freak about that
TG: cause that shit aint gonna fly
TG: that is some straight up crackpot motherfucking noise i will not abide
TG: on the official strider list of priorities you rank higher than pandering to his butthurt irrational paranoia
TG: so platonic feelings jam go
TG: this is a limited time offer hurry i dont do feels often bro

"Urgggh!" John drags his hands down his face, and gives Dave the most aggrieved and disgruntled expression Dave has ever seen a human being make. He hadn't known a face could look *that* 110% done in real life. "Feelings!"

Dave nods sagely.

TG: agreed
TG: i concur completely
TG: do go on

"I have a sister!"

TG: we need to throw a party about that eventually
TG: surprise shindig for all us poor assholes now saddled with new siblings

"And Karkat is Hemogoblin!"

TG: still laughing for ten thousand years about that tbh
TG: you can't see it but this is my laughing face

John stops flailing around in midair and looks. Dave keeps his mouth perfectly flat. "You're terrible, dude," John says. He rolls his eyes, and Dave smirks while he's not looking. Mission accomplished - or so he thinks, right up until John's expression falls again, and he twists his arm so that the wind swings them around and they start in another direction. He gets too quiet, too suddenly, and Dave's eyebrow inches up his forehead.

Well, at least John is goddamn consistent. Dave can count on him to pretty much always make things a federal fucking issue whenever it concerns doing something for his own good. He's obviously shut down so suddenly because there's something else on his mind.

TG: and you feel guilty as fuck because he got hurt on the job

John closes his eyes. Which is the opposite of something he should be doing when they're flying hundreds of feet over the city at fifty miles an hour. Like. Dave is not down with this turn of events, holy shit. He snaps his fingers a few times, loud enough that it gets John's attention and his eyes pop open again, thank fuck.

"You told me it wasn't my fault and all that stuff, but I still can't stop thinking it," John mutters, breathing out shakily through his nose. "And the fact that I didn't realize it was him, all this time…"

TG: to be fair
TG: he didn't realize you were you either
TG: so you two equal each other out in terms of righteous obliviousness

"- And also I kind of want to make out with him!" John blurts out, and then he slaps both hands over his mouth.

They stare at each other in mutual disbelief.

Dave can feel one of his eyes twitching. He should probably have his shades on for this conversation. He doesn't know what he was thinking, taking them off in the first place. Why is that even a thing. He needs a new ironic costume idea, this one was a shitty idea and he gives full credit for it to Bro.

Finally he slaps one hand to his face and starts typing again. Because seriously. Relationships. Not his division. But apparently John needs to talk this out even more than his irrational guilt complex, and Dave can kind of see why this issue in particular might be something he couldn't jam out with Karkat himself about.

Eurgh. He has a reputation to maintain, for chrissakes. Why is this happening to him. Why does he care about this goober so much.

TG: oh great
TG: gdi john
TG: is there anything in the moirail crossroads deal that says makeouts cant be on the agenda
TG: anything at all you can find a loophole for that
TG: i don't know shit about the diamonds and the clubs and all that conciliatory bs
TG: fuck man
TG: do we need to call in rose maybe she knows
TG: yeah you should talk to rose about this instead
TG: that sounds like a much better plan you know im shit at this
TG: i volunteer her as tribute
"I don't know!" John grinds a fist against his forehead, almost cross-eyed behind the lens of his goggles. "Rose would just try to psychoanalyze me, and anyway, she's still so worried about her mom and her grimdark thing and stuff. I don't want to bother her about it!"

When Dave goes to throw John an aggrieved look of his own, he runs up against a new stumbling block - the fact that John isn't looking at him, which normally wouldn't be all that big of a deal except Dave can't move into his line of vision because John is the one floating them around, here.

Seriously, why aren't they having this conversation on the ground? The ground would be so righteous right now. He could get down with the ground.

TG: that sucks man
TG: but also im pretty sure shell figure it out anyway
TG: that chick is scary good
TG: once she gets her tentacles into this she wont let you ignore her either
TG: and then what man youll have two strilondes on your case
TG: wont have any choice but to deal with yo shit
TG: jesus i cant believe this has been about sloppy makeouts all along
TG: you would let this kind of shit bug you eb

"Haha! Yeah!" John's voice cracks and hits a high note and wow that's not suspicious as fuck at all. "Now hang on - something's weird -"

TG: i fucking called it

"Whateverrr, Dave." John sticks out his tongue as they drift to a halt and start sinking down toward the nearest roof, aiming for a helicopter landing pad that Dave can barely make out in the dark. Then he flinches, and shakes his head, spluttering to correct himself. "Uh! I meant Flashstep. But seriously! Are you seeing Sharpshooter anywhere?"

TG: do you know how few fucks i have to give about the name thing

Dave looks around anyway. He's not exactly familiar with Seattle. At all. But they've drifted pretty far north by this point, and his internal clock is telling him it's been a good forty-five minutes since they left the Egbert house. Most of the office buildings around them are dark, with only the occasional scattered emergency light on each floor.

However, there is a distinct lack of Jade Harley, and with a personality like hers Dave can't imagine the girl would be easy to miss. He's seen Sharpshooter on the Internet and has a vague idea that she goes around in a perpetual cloud of chaos and green science lightning. But the sky around them is dark and clear, without even a cloud overhead that she could be chilling out in. If this is where John's weird windtution wants them to be, there must have been a miscommunication somewhere along the way.

The wind wisps around John, unseen but ruffling his clothing and hair so much that Dave can almost pick out where the breezes wrap around and over each other. No wonder the kid has a head of perpetual cowlicks; how the hell does he stand it all the time? "This is where it feels like we should be," John goes on, half-talking to himself now as he scans the road beneath their vantage point, with a faint frown on his features. "I mean - maybe there's a crime going on here or something? Sometimes that distracts the windy thing. But I'm not seeing Sharpshooter or Bec around here."

TG: well i wasnt going to say anything
TG: but yeah dude what the fuck
TG: do you think we missed her
"I guess it's possible?" He doesn't sound very sure. "With her spacy thing she can teleport pretty much wherever she wants - but she has to reappear somewhere else eventually, and the wind doesn't seem to think she's gone too far from here. We should be right on top of where she is!"

They look at each other. Then, as one, both heroes look down at the roof beneath their feet. They're in the middle of the helipad, a black and white quadrangle with a blocky H that looks freshly painted in the center.

Neither of them have x-ray vision, so looking down is entirely pointless, in retrospect. Dave just sets his jaw and owns it. If John isn't going to point that out, neither is he.

TG: you dont think

Without a word, John floats over to the edge of the roof, dragging Dave along behind him almost on reflex, while Dave stretches and tries futilely to get his feet to kiss and makeup with the wonderfully solid roof beneath him. He fails spectacularly, but then John sets him down so that they can both lean over the railing and peer at the street right beneath them.

No sign of Jade. There's a circular drive beneath them that hooks onto the street in a wide arc, but no sign of any cars suspicious or otherwise hanging around.

Dave is starting to suspect that John's powers might be busted. Which would be absolutely shitty for the kid, but doesn't necessary mean much aside from the fact that they're short a Harley on this little fetch quest and might be out here all night looking for her the old fashioned way if she keeps hopping around. The completely fucking smart thing to do would be to have a future-Dave arrive with exact coordinates and a time for them to coincidentally find Jade while expending minimal effort. Then Dave and John could go and get froyo or some shit and peace the fuck out until it's show time.

Come on. Just this once, a convenient future self with a message of goodwill and charity that will make up for all those times future-Dave has been an enigmatic dick to himself...

Nothing.

Dave bangs his head against the railing, the metal cold against his forehead as he squeezes his tired eyes shut and blinks hard a few times. He can only take solace in the fact that at least John has no idea how incredibly uncool Dave is and will continue be in the immediate future by not giving them a heads up. The kid is too pragmatic for that.

"Oh, nooo…" John says. Dave props his head back up, affecting a careless slump over the railing even as John tenses up beside him. Fuck it; Dave slots his shades back on and stares with unflappable regard at the nondescript black car that putters to a stop in front of the building they've made their perch. "Oh, shit," he adds, pulling back from the railing a little a peering over with only his nose sticking over the edge. It's stupidly goofy looking and Dave snerks a little into his sleeve before coughing and sobering up enough to take another look himself.

Down below, the door of the building swings open. Two shadows stretch out before the actual people appear, and Dave rests his head to the side on one closed fist as the two walk out to the car. The driver never leaves the vehicle as it idles, but one window rolls down on the passenger's side.

One of the people is a man maybe in his thirties - seriously, like Dave can tell jack shit about the guy's age from up here - in a sleek black suit. His hair is close-cropped and a faint, grey-winged mousey brown, but from this angle Dave can't see his face. He strides out and leans slightly to talk to the driver through the open window.
The second person is a girl, and if the first guy is a forgettable chump, this lady is dressed like some espionage thriller's idea of what a spy should look like. Dave is simultaneously impressed and horrified by how much Kevlar has to have gone into making the leather and neoprene and buckles mesh together into something even vaguely resembling a functional costume. Fucking hell, that's half of why Dave has such trouble getting his suits past Bro's obnoxious standards. Her bob of blond hair and the bright pink-purple scarf wrapped tightly around her neck and tucked into the front of her suit stand out like beacons against all the black. There's a heavy, matte black instrument case slung over her back, and she stumbles and teeters from side to side as she walks like she's trying to keep her balance on the deck of a ship at sea.

"That's a sniper rifle," John murmurs, and shit man, John is the last person on the planet who Dave would have expected to be able to ID a sniper rifle kind case on sight. "Crap!"

TG: oh frick
TG: dude
TG: you think this is why we ended up here instead
TG: some sniping shit going down
TG: or maybe your windy thing got the wrong rifle kind user

"I don't know," John groans, gnawing his lip so furiously Dave can see it through the mask. "This looks so shady…"

With a squeaking hiccup that they can hear from on top of the building, the sniper apologizes loudly, her words slurred and barely comprehensible as she almost falls into the back seat of the car and lugs her rifle case in behind her. It slams against the side of the door with a crack, but she just giggles and tugs it the rest of the way in. The man in the suit shakes his head, and turns away from the vehicle as the window rolls up, his quiet dialog with the driver apparently at an end.

"Laterz, Marlie!" the sniper calls, just as the suited man shuts the door on her face with a grimace.

"Ma-!" is as far as John's furious shout gets before Dave's reflexes kick in. He tackles John, smacks a hand over the kid's mouth, and pauses time before the other hero can fling himself over the edge of the roof. He manages to haul John back into the center of the helipad, but he's also pretty goddamn sure John lets it happen after a brief attempt to struggle against Dave's grip, because John is stupid strong. There's still raw fury in John's eyes, but when Dave raises a questioning eyebrow he closes them and breathes hard for a few moments before letting his shoulders slump. "I'm good," he mumbles, muffled, and Dave jerks his hands away to occupy them with his phone once more.

Shit, he hates it when he loses his ability to communicate. It's starting to seriously fuck with him. He hadn't appreciated it when the only people he could sign with were carapacians and certain dickwad older brothers, but at least back in Houston he hadn't been restricted to text alone.

"That was Marlowe," John finishes spitting in a much quieter voice, instead of shouting it for everyone and their asshat mob boss to hear. He folds his arms over his chest and taps his fingers against his sleeves as he glares back at the railing, though they can't see the guy from here. It's more of a pout, because John does rage like a bucktoothed four-year-old, even with the mask hiding his teeth, but the perks of having a hella tight emotionless mask is that John never needs to know that Dave is smiling on the inside. "Don't know his full name, but he was one of the Crew members who was with Diamonds Droog last night."

That gets Dave's attention.

TG: oh youve gotta be shitting me
TG: those guys are here now
TG: my night is made
TG: no really
TG: my night is more made than easy mac
TG: we've just popped that shit in the microwave
TG: and i've been in dire need of cheesy noodles bro

"But what is he doing here?" Oh, right. John isn't distracted by thoughts of late night easy mac right now. That's just him. Dave, momentarily lost in thoughts of mac and cheese, snaps out of it when John starts back toward the railing again.

There may or may not be a thin trickle of drool at the corner of Dave's mouth, and he will fight anyone who claims he has to pause time to inconspicuously wipe it away before John can see.

TG: shit
TG: you don't think your windy thing took us to mc central do you
TG: because as bitchin as that would be any other night of the week
TG: you know flipping bro the middle finger and getting all up in crew business for funsies
TG: were still short a jade

"I know!" John's pout hits maximum overdrive, and his eyes start to gleam a radioactive blue. Since the last time he pulled that kind of shit rage teleportation happened all over the place, Dave shoots a hand out and hooks the back of John's hood so at least he'll (hopefully) get dragged along for the ride in the event John turns out to be a hop, skip, and a kickflip away from hitting those levels of batshit crazytown fury again. That is an entirely possible sequence of events. God, he loves this kid, but John in hero mode is probably just as easy to piss off as Karkat, and twice as much of a flight risk.

Shit. The puns. They're starting again.

"But the wind doesn't want to go anywhere else," he continues, and hey, at least talking isn't teleporting. Dave nods encouragingly. "In fact, if that sniper is hanging around Seattle, it's all the more important that we get Sharpshooter right now and make plans to deal with that, too. So it's even more important that we find her! I don't know, usually the wind just gets me, but - I -"

It's obvious in hindsight. So obvious. Dave lets out a strangled groan.

TG: shit
TG: bro
TG: maybe you're not losing your mojo
TG: maybe
TG: just maybe
TG: harleys here already

"What?" John blinks away the glow, which Dave is so on board with, and looks at him like a confused, quizzical puppy. In response, Dave curtly jerks his chin down at the roof beneath them.

TG: just saying
TG: if we could find these guys by accident
TG: which by the way we are never telling anyone about ever
TG: because that shit be embarrassing as fuck
TG: and we will never hear the end of it
TG: im pretty sure an intrepid hero type like jade could
TG: and then proceed to investigate like the hardboiled sleuth she probably thinks she is
TG: our princess is not in another castle
TG: shes right here fucking shit up under our noses
John's throat works. Dave holds his hands out to either side, gesturing and raising his eyebrows for emphasis when his goddamn genius suggestion continues to go unanswered. By the time John decides on his response, Dave is fully expecting some kind of dissertation on the subject of his magnificence and genius at deducing the whereabouts and motivations of flighty space broads.

Instead, John facepalms and wails, almost mournfully, "Jaaaaaaade!!!"

Dave is of the opinion that they should run in, grab Jade, and run like hell. Just wing it, get in and out before Droog can capitalize on how incredibly stupid they'd have to be to run with a plan like that. Plans like that are his specialty.

Heir puts the hammer down on that before Dave can elaborate. "It's already bad enough we landed on their roof. What if they have cameras and stuff?!!" he hisses, flailing spectacularly in midair. "Arrrgh! Darn it, Jade! Why do you do these things?! We need to have a plan and some idea of what the building looks like and how many Crew members might be in there and bluhhhhhh!"

TG: plans are for squares
TG: once were inside your windy thing can lead us right to her
TG: if we run into any guards or cleaning ladies i can hop us back to ten minutes before any alarm is sounded
TG: hell in the grand scheme of timey wimey things weve probably already rescued jade and clocked out
TG: and future us are being obnoxious on the other side of the building
TG: you learn to just live with this shit man planning is overrated

Heir knuckles at his forehead, his brows furrowed in such an intense frown it looks like he's going to hurt himself by thinking too hard. "I just wish we knew what we were getting into," he says at last, even as resignation settles onto his face. "Or that Jade would just answer her stupid phone and text me back! Jeez! Now I'm getting paranoid that her ringtone will go off and blow her cover or something!"

TG: telling you
TG: in and out
TG: and if we see droog you jump us out no questions asked
TG: this shit is foolproof

John just gives him a look. "Dave. When have any of our plans ever actually been foolproof?" he asks, exasperated.

That...is an excellent question. But Dave has never let a little thing like logic stop him before.

TG: shhhhhhh
TG: come on lets fly by the windows and find an empty room
TG: jump in and track down jade
TG: and then we go home and sleep

Sleep being the magic word, here, John sighs and nods, raising a hand. The wind picks up, fluttering the trailing edge of Dave's white vest, and oh for fuck's sake they're flying again. Dave clamps down on every shrieking instinct that wants him to grab onto John for dear life and remains completely frozen in midair like the stone cold badass he is.

Heir drops them down to street level, on the side of the building facing away from the street. There's
an emergency exit door tucked away back there, but also a tiny unmarked entrance further along that is almost concealed behind a dumpster. Heir set them down, walks right up to it, and twists the doorknob.

All the way around. One quick flip of his wrist and the poor lock snaps audibly under the pressure.

Note to self, Dave thinks, as Heir pushes the unfortunate door open with a finger pressed to his lips, do not ever fuck with John in hand to hand.

The room beyond the door is dark, and Dave doesn't quite pull the door all the way closed so that a sliver of light from the street outside shines through. He gives up and removes his shades a second later so his shitty eyes will get with the program and adjust to the darkness. The light glints off rows of metal shelves on either side as they press forward, and his and Heir's steps tap and echo off the concrete floor in a way that suggest there's a lot of space around them. "Feels like a storage space," Heir whispers, and the wind whistles on either side, pitched so high and lilting that the hairs on Dave's arm prickle. "No one's in here. No one breathing, anyway. No Sharpshooter."

Dave nods, even though Heir can't see it, and stays close on the other hero's heels by his right shoulder. Internally, he has a timer going from the moment they cross the threshold into the building. Like working through a timed level on a video game. It just keeps him focused, alright?

He nearly runs into John's back when they reach the far side of the storage room. They've come far enough from the door that the faint streetlight does absolutely nothing for anybody, so Dave takes out his phone and lets the screen shine on the interior wall. The door is a little farther down, and Heir keeps a hand on the wall until they reach it while Dave holds the light over their heads. Standing in the circle of faint illumination, with the darkness pressing in tight on either side, reminds Dave of the kind of godawful horror games Bro would always try to trick him into playing in the dead of night when he was a young, naïve little kid - the ones where you only got three feet of visibility before something with a gaping mouth and eyes that blinked the wrong way lunged out of the fog.

John said nothing breathing was lurking around in here and yet oh god fucking dammit Dave can't believe he's actually scaring himself with this. Shit. Shit. Sometimes he hates his brain.

"I think we're okay," Heir says, so quiet that Dave is surprised he can even make it out, and then Heir reaches out and snaps whatever deadbolt is on this door, too.

The sudden light of the hallway stings Dave's eyes, but he refuses to fiddle around with his shades again. There's no one in sight in either direction but he's not risking it.

TG: well dude
TG: where to next
TG: shit we probably flew down past her if shes not on the ground floor

"Actually," Heir says, scratching his head and looking down at his shoes, nonplussed, "the wind...still says down."

TG: oh great
TG: shes gone to the core of the earth
TG: thats the real secret of the crew john
TG: theyre the mole people
TG: jesus i should have seen this coming from a mile away

"Oh no, you don't think they're actually -" John starts, his eyes widening as he stares at Dave in growing horror, clapping his hands to his cheeks. There is an approximately three second period in
which Dave knows for a fact that John, the gullible dumbass that he is, is actually giving serious consideration to the theory that the Midnight Crew have risen up from the underground mounted on giant sightless mole lusii. Those three moments give Dave just enough time to have a revelation that goes something along the lines of *I have been granted an incredible power over the paragon of youth and trust that is John Egbert because this kid will buy absolutely anything you sell him and I must use this power only for good and hilariously ironic evil.*

But then a snicker breaks past the supposedly uncrackable seal of his lips, and a wheezy snerk escapes his flawless façade. He does his level best to channel it into a throat-clearing cough, but that's all it takes for John to start pouting and fold his arms, glowering at Dave as realization sets in. "Flashstep, you're awful. Hahahaha. So funny. Really hilarious."

TG: no idea what you're talking about eb
TG: nothing but irony here
TG: sweet sweet irony

"Awful. Now come on, you dick, do you have ideas that are actually related to - I don't know, real life?" John shakes his head gesturing at the featureless corridor around them. "Maybe there's a basement level. Let's look for a stairwell or something."

But that's the thing, as it turns out. Aside from the door to the storage room they just came in through and the emergency exit at the end of the hall, the hallway is almost disturbingly empty of doors. Just smooth walls as far as the eye can see. The one stairwell they find only leads to the upper floors, and the elevator only has buttons to take them up. At the far end of the hall Dave can see the open space where the hallway opens up onto the lobby, but John shushes him and holds up two fingers when he goes too close. Apparently there are still two people in there, but when Dave pauses time and chances a look, he can't see any sign of another elevator or even any doors aside from the ones that lead outside.

But whatever vibes John is getting from the wind, they're only interested in the extremely goddamn vague direction that is *down.*

Just as John turns, frustrated, to glance worriedly in the direction of the lobby, where the low murmur of the secretaries at the desk has increased in volume, Dave gets his shit together. He's surprised it takes him as long as it does but nobody's perfect. The idea hits him when he's twirling his phone in one hand in quiet aggravation, and his thumb accidentally brushes the Pesterchum window for John to one covered in bright yellow orange text.

Of course.

TG: hang on

"Huh?" John looks at him, blinking. "What is it?"

TG: dont worry i got this

And with that Dave flashsteps back into the stairwell. It's dark and cramped and the concrete smells like damp and mold. It gives the impression that no one really bothers with the stairwell, not when there's a perfectly good elevator to pander to the masses.

But this time, instead of commiserating with John over the lack of any obvious stairs downward, Dave applies himself and starts going over the floor an inch at a time in doubletime. John comes to the open door behind him as he works, but once his eyes comb the ground and catch sight of what he's looking for, Dave springs back onto his feet, his knees aching from crouching down.
He draws a toe along the seam in the ground. It's hidden well, sure, but the hinges are obvious when you know the signs. The seam is visible only as the faintest of shadows in the light from the hallway, but it's there, a four sided trapdoor that must lead down into a basement that is most definitely not in the original building plans.

"Whoa!" John kneels down and tilts his head to the side. There is a faint whine that climbs in volume, and when Dave leans over his bangs fly up out of his face in the updraft through the seams that John has apparently kicked into overdrive with his wind powers. "I didn't even notice that! How did you see that?"

"I'll bet anything there was an alarm on that outside door, too," Heir mutters, inspecting the faint outline in the floor while trailing his fingers along the crease. That is the exact opposite of hygienic, but Dave doesn't comment. "Droog isn't the type to leave a pace like this unguarded. Someone should have come to investigate by now."

Maybe." John sucks in a breath, and then huffs it out, waving Dave forward with a hand as he sits back on his haunches to inspect the trapdoor. "Damn it. Well, I've kind of trying to avoid this but…"

He straightens up, frowning. "We're gonna have to jump through. Be ready for shenanigans, man."

Dave lays a hand on his shitty sword and nods curtly. John reaches out with a hand and Dave takes it, gritting his teeth as John's eyes flash and -

He's never been conscious while John does the rage teleport thing. He's seen some heinously embarrassing videos on the internet that show him being a damsel in fucking distress all over the skyline of New York City while John and Bro covered his unconscious ass, but he'd passed out so effectively that he can't remember anything between taking a thorn to the neck and waking up on the roof with Rose puking grimdark into a trash can.

He zones right out. There's the vague sensation of being compressed, and squeezed through a thin space, but aside from that all he can hear is the beat pounding in his ears, so loud that it seems to rattle his brain in his skull like he's pressed his ear to a subwoofer.

And then they're at the bottom of a flight of stairs again. But unlike the dim half-light of the upper stairwell, this one is well lit and open to the hallway rather than set off in a side room, the light overhead a bright white fluorescent that harshes on Dave's eyes. He grimaces, touching a hand to the spot where his brand new headache has taken up residence, and waits for the obnoxious bassline to fade out of his awareness.
A gloved hand squeezes his own, and it takes him that long to realize that he and John are still clutching at each other like sleeping otters. "Are you alright?" he asks, concerned, as Dave yanks his hand free and closes it in a fist at his side.

TG: cool
TG: im cool
TG: come on lets get out of this wide open hallway im getting paranoid as fuck

"Really?" John persists, following Dave as they creep forward and Dave keeps his eyes peeled for some kind of corner or side area where they can get out of the direct line of sight of basically anyone who feels like walking down the corridor. There's a brand new elevator on their right, one that must not be connected to the main elevator above. "Because when I took - Hemogoblin, one time, he said he noticed something...weird…"

TG: well shit
TG: nah bro im good lets just get out of sight and regroup

Because it's starting to sink in that yes, somehow, by sheer fucking dumb luck, Dave and John have stumbled across yet another Midnight Crew base. This one isn't a shitty abandoned movie theater, but the last time shit like this went down, Dave picked up a brand new bird version of himself.

Jesus. There better not be some kind of goddamn walrus-John hanging around in this basement or Dave will lose his shit.

Shaking his head, Dave darts into the first side corridor he finds. There's a rolling cart covered in empty plastic containers that Dave has absolutely no interest in, and he ducks behind it. John huddles at his side, peering around the corner. Under this light his costume looks even more disheveled and utilitarian than usual, and Dave stifles the automatic tangent his brain wants to go on concerning ways he could improve on it. You'd think at least Dadbert would have some kind of fashion sense, but it's not showing in John's poor hero life choices.

There's a disturbing lack of people still. Dave bristles, his shoulders hunching up as he scans the walls up near the ceiling for any sign of cameras. Surely there should be more security than this?

A bright jangle breaks out and Dave slams back against the wall, whipping around in horror to stare at John as the music continues.

John stares back in guilty horror. "Hang on! Karkat is pestering me!" he yelps, slapping at his pocket until the tiny jingle cuts off. He pulls out the phone itself a second later but seriously?!

TG: now
TG: right the fuck now
TG: youre serious

"Well, it's not like we knew there'd be a bunch of sneaking around tonight!" John shrugs helplessly and reads the pesterlog, his face lit eerily by the glow of the screen. "I didn't think it would matter if I left the ringtone on!"

TG: texting in the middle of an extraction
TG: we are the most unprofessional fucks i know
TG: and thats saying something
TG: pretty sure they revoke hero licenses for shit like this
TG: and even if we go in and plead our case
TG: the judgell be like did you shits text on the job
TG: and you know what
TG: we cannot deny that your honor we did in fact pester each other while in uniform
TG: and boom there goes our credentials

John types rapidly in response to the grey bars of text filling up the screen, holds down the volume button on the side with fingers that may or may not be trembling a little from the sudden shock of the interruption, and then stuffs the phone back in his pocket. "Okay. Alright. Yeah. Sorry about that," he apologizes, his face flushed with embarrassment. "Come on. Sharpshooter must be further in."

TG: alright can you feel anyone else

"At least five people, none of them Sharpshooter." John's face hardens. "Should we try to get around the corner before one of them comes out into the hallway?"

TG: lets do it
TG: were doing this man were making it happen

Heir takes the lead this time, and Dave keeps his head down and his footsteps as light as he can while they race down the hallway, heading for the far end, where the corridor veers off to the right. When they turn they find another set of stairs that lead further down into the earth, and Heir nods when Dave tilts his head to the side in a silent question.

Of course, halfway down the next flight of stairs John's phone goes off again, though much more quietly than before. He pulls it out and texts on the fly, in response to whatever the hell Karkat is freaking out about now, and skips the last few steps in a floating glide. When Dave raises an eyebrow, John just shakes his head without a sound. "There are more people down here," he whispers when they reach the next floor. They duck underneath the stairs themselves into a shadowed cranny, and John multitasks by pestering Karkat and wrapping the wind around them at the same time. Whatever he senses, it makes him shake his head distractedly. "And - ugh, I think Sharpshooter is still one more floor down."

TG: so we need to leg it again
TG: race you there

Heir's smile is faint but it's there. "You're on. The faster we find her, the sooner we can just bounce out of here and call the cops on this place."

On that note, Dave smirks, and steps out from under the stairs. Because John might be able to punch through doors or some shit, but Dave can whup his scrawny butt in a speed trial, hands down. There's no contest.

And then, without warning, there is a violent boom.

wwwwwWWWHOMP!

Dave's feet fly out from under him and he pauses time to land in a crouch rather than faceplanting; at his side Heir tips forward but in the next moment he's floating in midair anyway, his hood flying off his head as he spins around. The ground rolls under Dave again, accompanied by another muffled rumble and a metallic clang, and he braces himself on the wall.

"Not again," Heir says, growling a little under his breath as he hovers just above the roiling ground. "If that's another building blowing up I will put Droog in a cell myself."

Dave readjusts his shades where they're hanging off the front of his vest, and rides out the last few aftershocks. His mind is racing though, and he shakes his head.
TG: no that was definitely below us
TG: that was too fucking close
TG: jesus fuck was that jade
TG: what the heck is going on

"Oh man. If she got caught - well, for one thing she might just teleport out of here before we even find her," Heir says, shaking his head. Then he seems to consider it. "Which - no, that would actually be a pretty acceptable turn of events. I've got as tight a bead on her as I can manage, so if she jumps out hopefully I'll sense it before someone sees us." His phone buzzes and rings in his pocket, and John groans, rubbing the back of his head and ducking back under the stairwell to jab at his phone.

Seriously. That needs to stop. Karkat needs to lay off and John needs to stop doing the indulging thing.

A door flies open ahead of them, and Dave has his swordkind in hand even before the men and trolls in black uniform swarm out into the hallway from multiple doors. None of them so much as glance in the two heroes' direction, though, pounding in a mob toward the next set of stairs down at the far end of the hall. Heir is a ball of tension behind him, even as the group vanishes down to the next basement level, and Dave turns to give the kid a stern texting-to about this whole thing.

And that's when Heir keels over.

TG: what shit
TG: shit fuck
TG: wait why the fuck am i typing this fuck

The hero hits knees first and then crumples up, so at least he doesn't smack his head against the ground before Dave gets there. Instead, Dave hoists John up at the last second and snags him awkwardly by the shoulder and the hair to yank him upright. But John is also dense as fuck when he's not floating and Dave nearly gets dragged down regardless. John had better appreciate the desperately uncool antics Dave has to go through on his behalf because no one else in the world would be worth this kind of stupidity.

Doesn't matter, though. When he grabs John's lolling head and nudges it around so he can see the kid's face, blood gushes out of John's nose like a goddamn fountain, spilling over his sagging mask and staining the fabric.

Glancing around, Dave makes sure the coast is clear still before hooking his arms under John's armpits and dragging him back further into their sneaky corner. Once he's got John propped up against the wall so he won't gargle blood while he's unconscious, Dave kneels next to John and shakes him a little, prodding at the kid's cheek when that gets no response. What the hell, he thinks, gingerly peeling back John's eyelid to see that his eyes have rolled back in his skull. The kid is totally out of it.

And yet, somehow, still clutching his phone in one hand. Which is suspicious as fuck and Dave reserves the bro-given right to confiscate that shit and take a gander at what the hell Karkat could have said that turned John into a bad eromanga character.

He thumbs through the pesterlog without really reading it, scanning until he reaches the very bottom of the archived posts and can start typing. He just hopes that whatever shit is going down with Jade downstairs, she can either hold out until he can get John to a safe spot or teleport out so that they can all get their asses out of the danger zone.

It was supposed to be foolproof. Honestly. Dave wonders why he even bothers worrying about plans
anymore when even his most impulsive of decisions tend to fall apart in the face of their collective holy-shit-quotient.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] has gone idle! --
CG: WHAT THE FUCK.
CG: JOHN WHAT JUST HAPPENED?
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
CG: WHERE DID YOU EVEN GO? I'VE BEEN SITTING HERE FOR THREE FUCKING MINUTES WORKING MYSELF UP INTO A NEW PANIC ATTACK YOU DUMB FUCK -
EB: holy shit how does he even read all those caps all the time
EB: like damn i know i can fucking go for days and days but that just sprained my eyes
EB: you cant even sprain your eyes and yet you have made the impossible possible
CG: ...WHAT.
EB: yo sup karkles we meet again
EB: what the hell did you say to john the kid just passed the fuck out
EB: we were in the middle of enemy territory and it would be goddamn peachy if he you know
EB: werent unconscious and shit
CG: OH GOD. YOU.
CG: WHY IS JOHN UNCONSCIOUS?
CG: I LEAVE YOU ALONE WITH HIM FOR ONE FUCKING HOUR AND
CG: THAT'S IT I'M COMING OUT THERE.
Oh shit. Abort abort abort -

EB: whoa slow your roll man
EB: sit your rump back down wherever the hell you are and dont do the thing
EB: absolutely do not do the thing
CG: I DON'T TAKE ORDER FROM YOU, SHITHEAD.
EB: you take orders from the blue text alright so just sit the fuck down for a hot second
CG: HAHA, WHAT'S THAT? DID YOU ORDER A NICE SERVING OF 'GO FUCK YOURSELF?' TODAY? BECAUSE THAT'S ALL THAT'S ON THE MENU YOU SMIRKING ASSHOLE.
CG: WHAT IS WRONG WITH JOHN?
EB: will you give me like ten seconds jeez

It is hard, typing up a pesterstorm and lugging an unconscious body around at the same time. It is hard, and no one understands. Dave pauses time, yanks the nearest door open, and is greeted by the sight of a tiny supply closet.

Eh, works for him.

He pulls John inside and closes the door again, knocking over a full bottle of bleach that glugs and sloshes as it rolls under the nearest shelf. He's panting a little now from stress, but at least now the chance of some Crew member literally tripping over John has been minimized.

Why the hell had they thought going in after Jade was a good idea, again? Seriously, who in their right mind still let John and Dave make decisions? Clearly neither one of them is cut out for the whole 'planning ahead' gig.

EB: look here i got john into a safe corner but he might be out for a while here
CG: STOP TALKING LIKE YOU'RE HIM.
EB: that actually bothers you
EB: idk man thats pretty much hilarious in all ways im tempted to keep this up
EB: ironically speaking of course
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has gone idle! --
-- turntechGodhead [TG] has joined the chat! --
TG: but is that better
TG: let the red of my text soothe your bewildered troll eyes you sensitive soul
CG: OH FUCK NO.
CG: TELL ME WHAT'S WRONG WITH JOHN.
TG: the fuck should i know?
TG: a minute ago he was fine and texting you
TG: in the middle of sneaky infiltration ops btw
TG: and the next hes on the floor with a beauty of a nosebleed
TG: like this thing was the next niagara falls it was truly a kodak moment
CG: FUCK.
CG: HARLEY AND HIS DAD SAID HE'D BEEN GETTING NOSEBLEEDS ALL DAY. THIS IS THE FIRST I'VE HEARD ABOUT HIM PASSING OUT THOUGH.

Dave needs both hands for the amount of face he needs to slap. Karkat is one thing, he doesn't expect shit out of Karkat, and he's never even met Jade in person, but at least Dadbert or heck, even John himself could have been assed to mention the fact that apparently this shit is normal. Or at least happening on the regular, which, what the actual fuck?

TG: well shit
TG: and no one thought this was a thing that i should be informed of
TG: bless your secretive fucking souls i am going to flip the equivalent of the collective shit of an entire moderately sized developing country if this is some serious brain aneurysm level fuckup you horses ass
CG: ACTUALLY, AS MUCH AS I'M LOathe TO ADMIT IT, I'M RIGHT THERE WITH YOU, STRIDER.
CG: URGH. I THINK I NEED TO GARGLE OXYCLEAN TO GET THE TASTE OF THAT OUT OF MY SHOUT SPHINCTER. NEVER MAKE ME DO THAT AGAIN.
TG: oh snap
TG: you mean we actually agree on something
TG: hang on i need to screenshot this glorious moment for posterity
CG: STOP THAT NO. FOCUS, BULGEGARGLER, IS JOHN RESPONDING YET.
TG: sorry bro too busy gargling bulges over here
CG: OH HEY FUCK YOU.
TG: you know
TG: i have so many options here
TG: usually id say if you insist but dinner first
TG: if youre making an offer youve come to the right place
TG: i could make some witty comment about my dick but its just too long
TG: this is usually a hard topic to bring up but i can try to rise to the occasion
TG: youve really opened the floor to so many comebacks here
TG: but ill just try to suck it up
TG: for the good of the team
CG: …
CG: TELL ME YOU DID NOT JUST MAKE THREE DIRTY PUNS WHILE TEXTING ME ON MY UNCONSCIOUS MOIRAILS PHONE.

Dave tuts to himself, shaking his head in disappointment. He expects better work from someone who's spent so long around John.

TG: six
TG: would it help if I used the blue text again
g
CG: NO.
TG: well shit there goes the roleplay strategy
g
TG: way to harsh on a mans kinks bro
g
TG: hope I didn't jerk you around too much
g
TG: no hard feelings
g
CG: HOW.
CG: HOW IS THIS EVEN POSSIBLE.
TG: were in this together now man
g
TG: we need to see this through to the end
g
TG: we are motherfucking entrenched in this shit and no one goes home until our hate dicksoiree of
g
a text relationship has been immortalized in cinemas worldwide
g
TG: through the fire and the flames
g
TG: we carry on
g
CG: ...I'M DONE.
CG: I'VE GOT NOTHING TO SAY TO THAT.
CG: THERE ARE NO WORDS FOR HOW LITTLE I WANT THIS RIVALRY TO BE A
THING.
CG: CAN WE JUST BE HATEFRIENDS FUCK I DON'T WANT TO DEAL WITH THIS
ANYMORE.
TG: hells yeah bro
g
CG: WHAT.
CG: IT CAN'T BE THAT EASY.

Dave just rolls his eyes because really. Where did John even find this guy?

TG: sure it can
g
TG: im only trying to piss you off because its hilarious when you freak out
g
TG: but also eventually you have to realize that when i say no hate i literally mean no hate
g
TG: so no mas ragefits bro just let the peace of shared brohood flow through you
g
TG: for johns sake if nothing else
g
CG: ...
g
CG: AND YOU'RE NOT TRYING TO MOIRAIL JOHN.
TG: he talks to me about depression and hero shit man theres literally nothing there thats a secret
TG: its like gossiping but also therapy because john is somehow that messed up in the head that i of
g
all people have to point out his coping mechanisms are bullshit
TG: none of this hugging and papping in a weird pile of junk just platonic get your shit together style
brotalks
g
CG: WELL
g
CG: GOOD.
g
TG: yup
g
CG: THAT IS ABSOLUTELY FUCKING FANTASTIC.
TG: it totally is
g
CG: PEACHY.
TG: downright caucasian
g
CG: KEEP IT THAT WAY.
TG: you got it bro
g
TG: so would you ever make out with him

It occurs to him that smirking in a dark supply closet lit only by the bluish glow of a phone screen
with one's best bro's unconscious body leaning up against the wall opposite might actually be creepy
as fuck. But also he's already resigned himself to the fact that he and John are going to need to go
back in time to salvage this shitty operation anyway, so he's got plenty of time to dick around. Ah, the privileges of being able to abuse time travel.

CG: WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?!
TG: that was a hypothetical question
CG: WHAT - WHY WOULD YOU EVER FEEL THE NEED TO ASK THAT KIND OF QUESTION? WHAT IN YOUR SICK, DEPRAVED HUMAN MIND WOULD EVER MAKE THE MENTAL LEAP TO CONSIDERING THAT AN EVEN REMOTELY VIABLE TOPIC OF CONVERSATION IN OUR NEW AND ***EXTREMELY*** TENUOUS HUMAN 'BROHOOD.'
TG: idk seemed like the thing to ask
TG: you and john
TG: smooching
TG: sloppy diamond makeouts
TG: could that ever be a thing
CG: THAT IS SO UNBELIEVABLY NOT YOUR BUSINESS THAT THE UNIVERSE ITSELF IS HAVING AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF FAITH DUE TO A SUDDEN NET RECESSION IN THE BELIEF MARKET.
TG: just saying bro
TG: the kid is hot
TG: it is entirely possible he works out
TG: and you have never been tempted to mack on that
TG: never ever
CG: IF THIS KIND OF AMAZINGLY INVASIVE LINE OF QUESTIONING IS COMMON IN BROHOOD THEN I CAN ONLY TRY TO SCAVENGE SOME KIND OF DIGNITY WITH AN OLD CLASSIC.
CG: I PLEAD THE FIFTH, FUCKWAFFLE.
TG: well dunk me in gravy and call me chicken on waffles i tried
TG: oh my god did i try
TG: oh shit fuck someones breaking in bye
CG: WHAT NO
-- turntechGodhead [TG] has left the chat! --
CG: COME BACK HERE YOU INSUFFERABLE ASS OF A HUMAN-BRO.
CG: GOD FUCKING DAMMIT.

His work here is done.

Also, someone is breaking in hello. Dave draws his sword and yanks time to a stop, just as the door swings outward and someone scowls in at them.

He stops, blinking, because despite constant exposure to the Badass Quandary and more recent sightings of the WV, the sight of a carapacian is still arresting in its alienness.

At this point, Dave is starting to wonder if he just attracts the damn things. Maybe it's pheromones. Maybe he's inherited some kind of gross scent markers from the Lalonde side of the family, because Doc Lalonde had had two Prospitian dames at her lab, too.

However, there's no way this guy is anything but trouble. WV seems to be some kind of adorable anomaly, because this carapacian is dressed in an oversized grey sweater emblazoned with a black spade, and he still scares the fuck out of Dave.

SS: There yah wet blankets are. Thought I'd hafta do a number on this joint before I found you.
SS: Now hightail it outta here afore I introduce you to the business end of a specibus.

At least, Dave thinks, he's got someone to sign at. And this guy's not in a suit and there's a surprising lack of an alarm being raised, so he can only assume that this is another member of Team Break Into the Enemy Base With No Plan. 'Sorry mister, but as awesome as that sounds, I'm still down a lady friend. Can't just ditch her, not when there's explosions going on downstairs,' he signs.

The carapacian itches at his ribs through the sweater, snarling with all his teeth bared. It's a lot of teeth. Dave keeps each hand on a sword whenever he doesn't need it to sign. He eases to his feet and steps between the guy and John.

SS: Oh for fuck's sake, the Witch is already neck deep in it?

SS: And I owe the robot a favor too. Horsefeathers.

SS: Look, just get outta my way and let me handle this. You're already down an Heir. And here I thought Karkat Dumbass was a shitty Knight.

Whoa. Okay, they need to call an emergency halt to this one-alien rant parade, because Dave is missing some steps, here. 'You know Karkat?' he signs, trying to picture this shabby, spindly alien with the calluses and scars of a perpetual bladekind user being related in any way to one Karkat Vantas. Maybe a hero thing?

SS: Know 'im? I just came from giving the kid a piece a my mind.

SS: Who knows, maybe he'll pull his shit together now.

SS: But probably not. He hasn't managed it yet.

SS: Just ask him about Spades Slick. Me 'n him, we got an understanding.

'Hang on,' Dave replies, tugging out his phone. The carapacian is still standing in the open doorway, which is bad news if any of the Crew show up again, but Dave needs to confirm this.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] has entered the chat! --
TG: yo bro are you familiar with one dodgy dersite going by the name of slick
TG: bc hes claiming youre his prior reference
CG: WHAT, IS HE THERE WITH YOU?
CG: THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE, THAT DICK LITERALLY ONLY LEFT THIS HOUSE TWENTY MINUTES AGO. THERE'S NO WAY HE COULD BE IN THE MIDDLE OF DOWNTOWN SEATTLE ALREADY. THAT IS PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE.

'How'd you get here from the Egbert house?' Dave asks. 'Quick, before Karkat has a mental breakdown over this.'

SS: Cop car at ninety miles an hour.

SS: I've been pinching cars from the coppers since Japan, yah punk. Fastest way from one point to another.

SS: People respect the chassis.

…Oh yeah. This guy is definitely more the BQ's type than WV's. Dave mentally revises his first impression of the carapacian.
Because this guy is *insane*.

TG: stole a cop car and pulled some fast and furious shit apparently
TG: dude where did you even find this guy hes a real piece of work
CG: HE FOUND ME. DID YOU NOT READ THE ENTIRE DISSERTATION I HAD TO GIVE JOHN ON THE FUCKED UP WAY THAT ASSHOLE BROKE INTO THE EGBERT HOUSE?
TG: nope
TG: give me sparknotes
CG: FUCK. FINE. HE BROKE IN AND MADE SOME PACT WITH ME AND NOW I THINK HE MIGHT HAVE BLOOD POWERS. BUT HE'S IN THE ANTI-DROOG CAMP SO WE TOLERATE HIS STABHAPPY ASS. FOR NOW.
CG: PLEASE MAKE SOME EFFORT TO KEEP HIM AWAY FROM JOHN BECAUSE THIS GUY IS FUCKING INSANE AND IF HE HURTS JOHN ON YOUR WATCH I WILL FEED YOU YOUR OWN DICK.
CG: THROUGH A STRAW.
CG: 'BRO.'
TG: duly noted
-- turntechGodhead [TG] has left the chat! --

Welp, chalk that one up for the record.

_Everyone around him is insane._

SS: Oh thank fuck, yah haven't actually managed to off your Heir.

SS: I gotta level with yah, kid, I was really starting to wonder if I picked the wrong sap to back in this massive turf war.

'What are you - okay no, no touching John,' Dave signs hastily, looking up from his phone and tensing.

But Spades is still scowling and hunched over in the doorway, barely sparing a glare for Dave. He hasn't moved.

John has.

"Blurghlrgrlg!" John mumbles incoherently, one eye blinking open a little before the other. Gore from his nose paints a drying rust-red stain down the front of his mask, and his eyes are still unfocused, but at least he's talking. He shifts a little against the shelf, grimacing as he sits upright. "Dave?"

'Oh thank fuck,' Dave signs, and then backpedals to pull out his phone. Dammit. Five minutes of freedom, and now back to the old grind.

TG: you passed out man
TG: also karkat sent us some knife happy backup
TG: when you said shit was confusing
TG: i think you were severely understating how confusing said shit happened to be
TG: because SHIT eb i have no idea whats going on anymore

"Did I faint again?" is all John says, rubbing blood from his nose off onto the palm of his glove. He makes a face at it, looks at Dave uncertainly, and only then, with a flinch, seems to remember that he needs to be looking at the phone for this part. Dave also belatedly realizes he's still using John's
phone.

God, they both need to go the fuck to sleep. He tosses John the phone and switches back to his own, never once letting it show on his face just how badly he fucked up the cool gambit in front of Spades.

"Wait. You're the stabbing guy who keeps hurting Karkat?!" John demands at last, shouting a little louder than is smart. Dave cuts a hand curtly in front of his mouth in a silent request that John tone it down, and the kid ducks his head and lowers the volume. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't treat you like any other criminal."

Spades snorts and rolls his eyes, tugging his grubby hat lower over his face.

SS: Because fuck you that's why. The kid needs ta learn to take a jab every once in a while.

SS: The business between me 'n him is none a yours. Now piss off and take this one back to your Knight harem while I round up the Witch for yah.

"Absolutely not!" John starts to get to his feet, lurching back and forth as he does. In the cramped space of the supply closet, this involves Dave nearly taking a flying knee to the temple. He dodges out of the way and the carapacian skitters backward warily while John rests a heavy elbow on a shelf full of cleaning products to lever himself up. Every move looks like it hurts, and Dave rises with him almost unconsciously, his fingers twitching as he sways and tries to judge if John is about to keel over again.

TG: whoa dude
TG: should you even be up and walking
TG: like you were a blood geyser for a second there
TG: you need fluids or some shit
TG: maybe
TG: maybe we should do some strategic retreating here
TG: you need to sit your ass down

"We're not going," John says, his face too pale and his voice gaspy as he rubs the side of his head, "without Jade."

…There's no way to argue with that one. Dave feels his face begin to twist into a grimace of resignation, before he smooths that away.

They've already pulled plenty of stupid stunts tonight. What's one more?

The carapacian gags, snorts long and loud, and horks up a throatful of phlegm to spit to one side, looking sour all the while. After a moment, he shakes his head, and turns his back on their supply closet.

SS: Fine.

SS: It's yer funeral, you dumb sons of mothers.

SS: Only one I got an obligation to is the Blood kid, so if yah go and get your fool selves justly killed I ain't bailing you out.

'Wouldn't expect you to,' Dave signs, because it's faster, and if John throws him a look Dave ignores it in favor of staring this carapacian dickbag down from behind his shades. The alien notices the stare and returns it, squinting over his shoulder, before 'hmphing' audibly and scuttling away down the hall.
toward the stairs down.

"Let's get Jade and go," John says. Dave doesn't miss that he's switched back to calling Jade by her name instead of the pretentious hero alias thing. He wonders if John has noticed. The kid is clammy and pale, and Dave doesn't know what it means that he's apparently been fainting all day long on top of all the emotional shit going down.

When he makes an aborted move to grab John around the shoulders and initiate emergency support protocol, however, John moves; the kid starts off after Spades's receding back with a lurching, uncertain gait, and Dave gets nothing but an armful of air.

Dave follows. It is all he can do.

- 

The answer of where the hell all the earth-shaking booms are coming from is obvious when the three of them round the last turn of the third stairwell. Spades slithers down the stairs in a half-fall, half-scurry and hops the bannister at the curve, so he's out of sight for a moment before Dave flashsteps around. John nearly crashes into the wall, he takes the turn so fast, and Dave yanks on the kid's hood to reel him back around so they can blink down at the rubble-strewn hallway before them.

"Oh jeez," John says, scruffing up his hair with a hand. "Jade. Jade, why?"

TG: so the green lightning fire is her

"Yup."

It's literally everywhere. Just. Lightning everywhere. Dave is both impressed and terrified, and he hasn't even met the girl yet.

SS: Space Witches. What a buncha live wires.

"Well, at least we know she's been here - is still here," John corrects himself halfway through. "The wind still says she's in all that mess. Gosh, what the heck would get her this riled up? Does she not realize there's an entire building on top of us?"

TG: probably thinks she can teleport spam her way out

TG: talk about space kid privilege

That's when the first of the Midnight Crew spots them. Dave isn't entirely sure when they gave up on the whole subtle sneaky approach, but it's shot to hell anyway. The Crew member, a troll with bleached and redyed red hair, yells just as another boom rattles the building and the ceiling creaks ominously. "Agh! How did you even find - shit!"

Dave doesn't let her finish the sentence. He's too late to stop her from yelling, but he darts in between one second and the next, meeting her crowbarkind with the guard of his shitty sword before she can do more than raise it. A flick of the wrist and the Crew woman's specibus goes flying to the side. She yanks her hand back and trips away from him, yanking her suit jacket open so hard a button pops off to reach for a spare pistolkind tucked under her arm.

Dave slices once, twice, three times.

Once and the strap holding the pistol to her side snips in two, and the weapon itself falls to the ground with a clatter.
Twice and he's ducked down to slice through her hamstrings.

Three times and he's flipped the hilt of the swordkind around so he smacks the side of her temple with the other end of the sword.

She falls without another word.

Hell yeah.

SS: Okay.

SS: I revise my earlier statement.

SS: You are hereby designated 'Semi-competent Henchman.' Bask in your new rank on the echeladder, kid.

The carapacian skitters down the last of the steps and seizes the Crew member's discarded crowbar, weighing it in his hands and smacking it against his palm with a sharp nod. Then, without another word, Spades leaps over a pile of collapsed wall and sprints down the hallway to start viciously whacking the next troll in a black suit to cross his path.

Well, at least he's good for mindless violence. Dave just wants John and Jade out of here yesterday, so anything that helps take care of the Crew for him is fucking keen in his book.

So when John claps him on the shoulder and nods, plucking at his blood-stained mask one last time, Dave nods back, and they leap into the mess of Crew members that have flooded the hall in an effort to deal with Jade's crazy explosion free-for-all.

He darts and weaves through the chaos, taking advantage of the confusion that Jade's surprise boom party has unleashed in the ranks. No wonder no one seemed to notice John and Dave landing on the roof; if she's been raising this much hell, the Crew's probably been more concerned with containing her than dealing with two dumb shits wandering around with their heads up their asses. Some Crew are running away from the source of the crashes at the far end of the hall, while others are sprinting toward it, but no one seems to know what their orders are concerning the two heroes and a rogue carapacian when they are suddenly confronted by one of the three. "Where are they even coming from?!” one man shrieks as his tire iron is slammed out of his hand.

The looks of horror and rage and mingled surprise and desperation on some of their faces is almost too much for Dave's brain to process, until they just end up a sea of blurred faces while his eyes sting and burn. With every burst of green space stuff that shatters the overhead lights and crackles along the walls, his eyes hurt more, and he gives up, sliding his shades on again between one slash and the next.

There is a brief minute-long span where there are two Daves fighting at once - current-Dave finds one of his strikes backed up by an extra jab from a copy of his own weapon, and the future one just smirks at him, slicing a greenblood's whipkind in two just as Dave chokes on pain and flings himself back a minute in time to catch up with himself. He rolls with it without thinking through the implications, just letting the loops handle themselves.

And all the time he keeps John in the corner of his eye, watching for any stumble or stutter in the other hero's pace as the Heir sweeps the feet out from under his opponents with the wind. He seems to be fighting fine - at one point he punches a guy so hard the troll nearly ploughs through a wall - but Dave can't forget that not five minutes ago John was down for the count. He needs to keep this kid safe.
He thinks that, just as they reach the middle of the hall and bright light burns right through his shades and momentarily blinds him. The shockwave of the latest boom catches him off guard and flings him backwards before a wall oh so kindly interrupts the impromptu flight. His ears ring and he lets out a choked, soundless yelp as he fumbles the landing. He lands hard on the hip on the same side as his patched up stab wound. The injury, which had been nothing more than a blissful burn during the haze of battle, flares screaming back to life. His internal metronome, which has been ticking off every beat of a very successful strife combo streak, cuts off as something hard and round in his pocket cracks hard against his hip bone and then, abruptly, pops out of his pocket and shoots across the floor.

Dave blinks his eyes furiously, one arm of his sunglasses hanging off his ear, and squints at whatever the hell he just dropped.

His stomach flips like a pancake on a hot griddle.

Because it's the cue ball. It rolls to a stop eventually, even as Dave watches in fascinated horror at the arc it takes before coming to a halt. He crawls after it, only getting his feet under him for a moment before the pain sends him to his knees again, but years of training at least keep him moving until he closes a hand over the wayward cue ball.

But you see.

The thing is.

"Dave!" John yells. "Are you okay?!" Dave snaps out of the moment of frozen confusion at the note of alarm in John's voice as a jolt of fresh adrenalin shocks his system. This time, when he drags himself up on the wall, shoving the cue ball into his pocket, his heart is pounding hard enough that he can ignore the stab wound again. All he can hope is that the stitches won't pop from all this.

John is at his side a moment later, and the wind whirling around him is almost visible now, heavy with dust and micro-fragments of broken walls and ceiling tiles. He looks like some insane air dervish, his hood off and his hair in total disarray, and with an earnest, maniacal blue-eyed expression he hands Dave a broken sword blade that he doesn't remember flying off the hilt of his now shattered blade. "You dropped this," he says.

Which is fucking sweet of him, but seriously, what the fuck good would the sharp pointy end of the broken sword do Dave? God, even now this kid is a complete doofus.

They don't have time for Dave to reassure him anyway. Not now that the points do matter. So Dave just flings the hilt of his sword at the short woman who charges at them from behind John's back, just because he's not sure if John notices her coming. John proves that impression wrong a moment later, when the woman dodges the tossed chunk of metal and walks right into a conveniently levitated chunk of masonry. She topples over backwards, and Dave has no choice but to hold up his hand for an obligatory high five. John obliges, a brief, wild grin on his face.

Their mutual awesomeness thus noted for the record, Dave draws a new sword and they spin to face the end of the hall again.

And then Jade Harley punches through the wall.

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It feels like someone's taken a bass guitar and smashed it over her head.
Her brain aches something fierce, and when Jade rolls over, cheek scraping over cold metal, she reaches out automatically for her sylladex. She has to have picked up some kind of headache medication along the way, right?

Her hand finds nothing but air, and that's when she realizes that she's in serious trouble.

She closes that hand into a fist, and lets a groan escape her as she gropes around with the other hand, feeling for the pocket dimension that she has always been able to sense at her fingertips. She eases one eye open and braves the really bright overhead lights to chance a look around.

Everything is swirly for a couple of seconds, and then she realizes her goggles are missing, leaving only her plain old glasses that she wears underneath. She blinks and the bars and roof of the cage slides into focus.

Oh right. The cage. Jade flops back on her side, pouting, because she can't believe she feel for something so stupidly obvious as a distraction! She should have known Diamonds Droog would be too smart to get caught monologuing. And now she can't feel anything around her: everything has gone too still, like the whole world's frozen in place and the only thing Jade can feel moving is herself.

All of her constant sense of the space around her - gone. Just like that.

She squints at the cage bars, and reluctantly admits that the science that would have gone into creating something that would just shut down her powers like this must have been unbelievably cool. Is it an inherent property of the metal of the cage, like some kind of kryptonite, or perhaps an energy current being conducted through the bars? Like, would this same material work on someone like John, whose powers worked through a completely different medium? Or is this just a space thing?

Beyond the cage bars, Jade can make out a bank of computers, some of them quietly beeping, but she's at the wrong angle to be able to read the screens. The room is relatively small, the walls sterile and white, and aside from her and the cage and the computers, there's not much to be seen other than a stack of filing cabinets. A tiny black camera winks from the top right corner of the ceiling, silent and judging as Jade rolls around with a post-sedation headache.

She flops over again and makes a good faith attempt to prop herself up on her elbows, head spinning. She can't tell if she's this dizzy because of the lingering effects of the tranquilizer dart, or because the world has gone flat and two dimensional thanks to the loss of one of the key senses she's always used to orient herself spatially. For instance, she misjudges the distance between her hand and the floor, and slams her palm down, jolting the bones against unforgiving iron. She shakes her head and her hair falls loose over both shoulders, pooling in a wavy lump on the floor under her.

That's when she spies the circle of fluffy white fur curled up off to the side. "Bec!" she says, her mouth full of cotton, and after making the mistake of crying to stand up - ohhhh boy, that hurts her head - she army crawls over to him on her elbows, sinking a hand into the scruff between the wolf's shoulders to seek reassurance.

She doesn't get it. Jade stares, and shakes Bec a little. It doesn't respond. When she shakes it harder, the wolf slumps a little. She can't feel the usual crackle of static electricity or unnatural heat under her hands, and she doesn't think that can be explained just by the loss of her own powers.

Bec isn't moving. Bec isn't even active. She shakes it, horrified, but the analytical part of her mind has already started to piece this whole mess together. Her spacey thing isn't working. Bec is powered by some mix of harmless radioactivity and spatial distortion, though she's never known the exact source of the wolf's power.
Whatever it is that Diamonds Droog slapped together the create this cage, as long as they're in it, Bec is dead. No wonder it hasn't tried to jump her to safety yet. They're both stuck here, in Droog's clutches.

It's not a comforting thought. Jade tugs on Bec's fur one last time, and this time scans the room with a little more urgency.

Because if Bec's not getting her out of here, and she can't access her own powers, she needs another plan. *Always have an exit strategy*, Grandpa drilled into her. While a lot of Jade's exit strategies rely on her space power - too many of them, if she's honest with herself, a fact that would have made Grandpa veery disappointed in her - she's sure she can figure something out.

If only all of her tools weren't stuck in the sylladex! When she pats down her own body, she realizes that someone has taken off her lab coat and her belt, too, so that all that's left is her galaxy-patterned suit. It makes sense that any weapons or tools she had on her person would have been confiscated the moment Droog caught her, but it's just another thing stacking the odds against Jade. She has any number of soldering tools or minor explosives in her sylladex; all she'd need would be a teeny tiny amount of C4 on one of the bars of the cage and she'd be totally set to bust out of here and wreck some shit.

But she can't reach any of it! Darn it!

Jade folds her arms and rests her back against the bars behind her, looking from Bec to the bars opposite to the computers just out her sight. She can't even see hinges or a door or a lock on any side of the cage; it's painfully minimalistic, and if she recalls how that helicopter dropped in on top of her, it most likely only opens through the roof or the floor, or by some other means she'd need a code or a key to unlock. If she had her powers, she'd be able to feel out a card reader or something like that and destroy it - but if she had her powers, she wouldn't be in this mess!

But...wait…

Jade sits upright, waits for the dizziness to pass, and sucks her lower lip into her mouth as she measures the bars of the cage and the space between them. She wastes a good ten seconds waiting for the exact dimensions of the cage to jump into her head before she remembers that she needs to actually estimate it herself, not just let her sense of space do the work for her. She eyeballs it and thinks that each cylindrical bar has a diameter of an inch and a half; between each bar there's about a four and half - or maybe five? - inch gap. The lack of surety grates on her.

...But she might be able to make it. Maybe. It is entirely possible that she could just sort of…

Jade shrugs. She wouldn't know unless she tried. Patting Bec on the head, she crawls over to the bars nearest the exit and the computers, and pulls herself upright. Her body feels unwieldy and heavy, and the more she thinks about it, the less likely it seems like she can pull this off. To pump herself up, she sticks her foot through the gap in the bars.

Success! Jade grins and wiggles her toes in her shoes, tapping her foot on the ground outside the cage. Excited, she waits before trying to yank her head through, and instead focuses on breathing out, sucking in her belly to angle her hips past the gap. Her butt gets about halfway through, and there's plenty of room for her waist -

When, suddenly, all her wonderful progress stops, and movement sideways becomes impossible. She's got most of her right arm and leg through the gap, and the indignation is immediate. She glances down, nearly beaming her head on the bar in front of her forehead as she tries to figure out what stopped her. She tries to relax some more, and wiggles her free arm and leg to no effect. Her
back is right up against the bar behind her, and bar before her presses in close along her iliac crest on the right side, and the whole set up is tight enough that even when she breathes out all the way, so that there's no air left that her diaphragm can force out -

Her chest remains stuck.

"...No way," Jade says. She seizes the bar with a hand and yanks herself to the side, but only succeeds in crushing her ribs even more. Maybe with a little more leverage, or with something slippery like lotion from her inaccessible sylladex, she'd be able to force them through. But there's just no way she can make her chest any flatter.

This is sooo dumb. Incredibly dumb. Stupidly dumb.

She is stuck in this dumb cage...because of boobs.

Jade squeezes back into the cage and falls to her knees, seizing her chest with both hands.

"Noooooooon!" she howls at the ceiling, loudly enough that she kind of misses the door of the room opening.

"Oh, there's no need for that. I'm hardly going to hurt you."

Jade whips around, hair flying, and groans when she sees Diamonds Droog stepping into the room on a pair of heels. The Crew suit member has shed her scarf and coat, and is once again in a sharp black suit and tie. An unfamiliar female troll in a black suit follows at Droog's heels, her head bowed so that Jade can't see the color of her eyes as the troll scribbles away on a notepad.

"That's odd, really," Droog continues, hitching her hip elegantly on the edge of the table that holds the computers, eyeing Jade with a glimmer of that terrifying intelligence in her eyes. "It should have taken much longer to wear off than that. The Scratch promised us at least a few hours -" Droog cuts off, and gives Jade a strange look, one that the mob boss is clearly trying to suppress, with little success. "...Is there...any particular reason you insist on clutching your chest while I'm speaking to you?"

Jade blinks. She looks down at her hands, which are still grabbing her boobs.

Then she looks up. "No. Why?"

Droog stares. The ensuing lull in the conversation quickly becomes awkward, and Jade raises her eyebrows. "...Are you going to stop," the Crew leader says at last, sounding defeated. It's not really a question.

Jade looks down again - and shrugs. "Why?"

Droog sighs heavily. "Is it really possible," she says, pained, "that I am the only person in this entire city with some sense of decorum?"

Jade doesn't really know what that's supposed to mean, but she's starting to get that the dramatic-boob-grabbing thing might be weirding Diamonds out. Maybe because she doesn't have boobs of her own.

But there are entire cultures out in the world where people who have boobs don't even wear anything over them, so Jade has never really understood why stuff like that really bothered people. With trolls there isn't even a real correlation between gender identity and what they have up top - it's all muscle to them. It's just not a thing that really seems significant, except that in some places she would have gotten arrested for some reason if she didn't stay clothed all the time. Back home Bec certainly had
no problem with her running around in the buff!

"I still can't believe you'd betray me this way," she mutters as she drops her hands and sits cross-legged with a huff. "Not you," she adds when Droog's eyes twitches. "Anyway, what were you saying? Was it going to be something like, 'Ohohoho! I have decided to set you free, and renounce my life of crime!'?"

Droog is not impressed by Jade's imitation. "No," she says flatly, folding her arms and tapping a single fingernail in a slow beat against the other arm. "Oddly enough, I intend to complete the task that my employer has engaged me for. I would have shipped you off to base already, but I would prefer to have a personal hand in your delivery. I'm certain that, in my absence, any number of things would go wrong with the transfer."

"Ugh! That's no fun!" Jade says, scratching at the back of her head. She still feels achy and heavy, and she misses the ability to float something fierce. "Why does your employer even want me so bad? He sounds like a real creep!"

She can only guess it has something to do with the fact that the Midnight Crew's boss wants to start the end of the world and everything. But that still leaves so many unanswered questions, things Grandpa either didn't know before he left or chose to keep from her for whatever reason - why the mysterious Doc Scratch wouldn't just kill the four of them right off so they couldn't interfere with his plans, why he could never find her out on the island, why he'd try so hard to nab Jade and Dave and not Rose or John so consistently.

And Jade doesn't like the not knowing.

"That is hardly something that I would discuss with a prisoner," Droog says. She waves a hand dismissively, her lip curling. "I'm certainly not going to monologue further."

Jade deflates a little. "Aww. Then why are you even here? What do you want?"

Droog is quiet for a long moment. "Get out," she says, without looking away from Jade's face, which baffles Jade for all of two seconds before the troll straightens up from over her notepad, blinking at Droog with wideset golden eyes before bowing her head and leaving the room. The door shuts behind the troll with a click and Droog waits with her head tilted to one side, as though listening for the Crew member's footsteps as they echo down the corridor.

And then Droog refocuses on Jade, leaning forward with narrowed eyes. "Slick has vanished again," she breathes out, the hostility in her voice so sudden that Jade jerks her head up on reflex, one hand clenching into a fist against the cold floor of the cage. "Into the same void-contaminated area that you did. The same area in which I know the Heir of Breath often vanishes into, which has hidden him from the Boss's sight for so long." Droog snorts. "Not that that would protect him, if we chose to shut him down. No, I care very little about what you heroes do, not when you are so easily managed, but Spades Slick? That, I care about a great deal."

She doesn't mention Hemogoblin, and that makes Jade wonder not just how far this void protection covers John's neighborhood, but how much Karkat even registers in Droog's world. She went out of her way to isolate the troll last night, but Droog seems to have no compunction about separating what her boss wants from what she wants.

Whoever this Spades guy is, it sounds preeetty personal.

"So?" Jade sniffs, rolling her eyes. "Why are you telling me this?"
"I am telling you this because I could, if I wished, make the trip from here to the delivery point...unpleasant. For you," Droog adds, off-handedly, as though Jade really needed that cleared up. "But I have no personal animosity towards you. This is simply a matter of business. Tell me the connection between you heroes and Slick, and perhaps I can bring myself to make your stay here...more or less accommodating." Her smirk is crooked. "It's not an offer I make to many others."

Oh man. Jade can't keep herself from biting her lip, because she's never had much of a poker face. She has no idea who this Spades Slick character might be, but hopefully Droog can't tell that's what is making Jade nervous. She needs to keep this dialog going as long as she can to try and talk Droog into giving away some tidbit of information Jade can use to escape! "Yeah, he's just, you know. Around," she hedges, shrugging. "I mean, when he's not - uh, away."

...Sooooo smooth.

Droog traces the corner of a keyboard with her finger, her expression unreadable apart from that barely repressed hostility. "Oh, do go on," she says, with a voice so flat Jade can't tell if it's sarcastic or not.

Right now, Jade thinks, would be a totally awesome time for her brain to start working again! There has to be something she can use, something that she's seen or heard or read over the past few days that might give some hint as to who Droog is talking about, something that she could use to tempt Droog into making a concession that will give Jade her way out -

Droog exhales sharply, disgusted, and rises to her feet, tucking a hair back up under her hat as she flicks her eyes toward the door, and even though Jade recognizes the tactic for what it is, she can't help stammering and blushing and blurting out - "He's really been giving you the old Trotsky, huh!"

She laughs even more nervously when Droog turns slowly back toward her, and then she just keeps going because what the heck! Why not? Her mouth is running along ahead of her brain, but maybe it's onto something! "Yeah, I mean - Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, Spades? Did you guys at least hold a show trial for him at least before you kicked the poor guy out of the card suit club? That's just common courtesy! If you're gonna exile someone and chase them around trying to assassinate them afterward, the show trial is key!"

"We -" is as far as Droog gets before the woman clamps her mouth shut, striding forward and almost - almost coming within arm's length. Jade tenses, tries not to lean toward Droog; she can't risk giving the game away. "Just what has he been telling you?" Droog breathes, barely above a whisper.

_I don't even know who we're talking about_, Jade thinks, and she swallows hard. "Not a lot," she says, shrugging, and then leans forward to whisper, quiet enough that hopefully Droog will need to come closer. "He reeeeeeally doesn't like you guys." A safe enough guess. But the rest...well, let's just say Jade's told some whoppers in her time, but this stuff takes the cake! "I mean, why would he, after you ruined the snazzy card metaphor!"

The pause lasts long enough that, for a wild moment, Jade thinks she's actually somehow managed to nail this sucker. And then -

"A load of nonsense, then," Droog mutters, and Jade's heart sinks. Droog's frown has gone speculative, but the Crew boss doesn't come closer to Jade. Instead, the tall woman paces away, one hand in her pocket while the other smoothes the fall of her tie with an almost absent-minded compulsion before reaching up to rub at her lower lip. Then she murmurs something to herself, something that this time _Jade_ can't quite catch, and stands still, facing the other wall.

Then at last Droog repeats, "Nonsense," and she turns to glance at Jade, one eyebrow raised. "What
has he offered you? Insider information on the Midnight Crew? I can assure you, he doesn't have it."

Scorn layers her voice, and she smiles cruelly. "We've never had a Spades member."

Jade just stays quiet. It had been a gamble, and for a moment there she'd thought she'd almost had Droog hooked. But no matter how she strains her brain, she can't pick apart reasoning that had caused her to say all those things. The card suit connection seems so obvious, in retrospect, but apparently it's not a thing?

Well, Jade for one is almost personally offended by the fact that the Crew would pass up such an awesome opportunity to complete their naming scheme!

"Loyalty to Slick will get you nowhere fast, girl." Droog must have had enough of Jade's awkward silence. The woman saunters forward half a step, not nearly close enough, and stares until Jade reluctantly meets her eyes. "He's nothing but a coward, a shell without a lick of decency. He's led me quite a few trips for biscuits, but that he'd feed you a line like that only shows that he's desperate -"

"Oh!" Jade exclaims before she can stop herself, clapping both hands over her mouth two seconds after the gasp of realization escapes her. Droog jerks bodily, as though stunned that Jade would be so rude as to interrupt her midsentence.

But she gets it now! The carapacian on the roof, the one who'd stopped Droog from advancing on Hemogoblin until Sharpshooter and Heir got back to pull him out! That's who this is all about? Because the only other shell Jade knows in town is WV, and she highly doubts that a fine upstanding sidekick like the Wonder Vee would have anything to do with a lady like Droog! "But he got away when he was right there on the roof last time?" Jade giggles. "Maybe you're slipping!"

Droog's posture is perfect, but when she cocks her head to the side, hair falling out from beneath her hat, the movement is too slow and deliberate, and the smile that creeps across her face shows too many teeth. "No. I'm really not." She walks toward the door. "Unpleasant it is, then."

Jade doesn't catch on until after Droog shuts the door behind her, leaving Jade alone.

Out in the hallway, Diamonds Droog comes to an abrupt halt mid-step. She looks down at her hands, considering, and then murmurs something to herself again.

When she's observed the results, Diamonds nods, her expression sealed off so that none of it shows in her face.

This requires a change in plans. More than that, she thinks, it requires a change in perspective. She has always prided herself on the ability to get the job done. But knowing what she knows now -

Well. Self-preservation is key to completing the job, after all. Diamonds has never been one of those to sacrifice herself for a cause.

She removes a makeup compact mirror from her pocket, and dabs at her face until it's a perfectly smooth mask, artfully and tastefully done. Marlowe returns a moment later, a quiet presence by her shoulder, and Diamonds snaps the mirror shut, sliding it into the pocket and turning to Marlowe with an assessing gaze. "Yes ma'am?" he says at once, his chin rising a little, as though to bask in her regard.

For once, the unthinking obedience and devotion of her subordinates doesn't reassure Diamonds. It is worrying. Die's work is critical to maintaining the loyalty of a gang of criminal rabble-rousers, according to the Boss, but -
Diamonds silences the thought, and thinks instead back to a note in pink, left for her in a carapacian colony an age and a day ago. The inklings of her future course bubble up in her mind, but she can't afford for certain parties to know what she's planning. For her own sake and no one else's, Diamonds ushers them to the back of her mind, and thinks of nothing but the void.

She would never actually carry out such a plan, after all. Planning it would have no impact on the real world if she convinces herself and anyone listening that she'd never follow through.

"Change in plans, Marlowe," she says, and she strides toward the elevator, the one that stops at the basement floors and her suite, and no other floor. Marlowe fawns at her heels, his hands folded behind him as Diamonds swipes her keycard and hits the button for her floor.

And Diamonds chooses.

"Send Crichton to keep an eye on Sharpshooter, and recall the chopper. You and I have business above."

Marlowe stirs with unease, because he is loyal, not stupid. "Ma'am?" he says hesitantly, the closest he's capable of coming to questioning her orders aloud.

Because Crichton is competent at what he does, and no more. He starts rumors, he lies compulsively through his teeth to the media, and he infiltrates legal structures to influence the course of investigations with reckless abandon, confident in the Crew's ability to recall him if he's ever caught. He is a useful tool, capable of feigning sanity when he needs to, but only in those situations for which he is designed to be used. Many in Diamonds's employ are the same way - not all of them can be as useful as Marlowe in as many different situations.

Crichton is no good for guard duty. Crichton is a fanatic; worse, he is a violent fanatic. Not Die's best work, not by a long shot, and Diamonds has always had to maneuver him carefully, so that his usefulness outweighs his insanity.

And yet, Diamonds thinks, he is exactly who she would need in that room with Sharpshooter, if she were to enact that plan.

Not that she would ever do such a thing. No, never.

"Do it," she tells Marlowe, cold enough that the man flinches, and then she thinks of nothing but the void zone around a certain neighborhood in the suburbs of Seattle, and steps into the elevator. "And if you should come across Slick…"

Diamonds flicks her key card at Marlowe, who, to his credit, doesn't fumble the catch. He snatches it out of the air and turns it over. He frowns with barely concealed confusion at the front of the white card, emblazoned with a diamond so pale a pink it barely stands out from the rest of the card.

"Give him my regards," Diamonds finishes, allowing a hint of her smirk to slip loose. When Marlowe sees it, the tension leaves his shoulders, and he nods, tucking the key card into his own pocket as the elevator doors shut between them.

Her phone goes off twice in her pocket as the floors flash by, and Diamonds removes it to handle two conversations at once.

The first is simple.

??: Your base is about to be compromised.
DD: < By?
The Heir and the human Knight. They seek the Witch.

DD: > Mmm. I'll keep that in mind.

DD: < Oh, you're doing fine. There is no need for drastic measures. Your target has been reacting exactly as we could have hoped. Your autonomy has not led you astray. Carry on as you have been.

DD: > However, there is one thing you can tell me.

DD: < What is it?

DD: < You know what.

DD: ...I see. That.

DD: Very well.

Once she receives the reply, Diamonds tucks the answer away in the back of her mind for safe keeping. It's a remarkably ordinary answer, and she can only imagine what she'll be able to find out about it once she has the time. But for now, the answer is enough, and she passes it on to Marlowe with further instructions. She's never encountered this exact scenario before, but she's dealt with worse.

The second is a trial run, one that leaves Diamonds's heart beating so hard that it rattles her to her core.

Droog.

DD: > Boss? Whaddya need?

Oh, merely to provide you with a forewarning. My sources indicate an approximately 60% chance that you will be in the vicinity of a void-blocked zone before the night is done. Your actions tonight for the rest of the night have gone dark.

Once you pass into such a zone, I cannot guarantee the successful outcome of any of your ventures in Seattle. I am merely (mostly) omniscient in matters like these, and I do know that the certainty of your capture of Slick decreases by roughly 30% if you persist in taking a course of action that I cannot foresee. And I know how much his capture would mean to you.

DD: < I see. That is not promising. I cannot think of why I would need to visit such a place at the moment, but I will keep your warning in mind, Doctor.

DD: > Anything else?

Hearts has returned. I'll be sure to pass along the report that you have completed the groundwork for operations in Seattle.

DD: < But I have not -

DD: > ...Thank you, sir.

Never a problem, Droog. Ta for now.

Diamonds closes her phone just as the elevator opens up onto her private rooms. There is a minute tremor in her fingers, and she squeezes her hands into fists until it goes away. She peels off her suit jacket and straightens her tie. In her mind's eye she's watching the pieces fall into place.

Tonight won't end well for the Midnight Crew.

But it may turn out just the way she wants it to.

The only question is, will the boss notice?

The goldblood troll enters the room a few moments after Droog leaves, her wide eyes looking perpetually startled as she goes straight to the bank of computers and starts tapping away. Occasionally she makes notes on her pad of paper, but she never ventures close enough to the cage.
for Jade to grab her.

Sooo frustrating! Jade huffs and drags Bec's limp body closer so she can scratch behind the wolf's ears. Usually it's a comforting action, but the lack of electric green static just makes her feel even more uneasy, so she stops and hugs her knees instead, pouting and pulling weird faces in an attempt to catch the guard's attention.

That works about as well as one would expect it to. But Jade's fresh out of ideas! She supposes she could try to break the cage bars, but she has to wait until she's alone to try that or they might knock her out with a sedative again. Which would kiiinda suck.

So she flops over sideways onto Bec, and crosses her eyes at the goldblood until the door opens again. She bolts upright when the door slams into the wall behind it. The goldblood clearly wasn't expecting the abrupt arrival either, because she flinches before turning back to her work.

Another human man steps in. Jade thinks he looks vaguely familiar, but that might just be because he has a pretty generic face. Maybe if he had facial hair or something it would make him more distinguishable, but right now she just thinks maybe he might have been one of the people on the roof with Droog the other night. He sails right by the other Crew member without even glancing in her direction; he pulls out a chair from the computer desk and sits down in it, watching Jade with distant eyes.

"Uh. Hi!" she says after a few minutes of that, because if someone doesn't say something the staring is about to get really creepy.

"Oh, hello," the man says absently, seemingly more interested in keeping an uncomfortably close eye on her than speaking.

"...What's up?" she tries again. Her hand tugs at Bec's fur absently, and her chest tightens at the lack of response. "Uh. Can I help you?"

"You can remain within your cage. The Lady Droog has asked me to keep guard on you. So. I will." That last part is said with such force that spittle flies from the man's mouth, completely at odds with the placid serenity of his expression. Jade isn't sure he's even really looking at her - he's off in his own little world, one that seems to include him and Droog and no one else.

...Ookay. She got stuck with the weirdo. Jade tries to think about something else.

She wonders if John has noticed she's gone yet. Going off without telling anyone probably hadn't been the smartest idea she's ever had, but she's used to working with only Bec and WV, and those two were usually always with her. But John had been upset and Karkat had been hurt and Jade had thought that tracking down Droog was the least she could do for them after all the trouble she caused by showing up all unannounced.

Now, with WV left behind to cover for her, Jade thinks it could be a while still before they even realize she's not in the house. And she has no idea how they would figure out where to look for her! She's really landed herself in a jam, here, and she's not sure backup is coming!

…

But pouting won't get her anywhere! She needs take matters into her own hands. Jade rolls her shoulders and lets go of her knees, scooting a little closer to the cage bars. She pretends to over-exaggeratedly glance at the goldblood, and then leans in to whisper at the man. "So, you work for Droog, huh. So what's that like?"
"Wonderful," the man says. There's not even a lick of sarcasm in his voice; he totally means it. It's kind of terrifying, and Jade gives serious consideration to moving away from the bars because she's pretty sure crazy that strong could be contagious, science be damned.

"Can't you be more specific?" She makes a face. "Come on, I'm bored and this cage is dumb! What kind of work do you do that involves kidnapping people and stuff?"

The man snorts. "As though I would give away those kind of secrets to someone like you," he says scornfully. "I'm here to guard you, not entertain you."

"No, come on! Droog isn't here, she wouldn't know. Besides, who am I going to tell? My dead dog?" Jade shakes Bec for emphasis.

"Oh, she would know. And if she didn't, he would," he mutters, and the golden-eyed troll looks up long enough to shudder in sympathy, nodding.

Hmm. Someone else they're afraid of? Jade wonders how much cold hard cash she'd rake in if she bet they were talking about Doc Scratch himself.

"That's not creepy at all. Uh," she tries again, beaming as hard as she can. "You don't mind having to do criminal stuff all the time? I mean, no offence, but your boss is kind of evil!"

"Shut up." The man lurches forward in his seat, his expression hard. "How dare you speak of the Lady that way?"

"Because she is! You're the bad guys!" Jade inches back. "Maybe I should do a general survey, while I'm here! Find out what it is that makes bad guys be bad guys and all that, and why you're so dumb that you'd listen to people with card names instead of regular names. I've never done something like that before!"

The man stands up so fast the chair topples over backwards. "You would insult her name?" he says, and wow, Jade hadn't even realized she'd been ticking him off that bad! This guy's leapt from blank to incensed faster than a bounding jackalope.

If he would just step a little closer…

Jade tenses up, raking her eyes over the man's body and bemoaning her lack of space sense for, like, the five hundredth time in the past ten minutes. Seriously, how do other people walk around not knowing all the time?

By the computers, the goldblood cowers, and then looks annoyed when she realizes the lunge wasn't aimed at her. "Stop badgering the prisoner, Crichton," the troll snaps in a low monotone, before jabbing at the keyboard in front of her. "Do you not have anywhere else to be?"

"This is where the Lady wants me. This is where I stay." Crichton eyes Jade with open animosity - too much animosity, actually. She stares, fascinated and honestly kinda worried, at the thin trickle of spittle that he doesn't seem to notice is still stuck to his chin.

Jade's seen that kind of blind, unseeing anger before, just before a troll named Petran shot her own teammate in the shoulder. But that troll had been totally out of it, angry at both Jade and her own boss, and Jade had sort of assumed it was some symptom of coldblood dementia. It's a lot more common than people like to think about.

But this Crichton guy's not a troll. So maybe the Midnight Crew just likes hiring people with seeerious issues. She'll have to take that into consideration if she does do that whole survey thing.
As scary as this guy is, though, this is good. This is exactly what Jade needs to happen. She thinks she sees knives at his hip, and the outline of a pistolkind holster under his arm, both of which seem like standard gear for Droog's people.

He just needs to come…a little closer…

Jade rolls her eyes, and singsongs, "You like Droooog~! I can so tell, mister! You're busted!"

Crichton's pupils dilate. "Blasphemer," he breathes.

...She's got this one in the bag. She shoots him a pair of finger pistols. "Crichton and Droog, sittin' in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-"

"Don't aggravated him -" is about as far as the goldblood gets before Crichton totally loses his shit.

He slams into the bars of the cage and the entire structure rattles and clangs.

Jade lunges forward to meet him, catching the arm that latches around a bar by the wrist and yanking it towards her. Crichton's off balance, and Jade's still strong, and when she kicks through the gap between the bars, she jams her knee through so hard she can feel her patella crack painfully.

But she also kicks him in the 'nads, and in the end, isn't that all that really matters? His ugly snarl cuts off with a short, pinched-off shriek, and by that time Jade has her other hand through the bars to yank open his suit jacket.

She misses the gun, her fingers flying wild in the gap between his side and his arm, and when she finds out who designed a cage to nullify her powers, she will teleport their dumb butts to the middle of the Sahara. Or maybe the Roof of the World. Somewhere remote, so they can think very, very hard about what Jade has to put up with!

Crichton grunts and starts to jerk his arm back, and Jade wings it, leaning back all the way, planting her foot on the bar, and tugs on that arm with both hands. The cage bars clang even louder as his skull crashes against them, and the man's head lolls, eyes blinking unseeingly as he sinks to his knees.

Jade's heart pounds, and she's horribly aware that she's not aware of exactly where the goldblood is at this moment, has no idea whether the troll might have fled in the first crucial moments of the struggle. If that is the case, Jade's plan needs to be reworked again, and her head spins as she flips open the thumb break snap to draw the pistolkind. "Don't move!" she shouts even before she looks up, keeping a grip on Crichton's arm as she looks up through the curtain of her hair to see where the troll has gone. She has to squint to see through her own hair, and blowing air through her mouth to try and move it does absolutely nothing. Chalk up another inconvenience for this dumb cage!

The goldblood is still in the room. She's dropped the notepad and made a break for the door, but at Jade's shout she freezes, one claw on the doorknob. Jade swallows hard, and clicks back the safety deliberately, so the sound is very obvious. The troll's back stiffens. "They don't call me Sharpshooter for nothing, you know!" Jade says, her voice more unsteady than she'd like. She has no idea how deeply ingrained her sense of space is in her marksmanship; Grandpa had done his best to make sure she knew all the bases, and that she never relied too much on her targeting scopes and her glasses on the firing range or the obstacle courses, but she's off-balance enough that she wouldn't trust herself to hit a skeet in an empty field.

Thankfully, the troll's claws slowly rise up in the air, away from the door handle, and Jade breathes out shakily, adjusting her hold on Crichton so that she can give him a good smack again if he pulls himself together. "Now," she says, rolling the shoulder of the arm holding the pistolkind, "you know
how all those computers work. You're in charge of monitoring the cage."

The goldblood turns ever so slightly so she presents a smaller target, her wide eyes burning as she stares back at Jade. "Dn't tell her 'nything," Crichton mumbles, and Jade yanks him up against the bars again so he falls over sideways. There's a thing trickle of blood running from a cut across his forehead, and the whole area is gonna bruise something fierce, but she's watching her strength. He'll be fine, if she doesn't have to keep scrambling his brains like eggs!

"Just let me out," Jade coaxes, trying for her most friendly, chipper smile. "I won't hurt anyone. I just want to leave! Pinky promise!"

The troll hesitates.

Jade feels a tremor shake her raised arm, jittering from having to hold her hand steady and keep the pistol locked on the troll's kneecap. She hasn't had to deal with shakes for...a while. She blames the unique circumstances of this particular standoff for the jitters. Hopefully, they're small enough that the goldblood won't notice while she's debating whether to listen to Jade or not.

Gosh, Jade hasn't kneecapped someone with a real bullet since...Budapest? Gosh, that was a while ago. She really hopes she doesn't have to use this stupid gun for real. If she can just get out of this cage and reach her sylladex...

"...Let me reach the computer?" the goldblood says at last, closing her luminescent eyes with an expression close to pain. A tiny trickle of blood leaks from her left nostril, but Jade has no idea what could be causing it.

"Just don't try to set off an alarm, or any other funny business!" Jade warns. "If this thing opening up isn't the first thing that happens -"

"I understand," she cuts Jade off, edging toward the computers. Jade tracks the Crew member as she leans over the keyboards on the desk; her gaze is momentarily drawn to the tiny droplets of yellow blood that dribble down the troll's upper lip and fall off onto the desk, before she snaps out of it and aims at the near knee again. One of her eyes is starting to spasm from the sustained focus, but she thinks it's just stress.

"Y'can't do this," Crichton slurs all the while, his eyes still unfocused as he gropes uselessly at the air in the goldblood's direction. "Pissblood, how dare you...how dare you..."

"We're not all fanatics, Crichton," the troll snaps, her head jerking up at the slur, and Jade doesn't think she imagines the troll stabbing at the keyboard with an extra flourish of her wrists. She suspects Crichton might actually be helping her case here just by being his obnoxious self. "Survive to fight another day." The goldblood pauses again, her eyes catching Jade's before skittering away again. "The Lady would approve such a course of action."

Her thin lips curl as she taps the enter key, and the cage begins to rattle around Jade. "Besides, who here lost his specibus to a prisoner, again?" the troll sniffs, stepping back from the computer. "First you're captured, and now this? I won't be the one punished for today."

"Yes, you - ugh!" Crichton says, and whoa, he's waaaay too awake!

But then the floor starts to retract under Jade's feet, the metal of the cage pulling back to reveal the same smooth concrete of the rest of the room. At the same time, the bars of the cage twist in on themselves and rise, so that Jade has to let go of the man's collar and scramble back toward Bec. She tosses the wolf out first - because if all else fails, she just wants her best friend to wake up! - and then
she executes a flawless youth roll right the heck out of the cage.

Bec twitches, and starts crackling with green, but doesn't sit up. Jade kneels beside the wolf and feels a tiny spark go off in her brain. It's a lot to take in, after all that flatness, but she welcomes the sensory input. "Thank you!" she tells the goldblood sincerely.

"Just get out," the troll spits, sullen, and Jade sees that she's eyeing the pistolkind that's loose in Jade's hand. Oops! Jade capitulates that thing, because there's no need to leave a live specibus lying around for the Crew to mess with, and then heaves Bec up under her arm so the poor thing can reboot while they abscond. She switches her focus out into the hall as she steps toward the door, but she also keeps her eyes on the two Crew members in the room with her. Better safe than sorry!

"No hard feelings! Tell Droog I said bye, though!" she says, and then she turns the doorknob.

Three things happen at once.

Bec spasms under Jade's arm, and she fumbles her grip on the wolf's dense body.

In the split second she takes her eyes away from the Crew members, the goldblooded troll dives for the computer, probably to set off the alarm. Which would kinda suck. A lot.

But even before Jade can shout and raise a hand to snatch the computer out of the way, the situation skedaddles right off the tracks and runs itself over the edge of a cliff, as Crichton stands and stabs the goldblood in the back.

"You shouldn't have done that." The man's eyes glitter like beetle shells as he yanks his bladekind out of the other Crew member's back. The goldblood slumps forward over the desk, looking faintly surprised. "You shouldn't have betrayed the Lady like that."

And -

Jade drops Bec.

- 

Jade doesn't really remember punching through the wall.

She's more focused on punching Crichton. The wall was just sort of in the way.

"WE!"

The explosions might be her, might be Bec's start up sequence. Either way, it sets off a flurry of motion from every Crew member in the building, and it's too much for Jade's brain to handle. That's all getting shoved to the back of her mind so she can plant a flying side kick in the middle of Crichton's face.

"DO NOT!"

A row of lights shatters overhead, and Jade waves off the shower of broken plastic shards so she can seize Crichton by the shirt and haul him off the ground.

"KILL PEOPLE!"

She punches him through another wall, into a room filled with stacks of crates. The whole building rocks and shakes over head with the force of the power rumbling through the air, and Jade can't tell if it's her, Bec, or both of them at the same time.
Either way, their space powers are tearing this place apart. She thinks about that promise she made, to just leave without hurting anyone.

Well, so much for that plan! She's gonna deliver every single Crew member in this place to the police, even if she has to teleport them all there by herself!

But first, she's going to introduce Crichton to her fists of righteous fury a few more times. Never let it be said that the extra fistkind specibus isn't worth it. Because it is sooo worth it.

"WAAAAAAAGH!" she shrieks, flinging Crichton back out into the hallway, and then punching through the last of the wall herself, her hair crackling around her head with green static.

"Jade!"

She blinks, and looks to her left.

John waves at her frantically from behind a chunk of wall. "Jaaaaade!" he hisses. His distraught frown would make Karkat proud. "Oh my god, what the heck is even going on down here?!"

"Oh, I got kidnapped!" she says, shrugging. She pokes Crichton's curled up body with a toe, and the man groans. "And this guy just stabbed someone while I was making my grand escape. So."

"You were kidnapped," John repeats flatly, floating out from behind the rubble. The hall is full of unconscious people in black suits, so Jade can only assume John was pretty busy!

"Uh, yeah? Didn't you come to help me wreck their shit?" Jade asks, gesturing at the Midnight Crew with a vague wave of her hand, before placing both fists on her hips.

"We didn't even know you were gone for almost an hour!" John yells, throwing up his hands. The wind picks up a little, but if he thinks throwing a little hissy fit will impress her, he has a lot to learn about being a little brother! "We thought you were investigating the Crew on your own! Did they hurt you?"

"Psssh, naw." Jade rolls her eyes. "I was investigating for a while! I totally was! They knocked me unconscious for a while, and they have this really dumb cage thing but - that's not the point! Are you going to help me lug these dummies to the police station, or should I just wait until Bec is up and running again?"

"You were kidnapped!"

John seems to be stuck on that. Someone shifts behind him, and Jade decides that's more important at the moment, because if John's about to freak out over nothing, that's totally Karkat's division, not hers.

But the person behind John is not in a black suit.

He is familiar, though!

"Dave!" Jade screams with delight, clapping her hands together, and then she teleports right over to grab him in a headlock. She hooks her other arm around John's neck and drags him into the group hug too, squeezing until the wheezing from Dave's side gets a little distressed and John stops elbowing her in the side like the obnoxious derp he is. "Oh, John, why didn't you tell me Dave was coming to visit! I would never have left!"

"I think you're choking him out," John gasps. "You're choking me out!"
"Oh! Right!" Jade lets go of them and grabs Dave by the shoulders to inspect him with a critical eye, all her anger forgotten in light of this wonderful development. "Aren't you going to say hi, buster?"

Dave's face is all one blank frown that still somehow manages to radiate little 'do not touch' vibes from behind his dumb shades. He pulls out his phone and starts typing.

...Is he ignoring her? Rude!

"Yeah, he says hi back," John says from behind her, and when Jade turns to pout at him, she sees he has his phone out too. What happened to being Mr Professional Hero, and all that uptight nonsense? He catches her meaningful look and wagging eyebrow, and rolls his eyes right back at her. "Dave can't talk. And it was...kind of a last minute visit. No, Dave, she just knows all of us. Because reasons, I guess."

"Oh!" Well, Grandpa had never mentioned that in any of his files! Hmph! Jade folds her arms and tries to look appropriately apologetic. She's failing miserable. "Uh. Well, still! It's really nice to meet you at last!" She has to unfold her arms to scratch the back of her head, and she glances around the hallway to distract herself from the momentary awkwardness as Dave starts furiously typing again.

Oops. She kind of did a number on this place. Her space sense is pinging her with little warnings whenever she reaches for the structural walls that hold up the building that extends up above them. They're in a pretty extensive basement, and it feels like most of the ceiling could fall in on them at any moment. "We should probably leave soon," she says, whistling. Bec doesn't appear immediately, and that's worrying.

"No kidding!" John says, more than a little crazy-eyed as he surveys the remains of the Midnight Crew's base. His mask is all bloody and gross, and Jade's heart sinks a little as she realizes he must have had another weird episode of forgetfulness at some point. "How are we even going to explain this to the police, is my question. Jeez!"

Jade whistles again, and this time Bec appears in a burst of green lightning. It flops over at her feet at once, and she stoops to ruffle its hair. "Don't worry, boy. We'll get you something yummy to eat really soon!" she promises, and the wolf whines at her, setting its muzzle on her foot. "You're better with police and stuff than I am, probably," she adds when John looks at her. "I don't usually arrest people or anything like that."

"I guess just call them and report this place. And tell them to bring emergency crews, because who knows how much longer we have until it all collapses." John stows his phone in his pocket. "We need to get to a pay phone. Unless either of you has a disposable one."

"I might!" Jade says. She starts feeling through her sylladex, glad when it actually works. She needs to make up for all this trouble she's caused.

"Oh. Yeah, Dave?" John says as he checks his phone again. He goes pale. "And you said someone got stabbed, Jade?" he says, urgency in his voice as he looks up at Jade, blue eyes wide.

"By that Crichton dickhead, yeah!" Jade thumbs in the direction of the room with the cage - and freezes. "Oh! Hang on, I think she's still moving!"

She'd been so pissed off, she hadn't even thought to check if the goldblood might have actually survived. That's...kind of a big mess up. Oops. Jade bounces over to the room immediately, being sure to give the cage a wide berth as she bends to look under the table holding up the computers. There's a splotch of dark yellow blood slowly drying on the floor beneath her feet as she squats down. The computers themselves are all bluescreened, so she thinks the troll must have deliberately
shut them all off before crawling under the desk. A pair of gleaming golden eyes glare at her from the darkness.

Alive. Not dead. That's all that matters.

"Uh. Want me to send you to the hospital?" Jade asks, sheepish.

"Is that a threat?" the troll growls, her horns scraping the underside of the table as she tries and fails to get her feet under her. Jade can't determine the exact scope of the damage Crichton did, but the blood loss alone is probably massive by this point.

"Uh, no? But you don't get a choice either." Jade closes her eyes and pictures a map of Seattle in her head, pinning down the coordinates she wants. She wishes Bec were in any shape to help her aim, particularly with all the wacky stuff her powers have been doing lately, on top of the sedatives and the cage, but she'll have to make do! "I'm sending you right to the emergency room. Good luck explaining this!"

She reaches out, boops the troll on the foot, and pushes until the troll vanishes. Jade's mind follows her through space all the way to the hospital, and then she lets go when all the goldblood's molecules come back together. The last of the green plasma licks over her outline in the shadows under the desk, before subsiding.

It takes more out of her than she likes to admit. Jade sags back in a crouch, feeling sort of dizzy, but then she glances at the open cage beside her and decides she'd rather be sick somewhere else. Like with Dave and John! This is so exciting!

Urp. If she doesn't throw up, anyway. Shaking her head, Jade bounces back to where the two are standing in the hallway. "Okay! We can go call the cops now!" she announces, hooking an arm through John's and grabbing for Dave's. He just pulls out of reach, staring at John's face with an unreadable expression as he types.

...So cool. Jade is kind of intimidated, actually. She wishes she knew what he was typing. Unlike John, Dave is a lot more cold in person. Or maybe that's just the impression she gets because he blocked her on Pesterchum, too.

"Wait, Dave, are you serious?" John yelps, glancing around them. Then he nudges Jade in the side. "Hey, can you tell if there's a carapacian around?"

Jade's mind goes in the obvious direction. "You brought WV?!"

"What? No!" John protests, holding up his hands. "There's another one running around, helping us - uh, kind of, anyway. He was just here, only five minutes ago. Where could he have gone so fast?"

Jade cocks her head to the side. "I can check!" She filters over all the people taking up space around her, trying to distinguish the hollowness of a carapacian shell amid all the troll and human bodies lying unconscious everywhere. But eventually, she has to shake her head. "If he's here, he's moving somewhere above. And my head hurts too much to tell." She rubs her temples, sighing. "Darn it, Diamonds Droog!" So annoying!

"So Droog was here." John shifts warily, as though he expects Droog to pop out of some secret compartment at any moment.

"Still is, I think," Jade corrects, squinting up at the unstable ceiling above so she can take in all of the details of the space around her that she's been missing out on all this time. "Most of this building feels
empty, but there's a lot of movement up on one of the upper floors." It feels like at least three people, if not more, but two in particular are causing a ruckus that jars against Jade's headache. "She might be trying to make her escape, too! We need to stop her!"

The thought kindles a flame in her chest. Diamonds Droog just made this whole thing almost as personal Clubs Deuce did by sticking Jade in a cage, and she is all for giving Droog a piece of her mind. And a fist.

"But we've already lost track of Spades. We might want to retreat before the cops show up on their own..." John sighs heavily, glancing down at his phone for Dave's latest message. Whatever he reads makes him give Dave a look that is one hundred percent done. "Ugh! No, Dave, I think we should listen to our guardians. It's really not a good idea to let Droog anywhere near you." Another pause as Dave types. "No, I'm pretty sure we already talked about how foolproof our plans are."

Dave types again, raising an eyebrow.

"No, see, that's an example of a plan that isn't a plan at all, and those don't work either."

Jade exchanges a look with Bec. This would work a lot better if Bec were the kind of guardian animal who noticed when its charge was looking at it significantly. But Bec, alas, is Bec, and all it really does is continue to recharge, a silent, floofy wolf that occasionally throbs with galaxies.

But she thinks she gets the point across. She clearly needs to get her two cents in, or John is going to waffle the rest of the night away. "I vote we go kick some serious tuchus!" she chimes in, punching Dave on the shoulder with a grin. "Come on, John, we need to go avenge me!"

"Uh, Jade, we should probably leave it to the police. Avenging is kind of...not the same as enforcing justice," John says. "Also, do we really need to give Droog another chance at kidnapping either of you?"

Jade grabs John by the jacket so she can glare at him right in the eyes. "John. I need to go avenge our family honor."

In the corner of her eye, she sees Dave facepalm.

"You can either support me...or you can support me! There is no other option! Yeah!" Jade finishes, ignoring Dave's sass. "So let's go kick some ass! Don't make me whup you into shape!"

John’s face makes the most interesting expression beneath his mask and goggles as she makes him stare into her unblinking eyes. It's somewhere between pants-wetting terror and horrified fascination - And when it transitions into grim resignation, Jade just grins, knowing that she's won.

"Argh." John drops his head into his hands, and nods. Dave gives her a thumbs up, a tiny smirk on his mouth, and she returns it.

Oh yes. This is the beginning of a beautiful, beautiful friendship.

And now they can all bond by engaging in that wonderful, vaunted heroic pastime of beating people up.

---

Spades stabs the guy who hands him Diamonds's business card.
It's just kind of reflex.

CG: JOHN.
CG: WE HAVE A FUCKING SITUATION HERE.
EB: karkat? what's up?
CG: OH NOTHING MUCH, JUST THE USUAL FRESH FUCKERY THAT WE DEAL WITH.
CG: BARELY EVEN WORTH MENTIONING.
CG: SO INSIGNIFICANT IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS THAT IT WOULD NEED TO BE EXAMINED THROUGH THE LENS OF A MICROSCOPE TO BE SEEN.
CG: I'M SURE THE WONDER TWIN WILL HAVE ONE IN HER UNBEARABLY USEFUL AND YET MOST LIKELY FICTIONAL 'SYLLADEX.'
CG: SO GRAB HER AND GET YOUR DUMB ASS BACK HERE.
CG: SO THAT WE CAN ENGAGE IN THE WONDERFULLY AWKWARD RITUAL OF SHUFFLING AROUND THE MICROSCOPE PRETENDING THAT WE GIVE A SINGLE FUCK ABOUT THE INCOMPREHENSIBLY PALTRY AND TRIVIAL SITUATION THAT JUST WENT DOWN.
CG: I MEAN MY SANITY IS IMPLODING OVER HERE. THIS SITUATION IS JUST THAT PANNUMBINGLY INCONSEQUENTIAL.
CG: IMPLODING, JOHN.
EB: karkat, that was actually a really impressive rant! you sound a lot better! :D
EB: but also that didn't explain anything at all.
CG: LOOK.
CG: WHILE YOU AND SHADES HAVE BEEN OFF ON YOUR INCREDIBLY STUPID OLD WEST REENACTMENT OF A HARLEY-WRANGLING RUMPUS, SOME KNIFE-FETISHIZING NOOKLICKER BROKE INTO YOUR HOUSE AND STARTED SHITTING ALL OVER MY RIGHT TO INFORMED CONSENT.

Doesn't kill the guy, obviously. It would take more than a little jab to off someone. While the man is staggering, Spades turns and jams the card into the slot next to the elevator repeatedly.

Within moments he's reduced to incoherent snarls, ready to tear out the wiring when the scanner fails to respond. He's raising a knife to hack at the scanner when the man tears the card out of his hand, slides it through the scanner rather than stabbing it in, and wearily hands the card back to Spades.

Spades stabs him again.

CG: I AM FUCKING OFFENDED JOHN.
EB: what?!?
EB: someone broke into the house? what the heck, karkat, where’s my dad?!?
CG: FUCK IF I KNOW.
CG: I JUST HOPPED OUT OF THE COON AND BAM.
CG: A SURPRISE STABBER HAS BEEN USHERED BACK INTO MY LIFE BY THE SICK, SICK WILL OF THIS SPITEFUL ASSCRACK OF A UNIVERSE WE CALL HOME. THE WHOLE THING FONDLED MAJOR SEEDFLAP.
CG: WHILE YOUR DAD WAS PRESUMABLY WANDERING AROUND IN HIS OWN
LITTLE POCKET OF FOOLISHNESS.

CG: BAKING A CAKE OR SOMETHING.
CG: I AM FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT MAN IS CONTINUOUSLY IN THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING SOME NEW BAKED CONFECTION FOR NO REASON. IT JUST NEVER STOPS. THE MOMENT HE FINISHES ONE PASTRY HE IS COMPelled BY THE LAWS OF PARADOX SPACE TO MAKE ANOTHER ONE.
CG: AN ENDLESS, PREORDAINED TORRENT OF DELECTABLE HUMAN BAKED GOODS.
CG: HE'S JUST LUCKY HIS CREATIONS ARE INARGUABLE ARTIFACTS OF MOUTHWATERINGLY LUSCIOUS SUGARY GOODNESS.
CG: OR I WOULD BE SO PISSED OFF RIGHT NOW JOHN.
CG: SO PISSED OFF.
EB: hehehe.
CG: WHAT.
EB: ah, you're being a mr sour-bulge again.
EB: i actually kind of missed this!
CG: I'LL REPEAT.
CG: WHAT.
EB: you being your usual self instead of being all incoherent and stuff!
EB: or more normally ranty anyway.
EB: does that make sense?
CG: ABSOLUTELY NOT, YOU STUPIDLY ENDEARING FUCKWAD.
CG: NORMAL PEOPLE ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO WAX NOSTALGIC ABOUT ME BEING AN INCURABLE ASSHOLE FUELED BY THE LIMITLESS STREAM OF SECRETIONS OOZING OUT OF MY RAGEGLANDS.

This whole thing is most likely a trap. Diamonds is good at shit like that. Strategy and kidnapping were always her gig.

Spades could care less.

He stands in the middle of the elevator, tapping a foot impatiently as the floors roll by, his shoulders hunched in preparation for whatever fresh hell Diamonds is going to unleash.

EB: yeah, but…
EB: when you get all mad and stuff and really hit your stride it's just kind of adorable!
EB: instead of being reeeally worrying like it was when you were about to pass out from sleep deprivation.
EB: so i'm glad you're feeling better!
CG: …
CG: JESUS HOW CAN YOU EVEN SAY ANY OF THAT WITH A STRAIGHT FACE. HOW CAN YOU BE THAT -
CG: NO, FUCK, WE'RE GETTING OFF TOPIC.
EB: oh yeah!
EB: D:
EB: but is the person still there?
EB: go find my dad right away and tell him what's going on!
CG: YEAH, YEAH, I'LL GET RIGHT ON THAT, RIGHT AFTER I FINISH COUGHING UP MY NEWLY RECONSECRATED LUNGS IN THIS FUCKING PANIC ATTACK.
CG: BUT NO, THE STAB-HAPPY FUCKFACE TOOK OFF ALREADY.
CG: AS MUCH AS I WOULD LIKE TO SAY I DROVE HIM OFF LIKE THE INCREDIBLY
COMPETENT SPECIMEN OF HEROISM THAT I AM, MOSTLY I JUST KIND OF SAT
HERE LIKE A PATHETIC SACK OF SHIT AND NODDED AT THE APPROPRIATE
MOMENTS WHEN HE STARTED RAVING ABOUT SOME NEW AND CONFUSING
BRAND OF STUPIDITY.
EB: but you're okay? you didn't get stabbed or something, right? because you keep mentioning stabs
and then not explaining???
CG: OH, SURE, YEAH.
CG: THIS BRINGS THE STABGAUGE TO WHAT, A SOLID THREE-ZERO FOR HIM?
CG: AT THIS FUCKING RATE HE'LL HOLD THE GAMBIT OVER MY HEAD FOR THE
REST OF OUR SHORT, MISERABLE ACQUAINTANCESHIP.
EB: karkat.
EB: you've been apparently stabbed three times and you didn't think that would be a thing that
should be stated for the record?!
EB: this is me making a face of stern diamondy best friend disapproval: >:(
CG: LOOK STAB WOUNDS DON'T EVEN REGISTER HALF THE TIME THESE DAYS.
CG: IT'S ONE OF THE FEW THINGS ON THIS EARTH THAT I'M CAPABLE OF
HEALING IN SECONDS.
CG: I'D HAVE GOTTEN MY RAGESPINCTER IN A KNOT IF WE WERE IN PUBLIC,
SURE, BUT THERE'S NO ONE ELSE IN THE HOUSE WHO DOESN'T ALREADY KNOW
ABOUT MY HEMOTYPE.
EB: but doesn't it still, y'know, hurt or something? before you heal it?
CG: OF COURSE IT STILL FUCKING HURTS, MUCH TO MY MIGRAINE
COMPOUNDING REGRET. I'M JUST MORE CONCERNED WITH THE FACT THAT HE
SOMEHOW STOLE MY POWERS.
EB: whoooa!
EB: for reals?
EB: like now he can use the blood thingy?! :O

The elevator slides open, and Spades steps out.

Diamonds Droog stands in the middle of a pretty damn swanky room, her hands clasped behind her
back as she stares out a window at the city beyond. Most of the lights are off, except for one lamp off
in the far corner, and déjà vu sucks Spades down for a moment, set off by the sight of Diamonds
lurking in the shadows, her head barely tilting in acknowledgement of his presence. Proud and tall
and quietly content in her own superiority.

An age and a few universes ago, the scene was eerily similar. Droog was barely recognizable years
after the mass exile that left them all scrabbling to build a city in the wreckage of the old world, but
he'd still been a Draconian Dignitary, vain but more than powerful enough to justify the vanity. Back
on Derse he'd stayed quiet and controlled in his place in the hierarchy, a step below Spades - he
ignored Spades while they drank coffee in the break room and discreetly did Spades's paperwork for
him whenever Spades got fed up and shoveled it off on him.

But after that shit got blown to the Horrors and back again, Di had gone coldly, viciously crazy.

Happens to the best of shells, but when Dersites do it, they do it in style. On multiple occasions the
crazy fuck had torn up the town that Spades was trying to build up with his own blood, shell, and
knives. The old Dignitary who tried to curry favor and hoard others' secrets for the sake of leverage,
unobtrusively completing the tasks assigned to him, turned out to be on no one's side but his own.
CG: THE MUTANT BLOOD FUCKERY, YEAH. OR AT LEAST PART OF IT.
CG: LIKE THE IMBECILIC, GULLIBLE WRIGGLER THAT I AM, I REPEATED SOME FUCKED UP RITUAL INCANTATION WHEN HE TOLD ME TO.
CG: HE KEPT CALLING THIS WHOLE THING A GAME, AND SINCE I WAS A KNIGHT OF BLOOD HE THOUGHT THIS GAVE HIM PERMISSION TO START MAKING BLOOD OATHS AND SHIT.
CG: AND NOW HE'S HEADED YOUR WAY. THE NUBFUCKING DICKPRINCE HAS APPARENTLY GOT BEEF WITH DIAMONDS DROOG AND HE INTENDS TO GET TO HER FIRST FOR WHATEVER FUCKING REASON.
EB: oh…dang!
EB: a knight of blood huh? like the time thing with dave?
CG: OH SWEET MOTHERGRUB TELL ME YOU'RE NOT ON BOARD WITH THIS SHITHIVE MEDIEVAL METAPHOR TOO.
EB: uh, not really?
EB: dave has just mentioned this alien dame sometimes who really gets on his nerves!
EB: and she calls him a knight a lot, and sometimes rose is a seer and i'm an heir but we never really paid much attention to it!
EB: what with all the more important stuff going on like tentacle-rose and the midnight crew and stuff.
EB: a lot of stuff happens all the time and it's hard to investigate everything, okay?!
CG: GOD, WE HAVE SO MUCH SHARING TO DO, I CAN'T EVEN KEEP UP WITH WHAT YOU KNOW AND WHAT I KNOW AND WHAT YOU KNOW I KNOW AND WHAT I KNOW YOU KNOW AND WHAT WE BOTH MUTUALLY KNOW BUT ONLY AS HEROES AND SO HAVE NO IDEA WHETHER THE OTHER KNOWS WHAT OUR HERO PERSONAS KNOW.
EB: tell me about it! i've been trying not to think about the massive exposition dump we'd need to sort out our mutual dumb. :/
CG: DO WE NEED A CHART.
EB: karkat no we do not need a -
CG: WE NEED A CHART, WE NEED TO KEEP THIS FUCKING ORGANIZED DAMMIT.

- 

So Spades had tracked Di down, to the hideout in an old speakeasy where the carapacian had set up shop.

They'd destroyed most of the rest of the town in the ensuing strife.

Eh. Good times.

And for a while after, Spades'd just barely won Di's loyalty - on an provisional basis, of course, the wary concession of a Dersite just waiting for an opportunity to usurp power for himself. It'd been like having a dragon tangled up around his ankles, ready to trip him without warning while the two of them violently cajoled other exiles into rebuilding civilization. They hadn't even hated each other enough for the dubious reassurance of a rivalry to ensure Diamonds's allegiance; it had just been business between them, pure and simple.

If Clubs hadn't shown up when he had, Spades thinks Diamonds would've taken him for a ride - out into the desert, where the dead still walked, and no one coulda heard him scream. Clubs was a limp rag, but damned if Spades didn't owe him a smoke or three for talking Di down from murdering them all in their beds.
Diamonds shifts a little, and Spades catches sight of the cue stick, barely concealed on the side opposite him. But there are still pleasantries to get through, as annoying as that is. The traditional pre-strife razzing. Spades holds up the pale key card in the meager light, and flicks it at the human, trying to blink the memory of the equally tall carapacian with cold white eyes who once was.

"You ran away with a robot," she says, curling her lip at the card and ignoring it. "I had no idea you were such a piker."

SS: Says you.

"Sure you won't try to run away again? I am a busy woman. If you can't be bothered to make this worth my time, I have other places to be." She spins the cue stick lazily, wandering closer to the window with some unknown intent. "I could leave the rest of the ground work to my people in the field, and escort the Witch back to base, instead of waiting around for you to man up. I've been assured in the most backhanded way that they'll finish the work by tomorrow morning, anyway, regardless of what I do."

SS: Still can't believe you sold out like this. The Di I knew wouldn't have gone quiet.

SS: What dirt does Scratch have on yah? I'm dyin' of curiosity over here.

"Or maybe," Diamonds says, as though he hasn't said a word, "I'll pay a visit to your Hemogoblin, out where he thinks he's hidden himself. I know his face. I'm sure I can work that into my schedule."

The oath is stronger now, an extra coil in his veins that tugs on him like a leash, and Spades had forgotten just how unpleasant it was when the damned thing jabs at him at full strength. A threat to Vantas is a threat to both of them, and right now the kid is downright pathetic.

So he grimaces, mentally telling the oath to shut its yap, and then holds up a knife and crouches, ready to spring. Diamonds turns to face him head on, with that little smirk that means she knows exactly who she has to hurt in order to hurt him. It doesn't matter what she thinks Vantas is to Spades; she's just been prodding him to see if she can use it.

He dives out of the way of the first strike, rolling behind a table, and seizes the first thing he can lay claws on - a lamp. He tears the plug out of the wall and lobbs it at Di's head before she can follow him. Then he darts in close, right as the dame ducks under the flying appliance, and slices off her nice white tie.

Diamonds looks down at the hacked off scrap of fabric and the button that flies off with it, jaw dropping.

SS: You were sayin'?

- 

EB: karkat, we're trying to invade this secret mystery dungeon where jade is wandering around, can this wait?
EB: or at least can you go to my dad first so he can make sure you're okay and not actually bleeding internally?!
CG: DON'T BE STUPID JOHN.
CG: BLOOD. POWERS.
EB: bluhhh! sorry if i'm still not used to thinking about you in terms of blood powers!
EB: i barely know what hemogoblin can do, and my brain is still hurting trying to put the two together!
CG: OKAY SO THAT'S ITEM NUMBER FIVE.
EB: you're making the chart aren't you.
CG: OF COURSE I'M MAKING THE FUCKING CHART.
EB: urrrgh, okay, go downstairs and make the chart in the same room as my dad.
EB: who you will coincidentally be informing about the break-in that just happened.
EB: okay? this is an order courtesy of your best friend/partner!
CG: YEAH, YEAH, FINE.
CG: HEY, BEFORE YOU PISS OFF, CAN I ASK SOMETHING THAT I'VE PROBABLY ASKED BEFORE BUT FUCK IT, THAT WAS BACK WHEN NEITHER OF US WERE APPARENTLY COMMUNICATING SHIT.
EB: uh - really quick, hurry!

Diamonds flips from zero to insane war machine in two seconds. She has a unique talent for that, a talent that Spades has never appreciated having turned against him, except for the fact that it's what always made Di so much more interesting to fight than the rest of the assholes they went up against.

She spins and the cue stick is less than a blur, too fast for him to see, but if it hits him, it can split his shell open like an egg. So this time Spades drops to the floor and scuttles away. He grabs the table itself next, drags himself upright, and kicks the table up off its legs with the toe of his foot, just in time for Diamonds to whip her specibus against the wood with a sharp, splintering crack.

The table snaps in two, and Spades kicks the splintered bottom half at Di's heels. She steps over it without missing a beat, still swinging. Spades slices at her not with a knife but with claws, raking at her sleeve with his free hand while the bladekind angles in for her ribs.

He pays for it when Diamonds laughs, vicious and cruel, and flips the cuskind in her hand so she can stab it back at his head. The blow lands true; pain shoots through his skull, his hat falls to the ground, and Spades curses wildly as the jolt makes his blade hits Diamonds all wrong - it skims over her side and slices through flesh but doesn't dig deep, and then he has to skedaddle out of there before Di can press her advantage.

They circle each other, both unblinking. By unspoken accord, there is a breath where Spades stoops to retrieve his hat and settle it back on his head, scratching at his own head injury to see how bad the damage is; Diamonds sheds her torn suit jacket in one smooth motion, her face contorted in a scowl filled with distaste at the panel of fabric that hangs loose by a few meager, frayed threads.

Then she's tossing the ruined jacket at Spades's face, a move so unexpected that the jacket smacks him in the face and blinds him for a few critical moments. She's no doubt lunging for him wordlessly, and he dodges blindly out of the way again when the whistle of the cue stick slicing through the air alerts him to her position. He rolls and comes up next to the couch. He tears a cushion off the thing and whips it through the air at Diamonds's right eye as another distraction.

This one, she doesn't dodge in time; either she's too lost in her rage to react in time, or perhaps she just doesn't consider a couch cushion enough of a threat to turn her onslaught aside. The cushion impacts on her right shoulder.

Bingo.

Spades snaps his fingers, and the blood from his head wound, smeared all over the fabric of the cushion, jabs out in tiny spikes, tearing through Di's waistcoat to the skin beneath. It's not enough to really cut her, but the woman yelps, startled, and loses precious time ripping the clinging cushion out of her flesh, her eyes crazed and angrily bewildered as she stares at the blood soaking into her
shredded shirt.

See, that's the thing. This Diamonds Droog knows him only as an enemy, a target, while Spades remembers her habits, her tricks, her weaknesses. The badly healed break in the Dignitary's shoulder blade from an encounter with the Queen at a quarterly earnings report gone south. The way she likes to feint for an opponent's head and then stab for the soft squishy parts. The slight hesitation that plagues her when she's forced to defend on her right side, the side that Clubs usually covers when they're together.

Not everything carried over to this new human body of hers. But it's still Di.

And he's still Spades.

And she's never beaten him yet.

-

CG: I'VE BEEN HAVING ALL THESE FUCKED UP DREAMS, BUT IF I'M NOT JUST GOING COMPLETELY BATSHIT INSANE, I THINK THERE'S ACTUALLY A PATTERN IN THEM. SOMETHING I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THINKING ABOUT THAT KEEPS POPPING UP AGAIN AND AGAIN, LIKE A DEMENTED ROBOTIC BUNNY RABBIT ON A SUGAR BENDER.
CG: YOU DIE, AND LATELY HARLEY AND THE ASSHAT HAVE BEEN SHOWING UP IN STARRING ROLES, TOO, AND IT'S ALL MORBID AS FUCK.
CG: THERE'S A GOLDEN PLANET IN THE SKY BUT THE MOON HAS CRASHED BECAUSE OF SOME HELLBEAST RUNNING AROUND BLOWING SHIT UP, AND EVERYONE IS ON A BATTLEFIELD THAT I'M NOT ALLOWED TO LOOK AT BECAUSE FUCK MY SHITTY THINKPAN, AND YOU JUST KEEP DYING.
CG: OVER AND OVER AND -
CG: LOOK. JUST. I KNOW THIS IS CRAZY. BUT DOES ANY OF THAT SOUND FAMILIAR TO YOU?
CG: JOHN?
CG: ...JOHN?
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has gone idle! --
CG: WHAT THE FUCK.
CG: JOHN WHAT JUST HAPPENED?
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
CG: WHERE DID YOU EVEN GO? I'VE BEEN SITTING HERE FOR THREE FUCKING MINUTES WORKING MYSELF UP INTO A NEW PANIC ATTACK YOU DUMB FUCK -
EB: holy shit how does he even read all those caps all the time
EB: like damn i know i can fucking go for days and days but that just sprained my eyes

-

John is missing time.

And this time, for some reason, he can't just ignore it. He's vaguely, uneasily aware of other gaps from over the course of the past few days, of things that his dad and Jade have mentioned that he's not allowed to think about. But he'd been able to smooth all those incidents over and skim over the conversations in his memory so that everything is seamless.

But now there's a sharp, jutting gap in his mind, even more jarring than all the usual crud he keeps locked up in the back of his head. There's blood all down his face, and Dave presses in close, a silent presence glued to his side, like he's afraid John could keel over again any second now.
Something is wrong, and he wants Karkat to be here so badly it's like a physical ache.

So that's what's on his mind when Jade grabs him and Dave by the wrists and whistles for Bec to follow. As opposed to, you know, important stuff! Like focusing on the fact that they're about to teleport -

"Shit!" someone yells.

- right into the middle of a an ongoing skirmish. Jade lets out a "Whoooa!" and then bounces them out of the way of a flying bladekind. Dave slams into the wall on Jade's other side, tripping over nothing, and John catches himself an inch above the ground. He thinks Jade might not be feeling as well as she's trying to pretend she is, because that was a pretty shitty landing…

SS: Oh, for fuck's sake!

The room's clearly been turned upside down in the struggle. Every single piece of furniture has been overturned or gutted, one of the windows has a chair-sized hole punched through it, and the overhead fan hangs limply from the ceiling by a single cord. Diamonds Droog is closer to them, breathing hard enough that John can feel her lungs heaving from here, and she whirls to glower at them with unchecked frustration. That Spades Slick dude is across the room, crawling out of the wreck of a closet full of black suits. The carapacian is frozen in the act of stamping on a particularly nice hat, and John wonders if they were even really fighting, or if Slick was just trying to torment Droog by acting incredibly petty.

Either way. "It's over, Droog!" he calls, trying to reassert some kind of control over the situation, and trying really hard not to feel the panic that bubbles up when he realizes that they're in the same room with the woman who has tried to kidnap Dave - who apparently succeeded in kidnapping Jade while no one was paying attention - and beat the living hell out of Karkat.

It would be easy to be genuinely afraid of Diamonds Droog. At least Hearts Boxcars had been somewhat sane. A mob boss who favored machine guns and bombs, yeah, but not a mob boss who was devastatingly intelligent about achieving her own inscrutable ends.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, but he doesn't dare check what Dave is trying to say, which earns him a poke on the arm. Beside him, Jade puffs up - literally. Green light crackles around her and makes her hair float up like a crackling net of static-riddled curls. "Sorry about your basement!" she says, folding her arms. "But also, I'm not really sorry. At all."

"So we can do this the easy way or the hard way," John adds. He starts drawing in the wind around him, feeling for the influx of air that streams in through the hole in the window, just in case Droog decides to get stubborn.

Spades Slick facepalms.

SS: Incredible. I give you three idiots every chance in the book to fuck off, and yah still end up flinging yourselves in the middle of this shit.

SS: Fucking heroes.

Diamonds Droog doesn't even look surprised to see any of them. And that's...pretty creepy! Instead of being shocked or intimidated by the fact that it's now four against one, the woman throws back her head and barks out a harsh laugh, cracking her neck as she levels a crooked smile at them. "Oh? Is this the part where you inform me that all of my base belongs to you?"

SS: No, I will not translate for you. Do I look like some kinda messenger boy to yah, punk?
The carapacian seems to be snapping at Dave, whose hands are a flurry of sign language. John recognizes a middle finger that gets thrown up after the carapacian's answer, and that's about it.

"Well, it totally does!" Jade insists. "And you'll be pretty sorry if you try to pull any funny business like you did last time! I'm watching for snipers, now!"

...Snipers.

John doesn't want to know.

No, really! He is not curious about that! At all!

"Snipers?!" he demands.

"Just the one," Jade says distractedly, like that somehow makes it any better.

SS: Will you stop yapping if I translate this one?

SS: Then no. Stop that. Your bland fleshling sign language is giving me a damn migraine.

Another middle finger from Dave.

"And you're so proud of yourself, aren't you?" Droog says to Jade, smiling until Jade's confident buzz wilts a little. She shakes her head, tapping a thumb against the end of the cue stick as she leans on it at an angle, one hip resting on an overturned desk, her body language completely relaxed. "If you couldn't escape from someone like Crichton, I would have been severely underwhelmed."

Droog isn't worried at all.

So John takes the initiative. He reaches out with a hand and - Heir Heir Heir not John crap - twists his wrist, yanking the air in a tight curl. The wind obliges by knocking Droog's cue stick right out from under her, and John - Heir -makes the executive decision to send the specibus flying right out the window, where he wouldn't have to worry about it lying around in the room for Droog to try and snatch back. The Crew member's expression flattens out, but she barely looks startled, more disgruntled than anything as she raises the hand that was holding the cuekind to quirk an eyebrow at it. "Better," she says, sounding approving as she lifts her eyes to smirk at John. "Now you're thinking."

"Are we not gonna beat her up?" Jade whispers, drawing her hair back in and ducking her head to say it in John's ear. He would have been able to hear her anyway, but Jade doesn't know that. "Should I just teleport her to the police and tell them what she's done?"

"I don't know how long they'd even hold her for before she got bailed out," John mutters back. "Urgh. I'm actually thinking, maybe send her right to the Legislaceration office?" He has no connections there like his dad does in the regular Seattle police force, mostly because Legislacerators are a lot less friendly to heroes in general, and the Seattle office is made up of overseers and secretaries and not much else by way of training Lacerators.

But there's a chance, however slim, that they'd be able to hold Droog on interstate charges without bail, and maybe that would actually keep Droog out of their hair for a while. It's a long shot, but at least it's better than taking another Midnight Crew ringleader to the cops. The last time they tried that, even more bombs had been involved.

SS: As though any prison could hold someone like Diamonds.
You're wasting your time, kid. Just let me handle her.

Spades Slick steps forward, into the light of the one remaining lamp in the corner that neither combatant has managed to smash, and that's when John gets a really good look at him. For the most part, despite the state this room and Droog herself are in, Slick barely looks ruffled. There isn't a speck of blood on him, even though Droog is cut up pretty badly, and John wonders just how tough this guy actually is when he remembers. Weird blood power rituals. Just because Slick looks sour and spindly and mean doesn't mean he's not neck deep in the kind of weird shenanigans that have been plaguing them all over the past few weeks, and any injuries he might have had probably healed just like they would have if they'd been inflicted on Hemogoblin.

Seriously. So weird.

Bec pops in without warning. Jade squeals with delight as the wolf hovers in a film of yellow and green light before huffing through its nose and sitting down at her feet. Dave backpedals away from the animal so fast that he almost crashes into a coatrack, his eyebrows flying up so fast John is pretty sure Dave has come as close to outright terror as he's capable of expressing. Then the other boy seems to realize he's being pretty obvious about his weird dog fear, and coughs, sidling closer to John than Jade with his shoulders huddled up defensively.

Everyone but Spades Slick is a little distracted by the magical zapping wolf. Even Droog, as it turns out, because she only notices Slick's next surprise attack when the carapacian is already springing off the overturned couch to leap at her, sharp teeth bared in a snarl as he aims a knife at Droog's face. "You little-!" she has time to yell before Slick crashes into her, trying to force the bladekind down while Droog catches his arm at the last moment. Then the two combatants tilt backward, grappling for control of the knife as Droog stumbles and nearly falls over the desk.

"Agh!" John yells, tearing at his hair. "Oh crap!" And for a whole five seconds he wastes time wondering whether he should be rooting the carapacian on or trying to prevent some insane murder stabbing action from going down right in front of him. Then he remembers - "Wait, you stabbed Hemogoblin, too!"

Slick whips around mid-stab to throw him a death glare.

"I stab everyone, yah goddamn pansy - urgh!"

Dave grabs the carapacian under the arms and hauls Slick off Droog, his mouth a grim line as he tosses the alien bodily away from himself just as the carapacian tries to swipe at him. When Slick scrambles back up onto his feet, snarling and gnashing his teeth so incomprehensibly that the mental component of his speech is a jumble of white noise, Dave just plants himself between the Dersite and Droog, a skinny line of white and red that is way too close to Droog for John's comfort.

"Jeez!"

Dave seems way more concerned with frantically signing at Spades Slick than being wary of the Crew member staggering upright behind him. Droog wipes a thumb over the thin cut Slick managed to slice down along her cheek and inspects it, a soft "tch" escaping her; then her eyes sweep over to Dave, too deliberately to be chance.

John raises both hands this time. Because if Diamonds Droog thinks she's laying a hand on one of his friends again - well, she's just not, okay!

Then Droog pauses, glances over in John's direction, and raises an eyebrow. "Well. Now I am impressed," she says, and she almost sounds sincere, but John has no idea what could have spurred that comment, because he hasn't actually done anything yet -
Until he looks beside himself, and realizes that Dave is still standing right next to him.

SS: No, I will not translate for future-you, either. Piss off.

Jade just looks delighted, clapping her hands to her cheeks as she looks back and forth from one Dave to the other. "Oh, that is so weird! So cooool!"

SS: Do you honestly think I care? Get outta my way, kid.

"John Egbert?"

Later, John will blame it on the fact that he's nowhere near thinking himself into an Heir mindset. He's been flying by the seat of his pants since Dave arrived - since Jade arrived, really - and he's been thinking like John through this entire debacle. His head is a mess, and when he turns toward the source of the whisper it's reflexive. Someone says your name, and you answer to it. That's basic.

But it can't be. Not when you're a hero. Not when you're supposed to pretend you don't know the name, and then hightail it out of there before anything else can go wrong.

So when his eyes light on Diamonds Droog, and her lips part to bare a smile full of teeth, John knows -

- he knows -

- that he is completely and utterly screwed.

"Hello there, John," Droog mouths, and for the first time John realizes that she didn't even say his name above a whisper. The two of them are the only ones who know, because he's the only one who can hear a voice that soft.

"That is eeeenough!" Jade declares, oblivious. She darts into the middle of the room, setting her back to the future-copy of Dave so that she can raise a hand and hold it up to ward off Droog, her eyes bright in the darkness. "Jail! Both of you!"

"Arrest me," Droog whispers, "and I won't be the only one who knows."

Future-Dave reaches out and latches onto Jade's wrist. "Hey!" Jade yelps, but all Dave can do is shake his head at her, tipping his shades down with a finger to stare at John meaningfully.

SS: No, I don't know what's happening, ask your own damn self!

John's stomach has dissolved. His insides are all one sludge of horror, crawling and tossing in his gut as he sags back.

Diamonds looks unbearably smug.

Right up until John tackles her through the broken window.

- "I wouldn't kill me, either, if I were you," Droog adds, as the wind tunnel sucks them up and out into the night sky. She's impossibly cool for someone dangling over a hundred feet above the ground, high enough that if John's hands were to slip -

John's heart doesn't seem to be working. Either that, or it's going so fast that he's just too desperately enraged to feel it. "How," he growls through gritted teeth, pelting them further up into the air so that
they slice through a low hanging cloud. "And give me one reason *why not?!*

It's the same rage that swallowed him up when the Puppeteer ordered him to stand down, the same instant fury that made him lash out at Jade when she whispered his name in his ear only a few nights ago.

But this time, he can't imagine *anything* that can make this hate go away. Diamonds Droog *knows*, she knows and so the Midnight Crew knows and he confirmed it for her and *he is so utterly fucked*.

"Mmm. I have my sources," Droog drawls, tilting her head to the side and inspected the fingernails of one hand. His fists are twisted and clutching at the front of her waistcoat, and John isn't entirely certain if the wind is helping him hold Droog up, or if it's just his own superhuman strength carrying her aloft with him.

All he'd need to do is let go. But *oh god -*

*I need to go home to Dad. We need to discuss this.*

The thought cuts through all the muddled shit rattling around his skull, like a breath of cold, clear air. It's the only thing John can focus on long enough to latch onto it. Everything else falls under the categories of either *take Droog out* or *oh god don't kill her*, but those two conflicting impulses can still be tamped down by the thought of getting his dad's input.

Thank god.

"And if you were to kill me, I'm afraid that certain other failsafes would come into play on my end." Droog shrugs, which she really shouldn't do if she wants him to keep a grip on her. A sharp gust of the breeze finally dislodges her hat, and the hurricane-force winds that John is drawing on batter the hat against the nearest building below until it's shapeless and torn. "Namely, several of my key assistants, each of whom has recently been informed of a certain key detail of your identity. The moment word of my untimely demise breaks, they will not only release those facts to the media, but also make it their life's work to hunt you down, no matter how often you try to change your name. They would be heartbroken if you killed me, see - their poor minds would break right in two."

He feels so cold. "You would tell them anyway," he says hollowly. "You think I don't see how screwed up this already is?! I can't trust you *not* to tell anyone!"

This isn't Jade. This isn't Dave. This isn't Karkat.

His head throbs.

*I should just take her home, now. If she already knows my name, she probably knows my address, and we need to talk about this, but Karkat is there, oh god oh god oh god -*

*I need to go to Dad.*

Because *this* is the worst case scenario, the one thing his Dad has always warned him about, the thing that kept John quiet and alone and friendless for all of elementary school, and all those long years between losing Rose and meeting Karkat. *This*, the fear that someone on the wrong side of the law would find out who he was, who his loved ones were -

And *crush* him with it.

"*Or,*" she says, tapping a finger against the side of his mask, drawing his attention back to the present, "you can trust that I am a *professional.*"
He stares at her, and she rolls her eyes at the look on his face, her tightly coiled hair flying everywhere as the wind twines around them. "My offer still stands, you know," she says. "If you stay out of my way, I'll stay out of yours. The business of the Crew would be off limits. Your identity, in return, would be none of my concern. Easily forgotten, really. A misplaced file here, and no one else in the upper ranks would know. And those in my employ would never betray my confidence. If you chose to leave Seattle to us, we would not pursue you."

... 

Does she seriously think he'll believe that?! This is a huge federal fucking issue, and she's - what, suggesting they just ignore each other? That Heir overlook any violence or crime perpetrated by someone in a black suit? That he should just trust a known, violent criminal with a penchant for kidnapping and blackmail won't drop his identity like a bomb on the local news station?

The whole thing is wrong! This is so messed up!

"Why?" is all that comes out of his mouth.

She rolls her eyes. "This has never been personal. This is just good business. Small fry criminals like the kind you should be dealing with? Ain't my people." Her diction is slipping, into the kind of gangster slang straight out of an old mob movie, but John can't even process that right now. "Take them out, and honestly? You're taking out the trash who'd interfere with my operation, too." She raises an eyebrow. "So? Whaddya say, kid?"

He can't believe a word Droog says.

He can't afford to.

"Tick tock," she says, sighing. One hand comes up and clutches over John's hand on her shirt, sharp fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm as though Droog is trying to peel his hand off her, while they're still dangling in the middle of an impending tornado. "This offer is only good for the next -" she checks the watch on her wrist "- five minutes. After which point, if I am not free to join him at our primary base, my good friend Marlowe will be sending the first report to a contact of ours who writes for the Seattle Times."

"What?!" John yells.

"He might even make the morning edition, if he jumps the gun a little." Droog laughs freely, the noise spinning out on the wind for anyone to hear, and she pats him on the hand as though pandering to him. "Put me down. And walk away. Everyone wins."

And now he has a time limit.

*This is such bullshit.*

John glares. Droog smiles.

"This isn't over," he says.

"I didn't think it would be," she replies. "But I think, for now, it really is."

*Tick tock.*

John grimaces and closes his eyes.
They start to descend.

"...Attaboy."

- 

It only occurs to him that his windstorm might have been warding off any of Jade's attempts to help him out when he and Droog touch down, and the winds finally tangle up close around him rather than ripping through the air in an outward expression of his rage. He's tense and jittery and shaking so hard with terror and rage and panic that there's no doubt Droog can feel it through her grip on his hands. He refuses to look at her face, because he isn't sure he'll be able to control himself, no matter what he sees - sympathy or disdain or nothing at all.

"J-Heir! Heir!" And Jade makes herself known pretty much the moment John crumples everything in on himself and starts the process of squashing it. Droog steps away from him when he forces his fingers to unclench, his knuckles white with the effort, and clears her throat when Jade bounces in a few feet from them.

The message is clear, and John trembles, nearly collapsing under the weight of it.

If Jade interferes, you're done for.

"Let her go, Sharpshooter," John says. It's the first time he's really noticed his own voice since this mess started, and it shocks him how hoarse he sounds.

Jade jerks back, her automatic grab for Droog's shoulder cut off, and she yanks her hand back as though she's been stung. "Huh? Why? What's wrong?" she asks, and there's nothing but honest confusion in her voice, genuine concern as she drifts closer to John instead.

John envies her that. He's not sure Jade really understands how complicated real life can be, after years of living isolated on an island and trained by robots and a wolf and little else. Not even working as Sharpshooter could really erase that fundamental not-knowing, the obliviousness, the simplicity and bluntness of emotion that's only obvious when you squint.

Things aren't complicated for Jade.

For John, well -

Just another failure, courtesy of me.

"She knows my name. And so do her assistants," he says, the words sinking into his teeth like decay, like rot, like filth. "Sharpshooter, I know you don't understand - just - we have to let her go."

Because if she knows my name she knows my address she knows my dad I need my dad I need Karkat -

...He's gonna be sick. His stomach roils and heaves, sharp like acid, and he swallows hard, realizing he's got maybe a few minutes left of control before he throws up in front of Droog herself, and that's the last thing on this earth he'll let himself do. He feels another set of breathing lungs jogging toward them, and then Dave is there, a red blur in the corner of John's eyes, and he is not crying -

"She knows my identity, so she probably knows my address," he spits when Jade still stares at him with an utter lack of comprehension. That one seems to hit her, a flash of worry that makes her draw even further away from Diamonds Droog. "So we have to let her go."
"I'm glad you've seen reason," Droog says, her voice too smooth and calm. John is wrecked, John is in pieces, and Droog looks like she's just stepped outside on a breezy day to get a cup of coffee. Even with her torn up clothes and her hair a thicket of short, wild curls, she radiates control.

He hates her, and he hates himself, and he can't tell which feeling is stronger. It's pretty hard to hate anyone more than he hates himself sometimes, but Diamonds Droog is officially in the running!

"But -" Jade starts, and then she bites down, frustrated. "We could -"

"Stop while you're ahead. This diversion has lasted long enough." Droog turns on her heel, glancing around casually. "Hmm. I don't suppose you left Slick in my rooms?"

"Not telling you," Jade says, a pout settling on her features as she deliberately turns away from Droog and touches John's arm. He flinches away, feeling shocky and gross, and the hurt on her face just makes him feel worse. "Not telling you anything at all!"

Droog sighs. "Children." Then she starts walking away without another word, drawing a disposable cell from the pocket of her pants as she strides down the sidewalk. There's no sign of anyone else on the road, but she seems to have a destination in mind, or maybe a car waiting around the corner.

She played them all, from beginning to end. John has little doubt Diamonds Droog could pull off something as simple as a getaway vehicle.

His phone is going off in his pocket. Well, what else can go wrong, he thinks, sliding his thumb across the screen blindly. There's a barrage of harsh, bright red text that he can't even bring himself to read, all the messages Dave probably tried to send that John hadn't been able to look at earlier; instead, he just looks at the latest one, because that's the one that's most likely to be relevant.

TG: okay
TG: shit
TG: thats a seven minute loop
TG: ill be right back im literally running up as i type this
TG: brb

The Dave standing beside him gestures at Jade, holding out his phone for her to read the screen. Jade leans in, upset, but then her face clears and she nods. "You got it!" A snap of her fingers and Dave vanishes, and John guesses that's how a second Dave showed up earlier, to stop Spades Slick from stabbing Droog in the face and triggering all the repercussions that would have ensued in the event of her death. He's not surprised when he senses Dave running up again at the same moment the original one vanishes.

At some point, he stopped seeing anything, though. John's just kind of staring at nothing - maybe the spot where Droog had been standing, or maybe just a circling current of air that winds in tight around him, trying to soothe his panic. He feels a quick, fretful hand that hovers just above his shoulder, not quite touching him, and that's probably for the best because he thinks if he stops pulling in the wind it's just going to explode all over the place.

Don't think.

The faint sound of Jade's voice, distant and muffled because he doesn't want to hear anything at all.

Don't think about it.

Someone does touch him, but he's busy burying everything, so he doesn't react.
Don't think about anything at all. Just get home -

Green light swallows up his field of vision. He doesn't know where they're going.

Just get to Dad -

The temperature shift registers, from the cold night air to the warmth of a place with familiar air currents, drafts that he knows like his own breathing, so at least Jade and Dave knew to get him home. Dizzy, dizzy, dizzy and there's a faint pain in his palms, where his fingernails have been digging in through the fabric of his gloves, a larger pain in his head where he can't stop remembering that Diamonds Droog knows who he is. Someone pulls him away from Jade and Dave, but he barely notices aside from how it jostles him.

Is someone shouting? He can't hear -

"JOHN!"

John blinks and looks up, and Karkat is standing at the top of the stairs, his face frozen and too pale a grey.

Oh.

Get to Karkat.

He pushes someone away - he thinks it's his dad - and then Karkat is doing the stupidest thing in the world which is trying to run down the stairs when his ribs are a mangled mess, so John has to force life back into his numb limbs to meet him halfway, before the stupid dumb idiot kills himself.

And then he's practically inhaling a mouthful of Karkat hair, and there are warm hands pressing against his face and patting at his back, and a rough voice shooshing in his ear. It smells like Karkat, and it sounds like Karkat, and John is half-terrified all over again that if he doesn't stop now, he'll crush Karkat, too. "Karkat?" he says. "Karkat?"

"I've got you," Karkat says before John even finishes stumbling over his name, "you impossible, stupid, stupid fuck, I've got you."

Karkat drags John back to his room. There may or may not be snarling involved, but John's not coherent enough to understand who is being snarled at. Whatever kept him standing as Droog walked away leaves him when the door closes, and after that he can only hope he doesn't drag Karkat to the floor when he faints.

When awareness comes drifting back in, John isn't entirely sure he's ready for it. "Nooooo," he says, and it earns him a pap across the forehead. Which he is totally okay with.

"Fine then, no," Karkat agrees, and the arm wrapped around John's waist tightens. "C'mere, dumbass."

"I fucked up," John tries to explain, because it's reeeeally important that Karkat understand this.

"No, you didn't. You've explained the whole thing to me three fucking times, and I'm pretty sure we've established by now that you caused literally none of what happened last night," Karkat says.
"If anything, we're blaming Droog for being way fucking ahead of the game, and Harley for being a complete dipshit."

"I did? We did?" John says, more than a little dazed. "That last part sounds like just you."

"No. Fuck no. Repeat after me: 'my sister is an irresponsible, impetuous dipshit, and she needs to get with the fucking program before she gets someone killed.'" Karkat dictates, rubbing a thumb in circles over John's temple and kneading at his scalp with his other hand. It's really hard to say no to that, so John just kind of nods until Karkat takes that as agreement. "Good. Maybe this time it'll stick."

That's when John realizes they're in the closet.

"Why are we in the closet?" he asks, which is one of those questions he supposes he might have already asked Karkat multiple times in his breakdown.

But as it turns out, it's not. Karkat looks almost relieved in what little John can make out from the light trickling in through the crack between the door and the carpet. "Oh thank fuck, you finally noticed. Does this mean you're crawling back to real life functionality?"

"Maybe. I might take a rain check on that." John laughs, horrible and croaky. "Real life kind of seems shitty, if I think about it too much."

"Preaching to the grubfucking choir, here," Karkat says, raising a hand and then letting it flop back down across John's side. John shifts a little to get more comfortable, and squints to try and take in his surroundings.

…

"Karkat, did you drag the entire mattress into my closet?"

"Shooooooosh." Karkat cards his claws through John's hair, and wow that is soothing. John melts a little, letting his head fall back to stare at the ceiling while Karkat picks his way through a knot of tangled cowlick. "Emergency piling instincts kicked in when you fainted all over the place. We don't have a panic room or an emergency concealment block here, so I started flipping my shit."

John hiccups. "Actually, we do. Have a panic room, I mean. It's part of the basement."

"Oh. Uh. Well, fuck." Karkat appears to think that over. "Whatever. The pile would have been a fucking hassle to haul downstairs in one piece, anyway."

Ah. So that's why John's got what feels like a stack of his own textbooks under his elbow, crammed up against the wall because the closet isn't exactly built to hold two teenagers and a mattress-pile. Karkat is curled up around him like a limpet, their legs tangled up because there's literally no other place to put them, and what feels like every blanket in the house is piled up on top of them.

"Also, going downstairs would have meant dealing with your dad and no offense, but that's the last bucket of liquid sewage you need slopped all over you," Karkat adds, and wait wait wait, what?

John tries to sit up at that, but Karkat has a pretty good grip on him, and it's hard to try and fight cuddlesmushes. It's hard, and John isn't emotionally invested enough in sitting up to push it, so he falls back again. "Huh? What happened?"

"Harley and Dave told him whatever version of events they witnessed, and the asshole tried to barge in here without warning me," Karkat says, a faint growl in his voice that makes his throat vibrate
along John's forehead. "Which. Uh. I might have been...territorial."

John groans. "Karkat, did you attack my dad?"

"No. I was defending my moirail."

"Oh my god, Karkat."

"Shut up, John, you knew I was a fuckup when you became friends with me." Karkat adjusts himself so he's not pinning John with his chin on John's head, and resettles so that John can see a pair of luminescent red eyes blinking at him under the bottom edge of his hanging shirts overhead. "I just yelled. A lot. It's what I do."

He sounds almost perversely proud of that, and that's enough to make John giggle, more than a little hysterical. "Why can I not remember that? You always try so hard to be polite in front of him, and I missed you going to town?" It sounds like the most hilarious kind of clusterfuck!

"You sure acted like you were awake when you started freaking out and having a goddamn panic seizure until I shut up and he left," Karkat mutters. "You don't remember any of that?"


"And she probably knows my face," Karkat says, sounding more serious. "Yeah. We're pretty fucked. Like. This is pretty much the universe itself fucking us over the table. People in future generations will pay homage to the sheer magnitude of how fucked we are, and pray that they never be so stricken as we two poor assholes have been."

"What are we going to do?" John grabs Karkat's shirt, and buries his face in it. It's still and quiet and dark in the closet, and all he can really feel is Karkat's breathing. Reaching out to sense the air outside the closet would mean acknowledging that the rest of the world exists, and he is not ready for that, on so many levels.

Just him and Karkat. That's good. He's good for that.

"Apparently?" Karkat digs around in the darkness, and somehow produces a phone from under John's ribcage, scrolling down the screen while John is still blinking at the sudden light. "According to all these texts your dad started sending an hour ago, we're going to lay low for a few days, and then fuck off on a 'family emergency/vacation' in the mountains. All of us, including the Lalondes, which, when the fuck did they even get here, is the real question -"

"Lal - Rose is here?!!" John sits bolt upright. There are very few things in this world that can motivate a man to escape a feelings jam, and the news that one of his oldest and dearest friends might have arrived, on top of everything else, is in fact one of those few things.

"Calm down, you crazy hug whore, she's not even in the house," Karkat grumbles. It takes him three tries to drag John back down, but he succeeds. Mostly because sitting up is a lot more effort than John remembers it being! "She's down for the count too, apparently, so her custodian's probably driving her out to the Cascades early, don't get your spongelobes in a twist. And holy shit, do not get me started on when you tried to drag Harley and the douchebag in here -"

"Wha-?"

"- because I am having absolutely none of that pale orgy nonsense," Karkat finishes. "None of it. Now lie still, you wriggling moron, you need to actually sleep." When John tries to say something
like but Rose, Karkat tugs a blanket over their heads to shut him up. "Amazingly enough, even if you can't remember it, having a night-long mental breakdown doesn't count as sleep for your thinkpan."

Karkat's elbow ends up in John's side the next time John thinks about sitting up, and John takes the hint. His head feels dull and muted, and he almost thinks pain medication might be involved in that. Knowing that there's a plan, that his dad has in fact been briefed on almost everything that went on last night, helps soothe his nervous anxiety even more, and makes it easier to ignore everything hidden behind that veil of fuzzy, dampened emotions.

His eyes start to slide shut; between Karkat and all this lack of sleep, he supposes even in a crisis sleep is possible. There are all sorts of protests he should be raising - not the least of which is that Karkat needs sleep, too, and that means the troll should be in the reccoperacoon and not here, undoing all their hard work at getting him through withdrawal - but somehow they drift out of his mind before he manages to make the words work.

A pair of dry, cracked lips press against his forehead, and his reply is instinctive, so automatic and unthinking that he almost believes later that he only hallucinates mumbling, "Love you."

"So fucking pitiable," Karkat mumbles back. "It's like fucking sugar cubes, how pale you make me. How the fuck do you do this to me?"

Then, after a pause so long that John's eyes have slid shut entirely, "Yeah, yeah. I love you, too."

- Los Angeles

He believes he can win.

So why is he still losing?

"Will you fuckin' stand still an' let me hit you?" Eridan Ampora howls, as another blast of white lightning fizzles out against the half-melted pavement. One hand still steaming with white fire, he whirls and scans the black and white landscape for the briefest glimpse of grey and purple.

Gamzee's not even trying to hide. Eridan spies him lurking in the middle of a courtyard, idly squatting to investigate something on the ground. As though he feels eyes on him, the stupid fuck glances up at Eridan, smiling blandly and raising a single hand in greeting.

It's fucking enraging. Eridan fires white fire from one hand with a snarl, enough to wash the whole courtyard with a flurry of lightning and scorch the monochrome walls. Panting, he lays off and waits for the fire to die down.

honk

"I can't believe this!" Incensed, he spins and finds Gamzee kicking his heels over the edge of a rooftop level with Eridan's altitude, kicking an angelic gargoyle in the ugly mug and honking to himself like this is some kind of fuckin' game. Eridan levels his rifle, keeps it aimed squarely between Gamzee's twisted horns, and fires a more concentrated round of power. He carves out a huge chunk of black and white stone and slices off the wings of an unsuspecting servitor angel, but Gamzee reappears on the street below, walking along with his hands in the pockets of his stupid clown pants. If he looks up and waves at him one more damn time, Eridan is going to take this rifle and personally shove it up his ass.

Because that's all the goddamn asshole clown does. He just stands there, and waves, and waits until
Eridan fires to vanish into thin air.

It's not fair. Eridan is trying to have a goddamn showdown, and Gamzee is being an evasive prick.

The Gamzee he remembers most clearly was too chill to take seriously. He'd been a slime-addict, a complete stoner whose pan would have melted out through his ears if he lay down on one side for too long. Addicts in a hell like Alternia didn't tend to last long; they either wandered into another lusus's territory in their daze, stayed out too long in the sun, or got themselves culled for being too slow. Gamzee's surviving as long as he had can only have been the result of unfathomable good luck. Or all the goddamn miracles but hell no, Eridan is not going there.

But there had been - something. One of the last thing's he remembers before Kan up and introduced him to the business end of her chainsaw. (Which yeah, he had kinda provoked her into doing. He'd been a total chump, and he shoulda probably apologized for murdering her. Or something. That's in the past now, whatever.) Vriska had been babblin' some shit about facing off with the monster following them instead of trying to ally with it, which had seemed like the only logical fuckin' option at the time, and then Gamzee had slunk out of the shadows, face carved up and sporting a new coat of green and blue paint -

With black tears drooling from his reddened eyes.

Eridan wonders just how long Mal had been lurking in the clown's head, waiting for the chance to sink its unholy feathers into his vulnerable slime-softened pan. Maybe just as long as it had been crawling around Eridan's. They'd all been pretty thoroughly screwed up in the heads, by then, and crazy tends to get Mal's attention.

Either way, Kan had kicked both their asses so easily it was fuckin' embarrassin', and Eridan had been too dead to see what happened next. Judging by Mal's reaction, it hadn't ended well. He didn't think it was possible for someone to be that ass over wings terrified of Gamzee Makara.

Now, though, he's dealing with a Gamzee that's damn unsettlin'. He'd been talking like Gam on sopor, until he'd snuck up on Eridan and tried to bring a juggling club down on his skull, his voice grating and raw with the edge of a feral troll on a subjuggulation bender. And ever since Eridan dodged it, flailing, Gamzee's been dead silent, stalking around and smiling and, ever so often, appearing right behind Eridan yet again to let out a HONK that makes Eridan's skin crawl before darting out of range again.

And no matter how hard he believes, no matter how he snarls and demands more from the hope that burns in his chest to blast Gamzee with, Eridan can't lay a claw on him. It's mindlessly infuriating, to the point that when Eridan fires off his next round, it goes so wild that Gamzee doesn't even bother to move outta the way, just stares up at him with an incredulous, disbelieving look and a raised eyebrow. The building behind him shatters and crashes in on itself, blowing the juggalo's baggy clothes and ridiculous hair every which way as he steps away from the chunks of obsidian flying everywhere.

There has to be some way to pin the clown down. He's higher on the hemospectrum than this asshole, and no matter how watered down and pathetic the hemotype hierarchy might be on this useless planet, that still means something in all the memories of the life he used to have. He just has to have faith that sooner or later, Gamzee will fuck up and overplay his stupid abscond card. That's how all the greatest military masterminds, of all universes Eridan can draw on memories of, became great - through upright perseverance and the ability to outwit and outlast the other guy. And fuck, if he can't outwit Gam of all trolls, honestly Eridan doesn't even deserve to win this round.

"C'mon, Eribro," that infuriating voice drawls, wistful and patient and coaxing, like a mockery of the
sopor-sucking troll that once was. "Just let it go, my man. We don't need to be getting our fighting on like this." Gamzee steps forward, hands raised beseechingly and horns tilted back. "You're motherfucking hurting people."

Eridan snorts and holds his fire for two damn seconds while he floats down to the ground, making sure to stay a good twenty feet from Gamzee. "Why does that matter? Not like I'm hurtin' anyone who counts."

Gam blinks, cow-eyed and befuddled, and if his face paint weren't smeared into a chilling leer around his wide purple eyes, Eridan would almost be fooled. "You're all trying to put the hurt on me," he says, sounding injured and sad. "And I didn't do nothing to you, mi hermano, not a motherfuckin' thing as would make you so angry all over my business."

If he's trying to come across placating, it's not gonna work; Eridan got enough of that pacifying shit from Fef, and he's so not even interested in that quadrant bein' filled ever again. All he ever got from Fef was a load a carp about how he needed to control himself, when obviously he just needed to let it go. Now that he believes in himself, who the fuck needs control? He's as sane as he wants to be. "And who said a dumb fuck like you even counted," Eridan mutters, but then he shakes his head curtly and raises the rifle. "Whatever. You used to be a friend, even if you were a shitpanned, Faygo-drinking numbskull ninety percent of the time. So last warning. Get out and lemme rule this city like I was fuckin' hatched to."

Gamzee's pleading expression vanishes so fast it might as well have not been there. It's always been hard to read him with all that paint marking up his face, stretching his lips into fake smiles, but Eridan can see that under the smears Gamzee has gone too still, lips flat and eyes hooded as he cocks his head to the side. The next step he takes forward is measured and slow. "Bro, my motherfucking advice to you is that you just get your chill on, before we have ourselves a real motherfucking problem. Seeing as how you had some nasty motherfuckers all having themselves a slice of your pancake, I'm being pretty damn MOTHERFUCKING PATIENT while you get your realization about WHO YOU'RE MOTHERFUCKING DEALING WITH, HERE."

HONK

Eridan fires. Gamzee falls back, curving over bonelessly into a back bend as the ray of white light arcs over him. Instead, Eridan is forced to watch as it crackles down the street until it hits the next thing that gets in its way - the dome he set up over the city. It explodes with a booming crack, like an iceberg fragmenting, and the blast wave kicks up a wall of air and concussive force that Eridan has to plant his feet against and believe he can withstand. He raises an arm over his eyes when dust and fragments of stone sting his eyes - and then swears, blinking and tearing up with violet-tinted tears as he realizes he's taken his eyes off Gamzee again. "You don't realize who you're dealin' with, you beach-crawling scumsucker!" he yells, wiping his eyes frantically and missing his glasses. When he can see again, Gam is gone. What else is new. Biting through his tongue and willing it healed, Eridan whips around, expecting the purpleblood to have snuck up behind him again. But the street leading back to the center of the city is empty. Looking around reveals nothing but a brand new gaping hole in the middle of the white wall of the dome, one that makes Eridan growl but which he can't waste the time to fix up right now. Maybe he can patch it after he's punted Gam's ass through it like a fuckin' football.

But for a good minute, Gamzee's nowhere to be found, and that just makes Eridan even more tense, nervous and freaking the fuck out inwardly because he can't see Gamzee, but he has no doubt Gamzee can see him. God, why did he take his eyes off that asshole?
Something moves in the shadowy archway to his left. "Ha!" he exclaims, and brings his hand up with a flurry of white fire already smoldering -

"Please don't! Oh god, please don't!" It's not Gamzee. It's a human woman with stringy brown dreads, who trips and falls to her knees, cowering as she tries to scramble back into her hiding place. "Don't eat me too!"

For a moment, he's utterly perplexed, and that gives her the time she needs to haul herself back into the dark canopy of the covered courtyard, where he hadn't been able to see her from above. One of her arms ends at the elbow, a melted slag of twisted flesh and bone mottled with blanched white flesh and open red sores, and he recognizes with a pang the preliminary effects of all that grimlight acid Mal had dumped everywhere. The pools themselves have mostly dried up and begun to flake, revealing the half-digested bodies and the hollowed out remains of cars, but he supposes if there were some people who had only just been caught when Mal fled, they must have been able to hide in all the refurbished castles.

This woman is one of his new subjects. He yanks his hand back sheepishly, clearing his throat and lifting his chin and trying to look fuckin' dignified, instead of terrified that an insane clown fucker could be about to jump him.

But is that what Mal was doing to the people it dragged into the acid down here? They think it was eating them? Are they really wrong?

Eridan shoves that tilting, mind-blurring thought away before it can make his stomach twist. Mal had insisted he focus on making angels; he had handwaved the carnage going on below and left it to the rest of the hivemind. "Don't be fuckin' disgusting!" he snaps instead, gesturing curtly with the rifle. "Get outta our damn battle field, woman! This is private business!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she sobs, groping around in the darkness until she vanishes into the dark smudge that's all Eridan's shitty eyes can make out. Mothergrub help her if she runs into Gam in there, but Eridan reluctantly marks that building in his mental map of LA and decides he'll at least make some kind of effort to avoid torching her. That would be fuckin' inconsiderate. Downright unconscionable.

honk

A slow clap from above tips him off, and he fires a bolt of lightning with even looking. He bares his teeth when he looks up and sees Gam sitting crosslegged above him, perched on the slanted top of a street light that has toppled over and buried itself in the side of a building. The clap pauses for a moment so Gamzee can wave cheerfully, and then resumes. "Tavbro has been all telling me this killing thing ain't as down here as it was back on the old Alternian heretoforb. We gotta be all respectable and shit because it's prohibido. This mean you're doing the thinking thing again?"

"I think I'm the one who decides what's illegal and what's not in my territory, jackoff!" Eridan snaps. "And juggalos are so fuckin' banned! Banned for the rest of eternity. So get your ass offa my property!"

Gamzee leans forward at a dangerous angle, his limbs dangling. "If'n you be by my side, ol' compañero, we can go on our most righteous way. You can even leave all this place done up all motherfucking fancy with the black and white like this, so long as you come along to get all our friends." All of his teeth go into his smile this time, and it's horrifying because not even trolls should have that many teeth. "You feel me?"
"...Sorry, that's a no from me!" Eridan retorts, and he springs into the air. "Eat science magic!"

Gamzee rolls off the street light and out of the way of Eridan's leap.

It's a cartwheel, actually. He fucking *cartwheels* down the unstable, half-fallen pole all the way to the ground, beaming like a loon.

"That didn't even make sense!" Eridan shrieks.

Gamzee just falls into a forward roll and ends up smiling up at him from below. "Bro, it don't have to make sense, if that's how your heart is all feeling it to be. S'how miracles work."

That kind of reasoning sounds familiar. Probably because it's the same unthinking faith that Eridan has been using to keep his shredded organs from falling apart from all the damage Mal did earlier.

This asshole not only has the nerve to break through Eridan's awesome unbreakable dome, he has the fuckin' audacity to act like hope is what's fueling all his shitty useless absconds?

"I will punch you so hard your descendants will be too scared to crawl outta the caves!" he snaps, forgetting for a moment that there are no brooding caverns here aside from the ones in which the Mothergrubs themselves reside, no set of harsh trials that prospective trolls have to wriggle their way through before a lusus will choose them. It's all sanitized and *human*e here, and the word itself tells you exactly who encouraged that kind of reform. Even the weak little runts get assigned a lusus or adopted out.

But it's the principle of the thing. And however the fuck Gamzee remembers what came before, Eridan's not going to question it because he's the only other troll on the planet who would understand the threat.

"Hey, if that's a thing that'll make you feel better, you can go right ahead, Eribro," Gam says, too pleasant. He tilts his cheek up toward Eridan. And then lets out an outrageous -

*HONK*

"Agh!" Eridan doesn't fly down; he just cuts off the belief that he can fly and lets himself *drop*, lost in a blinding haze of rage. Even if he hits ground and not clown, he figures if he believes his legs will survive the impact, they *will*.

The shock of actually *hitting* Gamzee startles him so badly he nearly jumps away again. Gamzee feels like a skinny sack of bones and not much else as they plow into the street, and the impact jars Eridan so hard his teeth clack in his skull and a canine tooth cracks in his mouth with a sharp burst of pain. He spits the chip of tooth and the spurt of violet blood and some of it drools down his chin as he latches onto Gamzee. Like hell is he absconding out of this!

And Gamzee just *smiles*.

"Stop! Smiling!" Eridan screams, incensed. Gam smiles wider, and just *won't stop*, even when Eridan levels his laser rifle right up under the troll's chin, his hands and the fuel cell smoldering with light. "Do you think this is a fuckin' game?! Do you think one of your stupid fuckin' miracles will save you?!!"

Gamzee reaches up and pats one of Eridan's hands, smiling. "Hell, hermano. Everything *is* a motherfucking game."

The ensuing rage inspired by those simple words blacks out his vision and cramps his stomach and
oh wait fuck, that's his kidneys collapsing. Bitter, spiking pain stabs Eridan in the gut as he gasps, dropping the rifle and wrapping his arms around his torso. He wheezes and chokes on the wash of chill cold blood that floods up into the back of his throat, thick and stringy with chunks of meat.

Without him even really noticing it, that warm diamond of power in his chest that Mal had helped him tap into seems to have vanished, and without it, his insides are basically chunky salsa.

He can't resist when Gamzee sits up and pats him on the head between the horns, smiling and smiling and smiling. "There," he says, shaking his head. Eridan wants to scream with rage, but all that comes out is a choked gurgle. "You motherfucking done with the unhappy-making lightning, bro?" There's a feral glint in Gam's eyes, his smile more self-satisfied than bland, and that -

Oh. That's when Eridan realizes what's going on.

But first - he reaches frantically for any hope left in his dwindling reserves, scraping together something that'll undo all the destruction Mal wrought on him, and comes up empty. Frantic, reaches out, lifts up the rifle, and smashes it down against the ground. The fuel cell of Hope cracks and all the compressed power he'd channeled into lasers earlier soaks back into his claws like a shock of static. Not much, but enough that when he closes his eyes and believes he's going to be okay, the pain and the rage both begin to ebb away. Swallowing down all the gross chunks in his mouth makes his stomach flip and swerve, but his insides start to slip back into place again.

And when enough of the rage clears up, he understands exactly what kind of game Gamzee's been playing. He spits one last mouthful of blood to the side, seizes the rifle, and shoves Gamzee back down with a grunt. "You fuckin' played me! You're doin' this on purpose, you impossible ass!" he screams, spittle flying from his mouth as he jams the useless rifle up into the soft underside of Gamzee's chin. "Kar was always pissed out of his mind that none of us gave a shit about debating what a Bard of Rage was supposed to do and it's - this! You're makin' me like this!"

'Like this' covers a lot of ground: the stupid way Eridan's been blindly shooting holes in his own dome, the way his vision blurs even worse whenever Gamzee gets too close, but most importantly, the rage that all of Gamzee's flitting around and mockin' Eridan has caused. The more Gamzee pisses him off, the worse Eridan has been doing in this strife, and more importantly, the less he's been able to focus on believing his body is healed. This was deliberate.

This is how Gamzee's doin' the real fighting. No straightforward combat, just dodging and feinting and smiling, leading Eridan on with a stilted chorus of honks until Eridan gets so enraged he can't see straight. He coulda fought himself to a standstill and brought a building down on his own head, and Gamzee would just wander over afterward to smile placidly at the rubble.

Gamzee holds up both hands, rolling his shoulders and falling back into a lazy smile, rather than the horrific, toothy grimace he'd worn while he thought he was winning. It's still enraging to see that he's not taking this seriously - but no, Eridan can't fall for that ploy again. Gam's been dicking around, but he's been doing it goddamn deliberately to piss Eridan off. He can't forget that, or Gamzee wins.

Bards. Bards don't fight. Bards inspire.

Eridan doesn't have enough juice to waste on blasting Gam right now. He needs to regroup. Gasping, the last echoes of pain still wracking his torso, Eridan brings the butt of the rifle down on Gamzee's face and jumps into the air, pelting away in the direction of the dome. As much as he'd fuckin' loathe to do it, if he needs to he can probably pull in more hope by undoing some of the dome itself. He's seriously regrettin' all the reckless lightning he flung around earlier under Gam's influence, because he doesn't think that energy is coming back anytime soon.
Gamzee just watches him go.

Smiling.

*honk*

He heads for the jagged hole in the dome, and topples over on the roof across the road from where he and Mal had their falling out. Everything smarts, like he's taped his insides together with rusty staples, and all he wants is to be furious at Gamzee for pulling this kind of crap - *crap* - instead of just strifing him like a normal person.

But no. If he wants to beat Gam, he can't let the troll get into his head. His mind is like a fuckin' temple. No angels, no horrors, no raging assholes. Eridan needs to fight this on his own terms. He props himself up on a nearby buttress and hopes like hell that Gam won't somehow magic his way onto the roof and lean over to grin all up in Eridan's face, because he refuses to be fuckin' responsible for his actions in the event of that kinda fuckery.

Think it through.

Prince of Hope. Never did hit the god tiers, but he blasted his way through enough of his planet's towers and dungeons before all hell broke loose to get the gist of his role. Maybe the angels coulda told him more, like how Kar was always harping at him about in the memos, but killin' them had been a goddamn privilege. Angels are dicks, all of them.

Still. Prince of Hope. A destroyer class. He can unleash all kinds of mad, uncanny hope majjyks and laser beams to try to annihilate Gam's juggalo face - but look how well that's been working out as a strategy. He'd thought his belief boundless, but flyin' face first into the cold hard reality that all his belief can't overcome Gam's sheer, innate asshattery has dealt him a harsh blow. The Hope welling up in his chest feels faint and distant, and he can't risk letting it slip away.

He needs to think about all this nonsense differently. Maybe not try to destroy Gamzee through bursts of hope -

No.

Eridan's grin stretches so wide, his teeth creak.

He needs to do what he did to Kanaya.

He needs to destroy *Gamzee's* hope.

Sure, Kan had come back with a rainbowsucking vengeance, greater and more terrible than before, but that had been an unforeseen miscalculation. Who could have predicted something like that? Gam is a lotta things, but Eridan highly doubts he got any dormant vampire genes outta the slurry.

So. Destroy what Gamzee believes in, what he trusts in most in the world, and then sucker punch the assclown while he's reeling. This is, in fact, a tried and true plan.

Eridan cackles to himself, and winces, adjusting his grip on his stomach as he filters more power out of the dome to actually heal himself.

And on top of that, Gamzee's already given it away. With Kan, it was the Matriorb, the very last hope of their entire pitiful, ragtag collection of trolls barely out of wrigglerhood. He hadn't just been destroying Kan's hope; it had been the hope of an entire *species*, and the power multiplier Eridan got for 1HKOing that sucker had been unbelievable.
Gamzee - sopor-sucking Gamzee, anyway, trusted basically any troll who stumbled over his hive, dumb fuck that he was. But he had specific friends, all the dumb assholes in their twelve-troll circle jerk who had him on the chumroll, and more importantly, he had the two gullible dickheads who put up with his stoned ramblings and spacey moments often enough to be considered "best bros."

Who the fuck knows where Kar is. He outlived Eridan last time, anyway, and that's one thing that Eridan is kinda grudgingly happy about. Kar was a good friend. A weird hardass who refused to let up with the grey anonymity filter on Trollian, but a hardass who made a pact to listen to Eridan's overwrought blathering when Fef dumped him hardcore. So no, Kar would be off limits anyway.

But Tavros is here.

Gamzee brought him right to Eridan's doorstep. He said so himself.

Eridan chuckles breathlessly, and assesses the size of the hole he blew in the dome with narrowed eyes. Everything's still pretty out of focus, but he's pretty sure he can manage it.

HONK

"Fuck you so much," Eridan snaps, not looking back at the juggafuck perched on top of the buttress. He flips the clown the middle finger, and shoves off.

"Eribro?" Gam calls after him, sounding uncertain. Eridan pelts toward the dome, his confidence rising and his speed rising with it as his certainty grows. "What the MOTHERFUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

His response is two middle fingers flung up toward the sky as he dives through the hole in the dome, and surveys the outside. The sudden breeze startles him, until he remembers that the air in the dome had been stagnant because Mal had been so insistent they make it mostly impermeable. The air tastes fresh and free of the lingering sting of blood and acid, and his head feels strangely clearer as he looks around him.

He and Mal hadn't managed to cover all of LA - that would have been a ridiculous amount of power to spend when Mal just wanted the downtown area to feast upon. But the outskirts of the city have still suffered from the effects of the original dome, the one Eridan helped sculpt out of acid and corroding grimlight. The nearest buildings haven't been remade in the image of the Land of Wrath and Angels, so the stone and masonry still sag, twisted and melted and drawn inward toward the ring of the dome as though pulled in by an irresistible force. Huge cracks spiral out in the road, filled with the faded, desiccated remains of what look like grimlight tendrils attempting to sink roots into the ground. There are a few news crews down the highway, too far away for Eridan to care, but aside from that it looks like for the most part everyone has cleared out the area.

More significantly, there is all of one person on the highway, a huddled figure that only becomes clear to Eridan's shit vision when he swoops down to confirm their identity.

The last time he saw Tavros Nitram, there had been a hella lot of brown blood all over the walls because for some goddamn reason Kan and Eq thought impromptu amputations were an appropriate activity in the common room. Kar had passed out, Eridan had boggled, and it had all been amazingly awkward because Equius had that unique ability to infect the entire room with his weirdness. Then Tav had woken up and started charging around on his new mechalegs and stammering all over the fuckin' meteor.

Apparently, that didn't carry over. Tav looks up at Eridan with wide eyes from a wheelchair just like the old one, swamped in a hoodie emblazoned with the album cover of some Mexican hip hop group
Eridan can't recall off the top of his head. Control Machete or something. He and Fef never really listened to music like that.

Anyway. "Tav," he says brusquely, floating down to hover in front of the brownblood. "Long time no see, I guess."

"A-ah!" Tavros stammers, so at least nothing's changed. "Lo siento! ¿Te conozco? I mean…do I know y-you?"

"What?! Of course you know me!" Eridan says, folding his arms and glowering. He's in no mood for dickin' around when Gamzee could show up any second. "What kinda question is that?!"

"I'm sorry?" Tav says, like he's still not sure, his eyes quizzical as he rolls his wheelchair back. "U-um, sorry, yo estoy - I am waiting for a friend? I'm s-sorry if I'm in your way."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, the juggalo dickhead is right on my tail, so just sit still," Eridan snaps, casting a wary glance behind him at the dome. He's still not sure how Gam got through the first time, but it won't take a scary guy like that long to catch up when Eridan left such a convenient escape route. "Sorry, but I have to -"

He breaks off, and looks at Tav again. The other troll stares at him, totally uncomprehending, and Eridan wonders just how good the troll's English even is. That's a heavy Mexican accent.

Besides, it had seemed like a great plan back in the heat of the moment, but a lot of his plans tend to do that to him, only to turn out all wonky and stupid in hindsight. And now he can't help thinking, with a burning guilt, that he'd come out here intending to blow Tavros to kingdom come just to hit Gamzee's weak point.

But Tavros was supposed to be one of the people who counted. He never really talked to him, sure, but he was friends with Kan and Rez and pretty much everyone but Vriska at least tolerated him, and honestly Vriska just couldn't seem to make up her mind whether she wanted to kiss him or murder him. Which was overall a pretty common problem to have on Alternia because murder just kind of happened all the time, whether you noticed it or not. But anyway, that had been enough to stack Tav in the 'do-not-kill' category when it came to all of Eridan's doomsday device plans.

Shit. Fuck. He didn't think this through again. He clenches a fist by his side, knuckles white, and forces himself to march forward and grab Tav by the wheelchair before he can wheel himself off the edge of the fuckin' road.

"P-por favor, my friend will be back soon! I promise! Te lo juro!" Tavros starts shrugging off his hoodie, like maybe he intends to toss it at Eridan's face and use the distraction to make a get away. "Please let me go!"

"Shut up shut up shut up!" Eridan chants, more than a little pissed. Where the hell is -

"You should probably LISTEN TO THE LITTLE MOTHERFUCKER," a harsh voice growls in Eridan's ear.

Eridan doesn't think. He reaches around and grabs Tavros's throat with a hand, sinking his claws in until he draws blood. "Who d'ya think would be faster?" he says, licking his lips as his throat dries up with terror. He can't see Gamzee, and that's just scary. "You trying to get me all ragey to the point that I lose focus, or me tearin' his throat out."

Tav's throat burns brownblood hot under Eridan's hand, and when Gamzee doesn't just try to bash his head in, Eridan knows he's won. The triumph boils through him, even as Tav gives a tiny
whimper and his throat works as he says something pleading in Spanish, either to Eridan or Gamzee or both.

"You wouldn't dare. I'd FUCKING KILL YOU," Gamzee says at last, prowling into the range of Eridan's peripheral vision. That bland, mild smile is gone and all that's left in Gamzee's expression is unconcealed animosity, the kind of murderous hate that Eridan knows all too well.

Eridan, on the other hand, can feel the shitfaced grin splitting his own face. Because he's won. "And Tav'd still be dead," he says, shrugging and tapping a claw against the fluttering pulse of the carotid artery. "And you like him."

Gam's expression falters for just a second, and after that he has his murder face back on, but that's long enough for Eridan to make out the raw fear the clown's trying to hide. Makes a guy wonder just how Tav died, last time around.

If he had to guess - probably Vriska. She'd been talking a million miles an hour so he'd kinda filtered her out a lot near the end, but from the moment she and Tavros met Tav had probably been doomed. Eridan had been her kismesis long enough to see just how violent her mood swings could be. Vriska went hard and Tav...didn't. Him and Nep, neither of them could hate properly even if it killed them.

"Gamzee, ¿qué está sucediendo?" Tavros says in a strained voice, almost too fast for Eridan to understand him. He never really had a head for anything but English and Alternian. "¿Es esta la persona que estaba buscando? ¿Por qué estás enojado? ¿Qué has hecho?!"

"Ain't no thing, Tavbro," Gamzee growls, his voice veering wildly from a grate to a roar. And fuck, Eridan is pretty sure he's the fuckin' posterchild for sanity compared to whatever the hell Gamzee is, these days. "Our friendly invertebrother here was just about to motherfucking LEAVE."

"Was I?" Eridan snarks, snorting as Gamzee starts pacing around. "An' here I thought you were trying ta drag me along with you on your stoner clown and cripple world tour. Or did you finally come to your senses?"

"FUCK OFF BEFORE I MOTHERFUCKING HURT YOU," Gamzee bellows, turning and punching a car instead of Eridan's face, which is clearly what he'd rather do.

Eridan's eye twitches as the entire car crumples in on itself and smashes into the guardrail, denting the metal. His face aches in sympathy. "Whatever. You and Tav stay away and everything'll be fuckin' fine. Glad you saw it my way." He lets go of Tav before he can accidentally choke him out, shoves the wheelchair to the side - and then raises his hand and fires a bolt of lightning at Gamzee's back.

This one hits.

"W-what?! What are you doing?!" Tavros yelps, his voice clumsy and shocked as Gamzee slams into the wall of the building opposite, charred and smoking as he slumps to the ground. Eridan doesn't think he has enough juice left to have killed him, but he can at least hope Gam knows when to bow before his obvious superiority in combat, and just stay put.

"Makin' a goddamn point," Eridan says, sniffing. He brushes up his sleeve, grimacing at all the dried up grimlight residue and blood on his clothes, and dodges the hoodie that Tav tosses at his face. "He fucked with me in my domain. I had to set an example, or he'd just try it again." He floats up into the air and shoves his hair back out of his face. "Later, Tav. Nice seein' you alive, I guess." Then he sets his sights on the hole in the dome, and takes it slow, reserving most of his strength for healing the rips Mal left in his spinal cord. All he wants is to curl up in one of his sweet new castles and sleep for
days, until everything is fixed and he doesn't have to concentrate so hard to believe he's healthy and whole. Then he can get to the business of ruling -

An arm wraps around his neck from behind, and squeezes, yanking him back and off balance as the weight of a whole other body tips him over. "Fuck!" he gags, clawing at the arm as the two of them tumble toward the ground. "Ga'zee, ge' off!"

"No!" And it's *Tavros* whoshouts to be heard, huge brown pupated wings beating hard to break their fall. "Usted no va a ninguna parte! You shot my friend! I th-think you are a bad, bad man!"

Eridan can't even believe this is happening, but that doesn't stop it from happening. It just keeps being Tavros, *flying*.

And, apparently, picking up where Gam left off. Fuckin' hell, when did Tav grow a backbone?

Eridan reasserts himself in the air, struggling unsteadily to keep aloft even as Tav's dead weight legs drag them down. The chokehold is not helpin’ at all in the slightest, and just as Eridan tries to bat a hand behind him and shove the brownblood off, Tav starts smacking him upside the head with a half-closed fist. It's pathetic, honestly, because Tav can't throw a punch for the life of him, but he's also got all the upper body strength that wheeling around in a wheelchair all day would imply, so it hurts when he clips one of Eridan's horns. "Leggo!" he yelps, smacking Tavros's hand away.

Tavros hangs on grimly, even when Eridan jabs a claw into the fleshy part of his flailing arm. "No!" he yells back, grunting. "H-he came all this way b-because he thought you needed help! You didn't have to hurt him like that! Uh, at least I think you didn't, so you p-probably shouldn't have! Apologize!"

They hit the ground and Eridan staggers when Tav does absolutely none of the work in supporting their combined weight. If he means to hold Eridan here until Gamzee wakes up, it's working, which is pretty fuckin' sad. "Hell no! He provoked me! He deserved everything he got!" Eridan rolls his shoulders and drives his elbow backwards. He knows he catches Tav in the ribs when the brownblood flinches at the pain. "I'm tryin' really fuckin' hard to be a magnanimous sovereign here, but you're asking for it too, Tav! One more warning - piss! Off!" He punctuates the last two words with more elbow jabs.

And finally Tav lets go, collapsing backward in a heap before he starts flapping his wings again to hover upright. Eridan yanks away, rubbing his throat with a wounded expression that he makes sure to level at Tav. As predicted, Tavros looks abashed, a dark bronze flush staining his face as he looks down at his dangling feet. Eridan knew that whatever little flash of confidence inspired that assault wouldn't last; with Tavros, it never does. That was half the reason Vriska hated and pitied him so desperately. Be firm enough and Tavros would *always* back down first.

**HONK**

Gamzee appears out of thin air, still smoldering. Literally. Eridan stumbles back, startled, and Gam lifts his head. His hair is singed and standing on end all over, his clothes are pretty much tatters that only cover the important parts by sheer dumb luck, and all of the paint has burned off his face.

And all around the livid bruise of his irises, the yellows of his eyes have turned a bright, feral red.

Oh. Shit.

"Gamzee, no!" Tavros has time to shriek in a sudden panic, just as the first juggling club clocks Eridan upside the head.
His neck cracks around so hard Eridan thinks for a moment of bright horror that his spine has been broken. But then the pain shooting through his jaw hits, and he doesn't have time to think of anything except oh fuck I fucked up. A whole tooth bounces around in his mouth, knocked out at the root with the force of the blow, and he almost swallows it as he catches himself on his hands and knees, the taste of blood in his mouth once again.

He doesn't see the second blow coming through the white haze that covers his vision, but he does hear Tavros shrieking at the top of his lungs in Spanish; he makes out a fervent, "Basta!" just before the club cracks against the other side of his face and sends him reeling in another starburst of pain. He doesn't have room in his mind to believe he can heal this on top of everything else. There's just too much all at once.

But this isn't right. Gamzee practically admitted he didn't fight head-on like this! Why the hell is he so strong?!

Well. If he actually wants to strife properly, who is Eridan to deny him? Snarling, Eridan lashes out blindly with a wave of white fire, trusting that Tav will know to get the fuck out of the way and that Gamzee will be too rage-stupid to see it coming.

And trust goes a long way when it comes to his power.

He only gets half of what he wants to happen, though; he peels his eyes open to glower at the two of them, cradling the massive pit of pain that his broken jaw has become in one hand as he sits heavily back on his knees. He misses Tavros, but that's because Gamzee somehow has the presence of mind to seize the brownblood around the waist and haul him out of the way before Tav can lose a wing. But after that Gam doesn't let go, even when Tavros starts yelling and battering at the arm that clutches him close to try and break loose. Gamzee's eyes are scary dilated, blown huge and dark in the center of all that red inflammation, and Eridan isn't entirely sure the purpleblood even realizes he's crushing Tavros with all the unrestrained coldblooded strength.

He's everything Eridan never was, lost in a true episode of coldblood dementia, and Eridan can only marvel at how unfathomably stupid the universe had to have been to drive a fuckin' Rage player that crazy.

...Or, worse still, maybe that was the point of the Rage, which is just - no. No, no, no. Fuck. He never thought he'd miss the old Gamzee, sopor-stupid and slow and infuriatingly passive in a world where the passive got trampled, but oh god he misses the old Gamzee shit shit shit.

"Gamzee, basta!" Tavros twists and squirms, and grabs Gamzee's club-swinging arm by the sleeve before he can bring it down again. It buys Eridan enough time to scuttle away, panting and dripping blood from his mouth as he heaves himself upright on the guard rail. "Bad! Very bad, Gamzee! You promised, no more clubs! Calladito!"

Gamzee responding roar is mostly unintelligible, and it sends another stab of pain through Eridan's head, his vision tunneling and warping as a mix of terror and rage washes over him. For a horrible moment, he's absolutely certain that Gamzee is just going to rip Tavros's head off and then do the same for Eridan, and parade their heads around as trophies until the rage dies down and he realizes what he's done.

Welp. "Sorry, Tav!" he yells, and he throws the last of his reserves into blasting Gamzee again. The dome is still there to draw on, but consciousness seems to object to all trauma his head has gone through lately.

He misses how Gamzee dodges that one; maybe he's just so far gone in the madness place, he
weathers the feeble blast of fire without even moving. But a shadow looms overhead and Eridan bites the inside of his cheek, squinting up at the slouching, languid predator who squats to grab him by his hair and yank his face up. Tavros is splayed out on the road helplessly, but he crawls to hook another arm on Gamzee's. "Calladito," he tries again, in what is unmistakable a tone of tender pity, rubbing a thumb over Gamzee's widened eyes. "It's fine, Gamzee. He's not trying to hurt you anymore. Breathe, breathe. Respira."

"You would be pale for the insane clown," Eridan groans, and then he yelps as Gamzee abruptly releases his death grip on Eridan's hair. "Ow!"

"If you d-don't mind, it would be probably good if you sh-shut up," Tavros hisses, which is the most commanding Eridan has ever heard him be, in this life or the one previous. Then the brownblood goes back to shooshpapping Gamzee, who rocks back on his heels with a look of faint confusion and cocks his head to the side with an ear tilted toward Tavros's nonstop murmurs. Eridan sags backward, not quite out of range, but it's the best he can do.

Slowly, Gamzee's eyes stop burning red, and the huge black quarters of his eyes contract back into regular pupils. And fuckin' hell, Eridan is so on board with the moirallegiance party here. He takes back everything bad or sarcastic or even vaguely insulting he ever thought about Tav because this guy is a life saver. "And we'll go see the others first," he's promising, rubbing circles around Gamzee's hornbed. "Karkat and, uh - Aradia? And all the others. And tal vez cuando regresemos, Eridan estará en un mejor estado de ánimo."

He gets his name out of that, and nothing else. "Only telling him good things, right?" Eridan mumbles. The look Tavros throws at him is decidedly unamused - downright reproachful, even - and he decides to shut up again.

"We're g-going," Tavros says with conviction, his accent heavier than ever as he pats Gam on the back. "And you can g-go back in that th-thing and do whatever it is that you do, understand? Um, I don't really think y-you're the best influence right now."

"Tav. I agree so much. So fuckin' much, like, oh my god, you do not even comprehend how much." Eridan stands. Standing should not hurt so much. Gamzee shakes and shudders on his knees, curled up on himself, running his own claws through his hair, and Eridan wonders just how precariously this brief spate of sanity is balanced in his messed up head.

He doesn't want to be around to find out. Dealin' with Mal and Gamzee both in the space of one day is too much. He is a dictator-to-be here, not some kind of villain type. And Gamzee is officially outside the dome, so mission fuckin' well accomplished, now he can go home and celebrate surviving not one but two brands of crazy one right after the other.

"Eridan."

Eridan jabs a finger at Gam. "No. No. Absolutely not, you asshole. Whatever you want, no. I'm goin' home and you're not stopping me, dammit."

Gamzee stops clutching his own head and looks at Eridan, his eyes tired and haunted and still just a little bit hateful. "Game is still on," he says, reaching out and grabbing Tavros's claw absently to pull it away from his face. "Are you MOTHERFUCKING getting your hearing ducts open? Because it ain't safe, my Eribro. We're none of us safe alone. You already MOTHERFUCKING LOST IT ONCE. About how long do you get your reckon on until the gods get to whispering at you again?"

"Game," Eridan repeats. It's a little like being smacked with a door that has opened without warning. "Wait - you mean fucking Sgrub?" When Gamzee gives a jerking nod, Eridan groans. "Fuckin'
perfect." He hadn't really bothered wondering why they all had these powers - why, if he thinks about it, all of Fef's previously miraculous powers were probably just Lifey things that she used without remembering why she had them.

But. Fuck. This is fuckin' huge, and he struggles to process it. "But we're not - we didn't do any a' that server and client nonsense," he protests, throwing up his claws. "Why is it all working here?"

"Motherfuckin' miracles," Gamzee says, laughing low in his throat. "Miracles, my friend." Then he rises to his feet, pulling Tavros up with him as he does until he settles the brownblood on a black-scorched shoulder. Tav clings there, looking vaguely terrified, but pouting with self-righteous indignation when he looks at Eridan. "Come with us? We can go get Karbro and Kansis and all our other wicked motherfucking brothers and sisters, and then we'll be safe."

It's tempting. For all of two seconds. Then Eridan snorts, and Gamzee blinks, perplexed. "One last time. I am statin' this for the fuckin' record, so as there'll be no more misunderstandings," Eridan snaps, his back straightening as his faith in himself starts to rekindle. "Fuck. All. Of you."

"But hermano -"

"Hell no. I'm not listen to this spiel. I will have you fuckin' know that I went through that entire game without a single one a' you inconsiderate asshoals coming to help me," he says, slipping into a fish pun in his anger before he can catch himself. "If anything, you all needed me, and you only started to wonder where I was when you needed me to help you take on the King."

"And while you were alone, they got in your head," Gamzee says vehemently, taking a step forward. Tav clamps down on his temple and massages it, but Eridan doesn't step back, just raises his chin to try and at least give the impression of looking down on a troll a foot taller than himself. "You don't know what you were MOTHERFUCKING LIKE when Karkat had to go drag you out of that motherfucking planet."

"Yeah well, already replayed that shitshow," Eridan says, gesturing at the dome behind them. "And I kicked the angels' ass on my own. Again. So piss off." He thinks about it. "If you do find Kar, tell him...I wouldn't be opposed to seeing him. You know. For old time's sake. But he's the only one! As far as this troll is concerned, all the rest of you can die in another goddamn meteor storm. I'm out."

He spins on his heel, determined to exit with a properly dramatic flair. He misses Mal's wings for a moment, but maybe when he's not straining to keep his hope from flagging, he'll be able to make himself a pair that aren't rooted in his spine and slick with white acid and tar. He almost stumbles and trips when he sees that, at some point, the three of them have attracted an audience with all their shenanigans; the vans that he spied further down the highway are now only forty feet away, each news van emblazoned with a logo on the side when the glint of cameras peer around the corners of buildings at a safe distance.

Well then. Conscious of the eyes on him now, Eridan's back straightens and he lifts his head high, sniffing disdainfully in their direction and tossing his hair as he snaps his fingers and rises up into the air.

He didn't need to snap. It just looks cool. He also concentrates until he starts glowing a little, the white flames of raw hope rippling over his arms as he turns away from Gamzee and Tavros and the watching eyes of the nation.

And then, in a blaze of power, he floats back into his city, and seals off the breach.
Elsewhere...

Clubs Deuce fidgets, and raises a hand.

"Don't you dare," his newest assistant says, smacking his hand away from the control panel.

He pouts.

"Absolutely not."

Clubs has never really understood why Diamonds insisted that Clubs's retinue include some of his people, except perhaps that it's his pitiable way of expressing a pale concern that he's just too embarrassed to express otherwise. Clubs tends to attribute a lot of Diamonds's stranger ideas to a combination of deep-seated devotion and equally deep-seated denial of said devotion.

This is the third time he has walked down this hallway in his life, and the long hallway leading from the elevator to the heart of the facility still gives his stubby legs a bit of a workout! When he came by earlier this week, at the request of the Boss, he had been brought up to speed on everything that this division does for the Crew, but he'd be the first to admit that he doesn't have much of a head for learning and remembering things the first time around. It falls under the Felt's jurisdiction, and he tries not to bother them too much.

The new assistant, Zahra Yavari, follows only a step behind him, the black and grey fabric of her hijab illuminated by the harsh yellow glow of the light strips set into the wall. She's not much taller than Clubs, which is obviously just another way Diamonds was being kind in his subtle way, making sure that Clubs wouldn't have to crank his neck up all the time to look up at one of his assistants. A lot of Diamonds's people are tall like him - that is to say, intimidatingly tall - but Yavari is five foot five of plump human female, and when she is not being a spoilsport, she plays a mean game of poker. When Clubs digs through his pockets, anxiously searching for the key card they need to enter the facility, she taps the left pocket of her suit with a significant look, and Clubs checks the same pocket on his own suit to find the card.

What a neat trick! She really is quite helpful! Diamonds is so nice to have leant her out to him while some of Clubs's old assistants are under review.

After Clubs boosts himself up on his toes to let the reader scan his iris, the door unlocks with a sharp chack and slides open so they can enter. Immediately, a twitching man in a felt green suit hurries up to them, his hat a brilliant daffodil yellow emblazoned with a one. He clasps his hands, rubbing and twisting them nervously in front of his chest as he bows his head to Clubs. "W-welcome, welcome back, Deuce," he chatters, speaking so quickly that his teeth clack and click harshly on each hard 'c' and skidding off the last syllable. "Apologies, Doze c-completely ignored the alert that told us when you entered the premises. It was inexcusable of him." He snorts sharply on that last word, rubbing a finger at the underside of his nose.

"Aw, no problem!" Clubs assures him, smiling encouragingly at the slower, heavyset man in the blue top hat who creeps up behind Itchy with a sheepish, sleepy expression on his corpulent face. Doze is so well known for his torpid demeanor and his tendency to nap on the job that he's practically a legend even outside of the Felt subdivisions of the Midnight Crew. "Ms Yavari and I could find our own way down alright, so no harm done! It was like an adventure!"

Yavari harrumphs and says nothing, scanning the walkway before them with a level gaze.

"Die wants us to escort you down to the training halls," Itchy explains, darting back along the walkway and whirling around when Clubs and Yavari don't follow at once, motioning impatiently
with jerks of his slim boney hands. "C-come, come, come! Doze!" he snaps at the slower man, who blinks and sluggishly lumbers after him. "Everyone, follow me! This way!"

The sound of Itchy's snuffling and the occasional sharp sniff echo in the wide, empty space that surrounds the walkway. Clubs walks with a claw on each of the rails on either side, to be safe, and tries not to think about the steep drop to the indoor reservoir that lies forty feet below. One of the children here is very big on survivalist training, but Clubs can't really see why such a large swimming area would be necessary.

Something drips and splashes down below, and he leans over, trembling, in time to see the fin of a shark rise up above the water line, and then sink back down into the dark water with barely a ripple.

Oh. Right.

Itchy and Doze both have to swipe their cards and submit to iris scans before the inner door will open for them. Clubs doesn't really understand the necessity for all these extra security precautions - he just kind of accepts it when Diamonds and the Boss tell him they're necessary. Diamonds knows best, after all. It takes a moment for Itchy to cajole Doze into doing his part, jittering and snapping until the other human slides his card through the reader and pulls back his half-closed eyelid so the scanner will stop beeping out an error message.

So elaborate! Clubs is very impressed. The next hallway leads through the center of the complex, and they pass the clear Plexiglas wall that opens onto the cubical where one of these two Felt members is usually keeping watch on the only entrance and exit. The walls and floor are very white and Clubs doffs his wide-brimmed, floppy sun hat and clutches it to his chest as a faint decontamination mist sprays over them. Itchy spins on Yavari, clicking his tongue impatiently and cutting a hand at her head scarf, but the woman narrows her eyes at him and folds her arms, silent, until the Felt member wilts and scurries away toward the door, shoving Doze toward the entrance to the guard station.

Meanwhile, Clubs and Yavari continue to follow Itchy, who picks up the pace until he's practically loping down the corridor, hands spasming as he leads them past several closed doors until they reach an elevator that takes them all the way down to the lowest floor of the complex, skipping past all the boring old laboratories and testing rooms and heading down on the level where the reservoir is, along with the rest of the training areas. Clubs claps his hands together and bounces on his heels with excitement; the last time he'd visited, it had been all stiff and formal and the Scratches had been in the middle of routine checkups. This time maybe he'd get to see them training! That would be much more fun!

Itchy, bouncing on his heels for another reason entirely, chews with a vigor on his fingernails until the elevator door opens and he springs out, almost sprinting and twitching his way across the wide expanse of the indoor gym to the side that opens up right onto the reservoir. A troll in a felt green lab coat stands right at the edge of the mat-covered floor with his green hat resting by his feet, scribbling on a tablet as he squints at the surface of the water. His horns are as straight and thin as pins, and are tipped with blunted, round spheres of horn. "Di-di-die!" the assistant chatters, chafing and rubbing his hands again as he sidles up to the troll's side. He leans in close, maybe to whisper, but just ends up nervously laughing and squealing, "He's back."

The tablet pen snaps in the troll's hand. "Piekło ognia!" he shrieks at the ceiling, flinging the broken pieces of plastic out over the water.

Gosh. Die must still be in a bad mood, today! Clubs ducks his head, tapping his fingers together, and puts on his most apologetic, sympathetic look for when Die turns and shoves the tablet into Itchy’s tremor-wracked hands. The greenblood glowers at Clubs with ire in his single dark green eye,
sneering as he adjusts the dull miniature telescope of the mechanical eye in his left eye socket by poking it until it collapses back into a regular shape. "Po co tu przyszłeś?"

Clubs doesn't understand a word he's saying. "Sorry, Die, I really don't-

"Why are you here, why have you come?!" Die says in tight, hissing English. "I do not have all day."

"Have?" Clubs repeats, blinking.

"Jestem zajęty!" Die stoops and snatches up his hat, viciously batting at some dust that Clubs can't see before jarring the much abused hat over his horns. "I am busy! Too busy to be dealing with you! Why heeeve you come?!"

He draws that last 'have' out with such force that Clubs doesn't have the heart to break it to the poor troll that he's still not saying it right. Die, as near as Clubs can tell, is the real guy in charge of this obscure branch of the Felt, while Itchy and Doze serve as his assistants and enforcers. There are other silent assistants, some of whom line the room even now, but none of them have the rank to wear the special hat of a full Felt member.

"Oh! Well, I was hoping that I would be able to come see how well they fight! I did tell you I wanted to come back, right?" he wonders aloud, tapping his chin. He can't rightly remember, and when he glances at Yavari for confirmation she just shrugs, because she wasn't there at all that day. D'oh!

"No, you did not! This is heeeighly inconven - inconvenient!" Die says, still scowling. He gestures at Yavari. "And what are you? His newest nanny?! Pah! Take him away!"

"A-a-a-actually, he did say that, sir," Itchy spits out, a high-pitched giggle bursting from his lips when Die turns his livid stare on the human. "It was near the end and you were kind of distracted. It's how we kn-knew to fetch him upstairs."

Clubs beams at Itchy for his help, puffing his chest out and smiling at Die as well when the other troll looks back at him with wild eyes.

"Ach!" Die throws up his hands, cross. "Fine! Fine!" He snaps his fingers sharply, and strides off, the coattails of his lab coat flaring out behind him. "You, come, maly kretyn! Come and observe my creations as they train!"

Clubs shakes his head ruefully and shrugs at Yavari, who just stares back at him without comment, and then Itchy starts hustling them after the Felt doctor across the mats. To the far right of the elevator they came down in, a lone girl practices in the center of a raised platform. Her skintight practice suit is black, her skin only a few shades lighter, but her goggles, shoes, and the enormous forkkind she plants in the middle of the dummy's chest are all a bright, eye-searing red. She twists the fork specibus around in a circle, gutting the poor unsuspecting thing, before yanking the specibus out and spinning it around as she falls back into a circling, cautious pace.

"Look. Behold," Die says flatly, waving a hand in the girl's direction. "Have you seen enough? May we move on so that I may return to werk?!"

Clubs blinks at the girl blankly, trying to remember a name even as she continues to attack the dummy's weak points. Oh dear… "Shucks, you should know by now I don't have much of a head for names and all that," Clubs says, hanging his head. "I'm sorry. You don't mind…repeating everything, do you?"
Yavari pinches the bridge of her prominent nose. Die lets out a shriek like an elephant in severe distress. "Why has Droog cię jeszcze nie zabił?" he hisses, but he turns and gestures at the human girl again anyway, with even more dramatic flair. "That is the JC-1996! My greatest work!"

"Berzerker," Itchy hisses in a loud, wheezing whisper, eyes darting from side to side as he grins toothily, teeth clacking on the 'k.' And oh dear, Clubs actually remembers what happened last time -

"I will not abide those ridiculous nicknames in my lab!" Die shouts, walloping Itchy upside the head with a rolled up newspaper. "Not when I am free of that horrific failure for the first time in years! You will stop!"

"Stop," Clubs corrects automatically.

"I most certainly will not!"

Berzerker freezes mid stab at the sound of her name - either the string of numbers or the nickname; it's impossible to tell which - and turns with a precise motion to look at them with icy blue eyes. Clubs shivers when those eyes sweep over him, flat and dispassionate, as though assessing him and finding him insignificant, while she directs her attention to Die and waits for orders.

He remembers now that this was the one that scared him the most, even though he couldn't remember the string of letters and numbers that Die seemed to really like. Her hair is cropped close to her skull, shaved in an undercut on one side with the rest of her short black waves flipped across in a perfect coif. She's curvier than Zahra and only a little taller, and unlike Zahra's purposely modest suit, her bodysuit hugs her skin, making it clear that it's mostly muscle and little else. Her silence is intimidating.

He waves at her anyway, smiling encouragingly. She stares at him again, deadpan, until he cowers a little and lets the smile drop, and then she rolls her head to look at Die. The doctor motions at her impatiently. "I did not order you to stop! Kontynuuj! Demonstrate for this głupi what you are capable of!"

Berzerker doesn't look away from them. She twirls the forkkind around in her hand, clamps down on it with a fist, and stabs behind her with utter precision. The weapon buries itself in the dummy's face, and only then does she spin around herself, one smooth movement that brutally tears the fork out and takes a chunk of the target out with it. She starts dismembering the poor thing, and Clubs becomes uncomfortable enough that he has to remind himself that the poor dummy is not alive. Diamonds would scold him for being too sensitive, but his own attempt to recreate Diamonds's usual reprimand doesn't have much effect.

He still has to look away before too long, sheepishly patting Yavari on the arm. She doesn't look upset, really, but he is used to dealing with people who don't like to admit they need comfort. His son, for instance, is absolutely awful about it, but he's still going through those pupation stages when young trolls become rebellious and sarcastic, and Clubs is sure Sollux will outgrow it eventually.

"Total obedience. She is a killing machine. This is enough for you?!!" Die demands, and Clubs nods, even as Yavari discreetly edges away from him and looks at her sleeve, nostrils flaring. "Good! Dobrze! The next!" And Itchy speeds them along when Die explodes off in a cloud of muttered Polish that Clubs can't understand. The yellow-hatted Felt member snuffles again as he giggles at a high-pitch and casts several terrified glances at the girl they leave behind. Clubs is just glad he's not the only one intimidated by the people Die has been molding down here in the lab.

The next Scratch is off in a room set off to one side of the main gym, surrounded by a group of dummies and sectioned off with a wall of more Plexiglas that is covered in scores and chips and long
scrapes. Perhaps it's there more for the protection of any observers than for the sake of keeping them out.

This one's black suit cuts off at the arms, exposing his shoulders and arms, and the torso and legs are lined with yellow-orange strips down the front and seams. Most of his sandy blond hair rakes backward, but a few flyaway, choppy bangs cut across his forehead at an angle, and his sideburns are worthy of a standing ovation. He doesn't appear to be moving at all, but several slices open up along the dummies' sides regardless, and it is a testament to his speed that Clubs can't see the bladekind, but he can hear the faint hum of the sword whipping through the air even through the glass. It really does look like he's just standing in one place, his arms loose at his sides and his taut muscles totally relaxed.

Then the head of a dummy flies off at a sharp angle and ricochets off the wall.

"DS-2409," Die says gruffly. Clubs wonders what always gets the troll in such a grump.

The Scratch slides the sword into the sheath across his back and tilts his head ever so slightly, just enough that light glints off his tinted lenses. Clubs remembers his eyes are a wild, hawk orange-yellow from the last time he saw all four of the Scratches in a room together.

He snaps his claws a few times, as the name jumps back into his mind. Perhaps he's retained a little after all! Won't Diamonds be so proud? "Cogitator! I remember that one!"

For some reason, that only seems to make Die more disconsolate. "Those are not their code names!" he screams at the ceiling, but Clubs looks up and can't see anyone up there, so he can't imagine who Die is talking to. Itchy wheezes with laughter, and Yavari coughs into her hand.

"Nn?" Cogitator grunts, staring at them almost as expressionlessly as Berzerker. But his self-control is more brittle than the girl's, his shoulders tightening with obvious unease even while his face remains concealed. "Yeah?"

Die checks a monitor set into the wall beside the door, waving a hand absently. "Doskonałej pracy. You are doing well. Carry on."

The boy hesitates before going back to his training, a muscle in his jaw twitching, but Clubs doesn't think Die notices the pause, caught up in whatever read outs the computer monitor is giving him. By the time the Felt doctor looks up, irritable and muttering to himself, Cogitator has gone back to work. "He is precise, if not as physically powerful as JC-1996," Die says, though Clubs is privately of the opinion that just as many limbs go flying under Cogitator's steely gaze as they did under Berzerker's cold eyes. "And compliant. For the most part. Aside from te przeklęte pseudonimy… It would seem we still need to work out some kinks there, if even these are both so easily distracted. Not that you would understand why such a thing is important," he spits in Clubs's direction.

"Not really! But I'm trying my best!" Clubs reassures him, and Die stabs a claw through the computer's touch screen with a despairing wail. It seems like it's an accident, because when Die realizes what he's done he growls and yanks the offending claw free, shoving past Itchy to stalk back toward the water's edge.

Before Clubs can start to trot after the doctor, a series of beeps chime out from Itchy's side, and the man leaps nearly a foot in the air, giggling and trembling as he tucks Die's tablet under his arm and shakily pulls a walkie talkie from the inner pocket of his green suit. "Y-y-yeah, Doze?" A series of slow, ponderous grunts that might have been words emerge from the walkie talkie, and Itchy nods in double-time as though they make perfect sense to him. "Yeah yeah yeah, be right up. Hurry up and go to the first door already! Ugh! I'll be there lickety split!" He jams the walkie talkie back into the
pocket, tense and jittery as he sprints over to Die and whisper-shouts in his ear. "Gotta go! She's back!"

Die rips his tablet back out from under Itchy's arm with a furious sigh. "Mój Boże, zachować mnie od idiotów. Droog could not have just...kept it?" he demands, even as Clubs and Yavari catch up. "Fine. Better it be here, where no one else can pay witness to its inanities. Perhaps this time we can tweak its settings into something resembling compliance."

"Yessir!" Itchy streaks off toward the elevator, and Clubs starts to follow him on instinct. Yavari grabs him by the back of the collar and swings him back around toward Die before he can do more than raise a foot. Well, she probably knows best, anyway! Diamonds would only send the very best of assistants. He knows how Clubs can get a little distracted at times.

"Who is he going to get?" Clubs asks brightly, looking back at the elevator a few times as Die laboriously attempts to use his tablet without a pen, tracing over a schematic a few times with a claw until he seems to be satisfied with the result.

Die sighs again. "If you cannot deduce it, there is no hope for you anyway," he says, which…doesn't really seem to answer the question, but Clubs ducks his head and nods as though it does, just in case.

But also, there are supposed to be two more Scratches! He remembers them, distinctly! Clubs rubs the back of one leg with the toe claws of the other, a move Diamonds has snapped at him for more than once because it is not dignified, but as the minutes trickle away and Die acts for all the world as though Clubs and Yavari have already left, he becomes more anxious, fiddling with the floppy brim of his hat and the loose thread around the clubs symbol Diamonds helped him sew onto his lapel.

"...Should we go?" he whispers to Yavari at last.

"Czy możesz, proszę?" Die says fervently.

Yavari stares out over the water, her dark eyes unreadable as she completely ignores the question. Clubs looks out at the water as well, but can't make out anything beyond the circle of light cast by the gym's overhead lamps; even within that circle he can't see anything beneath the surface. Everything else out there is dark, though the water seems surprisingly choppy for an indoor reservoir. Maybe it's the sharks?

An enormous gurgle echoes through the cavernous space; a splash of water fountains up in the center of the dark waves, and then something huge and pale, pasty grey explodes out from beneath the surface, spinning through the air until it impacts the opposite wall of the reservoir with a dull, meaty thwack. Clubs's mouth drops as he watches the shark flop back down into the water, stunned.

"Ha! Take that, you confounded cur!" someone crows from the water, but even when Clubs squints, he can't make out who. There is another splash, and then, "Oh, botheration! We have company? Doctor Die, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wish it were not so," Die says, grim. "Regardless, JE-1993, you have completed the course?"

"Indeed I have! Be out in a moment!"

When the boy emerges from the water, heaving himself up on the side and chuckling as one of the silent Felt members hands him a towel, Clubs starts to remember more about this Scratch. His goggles have rectangular lenses, and the eyes behind them are mischievous and bright green. He's burlier than the other boy, rugged and broad in the shoulders, and walks with a pronounced swagger
as he rubs a towel over his dark hair. The only spot of color on the black is the dark green of his utility belt. His body suit is even more cropped than Cogitator's, exposing upper arms and powerful thighs.

It almost resembles booty shorts…but surely that can't be practical -

"Back again so soon, Mr Deuce?" he drawls, a note of amusement in his voice. His accent is more obviously fake now; Clubs isn't good at noticing that kind of thing, but he knows enough that it's obviously an accent the boy taught himself rather than one that was learned naturally: posh and educated, but sprinkled with non sequiturs and slang that don't quite match up, as though he learned his vowels from Oxford but learned to trip fast over 't's from someone in the East End of London, with the vocabulary of someone from the American South in the early 1910s. It's...perplexing.

"Ah, yes! What were you doing in the water?" Clubs asks, pressing his cheeks and glancing behind the boy at the shark, which seems to have lost the will to move.

"Oh, I punched a shark in the nose. Always gets the day off to a rousing start!" he says jovially, leaving the towel looped around his neck as he stretches one of his arms across his chest. "Did I not do an absolutely sensational job, Doctor Die?"

"Adequate," Die corrects, sniffing. "As you can see, Clubs, JE-1993 is not quite...doskonaly. There are still behavioral inconsistencies which require recalibration.

"Oh, Doctor, you always say the most spurious things," the boy laughs, slapping the doctor on the arm good-naturedly. The blow has enough force that Die stumbles and barely regains his footing, scowling disgruntledly at the Scratch. "Land's sakes alive, what does it take to impress you, old chap??"

"Less. Talking," Die says through gritted teeth.

"What is your code name again?" Clubs asks the boy. Behind him, Yavari makes a strange shushing noise, but he can't imagine who she would be attempting to hush at a time like this. "Starts with a B, but I'm drawing a blank after that."

"There are no other code names. I will not allow it!" Die screams.

"I understand completely, sir. My noggin isn't the steel trap it once was, either," the Scratch says, ignoring Die's outburst and tapping the side of his head. "If we just so happen to be speaking of the code names which are not to be spoken of, my nickname would be Bolter - or some such, if, you know, we had code names. Which we do not," he hastens to add when Die turns a rather remarkable shade of avocado green. "Okey dokey. I think I should hop back in the pond, now."

"The infernal creature is not even present and it is leading to discrepancies." Die adds another vicious note to the chart on his tablet. "And to think, the Boss wanted us to attempt to field test you impossible creatures -"

"They seem very nice to me!" Clubs protests, fiddling with his lapel again. "I don't think I could punch a shark! That's very impressive! Even Diamonds would say he was impressed, I can tell!"

"Punching sharks," Die says, sounding near tears. "Do not remind me. Do not even speak of it to me."

"Well, isn't that just crackerjack!" Bolter exclaims, his boyish grin widening even further as he folds his arms. "See, Doctor Die, you just need to have more of a sense of adventure, like the good Mr Deuce here! Going a round of fisticuffs with a shark is an excellent way to train!"
"He obeys orders well enough. Almost over-zealously, one could say," Die says. He is rubbing his temple with a hand, looking ready to snap another piece of equipment. Clubs would almost be tempted to try and soothe the beleaguered troll, were it not for his prior commitment to Diamonds. "I do not know why he is so chatty. But he functions well in combat, so make of him what you will. The fourth is the only real problem if you wish to report back to the Boss on their readiness for field werk."

"Work," Clubs says automatically.

The tablet, as it turns out, soars like a Frisbee when Die flings it. As it flies past her head, the Berzerker's hand shoots out and she deftly catches the machine, inspecting it for a moment with a complete lack of curiosity before handing it off to a Felt attendant so she can resume her relentless training. "Droog will zabierze cię do domu w kawałkach," Die vows, stepping toward Clubs. Clubs doesn't rightly understand what the troll just said, but he finds himself shoved back abruptly by a hand on his shoulder as Yavari places herself between him and the Felt doctor, one hand dipping into the pocket of her loose pants. More confusing still, Bolter drops his hand to his side as though reaching for a specibus that isn't there, and snaps it back into a fist as he falls into a fighting stance, eyes locked on Clubs with sudden detachment. Everyone is being so confusing, and Clubs opens his mouth to tell them so.

"Aiiiiiiii, babbus! Mama is home!"

Bolter blinks. Die sinks back, letting out a groan of deep, abiding existential despair. Clubs squirms around in Yavari's restraining grip to look back at the opening elevator doors.

The fourth member of the Scratches traipses in, and of course he remembers this one - Ranger! She would be difficult to forget! Her blonde hair bobs as she trips and darts toward Berzerker, tossing her arms around the other girl without regard for the fact that the other Scratch is in the middle of disemboweling a new dummy. "Jaaanney!" she singsongs, papping the girl on the face. "Hella rad, stabbing things! I'm approving so hard!" Then she squeezes Berzerker tightly, and lets the girl go, blowing a sloppy kiss as she steps out of range.

Berzerker doesn't really react, except to pause in her training, and restart it the moment Ranger whirls to beam in their direction. "Jaaaaaake!" she exclaims, bounding forward. "C'mere and give Mama Ranger some of that beefcake, you friggin' tall drink of water!" Itchy is only just now stepping out of the elevator as Ranger sprints across the gym floor, which is a testament to how fast the girl can move, despite her tipsy demeanor.

All of the danger vanishes from Bolter's posture as he strides forward to meet her, catching her with ease when she tackles him in a running hug, swinging her around as she knocks her forehead against his. "Oooh! It's been too long! I missed you all!"

"Good gravy, Ro, you were only gone for a few days! Is the outside world truly that hair-raising?" Bolter laughs.

Ranger flips her hair. "Solo missions are noooot for this girlie," she says, sniffing. "Talk about a snooze-fest! No one would even talk to me!" She taps the small of his back with the feet she's wrapped around his hip. "Now! Where is mah Di-Stri?! Where is my precocious - no, sorry, precious, that's the one - precious Cogs?!"

"Here." Clubs does not remember seeing Cogitator walk over. He is, quite simply, there, and Ranger lets out a squeal of irrepressible delight as she jumps off Bolter and grabs the other boy around the neck, rubbing her cheek against his own. The two are exactly the same height, but where Cogitator has been toned and molded into a taut swordsman's body, Ranger still has a gangly, half-finished
look to her, as though she still needs to grow into her bones.

"All my babbus together again," she sighs contentedly, dragging Cogitator down to scrunch the top of his head with a noogie. He seems to be letting her do it, resigned.

Only then does she spy Clubs. "Ohhwwhhhhooaa, hold up!" She lets go of Cogitator and her mouth pops open. She elbows the Scratch boy when he smoothly straightens up, and then punches him hard in the shoulder with a closed fist, never taking her eyes off Clubs. "Why didn't you guys tell me the cool little guy was back?"

Compared to every other Scratch kid, her energy radiates off her in palpable waves, a kind of boundless enthusiasm that makes Clubs beam at her. As though that's an invitation, the girl stumbles forward and clasps his hands, smiling right back through heavy, smudged lipstick, her mask slightly askew now that he sees it up close. "Heyyy, Mr Clubs Guy! You came back to visit us?"

"I did!" Clubs agrees, laughing and shaking her hands vigorously. "Hello to you too!"

"W-wow. Only three minutes! That's a n-new record," Itchy says, teeth chattering as he waves a jittery hand in front of Die's frozen mask of horror. The greenblooded troll seems to have become stuck, for whatever reason. It seems a little unprofessional, in Clubs's humble opinion! "I think you broke him good!" Itchy's smile is more than a little malicious.

A faint whine, like steam escaping from a leaking pipe, begins to emanate from Die's mouth.

"…You alright there, Die?" Clubs asks kindly.

"You heve returned," Die says at last, unable to take his increasingly furious stare away from Ranger. "Even more desynchronized than ever before. Dlaczego mnie nie dziwi?"

Ranger wilts, her smile fading as Die advances to smack at her hands until she lets go of Clubs. A protest bubbles up in Clubs's throat, because it's all fine with him, but Yavari tightens her grip on his shoulder until it is painful, and he knows that this is something Diamonds wouldn't want him to harp on about.

Ranger kicks her toe at the mat, head ducked. "Is this about the code name thing? Because lemme tell you, sir, it's not that big a deal, it's just that RL-2408 doesn't have the same ring to it."

"It is a perfectly acceptable code name," Die hisses, eyes flashing. "This disobedience is an embarrassment to the work this facility does, and you will desist, even if I must crack open your skull and adjust the settings myself."

"C'mon, not again! Even Janey likes them, and Janey doesn't like anything anymore!" Ranger says defensively, gesturing in the other female Scratch's direction. She laughs gaily, hiccupping a little, and turns a wild grin toward the other girl. "Right, Janey? You like Berzerker, right?"

They all look at Berzerker.

Berzerker doesn't so much as blink under all the scrutiny. Then she shrugs. "…Eh."

"All of you, back to weeerk!" Die screams. Berzerker turns back to her target with a small shrug, Cogitator vanishes again and reappears in the closed off room, and Bolter jolts as though someone has shocked him, touching his head as though in pain, but nods and jogs off obediently toward a firing range. "Not you!" Die then adds, seizing Ranger by the wrist, hard enough to bruise. "You will be undergoing review immediately."
"Bleurggh!" Ranger says, sticking out her tongue and pouting.

"I apologize that you have been forced to witness this, Deuce," Die says through gritted teeth. "These names have become a point of unreasonable contention. They were on their best behavior last time, but it appears that they are still too rough and unfinished to be trusted to act professionally on a consistent basis. Ignoruj ich."

"I don't know what you mean," Clubs replies, puzzled. "I like the nicknames! They're fun!"

Die tears off his hat and begins stomping it vigorously, keening with incandescent rage.

Diamonds would so not approve.

The elevator ride is incredibly awkward. Die shoves them all in at once, muttering in Polish and yanking Ranger around by the wrist so brusquely that Clubs feels sorry for the girl. When they reach one of the floors between the gym and the exit floor, perhaps the same one Clubs visited last time - they all look so much alike - Die frog marches Ranger out in front of him. She tugs her arm free, looking wounded, and heads down the hall of her own accord, apparently familiar with their destination already.

Clubs steps out of the elevator too. Possibly he's not supposed to do that; Yavari gives a hoarse shout as the elevator door slides shut behind him, and Die lets out a bloodcurdling shriek of rage when he sees Clubs has joined him.

Oops. "Oh dear," Clubs says, apologetic, watching as the set of numbers over the elevator start to count down while Yavari rides back up to the top floor without him. "I'm sorry, I thought we were all going along -"

"I want you out of my facility! Why is this so hard to understand?! This is my division and you will get out and go back to whatever stupidities your division deals with -"

Ranger raises a hand and opens her mouth, but Die whirls on her before she can start to say anything. "Nie! Get to your room. I will deal with you shortly!"

"Okay, jeez! Don't even get a please, do I?" Ranger pouts, tugging her mask off her eyes at last and letting it hang around her neck, revealing a face full of angular features that, like of the rest of her, she has yet to adjust to - as though puberty caught her by surprise late in the game, and she isn't sure whether she's pretty or not in the aftermath. "I'm going, I'm going!" she drawls when Die bares his fangs at her, sauntering down the hall and silently counting off the doors on the left with an exaggerated bounce of her finger.

"Now you. Get out," Die orders, turning to herd Clubs back toward the elevator. However, just as Ranger yanks open a door and pretends to swoon dramatically back into the room beyond - which makes Clubs giggle - another door slams open closer to the elevator. "No, out!" Die repeats emphatically, but then Clubs blinks and neatly ducks under Die's outstretched arms. The other troll is tall enough that Clubs has the advantage, there, and then Clubs lifts his head and pushes back the brim of his hat in time to see his three assistants spilling out into the corridor.

Petran Osolst, giant robot mechanic, claws at the wall to support herself, the yellows of her cerulean eyes shot through with a feral, reddened tinge. A ring of thin white bandages wrap around her head like a crown, and it appears as though some of the hair has been shaved from her head. "Clubs!" she growls hoarsely, yanking an arm free of the two people attempting to hold her back. "I know your
"Petran! Petran, stop it! You need to lie down!" Lila Moreau has one arm in a sling, but that doesn't stop her from grimly hauling Petran back. Quinn Buckley is not far behind them, the only one not in bandages as he jogs down the corridor and helps Moreau restrain Petran's unreasonable outburst.
"You're not well yet!"

Up until a few days ago, when Clubs had sent the three along ahead of him to continue the job while he was called back to base, they had been the three assistants he most liked, and the three most involved in the witch caper. He doesn't have the extensive network that Diamonds uses for his inscrutable ends, or the veritable army of thugs that Hearts and some of the Felt can draw on at will, so Clubs likes to think that his relationship with his helpers is a lot more personable. Moreau is excellent with gadgetry and computers and such, and always helped him with arranging business like ordering suborbital missile strikes, which often involved Felt paperwork that made his poor head spin. Quinn, on the other hand, had been one of the first people Diamonds had loaned out to Clubs, a laidback enforcer who didn't seem to meet Diamonds's exacting standards for his personnel corps, but who had a keen eye for finding ways out of a spot of trouble.

Then, in the middle of his visit to Die's facility earlier this week, Clubs had received an email first from the Boss himself, informing him that the three assistants would be off-duty for a while due to some kind of breakdown caused by the spacey witch, and then a series of rapid-fire messages from Diamonds directing him to take on Yavari 'for everyone's sake' and to not worry about the missing three. He never received their final reports, either. But he'd tried not to worry when Diamonds told him not to.

Now, all three of them are in heavy cloth hospital gowns and pants, the same kind that all four Scratch kids had been gussied up in during that first visit. Clubs steps forward, confusion searing through him, because why would they be here? Why on earth would they be in a facility dedicated to training Crew members like the Scratches for special operations? Internal reviews were supposed to take place back at base, and if both Petran and Moreau are hurt, they should be in a hospital, first and foremost! He starts to puff up, turning to give Die a stern lecture for whatever he could have done to pull some of Clubs's friends away from medical attention.

"Niewiarygodne!" The Felt doctor shakes his head, his battered hat sagging over on one horn. "So much work still to be done. You two! Take her back to the pre-op room or you will be joining her on the table for round two!"

"Yes. Of course," Quinn says, his voice tight, and he loops an arm around Petran's waist. She manages to graze Moreau's face with a claw when the human throws her over his shoulder, but Moreau doesn't flinch, casting a glance back at Clubs and nodding gravely before following Quinn and Petran.

Clubs trots after them. Petran is shouting something about propulsion systems and stress on hydraulic pistons, which sounds a lot more like the giant robot expert that Clubs has always known, but then she screams, "And that laser came out of my salary, you thieving space bitch!" and then he completely loses all sense of what seems to have upset her so much. But if it concerns his people, it concerns him, surely!

"Leave it," Die says coldly, shouldering his way in front of Clubs. "This is none of your business."

"They're my assistants!" Clubs says, frowning. "Of course it is my business! Why are they even here?"
"Because the troll has deviated so far that she's flipped," Die says. "She will be rehabilitated shortly, if you would be kind enough to get out of my laboratory!"

Clubs is already shaking his head before Die finishes, patting at his pockets and searching for the item he knows he stashed there...though that was a while ago... "I don't think that would be a good idea. They shouldn't be here. They should be at an internal review," he says with utter certainty. There are rules about this kind of thing. He's not so good at remembering them all the time, but he knows this one.

"This is the internal review!" Die insists.

Oh, no. They're going to have an incident, aren't they?

"Oh! Here it is!" Clubs pulls the card out of his pocket. It is the ace of clubs, and when he flicks it in his claws just the way Diamonds helped him master, it becomes a crook of felony. "Now I don't want to cause any trouble," he says, when Die stumbles away from him, sputtering. "But also I'm fairly certain that internal reviews take place at the base! So! I think you're a liiiiiiar!"

"And it would appear that you have forgotten where your loyalties should lie, if you would draw a weapon on me in my domain!" Die snaps, drawing back and digging into the deep pockets of his green lab coat. "You uncouth Crew ruffian! We Felt do nothing that the Boss has not approved of. Or do you not trust that I am doing my job?"

Actually, Diamonds has repeatedly informed Clubs that the Felt are not to be trusted at all. Diamonds can be a little silly about his paranoia, but he'd also taught Clubs a really fun rhyme that went something like 'when hunting the Felt, play the cards that you're dealt,' which had made more sense at the time when the Felt were their rivals and not their friends. Of course, they'd all been carapacians back then, and everyone had been able to use the cards to hide their weapons, and Diamonds hadn't been so mad at Spades all the time. Fun times, even if no one else seems to rightly remember them!

What he's trying to say is - "Nope! This has been fun, and your Scratches seem really nice, but also you should probably give me my people back. Right now." He locates another card in his pocket, the jack of diamonds, and reverently switches out his floppy hat for the old, tattered black backup hat he always wears on serious business. If things are about to get feisty, he needs to be prepared!

Die pulls out something from his pocket, backing out of range of Clubs's crook. "Hmph. Well. Perhaps this time, the Boss will be more open to my suggestions. I knew we could not trust Crew to remain loyal with such minimal recalibration."

If it's the doll, Clubs might be in trouble. He doesn't want to just whack Die for no reason, though! Oooh, this is difficult. He wishes Diamonds or Hearts or Spades were here! They always knew what to do. The most he can bring himself to do is to frown and brandish the crook. "We really don't have to fight. Just let me take my assistants to their actual review! I don't think that they should be blowing it off like this. It doesn't seem right."

Die looks at him with strange pity. This is rather awkward, because Clubs is not interested in his pity in the slightest. Then he holds up the object, which is not a voodoo doll but a black, chunky remote, with three large buttons. "They cannot be allowed to leave. And neither, it seems, can you."

And with that, the Felt doctor hits one of the buttons with his thumb.

The pain is immediate. "O-oh!" Clubs says, startled, dropping his crook and watching the clubkind clatter to the floor as he reaches up to stem the gouts of muddy brown blood pouring out of his nose. Then he feels warm wetness running down from the corner of each eye, and something wet trickling
through his ears, and he falls to his knees. "That hurts," he protests, pawing at his nose. Bright, stabbing pangs of agony pulse through his skull and make his horns ache, rattling him through his skull. It feels as though something is chewing on his brain, from the inside out, and it hurts it hurts it hurts -

"An emergency shut down," Die says, but he sounds far away through the liquid clogging up Clubs's ears. "Yes, prep him, as well. Być może tym razem szef pozwoli mi dokończyć…"

He doesn’t remember falling onto his side, and curling up into a ball. The pain seems to be getting worse, and oh dear. Perhaps he should have thought that Die wouldn't need a doll to hurt someone, anymore. A lot of things have changed, and sometimes it's hard for Clubs to keep track of all the differences in his poor head.

But he looks up through bleary eyes, and can't focus on Die as the doctor looms overhead. So he casts his gaze beyond that, past the closed door where his assistants have vanished, to the door at the far end of the hall, which has cracked open so that the human girl crouching on the floor can peer at him with horror in her bright pink eyes.

Diamonds is going to be so cross with him.

-

06: Lekarz Scratch?
...Clubs. Oh dear. You have been busy, Dienek.
06: He became drażliwy when he saw that his subordinates were present here in the recalibration ward. And of course, he is one of those you insisted would not accept the mindgrub process as necessary.
06: Of all of these Crew members you insist on us working with, he has been the most difficult to predict the behavior patterns of. Allow me to correct this.
If you must.
06: Really?
I fail to understand why you continue to express such unwarranted surprise when I acquiesce to your more trifling requests.
06: It is just that you seemed adamant that the suit members be left to their own devices. You would be surprised. Most of the time, it is simpler for a charming, omniscient being like myself to settle down and observe as the freely chosen actions of those around me inevitably play into my hands.
Your interference in the mind of Clubs Deuce will have no true impact on the course of events that I can foresee.
And I can see quite a lot.
So, carry on.
06: It would be my pleasure, Boss.
I'm sure Droog will be pleased by this, if nothing else. Clubs has not been subtle in courting her.
06: You are sure? The Lady Droog is not one I would wish to anger. She may disdain jejó żenujące flirty, but she has never denied it, either. And she of all the Crew will recognize the signs.
Droog is quite occupied with the other tasks I have assigned to her. Never fear, though. If she takes offense at your meddling, it occurs only in a timeline which my remarkable powers of prognostication cannot penetrate, and thus is so unlikely a possibility as to be nonexistent.
06: Then I shall proceed. Let me see what I can do to make Clubs Deuce more…
06: Compliant.

-
Later...

Ruth Agrona Cohen regrets ever moving to Los Angeles. It's been three years of smog, daily two hour commutes in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and enduring the higher than average rate of villain encounters that come of living in a city with a population over three million.

And now this.

Admittedly, she's never lost an arm to morning traffic, so that's a new experience. At the time, the pain had been overwhelming; so overwhelming, in fact, that all she can really remember of it now is a sharp, hot agony, and then being lost in a daze of pain and shock. She can't remember how she got away - can't even imagine how she would have staggered away on her hand and knees with blood pouring everything. But when she came to her senses, her arm was a cauterized stump, her knees rubbed raw and bloody from crawling over broken pavement, and she'd somehow managed to escape the twisted, writhing thing that had dragged her down out of her apartment in the first place.

Three days pass, and only then does she acknowledge that maybe she didn't escape. Maybe the monsters really are gone. She and the little girl whom she is currently hiding with still cower when the shadow of wings sweep overhead on their way to loot the local supermarket, but the angels no longer seem inclined to swoop down and carry off easy prey. They simply watch, and soar, and wait. She doesn't know what they're waiting for. It's been three days since the dying stopped, three days since the mutated things and the acid that flooded the streets shriveled up and died, but the angels remain, and they wait, and Ruth finds herself waiting with them.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Other people are starting to emerge, too. In the chaos and confusion of the Prince's attack, it had seemed like everyone Ruth saw was dead or dying or in agony, but other people hid. Some of them got caught, like she did - that would certainly explain the man who hobbles into their supermarket on a single battered crutch, his left leg missing at the knee and half of his face melted into slag. He startles when he sees the two girls, clutching his case of water bottles awkwardly under his good arm and turning sheet white, but Ruth ducks her head, pushes the little girl's head down, too, and they hurry by without bothering him. He seems to take the hint, and the clack of his crutch vanishes into the distance.

The little girl never says anything. Ruth uses her as an extra set of arms, shoving canned soups and vegetables and crackers at her, but she doesn't even knows the girl's name. All she knows is that the girl came through the reign of terror completely unscathed; there isn't a single mark on her, that Ruth has seen, and all of her limbs and features and horns are intact.

Ruth'd call it a miracle, but three years of Los Angeles and now this have somewhat withered her faith. She fills up a second hand basket with the last of the antibiotics on the picked over pharmacy shelves, covers them up with a layer of toilet paper because they've already been attacked over medicine once, and then starts hustling the little girl towards the shattered doors, and down the street into the Castles.

If there were supermarkets and other stores in the area before - and there were, because Ruth has lived in the area long enough to know where each and every Starbucks was located - all of the stores and their contents disappeared when nearly half the downtown area was converted into black and white. Not many other people are willing to hide out here after everything that went down, but the remade castles are remarkably structurally sound, and certainly in much better shape than the rest of downtown, which makes it perfect for hiding out in. The gargoyles that soar overhead resemble the angels in the sky a little too closely for Ruth's liking, but she shudders and touches a hand to the twist
lump of her arm, and keeps going, her dreadlocks swinging. Twice a patrolling angel shadows them, only to veer off just as Ruth's heart starts pounding in terror.

The little girl doesn't seem to notice the danger. She just stares up at the winged lizard things serenely, her brilliant cobalt blue eyes luminescent beneath her shaggy bangs. Ruth has to steer her into covered archways for safety by looping her remaining arm around her neck, her short, curving horns jabbing into Ruth's side all the while.

They stay in the covered courtyard where Ruth first found refuge three days ago, wedged between the creepy cathedral on the left and yet another one of the castles. Two trolls had been blowing up entire buildings near the edge of the dome, and when she had to break cover one of them had glowered and ordered her to get out of the way. She'd found the little girl in this courtyard, unharmed and unmoving in the middle of the room despite the explosions that rocked the castles around them, and Ruth had seized the girl and tucked them both into a corner in the darkness until the fighting stopped.

Now they keep the blankets in that corner. It's pitch black in this particular courtyard, though others are lit by luminescent strips of white light, and Ruth turns on the battery-powered lantern to bury the cans of food under the blankets. Los Angeles was never a nice city, despite the best efforts of that fuchsiablood girl and the Lady Cascade, and she figures it's only a matter of time before people stop looting stores and start looting each other. People mutter about a hole opening up in the dome, about the whole thing shedding its skin like a cocoon to reveal this new, gleaming white variation that lights up the sky day and night, but Ruth has seen no sign of it, and she grows more cynical by the day.

She doesn't think they're getting out of here.

An angel screeches mournfully overhead, audible even through the roof, and Ruth cowers. But the next screech startuples her even more badly, and then suddenly the courtyard echoes with a chorus of shrieks and chimes, like someone has taken a wind chime and started smashing it against the side of a metal pole. She drops the handbasket and blindly swings out to grab the little girl and drag her under the blankets. She forgets, as she often does, that her hand on that arm is gone, and misses the girl completely. Frantic, Ruth swing around, eyes straining in the awful yellow light of the dying lantern, and only just catches a brief glimpse of blue eyes glittering in the dark before the little girl steps out of the circle of light, her tiny footsteps tapping just loud enough to be heard over the screaming.

"You can't go out there!" Ruth yells hoarsely, scrambling to her feet. She knocks the lantern over and it rolls away, so she fumbles blindly after the little girl. Her tiny silhouette appears in the illuminated archways ahead of Ruth, giving her something to aim for, but the little girl steps out onto the street before Ruth can drag her back in. She doesn't know what is upsetting those horrible things, but there's no way it means anything good for them. Only three days of peace, three days since the angels stopped snatching people up to make into more angels, and three days is not enough to mean anything at all.

She reaches Ruth, but doesn't dare to step out onto the cobblestone street, swiping uselessly with her remaining hand to try and catch the little girl by the back of her sweater. "Come back inside," she hisses, her eyes widening with horror as the shadows of wings overhead cluster and spiral in a mirror of the frenzy the angels must be in overhead. "Come back inside right now!"

The little girl doesn't even look back in her direction. She stares up at the angels and waits, and it's only a matter of time before one of them notices her.

For a brief moment, Ruth considers stepping out to grab her. She catches her lip between her teeth, and raises a foot - and stumbles backward, away from the open archway.
She's always been a coward.

"Oh. My god. Shut up! Shut up, you fuckin' dumb assholes, I know I'm awake! Yeah, back off, 'afore I start shooting again!"

The screeches cut off at once, and Ruth watches with a fist pressed hard against closed teeth as the dark wings slowly disperse. The silence afterward is nearly as eerie, terrifying, and - yet she's heard that whining, cross voice before.

It's not a snake-angel that drops down in front of the waiting girl, but a violetblood troll. He doesn't look nearly as haggard as he had three days ago, whirling to aim a handful of fire at her with a wild-eyed stare. He's wearing dark purple and a whitish-gold cloak that doesn't look quite real, shifting in a breeze that's not there. "Hey, wrigglin' squirt, I'm lookin' for a human landdweller who was hangin' around here," he says, pompous and pouting as he folds his arms and looks down on the little girl. "You seen her?"

Ruth steps back, her heart spazzing out as she tries to move out of the range of the outside light. If she's quiet, maybe he'll ignore her again -

The little girl raises a claw and points it right at her. Then she opens her mouth and speaks for the first time since Ruth met her. "Ruth is scared."

"Whatever," the violetblood mutters, rolling his eyes behind thick-rimmed glasses, his 'v's closer to 'w's than anything else. "Thanks, I guess." He turns and sees Ruth immediately, his lips tightening in some unreadable expression. Ruth freezes in place, her blood running cold as he jerks his head, beckoning her to come out. "Hurry up, woman, I've got some pretty important princely things I gotta get around to doin'. This is important stuff that I can't just ignore forever, so stop makin' me waste my time."

Her mouth is too dry for her to gulp. Ruth almost falls forward, dazed, while the troll taps his foot with an impatient frown. There's nowhere for her to run, anyway, not when he's already seen her. Why, why, why had she stayed in the same place he'd last seen her? He knew exactly where to return to. She hadn't even imagined he'd bother coming back, but she should have known better than to hope she was safe.

"Yes?" she says faintly, stepping into the archway. It's too quiet, and no sound comes out, so she licks her lips and tries again. "Yes?"

The troll eyeballs her speculatively, his lips still pursed in a moue of discontentment, and then nods jerkily, looking off to one side, away from her and the little girl. "So. Your name's Ruth."

"Y-yes."

"An' your arm - that happened earlier, right? When Mal went fuckin' Caligula on everything," he says. He doesn't sound uncertain, just as though he wants these things stated for the record.

"M-mal?" she repeats, struggling to see where this conversation is going. She's not dead yet, and she tries not to think too much of that.

"Mal!" he repeats, snapping with impatience, and then just as clearly reining himself back in when she flinches. "The giant fuckin' asshole alien thing that was pretendin' to be angels and eatin' everyone. Because it was an asshole."

"The...Prince? It said it was a Prince. We all - everyone heard it," she protests. It would be hard to forget the burning, acidic voice that had scraped and shrieked through her mind, announcing its reign
of terror. But the troll snarls, eyes flashing, and she flinches, bringing up both arms instinctively to try
to guard her face. "I'm sorry!"

"That's not - shit," he says, scratching at the side of his face and scowling ferociously, but he doesn't
seem to be looking at her anymore, his gaze gone distant. "Uh. That was a misunderstandin'. Kind
of. Mal was Mal and Mal liked eatin' people and doing stupid dumb things like that. No sense of
how the whole ruling thing worked. Downright unprofessional. I'm the Prince." He says that last
with some measure of pride, his thin chest puffing out and his pout twisting into a triumphant smirk
as he jerks a thumb at himself.

Ruth thinks about screaming.

Then she looks him up and down again. It had been hard to see through all that raw terror all those
days ago, but she's pretty sure she has a good twenty pounds on this guy. Violetbloods don't pack on
raw muscle like land-dwelling trolls at the high end of the spectrum, but even considering that, this
guy is kind of...shrimpy. No taller than any other teenage boy, and certainly a few inches shorter than
her. Short enough that she can look down and clearly see the inch or so of black where the dye of his
violet streak has grown out and not been redone.

Then again, he can also fire white lightning from his hands, and from the rifle slung over his back.
Which is terrifying to think about, because at any moment he might change his mind about whatever
made him decide to spare her the other day instead of wiping her out in the middle of his inexplicable
blood feud, and she does not want that kind of power turned against her.

But he doesn't match the image she has had in her head of the far-off, winged abomination that had
set up a throne of glass and thorns and tentacles in the middle of the city, and so she clears her throat,
shifts her weight from side to side, and nods slowly. "S-sure. Whatever you say."

This is clearly not the response he expects to get from that kind of announcement. His whole body
sags, and he makes a face before he catches it and marshals himself back into some semblance of
princely dignity. "Hmph! Anyway! I feel kind of awful about all that excessive dipshit Mal did while
I was off makin' mediocre life choices. So. I want to give you an arm."

"...An arm?" she says.

"Yeah, an arm!" He raises his eyebrows expectantly. "Because I am fuckin' magnanimous. And we
need to take the terror of this reign of terror down a notch because this is ridiculous. So yeah. Now
let me see it."

Ruth tucks the blunted arm behind her back. "Uh...no."

"Uh, yes!" the troll says, rolling his eyes. He reaches out and tries to grab her shoulder, and she
ducks out of the way repeatedly. "Ugh! Landdwellers. Let me just - see - it -" He almost trips over
the hem of his own cape, and Ruth seriously considers just running because this guy is kind of
incompetent.

The little girl just watches. But she's also some kind of sellout, so Ruth has cooled toward her
considerably. To think, three days of sharing space and supplies with the kid, and this was the thanks
she got?

Then the little girl says, "Let him help, Ruth," softly, and it startles Ruth badly enough that she
stumbles, and the violetblood tugs her amputated arm out from behind her back to inspect it, his
claws long and ragged enough to prickle as he prods at one of the open sores oozing white pus.
"Look, I gotta make this thing dangerous, or I can't do fuck all," he says, his brows furrowing as he turns her arm over, digging a claw into a vein of white that eats up the underside of her arm. "Destruction and hope and all that. Basically, you're gonna be able to wreck shit. Do you accept those fuckin' terms and conditions?"

"What are you even going to do?!!" She tries to pull away. He digs a claw in and she nearly whites out from the pain.

"This." He shrugs, and starts to glow.

Ruth screams, and punches him in the face. He lets go and she takes the opportunity to abscond. "Holy fugh, I think you broghe my nose!" he wails, clamping down on the nose in question with a claw. "Oh god, why?!"

"I want nothing to do with the glowy fire thing!" she fires back over her shoulder. Fuck her supplies, she's getting out of here. "I'm not stupid! Asshole!"

She looks back again. Oh, damn. He's flying. She skids to a stop as he jumps over her head and lands in front of her, sniffing hard and scratching at dried blood on his upper lip. "Do you not want a new arm?!" he demands. "Do you even know how hard it is to make this hope shit do anything other than blow stuff up? I'm fuckin' hardwired to break things, and this is, like, a one-time offer so you can become an awesome noble in my new court."

"Just blow another hole in the dome and let us all leave!" she says. Because that's the one thing that she can concentrate on, the fact that three days ago this troll and the other had been fighting, and ever since then people have whispered about a hole in the dome. A way to escape. If he can do that - "Do that, and everyone who got hurt can get actual medical care! Why would I want an arm that might blow people up when I could have a regular prosthetic?!"

The troll stops dead, and looks absolutely shell-shocked, as though this incredibly obvious solution never occurred to him, and for a brief moment, Ruth dares to hope she's convinced him.

That hope gets shattered an instant later, when the violetblood frowns again, and shakes his head, a storm brewing across his features. "No good," he says darkly. "Need to keep reinforcing the dome, not the other way around."

"But why?" Ruth is aware that she's begging, now. Her knees feel weak, and she wants to crawl into the dark corner of her courtyard and go to sleep in the silence of a half-dead city. "If you're not the thing that caused all this, why won't you let us go?!!"

"Cause the world is endin' and all that," he says, as casual as anything. Ruth's jaw drops open, and a tiny, cold hand touches her remaining hand. She flinches, but it's just the little girl, just barely clasping Ruth's hand with her claw. "All the angels're the first sign heraldin' the apocalypse, and I can't really take that back, now."

"But there are more than seven." When the troll only looks puzzled, Ruth says, impatient, "'And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.' Book of Revelation, 8. If you're trying to go traditional, you went a little wide of the mark."

One of his eyes twitches. "Oh my god, who even knows something like that?!"

"Are you kidding? I volunteer at Sunday school. Revelations is the only thing the brats will sit still for half the time."
He slaps his face. "Yeah, well, who even knows how this stupid game crap fits in with all that," he says, grinding the heel of his palm against his forehead. "This is, like, rule number one of the new world order - don't try to apply logic or science or anythin' to the apocalypse. As long as I can keep that dome up, fuck all that." He glowers up at the radiant sky, his permanent scowl deepening. "I'm not dealin' with all that crap. I believe the dome can stop all that destruction nonsense, and that means it's true. And I'm gonna rule this city with a fuckin' iron fist."

There's nothing she can say to that kind of logic. Ruth just raises her estimate of how insane this troll is a little higher, and stays quiet, trying to edge away from him as best she can with the little girl still clinging to her hand. She should just jerk her hand free and run, but the girl is blueblood strong, and though her grip doesn't hurt, it's strong enough that Ruth would probably have to break her hand to get it loose. She can't afford to lose her only remaining hand like that.

"But I need a court. Since all those assholes are probably runnin' around ignorin' me, again, I need another way to rack up the multipliers," he says, looking at her with an expression that's half demand, half pleading. "So just let me give you an awesome laser arm and call it a day."

Ruth hesitates. She could use both arms, and it's not like anyone is making prosthetics and performing surgery while this dome is up, not with how shell-shocked all the survivors are. She doesn't know what kind of devil's deal she's making, here. But if she can protect herself from whatever fresh hell gets unleashed on Los Angeles next, she can't turn that down. She's too much of a coward.

If you can't beat them, join them.

"How often would it fire lasers?"

"How often do you believe it will fire lasers?" He's wound back around to looking irritated again. "Just believe it'll happen when you want it to, and it will. Hope majjyks are literally the easiest fuckin' thing to comprehend, honestly." He makes gimme motions with his claw. "Goin' once…"

She hesitates for all of two seconds.

And then holds out the stump of her arm. "Yes."

"Finally." The violetblood reaches out, grabs her melted elbow, and twists as his entire body catches fire. "[Your Oath Is Mine]."

Ruth tries to yank away again, but now he and the little girl are both there to hold her in place while the fire billows down the Prince's arm and wraps around hers. It hurts, a slow-building burn that licks at her flesh and sets her veins alight. She can see her own arm glowing from the inside out, and just what has she signed up for? She looks back and forth from the Prince's crazy-eyed, intense stare to the plates of white light that start to latch onto the end of her elbow, and feels dizzy from the buzzing, white-hot scent of lightning and ozone and, oddly enough, vanilla that rises up from her burning arm.

When the violetblood releases her at last, Ruth does collapse. The little girl still has one hand, so she catches herself on the other, still half-anticipating the painful jolt that always pulses from the infected part of her amputated arm when she accidentally uses it for anything.

There is no pain. Even the scorching agony of whatever the troll did to her has receded, and Ruth sits slowly back on her heels, raising up the new arm that broke her fall. She can't see how it attaches to her elbow - there are none of the mechanical clamps or wires that would be needed for such a heavy piece of equipment. But it responds when she wants it to turn over, with a series of crystalline
chimes, and then her eyes finally pick out the hundreds of individual white blades that make up the bones and the muscles and tendons of a new lower arm and hand. She thinks about the hand making a fist, and it does, instantaneous and smooth, in a chiming of tiny clicking blades. Something blazes like fire in the very center, between the large, thin knives of the radius and ulna, and she remembers all that talk of lasers with an audible gulp.

She hadn’t thought he could actually do this. She’d believe that perhaps he could have destroyed her remaining arm, or killed her, or accomplished nothing at all, and stomped away, deep in his own private madness.

But this is real. This shatters everything she has ever believed.

This is impossible. This is...incredible.

"Oh, yeah. That thing is totally capable of destroying people's hopes and dreams," the Prince says, exultant. "A weapon worthy of bein' bestowed on a prince's follower. An' I totally destroyed all the corrupted shit still in the rest a' your arm, too. So you're welcome."

"What are you," Ruth asks, raising her eyes up because this –

This is a miracle.

"He's a god," the little girl says, adoration in her blue eyes as she squeezes Ruth's regular hand, sinking to her knees as well. Ruth looks at her with almost as much wonder, because the girl had known all along, hadn’t she. Somehow, impossibly, she’d gone out to stand under the angels and start all this, and isn’t that a miracle, too?

"Not yet, I'm not," the Prince says, mussing up his hair. He flushes, looks almost mortified or disconcerted at the moniker. Then he tilts his head to the side, and narrows his eyes at the little girl, as though really seeing her for the first time. "Wait, hang on a fu- glubbin' minute. What's your name?"

"Faith," the little girl says. "Both of my mommies are dead. Will you take my pledge too, Prince? You were asleep all this time, so I had time to think about it. Please?"

Ruth feels the cool of the girl's palm, and wonders. It doesn't make sense, except in the ways it does. Trolls don't break the six and eight letter naming scheme they've been using since the old Alternian Empire unless they've been adopted out to humans. The little girl - Faith - hasn't said a word during all that time she spent with Ruth, but now she speaks like someone twice the age she looks, with all the shining devotion in her eyes that Ruth hasn't recognized since she looked into the eyes of her old preacher back home and said that she was leaving the parish.

The Prince stares hard, suspicion in every line of his body. "This fuckin' game," he mutters, tapping a distracted, frenetic beat against the side of his leg with a jittering hand as though totally absorbed in other thoughts. "Mal couldn't get anywhere near you, could he?"

Faith shakes her head, curls bouncing. "No. I knew you wouldn't hurt me. I believed it, and it was true."

And -

Ruth understands.

All of this - all of it - has been a miracle.

And in that moment, on her knees with an arm blessed by one who will be a god, she believes.
The Prince grins, all teeth like a shark, and holds out a hand wreathed in white fire for Faith to grasp.

"Welcome to the Court of Hope, Faith."

Chapter End Notes

AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

And before anyone says a word about Diamonds knowing shit she shouldn’t, I direct you once again to the altered conversation with ?? in Jade’s section. There have been other hints, but I’m also holding back the full explanation for the end of the next arc, so that’s about as blatant as I was going to get in terms of foreshadowing.

Aaaand anyway, that’s chapter 15! Next up is chapter 16 – Time Shall Not Sever Us, which sounds a lot more ominous than it probably actually is. Arc V (side B) will end with the next chapter, an exposition heavy motherfucker with a lot of flashbacks. /seduces you all with promises of Bro and Davesprite and the obligatory angry Spades/BQ makeout sesh

Mal is a winged Ophan, but with more teeth. If anyone needed a better visual image for it, I direct you to M.C. Escher’s Concentric Rinds.
Time Shall Not Sever Us

Chapter Summary

Is it worth a tear, is it worth an hour,
To think of things that are well outworn?
Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,
The dream foregone and the deed forborne?
Though joy be done with and grief be vain,
Time shall not sever us wholly in twain.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Jade is here. At last. IDK, she jumps around a lot and the quality is down the tubes, but it gets the job done so we’re just gonna blow through this and not look back. Also, apparently Sollux’s section was too much for this chapter to handle on the character limit, so he'll be reposted instead in the next chapter. /s The party may now resume regularly scheduled heroic angsting and crime fighting. Also, since it’s already finished, a Diamonds section will be posted shortly to open our new Arc, COMPULSION, with Chapter 17 – Strange Weather.

We also have a power anthem at last: Hey Momma/Hit The Road, Jack (Pentatonix).

Warning for multiple bloody major character deaths in memory form. Like. Jesus. /stares at story/ Primarily a recap of an alternate Acts 1-4 of Homestuck. Please note that the timeline WILL NOT align perfectly with Homestuck canon, even at the beginning before the major changes take effect. Assume that any and all minor changes or omissions are the result of AU. All of them. I know what I’m about, son.

H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They drive out to the Cascades that Saturday.

The morning starts out on a less than promising note, and Karkat is tempted to take that as a harbinger of yet more fuckups that are doomed to come.

Which is pretty fucking understandable. In fact, Karkat is personally amazed that the past few mornings went as well as they had. Four super-powered heroes under one roof, two of them skipping school to lay low and going stir crazy with it, you'd expect more ridiculously stupid shit to go down, but the power of the stern fatherly glare is not to be taken lightly. There are few things that John's custodian takes more seriously than his son's safety, and knowing what they know now - that Diamonds Droog can hold John's secret identity over their heads at any moment - has caused Samuel Egbert to fall back on whatever unspecified training he has from his armed forces days; Karkat has never actually been sure what military branch John's dad was in, but it's like living with a well-dressed, ever-smiling drill sergeant. Dad Egbert takes full control of the situation - calls in sick days
at his day job, helps Crabdad communicate to the school that Karkat won't be coming in due to a family emergency, and then assigns each kid chores or homework on a rotating basis so none of them have the time or energy to cause another fucking crisis.

So Harley keeps her feet on the ground at all times, occasionally scrambling to repair whatever damage her carapacian sidekick causes - at one point the thing teleports an entire bathtub onto the roof of the house, and that's about as exciting as plumbing has ever been. The red-eyed douchebag seems content to remain quietly in the background, avoiding interacting directly with anyone but John and doing whatever it is self-proclaimed 'ninja rappers' do in dark, shadowy corners. Sometimes Karkat would swear there's more than one Dave running around, which would violate all of Samuel Egbert's ground rules, but what with the benefit of fucking time travel Dave seems to be able to forewarn himself before anyone can catch more than a flicker of red in the corner of their eye. Asshole. He texts John an obscene amount, but Karkat is trying not to flip his shit over that. Unfortunately, that seems to give Dave the impression that, just because Karkat is mercifully sparing him the worst of his usual bile in the name of taking the moral high ground, it means Dave has permission to text him an obscene amount, too.

And Karkat is still hobbling around, usually using John's elbow as an interim crutch. His ribs certainly don't feel like they're healing at an abnormally fast rate, so he's inclined to think that Spades Slick was a lying piece of shit, but Flashstep had the brilliant idea of helping (read: forcing) the carapacian to leave the Midnight Crew stronghold before Droog could return or the police could arrive, and now Slick is in the wind and no one can ask him anything at all.

But that's not the point. No, the real question here is, who the fuck thought that leaving the demented, piece of shit time knight in charge of breakfast was a good idea?

No one, apparently, because when the fire alarm in the kitchen goes off at ass o'clock in the morning, literally everyone is still in their pajamas when they teleport and/or race to the kitchen to see what in fuck's name is going on. Even Samuel Egbert marches in with his face half-shaven, wielding a fire extinguisher like a truncheon and looking stoic but also resigned, as though he's been anticipating some fuckery like this all along.

Dave looks up from the unnameable, inedible thing now crisping and smoldering in the frying pan. He drops the spatula and somehow, in spite of the obnoxious sunglasses, manages to give the distinct impression of a deer caught in the head lights.

TG: ...
TG: well shit

"But why?" Karkat has still not received an answer to that question. "You inconsiderate fuckwad, you couldn't have waited the half hour it would have taken for John's dad to show up?"

They all have pancakes now. The pan full of what Dave called omelets and Karkat called a festering heap of post-digestive excretions had to be given an early funeral by way of the trash can, and the pan itself was a lost cause too, but this is the Egbert household and Samuel had simply produced a backup griddle from the mysterious depths of the kitchen cupboards and started churning out massive pancakes. Harley, who like any insanely hyperactive maniac is way too fucking chipper for five in the morning, finally shuts up when she starts shoveling food in her mouth, now that Dad Egbert has done the service to mankind of teaching her not to talk when she eats. She seems to have misinterpreted that as meaning she's not allowed to talk at all while eating, and Karkat is not about to disillusion her. Seriously. He's not stupid enough to look this gift-hoofbeast in the mouth.
Karkat can't even imagine what the poor man's going through. His son has effectively been hosting a four day sleepover in his house with no obligatory school breaks and they're all about at the point where the only thing they can do at night is put on yet another shitty hero movie and stare blankly at the screen like the living dead. Karkat's ventured to his own hive only to pack clothes and make sure Crabdad has enough iced roe and actual food to keep the dumb shit lusus alive through the weekend, because John is understandably paranoid that both their houses are being watched.

John has run out of pranks to try to lighten the mood with. Even Harley can only talk about science for so long. Karkat's frankly surprised Dave lasted as long as he did without attempting to pull suitably ironic stunt. Everything with this asshole has some kind of ironic explanation behind it, to the point that Karkat's pretty fucking sure Dave doesn't even know what that word means. He just uses it as an excuse for all the frankly weird shit he does, like rambling about taxidermied frogs and the logistics of sewing extraneous zippers onto a jacket for no fucking reason and the copious amounts of apple juice that he consumes.

There's a few exceptions to the rule, including, incomprehensibly, the mystifying rapport the douchebag has formed with WV. No one knows when it happened. No one knows how. No one knows why. It's like a riddle wrapped inside a mystery shoved up the wrong end of the space/time continuum. Right now the alien is swaddled in a bunch of ghost-patterned sheets it dragged out of the linen closet on a whim, in a rough approximation of the wrappings most carapacians wear, and is sipping apple juice from the same jug as Dave while they sit on the floor together, sloppy and spraying juice everywhere whenever he gets overly excited. Neither of them can talk, but Karkat catches Dave signing slow and deliberately, and sometimes he thinks WV copies the signs, instead of flailing about with his silent carapacian gestures.

But in the meantime, no one else in the house can understand Dave or WV. So Dave shrugs and the group Pesterchum memo, a mass of red only occasionally broken up by other colors, starts going off on everyone's phones. Samuel Egbert is not included in the memo, since he doesn't actually have a Pesterchum account, and it's become a convenient way to communicate even when John's dad puts them all in separate rooms and cajoles them into some new chore to keep them from potentially blowing something the fuck up.

It should be noted that Karkat was not, at any point, consulted on the subject of the memo board's title, but yelling about it would only be playing right into Dave's devious, despicably ironic trap. The provocation is so obvious, it's pathetic, and Karkat has to actively stop grinding his teeth for fear of cracking a canine with the force of his irritation whenever he has to read it.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] at 06:23:44 opened memo on board KARKAT'S ONE TROLL COMEONOLOGUE [the Pesterlog edition] --
TG: never had a working kitchen before
TG: considering mines been converted into a permanent puppet death trap for as long as ive been alive
TG: and i thought hey
TG: i cannot possibly pass up this incredible once in a lifetime opportunity
TG: to learn if i am in fact capable of making some bitching omelets.
TG: and
TG: well
TG: ...
TG: today we learned a valuable life lesson

"What I don't get is how you didn't notice the eggs were charred and crusting onto the pan itself," John says, with that tiny smile on his face that means he thinks the whole thing is just kind of hilarious. He would. "I mean, I could understand it catching fire - who hasn't set things on fire while
cooking once in their life? But it had to have been smoking for ages before the alarm went off!"

Dave's face is completely unreadable as he passes the apple juice back to WV. He shows absolutely no sign of remorse or embarrassment or anything. He's just a blank, insufferable, emotionally repressed asshole, and Karkat has given up trying to see half the body language cues that John swears up and down are there if you just know what to look for.

TG: i get distracted man
TG: zone out and lose track of things
TG: and then future me is a dick and doesn't come back in time to wake me up
TG: do you know how annoying that is
TG: do you understand how angry i am that even as we speak i am not going back to tell past-me not to fuck up
TG: this shit is stupid as fuck yo

In the corner of his eye, Karkat can see Harley chewing furiously, obviously intending to rejoin the conversation as soon as she can, and feeding a pancake to her pet barkbeast thing, and honestly? That thing is starting to just creep him out. His nightmares have been repetitions the past few nights, so every time he looks at Bec there's a pang of momentary, unmitigated terror at the memory of that wolf's head on another monster's shoulders.

He still doesn't know what any of it means. He and John have puzzled over the nightmares whenever they have a free moment, but every so often John's nose will begin to trickle blood and they'll have to cut off the conversation without pressing any further, John's face torn between blank confusion and the edge of some painful revelation.

It's the same way he looked after the one and only time Heir ever dared to teleport Hemogoblin with him on the job, pale and vaguely haunted, as though taunted by his own inability to remember what's going on because that's actually a thing now. Yeah. Harley and John's dad have both tried to explain what the hell's going on, but it just sounds more like that babble that Spades Slick was on about, so Karkat tunes out Harley and nods along with Samuel and starts to develop a sixth sense for when John's about to max out his credit for the day.

He gets that something big is coming. A shitstorm of absolutely preposterous proportions. But he's reserving all judgments until he's hearing it from someone other than Jade fucking Harley, because she's back on the shitlist for the foreseeable future. She'd tried to argue that first day that if she hadn't suggested the three of them go after Diamonds Droog then they would never have learned that Droog knew John's identity, as though that somehow made the whole thing better, and Karkat had had to leave the room and scream into a pillow in the closet-pile for close to an hour before the urge to claw her face open went away.

John wrinkles up his nose. It's adorable. "Time powers."

TG: i know

"Whatever. Let's just keep the shitpanned levels of stupidity to a minimum, please?" Karkat grumbles. He's claimed the entire couch for him and John by pleading broken ribs, and his request was granted, so when he finishes his pancakes he sets the plate down for a second and lounges like the fucking convalescent that he is. He's found that as long as he doesn't bend or twist or shout in any way, he can make the pain medication last longer. "One day. Just one day, where we act like fucking professionals while we're dealing whatever crisis happens next, instead of a bunch of unrepentant morons. That's all I want."

John laughs, smothering it too late by covering his mouth with his hand. It's half-hysterical, and
Karkat reaches out and grabs John's knee because it's the first thing his hand finds, patting at it awkwardly in a vaguely soothing gesture. "We can try," he says, rolling his eyes. "But I think we're just doomed to always end up in situations where stupid stuff happens. It's like a universal constant or something. The best we can do is probably just go along with it!"

TG: look at it this way
TG: when john finally accept my broposal and you join us as his diamond waifu
TG: this is what you can look forward to
TG: endless zany shenanigans
TG: outrageously ill beats at all hours of the night
TG: and our trash can which will runneth over with burnt omelets
TG: so basically youre set for life there

Karkat has something to say to that. Something incredibly cutting and witty that will express his thoughts on the matter in a succinct fashion at a volume more properly suited to a heavy metal concert, even if by doing so his fucked ribs with return the favor threefold.

Then Harley stuffs a forkful of pancake into her mouth, reads her phone screen, and spits both pancake and fork all over the carpet. "A proposal?! You're getting married?!?!” she shrieks through her mouthful of food, so muffled that Karkat can't tell if the mistake is real or just garbled.

Back in the kitchen, a plate shatters on the tile floor.

TG: oh yeah
TG: totally

John facepalms with both hands.

...They're never going to make it.

They only manage to escape the wrath of Samuel Egbert by the narrowest of margins. There's general confusion concerning who is threatening to marry who, given that Jade's screaming doesn't include much context, and so chaos reigns for a good fifteen minutes before it is established that no one has actually literally proposed to anyone. John claps a hand over Jade's mouth before she can wreak any more havoc by telling Samuel Egbert about the shitty JPEG that Dave forwards to the rest of them with a tiny smirk on his obnoxious face, and Karkat channels his latent fury by seizing everyone's plates and speeding them through the cleaning process, drying them with a vigor usually reserved for fighting criminal fuckwads.

When they finally get their collective shit together, pack their things at the last minute, and hustle everyone out to the Egbert's car, it's another minor crisis trying to figure out how to arrange everyone. Harley whistles until she's hoarse trying to make her barkbeast do her bidding, then gives up and hauls Bec into the trunk of the car with her bare hands. No one but John had trusted Harley's offer to store things in her sylladex, and watching Samuel attempt to graciously back out of her offer without outright stating that she was out of her mind had been a thing of glee to behold, so the wolf ends up lying down on a pile of their bags. Samuel Egbert, being the wonderful human specimen of mediation that he is, attempts to very gently suggest that Karkat sit up front in the passenger's seat, but that does exactly fuck all to put space between Karkat and the raging shitstorm that was Jade Harley going nuts in the backseat. John sits in the middle between Harley and Dave, and somehow WV ends up crawling over and sitting on everyone's laps over the course of the trip. At one point the carapacian emerges from within the glove compartment without warning, squeaking with indignation until Karkat opens up the compartment for him, and Karkat has no idea how he got in there.
And then, of course, the drive itself is a fucking nightmare. Karkat thinks it's a miracle beyond words that he is only reduced to incoherent rage tears once throughout the entire trip.

Because whoever thought taking the hyperactive teleporting space witch on a two hour road trip in a tiny, enclosed vehicle was a globefondling shitclown. There had been some excuse on Doctor Lalonde's part about how the shielding on her Washington lab was designed to prevent unauthorized surveillance and teleportation, and that it would be stupidly dangerous for Harley or John to try teleporting them straight there without testing how their powers reacted to the shielding, first. Then Dadbert has chimed in himself to mention that he would want his own vehicle in case of emergencies anyway, which explains where John got all that paranoia from, and that somehow all resulted in the two guardians justifying this shitshow rather than the obvious solution of having Harley teleport them all the way to the lab, or at least as close as she could manage.

Yeah, Karkat stopped believing it after the first thirty minutes. No excuse could be worth this. None whatsoever. He'd think maybe this was Dadbert's backhanded way of making them all miserable for the chaos of the last few days, except the man is being forced to suffer right along with them. John might be pretty pro-Harley these days, but Karkat can see the way Samuel Egbert scans the back seat of the car in the rearview mirror with a tight, controlled expression, and thinks that Egbert just doesn't want to risk Harley dumping them, whether accidentally or in some weird act of betrayal, in the middle of the Congo. And thanks to that paranoia, they've all been sentenced to the lowest circle of hell.

For the first hour Karkat stays mildly high on pain killers just for the sake of being able to ignore Harley by pretending to be easily distracted by passing vehicles.

Dave pulls a set of huge red headphones over his ears, folds his arms, and appears to enter a miniature coma for the duration of the trip - or at least, his expression doesn't change once for the entire car ride, not even when Harley teleports the sunglasses off his face multiple times, giggling at the same infuriating pitch that reminds Karkat too strongly that she's his moirail's sister. But the kid's fingers never seem to stop flying across the screen of his phone, and Karkat suspects that for every message Dave sends to the group memo, at least five more are going to John alone. Which is infuriating, but spectacularly less so than Harley, who will bounce out to visit an interesting looking building as they drive by it, only to reappear in her seat a few minutes later, oblivious to the fact that every time she does it Dadbert gnaws harder on his splintered, unlit pipe.

John, who is desperately trying to work on the same homework as Karkat to make up for all the school they've missed over the past few days, puts up with Harley's antics with absolutely inhuman good humor, and Karkat starts seriously considering how one might nominate one's palemate for sainthood after the fifth time John neatly manages to head off Harley's attempts at correcting Karkat's chemistry homework. She keeps unbuckling and leaning over the divider and into Karkat's personal space to point out where he's balanced an equation wrong, and there's only so much of that any troll could take before murder happens. John diverts her attention by offering her his own homework to correct, which she does with aplomb.

And she never once stops talking. Even when everyone else stops talking back. Even when the hour and a half mark passes and the road trip ennui has sunk in so deeply that everyone is mildly sick and the water tastes tepid and they're all lagging from a lack of physical activity. Karkat can feel the pain medication wearing off, despite his best efforts to string it along, and that does absolutely nothing to help his tolerance for Harley's bullshit.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 12:08:21 opened memo on board NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS
HARLEY --
CG: JOHN.
EB: i know...
CG: JOHN.
CG: OH MY GOD.
CG: THIS IS NOT POSSIBLE.
CG: ONE HUMAN BEING CANNOT POSSIBLY BE THIS LOUD.
EB: i knowwww :/
EB: she was alone for a lot of her life, so i guess she's just trying to make up for lost time?
TG: seriously
TG: i can hear this through my headset
TG: this shit is supposed to cancel noise this cant be happening
CG: ALSO I SWEAR YOUR DAD LISTENS TO NOTHING BUT POLKA AND SLOW JAZZ.
EB: yeah, pretty much.
-- gardenGnostic [GG] has joined the chat! --
GG: and just what's that title supposed to mean, karkat?!
CG: FUCK NO.
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] blocked gardenGnostic [GG] from the chat! --

A foot kicks the back of his seat. Since this is Harley, it feels like being kicked by an elephant. "Karrrrkaaaaaaaaat -"

"SHUT UP!" Karkat shrieks. The phone tumbles from his hands and slides under the car seat as he drags himself around to jab a claw at her. "JUST. SHUT. UP!" When Harley opens her mouth, presumably to spew some fresh pointless jabber, he mimes zipping his lips. "No more talking! No! It's called the fucking silent game, where we see who can shut the fuck up longer, me or you! Starting immediately - unless you think you can't beat me!"

Harley squints at him with narrowed eyes, assessing. "...You're on," she says at last, folding her arms over her chest and propping up her feet with a pout on her lips.

Karkat nearly cries with relief. He flops around in his seat again, rubbing at the ache in his side, and the blessed silence that stretches out between him and the back seat really does bring a single tear to his eye. To his left Samuel Egbert removes the pipe from between his clenched teeth, and Karkat does not imagine the raw look of gratitude the man shoots at him.

TG: first of all id like to be on the record as not actually giving a shit about all this
TG: second i would like to nominate karkat vantas for times person of the year
TG: you beautiful shouty creature you
TG: i cant believe those words just came out of my mouth
CG: THEY DIDN'T COME OUT OF YOUR MOUTH, DUMBASS, YOU FUCKING TYPED THEM.
TG: its the principle of the thing
TG: and stop making fun of my disability
TG: you know how sensitive i am about that shit
CG: DON'T EVEN FUCKING START THAT BULLSHIT ROUTINE WITH ME, ASSHAT. I AM TAKING ONE FOR THE TEAM HERE.
EB: karkat thank you :')
CG: YEAH, NO PROBLEM. TALKING HURTS ANYWAY. IF WE'RE LUCKY SHE MIGHT EVEN HOLD OUT FOR THE NEXT THIRTY MINUTES AND THEN AT LEAST WE'LL BE OUT OF THIS FUCKING CAR WHEN THE MOTOR MOUTH STARTS UP AGAIN.
CG: IF I NEVER HAVE TO SIT ON MY ASS IN A CAR FOR TWO HOURS STRAIGHT AGAIN IT'LL BE TOO FUCKING SOON. NOT EVEN SCHOOL IS THIS BAD.
EB: tell me about it! i think i'm feeling kind of sick :(}
CG: WHAT.
TG: what
TG: omg dude are you gonna hurl
TG: are you telling me youre about to jettison the chunky cargo
TG: was this a roundtrip meal ticket
TG: because shit i can switch seats
TG: hell you can sit on my lap
TG: just jesus do not puke on me

By the end of his own rant, Dave looks downright green in the rearview mirror, one hand clutching his own seatbelt buckle with an air of desperation, as though ready to undo it and fling himself out of the line of fire at any moment.

EB: aahahaha, probably not! we're almost there, i think i'll make it!
CG: DOES YOUR HEAD HURT OR SOMETHING? WHAT THE FUCK'S WRONG?
EB: it's just kind of closed in and stuffy in here.
EB: sometimes stuff like that bothers me, but this is the first time in a while...
EB: i wish we could put a window down.
TG: youd rather we flew i can goddamn tell
TG: its a bird its a plane
TG: no its just eb trying to fly six people and a dog halfway across the state
EB: i wonder if i could lift the car with all of you in it...
EB: :D
CG: JUST PUT THE FUCKING WINDOW DOWN DAVE, BEFORE I COME BACK THERE AND DO IT MYSELF.

Dave rolls the window down. They've slowed to match the speed limit, somewhere around thirty five miles an hour, but the breeze that rolls in is apparently enough to draw such a deep, contented sigh from John that Karkat wants to squirm around and see the face he's making. The most he'd probably be able to manage without Samuel giving him the evil eye would be to maybe hold John's hand, but that is way too fucking personal for him to try when Harley and Dave are both in close proximity.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] has joined the chat! --
GG: why'd we put the window down?
TG: oh shit
CG: WAIT NO HOW THE FUCK DID YOU DO THAT.
CG: WHAT FUCKING GOOD IS THIS BULGEHUMPING EXCUSE FOR A BLOCK FUNCTION IF IT DOESN'T EVEN WORK?!
GG: stop being such a meanie butt, karkat! :P
GG: if you're talking on pesterchum, does that count as talking in the silent game?
GG: foul! >:O
CG: NO IT DOESN'T FUCK COUNT, JESUS. OUR CONTEST CONTINUES. SERIOUSLY, HOW ARE YOU HERE, WHY THE GRUBFUZZING HELL ARE MY REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO MASH THE BLOCK BUTTON DOING ABSOLUTELY FUCKALL?
GG: lol not telling!
CG: NO ONE FUCKING SAYS LOL ANYMORE, HARLEY, TAKE YOUR OUTDATED INFERIOR CHAT ANACHRONISMS AND ROFLCOPTER THE FUCK OUT OF HERE.
TG: lol
CG: FUCK YOU ASSHOLE.
GG: see! dave uses it, and dave is the coolest kid! waaay cooler than you, karkat!!
TG: shes got you there bro
CG: YOU KNOW, I USED TO THINK IT WOULD BE COOL TO MEET SUPER HEROES.
CG: AND THEN I MET THEM.
EB: guys?
TG: whoa dont harsh on our cool
TG: we can teach you karkat
TG: no troll hero left behind policy
TG: you too can one day become the living embodiment of cool
GG: soooo cool! like ice cubes!
TG: like norway
GG: or liquid nitrogen!!
CG: LIKE YOUR COLD CORPSES?
TG: like the coldest darkest most silent recesses of space
EB: guys?
CG: HA! YOU'VE WATCHED STAR TREK.
TG: nutrek does not even count everyone has
EB: i'm pretty sure it counts, dave!
TG: what no
TG: eb youre supposed to have my back
EB: you're all ignoring me so bluhhh.
EB: ANYWAY
EB: as i've been trying to tell you guys for the past three minutes...
EB: pretty sure we're here!

"These are the closest coordinates Doctor Lalonde was able to give us," Samuel Egbert is saying when Karkat looks up from his phone; the car has slowed dramatically, creeping along the road toward the tiny group of buildings that seem to make up the ranger station they were told to drive to.  "From here, she said she'd send someone to escort us the rest of the - ah, that looks promising!"

There are a few cars scattered around the lot, but only the one pulled up snug near the wooden fence has a troll in a long white coat leaning against it, evidently waiting for someone. When the troll notices their approach his head shoots up, and a slight smile spreads across the troll's pale face as he pushes upright and waves them down with a two-fingered salute. Karkat sinks lower into his seat, feeling his stomach clench up when they pull up alongside the other vehicle and he can make out the faint purple tint of the hair pulled back from the troll's face in a loose braid down his back. He can't tell if it's a high purple or a low violet, but either way he wants to draw as little of this asshole's attention as possible. Even with his contacts in he feels exposed.

By the time the violetblood leans near Samuel's rolled down window, head tilted ever so slightly so that his hair falls to the side, Karkat has managed to curl himself up into a ball in the passenger's side seat, knees drawn up to his chest so he can glare at the other troll surreptitiously while pretending to be staring out the other window. The other troll's glasses have no rims, just the clear lenses, easily overlooked, and though a faint hint of smile lingers in his expression he seems mostly serious as he nods to Samuel Egbert. "Doctor Lalonde said to tell you this," he says, clearing his throat. "7-33-9. Lemon merengue. 1976 Pinot Gris. The herb of grace contains 46.8% methyl nonyl ketone."

Samuel sighs, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "Good."

TG: she sent us a shopping list
EB: probably a password!
GG: definitely! my grandpa had me memorize a lot of long ones like that for his labs before he died!
TG: or that

"We can make the laboratory in a little under an hour, if the weather remains clear," the troll continues smoothly, as though he didn't just rattle off a string of nonsense. "But it's important that
you not lose track of my vehicle at any point, particularly at the switchbacks. The closer you get to the facility, the easier it is to become...confused. Lost."

"A side effect of the shielding?" When the troll nods, one claw slowly creeping up his chest to press at the pendant that falls to the middle of his sternum, Samuel Egbert holds out a hand. "Samuel Egbert."

The troll blinks, but shows no other sign of being startled as he delicately shakes the man's hand. "I am called Novitiate Halburn." When Karkat can't help the baffled look he casts that way, Halburn's cheek dimples with a deceptively benevolent smile, and he turns his attention on Karkat. "I deal primarily with thaumaturgy of the mind. I will only take on a balanced name and the title Lectoris when I've completed my thesis work."

"No one asked," Karkat mutters, doing his best to crush himself up against the far door and turning his head toward the mountains that rise up around them, breathing hard. He ignores whatever the fuck Dadbert and Halburn discuss next in favor of trying to remember if he remember a goddamn toothbrush, and he ignores the messages that make his phone jitter in his hand until after he hears the crunch of feet on gravel and the sound of another car starting up. When Samuel backs up and follows the nondescript grey car back toward the main road, Karkat finally emerges from his defensive curl and starts answering.

EB: karkat?
EB: are you okay? was there something weird with what he said?
GG: ha! i won the silence game! that means we can talk now right?
TG: another hour of this
TG: jesus
GG: hloooooo, karkat?
EB: okay, that guy's gone!
TG: weve lost him
TG: man down
EB: karkat? do you feel sick now?
CG: I'M FUCKING FINE. I WAS JUST SURPRISED NEITHER OF HIS NAMES FIT.
GG: huh? what was wrong with them?
GG: is this that weird number thing? :/
CG: OH HEY, WOW, WAY TO SHIT ALL OVER A TRADITIONAL NAMING PRACTICE THAT EXTENDS BACK TO THE ANCIENT ALTERNIAN EMPIRE, HARLEY. NOT LIKE THAT MIGHT BE A SIGNIFICANT PART OF TROLL CULTURE OR ANYTHING.
TG: today we learned
CG: THIS IS PRETTY FUCKING BASIC, YOU SHOULD ALREADY KNOW THIS. SERIOUSLY. WHAT, WERE YOU SEARCHING FOR YOUR THINKPAN UP YOUR ASS WHEN THEY DISCUSSED THIS IN THE THIRD GRADE?
GG: karkat, stop ignoring my victory! can i talk now or not?!
CG: ONLY IF YOU WANT TO LOSE ROUND TWO, YOU INSECT.
GG: ack! :X
TG: our hero
TG: thank you karkat bless you
EB: okay, we have one round of juice boxes left
TG: eb
TG: john
TG: bro
TG: brosicle
EB: yes, there's apple juice. somehow. impossibly.
TG: hell
TG: fucking
TG: yes
CG: WHAT IF SOMEONE ELSE IN THIS GODSFORSAKEN CAR WANTED THE FUCKING AJ, DAVE. WHAT WOULD YOU DO. REALLY. I'M ABOUT TO WITHER AWAY LIKE A GODDAMN FRAGILE DESERT FLOWER OVER HERE OUT OF CURIOSITY.
CG: AND THE ONLY THING THAT MIGHT BE ABLE TO SLAKE MY THIRST WOULD BE THAT ONE CARTON OF APPLE JUICE IN PARTICULAR.
EB: :O
EB: a challenger?!
GG: ooooooh nooooo!
TG: oh shit
TG: probably something unspeakable
TG: you would never look at me the same way
TG: and i couldnt bear that bro
TG: our new brohood means too much to me
TG: dont ask me to tell you this thing
CG: I THINK
CG: YOU'RE A LOAD OF BULLSHIT IN HUMAN FORM.
CG: WHO HAS SOMEHOW MANAGED TO POSTURE AND POKERFACE HIS WAY INTO FOOLING THE REST OF HUMANITY INTO BUYING HIS FRESHLY RAKED MANURE ON A DAILY BASIS.
TG: am i are you sure
TG: are you positive
TG: do you really want to risk it
EB: ...
GG: ...
CG: DRINK YOUR GODDAMN APPLE JUICE THEN.

It's grown overcast and cloudy in the hours they've been trapped in that hellhole of a car, but the threatening rain - or snow, maybe, at this altitude - never materializes. Karkat spies a few wide patches of snow higher up on the peaks around them, settled deep in pockets of shade where the meager sun never quite reaches. On the main road they're hedged in by trees that press in close and block much of the view with shaggy thatches of evergreen needles, but then the Novitiate signals for a turn that Samuel Egbert almost drives right by. It's difficult to notice, barely a shadow in the thickly clustered trees, and at first Karkat thinks the violetblood expects them to off-road it up the mountain.

Then they reach the turn itself and Samuel slowly edges them onto the dark gravel path. The trees have laced together overhead, gnarled and bent to form a ceiling that blocks out the sky completely, and Karkat catches himself holding his breath for no reason, his gaze locked onto the taillights of the car in front of them. The path winds and even dips for a while, as though they're about to descend back in the direction of the Skagit River, but then the red lights bob in front of them and hitch another sharp left. Daedbert stays glued to the other car's bumper, and Karkat gives up on propriety when the trees grow so thick that the darkness becomes absolute. He reaches back and his claws crash against John's hand, already coming up to meet his. There's a tiny high pitched 'oh!' from Harley right behind him, and she sounds a little awed but thankfully doesn't seem to realize she lost the contest and would be free to start jabbering away about whatever startled her. The only light in the car comes from the lights on the dashboard and the gleam of four cell phones.

TG: this is not your average everyday darkness
CG: DO NOT EVEN START THAT.
EB: this is
EB: ADVANCED darkness!
CG: JOHN I TRUSTED YOU.
GG: oohhh! so thats why doctor lalonde thought we wouldn't be able to teleport right here!
EB: huh? we're not there yet, are we?
TG: please say we are
TG: oh god i understand you eb i cant take this car anymore
TG: i need to be free
TG: also i think vv just elbowed me in the crotch
TG: i have been betrayed in the name of aj
TG: i always knew this day would come
CG: DO YOU TEXT THIS MUCH BECAUSE YOU CAN'T FUCKING TALK OR IS THIS JUST SOME SPECIAL CURSE BESTOWED ON YOU BY THE UNIVERSE THAT YOU'VE TAKEN IT UPON YOURSELF TO USE TO TORMENT OTHERS LIKE THE SICK, ANNOYING AS FUCK DOUCHEBAG THAT YOU ARE?
TG: ...
CG: ...
EB: omg
GG: aaaanywho! :)
GG: gosh i wish you guys could sense whats going on with space here! its pretty fascinating!
GG: everythings gone twisty and numb!
CG: THAT MEANS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO ANYONE OTHER THAN YOU.
GG: i dont know what it means either! thats whats so interesting!
GG: i can still feel everything, and i think i could teleport back home from here if bec helped...
GG: but hang on...
EB: crap!
EB: no jade, don-

There's a crackle of green light that lights up the interior of the car. Karkat and Samuel whip around to stare at the back seat at the same time, but then something impacts the hood of the car with a thump! and Samuel slams on the brakes. The brake lights on the car in front of them flare as well, thankfully, which means they don't need to worry about the Novitiate ditching them in the forest of fucking doom while they all stare at the wild Jade Harley who has just teleported onto the hood of their car.

Shakily, her face still planted against the hood, Harley raises a hand to make a thumbs up, and beyond her crackling green limning another faint light appears as she – apparently – pulls out her phone to start texting.

GG: okay soooo~~~
GG: i was aiming for the passengers seat of the car in front of us!
GG: wow! that was so weeeeeeird!
CG: HOLY SHIT ON A STICK HARLEY.

"John. Why...is Ms Harley...on the front of our car?" Samuel Egbert says. His voice is far too level. Rightfully terrified, Karkat tries to scoot as discreetly as possible to have as much space between him and any impending parental explosion as he can manage. He's too young to die over Harley's fuck ups, goddammit.

EB: jade, get back in the car! before my dad gets mad!
GG: eep!

Harley rolls off the hood of the car. Samuel Egbert puts the car into park and already has his door
cracked open when Harley shakes her head. "I'm fine, Mr Egbert!" she chirps, scrambling around Karkat's side of the vehicle and ignoring his patented judgmental glower as she crawls back into the back seat. "Just a mess-up! I won't do it again!" Once she's back in her seat and Dadbert has thrown her enough stern glances that the quota has been met, John finally undoes her still-buckled seat belt so she can redo it herself and Samuel shifts the car back into drive. He flashes the headlights and the Novitiate starts trundling along ahead of them once more.

GG: there's a lot of spatial interference here! i can still jump, but i'm not entirely sure i can control where i'm going...whats up is down and what's left is right and when i think i'm aiming forward i end up all turned around!
GG: i can tell there's a lot of stuff around us taking up space, like mountains and deer and all that, but i couldn't tell you exactly where.
EB: so you can do the spacey thing, but it turns out wonky?
GG: yeah! you might have better luck, john, but i don't think we should try it out here because of all the trees.
CG: AND FOR ONCE IN OUR MISERABLE LIVES COMMON SENSE PREVAILS.

The car starts to jolt a lot more over the road, and Karkat clenches his teeth on reflex with every bump and pothole that they seesaw over. He's been driving for years now and potholes still give him nightmares after that one time a tire blew out in the middle of the road back when he lived in the city. Anything that drew attention to him was to be avoided at all costs, but in the space of a day he'd shouted at five innocent bystanders trying to help him and had to call a tow truck, and by the time he got home he'd been sweating through his hoodie and had to throw it out because he'd been paranoid that someone would notice the reddish stains were a little too bright a red.

But the Egbert's car prevails, and with one final bump they hit a smooth patch before one last turn. Abruptly, light spills in from above further along the road, a gap in the trees that is so bright for a moment compared to the tree cover that Karkat can't see a damn thing, blinking away watery tears as first the Novitiate's vehicle and then theirs emerge from the trees onto another road.

Not that it's much of one; there are worn tire tracks that form a trail along the crest of the rocky outcropping, but meadow grass has grown in the wide space between the eroded tracks. Around them, the grass and scrub is broken up by large stretches of dark, rocky soil. A disused foot path, made up of blocky chunks of stone, leads off and down to the right, but their miniature convoy continues to drift towards the left, until they pass under one last stringy tree, bent almost in two by the wind, and start to descend on a series of switchbacks that lead down along the face of the mountain. Heights don't really bother Karkat - he couldn't run around on rooftops all the damn time without getting over that - but he's still uneasy as gravity presses him forward against the seatbelt. Just past each carefully carved out switch in the road, he can see the smooth, steep inclines that run unbroken, too precarious to walk along, let alone drive across, and the occasional brink where the grassy slopes cut off and the abrupt cliff overhangs a crag of rocky, loose soil.

John's thumb taps along the back of Karkat's hand, and it helps dislodge some of the anxiety.

TG: awww
GG: oh no you don't! the last time you started teasing them, karkat tried to throw a plate at your head!
CG: IF HARLEY IS BEING THE VOICE OF REASON, SOMETHING IS VERY FUCKING WRONG HERE. THINK ABOUT THAT, DAVE. THINK ABOUT YOUR LIFE. THINK ABOUT YOUR CHOICES. THINK ABOUT THEM VERY HARD.
TG: ...
CG: DAMMIT.
CG: DON'T YOU DARE.
TG: very hard
CG: FUCK.
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] blocked turntechGodhead [TG] from the chat! --
EB: uhhh...
GG: you cant just block people all the time, you know! dave is basically the reason we made the memo in the first place!
CG: WATCH ME. I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO ABUSE THIS POWER LIKE A GODDAMN AUTOCRATIC PESTERTYRANT.
CG: YOUR TIME WILL COME, HARLEY.

As they near the foot of the incline, it becomes easier to look around and observe the small valley they've found themselves in. Most of the space between the dark green cliffs that rise up on either side is occupied by a moderately sized lake, fringed on the bank opposite by an encrustation of ice and snow that extends up to the mountain's peak above. The road they follow curves around fifty yards from their side of the lake, the view of the dark surface broken up by copses of isolated trees.

It takes too long for Karkat to notice the building at the end of the road, and for a horrific moment he wonders if his fucking eyes have finally decided that right here, right now is when they're going to shit all over him and stop working entirely. The shape rises up in the distance, blurry and grainy, and he'd almost think he was hallucinating in the midst of one final ragestroke, except for the fact that a few seconds later Harley starts babbling about spatial distortions out loud, breaking the wonderful silence that reigned supreme in the car for so long, and Karkat buries his unending woe and despair by focusing on the fact that apparently all this void shield bullshit that Doctor Lalonde deals with is fucking effective. He can barely look at the lab building without his eyes threatening to skitter away to look at the piece of shit clouds or the very fucking boring lake.

But finally, after enough sideways staring, the building comes into focus. It's a dark, dark grey, non-descript and easily overlooked - essentially a block of dark stone that blends in with the barren slope behind it. There are plenty of wide windows, but all of them are of dark, tinted glass so that nothing can be seen through them.

They never pass a sign that states this is Lalonde Labs. It just seems to be implied.

It's only as they pull up and into the tiny parking lot that John's grip on Karkat's hand slacks off; he immediately misses it, but figures it might just be because they're leaving the vehicle soon, anyway. Then there's an 'oof!' from Harley and a grunt of surprise from the stoic douchebag, along with a squeak of indignation that can only mean WV has been caught in the crossfire, and Karkat swivels around to see John has plastered himself up against the window, one foot caught on Harley's long skirt and a knee dangerously close to Dave's groin as he stares at the double glass doors of the front of the lab. Dave's usual stoic mask has broken at last, a vague look of genuine consternation evident only in the furrow of his eyebrows, but John is oblivious.

The door on the left opens almost before Samuel Egbert finishes parking the car, and a head of blonde hair bobs out, and that's when Karkat realizes what's got John wired. Dave looks vaguely terrified as John flings the car door open with a sudden lurch that rattles the car, and WV tumbles off the floor of the backseat and out onto the road with a flare of green light; Karkat's not sure John's feet do more than skim over the ground in a token effort at pretending to walk before the dumbass tackles Rose Lalonde like a levitating brick shithouse.

The other hero takes it in stride, but she's also a head shorter than John and he lifts her up like - well, like he'd pick up anyone, really, like they weigh nothing at all, because John is ridiculously fucking strong. But as Karkat kicks his own door open to slouch over there and glare at Rose properly, he becomes all the more uncomfortably aware that the woman looks fragile as fuck.
New York City is at the ass-end of the country away from Seattle and given the sketchy nature of the Internet, with heroes in particular, most of what you find has been photoshopped beyond recognition, pandering to whatever weird kinks the forums have fixated on that week. But Karkat is pretty sure the Seer of Light has never looked so slight. Some female heroes like Harley could bench-press a small car (even without space powers) and it shows, but as a magic practitioner Seer relies more on majjykal spells than physical force. There's a thin line between slender and underweight that the Seer has always toed, but now she's crossed it, so that the belt around her waist and the way her bony shoulders press through her sleeves make it clear that the long yellow dress was tailored for someone of a far healthier weight. Even for a human she's too pale, with a sickly cast to her skin and a metric fuckton of heavy makeup around her eyes that emphasizes the shadows there like some perverse signpost.

They hug long enough that everyone else exits the car. Long enough that two more people emerge from the lab building. Long enough that Karkat starts to feel a territorial rumble start to rev in his throat, and lays a claw on John's shoulder because this is fucking ridiculous. "John -"

A hand shoots out, seizes Karkat around the neck, and drags him into the hugsmush, too.

...This is the opposite of what he intended to happen. "John, you fucking dumb shit!" he snarls, squirming and trying to claw his way free - or at least into a hug that only included one other person. But John's arm is an unbreakable bar of enforced hugging and it's difficult to flail around like a fucking lunatics when one's moirail has a hand in one's hair, skritching right up at the base of the skull where it always fucking itches.

Rose Lalonde turns her head to peer at him from under John's chin, a faint smile tugging on her matte purple lips. "Karkat. What a coincidence. I should have known you would be joining the commemorative tender embrace of reunion."

"We've never met before! Agh! Let me out of here!"

"Wait!" John exclaims, his face lighting up with realization. "We can finally do the thing!"

That's not ominous at all. Karkat is not terrified in the slightest by the devious look of impish cunning infecting John's smile. "Oh my fucking fuck, John, what are you - ARGH!"

John stumbles backwards, and drags both of them with him. Rose hooks both arms around the back of John's neck with an utterly serene, bemused expression, her hair flipping in the breeze. Karkat is somewhat less composed, and may or may not emit a sound uncannily similar to a distressed yodel.

"Jade!" John calls, and as though that's some kind of secret Harley-Egbert battle cry Harley collides with their hug circle on the opposite side of Karkat. Her arms stretch just barely far enough that she's able to squeeze all three of them, including John, and tilt all three of them off their feet for a dizzying second before setting them down again. "Dave, you too!"

Dave, the poor bastard, actually makes an effort to escape. He's seen what awaits him, and he fumbles and almost drops his cell phone. Not that anyone's paying attention to his messages as the four-person cannonball staggers toward him with all the coordination of three teenagers attempting to drag a surly troll along for the ride, all of their legs knocking into each other. Someone smells overwhelmingly of space lightning (three guesses as to who) and at some point Karkat grabs the back of Rose's dress by accident in what might be construed as a hug in any other universe, but it's only because without the extra clawhold he's going to end up trampled as they veer and blunder after Dave. By the time they crash into Dave, Karkat's caught himself laughing breathlessly, and he nearly bites through his lip cutting off the brief huff of laughter.
It's Harley who reels Dave in, nabbing him in a headlock and pulling him in between her and John. Of course, Harley being Harley, she yanks the human in so abruptly that his and Karkat's foreheads smack into each other and both of them wince.

"There!" John says, utterly content off in his own little world, and the arm around Karkat's back pulls him closer so that he can stick his face in Karkat's hair. "Gosh, I missed you guys," he mutters.

You've already been stuck with everyone but Rose for days, Karkat thinks, rolling his eyes, but doesn't say it aloud. John sounds the happiest and calmest he has since Diamonds Droog knocked him off his axis, and Karkat can't be the one to break that. Dave and Harley and Rose are all way too close for comfort and Karkat is about five seconds from losing his shit in front of everyone, but this is contradicted by the conflicting impulse to press in closer to John. The fact that being close to John coincidentally means letting these other three assholes within three feet of him has to be overlooked for the moment.

A tiny pressure flutters between Karkat's shoulder blades, and it takes him way too long to notice Rose is the one patting him on the back, and not John. "It is good to see you all," she agrees, ignoring Karkat when he flails at her and tries to disentangle himself from this clusterhug. Her eyes are sharp despite the tired bags shadowing them, and there's a trace of merriment that says she finds the whole situation is amusing to no end. "Brother dear, hello. Jade, Karkat, a pleasure to meet you in the flesh."

"Same!" Harley chirps, rubbing her cheek on Rose's and leaning too far to that side, so that their entire huddle lists dangerously and almost overbalances.

"Yeah, yeah, fine, fucking awesome. Let me go!" Karkat snaps, and this time he manages to duck under Rose's hand and spin out with John's relenting arm still on the back of his neck. He glowers at the four humans with his arms folded over his chest. "Okay, the happy fruity hugging asshole party is over, everyone can go home. We have accomplished literally all that we set out to achieve today, the rest doesn't even count."

"Such a spoilsport! I think you need more hug to make you less grumpy!" Harley says, laughing and not seeming to notice that Dave is now clawing at her arm around her neck in a distinctly panicked way that implies he can't breathe. Then there's a split second, not even half a blink, and Dave is out of the hug, too, shoulders up and chin jutting forward slightly as though to reassert his cool. "Daaaave!"

TG: no

"Hell no," Karkat adds. Because some things in life are worth fighting, even if it means sacrificing your dignity by publically allying with a total douchebag. From the way Dave's head tilts in a barely-there nod, Karkat thinks they're on the same page.

John doesn't push it, because he is the superior sibling in the Egbert-Harley complex. Obviously. He just laughs, all of his teeth showing, and lets go of Rose before it can get awkward again while Harley pouts in the background. But his grin diminishes noticeably when he looks at the two people who followed Rose out of the building. "Oh! Uh. Doctor Lalonde. Hi."

Karkat doesn't like the weird, unhappy note in John's voice, and shuffles closer to the kid's shoulder so that he can look at the blonde woman currently engaged in a stern parental stare competition with Samuel Egbert.

The outcome is a foregone conclusion, of course; you can't beat the Dadbert in a stern frown competition. He is simply the best there is. But she holds her own long enough that Karkat is mildly
impressed; prolonged exposure to Samuel's disappointed stare has been known to cause even Dave to break out into a cold sweat. By the time Doctor Rue Lalonde admits defeat with a gracious nod of her head, a repentant smile on her lips, Karkat thinks she's set a new record. "John, darling," she says, the smile not quite reaching her eyes as she turns to face them. The resemblance between her and her daughter is perceptible but not absolute. "I wish we could have met under less worrying circumstances."

John is vibrating with tension, but Karkat can't tell if it's anger or not. From what he understands, everyone and their mother has reason to be more than a little pissed at Doctor Lalonde for shitting all over the concept of guardianship where Rose is concerned, but John's been evasive about it, willing to admit that he's upset on Rose's account but not to actually discuss it. All John says is, "Yeah," with none of his usual exuberance, and Karkat might not imagine the way the doctor closes her eyes in an imperceptible flinch. Rose's hand tightens on John's other arm, her expression unreadable as she determinedly does not look at her guardian.

"And who is this lovely young lady?" Samuel Egbert intercedes, directing a polite smile at the second person who had followed Rose outside. He must think it's a safe way to hustle their awkward asses past this incredibly fucking awkward moment they've managed to wallow in, by turning the conversation to focus on someone who's not a Lalonde. Karkat darts a passing glance at the troll, still more concerned with keeping an eye on John, and -

Karkat stares.

Because he knows her.

"Kanaya Maryam," he mouths along as the troll says her name, bowing her head slightly in a clipped nod of greeting. She's dressed like someone straight off the runway, a dark blue gown with a high collar and boots with heels, and her horns are daringly asymmetrical, the kind of quirk that trolls would pay plenty to either get rid of or to imitate, depending on what's in style. She holds herself in a manner that is deliberate and aware, a purposeful grace that doesn't quite hide the battle-ready stance her feet have fallen into, just barely wide enough that she could probably kick a man in the face before he noticed the long slit left up the side of her skirt to allow freedom of movement.

He has never seen her before a day in his life, but the lack of recognition in her jade green eyes still stings when she spares him a cursory glance. He can't fight the impulse to zone out a little and listen for the beat of her pulse. It's strange, sluggish and cold and brilliant with bursts of color that he can't parse in his mind's eye, but at the same time it's not strange at all; it's exactly what he expected to sense.

John's elbow nudges him with precise care in the arm rather than the ribs, and Karkat jolts out of his stupor to find that all his pancracked staring has earned him a suspicious frown from the jadeblood. Great. Now of all times his thinkpan would decide to sacrifice the last of its meager, putrid excuse for sanity in exchange for the rare and unprecedented opportunity to act like a complete and utter shitwit in front of new people. He coughs, and swallows the wrong way, and wastes a good ten seconds choking on his own spit, which is a whole new level of personal failure, even for him. "...Hello," he says at last. No need to make any mention of the fact that he knew her name before she said it. That's just unfathomably freakish and he's trying to be somewhat less obviously a fuckup from here on out. Really.

"Hello," she replies, formal and cool. "Is there something that I may be able to assist you with?"

Hahahaha oh fuck she's pissed. "No, I - fuck - shit -" Karkat says, drawing even closer to John on reflex, because he doesn't know how he knows but he's pretty sure if he pisses her off much more
Kanaya could fuck his shit up. "I - have we - met before? Because you seem really fucking familiar."

Just like that, Kanaya's expression clears. "I do not see how we could have, unless you make a practice of frequenting the greater Philadelphia area," she says. "This is certainly the first time I've been near Seattle."

He wants to crawl into a hole and bury himself out of sheer embarrassment. He can feel heat rising up in his cheeks and the tips of his ears, and he finally just gives up and latches onto John's free arm, staring at the ground because at least the ground can't fucking judge him. "Yeah, no, you're right. Just ignore whatever fresh fuck comes out of my mouth. The grubloaf posing as a thinkpan in my skull should have been culled ten fucking years ago."

"It's fine. It would be an understandable reason to stare." Kanaya smiles. "Perhaps you are familiar with my work."

She likes sewing and chainsaws and has the most extensive library of lurid supernatural romances in the entire eastern sector, his brain sees fit to inform him, none of which has anything to do with the possibility that maybe he's hallucinating all this déjà vu based on seeing her unknown work. "What do you do?" he asks weakly, even as they all start to trail after Doctor Lalonde as she leads them into the building.

Harley bounces ahead, her voice echoing in the cavernous lobby as she chatters nonstop at the doctor and the Novitiate about god only knows what, while Samuel Egbert admonishes her to keep her feet on the ground. Behind him, Karkat is aware of Dave's rapid, skipping pulse as the stoic douchebag brings up the rear, apparently slouching along at his own pace instead of joining the group. WV runs around them all in wavering circles, stopping to inspect the tiles or tap on the wall and in general be a tiny tornado of squeaking chaos. Karkat has no idea where Bec is; for all he knows, Harley has just decided to leave the barkbeast crammed in the trunk with all their luggage to avoid dealing with it. If her space powers are fuzzy, Karkat doesn't want to know what will happen the first time the barely-sentient space wolf starts trying to pull some fuckery.

Kanaya falls into step beside them on Rose's other side, linking her arm with the fragile human's with a warm, open smile reserved solely for the blonde girl. "I auspice," she says, with just the right weight of tantalizing, enigmatic significance in her tone that Karkat can tell she's fucking with him, because auspicism isn't a fucking job, it's romance.

And John is snickering. He's trying to muffle it, but John is awful at the stealth gambit, even when it comes to his pranks, and Karkat eyes him sourly until he can see tears welling up in John's eyes at the effort needed to contain his laughter. "What," Karkat says flatly, leaning more of his weight on John's side until they slowly start to push Rose and Kanaya toward the wall with their combined mass.

"You are familiar. With her work," John manages to say between bursts of giggles. "Work work, Karkat!"

Work work has become the stupidly insane way that a household full of heroes has begun to refer to hero work, emphasis and all, and when John says it like that, it's fucking obvious. "No way. Philadelphia?!"

He ends up on the receiving end of two elegantly arched eyebrows, one from Kanaya and one from Rose. They couldn't have been more synchronized if they'd rehearsed it. "Yes."

*The Malachite Sylph, then.*
He doesn’t say it aloud. He just shakes his head, rubbing at a temple as the implications sink in. "You’re fucking kidding me. John."

"Y-yeah?"

"Exactly how many heroes do we personally know?"

That wipes the mischievous smile off John’s face.

- 

The Egbert house is empty.

But two people are still watching it.

From afar, tucked behind the chimney of a house across the street, a robot who was once a man observes, the pistons in its chest slowed so that the sound of the machinery doesn't alert the other watcher to his presence. He’s been avoiding Diamonds Droog’s wandering eyes for years, and has no interest in bidding the woman herself any more than a passing ‘tally ho.’

His precious granddaughter had left him a message informing him that this house had been compromised, and to postpone their long-overdue meeting to a later time, but he had not thought Droog would be so bold as to come here herself, so soon after the premises was vacated for the weekend.

This bodes ill.

- 

Below, on the sidewalk before 21605 Fir Drive, Diamonds Droog revels in something she thought she'd never have the opportunity to witness: her boss texting her, seeking to confirm something he would usually already know.

She makes her excuses, gives him a rather creative interpretation of the sequence of events that led her here, and then closes the phone to bask in the gratification of a hunch indulged. The void wards covering this neighborhood are weak, enough to prevent whatever enables the boss’s disturbing omniscience but nothing compared to the distortion currently hiding the heroes from surveillance. Her own people lost track of them some time ago, perplexed so utterly that they became lost in the Cascades for several hours, and reappeared only to find themselves halfway to Idaho.

But the heroes are not her problem unless they once again interfere in Crew business. Diamonds has obtained permission to focus her efforts on Spades Slick instead, and to shore up the last of the infrastructure needed to maintain basic Crew operations in Seattle so that Hearts will be able to handle it himself. She anticipates she’ll be able to return to the Crew base within days, hopefully with Slick in hand, the Heir of Breath and his cadre of heroes no longer on her radar. The heroes are the boss's obsession, not hers. Hearts is still ignoring her missives on Scofflaw, in a sulk over being cut out of the loop by the boss, but Diamonds scorns the personal animosity he managed to build against the Heir and Hemogoblin in so short a time. Perhaps having been sidelined by Diamonds will instill some professionalism and dignity in Hearts – but she doubts it.

A faint twinge of unease pings at her when she notes that yet another day has passed without some insipid note or request for help from the bumbling Clubs. But she’s not overly concerned.

Marlowe calls her on the disposable cell to inform her that he has obtained the item she requested. She may have to consider replacing him, soon; he’s deeply entrenched in some of her more
questionable exploits now, and the task she sent him on dances with outright betrayal of the boss. And Diamonds, of all the Midnight Crew suit members, is very much aware of how easily Marlowe’s loyalty and devotion could be manipulated to fixate on another target.

A shame. He’s been quite useful. But of course, all things in their time. Diamonds turns away from the house of John Egbert with a satisfied smile.

Back to business.

- 

In the parking lot outside Lalonde Laboratory, a series of loud bangs and thumps emanates from the trunk of a parked car. Several muffled curses follow, until, with a bang, the lock gives and the trunk flies open.

Spades Slick clambers out from under a duffel bag and stumbles inelegantly out of the trunk of the Egbert's car, with a distinct aura of impending murder. He spits out a mouthful of white fur, and glowers back over his shoulder at the wolf he's been forced to share trunk space with for the past three hours, ever since the goddamn Witch had the temerity to stuff her pet hellbeast into Spades's personal hiding spot.

Becquerel snorts through its nose, and tucks its muzzle back under a paw. It had tolerated his presence, but Spades has a crick in his neck from holding himself tense and wary, ready to stab if the wolf turned on him or if someone pried the trunk open and expose him.

Having escaped the trunk, he shakes off a sweater that has tangled around his heel, muttering constantly under his breath as he shovels it back into the trunk. He arranges it over the wolf guardian's head with a parting sneer. Then he crouches and starts making his way toward the building that looms before him, a mind-blurring mess of Void that projects itself outward. He grudgingly admires the kind of effort it would take for a non-player to manipulate an aspect to that extent, but also it's giving him a goddamn headache so no, he'll never admit it out loud. Reminds him of the shit they had to use to ward off Horror bleed off back on Derse, but those days are long gone, and it hadn't done shit to prevent the players from dicking around during eclipses, listening to the whispers that slipped through, and inviting in the madness.

Bunch 'a morons.

Spades Slick scurries to search for a side door. Like hell is he stupid enough to waltz in through the front and get caught before he even has a chance to stab anyone.

---

Their state is one of cautious, quiet, guarded toleration.

Or at least, that seems to be the balance Rue Lalonde is attempting to strike while Kanaya's in the room. Rose still feels excruciatingly aware of the many, many potential barbs and near-insults that her mother could let fly at any moment, the narrowly averted comments that would no doubt have focused on Rose's latest foolishness, or perhaps the uncouth way she persists in resisting offers of reconciliation. Rue Lalonde is a passive-aggressive submersible lurking beneath the surface, and Rose is bleeding out, dead in the water.

If it weren't for Kanaya's presence, she knows that this would already have erupted into all out war. That tension hums between them like a live wire whenever Rue dares to enter the room, and more than once Rose feels the urge to strike preemptively, to shred this false peace with a particularly
pointed jibe.

But their destruction would be mutually assured, because Kanaya is having absolutely none of that. Mediation, after all, is her forte, and she seems to see Rose's feuds as her personal responsibility.

"You are both being wholly unreasonable," Kanaya says, arranging the ice pack on Rose's forehead and gently smacking away any hands Rose puts up to adjust it herself. Her face paint has been applied perfectly, but the hints of strain and irritation remain in the corners of her eyes. "We will have company soon, and neither of you are fit for it. Must I hold an intervention for my own lover?"

There are a number of things Rose could say to that, all of them on the edge of her tongue, and it's only with the last dregs of her self-control that she swallows them down like sharp knives. Kanaya is coming down off an ashen rejection and thanks to Rose she's spent the past day and night flooring it all the way to Seattle in a panic instead of letting off steam, and Rose will respect that if it kills her. Still, some things slip through. "Kanaya, I'm fairly certain that at least a third of our relationship is based on one long intervention," she can't help but point out, easing herself up higher on the pillow and wincing as her entire head throbs a warning. It's difficult to say what the major source of the pain is - a post-seer fugue headache, a Horrorterror-induced migraine, unease generated by the heavy void wards, or perhaps simply prolonged exposure to an overly aggressive mother figure. It's not as though she has much personal experience with the latter, after all.

"Do not remind me," Kanaya says darkly, passing Rose the spool of yarn and a pair of needlekind that make Rose grimace until Kanaya fixes a patented evil eye on her. The needles were a gift from Rue, presented without a word earlier that day, and Rose hates them for that alone. But Kanaya believes it's a peace offering, and wants Rose to be cautiously open to the possibility of a neutral reconciliation.

Rose sees only the typical guilt of an estranged parent who thinks that gifts and petty material offerings will somehow erase all the problems in their relationship. It's more commonly seen in parents who have recently divorced, who wish to appease their children and soothe their own guilty conscience, but the basic psychology behind it remains the same.

"I do not like having you here. Either of you, really," Kanaya adds, when she's satisfied that Rose is indeed occupying herself with the task of knitting, and not wallowing. The troll's hair is choppy and messy with golden clips and pins, a single ring around her unhooked horn, and she's sporting a dark blue dress that glitters and flares around her heels when she folds her legs. It's a more summery skirt than any Rose has ever seen Kanaya wear, as though anticipating spring when winter's only just ended, but Kanaya balances it with a high halter neckline that covers nearly all of her shoulders before exposing bare arms, a heavy choker necklace adorned with heavy topaz stones lying along her collarbones.

She's gorgeous, and Rose has been sleeping in fits and suffering from such crippling headaches that honestly she isn't sure if she's remembered to shower since Chicago.

Rose hooks the needle through the slip knot with perhaps more force than is wise. It certainly earns her another reproving look. "Mmm," is all she allows herself to say, a noncommittal hum as she begins to knit.

She's been drifting in and out of consciousness every few hours since the incident with the cue ball, and at some point, Rue had convinced Kanaya that they needed to relocate to the laboratory that Rue apparently worked out of for all the years that Rose and John were in middle school together.

It's all too easy for Rose to summon up the mental image of her staying over at John's house, the two
of them plastered to the couch after binging on campy Batman and Hitchcock films, oblivious to the fact that her mother had foisted her off on Samuel Egbert quite neatly for the rest of the night so that she could fuck off to the laboratory. For a good part of her childhood Rose had considered the Egbert residence an extension of her home rather than the house of a friend, but only in hindsight has she realized that the amount of time she spent there would surely have been considered excessive if Samuel Egbert had thought she had a guardian to go home to at all.

And Rose had been awake enough when they arrived to have the pleasure of witnessing Kanaya verbally tear Rue Lalonde a new one when the troll caught wind of all the alcohol that Rue naturally kept on the premises. Bad enough, Rose thinks, that she’s had to wait these past few days, knowing that John was only a simple teleport spell away, and yet being unable to muster up the concentration needed to pull off the jump; now, she is keenly aware of the fully stocked bar that Rue has had her assistants lock away from the both of them.

As though locks could stop either Rue or Rose if they put their minds to it. The void prevents outside influences from infringing on the facility by dampening ambient magic, blocking out prying eyes, and cutting off the voices of the Horrorterrors, but thaumaturgic research couldn’t go on under the wards if there weren’t exceptions that allowed for internal majjykal activity.

Rose has allowed herself to believe that the burn of her thirst might have diminished, but being able to foresee every path that can take her to that locked door just down the hall is not helping her sober streak in the slightest. Her mind is in tatters once more, and Kanaya is working damage-control on multiple fronts while Rose tries to contain everything that her panic stripped bare. To add insult to injury, when her mother had first walked in and announced that the room had been sealed off, Rose had been unable to keep from remarking that she must have just topped off her emergency flask, to last her through the unexpected drought.

Rue had stared her right in the eye and told her that she was attempting to go sober, too.

It's maddening. Rue reeks just as much of alcohol as ever; it's the only thing that Rose can see around her conspicuous lack of an aura. It's a sham, just another insipid move on Rue's part, and the only real question is how long Rue is willing to endure sobriety in order to prove her point. Quite a while, Rose should think, because if nothing else, when her mother finds a way to rub Rose the wrong way she commits to it whole-heartedly.

With the equivalent of a fully stocked liquor store in the same building as them, it's a toss up, really, who will break first.

Knit two, purl two. Rose doesn't have a clue what she's knitting, but the rhythm quickly becomes effortless as her fingers remember the old patterns. She pauses only to sporadically answer texts from John and Dave and Jade and now, for the first time, Karkat Vantas. The four of them are still in the process of driving out to the meeting site where Rue has people waiting to escort them the rest of the way to the remote lab, and Jade at least is going stir crazy. John is in higher spirits now than he was a few days ago, and Rose thinks that he's finally begun to calm down and digest all of the bombshells that he had to deal with one right after the other. Dave presumably zoned out some time ago, because his very revealing, if piecemeal, chatter about all and sundry cut off quite abruptly with no explanation. And Karkat...

Well. Rose had been under the impression that Karkat was considered by all and sundry to be perpetually irritable, but apparently he's managed to get himself on more pain-killers than she has.

In other words, he's not just irritable. He's high as balls.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 11:45:07 --
CG: LALONDE.
CG: SO.
CG: YOU’RE THE PASTY HUMAN GIRL IN ALL OF DAD EGBERT’S RIDICULOUS HUMAN PHOTO ALBUMS.
TT: Correct.
CG: AND THE SEER OF LIGHT.
TT: Also correct.
CG: BUT IN YOUR SPARE TIME YOU MORPH INTO A TENTACLE CRAZED DARK GOD FROM THE NEGAVERSE AGAINST YOUR WILL.
TT: ...Yes. The things which you have stated are indeed truth. You may refer to me in my secondary form as the Dark Lady Ketos Calmasis Senescence, supreme tentacle sorceress of the Outermost Ring and undisputed Ruler of All Things Cephalopodan.
TT: Is there anything else you need me to clarify? We really should have spoken before this, but from what I can tell neither of us have been particularly functional sentient beings as of late.
CG: ...
CG: YEAH OKAY, HOLD ON. I’M PRETTY SURE YOU’RE FUCKING WITH ME, BUT I’M LETTING THE DARK OCTOLADY TITLE SLIDE BECAUSE I CAN’T EVEN DEAL WITH THAT RIGHT NOW.
CG: I NEED A MINUTE.
TT: Oh? Something the matter?

There is a lengthy pause. Rose raises an eyebrow, and wonders if she should switch back over to John’s window and ask if something’s gone wrong. But then Karkat resumes his end of the conversation, and she is able to shrug and lower the eyebrow again.

CG: BACK OFF, WOMAN, WAIT JUST A FUCKING MINUTE. I’M PRACTICING MY FUCKING DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES.
CG: BECAUSE.
CG: FUCK.
CG: HAAAAAAAAAGH.
TT: I’m afraid I’m not following.
CG: OKAY. FUCK. HARLEY WAS TRYING TO GET HER GRIMY PAWS ON MY PHONE, BUT THE CRISIS HAS BEEN AVERTED. FOR ONCE.
TT: You were saying?
CG: RIGHT. WHERE THE FUCK WAS I.
CG: OH FOR FUCK’S SAKE, I HAD THIS PIECE OF SHIT CONVERSATION PLANNED OUT. I HAD THIS DOWN.
CG: I THINK WE JUST PASSED A TRACTOR HAULING AN ENTIRE PORTABLE TWO STOREY BUILDING ON A FLATBED TRUCK.
CG: WHO EVEN DOES THAT? HUMANS, THAT’S WHO.
TT: ...
TT: Are you...entirely certain that you’re messaging the correct individual?
CG: WHAT.
CG: OF COURSE I FUCKING AM, YOU OBNOXIOUS PURPLE TEXT TENTACLE WHISPERER.
CG: STOP TRYING TO DISTRACT ME FROM THE FUCKING SPECTACULAR INTERROGATION GOING ON HERE.
TT: The commentary about passing traffic just seems a little...off topic.
CG: NO FUCK YOU. WHAT I NOTICE ABOUT TRAFFIC AND WHEN I MENTION IT IN CONVERSATION IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS YOU SHIT.
TT: Mmmm. Let me guess. Two tablets of over the counter Hamnox?
CG: HOW WOULD YOU EVEN KNOW THAT?
TT: It's the strongest pain relieving medication on the market that Mr Egbert would have been able to obtain without drawing unwanted attention. My sympathies regarding your injuries.
TT: I would recommend not taking it on an empty stomach.
CG: OH. YEAH. JOHN SAID THAT, TOO.
CG: WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS?

Ah. Now they're getting to the meat of the matter.

TT: Because John has expressed a serious amount of attachment to you, and your recent health troubles have caused him an corresponding amount of distress.
TT: Therefore, your health is my concern. How are you feeling, Karkat? Anything in particular you would wish to discuss? I am all ears. Professional, discreet, non-judgmental ears.
CG: I'VE GOT A HEAD FULL OF NIGHTMARES, A THORACIC CAVITY FULL OF USELESS BONE FRAGMENTS, AND A BACKSEAT FULL OF EXTRANEOUS HUMANS.
CG: I'D RATHER FUCKING DISCUSS ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE IMPENDING RAGEFIT THAT I AM ONLY JUST BARELY SUPPRESSING TO AVOID GIVING DAVE MOTHERFUCKING STRIDER THE SATISFACTION OF SEEING MY LOSE MY SHIT.
CG: MORE TO THE POINT. I'M HERE TO FUCKING WARN YOU THAT YOU FUCKED JOHN OVER ONCE ALREADY. IF YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO GET A SECOND CHANCE, GUESS WHAT?
CG: ME, THAT'S WHAT. ME.
TT: Ah. Yes. I have already received a similar lecture from Dave.
CG: THAT WAS A FUCKING JOKE, RIGHT?
CG: HAHA. LOOK AT ME, ENGAGING IN THIS PLEASANT DISPLAY OF VAGUELY BEMUSED HUMOR WHEEZES FOR YOUR SAKE. BECAUSE I KNOW THAT PRETENTIOUS DICK-OBSESSED ASSHOLE COULD NOT POSSIBLY HAVE BEAT ME TO THE REQUISITE WARNING SPEECH.
TT: By more than a week, actually. Shortly after the incident in New York City that put the three of us back into contact with each other.
CG: GOD
CG: FUCKING
CG: DAMMIT!!!
TT: I owe both you and Dave a debt for keeping John together and sane when I could not. You may feel free to collect at any time.
TT: There is not much I can say to justify my actions. An unfortunate combination of isolation, alcoholism, and Horrorterrors took their toll on my sanity, and by the time I realized that I had ceased communicating with John -with anyone but Kanaya, really - their grimdark tendrils were firmly entrenched in my mind.
TT: John forgives easily, and Dave seems content to hold it reserve. But if you should wish to engage in a round of chasticuffs, as would be your due as the moirail of a mistreated party, then feel free.
CG: YOU ACTUALLY KNOW WHAT THAT IS?
CG: HOLY FUCK.
TT: I've been doing my research. It has been made clear to me that my knowledge of the fourfold varieties of troll-oriented interpersonal relationships has been sorely lacking. I'm afraid I overspecialized in favor of more general psychological concepts and illnesses. I've been rectifying this oversight.
CG: YOU'RE KIDDING ME.
TT: Not at all. The psychology of interpersonal relationships seems absolutely fascinating. A new frontier.
TT: John has informed me that you are in fact a self-taught expert in the field of quadrants as
depicted in literature and filmography. If that is the case, I would be interested in obtaining your perspective.

CG: ...INCREDIBLE.
TT: Hm?
CG: HOW THE FUCK IS THIS POSSIBLE.
CG: YOU'RE ACTUALLY TOLERABLE. I'M FUCKING DUTYBOUND TO DESPISE YOU ON PRINCIPLE FOR WHAT YOU DID TO JOHN, AND IT TURNS OUT YOU MIGHT BE THE ONLY REASONABLE FRIEND HE ACTUALLY HAS.
CG: I MEAN JUST LOOK AT HARLEY. LITERALLY RAISED BY WOLVES. THAT ONLY WORKS WHEN THE WOLF IS AN ACTUAL FUCKING LUSUS AND THE WRIGGLER IN QUESTION IS ACTUALLY A WRIGGLER.
CG: CAN YOU IMAGINE A HUMAN WRIGGLER RAISED BY A LUSUS?
CG: I DIDN'T EVEN WANT TO BE RAISED BY A LUSUS.
CG: GOD I REGRET IMAGINING THAT.
TT: I'm fairly certain there is at least one work of classic Alternian literature concerning just that subject. I could recommend it to you.
CG: OH GOD PLEASE NO. I ASSURE YOU NO WORK OF LITERATURE COULD POSSIBLY MATCH THE SHEER MAGNITUDE OF THE IMAGINARY CLUSTERFUCK MY SHITTY EXCUSE FOR A THINKPAN IS CURRENTLY FRYING UP.
CG: THIS IS WORSE THAN THOSE FUCKING OMELEBOMINATIONS DAVE TRIED TO SHOVEL DOWN OUR POOR UNSUSPECTING PROTEIN CHUTES THIS MORNING.
TT: It may also just be the pain medication talking.
CG: DON'T REMIND ME. I CAN ALREADY TELL I'M GOING TO REGRET EVERY SINGLE MESSAGE I'VE SENT TODAY. CAN WE JUST MUTUALLY AGREE TO DELETE ALL TRACE OF THIS EMBARRASSING EXCUSE FOR A CONVERSATION WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER? I NEED TO FILTER WAY MORE OF THIS SHITFUCKERY OUT OF MY SYSTEM BEFORE I START SEGUEING INTO THE PROS AND CONS OF OMELET INGREDIENTS.
TT: As fascinating as that would be, why don't we talk about your nightmares instead?

Karkat does not want to discuss his nightmares. The words he uses to tell Rose exactly where she can place her concern are disturbingly specific. However, this does happen to send him off on a most intriguing tangent concerning the use of dream motifs in some obscure troll soap opera called Dazed Days, and from there, with some nudging, onto a meandering lecture on the wonders of troll Will Smith's acting.

He is an...interesting character. She can see why Dave would enjoy provoking him, just to see what frankly incredible metaphors the troll might come up with next.

"They'll be here soon," she says, beginning another row of purl stitches.

Kanaya nods - and then stiffens. She removes the claw massaging the back of Rose's neck and slides off the bed, prowling towards the door with a perfectly smooth expression.

Rue doesn't send assistants to speak to them. She's still trying to take a 'more personal, hands-on' approach when it comes to dealing with Rose, and when Rose discovers who gave Rue Lalonde that advice, she is giving them a strongly worded piece of her mind.

Knowing this, however, Rose sits up further, removes the ice pack from her forehead, and concentrate on her knitting all the more intently. She shall knit like this is the misshapen cozy destined to warm the cockles of the Horrorterrors themselves, if need be. Anything to make it clear to Rue that she could care less about whatever important news bulletin she feels the need to share right this moment.
Kanaya opens the door before Rue can so much as knock – which she has been doing, rather than simply barging in, a fact that Rose can be grudgingly thankful for. The troll plants herself in front of the doorway between Rose, cants her head in a nod, and, after she's thoroughly inspected Rue Lalonde for whatever she felt the need to look for, holds the door wider as Rue steps in.

The doctor is not alone though. Silent aside from the faint click of her pale feet on the floor, the Wondering Querent slips into the room like a sigh, nodding back to Kanaya without a word.

The last time Rose saw the WQ, the carapacian had been creeping away through the dark night, a pearly white specter against the backdrop of the forest that surrounded the Lalonde Laboratories in Maine. She'd also been the only person at the labs to have been almost eager to explain things to Rose, and Rose has often cursed the circumstances that had limited the amount of time she'd had that night to question the Querent more thoroughly on the topic of Skaia.

Now, the abnormally tall, slender carapacian smiles at Rose gently, her dark eyes thoughtful and worried as she claps her claws over her chest and stands near the wall. Rue speaks instead, stepping as close to the bed as she dares before drawing her shoulders back to begin. "Rose, darling. You look well."

"I look like shit," Rose counters, not taking her eyes from the knitting needles. Her other sight, just barely extended for fear of upsetting the balance in her mind, takes in the hollow where Rue should be and the benevolent glow of the WQ's ancient soul, a persistent radiance that mantles the alien like wings. "May I help you?"

Rue's eyes flicker, and she takes another hesitant step toward the bed. Like a circling bird of prey, Kanaya rounds the bed to approach from the other side, watching Rue Lalonde's face with an expression of consideration; Rose can tell the troll is sizing Rue up again, trying to determine where and when to push to try and bring mother and daughter to a balance point. Undeterred by the scrutiny, Rue goes on. "I - am glad that you are making use of the new needlekind. Are they working well for you?"

Every word comes out stilted and awkward, as though the doctor is reading from a script, which just makes the act all the more painfully obvious. Rose's lip curls. "Adequately," she says distantly, in a bored tone that makes it quite clear that by adequately she means the exact opposite.

Rue's mouth tightens, but Rose doesn't see the flinch she was aiming to incite. More significantly, Kanaya is vibrating with a faint growl of irritation at her side, and Rose checks herself before she can press the advantage. It is no good attempting to provoke her mother into showing her hand if she annoys Kanaya into temporary vacillation in the process.

"As long as you're happy, darling," Rue says at last, when she's regained control of herself. "I simply wished to give you a progress update on that worrying artifact you saw fit to play with."

"There is the haughtiness Rose has been waiting for. She rides it out, because even with her mind once again in the process of recovering, she has regained the self-control she'd cultivated as a child to deal with her mother's tactics. "Oh, by all means," Rose says, rolling her eyes derisively. "Have you managed to divine the secrets of the cue ball?"

Rue's expression tells her all that she needs to know, really. There's a bitterness there, the disdain of having been foiled in an attempt to outdo Rose, that always gives her away. "It is powerful," Rue says, folding her arms. "Worryingly so. I have some of my best analyzing it, and we have yet to be able to crack the outer shell of its defenses."

"Defenses?" Rose snorts, setting aside the knitting. This is the first real test of this little confrontation,
and Kanaya tenses at her side as Rose shifts her legs out from under the sheets.

But when Rose totters to her feet, it is with minimal shaking. Her headache throbs once and then subsides, which is reassuring. And being on her feet helps Rose reclaim some of her dignity. "I certainly had no trouble accessing it," she says, permitting herself a small smile of triumph.

"If it let you use it as a scrying tool, that only makes the situation more troubling," Rue sighs. "I'm tempted to ship it back out to the Maine facility. They might make more progress with the newer equipment than we can with our limited staff."

Rose's fingers twitch. Common sense urges her to never tangle with the strange green and white sentience that reached out to her through the cue ball ever again. Anything that can reach out to the Furthest Void and barter with the many-angled ones in their natural habitat is far beyond Rose's level of power.

But every word out of Rue's mouth drips condescension, as though backhandedly daring Rose to prove she could do any better. Always, always, always, this hateful woman has to push and prod and pick and -

WQ: I would advise against tampering with the eye at all.

Rose's mouth seals off, and she and her mother both snap to look at the carapacian at the same time, a motion so similar that it makes Rose's skin crawl. Kanaya has joined her in standing now, one claw on Rose's shoulder in both comfort and warning, her attention also focused on the Wondering Querent.

"So you've said," Rue says. She's clearly skeptical, but not dismissive. Rose can only guess what has caused Rue Lalonde to gaze upon the Querent as though she's finally dealing with someone she could respect. Rue has never considered anyone her intellectual equal in all the years that Rose has had to deal with her quiet, unpleasant vanity. "What do you know of it?"

The Querent's head tips to the side, and Rose realizes that she's the sole target of the level, considering stare, even as the carapacian answers Rue. Or perhaps she and Kanaya - it's difficult to say when they're standing so close together.

WQ: Artifacts of that nature are not trustworthy. They serve as the eyes of one whose influence cannot be understated, and allow him to see and manipulate events to his satisfaction without being detected.

WQ: Occasionally they go dormant and he loses track of them in the world. But this one is awake and aware, and the void wards here will only blind it for so long before it begins to sow misfortune and strife in the service of his will. The sooner it is destroyed, the better for us all.

It's too familiar.

But Rue doesn't know what Rose knows, and what Kanaya knows, on the subject of a certain white-texted individual who could see what he should not have been able to, outside the bounds of technology and magic as they are understood, or that the cue ball had been present in Kanaya's apartment at the time. So while Rose slowly but surely exchanges a significant glance with Kanaya, the doctor raises an eyebrow. "And who would this man be?"

WQ: Not a man at all. There are still things in this world that you would not understand, Doctor, things that will not make sense until you have...seen what there is to see.

"But do you have a name?" Kanaya asks.
The blink of surprise on the Querent's part isn't fake. Rose can see the genuine astonishment in the carapacian's aura, as though the question, as obvious as it should have been what Rue was really asking.

Well, no one has ever said that carapacians think the same way as terrestrial beings. They are aliens, after all, and notorious for their less-than-forthcoming nature on the matter of everything from their origins to their religion to the ectobiological technology they use to reproduce. Everything that is known about them is either known circumstantially or is purely speculative.

WQ: I - I apologize. It is always difficult for us to be straightforward. A holdover from - well. It doesn't matter now.

WQ: You may be familiar with him already. He has assumed leadership of the Midnight Crew of late. He is the one they call Doc Scratch.

Not the most pleasant revelation to have to swallow when one is already dealing with a post-Horrorterror hangover.

- 

This facility, built to house the operations of over two hundred scientists, lab techs, and administrators, currently contains fifty or so individuals. It is, according to Rue, barely more than a skeleton crew; when the Lalondes moved out to Maine, most of Rue's team had gone with her, and remained in the main laboratory to continue time-sensitive experiments when the lead scientist herself took off to pursue her wayward daughter.

Maybe five accompanied her mother on this ill-thought out mission of perverse good will - or perhaps were only just now flown out in light of recent developments - and it's not difficult to see the pattern in those Rue had flown in: two neurosurgeons, a mindscapeist, a therapist who let it slip that he did his clinical internship at a residential program dedicated to recovering cult victims, and the Wondering Querent herself.

She wonders if Rue intended to imply that Rose would require brain surgery to recover from this latest mishap. Kanaya certainly thinks the idea is a little over the top. And since Rose is, by and large, attempting to avoid being the instigator of the inevitable break between her and Rue while Kanaya is in the vicinity, she keeps mum on the matter. Thankfully, in the last hour before John's arrival, Kanaya firmly directs Rue out of the lobby so that Rose can pace before the glass doors in peace, and stare out over the pristine mountain valley toward the switchback trail that is the only method of entering and exiting the area on the ground. With her sight as benumbed as it is by the wards, she can't see much further than that, and the last scrykind she tried to use to amplify her sight had been a trap planted by the very Midnight Crew that has been plaguing them so persistently.

But while Rose would have been content to pace or even to go to meet John further up the road, she remains in the facility, and at one point is even forced to abandon her vigil.

This is because Ambrose and Oriole Strider beat the main group by a good half hour.

And they somehow manage it without having informed anyone that they were coming at all. Rue is certainly surprised when the first scientist she sends out to the ranger station returns early, terrified as he stammers that no, they hadn't asked for or given a password, they'd just kind of shown up in a full-size pickup truck with the windows rolled down and TNGHT blasting and hauled the poor man into the truck with them when he refused to help them out. Whatever Bro Strider said to convince him to lead them to the laboratory had apparently been too ironic or too traumatizing for the poor scientist to argue.
"You have ignored every single one of my invitations," Rue says, exasperated, her arms folded tight as she tries to argue with Ambrose. "I would have sent the jet to bring you up."

'Tries' being the operative word. Rose watches, fascinated, from the couch by the window where she has taken up residence, as Bro Strider shrugs and flat-out ignores the whole thing. "Need to have a word with the kid," is all he says, hands in his pockets. Which means nothing. Rose has seen the Puppeteer on broadcasts; he is the quickest draw at swordkind in the Southwest, and perhaps in the world.

Meanwhile, a distinctly orange Dave keeps a safe distance from the eldest of the Strider clan, glancing around him in nervous twitches and scanning the ceiling and walls as though expecting a surprise attack at any moment. One of his wings is utterly magnificent, a clean curve of orange and red and gold large enough to, presumably, lift someone of that size in some semblance of flight. However, the other is still taped up, as Dave had reported, quivering constantly against his side with barely repressed nerves. With all the bandages Rose can't even see where the break would have been.

Rue looks disgruntled. It's an awful look on her. Rose does her best to memorize the image to reminisce on in darker times. "If you can, you're welcome to try. She's stonewalled quite effectively when I attempt it," she sniffs, casting a not-so-subtle frown in Rose's direction.

Ah. Rose is the kid being referred to. How refreshing. "Kanaya, a moment?" she says, placing a hand over Kanaya's claws when the troll shifts at her side. Rose can feel the muscles in her own back shifting as she straightens up, aware of the man's regard even though his gaze is hidden beneath those damnable shades.

She doesn't know how to think about her father. Never mind that Dave's habit of thinking of the man as their elder brother has infected Rose's impression of him - even John refers to the man as Bro - Rose is still wrapping her mind around the fact that she has a second parent at all, when she isn't even interested in keeping the first.

"If you are sure," Kanaya says. She squints at Ambrose, nostrils flaring. "He is dangerous."

"High praise, coming from you," Rose murmurs, and Kanaya tilts her head with a faint smirk of acknowledgement before sailing off across the lobby, a picture of grace as she strides toward the winged Strider as though to speak to him in an undertone.

She doesn't see Bro pass Kanaya on the way over. One moment he is watching Rue Lalonde flounce off in her latest silent tantrum, and the next Rose must school her expression into something pleasant as she straightens up, aware of the man's regard even though his gaze is hidden beneath those damn shades.

"Kid," he says by way of greeting. She can read absolutely nothing from his tone, flat and monotonous and brusque. If it were anyone else, she'd say he sounded rude, but he's simply too curt to assign even that much emotion to him.

"Bro," she says, the name odd and spare in her mouth. She is tempted to call him Father, to set him off balance from the get-go, but that would be a tactic she'd use on Rue. Bro may be odd, from what little she has experienced of him and heard from Dave. But he's also not Rue. And really, that goes a long way towards recommending anyone as a parental unit in Rose's mind.

The silence lasts a while, as they consider each other rather blatantly. Certainly Rue could never have gone so long without a snide comment, but Bro is silent long enough after they exchange greetings
that Rose falls almost into a kind of complacent calm. She meets his gaze through the sunglasses, letting just enough of her sight focus in to see the yellowed-orange through the tinted lenses. Even that doesn't make Bro any more readable; he has had long years to master concealing the emotions that Dave still reveals through his compulsive rambling.

"Got something for you," he says. It's abrupt enough that Rose realizes she truly has grown complacent, and startles before catching herself.

"You shouldn't have," she says, automatically, because that is what one says when one's parent gets you something. Rose has never willingly accepted a gift from Rue Lalonde in her life without assuring the woman that it was both unnecessary and unappreciated. Then she winces inwardly, because she had not intended to let that much cutting disdain sneak into her tone. It's something more suited for dealing with Rue, not this man that she barely knows, and who she might not wish to thoroughly aggravate when he was one of those who dealt with her breakdown in New York.

He doesn't let it ruffle him though. In fact, she can't even tell if he notices the faint edge of sarcasm she let slip through. One eyebrow raised, he draws the package from wherever he has stowed it so quickly Rose can't perceive it and tosses it on the couch beside her before backing off. "Only if you want," he adds, the picture of indifference. "Gotta have a talk with Rue."

...And that appears to be the end of their conversation. Rose feels oddly at a loss. Nothing concerning their heretofore unmentioned father-daughter relationship, nothing about the fact that she ran away from her mother's care to shack up with her lover - not a word. She barely forms a 'thank you' with her lips before Bro is halfway across the lobby again, slouching off down the corridor that Rue had stormed off through toward the interior of the laboratory. At the far end of the room, Oriole's head snaps up at once, triggered by the other Strider's movements. Then he ducks his head and mutters something to Kanaya before tagging along in the man's wake, feathers fluttering behind him.

Well. Bro makes a quick enough exit that Rose can only shake her head and examine the package beside her. It's wrapped in shitty newspaper and tape, and when she turns it over in her hands the wrapping essentially falls apart to reveal the small, slim case within.

Rose stares, and opens the case.

Then she has to shut it again, because the emotions that rush her clamp down on her throat and make it difficult to breathe, let alone contemplate all the nuances of what a gift like this would mean.

But no matter how she puzzles it over and over in her mind, she cannot see how this would be ironic.

She draws in a shaky breath, and shakes her head mutely when Kanaya asks her what is in the case. Her fingers may tremble a little as she tucks the item into a pocket, but she smoothes them out against the fabric of her skirt and eventually she can ignore the tremors, if not the item itself.

She will need to reserve judgment on Ambrose Strider for the moment. He has handed her a game-changing piece, one she had not taken seriously before as a possible option in her on-going struggle to maintain her distance from Rue.

But if he is serious, the question becomes -

Is she willing to accept this?

She's not the only one to receive a gift from Ambrose Strider. The moment that they join the Striders
in the basement room where the Wondering Querent has been working, the man lobs a second package directly at Dave Strider's face.

Dave fumbles the catch spectacularly, flailing and almost batting the package at the nearest wall like a squash ball. When he finally does grab the thing he holds it as far away from his body as he can, as though fearing the package could blow up at any moment. There seems to be an odd element of perpetual paranoia in those close to Bro, and Rose adds that to her mental list of ways in which her ecto-parent may or may not be an utterly alarming custodian.

When Dave begins signing, a disgruntled furrow in his brow, Bro replies aloud from where he lounges against he wall. "No, I'm not gonna tell you. Open it, you little shit."

"Please," Oriole adds, as he shuffles toward their group with a wary stare. "That way we can stop with the stupid ass communication fuckups."

Dave's head swivels toward the orange version of himself - and then he's tearing into the newspaper like there's no tomorrow. While he does so, John shifts by Rose's side, enough to draw a grunt of discontent from Karkat. "So, you're Oreooooo?" John says, sounding delightedly mischievous as he quite obviously massacres the name. "Wow! You do have wings!"

Said wings flare a little, the bound one twitching uselessly, and then huddle up over Oriole's shoulders in a defensive gesture. "Oriole. Yeah," he replies curtly, stuffing his hands in his pockets. His eyes are visible over the tops of his shades, and Rose thinks that he isn't as used to concealing his emotions as the other two Striders in the room pretend to be, because he doesn't even try to hide the raw curiosity in his gaze. "And you're the blue one."

John laughs and unhooks his arm from Rose's. Karkat yelps in protest, but John has already strode forward to snatch Oriole up in a hug as well. "Nice to meet you!" he says merrily, even as Oriole squawks in protest and a wayward wing almost clips the delicate conglomeration of computer screens that the Querent has mounted on the wall. "Wow! Everyone is here! This is awesome!"

Dave lets out a wordless, gaspy shriek as the package explodes in his hands and he takes an oddly-shaped puppet to the face. He's signing furiously at his older brother the moment he's diced the puppet into quarters.

Bro Strider's mouth quirks in a tiny smirk. "Psyche." It might be Rose's imagination, but she thinks he tosses the next package at Dave a lot slower, so that Dave has more than enough time to snatch it up without panicking again.

"We're fucking ridiculous," Karkat is muttering. "How does anyone even take us seriously?"

"A question for the ages," Rose agrees. Because really, the whole thing is a subject she tries not to dwell on for fear of disrupting the delicate balance of sobriety in the universe.

Oh. Perhaps she should not think about sobriety, or any other related terms. She smiles blandly at Karkat's reluctant scowl, and thinks that the two of them might get along just fine.

"And not one that I'm sure can be answered in any way that is not at least mildly insulting," Kanaya adds, shaking her head at the antics going on around them. Karkat jumps at the sound of her voice, as though spooked. Rose can only wonder what that is all about.

It's difficult to take in everything going on in the room at once; it's so full of people, all of them friends or family or friends of the family, and Rose can hardly set eyes on one person before someone else in the middle of doing something either bizarre or fascinating that calls her attention.
Jade is trying to invade the Wondering Querent's work space, prodding at wires and excitedly trying to divine what the contraption does. Rose's mother and Samuel Egbert are still conversing in low whispers, Rue's face the mask of cool disdain she wears when she knows she's in the wrong, and is unwilling to apologize. Samuel simply looks tired. No doubt the two of them are discussing more of their secrets; Rose has to look away before she can become angry at the thought. Karkat leans toward John at all times, glaring at anything and anyone who gets too close to them like a remarkably possessive polecat. WV crawls on top of a filing cabinet, cooing to himself out of sight of most of the room as he taps a thrumming green battery cube set into the wall. Dozens of the things have been hooked up to the WQ's machine, all of them with extensive warning labels that explain why no one should crack the battery chassis without a foot thick wall of lead between them and the exposed uranium.

WV cannot be tamed by such simple things as warning labels. He unhinges his jaw and attempts to fit the entire battery into his mouth, saliva drooling out of the corner of his terrifying mouth.

Good lord.

"Oh. My god. Fucking finally."

For a moment, Rose barely recognizes the voice. It's been a while since she last heard it, after all, and even then she'd been weaving in and out of consciousness at the time. Oriole's voice has an additional, barely-there screeching note to it, scratchy and a little hoarse, and the absence of that is what tips Rose off. "Dave," she says, smiling at him. "It's good to hear your voice."

John lets go of Oriole, whirling in a twist of air that Rose can feel from here, excitement on his face. "Dave! You can talk!"

Dave fidgets with the steel grey collar around his neck, the relief obvious on his face as he clears his throat. "You're telling me," he says, coughing a little. "How long has it even been? Too goddamn long. Jesus kringlefucking christ."

Incredible. He sounds exactly like he types.

"I thought I raised me a fucking lady, not a potty-mouthed shithead." And then - so fast that Rose almost misses it - Bro Strider rolls his eyes while glancing at her, as though inviting her in on the joke. "Whatever. Try not to fuck this one up, kid, those parts don't come cheap."


"Great. He can fucking talk. All in favor of revoking the douchebag's speech privileges until he fucks off back to Texas, say aye," Karkat says, looking irritated enough to flip a table.

Unfortunately, all he does is draw Dave's attention to him. "Karkat. Bro. You cannot be harshing on this," Dave says, gesturing more toward his entire body than to the collar, a faint smirk on his face. "Not now, when I may finally drop the sick beats in your honor."

"That is the opposite of what I would want."

"Too late, bro, I've been sitting on these downright ill rhymes for days, now. They have to be set free."

"No they fucking don't, they really really don't -"

"I want to hear them!" John says, raising a hand. "But also, I don't think we have time? Didn't Doctor Lalonde have something really important to tell us?"
"Not just me," Rue says. John jumps almost a foot in the air - something he can accomplish more easily than most - as though in all the chaos he failed to notice Rue Lalonde striding away from Samuel Egbert toward the center of the room. There is a table in the middle surrounded with a bevy of chairs, but Rue positions herself at the end of the table closest to where their motley group has clustered near the door to address them. She pitches her voice loud enough that most of the heads in the room turn toward her, and Rose bites back the impulse to look away from her mother just to be contrary. "While I could give a brief overview of what little I know, there is one here who can explain far more clearly than I. Unless Samuel or Ambrose have something...?"

Bro shrugs loosely, his shades reflecting the overhead light for a moment before he folds his arms over his chest and sets up a silent watch by the door. He could not have possibly looked less interested in what Rue has to say, and Rose thinks that there might be something to emulate there. Certainly she'd be very interested in the ability to convince Rue that she could care less.

Samuel Egbert lays a hand on John's shoulder, smiling fondly as John looks up at him with a confused grin. "I'm afraid all my attempts at explaining things haven't gone all that well, and I never understood as much of all that science as you, Rue. The floor is yours."

"Then thank you all for being here," Rue says. Her normally flawlessly confident tone wavers a little, and Rose can't help the smugness that rises up in her breast, the vicarious amusement of seeing Rue falter in front of all these expectant eyes.

Then the doctor regains her momentum. "I know that more than a few of you have little reason to believe or trust in what I am about to say. I wish, more than I can possibly express, that I was not the one telling you about this today at all." She closes her eyes, lashes fluttering, and appears to decide something internally before opening them. "But the woman who knew the most about this game is dead. Joanna Egbert was an extraordinary woman. And without her, we have - all of us - been flying blind."

"Game?!" Karkat interrupts. The troll buries his face in his claws. "God fucking dammit, not another one."

"You've become familiar with the term, then," Rue says smoothly, eyebrow up. "I must confess, I'm surprised. From the impression Samuel gave me, I thought your group has been rather stymied by John's neurological hiccups."

John blinks and looks up from patting Karkat on the back, nonplussed. "What? The things where I have nosebleeds and stuff?" he says, laughing apprehensively, and Rose's heart aches. John's been out of the loop even more than she has, from what the two of them have pieced together over Pesterchum. She knows it's been bothering him more than he likes to let on, on top of everything else that has gone wrong in his life of late. "Uh. We know a little bit, I think, but it's all really weird!"

Rue nods, as though none of this is news to her. "So Samuel has said. The best we can do, I suppose, is see how much we can impart to you before you suffer another attack. You need to know all this. After we find the limits of what your brain can handle, I have several doctors on site who may be able to assist in healing whatever is causing these strange lapses."

For the first time it occurs to Rose that maybe the neurosurgeons lurking around the facility with their MRI machines might not be here for her, after all. It's hard to see the obvious sometimes, when Rue is around to badger her into a fit of paranoia.

"We'll figure this out, son," Samuel murmurs, barely loud enough for anyone but John to hear. "It'll all be fine."
Rue nods, and resumes her speech. Rose think she probably has this whole thing mapped out, including pithy phrases to toss out whenever they get diverted, as they just have. "The four of you - John, Jade, Dave, Rose - have been kept in the dark for a long time, either for medical reasons" - a nod to John and Samuel - "or because we guardians simply didn't know all that you would wish to know." She swallows audibly, and goes on. "I know for a fact that I have made mistakes in how I chose to protect Rose in the past, and that included keeping facts from her which might have benefited her more in the long run."

"An understatement," Kanaya whispers, low, for Rose's ears only, and Rose can't fully repress the tiny 'ha!' of laughter that emerges from her lips. Well. It's not as though she intended to give the impression that she gave a damn about all of Rue's self-recriminations in front of all these witnesses. Her mother fucked up, but Rose doubts she truly regrets it; more likely Rue is paying lip service to try and win back the favor she lost in Samuel and Ambrose's eyes when Rose went off the deep end on her watch.

Rue hesitates again before pressing on. "And the rest of you are here because you have become inextricably involved in this mess of a situation," she says, her eyes lingering on Oriole in particular, until the bird-kid vanishes and reappears somewhat behind and to the left of the center of the room with a clumsy flash-step, lurking with his eyes mostly on John rather than Rue. "The Midnight Crew is no ordinary criminal organization. They too are linked to the game that is playing out around us, and that makes them more dangerous than you know. If you are to defend yourselves against them, you need to understand something Joanna always called the Game, and which I have researched over the years under the working name of Skaia."

"The Skaian Paradigm?" Rose says, eyes flying to stare at the Wondering Querent. The carapacian caresses a claw over the smooth corner of the workstation and meets Rose stare for stare, a soft, sad smile on her pale face, but says nothing.

Rose tears her eyes away, and snorts, stepping forward and away from Kanaya so that everyone is looking at her now. "You actually intend to explain something? Incredible," she says, injecting as much skepticism into her tone as she can while circling around Rue. Mother and daughter face off in the center of the room as everyone draws back. "But I find it hard to believe anything you have to say would be of merit after all this time. You've spent so long poisoning the well, after all, how much truth can be left?"

"I have been offering to explain since you left the laboratory in Maine," Rue says, her voice tight, the effort needed to control her automatic response obvious in her strained face. "You have dodged my efforts at reconciliation at every turn. Rose, please, I am trying -"

Rose can see nothing like that in Rue's aura. It's the same blank as always, spiteful and void of any impression, and she doesn't trust it in the slightest. "Why don't I believe you, I wonder? I would rather speak to someone who doesn't share your ridiculous agenda." She turns toward the computer screens, alive with the opportunity to cut her mother down a peg. "I would rather hear from the Wondering Querent."

"Don't you mean the Queen?"

Rose has her back to John right now, and she has to turn on her heel to glance back at him, her mouth open to ask why -

And then she freezes, because John's face is streaked with blood.

"I mean, that's her name, isn't it?" he's babbling, while Samuel grips his shoulders with an expression of horror. John has progressed from a simple nosebleed to bloody tears that have welled up in the
corners of his eyes, occasionally trickling down his cheek to add to the gore-strewn mask. "She's the White Queen. I remember, Jade talked about her a lot when she was asleep." He says a little, putting a hand to his face and grimacing at the blood that his hand comes away with. "Urgh. I feel kind of gross."

It's Karkat who elbows his way past Samuel's defensive grip first. John staggers, knees wobbling, and pain flashes on Karkat's face when he has to catch John; no doubt his ribs aren't thanking him for it. "John! Fuck!"

Then Jade is there, hoisting John up by his other arm, Dave flashing between John and Samuel completely to hover at John's back, and Rose's confrontation with Rue vanishes from her mind as she darts forward, cupping John's face with her hands and trying not to panic. "John? John, look at me," she says when John squeezes his eyes shut. Her heart races a million miles an hour as blood smears under her hands, and she has experience with the mind and its damning whimsy, and she knows that from both a medical and a magical perspective, bleeding eyes means nothing good whatsoever. What on earth would trigger such a sudden reaction like this?

"My head really hurts," John whispers, like he's confiding this only to the four of them. He forces a laugh, sour and sickly, and raises a hand to clutch at his skull. "I don't think I'm supposed to think about all this."

"Shoosh then, you dumbass," Karkat says angrily, trying to tug John closer with desperate claws. But Jade, Dave, and Rose follow him like it's nothing, like they're all one unit that cannot be separated. Dave is grim and silent, and Rose wonders if in the panic he's forgotten that he can speak again, or if he's too busy wrapping his arms around John's waist to even sass Karkat for his clinginess. "Oh my fucking god, what is even happening to you, what the fuck -" and then Karkat deteriorates into a stream of word vomit, cursing a blue streak as the terror overwhelms him.

Not that any of them have any room to speak. Rose can sense the guardians all around them, but it's difficult to hear anything they might be shouting at them when it's just the five of them in a tight circle, slowly crumpling to the floor as John's mind tears itself apart.

"But you do remember stuff," Jade says, her green eyes alight. She sounds almost relieved, which isn't an entirely appropriate response to the situation in Rose's opinion. "I knew you could!"

John shakes his head wildly, bewildered. "No, I don't - I just don't want to think about - what are we talking about again?"

Jade slaps John. Karkat snarls, sharp teeth bared, but John's still between him and Jade so Karkat can't lunge at her. Jade shakes him, which essentially shakes all of them at this point. "Come on, John, don't blank it out again! We're all here!"

"But it hurts! It hurts a lot!" John looks terrified now, not just confused and pained, and Rose can feel the shift of the muscles in his face as he twists in their collective grip, trying to pull away. "I see it sometimes, when I'm just the breeze, and it's awful! I don't want to remember that! Just let me go, you guys, so I can -"

Oh.

Oh.

"You always do this!" Karkat growls, a hand pressing partially over Rose's as he smoothes over John's forehead, wiping at the blood on his cheeks. There is a moment where the troll seems out of place in their muddle, a point at which Rose's mind stutters before she adapts to include him in her
mind's eye, in the flurry of potential actions and dips of chance that are slotting into place. "You try to ignore everything and pretend it's all fine, but fucking newsflash, John, if you think you can ignore this, you're even more of a fucking moron than I've always thought!" Karkat pulls his hand away and John doesn't have a choice but to look at the blood smeared over Karkat's palm. "I don't even know how the fuck you're doing this, but it's hurting you. Congratulations, you're officially more of a danger to yourself than anyone else on this fucking shithole of a planet. Just calm down and get your shit together!"

Rose only halfway knows what's going on, lost in what John couldn't or wouldn't tell her all these years. But her mind is soaring, barely pausing to let her process each minor realization at a time as she pieces together what she needs to say to make this right. Karkat has them almost there, she thinks, because Karkat has integrated himself with John as such a deep-seated level that his words hit John like anvils, but John could still break away from them in his panic. And Rose suspects that if John shuts this down now, his mind might never be able to handle it again without fracturing. A stiff breeze has picked up around them, wavering and twining between them all as though the wind is unsure whether John wants to draw them closer or fling them all away.

How long has he been remembering whatever it is that has scared him so much, and then been forcing himself to forget, all on his own? Resetting himself whenever it becomes too much to bear, whenever a word is too familiar or an old pain rises to the surface?

Either way, it needs to come to the breaking point here and now, and Rose is the one who can see what needs to be said next to hammer it home. "Stronger together than we are apart," she murmurs, resting her forehead against John's. "John. Remember? We're all here with you, just like you were there for me. And this is something we need to face. This paradigm is something we need to know, and you have to be here with us."

And that needs to be enough. The John Rose knows has never really been able to say no to his friends, or even to a passing stranger - unless the suggestion is for his own good. This teeters on the fence, a request that would be for John's own good, but is also critical to their group's ability to continue on in this mad, senseless adventure they're caught up in, and John -

John can't bury this.

Dave mumbles something, too quiet for Rose to hear, and for a heart-stopping moment she wonders if it'll push John back in the other direction and shut everything down. But then John slumps in the middle of them, fresh blood painting a stripe down his chin, and whimpers. "Trying," he says, hissing through the pain. "But I just -"

"Just stay right here." Rose fights the urge to look into John's mind, to enter his mindscape as he once did hers. He's mired in a pattern he's apparently been engraining himself in for years to prevent the pain from really hitting him, but he has to break it on his own. Her leaping into his mind willy-nilly would only make things worse. "You don't need to try to actively remember. We're going to learn more from the Querent. As long as you remain open to that, and don't blank out new memories, that's enough. Where you are right now is fine."

The relief in John's eyes is palpable, and a hand reaches up to squeeze Rose's. It's only then that Rose becomes aware that she's still clutching John's face, that she and Karkat have fallen all over each other to somehow crowd up onto John's lap together, and that Jade is hugging all of them again, sprawled with her arms flung out over Dave's back and Karkat's head to keep them all in this pile on the floor.

"I think I can do that," John says faintly, still holding her hand. His eyes waver, torn between focusing on her and whatever mental gymnastics he's undertaking to keep from blanking out the past
few minutes. Then the steel returns to his expression, that plucky determination that Rose remembers from their childhood, that shows up whenever John decides to set his mind to something. And that's when she knows they've pulled him back from the brink. "Okay. Yeah. I think I can do that. No harm in hearing new things. Yeah."

Karkat paps at John's face, and the expression on his face is one that makes him look five years younger, genuinely relieved and not furious with the world. The troll sighs. "Way to give us all a fucking heart attack first, dumbass."

Rose thinks this is the first time she's ever heard someone use dumbass as a term of endearment. But there's no denying that Karkat sounds downright sappy. Dave reaches up to ruffle John's hair, his jaw still clamped shut, and the growl that Karkat gives is halfhearted at best.

And they've all only been in the same building as each other for thirty minutes. Rose doesn't even dare contemplate how they're all going to separate at the end of this.

If they even can.

"You guys," Oriole says from somewhere above, "are so fucking weird."

"Yeah, yeah," Dave replies, his voice still startlingly similar to the other boy's, muffled in John's hair. "You're still fucking orange."

"You're never going to stop pointing that out, are you." It's not a question.

"John, are you alright?" Samuel Egbert asks, steely and on edge, and that's what seems to shake Rose out of her musings and fall back into sync with the rest of the world. Jade lets go of them all, blinking dazedly and shaking her hair so wildly that it flies in everyone's face, and that's when everyone else starts to peel away from John. Crisis averted. No fresh blood trickles out of John's nose and eyes, and Karkat starts wiping at the caked on blood with his sleeve like a fussing moirail before John can push his grabby hands away.

It would seem that they're going to continue on without discussing this further, though, John biting his lip and looking down at his hands with disconcertment scribbled across his face. He's clearly still not steady, but when she looks at him with a silent question in her eyes, he nods, as much for his father's benefit as for hers. Rose files away her more urgent questions - why John's mind has been so vicious in repressing what he remembers, why he remembers at all - for later. She doesn't understand enough about what's going on to accurately judge why there are complications.

There is a familiar hand resting between her shoulder blades, and when she lets go of John's face she turns her head ever so slightly to see Kanaya kneeling there, bracing her. "That was abrupt," Rose attempts to explain, but she's not entirely sure what she's trying to put into words. "I think we've been completely sidetracked."

"It could not be helped. Serendipity is strange that way," Kanaya says solemnly, helping Rose rise to her feet when it becomes clear that even kneeling for so short a time has done nothing to prevent Rose's headache from resurging under all the pressure.

But before she can ask Kanaya to clarify that last comment, the familiar sound of a throat clearing sounds behind her, and the rest of the world comes rushing back in, just in time for Rose to cast a dirty look at Rue Lalonde. "Am I to understand that John knows something of the game?" the doctor asks, barging into the conversation with all of the delicacy of a rhinoceros wading through a daycare center.
"I don't really want to. I think trying to remember would probably be a pretty conksucky idea at this point," John says. He's pale and Rose doesn't miss how he's leaning on Karkat almost as much as Karkat is leaning on him, Samuel hovering over both of them. "But, uh. I think we can talk about it. Without me passing out. So that's an improvement!" He chuckles after the last part, as though he can laugh off his own intense mental anguish like it's nothing more than a prank, and isn't that just John in a nutshell?

Rue glances around at all of them, then nods slowly. "That's good. I was worried this could cause you unnecessary pain, if we pushed too hard," Rue says, and Rose has to fight very, very hard not to roll her eyes at the feigned concern in Rue's voice. More likely the woman was more worried she wouldn't get to unveil her latest in a series of tight-fisted disclosures without John distracting everyone by collapsing multiple times. "And as it happens, Rose, I had already asked the Querent if she would be willing to share what she knows." Rue gestures to the slim carapacian then, with a deferential tilt to her head as she smiles at the alien. "She has done with this Queen's Hub what I thought impossible. She has been able to access records of the previous universe."

"Previous universe," Dave mutters. He's fiddling with the collar around his neck still, as though he needs to reassure himself with each flicker of his hand that sound is still emerging from his mouth. "We're actually running with that one. Alright. Okay. Not like any of this needs to make sense."

"Duh, Dave!" Jade says, jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow. "My grandpa talked about it all the time! Why do you think people call it paradox space? What did you think came before the universe existed? Nothing?"

"You know, for some reason, I just never bothered to wonder about that." Dave throws up his hands. "My bad. I should have been contemplating this absolutely fascinating idea that we needed to have a daddy universe all along. I mean, where do we draw the line here with the existential questions? Is Jupiter secretly made of strawberry ice cream? Are troll horns symbiotic pieces of candy corn that have attached themselves to their heads over the years? Is the universe actually a giant goddamn frog? We just don't know." He lowers his hands, looking vaguely defeated. "But that's why we have you, Jade. To ask the real questions."

"Oh god, he really does just talk," Oriole whispers in horror. "It just keeps happening." Over in his corner, Ambrose Strider looks as though he's giving serious thought to smacking Dave upside the head. Rose thinks personally that Dave is doing it deliberately, trying to distract attention from John. He and Karkat are both playing defense for John, so that John can gather his scattered thoughts and nod along with Rue's pronouncements without having to deal with anyone - other than Rose - watching him too closely. Rose isn't sure that either Dave or Karkat realizes they're doing it.

"Actually!" Jade starts, a brilliant smile on her face. "Now that you mention it -"

WQ: Our Glorious Speaker is indeed a frog. One day we may be graced with His beauteous Croak once more, but a scratch of a universal session always wears Him thin.

WQ: I do not know about your Jupiter, though. It is a strange place.

Jade pouts at having her thunder stolen. Dave's jaw drops so that his mouth hangs open in disbelief. Rue nods along as though this all makes perfect sense to her.

And Rose pictures it. It's all too easy; the vision ripples through her mind's eye like it's been waiting there for her to see it all along. He would have supernovas for eyes, galactic clusters scattered throughout His vocal sac, and solar systems winding about His toes, a creature both infinitely vast and glorious.
Her migraine picks up again with a sharp jab, before Rose can determine for herself whether that fleeting glimpse was a true vision or not. She's never given much thought to the shape of the universe before, but...suffice to say, she's not discounting the frog theory. It makes as much sense as anything else she's ever heard.

"But why a frog?" Dave is trying to argue. Perhaps he's just being argumentative for the sake of being able to hear his own simulated voice again. "Why not a universe shaped like a dwarf flying squirrel? I mean, have you seen those things? That would be goddamn adorable, don't even lie to me."

WQ: ...But a squirrel could not Croak, my Knight.

This is apparently the only real objection the carapacian has to offer; the Querent fields Dave's barrage of strange questions like she's not even bothered by the incredulity. She is serene in her belief, smiling at Dave with a distant fondness. Rose can't remember if she's ever heard of any supreme Frog deity in any of the scanty reports on carapacian religions; most of it was restricted to philosophy, really, the teachings of the Worthy Villein providing a general moral code, but there could be anywhere from four to sixteen god-like figures depending on what mood one happens to catch a talkative carapacian in.

"But Queen - sorry, Querent," John corrects himself, shaking his head a little. He's not wearing the contact lenses he must have worn all through their childhood, and the bright blue makes him look all the younger. "There was a frog before...our frog? This one we're in right now?"

WQ: Yes, but you mistake me. This universe is the same Speaker, merely reset. Extensive cancerous growths within the universe, combined with the machinations of the one called Doc Scratch, led to a failure of the game session which would have given birth to a new Genesis Frog.

WQ: It was your game session. You four were forced to scratch it in order to try again. This iteration is what resulted. The fact that your powers have carried over was...unexpected, but fortuitous for what we need to accomplish in the future.

WQ: If you like, I can replay the entire game session for you. All such things are viewable through the Hub and certain unregistered chat programs of questionable temporal legality, once they have been tuned to connect with the correct records. With all four of you present, the signal will be much easier to track. The subject is vast, and there is much you need to learn in a short time.

"That would be for the best," Rose says, darting another glance at her mother. "Verbal explanations have fallen short in the past."

"The Querent has been reluctant to share her findings with me alone," Rue says in a kind of oblique reply to Rose's unspoken accusation. "I think, though she would never be so impolite as to say it aloud, that it is because I was not a player."

WQ: My apologies.

"But if you all are willing to take a seat and observe what she has to show us, it would go a long way towards explaining to you all why you have the powers that you do, and why the Midnight Crew has been so persistent in opposing you." Rue glances around, taking in the fact that absolutely no one has sat down in all of the chaos that just ensued, and then shrugs a little. "Samuel, Ambrose. Anything you would like to add?"

"No. You've about covered everything that I know of," Samuel says slowly. He is the only one to pull out a chair from the table and lower himself into it, thoughtfully rubbing at his chin with a thumb
as he angles himself toward the screens on the wall. "Old Nanna kept putting off the punch line - always said the timing wasn't right. I never got more than a few scattered hints about John before his arrival by meteor, and by then it was too late for her to explain further."

"Meteor," Karkat repeats flatly, shoving his glasses up his nose as though that will make all things clear. No one answers him. The troll looks as though he's in genuine pain, his rust red eyes squinched up with disgust as he rubs a hand over his face.

Bro grimaces at the name Rue has used again, and gives a terse shrug. "I just know that shit was off the chain levels of fucked up. And now apparently we get to relive it all. Get it over with, Lalonde."

The Querent raises a claw though, glancing around the room with her dark eyes shining.

WQ: A moment. We are still expecting another guest.

WQ: She did say she would be here...PM delivered the message herself...

BQ: Looking for me?

The voice that echoes in Rose's mind bursts and cracks like hard candy between teeth, a flourish of black. If the Querent's voice is a low, sweet sobbing song, this is a telepathy that sets out to be the polar opposite, all sharp thorns. Rose casts her sight around her and spies the shadows shifting and roiling in the far corner of the room just as they deposit a Dersite carapacian in the room. She's the spitting image of the Wondering Querent, right down to the abnormal height, but with the colors flipped so that the newcomer scowls down at them all with proud white eyes. Rose sees the mutilated hand for only a brief moment before the carapacian tucks it against into the pocket of her midnight green trenchcoat, but she's sure the ring and small claws had been messily lopped off at some point, leaving the stranger only half a hand.

Bro grunts, and then he's between the rest of the group and the new carapacian, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck languidly. "Wondered if you'd show your face."

BQ: And here I am. Be honored, human. I am not like my cousin-queen; not many lay eyes on me and live to repeat the experience.

For the first time, the Wondering Querent steps away from the grey computer station she calls the Hub, stepping toward her mirror image with claws outstretched, her steps ponderous and slow.


The Queller eyes the claws that are held out to her with a wary recoil, before ever so deliberately removing her hands from her sides and delicately lying them atop the Querent's. They do not clasp hands; the two carapacians simply stand there. The two stare into each other's eyes for so long that Karkat coughs loudly and Dave tries to provoke a contest by coughing even more pointedly, the two boys glaring at each other around John. Rose can only imagine that the two of them have been absolutely insufferable in the Egbert house over the past few days, if this is how they act in polite company.

BQ: Now then.

BQ: It has been too long, Qasida.

WQ: Since Cairo.

WQ: Our truce continues?
BQ: ...If it must. Anything to befuddle the conditions of this game, you know that.

WQ: I appreciate that. More than you know.

BQ: Now. Where is he?

The Dersite glowers around the room, her eyes digging into Rose's before dismissing her coolly, scanning the room as though seeking someone.

BQ: Ah - there you are -

And with that the carapacian snatches her claws away from the Querent's with a scowl of triumph, sailing past the main group of people and around the table to thrust a claw into the shadows under the filing cabinet and the desk, and it's only then that Rose realizes with a start that the smaller Dersite carapacian, WV, is no longer atop his battery perch. When the Queller drags him out from under the table, the smaller carapacian dangles in her grip, floundering around in his baggy clothing to try to twist around and claw his way free, squeaking wordlessly.

BQ: Wha-

BQ: This is not Spades!

The Queller holds WV away from her, looking thoroughly put out. WV finally succeeds in turning to face her, and the righteous indignation that swells in his expression makes him puff out his chest and try to make a few cursory swipes at the taller alien, despite the fact that her arm's reach is nearly twice the length of his own.

"Hey no," Dave says, shoulders hunching up. "No one messes with the little guy."

"Put him down!" Jade adds, stepping forward. "That's my sidekick you're manhandling, lady!"

BQ: Unbelievable. A pawn. Where on this Pondsquatter-forsaken planet did you manage to unearth this wretch, Witch?

"None of your business!" Jade sticks out her tongue and tugs down the lower lid of her right eye, and then stamps her foot. "And I went through a lot of trouble getting him quantumly stable, so you better not hurt him, or I'll call Bec!"

As though that's a signal, WV crackles with green lightning, whistling shrilly. The Queller's exclamation of shock shoots like a bolt of black lightning through everyone's minds, doing absolutely nothing for Rose's ongoing migraine. The taller carapacian drops the pawn so that he's free to scuttle under the table, still frazzled with green sparks from his outburst.

BQ: What.

BQ: That is not normal.

BQ: What on earth is that abomination. It's been contaminated by Jack, clearly.

"No way! WV is cool!" John says, folding his arms. "Even if he is kind of weird about soda."

The Querent intervenes, laying a cautious claw on the Queller's shoulder. Even so, the dark carapacian whips around too quickly, one hand flying to her side. She hesitates when she sees who has grabbed her. Rose suspects that if it had been anyone but the Querent who stopped her, that person would soon have found themselves missing an eye.
WQ: Let the poor creature be, sister. If he is who I think he is, we owe him our pity, not our spite. But now is not the time for such matters.

BQ: I was promised by the Knight of Time's future self that Spades would be here. This is false advertising. That abhorrent thing has never been an Archagent in its life.

"When I become future me," Dave says, "I am going to strangle me."

"No you won't," Bro says, making Dave bristle. "Not until you take care of that goddamn package you bring along for the ride, or I will have words for you, kid."

"Package?" Dave asks, suspicious.

"Oh, you'll know it when you see it," Oriole sighs, slapping Dave on the back. "Seriously. It'll be really, really obvious."

BQ: Spades is here. I can feel it. I will find him.

She yanks her shoulder free of the Querent's claws, glaring at the room as though blaming the walls for concealing this Spades character from her sight.

WQ: I am sure he will turn up. The Knight would not lie. But you will remain for the beginning, at least?

BQ: I do not see why I should have to. But if I must.

The Queller traipses to the table and sits in a chair across the table from Samuel Egbert, who looks as though he is seriously questioning this choice of seating arrangements, but also too intimidated to stand up and move away. The Queller inspects her claws and sets her feet up on the chair next to her, a deceptively relaxed lounging position that is too regal to be labelled a sulk.

BQ: Carry on. I'm curious to see if this Hub is truly functional. I could not have reconstructed my own, to be sure, even if I could be bothered.

WQ: It is.

The carapacian surveys the room one last time, and Rose can feel the mood shift when the Querent dims the lights slightly and begins to tap away at the keyboard, so that four of the monitors mounted on the wall begin to fuzz and blur with grey static. There's a rustle of Oriole's wing unfolding and folding again, before he makes himself comfortable against the wall away from Bro. Karkat is fussing at John in as close to an undertone as the troll can apparently manage, grumbling something about having John sit down, but John deflects the troll's concern with ceaseless cheer, as though to make up for his early break. Jade tries to quietly coax WV out from under the table and away from the Queller, but she doesn't seem to have much luck before she gives up and starts hovering cross-legged with a huff, the light of the computers flaring off her glasses.

Rose can feel herself swaying on her feet, but she is determined to stand for as long as Rue is, and her mother shows no signs of joining Samuel and the Queller at the table, going to join Bro at the back of the room without sparing a glance for Rose. So Rose breathes out carefully through her nose, and sets herself to endure. A quick check through Rose's other sight reveals that the Queller's aura is what she expected to see: an inverse of the Querent's benevolent aura, full of deep shadows and dark curls. But then the carapacian's gaze snaps back to stare at Rose, a snarl lifting the corner of her mouth in a silent warning. Rose blinks away her ability to see auras and looks away, her hand squeezing Kanaya's perhaps too tightly.
They need answers, perhaps more than they know. She is struck by the certainty, deep in her bones, that the Queller’s presence means nothing good for them, but the feeling of discontent is so vague that Rose can’t even say for certain how the carapacian would negatively affect their future - or, perhaps, has already negatively impacted their past.

Knowing more about this game that they’ve played, this previous universe that sounds too familiar for her comfort, might be the only thing that can clear her sight again, that might explain all those things that Rue Lalonde has hedged around for so long, including the link between the boss of the Midnight Crew and the Horrorterrors that the doctor notably failed to mention in her little speech earlier.

Rose wants to know the meaning of the spirograph. She wants to know what Skaia is, and why John is so terrified of it.

She wants to know why they failed.

WQ: Now then. Shall we begin?

Out in the hallway, Novitiate Halburn is descending the stairs from the floor above, humming to himself. He stopped by the lab rooms that the recent arrivals have been working out of to tease Doctor Marion about being kidnapped by a sword-wielding maniac, and is now on his way to rejoin Doctor Lalonde and her large group of visitors in the basement conference room, in the event the lead scientist requires another errand run. There aren’t many lab techs or assistants present in this facility at the moment, but Halburn is more than happy to carry out some of the minor tasks that would usually be assigned to them, if only to piss Marion off by acting like a ‘sycophantic mind-tampering brownnoser.’

It’s hilarious. He hasn’t had this much fun blackflirting with someone in ages.

Then, just as he turns the last corner of the stairwell, a sharp pain tears through his side, just below his gills. He stumbles and presses a hand to his side, biting down hard on his lip before a cry of pain can escape him. Bright violet blood sluicing between his claws, he turns to face his attacker.

SS: Just stay there and shut up, if you know what’s good for yah.

The carapacian then continues down the stairs on his own, wiping off the chilly blood on the exposed hem of his suit jacket under his sweater.

Halburn considers raising an alarm by shouting, but he’s always had a rather quiet voice, and he doubts he would be able to shout loudly enough to reach the conference room. Instead, he sits down shakily with his back resting against the wall, withdraws a phone from his pocket, and begins texting first his boss to inform her of the breach - and then Marion, demanding that the man bring Exarchopoulos down to stitch up Halburn’s new stab wound.

And he tries very, very hard not to panic. Stab wounds aren’t something that everyone can shake off, after all.

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Dave still doesn’t understand what the hell he’s hearing.

He remembers hearing someone count down a few days ago, and ever since then the noise has been constant, nonstop, 24/7. If he weren’t used to falling asleep slumped over his mixers with a track still
thumping in his ears, he would have been more sleep-deprived than Karkat by now.

[ clank click wuuu- boom! reeeeee- clink clack wah! ]

The beat jolts and stutters around, and occasionally all the sounds sync up but most of the time it's just a goddamn shitshow that makes his inner DJ contemplate setting his mental turntables on fire. And then there's the background noise that just keeps drumming along, oblivious to whatever the hell the other track is playing, more persistent than a burrito going nuclear in one's digestive track:

[ thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump ]

It's maddening. His fingers itch for his turntables back home, because that's what he's always done when inspiration strikes, but it has been fucking days and now this shit is just seven different kinds of stupid. He catches himself using a fork as a metronome by tapping it on the empty plate where his pie used to be after dinner and flicking the sides of empty juice containers to try to emulate all the different sounds, and sometimes when the syncopation pops his ears too much he has to break the whole no-powers rule.

Of course, none of his insanely stealthy maneuvering can keep John's dad from frowning at Dave disapprovingly whenever he thinks he's pulled this shit off. Samuel Egbert must have some kind of thirteenth sense for time-traveling broads. His sixth through twelfth senses are reserved for various John and pranking related antics, the fourteenth sense consists of a preternatural instinct for baked confectionaries, the fifteenth is knowing almost exactly when Karkat's about to lose his shit, and Dave is pretty sure the sixteenth sense is a butt thing.

All attempts to find sympathy with Jade crash up against the sparkly green nebula-patterned brick wall that is her ability to sense where literally everyone is at all times. The idea that Samuel might have some kind of mind voodoo psychic power just makes her clap her hands together and speculate on the statistically probability of the idea, her eyes shining as Dave tries and fails to abscond. And he's not about to go badmouthing John's dad to John, of all people. It's always acceptable to talk shit about Bro, natch, but that's because one'd have to be fucking toked not to think Bro was an insufferable ass. But John actually respects his dad, all nods and 'yessirs' and bubbly obedience, which is just plain freaky and also happens to mean that Dave has to cut off rambling before John gets huffy and pissed.

Which means there's really only one person Dave can talk to.

WV is such a wonderful listener. Seriously, what a bro. John has some stiff competition these days, because what the little guy lacks in comprehensible speech or sign language he sure makes up for in gosh darned cuteness. It's impossible to hate WV, even when he commandeers you in the middle of important apple juice empire business to help him build a tower out of discarded pie tins and string. Dave can sign at the carapacian for hours and not get a lick of sense out of him, but even when he's flailing around like a pissed-off albatross WV is hilarious.

Right now, the two of them are collaborating on said pie tower, which can be generally interpreted to mean Dave is doing all the intense as fuck stacking and WV is fluttering around like a coked up squirrel, squealing and battering him with pointy fists whenever he messes up the grand design, which has been drawn in green marker scribbles on the printer paper scattered everywhere.

When they're done, Dave is taking a goddamn picture. This glorious metropolis of tin cans and crumpled up balls of paper is a labor of half-ironic love, and this shit needs to last forever. An icon of their time. It needs to be around when humanity's been wiped off the face of the planet so that the archeologists of the civilization of robotic bipedal squid-zebra hybrids that replaces them can grossly misinterpret the whole sordid affair.
That would be a dream come true. He and WV would have climbed the entire mountain as the infamous planners of this outrageously rad city.

'We're doing this man. We're making this shit happen,' he signs to the carapacian.

'GREEN GLITTER NAIL FILES! WV returns in enthusiastic ASL. 'PLEASE THE ENVIRONMENT! A CONSTRUCTIVE MANNER, BOY!"

That.

Is so.

Adorable.

This is why talking to WV never gets old.

"Dave, you insufferable nipple, please tell me you're not doing what it looks like you're doing."

[ thud thud thud thud thud thud ]

Alright. Fine. There's one other person he could have talked to. But it's hard to beat WV as a confidant. He is simply the best there is. And Karkat is only interested in communicating at a volume somewhere just below the roar of a jet engine, so that's out of the question.

The troll hovers in the doorway, but Dave makes a point out of not turning to look at him. Mostly because Karkat pretends to hate being the center of attention but being ignored is a one-way shortcut to having a hilariously riled up troll on your hands.

TG: yo since you're standing think you could grab that sock sticking out of the pile in the closet TG: we need it for the structural integrity of the tower of crumbled crusts and broken dreams

Karkat doesn't grab the sock, despite the fact that his and John's kooky lovenest is like right the fuck there taking up the entirety of the closet floor. Sometimes he needs some gentle persuasion, because Karkat is secretly a delicate desert blossom.

Instead, the troll keeps talking without looking at his phone screen for more than a second, disbelief and irritation duking it out across his face. "No. Absolutely not. Do you know why? Because we are leaving in twenty minutes, and yet it looks like you and everyone's favorite thinkpan-challenged alien toddler are using my fucking 'coon as part of your latest idiotic death trap of a construction project," he says between gritted teeth.

Dave shakes his head sadly.

TG: easy now fuzzy little troll peach TG: we do not badmouth the mayor of the democratic republic of the recoopracoon TG: look at his face TG: look how his self-esteem shatters in the face of your cruel thoughtless words karkat

WV seizes a comic book and smacks Dave repeatedly on the knee. 'PONDER THE MANGLED TRAPESE DISPLAY! THIS IS NO TIME FOR LAUNDRY YOUNG STUPID BOY! DORITOS!'

Yeah, Dave has taught him all the most important signs. Obviously.

Karkat at least has the decency to look properly ashamed, folding his arms around his chest in that
defensive ways he's got and looking down. Dave doesn't know if Karkat's always huddled up like that when he's chagrinned, or if it's a new thing, what with the messed up ribs and all. "I didn't fucking vote for him. Do you not remember the goddamn discussion we had about private property, fuckface?!"

TG: vaguely
TG: in much the same way i remember all of our little talks
TG: like the faded jpeg artefacts of shitty comics past
TG: sticking to the ass end of my memory
TG: like pieces of used toilet paper

Karkat stomps into the room, peeved, which is his default state anyway, so no one really cares anymore. As long as he doesn't work himself up into whatever the hell a rage aneurysm is, Dave thinks he's in the clear. Also, Karkat lifts his feet deliberately over the fragile paper clip-and-string replica of the Helix Bridge stretching between the corner of John's desk and the trash can when he could have easily stomped on it, and that means he respects the Mayor's indisputable authority, so they're in the clear. "Have you even packed?! What am I fucking saying, your shit's all over the floor," Karkat retorts, rubbing at one eye that's a considerably darker rust red than it has been since Dave arrived. Even the yellow sclera look irritated and swollen, and Dave wonders if that's why Karkat wears glasses he doesn’t need either, just like John.

Dave must not answer for long enough that Karkat loses his already non-existent patience. "That's it. I'm going to walk all the way back down the fucking stairs to get someone you'll actually listen to."

TG: haha oh my god
TG: no you wont
TG: youd be too worried id start palehumping john or something
TG: jades out of the question because she drives you crazier than i do which is something i aspire to emulate in my daily life btw
TG: and were both fucking intimidated by johns dad
TG: i mean the man has a restraining order set against him by the entire cirque du soleil franchise
TG: clearly neither of us want to mess with that
TG: just get me the sock and well be out of here so fast your nubby ass horns will catch fire

Karkat grimaces, smacking his face, and that's about as deep a moment of brotherly solidarity as the two of them are ever going to manage. "Oh my god," he says, but Dave figures that's just for the record. Then the troll throws up his hands, yelling, "Fine. Fine!" with corresponding winces while tromping over to the closet and kicking the door open to reveal the pile.

It's only the work of a second to flashstep past Karkat, seize the sock, and dart back out of range. When he realizes, Karkat makes an interesting, muffled shriek in the back of his throat, and Dave allows himself a tiny smirk that he flattens out before Karkat spins around to glower at him, livid.

TG: behold
TG: the sock ruse was a........
TG: distaction

"When I'm better, I will *kick your scrawny human ass*," Karkat hisses.

TG: nah
TG: okay maybe you could
TG: thats is entirely possible not ruling it out
TG: but karkles i thought what we had was special
"We have nothing. This so-called 'brohood' - and oh there is no fucking way Karkat just made air-claw quotation marks, Jesus, he's worse than John - "is a fucking sham. I think it's just a douchebag code word for 'new target for childish pokerfaced mockery.'" Another pair of air-quotes. "I demand a refund of this friendship."

TG: not possible
TG: you dont know how to quit me
TG: you just wish you knew
TG: but
TG: you dont

"I know exactly what you're quoting, and how dare you soil one of the greatest works of vacillating romantic drama by filtering it through the putrid cesspit of your wordhorde."

TG: i dare
TG: because i care

That's about when Karkat's gibberish becomes completely incoherent. The troll stands there, gesturing uselessly and pulling at his own hair and probably demanding Dave move his ass. Which to be fair, Dave should probably do, but also there's this little thing he has called time travel powers. So Dave nods along as though he can actually understand Karkat between all the spit while doing absolutely jackshit to get ready; he hands off the sock to WV so the little guy can do his thing and they can get this rodeo on the road.

The carapacian wrinkles up his nose at the article of clothing, and Dave wonders if it somehow doesn't meet building standards when both of the alien's claws fly up to his face and with a plaintive squeak and shock of green lightning WV flies backwards, ploughing into John's bookcase and rattling the kid's dorky book and movie collection so hard that Dave has to race forward and smack the teetering case back up against the wall. By his feet, WV sneezes again, this time without the space mojo, and flings the sock away with disgust all over his dark shelled features.

Wait. Can carapacians even smell?

...

TG: okay time to go

[ tick tick tick tick tick tick tick ]

There's something weird about the way Oriole is holding his wing.

But then Dave is completely distracted by the fact that he's taking a puppet to the face. A puppet which he'd been led to believe would be something to let him talk again, so he'd been suckered into opening it without checking for the obvious signs of smuppetfication.

Because Bro is a douchebag. This is a fundamental, inarguable fact of life. The universe would probably just perform a superb triple kickflip off the handle if Bro were to even for one single solitary instance act like anything other than a perfectly unironic, inscrutable dick.

But then there's a second package in Dave's reluctant hands, and he's distracted again, going over every inch of it for trapwires or Saw-inspired tricks (and hadn't that been a nightmare to live through, when Bro first saw those movies), and then oh my god he can talk and, like flipping a switch, he has the best older brother ever. Seriously. Unironically. Dear sweet Santa Christ, it's been too long since
Dave's heard the sound of his own voice.

Naturally, of course, the moment he thinks he has a spare moment between all the fucked up drama going down, the white version of the Badass Quandary is dimming the lights, and it's time for some goddamn cinema action, and Dave has to shut up again.

But when this is over, mark his words, there's going to be a goddamn rapocalypse. He has been sitting on these terminally ill rhymes for what feels like months, okay? Being stuck signing only to Bro and the Black Queen for weeks has probably stunted his hellacious lexicon. He might need to rap to himself in private for a while until his voice is back up to speed. Yeah. Surely there's a dark corner around here in Creepy Labs Incorporated that he can practice in without anyone overhearing a particularly shitty rhyme sesh.

He sticks close to John, because John is a fucking shitshow waiting to happen and judging by Rose's hand locked on the kid's wrist, she's afraid John'll go down and take Karkat with him like the pile of muscle-bound bricks that he is. But at the same time, Dave darts a few more sideways glances in Oriole's direction behind the cover of his shades because what the fuck is he seeing, there? It's something different in the way the bird-kid holds himself, something more than whatever battle-readiness has been instilled in him by what Dave can only presume were endless days and nights of nonstop indoctrination. When the lights go down the shades go up, orange eyes gleaming in the dark almost as bright as Karkat's and Kanayayayaya’s, which makes Dave's eyebrows shoot for the heavens above because apparently Oriole is all about the situational facial nudity still.

Maybe if Oriole were an actual bird Dave would have an easier time figuring out what the fuck's changed. People are harder to deal with. But if Bro managed to fuck up Oriole's wing again with all that bullshit, Dave is going to be so pissed. That's definitely not his wrap-up job anymore, which means the wing's been rebandaged at least once in his absence. Goddamn ominous, is what it is.

He's getting distracted again. He can obsess like a complete weirdo over his bird-twin's broken wing later, when there aren't so many witnesses. Dave grimaces and deliberately avoids meeting the Quandary's sarcastic smirk as he stares at the wall of flatscreens the - Qasida? Querent? who even knows anymore - other carapacian dame has set up. She's got like fifteen or something on the wall, wired haphazardly to a series of computer servers that look like they could explode and blissfully olly the fuck out of this mortal plane at any moment if they overheated. Dave doesn't even code or anything like that, and he can see it's pretty slapshod work. Like the alien was working off a blueprint in her mind's eye but couldn't find all the pieces she'd need to put it together in real life.

The four screens covered in static go completely black with a faint whine, and Dave is half convinced the carapacian blew a fuse and broke the weirdass thing entirely.

Then, in the upper right screen, the image of a small room appears, with a tiny time stamp in the corner of the screen. It's labelled 04/13 but clearly this all takes place fucking years ago, and Dave wouldn't understand why Rose, John, Karkat, and Samuel all breathe in sharply at the same time if it weren't for the fact that he knows April the thirteenth is John's birthday. They're all still massively overreacting, but people who aren't Striders tend to do that.

But it gets worse.

The room is fucking papered with posters of creepy ass harlequins.

Tiny ass harlequin figurines sit on every available countertop. There's an entire wall taken up by a mural of several Cirque du Soleil assholes working on their carnival gambit. Someone has left assorted prankster props scattered all over the desk.
Dave cringes with the instinctive horror of ones who's learned to associate all forms of clownery with horrors beyond reckoning. Somewhere in the darkened room Oriole gives a faint warble of distress.

"Uh," John says, sounding half-strangled in a way that makes Dave take a half step closer to him in case shit goes down. "Dad? ...Isn't that your study?"

"So it would seem," Samuel Egbert says, his voice carefully measured and level. "Though I'll admit, that masterful mural would be a fine new addition to the décor that I wouldn't have thought to add in, myself."

That's not the only difference though. Now that John's said it, Dave can vaguely see the resemblance of the small room on the screen to the study in the Egberts' disturbing charming suburban household. None of the bookshelves are present, and the whole thing is pretty spartan aside from the joker decor. The curtains have been pulled back and the blinds opened to let in bright spring sunlight, there's a huge safe in the corner, and the desk, covered in playing cards and other trickster memorabilia, has been pushed off towards one wall to make room for an old-fashioned, well-worn piano.

And John is sitting at said piano with his back to whatever freaky camera is recording this, his feet kicking as he merrily but soundlessly appears to bang away at the keys.

BQ: Qasida?

WQ: I am aware.

WQ: Ah. Found it.

The Prospitian carapacian shuffles and rearranges something in the shadows under her setup, the faint rustle and click of wires being adjusted and plugged in, and then the sound kicks in. Dave has to adjust his original assumptions radically as a haunting refrain filters through the speakers; John is apparently holy shit levels of talented. Where has the kid been hiding this? Dave's only heard five seconds of it and his fingers itch to see if he could remix it.

And in the back of his mind he thinks he hears another sound that overlaps a little with what's being played -

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[ & - \quad \text{-} d \cdot \zeta ]}
\end{align*}
\]

"But I can't play the piano!" John exclaims. But he also doesn't sound very sure about that, which says plenty about his state of mind. "Wait. Can I?"

"You've never taken lessons a day of your life," his dad says, leaning forward in his seat with a creak. "We've never had a piano in the house before, either. Rue..."

"It was another iteration of our universe," the doctor says, her voice weirdly soft. Dave still has absolutely no idea how she would have worked out science to explain this weird ass shit, but watching this after years of making it up as she goes along must feel like humping the Holy Grail. "We've always hypothesized there would be considerable alterations. That's the point of a reset, in essence - to scratch what didn't work and operate the same system under new conditions."

"And that has stripped John of musical talent? How unfortunate," Rose says, and wow, her skepticism gambit right now could probably wilt a small field of crops if properly weaponized.

Then John looks up from the piano, startled, and oh for -

"-fuck's sake, Egbert," he remembers he can say aloud, smacking his face as John visibly jumps at
the sound of his actual voice. "I don't believe it. I am physically incapable of believing it. Thirty
seconds in and this show has already jumped the shark. We've done a triple toe loop right over a
fucking megalodon, that's how unbelievable this is -"

"Shit." Bro sounds like he's in physical pain. "Tell me the other guy installed a mute button -"

It's a tiny thirteen year old Egdork wearing an honest-to-god beagle puss. There is no way Dave can
shut up about this, no matter how uncool he sounds.

"Joooohn! You were so adorable!" Jade squeals, completely missing the point. She's still floating in
midair, prodding at the screen until the Querent puts out a hand to gently turn the jabbing finger
aside. "Look at your teeth! Talk about some beaver chompers, mister!"

"I grew into them!" John protests, which is a complete lie. His face is as easy to read as ever, a study
in vague horror and fascination as he watches the scrawny John on the screen start dicking around
with a pack of cards on the floor in some kind of really sad game of Solitaire.

"Not wearing contacts, either," Karkat mutters, and Dave has to take a second look himself to
confirm when ex-John scurries out of the oddly rearranged study to cross a living room full of even
more insane clown paraphernalia. But yeah, when John sneaks outside and takes the beagle puss off
to stare up at the sky, a wistful look on his chubby baby face, his eyes are a brilliant blue, with none
of that deeply ingrained paranoia in them that the John Dave knows would have had if he took even
one step outside without his tinted contacts in to conceal his identity.

[ Wind skims the voids keeping neighbors apart, as if grazing the hollow of a cut reed, or say, a
plundered mailbox. A familiar note is produced. It's the one Desolation plays to keep its instrument in
tune - ]

Then John puts the beagle puss of shame back on, and the low drone at the back of Dave's head
subsides.

This is so weird. Like looking at a John who never -

Dave sucks air in through his teeth, but Rose says it first. "You're not afraid of being seen," she says,
slowly, marveling at the concept. "You - don't seem to have a heroic alias to hide behind."

John's laugh is pretty shaky. "Uh, yeah, I uh - I don't think I was that scrawny at thirteen, either! I'd
have already started hero work by then, so...I wasn't a hero? Sooo weird."

Finally, while John's running around peering into the window of his dad's car and his own house,
sneaking around with exaggerated pluck like he's playing some kind of lame spy game in his own
head, and eventually engaging with his dad in some strange, completely pastry-based dotestrife with
a Samuel Egbert who's as dapper as ever, two other screens slide into focus. John is aggrieving his
dad with a tiny goddamn hammer and getting auto-pastried all over the damn kitchen, so Dave
fervently hopes this can't get any weirder.

On one screen a tiny girl with a black headband and heavy goth makeup is thoroughly engrossed
with knitting while sitting at her computer desk. Her room is dark, all blacks and dark purples and
pale lilacs, the only light coming from the bedside table lamp and the electric glow of her purple
laptop. Outside the curtains a thunderstorm rages, lightning flickering across the night sky and low
rumbles of thunder purring through the speakers, but all Dave can really wonder about is the
repeating mantra of -

[ You wonder if this rain will ever let up. It's driven since the month began, perhaps long enough to
forget its purpose. It no longer even knows to assuage fire. Somewhere a zealous god threads these strings between the clouds and the earth, preparing for a symphony it fears impossible to play. And so it threads on, and on, delaying the raise of the conductor's baton.]

Seriously, where is that extra sound coming from? He can tell it's not coming from the speakers, but he's too fucking paranoid to nudge John and start asking the group if they're hearing these extended versions of the auditory hallucinations, yes he's been having them all day, why do you ask -

Yeah. Something tells him he should just keep his mouth shut. His coolkid gambit has never been more at risk than it is at this moment, while everyone else is engrossed in watching a bunch of barely-teenagers run around being dorks on screen.

Well, actually, Rose is just sitting there, presumably doing normal Rose things. Unlike John and his frankly embarrassing disguise antics, Rose seems content to sit at her computer, a slim headset with a mouthpiece attached to her headband, and knit away at whatever the heck she's working on.

There's also the fact that her walls are absolutely fucking plastered with posters of cartoony tentacle monsters, ones with wide eyes and nubby mouths and stubby tentacles, like a cutesy artist's rendition of what tentacle art would be suitable for the mind of a young girl. When she swivels a little in her chair, Dave can spy a tiny Squiddle on her shirt.

"Kanaya -" Rose manages, half-strangled. The troll is a dark blur in the poor lighting as she strides across Dave's field of vision, seizing a chair from beside Samuel Egbert without further prompting for Rose, and when Kanaya wheels the chair over, her eyes almost neon green and yellow in the darkness, Rose sinks into it with hands groping for the armrests, as though the creeping horror of the room sucked away her ability to stand upright.

John follows like a Rose-magnet, and that means Karkat and Dave end up being drawn in his wake, all of them clustering with Rose's chair as their new centerpoint. "That is - that would be the opposite of a meditative space," Rose murmurs, shaking her head at the screen. "So many visual signifiers - it would draw the Horrors in like beacons in the dead of night. What could I possibly have been thinking -"

"Huh. The hole in the wall is gone," Oriole says, and Dave almost asks 'what hole?' before finally looking at the third screen and looking at pretty much an exact replica of his own room. With, amazingly enough, an intact window where the hole in his wall would usually be. There are a few unfamiliar posters on the walls and a few of his amateur attempts at taxidermy, which he definitely remembers having to throw away when they started to rot a few years ago, are still placed strategically around the room for maximum effect. Even the Dave doing absolutely jackshit while fiddling around with MS Paint on his old computer looks exactly like Dave remembers looking at thirteen - coltish and pale, with shades that swallow up half his face.

And if he listens in just the right way -

[ So don't change the dizzle, turn it up a little, I got a living room full of fine dime brizzles. Waiting on the Pizzle, the Dizzle and the Shizzle, G's to the bizzack, now ladies here we gizzo - when the pimp's in the crib ma, drop it like it's hot, drop it like it's hot, drop it like it's hot... ]

Oh god. It's worse than he thought.

"It's a shitty rap."

He's officially never mentioning any of this to anyone, ever. This is humiliating as fuck, yo. He is putting the hallucinated narration shit on lockdown. Conceal. Don't feel. Don't let them know - oh
for the love of Moby Dick he's not going there.

John has yoinked his dad's PDA and absconded from the kitchen in a burst of smoke pellets. There's a game CD in a flimsy paper packet clutched in his hand at first as he races for the stairs, ignoring the faint echoes of Samuel's voice that follow him up the stairs from the kitchen. It seems like whatever camera the Hub is using only follows the kid in the house, and not their guardian. But at some point the CD vanishes, and Dave can't tell where on John's person he's keeping it, unless he's somehow stuffed the whole thing plus the red package into the pockets of his cargo shorts. Once he's up in his room he needlessly admires one of the shitty movie posters that have replaced the nerdy hero posters and jogs to the computer, sliding on a headset of his own as he does.

When Jade's voice starts up, chipper and even higher-pitched than usual, everyone in the room who's not a carapacian or Bro jumps. The fourth screen, the one Dave's eyes automatically flash to, assuming that's where Jade's shown up at last to join the past universe party, is still stubbornly blank. But the John on the screen is nodding along as the voice speaks - like he's listening to a recorded message.

GG: hi happy birthday john!!!!! <3
GG: helloooooo??
GG: ok i will talk to you later!!! :D

A click later, and then:

TG: hey GG is looking for you why are you even so popular all of a sudden
TG: is today some sort of special occasion or something
TG: did you do something to curry favor with ladies
TG: did you break your leg on a puppy or some shit
TG: dude what are you doing

John answers out loud, rolling his eyes so hard they can see it from a fucking universe away. "I discovered a comet that is going to destroy the earth, and it was named after me," he says. "Now I am famous, and everyone wants to talk to me a lot."

"Incredible," Dave mutters in John's ear. "You were even more of a nerd back then."

John elbows him in the ribs. Then, as the Dave on the third screen starts mumbling into a headset of his own, and the words come through clear over the speakers in the conference room, the current Dave starts to put two and two together. It's some kind of audio version of Pesterchum, though judging by the field of red and blue text on John's computer screen, the text option is still working. And hang on there's something incredibly weird about this whole thing because John is just clicking away at the computer one second, and the next he's summoning the game CD from out of thin air, jamming the impossible reappearing disc into the poor abused slot of his shitty old computer and kicking his feet some more as he waits for the software to install.

..."You had a sylladex!" Jade exclaims. This is clearly the most exciting news she's heard all day, and John just stares dumbly at his hands while his sister floats over to mash up his hair in an enthusiastic noogie.

Like those are the goddamn magic words, Jade's screen turns on, zooming in on a massive, towering white mansion in the midst of a steaming tropical island. The viewpoint settles at last on a dark-skinned Polynesian girl as scrawny as John, snoring a little as she naps in the middle of an indoor greenhouse. Her fingers sport quite a few colorful elastic bands as rings, and there's a tiny note
folded up under her hand that Dave can't read.

And everything slowly starts to turn into a magnificent four-part shitshow. When alternate universe Jade finally wakes up and begins hopping on teleporter pads to travel through rooms full of fantastically weird portraits and suits of armor, all Dave can hear is:

[ You eat a weird bug and don't even care! ]

Fucking incredible.

- 

Dave doesn't know if anyone else in the room is keeping up with all this. He knows he's missing things now that there are four screens to focus on, images flickering by that even if he pauses time he can't split his focus efficiently enough to get everything.

He sees that they all have Jade's weird sylladex ability. They're all captchalogue things left and right, and John in particular is a goddamn menace. How he hasn't accidentally impaled someone in all thirteen years of his stupidly dangerous life is a miracle that can only be attributed to a merciful and benevolent cosmic deity that Dave is sure Karkat would have some furious words to share with via shouting match. Matthew McConaughey - who is, weirdly enough, not a troll in this past universe - takes a razor blade to the face, and both the past and real John shriek in dismay.

But then the four of them start talking over their Pesterchum audio chats about a game, and suddenly Rose has hooked up as John's 'server player,' and then the everything goes fucking bass-ackwards as the Egbert house starts to expand and deform in ways that defy every law of physics known to man, filled with weird ass scientific equipment that takes up all of the balcony and significant chunks of John's room and the living room. It's all apparently under Rose's control, from halfway across the continent.

"Oh my god. What the fuck?" Karkat demands at one point. "Okay, now I know this is all just some crackpan's idea of hilarious CGI. Haha, very funny."

WQ: Alas, it is not a false image. Skaia invests great power in its Proxseeds.

WQ: Creation, destruction, metamorphosis...all of these lie within the scope of the players' power.

"This is incredible," Kanaya agrees, her pale claws still squeezing Rose's shoulder whenever the alternate Rose returns to her Horrorterror shrine of a room. "It truly is warping the physical environment of the domicile."

That's when the meteors start to show up. Jade hears an impact outside her room and investigates, but then John spies one hurtling toward his house, and that's about when it really starts to sink in that all this talk about a meteor apocalypse hasn't been bullshit.

Jesus.

Shit starts to get real when a terse exclamation from Rue Lalonde makes them all focus on Rose's screen, because in rapid succession everything goes to hell: the power at the Lalonde house cuts out, leaving John stranded with a massive fucking meteor bearing down on his location; the meteors raining down around Rose's house, meanwhile, have set all of her shit on fucking fire, and though she manages to regain an internet connection in time to help John complete some weird task and white out his screen just before the meteor hits, she's soon trapped outside in the blazing heat and the incessant rain, slamming her fists on a portable power generator as her makeup streams down her face and the fire ravenously consuming the forest around her blisters her pale skin.
Then a mysterious passage opens up in the creepy pet mausoleum, and Rose absconds with trees crashing down all around, her hair stuck to her face and her caked on black lipstick one horrific smear across her mouth as she trudges through the dimly lit corridors toward SkaiaNet Labs. John and Jade are still running around doing weird shit; Jade is a robot half the time, and John has started coming across inky black enemies that leaves oily streaks all around his recently relocated house, still fighting with a pathetic hammerkind and sweating up a storm. Dave barely has time to spare to watch himself getting his ass kicked by Bro in a desperate effort to obtain a new copy of the Sburb game CDs to try and rescue Rose - the circumstances concerning how he lost his own copy have been all too conveniently wiped from his memory due to excessive amounts of uncool. That's his story and he's sticking to it.

Rose comes across what the Quandary derisively refers to as a session terminal, and Dave feels the cold really sink into the pit of his stomach when Rose, voice shaky and hands trembling a little as she works the controls, reports to John that the meteors are everywhere.

"John, you don't understand," she's saying, sinking down and scrubbing a hand through her hair, a wild look in her eyes as the thirteen year old stares up at the damning live map of the world's destruction. "This is - this is an extinction class event. I - even if the meteors stopped now, after so many large-scale impacts, there'll be ash and debris in the sky for years. Centuries, even. I've read enough post-apocalyptica to see where this is going. Nothing will be able to grow."

EB: i'm sure it can't be that bad...
EB: but uh, i guess it is?
EB: gee, that really sucks, rose. we need to get all of you out of there soon!
EB: what the heck is dave doing is the real question here!

On his screen, alternate John doesn't look all too concerned about the fact that the human race has been condemned to an early grave, even as he reassures Rose. There's a flicker of worry on his face for all of a moment, and then -

[ whoooooooosh! ]

- it's blown away, leaving him as bald-faced and naively optimistic as ever. This is a John with none of the real John's hang ups about a hero's duty to protect civilian life, and he blows all the existential terror that's got Rose on her knees in the green-lit lab out of his mind like a blast of cold air.

Of course, then John proceeds to flip the fuck out over Gushers being a Betty Crocker product, something that only draws a shudder of disgust from the John in this room.

"This is really weird. So fucking weird," Dave says, because someone has to say it. They're watching weenie versions of themselves skip along and casually bring about a meteor apocalypse by playing a goddamn reality-altering video game and how has no one said this yet.

Now the younger Rose is biting back tears and stepping onto a transportalizer like those that riddle Jade's jungle tower, throwing one last fleeting look at the computer screen with despair in her face. Now Dave is - Jesus fuck, younger Dave is still getting his ass handed to him by Bro, and that's just sad. Bro is literally just handing Dave his ass, buttered up and served on an ice cold platter of unquestionable superiority. Now John is running through his house one more time, his thirteen year old baby face twisted with terror as he calls his dad's name in every room until he finds a black smear where the Dadbert made his last stand. Now Jade is falling asleep and has a secondary robot body, but it's getting harder for Dave to keep up with what's going on at what time. Amazingly enough, watching four different miniature assholes race around the screens and understanding everything that happens isn't a skill he has. From what he can tell Rose just lived through an explosion that took out the laboratory in the distance and is scrambling to escape a room full of combustible liquids in case
the next blaze of the forest fire reaches the house.

And Dave -

Is STILL GETTING HIS ASS KICKED.

"I swear you guys, I am not actually that shitty in a strife. Oh my god," Dave says in disbelief, watching Lil Cal batter another version of himself across the face for like the tenth time. Unbelievable. "Bro, what the fuck, if Rose dies in a fire this is literally your fault."

Bro just grunts. Because Bro is a complete and utter dick.

Finally Bro throws Dave down and absconds, chill in his victory ollie, tossing a pair of Sburb discs with "BRO" scrawled across the front like a half-assed pity prize for getting to thoroughly annihilate Dave's ass.

Jesus. That was like witnessing the fucking Battle of Antietam or some other monumental military failure. No, that was literally Hiroshima in strife form. Bro fucking bombed him. Dave is pretty sure this particular past-Dave tanked their coolkid gambit for next fucking century. They'll never recover from this. Dave has probably been working through this coolness deficit his entire life in this universe and never known it.

TG: bro just kicked my ass
TG: thats really all there is to say on the matter

Someone, somewhere in the conference room starts sniggering.

...Their time will come.

Jade starts dicking around with a harpoon zipline. Dave can't figure out what the fuck is going on with her timeline except it involves sleeping and robots and cuckoolander know-it-all mystique, because she's been awake in the game all along. Rose ends up in the game's Medium in record time because once past-Dave's not making an ass of himself he's doing all this prototyping shit so fast it's going out of style in his wake. Her land's all neon pastels that hurt to look at, rainbow swirls of water and chalky beaches, and she starts stabbing the shit out of the game enemies with a pair of knitting needles and way more proficiency than John has managed to muster so far.

Dave refuses to watch any of his own entry to the Game after a certain point. As far as he's concerned, he just magically popped out of the way of that inbound meteor through sheer force of cool. The meteor took one look at the Strider abode and thought, 'OH SHIT,' and then turned right the fuck back around while Dave lounged around waiting for the stupid crow-sprite thing to stop messing with him, and everything was fucking awesome.

Yeah.

"Dude, you fucking sucked at this game," Oriole mutters.

Then they watch a future Dave show up, toss a bunch of captchalogue cards on the roof of the Strider apartment, and prototype himself to create -

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me."

Karkat lets out a howl of derisive laughter, directed at both of them. "We fucking sucked at this game," is the only comeback Dave can think of, grimacing and vowing not to look at his own screen at all because really? Really?! They were literally the same person, and how the fuck did that
translate to this universe? His head aches just thinking about it.

It takes Dave and the newly christened Davesprite all of five minutes to talk John out of some insanely stupid idea he's got to rocket off with a jetpack toward the final boss of his planet, five tense minutes that end with John veering off course at the actual last moment to spiral off like a fucking loon through the grey mists and black-blue bruise of a sky over his game planet. And once Jade's ready, John brings her through into the Medium with remarkable competency.

But not before Becquerel fucking annihilates the last giantass meteor in a burst of green radiation and space lightning, and the last glimpse any of them have of the planet Earth is an irradiated wasteland of sand and craggy, blasted impact craters.

Jade's sprite ends up being prototyped with a suit of armor - maybe by accident, maybe by alternate John's nerdy design. When she finishes falling through the air and shoots her totem piñata, white light scoops her tower out of reality, and into the Medium.

[ I slept and saw God's forge in frost. Its hearth was quelled, and as it cooled so swooned the verdancy it kept above. In slumber it grew a thick winter skin, white as bedsheets. In their folds the waker dreamt, her breath as steam, her touch as hot as iron, forgotten in the fire. Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew! ]

[Welcome, Player 4, to the Hands of Frost and Frogs]

- Weird shit happens. John ends up creating multiple ectochildren out of paradox slime that go back to become themselves and their guardians before crashing back on his planet again. Dave is running so many time loops that the screen itself doesn't seem to know which is the current alternate Dave half the time, as he's doing something entirely pointless involving the stock exchange and the purchase of every fraymotif known to nakodile kind, while Davesprite eventually takes off for parts unknown.

Rose tears apart the pastel castles of her land with a vengeance, her needles raised as she progressively uses them less like stabbing strife specibi and more like wands channeling a darker power. Jade collects frogs on some mad quest to synthesize the genesis frog, a mission that makes the Quandary spit sourly and make rude hand gestures in multiple languages at that fourth screen. It's starting to sink in that according to every rule of this stupid game, the Black Queen is meant to be a major antagonist, and Dave's skin crawls when he considers how much time he's spent alone with her in real life.

Occasionally the screens will hum and flicker, and switch to what the Querent calls their dreaming souls. Dave doesn't know why he's surprised that he and Rose are stuck on the enemy moon, the one literally called Derse with dark carapacians running around trying to sabotage their efforts to win the game. Rose drops by Dave's tower for a while, and they have hella rad dance party, natch, before Rose leaves to do more research.

But it's not until Rose's screen goes dark that everything really starts to fall apart.

Because, incredibly enough, the world ending? Is just a fucking taste-test for the shitshow to come.

It's also around then that Karkat starts to legitimately freak the fuck out, and when Karkat freaks out John freaks out because of their fucking codependency and really, it's all just a mess.

The only real warning they get is Rose biting through her lip as her alternate accepts a very familiar cue ball from one of the consorts of her land. Slowly, moment by painful moment, the shadows in the cave she's taken up residence in grow deeper and darker, with unnatural curls, and when Rose
raises the cue ball to ask it something, the screen fizzes and dies in a bloom of darkness. And for a long time, that's the last they can see of Rose.

John's screen goes grimdark next.

He's wandering around on his planet, oblivious as always, with a rather familiar carapacian and a salamander he's taken to calling my daughter, Casey! at his side. With Rose radio silent, John and Jade are chatting it up, and John is trying to find the package she sent him, stolen from the Egbert car at some point after the entire vehicle plunged over the side of a cliff. Luminous, aquamarine clusters of bobbing anemones gleam across the rocky chaparral, but the landscape grows more and more scraped over as John jumps over the outcroppings, his new green sweater streaked with the black oil blood of the ogres and imps that serve as the most common game antagonists.

Then WV rounds the side of a shorn-off blue plateau, and shrieks, scurrying back to crouch behind the rock with his makeshift weapon in hand until John hurries to catch up with him. Casey the salamander tugs on John's jeans in an attempt to pull him away from the crater in the distance, but there's a bright green package sitting like obvious schmuck bait on the ground between John and the shattered remnants of the cloudy, steel grey palace in the distance.

And John, of course, is a total schmuck. He lopes over to the package, grinning - and stops, one hand reaching down to snag it but never quite making contact. The kid blinks, shaking his head and rubbing his temples, and then, slowly turns toward the giant meteor ensconced in the wreckage of the palace. A few of the towers are still standing, bent at odd angles, but the majority of the structure looks like a pipe organ badly mangled by the force of the collision. Both of John's recently acquired sidekicks try to haul him back when the kid starts marching in that direction, shrieking warnings about 'denizens' and final gates, but Casey breaks away when John gets too close to the half-collapsed moat and flees out of the range of the camera.

So it's WV who accompanies John across a fallen pipe to whack open the first door they come across. There are scribbles in Alternian all over the walls of the corridor John finds himself in, warnings written in what looks like blood, but the kid barely spares them a second's glance before staggering by.

"Oh, no," Rose is whispering, and Karkat of all people is backing her up, chanting under his breath like a troll possessed. "Oh no, oh, John, no ."

By the time John looks up at the camera again, he's in some central room, one that's absolutely coated in troll blood covering at least half the hemospectrum. John's nose is bleeding and his eyes are glassy and distant; no matter how much WV batters at him with his fists, it doesn't even seem to register.

The shadows in the room are so, so dark. When they start creeping forward, dark purple and bruise black tentacles beyond counting, John sags to his knees in a daze.

The screen goes black.

"What the taintchafing fuck?!" Karkat spits, giving a little half-lunge toward the screen, as though he could bring the picture back by shaking it. "What the fuck is going on? What is this shit?!"

"It's Horrorterrors," Rose says, which at least shuts Karkat right up. But Rose's voice has gone flat and dead, like she'll never be snarky again. "They are many-angled beings of non-Euclidean geometries, hiveminds beyond mortal comprehension. Whatever it is recording all of this, I doubt the camera would be able to handle it without the internal mechanism melting into slag."
BQ: Now do you begin to see just how badly your session went awry?

BQ: The Singers of the Ring are only ever meant to be tangentially related to the Game. They exist in the void between sessions, and are supposed to be content to remain that way.

"So what changed?" John asks, rubbing at his arms as though shivering. His screen and Rose's are still dark, and now, on Dave's screen, the shadows seem to be deepening as the alternate Dave tilts his head to the side and exits the dungeon he's exploring without a word, flashing across the lava-filled landscape toward a dark cavern that seems to lead down into the bowels of the planet.

BQ: Someone breached the sanctity of the Medium. Someone invited them in.

BQ: But even before that, the kind of dedication to this singular task - that of seizing and consuming the minds of all the players, not simply those on Derse who would be more vulnerable - is anathema to a Horrorterror of any breed. They sow chaos for its own sake.

The Querent cuts in.

WQ: But this single-mindedness implied to us that someone had given them direction. Someone had twisted at least one hivemind, if not more than one, to their purpose. This is their design.

WQ: That was when we knew the Game had been irrevocably compromised, at the most fundamental level of its programming. That is what triggered the emergency glitch contingency subroutines.

BQ: But still, even with those in place, the situation deteriorated at an alarming rate.

Abruptly, just as Dave's screen starts to fade to black, with Dave in the middle of a hollowed out volcanic magma chamber, staring up at an immense, molten iron smithy, John's screen turns back on. Alternate Dave is dropping his bladekind at his feet like a complete moron and stepping toward the tangle of knotted grimdark steadily consuming the body of a giant creature on the floor, but alternate John is screaming in the middle of a mass of black vines, and Dave doesn't know which fucking screen to stare at because they're both utterly horrific.

Then John tears WV out of the grip of a tentacle knotted around the carapacian's torso, his face a bloody mask of tears and his eyes gleaming in the dark as he presses a hand to his temple. A mouth full of teeth opens up in the darkness overhead -

And then the entire screen zooms out wildly, out of control, as the interior of the meteor explodes in the burst of a spontaneous hurricane. John and WV are two tiny figures in the whirling storm, tossed out of the meteor and landing in a graceless heap somewhere well outside the crater of the old denizen palace.

Dave should not be so overly invested in what has thus far amounted to an hours-long film of their shitty past lives. But he's so relieved when the last of the grimdark clears out of the corners of John's screen that he exhales sharply, and his hand seems to have migrated at some point to dig fingernails into John's shoulder, as though to make sure he's still there. He whips the hand back into his pocket before anyone can see it, though he's sure Bro's noticed already.

Using the windy thing to that degree, after not having seemed to have any of his current powers at all throughout the entire game, seems to have knocked the alternate John for a loop, because he needs WV's help to limp further away from the broken pipe organ when an enormous serpent rises up out of the earth. The snake glitters bright green with a slender white head, its scaly flanks edged with the tatters of fluttering wings. Grimdark tentacles have wrapped around the back of its human skull and
sunk deep into its brain, but even as Dave thinks this is the new way the Horrorterror is going to attack John, the serpent snarls and smashes its entire head against the ground, scraping the grimdark tangle off against a trapezoidal crystal, and bellowing with triumph when it's free at last.

Then John and WV are far enough from the palace that the screen has to follow them as they flee the rampaging denizen, who just woke the fuck up ahead of schedule with a massive grimdark hangover.

WQ: That is, as near as we can tell, the mechanism by which the tangle you know as Leviathan was able to so thoroughly compromise your minds.

WQ: Someone helped seed each of the denizens with the grimdark, and from there it festered in their minds until it began to affect you all, too, drawing you toward the final dungeons before the time was right.

"Remind me again why extraterrestrial calamari porking the local giant monsters would affect all of us?" Dave says, as his own screen cuts out entirely. Alternate John has wiped off his face and is rocketing around, shouting for Dave and Rose and Jade through their Pesterchum. Only Jade answers, and on her screen, she's left her sleeping wolf in the care of the robot body to handle some of the frog breeding duties while she trudges off toward a statue of a figure with enormous spines and twined serpentine bodies, looming in the distance across the frozen tundra. A blizzard starts to kick up, even as the shadows on the iridescent snow start to deepen and writhe, drawing Jade on. This is so messed up.

WQ: Because the mind of a player of the game and the mind of their denizen are inextricably linked. They are as much a representation of your struggles and individual growth as they are one of the endgame bosses.

WQ: When one is compromised, so is the other.

WQ: And they were all very much compromised.

A chair creaks, and now the Quandary is on her feet, pacing off on her side of the table with the light of the screens glinting off her carapace. She snarls with disgust, a wordless sneer of discontent and old rage.

BQ: The damage was done. The session was sabotaged beyond repair by the very fact that the package the Heir failed to retrieve contained the instrument of our downfall.

On the screen, Jade steps through fluted columns into the antechamber of a Greek temple, the statue of the quilled denizen resting on the roof overhead as Jade stares with glassed-over eyes at the entrance to the final dungeon beneath the tundra. But she's still slowly, stutteringly replying to John's frantic Pesterspam, with drawn out pauses between her replies as though the thoughts are difficult to string together into coherent words; it's still more than either the alternate Rose or Dave have managed thus far.

EB: jade, call bec right now!
GG: hang on just a second john!!!
GG: i need to...check something out...
EB: nonono! uh, oh man...
EB: call bec! wouldn't he want to see this too?!
EB: come on jade!
GG: yeah, maybe...
It takes Jade three faltering tries to whistle for Becquerel, and even when she does the wolf takes far too long to respond, still worn out from whatever nuclear explosion it unleashed on Earth. The moment it finds her, though, the mutt flares a warning of green plasma and teleports her out of the Horroterror's grip before the shadows can do more than screech in protest. The Jade on the screen blinks, her mouth an 'o' of puzzlement, before shaking her head vigorously.

EB: yessss! he got you out!
GG: john, what the heck is going on, mister?!
GG: my head feels really weird, and when did i get to that dungeon? :/ i had frog things to do!
EB: i don't get it really, but dave and rose aren't answering and you were acting really weird on my server app!
EB: davesprite showed me where the spirograph gate to rose's land was, but it's all gross and grindark and stuff. i don't think we can find her in all this without dave's server app, the planet's just too big!

John's not kidding, because he's rocketed through a questionable looking spirograph and hovers over the chalky pastel landscape of Rose's land with WV in a rocket car beside him. Only the thing is, all the pastel and chalky is coated with tar, the seas churning and brimming with black that eats away at the foundations of pale pink castles.

They have to pause the whole thing for the real Rose to throw up in the bathroom down the hall. Kanaya drives them back into the conference room when they try to follow her, and when she returns Rose is pale and shakier than before, but refuses to respond to any questions as she folds herself up in her chair. "Let's just continue, shall we?" she says, with a dark amusement in her hoarse voice.

Rose's screen remains stubbornly blank, and John's glitches occasionally as he tears through the Lalonde house, but then he's found Jaspersprite, the painfully pink cat princess abomination who can point him on the way to the gate to Dave's land but has no idea where Rose has gone.

JS: She said i was free to go and do what i want!
JS: And also that she didnt think she wanted to finish her land quest.
JS: Which is a shame because if shed learned to play the rain she might have saved all the fish which would have been tasty!
JS: But im just her cat and also a princess ghost so who knows! :3
JS: Maybe she had a more important quest she wanted to do. It's up to her I guess!
JS: Purr purr purr.

The neon yellow clouds have started to turn a dull grey by the time John makes it to the portal to Dave's land. Now Jade is frantically snatching up frogs; now WV's nearly plummeting into a cascade of lava that John barely yanks him away from in time. Jade gabbles out directions for John to follow because she's still Dave's server player, can still see that Dave's passed the fuck out on her screen and direct John to the coordinates listed on her expanded map application.

And still there's no sign of Rose.

"This is bullshit," Dave mutters when John finally catches up to where Bro is fending off the grimdark-possessed body of an enormous man in a smithing apron, built of molten lava and crusted over with an ever-shifting skin of volcanic glass. Bro tosses the alternate Dave's unconscious body at John and sends them both crashing into WV's rocket car before taking on the denizen alone.
"Seriously, this again?" He got enough of the unconscious damsel gig in New York, thanks.

WQ: Derse lies closer to the Furthest Ring than does Prospit. All Derse dreamers are more vulnerable to such incursions. There was nothing you could have done at that point.
The past John hauls Dave back to the isolated remnants of the Strider apartment, and at one point dumps three buckets of cold water from his sylladex onto Dave's head in an attempt to rouse him from the Horrorterror daze. He and Jade argue for a while about the safety of John picking up Dave's server connection to Rose, even as John takes Dave's shades off and starts eyeing them with apprehension.

GG: seriously this seems like a bad idea!
EB: but we need to see where rose is, and dave still won't wake up!
EB: aaaaargh!
GG: im just saying, youre still all dinged up from that flying stuff, and messing around with other peoples server stuff can cause screwy stuff to happen...maybe i should try to dream and see what skaia has to say!
EB: too late, i'm gonna do it!
GG: jooooohn! do not do the thing!

John does the thing.

But of course, because the past was literally a piece of shit, Dave's screen doesn't fizzle back on until after John has sped off through the gate back to Rose's land in a pair of rad ass shades and left Dave himself at WV's questionably tender mercies. The camera's not focused on the alternate Dave's unconscious, prank-riddled body, either; it's a Dave in purple pajamas, drifting in the black of space with all of Derse behind him, his nose pouring blood as he floats right into the path of outstretched tentacles.

It's only in this context that Dave starts to really understand the sheer scope of what a Horrorterror is because the thing is huge. Derse is a fucking planet with a fucking moon, and the morass of tentacles, thorns, and teeth that has lodged itself right up among the meteors of the Furthest Ring could swallow the entire thing five times over. Worse, sometimes the camera will shudder and wink out before resetting, and then the tangle will look even bigger, as though parts of its body mass are only visible at certain angles.

Fucking Horrorterrors, man.

An explosion rocks Derse, and the shockwaves hit dream Dave when he's barely a foot from the nearest mouth full of teeth and white fire. Thankfully, they hit the Horrorterror, too, and when the Dave on the screen whips around to stare at the winged monster rising up from the dark planet, the tangle hisses and slides away into the void with a quiet pop, as though it had never ventured into the session at all.

Then, with a cracking roar, the winged black thing pelts away through the space between Derse and the far off ring of planets closer to Skaia, blowing up even the purple Dersite battleships if they happen to get in its way.

Dream Dave scratches his head, and the screen flips back to the Dave on the lava planet, sitting up and banging his head on the underside of the table John had, in a fit of spastic trickster dumbassery, handcuffed Dave to. Without his shades, thirteen year old Dave is disgustingly easy to read, his eyes squinted up against the light as he takes a phone from his pocket and starts typing.

TG: uh guys
TG: i think troubles coming
EB: DAVE!
GG: DAVE OH MY GOD!
TG: oh jesus someone taught you two to how to caps lock
And there is still no Rose. Dave is starting to wonder if there's even a Rose left to worry about at this point.

"What was that?" Jade asks in the present, shaking her head. At some point in all this she sat down on the conference table with a faint thump, and even her hair has stopped floating so that she can chew on a strand of it, combing her fingers through the tangles with a nervous compulsion. "That thingy that flew away just then? Was it a good thing?"

BQ: No, you stupid girl.

BQ: He was Jack Noir in that life, and my traitor of an Archagent, destined as always to be both a help and hindrance to players. And the moment one of his usual cohort delivered the stolen package to his quarters, the entire session went terminal.

Jade almost falls sideways off the table, catching herself with a glint of green and a dismayed cry. "You mean the present from me? Why did it mess things up so bad when John didn't even get it?" Jade asks. "What was I trying to send him? Grandpa never mentioned anything like this."

BQ: A stuffed animal bearing multiple dangerous, high-level specibi. Most relevantly, a copy of the Heir's primary god tier specibus, and the Foul Croaker himself only knows how you got ahold of the captchalogue code for that so early in the game. It was one thing for the Knight of Time to bring back weaponry for himself, but quite another for you to put such a powerful hammerkind into the hands of the one thuggish brute dumb enough to wield it against me.

"Wha -"

The Quandary raises a hand in the dark, the one with the missing claws that Dave has never asked about for fear of being gutted by an angry alien dame.

BQ: From what I was able to piece together after the fact, the package was stolen in the commotion caused by Typheus's rampage. The Droll, the Dignitary, the Brute - it hardly matters who did it. Either way, the next time I confronted Noir about violating uniform regulations, with the help of that vile rabbitkind he tore the ring from my hand. He claimed the Queenship.

BQ: Unfortunately, different pieces are affected in different ways by inheriting the ring. Pawns are useful as blank slates - but an Archagent... All of their most basic instincts are amplified, first and foremost those concerned with taking out agents of Prospit. Subversive subroutines that would otherwise have caused him to sympathize with and ally with you in common cause were shut down automatically so that he could more naturally fulfill the Queenship.

BQ: And then, naturally, he murdered all of you.

"And yeah, fuck, I can't watch this," Karkat announces. "Fuck. Fucking fuck. Pause the fucking thing, I - fuck!"

Dave barely manages to sidestep out of the way before Karkat shoves his way toward the trash can. Apparently, unlike Rose, the troll doesn't have it in him to haul ass for the restroom before upchucking. John manages to kneel next to Karkat and remove the dangling ties of the troll's hoodie from the line of fire before shit gets nasty.

"Perhaps we could all use a break," Samuel Egbert suggests, which is honestly the best idea Dave has heard all day. Watching Horrorterrors puppet them all around and swallow up all of Rose's land has left him with unsteadiness of his own, but he will literally punch himself in the balls before he'll willingly ask to borrow the trash can from Karkat. This has been the worst movie marathon of all
time.

"It might be useful to collect our thoughts and first impressions," Doctor Lalonde agrees; that's all the warning they get before the dimmed lights flare again. Everyone looks faded and drained in the electric light, and Dave doesn't feel much better himself. There's a deep-seated unease in Rue Lalonde's face as the Querent pauses the recording. "Take a half hour, perhaps? If anyone needs something to eat, there should be something in the break room by now. But if you intend to wander the halls, please be aware that there is a carapacian stabbing doctors on the premises as yet unaccounted for."

BQ: SPADES.

Karkat retches again.

- Karkat squats in the hall, head between his knees and trashcan sitting by his side while he does his dumbass deep breathing exercises. No one's entirely sure if he learned that trick from the Internet or someone else in the house, but it seems to be working enough that John can afford to take his eyes off Karkat for a second when Dave slides down the wall opposite them to sit down.

"Not a word," Karkat says between long gasps of air, scowling at Dave with sunken eyes. It looks like he burst a capillary in his eye at some point, because the right one is all rusty. "I - fucking - mean it."

"I'm one more squirming tentacle image from being right there with you, man," Dave retorts, grimacing and trying not to concentrate too long on the nauseating images of squid monsters from beyond the stars that dance in his head. "Fuck the creepy past universe, okay? Everyone was dead and we were all getting mindraped with tentacles on a semi-regular basis."

"I second that! Urgh," John says, rubbing his cheeks with his hands and trying to slap some life back into them. He looks almost as tired as Karkat, and even as Dave watches a tiny smear of fresh blood trickles over the scabby crusts of dried blood that must have been going on and off throughout the viewing session. Dave gestures to his own nose as discreetly as he can while raising an eyebrow at John, and the kid gets it on the third try, by which point Karkat is squinting at Dave's eyebrow with suspicion. "I still have no idea where my dad ended up in all that kerfuffle, and did you notice? There was no sign of Karkat at all!" He scrubs at his nose with his already bloodied sleeve, wincing at the sight.

Jade flings herself down next to Dave with a huff, so close that Dave cowers. "I brought sandwiches," she says, setting an entire platter of sandwiches on the floor between the four of them. She tears a bite off of the chicken salad sandwich already in her mouth with a frown before going on. "Guys, I think we really messed up."

"Seems to be the general consensus, yeah," Dave says. He stays nauseated for about two seconds before the fact that there's free food two inches from his foot wins out and he takes the first sandwich he can reach.

Oriole shows up next. "I don't even want to talk about it," are the first words out of his mouth. He's forgotten to put his sunglasses back on, and he sits down on John's other side with his free wing splayed out, looking shell-shocked.

But at least he provides a convenient distraction, because they really need one right now or they're all going to be awkwardly trying to eat food while Karkat makes a fucking heroic effort not to vomit
again in their presence. Dave narrows his eyes at Oriole and tries to figure out what it was that seemed off about the way his reincarnated crow-prototyped future self sprite just sat down.

...Well, that sentence was a goddamn adventure from start to finish.

"Welcome to the circle of the generally traumatized, yeah." Dave switches sides between one second and the next, crouching next to Oriole. Karkat squawks like he's personally offended by Dave flashstepping, and then he's retching again. "Let me see it."

Oriole meets him stare for stare. "No."

Dave takes that as a yes. He starts grabbing at the bandages, and takes a sharp foot to the side before Oriole settles the fuck down. When he's finished undoing the too-tight mess - Bro's work, definitely - the bedraggled, unwashed feathers poof out pitifully, more than a little crunched from all this time wrapped up. There's still exposed skin where the bone jutted through the break and feathers tore out, but aside from that...

Dave applies pressure, and Oriole grumbles at him, staring determinedly down at his claw-hands in his lap while ignoring Dave's fiddling.

They're probably not going to ever talk about that fact that at one point, Oriole was literally Dave. Bro would be proud.

By the time Dave finishes inspecting the wing from all angles and coming to the conclusion that the break he thought would probably cripple Oriole for life is pretty much fully healed already, with only residual soreness and stiffness from being taped down for so long, Rose and Kanaya have returned from the restroom. Karkat looks aggrieved at this turn of events but tough shit, he needs to get used to working in groups that aren't just him and John.

"Well, Karkat, it would seem neither of us can claim the ability to keep our meals down," Rose says, sitting without Kanaya's help despite the offered hand of assistance. Paradoxically, Rose almost looks a little better, so maybe she and Kanaya went to the restroom to freshen up or something and not to cover up a second barf-fest. When Jade offers them part of the sandwich bounty, both of them turn her down. "I don't think food would be the best idea at the moment, Jade. I fear this will only get worse before it gets better."

Karkat may mumble something garbled like, "Tell me about it," but it's up for debate. Jade swallows her bite of sandwich slowly, and then looks at the rest of the food with her lips twisted and her brow furrowed in dismay before she sets the sandwich back down.

"Yeah, I'm kind of glad I'm not remembering any of that stuff," John says, still rubbing Karkat's back, and okay apparently they're skipping right past the part where he'd deny the fact that he could remember all that stupidity if his brain weren't as screwed up as the rest of theirs. "Even watching it is hard, I can't even imagine remembering what it was like to live through it!" He's almost too bright and chipper, obviously forcing it, so yeah great, John's twice as fucked up as everyone else here. Awesome.

"Goddammit! You didn't live through it, that's the whole point!" Karkat yells. It's the first time he's really yelled in a while, so everyone flinches back because Karkat can get loud. Like, ear-piercingly loud.

"The carapacian did say you were all murdered," Kanaya adds. Personally Dave's first instinct when Karkat shouts is to contradict him with all the beautiful words now available for him to say aloud, but Kanaya seems to toe the classy snark line more than the irony line. "I would think that I agree, Rose -
it's only going to get worse." She cocks her head, assessing Karkat with a steely green eye. "It might be for the best if the two of us absent ourselves. I doubt that you would react any more pleasantly to the sight of your moirail in mortal peril, any more than I would Rose."

And -

Karkat laughs.

"Oh shit we broke him," Dave and Oriole say at the same time.

"Shut up, both of you," Karkat snaps, irritable as he rubs at his face and reaches out for the trash can. "You people don't get it." The troll spits something gross into the trash can, and then glowers at all of them with eyes that are more exhausted than angry. "I've already seen all this. I've been dreaming about it for weeks."

---

BQ: SPADES!

WQ: Dear, you're shouting.

BQ: He is insufferable. He shall know my displeasure.

BQ: At maximum volume.

WQ: Will you require assistance in tracking him down? I know the facility well enough by now that I may be able to help turn him out of whatever cranny he has found.

BQ: No. This is between me and him.

WQ: Well. If you're sure.

WQ: ...Do you believe he has a ring?

BQ: Well, we won't know that until I've found him and thrashed it out of him, will we?

WQ: Ah.

WQ: Try not to break him too badly.

BQ: I will annihilate him. I will tear the internalized genitalia from his abdomen and use them to string my own personal electric violin.

BQ: And then I will tie him to the nearest concupiscent platform and reintroduce him to the Black Inches.

WQ: ...Oh dear.

From the grate of the ventilation shaft above, Spades Slick growls to himself, and scoots back into the darkness.

He needs to seriously rethink his strategy.

---

John's never kept a closer eye on his phone before. It's his newest nervous tick, and more than once
Karkat threatens to confiscate the thing so John will stop flicking through the forums at top speed during lunch, refreshing and closing the window and gnawing a new sore spot on his lip while he waits for the pages to load. He waits with a constant, low pulse of dread heavy in his stomach, his heart periodically bursting out into panicked thumps that leave him breathless and sick, so dizzy in the space behind his forehead that he can't see past it.

Any moment now, Diamonds Droog could release his secret identity to the world. Or maybe just the greater Seattle area, but it would only be a matter of time before it spread to Maple Valley and exposed his private hero life to everyone he's ever known. Even if the Crew boss were to keep her word - which John highly doubts - the very foundations of his morals as a hero would be compromised by his inability to oppose crimes committed by her people. Already have been, actually. He let her go free after all, and talked his friends into being accomplices right along with him.

God. He's so stupid. Sooo stupid. Literally the stupidest piece of shit on the planet. The look on his dad's face when John had finally been able to come downstairs and look him in the eye -

Yeah. He'd be disappointed in him, too, if he were his dad. John has messed up before, but all of those incidents had been accidents. The unnatural breeze at the aquarium field trip when he was eleven, teleporting out to Houston in spontaneous anger - no one had been hurt, and John had apologized and understood what he did wrong, and they'd learned from it. But this -

This jabs into John's gut like a thick chunk of glass, uncomfortable and jolting whenever he begins to adjust to it. This feels too much like two years ago, like stepping out of his bedroom window only half expecting the wind to catch him, a twisting swoop in his belly as his heart pounded in his ears and he flew away from home with no destination at all, conscious only by the urge to fly fly fly.

Flying had lifted his mood, as it always did, but the lingering anxiety drove him farther and farther from Seattle, knotting his logic into snarls and leaving him halfway to Colorado before he even thought to worry about the fact that his dad would be terrified when he realized John was gone.

Running away had been the worst decision he ever made. It led to him finding Dave, but that's beside the point. It happened so long ago and so much has gone on since then that John's convinced himself that he'd never have to relive what it felt like when his dad was disappointed in him again.

Well, he's feeling it now. It feels kind of like dying. They put on a pantomime of their usual interactions in front of the other people in the house, but after John gave his dad a rundown of the entire incident with Diamonds Droog the day after, Samuel nodded and then sighed as though the weight on his shoulders had multiplied tenfold. His head sunk into the palm of one hand as he rubbed his eyes with his fingers, and his expression, when he finally looked up at John again, was three parts exhaustion and one part coiled, poorly concealed disappointment. He said, "I'll see what I can do," before turning back to his computer and beginning to send out communiques to tap into all of his old military and police contacts without a word to John.

They haven't talked properly since then.

Talking is important; months of therapy drilled that one into John's head ages ago. But...there just hasn't been a spare moment! Yeah! They'd need more privacy or something first, and his dad's caught up in dealing with the three extra people they have hanging around the house - five, counting Bec and WV, all of them volatile and prone to super power abuse while in the house. John can't just expect him to drop everything when they have so many balls to juggle at once, not when John's the cause of all these stupid problems and is doing pretty much jackshit to help solve them. When everything's settled down, the two of them can talk!

He aches when he pawns that excuse off on Rose repeatedly; once they meet in person, he knows
that barring extenuating circumstances she'll see right through him. It's her specialty, after all. Karkat is harder to fool, but they spend most of their time debating different ways to try to deal with Diamonds Droog because that's the root of all this dumb shit, anyway. John is so spectacularly, quietly miserable that he doesn't even have to worry about concealing a raging boner when Karkat talks with his lips against the side of John's neck. As long as he maneuvers the conversation clear of anything concerning Samuel Egbert, he thinks he can keep this from becoming a bigger deal than it needs to be.

Because Karkat would try to take what he thinks is John's side, but John doesn't deserve to have a side. He messed up bad, and he knows it, but he still can't see a way through this. In the state of mind he's in, even having Jade and Dave and Karkat here just makes the physical ache of Rose not being here all the more painful. He should just appreciate having three of the people he cares about most under the same roof as him; he bites down hard whenever he catches his lip wibble at the thought that Rose was right there, only a few blocks away, but he'd been too busy freaking out to visit her while it lasted.

Everything is awful.

--

-- gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 15:42:00 --
GG: hey john!
GG: ...
GG: are you mad at me? :(
GG: oh noooo.
GG: i'm really sorry i went off by myself like that. i didn't mean to cause all this!
-- ectoBiologist [EB] is idle! --
GG: i know you're on your phone, dummy~
GG: please, karkat won't let me in to see you...and now wv just tried to unscrew the ceiling fan in your guys' living room...
GG: i just keep causing you problems it seems like! /
-- ectoBiologist [EB] joined the chat! --
EB: ack, no! no, jade, it's not your fault!
EB: i mean you probably shouldn't have gone off like that on your own, but diamonds droog would still have known my name anyway. the only thing is now we know that she knows.
GG: seeee!!! that's what i told karkat, and he yelled at me!
EB: karkat yells at everyone.
GG: but he yells at me the most because he's suuuper protective of you and he acts like i told droog who you were myself!
EB: i don't know about that...
GG: he totally does!
EB: bluhhhh. :P
EB: i'll talk to him.
GG: i hope his sleep thing and his ribs heal soon, because he's so totally shouty all the time!
EB: no, that's pretty normal.
GG: oh man! doesn't it make your eardrums hurt to hear that all the time? :o
EB: eh, not really? i mean, it was kind of weird at first, but also i've been friends with him for years now, so i kind of just got over it!
EB: well, at least when he's shouting coherently you know he's feeling better.
GG: wow!!! what a weirdo!
GG: you guys are both kind of weird! i guess that's why you suit each other!
EB: whoa jade, i don't know what you're talking about but -
GG: you're just so sweet together! i checked on your closet the other day when no one would answer
for a little while!
EB: oh my god jade, you went near the pile?! he will LITERALLY try to rip your throat out or something!!! D: what were you thinking?!
GG: that i was soooo stealthy neither of you even noticed me!
GG: i sent pictures to rose and everything~
EB: oh my god.
GG: well you stopped answering dave's messages so he was quietly pretending not to freak out in the corner!
GG: except he totally was. it was really obvious.
GG: but yeah, you guys are such cute snugglebuds! i officially give my sisterly seal of approval to your moirallegiance!
EB: jade i - PUNY HUMAN. DO YOU ACTUALLY THINK THAT I WOULD WASTE ONE OF THE RARE, PRECIOUS FUCKS THAT I HAVE TO GIVE IN THIS UNIVERSE ON CARING ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT YOU APPROVE OF A RELATIONSHIP WHICH IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS.
GG: hoo boy! hey karkat!
EB: GO SHOOT SOME POOR UNSUSPECTING WATERFOWL IN THE BACKYARD AND STOP PESTERING JOHN. YOU AND THE STOIC DOUCHEBAG, BOTH OF YOU, GO TAKE A FUCKING FIELD TRIP OR SOMETHING.
GG: but mr egbert said no field trips!
EB: MY AUTHORITY CLEARLY OVERRULES THE DADBERT NOW FUCK OFF.
GG: i don't think that's how it works~~~ :/
EB: FUCK.
EB: OFF.
-- ectoBiologist [EB] blocked gardenGnostic [GG] from the chat!--

GG: i'm gonna figure out how to get around that! i'm warning you, karkat!
CG: HA. I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY.
CG: OH NO. MY CLAW. IT'S SLIPPING.
GG: karkattttt!
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] blocked gardenGnostic [GG] from the chat! --

- 

Don't think about it.

The transition from Dave's land to Rose's is just the exchange of one kind of heat for another. The Ła ni ĝi uk Haa t a ni ĝi ĝi o k w o nk is excruciatingly hot, a sweltering, constant blaze that made your blood simmer and your head spin if you flew too close to the lava itself. Normal rules of heat convection don't seem to apply in the game, or else they've all developed an immunity to some of the worse effects of dehydration and extreme temperatures. Who even knows!

Rose's land is a paradise of chalky beaches and endless waves though, with constant neon gold rain falling from clouds and waterfalls that pour from enormous turtle shells in the sky above. The heat is less intense, but the humidity is god awful! It feels like breathing in warm pool water, honestly. The ocean spray, in comparison, is icy cold, and lumps of translucent pastel ice occasional drift by in the frosted waves. The rules of chemistry and physics don't really apply here, and the idea of icebergs in a tropical paradise makes about as much sense as Dave's land of steel and lava.

But there's no light anymore. The glare of all the epileptically flashing clouds and luminescent waters that half-blinded John when he flew through here before has died off, and he doesn't think it's just because of Dave's totally awesome shades. He can't even see the glittering white of Rose's house
in the distance; everything’s gone murky and grimy. The waters below no longer glitter and swirl in kaleidoscopic swirls, and the lustrous pink beach beneath his rocket shoes is covered with a gloopy kind of tar that squishes and slides like muck rather than beach sand.

The ߀ à OfFilet ȁ à ʃam is still pretty rainy, but the light part is definitely debatable!

A bright shot of pain arc through John's head and he clutches his temples, eyes squeezed shut against the sudden agony. It's been doing that on and off ever since the tentacle things showed up in the weird meteor, as if something tore out the back of his skull and left a gaping hole through which his thoughts keep petering out. But he can brush the back of his head and feel the unbroken skin and hair for himself, no matter how powerful the impression is, and he uses that assurance to ground himself until he can stop thinking in patterns of pain and focus on his surroundings again.

Focus. They seriously need to find Rose! He can't believe she's been out of sight this long, but he supposes it's nobody's fault at this point. All of them have been messed up by whatever attacked them, but the scary thought is that, judging by the state of her poor planet, Rose might have been hit first and hardest, and none of them realized before she was alright in deep trouble.

Well! He's here now! And hopefully when Jade's finished frog hunting, she can join him in hunting soon! John is still a little panicky, but not as flat out terrified as he had been for a few horrifically long minutes back there, when no one but Jade would answer, and Dave had been reduced to monosyllables before finally going silent.

It takes him a few long minutes of fiddling to understand how Dave's controls on his shades work. Everything Dave uses always has to be semi-ironically overcomplicated and the server player interface in the right corner of the right sunglasses' lens is no exception. But eventually John snaps his fingers and the viewpoint that is supposed to focus only on a player's house switches over to Dave's specialized PlanetCam, an app from the same people who made GristTorrent, apparently. It zooms and zooms, processing as it hunts for Rose's presence on the planet, and the sick rap music that John turned on by accident and can't figure out how to turn off blares in his ears through the Squiddlemuffs while he hovers in midair, glancing worriedly at the waves. The churning seems to be growing stronger and more erratic, like the sea that Rose said was supposed to be dead except for the denizen who lurked in the deepest whale-ways is now agitated by the motion of dozens of monsters.

It's second nature to summon up a strife specibus by now. John lets the hammerkind sit heavy in his grip and waits, worrying at his lip with his teeth and wondering why the PlanetCam, which can always find Jade in seconds when he uses it on his Cosbytop, would struggle so hard to locate Rose. He can only hope she hasn't wandered toward her denizen's lair like the rest of them had, because he has no idea how he'll be able to alchemize a bunch of scuba diving gear in time.

There was someone who could have helped him figure out punch codes faster, but his head aches so much when he thinks about it that -

[ping]

Oh! John snaps to attention, the roiling waves forgotten as he waits for an image of Rose to appear and give him coordinates. And once he finds Rose, she can tell them what the heck is going on, and what they need to do next! John likes to pretend he's the friendleader, but Rose and Jade are the ones who understand all the weird game lore and what the heck the four of them are supposed to be accomplishing, here. For all he knows, maybe all this weird tentacle stuff has just been another trial in the game. It tends to do things like that.

The app beeps one last time, and shows him a picture of - nothing at all! It's just some random pink
cliff-face, with a shallow cave carved out of the chalk, riddled with more of this black gunk that's everywhere but definitely short one Rose Lalonde! What gives?!

[error detected; target player is outside the PlanetCam range]

[download the BattlefieldScanner app to locate players and fully prototyped sprites post-land quest]

Whaaaaat?!

He's not thinking about it. Not at all.

"Jade! It says Rose isn't in range! There's this little floating blue and white cloud circle in the corner of the screen, and that's it!"

Over the rap music, Jade shouts to be heard at the loudest volume setting on Pesterchum. "The app only covers our planets! If Rose somehow made it to don't think the name without us, I guess she wouldn't show up?"

John looks up at the greying sky, at the dim outline of nothing at all floating in the center of all this mess. It's had a new Mobius ring twining around and through the bright blue and white clouds ever since Jade entered the Medium, and John feels his stomach drop. It could take him hours to rocket all the way there - unless -

"Jade? Do you think there's a gate to that place? Maybe one on my planet?"

"Uh, duh! That's the final gate, after the seventh! How else did you think we'd get there for the endgame? But I don't think it activates unless you've dealt with your denizen, and Rose probably didn't build your house up enough to reach the spirograph..."

"Urrrgh..." John facepalms. He doesn't want to think about the monstrous, lithe, green and white serpent that rose up out of the earth of ꩥ⋙_months ago, sleek and definitely the most powerful thing his HPReader has ever tried to analyze, EVER. In the brief glimpse he'd got before WV hauled his butt to safety, Typheus's stats had been off the charts. No way he can take it down in time to help Rose!

And while he's not paying attention, lost in those thoughts, Rose's denizen attacks.

His eyes are aching with the effort of staring at multiple screens. The room is dark, and John doesn't really remember leaving the sandwich pow-wow to start the Queen's Hub again, but everyone's huddled back into the conference room again aside from the Black Queen, off hunting Spades Slick, and WV, who was last spotted picking the lettuce off an entire platter of sandwiches to get his green fix. Jade has tugged the entire table so it lies horizontal across from the wall full of screens, so that more people can sit on it and watch. Rose is perched on one side of John, Karkat on the other, and both of them have a death grip on his hand on their side. Jade hovers behind him, her hair drifting and sparking and occasionally trailing over his shoulder when she leans in to squint at the screens, and Dave is sprawled out sitting on the floor in front of them, using John's legs as a backrest.

But it's still not enough to ground him and make him stop thinking about -

All he gets by way of warning is a low but shrieking whistle, like a moaning cry that ripples out from the surface of the black, sticky sea. Then an enormous mass launches out from the darkness, releasing the stench of blood and brine into the air as the monster slams down onto the beach.

John barely scrambles out of the way in time, his rocket boots firing on all cylinders as he spirals crazily out of the way. It's a little disorienting, and by the time he rights himself the denizen is lumbering around to launch another assault.
Cetus is a whale, pale lavender all over but for the wide maw that serves her as a head, an wide throat with the ventral pleats of a whale running from her lips to her belly, but the jutting rows of teeth of a shark.

Then, even as John circles higher into the air, trying to get out of the range of her leaps, Cetus's head explodes. Black thorns stab out in a crown in the middle of the lavender gore, and the sharp-edged fins at the denizen's sides burst out into writhing tentacles. Her tiny, beady eyes burn with white fire as her lavender skin goes grey and her head turns black.

Cetus has gone completely grimdark.

John screams like a little girl, mentally tosses his mangrit out the window, and absconds toward the nearest Gate. It's the one back to £ΩHА₵ and the exact opposite of the way John would have to go to get back to his land, but all that's really going through his mind is pain and OH SHIT OH SHIT WHALE SQUID MONSTER OH SHIT!

The pain hits him at the absolute worst moment, and he grabs his head as the lingering ache fragments his focus. His flight path wobbles and falters, but the momentary waver probably saves his life. A thorn of grimdark stabs right through the air where he would have been flying, and pierces the shifting spiral of the Gate.

With a shattering crack, the spirograph splinters and explodes. John whirls around in horror to gape at Cetus.

She smiles at him with all her teeth. And that...that's a lot of teeth! Then her dense, ponderous body slides off the beach, drawn along by the tentacle thorns at her sides, and the cetacean cuts through the black seas like a knife as she works herself up to another flying leap.

[ whoooooooooooo OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSH! ]

The second denizen arrows through the air and slams into Cetus's side. The Horrorterror-infested denizen crashes back into the waves, hard, letting loose another whale moan gone horribly awry. The wind whistles wildly, driving the greyed clouds of the land into a wild frenzy and blocking out the last of the light from that place.

Which seems like a really familiar tactic, considering it's exactly what Typhus did to ¶Ω UYYYY in the first place. The whole point of John's land quest was to clear the skies and break the oil pipes and set the fireflies free, right?

Then John finds himself confronted with a scaly face, serpentine and pale as frostbite. Cetus might be all mouth, but Typhus could still swallow fifteen Johns and not fill his gullet.

John gulps loudly.

The snake tilts its head to the side, and a slim, pale green forked tongue hisses out between pursed snake lips. It never actually touches John; instead, a swift breeze wraps around him, and then sucks back into Typhus's mouth with the tongue.

[ A shame. We will have to try again sometime, you and I. I think the Choice you would make would be...most interesting. ]

[ For now? I shall handle Cetus. She is lost. ]

[ Know the benefits of my patronage. ]
And with that, a gusting breeze ruffles John's clothes and blasts him away from the two denizens. Rose's house is little more than a crumbling black blur as Typheus's blast slingshots John through the Gate back to his own land.

The breeze dumps him so suddenly there's no time to activate the rocket boots. John's face scrapes against the rough black and blue gravel hard and he bounces, rolling hard until he finally flops over on his back, panting.

Holy crap.

The rap music stopped, thankfully. Maybe it's a blessing from Typheus, because John is inclined to send up a prayer. Unfortunately, he's come in on the conversation between Jade and Dave at the worst possible time. He sits up with a groan, rubbing his head and yanking off Dave's shades so he can focus on his view of Jade instead. It's been a while, and she's in a black and green dress and standing on a snowy hill now, Bec passed out at her feet.

TG: yo harley you have incoming
TG: it just blew past lohac like its tail was on fire and its headed for frogsville
GG: dave, are you sure? i can't see anything! :(

"Fuck. Jade's first," Karkat announces gloomily. "Tentacles to the chest, and then he eats her barkbeast."

"Ten bucks says Jade kicks its ass," Dave replies, holding up a fist.

Karkat glowers sourly, and fistbumps. "That is a fucking bet I'll take, asshole."

Karkat is pretty sure his nightmares are playing out on the screens. Most of them were focused on John, so he doesn't have a clue when they lost sight of Rose, but the troll rattled off a list of deaths in order. When Dave and Rue questioned him skeptically, Karkat had naturally gone into full on bitchfit mode and refused to say any more until right before the deaths he thinks he can predict.

And John has a horrible feeling that Karkat's not wrong, because -

TG: will you just get out of there jade
TG: this shit is dangerous
TG: i dont know what went down on derse while i was passed out but that thing had wings
TG: the bqs coming right at you now duck and cover
TG: trust me we cant handle something with her firepower yet
EB: i don’t know what's going on, but maybe try to get to my gate jade!
GG: we only just finished with the paradox genetic sequencing!!! D:

Jack Noir looms in the sky. Jade dodges, and the Jacked-up Neoroyal stabs, and then Jade is a gory mess on John's PDA-specs.

And John screams. Dave is shouting through Pesterchum, trying to get him to report what happened to Jade, but John's screaming and screaming and screaming, right up until the moment the monster swallows Bec whole and raises a fist to blow ᶩ detox ᴨ to smithereens.

The tears pouring down John's cheeks are slowly tinting red as the song he knows only as the [Eye of the Storm] shudders and screeches wildly out of tune.

[ wwwwwwwwwww errorerroerrorerroerrorerror- ]

By the time he snaps out of it, sobbing and gasping, Jack Noir has already landed on his planet and
set fire to the oil slicks. The green fire consumes everything it touches, leaving only the blue-black earth behind, and John watches with a faint horror as the nearest consort village goes up in flames.

"Now John. Sword to the chest," Karkat says, but he can't manage that false, uncaring flatness that he did when he predicted what would happen to Jade and Bec. Now he sounds tense and uncertain, and the hand clamped down on John's exerts enough pressure that it would have snapped the bones of anyone else's fingers like matchsticks.

John has enough presence of mind to untwist his hand from Karkat's and, when the troll jerks to look at him in mute betrayal, John hooks his arm around the back of Karkat's head and pulls the troll into a bruising hug. "Don't watch," he orders, papping the side of Karkat's face preemptively and turning it so all Karkat will be able to see is John's sweater. Because he's spent days soothing Karkat through the aftermath of the nightmares, and he can't even imagine how badly Karkat could react if he watched John die in a public setting. They're going to head this potential shitshow off before it can even happen.

Thinking about anything other than Jade is hard.

But he has to.

He can't go back through to Rose's planet. If Tycheus and Cetus are actually fighting, he's planning on going the opposite direction, thanks very much! And there's another complication, John realizes, when he rockets past the burning village and sees the consorts milling around in terror.

He can't leave them here to burn! That would be so shitty of him! He doesn't even know what happened to Casey, and that already weighs on him. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, "Follow me, you guys!" Some of them mill around, walking into cliff walls and tripping over plants, but the vast majority of them trundle along in John's wake when he sets off again. The only destination he has in mind is away from the green death fire, but he thinks he remembers a spirograph around here somewhere. Gosh, if only Rose were here to direct him to a Gate, or even Davesprite -

He comes across another village of salamander folk, and rallies them to join his growing posse. It's slowing him down to wait for all the consorts to keep him in their line of sight, but if he doesn't they stop walking altogether! Not all of the game constructs are all that smart...

Somehow, they find a Gate, and John starts ordering salamanders through it, not entirely sure where he's even sending them.

TG: john
TG: why the fuck
TG: are there salamanders on my gear lawn
EB: refugees! i couldn't just leave them to get toasted!
TG: john you fucking asshole
TG: i want you here not a pack of your dumbass consorts
TG: im not dickng around here
TG: that thing skipped right over lohac you might be safe here
EB: just a few more!
TG: and where the fuck is wv
EB: huh? i left him with you!
TG: ...
EB: ...
TG: oh fuck
TG: jade i seriously need you to answer and tell me where wv is on my asscrack of a planet
The spirograph pulsates and John yanks the nearest consort back before it can walk through, bracing himself for whatever is going on.

WV drives through on his rocket car, which John had kind of forgotten he still had. Unfortunately, the carapacian lets out an excited hoot and flails wildly at John - and the rocket car veers out of control, zooming right past John's head and crashing almost a football field away in a tiny cloud of smoke.

That's why it's important to always wear seatbelts! Augh, WV! John flings the salamander through the spirograph and kicks his shoes back alight, pelting after WV.

The green flames are advancing rapidly, thriving on the oil pipelines and streams, and by the time John reaches WV the blaze is unnervingly close. WV is squirming and complaining in his squeaky voice, but unhurt - carapacians can take a lot of damage and keep going. Then, as John bends down and hooks his hands under the overturned rocket vehicle, grunting as he pulls it off WV, he makes the mistake of glancing back the way they'd come.

He recognizes all three of the figures tearing it up across the nearest oil slick, is the thing. One is the Jacked-up Neoroyal, limned with green lightning and barely standing still for a moment before it vanishes again. The second is Bro Strider, somehow, impossibly holding his own with Lil Cal dodging through the flames. And the third is Davesprite, shooting spritelasers like the kind Nannasprite had

John has no idea where Nannasprite is, or even where poor abandoned Jaspersprite might have ended up. But he knows, as the flames leap higher, that it's only a matter of time before Jack Noir loses patience with the strife and cuts the two Striders down. That, or the flames and smoke will do them all in. And John doesn't want anyone else to die.

His head pounds. WV shrieks, and then coughs on smoke. Jade's blood-stained corpse remains stamped in the corner of his server app, charred and battered as she lies on one of the few chunks of her land still intact.

And he thrusts his hands forward, barely seeing through the tears as everything goes blue.

For a moment he's the wind. It's only for a moment, though. He laughs and tangles through the rock arches and sweeps over the plateaus, whipping the oxygen away from the riotous flames until, starved, the green blaze dies. There's only joy here, because the wind doesn't know loss or fear or pain, only the irrepressible freedom of being unbound. He wraps around $\mathcal{L}$ and smothers the flames that threaten other consorts, and he dives between Jack Noir and Bro Strider, giggling and taunting as he redirects a stab meant for Davesprite's heart.

But he can't maintain it. He slams back into his body again, and knows he's messed up the moment he settles back into his meat and bones. WV grips him by the shoulder as John leans forward to rub a hand over his face.

It comes away blood-slicked, and the stabbing pain in his head where the Horrorterrors used to be is a raw, stabbing gouge scorched by the memory of dancing with fire. The nausea is so bad that he thinks he could puke up most of his internal organs and, like, not even care because at least then it would stop.
He looks up, and Jack Noir is standing in front of him.

Dying only hurts for a moment. What's worse is knowing that there's already blood on Jack Noir's swordkind, red and orange mixed together, and remembering that he hadn't used the sword on Jade.

He dies with WV's screams, and the damning knowledge that he just got himself, Dave's brother, and Davesprite killed, following him into the dark.

He thinks that might be when he starts to hate himself.

- "We need to stop," someone is saying. John becomes aware that he's trembling, crunched over Karkat's shaking back as someone - multiple someones - attempt to peel the two of them apart. Which would be the opposite of okay, and makes him latch onto Karkat tighter out of reflex. His head still hurts, and he can't tell if it's a memory of pain or just a side effect of feeling a phantom sword speibi stab through his chest.

WQ: He should not have been able to see this. He is a Knight, not a Seer or a Mage - how could he know - the blood?

"John, Karkat's ribs!" Jade says, sounding almost exasperated in her worry, her voice right in his ear. "Both of you need to sit up, right now!"

John sits back on reflex, because it's hard to reconcile the broken body of a dead thirteen year old girl with the strident voice of the woman in front of him, her hands on her hips as she tuts at him. "You were dead," he feels the need to say, edging closer and closer to tears at the thought.

"Well, I'm not now," Jade says, rolling her eyes. They're swollen and red and she's been crying, too, and John hadn't even noticed. "Duh!"

That is...a lot more reassuring than he thought it would be. His brain wants to smash it all, wants to compact all of the mess and stick it back in the hole where it belongs.

But he promised Rose he'd stay balanced. Maybe she didn't know what she was asking - or maybe she knew better than he did, himself. And so he gulps repeatedly, like a mirror of Karkat's hiccups, and stares at Jade's tear-streaked face to try and rememorize it. She's not thirteen, neither is he; she's alive, and he's alive.

"I can keep watching!" he says when he trusts his voice to be steady. He's not sure he achieves it, but Karkat stops shaking against him when John smoothes a hand down the troll's back. "Karkat, you don't have to put yourself through all this again, though."

Rose was the one who'd been shouting at the White Queen to stop the recording; it's her fingers pressing hard into the muscle of John's shoulder, and he meets her gaze miserably when she taps her thumb against his cheek.

If he thinks about it too hard, the guilt is there, waiting to swallow him up all over again.

Because he's failed Rose twice, hadn't he? Her screen has been grimdark for ages now, with no sign of flickering back on like John's and Dave's did. If what the Queens said was true, that denizens were linked to the minds of their players - what did Cetus's state say about Rose?

So, twice. Twice John has looked the other way, off in his own little world, while Rose delved into a
darkness that swallowed her whole. Both times he could have gone to look for her immediately, right when she stopped responding, and as it turns out? It doesn't matter which universe John is in. He is the fuck up. It is him.

"John," she says, and half of him expects her to lay into him, to blame him for failing her like he deserves. "If the two of you need a breather, it is fine. No one will judge you for it. This is...worse than I had thought."

Karkat looks up at last, shifting in John's arms like a mess of pointy angles and sharp claws, in one of those prickly moods where John can't tell what kind of anger it is in Karkat's expression - it could be anything from regular old irritation to a more specialized fury. His rust-colored contacts are a little off-center and his eyes look inflamed from holding back tears. "Fuck it. Just fuck it. Why not watch it all again?" Karkat bark out a laugh. It's not a good laugh. "Haven't seen you die, anyway, Rose. So that'll be new. If we even fucking see anything at all."

Rose's flinch is minute, but it's there. All she says is, "Alright then," before settling back, her touch on John's shoulder slackening but not leaving. On her other side, Kanaya has narrowed her eyes at Karkat, and in front of them Jade huffs, folding her arms and sitting cross-legged next to Dave on the floor. John blinks down at Dave, who's craned his head around to stare up at their freak-out with an inscrutable expression.

Watching. Waiting.

John hesitates - and then nods, plastering the best smile in his repertoire over his face. Dave's back is still stiff and tense against his shins, but the other hero turns and looks at the screens again.

John catches his dad's eye across the room, and has no idea what to make of Samuel's concern. He can't even process anymore right now. He closes his eyes, and doesn't open them until the whispers stop and the sound of a younger alternate Dave actually, legitimately yelling for Jade and John to answer him fills the room.

When Jade's screen flips to Prospit, the sigh of relief that goes around the room is almost palpable to John. A Jade - unharmed and very much alive - hangs out of the open window of her tower, chattering hastily to reassure Dave as she eyeballs the second tower. "What's the point of having an extra life if you never use it!" she says, clearly trying to laugh it all off, but where dream Jade has always been flighty and easily-distracted before, there is a new weightiness in her eyes, a furrow in her brow as she massages the spot where one of Jack Noir's attacks hit her old body. "But John won't have alchemized anything to use here in Prospit, yet, so he won't have any of his captchalogue stuff on him! I'll go make sure he woke up okay! He's been asleep for so long, it's about time, honestly!"

Dave's screen is still stuck on Derse as he floats through broken, shattered purple hallways, glancing up and around him at the results of the explosion that occurred when Jack Noir first left on his killing spree. It's a lot less extensive than it had been on Jade's planet because he hadn't had - apparently - all of Becquerel's power back then, but the Dersites scurrying through the halls still look terrified and aimless, fleeing from Dave rather than interrogating him. "Can't find Rose still," he's muttering. "Time runs differently out here. Maybe she's still okay on Derse."

GG: just find her, hurry!
GG: alright, i'm at john's place!
GG: ...
GG: crap!

"...What..."
GG: he's still asleep! >:/
GG: i thought you said davesprite AND wv kissed him!!!

"Do you seriously think I could make shit like that up? I mean. God Jade. Not even my mind is that twisted. How am I supposed to understand how the whole dead person dream body reincarnation shit works? Maybe there's a delay."

GG: there wasn't for me!
GG: but i was awake already...

Dream Dave facepalms, and rounds the corner.

He runs smack into a huge, hulking Hegemonic Brute of a carapacian. Like the rest of the Dersites, this one is adorned with the garish purples, reds, greens, and golds of John's harlequin prototyping.

But this one has an oddly familiar shape to his head, though the sleekness of a carapacian's shell renders him almost unrecognizable; more tellingly, a tiny red heart sits pinned to the swatch of goldenrod stripes.

Hearts Boxcars, of all people, squints down at Dave.

HB: Yeah? Whaddya lookin' for, punk?

Dave's mouth works soundlessly for a moment. "My sister?" he says, sounding almost timid.

The carapacian squints for a moment longer, leaning in close to scowl right into Dave's face; close enough that Dave pulls back a little, nose wrinkling and looking mildly disgusted at whatever he's smelling. Then Boxcars hooks a clawed thumb over his shoulder toward a flight of stairs.

HB: Observatory library.

HB: What's left of her, anyway.

HB: And now nobody's answerin' their damn communicators, half the place looks like Di or Jack've finally lost it and took sledge-hammer to the walls, and I gotta get to the Battlefield because apparently Jack's taking out our own people down there, too.

HB: I tell yah, give a shell a little ultimate cosmic power, and he starts losin' his Croakin' mind all over the damn place...

Dave edges around the wideset Dersite, sidling along the wall with a grimace on his face, while he manages to muster up a grudging, "Thanks."

HB: Don't mention it. Queen's dead, Jack's AWOL, and I've already been fired, anyway. Beat by a non-player - whadda joke!

And just like that, Dave is sprinting up the stairs, Boxcars muttering behind him about shaving cream and safes and unnatural strength. Meanwhile, Jade is in a golden bedroom remarkably similar to John's copy in that universe, pulling back dream John's eyelids and pinching him hard on the fleshy part of his arm in an attempt to get a response. But aside from breathing steadily, in and out, dream John slumbers on.

GG: urgh! i don't know what to do! :(  
GG: dave, get your future self off lofaf and go kiss john!
TG: okay first of all i have absolutely no idea where future me has fucked off to
TG: first he ditches you to die and then hes back like two seconds later to mack on corpses
TG: that shits fucked up i have no idea what im thinking
TG: and second of all real me is kind of busy trying to keep johns dumbass consorts from hurling themselves off the nearest lavafall for shits and giggles
TG: the nakodiles want to eat them
TG: im tempted to let it happen
TG: if davesprite and wv couldnt pull it off forget it
GG: yeah, but they're a carapacian and a sprite! maybe it has to be another player!
TG: god
TG: dammit
TG: give me five minutes
GG: hurrrrrry! ;/
TG: FUCK

Dream Dave shoves open the closed door with 'Observatory' in a rolling script on the label beside it, but John can feel his stomach clench in preparation for what's beyond before the door even opens. There's already blood leaking out under the bottom of the door, after all, and he's known all along that nothing good could have happened to Rose.

Every window in the library has shattered. Whatever reached out from beyond the Furthest Ring to reach Rose, it had teeth, and it knew how to use them - dream Dave's on his knees retching without restraint. "Rose - fuck," he chokes out, raising a shaky hand but yanking it back before he touches the nearest piece of her.

"Jade is next. Pretty sure she gets crushed by the moon," Karkat interrupts. His face is exhausted, and the dull, prophetic certainty in his voice doesn't make it any better. "Then John again, and Dave."

WQ: You should not know that.

"Well too bad, because I do! Holy festering grubpustules, you think I want to know all this?!!" Karkat demands, his volume rising. "Watching John die, over and over? It's half the reason I'm a fucking invalid right now!"

WQ: You are not a Seer. This is troubling.

"Why does he hate us so much!" Jade interjects, throwing up her hands at the screen as Jack Noir arrives on Prospit, just barely visible in the corner of Jade's screen when she races to the window of John's dream bedroom to see what all the quaking is about. Jack slices through the chain linking moon and Prospit proper and, in a burst of green of the kind that destroyed Jade's planet, sends the entire moon structure unravelling and breaking up into flaming chunks of debris as everyone falls toward Skaia.

John feels the nosebleed, and doesn't even care. The cloud mirages spiral by on the screen too fast to be seen through the smoke as Jade dodges and half-runs along a street of golden cobblestones that are still intact, shoving off that piece of debris to tackle John's limp dream body in midair. "John! John, we have to go! Get up, get up, get up!"

Dream John doesn't respond, not even when she shakes his shoulders and slaps him across the face. They're plummeting faster and faster now, and even when Jade tugs on John, her ability to float can't slow his descent, too. "John, you have to get out of here! You have to wake up!" she screams at his face, and then, with dawning terror in her eyes, Jade sobs, and sends one last Pesterchum message.
GG: dave!
GG: tell john i'm sorry, okay! :)
GG: bye!
TG: jade
TG: jade what the fuck NO

Jade tears the glasses off her face and swaps them with John's. Then, with a mighty push, she shoves John out of the way, just in time for her entire screen to be swallowed up by the golden fragment of Prospit's moon that crushes her. Still stubbornly, stupidly asleep, John skids across the black and white checkerboard of Skaia before stopping. His eyes don't even flutter behind Jade's glasses.

John just adds it to the tally of people whose deaths he's caused so far. He's really starting to rack them up! Haha...ha...

On Dave's screen, there is a faint click, one that makes the real Jade's head snap to his screen like a shot. John knows the sound, too.

The Black Queen steps out of the shadows behind the door of the Observatory, the safety off on the white pistolkind she presses to the back of Dave's skull.

BQ: Captchalogue what's left of her.

BQ: We don't have much time.

Dave raises his hands slowly, inching his head around to the right. "Why?" he asks, wary, his fingers twitching in an obvious way, reaching for a sword but not quite ready to draw it with the odds so out of his favor.

The Queen raises her other arm. Most of her claw is a gory, dripping mess, but John doesn't think it looks all that serious of an injury in the context of the death and destruction playing out on the screens of the Hub until she answers Dave.

BQ: Because I am dying.

BQ: And so are all of you, if Jack has anything to say about it.

BQ: Congratulations. I hate him more than I want to see you lose. But neither of you need to be alive for what we must do. I would simply prefer not to have to cart both of your bodies around, not when you are a perfectly capable player with a sylladex on hand.

BQ: Come with me if you want to live, Knight.

Dave hesitates. And then he faces Rose's remains, still on his knees - and draws a sheaf of sylladex cards out of his pajama pockets.

BQ: Good boy.

And just then, with Jade's last life gone and John useless and Dave at the mercy of one very pissed off, enigmatic Queen -

Rose's screen turns back on.

At first it's just static, running up and down the screen in jittery grey patterns, and John, after the momentary near-heart attack at the sudden burst of activity on a screen that's been grimdark for so long, starts to think it's just busted. He's been blissfully free of near-flashbacks all this time, having
been unconscious or dead, and he almost thinks he prefers it that way. But Karkat is sure he's going
to die again which is going to be awesome.

Then the sound starts. If it's Rose's breathing, it's nearly unrecognizable - the pattern is slow but
irregular, the kind of hoarse panting of someone on their last legs.

And then, at last, the picture restarts. Rose's shoes are purple and black, trimmed with gold, and she's
walking through a corridor with white and black patterns on the walls, banners and tapestries in
purple and gold slumped on the floor as she ascends a flight of treacherous stairs. Her breathing
rattles horrifically, and when she coughs the sound is wet with blood.

Somehow, just as Dave turns and follows in the Black Queen's wake, descending from the
Observatory down into the heart of Derse, Rose reaches the top of the stairs, and enters a room that is
perfectly, despicably green.

Rose's face is mottled grey. Her left arm writhes beneath the flimsy cover of her sleeve in a way that
John can't bear to look at without a corresponding twitch of nausea. But the right half of Rose's face
is mostly clear, and the hate in her eyes is so astonishingly clear-eyed that it's hard to connect it to
the body of the girl so thoroughly infested with the grimdark that she looks downright feral.

"Doc Scratch," she says, staring at the back of the leather chair across the room. "I know...you did
this. I -" another wet cough, and Rose spits black blood onto the felt green carpet "- I can see what
you did to them. To me."

"That's this Scratch guy?" Oriole demands, though John mistakes the voice for Dave's for half a
second. "Oh my god. That's - what even is that? That's the boss of the Midnight Crew?!

"Yes," Doctor Lalonde says, her whisper hushed and her cheeks pale and strained when John
chances a glance at her perch on the very edge of a chair. "From what we've been able to determine -
yes."

Mmm. Are you sure?"

The man who spins around in the chair to meet Rose's challenge is not a man. Not unless the massive
white orb where his head should be is only a mask. He is prim, perfectly primped in green and white,
and the overall effect when combined with that faceless orb is one of ghastly, dissonant serenity.

Because really, dear Rose. If you could see anything at all, surely you would not have played so
perfectly into my hands.

A Seer is meant to foresee pitfalls, to guide her team to victory. To lead them. But really, all I had to
do was hand you the means, and you left them to their own devices. So sad, when such a promising
team of players falls prey to such an elementary series of blunders.

His smooth voice is heavy with barely restrained condescension, and John can hear the smirk in his
tone, even if there is no mouth to make it.

He'd expected to hate the boss of the Midnight Crew on sight. Mostly, he's just disturbed.

Rose staggers forward, snarling. Her teeth are too sharp. "I won't let you get away with this."

Tut tut, my dear. I truly feel that I already have, but let's not argue. Not when the end is so near.

"I'll destroy you," Rose seethes. She raises her left hand, and the needlekind at the end is grasped in a
tangled set of tendrils rather than fingers. "I can make it all sť o p. " She's wheezing through her
nose now, her teeth clenching too tightly as though she's forgotten how to breathe, lost in that single-minded determination.

It's wrong. It's all wrong. But there's no one but Rose there - wherever there even is - no one to stop her and scream that she needs to stop. John catches his own hands shaking a little, but he can't look at the real Rose. Not now. He thinks they might all fall apart again, and he wants to forestall the moment as long as he can.

Doc Scratch cocks his orb of a head to the side, and sighs mentally, drawing off his suit coat.

Well, I have a spare moment. Do try your best.

If it is a fight you desire, I can certainly accommodate you.

Rose screams, a sound more mad than sane, and lunges for him wreathed in black thorns.

Scratch steps into her attack, and catches the corrupted arm with ease and twisting. John misses the exact move the strange man uses - krav maga, maybe, something simple and fast - and then Rose is plowing facefirst into the sharp corner of the desk. The man maintains control by keeping that grip on her frantically twisting arm, even as he reaches out with the other hand to grab Rose by the chin and tilt her face up to his. Even when Rose snarls, white fire leaking from her eyes and phosphorescing in an impotent rage, the orb reveals nothing.

Seer to Seer. Neither of us are a primarily combative class.

Rose spits on his face. It's black and sticky with acid, fizzling away at the man's smooth face.

Green light burns around Doc Scratch, crackling like an aura of neon lightning.

Jade gives a short cry of disbelief, and punches the floor of the conference room so hard John hears tile crack beneath her fist.

But I believe that in this case, the odds are 97.5% in my favor.

Perhaps it is time you learned a lesson in humility, little Rose.

And then he punches Rose through the wall.

On Derse, Dave and the Black Queen are in the darkest, most central part of the planet, so deep in the chains and purple marble that Jack Noir's blast didn't penetrate this far.

In the very center of the hollow space, there are two beds. "Why the hell are we here?" Dave asks, his shoulders hunched up as he floats forward to kick the one with a dark purple gear emblazoned on the flat surface.

Behind him, the Black Queen raises the gun and places her finger on the trigger.

BQ: This is where you die.

-  

The shouts of "NO!" when Dave's screen flickers and flips to a view of ŁΩHA¢ are perfectly synchronized in every corner of the conference room.

Jade flings herself onto her back, tearing at her hair with a howl. "How much more can there be?" she demands, mashing the heel of her palm against her eye. "This is dumb! Why do we all die so
much!"

"I've been asking that question for two fucking weeks, and no one can give me a fucking answer that isn't incredibly stupid," Karkat replies. "How does it feel, Harley? Feels fucking annoying, doesn't it?!"

But John loses track of everything else just then, because -

_He's on his hands and knees, and his throat is dry, and there's a red pool of blood spreading out from beneath the molten gold wreckage to his left. One of Jade's hands is still visible, if only just, and John can't quite hear what he's babbling as he sobs, except it's something like, "Jade, nonono, Jade, I'm so sorry -"

There's something hard painfully grinding into the palm of his hand, but he can't bring himself to look at it. All he can think, the only thought his mind can fixate on, as his memories drift and spin and slot into place in this new body, is -

This is all his fault.

When Jack arrives, John's not even sure he's going to try to fight. He has none of his captchalogued items on this body, no hammers to use to fight. He's got nothing at all but broken ribs and a dead sister and the sound of a gunshot from Dave's end of the Pesterchum chat ringing in his ears. But Jack Noir pauses long enough that John sneaks a peek at the item in his hand, with a dull kind of curiosity.

He freezes when he sees the four-orbed ring in his hand, and the power locks his arm in place.

[Attention - an error has been detected. The Heir has been crowned.]

[Please wait. Rerouting...]

[Emergency protocol activated - Queens of Unorthodoxy. Engage.]

By the time Dave arrives, John's losing again, of course. His arm feels like he's stuck into the chamber of a nuclear fission chamber and left his blood to boil, blazing with power he's not built to handle. Even between the two of them, there's not much they can do to handle a Queen jacked up on whatever made Bec Bec.

Jade was a planet away. Bro and Davesprite - he didn't even see it, just inferred it.

Watching Dave bleed out, then, is a particularly new, excruciating agony. John's dying himself, so it's difficult to untangle which pain in his chest is which - the memory of his first body dying, the sensation of his dream heart pumping blood out of a gaping hole, or just the unique pain of meeting Dave for only the second time in person while they're both dying. John can taste the blood in his mouth and clotting in lumps along the back of his throat, and when John unclenches one of the hands fisted up against the stab wound under his body he gasps at the sensation of tamped up blood puddling out all the faster.

He's crying a lot. Dave's shades are off-kilter, but he's as blank-faced as possible right until the end, fighting back the obvious pain on his face between wet, sputtered choking; something wet slips out but Dave's eyes go deeply still pretty much at the same time.

John doesn't even knows if he grabs Dave's hand before he dies. His arm goes kind of fuzzy, and then everything is fuzzy, and he's dead again.
None of the screens are properly set to observe what Jack Noir does next. Rose is still being thrashed on hers by Doc Scratch, tossed through multiple walls and yanked back again by space powers. There's another explosion of green from Noir that Jade's viewpoint just barely catches the crackling edge of, and then a Prospitian ship crashes onto Battlefield.

"I want to stop now," Jade says, strangled and maybe too quiet for the White Queen to hear, when the body of an old man in safari gear is flung to the checkered ground. Watching Doctor Lalonde's body join the carnage, the mangled remains of a riflekind undrawn and unfired across her back, just makes the growing certainty in John's gut stronger. He tears his eyes away from the screen and just. Doesn't look.

His dad's sharp intake of breath, and the following slow, pained sigh of acceptance, tell John all he needs to know about who died next from that ship.

Bro's the one who says it.

Well, really, it's more like the screens all whine and go dark - not grimdark, just the flatness of having had their power cords severed all at once. Oriole has the lights on right away, so everyone sees Bro Strider standing in front of the White Queen with his specibus still in hand. "Enough," he says, flatly.

WQ: ...Yes. Perhaps that is enough for today.

- 

"John."

Everyone's got their own room. The facility is apparently empty enough that they can do that. But John's already tugged the mattress and bedding off the bedframe by the time Karkat drags his stuff over.

His dad came over and hugged him silently after they left the room. Dinner's kind of a blur, but John remembers that it happened. It's barely six thirty in the evening, but after a full day of watching pretty much everyone they know die, he's pretty sure none of them want to stay awake much longer. Maybe the adults are going to talk about adult things, but there's a point after which John just can't bring himself to think about that, and he's reached it.

Karkat should be in a recooperacoon, really, but the troll tosses the bedding down next to John's and kind of walks right into John, dragging them both down. "...Can we even jam about that shit?" Karkat says, tired and incredulous at the same time. "John, I don't even know where to start."


"Your thinkpan still functional?"

No.

"I have no idea," John says. It's at least partially true.

"..."

"..."

"When we go home, can we just - can we just fucking fight regular criminals again?" Karkat mumbles. "Muggers and stupid fuckery like that. I actually miss it."
"Dude, yes." There's still the million and one logistical problems of how to deal with the Midnight Crew, but John's burnt out on all of them. "Like a gas station hold-up! Normal hero things." It's ridiculous how appealing the idea sounds. "And then we can go get donuts."

Karkat sighs. "Thank you."

The door creaks open, and Karkat tenses up. John closes his eyes and knows who's at the door by their breathing before Karkat can even launch the preliminaries.

Jade hesitates a really long time. When she finally says, "Please?" her voice is soft, with a familiar warble of barely swallowed-pain that John only catches because he's zoned out into every movement of air in the room in an effort to not remember.

"No!" Karkat protests.

"Even if I stay by the door?" Jade shifts the mattress she's levitating with great care beside her. "I just don't... want to be alone in a room. I thought I could go talk to Rose, first, because we haven't talked much yet, but... her and Kanaya are arguing with Doctor Lalonde right now." She swallows. "John."

John tries to remember what it was like deliberately making himself distrust Jade. Yeah, that one was probably doomed for, uh, a while now.

Her and Dave and Rose - he's not entirely sure he has it in him to refuse them anything. Not after seeing exactly how he was to blame for everything that happened to them.

But also, Karkat. Karkat comes first, and realizing that just makes the guilt worse. "Karkat?" John asks, miserable with it.

"By. The. Door," Karkat says at last. "No fucking pissheaded space wandering. No excuses."

With a grateful, vigorous nod of her head, Jade flops her mattress down, kicks it out of the way of the door so it can close, and then drags it back into place with a series of small grunts.

Even just having her breathing in the same room is actually really helpful! John allows himself a cautious smile, even when Karkat grumbles mutinously and hooks a leg up over John's waist.

The door is then shoved open without ceremony, and Jade squeaks as it smacks her in the side.

"Oh. Goddamn, Jade, I didn't know -"

Karkat rockets upright and John narrowly dodges being kneed in the groin by infuriated troll. "NO, DAVE. NO. ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT -"

Jade is throwing off sparks. "Dave, that was my kidney!"

"OH AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN BRING A MATTRESS, SO WHAT THE FUCK KIND OF PRESUMPTIONS ARE YOU MAKING NOW, YOU AUDACIOUS SHITHEAD?!"

"Why does this hurt so much?!"

"I brought WV."

Everyone shuts up and stares.

From under Dave's arm, the carapacian raises his head to blink at them all with sleepy eyes, yawning
widely and burying his face against Dave's hoodie.

Oh no. It's too adorable.

"We get the stupidly adorable alien," Karkat says after a long pause. "You are allowed to, through my obvious generosity and cordiality, stay by Harley."

Dave shakes his head. "No deal. I demand John rights."

"Haha. Fuck you."

"Do I get any say in this?" John asks. He thinks that's a pretty reasonable request.

"No. You're a shitty negotiator." Karkat has a constant hum of a growl in his voice, tempered but still present, as he drums his claws against John's chest. John thinks he's tallying up potential pluses and minuses in this situation.

But WV is a hard bartering chip to beat. He's just kind of awesome, in a mute, easily-riled sort of way.

"You and Harley on that mattress, but over here. The endearing, possibly autistic carapacian between us," Karkat announces at last, imperious. Then he sighs and looks at John for confirmation. When John shrugs, he says, "Final offer, you annoying sack of grubshit."

"Done," Dave says immediately.

Then he holds out a fist for Jade to bump. Despite the fact that she's still in the throes of kidney pain, she somehow knows exactly when and where to complete the bump. The entire thing is...suspicious. "Hell yeah. Good job, Jade."

Oh yeah. They planned this. Jeez, if Dave and Jade are in cahoots, John thinks they might give Karkat a run for his money. Jade springs to her feet, tromping over to them with her mattress in hand. "No take backsies!" she says sweetly, before Karkat can say a word.

"I hate you two. So much." While Jade and Dave proceed to bicker about who exactly gets to lie nearest to WV and John, Karkat wraps himself around John again, all warm limbs and silent fuming.

And so John lies there, surrounded by some of the people he's managed to hurt the most in the world. His dad is disappointed in him, Diamonds Droog knows his name, and Rose is still not here.

He's never felt so content in his life.

His mind snarls, and creaks, and subsides.

---

Jade is not eavesdropping!

She's patiently waiting for Rose to finish her very loud, snarky conversation with her mom, and just so happens to be able to overhear every word that's being said.

"Rose, darling, please, continually undermining my authority will not help you prove your point. We have plenty to discuss, I know, but this is more important than what petty grievances we've waffled over in the past -"

"Oh yes. Petty. I suppose that's one perspective on it."
"Dear, I'm not referring to -"

"Aren't you, though? Yes, I guess it would be petty with the benefit of enough distance."

"Rose."

Still, she thinks a lot of stuff must be flying right over her noggin, because Doctor Lalonde doesn't really sound nearly as passive aggressive as Rose is always saying on Pesterchum - or if she does, it seems like Rose gives as good as she gets. They're both just really nasty to each other! Rue sounds tired, and Rose sounds bitter, and every so often Kanaya or Samuel Egbert will try to intervene but the two Lalondes are caught up in their own endless, cyclical banter, like they don't see any other way to act around each other.

Jade personally thinks that it's kind of depressing how convinced Rose is that her own mom hates her. She can't even imagine being trapped in an interminable, irreconcilable strife with Grandpa! Bouncing on her heels, she sucks her lower lip into her mouth and considers her options. On the one hand, she reeeally wants to talk to Rose in person and get to know her. But on the other, euuuuuurghhhl. After the kind of day they've all had, and with the evening they're gonna have after nap-break, Jade doesn't even know how Rose has the energy to be so angry!

The Pesterchum alert chimes in her pocket and Jade levitates her phone out absently. It's more difficult than usual, but she's adjusted enough to move things around as long as she isn't trying to teleport them. She can see why Doctor Lalonde didn't just install some kind of transportalizer between her house and this lab to cut down on travel time - with all the weird interference in the air, stuff just wouldn't come together again right!

TG: they still going at it
TG: this is amazing
TG: bro and i cant even goddamn talk for longer than five minutes at a time
TG: this kind of stamina is fucking incredible
TG: at least now we know theres hope for rehabilitating the birdbrain
TG: he hasnt gotten this bad
GG: dave, i don't even know what you're talking about now :P
GG: but yeah they're still arguing! where are you?
TG: your space thing is that fucked up
GG: well, i can see you right behind the corner, duh!
GG: i'm just wondering, why are you over there and not eavesdropping like a normal person?

At the far end of the hall, the head of whitish-blond hair bobs and vanishes as Dave realizes he's been caught. Jade rolls her eyes, because Dave is kind of a dork sometimes.

Don't get her wrong; in comparison to Karkat and John, both of them self-professed nerds, Dave is probably the coolest person Jade knows! So cool! But he's also the kind of guy who can sit around signing nonsense and old memes at WV in some corner of the basement for hours with the dedicated patience of someone who has all the time in the world to kill, zoned out with his headphones on while everyone else in the house is searching for him so Dad Egbert will let them eat dinner.

Seriously. The zoning out thing is kind of funny! Jade has never met someone who can tune out the space around him quite as thoroughly as Dave does without even seeming to notice how lost in his own head he's become.

Through the door, Jade hears the sounds of coolly passive aggressive strifing increase in volume.

TG: are you kidding
TG: bro is in there if i get within thirty feet of the door its fucking open season
TG: it would literally be like some dumb shit deer wearing mardi gras beads and cha cha dancing in front of a loaded smuppet bazooka
TG: so im going to stay back here where im not in danger of having war flashbacks to alternate history me getting the shit kicked out of him
TG: that shit aint right jade
TG: and now karkats hogging john which is just plain bullshit
GG: oh nooooo! D:
TG: a steaming pile of manure fresh from the field served up courtesy of karkat vantas
GG: ew!
TG: clearly the solution is to crash their party
TG: seriously that is an infinitely better plan that trying to crash anything involving lalondes on a rampage
GG: well~~~
GG: i think this argument could take a while...
GG: so no reason to waste quality nap time!

With one last fleeting glance at the closed door, Jade shrugs and mentally sends as many good vibes in Rose and her mom's direction as she can muster. It sure seems like they need all the help they can get! With that, she skips down the hall toward Dave.

TG: thats the spirit
TG: were doing this jade
TG: were making this happen
GG: we're gonna turn this manure into fertilizer for a pumpkin patch of friendship!
TG: ...
GG: ...
TG: jade
TG: do me a favor
TG: and say that verbatim to karkat
TG: like fucking word for word that entire sentence was just fucking gorgeous
TG: i want to start a goddamn religion dedicated to proselytizing that sentence you just said
TG: i need to see his face
GG: you got it! dude! :D

They're going to finish this.

That seems to be the general consensus, anyway. Everyone is pretty depressed and the atmosphere is just as gloomy as it had been when they stopped for an emergency breaktime, and Jade hovers up somewhere by the ceiling while the White Queen fiddles with the screens. Karkat has an entire battalion of Kleenex boxes at the ready in the event of John having another massive nosebleed spree, Doctor Lalonde is sitting so far away from Rose that she looks ready to open up the wall just to introduce more space, and Dave and Oriole are elbowing each other in some kind of unspoken, probably ironic competition to see who can keep a straight face the longest.

She's kind of jealous, almost, in a really backward way. The Jade before the scratch knew so much - she's the kind of person Grandpa had told Jade about in all his files, with all that speculation on the prophetic dreams he always expected her to have. But Jade has never had any dreams of Prospit; all of her extra knowledge, the little things that no one else in their group knows, she learned courtesy of Grandpa's research. Now, it's John who seems to know more than he should, and even if it's hurting him, Jade can't help but wish she had the benefit of that knowing, too. And don't even get her started
on Karkat's weird thing!

It's all such a mess.

- They're all up and about when John's dad comes to get them, but only because shenanigans go down when Karkat wakes up and discovers Jade has migrated in her sleep so that she's lying horizontally compared to everyone else, one leg flung carelessly over both Dave and John to prod at Karkat's cheek with her big toe.

Totally not her fault. She's a restless sleeper, and with the space around her all funky, it's not like she's aware of what she's doing whilst in the slumberthroes! But Karkat probably sits there stewing in his unhealthy troll anger for a while before waking them up with an infuriated shriek, flailing around and rolling off the mattress in some kind of desperate attempt to get away from them all. Under Jade's knee, Dave is drooling all over WV's face, and wakes up with a jolt that somehow takes him all the way out the door and into the hallway in the seconds before Jade realizes her leg's been pushed out of the way.

John just looks at all of them, rubbing at his eyes with his fingers, and shakes his head. "Guys. We're so weird."

"You're only just getting that now?" Karkat calls back, muffled, from where he's knocking his head repeatedly against the floor.

- Doc Scratch is kind of a big dumb meanie, is the impression Jade has received, which mostly lines up with what little Grandpa was able to pass onto her before he had to become a robot and leave the island. On one flickering, dim screen, the creepy guy is beating the crap out of Rose, lecturing her the entire time about poor manners and uninvited guests and not doing a good job as a Seer. Then, as the icing on the cake, he drags her outside onto a veranda and yanks her head up by her hair so she can see all the dead bodies littering the Battlefield.

Jade feels a little queasy because if the weird perspective of Rose's badly glitching screen isn't throwing her off completely, Rose has been in a castle only the length of a football field or so from the place where Prospit crashed.

And the nearest body is Doctor Lalonde's.

So you see now?

This is a session with no leader. This is a session where one of the players chooses to wander off and meddle with things she should not, and leave the rest to wander without aim, without perspective, without understanding.

This is what you have brought about.

"No," the alternate Rose whispers, distraught. She's a wreck by now, her headband lost at some point so that all of her hair has been dumped in her face. "I -"

At her side, the arm that's mostly grimdark swarms and writhes.

I did nothing, little Seer. I simply observed from afar as you undid yourselves.
Time runs differently between here and the Furthest Ring. And if I am not mistaken, that arm means certain parties will be calling to collect.

"No," Rose says. She yanks free, or Scratch lets her go - it's hard to say which. Either way, she leans over the edge of the ramparts, the sash around her waist fluttering as she stares down at her mother. Jade is terrified for a moment that Doc Scratch is just gonna kind of punt Rose over the edge, but he simply steps back, the round orb of his head inscrutable and serene.

Watching. Observing.

Then Rose lets out a low, agonized moan, a wail of grief that's one long 'no' before she looks up at Jack Noir, hovering in the air with one claw raised almost lazily and stabbing through members of both carapacean armies with abandon. Having finished off the heroes and their guardians, he seems content to wreak purposely violence, disemboweling enormous walking castles and, with a casual flick of green lightning, blowing the head off what looks like a White King.

It's not even a chess match anymore. It's just obscene.

Thirteen year old Rose is too young to look so murderous. "You," she spits, and the inky grimdarkness spiderwebs across the deathly pallor of her face. "I - yes. My answer is yes."

Rose's arm explodes into thorns. So does the rest of her, kinda. And then grimdark swallows the viewscreen, too, and the last thing they hear from that speaker is -

Suckers.

"I never saw much past that second time John - died." Every word sounds like it has to be dragged out of Karkat's mouth by a meat hook. But by some weird turn of events, the nap time from hell seems to have done him more good than it did John, who looks as though he might have just lain there for the past few hours without sleeping at all. "Sometimes it wasn't right, either."

"What do you mean?" Jade asks, sticking out her tongue when a tiny kink in her hair breaks loose from her latest attempt at braiding it. Cool fingers brush hers, and she blinks and smiles when she senses that it's Rose standing behind her and tugging the handfuls of hair gently away from Jade. "Oh! Thanks Rose!"

"I need the distraction," Rose murmurs, quiet enough that Karkat talks right over her without seeming to notice. Not like that's hard for Karkat to do, regardless. Even when he's quiet he's still shouty.

"Dave didn't show up on the giant checker board planet. John went into the denizen's lair without WV, and didn't come out. I don't fucking know what you want me to say, woman, it's not like I wanted to be having shitty-ass dreams that are only half right. Do you know how much of a pain in the waste-chute it is?" While he's listing them off, Karkat counts off on his claws; by the end, he flings them up in the air, nearly toppling backwards off his chair.

John catches the flailing claws and squeezes them, bonking Karkat on the back of the head with his forehead. "Does it make it better or worse, knowing it's not just all in your head?" he asks, sounding genuinely curious. "You always seemed more worried because you thought it was creepy that you'd dream about people dying, but if you're just somehow remembering stuff, that's not your brain's fault!"
"Oh my god, John, don't jam about this in front of these assholes," Karkat hisses, snarling when John claps both their hands over his eyes with a grin. "Urgh. Dumbass. Stop it."

"What were you and your mom arguing about, Rose? I, uh, overheard you talking from the hallway earlier." Jade remembers to keep her voice quiet. According to John's dad, there's an indoor voice and an outdoor voice, which is totally the first Jade has ever heard of any such thing, but she's trying to keep it down as practice. Besides, if she and Karkat start talking at their usual volumes at the same time, things just kind of spiral into a mutual shouting match, which Jade thinks is lots of fun! But also makes Karkat wheeze and splutter like he's about to pass out from rage.

And for the record? Rage aneurysm are not a thing. She's apparently the only person in this group of dummies to bother looking that up! So the next time Karkat tries to claim they're all annoying him into a stroke, she's gonna slap him with some cold hard science, as is fitting.

"What do we not argue about?" Rose wonders, snorting. Her fingers card through Jade's hair and twist the curls into something like order, slowly drawing more strands as she works down the back of Jade's scalp. "She's worried about John. I would prefer she not think about him at all. It's just one of a number of points of contention."

"Well, John is kinda messed up!" Jade chirps. Because it's true, and it's been pretty obvious ever since she arrived that John's gotten worse, not better, since all this started to escalate. "If she's got an MRI machine around here, I'm itching to look at his noggin too!"

Rose sighs, and it ruffles up the rebellious cowlicks that have already begun to escape the braid at the back of Jade's head. "My mother's concern has never done anyone any good. Whatever ails John, I have far more faith in our ability to help him deal with it than I do in her ability to keep from interfering where she's not wanted."

"She was worried about you in New York. We couldn't have saved you if it weren't for her calling all of us and making the void thingamabobs and all," John points out.

Jade stifles a yelp as Rose tugs a little too hard on a length of hair. "There is a difference," Rose says stiffly, her voice cold, "between worrying about a person for their own sake, and worrying about the rest of the world seeing you for the sham of a custodian that you are, and attempting to paper over the results of your own neglect."

None of them really know how to follow that one.

- Grimdark Rose only lasts a minute or so. For a heady moment, Jade is torn between hope and a sick despair, because the Horrorterror tangle slams into Noir with all the chaotic, bloodthirsty hate a hivemind can summon up, and on the one hand Jade really wants to see Jack Noir punished for all the mean stuff he's pulled -

But on the other hand, Rose is scary. The alternate one, Jade means, not the one currently standing right next to her with a rigidity in her stance, as though she means to face this head on. No, the one on the record screams with multiple voices, visible only in passing on the other three screens as she and Jack Noir tear through the air over the dead bodies of the other three kids, and when she holds out her hands to cast some purple-black spell at Noir he teleports out of the way, and grimdark Rose makes no effort to cancel the attack before it splatters across one last carapacian warrior and shatters her shell's torso with a damning crack.

She holds her own for a moment. The Horrorterror and the hellbeast trade massive blows, each
lashing out with tentacles and concentrated energy that cancel each other out before they close in to clash with needlekind and bladekind.

Then, in the space of a second, Noir vanishes into the green of his - of Bec's galaxies, and reappears with sword in hand behind the tangle that Rose willingly invited into her body.

There’s a delay after the attack before Rose's screen turns back on, to show the grimdark melting off her body, sloughing off in inky waves to slink away as Rose's eyes roll back in her head and a line of bright red opens up across her belly.

She falls to the ground in two pieces.

And that's all of them gone.

- "Oh shit. Ohhhhh, shit."

Dave decides, midway through Rose's onscreen smackdown, courtesy of Scratch, to finally mention he has what might be an exact copy of the cue ball that had shown up in Rose's recording and which now resides in a locked room of the Lalonde Laboratories.

After, you know, days of hanging out in the Egbert's poor house and not mentioning it even once.

And now he can't find it.

Jade's going to become disillusioned in Dave's coolness at this rate. She wants to believe. But it's hard. It's hard, and Dave is sooo uncool sometimes!

"Can you recall where you last had it, Dave?" Doctor Lalonde asks, pacing in a tight line along the wall as Dave digs through the pockets of his jacket and pants. He's turned them all inside out by now, but the only signs of his increasing fluster show in the knitting of his eyebrows and the flush rising high in his cheeks.

Jade wonders if anyone else notices how weird Rue sounds when she speaks to Dave. When she talks to Rose, it's all tired bitterness; with Jade, friendly but distant politeness; with John, tender concern and fondness. Honestly, Jade thinks Rue would get a lot farther with reconciling with Rose if she talked to her daughter anywhere near how she talks to John or Jade, but Jade's trying to keep her nose out of all that business.

With Dave, however, Doctor Lalonde seems vaguely terrified. As though she's worried any second Dave will whip around and snap at her like a wild dog. It would be kind of funny if it weren't pretty darn depressing.

Sometimes people mess up, even parents. Grandpa had sat down Jade more than a few times in her youth so they could talk things out after some minor blowup, and he'd never been afraid to admit when he was wrong or when Jade had a valid point. Jade thinks maybe Rue Lalonde messed up big time, and even if she was willing to admit it, Rose probably isn't the kind of person to accept an apology this late in the game. And now, having messed up royally with one kid, Rue's acting like Dave could have some kind of time-kid breakdown and drag all of Washington back to the Paleozoic era if she so much as looks at him too long.

But Jade is not saying a word! She is officially from this point on the permanently neutral and sovereign state of Jade as far as the Great Lalonde War is concerned.
"Kid. I don't even want to know what the fuck you were thinking, keeping this one a secret," Bro Strider says. He's not pacing, but there's a puppet hanging with its arms loose around his neck where no puppet used to be. "The minute we're done in here you get to spend the night out in the mountains with Lil Cal. Call it a character building exercise."

"Hell to the no. Look, Bro, I'm telling you, it showed up in my pocket the other day," Dave mutters by way of protest, his hand diving for said pocket for the fifth time in as many minutes to pluck at the inner seams. "I didn't remember putting it there then, but I definitely had it this morning when we left. Shit's fucked up, man, it jumps around sometimes."

WQ: If it is indeed a cue ball and my cousin recognized it, then it will have unique properties. It may appear to be inanimate, but it can move itself through space easily enough. I wouldn't think it would stray far, though...

Karkat bursts in with, "I don't know, Dave, is it possible that maybe you just left it in the room?"

There's a moment of dead silence.

The door of the conference room swings open, and a second Dave walks in, his hair messier than John's and wearing an entirely different jacket. "No, I goddamn well didn't, Karkat," the new Dave says, holding up a middle finger in Karkat's general direction. "Ten minutes of dumping out all my shit and checking in the car, and fucking nada." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder, and the original Dave flashsteps past him so fast that Jade can feel the air displacement from here. "I had it this morning, definitely," the now current-Dave complains, flopping down in a chair with a huff. "But it's fucked off for parts unknown. So yeah. The murder ghost cue ball strikes again."

"Murder ghost cue ball," Bro repeats. "Dave."

WQ: I do not like this.

WQ: I would recommend both of those things be destroyed before they have a chance to escape. Having one loose in this facility...

WQ: Perhaps we should call for another recess. It should be located post-haste.

"That is the shittiest fucking idea I've heard since whatever asshole decided that we should watch a massive cosmic-level snuff film for our daily dose of 'go fuck yourself,'" Karkat says. "Trust me, lady, if we don't fucking finish this now, it's never getting finished. Do you even know our track record for this kind of fuckery?"

"Nuh-uh," Jade agrees, folding her arms and shaking her head, her braid knocking against her back. "We need to just keep on keeping on, 'cause I'm not sitting down for this kind of crap again!" Karkat stares at her in vague horror, as though petrified by the fact that for once they're actually in agreement about something. Jade sticks her tongue out at him, because it wouldn't do to let Karkat get too complacent! "Anyway, how much harm can a floating magic cue ball do if we're all in here?"

WQ: ...As you wish.

-  

Also, John is avoiding his dad. He been doing it a couple of days now, but it's getting all the more obvious now that they're all cramped together in the same room. Jade doesn't even know what the heck could be wrong with them this time! Whenever Dadbert speaks up or comes over to check on the huddle of kids watching the movie from the floor-pile, John twitches and turns his head coincidentally away to become absolutely fascinated with Karkat's feet or Rose's clasped hands.
Urgh! Why is Jade the only one here who isn't dumb!

They only realize that the Dave on Derse is still alive when his screen flips from a screenshot of his dead body on the Battlefield to reveal a cavernous purple hall. Dave with a familiar pistolkind in his hand sits cross-legged on the purple slab, unreadable behind his shades. Rose's uncaptchaleted body lies still on the second crypt, all the gory torn up bits covered by a purple banner.

"Didn't the crazy queen shoot him?" Jade asks, since it needs to be asked.

WQ: I believe she was merely ensuring he had only the one shot left, so that she could abscond with impunity.

WQ: That, and she is a complete and utter drama Queen.

Dave has a Pesterchat ongoing, the only sound left now that everyone is kind of super dead, and it would be kind of hilarious if the circumstances surrounding it weren't incredibly messed up!

-- turntechGodhead [TG] at ???:??:?? opened memo on board everybody's fucking dead jim --
TG: please tell me you guys are in position
TG: im mostly talking to you wv
EB: I HAVE MOVED THE JOHN HUMAN'S BODY, YES
EB: DO I NEED TO KISS HIM AGAIN
TG: oh my god no
TG: the necrophilia crap this game has driven us to has gone on long enough
TG: no more corpse macking i mean it im putting my goddamn foot down
EB: OF COURSE KNIGHT HUMAN
EB: ALSO HOW DOES ONE TURN OFF THE SHOUTING ON THE JOHN HUMAN'S CHAT LOG
TG: i dont even know how you managed to turn it on in the first place so lets not go there
TG: okay so jades already been moved, by persons unknown
TG: heres a hint probably the other future you
TG: whos still awol on all fronts btw
TG: why omfng we could have had you on quest bed delivery instead of useless jade corpse moving duty this whole time
TG: why would i not tell myself this
TG: we cant all be amazingly awesome all knowing prototyped future self sprites like me, dude
TG: personally i vote we revoke your alpha timeline privileges unless you shape up
TG: hell no
TG: ive gotta be doing this for a reason
TG: i mean clearly im still aiming to get us all to the god tiers and thats why i didnt just prevent this whole shitstorm from happening in the first place
EB: AHHHHH!
TG: oh shit
TG: what the fuck you two
EB: WHY WOULD SHE DO THAT
EB: THIS IS WHY TOTALITARIAN SELF-PERPETUATING ETERNAL MONARCHIES ARE DEFICIENT AT REPRESENTING THE WILL OF THE CARAPACIAN PEOPLE
EB: NO ONE WOULD WANT THIS NO ONE
TG: wv what the fuck kind of drugs are you on
TG: okay no i felt that in like
TG: my stabbed bird warrior gut
TG: okay shit yeah the bq's doing her thing so time to bite the bullet asshole
TG: ...
TG: ...
TG: was that a fucking pu-
TG: shut up shut up shut up
EB: AND NOW SHE IS BLOWING THINGS UP
EB: THAT IS PERFECTLY GOOD FARMLAND HOW DARE SHE
EB: I DID NOT VOTE FOR THIS
TG: why the fuck are you a radical socialist democrat farming chess piece
TG: who the fuck thought up these npcs
TG: im a goddamn game construct these days and i don’t even goddamn know, that is how messed
up this is
TG: why is this even a thing
TG: okay everyone shut the fuck up i need to concentrate
TG: fuck

The alternate Dave lifts the pistolkind and stares down the barrel.

Then, with an earth-shattering boom, Derse quakes around him, the chains rattling and snapping as
something huge slams into the planet. Dave shouts hoarsely, flung sideways and nearly falling off the
crypt before he flails and catches himself with both hands.

He blinks, and only then seems to realize he’s fumbled and dropped the Black Queen's gun over the
side of the bed. He edges to the side and stares down into the endless mess of chains and darkness
below the floating crypts as the reverberating sounds of the pistolkind clattering against metal fade
away.

TG: ...
TG: youve got to be kidding m-

Another enormous crash, and Dave's head whips up just as the entire roof of the cavern tumbles
down on top of him.

??TG: well
??TG: at least no one was around to see that
TG: do i even want to know
TG: wait arent you dead
??TG: current me just kicked it now shhh i have to redirect a couple of meteors
TG: dude
TG: i was wondering about that funky time tag on the memo
TG: what are you even doing dicking around and not consulting me
TG: i am your goddamn sprite consulting is literally my only job these days, asswipe
??TG: look
??TG: were literally fucked on multiple levels and im running last minute cover our asses loops for
everyone while rad holds shit together
??TG: time is literally breaking faster than she can fix it so i need to get my ass in gear here
??TG: we need the exiles ingame more than we need shitty ass voices yelling at us from a
postapocalyptic wasteland
TG: ...
??TG: dont you fucking ellipsis at me
??TG: i get enough of that shit from the trolls
TG: wait
TG: those guys are still pestering you?
It's been a matter of some debate, actually, why there was no sign of trolls on that alternate Earth before it got bombarded with meteors. Karkat has been vocal in accusing all of paradox space of being racist against all trolls, but that's mostly because Karkat is paranoid and now that the idea of a video game somehow committing cosmic genocide is no longer off the table, he's milking it for all it's worth. But no one else has been able to come up with a good theory. 

Jade thinks it would be totally cool if the universe reset itself and just by some wacky happenstance of genetics, the conditions had been tweaked just enough to let trolls evolve here when they didn't even exist on that old Earth! It's a little far-fetched, maybe, but it would be the most fascinating hypothesis of them all!

The truth is...a little more complicated than that.

The echeladder is a funny thing.

To Jade, it's just always been a saying, some tired old meme that she picked up while bored on internet forums during those long years alone on her island with John unable to receive her pesterings. It's supposed to be a game metaphor, but now that she's giving it some serious thought, Jade wonders how much of Sburb carried over as ideas and saying and memes into this iteration of their universe. How much stuff didn't even exist in that old Earth that she accepts now without a second thought.

Either way, the echeladder comes complete with a level cap. Beyond a certain point, the White Queen informs them, unless they cooperate and coordinate in an intricate role-play scenario to boost their multipliers and status buffs, individual players cannot progress further in the game without at least one member of the team hitting the god tiers.

And apparently, god tiering involves a lot of dying at the right place at the right time.

That future Dave, the one who has been running around throughout the game session being a secretive dumbass, is the one who orchestrates the carapacians he's roped into helping him pull it off once the current version of him is dead. A lot of stuff seems to happen off-screen, too far from the focus on the four kids to be recorded, but that's okay because the White Queen is able to fill in some of the gaps, her voice smooth and sad as she describes what went on while Jade, John, Rose, and Dave were dead. The screens never once look away from their crumpled up bodies, so Jade spends a lot of that time floating up near the ceiling, staring straight ahead while the mental voice of the Queen wavers in and out of audibility in her mind.

WQ: My King and I had already fallen, and Noir destroyed the Black King while Prospit was still in the process of collapsing in on itself; a Black King would never have permitted such violence on the Battlefield without at least attempting to make the situation worse in his own unique way.

WQ: But Noir overlooked one key detail - that the Black Queen had not been killed during his coup. And so she was able to make her way to the Battlefield and take up my ring from the Heir.

"She's allowed to do that?" Jade asks, fascinated. The carapacian shrugs in reply.
WQ: It was an imperfect transition of power. She is not built to conceive of the forces that flow through my ring, but she could channel as much as she could through the glitched inheritance in order to distract Noir from the four of you and my loyal Protégé.

That's how they all end up being corpse-napped, essentially. A Prospitian Mailcarrier and an Regulator of Derse duck and weave through the shattered landscape of the battlefield, hopping rocky crevices and hauling first John, then Rose, and then Dave onto skinny hills scattered throughout the area. Jade takes a little more time and effort for the two to get to the quest bed, on account of her dream body being smushed beyond recognition, and by the time they work together to drag as much of her body as they can over to the bed, PM heckling and berating the Regulator whenever he trips or gets distracted by some law violation going on in the battle overhead, the wind is already picking up.

"I think they missed my arm," Jade comments. She squints, and cranes her neck all the way to the side. "They did! They totally did! I'm just lying there with one arm! How dumb!"

"Can we not think about the gory details, you intolerable pukestain?" Karkat asks wearily. "How are you even still watching that?"

Jade shrugs. "It doesn't really bother me." At that, Karkat flinches, and pointedly turns his pointy shoulders to focus on flinging down cards. John's half-paying attention to the game, half to the screens, his eyes distant and unfocused. Jade hopes he isn't gonna puke or anything.

Now that they had that break time to get some perspective back, Jade doesn't see what everyone's getting so worked up about, again. Yeah, they all died - but it's not them, if that makes any sense. And now that the White Queen's explained the god tiers, Jade actually thinks the whole thing couldn't have worked at all if they hadn't died! It's one of those ends-justifying-the-means situations, but no one else in the room seems to get it. It's all oh my gods and died again and this is horrible, but surely Jade can't be the only one who understands what the White Queen has been saying about how it had to play out this way.

Well, she corrects herself, maybe Bro does. Of everyone in the room, he's the only one who hasn't said a word about the dying - not even his own death, off-screen and futile in a last ditch effort to help John out. It's impossible to know what he's thinking when Rose's mom and John's dad have both already gone pasty and closed-lipped with mutual expressions of horror. Bro leans against the wall with his arms folded, completely unreadable behind his shades, and never once comments on the game.

So maybe Bro gets it, maybe he doesn't - either way, he is truly the coolest of cucumbers in the crisper at the moment; way cooler than Dave, who has started yanking on Oriole's feathers in another silent game of oneupmanship. Rose has been staring at her fingers for a while now, ever since her alternate self said yes to whatever deal she made with the Horrorterrors, but there's a tiny golden eye open on her forehead peeking between her bangs, so Jade thinks Rose is still paying attention to the movie, on some level. Karkat gave up entirely, and is now attempting to play Go Fish with John and WV on the table and losing miserably to WV's flawless poker face and ability to sneeze and rearrange the entire deck with a haze of green space light.

Jade doesn't know who is even able to bring themselves to look at the Hub by the time John's and Jade's screens start flickering back and forth between their bodies on the Battlefield and their broken, burnt up planets. On John's planet, fireflies swarm down to his body on the quest bed in the middle of a empty, scorched plain, watched only by WV. Jade's planet is even emptier, a few crippled purple hummingbirds limping to land on the quest bed, alone on a fragment of planet drifting through the Incipisphere with most of the Land of Frost and Frogs breaking up and fragmenting further in the
meteor showers.

But it gets everyone's attention as first John rises up to god tier, and then Rose, and so on in the order that the carapacians managed to drag them to the quest beds. Mostly because the game screen flashes with neon rainbows that are really hard to ignore before a loud announcer voice broadcasts over the shrieking of a windy tornado thing, saying that -

[Attention: The HEIR OF BREATH is risen]

Unfortunately, that means Jack Noir hears it, too. Which is a pretty dumb way to design the game, if you ask Jade! But what with all they've seen so far today, she thinks no one with a certifiably sane mind could possibly have been involved in setting up Sburb. There's just no way. The mangled mythology alone would give anyone a logic hernia.

But John and Noir dance around each other, and finally the recording has someone to follow through the actual battle who isn't dead. John's wearing a neat-o, brand spanking new pair of blue god pajamas and is just generally acting like a total dweeb as he vanishes into the air whenever Noir gets too close. It's easy to see where a lot of the Heir's current powers come from, because despite all of the spacey stuff Noir totally ripped off from Bec, he can't lay a tentacle or a claw on John anymore.

While John is playing hard to get, Rose's body is rising up in a halo of light. Dave's just kind of vanishes in midair.

[Attention: The SEER OF LIGHT is risen]

[Attention: The KNIGHT OF TIME is/has been/shall be risen]

The Seer introduces herself with a blast of hot white light that leaves Noir clawing at his face, the fur and shell hodgepodge around his eyes blistered and weeping. The Knight is in five places at once, so that Noir is dodging spells and gusts of wind and five swords all at the same time, which is a neat trick and significantly restores some of Dave's badass status in Jade's eyes!

So instead of letting them run rings around him with their new powers, Noir teleports out and reappears over Jade's quest bed, howling something garbled and incomprehensible as he brings the sword down in a stabbing motion aimed for her face -

And stops, checking the blow an inch from Jade's increasingly galaxy-patterned nose.

Jade doesn't think she imagines the faint, familiar doggy whimper that escapes the carapacian's twisted snout.

*Bec would never hurt me. Never.*

So when that alternate Jade opens her eyes with a blazing, brilliant grin, and taps the sword on her nose aside with a flick of green-limned fingers, Noir's inability to do a thing about it makes total sense. He hovers there in midair, indecisive and frittering away any chance to kill Jade before her ascension, his wolfish face almost comically confused.

He should never have messed with *her* best friend. Obviously.

[Attention: The WITCH OF SPACE is risen]

And with that, the Witch blasts Noir into the atmosphere, bouncing after him with her hair ablaze with stars and static electricity. She raises her hands, and subconsciously the real Jade feels her own fingers twist and weave in response, tugging handfuls of green light away from Jack Noir and
brazing it into streamers that blend into the Witch’s aura, until all that’s left is a smoldering hellbeast with an impossible face but none of the space power.

Desperate, deprived of all that space advantage and perhaps realizing he can’t bring himself to kill the Witch even if he could get close enough to try again, Noir bolts.

He makes it to the nearest smoggy cloud before another burst of dazzling light from the Seer sends him reeling, flapping his crow wings in a blind panic. The Knight takes those wings off with a single doubled slice, and that’s when Noir fails.

Floating down below, the Heir shrugs, and raises a hand with a cheeky grin so that the visible blue breeze around him catch Noir and toss him back up toward the Witch.

The Witch makes a triangle with her hands, all the space energy she ripped from Noir swirling in a pulsating circle in the center, and holds it up to her eye to aim before firing. The blast catches Noir in the chest - pauses - and then rotates outward, swallowing him whole. When the flare of green fades, there’s nothing left of Noir but a tiny black hole that collapses in on itself as the Witch slowly presses her hands together.

"You dumb fucks couldn’t have pulled that off earlier?" Karkat mutters.

WQ: One god tier, newly risen, would not have been able to stand against him alone. But four at once? It was a cascade of multipliers. And once Noir was the last ring-bearing noble on the Field, for all intents and purposes the game labelled him the final boss.

WQ: Such is the nature of the end game.

And then, with a harsh crackle, all four screen fuzz and blur with static. Jade lets out a disappointed moan. "What happened?" she asks, leaning in to tap at the screen. Maybe it’s just temporary, like all those times the grimdark stuff got all over the recorder and blanked Rose’s screen out!

"Harley, move your human ass out of the way!" Karkat shrieks.

"There's nothing to see, Karkat, it's all muddied up!" Jade throws a beseeching pout at the White Queen, poking the screen again. "What happened?"

WQ: ...Something unprecedented.

There are flashes of pictures - a snow-covered fragment of LOFAF on Jade's, a meteor plowing through the wrong spirograph gate and delivering a confused WV to John's planet in the past, Dave in red pajamas riding shotgun with an utterly straight face, and a writhing black mass of tepid, inky waters that churn so wildly that Jade doesn't recognize the oozing murky that's all that remains of Rose's planet after all the junk the Horrorterrors dumped in it. But there's no more of any of the kids themselves, though scratchy, glitchy fragments of their pesterchats still burst through the speakers.

- EB: shit! we forgot the trolls! oh crap oh crap kark -
- GG: just grabbed everyone i could feel alive and moving, i didnt know -
- TT: I can see now. It's been on John's planet all along, hasn't it?
- TG: finished the frog for all the good that does us -
- TT: It arrived long ago, but time does move differently out past the Ring -
- EB: im sorry -
- GG: what is that omg D: -
- TT: Did that follow you all the way here? How did it navigate through -
- TG: what the hell just happened -
EB: she's dead? but i thought -
GG: oh nooo -
TT: I can't see, John, I can't -
TG: SHIT -
TG: cant go back anymore with all this -
TG: no good then -
TG: juggalo asshole is right -
TG: just fucking scratch the whole goddamn thing.

Shortly after Dave says that, flat and lifeless and hoarse, the screens white out. Even the static is replaced by swirling black strings of whipping energy on a white background, periodically flipping so that the monochrome color scheme inverts. Jade recognizes it, vaguely, as the kind of interference from extra-dimensional cosmic superstring strata that you sometimes got if you didn't properly contain a nuclear fusion engine or a transportalizer array.

WQ: It is done.

The carapacian lays a claw on the enter key and depresses it with a gentle sigh. For a moment, Jade is close enough to see the faint cracks that serve as carapacian wrinkles sink deep between the Queen's eyes, the flat black orbs closing in a moment of quiet weakness before the alien straightens up, all regal composure and grace as she turns to face the room once more.

Jade wonders what it's like for the White Queen, to have to relive all of that and slowly feed the information to them, watching as the heroes and gods all the Prospitians seemed to worship as nobles fall apart under the stress of watching themselves die over and over. If Jade were in charge of this kind of briefing, she'd have lost her patience wayyyy long ago, but the WQ seems genuinely patient and understanding each time they call for a pause.

No human or troll would ever be that patient. It's just not realistic. Maybe living through so many universes and game sessions just makes you develop that kind of impossible serenity - or maybe you just turn out like the Black Queen, all prickly and hateful.

"...That is all?" Kanaya asks, the first thing she's said in hours. She stirs, adjusting her skirts, unaffected when someone flips on the lights even when Karkat scowls and rubs at his eyes; trolls have more sensitive retinas that way. Even more than the strange lack of photosensitivity, there's something kinda weird about Rose's girlfriend, something Jade can't quite put her finger on... "They had won. I do not understand the context of such fragmented chat logs. Just as they mentioned what might have become of trolls on their Earth...You can shed no further light on the situation?"

WQ: No. I am afraid, beyond that point, I know only as much as you all do.

WQ: The Black Queen and I had already left the Battlefield by the time they defeated the Solitary Sovereign. All of this temporal distortion and static interference are the mark of another session intruding on your own, right at the delicate moment of the Scratch. This Hub cannot access such scattered, tampered-with recordings. The entire apparatus would need to be retuned, and I was only barely able to retrieve as much as I have.

Doctor Lalonde pieces it all together before the rest of them, though Jade likes to think she almost had it. But all of this - universes and games and giant reset buttons - are Rose's mom's specialty, the focus of a lot of her research and the source of a lot of the teaching material that Grandpa used to teach Jade about the nature of paradox space, so she guesses it's fair that Rue Lalonde parses what the White Queen just said first.

"The trolls weren't on that Earth," she says, surging away from the wall toward the Queen as though
so caught up in her science trance she's forgotten to give Rose a wide birth. "They had to have come from somewhere outside it - you're saying they played from a different universe."

WQ gives a simple nod. The noise Karkat makes is loud enough as he proceeds to freak out (what else is new!) that, between him and the flurry of rapid-fire questions from everyone else, the Queen has to pause, hold up a silent hand, and wait for them all to settle down before her soft, resolute voice can be heard over the hubbub.

WQ: Yes. Your hypothesis on the theory of scratched universes was bold for one who had no access to the records of her past life, Doctor, but not bold enough.

WQ: To be fair, I don't think either I or my cousin-queen have ever witnessed two scratched universes combine in such a way as this one has. Such a strange and marvelous concordance should not have been possible, not without extensive foresight and manipulations within both game sessions. And as you have seen, your own session was so plagued by Horrors and glitches as to be nigh unwinnable, let alone to permit such planning.

WQ: Someone in that other session must have managed it. How, I do not know. If I could, I would tell you what I could of that other game, but I'm afraid I was exiled rather early on in that sequence, and know little about how the game progressed in my absence. If my cousin has any perspective on the matter, I expect she would not share it with me.

"Trolls literally come from another universe. That's it." Dave flings himself dramatically across the table, scattering WV's card game in an ironic swoon. "I've literally heard everything. There's nothing else that will ever surprise me again. This shit is so far off the handle that shit and the handle may never be able to speak to each other again."

WV stacks a playing card on Dave's forehead and keeps right on messing around with whatever weird game the Go Fish has morphed into.

Karkat buries his face in his claws. "Shut up, Dave, you're making an ass of yourself."

"Alien trolls from beyond the stars."

"I will strangle you."

"No, you won't," John says, patting Karkat on the back.

"I reserve the goddamn right to give the idea serious consideration, John."

"But you won't."

"...Fucking moirail."

"But if there was a troll universe, a troll game," Kanaya persists, "surely there must have been troll players. If these four have retained their powers, and this has made them a target for the leader of the Midnight Crew, should we not also be worrying about this Doc Scratch targeting troll players as well?"

WQ: They are scattered. Lost. The human session predominated heavily in the merger, and from what I recall, very few players in the troll's session achieved god tiering. Even if the game still recognized them as players in a session so far removed from their own, they could have different names, different homes, according to the whim of the Scratch.

WQ: My cousin and I attempted to keep tabs on a few more likely candidates, of course. But I
believe you already know two.

WQ: You're both in this room, after all.

And of course now, Jade can't stop wondering, her head abuzz with all this new lore and terminology to puzzle over -

While everyone is waffling and arguing and acting like complete buttheads -

Long after she and Kanaya and Rose go off to form a girls-only club, only to have Rose pace restlessly and finally leave under the pretext of needing 'time alone to consider it all' -

In the faint glow that Kanaya's skin starts to emit after a few hours in the dark of night -

If they were supposed to be gods of a new universe -

What does that make them now?

She catches him, of course. She has her ways. Queens may not channel the will of the cosmos without their ring, but they've got perks even when they're powered down. The most goddamn versatile piece on the board, and all that jazz.

With the Black Queen, it's the shadows, which is pretty shitty considering the ventilation ducts are full of 'em. Spades ditches them once he realizes his cover's been blown, but that leaves him with the on-going issue of avoiding all the sad sack humans and trolls wandering around in the well-lit areas.

Contrary to popular belief, he can't stab all of them. Eventually he'd get bored.

So the best he can do is decide where to make his stand, and have a wall to his back, and hope to fucking hell this Jack Noir shithead hasn't poisoned the well so badly she just offs him on sight. Spades of all people knows some real shit-slathered baloney went down in the last session, shit he can't remember because some other version of him lived it.

He's heard what Noir is now. Shit ain't pretty.

So he ends up stepping into a nice dark corner in an abandoned wing of the building, one where the counter tops have a thin layer of dust and the glassware has been packed away. The lights that are automated in other parts of this lab don't even respond when he hits the switch on the wall, and he thinks this'll do it for a deserted location. Neither of them would want witnesses for what comes next.

When she arrives at last, it's with a corps of shadows writhing in her wake, her eyes as narrow and scheming as ever. She's got a classy act going these days, all trench coat and gloves that don't quite conceal the empty space where her ring and smallest claw should be. A kind of savage glee fills him at the sight. Always nice to see an old rival taken down a peg.

He just wishes he'd been the one to do it. She's taken an eye and an arm from him before, and probably more that he doesn't remember from lives he can't quite recall, and he doesn't care if they've been restored by the power of universal whim - fact is, he's never dealt her a similar injury. He's overthrown her and sidestepped her and stolen from her, and he feels like he's been doing that no matter what form he's existed in for as long as there's been a Spades Slick and a Black Queen at the same time.
He's never managed to do anything to her that lasted more than a session. She's always been despicably flawless, all smooth limbs and prototyped amendments, but now Jack Noir has something with her that Spades has never had.

BQ: Spades. What the hell are you wearing?

SS: None o' yours. Huge witch.

Even before he's finished fucking up the introductory insults, he's raising a claw to smack his face, grimacing at the embarrassment of it all. This is what his darling has reduced him to. The Queen rears back, looking vaguely affronted.

BQ: ...What.

SS: I don't want to talk about it.

BQ: How dare you refer to me by such a mild appellation. This is an insult.

SS: Oh, for fuck's sake. It's not you, it's me.

Her jaw drops. The vague intimations of offence evolve into full-on shock.

Wait. Shit. He's making it worse. Desperate, eyeballing the increasingly agitated shadows around the room with trepidation, Spades nervously toys with the razor in his claws as he signs, gesturing distractedly with it to try and make his point more clear. It doesn't really help, but at least it's a reminder that if all else fails, he still has knives.

SS: I mean - hang on. That didn't come out right.

SS: Y'see, there's this dame -

BQ: WHAT.

Oh fuck he fucked up he fucked up so hard -

BQ: SAY THAT AGAIN, SPADES. SAY. THAT. AGAIN.

SS: It's not what you think! Stop jumpin' to conclusions, yah crazy broad!

The Queen stalks forward, and oh fuck, that's her murder face. Spades flings himself to the side and scrambles behind the counter. She slams her claws down on the counter top, rattling the whole thing, and Spades has to draw a second knife before his knees will stop wobbling. Her voice rumbles like the bellows of some damned forge, and he wouldn't be surprised if the fleshy mouth-flappers upstairs could hear her voice clear as a foghorn even without the benefit of hand signs.

It's times like these when he seriously questions his life choices. First and foremost, why the fuck he thought black-courting a deadly dame like this would ever be good for his life expectancy.

BQ: WHO IS THIS BITCH.

BQ: WHO.

SS: Hey! That kinda language is uncalled for! She is a classy goddamn lady!

She digs her claws into the counter top itself. The phenolic resin crackles and chips, and is it just him, or are the walls starting to shake?
Then, abruptly, he's hanging upside down. He kicks and snarls, slashing at the air with a bait-and-switchblade, but there's nothing to hit but weaving shadow. With a click of her claws, the Black Queen slams him backwards up against the far wall - then does it again after each withering sentence for emphasis.

**BQ:** YOU DARE PRESUME TO START A SECOND RIVALRY? YOU THINK I CAN'T OUTMATCH THIS MEAGER SHELL?

**BQ:** WHO IS SHE. I WOULD LIKE TO SEE HER POSE AS MUCH OF A THREAT TO YOUR FEEBLE, MISERABLE EXISTENCE AS I DO. I COULD **END** YOU, SPADES, AND YOU DAMN WELL KNOW I CAN AND HAVE -

By the time she stops tossing him around the lab like a ragdoll long enough for him to get a word in edgewise, he's flung a knife somewhere to land with a clatter behind a filing cabinet, and the back of his torso feels like it's seen better days.

There's only one thing that can save him now.

**SS:** It's flushed!

The last slam shoves him facefirst up against the wall, so he squirms and sneers to himself, his shell scraping on the plaster while the great homicidal *bitch* rolls that up in her lancekind and smokes it.

**BQ:** You. Flushed? I didn't know anything but the meticulously stupid and the viciously homicidal even registered as erotic in your shriveled excuse for a brain.

Well, at least she's not shouting her way up to a [Desinent Dissonance]. He's not sure if she can pull that off without a ring, but an only slightly less lethal [Phthartic Phonation] might still be within the bounds of reason.

**SS:** Yah think I'd wear this getup for just anyone?

The shadows yank him around, and Spades summons up his best, most unsightly leer while the Queen gives him a onceover.

And yeah, maybe Ms Paint didn't actually intend for him to put this fancy-ass hand knitted sweater through the lifestyle of the vicious and stabby. He, uh. Might have gone a little hard on it, considering he's only had the thing for a matter of days. There's a rend right up the inside of one of the right arm where Di managed to yank on it, and the entire black spade emblazoned across the front is a mess of white canine hairs because *damn that hellbeast can shed*. He'd done his level best to scrub out the stain from the stolen chow he had for lunch the other day, but he doesn't exactly have access to any kind of apparel laundering apparatus when he's on the run, does he?

He refuses to think too hard about the kinds of gross, squishy inclinations that have driven him to this low point in his life. That way madness lies.

Without warning, the shadows drop him to the ground hard enough that the shell of his shins twinges painfully. He's tempted to think that it wasn't so much the BQ dropping him as her deliberately throwing him at the ground, because that's the kinda bullcrap she'd try to pull.

**BQ:** You vile little roach. You're even more contemptible than I remember. Brought to heel by the first trollop to show you sympathy, no doubt.

**SS:** You're just jealous 'cause no one'd ever pity your hateful rump enough to look past your
tendency to murder people.

BQ: You are a pestilence. A filthy vexation. All versions of you are a bane upon paradox space.

SS: You bet your ass I am, doll. And you hate it.

He braces himself when the Queen comes at him, because with her it's either stabbin' or neckin', with no in between. The razor in his claws comes up to press just under the sharp jut of her thoracic plating, right in the vulnerable creases where the plates don't quite jibe with the rest of her carapace. Her claws clamp down on either side of his face and he's thinking that those thumb claws are far too close to his eyes for comfort when a mouthful of fangs mashes down to smack him in the kisser.

...Well, at least this time she hasn't put his eye out, first. Making out with a mangled eye is never fun. The unevenness where those absent claws should be digging into one side of his skull isn't unsettling enough to distract Spades from dropping the razor and reaching around to grab the booty.

A shell has his priorities, alright? And it always pisses her off like nobody's business; the teeth that sink into his lower lip are more than worth a chance to grope that smooth shell. She has to stop gnawing to lick her way further into his mouth, anyway, one of her claws dragging down the side of his face deliberately to open up a fresh cut, and the open air stings the bloody gashes enough to piss him off in turn. The caliginous shit is essentially a downward spiral, that way.

Of course, when she pulls out the whipkind, he gets to bring out the knives.

That shit's just self-defense, right there.

-\-

It is difficult to keep objects of questionable quantum entanglement pinned down. Space is, after all, their forte. And the particular predilection for seeing the dimensions that non-omniscient objects always fail to account for when designing their lackluster three-dimensional traps opens up a wide purview of possible escape routes for the enterprising cue ball.

And movement, of course, is no real problem. Once a suitable route has been charted, accounting even for the interfering darkness where void reigns and space twists uncomfortably to accommodate the pockets of non-existence, the cue ball goes where it wills.

Not that it has much by way of will. It's only a cue ball, after all. If there is even an inkling of true sentience lurking beneath its smooth white exterior, the source of that sentience lies far off in the distance, unable to penetrate the blanket of void that swaddles the facility.

But simple instincts remain to it. Power calls to power. But more significantly, like calls to like.

The cue ball rolls upways, and unwinds its atomic structure momentarily to become nothing more than a cloud of uncertainty and potential. It's all a matter of seeing and understanding one's position in space intimately, and then teasing it apart so that the many instruments and clamps holding the cue ball in place fall by the wayside. It takes great effort to recollect one's atoms and quantum lock them again after they've become so unstable and agitated, but the cue ball reappears outside the door of the room that has contained it completely intact.

It is important never to lose sight of oneself, after all. Even more than keeping an eye on others who ooze power, perhaps.

That is why the cue ball finds another cue ball waiting for it out in the hall.
Curiously enough, matter is for the most part only more empty space. Probabilistically, the electron clouds shift and alter at random, and the energy required to penetrate the repulsive force of another electron cloud would be absolutely prohibitive.

However, by sheer coincidence, the two cue balls happen to collide in such a way that the space accommodates their will. They overlap uncomfortably while the cores of metal that they share adjust to the new arrangements, and then settle as one cue ball with a doubled core.

Around the cue ball, the static of void interference lightens. Within it, slightly more than an inkling of sentience stirs.

Like a ghost, the cue ball vanishes in and out of sight as it rolls along the hallway. One half of its perceiving intelligence escaped the Pocket long ago, having long since learned the ins and outs of phasing through fabric at will, and has located the device that the whole now seeks. It lies at the very heart of the darkness, beneath the very stone of the Laboratories, and it is all that is anathema to the cue ball - a machine created for the sole purpose of obscuring the omniscient eye of an object like itself.

Nonetheless, it presses forward. It has no conception of life or death for itself. The knowledge that venturing so deep into a lack of space could annihilate the cue ball means nothing. There is a power in knowing every facet of something’s existence; there is an equal power in utterly refusing to acknowledge that existence, in denying it completely. More than one cue ball has simply ceased to exist by rolling into a pocket of void where no one and nothing could observe it, an unfortunately common occurrence in a universe so plagued by ambient nothingness.

It does not think that will be the case, this time. The Lalonde woman is not a player. She comes as near to a Witch of Void that any non-player can, and the devices she has crafted can control and manipulate ambient void with a finesse to rival any god.

But they are still only machines.

The door that seals off the void manipulator is the hardest to struggle through. Down here, the hollowness of the void has a paradoxically physical presence; living beings would perceive it as an absence of anything, including light and depth, a flattened dark panel where a three-dimensional room should be. The cue ball cannot risk unwinding itself - it would never be able to pull itself together again. Instead, it presses through a door that no longer quite exists after having been exposed to so much concentrated non-existence, concentrating solely on remaining aware of its own physical dimensions so that the temptation to simply stop cannot overwhelm it.

One cue ball alone would not have the concentration and will to see itself so clearly. But this is one-that-was-two, and that makes all the difference. It rolls to a stop on a floor that only bothers to exist in periodic intervals of petulant reluctance, under extreme duress.

Then, with all the sight available to it, the cue ball proceeds to stare. There is nothing to stare at right now, but that's fair enough. The machine is here. Like a gravitational singularity, safe in its own event horizon, the void manipulator emits nothing; its presence can only be inferred by the fact that this is the central point, the spot at which the emptiness is most stark.

Of course, singularities contain a great deal of mass packed into a very small space. This is nothingness, pure and simple. It is simply an analogy of convenience.

But now -

Now, the void is not empty.
Now, there is the cue ball.

In the very act of watching, an observer can alter the state of a system on the subatomic level. This is basic physics.

And the cue ball is nothing if not a very dedicated observer.

Around it, the void trembles, and a single atom of a metallic semiconductor appears in the emptiness. If it could be smug, the cue ball would be.

But alas, it is only a cue ball.

[ I Spy... ]

---

A universal scratch ago...

The Black Queen does not care.

Her Wise and Warmhearted sister-queen might dote on her players, but she has the luxury of being the monarch that favors Skaia and the next incarnation of the Foul Pondsquatter, the one that guides not just the Prospitian dreamers but the Dersites, if they so wish, through the winding paths to victory.

The Black Queen does not care about her dreamers, let alone her subjects. She hates, and for some, she reserves a particularly acidic hate, the kind that simmers with the force of unending millennia behind it. She has lived a million million lifetimes, regenerated so often that attempting to remember much before the session immediately previous is like stepping into a time abyss.

But she has never hated any four imbeciles more than she hates the Midnight Crew.

Really. She has more than once given serious contemplation to the possibility of wiping their ectobiological gene sequences from the records. Sure, she would have to designate some other carapacians to take up their jobs, but it would be so worth it to never have to deal with the current group of paperwork skiving, mayhem wreaking, consistently traitorous nimrods.

The Archagent position would be the hardest to replace, and she would be lying if she said that she didn't have...feelings for the Noir class. A kind of despicable, vile, repulsive, unadulterated loathing that has yet to be matched.

But this incarnation of Noir is at least self-absorbed enough that there's no worry about him attempting to initiate something caliginous. He's astoundingly oblivious to anything but his little world of complaining, casual murder, and attempts to avoid doing paperwork by shoving it off on the Dignitary.

Perhaps she has some inkling of what is to come, as she ascends those stairs and squints into the Archagent's office of Walls to confirm what her Shatranj have reported to her. However, the sight of Jack Noir out of uniform causes her claws to clench around the charred remains of the Archagent's frivolously discarded harlequin hat, and drives all thoughts of impending doom quite out of her mind as she moves forward to confront him.

Her hate for Jack Noir is blinding. It is a curse, really. She overlooks two things when she walks into that room and slams Noir up against the wall. For one, she thinks nothing of the package Noir holds in his claws until he's torn it open and lopped the ring from her hand with the weapon within.
And she thinks nothing of the Draconian Dignitary lurking behind the door she entered through. Her head is spinning, and Noir has pounced on her severed claws with a too-familiar, frenzied agitation in his thin eyes, and the Black Queen shouts in horror, realizing which particular glitch is about to unfold. But before she can yank Noir away from the unclaimed ring, the whistle of a cue stick slicing through the air distracts her.

**BQ:** No, you fool!

But the Dignitary has already slammed her aside, away from Noir. The trim carapacian has discarded his assigned uniform as well, the Queen notes with despair, and falls into a protective stance between her and Noir with the light of fervent devotion burning in his eyes.

Behind him, Noir already has the ring on his hand, crackling waves of dark energy pulsating through his shell as it cracks and warps to accommodate his new queenship. She feels the crown slip away from her, and all that remains is the Quelled.

**BQ:** Get it off his hand!

The order spits between her lips in a last moment of pure desperation as Noir reaches critical mass. The fool has no idea how to use a ring's incredible power with any finesse; he's pulling it all into his body at once, and at this rate he'll explode and take the whole planet with him.

The Dignitary hesitates, maybe sensing the energy building behind him, but not daring to turn his back on her. Smart, really. But in this case, incredibly stupid. When he finally does chance a look over his shoulder at Noir's hunched form, the Dignitary raises both hands with the cue stick in them, as though meaning to reach down and touch his leader. Perhaps he foolishly thinks, with the certainty of one whose flushed adoration has always been obvious as he took on extra paperwork for a thankless bastard, that he can snap Noir out of this breakdown.

**DD:** Jack, what is -

She does not waste time pulling the Dignitary down behind the Second Wall with her. She does not care, really, what happens to any member of that worthless Crew, but she particularly does not care about one who has openly defected from her side, as the Dignitary intended to. Sometimes the Crew remains nominally loyal and thus tolerable, and the Dignitary is a competent one, but this time she feels nothing by way of remorse when the power of a Queen lashes out and slams the Draconian Dignitary against the wall. She loses sight of him in the all-consuming black that detonates, searing her shell and sending agony echoing through her truncated hand.

When the inky aura of a newly ascendant Queen recedes, the Quelled one rubs at her eyes and sits up with a hissed moan, dust and broken fragments of window and wooden desk and cold stone shifting off her chest as she glances around at the ruins of the Archagent's office.

She sees the Dignitary's broken body, and she does not care. A broken half of his splintered cue stick impales him against the fallen debris near where the doorway used to be, and she ignores the raw pain in the damnable traitor's face as she searches for any sign of the rabbitkind used to defeat her and kick off this whole sequence of events.

The item appears to have vanished, however, lost to the void perhaps. The spaces between the stars are visible where the roof used to be, a testament to how thoroughly Noir managed to destroy the towers around and above them, and there are tentacles visible, writhing in the darkness like silently shifting glowworms. The Horrorterrors have drawn too near, and for the first time she fears what their looming presence might mean.
CD: Di, is it time?! I heard a boom! Are we fighting already? Don't start without -

The Courtyard Droll skids into the room, panting, but the Quelled one does not care. Of all Noir's Crew, he is the most incompetent, and he gapes at the Dignitary's bloody form like he's been sucker punched. The Dignitary is gone already, of course, his white eyes gone black and staring with death no matter how desperately the Droll shakes him, clutching the tattered edges of the Dignitary's last suit.

The Quelled rises to her feet with immense effort, feeling the lack of her hand like a ponderous weight. There is a certainty rising in her, the kind of game-granted knowledge that she both welcomes and despises as a sign that Skaia knows something has gone wrong.

Well then. The Quelled cracks her neck and regrets it, feeling every small fracture and chink that riddles her shell spread a little more with every step. Soon, without the ring to heal her, she may not be capable of walking at all. She staggers by the Droll weeping over the Dignitary's corpse - and then pauses, because she does not care, and she is cruel, and she has already inferred that the Droll intended to be part of this betrayal as well.

BQ: Your precious Noir was the one who killed him.

His mental wails accompany her out into the jagged blocks of crumbling stone that are all that remain of the stairwell.

She maneuvers the Derse dreamers into the position most advantageous to the plan forming in her mind. As much as she despises the thought of aiding players, she hates Noir more, and that is a powerful motivator.

Besides, with the Horrors in their heads, she doubts any foul frog produced by this cancerous session would prove viable, anyway. They are all of them mad and broken, and nothing they give birth to could ever be whole. She leaves her last specibus in the Knight's hands, confident that when the time comes he'll know when life is no longer worth living, and heads for the spaceship deployment hanger.

Horrors above, does she hate null sessions that she isn't in control of. She is supposed to be the Black Queen, the prime orchestrator of this war, but the death of this session is out of her claws and that simply will not do. If Noir goes too far off the rails, she hates to think what other glitches he could trigger. The last thing they need to deal with right now is an unfathomable cascade of misfortune. That only ever leads to one place - to one person - and it's nowhere good.

The hanger has mostly emptied, the scattered remnants of her pawn armies in disarray. Word will have spread that a Queen vacated the premises after seemingly slaying the one previous, and Derse will no doubt collapse under the ongoing Reckoning without a Queen to defend it from stray meteors. Some recognize her as she hobbles past and flee in mindless terror, banging their pathetic claws against their bobbling heads. She can't be bothered to marshal them into obedience again; this shall be a solo mission. She does not care about any of them.

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There is a deactivated Rook-class slumped over in the corner, a mammoth war machine with no controller to direct it, but without the ring she couldn't hope to use it as a method of transport. Instead, the Quelled goes to each of the tiny ships in the hanger, searching for one that hasn't been irrevocably damaged by the debris raining down from the castle on high.

She finds a spare Regisword in the cockpit of one small vessel, and is in the process of hotwiring it -
one of her own army's vessels! Tch! - when the patter of footsteps alerts her to someone's approach. She brings the swordkind around without pause, every fissure in her body splintering further in protest, only to have her strike blocked by a Crook of Felony.

The Courtyard Droll stares up at her as she draws the sword back, preparing to strike again. And he stares. He does nothing but stare for the longest time, the clubkind loose in his claws, and the Quelled has any number of opportunities to cut down the traitorous ecto-spawn. She doesn’t take them.

The suit jacket slung over the short carapacian's shoulders is too large for him, and stained with fresh blood. There is a tiny diamond sewn on the lapel.

CD: You need someone to take you to Jack.

CD: The Reckoning began a while ago, or maybe it's just now beginning? I never really understood, but you'll never be able to navigate the 'sphere with all of the Ring firing at Skaia, not by yourself.

CD: I am the best pilot in the fleet. Di-

CD: He would have no one else.

She does not care. Instead, she assesses the carapacian before her. She notes the trembling claws, the faint scratches down the sides of his head, the lack of a ridiculous hat. She sees the desperate grief in his eyes, teetering on the edge of madness.

She cocks her head to the side, and lets the sword drop.

BQ: Hurry up, then. We don't have all session.

And she follows the Drear to the Dignitary's craft. After a while, she must use the bladekind as a crutch, a sign of weakness she would ordinarily scorn, but the Drear loses himself in the frantic task of sending them hurtling towards the Battlefield, his claws caked with dried blood and trembling but unerring as they sail toward their destination.

She does not know if he intends to try to take revenge on Noir, or try to talk his leader down from the massacre playing out on the Battlefield. And she does not care. She directs him to the coordinates she requires and he obeys without a word, more compliant now than he ever has been before.

They set down behind a convenient, lurching hill so that Noir's rampage is out of sight; they're not far from the fallen husk of the Black King's body, in fact. There are bodies and smoldering farms all around them, for idiotic pawns sometimes take it into their heads to abandon the war and make a life for themselves amid the death. A futile notion. She always takes particular care to have her Bishops raze the peasant villages first. They never seem to learn their lesson, no matter how often she tries to imprint on the ectobiological memory that things like democracy or pacifism will always be struck down.

No, the Quelled one is more concerned with the Prospitian lying amidst the blood like a pale gem, sovereign and luminous even near death. Someone has clasped her claws together over the bloody stab wound in her chest in a needless funerary gesture, but the Quelled kneels beside her equally Quelled sister and knows that her cousin-queen still abides.

They shall always abide.

BQ: It is not on your hand, and I would have sensed another pawn ascending.
BQ: The Heir, then?

Blood drips along the Willingly Quelled's cheek in a thin line. The Begrudgingly Quelled wipes it away impassively, aware of the Drear approaching them but not caring.

WQ: ...Counter a glitch...with a glitch...

Her pale claws falter and she coughs, more blood oozing up through the gap between her blue skirt and pink-lined tunic. Dormancy can't be far off for her, now.

BQ: He is not enough. Not even a pawn reaching queenship would be enough, now, not with what Noir's been eating. He's beyond you or I now.

BQ: ...Dammit. We need the gods.

The Willing one wheezes but does not respond, her claws still and her mental voice quiet, and for a breathless moment the Begrudging one wonders if Dormancy has already set in.

WQ: They need...more time.

And that is when the BQ knows.

BQ: Another glitch, then. Just the one.

BQ: You will owe me for this, sister mine.

BQ: They will all owe me.

Her sister smiles faintly.

WQ: I...would expect...nothing less.

WQ: Do be careful...my...

...Well. She didn't need to hear the last of that, anyway. Brushing off the dust of a shattered and crumbling Battlefield from her red skirt, the Begrudging one rises. She loses track of the Drear in the chaos that follows, as she lurks through the shadows of the Battlefield with what little power remains to her, but despite Jack Noir's ongoing murderspree, the Drear is still alive when the Begrudging one takes the ring from beside the Heir's corpse and -

[attention - an error has Been detected. the blAck queen has been miscRowneD.]

[attempt tO reach the white queen has Failed. dormancy period detected.]

[please wait. rerouting...]

[emeRgy protocol Activated - darkness reiGns supreme engagE.]

It's bad. The voice of the Medium has begun to splinter. Too many glitches in too short a time.

But she only needs to hold out for so long.

And then the Bogus Queen only has eyes for Noir. They clash again and again, but despite her efforts, she knows she cannot win. Not with extra power Noir has swallowed to augment his own.

Instead, she does what a Queen must do, in the name of winning. She strategizes. She draws him
away from the pawns that swarm the heroes' bodies, and she shouts when it seems Noir's eyes might turn from her and bespy the quest beds being dragged into position. Noir is almost mindless, she finds, psycho-tically drunk on the crest of this new green power feeding into his shell, and he howls wordlessly like a savage, wild dog. She can't get a lick of sense out of him, though she can see from the fury in his eyes that he understands her hastily signed taunts.

It is a slicing dance of darkness, lit only by his green lightning and the unnatural white light radiating from the chinks in her carapace. The White Queen's power burns through her, a flurry of white flames that feels totally alien to someone used to wielding the darkness. They've traded only once before, in the heat of a Queenly battle long before the Shift that flipped Queens from active fighters on the Battlefield to strategists, and it had been the same intense, bone-deep agony then, too. Neither of them are suited for the other's ring. Noir has all the advantages, here. When her sword arm gives out at last, the constant blood loss from her ruined ring hand blurring her sight, she hasn't won them enough time. She couldn't do it, and the idea of losing so uselessly to Noir of all people grates on her. She gnashes her teeth, reaching for the bladekind to try one last time; however, her claws can't close around the handle. Dormancy seeps across her vision, but she blinks it away. If she cannot fight, perhaps she can leverage their old rivalry to distract him just long enough -

Noir snarls, wolfish and triumphant, and raises the bladekind to kill her.

When the Drear dives between the two of them, the shock almost startles the Queen into Dormancy. The carapacian has been shouting and attempting to join the fight all this time, but his power levels are nowhere near what they'd need to be to fight on the same level as Queens, landlocked while they circled and darted above.

He shouldn't have mattered.

CD: Jack, please!

Instead, Jack Noir stabs, and Drear is the one who takes the hit.

The Queen laughs. Because the look on Noir's face? Priceless.

BQ: That's the last of them, you know. The Brute had his head lopped off some time ago. And you already murdered the Dignitary in your office.

BQ: Didn't he love you? What a pity.

She has no idea about the Brute's fate. That doesn't stop her from lying, or stop Noir from flinching because she lies with such elegance that he buys it. He's sagging now, his wings huddled in close, as though he doesn't know how to maintain all that raging fury with Drear fumbling to breathe around the blade in his chest.

CD: Ja-ck.

She presses home, because Noir is still stalled out, letting go of the sword with one claw to grip Drear by the shoulder, staring blankly like he can't really see the Crew member's face.

BQ: They always follow you, don't they. Always. The most damnable pattern in all of paradox space. And now look? You've murdered them.

She laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

BQ: The only things you care enough about to keep around, time after time.
BQ: And you've killed them all.

Jack Noir *explodes*. He rips the sword free and Drear lets out a tiny gasp that the Queen barely hears over the crackling roar of incensed grief as Noir moves to stab her in turn.

But it's enough. In the next moment, before the sword can strike again, the Breeze spirals around them, and she knows the Heir is risen at last. Her body aches and strains, but she thumbs off the ring with a smile, coughing, and the power of the White Queen sucks out of her while Noir's flames are smothered by the blasting wind. She sees the realization in his eyes, and smirks all the wider at the beautiful sight.

Noir is the only Sovereign left on the playing field. This is checkmate.

BQ: Congratulations, Noir.

BQ: They're gods, now. There's a brand new day ahead, and all of your friends are *dead*.

BQ: No matter who wins...you lose.

And Noir finally speaks.

JN: No. Not all of them. Not yet.

He vanishes in a burst of galaxies, and the Heir meets him. It's in the players' hands, now. The Queen is *done* with this helping lark. She still cannot grip the sword, but she somehow manages to rise to her feet. Dormancy lingers, but if she can, she would prefer to make it to the Royal Chassis before it fully sets in. Her shell more crack than carapace, the Queen considers the Drear bleeding out at her feet.

She does not care.

BQ: I do not know how he does it, every time. Wins you all over to his side, I mean.

BQ: Surely by now you might have learned it never ends well for you. But I suppose you forgetful things are incapable of learning and retaining lessons, after a point.

The carapacian breathes shakily, and smiles up at her with bloody gums and uneven teeth.

CD: I know! Kind of weird, isn't it?

The Queen nearly trips while standing still. She prefers to blame it on the extreme damage done by channeling the wrong queenship entirely, and not the fact that she is completely unnerved by the implications of what the Drear just said.

BQ: What.

CD: Ah...and it hurts. Every time. I hate the times when Di goes first...

She closes her eyes, and understands.

BQ: You remember.

BQ: *You*, out of every member of that insufferable Crew...*you're* the only one who retains ectobiological memory.

Sometimes, she thinks Noir recalls – but only ever sporadically, and his personality and choices are
never consistent enough to account for a true pattern of memory. Stubbornly contradictory to the very last.

CD: Oh...yeah! You didn't know?

CD: I don't know how you do it! Living, over and over, I mean. It's kind of awful!

CD: I mean, usually it's okay! :) But then stuff like this happens and -

CD: You probably don't want to listen to a Droll like me jabbering. Sorry about that!

She needs to retrieve her sister-queen. They need to be gone, before whatever happens next - whether the gods win, or die, or just scratch the whole thing. That, or she needs to quickly fall into Dormancy so that the process becomes automated and they can abscond to recover and begin preparing for the next game session.

But she kneels beside the carapacian and watches impassively while he balls up a wad of the Dignitary's suit jacket to dab at his wound.

CD: He'd hate this, y'know.

CD: Oh! Not the blood - me wearing something that doesn't fit right. He'd say it was undignified and things like that. Always watching out for me, he is!

CD: ...Why are you still here?

She doesn't care.

BQ: I could make it all stop.

BQ: Deletion would prevent you from returning to this again. You need never remember the abyss, or experience another death.

BQ: And the four of you have been a pain in my neck for far too long. Not even the Warmhearted one over there would stop me if you consented to it. You are not the first clone to begin to retain memories.

The White Queen hates it every time, of course. The whole process involves the Black Queen tossing around far too many phrases like 'mercy killing' and 'respect for free will' through gritted teeth for her own liking, and often gives her heartburn for several sessions afterward.

But here it is, at last. If she can spin it to the WQ right, she'll have the chance to wipe out the Midnight Crew, to delete their gene codes from the records, and begin a new era free of their constant meddling. Paradox space will find some new imbeciles to plague and betray her, no doubt, but it won't be them.

She could care less about Drear's distress. She can care about freeing herself of a persistent nuisance like Noir's Crew. The eagerness she feels welling in her breast would make the Warmhearted one cluck her tongue and shake her regal head in dismay.

CD: ...Could you really?

CD: I kinda wish -

CD: Nah. Seeing Di again might only hurt more.
CD: I think I'd like that. Please.

Success tastes sweet, like the juice of a sweet orange bursting on her tongue, like hot blood. A rare good mood seizes her, in the midst of all this stupidity and defeat, and she places her claws on either side of the carapacian's head. She leans down, and dips a kiss against his forehead.

BQ: Oh yes.

BQ: For the debt that I now owe you.

BQ: I'll make it all stop.

And with a deft twist, she snaps his head to the side. He's still smiling, Droll in death.

She wonders if this is exactly what he wanted, but she does not care.

It's easier that way.

Heaving herself back to her feet, she marches back to where the White Queen's body lies dormant, and watches the clouds as they reflect the battle of gods playing out overhead. She stoops to pick the other Queen up and cradle her as she picks a new path through the Battlefield toward the center castle, where their Chassis always awaits.

The castle has been thoroughly crushed by the Seer's grimdark breakdown, but the Chassis always awaits. Like Queens, it abides. The Game provides. Banners lie scattered and brocaded tapestries litter the stairs as she ascends toward the Queens' Tower, and most of the arching windows - and the walls between them, let's be honest - have been blown out to reveal the Battlefield burning beyond. It is with a relieved sigh, and with the dark dimness of Dormancy curling through her mind and slowing her limbs, that the Queen taps the hidden switch with her foot, and the door to the inner chamber opens.

The Black Queen stares.

The walls are green.

*Felt* green.

BQ: No.

BQ: *NO.*

By the time she finds the Chassis, relocated to the roof, the Scratch is already bearing down on them. There is no time to check it over for sabotage; she inputs the necessary coordinates in an unseemly panic, always with one scarred eye on the viewscreens to track the progress of the end of the world.

But now she understands. The understanding burns in her throat like bad champagne. No wonder so much went wrong. She lays the White Queen within her recovery chamber in haste and hobbles to her own, her mind spinning as the grim truth becomes clear.

If he is already here, the Scratch will do nothing to improve the reset universe. His presence means that his master cannot be far behind, and his master is...the terminating point. The next session will be worse than null - it will be the end of this entire branching paradox cycle.

It will be the end of her. She and the White Queen have witnessed hundreds of their counterparts cut off in their prime by this lingering virus, this sick destroyer. It is the only way a Queen can die, and
the Black Queen's mind shies away from the horrific thought of having never existed, not existing, never to exist again. Complete erasure of all her time, past, present, and future.

She cannot accept this. Cannot accept that at long last, paradox space has decided to end her. Millions of regenerations of loyal service to a cause she hates, and this is the payment she receives? The worst of all possible ends?

But there is nothing to be done, no strategy that a hundred Queens has ever succeeded in using to save themselves, and she sits heavily on the stone of her own recovery chamber with her eyes closed in resignation. Not even allying with the brute would work. Once he has entered a cycle, it is already too late. It is always too late -

"Unless we do something to change it."

The Black Queen blinks, and looks up.

BQ: You?

A Maid of Time in the prime of her godly youth grins, hovering cross-legged above the navigational hub. Never mind that they are mere moments from spiraling through the Queen’s Gate and passing on through time and space to take up control of a scratched, doomed session, and that no player should be able to follow them to the Chassis. The Black Queen has seen thousands of Maids and Time players in all her years of existence, but this one is familiar, if only just. It was only a single universe ago, after all, and this one has a tendency to break the rules.

Aradia Megido grins. "Me. Now, skip the spiel about how I shouldn't be here and listen - listen closely. You know what's coming?" At a nod, the god's grin spreads even more. It is downright maniacal. "Good. And you know that paradox space will allow it?"

BQ: Even if he is the product of cascading glitched processes, he is still a legitimate part of the Game's protocols.

BQ: Yes. The Croaking bastard won't fight it. This is the terminal point. The Game ends here.

The troll cracks her knuckles. "Then tell me, Black Queen? How interested would you be in a chance to break the Game?"

She considers it.

She does not care about players, or pawns, or any of the other pieces in Skaia's insipid games.

But she rather does care about anything that might involve sabotaging a game session. And she cares rather a great deal about living.

She leans forward.

BQ: I am listening.

BQ: Intently.

- 

*The coast of Maryland*

An Aquatic Rover finally makes landfall around four in the morning. He's heavily built for a carapacian of his size, but the hollowness of a shell lets him float up on the surf and crash against the
beach without exerting too much effort. He scrambles for a moment, stuck on his back and flailing like a turtle in distress, before managing to roll over and stand up, peeling long strings of seaweed off of his person.

He glances around, taking in the thin, pallid sand of the beach around him. Stringy bushes of marram grass encroach upon the flat, rocky plain in meandering lines, but their stalks have lost the yellow-green tinge and begun to look distinctly pale and drooping.

AR is far from surprised. He's been swimming since the freighter ship he hitched a ride on to cross the Atlantic was pulled aside for a surprise inspection by trolls in a distinct shade of Crocker red, and even with a carapacian's innate ability to adapt to survive in any and all wasteland conditions, the infestation now lodged on the floor of the Atlantic continental shelf has made the waters increasingly more caustic the closer he got to the shore. The beach sands are littered with the bloated, rotten bodies of hundreds of dead fish aquatic lusii, some of them split open by the sun the previous day and still festering now that night has come.

A few still have white pus oozing from their raw gills, the last remnants of the taint they'd probably been filtering for days before it finally killed them. His own acid burns, particularly those in the soles of his feet where the damage was greatest, ache in sympathy. Others appear to have hemorrhaged completely in a single explosive aneurysm.

Even if the Terror incarnate at the bottom of the sea doesn't start actively claiming more territory for itself, things are already dying. AR wonders how long until the fish that float up on shore aren't dead, simply...altered. It took years for the Novaya Ukraine to get as bad as it had, after all.

"It's reely sad, isn't it? I didn't think it had actshoally gotten this bad!"

AR flinches and his claws go for regulation standard weapons that are no longer there, abandoned to the deep seas when the water ruined them. But the troll who pads along the waterline shows no signs of mutation. She does have the frilly ear bits and gills of the seadwelling ones, though, exposed by the aquamarine bandeau, which means that AR is duty bound to warn her that -

AR: It would not be safe to enter the water at this time, madam! You should probably stay clear of the area!

She laughs at him, freely and openly, and her reply when she speaks again is more than a little distracted. "I'd probably be fin! I visit these waters all the time, though I don't come up on shore very often, and it hasn't hurt me yet. What a mess! I wonder what keeled them all." She casts a pitying look at the next desiccated octopus lusii she sidesteps, though AR notices that she's careful to never actually set a bare foot on one of the bodies.

AR: Still! There should be a regulation against it, for everyone's safety! This water is contaminated.

"Naut a problem! That's probably a good idea!" the troll agrees, tossing her hair over a shoulder and smiling at him with all her teeth bared in a practiced grin. Her eyes are a deep, vibrant fuchsia behind the wide rims of her glasses, but between the scattering of freckles across her face and the height, there's only one troll this could be!

AR: Heiress!

Heiress does not suit her, he thinks. The initials are all wrong. A Fearless Protector, perhaps. When she ducks her head in acknowledgement, her angular shoulders squared as she smiles and tosses her hair, she seems much more approachable than the only other tyrianblood on the planet. "Cleaning up these beaches are going to be my next project! Someone needs to head an investigation into all these
deaths - otherwise nothing will ever be solved. Are you interested in marine life, mister?"

AR: Oh. Er. Not really?

The Fearless one shrugs, and continues to talk as though he hasn't signed anything at all. "I think it's just super important that we get on top of this. It would be outraygeous if this weird pollution became a serious problem on my watch!" Her nose scrunches up as she taps a pallid jellyfish corpse with a painted toe-claw. "I can't even imagine what kind of chemical leak would krill so many in so short a time, though...It must be pretty bad!"

AR: Horrorterror bloodbrine is quite caustic, particularly in liquid mediums, yes.

"Why would you say something like that?" the troll says absently.

AR: The tangle of the Ukraine has taken up residence on the sea floor. I tracked it this far, but I worry it could relocate again at any time. Its physical presence will begin to produce abominations soon.

AR: I would recommend you evacuate the entire East coast. Standard grimlight incursion procedure.

Well. It would be standard, if anyone would publish his rule books. The world would be a better place if people just listened to the Authorial 'Rivener, but he suffers from a lack of publicity. It's a shame.

"That seems a little excessive. We can't just evacuate people for the halibut!"

AR scratches his chin, and squints out at the water. The sea is dark, steel grey today with navy blue undertones, but he can almost imagine the grimwhiteness spreading in the sunless reaches beneath the surface. How long until the beach sands themselves become contaminated enough that they form a new acid swamp? It is this many-angled one's favorite tactic, and grimlight Horrors do not often change how they prefer to absorb prey, no matter how mad they become.

But...perhaps there is a way to prevent that!

AR: Could you order it to leave? The other one did in the Ukraine. Perhaps you could persuade it to leave for deeper waters. That would buy us time.

"Other one?" The Fearless Protector blinks at him, folding her arms and pouting skeptically. "Uh, seriously, what are you talking about?"

AR: The other one! The Condescension!

It's like flipping a switch. A snarl rips out of the Fearless one's mouth, and her entire expression darkens as her ear fins flare. "You know, I wouldn't even put it past her to be behind somefin like this," she mutters. "I know she's up to something, but I just don't know what."

AR: I don’t think that you're understanding me, here. That is the opposite of what I said. You have a major infestation below, but she has been able to take care of such things before -

But there is something wrong. He claps a claw over his mouth before he can sign any further, and squints at the troll more closely.

Perhaps he is only imagining it. He is a carapace, after all, and the anatomy of trolls and humans never really overly concerned him as long as they respected the law.
But he doesn't think that trolls are meant to be so thin. There is a strained, stretched quality to the troll's frame, as though she recently lost a great deal of weight, leaving only lean seadweller muscle and bone and skin. Even as he watches, she winces and presses a claw to her temple; her eyes grow glassy and distant, and for a stomach-turning moment he thinks he sees a milky film slide over them. She blinks and the impression is gone, but that is enough. When the Fearless one turns to look at him, head cocked to the side, it is with an air of speculation, a curiously hard expression that doesn't suit her face.

He feels like he is being looked through, and the horribly familiar sensation makes his carapace crawl.

AR: Oh.

AR: Never mind.

AR: ...I have to go.

"Perhaps you should stay," the troll says, fiddling with one of the chains of her headband, her expression thoughtful and far away. "I could use someone to help me out here, with all the migraines I've been having lately. No need to be koi."

AR: I have - uh - there is - m-my mate will be missing me -

She takes a step toward him. "You could tell me and Glubby what you know about the Condesce! I was just visiting her, but I'm shore she'll be interested in what you have to say."

AR: Come any closer and I'll shoot!

It makes her pause. He doesn't stick around to watch her processing whether he actually has a specibi on his person; instincts honed by years in the Ukraine, passing between the old and the new, have taught him the merits of a tactical retreat. Instead, he bolts, up the beach past her and away from the water. He needs to get off the beach before his aching feet can betray him and slip in the slick sands.

If she drags him to the water, it's all over. He hadn't known a Horrorterror could take a mind without horrifically altering the mortal flesh, but that girl has been compromised. If he only had his trusty artillery - but he's weaponless and alone, and the pang he feels even now at the thought of the Vynnychenko twins almost makes him falter.

"Come back! Wait, doofish, I'm not going to hurt you! Arresto!"

AR puts on another burst of speed. He's been swimming for ages, fighting the tide to reach the shore, but terror can do amazing things for a shell. He dodges along a narrow path between the tall grass until the wooden slats of a half-buried walkway clatter beneath his heels. He doesn't dare look back to see if she's closing in, but he thinks her shouts are growing fainter. When he hits the main road, it's empty and there's no vehicles he could hitch a ride with this early in the morning.

So he runs, and hopes to Skaia itself he's heading north.

He has a long way to go to reach Maine.

- 

Years ago (though not many)

Lawrence, Kansas
First arrived some time ago.

Woman in her fifties or sixties, with the creases of a lifetime of smiles folded into her face so that she appears to smile to herself over her drink, dunking sugar packet after sugar packet into a cup of tea only a shade lighter than her skin. Hair might once have been glossy and dark, but now lies close to her skull in grey-white curls. Green birds on her dress and a necklace of pearls around her neck. Ancient but ageless, with a vitality that defies her wizened face and stooped back.

Second arrives; he stoops to sweep a kiss across the skin of her wrinkled knuckles, and she chuckles as the joy buzzer concealed in the palm of her hand jolts him. Smiles good-naturedly, as though he's an old hand with her gambit, and rests his cane to one side as he settles himself across from her. Hair has also gone a hoary grey, but his mustache is peerless. Her dress may be outdated but his safari gear would be better suited for the jungles of the Congo than a small town cafe. Chortles when the waitress takes his order and then the two just sit together, speaking in low murmurs. The woman occasionally throws her head back in a braying laugh that holds nothing back, and at one point the salt shaker erupts with a flurry of paper snakes when the man goes to garnish his eggs.

Third is a woman who strides in on heels that could snap the ankles of the unwary, knives that stab the tile as she smirks at the host and scans the cafe with a keen, assessing gaze. Wears her angular dress and disheveled lab coat and dark red lipstick like armor, and walks to the table after only a moment of hesitation. Settles herself tentatively beside the old woman after the two greet her with knowing smiles. The two women seem to be familiar with one another, exchanging air kisses over each cheek, before the younger one primly adjusts the fabric of her dress across her chest and falls into a practiced lounge, her nails drilling the tabletop like pistons. If she's been drinking, it's obvious only in the faint scent of alcohol that clings to her, and in the flask of straight gin she keeps in her purse.

None appear overly threatening to the untrained eye. Someone watching them might even be fooled into thinking this little scene is that of two aging parents meeting with their child, a young, busy, successful doctor fresh out of school who grimaces and checks her watch too often and makes it all too clear in all the most stomach-clenching, passive aggressive ways that she has a life that doesn't involve them, one that she's eager to get back to.

Ambrose Strider is not fooled.

Tips the brim of his hat forward and watches the three in the blurred reflection of the metal napkin dispenser. Head buzzes and throbs with the remnants of the hangover from a late night DJing and partying too hard, but he's twenty two and his liver has handled worse. The glass of dark soda in front of him has gone flat, paired with black coffee that's been refilled three times now. Caffeine helps him defrag his hard drive after a long night of crashing it repeatedly. Wears a black shirt and a leather jacket that fall off one shoulder, with jeans that hang off his hips; has deliberately dressed his sloppiest for this outing because why the fuck should he care what impression he makes on these guys. Hauled ass on his shitty motorcycle to reach Lawrence by morning; still gross and reeking of sweat and alcohol and exhaust fumes.

Doesn't even know who the hell they are.

Still has no idea why he flaked out to the middle of nowhere, Kansas. It's horse shit, is what it is, because Kansas is a long ass way away from Georgia and he has important shit he could be doing, like spinning stacks and playing shitty video games.

Fixes his shades. Keeps a level eye on the reflection of the people he is stalking, and opens the fist that's been clamped around the handle of the coffee mug since it first appeared. Reads the note that showed up on the door of his apartment when he stumbled back in at one in the morning.
Come.

Underneath that the address of this cafe’s been scribbled down, and nothing else. No explanation. Nothing. Someone’s been reading too much of that new Evangelion manga that just came out a few weeks ago (not that he’s read it, or anything like that). Or else cryptic ass messages are just coming back into style.

No name, no explanation, and yet.

Here he is.

Sips his soda, and watches.

And wonders why the hell they’re all so familiar. Maybe he’s had too much coffee. Hand jitters and taps a frenetic beat against the table, and he has to stop himself when he realizes he's matching tempo with the young woman.

Tries to make himself focus on something other than the strangeness of this entire clusterfuck of a situation. Duly notes the aesthetically pleasing shape of the woman beneath her sharp, brittle armor. Remains completely uninspired by such thoughts.

Notices the first rising up from her seat and tottering in his direction. Does nothing, says nothing, lips a flat thin line as the old granny trundles over to smile at him fondly, her hands clasped over her belly. Stares up at her, impassive and still as a statue, the calm stoicism that keeps him removed from the shit of everyday life. Maybe a little dissociative, maybe a little fucked in the head, leaving him numb and hollow when he feels anything at all, but he crawled through foster homes and dingy clubs and auto shops built to strip vehicles that need to be disappeared and at some point feeling started to seem harder than the distance.

Not impressed, he thinks at the old woman, not even engaged enough to be pissed that she noticed him watching. Doesn't frown, doesn't do much of anything else. Trusts that the blankness of a cold, robotically assessing face will help this woman realize she does not want to fuck with him.

It’s always worked before.

Tilts her head to the side, smiles with something unreadable in her glittery, pale blue eyes. This close up, the faint, aged scar running over her right eye is barely noticeable behind the thick rims of her glasses, a faded dark line and a slight droop in that eyelid and nothing more. Says, "Ambrose, you look like skin and bones, dearie! You got here so early - did you remember to eat before the rest of us arrived?" Tuts and lays a hand on the curve of his shoulder, her eyes little shards of ice in a dark face that brooks no argument and will take no quarter. "Come along, I've ordered you a little something. My treat."

First instinct is to tell her in a perfect, crisp monotone exactly where she can shove her charity. Old habits, from times that have only just begun to pass, where money was too tight and food mattered so damn much and yet he had the innate asshattery in him to walk away whenever a bartender offered a free meal, on the house.

But her eyes are bright and her smile is kind and he's never had to deal with grandparents so he has no idea how to counter this quiet insistence when she stares him down.

Rises in a dream, still floating somewhere off and to the side as his chassis of a body mechanically slouches off after the old woman. Hands reach out in the dream to boost a chair from an unoccupied table, and drag it along with the legs dragging and jolting on every bump in the floor tiles behind
him. Flips it around and sets it down to sit on with legs spread wide and head cocked to the side in quiet, disinterested disdain, as calculated as the young doctor in its deliberate abrasiveness.

Just as ass meets chair, he's aware that something is between him and the seat. Realizes too late, as the obnoxious burp of air rips through the cafe and draws every single gaze to him.

Does not falter. Does not say a word as he reaches down and removes the whoopee cushion from beneath his ass. Flicks it at the old woman's side of the table without a sound.

Back in these days he's good at that. Can go days without speaking aloud, barely breathing above a faint rasp. He can talk. He just doesn't often see the point. Part of him recoils at the stupid, primal embarrassment of the prank, but he's spent so long ignoring it that he doesn't even think much of the eyes scrawling curious trails over his back with sniggers in the air.

"And now everyone's here!" Granny cheerfully settles herself in her seat once more, slowly, as though her liveliness isn't obvious, like she thinks he'll still fall for her decrepit old person gambit.

"Good, good!" The second chortles again, reaching out to clap Ambrose heartily on the back. Doesn't bother dodging it; lets it hit, and then slowly, so slowly, raises his gaze behind black shades to stare at the offending hand. "Been looking forward to meeting you at last, old chap!" Oblivious, maybe, or just too old to give a fuck about Ambrose's flat, shark eyed stare. "Jo's told me so much!"

Been sponging on him then. Fair's fair, he supposes.

And yet, what the actual fuck? The two grandparents start giggling up a storm for no goddamn reason, while the doctor's stiff and uncertain and haughty in her cloud of alcohol and Ambrose takes everything in from behind mirrored lenses.

Guesses jokerkind or some shit for the grandma, pistolkind for the safari dipshit. Harder to say for the doctor, but there's a distinct callus across the backs of her knuckles that screams fistkind. Doesn't fit with the prim image of a successful doctor too well educated and self-satisfied to get muck on her skirt and blood on her hands.

Still doesn't know what kind of doctor yet, either.

"Not much of a talker, eh?" Old man's still trying to make small talk.

Well, tough shit.

Food arrives a moment later, the awkward silence still enveloping them, enough to send the waitress running. Stares at the steaming heap of pancakes and eggs and sausage links and hash browns, enough to make his hung-over stomach twist and flop like the waves of the ocean, threatening mutiny. Can't show weakness in front of others, though, so a quick shrug and he starts stabbing at the eggs with a dull fork, maintaining an apathetic silence even as the old man frowns.

"Just a regular barrel of laughs, aren't you?" comes from the third. Smokey and low and clipped with faint, warring hints of both a British and French accent, fighting for dominance in her educated mode of speech. Eyes are a vivid red-violet, the color of orchids or a mixed drink that's gone too heavy on the raspberry liqueur.

God, he wishes he thought she were hot. Would make things so much easier.

"I don't suppose you have any more of an idea than I do how and why we knew to be here? The professor rather skimped on the details." Genuine question, so maybe she's not in on this conspiracy either, but a smile flickers in the crease of her painted lips. Fuchsia eyes, sharp like the crack of ice
against glass, give him a onceover, twice, the second with a shaped eyebrow arching high up under the elegant swoop of her bangs. Some kind of expression of realization.

Not interested in whatever revelation she thinks she's having. He's gone behind sloppy clothes and leather and blank shades, deliberately scattering attention onto the piercings that climb up the curve of his ear, the hook through his right eyebrow, the ring for his lower lip and the flash on the end of his tongue when he forces another forkful of eggs down.

There's nothing for her to see, for any of them to see, of the real him, detached from everything and assessing from above.

Grunts and shrugs again in response, flicks the crumpled note onto the table where it skitters to a precise stop before the doctor. Punctuates it with a huge bite of pancakes, smacking his lips.

Too huge; dry lips crack and he sucks them in discreetly before blood can drip everywhere.

"I knew you would all come if I sent for you. I'm just glad we could have this time together before it begins." Matter of fact with a laugh in her voice, the granny sits with her white-gloved hands folded before her as she watches Ambrose eat.

Stares right back at her, pancakes and cracked lips forgotten. Should have figured she'd be the one to have sent a note like this, and yet still marginally surprised that she'd 'fess up to it.

"And here we sit," the doctor murmurs, sounding as disgruntled as Ambrose feels, and she withdraws a neatly folded square of paper from the breast pocket of her coat to lay beside his crumpled note. Nods to each of them in turn. "A world renowned adventurer and philanthropist, a less well known joke shop owner who happens to moonlight as a university lecturer, a quantum physicist, and a DJ all walk into a cafe?"

Confirmation, then, that Ambrose is the odd one out here. Typical; sends him slumping further over the arm of the chair, legs kicked out to take up as much space as he can under their table, careless and silent.

And if the doctor knows enough to know his job, and studied under the old lady, it raises the question of how the hell he didn't know to spy on these three in turn. Means he's the only one fighting blind, here, and he doesn't like it.

Driven by an instinct he didn't understand, drawn over eight hundred miles to sit down in this cafe and watch the first, second, and third trickle in, and not understand why he knew to watch for them.

For the first time in months, he's unsettled enough to tap his tongue piercing against the inside of his front teeth, barely able to suppress the faint urge to frown from reaching his face.

Don't let 'em see it. Can't let anyone know how ignorant he is - they have the advantage, in knowledge and in numbers.

So: a curt nod and no more, still and slack and unconcerned.

"Eat your breakfast," the old woman reprimands him, rapping the back of his hand. Just stares back, dispassionate, and she smiles gleefully as though she knows everything he doesn't, including which prank she's got lined up next. Goddamn tricksters. "You and Rue don't seem to remember as much. I'm Joanna Egbert, these days. Jo or Nanna, either is fine, dearie. Rue was one of my students!"

Slaps the old man's forearm. "And this old coot is -"

"James Harley!" Boisterous and hearty. Clearly surprises Lalonde with the strength of his grip when they shake hands, and jostles Ambrose as he twists his hand in a tight shake. Doesn't let himself be
drawn into some kind of bone crushing, macho contest with the guy, just lets his hand be shaken, and then drops it back to the side while the old man laughs. "I'm a fan of your work too, old chap! Your patent for fluid control microprocessor units in artificial knees - truly inspired!"

Already knew these guys were spying on him. A little worrying, because that patent was submitted under a pseudonym and the checks have only just begun to reach his PO box. But the man respects the machines, and Ambrose can respect that. Earns him an nod of acknowledgement, if nothing else, and a quick thumbs up.

"Rue Lalonde," from the doctor, and then a sip from her own cup of tea, both hands folded around the mug so her nails are on display. In her own way just as carefully put together as he is and hell, he can respect that too.

"Your pancakes, dear," Jo pesters, and a muscle flexes in his jaw.

Not that he isn't aware that he's all bone and lean muscle and nothing much else, and that it shows. A diet of beer and pizza. Exercise regimens that vacillate between training for days without break and slipping between the roiling surge of bodies in the club after he's finished a set, trying and failing to capture that energy that consumes the dance floor. Face in the mirror is drawn and wan, and bruises last longer than they should, and he can't bring himself to care most of the damn time. As long as he keeps ticking along, cold and brittle but strong enough to deck anyone who tries to start shit in a dark corner, why bother?

No one's ever really commented. Never pushed him to take care of himself, because no one gave a shit. It's unsettling, and the obvious response is to shove the plate away and settle back, arms folded, breathing steadily to keep that brief flare of emotion tamped down. Drawls, "All yours, Egbert," the first thing he's said since last night, since dragging a brown-eyed asshole behind the stacks and trying and failing to make anything happen on his end when the guy went straight for the crotch. Asshole had been less than amused at the lack of response and took off back into the crowd to find someone else. Started chugging something with orange juice, club soda, and a fuckton of Amaretto to make the raw, sick disappointment go away.

Just gave him this fucking hangover. Objective not achieved.

When she opens her mouth to say god knows what, he beats her to it. "Ambrose Strider. Now. The fuck are we here for?"

Jo doesn't miss a beat, just nods as though he's said something insightful. "We asked you both to come because they'll be here, soon, and I'm not sure how much time we have left." Smile on her round face fades for the first time, and the slack wrinkles left behind on that old lady face are telling. "The children need to be protected, and James and I thought we could handle it, but -"

And it's too much. Not even he can bluff through this one, so what pops out of his mouth is, "What kids?" Voice growls and scrapes at his throat, more effort than it should be to drag the words up and out into the open air. "Lady, you just told me to show up. I haven't got a clue what you're on about."

That trips her up, which is all he really wanted at this point. Needs to level the playing field here.

"...How much do you remember, Ambrose?" Jo says, slowly, and all he needs to do sit back and fold his arms over his chest to make her sigh heavily. "Fiddlesticks. Worse than I thought, then."

Old man Harley takes up her hand and squeezes it, fond and sickly sweet. "Not all of us can retain as much of the legacy as you do, Jo, old girl. But it might do them some good to see the old arm. Spark their memories! It certainly convinced me!"
Gruff and disgustingly British, really, like a caricature of a man. Can't decide if it's an act or not.

Takes Jo a while to think this incomprehensible suggestion over, long enough for the waitress to deliver another round of drinks. Gin’s in Rue's fresh cup before he can even blink; raises an eyebrow at the doctor, who merely stares him down. Starting to see the signs in her now, the heavy makeup under her eyes to keep the shadows at bay, the liberal dollop of gin she adds to top off the first after only one sip. Alcohol's her pressure point, then.

Wonders what she thinks his weakness is. The old man and the granny might be on a whole other level of weirdness he's not prepared to deal with, but he's more than a match for Lalonde.

A snap, and the gloves come off Jo's hands, exposing neat white hands, at odds with the dark of her face. Warning sign number one.

Then buttons start popping at Jo's wrist – she undoes them, and then raises her hand to undo another set of buttons hidden under a neat fold in the fabric around her shoulder. Clothes aren't his thing. Makes him tense up, wondering if she's going to pull a weapon out of some pocket he didn't notice.

Sleeve falls away, unwrapping in a way that makes it clear that the one seam was never sewn shut in the first place, left baggy and loose to conceal -

Stares.

Stares some more, because why the hell not.

Rue stares too, shocked, and the flask she'd gone to tuck back into her purse falls onto the seat next to her, fingers loose and trembling.

Never seen anything like it; Ambrose can't help the instinct to surge forward and peer closer, because whoever made this prosthesis was a master. A god.

There's an empty, ten inch gap between the stump of a shoulder and the pale white of the wrist, right where the elbow should be; no sign of wired nerves or transparent pseudotissues or grubmods or carbon fiber, no explanation for how Jo reaches out and slides the plate back across the table toward him with a hand that is clearly detached from the rest of her body. Wrist on up is patterned in pale blue harlequin diamonds, while the hand flares uselessly right at the wrist as though still covered in a pale white glove.

"The other is the same." Cheery and matter of fact. Gestures to the other covered arm with a quick wave. Eyes may or may not bug out of sockets at the way the floating arm darts away from the old woman's side, whirling over the table and proving once and for all that someone has managed to design a floating, fully operational wirelessly powered prosthetic. "Hoo hoo hoo! Been like this my whole life. Quite useful for the gambit, of course, but bit of a nasty shock for old Poppa Sassacre! Didn't realize it was a holdout from the last universe's session until I was fourteen years old!"

Looks him right in the eye, and waves her fingers from behind the head of the troll in the booth behind them, throwing up a pair of bunny ears before the troll even notices the hand is there. "How is your heart doing, my dear?"

Still more preoccupied with the floating arm. When it rolls through the air before him, lackadaisical, he snags it out of the air with a hand and turns it over to get a look at the insides. Needs to know what makes this thing tick.

It's hollow. Nothing but empty space inside the thin shell of a porcelain white forearm, but it certainly has the manual dexterity to flick his nose and tap dance away across the table to Jo's side.
Not mechanical, not biological, not unless it's something more advanced than he's ever seen. Sufficiently advanced science and all that jazz.

Fingers twitch. Wants to strip it down and find out what makes it tick.

"I never knew," from Lalonde, fascinated as the impossible hand starts sorting through the sugar packets in the middle of the table. "All those tutoring sessions, discussing potential ectobiological molecular traces, and I never noticed. But it can't be -"

"It is." The hand drifts back to Jo and she smiles. "An extant ectobiological paradox marker. This, dearie, is the proof you've always been quizzing my poor old brain for. The time just never seemed quite right."

Thinks he can almost hear the processors in Lalonde's head whirring. "Evidence of a paradoxical construct that defies the laws of physics...but that would have to mean..."

"This is not the first time our little world has pattered along like this, no."

Gently reaches out and tugs the detached wrist back into place, wrapping the sleeve around it and doing up the buttons one-handedly. A practiced motion; she's had decades, if he believes her story. "We're one of the scratchverses you hypothesized. Why did you think I pushed you to think so far outside the scope of your research paper when you majored in quantum mechanics, dearie? You needed to know."

Sounds like crazy talking. Arms folded over his chest; catches his teeth gritting, and forces them slack. No signs. Need more information.

Fuck, does his head hurt. Must be the hangover shitting on him with a vengeance. Needs to stop partying after work or something, or maybe just not put off an eight hundred mile road trip until the middle of the night before he needs to be there. Not one of his brightest moments.

"You're talking about a paradox-fueled cosmic reset." Lalonde sounds shocked, personally offended, like somehow what she's hearing is downright scandalous. "That we - in our current iteration - are the end product of an oscillatory cosmological function. But that's -"

"Yes, dearie?" Jo prompts.

"That was hypothetical!" Hand slaps against the table, and oh yeah, Lalonde is pissed. "You spoke to me only in terms of speculation. Do you mean to actually say, all this time, you knew for a fact -"

A look at Egbert, and Lalonde swears, incensed, hair falling into her face. "The Skaian multiverse paradigm was only ever supposed to be conjecture!" Practically tears a notebook in two as she hauls it out of her purse and starts scribbling on it with a fuchsia-ink gel pen, sloppy wide numbers and symbols that Ambrose can't make heads or tails of. "It fits with the carapacian ectobiological genome markers, of course, we already examined those data points but - I'd need some kind of sample from the arm, too. Damn! Damn! If you already knew, then what model should I be focusing on, ekpyrotic or brane cyclical?"

"Paradox. Pure paradox loops, sweetie. Don't forget to account for the retroactive synchronicity principle."

"C'est des conneries!" French is starting to take over now for Lalonde, and he only knows what that one means because he makes a point of knowing how to swear in multiple languages. A dramatic tear and a sheet full of sparkly fuchsia ink goes flying; scrawls new calculations across the fresh sheet. Takes a hard pull off the flask, a straight shot of gin, and apparently drains the last of it, whipping it away from her mouth with a gasp.
Harley picks up the paper, chortling to himself like the smug British bastard he is as he reads over it. "Can't make bloody heads or tails of all this, I'm afraid, but I'm sure it's correct!"

Suspects Harley knows about as much about all this universe nonsense as he does. Only one word in ten made sense in Lalonde's rant. He’s familiar with ectobiology from the frantic cramming to take his GED early; it's the shit that spawns carapacians, their special super-secret assbackwards way of reproducing themselves based on mystery slime and databases full of ecto-genetic coding that none of them have been willing to chat about since World War II fucked their shit up good.

Vaguely knows that paradox loops are part of the Villein religious order thing, so carapacians again. Hearing that makes him cast a keener eye on the hollow white of the harlequin arm before it vanishes under Egbert's glove.

Lalonde's cosmic meltdown aside, still wondering how all this relates to the more pressing question, which is - "Kids?"

Raises his eyebrow over his shades to underscore his point. He does robotics, not the cosmos; would rather focus on this than whatever reincarnated multiverse theory Lalonde's trying to puzzle out, no matter how familiar it all sounds.

"Our children," and holy fuck clearly he did not come prepared for all this fresh fuckery. His face might actually twitch, which is more than enough to make Egbert elaborate. "Created through ectobiology and delivered by meteor, dear, not to worry. They were fighting to create a new universe, but...something went wrong."

A cut in from Harley, who strokes his magnificent 'stache as he speaks. "They're going to be heroes, but with the way the last universe had to be rebooted from scratch, everything's mucked up. We need to be vigilant while raising them, this time around."

"Raising them." Flat and hard edged, not taking shit here. "What, trying to pawn some brat off on me now?"

"But he is yours, dear," from Jo, anxious and kind and earnest, clearly not seeing a problem here. "Yours and Rue's." Another twitch of his face and she hurries to explain more. "She will handle Rose, of course, while I take John and James cares for Jade. I just hope we can communicate better, this time around!"

"Paradox children," Lalonde says faintly, which doesn't help at all. "Ectobiologically viable paradox children. I can't believe it's true." Stares down at her ravaged notebook, still marking up the page despite the fact that her ink has run out, and all she leaves are faint creases in the paper. "Do you even know what this means, Jo? Why have you never published about it, this is a significant breakthrough! Rose, you said? Tell me about her!"

"I have no math or data to publish, my dear pupil. I simply remember what came before." Solemn, eyes closed. "It did not...end well, for any of us. But perhaps thanks to certain circumstances of my life and afterlife, I see in my dreams most of what came before.” Shakes her head. “Hopefully, when the children arrive, I'll be able to draw on even more memories, to help us avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered in the original session."

Another fresh page, and this time Lalonde remembers to whip out a new pen, bright periwinkle that shimmers silver on the page. "Fascinating. I'd always assumed only the primogenitor and archetypal-class carapacians would be able to retain paradox memories." Eyes brighten with the fever of a science-related breakdown as Lalonde tugs on Jo's sleeve, tapping an equation with her finger. "And the loops are filtered through a extraversal sorting-algorithm based genesis crucible? Should we treat
it as an eleventh brane?"

Jo leans in to help, giving that ridiculous 'hoo hoo' laugh as she does. "Exactly as we outlined in the paradigm, dearie!"

Apparently everyone gets a space baby from another dimension. That's all he's getting out of this conversation. Even if it's legit - which he won't believe until he sees the proof with his own eyes, dammit - there's still the pressing matter of the fact that -

"Lady, you think I got time for a kid?" Layers it with sarcasm, frosts it with disdain. "Shit, you want a spare? Because whatever one you've assigned me, it's all yours."

"He." Corrects him on autopilot, like she already knows all the genders of all these impending space babies. Probably does, actually, names and genders and favorite colors, and that's insane. Messed up. Impossible.

Why does he believe every word she says?

Why does it feel like they've done all this before?

Keeps talking to him, saying things like, "His name is Dave," and Ambrose flinches because fuck does his chest hurt. Feels like having his heart carved out.

"Joanna, dear, I don't think the old chap is feeling quite up to this right now," Harley says, all mild-mannered British concern as he leans forward, and that means something's bleeding through onto Ambrose's face. Needs to shut down before it gives more of him away, exposes more of the shit that no one's allowed to see.

Pushes away from the table, chair screeching as he shoves his hands in his pockets and turns his back on them all. Walks away, but behind him the conversation continues in mutters until, just as he lays a hand on the door, Harley adds, "Let me try, instead. See if I can't inspire the boy to shake off this little gloomy spell."

So he ends up with some insane, dapper old British man trailing him out into the parking lot, cane tapping along heavily on the tarmac.

Not looking forward to the return trip; most of the ride up here passed in a hazy blur of preliminary hangover and sleep deprivation, and the caffeine has made his hands and heart jittery enough that he might need to pull over and sleep in a ditch or something to get past the twitchiness.

Or maybe not the caffeine. Maybe just lingering shivers from a deep, abiding horror he can't quite name, a memory of memories that he shouldn't have.

Whatever the hell Jo and Harley are preaching, he doesn't want to know any more. If he knows more, he thinks it'll only get worse.

A hand lands on his shoulder before he can make a clean getaway, though, and all he can do is stand stiff and stare straight ahead while the old man goes, "Just a few words, old boy, and then you can go along your way. On my honor as a gentleman!"

Harley takes the grunt of noncommittal acknowledgement as some kind of approval, clearly, because he keeps trucking along. "It all seems confusing right now. Lord only knows, when Jo started piecing it all together when we were children, it knocked my poor noggin right off its axis! Took me years to believe her, but once I did - well. We've had decades to get used to the idea that we will be able to see our children again, but you and young Doctor Lalonde may need quite the lecture to catch
you up on all the details.” Squeezes his shoulder. “There's no shame in not accepting everything we have to say, not yet. Skepticism is healthy! Keeps us on our toes!”

"Not interested." Shakes off the hand, and zips up the leather jacket, eyeballing the high sun in the sky to estimate if he can make Atlanta before nightfall. Starting to feel more detached again, losing that too-close, tense nervousness that makes his heartbeat immediate and unavoidable, drawing him too deeply into his own body until the dissociation stops.

Can't have that. Can't imagine how much worse it would be if his mind and his body were in sync again, if he felt everything all at once, with no delay to give him time to anticipate and deflect. Growing up had been hellish until he figured this shit out.

"I can't make you believe." Strokes the mustache again and looks up at the sky as well. Seems to be looking for something else, though, something that brings a wistful longing to his rugged old face. "Can't keep a chap when his will leads him elsewhere, either. But I can offer you something, and I'll ask you to promise me that you'll take it on faith that there are no strings attached. No obligation to me or Jo, if you take me up on this little offer."

"Mm?" He's listening.

"I'd like to offer you funding." Spreads his hands out wide in appeasement. "No, no, hear me out - my foundation is in the business of locating and encouraging the growth and development of promising young talents in the sciences and the thaumaturgic fields, and you've been on the list for some time - ever since your unique design style became recognizable." Claps him on the shoulder one last time, but thankfully doesn't try to hold him, or he'd have found himself short a hand, old man or not. "Hide it as much as you like, but you are an exemplary young man. And I believe in you."

Glances back at the cafe, through the window to where the two women are still sitting, barely visible through the blinds. Looks at old man Harley's face, and sees the beaming, bald-faced hope there, not pushing or forcing that belief onto him but certainly intended to inspire Ambrose to some kind of similar revelation.

He shakes his head.

Gets on his motorcycle.

And gets the everloving hell out of Lawrence.

- A year or so later, pretty much convinced that the whole thing was a hoax.

Jo was senile and babbling and her arm was some freaky shit, and that was all; the notes that mysteriously appear on his apartment door every few days get stacked in a corner of the kitchen, never to be read again. Harley's equally insane, but also funding some of Ambrose's cybernetic experiments, the ones he thought he'd never have the credit to get parts for, so all power to the crazy old grandpa who calls him on weekends and jovially tries to arrange meetings for tea until Ambrose hangs up on him. Lalonde was on a science bender over some theory with no basis in reality, easily swayed by her crazy ass mentor out of some badly misplaced student-teacher loyalty.

Or maybe the whole meeting was just one long, incredibly lucid drug trip, something extra in his last beer that night that hallucinated him to Kansas and back.

Throws himself into his work, lines up shifts at multiple clubs back to back, plays bouncer when all else fails, living off tap water and sick beats and pizza from last week. A new piercing through his
eyebrow and a barbell in the left ear that hurts like a son of a bitch and oozes a little with infection for a week before settling the fuck down.

Starts watching the stars at night, sitting out on the roof in just boxers and muscle shirts and squinting up at the night sky with his shades off. Tries to justify it with strife practice but usually ends up just watching, broiling in the late August heat of an Atlanta summer that never knows when to quit.

There's never anything to see. Spaces between the stars loom dark and heavy, and when the quiet hits around three in the morning, broken only by barking dogs and the occasional specibus firing off in the distance, could swear he feels a murmur in his chest, an ache that shadows the regular, steady beat of his heart.

Don't like it at all. Leaves him dizzy and nauseous with nerves, stuff he hasn't felt since he shut down non-essential reactions at thirteen. Shit like this is what surprise heart attacks in your twenties are made of. But like fuck does he have insurance; last thing he needs is to wipe his savings just when he's reached some kind of self-sufficiency.

Throws away his resident's key to the roof and locks himself in, mixing breakbeat tracks and trying to decide if this newfangled garage house music coming out of the UK is shit or not, and ignoring the fact that the heart murmur has followed him inside.

Lalonde's note arrives in the mail a few weeks later, when the doubled heartbeat in his chest has started to genuinely worry him. Nearly dumps the vodka-scented envelope in the trash with the rest of the shit, but then reconsiders and tears it open over spring rolls and steamed dumplings from Chey's. The sparkly fuchsia ink is a dead giveaway.

_Dear Ambrose,_

_(Gags on a mouthful of chopped vegetables and pork when he reads that. Jesus fucking Christ.)_

Professor Joanna seems confident in your ability to locate your charge's arrival coordinates through sheer blind intuition. However, it has become increasingly clear to me that her level of instinctive comprehension of the rules in this Game that we play is not something that has been passed on to us, and to that end I have called on the assistance of an astrophysicist in James Harley's employ. My secondary degree, unfortunately, is still in progress, and it is only with his assistance that I have begun to track the interplanar vessels that we believe will bring the children through the Medium.

Dave's meteor will arrive on the third or fourth of December. According to the current trajectory, however, we estimate the meteor will strike somewhere in the greater Houston area. Though I currently live in Maine, I'm afraid that Rose is also coming down somewhere to the west of my location. If I were you, I would make arrangements to be in the vicinity, if you have not already. Best of luck, and try not to fret overmuch. Joanna seems confident in your capabilities as a guardian, and as long as she is here to guide us as custodians, I have no doubt that all will be well. If you have any doubts, my number is below.

_Watch the skies, Ambrose._

_Affectionately yours,_

_Doctor Rue Lalonde, Ph.D._

Dumps it in the trash.
Houston happens.

Hits on the third, like Lalonde predicted, but Ambrose is a shithead and delays himself again and again, until the undeniable pull drags him to Texas late the next morning. Street's been cordoned off by the police, but Ambrose blows right by them, darting through the shadows until he reaches the smoking crater where a record store used to be. Looks down and sees, with his stomach dropping out from under him, exactly what Jo and Harley and Lalonde all told him he would see.

A little kid stares up at him from the miniature crater. All beady red eyes and a mop of white blond hair and pudgy baby hands that wave and grasp at nothing, reaching for someone who's standing a few yards off and not coming any closer. Babbles wordlessly, a bubble of spit popping in the corner of its mouth, oblivious to the scorch marks and rubble that are all that's left of the building that used to sit here.

Not even a scratch on the kid.

There's also a dead horse with a pink heart tattooed on its scorched butt, but some things in life Ambrose has just learned not to ask stupid questions about.

There's a long moment where he almost walks away. Let the kid live some normal life, or however normal it would be ending up in the foster care system after turning up on a space rock; surely more normal than it would be with old granny paradox prophecies hanging over his head and a custodian like him.

But even he's not that worthless.

Or maybe he's just finally found his weakness.

Shoves a pair of pointy shades on the kid's face before it can blink, and pokes at it gingerly before picking it up under one arm. Kid latches onto him with a grip on his polo like a vise, like some kind of human koala, and buries its face in his side, so maybe he's managed to do something right.

Grabs the horse too, before he goes. Knows better than to let a choice tattooed rump like that go to waste. He's already rented a car because like fuck was he going to transport a kid anywhere on a motorcycle, so might as well make it worth the cold hard cash he shelled out for it.

He's not ready for this. A college dropout DJ with a GED who keeps swordkind lying on every available surface in a shitty apartment in a shitty neighborhood? Who in their right mind walks up to him and tells him he's going to be raising a kid.

Crazy people. Crazy people, that's who.

- A month later he's a wreck, and sick with his own uselessness.

Catches himself thinking about the kid as an it on multiple occasions and no, fuck no, that needs to stop.

Starts out terrified that he'll break Dave if he so much as handles him the wrong way, and ends up checking out parenting books from the library, snarling ferociously at the clerks who simper and coo at the baby clinging to his back in the new carrier. Tries to set up a schedule, but Dave still wakes him up at random, unscheduled hours of the morning to squirm and cry until he gets burped.

Loses count of how often Dave's fancy new heart bib saves the fucking day because Ambrose can
use pretty much any bladekind on the planet with easy but he can't handle a goddamn bottle. Forgets to feed himself for a full week, dizzy and queasy every time he mixes up a bottle of formula and hopes to god that it doesn't make Dave sick.

Stops doing that after the second time he passes out on the bathroom floor and wakes up to Dave whimpering on the floor next to him, tugging at his hair and glasses with clumsy baby fingers. Has to spend an hour pacing around the tiny apartment, bouncing and rocking and murmuring stupid shit he tries not to think about until Dave calms down again.

...And sweet Jesus. Diapers.

And then Dave starts goddamn climbing shit, which is in none of these parenting books. Fucking ridiculous, is what it is, the exact opposite of what he needs right now, waking up in the middle of the night in a panic to find the kid crawling across the stovetop and dicking around with the controls, or sitting on top of the katana display on the wall seven feet above the ground. Most of the time he just keeps the kid close, one hand on his back while the kid contentedly gnaws on his shirt and climbs him like a jungle gym, vanishing from his elbow to his knee to the top of his head with gurgles of childish laughter.

They sleep on the same futon because cribs are expensive as shit, but Dave can be curled up sucking on a toe one second and halfway to the turntables the next, no matter how close an eye Ambrose keeps on him; ends up getting one of those kiddie leashes and strapping Dave in, even though they're made for kids who have grown enough to actually walk and he has to restitch the whole harness to make it fit. Keeps it looped on his wrist at all times, and they're fucking golden.

First time he shows up at a job with the kid in tow, pretty much convinced it'll be a shitshow. Owner cusses him out, screaming to be heard over the previous set, but the asshole currently at the helm is shitshow, so the big man boots him before the crowd can take off and lets Dave stay locked in the closed DJ booth with Ambrose the whole time while he salvages the show. Slides a pair of noise-cancelling headphones on the kid's head and keeps him on the leash until his four hour shift is over and, sweating, he can sprint Dave out before anyone can see him. Dave gums through at least one cord and disappears for a full thirty seconds before reappearing at the end of the leash, oblivious to the near heart attack he gives Ambrose every time he vanishes.

This is not the way a kid should be brought up. Doesn't take a genius to see the way he's already fucking Dave up, no matter how hard he tries to juggle work and the kid. Can't even imagine how much worse it'll get later on, when the kid grows up and hits puberty and has all those emotions that Ambrose trained himself not to deal with, a defense mechanism that went spiraling off the rails and left him like this.

Like fuck does he want Dave to turn out like him, broken and cold and flat, unable to smile when his own kid tries to play peekaboo. Everyday Dave takes more cues from him, laugh muted and smile barely more than an upturn of his mouth and a crinkle of his big red eyes behind shades.

Feels sick, feels sick, feels sick.

Can't do this. Can't watch this happen.

APC just started offering person to person text messaging this year, and everyone starts calling regular letters 'snail mail.' Signed up for that shit before he admitted that he was actually going to pick up the kid, waste of money that could have paid for more bright pink and pastel yellow baby onesies.

Not surprised when one of Lalonde's next letters mentions that she's experimenting with it, too.
Never called her, not once, but when the texts start blowing up his piece of shit Sprint phone he sees his chance. Lays Dave down for a nap, his little pair of outrageously awesome shades folded up nice on the table so they don't jab him in his sleep, and perches on the kitchen counter, at the end of the leash, to deal with this.

To get Dave out of here.

TG: And of course, Joanna is still waiting on hers. From what we can tell, young John is arriving far later than the others.
TT: mmmm
TG: Not that she's ever been worried about any of this. Would you believe that she mentored me all through my doctorate, and inspired me to take on the second degree, and never once let on that she had practical experience with all of the philosophy we were discussing?
TT: fucking fascinating

Would be a lot easier if Lalonde would just stop blathering about science and everyone's favorite psychic granny all the time. She treats the old lady more like some kind of spirit guide than a college professor.

TG: Still grumpy about the fact that she was correct all along?
TT: just saying, Lalonde, your mentor has a prankster's gambit a mile wide, and you didn't think she was lying to your face half the damn time? talk about naïve.
TG: Joanna is one of the few people who has managed to earn my absolute trust in this life. You of all people should understand how...difficult it is, trusting someone when you are one of those whose first instinctual response is to conceal your thoughts, and to remain aloof from the rest of the world.
TT: yeah, yeah, none of us can tell the truth straight out for love or money
TT: just means you've gone soft because of an old granny face
TT: doesn't mean she's actually trustworthy
TT: if she really had any of our best interests at heart, no way would she have left these kids with a pair of basket cases like us

There. Sweet redirect. Now maybe they'll get somewhere.

TG: I would like to think that for all our idiosyncrasies, we are not all that incompetent as new parents. It has only been a few weeks, Ambrose. Give it time.
TT: you've been charting your kid's growth and testing her for fucking ectobiological shit since day one, and i take the kid out to bars and clubs at night. yeah, we're fucking radical parents
TG: They are not normal children; I'm only trying to determine how I will need to adapt to accommodate Rose's unique needs later in life. If you are insinuating that I would ever make my child the subject of a research study, you are sorely mistaken.
TT: just calling it like i see it, but at least you have your sicknasty house and shit to keep your lab baby in
TT: you think a shitty hellhole like my apartment is any place to raise a kid
TT: what if I brought someone home to fuck and traumatized the kid
TG: Somehow, I highly doubt a situation like that would ever occur. You may wish to dial back on the late night work, but aside from that you're perfectly capable of raising him without traumatizing him, surely.
TT: woman, you do not know shit about my life
TG: And anyone who knew you for more than a minute would know you're asexual, after all.

Regrets everything about this conversation.

Should have known nothing would go according to plan.
TT: shut up
TG: Why? It is true, no? Rather obvious, when one knows what to look for. Perhaps something on
the grey spectrum, but you're certainly never going to try to "get some" where poor David would be
in danger of overhearing, so your argument is moot.
TT: you know fuck all
TT: you know absolutely fuck all about me, you sanctimonious prick
TG: That's not a no, darling.
TG: You didn't shower before you came to the cafe, you know. Lipstick on the hickie on your neck,
beard burn but no lipstick all down your jaw, so congratulations on pulling two in one night, but you
smelled of everything but sex. You're either a twenty two year old male with the self-restraint of a
monk or a twenty two year old asexual still playing the field. And apparently, in denial.
TT: shut up
TT: just
TT: fucking hell, just take the kid
TT: if you already know, why the hell are we arguing about this

Sicksicksicksick.

Dave needs better.

TG: Ambrose, you do know this is perfectly normal, correct? A lack of sexual attraction is just as
viable as any other orientation. I myself have always personally leaned towards the aromantic side of
things. This is not -
TT: shut up and get this kid into a normal living environment, Lalonde
TT: fuck, you want him in a house with something broken?
TT: get him out of my house, Lalonde, before I fuck up more than you can fix
TG: Ambrose, you're not broken. Insecure about this to, apparently, the point of neuroticism, but
there's nothing wrong with you.
TT: this isn't a fucking neurosis, Lalonde
TT: this is me trying and spectacularly failing to be able to hold up my end of any kind of
relationship, period
TT: first time this little shit comes to me looking for relationship advice, what do you think happens?
i don't do emotions. end of story
TG: I've been told puppets generally make for good demonstration tools.
TT: what
TT: ...puppets...
TT: okay, that's even more fucked up than anything I could come up with
TG: Ambrose, this in no way impacts your ability to raise a child. Your sexual orientation has
nothing to do with how you care for him, unless there's something rather significant you're not telling
me about how you intend to raise him.
TT: like hell it does
TT: like growing up with a guardian that hates himself is fucking healthy
TT: he'll be fucking miserable, i'll make him miserable
TT: i'm not entirely sure how you missed the huge flashing neon sign, but that's what i do

She doesn't get it. Doesn't understand that this is a crack that runs too deep, a fundamental flaw in
the thing that is Ambrose Strider. When they assembled him they left out the part that felt things.
Hasn't cared about anyone or anything in his life, foster family or friends or potential fuckbuddies,
and why would Dave be an exception to the rule?

Kid deserves better that a guardian who doesn't have a fuck to give.
TG: Do you?
TT: what kind of fucking question is that
TG: Have you ever raised a child before?
TT: god, fuck no
TG: Then how would you know? Give more of a shot than a month. Rose has been absolute darling so far, I can't imagine her brother would be anything less than positively adorable.
TG: Furthermore, on the subject of relationships, have you ever *tried* seeking out someone else uninterested in sex? I made myself miserable for years before realizing that the emotional connections that most of the population associated with sex did not appeal to me. Your situation is no different.
TT: just drop it
TT: will you take him or not
TG: ...No. No, I will not.
TT: then why the hell are we still talking
TG: Ambrose?
TG: Ambrose, dear?
TG: Please, don't do anything rash.

Not sure he remembers kicking off the counter and striding over to the futon; just sort of finds himself sitting cross legged on the floor by Dave's head, eyes unfocused, fingers laced and hands clasped tight against his mouth while he struggles not to *scream*. Phone's flung across the room, vanishing behind a stack of PlayStation games and the Sega Saturn. Impact makes a loud enough sound that Dave snuffles awake with a tiny wail.

There's a reason he turned all this shit off. Hadn't been happy, hadn't been much of anything at all, but hadn't had to worry about hurting someone, either.

"Hey, little man," when Dave starts making breathy little noises, the ones that mean one of his rare crying fits is on the way. Kid is too quiet, but has been since the very start, so maybe that at least isn't something Ambrose needs to worry is his fault.

Sags forward a little to lean his elbow on the edge of the mattress, his chin on his palm as he offers a finger for Dave to seize in a diminutive fist. Even squeezing with all of his surprising baby strength, it's barely a faint pressure on his finger; just enough that Dave quiets again, trying to draw the digit toward his nubby gums. Kid's not even fucking teething yet, and he's still chewing everything in sight.

This is the kid who's supposed to grow up to save the world? He's toothless and stubby armed and gets colicky if he drinks too much formula in one sitting.

And the *diapers*.

Sighs, "What am I going to do with you, kiddo?"

Talking to Lalonde was a mistake he won't make again. Thinks he needs to work on that diaper changing robot just to get the harsh sting of being on the wrong end of a text beatdown out of his head. Gets him all warm and tingly inside, thinking about using Harley's funding for a robot in charge of diapers. Would be fucking rad.

Doesn't notice Dave's other hand wandering. Not until a pudgy finger hooks on the ring in his lower lip and *yanks like a son of a bitch*.

Suppressing reactions to pain is first nature by now, not second; he just sighs and shakes his head, reaching up to extricate his piercing from danger. His lip smart, but doesn't bleed. "You're gonna be a little shit," he informs the kid, weary and resigned and maybe smirking a little.
But damn, that hurt. Has happened more than a few times in the past, and that lip ring and the eyebrows tend to be Dave's favorite targets. Might have to lose them until the kid is old enough to understand no means no. He's like a fucking crow with shiny objects.

Or...

Inspiration strikes.

Okay, maybe Lalonde is a dead end. But the puppet thing gives him an idea.

The diaper robot doesn't pan out. Win some, lose some.

Lil Cal, on the other hand, is a rousing success.

And by rousing success, he means Dave is scared almost literally shitless of the thing in the first few days. Lil Cal is the shit. It is him.

Dug the thing out of some creepyass puppet thrift store halfway across the city. Strings are fucked and there's a spatter of something faded, green, and probably troll blood along the fabric of one plush leg, but he slaps the thing into some kind of working order, and lets his speed make up for the fact that he has no fucking clue how to work a puppetkind.

Seriously. No one in their right mind takes puppetkind classes to cover their PE requirement.

But it makes things...easier. Doesn't have to worry so much about hurting Dave if there's an extra intermediary between the two of them. Needs the distance, needs the space, because he can't be detached about Dave, and Ambrose has always needed to avoid things in one way or another.

If he can't stop loving this stupid baby, he needs the outlet of Lil Cal or he's gonna freak the fuck out. Dave needs him to not freak the fuck out, and at some point Dave's needs took priority over his own.

Eyes are creepier than the rest of the puppet, if that's possible, and he never takes his shades off around them.

Dave *hates* it, ducks the puppet when Ambrose uses it to try and feed him, flashes out of the highchair or the bathtub to cling to his head and bury his face in Ambrose's hair, covered in mashed carrots or suds depending on the situation, while Cal falls to the floor. Eventually works out a system where Dave will stop bawling his head off and - warily - let the puppet handle things half the time, and then Ambrose will stuff poor Lil Cal in the closet and delicately handle Dave on his own, sitting the kid in his lap while he bends over the coffee table and strifes his way through taxes and bills.

Gets even better when Dave actually starts teething, and can take out his utter terror by using his new teeth on puppet flesh in what the kid obviously feels is sweet, sweet vengeance. The approval Ambrose feels is ungodly.

Still texts Lalonde on rare occasion. Never get much farther than -

TT: will you take him now
TG: No.

- before he tosses the phone again.

But he knows he's screwed when, months later, Dave starts learning how to talk. That's the moment
when the last of his emotional detachment shatters, and all that's left is the flimsy mask.

They're sitting on the futon and watching something incredibly stupid, and by stupid he means the Muppets because they're the only puppets on the planet Dave doesn't try to gnaw on sight in some twisted defense mechanism, and Ambrose is still trying to figure out just how puppets fucking work. He's only half serious about the puppetkind specibus, except okay yeah he's kind of disturbingly fascinated by it. Sometimes they play safe stuff on the N64, but Dave is in one of his climbing moods, restless and trying to grab every vaguely sharp object in the range of his leash, only ever sitting still when a bird Muppet shows up on screen.

The Whaddyasay Bird appears, bright red with floppy yellow feathers on its head and melancholy, half closed eyes, and Dave sits right the fuck up, watching avidly and totally engrossed in the twenty year old skit as a bunch of birds start hitting on each other. The 70s were a weird time. Rolling his eyes, he props open the robotics magazine he's been flipping through absently and turns the page.

A hand bats at his knee, but he doesn't look up until, "Bo!"

"Nnn?" he grunts, before he realizes what just happened. He looks down at Dave, but the kid hasn't looked away from the screen, just flopped down in a slump over his knee, eyes fixed on the television behind his righteous little shades.

"You say something, punk?" he wonders aloud, jiggling his knee so that Dave burbles with laughter, latching on with his usual death grip. "Sup?"

"Bo!"

It takes him a full five seconds to process the fact that yeah, it wasn't Lil Cal talking just then. Lil Cal can do a lot of things, but talking is hopefully not one of them. Ambrose blinks, and then slowly shuts the magazine, reaching down to grab Dave under the armpits and hold him up at arm's length. "What did you just say?" he asks, suspicious and frowning but also anxious as fuck.

"Bo!" Dave reaches out and plasters his hands across Ambrose's nose and shades, legs kicking for solid ground when he doesn't get put back down immediately.

This cannot be happening. "Ambrose," he says, his stupid heart beating with the extra murmur fluttering along in the background. "Come on, how hard can extra syllables be, right? Can you say that? Ambrose."

"Bo!" Dave insists, lips twisting down out of their usual flat line, patting at him with another hand. "Bo!"

"I - fuck. Bro?" he says, helpless, because his kid is saying his first word and -

"Bo! Bo!" Dave grabs his hair and yanks, crowing with delight.

Well. Shit.

He ducks his head and rests his chin on the kid's head. "That's right," he says, quiet and slow because his chest feels too tight to breathe. "I'm your Bro."

- TT: well
- TT: i hope you're fucking happy
- TT: the little shit has grown on me and now i think i'm attached
TT: you said Rose still wasn't talking, right. well surprise, Lalonde. it's obvious now. i have the smart one
TT: shit he's precious as fuck, what have you done to me, woman
TT: i am going to raise this little sucker into a total badass
TT: ...
TT: Lalonde?
TG: Ambrose.
TG: Joanna is dead.


He realizes, later on, that that's when Rue Lalonde begins to *break*.

When she shows up at his door three years later, it's already started, and after that, it's like they can't *stop* fucking up.

And he never did hear half of the shit Jo knew, real or not. Games and frogs and shit – he doesn’t know enough to explain it to anyone else.

Just enough that he'd give anything not to have to watch Dave go through it again.

God, he hopes he doesn't fuck this up.

Chapter End Notes

On one side we have Aradia. On the other, we have cue balls with minds of their own.

Well. If I were a betting man…I certainly wouldn’t bet against her.

All in all, probably the weakest chapter I’ve ever written, ever. Probably for the best if we just move along the Chapter 17 and pretend none of this mess ever happened.

Everyone knows everything they need to know for now, yay expository flashbacks, let's never repeat this experience ever again.

I was serious when I said AU, bro. We are officially in extreme Homestuck canon divergence territory. This is all immensely confusing for everyone involved, so feel free to ask questions at my tumblr and if it doesn't spoil too much, I'll try to clarify things – but there’s a lot of potential spoilers, so I’m gonna play these cards very close to the chest for a while yet.
Strange Weathers

Chapter Summary

And underfoot the heavy hour strews dust,
And overhead strange weathers burn and bite;
And where the red was, lo the bloodless white,
And where truth was, the likeness of a liar,
And where day was, the likeness of the night.

Chapter Notes

Hover for Russian, Spanish, and Alterian translations. Rose's section specific warning for alcohol consumption on an incredible scale. Mild epilepsy warning for John's section for a moving gif. Also, if you notice a broken image, lemme know - the picture links in this chapter seem to break on an alarmingly regular basis for no apparent reason. I think I've had to replace all of them at least once by now...

H&H belong to RMWT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC VI - COMPULSION

John asks Doctor Lalonde's permission before leaving the laboratory to fly.

He doesn't ask his dad.

Which ordinarily would have been the first thing John would do in any situation involving his powers, as Karkat has come to learn, and that's when Karkat grudgingly admits that he's going to need to pull an fucking intervention because his moirail has just managed to hit new levels of dumbassery. As if they haven't had enough of this shit over the past few days.

Dave had heard 'flying' and turned vaguely green, which Karkat interprets as a Strider warning sign that an evacuation of one's breakfast into the nearest load gaper is imminent. Jade is tearing up an entire research lab she's commandeered for her own sick, sick experiments, trying to teach herself Rue Lalonde's paradigm and the science behind it in the space of a day so she can convince the Querent to let her finagle around with the Hub to improve it. Kanaya was last spotted hunting for Rose's chosen sulking niche in order to drag her outside for some fresh air, with minimal success.

So it's just Karkat and the bird Strider who end up sitting outside while John messes around with the wind. Which is inconvenient, but the orange Dave is just a fraction more tolerable than the original by virtue of having not been raised a Strider, so it's not as bad as it could have been. Karkat is tempted to ask why the fuck he's not up there flying when, according to regular Dave who is somehow an expert on bird-human anatomy, his wings are working fine, but then a surging gust of wind nearly flattens a copse of pine trees to the ground and he can put two and two together and get that John isn't exactly conducive to anyone else flying when he's in a mood like this. Heck, Karkat
doesn't even want to fly when John's like this. There's a reason he's on the ground, and it's not that he's still nursing sore ribs of dubious structural integrity.

Now he's just waiting for the opportune moment to implement Operation God Fucking Dammit John Egbert You Speak To Your Father This Instant Or So Help Me. Since he wants to interact with Oriole as little as possible and Oriole seems content to perch on a boulder a few yards away and stare up at the sky, watching John do loop-de-loops, Karkat whiles the time away by tearing up fistfuls of grass and thinking up a better operation tagline because that was just...wow. There are no fucking words, really. It's reached the point where he can't even think up two words that would easily combine into one, and really, what is a sad sack like Karkat worth if he can't even smash words together to make hilariously stupid and comically morbid portmanteaus?

They’ve talked about the recording from yesterday as much as John seems willing – or even able – to talk. It’s mostly been just mutual silence and understanding, which makes it hard to gauge exactly how much John remembers of that overwritten previous life. But John’s brain has stopped resetting itself every time the subject gets mentioned, and Karkat figures that enough progress for one week.

The sky's still overcast today, and the valley they're in is elevated enough that the clouds seem closer than usual, low-hanging and stagnantly grey, with wispy trails trailing off through the thin air where John whips through the cloud cover in his antics. They're bruised and angry enough that Karkat thinks rain is overdue, but the potential never quite pans out. The surface of the lake occasionally dips and judders outward in shaky ripples when John comes close to the ground, but when it's still the water appears to have all the depth of a silver coin. When John is absent or higher up in the sky, the air close to the ground goes oddly still, like there's a pair of cosmic lungs out there with the breath knocked out of them that haven't quite managed to get the hang of breathing again, and the puffs of Karkat's breath sound harsh in his ears compared to the utter stillness.

Even as he thinks that, a sharp, tiny sting on the side of his neck startles him, and Karkat slaps the spot on impulse, grimacing when he pulls his hand away to reveal the crushed wings and thorax of a tiny mosquito. It's easy enough to rub a thumb claw over the tiny bite and filter the mosquito saliva out of his system, but by the time he's convinced the histamines in his bloodstream to calm the fuck down and stop trying to react to foreign material that's not even there anymore, another mosquito has started buzzing around his horns.

"Okay, yeah, no, I'm out of here," Oriole says, his voice edged with a hoarse screech, and Karkat glares at him only to see the orange-tinted human fluffing the feathers of his wings out, looking distinctly miserable over the rims of his sunglasses. At least five mosquitoes have decided that bird kid is on the menu for the day. "You know, this shit is why I was fine with leaving Houston. Houston is a fucking hell hole this time of year, but look at this."

"I've lived here my entire fucking life, and yeah, it's finally spring so welcome back to the pit," Karkat says unsympathetically, standing up and pulling his hood over his head, trying to ward off any more bites. "That lake is probably the mosquito equivalent of the incestuous slurry itself."

"Jesus." It's surreal watching Dave Strider's features rearrange themselves into a very obvious glower of resignation when it's not actually the douchebag himself. "Should we call him down or something?"

"He probably hasn't even noticed, that lucky moron. Just go," Karkat says, shrugging dismissively. He doesn't care enough to see what Oriole does next; he trudges further out into the field instead, kicking clods of dirt and rocks out of his path as he squints up at the sky and tries to figure out where John will swing out of the clouds next.

This is why he completely fails to notice the rock that beats him. He knows he's fucked up when his
toe slams into something way more solid than he was expecting, jamming his claw, and his ribs give him all of three fucking seconds' warning as he trips to inform him that on no uncertain terms were they willing to help him land gracefully. It's just not on the fucking agenda today. He tries to roll anyway because he's trained for painful landings, but the most he can manage is a wonky, one-shouldered somersault before his torso cramps up with pain and he flops out onto his side, snarling as he tears up a hank of long grass and sheds it. In the distance, he thinks he hears the distinct sound of sniggering, tainted by the occasional unmistakable 'caw,' and welp, that's it, any hope of ever establishing an armistice with the lone halfway tolerable member of the Strider clan just died along with the last of Karkat's dignity. It was a dim hope anyway, one best relegated to the dusty mental closet reserved for shitty dreams like the thought of ever not being culled on sight if his hemotype were outed, or the completely crackpanned notion of becoming a hero and meeting Heir and becoming his partner and -

Wait.

Irritated, Karkat rolls over onto his back with a huff and cups his hands around his mouth to shout, "JOHN. YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER SHITHEAD, STOP DICKING AROUND WITH CLOUD ART AND PREPARE TO MEET YOUR MAKER." Satisfied that John will be listening for some kind of shout, Karkat scratches behind his ear and then folds his arms over his chest as he contemplates the strenuous ordeal that is sitting up.

He cautiously wants to say that shouting is easier these days, so maybe Spades didn't pull all that healing nonsense out of his ass after all. He doesn't get dizzy from the pain when he has to deal with stairs anymore, either, but so far there's been no opportunity to ask if anyone in this facility is capable of operating an x-ray machine to take a look. Everyone here is either shell-shocked, insane, annoying, intimidating, recovering from being stabbed, or Harley, and Karkat trusts exactly none of those potential candidates with the grand task of performing the first professional x-ray he'll have ever received, ever.

Anyway. Karkat's usual bundle of ongoing issues aside, the wind picks up a little as he finally hauls himself upright. By the time he's warily glared at the miniature fucking boulder responsible for his fall in the first place and thus established his inherent superiority over it by virtue of being a sentient living being capable of glaring in the first place, John in full Heir uniform drops out of the sky, half-assing the landing with a series of three huge bounces before he skids to a halt in front of Karkat, grinning and pulling up his goggles.

Because John is an idiot. Seriously, he's lucky Karkat fucking adores him because otherwise Karkat could never let the kid live this uniform business down. They're literally in the middle of a valley so slathered in weird science protection that no one can approach it unguided without clearance, and John is still worried about random ass hikers witnessing a flying human being and somehow putting two and two together.

(It's weird, looking at Heir's hero uniform, now that Karkat has seen what the Heir of Breath looked like in a past life. Even fighting for his life against a flying hellbeast, that young John had been a bright scrap of blue fabric, his blue windsock of a hood tossing in a constant, sprightly breeze. In comparison, Heir is dark teals and steely greys, as though someone took that brightness and smeared soot all over it, and the moment he touches down the wind flattens out again, artificially dampened by a need for secrecy that John shouldn't even be worrying about up here in the middle of nowhere.

Objectively, Karkat knows Heir wears toned down colors because waltzing around dark alleys in sky-blue pajamas would get him knifed in a heartbeat. It's just common sense for heroes who work mostly at night to try to blend in. You get your whackjobs like Cascade or Nymph or whatever the fuck she's calling herself these days who like publicity and wear freaking designer costumes in
shades too close to their blood color, and the Puppeteer and Flashstep who are just fucking morons, but they're the incredibly stupid exceptions, not the rule.

But knowing what he knows about John, about all the shit going on in the dumbass's scrambled 'pan, Karkat can't quite keep his own shitty, leaky excuse for a thinkpan from wondering - if Rose and Dave and Jade made it out with their costumes that more or less tend to match the color scheme of their godselfs, what does it mean that John, who might remember the most out of all of them, takes one look at Kanaya's vivid, colorful schemes to redesign everyone's costumes personally and nyooms out of the room faster than you can say 'depressive episode'?

It's not a happy thought.)

Karkat rolls his eyes and reaches out, yanking down John's mask for him before he can get confused about who he's talking to. Unbelievable, how an action that would have been unthinkable not a week ago - unmasking Heir - is now just common sense. He doesn't miss how John's eyes flicker, his front teeth stealing out to tug on his lower lip in consternation before the ingrained paranoia settles down. Neither of them is used to this.

Karkat starts with a disconcertingly unrelated topic; all the better to set John at ease, and prevent him from redirecting the conversation himself. "So is it going to rain, or have you fucked around with the clouds like an uncaring god long enough that there's a drought in Portland and a hurricane making its way down to Kansas?"

The weather. Always a classic opener.

But oh, fucking hell. Maybe Karkat should ease back on the god comments and the intimations of cosmic injustice that always come so easily to him, because now there's a whole metric fuckton of baggage involved whenever gods get mentioned that he doesn't think anyone in their right mind is willing to question right now.

"I'm not a weatherman, Karkat -" John starts, clearly trying to laugh it off, and then snaps his mouth shut, considering the clouds with a curious look. "But I don't think so, no. The regular wind doesn't feel right. And those clouds are pretty thin once you're past the lower layers."

And that's not weird at all. You know. One's moirail being a living barometer. Nope. Totally normal.

"If I ever walk out the door without an umbrella when I'm going to need one later in the day, I'm revoking all of your goddamn snuggle privileges. All of them," Karkat says, shaking his head. "Those are my terms."

"Not even on April Foo-shutting up now," John corrects himself halfway through. Karkat can only imagine his evil eye is working better now than ever before. He's been practicing in the mirror since he was ten goddamn years old, and it's about time all that training started to pay off.

He's going to need all the leverage he can get for this conversation. Because when John starts avoiding something, it's like pulling teeth without anesthetic with Dave Strider acting as your assistant nurse - a game where the points don't count, the stink of remorse hangs in the air like a sick, sick perfume, everyone's ankle-deep in a pool of apple juice, and the operating tools have been replaced with bendy straws. If what Karkat suspects is correct, John’s refusal to remember Skaia or the game and all the shit they tried to discuss last week that was kind of critically important was most likely the fucking culmination of apparently a lifetime’s worth of extreme avoidance.

But there are no Striders or Harleys within a twenty foot radius, so hopefully Karkat can pull this off without something else incredibly stupid happening or a flock of annoying humans flying out of the building for an illicit John-pile in the middle of a meadow. He gets that for all of them it's not a
romantic thing, but he thinks he might have chipped a back molar grinding his teeth whenever someone else touched John these past couple days. It's like having back-seat shooshpappers flailing at your face when you're busy trying to keep your carwreck of a moirail from bursting into flames and catapulting off the nearest cliff.

If only Karkat's thinkpan would stop nagging him -

_Shut up_, he thinks at his brain, with the kind of Karkat Vantas-patented circular self-loathing that would no doubt give lesser beings a headache, and he focuses on the task at hand. Said task is now code-named Operation Filiultimatum, and it is a go.

"Anyway, I've been thinking, and maybe this whole situation isn't all that unmanageable," John is currently chattering, bobbing up and down in the air so that Karkat has to nod his head up and down to keep up with where John's face is at any given moment. That gets really old, really fast, and Karkat has to reach out and drag his moirail down by the shoulder to get him to keep his feet on the ground. He has the decency to look sheepish about it, but he keeps talking regardless. "I'm so frustrated about having to let any criminal activity go unpunished, but with the way all of this going we might need a lot of time to plan how to deal with the entire Midnight Crew at once anyway.

"Fuck that, I'm fucking peachy. Never better," Karkat snaps, shifting a little and ignoring the burn in his ribs. "I'll be back on the job when you are, because" - he holds up a claw when John opens his flap to argue - "because the last time you went out without me, everything went bugfuck insane. We're partners and as of now you're fucking attached to my miraculously unbroken hip because clearly I'm the only thing standing between you and a fucking full-fledged heroic catastrophe of a scale only a pair of imbeciles like Harley and Dave could enable."

He pauses. John stares, looking dazed but attentive, which is generally his default state when Karkat starts really ranting. So at least Karkat's got his attention. Karkat swats away another mosquito that comes cruising in to sample his candy blood, and goes on. "You're welcome. Anyway, I'm so sick of talking about the Crew and the game shit right now. John, you've been avoiding your custodian. Explain."

To his credit, John doesn't pretend not to know what Karkat's talking about. He does hit the ground, hard, his feet almost rooting themselves into the dirt as he ducks his head, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "Do I have to?" John asks, and Karkat utilizes an incredibly effective raised eyebrow to get his point across. "Yeah, I think he's mad at me. So I'm just trying to put that off as long as possible."

…It's like trying to pull teeth, but the teeth are also coated in grease and Harley's in charge of teleporting them around at random, on top of everything else. "Your father is the most ridiculously supportive parental unit in the history of the human race. I mean, I could see him transforming into a raging strifebeast to beat the shit out of anyone who might hurt you because that's what custodians do, but if this is still about the Droog bugfuckery, he wouldn't blame you for that. Try again."

John fiddles with one of the buckles of his uniform, sighing. "If I promise to go talk to him right away, will that work?" John says weakly, his gaze finally darting up to meet Karkat's with a kind of weary resignation. "It's - some old stuff, and some new stuff, and it's kind of complicated."

Karkat nods. "Fuck, John, yes. I'm not micromanaging your relationship with your custodian - just don't let this eat at you until it becomes something I have to stick my grubby claws into to sort everything out in your charmingly dumb thinkpan. I just want you to be sane and happy, you utterly pathetic moron, he thinks but doesn't say. He can't always get what he wants, but when he pats John's cheek and the human's face lights up with a crooked, dorky grin, he likes what he has just fine. There's a warm fuzzy thing purring in his chest in the exact spot where a tight coil of nausea
took up residence all day yesterday, and he may or may not feel the contented hum rise up from his chest into his throat when John ducks his head and knocks their foreheads together.

Probably the temporary moirailing buzz. Probably the lingering suggestion planted a few days ago by Dave, who is the absolute last person on the planet Karkat wants to be thinking about right now. Probably the fact that Karkat's blood feels like it's been injected with granules of sugar, slow and sluggish and so very pacified by the hormonal build up of several days' worth of him and John jamming and shooshing pretty much nonstop. He's still twitchy when other people are around, but right now he's almost fucking mellow as long as John's nearby.

Probably he's just overdue for a potentially major fuck up. Because that's what Karkat does. He fucks up.

But it doesn't feel like a potentially major fuck up to Karkat's thoroughly soothed, shitsponge excuse for a brain. He's already got a hand cupping John's cheek, the fragile human epidermis soft and achingly vulnerable under his claws, so why not tip forward on his toes and kiss John? His lips are dry and chapped and cool, and Karkat rubs a claw over John's suddenly jittery pulse point under his jaw until he relaxes again.

He's definitely purring now, a distinct, clicking rumble that doesn't quite stop when he pulls away from John. Karkat swallows the noise down with supreme effort, because the last thing he needs is for someone to pop up out of the woodwork and witness him acting like a vomit-inducingly sickly sweet, pap-happy teenager. That would just be fucking mortifying, and he'd have to ritually execute the witness in question in the name of his non-existent family honor, and then John would lose his shit over having to help hide the body -

"You kissed me," John blurts out, which is a nice segue point for Karkat's increasingly morbid train of thought.

"Obviously," he replies. John looks absolutely bewildered, a look which he manages to pull off only by taking on the demeanor and glassy stare of a deer in the headlights.

"I - uh," John says, coughing a little and - is he blushing? Holy fuck, he is. "I didn't know kissing was. Uh. A thing we did. Yeah."

That's about when Karkat's thinkpan catches up with the rest of him with all the misdirected force of middling-sized trunkbeast ramming into a baby buggy and reminds him that, oh yeah, his moirail is human. They need this kind of basic shit spoon-fed to them occasionally, or else they risk getting their romantically deficient wires crossed and proceed to slam across quadrants with all the finesse of thirteen-year-old wrigglers on a vacillation-kink bender. John is normally good about this kind of thing by virtue of the fact that Karkat has granted him a second-hand education on the intricacies of troll romance films, but he's still human. And also, he's John, so Karkat needs to remember at all times that he's dealing with someone who once related the apparently amusing anecdote of attempting to discuss quadrants with Rose and becoming baffled by the fact that there were four of them. As though that wasn't fucking implied by the word 'quadrant' -

John is a...very special human being, sometimes. If Karkat didn't find him irredeemably endearing, he's pretty sure the only other way to feel would be a futile irritation of universe-breaking proportions. Wouldn't that be fucking bizarre.

Whatever. Fuck. Play it cool. Cooler than a sack of polarbeast lusus shit in a refrigerator somewhere in East Antarctica. If there was any time in his life Karkat desperately needs to channel the eminently suave yet charmingly low-key conciliatory swagger of troll Will Smith, now is that time. "Do you not want it to be?" he asks, resisting the incredibly powerful urge to hightail it out of this potentially
disastrous conversation and strangle Dave Strider for being the one to bring up sloppy pale makeouts. "Fuck. If that's too close to the human flushed quadrant for you, I'll nix it. We have that power, John," he adds, rolling his eyes. "The incredible power of mutually making informed decisions about what's okay and what's not in this noirallegiance. Amazing, I know."

John's voice cracks. It's fucking adorable. "I am - not opposed?"

Wow, that wasn't questionable as fuck at all. "Are you sure?" Karkat asks, inching a hand to John's elbow and yanking him down onto the ground, because the human's once again started floating high enough off the ground that Karkat has to crank his head back to keep up a line of sight. "Or is this going to become a remarkable unfunny shitshow waiting to happen?"

"N-no, it's fine!" John says, spluttering and nodding almost violently. He has the weirdest look on his face, and for John Egbert, master of the strange, quirky, and downright dumb, that's a fucking accomplishment. "Seriously! I just - no, yeah, kissing is totally fine!" His voice squeaks again on the second 'i' in kissing, a spectacular display of the human vocal cord range that Karkat hasn't heard John produce since the very start of their friendship. "I was just surprised!"

"Good," he huffs, squinting at John for a moment before deciding that yeah, he believes it, no matter how squeaky John sounds. Karkat's still dubious, but John's not all that good at lying.

...Well. You know, about things that aren't, apparently, an entire double life of secret hero work. Maybe that's the secret of both of their mutual idiocy where that whole bulgechafing identity debacle was concerned - neither of them can lie for shit about anything else because they dedicated all of their limited prevarigambit to that single aspect of their lives.

That makes way more sense than it should. He's going to stop thinking about it. Starting right the fuck now. "Shhhhh," he hushes when his sense of John's pulse keeps jumping a little at irregular intervals. He plays it safe by carding his claws through John's hair instead of kissing him again. When John gives a tiny sigh and tilts his head back into the scratches, eyes closing, Karkat knows he's soothed whatever weirdness he might have stirred up by moving too fast. "Now, come on. I'm getting eaten alive by hemoist mosquitos."

"Mosquitos?" John says, glancing around. There's not even a hint of a defensive breeze whipping around him that might explain the pan-blowing lack of mosquitoes in his vicinity. "What mosquitoes?"

"Alright, they're fucking racists, too, chalk that one up for the record," Karkat growls, seizing a clawful of John's uniform and dragging him back toward the lab. "Only interested in mutant non-human blood. That's just despicable. How the fuck am I supposed to properly despise the bird freak if we have to work together to abhor the mosquito menace with a unified front?"

"You could just not despise him," John says dryly, a shit-eating grin starting to spread across his face as he bounces up over the asshole boulder that tripped Karkat earlier. "...I'm gonna tell him."

"Don't you fucking dare."

Talking to Kanaya hurts more than Karkat would like to admit, and he's not entirely sure why. He feels like a worthless, bulgescratching, extremely underdressed bumpkin around her casual elegance, but it's more than that; it's that when he catches her eyes for even a moment, he's flooded with the utter certainty that he knows her - but there's no corresponding recognition on her end. Not even the faintest glimmer of it.
It reminds him of phantom limbs, of people whose cracked up thinkpans keep imagining they feel sensations like itching or pain from a hand or a leg that's been amputated. Except in this case, it's not a missing limb but a relationship that he's never had, except maybe in some past life, so he has all of the nostalgic agony and none of the fond memories of ever having been friends with Kanaya.

And Kanaya is the first person Karkat hears who expresses doubt about everything that they saw yesterday.

"Not all of us have the luxury of having prophetic dreams, Karkat," she says stiffly when he asks why, peering around a corner as though expecting her matesprit to spring up from beneath the floor at any moment. "For all of you, those recordings were a confirmation of a long-standing theory, and you seem to possess personal experiences to back it up. But I saw nothing but poorly contrived nonsense, and the senseless, repeated murder of human children. I am not an expert of technology, but I know such things are easily faked in this day and age. In addition, it has also gravely upset Rose, and I am disinclined to put any weight in the theory of past universes for that reason alone."

With that, she strides off down the corridor, the train of her dusky blue gown flaring behind her. Karkat has to jog to keep up, pressing a claw to his side to keep his ribcage from protesting as he follows her past a clear glass wall that reveals a lab full of strange plants in various stages of overgrowth. They're deep in the section of the lab that's mostly been left to its own automated devices, and even as they walk by a set of overhead sprinklers switch on and begin misting the plants.

Said plants shifts and rustle way fucking more than any plant has any right to do, and Karkat picks up the pace until he's once again matching strides with Kanaya.

Even walking apace with her feels normal. Just based on what Karkat knows about the Malachite Sylph, he knows she's good in a fight, but it runs deeper than that - a kind of baseless faith that if it came down to the wire, Kanaya Maryam is someone Karkat would trust with his life. With John's life, even.

And of course, because Karkat is Karkat and the only fits of spastic eloquence he's ever been able to articulate in the history of his miserable existence are raving tirades concerning hate, the universe, and everything, he can't seem to find the words that would communicate that innate trust without giving Kanaya the impression that Karkat's a fucking creep. "I guess that's pretty fucking fair," he admits, scuffing his shoe against the floor and stuffing his claws into the pockets of his hoodie. There's a hole in the lining that he's wormed his claw through slow erosion over the years, and yeah, okay, maybe he's going to have to invest in new clothes at some point in the future because Kanaya observes him with assessing jade green eyes and he can practically feel the judgment as a palpable shudder. "Keeping your options open. You can probably reserve the right to call us all gullible pricks if it turns out the Queens are just dicking around with us." He pauses, but no reply is forthcoming. "In fact, I'd probably be personally disappointed if you didn't call us out. If I thought back on events knowing all that shit went down without having weird blood visions about it, I would probably not want to believe it, either."

"I find it puzzling that you are so tenacious in attempting to broach a conversation with me," Kanaya interrupts before Karkat can launch into another topic in this one-troll halftime show. "We don't know each other personally. In a matter of days, Rose and I could return to Philadelphia, and we may never see each other again. May I ask why?" She then lifts her nose, nostrils flaring, and then turns her luminescent eyes down another dark corridor with a faint growl of irritation. If she thinks she whispers, "Damnit, Rose," quietly enough that Karkat won't pick up on it, she's wrong.

Because I fucking miss you, he tactfully doesn't blurt out. "I don't know, because you're the only
other troll here?" he says acerbically, shrugging his shoulders. "I figured, hey, maybe we should have some kind of solidarity here. These assholes will drive us shithive maggots if we don't."

"Really? I find most of them rather pleasant. Even if they are all acting, as you would say, like 'gullible pricks,'" Kanaya observes. Abruptly, she skids to a halt, slams a claw out in front of Karkat, and yanks open the door to his right with such force that Karkat whimpers in sympathy for the hinges. He peeks in with her, but can't make out anything in the room but rows of stacked chairs. He thinks it's a storage room. Kanaya huffs and closes the door with considerably less force before continuing. "The small Dersite in particular is a paragon of charm, when he is not making crude gestures at Dave's instigation."

"You can understand all that slackjawed clawflapping?" Karkat says, raising both eyebrows. "I thought Dave was just fucking around like the asshat he is."

"Some of the signs they must have picked up from military standard hand signals. The small one spent a good two minutes informing me quite emphatically that I needed to traverse right and cease firing." Kanaya kicks out a foot and knocks a door open to reveal a very empty kitchenette/lounge area. "Shit!"

Karkat figures bringing up the very strange qualities of Kanaya's pulse wouldn't be safe ground just yet. But by Karkat's logic, Rose is important to John who is important to Karkat, and thus discussing whatever weirdness has led to Kanaya attempting to locate a very missing matesprit in the bowels of Lalonde Laboratories is totally within the bounds of reason. "How did the Seer of Light and the Malachite Sylph meet, anyway?" he asks, closing the door to the lounge when Kanaya stalks off without doing so. "Just proximity?"

Kanaya sighs.

The main plan seems to be to not worry like a heap of fussy taintchafing shit-for-brains about all the game nonsense that went on in some fucked up prior version of their universe.

For one thing, it's literally impossible to do anything about what shitfuckery went down back then. The past is in the past, and as long as they make every conceivable effort not to recreate the absolutely mindnumbing display of unfathomable stupidity performed by those four human idiots, they should at least be able to avoid the more obvious pitfalls. No talking to cue balls. No talking to hideous elder gods the side of planets. No talking to wolf-carapacian-crow-harlequin hybrids. No talking in general.

Karkat is very pro-shut-the-fuck-up at the moment. It's a pretty sound strategy, to his mind. So many problems could be solved if no one talked to anything even vaguely non-human/troll/carapacian, and even some of the carapacians are on thin ice as far as he's concerned. He commandeers a rolling whiteboard or three from a incomprehensibly bemused Doctor Lalonde and makes goddamn charts documenting this shit so no one - absolutely fucking no one - can claim they were too squicked out by the idea of rewatching that horror show to know what not to do.

He rewatches it. It's not so bad once he communicates the idea of a fast-forward button to the Querent, and he knows when all the gory parts are so he can clip past them. He inspects it with the obsessive eye of someone used to overanalyzing the poor continuity of comic books and the subtle hints of multi-quadrant romantic dramas, and he plots out the sequence of events as best he can, even when the intervention of Dave's past and future selves turns into a complete shitstravaganza.

Within minutes, Dave has rolled past the whiteboards on a space-driven rolley chair with an eraser in
one hand and a marker in the other, and from that moment on the human dick drawings flow like shitty, shitty wine. If Karkat turns his back on the charts and timelines for even a hot fucking second, he'll turn around moments later to find an ironically awful dick intersecting with the Derse timeline. It takes him even longer to catch the random bonebulge hidden in the Horrorterror timeline because of all the pre-existing tentacle diagrams on that whiteboard that serve as camouflage, and Karkat nearly cusses himself senseless in the corner when he sees it at last. When Karkat attempts to take the asshole down a peg by shouting at him in front of everyone and their custodians, Dave just raises an eyebrow and blames it on a future him. Harley whistles and makes some excuse about her space powers not working right anyway, so it couldn't possibly have been her moving the chair around. A likely story.

Whatever. The immediate fucking concern is dealing with the Midnight Crew and Doc Scratch before those assholes can pull off - well, whatever the fuck they're trying to pull off. The Querent, or the Queen or the whatever fucking title she's going by on a given day, is adamant that it's all some massive sabotage strategy, and that by dicking around with John's secret identity, Diamonds can ensure that John's too on edge to do anything about whatever potentially world-ending plans might be going on in Seattle. There'd been something about the other three humans, but Karkat's priority here is John, okay? Trying to handle all their issues at the same time would be fucking impossible.

Just. Let there be a general assumption that taking down the massive goddamn criminal enterprise staring them all in the face would be a good thing for everyone involved. As long as that keeps everyone working together toward a common cause and no one goes completely shithive maggots, Karkat thinks that they might be able to pull this off, even if he has to lasso Harley and handcuff her to Rose to keep her from bouncing off to visit New Zealand on a whim. If John's continued membership in the club of people who are alive and sane depends on Karkat leading these assholes around by the nose, Dave and Harley had better prepare themselves for nose piercings because they're the repeat offenders most likely to do incredibly stupid shit because they think it's funny or interesting or, god forbid, scientific.

And if he can somehow figure out who these other troll players might have been along the way, with or without Kanaya's help, all the better.

It would just a whole fucking lot easier if his most significant potential informant would stop creeping around the labs like a fugitive. Dave has been giving the subject of the Black Queen a wide berth ever since he thought she murdered an alternate version of himself, and even the realization that she'd just kind of encouraged the morbidly suicidal heroics that the Game seems to require for its players to make any damn progress hasn't lessened his wariness.

But while Karkat can't say that he's not terrified of Spades Slick - the man is a walking temper tantrum with a knife fetish, who in their right mind isn't terrified of that? - at least he can say that the alien has been weirdly helpful. Sure, Karkat had been lacking the basic context needed to understand a word out of the maniac's mouth, but nowadays he's a different troll. One who's sat through a private screening of the most disturbingly violent excuse for a video game ever played, witnessed his moirail die multiple times, and emerged on the other side with his puzzle sponge reduced to a whimpering, pathetic wreck.

But hey. Now he has all the more motivation to get his shit together and try to find a solution. Kanaya might be doing her level best to play the skeptic card and stay aloof from all the nonsense going on, but Karkat's got too much at stake here to let the humans in the party go and fuck everyone on the planet over.

Unfortunately, tracking down Spades sounds easier than it is. After a few hours of pointlessly
wandering around the labs trying to find the asshole, Karkat comes to the stunning conclusion that all
the previous times he's dealt with Spades had been instigated by the carapacian, not the other way
around. He still has that black-on-black business card in his backpack somewhere - fat lot of good
that would do him in locating this piece of shit alien - and is beginning to wonder if the Black Queen
eventually managed to find Spades, or if the two of them are just wandering around in circles like a
pair of sad sacks while Spades stabs holes in someone halfway across the state.

It's not until he gets back to the lobby that the Querent decides to pipe up and inform him that the
Black Queen found Spades several hours ago, but that We should probably give them some privacy
while they work some things out.

Of course, it just figures that by the time either of those two alien bilgespewers show their ugly mugs,
they've apparently taken out an entire lab in one of the parts of the facility that have been closed up
and shut off due to an absence of scientists to make use of it.

Worse, since Karkat has the most spectacular luck in all fucking universes, when Spades finally
slinks the carapacian sports a ring of triangular chip marks all around his mouth where the shell has
only just scabbed over, limps very obviously as he skulks into the room, and has a ragged slash down
the front of his tacky knitted sweater where someone ripped the fabric apart with their bare claws.
The tattered, cheap black suit underneath it isn't in much better condition, and has been buttoned out
of order.

Oh my god. "I've been looking for you for fucking ages, and you've been off getting laid?!!" Karkat
says, horrified.

Spades grins as he saunters up and flops down on the couch opposite. His sharp-toothed grin is
missing a tooth, and there's a spiderweb of cracks rippling out from a small dent around his eye, the
carapacian equivalent of a black eye. Jesus.

SS: Hell yeah, kid.

SS: When the dame yah hate most in the world hates you enough to restart a black fling - yah don't
say no to that shit.

SS: There's a life lesson for yah. Don't say I never did nothing for you, kid.

Karkat buries his face in his hands. Because it's one thing to watch caliginous romance flicks and
hateship the Scourge Sisters, and another to have one's ally of questionable repute show up with the
hate-bites along the ridge of his shoulder visible for all the world to see.

Seriously. Karkat could have gone his whole life without seeing this.

SS: Wimp.

SS: Ah, well, there's a difference 'tween bein' an unnaturally pissy little shit with too much existential
fury for your own good, and actually detesting someone enough to want to hit on 'em. Pansy like
you wouldn't know a real caliginous rivalry if it sliced your arm off and beat yah upside the head
with it.

SS: Anyway. Felt your needy ass calling for assistance, and yet here yah sit, not in any kind of
danger to speak of. Make this worth my time, kid. Tell me there's someone that needs stabbing.

Spades cracks his neck to one side and then the other, his shell clicking as he sprawls out. It's the
most relaxed Karkat has ever seen the maniac - right up until the carapacian digs out a knife from his
jacket and starts digging the thin blade under his claws to work out flecks of shell and dried blood.
"Well fuck, yeah, I've been hauling my ass all over this place looking for you," Karkat admits, grimacing as Spades starts flicking all that crap onto the floor. "But I didn't fucking call you because - surprise! - you never gave me a number. Jack ass."

Something he says must actually startle Spades, because the carapacian jolts upright, slicing through part of his own thumb claw with a yowl. Spades throws a surly glower at Karkat as he sticks the thumb into his mouth and mumbles around it, jabbing the knife across the table between them as he signs one-handedly.

SS: Don't give me a fuckin' heart attack like that, schlub. Yah don't know shit about how the Blood thing works, do you.

"We only just learned what the whole Game thing was yesterday." Karkat throws up his hands. "So sue me for not having a single iota of an idea what it means that I apparently played a game in an entirely different universe without knowing it. You assholes just kept talking and talking and never explaining anything."

Spades sighs with way more force than Karkat thinks the situation warrants, slouching even further down on his couch and propping a foot up on the armrest. He inspects the cut on his claw sourly; then, even as Karkat watches, the last of the slice seals over, the blood that's trickled down the side of his hand sliding back up to form a scab.

Seriously. That's weird. Karkat can do that, and it's still weird. Is this what it's like for other people when he heals himself?

SS: Figured as much. It can be pretty hit or miss with this shit. I remember you grey bastards and your game and not much fucking else.

"How fucking useful," Karkat mutters under his breath. He thinks he's being quiet enough that Spades won't hear, but the carapacian glares at him and Karkat remembers that his idea of a whisper is still pretty fucking loud. "And apparently the Queens barely left their palace planet shitholes, so they can tell us basically fuck all about any of the troll players."

SS: Ah, well, Queens are Queens.

SS: Don't make the mistake of thinking they care about yah; those two have seen more players come and go than you can imagine, and they're only pulling out all the stops to help this pack of numbskulls because their own asses are finally on the line.

Somehow, that doesn't surprise Karkat. Maybe it would surprise someone like John, who likes to believe the best of people, but Karkat has a healthy cynicism borne of lifelong paranoia. But anyway, he has an opening to find out what Spades might remember about the troll game session, so he decides to take it. "What about Kanaya? Do you remember if Kanaya was definitely one?" Karkat spins his pen between his claws and fumbles it, snarling involuntarily as he snatches it up and tries to pretend it never happened. Kanaya's positive that she doesn't remember anything, and at this point any outside input would be welcome.

He suspects half the reason Kanaya's gone so sour is because Rose has been avoiding everyone for quite a while now. Well, maybe sour's the wrong word for it - Kanaya is just focused on other things, and considers everything about this game secondary to the more immediate concern that is her matesprit potentially going off the rails again.

He's just going to leave Rose and her issues to Kanaya. He got the impression that Kanaya was thoroughly put out by his attempts to strike up a friendship with her, so he's giving her space.
Spades groans and starts picking at a chipped scab on his lower lip, the skritch of claw on shell aggravating enough to set Karkat's teeth on edge.

SS: Chick with the chainsaw? Hell if I know. I only work with Blood players. Can't trust anyone else as far as you can throw 'em.

SS: Plus, you had twelve goddamn players, kid, which was absolutely ridiculous. No way did I bother learning names.

SS: I remember the shitty clown. Just. Fuck that guy.

"But you didn't know his name?" Karkat says, tossing his pen down on the table, the better to dig his claws into his skull and scrape at the skin. His chest aches when he hunches over to rest his elbows on his knees, but it's lot more manageable than it was just yesterday. John had to remind him to take painkillers this morning; Karkat nearly made it all the way through breakfast able to ignore the low throb of pain. He can't tell if he's just getting used to it or if he's actually healing faster than normal.

SS: Games? Ganymede? Gerrymandering? Started with a G.

SS: Hung around with you a lot, 's the only reason I remember him. Honked like a complete shithead. Giggled when you stabbed him.

Useless. Fucking useless. It figures that Karkat would end up with the useless mentor figure. "Is there anything you're good for?!" he demands, twisting hair between his claws.

Something sharp and knifey jams into his arm without warning.

SS: You ungrateful, mouthy piece of shit -

"Do you do anything besides stab people?!" Karkat snarls, seizing control of the blood trickling down the razor blade sticking out of his forearm and hardening it to a point of his own, stabbing through the shell of the carapacian's hand until he lets go of the blade. Spades has another bladekind in hand before Karkat has even finished tossing the first one to the side, baring his teeth.

Karkat holds up both claws for a timeout. "No. Shut up," he insists when Spades starts signing expletives. "You can't stab any more people. Doctor Lalonde is literally one more perforated kidney away from tossing you out on your fucking ass, and I'm not standing up for you when you have actually committed all the violent acts of douchebaggery you've been accused of."

SS: I left my dame for yer sorry ass, I stab who I want. Show me some respect.

SS: From here on out, you refer to me as boss.

"Yeah, no."

SS: Yes.

"Fuck no."

SS: Kid, we need structure.
Why is this happening. "You're not my boss!"

SS: Shit would run a hell of a lot smoother if I were in charge. None of these squishy human shitheads can run a crew half as well as I can, obviously.

Spades takes advantage of Karkat's ensuing prolonged moment of profound existential despair to go retrieve the razor blade from where Karkat tossed it. The carapacian inspects it by licking the blade with a contorted expression of scrutiny, and then tucks the specibus away in a pocket, apparently satisfied.

Someone out there must regret ever handing Spades Slick his first knifekind. Someone has to be just kicking themselves over it, way more than Karkat ever could. He has to believe that, or he's not going to make it through this conversation with his sanity intact. "Did you just compare us to the Midnight Crew?" he asks, chancing a glance at his forearm to make sure he actually scabbed the wound over and that he's not, you know, hallucinating this entire trainwreck of an interrogation due to blood loss. "Seriously?"

SS: Well, I gotta make do with what I have to work with, and since those three ditched me to be fleshy traitors, you're the next best thing...

SS: And since I like yah so much, you can be in charge of enforcement. Some responsibility might teach yah to mind your manners.

Karkat needs a desk to bang his head on. Repeatedly. "Because you founded the Midnight Crew."

SS: Well, it was a couple universes ago, stop wetting yourself.

...This is going to take a while. Karkat picks up his pen, clicks it, and starts taking notes. "Gerrie, you said?" he repeats, rubbing at the contact lens in one eye until it settles down and adjusting his glasses over it when the lines on his notepad start to blur. He came here for information about dealing with the Crew, but he'll take names from the game if he can get them.

SS: You could ask me anything about anything, and you're stuck on those washed up has-beens?

SS: Fine, fine. There's definitely an 'm' in there somewhere. You talkers and your goddamn insistence on one damn name instead of a nice variety of initials.

SS: Gamera?

Karkat stabs the pen through the paper and stares at Spades with disbelief. "Gamera was a fucking giant flying turtle lusus in Japan back in the 1970s who literally shit flamethrowers and had a goddamn plasma cannon arm, and you're saying it was a troll in a game in a previous life."

Spades appears to mull this over.

SS: ...It wouldn't even fucking surprise me at this point, to be honest.

SS: The clown kid was a weird piece of work.

Karkat closes his eyes. "It was a fucking turtle," he whispers.

SS: ...

SS: ...Did it start with a G?

Things don't improve as the conversation progresses. Karkat works his way through four pens and a
notepad and by the time Jade wanders in an hour later to introduce even more fucking unnecessary shitfuckery to the situation, the couch cushions are bleeding stuffing from five separate stab wounds.

But he ends up with a list of initials that Spades swears on his favorite stabbing utensil are correct, and hey.

Maybe that's a start.

—

AM
TN
SC
NL
KM
TP
VS
EZ
GM
EA
F

---

It only takes one spell to keep Kanaya haring off on a wild goose chase. Rose can feel the regret seething in her stomach before she even casts the damned thing. But she does it anyway. And then there's a flickering, indistinct copy of herself, a glimmer of light photons that will appear as a phantom in the corners of Kanaya's vision if and when she realizes that Rose has vanished. She dismisses it with a flick of her fingers, and the light winks out to go attach itself to the troll. It's not perfect, but it will suit Rose's purposes.

And she purposes to get damn well disgustingly drunk.

Having let loose the phantom to misdirect Kanaya, Rose presses a palm to her chest, over the flutter of her heartbeat. There's some unease there, a flipping sensation in her stomach, and though her first instinct is to swallow it down and soldier forward under the guise of confidence, she cannot deny the plain and simple fact that what she is considering is unbelievably, incredibly stupid. That Kanaya would disapprove is without question, and that Rose has already taken the precautions necessary to throw her off Rose's trail, a betrayal of their accord, cannot be denied.

But there are so many factors to juggle, so many upsets and crawling memories and that Rose can't see past the overwhelming desire to just be fine. She would give anything in the world to feel fine, to feel pleasantly, drunkenly at ease, to not have just now come to the slow but unquestionable realization that yes, actually, she did invite the Horrorterrors into her mind.

She opened that channel. She unleashed many-angled hell on not just her own mind, but John, Jade, and Dave's as well. No other single person might have contributed as much to the complete and utter waste of a game session theirs became outside of Scratch himself.

This knowledge lodges itself in her mind, and twists.

This is her fault. It has always been her fault.

In the face of knowledge like that, really, what else is left but to drink?
Rose recognizes all the classic signs that her alcoholism has been triggered. Even without falling back into her mind space she can tell that the lid has been ripped off the container for the last of her unsorted thoughts, and the urge to drink winds itself into the fabric of her being more strongly with each passing moment. Stress is only one of the ways in which any number of mental illnesses and dependencies can be triggered, and she is nothing if not stressed right now. Hells alive, every single person in that conference room has no doubt inherited some kind of trans-universal PTSD; John might have been the only one suffering openly, but no one could come out of that unscathed. No one.

In a way, Rose thinks the Queens might have done more harm than good in their decision to show them those records. Perhaps they'd thought the human players would watch the records, realize all their mistakes, and resolve to never make them again. Certainly, Karkat seems to feel that being forewarned means being forearmed. Or perhaps the two aliens had assumed that the four children would be able to process the information that they managed to botch not only their efforts at creating a new world, but sacrificed billions upon billions of human lives to do it, and somehow not suffer crippling amounts of guilt.

They assumed quite wrong, if that is the case. Catastrophically wrong.

And now Rose finds herself...here.

She leans her head against the wall, and lets it roll to the side so that she can stare at the door knob. There's no mark over the door to inform an observer what the contents may be, but Rose knows. Everyone in the facility knows.

Hmm. She should probably not do this.

Her hand creeps out to the side regardless.

"Yo. Hey. Rose?"

She snatches her hand back in a fist and exhales sharply, a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, as she lifts her head and looks back down the hall.

Oriole should not be difficult to miss. Really. Even before, with one wing taped down, he radiated a kind of lopsided neon presence, and now that he is walking around with both wings loose, carelessly slouched against his back with a carefully affected nonchalance, he takes up almost twice as much space as before. In comparison to the sprite he was, actually, he's relatively toned down - Davesprite burned like a neon orange sun. Oriole is matte in comparison, ruffled and real, the translation of game constructs onto a human body.

But still. She hadn't even heard him coming. Hadn't seen him in the corner of her eye - or any form of vision at her disposal. She hasn't been this blind since -

"Oriole," Rose says, straightening up and doing her utmost to not look like someone who has been pacing and slavering before a closed door for the past hour in the throes of indecision. "Or would you prefer Dave, now?" she adds.

Even before she finishes the question, Oriole grimaces in a silent 'bluh,' and he shakes his head. "I never want to go by Dave ever again. Hell no," he says, holding up both hands as though to ward off even the thought of the name. "The wingless asshole is welcome to it. I want nothing to do with - any of that."

The pause that ensues is suitably awkward. If she were present, Mother would no doubt berate both
of them for being so gauche as to not have some meaningless small talk prepared in advance.

"So what's in this room that's got you skulking around?" Oriole says, shuffling one foot as he squints at her over his shades. Rose notices - again, so much more slowly than she normally would - that he's not wearing shoes at the moment, only socks that reveal the unnatural curve where his feet must transition from human toes to bird talons. He curls his toes under and leans his weight forward on them until the joints pop, much like Rose used to have the uncouth habit of popping her knuckles in order to spite her mother over the breakfast table. "It's what, 2 in the morning? People will think you're...up to something."

If his voice drops just enough into a monotone that it brings to mind a certain work of wizarding filmography, Rose certainly doesn't call him on it. "I am currently debating the merits and possible objections that might influence my decision to open this door, crack open the first bottle of absinthe that I see, and end this absolutely horrific day on a thoroughly drunken, possibly hallucinatory note," she replies dryly, shifting her shoulder to accommodate the extra space Oriole needs to flop back against the wall with his wingspan. This close up, with her focus less on alcohol and more on navigating the complexities of conversing with another sentient being in the early hours of the morning, she can see the burnt orange shadows, verging on almost a sickly green, that line Oriole's eyes as he peels the sunglasses off his face to rub his eyelids. "It is a thoroughly irresponsible and reckless move, with a high probability that I shall regret it in the morning. Thus the need for extensive consideration on my part."

"Ohhh. So this is the booze room," Oriole says thoughtfully, scratching under his jaw at a crooked feather that appears to have grown along the curve of his neck. "Well shit, if there's an alcohol bus, I call shotgun."

Rose can only stare. "...Really," she says, feeling more than a little confused and completely unsure why.

"Uh, yeah, really." Oriole meets her blank stare for blank stare, and then sighs. "Rose, okay - I don't know how old everyone here is, but I'm hedging we're all around nineteen or twenty. And as far as I can tell, none of these assholes drink." He throws up his hands as he really starts to hit his stride. He seems to have been sitting on this one for a while. "I mean, what kind of teenagers don't occasionally get completely shitfaced? It's like, a goddamn law of the known universe. Do you know, there wasn't even beer at that apartment? Not a goddamn drop. It was like living in a shitty, rank white boy bachelor pad but with copious amounts of apple juice instead of booze. I mean, no wonder those two are so fucked up."

It is finally occurring to Rose that, in spite of whatever his questionable temporal origins in a paradox universe might have been, Oriole represents a unique perspective. In a building full of scientists of varying degrees of madness and heroes in sore need of psychological counselling, he may well be the only one coming at this from the position of an almost-normal human teenager. Ectobiological crow mutations notwithstanding.

"Well, given our combined familial unit's particular track record, I'm not entirely surprised that Mr Strider would be less than interested in leaving alcohol around for Dave to find it," Rose says at last, folding her arms over her chest. Her hand is still clenching and unclenching like a nervous tic, and she wraps her fingers around the curve of her other arm to make it stop. "Neither Mother nor I handle our alcohol with any degree of self-control."

And if there was an award for understatement of the year...

"Ah, well, that sucks," Oriole says blithely. He hooks the arm of his shades on the collar of his shirt and glances obviously from side to side with lemon yellow eyes. "If you need someone to make sure
you don't blackout or vomit everywhere, I can play drunkbuddy.” He scratches at that bent feather again, and finally tugs it out between two claws, inspecting the crooked pinion with a critical eye as he scratches at the faint orange spot left behind. "Maybe it's the whole mutant thing, but I've never had a drinking problem."

Oh dear. And now she has a drinking buddy. That makes this whole idea so much more...accessible. Rose has the distinct suspicion that Oriole has no idea exactly what Rose meant by a lack of self-control, but in the state she's in, she's hardly going to divulge her blatant alcoholism to him.

"One moment," she says at last. "There's something I need to -"

She can't finish, and she barely catches Oriole's careless shrug in the corner of her eye as she drums her fingers along her arm and gnaws on her lip.

For Kanaya's sake, if not for her own, Rose makes one last good faith effort to swallow back the intense thirst. She pushes off the wall, her face flushed as she sets one foot in front of the other and takes one step away from the door.

Two.

Three.

And she stops as bile rises up in the back of her throat. This time, the image that forms in her mind is that of a Dave in purple pajamas, bent over her own shredded corpse. Incredible, really; just like that, her attempt to carefully compartmentalize the desire to drink back into a nice, quiet box in her mind withers. Her lips sting, raspy and dry, as she licks them, and the writhing despair in her stomach that she thinks she would do anything, anything at all to burn out of her system tightens like a vise.

Rose spins, lays a hand on the doorknob, and doesn't even bother shuffling through her mental repertoire for the appropriate spells to handle all the locks Rue's assistants added to try and keep both Lalondes out. She just rusts right through every piece of metal attached to the door: through the hinges, through the flat doorknob itself, through the bolts and loops of the locks, all in a brilliant flicker of light. There's a brief clatter from within the room after the dizzying after glare clears from Rose's mind, and she gives the door a slight tap so that it falls in with a muted crash, cushioned by another spell.

"Oh my god," Oriole says, peering in over her shoulder. "Oh my god."

"There are no gods here, Oriole," Rose corrects, her footsteps ponderous and heavy as she steps into the room, drawn to the nearest shelf of dark liquors like a satellite in decaying orbit. "Only spirits."

True to his word, Oriole handles liquor differently than Rose does. She hesitates before generalizing that to include all humans, because she is well aware that she possesses a particularly poor example of a normal human liver. Oriole has enough common sense not to try and match Rose shot for shot. She has little doubt he'd suffer severe alcohol poisoning if he attempted to put his liver through the kind of intensive regimen she has in mind. More than that, when he does stop, he has no trouble doing so. He's chattier than Dave, more open to talking in general, but it's not until the fifth round of tequila that he starts gesticulating emphatically with his wings, the feathers that frame his face bristling at intervals, and he unlocks his word-hoard to start responding to Rose's coaxing.

She hadn't realized how bitter he might be over what they learned yesterday.

"I mean, it was one thing when it was us being freaky clone twins or something," Oriole says,
pressing the ball of a thumb into the space between his eyebrows and massaging it, wincing at the sting of a tequila headache. "I mean. Fuck. I don't know what I mean."

"Go on," Rose says. On one level, she's surprised she's not slurring yet; on another, she is far more concerned with not spilling Patrón all over the floor as she tops off their borrowed glasses. The door has been propped up in the empty doorway at an odd angle, one that rankles on her slowly skewing vision, but she really can't motivate herself to take the time to correct it, not when they've done so well not attracting the notice of anyone in the facility who might object to their gratuitous drinking. "Stream of consciousness. Let it flow, brother dear."

"They never said it, but there's just this - this goddamn shit they never say, but they say it, anyway." Oriole is in charge of the salt, which he applies to the rim of their glasses with still-steady claws. "That I'm - I don't know, extra. Like I got tagged on like some kind of surplus Dave. And now -" he breaks off, croaking out a laugh, and drowns whatever else he was going to say by licking off the salt, downing the shot, and crushing a slice of lime between his teeth.

Rose imitates him because he's the one who introduced this method of drinking. She's always tended to follow in the path of her mother's drained martini glasses; she can't really imagine why Rue Lalonde even bothered to stock tequila here, unless it was merely out of some misguided sense of completionism - pretty much every type of alcoholic commodity is present in this room in some form or another, even if some of the bottles sit dust-laden from lack of interest.

Alas, her inexperience shows through when Rose tosses back the burning liquid and raises the lime slice to her lips, only to have her teeth clack together on a juiceless slice that she has already used. How embarrassing - and oh, damn, the putrid taste of distilled hell juice corrodes the back of her throat like acid. Choking and sneezing, Rose locates the next slice with shaky fingers and sucks on the lime until the sharp, foul tang is nothing more than a receding memory. "No more tequila, I think," she hisses, pursing her lips as she recaps the bottle. "Good lord."

"Yeah, I think we're done with that," Oriole agrees, the ghost of humor on his face despite the lingering bitterness as he thumbs down the lid of the salt container. "Weird shit happens when too much tequila gets involved. We should probably slow the hell down. I mean, you weigh less than me – where are you even putting all that?"

"Mmm." Rose is making absolutely no promises on the matter. Her instinct is to at least have an appletini in her hand, in one of those triangular cocktail glasses that Rue Lalonde tends to use exclusively, just for the sake of having something in her hands to keep them occupied. But she breathes out hard through her nose and struggles in vain to convince the part of her that is delighting in the ability to just give in and stop fighting the urge to drink that she can at least take an hour or so to let the first round she's had in weeks settle in her stomach. She's generally good at not vomiting, but tequila is new and if she does botch it, she's certain that she's going to start crying out of frustration.

Right. Oriole. They're still in the middle of his talk therapy session. Still trying to inveigle him into revealing his neuroses. Back to business. "Shurplus," she says, and ahhh. There's the slur she's been waiting for. Rose leans her chin on the palm of one hand, swaying a little as she rests her elbow on the counter. A hiccup jolts her, jarring her teeth a little, and she has to wave her other hand to refocus herself. "'Scuse me. Go on."

"I guess, just. Being a bird clone, at least I was still me. Still someone separate, even if we somehow shared a shitton of genes." He snorts. "Now according to the universe, I'm literally just some copy-and-paste version of the original article, and how long until they all start shoving me off and saying 'oh, look, there goes the spare Dave'?" Oriole rakes a hand through his hair so that some of the thin
strands fly up at wayward angles. "Do you even know how absolutely shitty it feels, knowing everything thinks you're some kind of copy? Just some sack of useless ectobiological shit who forgot a version of himself already existed?"

Rose's first instinct is to spit out some pithy one-liner - something like 'no one thinks that' would be a classic, she thinks. Perhaps it would even reassure Oriole for however long the drunkenness lasts. But just saying it wouldn't be anywhere near enough to hold up under the weight of sober logic, not unless she somehow manages to produce an accompanying, cogent argument upholding Oriole's right to individual personhood in the next five seconds to back it up.

Well. By god, she can try. "No one thinks that," she says, because that really is an excellent starting point. She has no idea why she'd think otherwise. "Not consciously. But it would be disingenuous to say that the possibility is...not unlikely that you may be subconsciously dismissed and diminished. You will need to assert your - ah, selfhood - in order to ensure that such a thing does not occur. Your viability as an manifestly distinct sentient being may need to be a fact which is stated for the record. No, viability."

"Or I could just fucking leave," he mutters. This time, he grinds the heel of his palm against his forehead, his expression discontent. "You think you people and your problems are the by-all, end-all, but I had a life before I got kidnapped for looking like someone else. I don't need to hang around with people who will never stop comparing me to some emotionally stunted bastard."

"You certainly could," Rose agrees. "It's well within the realm of capability." She reaches out and pats Oriole on the shoulder, her hand wavering between wing and shoulder before she settles for the latter, because as her logic becomes increasingly compromised she wonders more and more how fluffy said wings might be. But she might need to be a smidgeon more drunk than this before she gives in to the impulse. Right now, she's finally achieved the happy medium where the memories of yesterday feel like a vague, indistinct mass of unpleasant emotions. She can think the words 'I killed them all,' and her stomach flips only once before she manages to mentally blunder her way past the ensuing, nauseous guilt.

The blessings of inebriated emotional numbness. She intends to prolong this state for as long as humanly possible. "It might still be unshafe though, since the Midnight Crew are still a probable. Problem. A probable problem," she adds when the rest of her mind stumbles its way back on to the topic of conversation at hand. "I would advise against it."

"Don't remind me," Oriole says gloomily. "Everything about this has ruined my life. Goddamn, I don't even believe in reincarnation or any of that bullshit. How did I get balled up in your assholes' crazy second life parade?"

Rose smiles, and leans in to confide in his ear. She misjudges the distance, and a feather tickles her nose. "I assure you - everyone in this building is most likely wondering the same thing."

He pulls a face. "On so many levels, not helpful, Rose."

Rose gives up and folds her arms on the countertop, sitting so she can rest her head in the pillow of her arms and continue to smile. "Tell me about your life, brother," she says. "Tell me what makes you tick."

Because as long as she's thinking about Oriole's problems, she's most certainly not thinking about her own. Perhaps it's not the healthiest or the most altruistic reason for being a psychologist, but - well, that has never stopped her before.
Transporting oneself in a linear fashion always proves to be infinitely more challenging whilst under the influence. Occasionally the floor swoops out in circles from underfoot and leaves one fumbling and befuddled as one introduces one's elbow to the wall at an awkward angle. Rose doesn't remember inebriation being quite so dizzying, but perhaps it's because after the first few shots she'd switched to champagne in some proto-ironic attempt at raising a toast to the ignominious end of her sober streak. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but champagne leaves her bubbly in the head and as she stumbles her way down the hall the urge to giggle at her own ridiculous swerves grows ever stronger.

Why ever had she stopped drinking, again?

Mmm, right. Tentacles. The thought almost prematurely sobers her up - never a pleasant experience, even at the best of times - but then she recalls where she is and relaxes back into bubbly complacency, traipsing her way toward the destination that gleams like a fizzy burble in her sight.

Oriole went off on his own some time ago to sleep off his own marginally less intense drunken stupor. He really is a nice boy, even if he did confiscate the vermouth after her third martini, and Rose thinks she's come to quite like him. Now, it's almost six in the morning - time does fly when one has a bottle in one's hand - and Rose is just drunk enough to be in complete denial about the fact that she hasn't slept at all as she makes her way toward her spell beacon down the hall. She marked that room for a reason while still sober, and even it is taking a moment or ten to recollect why she did that, she'll be damned if she doesn't see what it is. She'll deal with the need for sleep (and the hangover that looms in the vague distance like the promised yet unwanted solicitude of an arranged marriage) after she's handled this.

It is only when Rose sees that the door she is aiming for is slightly ajar that she remembers, with a bubble of drunken insight, that she came here intending to speak with her mother.

Oh dear. The floor sways again and Rose stumbles to a halt against the wall, blinking blearily at the thin light between the door and the frame. She can hear the faint murmur of voices emanating from the office, and instead of continuing forward she takes advantage of this singular opportunity to rest and recollect herself.

Indecision arrests her; instead of dragging herself upright and finishing this ill-thought out venture, she digs her phone out of her pocket, gnawing upon her lip in deliberation as her thumb hovers over John's faded blue Pesterchum handle. After a moment she opens a new chat window with someone whose handle she received from Kanaya but whom she has not heretofore had the opportunity to converse with in the app. It's still obscenely early and no one in their right mind should have to be conscious at an hour like this - but of course, there is the fact that he should, in fact, be several hours ahead of Washington time. Whatever the reason, his handle is lit up - she can't recall it ever not being lit, actually.

-- ThoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA] at 06:10:30 --
TT: Hello,, Sollux. I wander if you might have a spare moment to discuss matters of varying degrees of conshequese.
TT: *consequence
TA: well that i2 the 2iingle 2hiittiie2t quiirk ii have 2een all day.
TA: ple2a2e tell me you're not doiing that on purpo2e or iim terminatiing thii2 conver2atiion before iit even begin2.
TT: Oh no, pardon me. I m, as they say, supremely inebrietied at the moment.
TT: I have recently learned that I was mosht likely responsible for unleashing unspeakable horrorsh upon my friends and probably the entire woruld in a past life through my own willful blindnessness and fascinashion with the unknown.
TT: Alcohol seemed like a good idea, it gives me such a nietzsche buffer between myself and my failures.
TA: ii hate two be the one two break thii2 two you, but there iiis no such thiing a2 a pa2t liife. that'2 hiippy bull2hit non2en2e.
TT: The more correct phrasign would perhapsh be 'a previous titration of tihis universe in the cosmic cycle of paradox brane amphibian-based reproduction.'
TT: *iteration
TA: oh. that. fuckiing frog2. AA won't 2hut up about them eiither.
TA: whose mean2 thii2
TA: thii2 ha2 two do with the end of the world, doe2n't iit.
TT: YeHIC!
TA: well FUCK, R2, ii gue22 ii applaud your purportedly incredible capacity for co2miic level2 of cata2trophe, and al2o a2k that you 2pare my maiinframe2 iif and when you deciide two pop off thii2 uniiver2e. you know, a2 a fucking profe22iional courte2y for me dealiing with your online 2ecurity ii22ue2 24/7.
TA: hang on, no. not R2. TT.
TT: Why the change??
TA: TT ii2 obviou2ly 2uperiior iin an onliine mediium.
TA: AA ii2 AA regardle22, but look R2 and then look at TT, look at the 2ymmetry. TT -- ii could fucking type that all day.
TA: TT TT TT TT
TT: Well, I certainly won't question your superior knowledzhe of your own typing quirk.
TA: damn 2traight you won't. now what do you want, iim kind of a bu2y guy here.
TA: what with, you know, two in2credibly irr2itating coldblood2 tearing up my apartment while iim attempting two work my hackmajjyk2 over here. two track down YOUR white--text 2talker ii miight add.
TT: Aboat that. Id on't know if anyone has kept you abreast of the situashion here, but there is worrying knowns.
TT: The wight-text has been all but conformed to have originated with Doc Scratch, leader fo the Crew and saboteur extradentia2de of the previo,us universe.
TA: yeah, ii kind of inferred all that from what AA and GA've been telliing me. iim 2tiill iiin the proce22 of backtracking thii2 a22hole2 IIP addre22, though. ju2t keep downloading the chatlog 2ecurity update2 when ii 2end them two you. iim pretty 2ure ii nailled the gap in hii2 code, but he'2 fucking good, he could catch on any moment now.
TA: not a2 good a2 me, obviou2ly. not now that ii know what iim dealiing wiith, here.
TT: That is emanantly reashhuring. Remiind me to knit you shome kind of scarf as thanks.
TA: plea2e don't. AA would probably actually make me wear iit.
TA: huh. ii wonder iif ii could a2k my cu2todiian two look iintwo 2ome of thii2. he'2 a bumbling moron but he'2 al2o got connection2 iin america.
TT: Criminimal conneshoins? ?
TA: ii plead your american fifth amendment for hiim. ii don't belieue half the drivel he'2 alway2 on about bc he exaggerate2, but he'2 gotten him2elf 2tuck headfiir2t iin 2hady 2hiit before, definitiitely. he'2 not good at telliing people no.
TT: Tha'ts unfortunate . Don't troubl him if it may put him nin harm's way.
TT: Hangnon. *on. Ime exceedingly drunk. But. I am also fairly certain that, given you and Kanyaay are around the same age, you should no longer posses a custodial lusus.
TA: no, he'2 a troll, which mean2 iim 2tuck wifth him for fuck even know2 how long. don't a2k, my childhood wa2 a 2hiit2how that i2 WOW 2omehow none of your bu2line22.
TT: Oh deer. Do I detect the distinct aroma of...daddy eschews. :)
Rose winces, and closes that chat window. Now that she's slightly more sober, she sees that there are several outstanding message notifications next to Kanaya's chumhandle - Kanaya rarely strays onto the group forums - which bodes rather ill. She's surprised Kanaya let this go as long as she has, considering the rainbow drinker doesn't sleep and Rose never returned to the room last night.

On one level, Rose is aware that there is no way for this to end well. Now that Pesterchum has become a more immediate threat to her buzz, she pockets her phone and narrows her eyes at the office door.

Time to bite the bullet, as they say. Breathing in through her nose, Rose takes the emergency flask from her other pocket, swallows a warm mouthful of rum, and sneezes her way through the aftertaste until she feels dizzy and confident enough to stride across the last few yards and barrel through the door.

A small coalition of people in white coats have beaten her to Rue Lalonde's office. From the hollow, deep bags under some of the eyes that dart back to stare at her, Rose suspects most of them haven't slept, either. So at least she's among good company.

But. Ah. Right. She remembers why sober-Rose wanted to be drunk for this. "I should like to shpeak with my mother, if I'm not innerupting anything important," she says, doing her utmost not to slur her words too heavily. "Privately." A sharp hiccup jolts her diaphragm and Rose has to smother a giggle at the double takes she receives.

"Is that Rose?" Rue says from behind the wall of lab coats, and just like that the scientists draw back away from the desk in the center of the room, some of them throwing curious looks at Rose that have the distinct tang of scientific interest. Well, she wouldn't be surprised if many of those in Rue's employ, particularly those dabbling in thaumaturgic research, might be interested in their employer's daughter and her tomfoolery.

Rose's mental focus is utterly shot, so there's a delay between her bemusedly waving at one of the more reluctant-looking trolls as he sidles toward the door and her looking at her mother. "Go, go. I'll speak with everyone later," Rue says, and there's something odd about her voice as she waves the rest of the researchers after the troll. The alcohol skews Rose's focus, and thus she finds herself singularly fixated on the way Rue Lalonde has harshly tucked her hair back behind her ears, out of her face, all of the wavy curls coated with a faintly greasy sheen under the unforgiving florescent lighting.

She is struck by the fact that, even given her current state of inebriation, she can recall relatively little about Rue's mien these past few days. The last clear image Rose can call to mind is that of the tired woman who attempted to speak to her Chicago; based on that alone, she sees that her mother has let even more aspects of her appearance fall by the wayside. Rue's eyes are bloodshot, her lips so pale that it takes Rose a moment to realize she's not wearing lipstick, and when the woman partially rises from her chair, the light throws the sharp, almost sunken hollows beneath her cheekbones into sharp relief. There's a long crease down one side of her angular dress, one that unsettles Rose for reasons she can't explain.

While sober, Rose has been too bitter to care what her mother's altered visage might imply. Drunk, she's both fascinated and - yes, alright, blithely concerned about it. Rue Lalonde is a stickler for her appearance; her perfectly applied makeup is one of her primary weapons of intimidation in a never-ending quest to passive-aggressively forecast her aloof snobbery to the world, one that Rose took to imitating as early as nine years old. As she recalls, she used John as a test subject for all of the makeup products they 'borrowed' from Rue's dresser before ever trying to apply it to her own face.

"You didn't - HIC! - you didn't wear makeup today," she says, feeling a little lost as she hovers
awkwardly between the door and the desk, unsure of how to parse her own emotional response to
this. Instinct tells her to have some snarky remark prepared for this occasion, but drunk informs her
that under no circumstances is snark an option at the moment. She'd only flub the execution, with the
state her brain-to-mouth filter is in. "And here I thought I would never see the day," is all she can
add.

"Rose." Rue hesitates, nostrils flaring, her expression warier than Rose thinks is really warranted,
under the circumstances. The floor chooses that moment to toss like the deck of a ship at sea and
Rose presses the tips of her fingers to her mouth as she grips the back of a chair for much-needed
balance. Impulsively, her other hand darts for the flask, but she remembers herself at the last moment
and tries to raise her chin and salvage some of her decorum.

A useless endeavor, really. Alcohol is the bane of decorum, at least where Rose is concerned. It
always has been. She hiccups hard enough to jolt her shoulders, and even trying to cover it up by
clearing her throat just earns her more of a wary, hard stare from Rue.

"Rose," she says slowly, "are you drunk?"

Ah, well. Cover blown, Rose shrugs and retrieves her flask for another sip that she lets sit in her
mouth for a long moment before swallowing contemplatively. "Indubitably," she replies at last,
sitting down in the free chair with a huff of air. Standing is far too much effort after walking all the
way here from - wherever she started out. "I though tit would be conducive to our coming to an
accordia - accord," she corrects at the very last moment, swirling the flask in her hand and using it to
gesture between the two of them. "Given the events of the previous few days, it has become clear
that we require a stable working relashionship if anyone is to survive this messh. So. Here I yam."

Either Rose's reflexes have been drastically slowed - most likely - or Rue is remarkably quick on the
uptake - also likely - because the doctor settles back into her seat after only just too long of a pause,
folding her hand together in a steeple as she glances from Rose to the flask. "I don't think I've ever
seen you drink before," she murmurs, low enough that Rose can't tell if it's mocking or not. "And
this - you need -" a sweep of her hand -. all of this, in order to speak with me?"

"On shivil terms. Sorry, civil," Rose says, shrugging bonelessly. "Anyway, y'were a single mom
stuck with an intractable, magically gifted child with an incline for dark majjyks and chaos gods. I
forgif you for not knowing how to deal with me past a certain point, I suppose. So yah."

Now that she's no longer standing, the slow burn in her chest from plying herself with more rum can
spread more easily to her head, slow and careless. It feels nice - like not having the capacity to worry
about past lives, or the ability to fret about some unforeseeable future catastrophe, or the inclination
to become upset about much anything for more than a few moments. Years of abandonment? Pah.
Why be hurt about something like that? It happened. It's over. It's done. Rose isn't sure how much of
this she's saying out loud, but she attempts to demonstrate the willingness to let bygones be bygones
with a vague, looping flutter of her hand, before she needs it to hastily prop up her head.

Maybe some people don't like the person they become when they drink. Rose likes it too much. And
that's the trap of it, in the end.

Drunk Rose is good at dealing with people, and emotions, and fun. But she's also the Rose who
makes the decisions that lead to missed days, to skipping out on hero work without even realizing it,
to drowning her issues rather than making any real effort to reach out to accept the help others offer
her.

Sometimes it feels like it's a choice between her rationality and her happiness, and even objectively
knowing that this is a false dichotomy produced by the faulty logic of alcoholic dependency can't
scrub that from her mind.

"I see," Rue says, intent enough that it draws Rose out of her musing spiral. "And can any reconciliation we attempt while you are under the influence really be considered reconciliation at all? When you will most likely come to your senses when this - this binge runs its course, and will hate me once more?"

Funny, Rose thinks, it's still funny. Still odd, she means, that strange tone in Rue's voice. Rose knows what her mother sounds like bitter and passive aggressive and simpering and condescending and all-knowing, but she's having such trouble placing this tone, and the expression on Rue's face is not helping: it's not her usual mask, after all, without the makeup to conceal all flaws and tells. It's just Rue, and she looks so forlorn, so -

"Why are you sad?" Rose asks, cautious. Perhaps she's imagining things...the martinis had probably been taking it too far after so long sober... "I can't hate you anymore. It's too inconvenient while we're all in danger for me to start strifes in the middle of meetings. So we will do this while I'm intoxicated, and I will not let cordial relashions falter once I am sober. It will be my reshponsibility."

Her earnest smile wobbles, and she has to reaffirm it, tilting her head to the side and reinforcing the smile until her teeth ache. "I thought you'd be extant - ecstatic that I want to talk. You wanted to talk, before, but -"

"Of course I am, Rosie, of -" Rue presses a hand over her pale, thin lips, and for a moment Rose thinks her mother is going to cry. When Rue removes the hand there's that familiar smirk, only it's paired with eyes that look utterly wretched. "Would it reassure you if I kept this up?" Rue demands, her voice dry and strained and not at all the correct tone to match that smirk. Rose shrinks back a little in her seat, her smile drooping at the corners. "If I acted as though it were fine that my own child needs to be utterly soused to smile at me?"

"Isn't it fine? Why would you care?" Rose asks, genuinely curious. "You're always drunk. What difference does it make?"

Rue's jaw snaps shut. Her teeth clack audibly, and Rose waits patiently, though with not a little woozy concern, as most of the color drains from her mother's face. It's a most peculiar reaction to what sounded like a perfectly reasonable question in Rose's head, but perhaps she misconstrued something in Rue's demeanor. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Oh."

Rose tilts the flask back and drains the last of it.

"Oh, Rose."

When Rose sets the flask down, thumbing a drop of rum off the corner of her lip before it can run down her chin, she sees that Rue has dropped her whole face into her hands. Rose can't make out her expression in the brief pause, only the bend of Rue's shoulders and the way they crumple and cave inward, like mountains subsiding.

Rue takes a shuddering breath, and looks up. The smile she flashes in response to Rose's earnest one seems more desperate than sincere, but who is Rose to judge anyone at the moment. "Yes. Yes, I'd like - for us to talk," Rue says stiltedly. "I would like that quite a lot."

It's a start.

-
At the end of their consultation, Rose really does feel optimistic about how things stand between her and her mother; it is the optimism of someone both drunk and so very sleep deprived that sleep itself sounds like a distant, unreal pipedream. It's noon now, so even the liberal amounts of alcohol in her system have begun to decline, and she just knows that she's going to be in for one hell of a hangover. Rose hooks her foot under the rung of the chair at some point during negotiations and then forgets about it when she stands up, so she stumbles calamitously and topples a stack of files with a light-headed giggle of apology. "Sorry," she slurs, banging her knee on the way down to smush the files back into a stack and fumble them onto Rue's desk. "Don't worry, I gotcha."

"There's no need to - dear," Rue protests, seizing an errant packet of paper and drawing it back onto the desk, standing up from her seat as though to come help. "Please."

"I've got it," Rose insists, winking, and she tucks the last of the papers back into a file folder. She's not entirely sure these are the papers that originally occupied said folder, but that's where they belong now. She staggers to her feet and slaps the folder down on top of the messy pile, inordinately proud of her own accomplishment.

The hands that close on her shoulders are hesitant and light, perhaps anticipating that Rose will try to pull out of their grip. But she just blinks, at loose ends, and then her mother's arms draw her in close. It's not unpleasant. A little too close and tight, perhaps, but the alcohol makes everything feel a little too close and fuzzy with her reaction time so slow. Rose reaches up and pats her mother on the arm good-naturedly, because she is trying to make things passably diplomatic between the two of them, and then she waits for her mother to let go.

"I would like us to talk again, if at all possible," Rue says, her voice thick as she speaks into Rose's hair. "When you're no longer quite so intoxicated. Please, try to sleep it off, sweetheart."

Well, it is not as though they can avoid speaking to each other again for all of time. Look at how well it turned out the last time Rose tried to do that. Bobbing her head in a wobbly nod, Rose pats her arm again. "Of course, Mother. Nae - not a problem. I believe I do need to have a lie-down. It seems the most reasonable course of action."

"Reasonable. Yes." Rue sighs heavily and steps back, her hands lingering on Rose's shoulder as she hold her at arm's length. Another sigh, and the hands drop. "Do you need me to help you back to your room?"

"No, no," Rose says dismissively, touching a hand to her pocket for perhaps the fifth time to confirm that the flask is still there, and still empty. She doesn't want to leave anything behind in her daze, but it's difficult to recall what she's checked already. "I can shee it."

Rue shadows her as Rose walks to the door. Her unusual concern has persisted throughout this entire tête-à-tête, though no explanation has been forthcoming. She acts as though Rose has never drunk alcohol before. Really. "Remember to hydrate, Rose," she says, touching the curve of a finger to Rose's jaw before Rose manages to shuffle out the door and close it behind her. Rose can't help the enormous sigh of relief that escapes her, a surprisingly loud noise in the empty corridor, as she slumps against the door and forces some of the muscles that have tensed up over the past few hours to unclench.

Things will still be tense between them. Rose has no doubt of that. But hopefully come tomorrow's hangover Rose will be groggy but primed to allow relations with Rue to remain on stable, neutral territory.

No, the meeting went quite well. Where it all starts to fall apart is when Rose looks up, and realizes
she's not alone in the hallway at precisely the same time Kanaya rounds the corner and jerks to a halt, looking almost as startled as Rose feels.

Oh dear. John had said he would talk to Kanaya, hadn't he. Rose had been responding to the group memo during one of her (numerous) breaks to use the restroom, gaily talking over any mention of her vastly deteriorated spelling ability, and hadn't really taken the warning seriously. She is abruptly, intensely aware that she reeks of liquor, a stench strong enough that she can imagine Rue only came so close because she's been so inured to the scent herself over the years - and Kanaya's nose is stronger than most.

"Kayaya," she says weakly, smoothing her hands over the rumpled fabric of her clothes, the same ones she wore yesterday and all this past night. "I. Ah. Ohhhh...uh..."

"You have been imbibing." Kanaya raises a hand, and then drops it, her expression slack and unreadable. It is around then that Rose realizes that she is not, in fact, alone in the 'yesterday's clothes' club, and her mind boggles momentarily. "I have been searching this facility for several hours, following what I now believe to have been a deliberate decoy."

Rose toes the ground. This time, when the anxious guilt churns up in her stomach, she can't swallow it down; she's just sober enough that the shame twists her insides into coils and there's no bottle nearby to satisfy her instinctive, harsh craving for something to blur the growing sense of despair. "There were eshtenuating circumstances," she says, furiously swallowing back the next hiccup that threatens to erupt inappropriately in the middle of her sentence. "I came to the objection conclusive beforehand that this was necessary to resolove my ongoing strife with Mother. We are good now. Shoo good. Mediashun is no longer needed."

"Dave and John had both informed me that you were, in their words, 'hooched to the fucking max,'" Kanaya continues as though Rose hasn't said a word, closing the distance between them in a few strides. Rose reels a little when Kanaya plucks at one of her eyelids with a careful claw to examine her pupil. "I did not wish to believe you would relapse so drastically without at least consulting me beforehand, however - ah - whoa there - are you capable of maintaining your -"

Maintaining her whatever is no longer on the agenda, unfortunately. Rose steps back wrong in an ill-fated attempt to stay upright. The floor just kind of buckles under her, or perhaps her ankle buckles in a devious act of betrayal, and she falls back hard, rescued from crashing to the ground only by Kanaya hauling her back upright by the elbow.

"No," she replies belatedly. "I'm sorry, Kaynaya. Gravity hash conspired against me. And also. The alcohols." Her eyes are beginning to prickle, and when Kanaya tries to help her back upright Rose shakes her head. And oh, no. She does not want to cry while drunk. That way gross sobbing lies, and it never ends well. "I messed up anway, didn't I," she says in a whisper, hiccupping in a way that almost conceals how her breath hitches in the preliminary steps of a sob. What a fortuitous hiccup.

"Well, as the laboratory remains remarkably clear of volatile chaos tentacles, I would say that the incident has not deteriorated as badly as it could have," Kanaya concedes, failing at any kind of stealth gambit as she takes Rose's pulse. "I am mildly concerned however, as I found more depleted bottles within in the storage room than a single human being would be capable of consuming without experiencing profound liver failure. Can you give me a rough estimate of how many ounces of alcohol you may have been personally responsible for ingesting?"

"Oriole helped. He'sha good drunkbuddy."

"Swallowing repeatedly and biting down hard on her lower lip does no good. Rose recognizes the exact moment that she reaches the tipping point, and then her chest seizes up painfully, her lungs shuddering as the first humiliating, rattling gasp escapes her lips. "I jusht wanted one thing to be fixed, because so much has gone ahry...aerie...wrong. But
now I - I've been shitty to you inshtead."

Kanaya's hand brushes through Rose's hair, a soothing stroke that presses at the base of her skull. "I trusted you, Rose. I will not lie and say I am not frustrated. However, this is not something we cannot work through," Kanaya says, and her voice is gentler than Rose deserves. "Thus far, no one has been harmed by this except, perhaps, your liver. Come. Let us get you to a pile. You need to recuperate -" 

"You've been hurt, though," Rose says miserably. The first tear leaks from the corner of her eye and she wipes it at sloppily, sniffing as a veritable torrent of snot threatens to make itself known. "I shouldn't set a d-decoy, eshpecially not after all the - the thingsh that have happened. All the salty thingsh. S'not fair to you."

Kanaya's voice remains steady. "You will help me understand why you did it later, when your blood alcohol levels have lowered sufficiently that you are capable of thinking clearly. Right now, you are prohibitively distressed. It would not be productive to have a feelings jam like this."

"Haah!" Rose says eloquently, reduced to pre-vocal utterances as the spaces between sobs diminish. This time, when Kanaya helps her stand she allows it; her knees wobble like the joints have been misplaced. They're not far from the living quarters where all of the visitors have been staying, but she keeps her watery gaze locked on the ground, trusting Kanaya to get her where they need to go.

"Ahhhh! You found her! What happened?! Is Rose hurt? Rose, are you okay?" a bright voice cuts through the veil of tears, and Rose lifts her blurred eyes enough to see a bright green smudge that can only be Jade. Rose blinks hard, truncating the next impending snuffle so that she doesn't start bawling again. She'd forgotten that the other girl intended to bunk with them last night; she'd forgotten a lot of things, in the face of her circular, despairing thoughts. "Kanaya?" Jade demands when Rose fails to summon up a coherent response.

"My apologies, Jade. Rose requires rest at the moment. She has overindulged in human soporifics," Kanaya replies in a murmur, greeting Jade with a nod. "It will not be a problem if we vacate the room so she may sleep, will it? I profess I am not sure what your schedule is like at the moment."

Jade shakes her head vigorously, her eyes squeezed shut and her hair flying out around her, almost long enough to whip the wall. "No, not a problem!" she hurries to say. A warm hand grips Rose's and Jade darts in close, hugging her for a few seconds before releasing her with a solemn expression. "Feel better, Rose," she says earnestly, her eyes wide and bright, and Rose can only nod in reply. Jade doesn't leave room for argument; she's refreshingly sincere that way. "Everything'll be okay! Don't worry!"

That's her cue. To say something - anything - "I'll do - my best," Rose manages between sniffles, but the smile she summons up doesn't meet standards; if anything, Jade just looks even more somber, ruffling Rose's hair and standing back so she can look on gravely while Kanaya helps Rose into the room and over to the bed that they disassembled on the second day before the others arrived. Tears stream down Rose's cheeks and she's lost the war with snot for the day, but Kanaya produces a box of tissues seemingly from out of nowhere and starts Rose off with a fistful.

"I will return shortly," Kanaya says, and Rose's head jerks up in panic before Kanaya squeezes her shoulder. "Lie down, Rose. I will fetch water. You are going to be severely dehydrated when you wake up." Her features soften with shadow when she turns off the lights within the room, standing backlit by the illumination from the hallway. "Try to sleep."

Rose opens her eyes, and stares at the dark ceiling. Her eyelids are heavy, and though the occasional convulsive sob jolts her back to awareness, soon she cannot tell the inside of her eyelids from the
darkness overhead. She lets her head fall to the side, snuffling as she curls up around the sick but muffled that promises a queasy awakening, and hopes vaguely that she'll somehow manage to sleep through the worst of the hangover.

Then she opens her eyes, and squints.

Huh.

"How long have you been there?" she asks, blearily. She doesn't mean 'there' as in that corner in particular, but she can't even imagine working up the energy to clarify what she means with another whole sentence. How long have you been watching?

The figure sitting in the corner was not there when she and Kanaya entered, and she thinks that when Kanaya returns it'll have vanished once more. "Since two of my kids decided to have an all-night rager thinking I wouldn't notice," is the slow, drawling reply. "Go to sleep, kid."

(Rose nods unsteadily, and she doesn't really perceive the moment when her eyes drift shut. If she wakes up when Kanaya returns, she loses it in the haze of sleep and unconsciousness that swallows her up.

She does not dream. She does not see. And in its own way, the numbness of the void that cuts her off from the world outside the compound is its own nightmare.)

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Someone is attempting to buy out Strider Juice, Inc.

Dave is almost in tears by the end of the email, lips twitching with barely concealed laughter because they sound so serious and earnest and clearly have no idea that the person running the sockpuppet email they've appealed to is just some kid dicking around with the internet and the stock market for his own incredibly ironic amusement.

Seriously. He could wait his whole life for a prime opportunity like this, and here's one being handed to him free of charge.

And god, could he use the distraction right now.

- 

The Pesterchum memos have become a complete horror show. Like, this is some shit that just gives Dave a fucking headache. At some point last night Rose slapped a TW: Epicyclical *Epileptically complex brainstorming trees of varying degrees of gore on the memo board as a whole, and yeah that basically sums up the whole thing pretty well. He spends almost two hours attempting to explain the incredibly obvious timelines to Karkat, but that just provokes everyone else into badgering Dave with their weird questions. They flock to him, and he has to dispense half-assed tidbits of wisdom like the magnanimous Guru of Obvious that he is.

But he draws the line when somehow Doctor Lalonde of all people starts texting him for clarification on stuff. Maybe it's just because he's the time guy, but surely it should be obvious that there was time-space distortion between Derse and the interior planets? That everything was an unbelievable clusterfuck, time-wise, from the moment Rose's creepy tanglebuddies started trying to eat people? Half of this shit doesn't make sense because it is literally insane, and unfortunately Rose starts making an increasing amount of typos and talks more garbled nonsense than she does straight answers around midmorning, when she's supposed to be the one in charge of laying down all that exposition about Horrorterror chaos and shit
So Dave just starts pawning all those inquiries off with the excuse that he does not give a fuck.

-- turntechGodhead [TG] at 11:04:56 opened memo on board personal space you sons of bitches --
TG: okay
TG: thats it
TG: im closing asks for the day
TG: no mas
TG: all other timeline questions may as well be directed to wv because thats literally as much sense as i will make
TG: unless were talking like
TG: the end of the world just got pushed up to two seconds from now
TG: theres a goddamn meteor the size of karkats vantass descending upon us from on high
TG: help us dave youre our only hope
TG: then and only then will i be coaxed out my retirement like the badass jedi knight that i am
CG: ONE DAY THERE'S GOING TO BE A RECKONING, DAVE.
CG: IN THE FORM OF MY FOOT INTRODUCING ITSELF TO YOUR SMUG FACE.
TG: been there tried that
TG: now hush karkles trying to talk over your shout barrage is making my throat hurt
CG: YOU'RE TYPING, YOU WHINING FUCKTRUCK.
TG: i am a fragile and delicate tenor and this voice must be protected at all costs
CG: SOMEONE, FIND HIM AND PUNCH HIM IN THE HUMAN MALE GENITALIA. FOR ME. PLEASE.
TG: what youre too nervous to come over here and fondle my genitalia in person karkat
TG: have to have someone else do the deed
TG: das lame man
CG: NO, I'M JUST IN THE MIDDLE OF ATTEMPTING TO CONVINCE SPADES NOT TO STAB ANYMORE PEOPLE. THIS IS A DELICATE OPERATION AND I REFUSE TO DISRUPT ALL OF MY CAREFULLY LAID OUT PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUES AND FAULTLESS ARGUMENTS BECAUSE OF YOU.
CG: LOGIC MEANS NOTHING TO THIS CARAPACIAN. NOTHING. I'M STARING INTO THE ABYSS AND THE ABYSS MOUTHS OFF AND THINKS HE'S THE MOB BOSS OF EVERYONE IN THIS ENTIRE BUILDING AND WANTS US ALL TO TAKE ON THE MIDNIGHT CREW RIGHT THE FUCK NOW IN SOME KIND OF MISGUIDED TURF WAR.
CG: I HAVE KIND OF A LOT ON MY PLATE HERE. SO SPARE ME YOUR HUMAN INNUENDO.

It takes him ages to figure out that the [vworp] wobbling on and off in the distance is coming from Kanaya and that the distinct, echoing murmur in Karkat's [thump thump thump] only seems to pick up when Spades Slick is in the immediate vicinity. Unlike Karkat's regular uptight rhythm, Spades fades in and out like smooth jazz, which is just fucking hilarious - until one time Dave rounds the corner and catches the carapacian in the act of snarling at a shadow, and everything crashes like an angry piano keysasmash in Dave's head.

Knowing what he does now, Dave figures he's hearing fraymotifs or some Game shit like that. He still seems to be the only one doing it - like hell is he quizzing either of his custodians on whether they hear this shit because Doctor Lalonde would probably want to x-ray his brain and Bro would laugh his ass off, but he outright asks John (because John is John and he trusts John not to dock him points on the cool kid meter because of a stupid question or five) and John blinks at him. Not the weird blank look he gets lately when his brain is struggling not to stop responding, just the regular old baffled incomprehension of a kid whose best friend just asked if he can hear the music.
"Dude, I have no idea what you're talking about," John says, and then he cups his hands around his ears like the dorky doofus that he is, cocking his head to the side as though that'll make the music magically appear. "Are you sure there's music? I'm not hearing anything."

"Just. Did you hear any music on those recordings yesterday, either?" Dave asks, raising an eyebrow. "Or just the voiceovers?"

"No." John fidgets, and now he has that shifty look, distant and hazy and on the verge of panicking. He's just come in from flying around and some of his cowlicks have completely lost control, sticking straight up and making his expression look all the more bewildered. "No, I didn't hear anything like that."

Dave nods shortly, because it's the answer he's expecting. "Figures I'd start hearing weird shit the moment we're all in the same building together," he mutters, leaning back on the wall and sticking his hands in his pockets. God, it feels good to be able to just talk to people again and have his hands free to do fuck all. Makes him itch to mix something again.

"What does it sound like?" John asks.

Dave grimaces. "Like a mess," he says, because it's the truth. He could mix smoother than this back when he was thirteen goddamn years old. The only sound with any consistency in his head is Karkat's; everyone else is crashing and cluttering along in an out of tune jumble. "I'll bet you a hundred bucks this is all because none of you dumbasses bothered getting fraymotifs in the game," Dave adds. "I'm the only one on top of the sick ass beats, as usual."

- 

EB: but aren't we kind of already in a turf war if you think about it?
TG: eb has a point man
TG: essentially this entire shitstorm is one massive hero vs criminal pissing contest
EB: maybe to fight criminals...
TG: we need to create criminals of our own
EB: or just giant robots.
GG: i can do that! :D
TG: hell yeah i have the funds you have the technology rose has the unholy sea monsters john and karkat have the mind meld and johns dad has the endless supply of baked goods
TG: were fucking geniuses why are we all unemployed vigilantes
TG: karkat ask the stabmaster if hes willing to change his last initial
CG: HOLY SHIT YOU THREE NEED TO GET A LIFE. JOHN, WE'RE GETTING YOU A LIFE, AS SOON AS ALL THIS BLOWS OVER. DAVE, HARLEY - YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN, FUCKERS. I DECLARE THIS ENTIRE MEMO A MONUMENT TO YOUR COMBINED STUPIDITY, AND IN FIVE SECONDS I'M SHUTTING THE WHOLE THING DOWN SO WE CAN PRETEND NONE OF THIS EVER HAPPENED.
EB: ahaahaha! just like old times!
GG: but wait wait wait! :( i still need to consult dave on stuff!
TG: nope aint happening
TG: sorry jade casa striders timeline 101 is closed for business
EB: oh man, seriously?
GG: but science needs you! you don’t want to impede the course of science, do you?
EB: we're sorry, we can't let you do this, dave!
TG: your awful scifi references and science being needy cant sway me i am a goddamn rock
EB: they're not awful! that was a classic!
TG: it didn't even have mcconoonohoy in it i seriously doubt that counts as a classic in john egberts
EB: mcconaughey!
GG: urrrgh! come on! :/
CG: I'M TELLING YOU, HARLEY. THE DICK. JUST. PUNCH IT.
GG: uhhhh, i'm pretty sure i could do serious damage, so let's not do that!
CG: DO IT. IN THE NAME OF YOUR PRECIOUS, PRECIOUS SCIENCE.
GG: ...
TG: okay no jade fuck no
EB: i can't believe we've reached this point again already. :| how does it always end up with someone threatening to punch someone else in the groin?!
TG: because we all have filthy filthy minds
TG: karkats being filthier than most
TG: also we think violence solves problems
TG: now jade was raised by a reincarnated hellbeast johns dad is secretly a scary ass motherfucker and i had bro who thinks katanas are an appropriate present for a third grader but i have no idea what your excuse is karkat
CG: HA. LUSII ARE ESSENTIALLY VIOLENT PRIMITIVE WASTES OF SPACE, JUST AS LIKELY TO TRY TO CULL THEIR CHARGE AS RAISE IT. THERE'S A FUCKING GOOD REASON GRUB CENTERS HAD TO GET OVERHAULED TO DELAY CUSTODIAN ASSIGNMENTS, YOU CULTURALLY INEPT MORON.
EB: and hey, my dad isn't scary!
TG: uh
GG: whomp whomp...
CG: FUCK.

There's apparently a furious debate as to how much stuff from the previous universe has carried over. Doc Lalonde's people are all over it, since apparently ectobiological shit and paradox wrinkles are kind of their gig, and Dave gets pulled aside by more than one scientist jacked up on coffee and possibly other stimulants of questionable legality, all of them chattering about synchronicity and testing initiatives and that's enough to send Dave flashstepping out of the room faster than Bro when he realizes the Muppets are on.

But then Jade corners him and drags him into helping her with her science thing, and that's when Dave realizes this whole thing has the potential to execute a flying backward somersault off the handle in the conksuckiest way possible.

See, Jade believes the whole game-induced meteor apocalypse thing is doomed to happen again. She's absolutely sure that their powers, their weird hero complexes, have carried over not just because the universe is a fucked up reset version of itself, but because the game is gearing up to start again. If this is a thought that has occurred to literally anyone else in this entire laboratory, they have yet to mention it aloud.

And while Dave is kind of sitting over here in the lonely camp of 'let's just not play this game if and when it rears its ugly mug, thereby averting the fucking end of the world, and everyone will be finer than cheese on enchiladas,' Jade has this kind of blind certainty that's hard to shake.

And she's certain they're all going to end up playing again.

"Grandpa told me all about it, before he left." Jade's feet are the only things visible at the moment. They're in the conference room from hell, and Jade is mucking around under the hellscreens themselves, lying on her back and tucked up in the mess of wires that the Querent pieced together to
recreate her Queen's Hub. One of her hands can just barely be seen twining between the wires, smeared with something black and oily. "John's Nanna knew a lot more, but she passed on as much as she could to him so he could teach me. So the world's definitely gonna end!"

Dave shakes his head, uncapping a blue expo marker and dragging the nearest rolling whiteboard over to where he's sitting on the conference table. Karkat has absolutely zero art skills to speak of, so Dave considers any and all additions he makes to the board - this one dedicated to Doc Scratch's meddling in the game session - a service to humanity. He draws, with totally ironic precision, the exact features and expression of Hella Jeff in the center of Karkat's shitty rendition of a cue ball.

"Way to be a fucking optimist about this, Jade, like damn," he comments. "How about we just slow our roll on the whole doomsday thing, alright? Or just. Better yet. Not even fucking roll at all. Jesus."

To Jade's credit, she follows Dave's less than coherent moments pretty well. She's pretty slick, when she isn't being a total dweeb to rival even John. "Pass me the screwdriver, I can't reach it with all this voidy stuff in the way," she orders, sticking a hand out through the wires at an awkward angle and making grabby motions. Dave heaves a sigh and tosses her the screwdriver she'd pulled out of god knows where earlier. "Thanks!" She snatches the tool out of the air with uncanny accuracy and then twists her arm back into the wires to start unscrewing a panel. He almost convinces himself she hasn't said anything because he's managed to win her over with flawless logic, but then Jade hums and says, "But we have to roll, Dave. Even if we tried to stop it by not playing, there'd always be a timeline where we did play, and that's the one that would count. You're the one who should know that, Dave! Time is your thing!"

...Well, everything in him screams that that would be a shitty idea, so they're not going to do that. Dave scratches the side of his nose irritably and almost leaves a line of marker across his cheek. "The time thing is overrated, Jade. I swear, I'm going to rebrand myself the Bro of Things, just to give the comic uber-nerds everywhere a minor aneurysm." Dave says, rolling his eyes behind his shades. "I'll do stuff. And things. None of it time related. I'll give up my sword and use only shitty sords. It will be my ironic swan song."

If he'd been alone, he'd have started humming to himself as the words of a fucking ancient meme abruptly shunt themselves into his brain like a blissfully ironic earworm. Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff, will get some stuff, and do some things...

"Alright Dave, if you say so! You're the expert on cool stuff!" Jade chirps back. A clanking noise echoes from behind the screens, and when she speaks again it's muffled. "Besides, I know you'd never let us down, no matter how you choose to ascend the echeladder!"

Someday, Dave is going to host a game show. The only two contestants will be John and Jade, and they're going to compete to see who can be the most dorkily, sincerely earnest nerdlord this side of the Atlantic. Rose can be the co-judge, because Rose is pretty much the only person in all of paradox space with the credentials to psychoanalyze nerdlords and determine who is being the most sincere. Of course, given their personalities, Jade would turn the whole thing into a science experiment and John would fail to see the beautiful irony of it all and try to make it a pranking contest, and Rose would no doubt turn her freakish psychic analysis onto Dave because Rose has a goddamn problem.

Or Jade could be kidnapped, and John could lose his shit, and Rose could turn grimdark all over again, and oh for fuck's sake, he told himself he wasn't going to think about all this shit.

Frustrated, Dave draws the y of Jeff's mouth with reckless abandon and then caps the marker, his mouth twitching with something that threatens to become a full-on frown if he doesn't keep himself in check. Keep it cool, keep it cool.

Fuck it. Dave tosses the blue marker aside and says, "You know what. Karkat is right."
Jade slides out from under the computers, her jaw dropping. Her hair is abuzz with regular static electricity that makes strands of heavy dark curls frizz out to stick to the machine parts around her, and her green eyes are threatening to bug out of their sockets. Seriously, her and John - no filter.

Even as he thinks that, Jade sucks in a huge intake of breath, as though ready to start razzing him.

Before she can say a word, Dave cuts her off. "No, hear me out. He's right. That absolute fucker is right." Dave uncaps a red expo marker to start in on Sweet Bro. "Fuck everything about this. I regret everything about this super extended family vacation. We're all going back to regular hero work. Starting, like, fucking yesterday. I will personally take all of us back in time and we'll go back to John's house and pretend none of this bullshit ever happened. We'll just eat Dadbert out of house and home and kick the shit out of any criminal who crosses us."

His voice might have got a little loud at the end there. He's blaming it on the new collar. Probably breaking down already. Piece of shit machine.

"Well, I'm totally down for crime fighting!" Jade fidgets with the screwdriver, visible hesitation in her face. "But also you agreeing with Karkat on anything seems like a bad idea."

"You're telling me," Dave says grimly. "I'd say it was a sign the world was ending, except oh wait."

There's a moment of weird silence from Jade that stretches long enough that Dave glances down at her feet. They're twitching a little in her shoes, and he's about to start inching forward - because what if she's having some kind of fucking seizure under there - when the strangled, panting laughter starts. Something in the Hub clangs loudly, like an elbow spastically slamming into the side of a modem, and Jade just starts howling and wheezing with laughter.

Well, at least someone around here appreciates his sense of humor.

- 

EB: karkat, you too? what is it with you guys!
TG: just
TG: pretty sure your dad could fuck shit up
TG: secretly
TG: with baked goods
GG: like, my grandpa's files didn't even have a lot on him, but he was definitely in armed forces or something so he's like a total badass!
CG: LOATHE AS I AM TO AGREE WITH EITHER OF THESE TWO ON ANYTHING - EB: aghhhhhhhhh! you guys!
GG: i mean, what did your dad do? like military, navy, or what, john? inquiring minds want to know!
EB: uh...
CG: WAIT. HANG ON. WHY DON'T I KNOW THE ANSWER TO THIS? SURELY THIS HAS BEEN MENTIONED BEFORE. MY THINKPAN CANNOT BE THAT SHITTY.
EB: i don't know if we should be talking about this...
TG: do you know
TG: oh my god john if not even you know what your dad did for a living before you arrived via space debris -
GG: of course he knows! :P right john?
EB: i just mean it's my dad's private business! he doesn't even talk about it to me a whole lot, and he wouldn't want me to talk about it online regardless!
EB: maybe if he said it was okay we could talk about it when we're all in the same room again, but not on pesterchum!
TG: oh man
TG: im having war flashbacks
TG: to the days when john didnt want to discuss anything personal over chatlogs
TG: and refused to use real names for days at a time
TG: good times
EB: bluh bluh, very funny dave. hilarious. :P
EB: selfie repeats. that is all.
TG: john no you promised
CG: WHAT ARE YOU EVEN ON ABOUT NOW, YOU BLATHERING FUCKWITS?
GG: seriously!
TG: oh man youve never had to deal with panicky secret identity means secret john
TG: i feel like such a fucking hipster now im the only one here with exposure to vintage john
TG: you guys
TG: he was so paranoid
TG: you dont even know
EB: daaaave!
CG: OKAY NO WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT.
EB: uh...was that on purpose? :O
CG: NO OH MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK -
CG: BLOOD BROTHER.
CG: NO STOP THAT. WHOEVER THE FUCK IS DOING THAT. STOP IT RIGHT THE FUCK NOW.
CG: HARLEY -
GG: don't look at me! :P
CG: YOU'VE BEEN DICKING AROUND WITH PESTERCHUM LIKE SOME KIND OF MEDDLING DICKBISCUIT FOR DAYS NOW. LOOK ME IN THE EYE AND TELL ME YOU HAVE NOT SOMEHOW FUCKED UP THE CODING FOR MY QUIRK, YOU BUCKET OF BLISTER DISCHARGE.
GG: uh, gross! and no, why would i just randomly make it so your font changes?
GG: i'm not even sure if it's possible to do that for just one phrase! i'm not some computer genius, you know...
EB: maybe it's something rose and kanaya's friend did when he made the app more secure?
EB: i mean, maybe if i type it like Blood Brother...
TG: shit man
EB: there it goes again!
GG: there, process of elimination! it's not just you, karkat!
CG: THIS IS SO STUPID. WHY IS THIS EVEN A THING THAT'S HAPPENAHGODANBDGKM
EB: ...karkat?
TG: idk bro that looks like just got stabbed keyboard smash to me
CG: SHUT YOUR SQUAWK BLISTER DAVE.
TG: haha oh my god
TG: it totally was
The summons comes a little after midday.

Dave's had a good streak going, but he screws the pooch when he walks out of the conference room without doing a spot check. And Bro, being a magnificent asshole, has never been one to miss out on an opportunity to ambush him. Dave senses the attack coming only at the last moment, and only because everyone has learned to be paranoid about clanking noises in the air vents since word got around that Spades uses them as hiding places. He looks up and dodges to the side, just in time for the mangled remains of an entire bedframe to crash out of the open ventilation shaft in the ceiling and land in a heap where he was just standing.

Dave looks up in horror because how did Bro even fit that in the vent?

A piece of paper gently wafts out of said vent a moment later and flaps down to land on his face. Dave, being the picture of ice cold pose that he is, brushes it off violently with both hands, flailing until he realizes that nothing else is coming at him. He glances around, spooked, but no one seems to be around to have witnessed that display of completely ironic composure.

He snags the note off the ground and sprints away from the vent to read it a few yards away. The note's been written on a scrap of paper torn out of a Game Bro magazine (ha fucking ha, Bro) in black ink, the letters so thin and scratchy it almost looks like the pen ran out of ink a few times.

bro

roof

we're doing this man

we're making this TRANSPIRE

"Dave?"

Dave crushes the note in his hand and looks up. Jade hangs out the door of the conference room, blinking, with a fistful of wires in her grip. "Did someone just throw a bed through the vent?" she asks. "That's so awesome!"

Oh. It's on.

-  

TG: anyway how did this become a memo about johns paranoia in days of yore and random quirk mutations
TG: this was supposed to be a memo to make you all stop riding my ass
TG: and yet here you all still are
TG: riding my ass like its an overworked swaybacked pony at the state fair
GG: no one's even mentioned timelines yet! this is just...friendly conversation! :D
TG: wait for it
CG: IS NO ONE CONCERNED ABOUT THE RANDOM ASS FONT CHANGING? NO ONE BUT ME? AS USUAL, I HAVE TO BE THE ONE TO DO ALL THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE LATEST SERVING OF WEIRD SHIT THE UNIVERSE HAS MASHED DOWN OUR THROATS?
EB: well...i don't know! maybe it's just a fluke?
CG: NOTHING IS A FUCKING FLUKE FOR US ANYMORE, JOHN. THE ONLY FLUKES IN EXISTENCE ARE THOSE WHICH ADORN THE TAILS OF CETACEANS.
CG: OURS IS A HARD LIFE. ONE IN WHICH WE DON'T EVEN HAVE THE FUCKING
LUXURY OF COINCIDENCE OR CHANCE.
CG: EVERYTHING IS A FUCKING CONSPIRACY JOHN. EVERYTHING IS THIS fuCKING FUCKERUUFKUFKICNGGAME -
TG: dude
EB: hoo boy.
EB: i'll be right there karkat!
TG: youve just gotta let these things roll over you karkles
TG: overthinking it just makes things worse
CG: THAT'S THE SHITTIEST ADVICE I'VE EVER HEARD. AND HAVING BEEN RAISED BY A GIANT GODDAMN SENTIENT CRAB, I'VE HEARD SOME PRETTY SHITTY ADVICE.
CG: CONGRATULATIONS, DAVE. YOUR REWARD FOR BEING SO INCREDIBLY STUPID IS MY ETERNAL DISAPPOINTMENT IN YOU AS A SPECIMEN OF THE HUMAN RACE.
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has joined the chat! --
TT: Did someone menshion ceintures??
TT: *centureons
TT: **cetashonsHIC!
CG: HOLD UP.
TG: holy shit you are beyond wasted
TG: like there is wasted and then there is whatever the hell you are right now rose
TG: its only like noon how is this even possible
TT: I have my waves. ;)
-
There's a glass skylight in the exact center of the roof, which is really goddamn inconvenient when you're fighting for your life. You'd figure it would be relatively easy to just fucking avoid it, but from the moment Dave sets foot on the roof Bro batters him toward the skylight, a blur as he yanks on Dave's shirt and smacks the back of his head and sends Lil Cal slithering in fitful twists around his ankles to trip him up.

Bro is fighting like a complete and utter shithead, in other words. He hasn't jerked Dave around this badly in years, and it's even more annoying now than Dave remembers it being. There's also antennae and satellite dishes scattered around the roof, and while neither of the Striders would care about breaking the radio tower or the AC unit back home, Dave gets the feeling that Rue would absolutely wreck their collective shit if they messed up any experiments down below.

The most frustrating part, really, is the fact that Dave knows he could be better than this. An arm slams into his side, right over the white scar of the stab wound that only just healed enough to stop bothering him all the time, and knocks him off balance, hard enough that it'll definitely bruise by tonight. Dave can only uselessly, wordlessly grunt in protest as he retaliates with a strike that meets air. When he regains his balance, the back of his left heel slips on something slick, and he realizes he's been driven back over the skylight again. The glass creaks ominously underfoot; he shifts his weight back to his right side and sweeps his left leg around so at least when he parries Bro's next attack he doesn't fall flat on his ass.

It's like no matter what he tries, he can never catch up to Bro. Not in this universe, or any other sick copy of it. And it's aggravating as hell. Dave pauses time and takes the opportunity to put some space between him and the window, and in the interim he spies Bro lurking behind a satellite dish, his stupid fucking polo collar popped so most of his lower face is in shadow, mouthless, his shades a sharp-edged screen.
Why are we like this?

Time slots back into its regular rhythm, and Bro vanishes again. Dave's sword stabs through the afterimage that's left behind, but even the humiliation of missing by a fucking mile gets turbo-boosted when a solid right hook plows into the side of his face.

Maybe it jostles something in his head the wrong way, because -

*He stops at the plateau on the way to the Battlefield.*

*Jack Noir couldn't shatter the katana. It wasn't some piece of shit practically designed to get downgraded to a shitty-ass 1/2bladekind. Shit was unbreakable. Unbelievably rad. Probably a collector's item.*

*So he just shoved it through Bro like a hot knife through butter.*

*Might Davesprite got to say something before the end, but Dave is far too late. It's a real goddammn riot, being the single most shitty excuse for a Time player ever to have the turntables thrust upon him. There's a faint static buzzing in his head, like someone chattering in his ear too close and too far away at the same time, and when he gets down on one knee all he can hear echoing in his head over and over again is you were the hero. Not me. Never me.*

- he kind of has some idea of why John doesn't like to remember things. Dave spits at the taste of copper pennies on his tongue, grimacing, and catches himself on the dish by way of landing ass-first in the concave part, jolting the entire apparatus down with a resounding squeal so that it angles toward a tree in the distance instead of the sky. The bottom of the rim cuts into the backs of his thighs, sharp enough to make him suck in a breath.

"Too slow on your feet, kid," Bro says. Lil Cal has his arms hooked under Bro's scruffy chin, just a hint of that horrific grin peeking over his shoulder, usually a sign that within moments the puppetkind will end up battering at Dave's face as yet another distraction before the beatdown recommences.

What really grinds his gears is that Bro doesn't even sound disappointed. He never does. It's just a statement of a fact, accompanied by a relentless barrage of asskicking. Like it doesn't matter how hard Dave forces his legs to move or which way he flip flops through time; it'll always end with him capping out, winded and too spent to move, while Bro is still far in the distance like an unattainable pinnacle of badassery. Even when these fights end on Dave's terms, it's the kind of terms that involve getting himself impaled like a total newb. Just once he'd like to -

Bro's face twitches and he whips around to auto-parry a second Dave at the last moment.

Well, alright, Dave didn't even know he was going to pull the time traveling card, but he's learned to just stop questioning it and exploit the random future-Daves as they come along. Trusting that he'll tell himself when to jump back, Dave grabs the edges of the satellite dish and hauls himself onto his feet, sprinting forward.

"Go high!" the future-Dave shouts like a useless goddamn dinglehopper, so Dave has to do the exact opposite and drop low because Bro *obviously* heard that and Lil Cal's head is creaking around one hundred and eighty degrees to bare its teeth at Dave from its perch on Bro's back. Dave kicks out and scores a glancing hit on the back of Bro's heel, but kicking is not his thing at all and then Lil Cal just *drops* and he has a face full of creepyass murderpuppet to deal with.

The *third* Dave rips Cal away from Dave's face and rolls away still fending off the puppet's groping hands; that Dave plants a knee on the puppet, raising a broken half of a sword over his head and
driving it through Cal's plush chest, while current-Dave takes advantage of the lack of puppet to stop freaking the fuck out and assess the situation. He suddenly has three of himself to work with, which is something he hasn't tried except in non-combat situations. Like, he had maybe four of himself running loops at one point during the startup phase of his apple juice business, but that hadn't involved any need to coordinate all those extra bodies in a fight.

\[ \Gamma^t = /// \text{ (and drop)} \]

Luckily, the other two have more of an idea of what's going on than Dave does. This is a common theme with future versions of himself. The third has Lil Cal pinned, which is a full time gig because Cal is a fucking menace and still trying to twine boneless arms around the third-Dave's neck.

Dave focuses on the fight with Bro, partially because he wants fuck all to do with Lil Cal and partially because the second-Dave needs serious backup. There's only so much a single Dave can do against Bro, after all. Dave rolls to the side and slices at Bro's leg this time with a proper cut of his sword. The weight of the blade feels off in his hands, the black grip twisting roughly against his palm, but Dave follows through, watching for the moment when Bro's afterimage blurs out of the way.

Time hiccups to a stop. Dave's slice still misses, but only by inches, Bro frozen in the act of raising his foot to plant a kick in the middle of Dave's shades. The second Dave, the one who froze that particular second in time, comes up underneath Bro's raised guard and jabs for the throat.

A shudder, and time fails to restart because the third Dave picks up where the second left off. Dave almost feels phantom fireworks go off in his head, his brain anticipating the blowback of holding time still for too long but never actually experiencing it. Shaking it off, Dave hesitates - and slams his shoulder into Bro's leg, the one that isn't poised to kick him. When time presses in, ready to start running the clock again, Dave handles the flashstep himself, pausing for long enough that the third Dave yanks the 1/2bladekind out of Lil Cal and chucks the broken hilt at nothing, a good three feet away from any of them -

Time restarts. Bro curses, low and muffled, and when the elder Strider has to sidestep the sword coming at his neck he winds up kicking Dave flat in the center of his back in an effort to kick himself free. Old instinct kicks in and Dave drops his sword to wrap his arms around Bro's leg, clinging like Lil Cal on a strangulation attempt, and somehow he must slow Bro down enough that the third Dave's seemingly wild, half-assed throw actually connects. The bottom of the flying hilt smacks into the back of Bro's head.

It doesn't make much of an impact, but it certainly works as even more of a distraction. Bro grunts, leg muscle flexing under Dave's grip as he prepares to probably kick the current version off, and the second Dave, cool as anything, slides in to level the sword specibus at Bro's jugular again.

Bro's sword blurs out, and suddenly the second Dave has only half a specibus left. The flimsy, piece of shit sword shatters, cracking loud enough to set Dave's teeth on edge.

It's the third Dave who lays an unbroken sword against the other side of Bro's neck. Bro reacts, or maybe he anticipates the strike as usual - it's too close to tell who drew first from Dave's shitty vantage point - and meets the threat with one of his own, whipping around to tap the third Dave's collarbone with his katana. Dave only wonders where that second sword came from for a moment before he realizes he's the one who dropped it for the third Dave to pick up and continue the fight.

Bro's head cocks to the side, considering, but he doesn't move to knock the third Dave down, and that's when Dave figures out what just happened. Bro and the future Dave both have a sword to each other's throats, too close for either one to risk pulling away.
That's a stalemate.

Well, shit.

-EB: uh, rose...
EB: should you really be drinking? that seems like, uh...not a good thing.
TT: John, your always trying to keep me right. :) This is why where besties.
TT: *yore
TT: **yuore
TT: Close enough.
EB: oh wow, you're really drunk :O seriously, I thought it was kind of dangerous for you to drink!
on account of...things?
TT: Tentacules, the word you're looking for is tentalces. My old tangelas~
EB: yeah, that! exactly!
EB: except i was trying to be subtle and stuff.
TT: Yea well, this is the one of the only places on the planet where I am capable of imbibing
without consequences! Thanksh to the fundamentally obscuring nature of the wards which Mother
made, the vats majority of otherworldly and supernatural phen...phenom...phenylalanine are unable
to breash it. Spells and assorted other majjys can funcshion within the null zon/ but even the
ambient thaumaturgical reashonances of th e world are muted within the building.
TT: HIC!
EB: well, if you say so! :/ you know more about it than me, so...
TG: okay so at least now we've confirmed that its the lalonde side of the family who inherit the
blackout shitfaced genes
CG: YOU TYPED OUT A HICCUP.
CG: WHY.
CG: FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS HOLY, WHY.
TT: Pshf. ..
TT: Karkat, sometiems you just needa express yerself. And sometimes that sleff-expression means
engauging in hiccoughs of a textual manner too! :_
TT: Whoops! *:
TT: Don’t worry, there's plenty of alcoholololic bevrages left in the supply room if you wish to
sampel the wares!
CG: NO OFFENCE, BUT SOMEHOW I THINK GUZZLING SOPORIFICS ON TOP OF
PAINKILLERS MIGHT BE TOO MUCH EVEN FOR ME TO HANDLE.
CG: AND BY THAT I MEAN AS CHARMING AS YOU APPEAR TO BECOME UNDER
ITS INFLUENCE I'M ALSO PRETTY FUCKING SURE I WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH
IT.
TT: Hahahahaha! , No problem. :) 
GG: i might have some later! :) we can have a sleepover party for real this time, rose!
TT: Eshellent! John?
EB: uhhhhhh, i probably shouldn't? my dad would so not approve.
TT: Thash not a no ;)
EB: uhhhhhhhh...
TG: why do i feel like handing jade a handle would end with everyone in their underwear wandering
around las vegas as the city burns around us
TG: the streets flooded by some unknown catastrophe we've unleashed on the unsuspecting hookers
TG: karkat sobbing into his vodka because hes realized troll will smith will never love him back
CG: YOU SHUT YOUR WHORE MOUTH.
TG: this image shines in my minds eye like a goddamn beacon karkat you cant silence the truth
Later, when Dave has caught up with the third copy of himself, he finds himself staring down the point of a bladekind, meeting Bro stare for stare behind the mutual blankfaced consideration of their shades. Dave can't even feel his hand; it's numb as fuck from the force of the blow that shattered the sword earlier, and he's half-sure that if he hadn't seen himself pull this off already, he would never have had the balls to just toss a broken sword at Bro's head and hope for the best. Bro's hat sits askew on his gelled thatch of hair, but he's still not even breathing hard compared to Dave's shaky hands.

"Getting there," Bro says off-handedly, and then he's gone.

The whole ironically cryptic thing? Is getting really old, really fast.

Still, Dave didn't even get stabbed in this strife, so at least he has that much he can gloat about and rub in Karkat's face. He hands the unbroken sword to his past self without a word so that version of Dave can go back in time to become the second, watches the second go back to become the current him, and wonders when shit like this became normal.

---

TT: But ,
TT: Theresa reason I wished to join the memo at this juncshure!
EB: theresa?
TT: *theres is a
GG: what is it, rose? did you seeee something? :D
TT: I shaw Blod Brothhear se!
CG: I DON'T LIKE THIS. SOMEONE MAKE HER STOP.
TG: god no this is hilarious
CG: JOHN I AM FUCKING UNCOMFORTABLE MAKE HER STOP. DAVE, CONTROL YOUR HUMAN SIBLING.
EB: don't worry karkat, rose is a seer! this is her specialty!
GG: and if she understands what's going on, i'm curious!
TG: ohhhh miss rose miss rose tell us more
CG: WHY ARE YOU ALL LIKE THIS.
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has joined the chat! --
TG: so this is why i never talk to you people.
TG: i mean jesus, what is this? this is a shitshow.
EB: not exactly our finest moment...
TG: let me know when the crazy stops.
CG: HA! YOUR NAÏVETÉ BRINGS A SINGLE FESTERING TEAR OF MIRTHWHIMSY TO MY GANDERBULBS. THE CRAZY DOES NOT 'STOP.' EVERYONE IN THIS FUCKING CHATROOM HAS A MIND LIKE A STEEL TRAP - RUSTY, UNRELIABLE, AND ILLEGAL IN 37 STATES.
CG: THE ROSE HUMAN WAS THE BEST OF US, AND LOOK AT HER NOW.
TT: Don’t worry, goign crazy once an while ish probabaly a healthy response to extreeme amounts of stress. We're all going pretty good, all thingsh considered. I would be mush more concerned baout us if noone was effected by tihs bullshist!
TG: yeah, i'm just going to
TG: go.
TG: (run man)
TG: (get out while you still can)
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has left the chat! --
TT: Oh yah!! I was gonna explain Blood Bratwurst ~
CG: OKAY, THERE'S NO WAY IN HELL THAT STILL COUNTED. THAT WASN'T EVEN CLOSE TO RIGHT.
GG: let her talk, karkat, jeez!
TT: It'sa all shparkly and red when you look at it, capishe?
TT: But when I look at it- I can seeh the over...lei, nah, overlaying persheptive filter.
TT: Sooooi think yoo still have the regulas font underrneath that but! Another ;ayer of reality paradoxically takes preshenedshe over the mundane one.
TT: *presidence
TT: Lichen autocorrect on the corporal realm!
TT: *atocrrect
TT: No, *autocorrect was right the firsht time, sorry.
GG: wow! i was thinking it was the game too, but your hypothesis sounds way more professional, rose! even with all the spelling mistakes!
TT: I do try.,
TG: nah man that made no sense at all
EB: i kind of get it? maybe?
CG: WHAT I'M GETTING IS, THIS IS ANOTHER ONE FOR THE CHART.
TT: 'Dont worry Zhon, Dave, I'm her all day. Ready to assisst you all by explaining exaaaaaelly what I foreshee.
TT: HIC!
TG: i changed my mind this memo is a keeper
TG: we have to preserve this for posterity
TG: the day rose went on a pesterbender
EB: i, uh -
EB: i think i'm gonna go get kanaya.
TT: ho nooooo :(

Mom Lalonde is waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Dave has walked off the post-strife adrenalin jitters, and the look on her face is almost enough to send him flashstepping back up the stairs out of self preservation.

"Dave, dear," she says, her smile sweet enough to inflict tooth decay by proxy. "May I ask why Lab Fourteen just began channeling college basketball, when it was directed to study unidentified objects in near geostationary orbit?"

Under the inscrutable force of her stern motherly smile, Dave becomes uncomfortably aware not just of the fresh coat of sweat covering him from head to toe, but also of the incredible amounts of guilt that a parental figure can instill with a raised eyebrow. Bro may be many things, but a guilter has never been one of them.

"It was totally Bro's fault," are the first words he blurs out.

The smile takes on the distinct character of aspartame, and Dave gulps.

"Dave. Perhaps it is time we discuss exactly where it is and is not acceptable to strife in a professional setting, seeing as Ambrose seems to have been a tad neglectful in your education."

Oh god. He's so fucked.

---
Seattle's source for up-to-the-minute weather forecasts, severe weather watches and warnings, radar and more!

**Severe Weather Alert**

[last updated 05:11:56 PDT]

The National Weather Service in Seattle has extended the high wind warning for western Washington, including King, Chelan, Okanogan, Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, and Douglas Counties. Expect gusts to 40 MPH.

In addition, the NWS Storm Prediction Center has issued a severe thunderstorm watch for portions of the greater northwest Washington area affected by an inbound low-pressure front, effective until late Monday afternoon. Hail up to one (1) inch in diameter, thunderstorm wind gusts to 70 MPH, and dangerous lightning are possible in this area. Storm cells in the developing stage have been spotted as far south as Pierce County.

Remember, a severe thunderstorm watch means conditions are favorable for severe thunderstorms in and close to the watch area. Persons in the immediate vicinity should be on the lookout for threatening weather conditions. Severe thunderstorms can and occasionally do produce tornadoes.

Remembering's dangerous. The past, after all, is such a worrying, anxious place.

Someone said that. John can't remember who, at the moment. But he's sure it was someone suitably famous, like Howie Mandel or Ophelian Rutledge or the Batman or something. Not Nicolas Cage though. He would totally remember if it was a Cage line!
The point is, his head feels like it's about to crack in three or something! No matter how hard he tries to mash everything down and keep it together, he keeps catching himself remembering something that never happened except, uh. It did happen. He supposes he can admit that now. But it didn't happen to him, not the him that counts, anyway, so it's not fair that suddenly his dumb brain's full of all these treacherous pitfalls, to the point where he remembers, he knows for a fact that he spent his childhood learning to play the piano and playing more pranks and gags and abjuring any and all baked goods, not just the Betty Crocker ones. Sometimes it's the memories of the real him that feel as thin as a slice of plastic, flimsy and sharp around the edges, and he can't imagine why he'd spend more than fifteen years of his life in intensive training to prepare him for a career as a super hero. It sounds vaguely unreal, and that sense of unreality scares him almost more than the game itself.

And now, he doesn't even have the luxury of forgetting. The spotty, murky places that have popped up over the course of the past few days - and even a few before that, sections of time where his memories have veered abruptly to the right or left in an attempt to avoid touching on something dark and cold and unpleasant - stand out in his mind like shallow pits. Things like Jade chattering to him because she doesn't understand why he has his super powers but not a sylladex, his dad explaining that the meteor that brought John to Earth blew Nanna and her prank shop to smithereens, Karkat messaging him about messed up dreams where everybody dies...

He's pretty sure no one else, not even Rose, has this much of the game still muddling around in the back of their minds. Or at least, Rose is too drunk to admit to it, Dave has shrugged and gone off on a tangent about Barack Obama every time John asks, and Jade was kind of bummed out about the dying thing for about five seconds before she got excited about the science of reality-warping video games again. To be honest it kind of freaks John out that Jade would probably welcome the chance to remember it all for herself. In fact, she'd be all for it!

He's the one who has messed his brain up doing everything not to remember. Which kind of sucks, a lot. He can't even remember when he made that first decision to stop thinking about anything that pinged too strongly on his subconscious; did he ever decide that? It's not like he's Rose, able to go inside her own head to shape it however she wants. If he did make the conscious choice to force his brain to reset every time he thought of something related to the game, he doesn't have the memory of that, either. He's just him, just John, and apparently he's even more useless than he always thought he was.

…Oh. Whoops! Haha, he's trying not to think like that right now. The last thing anyone needs is for John to get all mopey and stuff on top of everything else that's going on! He's already maxed out his mental breakdown quota for the weekend, and Karkat doesn't need to have to deal with all that again when he's still hurt.

So he does what he always wants to do when the walls start pressing in and his head aches. There's no one else around but Doctor Lalonde's assistants, all of whom seem kind of over-informed about John's powers - he gets the feeling that what Doctor Lalonde knows, she then has her bevy of scientists research to within an inch of their lives, and even if they didn't know his name and alias when the Lalondes lived in Washington, they definitely know it now. And since no one can reach this particular valley without a guide who knows where they're going, John figures if he stays pretty low and in the clouds no one will see anything they shouldn't.

Maybe he doesn't ask his dad because he suspects - he knows - Dad would disapprove. This kind of reckless behavior is exactly the sort of thing he hates, and guilt gnaws like a physical ache as John figures out exactly where his dad is - in one of the rooms near the conference room that has become their center of operations, probably catching up on all the paperwork from his job that he had to skip out on to supervise a houseful of super-powered teenagers for the past few days. John sits outside the office door for too long while nagging himself to just open the door and say something, just get it
over with, and eventually he waffles back and forth long enough that one of the doctors rushing past with a stack of black sheets of paper stops and eyeballs him with avid curiosity, and John hastily absconds before she can question him loud enough for his dad to hear. He checks in with Doctor Lalonde instead, takes her distracted nod as permission, and then hightails it out of there before she can change her mind.

So, since he can't avoid remembering little details, flashes of a life that he didn't live, he avoids his dad. His dad, who only ever wants to make sure John is safe and okay and urghhhhh. It's the kind of stupid, dumb logic that will probably piss Karkat off to no end when he catches on. But Karkat's still neckdeep in his charts when John comes in to tell him where he's going to be, so John mostly sort of manages to completely avoid the subject there, too.

Karkat's sitting cross-legged on the table and muttering to himself when John tiptoes into the conference room. There's something on one of the computer screens on the far wall that he pointedly doesn't look at because there's far too much electric green involved, and he bounces over to rest his chin on top of Karkat's head, barely skimming the white boards full of Karkat's angry diagrams and scribbles with his eyes. "No dicks," he observes, because Karkat went off on Dave already once today about vandalizing his chart, and he figures it's a hilarious way to bring Karkat out of his intense speculation mood.

He is not disappointed. "WHERE?!" Karkat demands, whipping his head around so fast he nearly beans John with a horn. Then - "Wait, no dicks? Fuck, it's a Christmas miracle," he says, turning to look at John, with a frown that might be construed as a tired smile in Karkatese.

Behind him, Dave winks into sight, Expo marker already in hand. He raises a finger to his mouth when he sees John raising both eyebrows at him, and proceeds to turn one of Karkat's drawings of a prototyped ring into a dick with a flourish before vanishing to whenever in the past or future he came from.

Seriously. Time travel has some serious pranking potential. John has got to talk to Dave about expanding beyond basic stuff like dick graffiti! For now, he's just gonna keep his mouth shut. "I'm going outside to fly. Wanna come?" he says instead of warning Karkat about the drive-by vandalism, leaning in so that he's pressing against Karkat's shoulder. "You've been in here for ages, and I know Jade's been talking about messing with the wires on those computers."

"Is that what she's on about?" Karkat says, his nose wrinkling up as he grimaces at his phone, which is sitting a few feet away on the table. "After a while I just stopped checking. I mean, why is it that we're all in the same building and yet we're texting just as fucking much as ever? Fuck, Dave doesn't even have any fucking excuse anymore."

"I have no clue, man," John says, shrugging. "Everyone's just kind of off doing their own thing, I guess. Processing stuff. Besides, if she came here in person and talked to you about it, you'd just end up arguing."

"It's what I do." Karkat recaps his own Expo marker and shifts to look at John more easily, which at least means he won't notice Dave's artwork anytime soon. "I don't know about flying right now, but I guess I can haul my sorry carcass outside for a while. Act like I'm not a fucking invalid. Get some fresh air like the lusus is always nagging me about."

"Air," John repeats, seized by a moment of hysterical glee. Because air. The next time Karkat wants to watch reruns of the Fresh Prince, he had better prepare himself for an absolutely obnoxious amount of waggling eyebrows and elbow jabs.

"Shut up." Karkat spins the marker between his claws absentely. "And then I need to drag Slick out
from wherever he's fucked off too. Apparently someone else got stabbed this morning, and guess who's the prime suspect. You get one try, and if the first guess isn't Spades Slick, it doesn't fucking count."

"Oh, wow. He seems kind of...incredibly violent," John comments, scratching the back of his head. "Should you be hanging out with him at all? He stabbed you." He's still kind of miffed about that, because on the one hand, Spades Slick seems to have a genuine grudge against the Midnight Crew, and they definitely need all the help they can get dealing with those guys! But on the other, John gets the feeling that if he met Slick in a dark alley in the middle of the night, he'd be the kind of guy Heir would want to arrest. And despite Karkat's growing nonchalance about stab wounds in the face of his more serious injuries, John is so not okay with anyone who actively sets out to hurt his best friend! "Also, how did he even get here?" he asks, as this seems like an incredibly good question. "I thought this place was hidden."

"Fuck if I know." Karkat rolls his eyes. "Aliens, John. We're dealing with actual, literal aliens. From a video game that bombards planets with space debris for its own sick amusement and spawns universe frogs because why the fuck not. Why are any of them here?"

John winces, because the earth is gone but that's a distant thought; none of them have time for that to sink in before they're fighting for their lives, and they never really have the opportunity to mourn the loss of their entire species before things get even weirder, and the impression that thought leaves in his head gives him a migraine that he can't stamp out. "Good question," he says. "But also I meant, like, how he got here as in the lab, not...existentially here."

"I'll ask. I'm sure the answer will make me doubt our mental competency yet again." Karkat sighs heavily, casting a sour look at the television screen and the wolf outlined in green that John is not looking at. "Anyway, I'll finish up with this last section and meet you out there."

"Sounds good! I need to go change anyway," John says, grinning back. He messes up Karkat's hair just for the chance to have that sour look directed at him - it's so good to see Karkat in his usual bad mood, instead of the sickly ones - and pushes off from the table to make for the door.

The table creaks behind him, and Karkat says, "Hang on, should you be dicking around outside at all? What happened to all of us playing least in sight?" When John looks back, the first inklings of suspicion have reached Karkat's face and oops! That's John's cue to boot it!

He laughs nervously, "Yeah! Doctor Lalonde said it was cool, so I should be okay!" John calls back over his shoulder, not stopping for even a second. He may or may not nudge the door with a tug on the breeze so that it shuts behind him faster than usual, and he raises a hand to wave at Karkat's outraged face just as the door closes. "See you out there!" And with that he sprints off down the hallway to grab his things, before Karkat can put two and two together to get five and spare change. Karkat is kind of scary good at noticing when John's avoiding stuff and then making John deal with it instead of burying it.

Not that John minds it! He just wants to fly first, to clear his head out in the open air, before they have to rake up all that gross stuff. Yeah. That!

Surprisingly, Oriole, not Karkat, shows up first. In fact, he's loitering in the lobby when John finishes changing into his costume and heads for the front door, and he salutes John's approach with a half-empty bottle of water in one hand. "Never try to go shot for shot with Rose," are the first words out of his mouth, before he takes another gulp of water. "Like. Oh my god. That was unreal. I don't get hungover, but I think last night almost made it happen."

John makes a face as he tucks his mask up over his nose. "You were drinking with her?" he says
"Because alcohol tastes nasty but being drunk is fun." The look on John's face must not improve, because Oriole rubs at his eyes with his hand. "Jesus, I'm surrounded by teenage teetotalers. How is that even possible? You've never been drunk?"

"Nope!" John shrugs. "It sounds overrated. And, uh. Also probably dangerous, all things considered. A hero needs to be in full control of their faculties at all times!"

It took everyone half the morning to realize that Rose's sporadic messages and increasingly ludicrous spelling mistakes were the result of her drunk-texting them all in between negotiations with her mother for - something. Rose has not been entirely clearly what. Like, John is all for her and Doctor Lalonde reconciling, if that's really what Rose wants to do, no matter how ambivalent he might feel about Doctor Lalonde personally. But also he's never dealt with a drunk Rose before. In fact, if you'd asked him back in middle school if he could ever see Rose drinking, he'd have laughed so hard he'd have broken a kidney or something! She'd always scrunched up her nose when her mother was around even when the smell of alcohol wasn't all that bad, primly firing snarky comments at Doctor Lalonde about the latest addition to her collections of wizard statues and bottles of gin, and on at least one occasion sardonically informed John that she would drink if and only if porcine mammals took flight.

Which is kind of why, after a certain point, he and Dave had privately agreed to give Kanaya a heads up as to Rose's whereabouts. Rose had extracted promises from apparently everyone using the group memos to keep Kanaya in the dark, but that just felt kind of shitty? Especially when it became really obvious that Kanaya was seriously freaking out.

Urgh. Hopefully Rose won't be mad about them going back on their promises. But. Well. He's realized there's a lot about Rose's life he doesn't know. Which is fair! There's a lot about him that's changed since she left, too. But still, the Rose John grew up with always knew when he was wearing one of his totally awesome gag disguises, even though they only ever talked over the voice Pesterchum app. He hadn't even known what Rose looked like aside from a few pictures everyone exchanged at some point, hadn't seen her until he glanced around and saw three dead bodies lying on their quest beds -

That needs to stop.

"Only because you're a bunch of grossly overpowered weirdos," Oriole is muttering as he sips on the water when John snaps back to the present. "You're going outside?"

Heck yeah. He needs to clear his head. Like, stat. "Yup."

"Mm." And just like that, with a lazy shrug and a sigh, Oriole kind of invites himself along. Not entirely sure if Rose lived in Washington or not in this life or the previous one, John snaps his goggles on and pushes the double doors open, and the wind rushes in to greet him like an old friend.

That, at least, feels like a constant.
In response to the escalating surge of unsolved arson attempts and bombings in the downtown area, the Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the Federal Villain Response Team, has issued an upgraded Terror Level for Seattle from Yellow to Orange (high risk of terrorist attacks). A representative of the FVRT is expected to make a statement Monday morning.

No known terror groups have claimed responsibility for the attacks, and there has been no official statement on how the city intends to deal with unauthorized vigilante justice in light of this heightened rating. Mayor Xiao-xing Brinner remains unavailable for comment.

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John doesn't read weather reports. He and his dad stopped bothering to tune into the morning meteorologist forecasts years ago, once they realized that a side effect of John's being so in tune with the wind around him was that he could predict barometric shifts long before they actually happened. Most of the time, he's better at predicting how the weather will turn out than any machine.

But as John swoops through the clouds that have drifted in to form heavy ripples in the sky, he notices something a little...odd. When he climbs, he can see that a lot of them are towering cumulus clouds, piles of moisture that have only just begun to shade grey, but tootally the first stages of thunderclouds. An updraft of warm air catches him midloop and John lets it waft him upward despite the dampness, squinting up through the veils of grey.

It's not acting like a normal storm. By now all the moisture in these updrafts should have capped out at a certain altitude, reached the highest point they can reach, and started to freeze. But none of these clouds are growing anymore, as far as John can tell. They're just...hanging out. There's not even enough of a natural breeze to push them along and get them some momentum, so they're just sitting around like plump, damp balloons. And they spread out as far as he can see when he falls below them, stretching out to the south and west in sluggishly shifting pattern. Any way you look at it, the weather's just kind of gross, and it seems like it's going to stay that way for a while.

He thinks, if he wanted to, he could usher the clouds along. But give the wind shear enough of a
boost, and the whole thing could get pretty ugly pretty fast! John has never exactly tested how much
he can meddle with the weather using only the connection he has to the wind, but he's self-taught
himself enough about the weather that he knows that obviously miniature tornadoes aren't out of the
question. Whatever the heck has caused these clouds to stall out, he doesn't want to try to fix it and
accidentally wind up launching a supercell at Oregon! That would just be inconsiderate!

Anyway, the whole thing kind of matches his mood, which he can appreciate. The breezes pick up
when he's in the middle of them, twining around his ankles and wrists like they're looking for
attention, and there are moments when he feel like they're alive, of course they are, he was so
vibrantly happy to be alive when he breathed out that he could have sworn the wind coursing
through him felt the same way, but he feels like it would take real effort to coax the flat, slow air
farther from his body into motion. Even up here in the air John still feels fatigued and hemmed in,
and if anything, all this flying around does is remind him of falling and failing, which is the last thing
he wants to think about right now.

Bluh. Great. Even doing something he likes is hard! Anxious and pretty much just desperate to try
anything that won't make him want to thump his own brain for being so shoddy, John somehow
drags up the energy to whip the wind up into some interesting gusts and sends them spiraling at
angles across the valley, making sure he doesn't hit anything or anyone important in the process. He
needs the practice, right? It doesn't matter if before it felt as natural as breathing or that his dad's
training over the years has mostly focused on keeping the wind under control and using it
defensively and for hero work; if stuff keeps going wrong, he should work on controlling the bigger
stuff too, before he ends up spawning a hurricane or something that he can't calm down. Sure, he
clips the trees on occasion, but they can take it, and eventually John feels his head start to clear. It's
kind of like a minor miracle and if he's supposed to be some kind of god, he is so taking credit for
that. He sucks in a breath of air that's somehow not loaded with moisture and the cold of the altitude
he's reached shoots straight to his brain with a sharp burst of clarity, soothing some of the raging
headache that plagues him.

It's not perfect. It never has been. But for a moment John is just John, and it doesn't matter which
memories he's got lurking around in his brain at any given time - he's him. Both versions of himself
are real, even if the memories don't quite sync up. The impression doesn't last forever, but it - settles
him, kind of. By the time he starts working up the confidence to mess around sculpting shapes out of
the clouds (he's still not gonna risk moving them), he feels almost okay. If it's, you know, possible to
be okay when your head is full of flashes of memory you never lived through.

...It's weird, yeah. But it only hurts when he tries to make the flashbacks stop happening. Clearly
spending years of his life actively repressing them has only made the problems in his head worse,
so...and this is some pretty off the wall logic, here, but...maybe he should...let them...happen?

He should probably talk to Rose about this. She's the expert on doing questionable stuff in one's own
mental space. Also, Karkat, because Karkat just needs to be consulted about some things.

And. Possibly. His dad.

John's headache resurges in full force at the thought. Lame, lame, lame.

Eventually he has to come back down to earth, and that's when Karkat launches a pretty effective
intervention! And by pretty effective intervention John means kissing was involved and his brain
shuts down for a good three minutes before he realized Karkat was successfully guiding him through
the halls of the lab without John putting up any resistance whatsoever.

He's totally not thinking about kissing Karkat. Right. No, okay, he totally is.
Agh! Focus! Play it cool!

...  

It's no good. John's brain is kind of stuck replaying it. Vaguely dazed, John turns and stares at the side of Karkat's face, trying to remember exactly which parts fit where on his own face. What even happened with their noses? Why doesn't he remember, it literally happened like two minutes ago! He can't decide if he should be trying to kiss Karkat again or if he should feel pacified or aroused or if his nose went to the right or the left and this is incredibly important -

- no, wait, it's incredibly stupid. That's the word he's looking for. Catching himself, John snaps his gaze front and center just as Karkat casts a suspicious look at him.

Anyway, yeah. Haha, it was probably dumb of John to think he could keep on avoiding his dad like this, anyway. Karkat pretends he's not totally escorting John to make sure he keep his promise, but he totally is because this is Karkat and he does subtle like a go-kart crashing into a small child at ten miles an hour.

"Do you need me to go in there with you?" the troll asks as they near the office where John's dad has taken up residence. There's the faintest hint of a faint, chittering growl lingering in Karkat's voice, and John giggles because he's still incredibly entertained by the memory, vague and spotty though it may be, of Karkat getting all territorial and shouting at Dad from the safety of closet-pile. As loud and abrasive as he can be, Karkat has always had that kind of unnameable respect for and fear of a friend's parent while interacting with Dad, and that meant John got to laugh at him all the time for being so politely terrified. But now that the switch has been flipped, Karkat seems just as ready to go off on John's dad as he is pretty much everyone else in existence.

"I think I've got it. Uh. Er." John stares at the closed door with trepidation, sucking in a breath and holding it in his cheeks before letting it out in a rush. "Remind me why this is a good idea again."

Karkat slaps his own face with the palm of his hand. "Because he's your custodian, and you're being a petulant wriggler about something he probably never held against you in the first place," he suggests acridly, shaking his head.

"Right. That." John doesn't move.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Karkat says, and that's all the warning John gets before Karkat reaches out, turns the door knob and opens the door, backpedaling as he does it so that when Dad looks up, startled, from his paperwork, the only one visible in the door frame is John, who is doing his best impression of a deer in the headlights.

"Son. Come in!" Dad says, setting his phone down on top of the stack of papers, his eyes flicking from John off to the side, in the direction that Karkat is now attempting to stealthily sprint backwards down the hall. There's something a little odd about seeing his dad in an office that's not his own, one where Doctor Lalonde's taste for sleek, modern styles shines through, but those manila filing folders are the same kind Dad's been using pretty much as long as John can remember. "You're still in uniform. Did something happen?"

That's about when John realizes that someone - Doctor Lalonde, probably - already told his dad that he was out flying. Oh gosh. He hadn't really even given the fact that he was going straight from flying to talking to his dad any thought, or that his dad might potentially be kind of pissed if he saw John had been flying without consulting him first; he just let Karkat usher him through the hall while still in Heir's costume because John had other things on his mind. Like kissing.
"N-ooo," he says, his voice cracking horrifically. It's kind of mortifying, and he clears his throat. "Nothing's, uh. Nothing happened."

"I see. That's good." His dad nods, and then pauses, his expression perfectly bland and composed as John continues to shuffle around in the doorway. "Would you like to come in and talk, son?" he says at last, his tone unvaryingly calm despite the fact that this is the second time he's suggested John should enter, and John flushes, swallowing hard as he scuffs a heel on the floor and then walks in, pulling the door shut behind him.

"So much to get caught up on," Dad says, setting his pipe down on top of a file folder. He stacks some of the papers, hooks them together with a paper clip, and sets the whole thing to one side. Then he smiles at John fondly, steepling his fingers together. "You've finished all of your school work, yes? Miss Harley was up to some wild antics in the car, and I know things got rather hectic yesterday."

"Yeah - me and Karkat got everything done," John says quietly, kicking his heels as he pulls a chair away from the wall and drags it across the desk from his dad's. He winces, and it feels a little like stepping barefoot on a field of blunted glass shards, trapped in the uneasy anticipation of accidentally stepping on the one shard that's still sharp, to admit, "I went flying. Uh. Without asking if that was okay. So, I'm sorry. I've been avoiding talking about stuff, I guess."

Basically the understatement of the year, but whatever.

"Really? I hadn't noticed." His dad chuckles wryly, shaking his head when John starts to blurt out another mangled burst of apologies, but then he sobers again, his expression utterly serious. "You've been upset. And with good reason," Samuel says, closing his eyes. "The fact that Diamonds Droog knows your identity - well, this is the worst case scenario. I'm just as distressed by it as you are, and I wish we could have talked sooner about our possible options for the next course of action we take." He shrugs. "But I also understand that you can't always talk to me about everything at first. You haven't...for some time now, I suppose. Perhaps it's good that we've both had time to process things individually, rather than you coming straight to me for debriefing."

"But if you needed time to yourself, then what brings this visit on?" Samuel's eyes are twinkling, and John groans inwardly, because he has the distinct feeling that Samuel already knows exactly what happened to get John's head in the game. His dad is kind of scary good at guessing stuff like that. He suspects it's a parent thing.

"Karkat kicked my butt." His dad's eyebrows skyrocket.

John backtracks hastily, holding up both hands. "Not literally!"

"Ah. Carry on."

John tries to remember where he was, coughing into his hand. "Uh, yeah. In a moirail way. He's pretty good at getting me to stop being dumb and actually deal with my real life problems."

"Then I am grateful to Karkat for his intercession. I must bake him something as thanks." Samuel laughs, just as his phone gives its little work ringtone and he has to painstakingly locate the off switch and turn it off. He shakes his head at the phone, flashing John a small smile as though to say...
"technology, huh?". "And to think, I was worried that young Karkat really did hold a grudge against me over that unfortunate mishap with the mattress," he comments, still chuckling. "I'm glad that's not the case. I do like being on good terms with your friends, after all. Especially now that your social circle has been expanding. I'm afraid I might have intimidated them all in my anxiousness to keep you all occupied these past few days."

John sighs and slumps forward, fiddling with the straps of his goggles. "I feel like this past week has just been a really crappy way to have mushed everyone into one place," he says. "And then watching all that stuff yesterday was just kind of a massive wake up call to the fact that everything is just ten times more dangerous than we thought."

"And you're not having any trouble with that? No -" His dad breaks off and gestures to his own head, a rueful smile on his face.

John makes a face. "No, not that I can tell," he says. "I mean, it's hard, and I still don't want to think about - well, a lot of things! But no one seems to have noticed me blanking out lately, so I don't think I've been making myself forget again. For better or for worse, I've got all these extra memories in my head, and it's not going away."

"That's more reassuring than you know," his dad says, leaning back a little in his chair. "Your nanna always insisted it was vital you understand your origins, and the fact that I couldn't share even what little she told me has weighed on me these past few years. It's good that you've sorted things out a little upstairs. It means we can focus on this trouble with the Midnight Crew without young Harley and I having to censor ourselves on details that are relevant to your powers."

"Haha, and maybe I won't get amnesia nosebleeds anymore!" John plucks at the fabric of his jacket, and grimaces at it. He really should have changed. Now that he's not moving and flying, his costume is starting to feel constricting and weird. "I really am sorry I worried you guys so much," he says, his voice low as the full weight of what he's been doing all these years presses in close. "I'll try not to do it again. I just wish I knew why I started doing it in the first place, or how!"

"We'll figure this all out, John." Then his dad stands up, and John fidgets as he walks around the desk to rest his hands on John's shoulders. It feels heartening and John smiles up at Samuel tentatively. The expression on his dad's face is a little strange for a moment before it clears up. "It's getting harder and harder to keep up with you," he murmurs. "One day, I don't know that I'll be able to keep you safe anymore - or if you'll even let me. You've grown up so fast."

"Don't say stuff like that!" John protests reflexively, because oh man, he's seen enough movies in his life to recognize a potentially really melancholy speech when he hears one! No way does he want his dad giving him the 'you're growing up' speech right now out of the blue, when everything is so crazy and messy and unreal!

Samuel tightens his grip. "No, son. I always knew someday you'd spread your wings and need to learn to fly on your own." His smile is more than a little sad as he adds, "It's something that every parent experiences, I suppose, though I sure the metaphor is not nearly as literal for them as it is in this case." A bubble of laughter bursts out of John's mouth without warning, and his dad chuckles right along with him. "But I like to think that I can protect you, for just a little longer."

And the thing is he didn't know it at the time. Rose hides it from him and Jade, directing their perception elsewhere so they don't notice the bodies lying scattered around the Battlefield. He can't remember what happened in that confused span of time between beating Jack Noir and ending the game, those moments where a second game session crashed into theirs, but he knows that when he watches it all play out on a recording years later, that's the first time he sees that his dad died not long after he himself did, and the grief feels so horrifically real that he can't bear to even glance in
his dad's direction until -

John surges up, the panic thumping in his heart driving him as he knocks his dad's hands off his shoulders and seizes Samuel in a hug. Even though he can feel the air whistling in and out of his dad's lungs, and hear the faint 'ooph!' of surprise when John hugs him hard enough that ribs creak, the unnerving memories keep him just this side of panicked.

A warm hand chafes his back, clapping him briskly between the shoulder blades. "I'm so very, very proud of you, my boy," his dad says, and John sniffs really hard because otherwise he's gonna get snot everywhere. But he somehow manages to get the threatening tears under control, following the cycle of Samuel's breathing in and out, the oldest pattern he knows.

Not dead. Not here. Not if John has anything to say about it.

When his dad finally pulls away, John lets out the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. "Now," Samuel says, summoning a smile that John can't help but return. It's confident and tricky and has none of that sadness from earlier, and John knows they've reached equilibrium again. "One of my contacts has come through at last with some information on Diamonds Droog. Want to help me peruse it?"

And honestly, that's some of the best news he's heard all week!

"You bet!"

-

From: [redacted] <address unknown>

To: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>

Subject: Requested Files

Samuel,

You've placed me in quite the uncomfortable position by asking for these, but I suppose you would not request them if it were not a matter of some urgency. Ordinarily it would be no trouble, but some people very high up in the chain of command have been sniffing around my office ever since I pulled these from the records vault. I have concealed my paper trail as best as I can but word on SERIOUS BUSINESS is that there may be an internal investigation into 'suspect activity,' which I fear to be my own. Someone kicked the hornets' nest in the upper echelons, and no one is certain how this will play out anymore.

In light of this, postpone further communications until I contact you again myself. Do not respond to any private threads on SB; I have reason to believe my account has been compromised and will be under surveillance for the foreseeable future.

Trust none of your other contacts, no matter how above board they may seem. We don't know how far this goes. Anyone’s contact information can be faked. Maintain your current course of action, but if I give the signal from this address, you'll know that the time has come, and I will no longer be able to assist you.

If that happens, end this: shred what you can, shut down everything, and abscond. Your position is already precarious enough as it is. They will come for you next.

Regards,
When word starts to get around that John has some memory of the previous universe, John suddenly realizes exactly how Dave must feel when people bug him about trying to clarify timelines. Namely, super annoyed, because he only remembers a little more than what everyone saw yesterday on those recordings - he has to repeat that he doesn't know why they scratched the game so many times that he almost keels over backward in his seat and throws a temper tantrum.

"Everything starting around when the Horror thingies started messing with our heads is kind of blurry," he tries to explain for the millionth bajillionth time. "And I remember patches of what happened after we all died on the Battlefield, but after that - nothing at all."

It's like the exact same static that corrupted the recordings on the Queen's Hub fizzles in his head whenever he tries poking around for an explanation, and John is sooo far from interested in messing with his memories in any way, shape, or form that he's content to just not know. Seriously. He hates that he remembers as much as he does, and when he tries to tell Jade that he's not too bothered by the missing gaps, she naturally throws up her hands. "But John, we need to know so we can fix whatever happened last time!" she insists, pouting a little. "Are you just saying you don't remember again when really you do?"

"No! God, no!" John says, blinking. Just to prove his point - and for future reference, so people will stop bugging him! - he snags one of the Expo markers that Karkat was using early and sends his chair scooting over to the nearest whiteboard, the one dedicated to the Battlefield. He draws a thick, heavy blue line across the end of the diagram, the marker squeaking all the while, and labels it, in tiny blur letter, 'the last thing I remember! :P'

"I wonder why," Jade says, sighing. She's got WV in her lap, a fact that the carapacian seems to accept with faint resignation, and when she starts patting the Dersite on the head he squeaks incomprehensibly and starts signing things that make Dave smirk. "You can't remember, the game itself couldn't even record it, nothing I try seems to clear up that static - what was so weird about the troll game session that everything's so scrambled up? It almost seems deliberate."

"Sounds whack, man," Dave says distractedly, signing back at WV. "Let us know if you come up with any explanations because I am goddamn out of ideas. Is Karkat still interrogating our new personal mob boss?"

John checks his phone. "Nope. Nothing new. He's probably still trying not to get stabbed."
Jade perks up a little. "So, do we get special gangster mob nicknames? Or are we still all using cool hero names?"

"We're not actually part of a gang, Jade," John says. "Like. That's not actually a thing that is happening."

"But don't you think it would be funny!" Jade smiles at him winningly, and finally lets WV go when he taps on her knee. The carapacian darts toward the door but doesn't quite make it before becoming distracted by one of the green power units by the wall. "I mean, it's not like we'd commit actual crimes or anything! But like. Alter egos!"

John hesitates.

...Oh man. She's right. It could be hilarious.

"That is some roleplaying level shit that I will not abide, Jade. Pretty sure that's a no from me, just on the principle of hell no." Dave has started to doodle something right next to John's note on the whiteboard. It closely resembles a flight of stairs, and a person in blue at the very top, and yeah, John has read all of Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff. He can see exactly what the punchline's going to be.

"I don't think our guardians would approve of us pretending to sign up for some random carapacian's criminal enterprise," he argues weakly. Someone here has to be the voice of reason. "If anything, we should be coming up with a super hero team name!" he adds.

Dave's head shoots up and his gaze swivels to meet John's with sudden realization. "Oh. My god. Do you even realize how ironic it would be?" Dave says, sounding almost breathlessly rapturous. "Holy shit."

"Yeah!" Jade says delightedly, clapping her hands together. "Now we're talking! Here, I'll grab a fresh whiteboard for us to use -"

In the heat of the moment, all three of them forget that Jade's powers are still fritzing in the void shielding.

They remember right about when, in a crackle of green lightning, an entire whiteboard appears - lodged halfway through the far wall, accompanied by a grinding noise that John think is probably an entire sliver of the wall being displaced to make room for the new addition of rectangular wall art. WV topples over in shock, and John and Dave let out almost identical terrified shrieks.

"Uh. Heheheh! Oops," Jade says, laughing nervously and lowering her hands. "...We can still write on it!"

John reaches out and taps on the wall next to where the brand new addition juts out at a ninety degree angle, and then freezes up. "Oh my god," he says, horrified. "My dad was working in that room."

As though on cue, the door to the conference room opens, and John's dad stares at the four of them, his white tie askew and faint beads of sweat standing out on his temples.

EB: kaaarrrrkkaaaaaat~~~
CG: WHAT'S BLOWN UP AND/OR CAUGHT FIRE NOW? I FUCKING KNEW THIS VACATION FROM HELL COULDN'T LAST.
EB: what, no!
EB: get over here, we're trying to come up with a cool super hero team name for all of us!
EB: you know you want to! :B
CG: ...
CG: OH MY GOD.
EB: jade's already suggested -
CG: SHUT UP, NOT A WORD OUT OF ANY OF YOU UNTIL I GET THERE. NO ONE MAKES A SINGLE SOLITARY SUGGESTION UNTIL I AM THERE AS YOUR SUPREME FRIENDLEADER TO MAKE THE FINAL CALL.
CG: WE CANNOT AFFORD TO FUCK UP AN OPPORTUNITY OF THIS MAGNITUDE, JOHN.
CG: THIS IS GENIUS.
EB: heck yeah!
EB: also, you'll get to see what jade did to the wall! oh man, my dad is sooo pissed!
EB: he's giving her lecture 23, i remember this one from the sixth grade! gosh, it's been ages since he hit 23!
CG: WHAT.
CG: WHAT THE FUCK DID SHE DO?
EB: you have to see it to believe it!
EB: eheheheheh!
CG: I'M GOING TO REGRET THIS. I CAN FEEL IT.

- 

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-- gardenGnostic [GG] at 18:20:33 opened memo on board not fun stuff! :( --
GG: john! have you and your dad seen this yet?!
GG: FVRTmemo.html
GG: because, uh, this kind of seems like one of those things you guys were worried about!
EB: oh, jeez. yeah, we just saw it a couple minutes ago. it pinged one of my dad's contacts.
EB: that is a thing that is in fact happening.
GG: oh nooo :(
CG: WELL, PISS IN MY COFFEE AND CALL IT A LATTE, WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT.
CG: FIRST I'M AN ARSONIST, NOW WE'RE PROBABLY ALL FUCKING TERRORISTS.
CG: THAT'S IT. THAT'S LITERALLY WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE. FUCK EVERYTHING.
EB: they haven't actually said we're the ones responsible for any of it, karkat. maybe this representative guy won't even care about hero work at all!
EB: it would be nice to have someone in law enforcement around who's helping us against the crew instead of letting them out on bail all the time...
GG: yeah! think positive!
CG: WHEN HAVE WE EVER HAD THAT KIND OF LUCK, JOHN?
EB: uhhh...
CG: MY SENTIMENTS EXACTLY. EVEN IF THEY WOULDN'T NORMALLY GIVE TWO SHITS ABOUT THE HEIR DOING VIGILANTE WORK, YOU'VE BEEN SEEN ASSOCIATING WITH ME, AND THE UNIVERSE THINKS IT'S FUCKING HILARIOUS WHEN I'M PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE.
TG: well at least thats one to check off my to do list
TG: bro will be so proud
TG: the houston police always wimped out instead of actually declaring us terrorists or villains or
anything but here we are
TG: we have almost climbed that entire mountain
TG: next is the one where karkat and i go on a cross country road trip to bond over our mutual
brood and stay at ironically shitty motels and avoid our responsibilities
GG: road trips are always fun! we could all go visit the smithsonian, i've never been! :)
CG: WHO THE FUCK SAID YOU WERE INVITED?
GG: i invited myself, duh!
TG: so you admit we're going on this road trip karkat
TG: this is a thing that will go down
CG: WAIT.
GG: plus you won't even need a car or anything if i come along! space perks! it'll be fun!
EB: can't the midnight crew track your powers these days?
GG: like that's ever stopped me before!
CG: NO. I ABSOLUTELY FORBID ALL OF THIS. THIS IS A TERRIBLE IDEA.
EB: yeah and wait a minute, remember that part where there's an entire mob of criminals trying to
take over seattle and possibly kidnap all of us and now we might not even be able to fight back
without getting arrested because of a terror alert?
EB: because that's kind of still a thing, guys!
CG: THAT BECAME OLD NEWS LIKE TWENTY FUCKING SECONDS AGO, JOHN.
LOOK AT HOW FAR WE'VE COME. THE FUTURE IS NOW. LOOK AT ME, INDULGING
IN THIS QUAIN'T HUMAN SARCASM.
GG: ehhh, you worry too much john! i'm already considered a terrorist according to france, and i'm
doing just fine, aren't i?!
EB: whoa, really?!
CG: I WISH I COULD SAY I WAS FUCKING SURPRISED, BUT I'M NOT. AT ALL. IN
FACT I DON'T KNOW WHY I DIDN'T SEE THIS COMING.
GG: it turns out kicking villains so hard that their dumb heads cause excessive damage to national
landmarks puts you on the naughty list :( 
EB: yeah, i can kind of see why that would bug people...
TG: i took out an entire sushi restaurant once
GG: wow! fancy!
EB: was it at least in the name of, you know, fighting crime?
TG: kind of
CG: MY SNIFFER IS DETECTING THE DISTINCT AROMA OF HORSESHT.
TG: just call it a goddamn nose
CG: AM I WRONG?
TG: well
TG: it was fucking rad
GG: ooooh! so cool! :D
EB: but...if it wasn't to fight crime then why -
TG: hush john
TG: the aroma karkat is detecting
TG: is the sweet sweet scent of irony
TG: it ages like fine wine
CG: HARLEY IS A WALKING WEAPON OF SPACE-BASED VANDALIZING
ACCIDENTAL MASS FUCKING DESTRUCTION AND YOU AND YOUR
DISTURBINGLY COOL PUPPET-OBSESSED CUSTODIAN PROBABLY GOT INTO AN
INCREDIBLY STUPID FAKE SWORD STRIFE IN THE MIDDLE OF DINNER LIKE THE
PAIR OF UNMASKED LUNATICS YOU ARE.
CG: THIS ISN'T THE RESULT OF YOUR COMPLETE MISCONCEPTION OF WHAT THE
FUCK IRONY IS. THIS IS THE UNIVERSE CHOKING ON ITS OWN SPIT BECAUSE IT'S
LAUGHING SO HARD AT WHAT A JOKE WE ALL ARE.
CG: FUCKING FUCK, AND YOU WONDER WHY THE HOUSTON PD HATES YOUR PINK HUMAN GUTS?
GG: you really are a 'glass is half empty' kind of guy, aren't you, mister!
CG: TECHNICALLY, THE GLASS IS HALF EMPTY AND HALF FULL OF FESTERING PUS OF INDETERMINATE BUT NO DOUBT DISGUSTING AND UNSPEAKABLE ORIGIN.
TG: welp
TG: and there you have it
TG: from your mouth to the ears of the goddess of irony herself bro we're going to have bad juju for weeks
EB: we've lost control of this conversation again...
GG: we never really had it to begin with. :P
EB: it's all hogwash.
TG: its what we do
GG: it's what's for breakfast!
CG: EVEN THE ROSE HUMAN'S DRUNKEN RAMBLING WAS PREFERABLE TO THIS. AT LEAST SHE MAKES A GOOD FAITH EFFORT TO EXPLAIN WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON.
GG: karkat! i explain stuff all the time!
TG: dude
TG: im pretty sure youre not allowed to even hint at feeling anything but unreasonable fury for anyone but john what the fuck are you doing
CG: I HATE TO SHIT ALL OVER YOUR PARADE, DAVE, BUT I APPRECIATE ROSE. EVEN WHILE INEBRIATED, SHE STILL SOMEHOW MANAGES TO OUTSTRIP YOU AND HARLEY IN THE FRIENDSHIP BRIGADE OVER HERE BY A MILE. THERE. I SAID IT.
TG: who is this and what have you done with karkat vantas
CG: HA. FUCKING. HA.
EB: i think i might go visit her in a little bit, actually! we can go together karkat!
EB: but she might still be asleep? i don't know how long alcohol hangovers are supposed to last...
GG: is there another kind of hangover?
EB: i don't...actually know...
TG: this is why oriole thinks we're all literally thirteen years old you know
TG: these gems right here
-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] has joined the memo! --
GA: I Saw Rose's Name. I Have Been Informed That I Should State The Following:
GA: Rose Is Incredibly Hungover May I Take A Message.
GG: kanayayaya! :) 
GA: Yes That Is A Variation Of My Name.
EB: karkat and i might come to see rose before the meeting.
GG: same here! we can make it a party!
EB: is she awake at least?
GA: Somewhat. However She Is Also Dehydrated And Must Recover Enough To Suffer The Lecture Of My Displeasure Before I Will Allow Visitors. As It Is She Is Too Pitiful At The Moment For Me To Reprimand Her Properly On The Self-Destructiveness Of Her Recent Relapse.
TG: good you can lecture karkat instead
TG: he is so in friends with your girlfriend its embarrassing
CG: SHUT UP.
TG: he wants to talk to her at a non shouty volume or something else outrageously friendly like that
GG: le gasp~!
GA: I Am Somewhat Confused I Do Not Understand What This Has To Do With Anything.
CG: IT DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH FUCKING ANYTHING, KANAYA.
DON'T TRY TO COMPREHEND IT, IT'LL ONLY MAKE YOUR HEAD HURT. TALK TO ME IN A PRIVATE WINDOW, THESE MEMOS AREN'T EXACTLY MY BEST MOMENTS.
TG: see he shouts at us but im pretty sure he and john have secret convos where the quirk comes off
TG: and now he wants to extend quiet time privileges to rose you should find this incredibly suspicious
EB: i told you guys, karkat isn't that loud all the time! he's just been kind of going through a lot lately!
CG: I AM LEAVING.
CG: I AM IGNORING ALL OF YOU.
CG: BEHOLD.
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] has left the memo! --
EB: ack! wait!
TG: he actually went through with it
TG: incredible
GA: I Still Don't Understand What I Just Witnessed.
GG: i kind of just go with it! it's more fun that way!

It really has been a weird day! The weather is gloomy, Rose has been soooo drunk, and now Jade only has a matter of hours before they're all supposed to meet again to decide what to do next.

So she'll have to make this quick!

Jade skims a hand over the side of the car as she heads for the trunk, adjusting her goggles as she goes. There's a sore spot on the inside of her cheek where her teeth slipped during dinner, and she worries it with her tongue. Usually it would be a snap to open up the trunk with her powers, but even after spending a day and a half trying to adjust to the twisty way her powers warp in Doctor Lalonde's void shielding, she doesn't quite trust that she won't wind up transplanting a tree into the middle of the Egbert's poor car.

So instead, she'll just have to improvise! And by that, she means she's totally just gonna...reach out and…

Jade glances around wildly, biting her lip, and then digs her fingers into the crack where the metal of the trunk lid meets the rest of the car. A sharp jerk, using all of her strength, and the lock snaps neatly, the trunk flying up to reveal the contents. The rest of the luggage ended up inside already, and Jade smiles indulgently down at the last remaining occupant. "Come on, Bec, you lazy butt! Time to go!"

Curléd up along the inside wall of the car, Bec flickers yellow-green, but lies still. There's a knife sticking into the floor of the trunk next to its snout for some reason - Jade hadn't even known anyone brought along knifekind for the weekend! - and the only real reaction Bec gives is to let its tongue loll out and pant at her.

"Come on, boy, you have to be my escort! It's just a little void - you can't just nap the weekend away!" As she exhorts her science wolf to leave its hideout, Jade starts hesitantly digging around through her sylladex. Her arm disappears up to the elbow in midair as she shifts through all of the clutter in the pocket dimension, and she wishes she could just call things up like that old Jade could. Well, normally she can, and without all the weird sylladex games that apparently everyone used to mess around with, but right now she's just as likely to call up the gun she wants as that old treatise on classic poetry that Grandpa was always bugging her to read. To 'expand her repertoire,' he always said, except then he'd died and left the island in a robot body, and Jade just kind of kept putting it off.
for...uh...a while...

Finally, her ring finger hooks on something that feels distinctly like a trigger guard and she yanks the specibus out with a distracted grin. It turns out to be a hefty Marlin hunting rifle with all the trimmings that Jade has added onto it over the years to improve the accuracy, so she can definitely work with this! She slings it over her back, sighs at Bec one last time, and reaches into the trunk of the car to haul the wolf out, arms wrapped around its middle with a bunch of fluffy white ruff prickling against her face until she sets it down on the ground with a meaningful nudge.

Bec stares up at her, eyes nonexistent and yet still somehow able to level a reprimanding gaze at her, regardless. Jade folds her arms and gives as good as she gets until finally the wolf perks its ears and turns its muzzle - and its attention - toward the west, nostrils flaring and sparks crackling along its tail as it gives a tentative wag. "About time you noticed," she comments, shaking her head as she slams the trunk shut with a metallic crunch. Uh. She might have put a liiiittle too much effort into that. Jade winces, smooths at the faint crimps in the edge of the trunk with her fingers, and then whistles for Bec to lead the way.

And so they set off toward the mountainside. The rifle sits heavy at the base of her spine, there's not even a whiff of a breeze to lift the sticky curls clinging to the side of Jade's face, and she just can't shake the feeling that something downright weird is in the air.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined the memo! --
TA: do you people literally ever shut up?
TA: i mean FUCK it 2u2t non2top twenty-four 2even textiing each other when you're all 2uppo2ed two be liiviing IIN THE 2AME BUUILDIING.
EB: uh...hi?
GG: :O
TG: wait
TG: the fuck is you
TA: ii can't even beliieve thii2 ii2 happeningi. ii can't beliieve thii2 ii2 what ii've been reduced two.
TA: but ye2. here ii am gracing you all with my unbelievably superior electronic presence.
GA: Well I'd Assumed You Had Been Reading The Memos Since You Took Charge Of Our Security, But I Am Unfamiliar Enough With How Pesterchum Works That I Couldn't Say For Certain.
EB: wait, hang on, some strange guy has been reading all of these?!
GA: Yes, This Is Sollux. He Has Been A Good Friend And In Charge Of My Internet Security For Some Time Now.
TG: oh right the computer guy
TA: AA ju2t told me 2omethiing that ratcheted up my paranoia two hiithertwo unprecedented height2, which ii2 ju2t fucking typical.
TA: 2o here ii am tryiing two a22uage iit by 2ubtly 2iide eyeiing all of you from acro22 the continent.
TA: a22o ii am here two tell you you need two 2top.
EB: seriously, how long have you been reading this stuff?!
TA: long enough two giive negative twenty fuck2 about you people and your pointle22 banter.
TA: thii2 ii2 me layiing two fiinger2 acro22 all of your re2pectufl flappiing 2houthorde2 and telling you with all the apathy iin my heart2 two 2hut the fuck up.
EB: what?!
TG: aahahahaha oh my god what is going on
GG: huh? why?! did we do something wrong? :(
GA: Did Something Infect My Technological Communication Device Again? I Promise I Have Not Been Visiting Anything But The Sites You Have Vetted And Approved In The Intervening Months.

GA: Also Why Was Aradia Making You Nervous She Is Your Moirail Is She Not.

TA: we're not di2cu22iing AA here. iin fact we're not di2cu22iing anythiing here.

TA: thi2 ii2 an a2tonii2iingly un2ecured medium at the be2t of time2, and the more you abu2e my encryption 2oftware the more chance2 the 2hiitty white text fucker who 2hall not be named ha2 of catching on two my runaround.

TA: can you all at lea2t try two make thii2 an app of la2t re2ort iin2ead of, ii don't know, formiing forty different fuckiing memo board2 and 2pammiing them wiith liiterally thou2and2 of me22age2 liike what the fuck?!?!

GA: Oh. My Apologies.

EB: did you seriously read all of those?!

EB: kanaya said you just set up firewalls and stuff! i didn't think you had access to everything!

GG: awkward...

TG: oh

TG: tell me this doesnt mean the end of the rap board

GG: wv and i've only just begun our training in the ways of slam poetry, we can't shut that down now!

TA: not a peep out of you, 2triider, you're the primary offender.

TA: ii wiill crash your account and permaban you from pe2terchum for the re2t of your god2for2aken liife, ii 2wear two fuckiing lovelace.

TG: dude calm yourself

TG: have you been taking lessons on empty glasses from karkles or something

GG: you know ada lovelace! :D

TA: no. ab2olutely not. ii'm not dii2cu22iing any of thii2 wiith any of you. ii mean iit, ii am currently functioniing a2 your collective admin and ii am not afraid two abu2e thii2 permaban 2cript.

GA: I Believe What He Means Is That We May Wish To Cease Pестering Each Other Before An Issue Does Arise.

TA: 2ee look at that. kanaya ii2 beiing the voiice of rea2on about iinternet 2ecuriity. iit really ii2 the end of the world now.

EB: you know our names.

TA: well obviou2ly egbert. now ii2 not a good tiime two mentiion ii am al2o famiiliiar wiith the fact that you all make a bizarre habitii of running around iin tiight2 playing hero, ii2 iit.

EB: fuckfuckufkucufkucufkucufkucufkucufkadaigbaogvfn

-- ectoBiologist [EB] has left the memo! --

GG: ack! oh no, john!

TG: oh jesus i think you gave him a panic attack

TG: john is a sensitive soul how dare you

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] has joined the memo! --

CG: I LEAVE THIS CONVERSATION

CG: FOR TWO FUCKING MINUTES.

GG: he's not really freaking out too bad, is he? :( 

CG: WE'RE IN THE SAME ROOM, I'VE GOT HIM.

GG: whew!

CG: WAIT, HANG ON. SOLLUX?

TA: that'2 'benevolent but va2tly 2uperior hacker overlورد' two you, vanta2.

CG: DON'T I KNOW YOU?

TA: never met you before iin my mii2erable liife.

TA: GA, i'i'm out of here. ii mean iit, 2top clogging up the iinternet wiith all of your guy2' 2pam.

CG: SERIOUSLY, I THINK I KNOW YOU. WHERE HAVE I SEEN THAT FUCKING STUPID SHITEATING QUIRK BEFORE?
GA: We Will All Keep Your Warning In Mind, Sollux. I Will Ensure It.
TA: fucking thank you.
CG: HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ON HERO SPEC FORUMS?
TA: je2u2, no ii have not. ii 2hould be a2frai2d of what ii would fiind on your harddrii2ve, 2houldn't ii.
TA: oh no look at the tiime, ii've left the appleberry bla2t 2hitehead2 alone long enough that they've 2et 2omethiing on fiire.
GA: Oh Dear. Are They Being Troublesome? I Thought You Intended To Send Them Further North Posthaste?
TA: ii
TA: uh
TA: 2hii ii forgot to
TA: fuck
TA: water my moo2e.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has left the memo! --
TG: smooth
GA: It Is Incredibly Obvious When You Are Avoiding My Pointed Queries Sollux.
GG: that was pretty suspect! :O
GA: We Are In Accord, Jade. I Shall Have To Investigate.
GG: good luck!
-- grimAuxiliatrix [GA] has left the memo! --
TG: i think we lost karkat too
TG: were dropping like flies
GG: oh nooo! :/
GG: uh...
TG: what
TG: oh god jade no
TG: dont say it
GG: i kind of have to leave too!
TG: dammit jade i told you not to say it
GG: i'm sorry! i promised myself i'd take bec for a walk today! he's been cooped up in some kind of hibernation mode for days now!
GG: and if kanaya's friend says we need to cut back on the messaging, we should probably listen!
TG: im wounded jade
TG: wounded
GG: oh, you'll be fine, dummy! :P we can have rap practice in person when i get back!
-- gardenGnostic [GG] has left the memo! --
TG: well shit
TG: karkat?
TG: damn
TG: i guess this what its come to
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has joined the memo! --
TG: me talking to myself
TG: seriously? i do not need this shit right now.
-- theandricGriffade [TG] has left the memo! --
TG: i am so lost what the hell just happened
TG: whatever if anyone cares heres an update on the bro situation
TG: he is not impressed that we may all be terrorists
TG: i repeat
TG: not
TG: impressed
TG: oh god
TG: is anyone there
TG: help

There are no human-worn paths through the undergrowth that Jade's keen eye can pick out, only the faintest of tracks where deer might occasionally pass through. The wooded area is close enough to the laboratory and sparse enough that she wouldn't be too shocked if the proximity of so much human activity might have been enough to startle any wild life out of the valley entirely. A stray bramble snags on the cargo of Jade's skirt, and she yanks the hem free without slowing or glancing down, her feet bobbing and skimming the ground to the beat of the faint song she hums to herself as she goes. Ahead of her, Bec trots along with its nose in the air, its fur stark white and absolutely useless as camouflage against the fresh spring growth. But of course, when you're a potentially all-powerful space warping canine, Jade supposes camouflage isn't exactly that big of a deal. It certainly never stopped Bec from sneaking up on her during training sessions in the deep jungle back home.

Ah, home. She still kind of regrets blowing it up. But Grandpa's instructions were always very clear - the day she vacated the island was the day she needed to trigger the self-destruct, lest evil parties try to steal Grandpa's most top-secret research and treasures, all the accumulated trophies of a lifetime spent adventuring and funding scientific advancement. It would have been awful if stuff like the grand forkkind of Temujinn or the stuffed carcass of the last dinosaur cryptid lusus of the Congo fell into the wrong hands.

(Some people might have argued that it would be better to preserve such rare artefacts. But while the hording tendencies of the Harley ecto-bloodline might border on the legendary, their fondness for both finely crafted firearms and unnecessary explosions cannot be underestimated.)

Anyway, it'll be good to finally get some of that back. The second note Jade received was pretty darn sparse on details, so she doesn't know exactly where this reunion will go down. She's on the alert, of course, spot-checking the upper branches overhead and ducking behind trees to squint around at her surroundings for any sign of movement, always with her rifle close to hand, but there's only so much she can sense when everything's so twisty and muddled around her.

Bec seems to have some idea, though! She just has no way of measuring how much all this void might interfering with it because Bec is pretty much inscrutable and Grandpa always warned her against trying to perform science on the wolf, but Bec lopes along ahead of her with its nose in the air and she thinks that even if both of their space senses are on the fritz, you still can't beat a wolf for tracking by scent.

Yet somehow, they almost manage to walk right past him. Probably because he doesn't smell exactly like Bec remembers him. Jade only realizes her mistake when Bec whirls, tongue lolling and tail wagging a hundred miles an hour - not an exaggeration at all - and leaps over a fall, overgrown tree trunk at a shadowy figure standing concealed in the shade of an enormous fir.

Jade wastes no time being surprised - bad enough she already made such a poor showing on detection! "Raaah!" she yells, leveling the rifle at the tall figure, her goggles already zooming in with crosshairs to help steady her aim.

The flared muzzle of a blunderbuss stares her dead in the face. Bec is a white blur Jade can barely make out as it twines around the figure's legs, tail bobbing as it noses every crack in the dark green metal where dark skin still shows through.

And darn it! Even after all this time, he's still quicker on the draw! Ohhh, Jade's gonna get such a talking to about wandering around unprepared for a strife! But first -
"Grandpa!" Jade cries joyfully, swinging the rifle back around and flinging her arms around shoulders forged of single-crystal titanium superalloy, heedless of the blunderbuss still leveled where she used to be standing. "It's been so long! How is the chassis holding up?"

The motions are a little stilted, but there's only a second's worth of lag before James Harley, legally dead in twenty-seven countries and powered by a thrumming engine instead of internal organs, sweeps his ectobiological daughter into a crushing robot hug.

It's pretty awesome.

- 

"- and you really should be carrying something of a far higher caliber when you're out on your own, poppet. Where is that nice semi-automatic you modified for Christmas five years ago?"

Jade swallows a sigh, and nods vigorously as she carefully draws another teeny tiny screwdriver from within her sylladex. She thinks she has a handle on accessing it now, but the significant pile of pencils, hair clips, and small change sitting between her feet is evidence enough that she's still having some trouble with the pocket dimension. But she's managed to assemble most of the tools needed to crack open Grandpa's chassis, her tongue peeking out the corner of her mouth as she delicately removes the last screw and sets it on her lap for safe-keeping. She has an assortment of tools clamped between her teeth as well, and Grandpa has been taking full advantage of her quiet to give her an intense, strict lecture in person for the first time in forever.

"I fink I'fh cracked opfen fe main engine," Jade mumbles around the tools, carefully removing the third back panel between Grandpa's shoulders and nudging servomotors and dark green and blue wires to the side to get a look at the hollow where the engine pressed up close to the shielded nerves of his spinal column. "Wh'do you want me to adjuft?"

As she surveys the insides of Grandpa's new body, Jade has to fight down the urge to poke and prod and investigate in a way that would nooot be good with all these vital moving parts shifting around. Like, at all. This chassis is kind of wayyy beyond Jade's capabilities, and she wouldn't want to risk breaking Grandpa and shutting down the life support for his brain. When she'd first help him transplant everything from his dying human body into the new one, Jade remembers being awed by the intricate craftsmanship in every joint and rivet. The outside doesn't look like anything special - chunky and heavily armored, built for strength and resilience rather than sleekness or speed - but the internal workings are a dream. It took a robotics genius to design this, maybe even more than one, and Jade knows of only two in the world who might have the talent - but this work has neither of their signature styles.

Besides, the Puppeteer at least is definitely not on the shortlist of people who know that Grandpa is still alive. Jade only knows for certain that she, Grandpa himself, Bec, and one other person Grandpa will never name know the truth. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Jade taxidermied her poppa when his physical body died, and what happened to his brain afterward isn't something that needs to be brought up in polite conversation!

But someone has to have made this thing - someone who would have known it was intended to prolong Grandpa's life if they were to piece together a chassis advanced enough to integrate with the remains of his nervous system - and Jade would give anything to meet them. You know, for science. Because this kind of talent needs to be shared with the world! But in these past few years Jade hasn't seen any work in the field of prosthetics and cybernetics that comes even close to matching the style here, which is a real shame. She'd feel a lot more confident about fiddling with Grandpa's wiring if she had the creator themselves here to supervise.
Grandpa is very, very still, inhumanly so, his green cloak folded off to one side so that all of the heavy lines of the titanium frame are visible, and there's a moment where Jade wants to reach out and feel for a pulse before she remembers that would be kind of dumb. All she'd feel if she tried that would be the hum of the engine. "Just a quick tune up. It's been a few years now, and there are bolts jittering around where I can't reach them, I'm afraid. The limbs, I can manage, but there's always a spot of difficulty trying to fix up one's back all by oneself!"

"Okay! You'll get it!" Jade assures him, and she sets to work altering the sequence of cables and hitting the keys that allow the left side of the chassis to take over all vital functions. It's a failsafe for if Grandpa is heavily damaged, and once everything has been rerouted Jade thumbs the emergency switch so that the servomotors and gears of the right half spin to a halt. Immediately she dips her fingers in and starts drawing forth the sections of titanium with care, snapping up different sized screwdrivers until she finds the ones that fit. Her gloves insulate her from most of the residual heat from the engine as she turns each segment of metal over in her palms to tighten screws, unkink wires, tape up places where the insulation has worn thin, and click off-center gears back into their sockets.

It's so strange. Now that the initial excitement of seeing Grandpa after so long has faded a little, Jade is stuck between the comfort of familiarity, of having her custodian back, and the slight weirdness of the fact that he's a cyborg. Grandpa was always in motion, a man of action and adventure even in his latter years, and she never really had the chance to reconcile herself with stillness his clunky new body is capable of. Even the churning of machinery along his left side seems off compared to how human beings usually move, and she feels like she's taken an extra wide step anticipating a stair that didn't exist.

But Bec is quiescent at Grandpa's rocket feet, panting with contentment as metal fingers scratch behind its ears, and when it comes right down to it, Jade has seen weirder!

Also, if he moved, she might, you know. Accidentally break him. Seriously, that is a thing that could happen! Still is good! She sets a thin section of casing down on her lap, claps her hands against her cheeks to shake herself out of her stupor, and gets back to work, humming. "So, you're not here to stay," she says, not making it a question. It makes her sad, but Grandpa as much as said in his note the other day that he doesn't trust someone - possibly multiple someones! - in their group. Which makes Jade kind of sad, because she likes everyone in their group! Even Karkat! He might be abrasive, but he's so stupid in love with John it's kind of hard to see him as any kind of threat.

There's a note of regret in Grandpa's modulated voice, and a heavy hand leaves Bec's ears to pat her knee. "No, my dear. I'm afraid that's just not...possible, at the moment. Better I stay dead, for now. There's something afoot in Siberia that needs investigating."

Oh! That's - not the reason she was expecting! "Something to do with the Midnight Crew?" Jade asks eagerly, perking up. "That's why you've been gone so much, right? Trying to fight them!"

Grandpa chuckles. It's a shame that his face is metal now, the lines stark and unmoving, so he can't smile back at her like he used to. It makes her kind of sad again. "Something to do with the person I commissioned this body from, actually."

Jade lets out an unintentional shriek of glee and drops a pair of wire cutters into the leaves, thoughts of the Crew flying right out of her head. "Ohhh! Can I meet him? Can I come with you? I mean - pleeeease, Grandpa? Pretty please?"

The shake of Grandpa's head sets a servomotor between his shoulder and his neck whirring in a way that it is noooot supposed to whirl, and Jade has to hastily jam a spare strut into the gap before it can slice through a wayward wire. "He most likely would not appreciate that. He tends to be very good at maintaining a low profile, as public recognition is not quite to his taste, but recently he left the
country entirely in a way obvious enough that it has me worried. He is...a private being, and if he is on the move...some jiggerypokery is afoot, my girl, and I would be remiss if I didn't ensure his safety after all he's done for us."

"Ohhh. Okay." Jade lets her sigh of disappointment escape, this time. "John is very big on privacy, too. So I guess I understand." It's been a hard-won lesson, but Jade, who has never seen much point in concealing things like her identity from the world, can see why people like John, Karkat, and Rose, who are so much a part of the society where they've lived for so long, might be bothered by the thought of being 'outed' as heroes. They want to have that refuge of a secure, utterly normal life to fall back on, whereas Jade has never really seen the point of separating herself into categories like that. It's a matter of perspective and differing values! They value privacy, and she values nonstop 24/7 opportunities to kick butt, whether she's using the Sharpshooter name or not!

"Mmm. And how does John seem, my girl?" There's a moment of hesitation before Grandpa finishes the question, a pause that Jade is pretty sure she didn't cause, since she hasn't touched anything near the chassis's neck. "I know you were quite disappointed when he failed to respond to any of your messages. The boy has been on my mind, of late."

Jade tilts her head to the side, closing her eyes and humming again as she sorts through her thoughts. It's harder to think of John in logical terms because she cares about him so much, but she has to report objectively, here! "He and Karkat are both pretty messed up," she says frankly, opening her eyes and molding the casing back into place over the rotors so that the internal seams line up again. "Uh, Karkat is his moirail."

"Indeed? That is promising. Go on."

Oookay. "He remembers a lot of the game, actually," she says, skipping right to the most important part. "Which might be the reason why his head's been scrambled eggs for the past couple of years! I'm not a psychologist like Rose, but he's been trying to forget the past universe on purpose for a long time, and watching the Queen's Hub yesterday basically dropped him. If he gets some other kind of shock...I'm really worried about him!"

"So the boy's noggin is out of sync," Grandpa sighs. It sounds like static. "I suspected as much. It's more surprising that he didn't break earlier."

Jade yanks a little too hard on a wire and Grandpa's right hand jerks out to the side; he is patient as she hastily winds it back in. "But he's getting better now," Jade babbles, running fingers through her hair to brush it back out of her face and receiving a spark of green static electricity for her trouble. Oops! She has to ground herself better if she's gonna keep working on Grandpa. "I mean, now that we know what the problem was all this time, he can talk about it with Karkat better. Half the problem was them being totally dumb about their hero secrets, you know -"

She breaks off. "...You don't think that'll help," she says slowly, testing out the word on her tongue even as she says them, uncertain. Grandpa's train of thought was a lot easier to follow when he was flesh and blood, honestly. "Why? What's wrong?"

Grandpa doesn't answer for a long moment, and Jade wonders if maybe she accidentally removed something and shut him down. Which would be awful! But then he resumes scratching at Bec's ruff with his working hand, circling the block of his thumb at the top of the wolf's spine. "I think he is, in many ways, Joanna's ectobiological son," he says at last. "She should have been the one to raise him; all of you would have been better served if she were still with us. Samuel may be her son, but he is no substitute for a custodian with as much knowledge as Jo had of that old life. Of mysteries that the game imparted to her when her remains were mingled in the prototyping procedure."
"John is strong." This is important. Jade sets her jaw, screwing the first of the panels back into place over the right side of Grandpa's back. "And he's got all of us who love him. He's gonna be just fine! I believe in him!"

"If anyone can pull through this, it would be that boy. And yet I worry all the same." Grandpa shakes his head. "Perhaps it is all tosh on my part. But I won't be here while you all help the lad, and the dickens only knows how much more damage could occur in the meanwhile if -" He breaks off, even as Jade hits the start switch and the right side of his body jolts back into awareness. She closes it up with the last panel, but doesn't move to stop the left side just yet, waiting for him to finish. Grandpa has a kind of - charisma, she thinks is the right word. His lectures can get kind of long, but Jade has always been drawn into the intentness of his speech, the sense that what they're doing right here, right now, is of absolute importance.

The world is at stake, after all. Lots of worlds, actually!

So it seems to flow naturally when Grandpa swivels to face her, Bec silent at his feet as the robotic chassis shift on the fallen log. "I hate to ask this of you, my poppet," he says, and Jade knows that what comes next is going to be important. Ohhh, it's been so long since Grandpa gave her a mission that wasn't recorded in an old file folder!"You have been doing such marvelous work on your own these years we've been apart, and I am unspeakably proud of the person you have become. But I must ask nonetheless."

Jade catches her grandfather's hand in her own, squeezing the heavy metal digits tightly as she nods. "Anything, Grandpa!"

"Keep an eye on Samuel and Rue," he says, his flickering eyes communicating nothing. "I have known something was amiss among the guardians for some time now - since...well, it doesn't matter. But I worry that with all of you in such close proximity, more discrepancies may arise." He is quiet again, as though weighing his words carefully. "I will not say that you may trust young Ambrose. He has always been stubborn, and certainly the way he's raised Dave has been more than a little unorthodox. But it would be difficult for any hostile parties to turn him, and in the event that we have been compromised, his strength would be key in countering any of the other custodians."

Jade nods solemnly, filing this all away in her mind and labelling 'VERY IMPORTANT.' "But he could still be a bad guy?"

"We can only pray he's not. He was strong enough to fend off Diamonds Droog more than a decade ago, and he has only honed his abilities and added a new specibus mastery to his repertoire since then. He would be a fearsome opponent." Grandpa's wrinkles are all gone; it's all smooth metal, and Jade can't read him as well as she'd like still. "Rue's mastery of manipulating void with her machines could pose a significant threat to your own powers, and her fistkind will still be more than up to snuff. Never forget that. Jo trusted her, but Jo is not here now, and I cannot account for all of her movements since she left Rose in New York. She spent some time in Africa leading the Crew astray but after that, there is distressingly little record of her whereabouts. I'd like to think she ensconced herself at another of these shielded laboratories for the duration, but I never chose to have her assist me in concealing my own labs with her void wards, so I don't know how much their influence may be to blame."

Jeez! Is everyone's custodian this shady?! They couldn't have just tried living non-secretive, upright lives, for her convenience? Jade huffs and nods hard, wondering when everything got so suspicious. Give her a straight forward boss fight, any day!

Grandpa finishes his briefing with, "Samuel may have been Joanna's son, but they didn't speak for many years while he was abroad. He returned to care for John with excellent timing, yet - even more
than Ambrose, I fear the way he trained John might have contributed to some of the issues the boy has now."

"Navy SEAL?" Jade guesses. It's her favorite theory.

If Grandpa could still make facial expressions, she thinks he'd be making one of gentle reprimand. "At first. Later, however - mercenary work."

"Oh." Her mouth keeps going without her permission, and she totally blames Karkat and Dave for the resounding "Shit," that pops out.

Grandpa tuts. "It is indeed quite the pile of hogswallop we have here, but there's no need for that."

"Yes, Grandpa! Sorry!" Jade says, ducking her head. The next few minutes are spent listening to Grandpa share some of his adventures, and Jade mentioning her time in Southeast Asia as she quickly tightens up all the screws in the left side of his back. When the work is done, she closes up the chassis again and pats it firmly so that the rumble of the quiet engine buzzes her palm. "We're all done here! But I should probably head back now. We have a meeting, and if you don't want anyone to know I'm out here meeting you -" The cybernetic head nods, and Jade continues, "- then I have to go."

"An excellent job, dear." Grandpa rises to his feet, rolling both bulky shoulders and nodding at the surprising smoothness of the motion. Seriously, this designer was a genius! "I won't keep you. You don't need to hang around with your creaky old poppa when you have all manner of adventures of your own!"

Jade flings her arms around him again. "I missed you, Grandpa," she mumbles. "We need to meet much sooner next time! A joint adventure or something!"

"Perhaps, perhaps," he says. "I've missed you too. So very much. Can you spare Becquerel for a moment?"

"Yeah, of course! It's been pretty quiet in the car today, no one will miss it for a few hours." Jade starts captchalogue all the miscellaneous junk and tools in the sylladex again, snatching up a few leaves from the ground by accident, but a glance at her watch confirms that she's kind of pushing it, here, if she wants to get back in time to not be missed. "Love you, Grandpa!" she says, darting in to press a kiss to a metal cheek before darting away. She casts one glance back, memorizing the dark green and brown of Grandpa's chassis where it stands stiffly, Bec a white heap at his ankles.

The wolf does not move to follow at her heels. She's always suspected it liked Grandpa better!

"Oh, Halley," she hears Grandpa murmur as she starts downhill, "I fear we've been stretched too thin."

It's as she's sneaking back in that Jade runs into WV. Or, rather, that WV catapults headfirst out of the overhead air vent, and Jade has to lunge forward with a yelp to catch the carapacian before he hits the ground. "Hey!" she exclaims, looking up at the vent, and her suspicions are confirmed when a series of loud clanks echoes from the ducts, as though a heavy insectoid body is scuttling away into the darkness.

Oh boy. Karkat has been going on and on about how he persuaded Spades with a sacrifice of blood, swears, and tears to stop crawling around the facility with a knife in each hand, but this? This is incredibly suspicious behavior. This calls for investigation. But first - "You're okay, WV?" she asks,
concerned, turning the tiny alien upside down as she scours him with her eyes, looking for blood. "What were you doing in there with him?"

The only reply she gets is a bunch of meaningless gestures mixed in with a couple army hand signs for 'advance forward' and 'retreat,' which is total nonsense. From what she can see, WV has somehow come through a close encounter with Slick without taking major injury, because the next second the carapacian loses patience with her worried inspection and plants a sharp heel on her forearm in an attempt to abscond. She sets him down rightside up and he shakes both fists at the air vent.

Jade glances between WV and the vent.

...She still has ten minutes before the meeting. Plenty of time! "Want a boost?" she asks, and she grins widely at the emphatic nod she receives in reply. Lacing her fingers together, Jade waits until WV steps onto her palms and then tosses him up lightly in the crawlspace. Then she jumps up and crawls into the air ducts herself.

The ventilation system is impressively spacious! But also definitely more carapacian- than human-sized, and Jade has to crunch her neck in a weird way to look up and see that her intrepid sidekick is already scrambling off with reckless abandon in the direction of the banging noises.

They trail after the noises for about a minute when, abruptly, Slick goes silent. Jade has to physically restrain WV for a second so she can hear properly, and shakes her head when the carapacian wheezes at her. "Everything's too twisty," she whispers.

Why is she whispering? She's pretty sure Spades is well aware they're following him; she and WV aren't exactly quiet themselves, here! Ignoring WV's grumbles, Jade nudges him aside and peers around the corner of the nearest junction in the ducts.

To her surprise, Slick is right there. He has a claw tapping against his cracked lips, a scowl on his face, and a knife twirling idly in the other hand, lounging just out of range of a tiny square of light from a vent opening, and it takes Jade wayyy longer than it should before she realizes he's gesturing at her to be quiet.

WQ: What has you so concerned?

Uh, so they can...eavesdrop, apparently? Jade blinks and opens her mouth to give him a piece of her mind about how harassment of WV is sooo not acceptable behavior. Spades stops twirling the knife with a menacing twist and Jade snaps her jaw shut, so that the sound of two mental voices - blurred and vague because she can only make out the noises and not the hand signs, but ringing with clarity in a way that only the Queens seem to have - continues to filter in through the air vent.

BQ: I vacated the premises as quickly as I was able to find the Knight.

BQ: But I know the Dignitary was dead when I left, and Jack wasted no time attacking anyone on Derse. He left to kill the Prospitian players immediately.

...This is...definitely an interesting conversation to be listening in on. WV claws at Jade's side in an attempt to wrangle himself around the corner as well, and Spades glowers at both of them when their squirming results in someone knocking into the wall.

Oh boy. These are really tight quarters, and Jade has no idea if she can defend herself well enough to avoid getting stabbed at this rate… Trying her utmost to be careful, Jade wobbles forward on her forearms without making a sound, and Slick grudgingly doesn't stab her when she gets near enough
to blink out the air vent opening at the scene below.

All she can really make out from this awkward angle is that this is a lab, one that Jade remembers ransacking for tools to mess with the Hub earlier today. None of the scientists in the facility are using it: that was why she'd thought it a good target for pillaging, and might also be why the Wondering Querent feels comfortable sitting on the nearest countertop, her head bowed in contemplation of what appears to be a sneaky Queens-only meeting. The Black Queen is a barely-visible bobbing head as she paces back and forth before her counterpart, just close enough to the vent that Jade can't get a good look at her.

WQ: So when the Brute told the Knight that Noir or the Dignitary had been killing Dersites -

BQ: I didn't hear that at the time. I needed to reach the observatory and get into position. But yes. There were...too many bodies to have been accounted for by Noir's rampage.

BQ: Someone else was killing that day.

BQ: We already know one troll was physically present in the human session when they should not have been. That much glitching in one session -

WQ: You think - the Bard?

BQ: Who else?

WQ: But to what purpo-

BQ: Wait. Quiet.

The Black Queen stops pacing for a long moment. Or at least, Jade thinks she does. Her space sense can't really tell her much, but the carapacian's head stops bobbing. Then, quick as a whip, the BQ looks up at the vent sharply, her white eyes narrowed. Jade squeaks and whips her head back, and Spades curses hoarsely.

BQ: Dammit, Slick. I know you're there!

SS: Shit.

And with that, Spades Slick absconds so fast it makes Jade almost knock her head against the side of the vent trying to watch him flee, his unravelling grey sweater tripping him up so that he curses and swears and hauls up the trailing hem to slice off the bottom half. Jade could swear the shadows of the ventilation ducts move in a way shadows are not supposed to move, slinking along after Slick with intent. WV whimpers and bats at the walls of the duct, tapping at a moving shadow and then yanking his claw back with a wheeze.

She waits for a long moment, heart pounding in her chest, for the Queens to call her out for eavesdropping, too, but there's nothing but mental silence. She's the only voice in her brain. Blinking, Jade peers cautiously out the vent again.

The lab is empty.

Jade and WV exchange looks, and she makes another mental note to herself - it's not just the custodians who are keeping secrets.

She wonders what a Bard can do.
She stops wondering when she checks her watch and realizes she's **five minutes late.** "Eeeeeep!" she shrieks, seizing WV around the neck before he can react. "We're so late!"

If the elbow WV digs into her side is any indication, he could seriously care less.

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Everyone is already in the conference room by the time Jade wanders in, WV in tow. The tiny carapacian had wanted to keep exploring the ducts, but she dragged him along regardless, because the last thing she needs is to have to start a ruckus over Slick stabbing her sidekick or anything like that. "Sorry I'm late! I'm used to being able to jump everywhere in the nick of time!" she apologizes gaily, skimming right past the reason she was gone to begin with. "What did I miss?"

And whooooa! Jade practically reels right the heck back out of the door when she takes a second look around the room. Both Queens are missing, which is interesting when Jade considers what she just overheard, and Spades Slick is most definitely absent, which doesn't actually surprise Jade in the slightest. He's a jumpy kind of guy, wayyy more of a handful that WV has ever been, and also she's pretty sure those shadow things were after him, so he'll probably be busy for a while.

Rose, who had just been emerging from the hangover throes when Jade stopped by her room on her way to retrieve Bec, is wearing a careful mask of bland consideration, but she no longer has to lean on Kanaya to stand upright and survey the room, so Jade thinks she must be feeling a little better. She's not even glaring at her mom, after all, and that's...progress? Maybe? Doctor Lalonde and Dad Egbert are standing next to each other, Samuel's body language a little less hostile than it had been yesterday, so maybe they're starting to patch things up, too, after all of Samuel's stern disapproval of how Rue raised Rose. Jade really hopes that whole situation will get resolved ASAP, so she can judge who is most likely to be a suspect in Grandpa's mission without being influenced by all this negativity floating around.

No, what really makes Jade blink and reconsider the merits of skipping out on this last meeting is that Dave and John are both on their feet and radiating all kinds of bad vibes, the target of which seems to be Dave's Bro.

Uh. Seriously. Jade hasn't really seen Dave do more than smirk and put on that coolkid face for all of the short time she's known him, but right now he's tense all over, bristling and tight-lipped with barely concealed irritation. And John - actually, John looks kind of like he did yesterday, blanched with shards of panic and misery practically jutting through his skin, and John has been doing so much **better** today! Argh! Karkat is latched to John's side with a hard expression, but it doesn't look like the claw he has gripping John's hand is doing much good.

Bro Strider, on the other hand, is downright frosty. Jade would say he looked unmoved by the two angry super-powered kids glaring at him, except there's a stubborn downturn in the corner of his lip, a tightness in his jaw, and even with his eyes concealed Jade thinks he might just be frowning a little. But also he could probably beat the ever-loving crap out of John and Dave with his hand tied behind his back, so what the heck? Why do those two look like they're about to pick a fight?

Doctor Lalonde's smile is a triumph of will over the incredible awkwardness all of this mess has inspired. For some reason, Jade feels like she should be taking notes. "Ambrose feels that, as things stand, it would be for the best if we minimized - well, you see, by having so many of you in one place at the same time, it could be catastrophic if the Midnight Crew moved to neutralize you as a threat. So he has suggested -"

"I'm taking my kids and getting the **fuck** out of here," Ambrose interrupts, folding his arms over his broad chest. "Seattle is a fucking death trap right now, Lalonde, and you know it." He raises an
eyebrow, and Jade makes out enough of his eyes behind his shades to see that he's directing the next comment at her. "I can't tell you what to do, Harley, but I can tell you that you should get out while the getting's good."

"I'm staying with John," Dave says curtly, his hands curling into fists by his sides as his shoulder hunch up. Neither he nor his brother have a swordkind drawn yet, but with this kind of atmosphere Jade thinks they're pretty close!

"Fuck no, little man."

"I'm pretty sure we should all stick together!" Jade offers, which earns her a wild gesture of agreement from Dave as though to say 'see, we're clearly in the right.' But gosh, seriously, why is this even up for debate? Is Bro nuts? Splitting up is a stupid plan! "If we can work out all the mechanics of how our powers work together, we'll be much better equipped to fight off stronger bad guys. It requires testing!"

Bro just shakes his head. "Science has nothing to do with it. Common fucking sense does. This isn't something you get to argue."

Dave's voice collar makes an odd popping sound, as though it isn't sure just what the heck to make of the noise Dave is trying to make. John digs white-knuckled fingers into the other boy's shoulder, which might be all that's keeping Dave from leaping into a strife right here and now. "Hey asshole, fuck you -"

"Common sense and rationality is a little much to ask at the moment, I'm afraid." Rose has her palms together, pressing the blade of her fingers down the bridge of her nose, with the faintest frown on her face. Her voice, hoarse from whatever she drank last night and this morning, still manages to cut through Dave's impending rant. She and Kanaya glance at each other and it's Rose who looks away first, as though she's been stung. "You might have had more luck persuading Dave to leave before we witnessed what we did yesterday. Now, none of us are in any state to separate in the immediate future." Rose spreads her hands, palms up as she shrugs.

Bro's jaw clenches. "I said 'kids,' didn't I? Means you're coming too, kid."

Almost as though she anticipated this, Kanaya doesn't miss a beat before replying, "Not possible. Rose and I must still pay a visit to Los Angeles before we can even hope to tack on yet another destination."

"Make it possible," Bro says, cool as anything and meeting Kanaya stare for stare. "Or I'll do it for you." And oh jeez, Jade is starting to see what Grandpa meant when he said Bro was stubborn. "This is a fucking unreasonable risk to my shithead kids, and I don't want them anywhere near here."

"Now, Ambrose." Samuel tries next, while Jade slowly sidesteps her way toward the John-Dave-Karkat huddle. Karkat swings his head to look at her, one sharp canine stabbing right through his lower lip with the force he's using to keep his mouth shut, but Jade doesn't even try to touch John; she stands at Dave's back instead, raising her hands in a gesture of peace because literally the last thing they need right now is for Karkat to flip into over-protective mode and start yelling at anyone who comes within five feet of John.

"I agree that Seattle is unsafe at the moment," Samuel is saying, his voice pitched low and soothing as he steps forward, his face calm and his tone coaxing. It would be a lot more effective if Jade didn't still have 'ex-merc' stuck bouncing around in her head when she looks at him. "My own first instinct is to relocate with John without delay. But the Crew will not stop being a threat just because we separate them. The children won't cease communicating now, after all this, and if you believe any of
them would leave with such business unsettled, you don't know them.

"Please don't take them." John's voice is hoarse and broken, and Bro's head snaps up. "Please don't." John's fingers clutch Dave hard enough that Dave has to be hurting, but even when Karkat reaches up to rub at the back of John's hand and peel the fingers gently away, Dave doesn't move.

Bro stares. Jade tucks her hand into Rose's when the other girl joins their huddle of solidarity, and Karkat nearly jumps a foot in the air when Kanaya appears at his other shoulder.

In the end, it's probably John that sells it, though. When the silence stretches out, Jade leans forward everrr so slightly, slow enough that Karkat doesn't notice, and she feels that John is trembling all over. He's not even sobbing; the tears just sluice down his face as he stares not at Bro but at something in the distance only he's seeing.

He's not okay. He's really not. And Jade isn't sure exactly what they can do to make it better, but by golly, she knows they're going to try.

"Little shits," is all Bro says. He never actually, you know, admits he's agreed to let Dave and Rose and Oriole stay; he just kind of vanishes, like that single sentence was meant to encapsulate his reluctant consent.

And all that drama (again, Jade thinks), is why none of them notice until later that Oriole isn't in the room.

That, in fact, no one has seen him in quite some time.

- 

They only find his note after someone gets the belated idea to search outside, in case he's just decided to take his newly-healed wings for a test flight. The note's taped to the front doors in the lobby, of course, which is the first place they should have looked, in retrospect. Jade manages to elbow her way in so she can read it while everyone else crowds around or waits to hear it second hand.

fuck, i'm not good at goodbye notes

never really had people to say goodbye to anyway so what the hell, i'm heading back to houston, idek what the rest of you are doing

just

i needed to leave. need to be on my own, figure out what i'm doing with myself

i'm gonna be honest, i feel like shit and i'm pissed as hell that suddenly there's this entire archive of video evidence trying to tell me i'm nothing

so fuck that. rose, you were drunk as hell but you give good advice. i'm not just gonna cut you all out because that would be unreasonable and shit, esp with the crew still probably gunning for my dave-shaped head. but I'm gonna go it alone for a while and get back on my feet on my own

like if you guys need help or something, text me, and if i hear anything about the crew or world-ending shit i'll give you a heads up

but i'm not just some extra dave. i'm me. and i don't think you all can really understand that just yet, not when you have so much other shit that's more important to you. you've all got your own
problems. i've got mine

but also, there's something we're all forgetting, but i can't remember what. wow that was helpful, wasn't it. fuck. just try to think about it, okay, because there's definitely something important that we're not remembering here and i'm pretty sure it's going to fuck us all over. we talked about it earlier but then everyone got goddamn emotional and here we are. forgetting shit

this note is falling apart so i'll just stop. yeah

later

"If that little shit had waited two fucking minutes," Bro mutters. "Now I need to go after him. Dammit."

"Dude. Yes. Go. Hunt down our little chicken nugget," Dave says encouragingly, and they all waste the next ten minutes trying to convince Bro that no, just because Dave is being a total dick it does not mean Bro gets to revoke his Seattle-privileges. Kanaya pulls out a tube of lipstick and this is apparently scary enough to inspire Rose to hastily intervene in the rapidly escalating rap battle between Dave and Bro - which is a shame, because Jade is taking notes on the whole thing for future rap reference! Jade is half sure Bro's just going to end up taking Dave and Rose and gunning the engine, and that she'll have to teleport in to rescue them from death by puppets or some nonsense, but Bro peels off into the evening with absolutely zero attempts at kidnapping, perhaps hoping to flag Oriole down before he can get more than a few miles away.

Either way, Rue Lalonde passes John's dad a ring of keys, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief that appears to come from nowhere, and looks anywhere but at Rose as she informs them all that she'll keep working with the Querent on the Hub to try to find out more about the game. Jade feels a pang, wishing she could keep working at it herself, but she can always come back later, surely! There's no way she won't visit a lab as neat as this one again!

Jade isn't sure exactly when Bec returned, but when they pop open the trunk the wolf is in there, looking as innocent as the driven snow as they stuff their luggage inside with it once more, like it hasn't been frolicking around with a dead man in a robot chassis for however long. She rolls her eyes at it, and when WV insists on wriggling into the trunk alongside the wolf, she shuts the trunk lid on the two of them engaged in an extremely one-sided wrestling match.

Then, with Kanaya and Rose in their vehicle and everyone else piling into the Egbert's car, they slowly make their way out of the valley. There's a rough patch as they cut through that forest Doctor Lalonde's scientist had to guide them through earlier, and then Jade feels the twistiness clear the air at last. She settles back, bouncing in her seat with a happy sigh, and gives Dad Egbert a five minute warning as she whistles for Bec and casts her mind out as far as she can reach, getting a feel for her powers' reach once again. Gosh, it feels good to be free!

Because Karkat has made it eminently clear that a second road trip is not in the cards, and Seattle's not too far away. Jade has jumped further distances in one go just trying to cross Texas, and that was with Clubs Deuce on her trail. With Bec's silent assistance, Jade waits until they are most definitely out from under the void warding, and then she pops them all straight back to the neighborhood, her grip on both vehicles and all the occupants augmented by Becquerel's influence. They land with a creak in an empty field a couple miles from the Egbert's house so as to avoid hitting any people or traffic, and Samuel drives the rest of the way to a small mansion tucked away in a quiet cul-de-sac, Kanaya's vehicle hard on their tailgate.

"Welcome, everyone," Rose announces sardonically as they exit the cars, turning pale eyes on them all with a faint but steady smirk, holding out her hand palm up for Samuel Egbert to pass her the ring
of keys. "Welcome to my old home."

(The Queens don't see them off. And no one seems to know exactly where Spades Slick is.)

(Which is maybe just how the carapacian likes it.)

(Jade wonders.)

Back in the Cascades, a cloaked, mechanical man exits a valley that only tenuously exists before activating the rockets in his feet.

He has a long way to go, and never has it been harder for him to leave on one of his adventures - except perhaps, for that one night, long ago, when he realized he had to leave his precious charge alone on an island, with nothing but robots and a wolf of questionable motives to guard her.

In the trunk of a car, a small carapacian hiccups and rolls onto his belly in a flash of green light. His only companion is utterly silent, as always, and WV huffs, prodding at Bec's side until the wolf flickers green in response.

Queens are intimidating. He isn't sure he liked running into them, even if they are trying to be helpful for once.

That didn't stop him from observing them. He's never really been one to let royalty frighten him.

Well. There's no time like the present. WV raises his claws, opens his mouth, and summons up all the breath in his lungs.

WV: karoghevorevemekylselindz??

(There's no one but Bec to hear. But it's a start.)

---

Her Imperious Condescension is present when Diamonds Droog finally arrives for the meeting.

Diamonds doesn't like it. It's been ages since she learned that the Condesce was responsible for a great deal of the Midnight Crew's funding, but her spy network has still be absolutely useless when it comes to rooting out exactly how the Condesce and the boss came to be involved in the first place. In the world of blackmarket politics, an alliance like that should have made ripples with someone. There are whispers from Siberia and Mongolia, but both are known haunts of the Condesce's, which makes it difficult to sort out the Doctor's stake in everything.

Also, Diamonds has a strict schedule she's trying to keep, here, and the Condesce's presence means that Diamonds is forced to wait beside the half-filled bowl of Swedish fish by the door like some teenage miscreant waiting for her turn to speak with the school principal. The injuries inflicted by Spades Slick still burn under the bandages when she shifts with a hiss, and she tightens her jaw to prevent another slip.

They wouldn't scab, for the longest time. The cuts and scrapes themselves wouldn't be serious on their own, but when the blood refused to coagulate and she began to bleed through her third suit,
Diamonds had come as close as she ever has in her life to freaking the fuck out. The further from Seattle she came, the more the bleeding slowed, but the scabs are still tender and easily torn free to start the hemorrhaging all over again. A sore spot in the crease of her elbow marks where her private doctor put the IV for the blood infusion, but she'd turned down the offer of an antifibrinolytic to slow the bleeding. The last thing she needs is some unfamiliar drug influencing her judgment right now.

"I got my Heiress under control," the troll is saying flippantly, holding out her phone and pouting her lips to take a selfie. Her masses of hair have been dyed a bright shade of fuchsia, and Diamonds shudders at the sight. "Wellll, occupied, anyway~ Long as she's busy with the massive squidbeach, she's ain't glubbing around with things elsewhere. Ain't heard a peep outta her about LA, either. #urwelcome"

But is she an activated player? This is rather an important thing to discern, Tethys.

The results of the analysis of the Knight's blood sample were...troubling. I do not like what I cannot see.

The tiny troll rolls her eyes so hard that a rare flash of unstained yellow sclera becomes visible, and then she leans over the sidearm of Doc Scratch's chair with the phone outstretched, making a duck face as she snaps another picture of the two of them. "Don't worry yourself, Doc," the troll cackles, tapping away at the screen with long painted claws. "None of that life-y bullshit that I can sea. And if I do sea it, I'll krill the beach so dead not even weird magic could save her bass." Another wide-mouthed laugh, and the Condesce flips the phone to show the blank-faced boss of the Midnight Crew something on the screen. "Look atcha! Holy mackerel, you seeeeariously need to work on dat shelfie game, frond!"

Diamonds's skin crawls at the mere thought of having photographic evidence of this particular unholy alliance floating around the Condesce's Twitter account, but she bites her tongue. She's trying not to draw attention to herself right now. It has been quite the struggle, particularly when all the Felt members in the building have gotten the notion that she somehow failed in Seattle, and now take every available opportunity to attempt to mock her for it. Clover sniggering behind her back as she passed through the accounting floor had almost been the last straw; even now her thumb taps a warning against the handle of the cue stick lying folded up along her forearm and palm.

Well. From the Crew and the Felt's perspective, she did fail. Operations have been successfully established in Seattle, but at the price of an entire secret base, increased public awareness of the Crew's existence, the escape of Sharpshooter, and loss of Spades Slick's trail, perhaps for good. That last one in particular rankles her, but she breathes, and maintains her professional mask.

Because Diamonds got a great deal more out of the venture than the boss can be allowed to know. No one except Marlowe can know, and she's debating when that particular vulnerability will need to be amputated.

Unfortunately, the tradeoff is that everyone and their criminal mother now thinks she's either lost her mind or her touch. But Diamonds is a professional. She's borne up under worse than this with her dignity intact.

Your next move?

The Condesce shrugs, humming to herself and beatboxing a little when the key changes. At last she says, "Probs gonna scuttle my way over to check in on the old CrockCorp. Been a while since those buoys and gills hadta stand up to an inspection. But Fef'll get all up in my business if I give her the helm fo' too long, so if you need anemone in DC bribed, I'll be back there in two shakes of a guppy's tail."
Excellent. Droog, inform Tethys if there are any outstanding measures required for your contacts in the capital.

Diamonds stiffens, and nods. "Of course, boss. I gotcha covered."

And Tethys? Do try to keep G'bgolyb in check. I would have preferred you found some other way to distract the Witch than setting another Horrorterror loose on the board.

Negotiating with two of them is rather my limit of my tolerance for managing chaos, never mind three.

I could do it, of course. But I can see that you will handle it just fine on your own. You may proceed.

The Condesce smacks her gum loudly in her cheek, baring sharp fangs in Diamonds's direction. "Yeah, yeah, shore thing. #letsgetitstartedinhere"

Someone has got to tell this troll that you're not actually supposed to say the word "hashtag" out loud - or, for that matter, use hashtags at all outside of social media internet forums. But like hellfire is Diamonds going to be the one to do it. Instead, she mutely calls up a certain list of names that have been tallying up over the course of the past few weeks and forwards it to the latest number her people have managed to ferret out. When the Condesce's phone chimes out and the troll raises an eyebrow at the caller ID, whistling, Diamonds allows herself a small twinge of pride. "You don't glub around now, do you?" is all the troll has to say, before she snatches up her 2x3dentkind from beside the crackling green fireplace and strolls toward the grandfather clock. "Shell you beachbunnies later!" the troll calls as she vanishes into the strange contraption.

Such a colorful character. I do enjoy her visits.

You wouldn't have known it from looking at the big guy's face - or lack thereof, anyway. The strange leader of the Crew is as much an unreadable, ivory wall as ever as he stands up from behind his desk with his palms still pressed together contemplatively. Diamonds raises her chin and adjusts the position of her hat before stepping away from the wall.

Perhaps it's just that she recently committed a massive breach of professional trust in order to further the Crew aces' designs rather than the boss's, but Diamonds thinks that the usual oppressive, chilled aura that always seems to fill the boss's room has grown colder. The thin, greenish flames in the hearth wrap and flicker between the logs of wood, and do nothing whatsoever to warm the air. Her wounds from the battle with Spades Slick ache like a son of a whore, reminding her that she's going to need to go hard or home in pieces if the big guy is aware of her minor acts of betrayal.

She's in a pretty shitty position right now. She doesn't like it.

Now, Droog. The first thing I would like to assure you of is that I am not angry.

…Mmm. Not the best possible start. Diamonds grits her teeth, and bows her head. For a moment she thinks she's gonna blow it, her jaw locked up as she fumbles to recall her cover story. "I made several critical errors while dealing with the heroes. I "- and this part stings the most to say, so much so that she has to spit it with more force than she intended - "underestimated them, in some respects. It will not happen again."

A mental sigh filters through her mind as the Doctor walks to a disturbingly green bookshelf to draw an equally green book out of the stacks. She can't make out the title from here, as it is written in a green ink that blends in remarkably well with the rest of the room's décor.

Urgh. Felt.
The playing field was altered drastically in between the moment that Boxcars was pulled from the operation and you entered it. Hiccups were only to be expected, with so much void-interference concentrated in that area. These failures have been accounted for.

You also had to activate the sleeper agent, am I correct?

_Balls to you, boss man. You're damned right, the failures were accounted for._ Diamonds keeps her features schooled into earnest remorse, smoothing the edges of her suit jacket with her fingers obsessively. She almost loses her cool when the edge of her nail snags on the fabric, but she eases it free without fucking up her suit. "Regrettably, yes, I did. I needed the insurance when it became clear I'd be dealing with more than two heroes at once," she says. "It was also in our best interests to confirm that Die *did* manage to tap the right people, all those years ago."

She injects as much dripping skepticism into 'all those years ago' as she possibly can, because _that_ had been the most troublesome part of her time spent in Seattle. Worse than dealing with a pack of heroic delinquents. Worse than that insufferable Spades Slick. Doctor Die is in charge of some of the Felt's most questionable experimentation, and has been since long before the Midnight Crew merged with the Felt. Diamonds has a healthy skepticism about anything Die claims to have done in the years before the merger began, and the most dubious sleeper agents in Diamonds's extensive collection of spies and little birds are all those whom Die claims he planted almost two decades ago. Diamonds has access to the files, of course, but she barely trusts Die's current work as it is, let alone whatever fucked up shit he did in the service of the Doctor back when the Felt were barely a blip on Diamonds's radar, back when she was still a he freelancing for the Братва groups on American soil and knew Hearts and Clubs only by reputation.

Because the sleeper in Seattle isn't one of her personal recruits, Diamonds had to play that entire confrontation with Heir by ear, which always leaves a bad taste in her mouth. But Die's dubious efforts paid off; even with the sleeper deep in the voided zone where the Felt lost track of its whereabouts, the agent could still be maneuvered closer to Heir in order to produce a name and address.

She had a backup plan, of course. But it would have been incredibly stupid. It's for the best that Die's sleeper project worked, even if it raises several very important questions.

The first and foremost being, how the _hell_ did Die know to tag someone close to John Egbert so long ago, when the boss himself claimed not to know for certain if Heir was the one he'd been hunting for in the void all these years?

Seriously. It boggles the mind. The whole point of waiting until now to confirm the Heir of Breath actually deserved the title was that they had to wait until he began altering reality on a fundamental level instead of just doing windy bullshit. Showing up in Houston had done that. The Knight and the Witch had started out much earlier, activating powers that gave off easily detectable energy signatures, but the Heir and the Seer could just have been ordinary people, according to Scratch. They couldn't jump to conclusions.

Diamonds is beginning to suspect this is one of those situations where someone has been lying to her. Profusely. And by god, she is sick to death of it.

Hm? Oh, no, Droog, time travel was involved.

_Shit. "Pardon?"_ Diamonds says, feeling more than a little light-headed. How much of this has the boss man been hearing? Even when she thinks she has a grip on her new strategy, she can't tell if she's truly fooled him - or if he's just tactfully waiting to murder her _after_ she's stopped being useful. It's what she would do if she were a blank-faced, near-omniscient mob boss with a competent but
treacherous resource on hand.

The round orb of Scratch's head tilts up from where he has been (apparently) studying the green-inked book, and he snaps it shut so that the spine rests in the palm of his gloved hand. He drifts toward Diamonds, who flinches back against the wall, but diverts at the last moment to inspect his Mobius chess game. The number of pieces has expanded since Diamonds was last in this office; one large figurine in particular catches the eye because it sends a throbbing pang through her brain, as though staring at the white wheels and wings for too long would give one more than a mere headache.

Dear Matchsticks has been running errands for me.

"...Sir...Matchsticks died in '09." Diamonds remembers. Diamonds was the one who killed her. The Crew hadn't been on the best of terms with the Felt at the time. The whole situation was rather awkward, particularly since half the Felt had been convinced the two gangs had already brokered a truce, while Clubs had already wired half of their hideout to explode on Hearts's orders. Matchsticks had escaped the blast, but not the brawl immediately afterwards. She'd been a wide-shouldered troll, rustblooded and swinging a fire extinguisher like a clubkind, and Diamonds had taken great care to smash the Felt member's skull in after the fire extinguisher split open against a streetlight and ruined her favorite Westwood suit jacket with a blast of foam.

Like hell would Diamonds ever forget someone who ruined one of her suits.

Her past self is still more than willing to respond to an alarm. Of course, the number of times she can assist us is limited to how many times she'd used the ability by the time she came to an unfortunate end at your hands, so I have been sparing and judicious in taking advantage of what few opportunities we have left.

Once you confirmed the Heir's identity, she and Trace went ahead and implemented retroactive tagging.

Oh sweet meatbag tenderizers. Time travel. Diamonds grimaces and allows herself a moment of weakness because damnit, even she has trouble seeing the logic behind it all. If it were any other member of the Midnight Crew standing here, they wouldn't see it. Hearts in particular has an infamous tendency to begin shrieking "I HATE TIME TRAVEL" repeatedly at the top of his lungs and brutally pummel anyone unfortunate enough to be caught discussing temporal shenanigans within arms' reach.

"So even though this person has been under our influence for almost twenty years, we've only been aware of that since the moment at which you had Matchsticks come forward from before her death to receive orders and then go back to do Die's dirty work?" She thinks that's how it would work. Maybe.

In essence.

It truly is moments like this that make Diamonds seriously contemplate swearing a vow of poverty, hanging up her suits, and relocating to a nice Orthodox monastery like her dedyushka always wanted. Kozheozersky is nice and remote and temporally linear, surely. One has to walk thirty two kilometers on foot to reach it even on a good day - no one would dare horse around with time travel in a desolate place like that.

"Why couldn't Matchsticks have informed you of these utterly crucial facts ahead of time?" she asks weakly. She can already tell the answer is going to make her brain hurt.
Because she already hadn't done so by the time I gave the orders. Altering that could have doomed the whole thing, and we can't have that, now, can we.

He doesn't phrase it like a question.

The subarctic climes of Arkhangelsk Oblast sound more and more tempting with each passing moment. Really. Diamonds has always been an American city brat, but she still has family in the old country. She could make this happen.

While Diamonds seriously considers monastic seclusion and carefully directs her thoughts away from anything concerning purposefully sabotaged missions, the boss sets the green tome down with a thump, dust flying up from the cover as he stoops to pull two heavy white bowls from somewhere behind his desk. One is heaped with waxy, oversized red lip candies, while the second contains at least ten servings of black licorice gummy bears.

Come away from the door now, Droog, if you will. I have been anticipating more company.

She complies in a slight daze. Occasionally she allows thoughts of a certain device Marlowe procured for her to drift across her mind, in an effort to gauge the boss's reaction, but his smooth face is as unreadable as ever, and his telepathic voice makes no mention of noticing any changes in Diamonds's thoughts as he strides with his hands tucked behind his back to wait by the door. If he is going to say anything about it, he'll no doubt wait until the moment Diamonds least expects it because, oddly enough, her boss is a complete and utter fucker.

No matter. She has reason to believe that thinking about interacting with the device in the future will block Scratch's ability to see her and know her thoughts in the present, similar to how planning to approach the heart of the void-zone near Seattle caused all of his careful calculations for Diamonds's actions that night to become inaccurate.

If she can harness this damn void shit, she might actually be able to permanently level the playing field, and that is something she is very interested in exploiting.

Hearts arrives first; Diamonds supposes she should have anticipated that from the barely perceptible differences in how the bowls of candy were positioned on the table by the door, but she's a little preoccupied at the moment. She eyes Hearts speculatively and raises an eyebrow when the man squints in her direction. He coughs when he sees the silent question, stuffs a fistful of candy into his pocket, and gruffly shrugs his shoulders at her.

When they'd parted there had been some...hard feelings over Diamonds receiving the assignment in Seattle, but Hearts never could keep up a grudge against a member of the Crew. Against certain members of the Felt, like Cans, yes, and she doubts the sting of being beaten by Heir and Hemogoblin will have faded from the man's memory, but never against her or Clubs. "I left plenty of both of them for you to deal with," Diamonds says, and she smirks when realization finally lights up the man's rugged face. "I do hope you appreciate it, Hearts."

"I heard," he says, and that is all. It's mild compared to some of the mockery the Felt have been tossing around all day, and Diamonds nods. She recognizes a peace offering when Hearts grumpily mutters his way into one. Thank yous aren't really his style. "And boss, Virginia was a fuckin' waste of time. I camped out for days and didn't see shit." The man tromps over to the nearest abominable felt green chair and sits heavily, munching on wax lip candies with a scowl. "The young one swims a lot and the old one was goddamn zozzled 'afore noon most days."

...
And that was the full extent of the conclusions you've drawn from surveilling them?

"Uh, yeah, boss, they weren't all that damn interestin'." Hearts tosses back another handful of candy, waving his other hand vaguely. "Whaddya expect, I'm not the damn spy guy. 'S what Di's people are here for."

But were you or were you not at one point held up downtown by a flat tire for several hours?

Hearts shifts awkwardly in his seat, his face working hard to cover up a grimace of shame with something appropriately penitent. He couldn't have looked guiltier if he tried. An actor, Hearts is not. "Uh. I was gonna mention that. In the report. Promise, boss."

Oh, not to worry. It simply gives me something to speculate on later. Thank you for your time, Boxcars. I know surveillance isn't your forte.

"But nothing really happened," Hearts mutters, scratching the back of his head and flopping back in the chair, his bulk making the whole thing creak. The motion hikes up part of his suit jacket to reveal a faint orange stain along the lower left of his ill-fitted undershirt, and Diamonds's breath hisses through her teeth like a steam from tea kettle. She is surrounded by sloppiness - the only exception being the boss man himself, who wears too much green for her to appreciate the quality of his suits like she should - and she can only imagine that if her spending a few weeks out in the field doing hands-on work has been enough slack to let Hearts think he can get away with wearing soiled clothing like that to a meeting like this, Clubs will show up in pin-stripes and polka dots with ribbons on his horns. Honestly, she can't leave either of them alone for a hot second or any hope for the Midnight Crew preserving its dignity goes flying out the window.

Speaking of Clubs, where is the stumpy moron? The door's still hanging open and the bowl of gummy bears sits on the table like a sad offering to an absent trick-or-treater. She can't imagine the boss would have prepared the candy unless Clubs was on his way; Scratch accounts for things like lateness with his unnerving knowledge of everything going on around him. It can't be long now -

"They seem alright, I guess!"

Diamonds recoils so hard her elbow slams into the wall behind her. Hearts must have swallowed his candy the wrong way, because he begins choking and wheezing and pounding his barrel chest with a meaty fist with a faint look of desperation on his face.

Only then does Diamonds see Clubs kicking his heel on a stool, next to one of the rounded archways that lead off into side rooms filled with bookshelves and esoteric green statues. He's not in a leopard-print suit, which is almost as much of a shock in and of itself; in fact, he looks almost impossibly mundane, and it takes Diamonds far too long to realize that he's wearing a plain, ordinary black cap instead of any usual ridiculous hats.

She hadn't noticed Clubs come into the room. There's at least ten feet of space between Diamonds and Clubs, and she hadn't even felt him try to sneak in and land a pap on her knee. The troll claps his hands on his knees with his gaze fixed on Doc Scratch, as though there's no one else in the room.

...Oh, good god. He's ill. It's the only explanation. Diamonds inches away from the brownblood, praying that whatever sickness he has isn't contagious. Or at least that it keeps him dazed enough not to notice Diamonds before she can make a quick exit.

"All of them are very well trained," Clubs is saying, his head tilted to the side while he taps a claw
against his mouth, as though giving the question intense consideration. "I mean, Doctor Die seemed kinda mad at the one because she caused some kerfluffle, but Diamonds's report says the RL-2408 performed just fine in Seattle anyway, so Die's probably just being a negative Nelly about it!"

Diamonds nods. Then she realizes what Clubs just said and what. "You - read a report?" she repeats, taking another step away from Clubs. Clubs has never read her mission reports in his life unless she held his nose to the screen and gave him a large-print sparknotes version of the damned things for future reference. Even then, she usually has an assistant or two pulled from her division and allocated to him at all times to keep him informed when he inevitable forgets some mission-critical detail.

What the hell kind of illness would inspire the mob laughing stock to actually do his job?

"Yup!" Clubs doesn't even look at her while he says it, pulling out his phone and sticking his tongue out of his mouth slightly as he scrolls through something. "'RL-2408, code-name Ranger. Completed task competently. Recommended for field assignments only under direct supervision of an ace member.' So - not perfect, but good enough for Diamonds, which is pretty darn good."

Diamonds stares.

Doc Scratch does not seem all that bothered over the fact that Clubs is apparently running up an uncharacteristically high streak on the competency meter. In fact, he's sailing away like a white-and-green ship in a sea of felt, humming to himself as he strides toward the green tinted windows on the wall beside the chaise lounge, the ones that lead out onto the balcony. The boss's hands are still tucked behind his back, but the windows spring open anyway so that the man can step out onto the balcony. They're high enough up that the stink of the city below doesn't reach them on the breeze, but Diamonds is too busy throwing looks at Clubs to even notice.

Excellent. Die can be overly hasty in making his evaluations when he has a particular animosity for someone. And unfortunately, I cannot observe the children personally. A second and third opinion is always a wise precaution.

Boxcars, how you would feel about taking company along when you return to oversee matters in Seattle?

No need to answer. I already know that you would be more than happy to help field test them for Die.

"I would, would I?" Hearts mutters half-heartedly, shoving up his hat to scratch under the brim. "...Eh, why the hell not. S'long as they take orders, no skin offa my nose. But if it turns out they're a buncha shitty brats, I'm shippin' them back to the mad scientist in pieces, y'hear?"

Excellent. There is always an element of uncertainty, but at least three out of the four should consistently perform well.

"What do you need me to do, sir?" Clubs chirrups, and he sounds the same as ever but Diamonds is still staring because something is off. She can't tell if it's the fact that she's desperately trying not to think about certain things in Scratch's presence or if it's legitimately something strange about the way Clubs is acting, but one way or another it is giving her heebie jeebies that she can't quite shake. He volunteers for assignments all the time with cheerful, reckless abandon, whether his team is prepared to handle it or not, so it's not that…

The boss steps further out onto the balcony, and Diamonds lingers in the room, casting an eye at Hearts and catching him eyeing her up, too. By silent accord, neither of them move to follow the boss; they can still hear him just fine from here.
Strange things tend to happen out on that balcony. Hearts is more open to complaining about the weird shit that happens around their boss after a beer or three, and though she'd never dare say it aloud Diamonds agrees with most of his muttered grievances. One of them is that the balcony should probably have been condemned and demolished years ago for the sanity of all non-Doc Scratch members of the Crew.

I am tempted to send you to tail our tyrian collaborator next. The Condescension has always had her own agenda. Not that she can turn against us, of course; that would be simply impossible for her. But I cannot see all that she does, and I would prefer to at least have some idea of her personal aspirations, so as to better account for them in our own designs.

Droog came too close of late to void interference, and it lingers still. I would prefer to keep from stacking interference on interference. For your own safety, of course, Droog.

"'Preciate it, boss," Diamonds manages to drawl, shrugging her shoulders lazily when Hearts raises both eyebrows at her. They need to think this doesn't matter to her. Just another bizarre part of their lives that she ignores in favor of doing her job. Void interference getting the boss all twitchy? Nope. Doesn't matter to her.

Marlowe had better not let go of that thing, or she is so very, very, Incredibly fked.

Though it is nice to know that the boss is still having trouble seeing her. Very nice indeed.

"I can do that!" Clubs chimes in, his head bobbing in a nod. "Can I take the Transformer?"

... You may.

"Yay! Thanks, boss!"

Tiny alarms are going off in her head.

Now then, Droog.

Diamonds shoves Clubs's strangeness out of her thoughts - she can't afford to play this game right now, whatever the hell it is. She needs to focus. "Sir?" she says stiffly. She should be lounging back against the wall; she needs to project all the nonchalance that she can, but there's a tension stringing up her spine that won't fade, a prickle of sweat along her sides that's going to goddamn ruin her waistcoat.

Slick has moved into a void-zone along with the heroes. I am working to circumvent said void shielding and pinpoint their location, but it will take time. Until then, how would you like to kidnap someone...very dear to him?

...Oh. Scratch did always know how to get her attention. Diamonds feels a hot, feral wave of pleasure curl in her belly, and she tries not to let her smile grow too wide and give the game away. Distractions, always distractions. But they're such appealing distractions."Oh, I'd like it, boss," she replies, sinking back against the wall and closing her eyes. "Tell me more."

From what I observed while I could still witness your strifing with Slick, he received a note from someone via the Lieutenant.

While Slick is under void shielding, MP and her patron are not. She may have succeeded in evacuating the man who lives above, but she's not infallible. And there is something...
Bring her to me. Failure is not an acceptable outcome for this mission. Once we have her, Slick's reactions are preposterously easy to predict, and it will be one more link soldered into the chain.

"It would be my pleasure." Diamonds tilts her head to the side, sifting through her memories of her short but memorable encounter with Slick's little Prospitian sweetheart in Kazakhstan, considering her options.

**Kidnapping.** No ridiculous children in ridiculous costumes. Just abduction and blackmail, pure and simple. And on top of that, the chance not just to repay Slick for being the cause of all this nonsense, but to bring MP in and...talk to the Prospitian dame about certain matters that Scratch need not know about.

God, how she loves it.

Excellent. You all may wish to leave soon. I am expecting a rather...horrific guest, shortly, and this one has been rather restless of late.

And that would be the out Diamonds has been itching for this whole time. The thought of what could possibly be visiting the boss makes the color drain out of Hearts's face, and the vague terror in his eyes is almost comical as the chair he's been rocking back in settles back down onto all four legs with a thump. "I - uh, I gotta go pick up the kids," he says hastily, pointing his thumb over his shoulder with a bead of sweat dripping down the side of his face.

"Later boss!" Clubs adds, trotting off after Hearts.

He doesn't even glance at Diamonds.

And that's just bizarre enough to settle the dispute in her mind. She and Clubs need to chat.

Diamonds rolls her shoulders, frowning as Clubs trundles out the door, and then she looks out at the balcony once more. The boss's back is relaxed and straight, his white suit impeccably cut to fit him, and she considers cutting and running while her luck still holds out because she does not need to push this man. There's a very good reason the Crew allied with the Felt despite all of Diamonds's personal reservations about trusting this pack of ill-dressed chumps, and that reason is Scratch is terrifying. If you can't beat them, join them - and there was no way in hell that the three Crew aces were ever going to be able to take on whatever the hell Scratch is. He's the boss because he could stomp them all in a heartbeat, and Diamonds has only just now, after all these years, begun to level the playing field.

So. His missions are their missions. His priorities are theirs. And his weird obsession with the hero kids must be pandered to, despite the fact that Diamonds has any number of other ventures she considers more profitable.

"What are you planning for these hero kids?" Diamonds hesitates. There's a vague sense of polite expectancy in her mind instead of a coherent reply, so she presses on. "Setting all of us on them in cycles, tossing those Scratch kids at them as a field test...what's the point of it all? You've seen my report. You know the Heir at least won't interfere with us anymore. Why are we wasting so many resources chasing them around the planet, on missions you've already predicted will fail by the time they're set in motion, when we could be handling bigger heists, expanding to other cities?"

Do you really need to know, so long as you have work to keep you occupied?

I really do, she thinks, because running my own gambit on the side is going to drive me insane otherwise. Because the Midnight Crew has an image to maintain, and hassling child vigilantes to the
exclusion of all else was not in the job description when they had agreed to let Scratch take the helm. The three of them'd thought that by joining forces with the Felt, they’d have the connections they needed to run scams and shake down banks across the country, where before they’d been limited in how far they could push their territory before they rammed up against the Mara Salvatrucha or other mobs.

And sure, they still do those things, but Diamonds is now left wondering when all that wonderful criminal activity had taken a back seat to this load of shit.

So she waits, even when the scent of blood and brine starts to flirt with the breeze from the open windows, and the sensation of being watched increases beyond the usual intimidating mental presence that the boss man poses. Her scalp itches, of all things, and her cheeks feel like they’ve been stung by salt water the longer she looks out past Scratch at the darkening sky.

Oh, I plan what I always plan for them.

I plan to use them.

The last comes so quiet, Diamonds isn’t sure if the boss actually says it, or if it’s just her mind playing tricks on her as she exits the office more hastily than she normally would. She maintains her poise as she shoves the door of the office open again, silently cursing whoever closed it behind them in the first place, and tries to ignore the sensation of something with too many mouths exhaling on the back of her neck before the grand doors of the penthouse office slam shut behind her.

Suckers.

Diamonds needs a moment to collect herself, pulling her hat low over her face as she descends the stairway. When her heart stops pumping like a fire hydrant, she composes her expression and looks up. Hearts is shuffling down the stairs one step at a time, reluctance written into his wide back until he looks back at her with what he must think is discretion and he jerks his head toward Clubs.

Clubs, who has already made it down the first flight of stairs and is rounding the second, almost to the accounting floor.

All without a word to either of them, it would seem.

That's more than troubling. That is rude. "Clubs!" Diamonds barks, sharply enough that Hearts flinches, wincing at her as she strides down past him at twice the speed. "I need a word."

Clubs looks up, and waits with a look of open curiosity for Diamonds to reach the landing. They're still out of sight of the Felt below, so she allows herself a small frown, folding her arms as she glowers down at him. "Something the matter?" he asks, radiating innocence as he blinks at her from beneath the brim of his cap.

It's not that there's something different about him, really. More that there's something completely absent. But she can't put her finger on what. "Your visit to the Scratches. It went well?" she says, folding her arms over her chest.

Clubs scratches at his neck, shrugging loosely. His posture is as shitty as ever. "Me and Yavari both sent reports and everything! Don't you already know?"

Diamonds had read them. Yavari's had been short and to the point, a blow by blow account detailing Die's usual hair-trigger temper and perfectionism, while Clubs's had been effusive and full of praise for the Felt's personal mad scientist's work, because Clubs is easily impressed. Nothing had seemed particularly out of the ordinary, apart from the fact that Yavari must have had to personally intervene.
to get Clubs to finish any kind of report on time. They'd gone in, observed the strange children, and
left without incident. "I'd rather hear it from you, now. Give me a synopsis," she says, running the tip
of one nail under the nail of her thumb. She catches herself before she can start worrying at the
manicure on the nail itself.

Clubs sighs. "I don't know what else to say. Why does it matter, Diamonds?"

That -

That was not something Clubs would say. Clubs would not sigh and roll his eyes a little and make as
though to continue down the stairs without waiting for her to answer the question.

Her hand reaches out before she really thinks about it to haul him back by the shoulder. "Clubs, what
the hell is wrong with you?" Diamonds snaps. "Your attitude is not acceptable."

The short troll turns back toward her only to huff out another sigh, his brown eyes glinting as he
folds his own claws over his chest and makes a weird face at her. "We have work to get to,
Diamonds! Why are you acting so weird?" he complains. The strangeness has done nothing to lower
his usual indiscreet volume, and Diamonds winces because there's no doubt in her mind that both
Scratch and the Felt down below could hear that last part.

A heavy, wide hand clouts her on the shoulder, heavy enough to jostle her and nearly send her hat
teetering off her head. She turns to snarl at the offending party, but Hearts beats her to the punch. "I
need to tell you somethin', Di," he says, almost a whisper in her ear, looking downright
uncomfortable. "Need some tips on how to deal with them brats."

"Dammit, you don't need tips, Hearts, they're children," Diamonds says impatiently, wrenching her
shoulder free. Clubs has taken the interruption as permission to trot down the stairs, his knobby horns
bobbling along as he scurries away without even a goodbye.

Hearts yanks her back again, and that's it. Diamonds snaps the cue stick down into her palm and jabs
the hilt of it back between her arm and her side into the soft, squishy part of Hearts's beer gut. He
grunts and knocks the specibus aside with a hand but doesn't let go of her, and she has to give him
kudos for resilience; if nothing else, Hearts is at least her equal in brute strength, if not in mind.
"What?" she hisses.

The man glances around with shifty eyes and coughs into a fist. "Look, seriously, I'm not tryna be
some kinda relationship counselor here -"

"- but you're bein' all manner of upset in public about this," Hearts continues, steamrolling right over
her, "And no one here actually wants to see you two arguin' about your thing and broadcasting it for
all the damn world to see. Least of all me, because I really don't give a damn what your issues are,
thanks very much." Having finished what might have been the longest speech he's made in weeks,
Hearts rubs the back of his neck, a pleading scowl twisted up on his face.

"What on Earth are you gabbin' about, Hearts?" Diamonds says, feeling her accent slipping as she
whips around to see that Clubs has pissed off down the stairs and somehow ended up engaged in a
bright-toned conversation with that intolerable, dangerously moronic Eggs woman with the rounded
horns. This isn't even her floor. "This shit is none of yours."

"It, uh. Kinda might be." When she glowers at him, opening her mouth to better express her wrath,
Hearts holds up both hands in surrender. "Look. You hightailed it right after because chasing after
that Slick guy gets you all riled up, but last time we met with the big guy upstairs, Clubs got kinda...pissy. On account of you smacking my face afterward."

"Why the hell would that have anything to do with the fact that he's acting bizarrely? You have noticed, haven't you?" she demands, gesturing down at the wayward brownblood with sweep of her hand. She's becoming increasingly paranoid, highly aware that they've shifted enough that the Felt members below can see them even if they can't hear the hushed whispers of the conversation, and she shoves Hearts further back up the stairs to regain control of the situation. "He certainly never made any mention of trouble between the two of you to me."

"Uh. I get the feeling he thought it was some of that shooshing nonsense." Hearts cringes as the force of Diamonds's glare increases tenfold. "Thought the little punk was gonna knee-cap me over it, to be honest, but now it just looks like maybe he - finally stopped. I mean, he's been pushin' you for a while now, but if he's over it…"

Diamonds can't even believe what she's hearing. "This has nothing to do with whatever ridiculous soothing fetish Clubs might have," she says, shoving her cuekind back up into her sleeve with enough force to almost tear the fabric at her elbow. "He's acting strange, and the best you can come up with is that he's simply decided to stop badgering me every hour of the day?"

Hearts gives her a pointed look. "He's treatin' yah normal, Di. That's all."

"Unbelievable." Diamonds's hand shoots out and she seizes Hearts's right ear between her fingers and her thumb, twisting.

"Fuuuck, Diamo- lay off!" Hearts protests as she drags him down the stairs after her. Diamonds raises her chin and stalks past the crowd of bumbling green-clad accountants and bribers with fully grown man in tow. A scan of the room shows that Clubs has disappeared, most likely down the far set of stairs. "Oh god, I'm sorry, I'll be your relationship counselor just - agh!"

Diamonds isn't all that concerned with where Hearts's stumbling buffoonery takes him as long as he's still following her by the ear, so he manages to plow into Biscuits (really, this isn't even their floor, why are either of those numbskulls up here?) hard enough to make the man topple over onto someone's desk with a shout, kick over an entire shredder full of destroyed documents, and lay waste to an entire pot of coffee on the break table with a wildly swinging elbow.

"Ma'am! Ma'am, please!" It's Clover who jogs alongside her, stumbling over his own feet but never quite falling over as he squashes his pale purple hat down on to his head. "Calm down!"

Diamonds reaches out and slams the small man headfirst against the nearest desk.

Or at least, that's what she intends to do. Clover's too lucky to hit the damn thing; instead he somehow, miraculously, falls by the side of the desk without taking any damage. And she has no intention of wasting time by stopping to try to hurt him once and for all, so Diamonds can only roll her eyes and keep marching.

"Really now, this is no way to behave in a work environment!" Clover has the audacity to call after her. Diamonds grits her teeth and ignores it; she's had plenty of practice with ignoring the Felt today, after all. But then the fool runs up beside her again and really, it's the last straw. He starts beseechingly trying to offer her something to calm down, and really, that just seals his fate. "Can we get you anything? Coffee? Tea? A new hat -"  

She lets go of Hearts, winds up with her leg pulled in tight to her chest, and then shoots her foot out, kicking Clover square in the chest. He shrieks as he crashes through the window, a faint "Not
"Jesus," Hearts whispers. His hat has fallen off onto the table he's cowering back against, and Diamonds surges forward, seizing the offending object and slamming it down on the other Crew member's head before shoving him in front of her toward the stairwell. No one else dares to approach after that, and Diamonds catches more than a few lower-ranking members of the Felt diving behind their desks as she passes by - they all know Clover is the only one with the sheer dumb luck to survive Diamonds Droog on a rampage.

"Look, I geddit," Hearts starts babbling when they hit the stairwell, breaking off to yelp as Diamonds gives him a particularly hard push downward before continuing. "You're not the mushy papping feelsy type. You're a classy bird and I respect that, I really do, you gotta believe me - shit!" The man's foot slips down two stairs by accident and his arms pinwheel before Diamonds grabs him by the ear and yanks him back on balance. "But yah think you mighta mentioned that to Clubs at some point, if you didn't want him to think you weren't interested? Because you've been sending mixed signals since pretty much ever since the two o' yah met -"

"I am not interested," Diamonds snaps. Then she realizes what he just said. She yanks on Hearts's collar so he stops with her, and frowns. "What mixed signals, dammit? I've been perfectly clear this whole damn time and it's never made the tiny imbecile stop bothering me before."

Hearts sighs wearily. "You fix his clothes."

"I attempt to resuscitate your wardrobe, too, all the damn time."

"Also, you keep assigning people to look out for him when you can't go on away missions together."

Now she's just feeling vaguely offended. "Again, he's an idiot. I'm more concerned about him not fucking up spectacularly and maxing out our bail money allotment for the month." She pauses to consider, and then raises an eyebrow of judgment at Hearts. "Clearly, he wasn't the one I should have been worried about…"

"You have a goddamn terrifyin' tendency to punt innocent bystanders out windows when he hasn't shooshed you in a while, like right the fuck now." Hearts jabs a finger accusingly back up the stairs toward the accounting floor and its new open-air partition.

What she should say is, you have no proof of any such correlation between the two. What comes out is, "Clover is hardly an innocent bystander."

Hearts throws up his hands in apparent disbelief. "Di, I don't even know what to tell yah. Clubs carried a fucking torch for you a helluva long time, and it did nothing but piss you off. Now he's treatin' you exactly like he's done me all these years, and you think he's lost it?"

"I think this is a radical change in his personality," Diamonds says, dropping her voice to a low mutter and casting an eye up the stairs to see if any of the accounting Felt might feel like lingering by the top of the stairs to eavesdrop. They seem to be clear, but there's always Scratch himself to be wary of. He's always watching. "I think that one of us would have noticed such a drastic shift before now. I think the Clubs we both know couldn't keep his mouth shut about a major decision like that. And you know it." She breathes in through her nose, and out through her mouth, and finishes in a rushing, barely-audible whisper, "I think he just spent the last few days observing the Scratch children, in Die's laboratory."

She waits for Hearts to piece it together. She watches the contortions of his face as he blinks and considers what she laid out for him, his eyes staring at the empty air in an immense feat of
concentration.

And she nods when the dread finally reaches the man's face, and he meets her gaze again with distinct alarm. The arm under her hand tenses up, and the two Crew members glance as one down the stairs. "Virginia. He'll be taking one of his nifty car-helicopter-transforming robot things," Hearts says. There's nothing but cold, hard calculation in his voice, the bumbling, busybody demeanor gone as though it never existed. "Garage two?"

"Three," Diamonds corrects absently, calling up the blueprint of headquarters in her mind's eye. "He ran over into my lot ages ago."

The meaningful sigh is completely uncalled for. She smacks Hearts upside the head. "I'm not saying a word," the man lies, shaking his head and rubbing at the spot with a sour look. "But I am taking the elevator."

"Good. I'm quicker than you, anyway." Before Hearts can turn away, Diamonds clamps a hand down on his shoulder and leans in close. "Do us all a favor," she says, "and think about my assistant, Marlowe. Plan to meet with him later today."

His face goes blank as he nods. "Di - Fuck it, fine," he says, apparently changing his mind halfway through, and then he charges back up the stairs toward the elevator like a shaggy blond rhinoceros.

With a nod, Diamonds whirls and starts racing down the stairwell in the opposite direction. They've been arguing too long and when Clubs intends to go somewhere, he can be a speedy little devil. With the mission-oriented mood he's in, he'll have headed straight for the garage.

Diamonds doesn't think about what it means that she just knows that, as though an entire chunk of her mind has dedicated itself to disdaining Clubs with such finely honed precision that she can guess his movements and potential fuckups before they even occur. It's nothing personal. She just has to keep Clubs from tarnishing the Crew's good name as much as possible. She's doing the world a service, honestly. Surely if it were Hearts who may or may not have been compromised, she would be just as certain in predicting his next move as she is now.

Surely.

She catches him at last two floors from the basement garage. The floors flash by, alternating stripes of black and green that only aggravate the indignation rousing itself in her head, a dizzying slow build of distrust and anger that she has to swallow down with great effort. Every time she passes a Felt or a Crew member on the stairs she has to slow her pace back into some semblance of dignity, hardening her expression and snorting whenever someone in green scoffs behind their hands.

The ones in black just avert their gazes. Though they might not be devoted to her as exclusively as her personal retinue is, no one in any of the Crew's other divisions would ever mock Diamonds to her face. They cannot disobey an ace member, cannot betray the Crew, cannot defect to another gang, cannot snitch to the cops.

Die's work, all of it. And when the boss man had first suggested the idea to Diamonds and Hearts in his ever congenial, terrifyingly charming mental voice, Diamonds had only taken it half-seriously. People snitched; that's just life, for criminals. It's just good business.

But she hadn't said no. And once it became clear that Die's methods, however unscrupulous, produced very reliable subordinates, she'd even embraced them. Where she went, Hearts had followed, nodding along with an unease in his demeanor that had faded in the years since, until Diamonds could barely recall it as a distant memory. Theirs had always been an uneasy truce until
the turf war with the Felt tied them together. Hearts had never fully ceded his autonomy even after Diamonds began to take the lead in opposing Scratch's first attempts to claim the Crew's loyalties, but in this matter he had given Diamonds a slow nod and allowed her to make the call.

Neither of them had told Clubs. Sometimes with Clubs, it was just easier that way. Complicated concepts got away from him. But the condition for allowing Die's mindgrubs to program loyalty had been that, no matter how much Die probed into the minds of the swelling ranks of the Midnight Crew, he would never interfere with the aces.

Clubs didn't know a thing. Because Diamonds is so used to taking care of things for him, to handling the reports and the minor details and the little things like brainwashing one's entire mob to ensure their allegiance, and she didn't see the point of troubling him with it.

Clubs went to Die alone, and Yavari was synchronized long ago. It would be no trouble, surely, for Die to tweak the settings a little and ensure that Yavari wouldn't mention anything in her reports about something going wrong.

Damn, damn, and damn again.

Diamonds starts to lay it on thick in her mind, giving serious consideration to driving back out to the void zone that is the Egbert's neighborhood. It's risky - any moment now Scratch could notice her slipping in and out of his omniscience - but she can't afford him knowing what happens next.

Because if they're right about this - if Die has messed around in Clubs's mind - it means that the Midnight Crew can no longer trust Scratch. Perhaps Die has gone rogue and done it, but with his damned omniscience the boss should have noticed, unless Die has stumbled upon the same method of obscuring his tracks that Diamonds thinks she has.

And if he hasn't said anything, that means Doc Scratch intended to let it happen.

"Clubs!" She means to shout it, but it comes out a humiliating croak. Diamonds clears her throat, straightens her back, and tries again, this time pitching her voice so that it's...somewhat more agreeable. Maybe. "Clubs?"

"Yes?" the short troll calls back, still humming to himself as he hops down the last few steps to the landing. "Are you taking a car too, Diamonds?"

And fine. Fine. Fine! Maybe Hearts is right, and Diamonds has gotten used to - well, Clubs's annoying, idiotic, stupid pale infatuation.

The key phrase is used to it. Not that she liked it or anything. But Clubs normally would have said something even more stupid than that, something like, 'Did you decide to come with me, Diamonds?' and that -

She doesn't miss it. It just grates on her, to notice the obvious gap where the disgusting adoration used to be. It's just a sign that something's not right with Clubs. You can't just turn something like that off like the flick of a switch; she should still be able to see some sign that Clubs is making an effort to act differently, after years of making disturbing pale affection a habit. That's all.

"I'm simply curious to hear more about the Scratch kids." Diamonds catches up and falls into step beside the troll, slowing her steps deliberately to match the troll's rolling, clumsy gait. She tucks her hands behind her back, perversely aware that she's imitating the boss man's favorite posture as she studies the side of Clubs's face for some sign of - she doesn't know what. "Die's work fascinates me, after all. Tell me, did he show you anything else he was working on while you were there?"
Clubs shakes his head exuberantly, letting out a tiny 'hup!' as he trundles around to start down the final stairs to the third basement. "Oh, not really! I saw some of my people there, and that's it."

Shit, shit, shit. "The ones who required a review?" she asks sunnily, cursing Die for a fool in the questionable privacy of her mind. Could the troll not keep anyone in that facility under control?

Clubs claps his hands together and smiles back at her, but his words undo any reassurance that might have provided. "Oh, yes! I was surprised to see them, but then it was fine. Petran was pretty badly off, which is sad, but she'll be better soon!"

The troll skips last three steps, landing on the floor with a huff and traipsing off through the door into the low lighting of the third basement garage. Off to the left, huddled up by the wall, sits a row of sleek, nondescript black cars - nothing fancy, nothing that would stand out in a crowd. Diamonds has always preferred to put her money into her suits; she could care less about vehicles as long as they do what they need to do. Working air conditioning, darkly tinted windows, and a large enough trunk to store the body of an average-sized man are really her only stringent requirements.

And so, somehow, by a mysterious and incomprehensible series of events and chance circumstance, she had ended up letting Club's inane projects expand to include not just his own parking lot spaces, but three quarters of her own lot, too. At the time, it had just seemed like an easy way to get Clubs to stop whining about not having enough space in the second basement for the hovercraft with mechanical tentacle-arms. Now, Diamonds can practically sense Hearts rolling his eyes from behind whatever pillar or army tank he's concealed himself behind.

"You don't think it was strange that they were under review at Die's facility?" Diamonds asks. She feels tired, watching Clubs dart from car to car and dancing a jig as he taps the hood of one before racing to another, as though he can't decide which to choose. She doesn't know where he gets all that damn energy. "Not at all?"

"Well, that's where these things happen, Diamonds! Even I know that! Poor Petran got scrambled up in her noggin, so Die has to fix it up!" Clubs says, sounding almost affronted as he turns to pout at her. "Are you trying to quiz me for something? Why don't you just say so?"

He looks like Clubs. He acts like Clubs. But Clubs wouldn't have known that 'review' was just euphemism for Die needing to tinker with a sick or malfunctioning grubmod. Clubs wouldn't take such a revelation so calmly, not after years of ignorance.

Oh, yes. Diamonds will need to take Marlowe with her to visit the Egbert's house. Scratch can't know what happens here. If searching for Slick's Paramour takes her by sheer coincidence through the mass of void shielding in the Cascades, even if it leaves Diamonds lost and wandering in a daze in Canada after days of confusion, then it's just the price she'll have to pay. Scratch can't see this.

Her phone begins buzzing in her pocket immediately. The boss man noticed, then.

Too bad. There's still one last test she'll need to run, the one she'd hoped she wouldn't have to. But Hearts is waiting in the wings, and he won't move unless she does. They've always known that one of the Crew could be compromised at any moment. It's simply a hazard of fiddling with people's minds.

Without really thinking about it, Diamonds sinks to her knees and latches both hands on Clubs's shoulders, hard enough to bruise. He yelps and squirms, making a face at her. "Clubs," she says, voice steady, "You are a member of a sinister gang called the Midnight Crew."

"Diamonds?" Clubs raises his claws and scrabbles at her hands, looking increasingly distressed.
She ignores the plea, and the bloody scratches that start to open up along the back of her hands as Clubs struggles with more intent. She's always been stronger than Clubs, anyway. Instead, she shakes him a little until he meets her eyes again, his lower lip quivering as she presses on. "Your nefarious plots are serpentine in complexity. Your schemes, convoluted."

"Uh, I think you should probably stop -"

She doesn't. Obviously. "You are planning a heist in your underground hideout." Thank fuck they made it to the basement for this part. She has to clear her throat and force out the last part. "...What will you do?"

Clubs's hands fall to his sides. He blinks at her, his eyes at full luminescence in the dim light of the garage, his jaw going slack as his mouth moves soundlessly.

Slowly, a sluggish trickle of bronze blood slinks out from his left nostril, like a snake in the silt of a riverbed, to stain the tip of his teeth when he fails to close his mouth.

He doesn't answer.

"That's what I thought," Diamonds says softly.

Then she winds back and punches Clubs across the jaw. It's not enough to knock out a troll, of course, but it startles him so that she has time to delve into the inner pocket of her suit jacket and uncap the syringe there with a flick of her thumb. "Di-!" is all he has time to get out before she stabs the needle through the fabric of his suit into the flesh of his arm, and depresses the plunger. She always comes prepared to kidnap someone, after all.

"Diamonds, why?" Clubs says, even as he sags forward onto his knees. Even while she was kneeling, Diamonds still had a head on the troll; now, she steadies him by the elbow as he staggers, and he seems to crumple up, childish in his confused upset. "My head feels...kinda...fuzzy..."

"Don't worry, Clubs. I'll take care of everything. As usual," Diamonds sighs, wrapping an arm around Clubs's back as his head lolls forward. One of his horns knocks against her shoulder painfully, and she raises a hand to inspect the damage while his whimpers of distress muffle against her chest. The flesh has been lacerated in places, with little strips of surprising pink exposed on the underside of flaps of dark skin that are still attached to the bone, and there is some pain and difficulty in straightening the ring finger of her right hand - probably an extensor tendon gone, which'll need stitches and splinting before she can balance a cuestick properly in that hand. She tries the other hand, squeezing at Clubs's limp shoulder, but everything seems to be in painful working order.

How tiresome. She's had worse sparring with Hearts and jamming her knuckles against his craggy face, but she'll be damned if troll claws aren't too sharp for their own good, and the injury couldn't have happened at a worse time.

"Didn't fucking need me at all, didya," Hearts comments, slinking out from behind the nearest semi-truck tractor unit, the only thing wide enough to hide his bulk near them. He squats, brushing the concrete floor with the knuckles of one hand to balance himself, and thumbs up the brim of his hat to squint down at Clubs. "Jesus. They completely fucked him over, didn't they? He didn't mention Occam's or explosives at all."

"No, he didn't." Diamonds tugs the phone out of Clubs's inside pocket and snaps it neatly in two with her bare hands. Once the insides are exposed, she peels back the outer casing, locates the SIM card and the GPS tracker she placed there herself, and hands them over to Hearts. The man closes a
fist and the two chips give a most satisfying crunch. "Now you."

"Oh, come on, Diamonds…"

She repeats the whole damn thing. "Hearts. You are a member of a sinister gang called the Midnight Crew. Your nefarious plots are serpentine in complexity. Your schemes, convoluted. You are planning a heist in your underground hideout. What will you do?"

"I don't even fuckin' know, Di, cut the heist plans loose with Occam's razor and roll boxcars?" Hearts shrugs with exasperation, clutching at the air uselessly with a fist. "There. I'm goddamn fine, I'm in the clear. Now what're we gonna do about this load of crap?"

A tiny drop of blood oozes out of his nose; he wipes it away impatiently, and there's not much of it, but it's there.

"You're not clear," Diamonds sniffs, thinking very, very hard as she hauls Clubs over her shoulder and straightens up. It's the shoulder with the fragile web of scabbing from having been diced up by a bloody pillow (dammit, Spades) but she can't be bothered to move him. She places a hand on his back between the shoulder blades to balance him. "They've got something in you. Doesn't look like it's very active though."

Hearts just looks appalled, a furious, ruddy flush suffusing his face as he splutters, "Wha- I woulda known! I ain't even been near that crackpot Die in - god, months -"

"Time doesn't mean much to the Felt, and you know it." When he cringes, prodding at the back of his own skull with a finger, Diamonds sighs. "I'm not, either."

Hearts remains squatting. He's very, very still, like a gargoyle crouched down in the middle of an echoing underground parking complex. "...What."

All cards on the table, then. "I tested myself back in Seattle. Something that girl Sharpshooter said…" Diamonds breaks off, shaking her head and adjusting her grip on Clubs. Remembering Seattle is officially so low on her list of priorities right now, it registers about as much as the light of the sun does from Pluto. "I can say it, but the nosebleed that ensued was unpleasant to deal with on short notice. We wouldn't even be able to have this conversation if either of us were as compromised as Clubs."

"But you knew, and you came back anyway -" Hearts cuts himself off. He grunts as he shoves himself up onto his feet, a distinct tremor of anger in his balled up fists. "Di, how much of Seattle was those heroes meddling, and how much was you deliberately ballsing everything up?"

"Shaddup, Hearts." Clubs shifts in his unconsciousness, and Diamonds takes a troll horn to the side of the head. Something flutters to the ground in her periphery, but she's busy tucking the remnants of his cell phone into her own pocket and recapping the syringe to notice. It wouldn't do to leave any evidence of a struggle, after all. If they're to pull this off without Scratch catching on, it has to look as though Clubs left to complete his assignment, and vanished along the way. "We can't give the game away. You know what the big man could pull if he knew we knew."

She sidles around Hearts and inspects the trefoil decal of the car Clubs had last been pattering around. When she flips up the metal, there is a tiny Decepticon symbol engraved on the hood.

Good lord. It's literally a Transformer.

Well, this is Clubs, she supposes. This kind of ridiculousness is par for the course. She reaches up, removes the keys from his lapel pocket, and unlocks the doors, settling herself in the - very tiny -
drivers seat to survey the controls.

"What the hell are we gonna do?" Hearts is not-very-quietly losing his shit, scrambling to stoop over and grab something off the floor, looking downright panicked as he clutches it to his chest. For a man who rivals Diamonds in terms of height, he's doing an incredible impression of a terrified blond turtle. "Applesauce, Diamonds, there's some shitty worm in my head? There's probably one in yours? The boss probably already knows, we're completely goddamn corkscrewed here and you're just fiddlin' around with Clubs's newfangled robot car without your damn hat!"

Diamonds flicks another glance toward the crumpled up article of clothing clutched in Hearts's fist. Ah. So that's what had fallen off, earlier.

...What a shame. It had been a nice hat. But she's a little distracted, at the moment.

"Just keep thinking about Marlowe on occasion," she instructs. "You'll need to visit him - before or after you pick up the Scratch kids, though I'd advise you to go sooner rather than later." Diamonds turns the key in the ignition and waits for the autopilot menu to boot up on the GPS screen. She types in 'Washington, DC,' and then makes personal adjustments to the suggested route, dragging it so that the green line of the projected route zigzags from Georgia to Illinois to Florida before finally bouncing back up to Virginia.

There. That's exactly the kind of random, constantly sidetracking route Clubs would take to get anywhere. "I'm doing all I can to muddle up the boss man's sight right now, but I need you to get it together, Hearts," she finishes, rising up out of the drivers seat and slamming the door shut, hard enough to rattle the chassis. Automatically, the car's engine revs and the headlights flicker on. But then it idles until Diamonds grows impatient enough to rip the door back open and glower at the autopilot.

It's only then that she notices the tiny flashing alert, placed directly in the center of the steering wheel, no doubt at the same level Clubs's eyes would be if he were sitting down. 'Don't forget to buckle up!' it flashes in a cheerful bright orange.

...That's just...she doesn't know what to say to that. Utterly mute, Diamonds does up the seat belt in the drivers seat, and then slams the door of the car shut. Instantly the car peels backward out of the parking space, so fast Diamonds has to yank back her hand before the side mirror can clip it. Then veers off through the parking lot, the screech of the brakes echoing through the darkness at the far end of the garage before the rattling metal death trap pinwheels around to fly up the ramp to the floor above, headed for the exit.

Perhaps she should see about investing in a speed cap on Clubs's vehicles if they survive all this. Because who in their right mind knows Clubs well enough to jam the autopilot if he's not wearing a seatbelt, but then neglects to prevent him from zooming off at the goddamn speed of light? Someone careless on the engineering team, obviously. They'll need to be replaced with extreme prejudice.

Hearts, meanwhile, is not getting it together. "I'm not picking up those damn Scratches! I'm not doing shit for the boss or the Felt or any of 'em! I'm gonna -"

At the rate he's going, he'll make some definite life choice that Scratch can sense, like taking on the entirety of the Felt in some misbegotten shootout, and then where will they be? One hand shooting up to steady Clubs on her shoulder, Diamonds shoves Hearts up against the pillar, the tendons of his neck taut under her fingers. "Don't be ridiculous. You will do what you're goddamn told to do," she hisses, digging her fingernails into flesh. "Because that's the only sensible thing we can do. We don't have the resources to take on Scratch, and you know it. Not with these things in our heads."
Hearts wheezes instead of replying in the affirmative. Diamonds frowns, shaking him, because she at least expects an acknowledgement of some kind when she points out the obvious to Hearts, if not outright agreement. Sure, Hearts can get sullen and crabby, but he generally respects that Diamonds is the brains of the operation.

There's a faint blue tinge to his mouth before she realizes that perhaps she shouldn't be choking him out while waiting for a response. She rips her hand away, smoothing away a curl of disgust from the corner of her mouth while Hearts sags back, rubbing at the swelling bruises around his throat with blocky fingers, his eyes wary and resentful as he hacks and coughs air back into his lungs.

Please. She hadn't been grabbing him that hard -

Hearts opens his mouth, tries to speak - and then leans over to the side to retch. Diamonds steps back hastily, but nothing comes up before Hearts collects himself. All right, perhaps she might not have noticed her own strength…

"Fine. Fine," he rasps at last, wiping spittle away from his chin. Eurgh. "You gonna let me in on the plan, or am I flying blind, here?"

Diamonds sighs and reminds herself that just because the logical course of action is obvious to her doesn't mean that Hearts's brain has anywhere near caught up with her. "Lay low. Play along with Scratch's games as best we can." Diamonds ticks down the list in her mind. "Try not to stir up too much contention with any of the Felt or these Scratch children in particular; we don't know what Clubs might have done to set this off, but it's not too difficult to imagine it might have involved the kids." On that note, Diamonds starts toward her side of the garage, adding, "I can't tell you everything in case you're compromised further, but certainly my new priority is finding some way to reverse what's been done to Clubs. The Midnight Crew can't retaliate if one of their members is on the other side."

Hearts brightens up considerably. "But we are retaliatin'?" he says hopefully. "Just, y'know, so long as it's not never…"

"I'm working on it, you big lug." Diamonds chooses a car at random, the most nondescript of the nondescript, and sets Clubs down in the backseat. After careful consideration, she rolls him over onto his side and buckles the seatbelt at an odd angle around his waist.

After further consideration, she shrugs off her suit jacket and places it over the troll's lolling head. No one could possibly see him through the tinted windows - that's the point of them, after all - but one can never be too careful.

Hearts may or may not cough into his fist, a hacking noise that sounds more like 'diamonds' with a lowercase d than a bodily reaction to being nearly strangled. But Hearts is also ridiculous even at the best of times, and tagged with a brainwashing mindgrub modifier, and thus can be ignored at Diamonds's leisure. "Handle matters in Seattle as you would normally," she instructs. "Let the Scratch kids do whatever it is they need to for this field test. And - here, hand me your phone."

"...You're not gonna smash it, are you?" Hearts says, sounding more resigned than questioning as he rubs his neck one last time and digs through his pockets hastily, emerging with clumps of lint, wax lips, and finally his much battered and cracked cell phone. He eyeballs her warily, and then slowly shuffles close enough to hand off the phone, yanking his hand back as though in fear of getting smacked.

Diamonds sighs again without answering. Finding the clock app is hard with how mangled Hearts has managed to make the interface, with almost every single icon on its own separate screen, but
eventually Diamonds finds it and sets up an alarm to repeat itself nightly. She labels it, 'CONSIDER VISITING 21605 FIR DRIVE.'

"Think about this nightly," she advises him, handing the cell phone back. Hearts scratches the back of his head as he squints his eyes and holds the phone barely an inch from his eyes to read it. *Balls,* does the man need glasses. "Maybe even visit the neighborhood, though I'd recommend you not go too near the house itself. The void aura in the vicinity of that address will keep Scratch from being able to predict much of your movements, but I don't know for certain how effective it is when you don't follow through."

"That is the weirdest damn thing I've ever heard. I'll take yer word for it, Di." Hearts closes his fist over his phone and hesitates before putting it away. "Di. Look. ...You gonna be alright?"

It shouldn't irritate her as much as it does. Diamonds finds herself eyeing the ring of blackening bruises around Hearts's neck, and doesn't realize how obvious she's being about it before Hearts backs out of range of hand and cue stick, tugging at his unbuttoned collar with a finger in an obvious sweat. "It's just, you're the one always banging on about being a fucking professional," he gabbles, the sweat breaking out across his balding forehead glistening in the dim lights when he adjusts his hat in another nervous twitch. "But you gotta goddamn temper, Di, and you've been shoving me around. You're not even paying attention to the hat thing anymore!"

Hearts raises his fist, brandishing Diamonds's hat in his hand. At some point, he managed to completely crumple it in his grip, so that the original shape is deformed beyond recognition.

On some level that irks Diamonds, but more pressing matters are currently occupying her rage circuits. Her lack of reaction just seems to make Hearts more nervous. "Clubs ain't gonna be able to calm your shit if you hafta keep him unconscious. How long until you lose it?" he argues, looking back and forth from her to the hat, and finally stuffing the article of clothing into the inside pocket of his jacket, where it forms an unseemly lump on his side more obvious than an ill-fitted gun holster.

Honestly, sometimes she wonders why she bothered partnering up with these two. "Clubs has never been anything more than a source of existential despair and irritation to me," Diamonds says acerbically, whirling to slam the car door shut on their view of Clubs's unconscious body. "And now he's even more of a dead weight than he's ever been before. Incredible, really." She snorts, and opens the drivers' side door to swing a foot in. "Worry about your damn self, Hearts; once you're out in Seattle, I'm not gonna be around to whip you into shape. One slip, and word could get back to Die or the boss that we know."

"Yeah, yeah. I got it. No drama with those backstabbing Felt, just wait for you to set things up and fix Clubs's noggin." Hearts shakes his head, clapping a hand on the roof of Diamonds's vehicle and resting an elbow on the top of the car door itself. It keeps her from slamming it shut on him - at least, without exerting a lot of needless effort - and she mentally gives him ten seconds before she breaks out the cue stick. "The hat thing is still fucking terrifyin', y'know. You *always* get pissy about dropping yer hat."

"Yes, well." Diamonds lets the cue stick specibus slip into the palm of her hand, and Hearts yanks away from the car with both hands raised.

At least he seems intimidated enough by the odd mood that has seized her that he's being tolerably deferential, for once. Maybe this time he won't draw attention to himself with a *massive fucking explosion* in the middle of downtown Seattle like he did last time those kid heroes pissed him off. There's only so much Heir's going to be willing to let himself be blackmailed into ignoring, and the terror threat level is already too high in Seattle as it is.
But no, that would be asking one miracle too many. Diamonds is too sensible to believe Hearts can manage anything, even an attempt at schmoozing to keep secrets from the boss man, without causing untold destruction. So she starts the car without smacking him. "You worry about your own hat, Hearts. I'll leave a contingency plan in place with Marlowe, in case I'm the one whose grub gets triggered next. You'll need to take over from me if that happens." She pauses, and looks up at the man. "Don't muck around. Watch out for yourself."

Hearts is aghast. "Now you're worryin' about me," he accuses, horrified, as he makes the sign of the cross over his chest. "None of that! None of it! Diamonds, you're sick in the head -"

Diamonds rolls her eyes and pulls the door shut on Hearts's babbling. His jabber becomes an inaudible drone through the mostly soundproofed car door, and Diamonds pulls out of the parking space in a smooth curve while he's still nervously crossing himself. She considers her options for a moment, then stops the car, rolls down the tinted window, and flips Hearts a single middle finger.

His mouth snaps shut. And on that note, Diamonds follows the same route Clubs's unmanned vehicle took to leave the garage, keeping her eyes fixed on the road.

In her mind's eye, Diamonds Droog retracts the words of a note written in incredibly classy handwriting, one that she received back in Kazakhstan but never took seriously until a few days ago. She destroyed the original, of course, because it would be downright idiotic to have kept such damning evidence around, but she remembers the words clear as day.

*He will know when you intend to betray him unless you take the proper precautions. When the time comes, the man who lives above says that only Void will be able to shield you.*

*I know Spades misses your old group of dastardly chums, whether he admits it or not!*

...That Meddling Prospitian knew all along.

So yes, by sheer coincidence, Diamonds finds that she *will* be tracking down MP for Scratch. Diamonds is, in fact, more interested in kidnapping that woman than ever before. This is an incontrovertible fact, which may be stated for the record.

She'll just be taking Clubs along for the ride, something which must remain in a completely different jurisdiction from said record.

...Diamonds can handle that. She has to be able to handle that.

She takes out her phone to assure the boss of this, a faint smile creeping across her face as she observes the flurry of white-text messages that have begun to clog the inbox.

It's just good business.

- 

*Toronto, Canada*

By the time they catch up to Vriska, she's already torn through three Tim Hortons, demolished the statue of Queen Victoria and the memorial to the 48th Highlanders Regiment, and committed unspeakable acts to a local pigeon.

Well, he says 'they,' but who even knows where Aradia's gone. When she's present, she's too much, a presence that roots him too solidly to the earth of a world that's a few weeks from blowing the fuck up. But then she'll slip out of sight and be *gone*, and he misses her like a dangling ~ATH pointer
misses a deallocated object.

He doesn't want to be her moirail. He doesn't want anything to do with the way she makes him feel, all edgy and too close and sick, caught up in her crazy. But when she's gone, he gets so anxious that no amount of Ambien can shut him down. It's a toxic diamond, the kind of inverted moirallegiance Shakespeare likes killing off in the fifth act for cheap tragedy. Shitty soap operas run through this shit like crack cocaine as a way to amp up the cheapass melodrama, and he always rolled his eyes at those stupid fucking reruns but now that Sollux is the one entangled with a wonky fucking excuse for a pale rhombus, he can't see a way out.

And now, on top of Aradia being a flighty death fairy who heralds the apocalypse on a regular basis, he has to deal with these two bitches. He's had to change phase the hard way multiple times since Kanaya called in this particular favor, and it's all their fault. The next time Kanaya tries to dump a load of grubshit in the form of fucking psychotic anti-heroes on him, he's telling her exactly where she can stick it.

Of course, this being Canada, the man behind the counter at the last Tim Hortons Sollux visits is more worried about Vriska than the fact that she just pulled a one-troll rager on his store. "Is she upset about something?" he asks after he points Sollux toward the massive fucking hole blown in the wall. Like Sollux seriously needed help seeing it. "Seemed a bit distraught, you know."

"The' th being a little bitch, that' th all," Sollux mutters.

"You don't think that's a little harsh?"

"No."

The man hesitates, and then leans forward a little to whisper, "Are you upset about something?"

Sollux has lived in Canada his entire life. You'd think he'd be used to this by now, but no. "There's a rampaging thpider-obthessed shithead on the loose, and you're athking me if I'm upthet?"

"It's not the end of the world, really! I'm sure everyone in this neighborhood is covered in the event of a villainous breakdown - part of the health insurance package, these days - and the wall can always be fixed -"

"It is the end of the world! It literally is, tho do not even fuck with me right now!" Sollux snaps his fingers before the man can say anything. "No. Fucking zip it, aththhole. I'm going to fly out that hole in your wall, and you're going to jutht shut up for the retht of the day. One more word, one, and I will know."

The man has the gall to pantomime zipping his lips and tossing a key over his shoulder, looking concerned and bemused at the same time. Patronizing dick. Sollux floats out the busted wall in a crackle of sparks, and scowls at the smoke rising up from a building down the street. Between him and Vriska's latest target, an entire four way intersection has been taken out by a fallen set of street lights, and traffic is being politely rerouted away from the twisted metal and churned up rock by the cops. Canada is good at taking shit like this in stride, and it's maddening.

See, as it turn out, Vriska isn't a complete fucking technologically-inept moron. Terezi's been working her way through every single detective adventure game Sollux can get the grubmods for at the speed of light, but Vriska'd fooled him into underestimating her by acting like a sulky wriggler 24/7. He's had his psionics full keeping her and Terezi off each other, and in between the screaming fits and occasional partial nudity and Aradia being no fucking help at all, Vriska had the goddamn shame globes to secretly hack together a working ray gun.
Sollux should have known, should have fucking noticed when wires and shit start going missing, but he's also pretty sure he didn't even own half the materials she'd need to piece together a laser/blasting hybrid pistolkind in the apartment, so he refuses to take the fall for this one. Maybe if his head didn't hurt from hearing soon-to-be dead people all the time, he wouldn't have passed out in front of his latest attempt to track down the white-text asshole and woken up to Terezi shrieking in fury from the ablutions block, the door of which had been welded shut from the outside.

Anyway. Note to self: Vriska's villain game is on point today. Even if her actions thus far have been restricted to demanding people empty their cash registers and provide her with extra-large iced lattes and espresso shots, she's also doing a really fucking good job of making a spectacle of herself by blowing shit up, and that's the kind of publicity that she and Terezi don't need.

She's knocking up a fourth coffee shop when he buzzes in on the descent, the Dark Horse Espresso Bar on Queen West. She's slashed through the hanging overhead lights, dumped creamer and sugar packets from the side table all over the floor, and driven most of the patrons and their laptops into the back corner. One poor asshole is cowering behind the coatrack by the front window, surrounding by shattered glass.

This is bad. She's switched from Tim Hortons to the hipster shitholes. Sollux can't tell if this is supposed to be an upgrade or a dramatic, hundred-foot existential nosedive into the heretofore untapped depths of even lower standards.

She's also wearing his pants. He knows this because she's leaning over the counter with her ass jutting out, acting for all the world like she's capable of pulling off seductive when she's wearing grubsauce-stained skinny jeans.

And the thing is, she can.

Jesus FUCK, is that irritating.

She's on her seventh espresso shot when she finally glances at him, her eyes hooded but glitteringly manic as she slams the cup down against the counter eight times. She does that, the eight thing, and Sollux knows a compulsive habit when one insists on him removing one of the hooks holding up the shower curtain because 'Nine? Talk about uncool! Soooooooo lame!'

"You caught up! It's about time, Sssssollux," Vriska says, hissing because she thinks mocking Sollux's lisp will bother him enough that he'll kick her out. She wraps jittery claws around another cup of coffee, and he does not want to know how many multiples of eight she's gone through by now. He's been on caffeine benders before, and it's never a pretty sight. "Wow, Terezi's not with you? Mark me down as surprised!" She salutes him with the coffee and chugs it before he can stop her. The makeshift ray gun belted at her side shifts with the slide of her hips as she turns to sit on the counter.

"Yeah, becauthue you fucked up the bathroom door, you piethe of thhit!" He probably could have torn the door off and let TZ out, but then she'd have come tearing after Vriska herself. At least this way one of these fools is on fucking lockdown. "What part of 'low profile' did you mithth out on?"

She smacks her lips as she pulls the cup away, then purses them as though pretending to consider the question. "Boooowooooring!" she announces at last, drawing the gun from her side and tapping it against her forehead eight times before leveling it at him. "I can't sit on my ass all day in a dive like that! I'd rather do something!"

Her mutant eye has a bead on Sollux, the sun tattoo crinkled up as she grins. But he's also pretty sure that in a contest between a dodgy ray gun and high level psionics, psionics win. Not even a fucking
question. He's dragging Vriska back home one way or another; the only real question is, how many pictures are going to be reposted all over the internet before he can shut this down and wipe the electronic evidence.

Sollux's thinking that, and opening his mouth to sigh and try to use logic on Vriska one last time - a stupid idea at the best of times - when she shoots him.

The ambient crackle of psionics braces him, so at least the concussive force of whatever the hell she's firing doesn't liquefy his organs. But it flings him backward out of the cafe anyway, and he crashes into a display of flower bouquets and cartons of oranges sitting outside the fruit market across the street.

"I'd rather fight you!" Vriska shouts delightedly over the sounds of a fruit avalanche settling. Sollux groans and grinds the heel of his palm into his forehead, and gets a whiff of pure, unadulterated, freshly juiced oranges just as the impression of dozens of crushed citrus corpses start to bruise his back. He's going to reek of oranges for weeks.

Having processed this shitty revelation, Sollux raises his head to glare at Vriska. And possibly to fry her ass. His back aches as he raises an arm writhing with red and blue psionic discharge to retaliate.

Vriska races forward, leaping over the jagged edges of the broken front window with both legs tucked up under her, like a fucking wriggler jumping rope. More tellingly, the manic grin on her face has transitioned into something resembling transcendent glee when she sees him, a brightness in her eyes as just the tip of a chipped fang peeks out over her lower lip. She tries to school it into her usual smirk of cool arrogance, but she doesn't fire again or try to dodge.

She's waiting for him to respond. Because this is Vriska, and she wants a fucking fight. She wants to be entertained, and Vriska probably gets off on this kind of bullshit. Jesus fuck, that's what set her and Terezi off on their dumbass rampage in the first place.

Well, she wants to fucking go?

...

No, fuck this. He did not wake up this morning to deal with this. Sollux drops his hand and grunts, levitating so he can stand upright without all the useless bullcrap of sitting up with a back full of bruises, and singes the shredded flower petals all over his body with a lightly applied jolt of electricity. He's never hurt himself with his own psionics; it just kind of tickles.

Then he deliberately turns his back on Vriska and starts walking away.

Because you know what? Sometimes, you just gotta look inside yourself and say, what am I willing to put up with today?

Not. Fucking. This.

"Sollux?" Vriska's put out. She stomps after him, and he suspects she's doing it on purpose so that he can hear every footstep. Does she try to piss everyone off like this? "Hey! Athhhhhhole! Don't you walk away from me!" That last part ends on a tiny shriek and a clatter of glass, and he thinks she might have slipped on broken window in her haste to follow him.

He looks back at her, grimacing, but she's already righted herself and is desperately attempting to look cool, striking an obnoxious pose when she catches his eye. Her posturing is fucking blatant. "No. Fuck you. I'm going to go home and thhower, because I'm covered in dead orange jizz and that'th where I draw the goddamn line."
Vriska splutters. When he shrugs and rolls his eyes, adjusting his glasses on his nose, she raises her ray gun and blasts the nearest stop sign - possibly because it's a convenient target, but more likely because it fits the eight theme.

Fucking spiderbitches and their fucking tantrums. Sollux isn't going to fucking indulge her attention-seeking shithive antics anymore. He shrugs and shakes his head. "Whatever. Thee you at home, if you feel like calming your bulge and acting fucking thivilized."

She stamps her foot. "What kind of a hero even are you?!"

Sollux raises a single eyebrow. "A shitty one. Obviouthly."

"This is pretty fucking weaksauce, Sollux! Do you hear me?! WEAK. SAUCE!" Another blast fires at him, but this time Sollux is prepared, wrapping himself in psionics to hold him in place until the concussive force expends itself trying to shove him backward. Vriska throws her hands out to the sides, beseeching, vaguely desperate as she raises her eyebrows and invites him to hit back. From this distance, her tattoo looks like a permanent black eye.

He floats into the air and starts drifting up and away.

He hears the crunch of metal clattering against the road, and he thinks she's thrown the ray gun down. "You have to stop me! Are you seriously going to just leave me here? I'll blow your fucking city to hell and back! Don't you float away, Sollux!"

He gives her a middle claw, one courtesy of each hand, and then he jets out of there like a fucking Lockheed Blackbird.

"LAAAAAAAAAME!" Vriska shrieks at his back. The last time he looks back, she kicks the ray gun against the wall in a fit of sullen rage and stomps off down the road with her hands in the pockets of his pants. Probably off in search of another coffee shop to continue with the eights.

Fine. He hopes she gets fucking arrested. Even if it means he needs to pay to bail her ass out, because Kanaya would be pissed if he left half of her greycrush to rot in jail or get deported, it will be worth it.

When he gets home, he only remembers Terezi's welded into the ablutions block when he's already ripped the door off the hinges. His apartment has transformed over the course of the past few days from a den of computer hacking iniquity to a certifiable disaster zone, so what's another ruined door, honestly. His head aches, he has the weirdest urge to bifurcate his mind and put half of it to sleep so he can dream, and he smells like a rotting orange orchard.

He stares. Terezi stares back. She's got one foot through the tiny half of the horizontal window that slides open a few inches from the ceiling, a death grip on the ominously-bent shower head, and another foot on the soap shelf. She's basically doing the splits.

...Legislacerators.

"This is exactly what it looks like," Terezi says.

"Oh, no," Sollux says, rolling his eyes. He shuffles in, tugging at the back of his shirt and ignoring the mirror, which cracked into five pieces after the second time Terezi threw Vriska up against it in the middle of the night, and then into eight after Vriska got the brilliant idea to carefully snap more shards for the sake of her goddamn neuroses. "Ugh. VK'll be back. Later."

Terezi's nostrils flare. Probably trying to sniff out a lie. Sollux has no fucking idea what a lie smells
like, but he thinks it's the scent of his fresh orange garnish that makes her wrinkle up her nose and stick out her tongue in a silent 'bleh.' "Where is she?" she demands, grunting and bouncing on her toes as she attempts to retract the foot that's halfway out the window. "What happened?"

"Probably in another fucking Tim Hortons by now, giving herthelf caffeine poitioning. Jutht leave her alone, TZ."

Terezi somehow manages to hop down nimbly without completely tenta-bagging herself, cackling as she executes the maneuver, but the expression on her blank-eyed face still has the edge of burgeoning irritation that could easily flare up into caliginous mutiny at any moment when she lands in the shower in a crouch. That's the problem, really - everything Vriska does infuriates the tealblood. She's worse than Sollux with improperly looped mortumatrices in an ~ATH workaround; she just can't let it go. "You're letting her run around without supervision?" she asks accusingly, clapping her hands to her cheeks. "When the jury hasn't even reached the verdict?!

"Yeah, well, we're trying thomething new, thince nothing else hath worked to get her to act like a rational excuthe for a troll," Sollux says, rolling his shoulders with a slight crack. "Now pithth off and thtay in the apartment while I shower."

Terezi wavers, and he can see her thinking it over. Her eyes, even when they're not hidden behind red lenses, don't give much of a hint to the inner workings of her crackpot Legislacerator brain.

(They do things to the law enforcement down in America, Sollux figures. Mess with their heads so that all they can think about is the law. He's a minor conspiracy theory buff, and he's pretty sure Canada's unshaven neckbeard is essentially a cesspool of carapacian cover-ups and secret lowblood hemotype cullings, courtesy of the Condesce. Or possibly her Heiress. The forums tend to vacillate between hailing Feferi Peixes as the next great tyrian empress, destined to break Her Imperious Condescension's cult of personality, and claiming she's a villain masquerading as a hero with plans to unleash untold horrors on the world that would make the Condesce look tame.

The point is, the idea that Legislacerators are weaned on mind-altering drugs and legalese textbooks isn't all that far-fetched in comparison.)

If it were Vriska, he wouldn't trust her alone in the apartment without Aradia around to keep watch. But Vriska is Vriska and she still doesn't seem to have processed the fact that the shitstorm down in Chicago had serious consequences. Terezi is irritating as well, but in entirely different ways, and Sollux has learned that as long as Vriska's not in sight, her self-control vastly improves to the point where she's not necessarily a danger to herself or others. At least she thinks about things before she does them - unlike Vriska, who has no fucking filter, Terezi likes following the letter of the law.

Her law, though, not necessarily anyone else's.

"The prosecution will refrain from cross-examining the witness until he has returned to his usual appleberry blast aroma," Terezi announces, and Sollux groans because oh fuck, the lawyer roleplaying shit is back. It's the most irritating thing about Terezi, hands down, because she's definitely rebounding from having fucked up her shot at being a full-blown Lacerator. FLARPing is bullshit unless you're, like, thirteen years old and stupid or forty and desperate, but Terezi seems to have missed that memo. "Otherwise the testimony may be compromised and rendered inadmissible in a court of law."

"Thure. Thwell. Thankth. Now get outta my shower." Sollux reaches out with a claw and sparks the wheel of the shower until it twists, dousing Terezi with a sudden blast of Ontario's finest ice water. She yelps, scrambling to catch herself on the towel rack, and drags herself out of the shower with her hair sopping wet.
But she's a coldblood. Ice cold for Sollux is her lukewarm; when she shakes her head vigorously, splattering the walls and mirror and Sollux with spray, it's with a smirk rather than a glower. "A brief recess!" she counters, laughing at his face when he grimaces. "And I demand that we order something other than Chinese!"

"I have exactly two fucks left to give today, and neither of them have been allocated to what we eat," Sollux grumps, stripping off his shirt. Terezi still here, but she's claimed to have gotten a whiff of him naked already anyway (because Terezi is the creepyass one, not Vriska, surprisingly), and again, neither of those fucks are given about anything to do with his two houseguests.

True to form, Terezi notes the movement immediately, a shit-eating grin spreading across her face as she pretends to leer at him. "Oh ho! Res ipsa loquitur - what a bod!"

"I don't even want to know what you think you're thmelling." Sollux flicks a towel at her, but she dodges with unnerving ease, all of her pointy teeth bared as she darts out of the bathroom. "Go heat up leftoverth or thomething."

Not without one final closing statement. "So many citrusy bruises! Let me smell that rebuttal!"

"Out." He picks up the door with the awesome power of his mind and wedges it into place between him and Terezi.

He swears. Sometimes it's like both of them are actively trying to goad him. He'd rather saw both his bulges off with a nail file than put up with this much longer. All he wants is for his contact in the Territories to report back to him so he can get these two assholes out of his life and focus on shit that really matters.

Aradia is still missing several hours later, when Vriska comes slinking back in like a final nesting parenthesis that fucked off and shit all over the algorithm. It's dark outside when the door creaks open, and Sollux is so deep in shoveling through another of the white-text guy's impossible loops that he barely spares her a nod when the ceruleanblood peeks her head in. He thinks he's caught on to the secret of this asshole's programming, and to be fair, it's something that should have melted any grub processor that tried to run it. This guy's dividing by zero and using Earth's deathdate as the source of his loops all over the friggin' place, a deliberate clusterfuck crafted with such delicate skill and precision that Sollux thinks he's dealing with a goddamn ~ATH savant. It should be impossible to kludge together solutions in such a nit-picky language like ~ATH, but this guy does it with finesse.

This guy is smart. Sollux, of course, is smarter. He's starting to catch on to the quirky, buggy breaks in the code, the shadowy, uncertain voids where white-text's bullshit gets uncertain and iffy. He thinks he's covered all his bases? He fucking well hasn't. Sollux estimates that he might have this guy's shit cracked in a matter of weeks. Longer than he'd like, but there are extenuating circumstances.

One of whom just walked in the door, smelling vaguely singed, and is now just standing in the open doorway like a useless lump. Sollux finally looks up and sees that Vriska is in a state of disarray. Her hair is raked back, but he can see the blue dye at the ends where she apparently found the time and motivation to threaten some poor hair stylist out there into dying it ombre. One of her sleeves has been ripped off - thankfully not the one with the really fucking noticeable spider web tat - but he knows track marks and he can't spy any, so at least she wasn't off getting fucked up on anything harder than caffeine.

She's also no longer wearing his pants. He has no idea whose pants those are. He doesn't even want to know where his pants ended up.
Seriously. Did she just flip through a rebellious pupa manual and pick whatever looked most cliché?

"...Heyyyyyyyy," she says hesitantly, looking around with shifty eyes as she skulks into the apartment, jamming the door shut behind her and sidestepping a silicomb mainframe. She's got the twitchy look of someone still coming down off a caffeine binge, one thumb tapping out sequences of eight against her thigh with obsessive rapidity. "Uh. So. M'back!" She claps her hands together and saunters in, eyes darting back and forth as though she can’t tell where to focus next.

"Cool thory, VK," he says, turning back to his main husktop. "The chicken nugth are on the stove. Spithy ketchup'th back in the fridge if you want it. Now thhut up, it'th quiet hacking time."

"Did either of you even miss me?!" Vriska demands.

"Like tooth decay," Sollux mutters. He can already feel a Vriska migraine coming on, just when he'd thought the spicy ketchup Terezi insisted on slurping down in huge quantities had cleared his sinuses right out.

"I could have been robbing a bank or shooting up in city hall! How dare you ignore me!" Vriska pouts, flinging her hair back out of her face with a dramatic flip.

That's the thing with Vriska. She's always got to be the center of attention. She has to be important.

She's really not. Sollux gives her another absent-minded middle claw, just as Terezi stalks out of the kitchen like a bloodhound on the scent. "So! The guilty party returns!" the teablue declares, weaving through discarded gamegrubs and mods scattered across the floor. "Was that already a confession I heard? What's all this about grand larceny, Serket?"

Vriska sneers, folding her arms over her chest. "Wouldn't you like to know, Tereeeeeezi. You should have come after me if you cared so much!"

"Don't anthswer that," Sollux interrupts before Terezi can reply.

Terezi opens her mouth.

"Don't you even fucking dare. Talk about anything elthe if you want, but do not fucking enable her."

Now they're both pouting, Vriska with disappointment at having her center of attention gambit imploded, and Terezi at a missed opportunity to engage in yet another courtroom reenactment. Then the two of them exchange glances, sour and challenging, and Sollux heaves a sigh, gearing himself for another psionic intervention if they can't keep their claws off each other. If they want to fight again, they can take it to the goddamn roof top and stop bifuckating all his sensitive equipment with their attempted hate-sexscapades.

Terezi shrugs, but instead of lunging, she steps to the side so that Vriska has a clear path to the kitchen. "Also, I ate the last of the ketchup," she says, licking her lips for emphasis. "It was delicious!"

Vriska snorts, and tosses her hair again, striding past Terezi and into the tiny kitchen. "That's gross, Pyrope. Talk about nasty!" she yells, banging the sheet pan full of dinosaur chicken nuggets against the stove as she transfers them all onto a not-filthy plate.

"You just envy my discerning sense of taste!" With that, Terezi jams herself up onto one of the gaming seats next to Sollux and started up the ancient husktop that hosts all the troll Nancy Drew games a law fanatic could ever fap to. It also has an ongoing Zoo Tycoon run-through in which a single gazelle is standing trial for murder before a jury of its peers and an elephant playing stand in
for His Honorable Tyranny, but she bypasses both in favor of grabbing a gaming grub at random and feeding it into the slot.

At least they're not trying to strangle each other again. He can ignore the annoying banter more easily than he can the tantrums that crush mainframes and slice through power cords. Sollux turns back to the streams of white coding on the center screens and cracks his knuckles to start in on another round of bifurcated code to crack how the white-text douche fucked over Pesterchum to reach RS.

"I can't belieeeeeeve you would just leave me alone like that, Sollux!" Vriska hunkers down on the floor somewhere behind Sollux, fiddling with the television and banging on it with mounting frustration until Sollux hits the right button with psionics to make her stop breaking his shit. "Thanks. But seriously! Talk about rude, I mean - what if I got lost or something!"

"You wouldn't get fucking lotht for long." No, he'd given hope of that ever happening days ago.
"Thith ith fucking Canada. Jutht go to anyone on the threet and they'd probably offer to pay your cab fare to get you back here. Or jutht drive you over themthelves..."

"But you ignored me! I thought Aradia said you were Gemini - what kind of hotshot hero just leaves an unstable person like me alone like that!" Vriska hits the back of Sollux's chair with her horns when she leans back. She does it eight times, which means he gets jolted eight times. Fucking asshole. "Maybe next time I won't be so nice, and I'll hurt someone!"

"As if the prosecution would stand by while you committed more criminal acts," Terezi shoots back, licking the computer screen with a teal-grey tongue and leaving a trail of slobber all down the front of Phoenix Wright's snappy red tie.

"Firht of all, that name ith fucking shit. I don't have a thtupid name like you two dickth," Sollux says, because it's the truth. Aradia came up with that stupid nickname, not him, and he'll deny it to his dying day. "And thecond, I could kick the shit out of you, VK, remember? Don't even tempt me."

"I got you today! I totally did! Everyone saw it!" Vriska insists, imperious and proud. "I think it would be closer than you think in a real fight!"

Sollux pinches the bridge of his nose, and contemplates drowning himself in the recooperacoon. One of these days it has to work, right? "Oh. My god. Like anyone actually even giveth a shit. They jutht wanted you to thtop blowing up wallth like a fucking villainouth loon." He fucks up and mangles a DIS* patch in the code, and nearly tosses that particular computer through the wall. "Not everything'th a fucking piththing contest."

"I know that! Obviously, duh!" Vriska slumps further down against the back of Sollux's chair, sullenly popping chicken nuggets into her mouth. "Whatever. I'm just the stupid crazy one, right? What do I know?"

"You're not stupid, Vriska. Sometimes you're one of the most clever people I know!" Terezi leans over her husktop, nose almost pressed to the screen, but Sollux keeps an eye on her anyway, because he has no idea where this conversation is going and it could erupt into a free-for-all at any moment. "You just have no moral compass, and that makes you one of the most dangerous people I know, too!"

"And you love it!" Vriska fires back. "How else would we keep this rivalry interesting?! Especially now that you don't want to bring the Scourge Sisters to this dumb, boring place."

"We can't do that again, Vriska." Terezi shoves the husktop off her lap and whirls, claws clenched.
Sollux stands up from his seat and slams her back down into the gaming chair with red lightning. That dazes her for a second, but she's still talking over the buzz of psionics. "I wanted - if I thought we could control it, maybe, if we didn't get so caught up in ourselves that we could keep from breaking the law, but - we were all over the place! I couldn't control myself, and I couldn't control you." There's silence as Terezi lowers her head, shaking it, and then, "You need a moirail for that, I think. You really, really do. But I can't be one for you. I hate you too damn much." By the end, the anger in her voice is a low simmer, but she's also gone quiet.

"Yeah, well. Like I'd want your fucking pity, anyway," Vriska stutters, jaw clenching. The plate is cracked down the middle in her jittery claws, so that's another one for the trash, but she hasn't thrown it yet. "I'm too badass to be pathetic. So that one's out the window!" She forces an ugly laugh for eight breaths, and then goes silent, darting a narrow-eyed look in Sollux's direction as though expecting him to give a fuck.

Well. He hadn't intend to. But Jesus FUCK, these two are irritating enough that he's actually going to have to get their shit together for them -

Oh no.

They irritate him. Constantly. Terezi's been prodding at his bruises all evening long, and now her horn is jabbing into his side while she hauls ass through Ace Attorney. Vriska's sighing profusely but complaining about not understanding a word on Sollux's husktop screens rather than jibing at Terezi to provoke a reaction. He hasn't had to separate the two of them in ages. Terezi's head cocked in his direction like a curious lizard, hesitation written into every line of her angular body as the two coldbloods eye him sideways.

...Oh, shit.

This isn't a feelings jam.

This is an irritation slam.

Terezi's airing of grievances has been so persistently disguised in lawyerese all afternoon long, he hadn't even really noticed when Vriska started vexairing too. But they're not trying to needle each other, not outright. They may not be able to help hating each other so desperately, but they can complain in front of him, to him, and expect him to play umpire.

And he's been doing it.

...

“You are both,” he says through gritted teeth, “tho annoying.”

Kanaya is going to fucking murder him.

-

Sollux only intends to put half his brain to sleep, but that hasn't been working as well as it used to lately. He has fucked up dreams. Or maybe just dreams that he's not allowed to remember. Whichever it is, a lot of the time, sleep is an all or nothing shtick - no amount of bifurcating his thought processes will keep part of his mind awake so he can code late into the night. Just another reason why his productivity has slowed to a fucking crawl, naturally.

He thinks he remembers a slurred dream that makes his head ache, but the fleeting memory vanishes when a heavily curled horn smacks against his chest with a painful thump. "Aradia, get off," he
hisses, shoving at the other horn jabbing up against his chin. "Not now, I'm trying to work."

"You were asleep, Sollux," she says, her voice low but laughing. "Auspicism is tiring, I see."

"How do you even know about that thhit?" Sollux stares up at the ceiling, massaging the tiny indents in his nose where his glasses dug in. "Where've you been all day, even?"

"Things have been accelerating. There's so much to do, and so little time, even for me..." She trails off, and a wandering claw traces a line down the side of Sollux's neck. It makes him settle back, but he's also sick at the touch of it. Ghosts have followed on Aradia's heels, as usual, and he can hear them, the broken screams and abrupt terror before they cut off. They fill the apartment like a cool fog, and for a moment Aradia's body feels ice cold instead of rustblood hot. The impression passes, but Sollux shivers anyway.

"Neither Eridan nor Feferi are doing well at all," she continues, and Sollux sets his head back down, reluctant but lured into the dim calm of a feelings jam all the same. "The Horrorterrors were always going to be an unknown factor in how things play out, but there were consequences to how we scratched the sessions. One was enough to sabotage everything. Now there are three of them with an unnatural focus on our game, and it might be three too many..."

"Thhit. I thought you said that Eridan dumbathth was getting his thhit together." Sollux draws his phone out of his pocket and thumbs his way to the LA news. Generally, when Aradia has shitty news, it means something else has blown up spectacularly.

"It won't make the news. He's maintaining a dome of his own now, under his own power." Aradia shifts, sighing with deep discontent. Sollux pats her elbow, and she takes it as permission to bury her face in his chest. "The Prince is awake. That never ends well. And I fear Feferi has lost her way."

"The Heirethth who's actually our friend who's altho Nymph or whatever the hell she's calling herself these dayth?" Sollux rolls his eyes. "What, is she actually a villain mathquerading as a hero with planth to unleash untold horrorth on the world?"

"Possibly."

"...I fucking knew it."

"We have the four of us safe, here," Aradia continues, slow and steady, her claws now tracing unfamiliar patterns on his scalp that might be letters in another language. "Equius and Nepeta are well. But Tavros and Gamzee are in the wind again, aiming for Karkat the last I heard. With Gamzee you can simply never tell."

A text message bar appears across the phone screen. Sollux runs his tongue tips over his teeth and scowls at the handle, wondering if he should even bother opening it. Dad is also acting really fucking weird lately. Weirder than usual. Of course, he's a fucking mob boss of some kind, so maybe he's just in some kind of tense shit that's actually managed to crack his creepy, good-natured happiness.

Fuck it. He hasn't heard from the midget asshole custodian in almost a day, ever since the first weird texts started, and he might as well bite the bullet until Aradia finishes jamming.

CD: c3- And how are you feeling, son?
TA: that'2 2eriou2ly iit?
TA: 24 hour2 of radiio 2iilence and that'2 all you've got two 2ay?
CD: c3- Oh? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you.
CD: c3- There was an unfortunate oc3c3uranc3e at work the other day, but everything is fine now.
TA: do ii even want two know?
CD: c3- Oh, I c3ouldn't tell you even if you wanted to know!
TA: what. 2iince when do you not want two hiint at riidiiculou2ly 2tupiid criimiinal activiitiie2 and go22iip at me when ii clearly don't care?
CD: c3- Things are different now, son! I've had to c3hange some things around, but everything is still awesome!
CD: c3- I have to go now. Lots of work to c3omplete before HB and DD get bac3k.
CD: c3- Goodbye!
TA: ...well that'2 not fuckiing weiird at all.

"Trouble?"

"Probably not," Sollux says. "My custodian' th a fucking weird guy, that' th nothing new. I'm thtill lighthening, go on."

Aradia giggles, shaking her head. He gets a mouthful of her wild hair. It tastes stranger than usual - because mouthfuls of hair are sadly fucking common occurrences when your dark moirail has curls for days and days - not like ashes and graveyard dirt, but like...something. Sollux doesn't really get out much aside from trips that are absolutely necessary for work or supplies, but he thinks it tastes like how the wind sometimes smells when there's rain coming. Not cold enough for snow, definitely.

"I flew to Seattle. What I found was...troubling," she says at last. "Gamzee is not there yet, or I'm sure things would have deteriorated even further, but there's a storm gathering."

"Well that' th juht th vague enough to mean nothing at all."

"It means that there are six players in one location, four of them a complete game team, and they should be more than capable of staying safe for now." Aradia squirms and lies on her back, one hand coming up to card her curls out of her face and rest in a fist against her forehead. "They've left John's home, but...something is wrong. The wind is all wrong. I can tell, and it's not even my aspect. Check the news for me, I haven't had the opportunity."

"Thure, you got it." Sollux has learned to infer from Aradia's astoundingly vague hints what she's really asking for, so he searches 'strange wind weather seattle' and waits for the server to respond. "Uh. Unusually thtrong wind warnings and a poththible fire watch if it keepth up."

"Arē nahī." Aradia's gleaming eyes close, her lined face lit eerily by the phone screen. "I worry about John. He is not well, and has not been for some time. When a god tier is not well..."

"We're fucked?"

Aradia is quiet too long. Great.

"Potentially," she says at last. "Anyway you look at it, the more players they have clustered together, the stronger they become. With as many multipliers as they must have in play, they've all got quite a bit of influence on their surroundings - but that means the more distressed someone becomes, the more things could go catastrophically wrong. In John's case, it might not stop at strong winds, not with the ocean so close by."

"Tho what do we do?"

Aradia sighs.

"We watch. And we wait. And we hope to Bilious himself it doesn't get worse."
22,226 miles above the Equator (Medium Earth Orbit)

He is never trusting kind, unassuming alien beetle women ever again.

Andrew Hussie has spent the past few weeks sifting the chaff of his subconscious and coming to the conclusion that nothing could possibly be more stupid than being trapped in the upstairs of your questionably furnished vacation home as it drifts through the impenetrably dim recesses of space. Rather like a sweet, sweet hippocampus majestically frolicking through the ocean, he is aimless, in possession of lips luscious and pouting enough to make Liv Tyler herself weep delicious tears of envy, and oh, right, so far removed from the rest of civilization that not even Amazon will ship to his place of residence.

You could try to think of something dumber than this. You would not succeed.

And now this. How does he always end up stuck taking care of incredibly dangerous dependents, anyway? At this rate, he's going to run out of clean, unbefouled copies of his own merchandise to wear, and what will he do when that happens? Ms Paint kept the downstairs washer and dryer in the completely unanticipated house/rocket divorce, bless her well-meaning heart, and he ran out of clean underwear days ago. The situation has become dire.

It's only for a few more weeks, he tells himself as he shuffles down the hallway, except oh wait, with that new shithead in charge of the narrative he has no idea how long it'll take for those weeks to pass. Time wasn't exactly in a good place to begin with, thanks to that whole Lord of Time business, and now it can take months from an outsider's perspective to get through a few measly days. Clearly standards have slipped since he was in charge of things - why, back in his day, he could update ten times in one day and still have time to order the butler to harass the neighbors -

Muttering to himself, Andrew Hussie nudges the door open with his shoulder and walks in digging into his hoodie pocket for the bottle. "Alright," he mumbles, looking up at last, "you smartass little - oh SHIT."

He has walked into the wrong room. A vaguely menacing wolf's head hangs on the wall, staring off into the middle distance. Outside, in the empty recesses of space, lightning flashes, casting the ominous wall decoration into sharp relief. Never mind that lightning in space should be physically impossible; sweating, Andrew Hussie backs slowly out of the room and slams the door violently behind him. "Why do I even have that room?" he wonders aloud. "No one even likes that room."

Contemplating this, he scurries along to the next door. He's not sure how he keeps mixing the two up. It gives him a fucking heart attack every time he sees that stupid wolf head, and one day he swears to Rufio he will torch the thing and use the fire to cook his last package of Hot Pockets and imbue them with essence of dire wolf.

There is no way that this plan can go wrong. It is absolutely foolproof.

The problem is, he's nearly as terrified of what lies behind door number two as he is of that shitty decapitated wolf head. So by the time he stops admiring the rainbow-filters and galaxy overlay of the self-portrait hanging in the hallway - he's calling this beautifully ironic series 'the Husselflies of Yore' - he can already hear a faint whine emanating from behind the door. It's bolted shut and it takes him a full two minutes to undo all the locks and remember where he left that last key (tucked into his shoe, in the curve of his instep), so the plaintive screech has reached an inhuman pitch that makes his kidneys ache when he throws the door open.

On the desk where his keyboard used to rest, a swaddled creature wails and punches a crabbed fist in
the air.

Part of the wall immediately to his left dents outward with a clang.

Thank god whatever dear Ms Paint used to reinforce this tin can for space flight can take a punch or three, because the walls are riddled with concave hollows and deep gouges, and Andrew is pretty sure that the structural integrity of a regular house would have given out weeks ago. One day, he is going to find the person who saddled him with this thing, and he is going to lecture them sternly.

The Waste of Space gulps, raises the bottle before him like a shield, and edges into the room.

The door slams shut behind him.

-Somewhere in Houston, Texas-

Ms Paint cannot deny that she's starting to wonder whether the man who lived upstairs might not have skipped a few key events while he was ranting - er, relating his idea for the past, present, and future to her. He's always been a little bit of an odd-ball, that one, but things have been going south ever since he started complaining that "none of this has anything to do with the actual comic" and "I think I'm going to take a break to work on the game" and "Ms Paint, have you been adding things to my summaries?" and "why in the name of Ryan's little fish in trousers is some moirallegiance obsessed pervert dicking around with causality?" and then, finally, "what the actual fuck has she done to it oh my god."

...Humans can be quite strange. And when a Waste of Space starts to lose track of his own narrative, nothing good can come of it. They can never directly interfere with the story themselves - oh no, that would be cheating! But they can suggest and narrate and guide, and the fact that the poor orange man seems to have lost his sense of where this offshoot narrative begins and ends can mean nothing good for anyone.

Unfortunately, her new host isn't handling the class much better. Ms Paint did manage to find her in spite of the man's many handwaves while he was attempting to explain where exactly she was supposed to go, but now neither Ms Paint nor her host have any clue what the carapacian is supposed to do next! The man upstairs isn't responding to Ms Paint when she tries to contact him, and though that worries her, she's certain that he can take care of himself for a while longer. But, ooooh! He is getting a stern lecture about keeping in touch when she sees him next!

(It has not yet occurred to Ms Paint that, perhaps, cell phone service is not a universally available phenomena, particularly not when one has been ejected from the surface of the planet and left to dangle in orbit around the planet. In the Medium, one has access to the cosmically generated wireless network of the great game at all times, and when that fails, it is always possible to procure the services of an intrepid Postal shell. The idea that a phone might not work just because of a little thing like exiting the planet's atmosphere is not one that a caparacian would even think to contemplate, and even if one did, would find ludicrously counterintuitive.

...Aliens.)

The door opens with a rattle and a click, and the hook rack loaded with random articles of clothing scrapes against the top of the door frame as her host laughs nervously and wedges herself through the small opening. Beyond the door, Ms Paint can make out the murmur of voices and the louder blare of human pop music emanating from one of the rooms down the hall before her host once again jams the door shut, whirling to face Ms Paint with a mug of tea in each claw. "He's not even studying for
his exams," the troll hisses, holding the blue and white striped mug out for Ms Paint to take and gloowering darkly back at the closed door. "Just sitting there blasting music and watching Kill la Kill. That ass."

MP: O-oh! Is that a bad thing?

"It's an annoying thing." The troll snorts and perches cross-legged on her bed, dragging the laptop over to boot it up as she stares wistfully at the door. "God, I wish I had time to watch Kill la Kill."

MP: That is a shame. I'm sorry, dear.

Her host waves a claw absently, rubbing at the furrow between her brows with the ball of her thumb and grimacing. "Not your fault. With any luck, he'll go to campus to get actual work done and then you can actually, you know, leave this room for a while."

Ms Paint nods and wraps both claws around the mug of tea, her lips clicking against the rim of the glass as she drinks. The tea is milky and sugary to the point that it is essentially hot flavored sugar water, but there's nothing wrong with that.

Her host's name is Zachal Keynai and Ms Paint had journeyed here expecting someone...a little different! The way the man upstairs had put it, this troll was supposed to understand her plight and be willing to provide shelter for her.

Well, yes, Zachal had been more than willing to invite Ms Paint in - but the man had somehow failed to mention that this temporary safe house would also be occupied by two other trolls, neither of whom Zachal is willing to let know that she is harboring a carapacian in her bedroom. "Midere is a gossipy bastard. Paimah is in some kind of threeway matespritship and she tells them everything," the troll had explained that first night, looking haunted. "They can never know."

It all seems a little over the top to Ms Paint, but who is she to question her newest patron? They all have their strange quirks and annoyances, none of which really matter in the grand scheme of things - until suddenly they do.
They sit in silence for almost a half hour, Ms Paint occupying herself by glancing around the small room as her host casts increasingly twitchy looks at the closed door, through which the shuffle of people moving around can be heard. Any time footsteps come close to the door Zachal tenses, but no one comes in. The front door squeaks open and someone calls a farewell that Zachal barely manages to return before the door swings shut with a thump.

"Finally," Zachal mutters, and she sets the computer aside to crack the door open and peer out into the rest of the apartment. "Coast is clear!"

MP: We may leave?

"Better! We can eat!" Zachal walks out, turns on her heel, walks back in, grabs her laptop, and sails right back out the door. Ms Paint follows in her wake, bemused and still holding her mug of tea, and the two go out into the main room. Most of the open space in the kitchen has been taken up with a patio table, complete with a beige umbrella that remains propped open despite the fact that they are indoors. The carapacian settles down on a seat beneath the patio table's umbrella while the troll rushes to the windows and draws the blinds shut, her laptop still tucked under her arm as she locks the patio door with a key. "Awesome. Cool. And those two shouldn't be back for a couple hours, at least."

Ms Paint shakes her head as Zachal sits across the table from her and cracks open the laptop again. The resident cat, an enormous creature, leaps up onto the table with a miserable meow and flops down across the flat surface, rolling its head to stare at Ms Paint with avid eyes. She has been warned against petting the creature, however, and she does not fall for the temptation presented when it butts its head against the hand curled around her tea.

Well. Perhaps she pets it once. Just once.

A few times. It purrs.

MP: You do not trust your roommates? Surely if you asked them to keep silent, they would not deliberately draw attention to me. If my presence is intruding on your daily life this way, I could try to seek shelter elsewhere -

Zachal is shaking her head before Ms Paint can even finish, scratching at a rust-colored scab that runs along the back of her forearm. "If you're here, you're here. 'Specially if that guy told you to come here," she says, shoving the cat's paw off her keyboard with a grimace. "We just keep you on the down low for as long as we can. It's the best we can do. I can see what those idiots are going to do pretty well, but as for us out here outside the main storyline?" She gestures vaguely with a claw, as though to indicate their immediate vicinity. "Total blank."

MP: How unfortunate.

"Tell me about it." Zachal gnaws on her lip, reading something on the computer screen with a look of resignation. "Help yourself to anything in the fridge - I might be a while."

Ms Paint hesitates, and leans to look at the computer. On it is an open word processor, covered with paragraphs and paragraphs of text.

MP: You have been working on the narrative all day. Should you not rest?

"Nah. I have to get this down. Have to." Zachal glowers at the screen. "Did that guy ever tell you what it's like, having to deal with all this in your head? It's a nightmare; you can't shake it off."

MP: He was usually very busy drawing small comics to accompany his narrative and wandering
around the house frightening himself every time he came across a decorative wolf's head. I just tended to fetch him what he needed before he could work himself into a panic, the poor fellow.

"Oh great, so it drove him nuts, too. That's reassuring."

The cat brushes its bush-like tail over the computer screen in an irritable sweep. Zachal eyes it sourly and moves the computer so that it rests almost on the very edge of the table, supported by her knees.

Ms Paint can only shake her head and scoot her chair around the corner of the table to get a better angle. "You're just gonna sit there and watch me type?" At Ms Paint's nod, Zachal sighs. "Alright. This recap is gonna be pretty shitty, though. I'm not that guy, there's only so much I can do before it just gets pretentious as fuck."

MP: I'm sure it will be fine!

Rolling her neck to one side until it gives a small pop, Zachal begins to type.

**In the words of the inestimable Charles Dutton, first Son of Skaia:**

In a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. For I have known them all already, known them all: have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons; I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.

Yeah, Dream Bubbles was a weird read, man. I only got through it because it was required in my literary criticism class and the professor was convinced the coffee spoons were phallic symbols or something.

Look, the point is, we are time's subjects, and time bids be gone.

Like One Sundered Star began July 4, 2013, a date which has absolutely no relation to the time frame of the story itself. The five heroes who take up the majority of the focus were introduced as they went about their days attending school, becoming horrendous drunkards, performing suitably ironic deeds, making new friends, blowing up volcanic islands, and fighting crime as masked (and unmasked) vigilantes. In Seattle, a troll named Karkat Vantas befriends the human John Egbert, who moonlights as the Heir of Breath, after being forced to move to the suburbs after being caught in the
middle of shootout. Unaware of his new friend's identity as the hero who rescued him the other night, Karkat is inspired to become a hero himself. In New York, Rose Lalonde spends her days fighting as the Seer of Light, but more and more often finds herself distracted by the mental whispers of the Horrorterror leψυαψην wildfire, who capitalizes on Rose's distress in order to lure her into the affectionate embrace of its otherworldly tentacles and make her a willing ςυλєвυץ in its nefarious schemes. In Houston, Dave Strider works with his abrasive elder brother/ectobiological father, Ambrose Strider, and ends up in a risky alliance with a mysterious Badass Quandary, who hurts as much as she helps in an oblique attempt to teach how to better exploit his powers over time. John Egbert, a boy plagued by anxiety and depression, relies more and more heavily on both his father and his new friend Karkat as he attempts to balance his everyday life and his heroic endeavors; though he and Karkat eventually form a moi̇allegiance, this places even more strain upon John, who starts to fret over the fact that he cannot distinguish between flushed and pale romantic feelings. Jade Harley lives alone except for her mysterious wolf guardian Becquerel, reading about the end of the world that is to come in her dead custodian's notes and pestering John's old chumhandle, unaware that he has changed it as she waits for the day that her training is complete and she can take on the world.

After an interval of approximately 18 months, Karkat makes his debut as the hero Hemogoblin, just in time for the nefarious Midnight Crew to begin to harass him and Heir in their efforts to spread their criminal enterprise into the Seattle area, spearheaded by the brutal Hearts Boxcars. Across the continent, Rose's Internet penpal and on-again-off-again girlfriend Kanaya Maryam tips her off to the fact that she has begun to lose time to her heavy drinking and has in fact been missing entire days of hero work. Unfortunately, before Kanaya can execute an intervention about Rose's drinking, an ill-timed note from Rose's long absent mother, Rue Lalonde, arrives through the efforts of an intrepid Parcel Mistress, providing the surge of fury and betrayal that finally allows the Horrorterrors to seize control of her mind and set her on a destructive collision course with the entire city of New York, channeling the powers of the Furthest Ring in an effort to open a summoning spirograph and bring the rest of leψυαψην into reality. Across the continent John, pushed to his emotional limit by a chat conversation with Dave's elder brother, accidentally taps into one of the abilities of a fully realized Heir of Breath and teleports to Houston to confront him. However, John understands very little about his own capabilities; something seems to be preventing him from thinking clearly about his powers and what they can do, and instead he is driven to either forget or to become emotionally distraught before his thoughts can linger too long over certain subjects. It is not a healthy state of mind, one which may have contributed to his depressive episodes and panic attacks in the past, but Dave, John, and Ambrose have bigger problems to deal with when Rue contacts them to request their assistance in stopping the grimdark Rose from tearing up New York City. Jade, in the meantime, has been crisscrossing the globe on a merry heroic road trip, when she stumbles upon a Wandering Variable who has somehow become quantumly desynchronized from the rest of reality, and sets out on a quest to perform SERIOUS SCIENCE in order to try and stabilize him, using her Grandpa/ectobiological father's science labs to analyze the situation.

In Seattle, Karkat, unaware that Heir has left the city, is drawn into a solo showdown with Hearts Boxcars when the Crew boss escapes from the police lockup, badly injuring Hemogoblin with a concealed pipe bomb in the process. Unaware that many of his skills as a non-god tier Knight of Blood are keyed to role playing scenarios in which he must act in defense of or service to another person that would max out his stats in Heir's presence, Karkat races to the docks to try to prevent Boxcars' escape from the city but fails, falling into the bay in humiliation and defeat. He returns home just in time to witness the televised battle between grimdark Rose, who has been labeled Dark Star by the media, and the three heroes who have just flown in from Houston to confront her. Rose, still trying to fend off the Horrorterrors from within her compromised mind, manages to sabotage the tangle's design for the summoning spirograph at the cost of the last of her mental strength. Dave takes advantage of his newly reclaimed ability to travel in limited time loops in order to rescue a class of
elementary schoolers and their teacher from the demolished Guggenheim. However, because the BQ has taught him a method of time travel that does not make use of the turntable accessories that would allow him to exploit time safely, he suffers through the memory of incredible pain whenever he accesses it, causing him to be distracted and then badly injured by Dark Star, and he falls unconscious in the middle of the fray. Ambrose and John must then spend the rest of the battle keeping Dave safe from the Dark Star tangle, which wishes to use Dave's body as a secondary vessel. Thankfully, John manages to apply Void-imbued cuffs created by Rue Lalonde and free more and more of Rose's mind from the grindark, and eventually Rose brings John into her mind to help free her mental avatar from the bloodbrine sea that has invaded it. While PM helps the four heroes abscond, Jade deals with missiles and ninjas sent to capture her by Clubs Deuce, one of the less subtle members of the Midnight Crew, before stabilizing the Wandering Variable and launching herself, WV, and Becquerel across the planet in the process.

Instead of sticking together and actually, you know, making an effort to find some answers about their situation, John, Dave, and Rose split up again. Rose only puts up with her mother's overbearing disdain long enough to put her mind in order before absconding from the safety of Lalonde Laboratories. She misses a grand opportunity to have all of her questions answered by the mysterious Wondering Querent, who has been working with Rue Lalonde for some time in an attempt to recreate a 'Queen's Hub,' and instead meets up with Kanaya in Philadelphia to restart work as the Seer with Kanaya's alter ego, the rainbow-drinking Malachite Sylph, present to keep Rose in check in the event either her latent alcoholism or her connection to the Horrorterrors overwhelms her once again. Unfortunately, both Rose and Dave come into contact with a dangerous being called Doc Scratch - Rose when Scratch takes advantage of Kanaya's poor Internet security to contact her on Pesterchum, and Dave when he stumbles across a floating cue ball in the streets, one that begins to watch his every move and slowly erode the ambient Void shielding that has protecting the four human heroes all their lives by observing him. This places both of them in grave danger, particularly when Doc Scratch uses his text connection with Rose to activate a second dormant cue ball already present in Kanaya's apartment. Neither Rose nor Dave seem to be able to take the cue balls seriously as a threat, and people tend to forget about them entirely when they are not visible, almost as though there is something uncanny about the cue balls that allows them to do their master's work unhindered and unnoticed by the rest of the universe. Like they themselves are the white text on the white screen of reality.

John returns to Seattle just in time to prevent Karkat from discovering his untimely absence, but his relationship with his father, Samuel Egbert, takes a blow over John's inadvertent repeat of an earlier incident in which he ran away to Houston. Father and adoptive son continue to clash uneasily when Karkat's alter ego, Hemogoblin, is accused by the police of having been responsible for the explosions at the police station that allowed Boxcars to escape, with John as Heir feeling an obligation to help his heroic partner and Samuel, who is already aware that Karkat is Hemogoblin, concerned that John has lost all moral objectivity about the troll. Neither Karkat, who is in the beginning stages of sleep deprivation and sopor slime withdrawal, nor John, torn between his father and his partner, are well equipped to handle the situation, but the two manage to get the job done with the help of Officer Greg Ellard of Seattle PD. The man who convinced the police chief of Hemogoblin's guilt is revealed to be "No Name Given" Crichton, a member of the Midnight Crew with a fanatical devotion to his boss, Diamonds Droog, and a talent for spreading misinformation about his targets. Though he surrenders without much of a fight, his presence in Seattle comes with the ominous promise that Diamonds Droog will soon arrive to finish the job that Boxcars started. Before they can process this, however, John and Karkat are blindsided by the arrival of Sharpshooter, aka Jade Harley, who announces herself as Heir's sister with aplomb. Fresh from being harried by Clubs Deuce across most of America and shaken by an encounter with the insane Juggaloco, Jade has little respect for secret identities and recognizes Karkat as Hemogoblin on sight the next day, leaving both Karkat and John desperate to keep her quiet in a farcical display of mutual
Despite the distance between the three of them, Rose, John, and Karkat continue to teeter back and forth on the precipice of their mental health. Karkat, plagued by bloody nightmares in which a younger John, Dave, and Jade die horribly, becomes more and more distressed and unstable as he deprives himself of sleep and sopor slime in a futile effort to stop dreaming about his moirail's death. He drives himself to the point of collapsing after a furious confrontation with Dave over his relationship with John, and his hero work begins to suffer as well, to the point where John finally forces the troll to sleep out of sheer desperation. To distract herself from the fragile balance of power in her mind space, Rose throws herself into mending bridges with John and getting to know Dave better after the revelation that the two of them are in fact ecto-siblings. But soon her mother returns, spurred by a lecture from Ambrose to make up for her earlier absence from Rose's life, and Rose becomes increasingly bitter and irrational in dealing with her mother's feeble attempts at reconciliation. Dave, left mute by the destruction of his collar in Dark Star's attack, scoops a secret mission from the Badass Quandary as payback for her repeatedly refusals to give him straight answers about his time powers and stumbles across a Midnight Crew base in an abandoned movie theater. There, he discovers this branch of the Crew, led by Felt member Crowbar, has captured PM in the middle of her mission to deliver messages on behalf of the Wondering Querent - and a second Dave, a mutant with bird wings who prefers to go by Oriole. The rescue mission ends when Dave brings the three of them forward in time, an ability he hadn't realized he had, and they return to the apartment to recuperate and regain their bearings.

The story abruptly digresses, turning to focus on eleven other troll heroes scattered around North America. Aradia Megido, born several centuries too early in India, is reminded by the premature arrival of the carapacian Queens that she has plans to sabotage the cosmic Game that gave birth to this universe. Tavros Nitram lives a carefree life as a minor hero in a small town in Mexico until Gamzee Makara appears in the middle of the night in a haze of madness and drags Tavros along to go meet up with their 'friends.' Sollux Captor is trying to live a normal life and deal with Kanaya's strange white-text computer hacker problems from afar when Aradia bursts in through the wall to convince him to join her in the hero business; meanwhile, on Prospit, one of Sollux's dreamselfes is hard at work converting the abandoned alien planet into a massive supercomputer, taking advantage of the fact that all carapacians are currently residing on Earth to meddle with the code of the Game itself at Aradia's behest. Nepeta Leijon and Equius Zahhak live in Florida and moonlight as heroes - except on those occasions when Nepeta starts failing her classes and Equius feels the need to ground her from hero work. Equius is also collaborating with an anonymous Ambrose Strider to complete part of Dave's collar, which will allow him to speak again. Kanaya faces discrimination based on her hemotype and fails in her attempts to auspice between the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice, the resident anti-heroes of Chicago, just before she and Rose witness a news report on the appearance of an otherworldly dome over the downtown Los Angeles and come to the conclusion that it may be a grimlight Horroterror similar to the one that killed off Kanaya's entire Medicull squad during the Novaya Ukraine genocide. Blind Justice - aka Terezi Pyrope - is a rogue Legislacerator in training, but her ongoing feud with Vriska Serket, the Indigo Scourge, is interrupted first by the arrival of the limeblood William Graham, a universal moirail attached to the Legislaceration Bureau who discovers Vriska's secret identity at the coffee shop where she works, and then by Terezi and Vriska managing to erupt into a full-on kismesissitude in the wake of Vriska breaking up a lusus fighting ring. The two spiral out of control and begin to tear down the city around them in a blind rivalry. Gamzee Makara, incarcerated at a hospital for residents with coldblood psychosis in Spain, manages to fool his nurses and psychiatrists long enough for his innate Rage to overwhelm the drugs in his system and breaks free, determined to track down all of his friends from the Game for reasons only he can fathom. Whether he is a full-fledged god tier Bard of Rage, or only faking it, remains to be seen. Eridan Ampora, also suffering from what has been diagnosed as coldblood psychosis, is abandoned by his moirail Feferi Peixes just in time for a grimlight Horroterror called Malā’ikah to take advantage of
Eridan's vulnerability and use him to manifest its power on the physical plane, attracting the attention of Gamzee and sending ripples of reality-warping distortion throughout the western United States. Feferi makes her debut in Washington DC, unaware that the reason she abandoned Eridan and found herself so drawn to the Atlantic seaboard was that Gl'bgolyb, the grimlight emissary of the Furthest Ring and the abomination responsible for the warping of the Ukraine, had already begun to sink tentacles into her brain, linked to her as it is to all tyrian blooded trolls. All eleven trolls have their roles to play in the game to come, though only a scattered few - Aradia, Gamzee, and Eridan - have any solid recollection of their past lives. It is not long before Gamzee, Tavros, and Eridan collide, an encounter which sets Eridan free from the Horrorterror's influence, but also unleashes a powerful Hope player on the unsuspecting people of Los Angeles, one who is determined to set up his own kingdom heedless of the game playing out around him.

Upon returning to the main narrative, we find that Jade's arrival has set in motion a chain of events which culminates in a series of dangerous revelations. Two others reach Seattle almost at the same time: Diamonds Droog, boss of the Midnight Crew's special ops and all-around monster, and Spades Slick, a carapacian that Droog has been attempting to capture for weeks and who possesses an uncanny blood bond with Karkat, leftover from another life. After concealing his hero life from John for weeks, Karkat is violently outed by Droog when she separates him from John and Jade to test his abilities on Scratch's orders, leaving the weakened troll badly injured and sending John into an emotional tailspin that causes him to reach out for Dave's support just as he did two years ago. Rose is preoccupied on a roadtrip with Kanaya and later caught up in the furious rivalry between the Indigo Scourge and Blind Justice as the they forcefully auspice the two anti-heroes and hustle them across to border to Canada. After an outing with Oriole goes awry and the Midnight Crew attacks, Dave decides to ignore a letter from Rue Lalonde reaching out to him as a mother and instead chooses to take off for Seattle to help a panicking John handle the insanity of Droog's rampage and Karkat's wounds. He unknowingly brings the cue ball along with him for the ride. Better still, once he and Karkat are under one roof, the two proceed to argue relentlessly, as Karkat feels threatened by Dave's closeness with John and Dave is a total dick just because he feels like it. Jade, hoping to help John and Karkat in their time of dire need, heads out on her own secret mission to track down Droog and winds up captured in the process, taken out by a tranquilizer round fired by the Ranger, a Crew-employed sniper. She is then trapped along with Becquerel in a space power-cancelling cage developed based on Clubs Deuce's prior experience with Jade and Doc Scratch's own personal affiliation with Space.

Rose soon begins to recklessly experiment with the cue ball in her possession. Sensing its inherent potential as the instrument of a Seer of Space, she uses it as a scrykind to try to expand her own Seer abilities and view Dave from afar. Unbeknownst to her, however, this allows Doc Scratch to assume direct control over Rose's visions, and he 'helpfully' drags her mind into the Furthest Ring to witness his on-going negotiations with several Horrorterrors. By the time Rose is able to pry herself free - or, depending on your perspective, when Scratch allowed her to go free - she has been trapped in the seer trance long enough for Kanaya to panic and take her Rue Lalonde in Washington. Meanwhile, unable to participate in John and Dave's frantic search for Jade thanks to his injuries, Karkat has an even more unusual nightmare than he has become accustomed to, and after viewing a younger John's death seems to wake up to a dream within a dream, scrambling to escape the confines of a brightly colored vision before being imprisoned again by two unseen guardians. When he wakes, he discovers that Spades has broken into the room, and is coerced into completing a mysterious blood pact with the carapacian that allows the alien to share some of Karkat's Blood powers. Dave and John stumble upon Droog's current Crew base in the Seattle area without making the connection that Jade has been kidnapped, and the two attempt to stealthily investigate before an inopportune message from Karkat triggers John's increasingly defensive amnesia and drops him in the middle of the Crew base. Though he awakens in time to help Dave and Spades fight their way down to where Jade has broken free from her cell and begun beating the shit out of Crichton, John is in no fit state to run
around performing hero work - a fact that Droog capitalizes on when she finds herself surrounded by the three heroes and Spades. She plays her trump card, her knowledge of John’s secret identity, and the heroes have no choice but to allow the Crew boss to abscond. John, rattled to the point of being nearly comatose by the realization that he will never be safe fighting crime again, spends the next few days slowly recovering as the hero children and Samuel prepare to meet up with Rue in her Washington laboratory, where Rose is waiting.

After a roadtrip from hell, Karkat, John, Dave, Jade, and Samuel are guided through the Void shields that ward Lalonde Laboratories against outside influence and participate in an incredibly sappy reunion with Rose. Karkat is struck by the fact that he knows Kanaya, but cannot explain how or why, and she does not show signs of similar recognition. Joined by Ambrose, Oriole, and the two Queens, and unaware that Spades Slick has stowed away in the trunk of the Egberts’ car, almost every single good guy in the entire story observes as the White Queen demonstrates the fruits of her labors - a makeshift Queen's Hub, a set of computer screens and a control panel which allows her to access records of a Game that the human heroes once played. Queens are immortal and eternal, the only pieces in this cosmic game that survive from session to session to restart the process of cloning their subjects and playing out the chess match in each successive game. For the most part, the records on the Hub screens show a drastically revised summation of the events of Homestuck, in which the Horrorterror лєιг тнαɴ active interferes not just with Rose’s quest but with the other three humans as well, stirred up by the physical presence of Doc Scratch within the game session. It chooses to infect the Denizens of each hero’s game land, and taps into the mental connection between Denizen and hero to lure the children into its tentacular clutches. The chaos god's meddling badly traumatizes John's mind, but he manages to break free and rescue WV as well, releasing the Denizen Typhueus from the grimdark in the process. After talking Jade into calling for Becquerel to have the wolf teleport her away from her own corrupted Denizen's home, John attempts to locate Rose in her land, only to find that the [Lađđ] αιγήт από Рαμό has been overtaken by grimdarkness and Rose is nowhere to be found. He and Ambrose locate Dave on ḠʊḤα成功举办 and John makes use of Dave's server copy to search Rose’s land, but Rose has already abandoned her planet and made her way to Skaia's Battlefield with the help of the Horrorterrors on her own personal vendetta against Doc Scratch. The Denizen Cetus has been completely infested with grimdark tangles and the massive whale attacks John. It is confronted by Typhueus, who banishes John back to his own land in time for him to witness Jack Noir attacking Jade on his viewscreen. Jack, empowered by the prototyped Black Queen's ring, murders Jade and then consumes the weakened Becquerel, blowing up most of Jade's planet in the ensuing explosion. Noir then turns his sights on John, and even the combined efforts of Ambrose and Davesprite can only hold him off for so long before the carapacian kills John as well.

Despite their best efforts, Jade's dreamself and Dave can't awaken John's dreamself on Prospit before Noir attacks and sends them plummeting to Skaia below, and Jade is crushed while pushing an unconscious John to safety. On Derse, Dave's dreamself stumbles upon Rose's body, torn apart by the Horrorterrors she has made her pact with, and is forced by the Black Queen, who has been badly injured by Jack Noir's coup and the theft of her ring, to captchalogue Rose's body and take it down to the Quest Crypts stored in the center of Derse. On Skaia, John's dreamself and Dave fight Noir but are quickly killed; the remaining human custodians, having just arrived on a battleship commandeered by Grandpa Harley, are murdered as well. This drives Rose to consent to the Horrorterror having control of her body and, grief-stricken, she lashes out at Noir with grimdark until he strikes her down. With most of the human children dead, the Black Queen takes up the White Queen's ring from John and distracts Noir long enough for PM and an Authority Regulator to move their bodies to the Quest Beds scattered throughout Skaia, while a future Dave coordinates everyone, redirects meteors to ensure that the carapacians who would become their exiles instead end up remaining in the Medium, and ensures that Jade and John's original bodies are moved to their beds on their respective planets so that all four heroes rise up to the god tiers almost at the exact same time.
Working together, they manage to defeat Noir, the last boss on the Battlefield, and win the game - but at their moment of Pyrrhic victory, the screens cut out, as the interference of the trolls' game session causes the Queen's Hub to malfunction, and they are unable to see what would have caused them to scratch the game and reset the universe in an act of desperation.

Returning to the present time, every so often throughout the viewing of these disturbing video recordings the current incarnations of our heroes are forced to take breaks to collect themselves - particularly John, who retains many of his memories regarding the pre-scratch universe but has been viciously repressing them for most of his life, taking advantage of the damage caused by the Horrorterrors in the previous game to dump unpleasant memories and sensations in the back of his mind where he can refuse to deal with them. The consequences of this dangerous repression and emotional instability remain to be seen. Rose, having learned that her pre-scratch self consented to the Horrorterror's presence in her mind, becomes convinced that she is personally responsible for the game's failure and the many deaths that ensued, and fatalistically chooses to drink heavily until she is capable of pretending to forgive her mother, believing that presenting a unified front is more important than her own sobriety in the face of her overwhelming guilt. Karkat attempts to talk Spades Slick out of stabbing people but fails miserably, more concerned with getting John and Samuel to talk to each other after days of not speaking about the fact that Droog knows John's identity. Dave has begun to be able to hear the fraymotifs of the game that are still playing in the background but is unable to make sense of what he hears. And Jade sets off to meet with her Grandpa again at last, only to learn that he must leave once again for parts unknown to investigate strange activity spotted in along the northern Siberian coast of Russia. Before he leaves, he warns her that at least one member of the heroes' party has been compromised by the Midnight Crew, and to keep his continued existence a secret from those around her until they can be sure who to trust. With their affairs not quite settled and with the knowledge of the pre-scratch game weighing heavily on their minds, the main heroes return to Seattle in an attempt to return to their normal routines, choosing to relocate to the old Lalonde house rather than the Egberts' due to the fact that with John's identity exposed, his house is no longer secure.

While Kanaya chooses to accompany Rose to Seattle, it is with the caveat that soon the troll means to continue on to investigate the ongoing mystery of Los Angeles. Oriole, haunted by the fact that he is the leftover impression of a secondary, prototyped version of Dave, refuses to stay with them, setting off to return to Houston alone in order to establish himself as his own person and hero. Both Queens and Spades Slick play least in sight as the heroes leave the lab, their exact locations uncertain, while Rue remains at her labs to work on adjusting the Queen's Hub to try to view the troll session, her relationship with Rose still strained. Ambrose wants Dave to come back to Houston, as he is certain that if all four kids remain in one place they will be at risk, but concedes that until it's decided whether John and Samuel will leave Seattle once and for all it would be better for everyone's state of mind if the kids remain together for mutual support.

And now, once again, everyone seems to have forgotten about the cue balls.

This can only end badly.

But there is a schism building in the combined ranks of the Midnight Crew and the Felt. Since the two rival gangs merged several years ago under Doc Scratch's command, the criminal gang has made use of mind-controlling grubs developed by Felt member Die to control their small army of thugs and minions. The three main Crew members, Droog, Boxcars, and Deuce, were supposed to have been exempt from Die's influence, but when an ignorant Deuce confronts Die in his lair, the doctor reveals that all three Crew bosses have emergency 'shutdown' grubs implanted in their brains, and proceeds to tinker with Deuce until the brainwashing becomes obvious to Droog and Boxcars. Droog, never the most tractable to begin with, is incensed by this betrayal and by previous frustrations, and kidnaps the brainwashed Deuce with Boxcars's assistance. She capitalizes on the fact that Doc Scratch has
difficulty seeing through the thick Void shielding that has protected the human heroes for much of their lives, and strategically conceals her future movements from Scratch's eyes by planning to revisit void-heavy locations. While she absconds for parts unknown, her future service to Scratch in question, Boxcars is left to fumblingly pretend to still be loyal to Scratch's Crew and sent off to Seattle with four young villains - the Ranger, the Cogitator, the Berzerker, and the Bolter - in order to field test their abilities.

And after all that, you decided to read over my shoulder as I tried and failed to summarize all of this absurd nonsense in a timely and concise, yet incredibly derivative and pretentious fashion.

Well, nobody's perfect. It is entirely possible that this entire thing has just been one massive waste of time.

And yet, here you are. Still reading.

I'm so sorry.

Ms Paint sips at her tea. It has gone cold. Around her neck, the ring which she keeps on a thin chain weighs heavy on her chest.

MP: That wasn't so bad, was it?

Zachal buries her face in her hands, then gives up and lets her forehead thump against the table. "I have a final due tomorrow that I haven't even started, there's a carapacian with a crazy mob boss after her staying in my apartment, and these idiots are all going to die," she mumbles into her palms. The cat leans over and casually sinks its teeth into the troll's forearm, and Zachal yelps, frantically shaking her arm until the cat gives up. "Oh my fucking god. This is so bad," she says, staring at the screen with desperate eyes. "There's no recovering from this. The lameness has hit maximum overdrive. We've officially hit our lowest point."

MP: Then there is no way left to go but up! Don't be so hard on yourself!

"If you say so, Ms Paint. If you say so."

And with that, Zachal shuts the laptop’s lid.

Chapter End Notes

I used this translator here for the Alternian.

The next chapter is going to be so much more normal than the past two chapters have been. And by normal I mean I'm bORED OF TALKING AND EMOTIONS TIME FOR A BOSS FIGHT OR FOUR AM I RIGHT OR AM I RIGHT?
The Fire Of Fight

Chapter Summary

Hope sits yet hiding her war-wearied eyes,
Doubt sets her forehead earthward and denies,
But fear brought hand to hand with danger dies,
Dies and is burnt up in the fire of fight.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Jade ‘n Jake, and we’re dONE with chapter 18 which is a shame, I rather liked chapter 18, I feel like it went quite well. The next chapter as a whole is going to be pretty short because there are just a few loose ends to tie up at Lalonde Labs before it’s time to UNLEASH THE PAIN. How odd. We haven’t had short chapters in forever. It’s like a Christmas miracle except in the middle of summer -

- wait what was that about pain?

Minor gore and body horror trigger warning for Rose's section. Today's power anthems are Seven Nation Army (Glitch Mob Remix) and Can't Hold Us (PTX). H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seattle, Washington

Hearts Boxcars has sweat through four shirts today, and the fifth one is almost ready to follow its predecessors to an early, drenched grave. He yanks hard on his collar and untucks the last of the rumpled hem in a last ditch effort at airing himself out, wondering if it's possible to drown in one's own sweat. It's not even all that hot in here, but he can't seem to get cool.

He determinedly refuses to think about why that might be.

He's not like Diamonds - he doesn't try to juggle ten different incredible deadly problems in his head at one time. He's not the brains of this shindig, he's the muscle. All he needs to do is distract himself with a nice, absorbing heist, or maybe the latest issue of Red Cheeks, or something. Anything.

He finds himself scowling around the warehouse, one of several such properties close to the waterfront that he marked for illegal corporate takeover before Diamonds went and got herself assigned to handle setup in Seattle. He cased the joint himself, so the place isn't falling apart or nothing, but now as he stands here, nominally overseeing the men who are unloading a shipment on the main floor, he's actually stuck trying to figure out what kind of hash Di's made of the place. Everything's all...organized. Boxcars has expanded Crew territory holdings to other cities in the past, and never has he seen his people so well-versed in maintaining a neat and orderly working environment.
He doesn't like it. He hates it. Ugh. This ain't natural. Even as Boxcars watches, a burgundy-blooded troll starts directing her supply line with a series of intelligible hand signals that he did not train them to use. Hell, he's never trained any of these guys at all - Boxcars just tends to hire based on how much a recruit can benchpress, their willingness to obey orders of an illegal nature, and at least a mediocre specibus mastery, and then he tosses them out onto the streets to act as brute muscle, enforcers, and intimidation racketeers. Sure, half of them are hoodlums who barely scraped their way through a GED, but they're his hoodlums and they've never needed none of this fancy ass training before.

Now, they're all afraid to even give him lip. His people obey his orders, yeah, but now that they've all got the fear of Diamonds put in them, they won't even open their gobs to chatter at each other, except to call out directions or shipment labels. No one but his lieutenants will so much as look Boxcars in the eye.

_Dammit, Diamonds. Why yah gotta be so fucking competent all the damn time?_

Jesus. Even when Di's not here, she's still present. And on top of the terror she's inspired in his people, Boxcars is still not even thinking about the fresh mess she's dragged them all into with -

_Not thinking about that. Not even a little. His mind is an empty warehouse on the subject; nothing going in or out. He knows zip._

On edge, Boxcars peels his shirt away from where it has plastered itself to his stomach again and lurches into motion with a growl low in his chest. He roars an order at one of the trolls cringing on guard duty and starts down toward the ground floor. Overseeing things is for chumps. He doesn't care if Diamonds rearranged the damn solar system to get things this orderly - he only cares that he can't afford to think about Di's nonsense right now.

Well. What better way to keep all these stray thoughts corralled than by working out his excess energy in replacing the fear of Droog with the much more reasonable and applicable fear of Boxcars. His heel hits the cold concrete of the warehouse floor and he manages to bluster and cajole the pack of sad sacks milling around on the floor back into a rowdy mob of hooligans in a matter of minutes.

Unfortunately, that's when his other problem decides to rear its ugly mug.

Well. Four mugs, really. Three, if you want to be real technical about it. Goddamn, these kids are underfoot. They're cramping his style and he's only had 'em for two damn days.

Die had been adamant Boxcars come pick them up in person, but like hell was he going anywhere near Die's lair after - uh, nothing. Nothing related to Clubs, for sure. So instead the kids had been escorted out to him by Doze and Itchy, blinking four pairs of beady little eyes like they'd never seen daylight before as their shithead Felt escort rattled off instructions on how to deal with these high maintenance twerps.

Boxcars hadn't really been paying attention. He'd been restraining his overwhelming instinct to tear the two Felt members' heads off.

But two days is long enough to have already set a pattern, and as per fucking usual, it's Ranger who starts shit. Boxcars only realizes something's amiss when he helps two of his lackeys heave a heavy shipping container full of goods of questionable legality onto a stack. Over the slam of crates hitting concrete, he hears the very, very slurred giggle that heralds the end of his few minutes of distraction.

"H'okay! Yeah! No worries, I've gotcha covered!"
Boxcars groans and thumps his head against the crate in front of him hard enough to dent the metal. When he turns to survey the room, the cause of the hubbub is pretty fucking obvious. Ranger, all legs and gangly arms and messy hair, wheels and stumbles her way off the ramp of one of the shipping trucks, carrying an entire four hundred pound crate by herself. Even as Boxcars watches in horror, she stumbles over a cable in a pseudo-drunk stupor.

Good god. She's going to trip and kill someone, and Boxcars is gonna have to explain to the boss exactly why he had to return one of the Scratch kids to Die in a plastic baggie. "Put that down, punk!" he yells sharply, shouldering a greenblood aside as he stomps toward the disaster in motion.

"I've got it!" Ranger calls back cheerily, hiccupping. "Jusht you leave it to me, boss man!"

The leading edge of the container smacks a man across the face, and the poor guy drops like a stone. "Oh shit! Ops! I mean oops!" the girl says distractedly, and the whole container judders and dips. A troll with hooked horns, caught off guard by the Ranger's wild stumbling, is sent reeling back against the side of the truck. "Darn!"

Boxcars wants to throw up his hands in disgust because seriously? Seriously? What'd he do to deserve this?

Instead, he barrels right up to the Scratch kid and plants his hand on the far side of the crate. "I said put this down, or I'll wallop yah so hard Die'll feel it!" he snaps, maybe a little more vehemently than is smart. Whatever. Die is a sick little freak. Ain't nothing wrong with thinking that.

There's an unsettling moment where the container keeps moving toward his face at an alarming rate, Boxcars's arm straining to stay firm as he almost gets knocked flat on his ass by Ranger's momentum. Then - "Oh! Uh, right, boss guy! If this is where you want it" - the girl drops the container without ceremony or prior warning.

Right on Boxcars's foot.

Everyone in the warehouse goes horribly still, transfixed. Ranger freezes, her bony fingers still outstretched where she let the container fall through her hands, but they slowly curl back into loose fists as anxiety replaces her boyish, earnest glee, with the distinct look of 'I fucked up so bad' hard on its heels. She gulps, her prominent Adam's apple bobbing, but her mouth stays shut.

"Steel toed shoes," Boxcars says at last, between gritted teeth.

"Hells yeah!" The Scratch puts her hands up, the grin taking over her face once more. "High fives for work zone safety!"

Boxcars's eyes narrow. "Still. In. Pain." One eye twitches more than the other. "So much pain," is what he intends to say next, but all that emerges is a choked shriek. "Holy sheeeowfuckufkcidfkc-

With a titanic effort, every bruised and battered toe in complete agony, Boxcars kicks the container off to the side. He can only count himself lucky that none of his guys are dumb enough to come close and risk either Boxcars's wrath or this kid's unique capacity for inflicting casual damage on innocent bystanders, because he's not exactly too fussed about where the crate lands. Both of his guys are still down for the count on either side of them, and this kid hadn't even been trying.

It's only mildly impressive and he will never admit that out loud. Anyone who can knock out two of Boxcars's men in under two seconds has...some talent. But he's pretty sure the whole thing was one massive fluke.

"She didn't mean it."
Boxcars blinks, and another kid is just there, and that's plain unnatural.

Cogitator and Ranger are definitely related, no matter what blather Die spews, or Boxcars'll eat his hat. Eat Diamonds's hat. Eating fucking anyone's hat. But where Cogitator's all sleek, deadly precision, right down to the immaculate arrangement of his hair, Ranger trips over her own stationary feet when the other Scratch kid drags her down no-so-subtly into a bow.

Which is weird. God, everything about these kids is weird. He fucking hates kids. Had to babysit Deuce's kid once and sweet mother of Mary, never again. If even one of these punks starts shooting lasers from their eyes, Boxcars is shipping them back to Die. No, to Antarctica. Somewhere he'll never have to risk seeing them ever again. The boss will just have to get over it - if they even stick around with the boss after -


"None of this bowing baloney, get offa the work floor!" he bellows. "Stay outta my peoples' way if you don't know what to do!"

"I can figure it out, I swerve - swear, sir!" Ranger pipes up, waving her hand over her bowed head in a circle as she attempts to lever herself upright. Cogitator just keeps applying pressure. "It's like tetris! I am a wiz at tetris!"

"It's not tetris, it's a goddamn criminal enterprise!" Boxcars jabs a finger at the stairway leading up to the second floor. "And you brats are infringin' on my smuggling operation! You needta stay in the office while I figure out what the hell to do with you!"

"Got it. Yes sir," Cogitator jumps in with a low mutter before Ranger can set off another fuse, giving a sharp, barely-there nod of acknowledgement. "We won't be in your way."

"Just off the top of my noodle, perhaps you could send us out in the field for some practice!"

Cogitator smacks his face with his hand. Boxcars glares to his right.

Bolter beams down at him - and Boxcars is tall enough that that's really saying something. The third Scratch is also toting a shipping container, balanced on one shoulder, like it weighs nothing at all.

"What," Boxcars says slowly, "the hell are you doing?"

"Oh, it's like stacking blocks to solve the puzzle in an ancient, boobytrapped temple of the ancients, isn't it?" the Scratch enthuses. "Or like tetris!"

"Yeah! Exactly!" Ranger agrees.

Boxcars's foot gives a hearty throb of agony.

"I hate children I hate children I hate children -" Boxcars chants as he hauls the three Scratch kids up the stairs. One of his lieutenants, Charlie, shakes their head as Boxcars barges into the second floor office. Some other underlings are shooting him weird looks.

Because he's carting three grown-ass teenagers over his shoulders like sacks of flour. Because he looks like a crazy person.

Oh god. This must be how Di feels all the time.
No wonder she's always pissed. This is fucking undignified, is what it is.

The fourth Scratch kid is just sitting right where he last remembers seeing her, on a chair in the center of the room nowhere near any of the wall to wall viewing windows used to survey the floor below. Boxcars isn't even sure she's blinking. As he dumps the other three on their feet and smacks them upside the backs of their heads until they shuffle toward the other chairs, Boxcars includes Berzerker in the lecture that ensues just on the principle of the thing. "Clearly we've had some kinda miscommunication," Boxcars says, waving the rest of his people out with an impatient swipe of his hand. "What part a' 'siddown and shut up' was so hard for you?! Cause I can provide clarificance."

"Clarificati-" Ranger corrects cheerily before Bolter shakes his head frantically at her, and Cogitator steps on her foot. "Ohhh. Clarificance. No, we're good! So good!"

Boxcars glares at all of them. "I'll say it again anyway. I don't goddamn like you."

"Yeah, we kind of got that, chum," Bolter sighs, looking legitimately resigned to it.

"Yer a waste of my time. I got other fish to fry without having to worry about you shits bumbling in to bring the operation down around our ears."

Even Cogitator's hair is starting to wilt.

"So think of something actually fucking useful you can do for this test run nonsense," Boxcars finishes, feeling incredibly put upon, "and go goddamn well do it. As far away from me as possible."

Berzerker and Cogitator nod without expression, because of the four they're the two with the most sense in their heads. Bolter looks intrigued. Ranger's chewing on a strand of her hair thoughtfully, and god that bodes ill. He doesn't know what kinda alcohol she's got her hands on, but that shit must be potent; the thought that she just acts like a sloppy drunk as a regular part of her personality is too damn terrifying for Boxcars to contemplate.

"So it has to be useful," Ranger says slowly.

"Obviously."

"Can it also be awesome?" Bolter asks.

*Instigators*, both of them. "We gotta a terror alert high enough to hang ourselves on, and you want to - what, hold up a bank? Torch a local zoo?" Boxcars seizes the kid by the collar and shakes him. "I will personally feed you your own Daisy Dukes if you call Lacerator attention down on my ops - or worse, get us all on the Villain watchlist. Capiche, Lara Croft?"

"Uh. Right-o, sir!"

"Villains," Berzerker says. Her voice - Boxcars doesn't think he's actually heard her talk before, and to his private relief, the other three Scratch kids look just as startled as he feels - is smooth, not at all the disused whisper he was expecting, and just a hair deeper than Ranger's falsetto.

Then Ranger claps her hands together and is out of her seat in a flash, her tipsy gait *amazingly* absent as she reaches out and touches the dark haired girl's shoulder with a finger. Cogitator and Bolter both tense up and hold their breath as the girl says, excitedly, "Janey! A whole word! Say s'more!"

"Is this seriously an accomplishment?" Boxcars asks wearily.

"Well, yeah! Jane-Jane barely says anything these days!" Ranger's excitement fades a little. "Not
since the operation, which was basically forever ago!"

"Villains," the other girl repeats. Not like a broken record, Boxcars thinks, his unease growing, but
as though behind that silent, perpetually bored expression, wheels are turning. Switches are being
flipped. Ideas are forming. Worms are wriggling in impressionable grey matter.

He shudders, and tries not to imagine a certain slimy thing oozing its way into his own brain. He fails
miserably.

"Villains," she says for a third time, and Boxcars is ready to smack her a new one when at last she
reaches her conclusion - "Heroes."

And, slow and deliberate, Berzerker bares her teeth at him in a dazzling, bloodthirsty grin.

Shit. This is not the direction Boxcars really wants this lecture to go. He starts sweating again, his
foot throbbing, and he glances nervously at each Scratch in turn. All of ’em have gone slack jawed -
even Ranger - and it turns his stomach because it’s the same look some of Diamonds's ditsier, crazier
ones get; the look Deuce had the other day, lost in a daze as the thing in his head overwhelmed his
conscious thought.

What the hell did Die load onto these kids' hard drives?

"Four of them are in town, right?" Bolter says eagerly, snapping out of his daze with a manic spark
in his eyes, leaning forward. "And four of us -"

"Can't count on that," Cogitator grunts. "Last intel had a fifth and sixth traveling east to west, last
seen in Chicago. Have to take them into account." He pulls a slim black and red PDA out of his
pocket and starts typing up a storm, flicking diagram after diagram across the screen so fast Boxcars
can feel a migraine coming on just trying to read them.

Oh god. Oh sweet, sweet Moby Dick. Die, why?! "Absolutely fucking not." Boxcars shakes his
head wildly, clenching his fists and feeling the conversation already spinning out his control. "I can
tell what yer plotting, and no."

"Why not, old chap?" Bolter asks, not even looking in Boxcars's direction as he leans in over the
blond guy's shoulder. "They're top priority targets, no? Pose a high risk to your endeavors here? We
can fix that up for you in a jiff!"

Berzerker settles flat blue eyes on Boxcars, and he feels a trickle of sweat wind down the back of his
neck. Meeting her gaze is a mistake. That's when he really realizes how wrong he was to think that
just because the girl was quiet and obedient, deaf to anything but orders, that she was a blank slate.
Something Die had crippled and hollowed out and twisted into a non-entity.

It's not blank boredom in that stare. It's silent, contemptuous intelligence, the kind Boxcars has only
ever put up with from Diamonds Droog, and the thought that there might be a second crazy smart,
crazy violent dame running around - one loyal to the Felt rather than the Crew - is enough to make
him consider retiring.

"B-because that's the opposite of low key!" he insists, his tongue clumsy and his mouth dry. "And I
gotta bone to pick with Heir and Hemogoblin. That's personal business, none of yours!"

Cogitator's eyebrow shoots up. His fingers keep tapping. "We can accommodate that."

And that's the thing. He doesn't know what they're capable of. Clubs mighta known, but look where
that got him - him and Di both radio silent and neck deep in the void. All Boxcars knows is that all
four of the experiments from Die's fucked up lab are vibrating in their seats, jolted by Berzerker's clever brainwave into barely repressed excitement, and that's not something Boxcars can just turn off. He doesn't have a way to control these kids if they push the issue, short of beating them into submission, and he could handle one - maybe two - but all four? All of them Doctor Die's handpicked test tube abominations?

"No," he says, with all the commanding presence he can muster. "I said no. You're not shitting on my work here by running off half cocked to bring hero wannabes down on my head, and half the police force along with 'em." Seattle PD aren't exactly going to be easy to bribe anymore, not after multiple explosions and suspicious bail outs for Crew operatives. Not with Diamonds, the only one who can really manipulate her police contacts without arousing suspicion, out of the picture.

"Could pretend to be unaffiliated," Bolter murmurs, and Cogitator nods sharply, almost jamming the other boy's eye out with the corner of his shades. Neither seems to notice the near miss, as though they're used to being in close proximity. "Shouldn't be a bother for you, sir!" he adds more loudly, smiling at Boxcars brightly. "It could even distract from Crew activities if we make enough of a rumpus!"

Berzerker is still staring, cold and calculating.

And fuck. *Fuck.* Diamonds said to keep his head down. To *not start shit* with these kids.

Boxcars can't swallow.

He looks away first.

As Berzerker grunts in what he knows, with a slow flop of his stomach, to be smug dismissal, Boxcars's eyes land on Ranger instead.

To his surprise, the fourth one - the one that got Di all pissy, he remembers - has drawn away from the other Scratches. She's always all over the other kids, scruffing hair and bumping elbows and nudging shoulders, but now there's a foot of space between her and Berzerker that wasn't there before, a hollow gap in the arrangement of the four freaks. Boxcars catches the oddest look on the girl's face - thin lips caught between worrying teeth, nothing like the brazen excitement radiating from her fellow shorties. Then she catches him looking, and goes bright pink, like she's embarrassed to have been caught, ducking closer to Bolter - *away* from Berzerker's throne - to chirrup, her voice falsely bright and cracking from the effort. Diamonds has never had to try that hard to sound like a girl, but then, Di has had years to learn how to pull it off. "And then we can bring them in, boss! Totes a win-win, right?"

It sounds weak. Boxcars squints when the girl chances a look at him, as though to see if he's bought whatever she's trying to fool him into believing - well, something; he still isn't sure exactly what's going on with her - and then she glances away just as fast, that strange concern still obvious on her face.

Well, if she has reservations about this plan, she ain't saying it aloud. And if she ain't gonna help him convince these other freaks that it's a *terrible idea* to start a showdown with a buncha smartass, *very conspicuous* heroes, Boxcars's hands are tied. He can't afford to be too obvious about opposing Felt initiatives, especially one that Die might have planted in the Scratch kids' brains. If this sudden, strange insistence on challenging the growing army of heroes opposing the Crew *is* something the doctor programmed into them -

"Fuck. Fine, you punks. Have it your way," Boxcars mumbles, yanking the brim of his hat lower with a pinch of his thumb and forefinger. The rim around his forehead is soaked with sweat, worse
than his shirt. "Any peep about me or the Crew, and Die can bail yah out, because I won't cover all four of yer sorry asses with my bail budget."

"Yay!" Bolter squeaks, echoed half a beat off by a noticeably slower, hoarse yell from Ranger. Cogitator gets a shit faced little smirk as Bolter beats lightly on his shoulders in exhilaration.

Berzerker closes her eyes, and to all appearances shuts off, like a computer with the power cord unplugged.

But Boxcars ain't gonna be fooled by that again. Let these kids play their games. He can't afford to be stubborn about them. Hell, even holding a grudge about the two local hero brats is a luxury he can barely afford in this situation. He has to keep his head down and his hat squeaky clean, or more than just his neck'll be on the line.

He thinks he oughta take Di up on that suggestion. Pay a visit to a house in a tiny neighborhood outside of Seattle. The boss won't like it, but hell, the boss can -

Uh. Nothing. The boss is the boss. And that's all. No potentially mutinous thoughts in this head. No, sir.

God, he's shit at this. Diamonds couldn't say exactly how much omniscience the boss might have, either - enough to scare Di shitless, obviously - but not total. He can't read minds at a distance, right? Just intent and future intent. Something like that. Maybe?

"Yeah. Go nuts," Boxcars says, his voice tight. Bolter shoots him a pair of double finger pistols, but other than that Boxcars gets the distinct feeling that the four kids aren't really listening to him anymore. If they even listened to begin with.

Well. More power to them. He's officially washing his hands of this nonsense. Harrumphing deep in his chest, Boxcars frowns sourly at Ranger one last time and stomps out of the office before her squeak of guilt finishes reaching his ears. His fingers paw through his inside pockets for a cigar, one of the ones the boss man banned him from smoking in the penthouse ages ago. Implicit in the order had been the disdainful hint that Boxcars oughta stop smoking them entirely, but to hell with that. Boxcars needs his nicotine fix. He finds one in the very last pocket he checks, on the edge of panic and his fingers shaky over it, and when he lights it up and pulls in a drag of heavy, tarry smoke, it reminds him that he still has a job to do. Stopped at the top of the stairs, Charlie at his right should with a look of patient expectancy on their sun-burnt face, Boxcars overlooks the warehouse from the same spot as before, through a dense cloud of angry grey smoke.

"Get back to work," he mutters to Charlie at last. "We ain't got all week."

His lieutenant tilts their head back toward the closed office door, beyond which - Boxcars shudders - the four Scratch kids can be heard plotting away, unsupervised. "And them?" they ask.

All this talk is putting Boxcars off his cigar. "Let 'em do what they want," he spits, leaning an elbow on the railing as he settles in at his post. Let 'em go fuck themselves over, he thinks.

It's not that he's rooting for those prissy heroes, nah. It's just that he wouldn't mind seeing that hack's test tube pets get what's coming to them.

No. He wouldn't mind at all.

---

Karkat wakes up and nothing hurts.
This is incredibly suspicious, and he distrusts it immediately. Grumbling, he opens an eye and peers through the murky, opaque green of the fresh sopor slime, and wonders if Harley decided to try science to 'improve' it or something.

He has, in the course of the past few weeks, been blown up, traumatized by nightmares of a life he never lived, deprived himself of soporifics and sleep to the point of hallucinations and physical withdrawal, and been fucking demolished by a notorious mob boss. He has also been stabbed with extreme prejudice on multiple occasions, but who's keeping track of a little thing like that anymore?

The point is, his body has been through enough hoofbeast shit to have killed an ordinary troll, and this spontaneous recovery can only mean the cosmos has something even more painful (and, no doubt, humiliating) lined up for him. I'm overdue for a permanent maiming, right? he thinks sarcastically as he drags himself out of the gloopy embrace of the recooperacoon. Or maybe a good old-fashioned psychic evisceration. That's been in vogue since that last cliffhanger in The Psiioniic, it would be classic -

Karkat pauses with one foot on the floor and the other hooked over the rim of the 'coon, paralyzed as he frowns and counts the days in his mind. He's very aware that he's dripping tepid green slime all over the thick carpet of one of the Lalondes' many extraneous guest rooms, but the issue of manners is at the bottom of the pile of grubshit his mind needs to sort through at the moment.

First and foremost, the very tip of the pile, is the dawning realization that the latest issues of four - no, five - of the major comics he and John read would have, in fact, been released last Friday.

The shriek Karkat emits as he loses his balance and kicks over a wizard-patterned lamp in the ensuing panic might have been shrill enough to mildly irritate the dead, but it gets cut off when he snags his foot on the lamp's power cord and almost slams his chin down onto the edge of the 'coonside table. The teetering lamp finally topples over the edge of the desk, missing his nose by inches as it falls and thumps to the ground with a muffled thud.

...He seriously needs to get back in shape.

And then he and John are way overdue for a visit to the comic store.

- 

JC-1996 watches.

She waits.

DS-2409, JE-1993, and RL-2408 bustle around in the isolated safehouse provided for their use by HB-CREW, in preparation for what is to come, while JC-1996 looks on. There is nothing she could do to assist in this part of the operation - she has set them into motion, as she has been told to do, and now DS-2409 and RL-2408 will handle the technological side of things. Neither she nor JE-1993 have the necessary hacking background to be of use at this time, but JE-1993 is flawed - not as badly as RL, but still imperfect - and seems to have convinced himself that by hovering around the computers he can somehow assist. As always, DS indulges him.

JC-1996 doesn't haven't many extraneous thoughts these days. They have all been pared away, and it is far more efficient, being like this - cold, clear, and hungry. But she thinks that perhaps DS's attachment to JE will need to be monitored. She has already reported it to 06-FELT on multiple occasions, but none of the synchronization treatments seem to have had much of an effect. JE loses his head and gets carried away, and DS permits it no matter how many times he is re-educated on the matter.
And RL, of course, runs wild. It makes JC’s brain ache to so much as look at her, these days, a persistent throb that she has also reported to 06-FELT and received medication for until she can return to the Base and be re-synchronized. RL is loyal to the FELT and their objectives, but some days JC thinks that’s the only part of their training that ever managed to stick. Certainly none of the other in-grown behavior control mechanisms seem to affect her. The other Scratch girl sits messily in her chair, occasionally plunking away at the keyboard, but also occasionally taking a swig of water from her plastic cup and pretending to clink it against JE’s as they engage in some paltry make-believe.

But the mission trigger seems to have been successfully implanted in the other three. HB-CREW might be under the impression that the Scratch team is here only for field testing, but then, he is CREW, not FELT, and therefore to be disdained. They will fight the Heroes, complete their mission objective, and bring glory to the name of the FELT.

They are going to kick some serious caboose.

JC returns to the task of polishing her forkkind. DS seems to be implementing an attack sequence in which targets HEIR and HEMO are ignored, as HB-CREW has requested. He is excellent with strategy, and intends JC to help RL in dealing with the powerful WITCH, while DS handles the KNIGHT. JE is to draw the local heroes away, and then stand by as backup in the event the SEER or any other heroes make an appearance.

But DS is not the leader here. He glances back at JC on occasion; he is synchronized enough that he knows who is truly in command, and he perhaps senses that JC has orders that contradict his carefully laid strategy.

HB-CREW ‘s whims are not to be tolerated. 06 has made their orders quite clear.

JC will fight HEIR.

There will be no mercy.

- 

The Lalondes lived in Maple Valley for a few years back when John and Rose were in middle school, long before Karkat ever knew John. Yet somehow, in that short expanse of time, Doctor Rue Lalonde located and purchased over one thousand three hundred and twenty nine wizard-themed articles of furniture. Karkat knows this entirely unwelcome fact because Jade Harley has a sense for that kind of thing and a tendency to overshare. He wishes he didn’t know. The knowledge sits heavy on his mind as he cagily tries to go through his old exercise routine under the bulging eyes of a rotund garden gnome perched incongruously on the dusty bureau in the corner.

Is that thing watching him? Are those black, painted eyes a cover for a concealed camera? Has his paranoia reached new, wizard-inspired heights? Fuck if he knows, but now Karkat has worked himself up about it, and he stops mid-kick to stomp up to the wizarding gnome and turn it until it stares at the dark red patterned wallpaper instead. Ha. Take that, tiny wizard figurine. Stick that in your plastic wand and go fuck yourself.

Satisfied, Karkat wipes at the damp, reddish streaks of sweat trickling down his forehead, and launches himself back into a set of high kicks. He has to strain to kick around the height of an adult indigoblood’s head, all his muscles pulling and aching in protest and his ribcage occasionally giving a warning pang when he spins too abruptly or tries a maneuver that’s too bendy. But that’s what he gets for having the grubshit kicked out of him and taking almost a week to recover without even stretching a couple times a day. By all rights, he shouldn’t even be able to move. Diamonds Droog
broke enough of his ribs that Karkat should have been laid up for weeks, even with his ability to seal up flesh wounds, uselessly lying around and contemplating the futility of existence in a malicious, possibly frog-shaped universe with an absolutely shitpanned sense of humor.

But he's starting to get that normal rules don't apply here. That the universe has decided to branch out and mess with him in even sicker ways than he'd thought possible. Not even his paranoid thinkpan could have imagined this fuckery. For fuck's sake, there are at least four people in this mansion who were fucking gods in a past life, and no one seems to have a single taintchafing clue what that makes them now. They're all trapped in one massively codependent clusterfuck of a cosmic conspiracy, and the only reason Karkat hasn't just washed his claws of the whole festering mess is that his moirail is neck deep in it, as per usual, and shows no signs of being able to dig himself out on his own.

"School," Karkat mutters to himself by way of inspiration. "Comics. Normal shit- ugh!" He attempts a backbend and instantly knows it's a mistake, his arms twinging and his sternum informing him on no uncertain terms that he fucked up; he winds up flat on his back, cringing into a ball to massage away the pang of over-stretched muscles. "Fuck. Normalcy, dammit." This time, he tries again and arches in a backbend for five seconds before his chest starts aching. He kicks his feet up and over and lands upright, arms pin wheeling as he regains his balance and pants heavily.

Unfortunately, the first thing he notices is that the round, framed portrait of *Wizard, Interrupted* is now right at eye level, glowering at him with melodramatic eyes under craggy white wizarding eyebrows. "Fucking. Piece. Of shit. Fuck," Karkat gasps, lurching over and tearing the entire painting off the wall to lean face-down on the carpet. God, he feels violated, honestly. No wonder Rose grew up so fucking weird.

They're all in this house straight from literal wizard purgatory because John's dad is pretty sure everything about John's secret identity is common knowledge among the Midnight Crew by now. Samuel doesn't say he's panicking, but also he's been wandering around the Lalonde mansion in a cold sweat, his tie backwards, as he tries to make sure the building's security measures are working, so Karkat can read between the lines. Samuel Egbert is more worked up about this than John himself most of the time, and that's saying something.

Diamonds Droog isn't exactly the kind of person anyone would trust to keep her word. Karkat has the distinct feeling that Samuel would have had John three quarters of the way to Manila with false passports days ago if Rue Lalonde hadn't somehow talked him around into using her unoccupied old house as a base from which to survey the old Egbert place and throw Crew spies off John's trail. It also means Karkat's identity is in jeopardy too, of course. It would be impossible for anyone to find out John's secret identity and somehow notice the oddly paranoid, Batman-obsessed, indeterminately rustblooded troll hanging around John and riding the bus into the city literally every night. Harley needed all of five fucking seconds to make the obvious connection, and even if someone managed to overlook all that, you'd have to be a total moron not to think that Karkat wouldn't be a target if Droog wanted a hostage or something to ensure Heir cooperates and doesn't interfere in the Crew's criminal affairs.

They've made an amazing mess of this whole shitty situation. Seriously, the shit has hit the air circulating device, and no one in this house has any idea of how to clean up the resulting carnage, except possibly to run away and never look back. Samuel Egbert is definitely in favor of that plan. But since Karkat has still not been able to pry a straight answer out of the man on whether or not Karkat would be informed as to John's whereabouts in the event the Egberts do abscond, he's decidedly not in favor of that plan. Any plan in which you lose your moirail is a stupid fucking plan.

There's so much potential for everything to go wrong, Karkat is pretty sure they could power a small
city with the amount of kinetic energy they could bring to bear if everything explodes at once. He sweeps a kick over his head and comes down facing the opposite direction without a gasp of pain and counts that a win, because it's the only thing he can do. Whatever comes next, he can't be the weak act in the circus of crazy, traumatized people who are the ones calling themselves heroes. He wouldn't trust any of them to fight their way out of a wet paper bag, let alone protect John while he's at his most vulnerable.

Karkat's his partner, and he so far past terror and panic he's wrapped right back around to a kind of grim resignation to the fact that everything is awful and he can't rely on Harley or Dave or Rose to do more than cause problems. Maybe that's just him being pessimistic except is it really? They're going to have to meet Karkat's standards if they want to prove they're more than just potential hazards to John's mental health.

Once, you know, Karkat's in any shape to kick their asses.

So. In like, a week. Harley had better watch her back.

...Yeah.

Karkat sucks in a breath, and starts working with his other leg, the one with the bone-deep bruise that should by all rights still be aching. It supported him all through the first half of his work out, so how bad can it hurt?

It really fucking hurts. He keeps it up anyway until John comes to drag him downstairs for breakfast, gritting his teeth through the whole process. If they're actually going to risk their lives going to school this week with all of the Midnight Crew riding their asses, Karkat needs to be in the best fucking shape of his life, and he's nowhere near that.

Not yet.

-  

Dirk contemplates the screen before him, two levels removed from the rest of his mind. Below him, there is a level occupied by something called DS-2409 - the part of him that follows orders, precise and logical and nothing more. It's a trick he learned a while ago - a way to split a part of himself off from the rest of him, and make sure that he can still control himself without giving away that he's doing it. If Dienek so much as suspected Dirk was still lurking in his own mind, able to work around all those unconscious triggers and command secretions, he'd carve DS-2409's frontal lobe up into sashimi.

He thinks if he hadn't mastered this, he'd be just as fucked up as Jane. God. The thought is terrifying.

He doesn't know how Roxy does it. She makes it look clumsy but easy to just shrug off the effects of the brainwashing like they're not even there. He'd managed to get her to a blind zone once, back at Base, and had tried to puzzle out how she stayed so de-synchronized, but Rox isn't exactly the best at explaining things in a way that makes rational sense. Mostly, Dirk thinks the problem is that Roxy doesn't know how she's doing it, either. Something in her brain has made her mostly immune to whatever the hell Dienek is doing to them, and neither she nor Dirk could figure out what before Itchy started sniffing around their hiding place, and they'd had to abscond.

So he has his own methods of keeping his mind sectioned off. It lets him watch out for Roxy and Jake when they accidentally deviate, and cover for them when Jane starts eyeing them too coldly. She's been informing on them for years, ever since the operation that broke her, and it's taken everything in Dirk's power to keep the four of them in one piece when one of them's been
transformed into a killing machine.

Most of DS-2409 is busy hacking into three different systems at once. The first and most vital to what they intend to do is the emergency broadcast system, the one with access to most of the phones, radios, and television signals in the greater Seattle area, but that job is mostly done. This city's firewalls are pretty fucking weak compared to the ones Dirk and Roxy have dismantled in the past, and it's only a matter of moments before Dirk is uploading their pre-packaged message and set it to broadcast on repeat. Several of the disposable tester phones they stole earlier begin buzzing immediately as the emergency system pings them.

The second system is one that belongs to the Federal Villain Response Team, and Roxy has taken point on that one. She acts distracted, jostling Jake and entertaining him when he starts getting too twitchy, but she's a decent enough hacker that she finishes almost at the same time Dirk does. It's an important job, keeping Jake sane, one that Dirk hasn't been able to handle alone under the pressure of all the restrictions Dienek has placed on DS-2409. Jake and Jane were always more susceptible, and Jake's really only a quick drop and a sudden stop away from being just casually, brutally cruel as Jane has become. He's gleeful about serving Felt interests, overly fascinated by the thought of fighting the heroes, and completely without regard for anyone who might be hurt in the course of this mission, his old love for adventure twisted together with something more vicious, something that Dienek planted there, and it scares Dirk that he's no longer sure where Jake ends and JE-1993 begins.

Dirk's just playing damage control. Roxy's the one who's held them together.

But then Roxy is through the FVRT's defenses and Dirk has to focus on helping her with the next step. Hearts Boxcars may be a lot of things - and Dirk might have a hell of a lot of planted triggers telling him to distrust the Crew boss - but he's not wrong about the fact that they need to keep federal attention off the Crew and the Felt. The FVRT has close ties to both the counter-terrorism bureau and the Legislaceration Bureau by the very nature of its design, and Crew operations in Seattle are still too fragile to risk bringing the full weight the FVRT could bring to bear down on their heads. But there's no way this mission is going to be in any way discreet, so the best Dirk and Roxy can do is bandage up the leak by spamming the FVRT's mainframe with trojans and malware - anything to distract them from what's about to happen in Seattle in a matter of hours. It's a shitty plan, but the FVRT team isn't due in Seattle for a few more days, so it should be more than enough to keep them busy.

And the third system -

Is the Crew's own.

There is mutual distrust between the Crew and the Felt. Nominally, the joint organization operates under the name 'Midnight Crew,' but in reality the Crew and the Felt are completely separate entities, forced into uneasy cooperation only by the willpower of the Boss who leads them both. Dienek has made it very clear that even the Crew bosses are subordinate to Felt interests, whether the three know it or not.

So DS-2409 feels very little compunction about cracking into the Crew's files on the Heroes. There's not much here that isn't already in the Felt's more extensive dossiers on the four - the Felt have been far more interested in these heroes than the Crew have, after all - but there is more on Hemogoblin here. Dirk believes in having as much data to work with as he can, particularly when they're going up against people with super powers.

Boxcars doesn't want them fighting Heir and Hemogoblin. One look at Jane's eyeroll, and Dirk can already tell that's not possible to avoid. He'd rather be prepared when it does, and not be blindsided
by what Hemogoblin can bring to the table in a potential free for all. There's a long, rambling file on the Puppeteer mostly written in fits and starts by Crowbar and Droog that gives DS-2409 a splitting headache when he tries to read it, so he grits his teeth and forwards it to Roxy's screen instead for her to peruse. The file on the Malachite Sylph, in contrast, is barely a paragraph long; aside from her connections to the Seer, no one in the Crew or the Felt has encountered her very often.

But Dirk can't afford to write her off. If she and the Seer have ended up in Seattle, Jake is going to be the one handling them, and that thought is terrifying, too.

"It's done," he says at last, short and to the point. Jane nods curtly, her blue eyes betraying a glint of predatory, wolfish hunger for a brief moment before it subsides back into her usual blank disdain.

There's a reason Roxy decided to come up with those stupid nicknames, and call Jane a Berzerker. Dirk isn't sure Jane can access all that pent up violence without Dienek here to trigger it, but he's learned that Jane can trigger herself sometimes, probably when Dienek's given her orders ahead of time. Certainly she triggered all of them today, pushed them right into a planted mission before Dirk could even try to head her off. DS-2409 had latched onto the plan to fight the heroes immediately, without question, while Dirk just grimly hung on and tried not to lose his sense of himself in the wash of single-minded intent that followed.

Jane and Jake are no longer themselves. Dirk knows that he's not himself, either, and he walks into the internal review labs every week wondering just how much more of himself he'll lose with this latest session. Wonders if he'll remember to protect Roxy, or if the next time he lays eyes on her he'll care even less than Jane does.

"And this'll definitely bring them running, old chap?" Jake asks excitedly, even though they've been over the plan so many times, his green eyes alight with an eagerness that makes Dirk tired at heart. Jake likes violence now, delights in it the way he used to enjoy adventure stories. And maybe the worst part is that Dirk can't remember exactly when that changed. He used to have enough of himself to memorize everything about Jake with a single-minded intensity, but now - now he's lost too much to DS-2409.

And DS-2409 doesn't care about Jake. Not unless it's within mission parameters.

"If it doesn't," Dirk grunts, closing the lid of his laptop, "you can probably just set a building on fire. They'll know it's us." Or at least, someone from the Crew - which is an impression that the four of them are trying to avoid. But on the other hand, Diamonds Droog and Hearts Boxcars both agree that explosions are a guaranteed way to get the attention of heroes in any given city, and when those two agree on how to handle field ops, it's a rare and precious thing.

"That would be fantastic!" Jake enthuses.

"But don't worry," Roxy says, fiddling with her hair as she twirls her rolling chair around, "Cogs and I are the most elite haxxors ever! We've totes got this in the bag! Now all we need to do is head to the rendzina - I mean, rendezvous."

There's nothing for them to pack up; they haven't been in the safehouse long enough to have done anything but access the computers. As they stride out the door, Dirk in the lead only because Jane slinks at the back, her silent eyes digging into his back as always, he thinks that this was the first time the four of them have been left alone since - ever - and not even once did they try to escape. No one even suggested that maybe they could stop to get something to eat, or explore Seattle, or find out what new movies have been released - something that Jake could once have been counted on to inquire about religiously whenever Dirk was allowed a spare moment at a computer with access to the outside Internet servers.
For Jane and Jake, there's nothing left but the mission. And when Dirk flicks his eyes to the side, trying to meet Roxy's gaze without Jane catching on, he realizes with a jolt that feels like being suckerpunched that Roxy's eyes won't meet his own; instead, she stares into the middle distance, as she's been doing a lot more often lately, without saying a word. Her feet carry her along, but aside from the tell-tale way she gnaws on her lower lip in worry, Dirk can't decipher what's going on in Roxy's head.

She's got something on her mind, and she hasn't told him what. They haven't exactly had many opportunities to talk lately; not since before her last review, at least. She's been acting more subdued than normal, still erratic and chatty when Dienek would rather all of them acted like Jane, but more and more that faked drunkenness seems just that - fake. Sometimes Dirk will catch Roxy with a concerned expression twisting her face, her lips tight and pale with the effort, her fingers digging into whatever unfortunate chair or table she has been standing near and leaving marks in the metal.

He can't bear to lose Roxy, too. But now he's scared he already has.

And for once, he doesn't know what to do.

"Jdsgnnacmtaschlwithus."

John is mumbling over pancakes. The pancakes are of uncertain but no doubt Egbertian origin, despite the fact that Samuel was last spotted (by Karkat, anyway) setting up an office/war room in what used to be a display room dedicated solely to statues of nonfunctioning household appliances encased in metal.

Not even Rose can explain that one. She just kind of drifts around the house smiling at framed JPEG wizard art in a haze of bitter nostalgia and when Dave coughs "irony" into his sleeves she somehow fails to contradict him.

The pancakes are fucking delicious, and possibly the only thing that can keep Karkat's attention from focusing on John to the exclusion of all else. They're damn good pancakes. "What'd you say?" he asks, still chewing on a delectable mouthful of fluffy golden pancakes. The two of them were talking at a totally normal volume about the math test neither of them has studied for, so the sudden muttering is too much for Karkat to process the first time around.

"Jade is. Uh. Look, it was totally her idea, not mine," John chatters, gesturing wildly with his syrup-sticky fork. His hair is even wilder than usual today, like it hasn't seen the backside of a comb in a couple of days - which it probably hasn't - and though he's less sickly looking than he was while being forced to confront all his repressed memories at once over the weekend, he's still got these enormous bags under his eyes that make Karkat want to pap them away and coax John into sleeping some more.

But he of all people knows what it's like when sleep isn't restful. Or helpful. So he satisfies the urge by swallowing the last gulp of pancake and pushing out from his seat to stand behind John, who's still babbling about Harley and school in a nervous mutter, and he begins the delicate process of combing John's hair with his claws. A flicker of breeze brushes over the backs of his hands and tugs strands of hair away from his claws until Karkat bats at it irritably and the wind subsides.

"She wants to be there in case there's an attack at school," is the explanation Karkat finally receives. "On account of, you're still hurt, and my head's kind of a mess? So she could teleport us out more reliably than I could with the windy thing if there's trouble. But I get if you're mad about it! Since you still kind of don't like her. Uh."
Karkat considers freaking the fuck out. For a good twenty seconds. That option has a lot of promise, okay. The weight of tradition and all that. Because it sounds like Harley is going to be hanging around and making the school day a nightmare, again.

He postpones his reaction by extricating a claw from John's impossibly tangled hair - good god, has he been drying it with a fucking tornado or something? - to pick up his mug of coffee and take a modest, pondering sip.

Who is he kidding. He drains the whole thing in a single swallow. Coffee is the elixir of sweet, sweet wakefulness, and when he stops drinking long enough to breathe he's braced enough by the fresh rush of caffeine to shrug and feel around in his pocket for a notepad and pen he's taken to carrying around instead of yelling. "I'll add it to the chart from hell. Under the 'potential shitstorms' category."

"The chart thing is actually a thing?" John asks.

"The 'chart thing' is so a thing. It's the healthiest fucking coping mechanism anyone has in this entire monstrously oversized fucking mansion and don't you fucking deny it, John."

It's enough to startle a happy chuckle out of John, sudden and surprised, as though he hadn't expected to laugh this morning. And that...that just makes Karkat's bloodpusher hurt to think; John's been so worn down lately that laughing seems like a rare occurrence. When John stops giggling like a dork, he tilts his head back so he's looking up at Karkat, his eyes scrunched up as he grins. "If you say so!"

Karkat sniffs. "I'm being a practical, organized friendleader. After all, I'm the only pantshitting wriggler here with all his nubs hatched in a row." He pats John gently on the cheek. "Don't worry. I shall lead your ridiculous human posse to victory like the generous and ever-prepared paragon of vigilance that I am. You're welcome, John. You're. Welcome."

John bursts out laughing again. Karkat allows himself to crack a fraction of a grin as he unknots a stubborn cowlick at the back of John's head. He tries to smooth the hair into some semblance of order, but with every giggle another tiny inkling of the breeze seems to find its way back into John's hair to twist it around. John doesn't even seem to notice he's doing it, which is adorable enough that even the thought of having Harley tagging along all day like a harbinger of irresponsible good will can get downgraded from 'freakout worthy' to 'mildly annoying' in Karkat's brain.

"Oh god. Future-me #3 was right. You two really do need to get a room."

Dave wanders into the room in a casual state of disarray that's probably supposed to be ironic. John and Karkat are both dressed for school in jeans and superhero hoodies, but Dave is decked out in the same clothes he wore yesterday, with the air of one who has slept in an unholy amount and has every intention of going right back to sleep after obtaining food. The blond tosses himself onto the nearest chair to John with abandon, scooting a new plate of pancakes in front of himself and reaching for the bottle of syrup. "Appalling, both of you," he continues, light from between the curtains drawn tight over the window glinting off his shades as he upends half the bottle over his plate. "There are young impressionable minds in this house."

"Jade. I'm talking about Jade."

"Dave, you despicably opaque trashbag, you wouldn't know if this was an inappropriate display of romance if I slapped you upside the head with the broadside of a Harlequin Diamond paperback."

"Are you kidding? This is goddamn sordid, is what it is. A man should not have to wander in on two of his best bros getting their feels on." Dave produces a can of whipped cream and flicks the cap off with his nail, with the ease of long practice. "Rose assigned me and Harley homework on this shit.
"Why're you up, anyway?" John intercedes - which is good, because Karkat can feel the urge to slap Dave with the broadside of a Harlequin Diamond paperback warring with the equally powerful urge to test his new appreciation for high jump kicks on Dave's face, and the conflicting impulses are giving him a headache. They're both such *good* options. It's a pretty standard reaction to being within ten feet of Dave, to be honest. "Oh gosh...Dave, I don't think my dad will be happy about you coming to school, too! He's already worried enough about Jade coming!"

"Also, I fucking forbid it," Karkat adds, yanking on one of the knots in John's hair with more force than intended. "Sorry, John. Anyway, yeah, all complaints can be submitted to my corporeally challenged office, Strider. No school for you. I don't make the rules, I just enforce them with a bloody fist."

"Well, at least you're feeling perky today, huh, Karkles," Dave says. He smirks at Karkat's snarl, completely, to all appearances, unfazed. "Heheheh. But oh man, I haven't been to school ever in my entire life. I refuse to break my winning streak now."

"Wait, you've never been to school?" John repeats, sounding intrigued. "But I could have sworn you -" Then, abruptly, he breaks off. "Uhhh. Never mind me!" He smiles brightly at Dave, shaking his head a little.

Wrong life, Karkat thinks uneasily, clawing John's fringe back away from his forehead. It hasn't happened often, but then, John's been quiet lately. Maybe sitting on more slips just like that one, where his memories of one life don't quite sync with this one.

"Homeschooled since forever," Dave says without missing a beat, dousing his pancakes with the whipped cream. His plate is rapidly deteriorating and bears a startling resemblance to the aftermath of a hurricane - soggy pancakes drowned by moats of melted butter, treacly lakes of syrup, and smothering crests of whipped cream. "Have I mentioned Bro is a fucking human disaster? Guy is hella cool, don't get me wrong, but also such a dick. For like all of elementary school he tried to convince me England was a myth, the Cold War was started by Nazi robot velociraptors from the Arctic, and a meringue was a kind of swim suit."

"Somehow, that explains so much about you," Karkat says, rolling his eyes. "Homeschooled by that guy. No wonder. Was your stupid 'irony' a pre-req for every single class?"

"Irony," Dave says flatly, "was the mission statement. The pledge of allegiance. The mascot. Irony is a way of life." And with that, Dave sets down the whipped cream, picks up all three pancakes in one hand to roll into a cylinder, and crams the entire gory mess into his mouth.

Karkat's jaw drops. John gasps and starts applauding, his eyes wide and dull brown behind his glasses. Dave accepts the applause with both hands raised.

Karkat buries his face in John's hair and reminds himself that although John's choice in friends may be suspect, they're still his friends and Karkat needs to respect his life choices.

...Or he could yell at Dave for being a horrible influence.

Yelling has always worked out for him before.

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Bolter has forgotten his name again.
It itches at him, and he scratches the back of his head in a token attempt to ease the itch before sighing. He's JE-1993, naturally, and the other code name is Bolter, the moniker good old Ranger thought up, the one he secretly prefers even though Doctor Die doesn't exactly approve.

But he used to have another name, didn't he? He just can't for the life of him remember what it was. Egad, he really is losing his marbles!

Ah, no matter! He can ask Cogitator when they next have a spare moment. Right now, there's danger afoot, and Bolter shifts his weight from foot to foot in excitement as he waits impatiently for Berzerker to explain exactly what dadblasted malarkey has got her arguing with Cogitator's foolproof plan right when they're on the cusp of giving those heroes what's coming to them.

"What Boxcars desires is irrelevant," Berzerker says, her voice rigid. "Implement a secondary strategy."

The thought of contradicting her is untenable. Cogs might be tiptop at coming up with plans, but Berzerker's in charge, no two ways about it. There's a twitch of wrinkles in Cogitator's forehead, but Bolter's sure that it's not really that much of a botheration to Cogitator to have to switch to a second plan. He's always got dozens of different plans whirling around in that great big brain of his; Bolter admires him for that quite a bit.

"You want us actively fighting four at once, instead of driving two out of the red zone," Cogitator says at last, pressing his fingers to the thin strip of plastic where the two triangles of his shades meet over the bridge of his nose. "Possibly six, if the Seer and the Malachite Sylph are in town, seven if the Puppeteer has shadowed the Knight. Jane, that's infeasible, even for us."

"Make it feasible. These are our orders," Berzerker says. "Do you not obey?"

And something tightens in Bolter's stomach, a gut instinct that has his head jerking up and all of his senses on fire, everything focusing in on Cogitator. Waiting for a response.

"Of course I do. It's just going to take time. Time we barely have," Cogitator replies, and Bolter feels all the air huff out of him with a whoosh. He hadn't realized he'd become so tense! He lowers his hands back to his side, and can't remember why or when he might have raised them in the first place. That happens, on occasion, but not usually around any of the other Scratches. Mostly around Crew members, because they're a potential liability.

Hmm. Oh well. He's sure it was nothing! Cogitator would never disobey orders; that would be preposterous!

And anyway, Bolter will have an opportunity to work out some of this tension shortly, when the heroes arrive. Finally, a chance to take on these boorish curs who've occupied so much of the Felt's time and give 'em the old one-two!

"Gonna need to rearrange things," Cogs is muttering, his phone in hand as he makes some last minute calculations. They've met up in a parking garage, next to one of the outer walls with a view of the city visible between the concrete half-wall and the roof. The weather's a dull, dismally boring grey outside, so the other boy's hair has a silvery cast to it, rather than the faded, sandy blond Bolter knows it to be. "Almost all of us will need to take on two at a time." He pauses, head bowed, and then says slowly. "Jane - you want them."

"Yes."

"Done. Jane handles Heir and Hemogoblin," Cogitator says, dragging something down the screen of
his phone. Bolter leans in to watch, bouncing on his toes before settling with one arm bumping against Cogitator's. "They're basically guaranteed to show up; getting rid of them was going to be more trouble than it was worth."

Ranger's hand shoots up. Bolter twitches and nearly jumps out of his own skin, it's so sudden, and it takes a good few seconds before his heart stops racing. "I wanna fight the seeing one!" she says, her legs wide in a v as she kicks out her feet and sits on the hood of a dark blue car. She's been biting her lip for some time now, but now her eyes are fierce and certain as she waves her hand around. "C'mon, Cogs, do mamma a solid!"

"The Seer?" Cogitator's voice is tight. "She might have the Malachite Sylph as backup, Rox, and I've got fuck all on her. I wouldn't know what you were going up against. You've handled the Witch before ."

"Yeeehah, and it was boring and kind of sad-making!" Ranger pouts, batting her eyelashes at Cogitator and clapping her hands together. "Plus, she'll totally remember the whole sniping thing, this time around, so it won't work again. Lemme fight someone else!"

"I can tangle with the Witch, Cogs," Bolter offers. He beams when the two blond heads whip around to look at him; Jane is resting her eyes or something over in the dark corner by the stairwell, only the red of her goggles, shoes, and forkkind standing out in the shadows, so he thinks she at least doesn't disapprove, which is all that matters when it comes to Jane these days. One always knows when one has gotten a foolish, wrong-headed notion stuck in one's noggin when Jane starts squinting at you! It's quite handy! "Her sharpshooting versus mine - we'll sort out who has more of a knack for it!" He pats the pistols as his hip for emphasis - then, mentally, he runs through the ones holstered under his arms, over his shoulder blades, at the small of his back, and on the outsides of his calves.

"I don't like it," Cogitator says, drumming his fingers on the phone and rocking back slightly. "We don't know how much firepower she can actually bring to the table. No one knows, not when she can pull weapons out of thin air. If she's got the wolf with her - even more radicals I can't account for. Once she knows where you are, you're finished."

Bolter presses a hand to his heart, miming as though he's been shot. "Cogitator! You wound me! You think so little of my hand to hand prowess? Of your own inimitable planning capabilities! I know you'll see us through to victory!"

"Inimitable, huh," Cogitator mutters, but he's back to drawing diagrams on his phone with a purpose rather than hesitating, so he's at least considering the idea.

"Peerless!" Bolter assures him, and it wins him a brief flicker of a smile that barely flutters at the corner of Cogs's mouth. "And you, bosom friend?"

"Only two potentials left," Cogitator says, his expression flattening out again. "Flashstep - the Knight's definitely in town at Droog's last report. We don't know if the Puppeteer might have followed." He runs his fingers through his hair, even though it's already perfect. "But no. Yeah. I should be the one to handle them."

Bolter gives a small, rousing cheer that Ranger joins him in, and the two of them exchange wide grins. Ranger can always be counted on to be up for a good challenge, even if she is a little unpredictable sometimes. As they settle in to wait for the heroes to react to their summons, Bolter can feel the tension winding up in his muscles, and he moves closer to the gap in the wall, knuckling at the grey concrete and scanning the overcast city before him. They’re a little distant from the downtown area of the city, so most of the buildings around them are no more than five stories tall, and he wonders if Ranger will choose one of them when she's moving into position. There are plenty
of little roads and grassy areas between the low, splayed out buildings – so not many potential places for a sniper to set up shop. Only one, really, and Jake can see from here there would be some logistical difficulties in trying to secure that location. She's far more the long-distance shooter than he is, though she's a bit slower on the draw - to each their own, of course! But when the time comes, no doubt Cogitator will direct them all to the most advantageous positions from which to draw off their designated target, and depending on what his calculations tell him would be the best approach for Ranger to take, that will settle that.

"Ready for this, Jake?" Cogitator mutters, still at Bolter's side. Bolter can already see that the other boy is preparing himself mentally; no longer drumming his fingers or running finger through hair, but standing perfectly poised to leap into battle at any moment.

"Jake?" Bolter repeats, distractedly.

Cogitator doesn't clarify.

- They stop by Karkat's house.

This is a terrible mistake.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" John asks, dubious, as he eyes the door from the passenger's seat. "'Cause we only have half an hour."

"And me!" Harley points out, leaning in. Her hair is in two braids today, far more neat and orderly than Karkat has ever seen her hair behave, and he thinks Rose might have had a hand in that. "I can get us there in a snap, don't worry!"

"Stop reminding me when I'm busy trying to forget that over here," Karkat mutters, unbuckling and nudging the car door open. He steps out and turns back to the interior of the car to scowl at John and Jade.

Two twin, expectant faces stare back at him.

Karkat opens his mouth, decides it's not even worth it at this point (he needs to conserve his fury for what lies ahead), and shuts it again with a clack of teeth. "If I'm not fucking back in ten minutes, get the hell in there and pry me from that imbecile's big, meaty claws."

"But he loves you!" John says with a huge grin, because John is an idiot.

"It doesn't know the meaning of the word. As far as that monster is concerned, 'love' is an annoying attachment mechanism born of a millennia's worth of evolution that culminated in a creature with the sole goal in life of making my life a living hell."

"Really?" Harley says, resting her chin on her fist.

"No. Karkat pretends not to like his lusus sometimes, that's all," John says, shrugging.

"I mean every word, John, and don't you dare tell her otherwise." Karkat pouts and allows just enough of a pause for John to reach out and pat his hand conciliatorily before he heads for the front door. It's another overcast day, and as Karkat digs through his pockets for his keys in a jangle of metal he glances down at the raggedly kept front lawnring. The neighbors' is immaculately trimmed, so the border between his house and the other is even more jarringly embarrassing. But both lawns look faded, like the grass is dingy and greyed out, and when Karkat looked out the window earlier
today, most of the neighborhood had the same pallor. The clouds sit thick and heavy overhead like winter's decided to pay a return visit, but it's not chilly; the air's too still for that. Something's off, and Karkat can't quite wrap his recovering, measly excuse for a puzzlesponge around it.

Then he notice, at last, a loud, distorted murmur coming from inside the house. Even before he jams his key in the lock, all thoughts of the weird weather get lost in the certainty that his neighbors are going to kill him if Crabdad has done what Karkat thinks it has done. "I will dump you in boiling water and the lusii control people can drag your steamed, tenderized carcass to the reserve seasoned with Old Bay, you absolute piece. Of. SHIT!" Karkat bellows before he's finished shoving the door open.

His house is once again a disaster zone. Crabdad has been alone without Karkat to minimize its rampaging custodial instincts for several days, and the house has paid dearly for his neglect. For a full minute, the sheer amount of mess is simply too much for Karkat's beleaguered thinkpan to process. First and foremost, the wall directly across from him bears a single, enormous scratch clear through to the electrical wiring, as though a large pincer caught on the wallpaper, but also - more inexplicably - several scorch marks trail across the wall at sharp angles as though Crabdad actually managed to create fire. The carpet of the stairway has been completely uprooted and left leaning in a rumpled wave along the front hallway. Empty ice cube trays lie scattered across the damp floor, and in the kitchen the sink is running, with every pot Karkat has ever owned filled to the brim with water and arranged on every available surface. In the living room the couch has been shoved up against the far wall and most of the cushions disgorged of their stuffing. The television blares the news at the highest possible volume setting, the voices of the two news anchors the same ones that Karkat could hear having a conversation from halfway down the front walk.

Then, with a skree, the culprit itself appears at the top of the stairs.

"AND IN OTHER NEWS THE RECLAMATION OF NEW YORK CI-"

"You senile spawn of a brackish rock pool -"

"SKREEEEE!" Crabdad jumps the entire stairwell, its legs creaking as it lunges for Karkat with widespread pincers and a joyful shriek.

"-WELL, THOUGH SOME HAVE QUESTIONED WHETHER THE DANGER HAS-"

Karkat yanks the door shut behind him before dodging out of the way. Crabdad slams into the door in a clatter of spindly limbs, the spines that run along the spine of its shell flared up as it twists its knobby head around to peer at Karkat in confusion. As though he'd actually sit around like a complete fuckface and wait for the sea monster to tackle him.

He could have had a nice sheep lusus, or a giant horned hopbeast, or any other one of the thousands of warmblooded, landdwelling lusii out there. But noooo. He had to get saddled with a fucking mutated freak of a marine custodian.

"Did you try to torch the place?! That's a new low, even for you!" Karkat accuses, and then he shrieks and has to cartwheel out of the way when Crabdad shoves off the door and flings itself bodily at him. Moving hurts, dammit, and he lands in the living room, where it becomes clear that yes, Crabdad has made an attempt to watch the television. The screen is riddled with tiny cracks and the remote has been crunched beyond recognition, several of the buttons stabbed out of their sockets and the plastic case cracked down the middle. Classic signs of a ham-handed custodian dicking around with Karkat's nice things. He hates to think what his comic book collection looks like right now.
Karkat can't even begin to figure out where the volume buttons might have ended up before something hooks the back of his hoodie and reels him in. "KREEEEE!" Crabdad whines at the top of its lungs, plaintive and ululating as it crushes Karkat against its carapace.

"You're crushing me, fuckface, now put me down this instant," Karkat screams back, his throat scratching at the effort needed to out-yell both the lusus *and* the television. He realizes he has dropped the remote, and is forced to scrabble and claw at Crabdad's limbs ineffectively in an effort to reach the remote again. Crabdad is having none of that, of course; it just spins Karkat around in a circle, rubbing the painfully bony underside of its chin against the top of Karkat's head in some sick, sick display of custodial affection. "I need to go to school! Schoolfeeding, you horrific creature of the shitty abyss, I have to go!"

"KREE?"

Oh god, yes, they're finally making some progress. "Yes! School!"

"AND NO COMMENT FROM THE TWO MOST PROMINENT COLDBLOODS IN THE AREA, THE CON-"

Karkat is jerked away from Crabdad's chest to be held at arm's length while the crustacean inspects him with all eyes blinking. With all the self-control he can muster, Karkat waits for his custodian to put two and two together.

"...Skree?" it whistles.

His self-control gambit tanks. "I'll deal with you later!" Karkat says, squirming and trying his best to kick Crabdad between the eyes, but the angle's all wrong. Finally, he jams the claw of his thumb into the palm of his hand and smacks the bleeding wound against one of the lusus's claws holding him up off the ground. A pulse of red, and he jams the blood out in the form of a spike sharp enough to jab through a crack in the lusus's shell. Crabdad lets out a skree of pain rather than inquiry, and Karkat is released. He lands on the balls of his feet and rolls, lunging for the remote control as Crabdad beats a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

"NO PROGRESS MADE IN ANALYZING THE NEW DOME-"

Then it hits Karkat what he's just done, and he stares at the blood knife kind in the palm of his hand in horror. "Oh, fuck. Did I just stab - *fuck,*" he says, horrified. "I'm turning into *him.*"

Because that's *exactly* what Karkat needs right now - to start stabbing things on reflex, in gory homage to Spades fucking Slick.

One of these days he's going to reach sarcastic critical mass and collapse in on himself. He can only pray he takes Crabdad down with him when the time comes. Seriously, how much longer does he have to put up with this annoying fuck? He can't even remember the last time he heard from the lusus control departme-

"AND IN LOCAL NEWS, SEATTLE IS STILL UNDER A HEIGHTENED TERROR ALERT-"

Karkat groans, steps over the remote, and yanks the television's power cable out of the wall socket.

- 

Roxy has a plan.
Said plan runs...somewhat counter to Cogs's plan.

She just hopes that when the time comes, he's not toooo pissed at her.

He'll understand. She has to do it.

Has to.

Roxy bids Jakey and Dirk an inattentive goodbye, and skirts Janey nervously as she makes for the stairwell to head up to the top floor of the parking garage to get a better view of things.

All the while, there's a tremor in her fingers, in her hands, in her heart, a too-quick thud as her heart races along.

But this is the only thing she can think of to do.

This is her only shot.

- They make it all the way to lunch before shit hits the fan.

Karkat is frankly surprised they got that long of a break. They're outside when it happens, and Harley is busy climbing up the limbs of John's lunch tree because she's a terrible influence, so they don't learn until later that everyone in the lunch room - in the entire school, for that matter - gets the same text at the same time.

"You got a text too?" Karkat says, not bothering to look up from his sandwich. John's dad made it, which means it's basically the most delicious BLT ever crafted by mortal hands, and must be eaten with great care because John is pretty sure there's got to be some kind of prankster's gag hidden in it somewhere. John is rarely wrong about these things; he's had to live with his dad's weird specibus specialization for years, after all.

"Yeah but - oh, holy crap, my dad's texting me too now, hang on." John grimaces and sets down the apple in his hand so that he can type with both thumbs. "Dad, what the heck! I thought he promised he wouldn't freak out like this again! Jeez!"

"What iss it?" Harley calls down from where she now sits perched tens of feet above, her braids swaying in the faint freeze. It's the most breeze they've gotten all morning; Karkat's pretty fucking sure that there's some kind of permanent draft around this tree and that John's probably responsible in some way. Fucking hell, Karkat's been eating here for years with this kid and never once realized that the weird, out-of-place gust of wind might be a sign of, oh, he doesn't know, something incredibly suspicious?! Like, per-fucking-se, one’s lunch companion having wind powers?! "Heeey, did you guys get a text too? What's yours about?"

Okay. No. He's not getting worked up about this again. He and John were both equally idiotic. Their respective gene pools were literally scraping the bottom of the barrel of incestuous slurry when they cobbled together the code for John and Karkat's intelligence quotient. It's over and done, now. "We have no fucking idea!" he calls back up at Jade, and then, grumbling to himself, Karkat thumbs open the text message on his own phone while John becomes increasingly bewildered by whatever the hell his dad is messaging him about. He takes a long sip of his bottle of orange juice, as he casts a discerning eye over the contents of the message.

He does not spit the juice everywhere when he realizes what he's reading. That's fucking slander, spread around like the black plague by Harley's tender, gossiping ministrations later on. No, Karkat
just lets his jaw drop a little after swallowing, and he has to reread the message three times before it makes any sense.

THIS IS NOT A TEST OF THE EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM.

WE SCRATCH KIDS CHALLENGE ALL HEROES PRESENT IN THE SEATTLE AREA TO A DUEL.

FAILURE TO SHOW WILL BE TAKEN AS EVIDENCE OF SAID HEROES BEING HELLA LAME. AND CIVILIANS WILL PAY. FACT.

COME TO THE INTERNATIONAL FOUNTAIN IF YOU TAKE YOUR SHIT AS SERIOUSLY AS WE DO. WE ARE HERE. WE ARE WAITING. WE HAVE REALLY SHARP WEAPONS AND RAD GUNS.

REPRESENT, MOTHERFUCKERS.

"Well, I guess we know why your dad is losing his shit," Karkat says. “How the fuck did they get both of our numbers?”

John makes a noise somewhere between the squeal of helium leaking out of a balloon and a mourning humpback whale, his face slowly turning a disturbing shade of puce.

Harley lands next to Karkat lightly in a cloud of fabric, pollen, and hair, and Karkat nearly falls over into John's lap trying to dodge her while still sitting down. She has her own phone out and is inspecting it with one of the extra lenses on her glasses pulled down. She squints and wipes at the screen with the hem of her purple shirt. "Huh. Do you think this is meant for us?" she muses, elbowing Karkat in the side.

He flinches and starts making a good faith effort at crawling up John's arm to try to reclaim some personal space away from Harley. "I don't fucking know, Harley, what do your amazing powers of scientific deduction tell you?" Karkat demands.

"Probably that it's meant for us!" Harley replies cheerfully. "The key phrase is 'all heroes,' after all!" She snaps her fingers in some kind of eureka moment. "Ohhh, that means Kanaya and Rose are invited too! Sooo coo-

"Oh my god, are you alright?!"

All three of them look up to see a teacher striding towards them from the open door of the lunchroom, one of the ninth grade English teachers if Karkat remembers right - hey, it's not like he was here for freshman year; he has no reason to know even that much about the lower grades. She looks existentially harassed as she irritably tucks a strand of hair behind one of her horns, a state of being that Karkat fervently sympathizes with, because he's been suffering under the same conditions for basically his entire life. "You fell," the troll says, her concern directed mostly toward Harley, and oh fuck they're in trouble.

"Yeah, I'm fine! No worries!" Harley says, flashing a reassuring smile. Because Harley is the kind of indiscreet paintthuffer who leaps from tall trees without caring about the fact that both her legs should have been broken by the fall.

"You jumped out of a tree!" the teacher repeats, stomping towards them with a vengeance and folding her arms over her ruffled shirt. "What were you thinking? That was a fifteen foot drop! Why aren't you three inside the cafeteria with the other students?"
John surges to his feet and Karkat follows on instinct, checking himself and pretending to become fascinated with the tree in question as John loops his arm with Harley's and smiles winningly at the teacher. Maybe if Karkat stares despairingly off into the distance long enough, the teacher will think he doesn't know who these two idiots are and leave him to wallow in his own misery in peace. "I know! We'll make sure she gets to the nurse's office," he says. Harley opens her mouth, and Karkat almost snorts with laughter when John steps on her toe with the heel of his foot. When John of all people steps on your foot, it hurts. "Come on, Jade, doesn't your butt hurt or - something? Anything?"

When Karkat cancels his despair-fuelled staring contest with the tree, he sees John is winking furiously at Harley, who looks a little baffled before very, very obvious realization lights up her face and she starts to play along. "Yeah! Now that you mention it! I landed kind of hard! On my butt!"

Karkat slaps his own face and considers how practicable it would be to strangle himself with his own hoodie drawstrings out of embarrassment by proxy. He considered this scenario several times in the past, and come to the conclusion that yeah, if he removed the drawstring and ruined his hoodie forever more, it would probably work just fine as a garrote or something when the time comes and the number of fucks he has left to give implode.

But he really likes this hoodie.

"Hurry along, then. Lunch is over. All students are to return to their first period rooms," the teacher says, shaking her head and clearly not convinced at all by John and Harley's incredible display of shitty acting.

"Huh? Why? Did something happen?" John asks, brows furrowed as he reaches out behind him and waits for Karkat to clasp his hand before hustling Harley back toward the cafeteria doors.

"The school is in lockdown," is the answer, and Karkat nearly trips headlong over the threshold of the door as the teacher ushers them back into a cafeteria full of the rustle and murmur of high school students chattering to themselves. All eyes look up, scan the three of them, and dismiss them before every student goes back to their intense conversations.

It's fucking freaky. Usually this close to the end of lunch period, everyone is basically shrieking to be heard over all the other conversations, and the stoners are lined up at the cashier's station in a desperate bid to wheedle the last of the pizza out of the cafeteria workers. But everyone is huddled in their seats, bent over their phones and communicating only in whispers. The teacher provides no more by way of explanation before hurrying off to join the other supervising teachers at the exit doors, where they seem to be releasing the students back to their classrooms one table at a time.

"Over here," John whispers, and Karkat squeezes his hand before letting go and stuffing his claws back into his hoodie pouch as they approach the table where four members of the swim team sit, as far from the exit as possible. They're okay, as far as people in general go, but they're John's friends, not Karkat's, and he's not comfortable with PDA when other people are watching. "Guys, what even?" John says, scooting onto one of the benches and dragging Harley down with him.

"Taken a look at your phone recently?" one of them answers, a violetblood with red-rimmed glasses, as he holds up his flip phone and spins it so the butterfly phone charm clacks against the side. Karkat tries not to make eye contact with him, ever, because that's just the policy he has around coldbloods who could disembowel him if they ever got too good of a look at his eyes without contact lenses. It's a fucking sensible policy and he sees no reason to change it. Ever. "Everyone got the same weird message, and then the teachers started bugging out because they all got calls from the emergency alert system. Sounds like the administration just wants us all in lockdown until they figure out what's going on."
"Well, that's not happening," Harley says too loudly, tossing one of her braids back over her shoulders and lacing her fingers together, stretching her hands palm out in front of her. "Where's a place we can -"

"Shut up," Karkat hisses before Harley can finish whatever no doubt suspicious thing she was about to say. He darts a glance at the four swimmers, but the three who nodded in welcome to John without pausing have already started talking about whether swim practice will be canceled, and the violetblood's been drawn back into their heated debate. "Not in public, Harley, fuck."

"The bathrooms are still open, but it'll look totally dumb if all three of us go at the same time," John says in an undertone, rubbing his temples. "Teachers will notice."

"Wait five minutes, then," Harley says, shrugging, and she pushes up from her seat. "I'll see you guys later!" she says, humming to herself as she sidesteps between the crowded tables and sashays her way into the female-identifying bathroom. None of the teachers head her off, too preoccupied with cajoling a bunch of cheerleaders into paying attention.

"She just does whatever the fuck she wants, doesn't she," Karkat says, taking off his glasses and pressing the heel of his palm into his right eye as the room blurs fuzzily around him. It's only been half a day with the contact lenses and his head has started aching; he hasn't worn them as much over the weekend, surrounded by people who know and didn't really give two fucks about his hemotype since they had their own secret identities - or lack thereof - to worry about, and now it feels like getting used to the constant distortion of his vision all over again.

By the time he's put the glasses back on, John has sighed heavily and flopped down a little in his seat, smiling ruefully. "Well, she does get stuff done!" he says, shrugging. "She's always been so enthusiastic about things!" He says it with a fondness that doesn't entirely match up with the fact that they only met Harley about a week ago; it's the fondness of years of friendship, and Karkat doesn't have to say a word before John winces and catches his slip. "Uh."

"It's fine, dumbass," Karkat interrupts before John can retract his comment or apologize or something else stupid like that. When John stammers, he snorts. "You seriously think it would bother me that you mix up memories sometimes? I like knowing what weird shit is going on in your thinkpan, remember? Helps me make sure you don't wander off and poke your eye out, or ignore important shit and let it eat at you until it actually is unhealthy." He does a spot check to make sure the teachers are still busy, rubbing his temples. "Uh."

"It's fine, dumbass," Karkat interrupts before John can retract his comment or apologize or something else stupid like that. When John stammers, he snorts. "You seriously think it would bother me that you mix up memories sometimes? I like knowing what weird shit is going on in your thinkpan, remember? Helps me make sure you don't wander off and poke your eye out, or ignore important shit and let it eat at you until it actually is unhealthy." He does a spot check to make sure the teachers are still busy, and stands up.

John joins him, doing his best to act inconspicuous, but John is way more noticeable than Karkat so the troll huffs and switches sides so that he's concealed behind John rather than the other way around, which would never work in a million fucking years. "I just don't want to worry anyone," John says, his voice too small as they duck into the restroom. "It's not like my head's any more messed up than usual; it's just that now I know more about how it's messed up. It'll just weird people out if I'm talking about stuff that didn't happen all the time."

"Pretty sure you've managed to get this process backwards," Karkat says, rolling his eyes. "Now that we know why your pan's a disaster, we can do more to get it back together again." He drops his volume for once, with great effort, as they walk past the mirrors over the sinks and come to a halt to wait for Harley. "And I'll stop worrying about you when we're both deader than my shriveled up, fury-infested soul, John, so good luck with that," he adds, resting his forehead on John's shoulder.

"Harley patented pale-block interruption, coming through!" Harley announces as she appears in a burst of lime green. She comes so close to the far wall that it almost looks like she's walking through it rather than teleporting around it by meddling with the fabric of the universe. Karkat's still not used to that. "You dorks ready to rumble?"
"Yeah," John says, though in Karkat's opinion this impromptu jam should probably have lasted another ten minutes before he'd say John was over this latest dip in his mood. John's smoothing over his issues instead of dealing with them, again. "Let's meet up with everyone else and find out what they want to do."

Harley's eyes glow green. "No problem!"

- 

DS: Sound off.
RL: here!!
JE: Ahem! Reading you loud and clear bro!
JC: .

DS: State your positions, everyone. And Jane, take it easy with the radio silence horseshit. There's only one hope for this mission to avoid insolvency, and that hope lies in everyone keeping me abreast of their current status and not clamming up right when they need assistance to salvage their asses from the trash heap of failure.
JC: If that's what the mission requires, DS-2409.
JC: I am on your five o'clock.
DS: Meritorious, yo. Jake?
JE: Some harridan just attempted to oust me from my position but i gave her the old run around and i believe she has lost interest in me. She seemed to think that i was up to some skullduggery and i cant imagine what gave me away!
RL: lmao jack
RL: if u were 2 look around u would toytes notice were all dressed up in black leather and p much everyone else is in normal cloths
RL: * totes
RL: atm you are probs the most shady charracter shes seen all day
RL: ur shadier than cogss shades congrats
JE: Oh wow! *tugs at disreputable collar with sweaty mitts*
DS: Roxy? You're secure?
RL: yaya
RL: srsly cogss i got this
DS: Really?
RL: rly rly
DS: Why is this not reassuring me, Roxy.
RL: le siggnnnn
RL: i dont see u micromanaging ur jakey poo and his new elderly lady friend over yonder
JE: Well i wouldnt be so spurious as to call her elderly...
RL: a n c i e n t~~~
DS: Micromanaging is what I do. That is the literal definition of my job. It is basically the indefatigable fundament upon which the unstable ziggurat of our first trial run must be built and somehow, impossibly, reach its nadir.
DS: So please tell me you've got this.
RL: bor
RL: * BRO
RL: i got tihs
RL: in
RL: the bagg
RL: *winnkwnoks*
JC: .

-
Karkat misses the part where John finishes negotiating with his dad to convince him they need to go out to confront these Scratch kids. He assumes there's a lot of stern fatherly frowning, countered by earnestly sincere arguments on the part of the offspring, because human custodian-child relationships tend to involve a lot less incoherent shrieking and accidental demolition of furniture than lusus-troll negotiations. (Unless you're a Strider, in which case casual destruction and mental trauma are apparently a fact of life.)

Either way, John emerges from the Lalondes' display room-turned-office looking shaky and pale but with a thumbs up that means he and Samuel Egbert reached some kind of heartwarming, hard-won compromise. Of course, with civilians being threatened in that initial message - one that Karkat, John, and Harley came back to the mansion to learn had been broadcast on the television's emergency alert system, as well - Karkat can't imagine that Dad Egbert, the one who taught John all of that kid's strict heroic moral code, would try to discourage them from meeting this challenge. Heir has to get it from somewhere, after all.

But yeah. Karkat misses all that.

 Mostly because these assholes are trying to ditch Karkat to go off and do the hero thing on their own, just because of a little thing like him having been gravely injured last week.

He is completely justified in performing a spectacular jackknife off the fucking handle.

"LOOK ME IN THE EYE, HARLEY."

"It's not -"

"LOOK ME IN THE EYE AND TELL ME YOU'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT HAPPENED THE LAST TIME I LET YOU INBRED SEEDFLAPS DRAG JOHN OUT ON THE JOB WITHOUT ME."

John freezes with one foot out the door of the office, mouth agape. His father appears behind him, his suit as impeccable as ever as he removes the unlit pipe from the corner of his mouth to stare at the five young people standing in the poorly-lit, absolutely fucking massive living room. There are empty pedestals and dusty wizard statues scattered around literally everywhere, and a heavy brocaded sofa with the plastic cover lying crumpled on the floor where Dave dumped it in his quest to find somewhere suitable for lounging and/or lying in a daze as he zones out for the fifth fucking time.

"But you're still injured!" Harley blurts out, planting her fists on her hips as she glares him down. She's already in uniform of course; she snapped her fingers and changed right after they teleported back to the house. "You should be resting!"

Karkat is fucking **offended**. "Do I need to kick your ass?!"

"No, dummy, I think you need to lie down!"

"BECAUSE I WILL KICK YOUR ASS TO PROVE A POINT."

"Isn't there an emergency?" Dave drawls. He has a stuffy purple couch cushion resting over his head, so it comes out muffled. "My crisis senses are tingling. Or maybe that's indigestion."

Karkat rips the pillow off Dave's face and tosses it to the side. "I agree with you of all people. There's an emergency. DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH IT PAINS ME TO SAY THAT OUT LOUD?!"

"No, but I know how much it pains me to hear it," Dave replies, cracking his neck to one side and
digging into his ear with a pinky finger. "Shout a little louder, Karkat, I'm not sure you achieved the volume needed to liquefy solid walls, yet."

"Stop being a truculent jackass and tell Harley I'm well enough to go fight crime."

Dave raises his shades a little, enough for his red eyes to peer underneath, and he gives Karkat a onceover. Karkat straightens his shoulders with indignation under the scrutiny. "You were kind of, like, on your death bed, dude," Dave says, fiddling with his collar. "John threw a bitch fit about it and everything, remember? That didn't stop being a thing."

"I'm fine. Slick explained a few things, and I am almost entirely not in any way in doubt of my ability to function in a strife setting." Possibly. Maybe. Look, John's not going fucking anywhere without him, and his ribs stopped hurting hours ago, and that's the only standard Karkat is measuring himself by at the moment.

"That sounded like a load of word salad and not a lot of substance, mister!" Jade says, shaking her head. "I'm the one teleporting everyone, so I can totally dump you here if I have to."

John finally seems to unfreeze, and he walks out into the living room, dodging his way absently between rows of junk and random pieces of expensive-looking furniture like he still has the layout of the Lalonde place memorized - which he kind of does. Karkat throws him a beseeching look. What the fuck does a troll have to do around here to get the other heroes to take him seriously when he says he's fine. "I'm going with you," Karkat repeats, because it bears repeating.

John's face twists up in consternation. "Karkat - I, uh -"

He needs to explain. Because clearly no one here paid any attention to the charts Karkat made back at the laboratory - too busy drawing cartoon dicks behind his back, no doubt. Aware that this isn't exactly a subject John's in a good headspace for hearing about right now, Karkat crosses the last few feet between them and grips John's arm before he starts talking, just in case. "Game mechanics," Karkat mutters, and he sees John's eyes flicker, rings of blue around the brown contacts. The kid's whole body stiffens in kneejerk, barely repressed panic. "Yeah, I know. You don't remember anything about accelerated healing? Because Slick seemed pretty fucking sure I'd be on my feet again in less than a week. I wouldn't believe a word out of his foul mouth, but -" Karkat gestures to his ribs. "I feel fine."

"I know I hardly ever get sick. And we took a lot of hits in - uh, that game that normal thirteen year olds probably shouldn't have gotten up from. It all happened so fast..." John says hesitantly. He casts a glance back at his dad. "You're sure?"

"We don't know how many of these Scratch kids there are, and we don't know how they relate to Doc Scratch himself," Karkat says grimly, tightening his hold on John. "Yeah, I'm fucking sure. You need someone there to watch your back, dumbass."

John is quiet for a long minute, and Karkat wonders if he is actually going to have to do a fucking cartwheel or something to prove to everyone in this goddamn room that he's not about to keel over in the middle of a fight.

Sure, he's still a little sore. But he doesn't intend to leave John alone for a single solitary second as Heir after what happened last time. If nothing else, he can hang back in the shadows and provide an element of surprise. It's worked out well in the past, after all. It's totally a solid plan.

"Well, back at you, then," John says, loud enough to include the rest of the room in their conversation. "You watch my back, I watch yours. I'm not leaving you to fight by yourself, either."
Ever again, goes unstated. And yeah, okay, Karkat can see why that would be a reasonable caveat. He doesn't buy into half of the bullshit Spades Slick tries to pass off as truth the last time he met with the mysterious carapacian, but he certainly has no plans for fighting criminals alone for a while.

Maybe the Knight thing is nonsense. Or maybe - Karkat glowers at Dave - maybe he's just going to focus on protecting Heir for the foreseeable future. Just as a precaution.

"Karkat…" Harley says, in what is not quite a whine; more like genuine, sincere concern, the kind that makes Karkat feel kind of bad, because Harley's a lot of things but she's also (he grudgingly admits) probably really worried about his wellbeing. Fuck only knows why.

"Are we all prepared?"

Karkat shakes his head a little, and looks up into the gloom of the second story. Even with all the light fixtures on the walls and the lamps lit, the Lalonde mansion still has all the atmosphere of some Gothic horror novella. Rose descends the stairs with the air of a young lady of the house, Kanaya sweeping in at her side. It takes him a beat before he realizes that both of them are in costume, though neither wears a mask; Rose has her jacket zipper up all the way to her chin and Kanaya has an unseasonably long, dark bottle green coat that completely conceals what she has on underneath, but he recognizes the boots and gloves of the Malachite Sylph, and there are tiny stylized suns all over Rose's jacket that give it away instantly. When Kanaya turns the corner of the stairs there's a weird moment where Karkat has to do a double take, because he could have sworn the skin of her face cast a faint, pale glow on the wall beside her.

Rumors have always floated around the blogosphere that the Sylph might be a rainbow drinker. Holyyyyy fuckballs.

"Hemogoblin's coming with us, so we still need to change," John says steadily, betraying none of the uncertainty Karkat might have expected. "Can you see anything that might be bad about that, Rose?"

Rose tilts her head to the side, her eyes closing. Her blond hair falls over her face a little, almost obscuring the glimmer of gold light as a third eye blinks from her forehead. Which is fucking weird, still. "Hmmmm. I can't sense much of anything that might go horrifically awry, actually," the girl muses at last, one eyebrow arching up even though her eyes remain closed. "It's not an exactitude, of course. I'd need more time to scry the portents in detail. But it's not an unfortunate path." She cracks one eye open, and both eyebrows rise up to the heavens. "David, put some clothes on."

"You know what's even more ironic that fighting villain dorklords in fancy fucking suits, Rosemary?" Dave returns, crossing his legs and bouncing his foot. In all the hours that Karkat, John, and Harley have been at school acting like civilized members of society, Dave has still not changed into regular clothes. "Fighting them in pajamas. Bam. What now."

Karkat, who's still trying not to stare at Kanaya because god fucking dammit he's trying to not act like a moron in front of her all the time, rolls his eyes. "Suit yourself, fuckface, we'll leave you here instead of me. Have fun."

Dave grimaces and then vanishes at pretty much the same time someone taps Karkat on the shoulder. Someone who's not John, so Karkat whirls around. Dave is in a white suit, the collar of his red shirt popped in a despicably douchebaggy fashion reminiscent of his elder brother. "Go put on your fakey fake horns, sweetie," the human deadpans, accidentally - probably - smacking Karkat on the shoulder with one end of his black tie as he starts to knot it around his neck.

Okay. That was blatant provocation, and Karkat snarls on impulse before John loops an arm around
his shoulders and drags him away. The two of them are suddenly the only ones not ready to go out for a midday heroic emergency, and Karkat catches John almost floating up the stairs in his haste to scramble back to their rooms and get into costume.

It only occurs to Karkat that the last time he saw his costume it was in tatters when he digs into the duffle bag full of his stuff that he packed for the trip to the labs and pulls it out completely and impossibly intact. Karkat blinks and shakes out the dark, blackish red body suit, and searches for any sign of the gaping holes and tears that should have littered the fabric and the Kevlar underneath, but there's exactly fuck all. Only on closer inspection does Karkat make out the minute stitches where the rips have been sewn back together, and when turned inside out the Kevlar has been expertly patched.

The note that flutters out and lands by his horn prosthetics when he hastily starts yanking on his costume provides something by way of explanation. One claw still free of the hugging closeness of the suit, Karkat reaches down and snaps it up to read.

*It has been brought to my attention by a third party that you have been out of commission for quite some time, and required repairs to your costume that you might not have thought to complete on your own. Consider this a boon, and a sample of my talents in the field of costume repair. In the event you wish to redesign your costume in the future, speak to me first. You and I need to have a long heart to heart chat about the questionable fashion merits of spikes.*

*And by questionable I mean what on earth were you thinking. Please speak to me.*

*Please.*

And then underneath that, like a completely unnecessary footnote:

*youre fucking welcome can we go now please*

- 

JC: .
JC: .
JC: .
JE: I think berzerker just implied an ellipsis in three parts!
RL: a meaningful pause u mean?
JE: Quite possibly! The transcript definitely shows her sighing three times!
RL: say sometihgin else janey!
RL: impart to us ur salient wisdom
RL: *silent
JC: .
JE: Oh wow!
DS: I believe that at some point you all promised me you would not abuse this live chat function. We're supposed to restrict it to imperative communiques, not constantly call in like this is some kind of automated phone sex hotline.
JE: But what could be taking these hooligans so long cogs? It's been almost an hour!
JE: A vendor of fine shaved ice just approached me and i had no money with which to procure a sample! How else are we to pass the time?
RL: ohh hhhoooo! shaved ice??
DS: Absolutely not.
RL: i have funds
RL: adn the woman who hass the cash hass the power!
RL: capitalism
RL: fact
Karkat has visited the International Fountain basically fifty fucking times. Sadly, aside from the public pool, the fountain has always been one of Crabdad's favorite places to make a fool of itself in public. When he'd been a young, naïve city wriggler, Karkat had splashed along with the lusus and probably terrorized all the poor human wrigglers in the vicinity for years before he grew up and realized how incredibly dangerous it was for him to run around and risk scraping his knees in public. The last thing he'd needed was for another troll to get a good look at him. His pupils hadn't filled in with his blood color yet, so he'd just been another black-eyed face in the crowd, but those days of youthful hemononymy were soon to come to an end. Karkat had stayed inside more and more, and before he knew it he'd amassed an army of hoodies and false colored contact lenses to hide behind. No more trips to the pool for him or Crabdad. Maybe that had contributed to the lusus's tendency to go absolutely fucking stircrazy when left alone in the house for any extended periods of time, but what the fuck else was Karkat supposed to do?

Anyway. The fountain's located smack in the middle of the Seattle Center, north of Belltown, where they held a World's Fair back in 1960-something - Karkat never really paid attention on field trips. The weather's not all that great today, so the grassy mall around the fountain's outer rings is mostly clear of all the usual hordes of families that come by to cool off in the summer months. But there are a few people still wandering around - most of them being ushered away by the handful of cops circling around the area. A couple of white tents set up to provide shade for food and drink vendors flap in the faint breeze, but most of them are already vacant.

The cops might be a problem. But if there are any roadblocks in place, they're not an issue by virtue of the fact that they're all travelling by Harley's space powers. She'd spent the last five minutes before they left dragging a squirmy WV out of the trunk of the car to wait for them back home and consulting with her weird wolf pet thing to have it help her aim for a location near the fountain that wasn't occupied by some poor fleshy human body or someone else's car. As Samuel pulls up beside a building across the street from the fountain, idling and trying to look inconspicuous, Harley begins crackling with lightning again, and Karkat braces himself for another vaguely unpleasant trip.

"I'll bring the car around on the road by the Space Needle - for those of you unfamiliar with Seattle, you won't be able to miss it. That will be your point of retreat in the event you find yourselves overwhelmed or in need of medical attention," Samuel Egbert announces from the driver's seat before Harley can follow through with it. The man looks as strained as ever, but not quite as run down as Karkat remembers him being while all of the kids were in varying states of trauma recovery. He even manages a reassuring fatherly smile for all of them, twisting around to where four of the six heroes have crammed themselves into the backseat. "I know you'll all do well. Be careful."

"You got it, Mr Egbert!" Harley promises. Rose, sitting on Kanaya's lap and looking far more comfortably regal there than Karkat feels smushed on top of John in the front seat, inclines her head, the shadows under her eyes concealed by precisely applied makeup but still visible in this close of a proximity. She hasn't been drinking or they'd all be able to smell it, but Karkat is very aware of the
fact that between him, Rose, and John, three out of the six people here have recently been incapacitated in some form or another.

"And if a member of the Midnight Crew arrives?" Samuel says, staring at them all meaningfully.

Dave pipes up, "Grab John and get the hell out of Dodge."

"Thank you, Dave. That will be all, children." And with a burst of neon green, Dad Egbert winks out of sight with Bec still presumably in the trunk, to be replaced in Karkat's watery vision by the sight of the silvery dome of the International Fountain. It's smaller than he remembers it being, but still fucking huge, resting at the center of the dip in the ground. The fountain's jets arc up in plumes of water, following the beat of some music that Karkat can't hear at the moment - maybe someone shut it down after, you know, the threatening text message that literally everyone in the greater Seattle area received. Even as he watches, some of the central water jets cut off abruptly, splattering the stone around the fountain with an aborted arc of water. The miniature jets keep going for a while longer.

Hopefully, the six incredibly obvious people appearing in the middle of the clearing won't attract the attention of the cops attempting to establish a perimeter for a while.

"Heads up, we just got a second message. Think we pissed 'em off by taking our sweet time," Dave says, his artificial voice low. He's lurking on the other side of Rose and Kanaya, scrolling through something on his phone. Karkat, who doesn't bring his phone when he's in costume, has to read over John's shoulder when he pulls his own disposable phone out of a pouch on his belt. Neither Karkat's nor John's costumes are very easily concealed or altered to fit in, so they're both wearing hoodies over everything, pants having been deemed too hard to get rid of in an emergency.

THIS IS NOT A TEST OF THE EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM.

WE'RE GETTING BORED, HEROES.

TICK TOCK. TICK FUCKING TOCK.


"Karkat, it took us, like, an hour to get our shit together. And Jade can teleport," John points out. "Instantaneously."

"I am not interested in semantics, John -"

"Preeetty sure that's not what that word means -"

"You may want to shed your hooded garments, gentlemen," Rose says. Karkat blinks at her in time to see the girl unzipping her jacket. "We have company."

"What do you see, Rose?" Kanaya asks, pressed almost as close to the human as Karkat is to his own.

"Two at a distance, two right in front of us. But one of them is -" Rose breaks off and makes a noise of frustration. "It's - that's not possible. I've only seen someone like this once before, and it was my mother."

"Wouldn't that be awkward as hell," Dave comments. He takes off his shades and hooks them inside one of the inner pockets of his suit jacket. His face is pale and freckled without them to obscure half his features. "Yeah, I see 'em. It's that sniper again, shit."
That's when Karkat spots them, too. There's only one vendor still at work, and just as the cops turn their attention towards driving the shaved ice stand off the premises, the vendor's last two customers step out from under the shade and onto the grass, walking shoulder to shoulder with cones of bright pink and green ice in their gloved hands. Both are humans, one with bouncy blond curls, goggles, and a brilliant pink scarf knotted around her neck, and the other a man that dwarfs her, tall and muscular enough that he gives John more than a run for his money, and made no less intimidating by the fact that he's essentially wearing the equivalent of evil booty shorts.

Seriously. Nothing is left to the imagination, there. Nothing.

"Heir," John corrects automatically, and it's like flipping a switch as John's voice loses the strain that has been plaguing him for days and Heir's confident, serious tone takes over. That can't be healthy. "...Are they seriously eating shaved ice? Isn't that kind of unprofessional?" And yeah, as all six heroes watch, the girl spoons the shaved ice into her mouth with a nervous jitter to her hands, and the guy laughs at something she chatters between bites. Neither of them seem too concerned about being noticed by the police.

Hemogoblin yanks his hoodie off over his head. "We've probably done worse."

"This one time Clubs Deuce attacked me when I was eating tacos!" Sharpshooter chimes in.

"Okay, so, making my point for me, good."

"Perhaps we should simply ask them if they're involved or not," Kanaya says, removing her coat in a smooth, practiced motion and folding it into a neat bundle that she lets hang over her arm. Rose finishes undoing her jacket at the same time and Karkat drops out of his hero mindset long enough to have a minor, geeky aneurysm.

Because he's seen the Seer of Light's new costume design floating around the internet, snapshots from her fight in Chicago the other day. But he had no idea that the Sylph had been redesigned, too. This definitely isn't what she was wearing in Chicago. Her legs and arms are sheathed in leggings and sleeves of dyed greyish-white Kevlar, while her torso is covered in dark green with diamonds of grey at her hips and a cowl of pale grey hugging her shoulders and upper arms instead of a cape. She wears an open black skirt with a vibrant green damask-patterned inner lining, and has traded in the more subtle caps that she must have used to even out the asymmetry of her horns in the past for black horn guards that completely cover the candy corn keratin underneath.

And then, just to boggle Karkat's inner fanboy even more, with a flick of her wrists Rose removes a clear, pale yellow visor from the inside of her jacket. Tucking the arms of the visor behind her ears like glasses, Karkat can see that it imitates the style of her original mask, the one she wore before New York got blown the fuck up.

It looks like she's wearing -

"You've got," Dave says, "to be shitting me. He did not."

"I believe it was his way of welcoming me to the family," the Seer says, a sly smile curving her lips as she adjusts her shades.

Heir takes a deep breath, and says what probably everyone is thinking. "You guys look so cool."

"Everyone ready? Awesome!" Sharpshooter claps her hands together, nods sharply, and then, with a snap, is floating over toward the two black-clad figures engrossed in their snack, the rifle slung across her back swinging by its strap. "Helloooooo! Right here! Yoohoo!"
Oh. Right. That. Hemogoblin checks that his mask is still in place, and falls back, letting most of the rest of the group spread out in front of him. His instinct is to stay close to Heir, but he slinks over to side behind the Seer of Light, keeping one eye on Heir and the other on the Scratch kids. "In Chicago," he says through the corner of his mouth, "none of the cameras could see you. Blind Justice and the Indigo Scourge acted like they couldn't, either."

"Mmm. A trick of the light. Why do you ask?" Seer replies just as quietly without looking back at him, tapping an old, antique knitting needle against her thigh. The Sylph does look at him, assessing Hemogoblin with jade eyes, and shaking her head a little. He gets the distinct feeling that his costume is being found wanting again. Well, not everyone can roll out of their 'coons and dress like a fucking fashion model for a day of violence, okay?

"Can you do it to me? Not many shadows I can hide in in the middle of the fucking day." The sun's not out, but there's still enough ambient light that Hemogoblin trying to sneak around would stick out like - well, like a troll wearing a racy skin-tight bodysuit. "I prefer stealth."

Seer is quiet for a long moment, chanting something so low under her breath Hemogoblin can't make it out. Then, abruptly, the light around him skews and when he blinks, there's something weird about his surroundings. Like all the colors are being refracted through water. "Sorry," the Seer says, and there's another spark of light from her hand before the world settles back into the right dimensions. "That should last until I cancel it or my power runs out, whichever comes first. Good luck."

Sharpshooter, in the meanwhile, has managed to flag down the two presumed Scratch kids. "We got, like, every single hero in the city to meet you, so what do you want?" she singsongs, planting her fists on her hips, her lab coat billowing out behind her as she bounces. "Ringing any bells?"

"Mmwha?" Pink Scarf says eloquently around a mouthful of shaved ice, looking up and gulping hurriedly. Her eyes go wide as saucers, and she elbows her burly companion in the ribs. "Crap, I think 's them! Shit!"

Evil Booty Shorts actually drops his ice cone onto the ground when he sees them, pressing a finger to a black earpiece. "Uhhhhh, Cogitator? Bro? I, uh. I hate to be a pest. But. Oh, devilfucking dickens…this is so embarrassing…" After a pause, he looks at all of them very deliberately. "Er. Five."

"Oh, good," Hemogoblin says, rolling his eyes hard as he slides back into position at Heir's back. "They're just as bad as us. That’s reassuring."

He then remembers that no one can actually see him, and everyone's attention is too riveted to the Scratch kids in front of them to, apparently, pay attention to the disembodied whispering.

Fuck. Muttering to himself, Hemogoblin starts digging his claws into his skin and drawing out his sicklekind.

"Ah, yah, we called you out here! It's like, hecka yeah!!" Pink Scarf starts babbling, her words slurred and jumbling together in some kind of really fucking familiar speech pat- oh for fuck's sake is she drunk. "And five of you, like - what a good turn out!" She hesitates, trading equally bewildered stares with her companion. "Uh. Do you all...come here often?"

"Yes, and it's kind of rude of you to call us all the way out here in the middle of the school day. Rude!" Heir says, sighing through his mask.

"No," Flashstep says flatly.
"We do not even reside in this city," the Sylph adds. "This is a bit of an inconvenience."

"You're stalling, dear," Seer says, folding her arms. "At least tell us what spurred on this unorthodox challenge of yours while your teammates get into position to attempt to ambush us, if you would be so kind?"

Pink Scarf winces. "You know about that?" Booty Shorts says weakly.

"Oh yeah, I see what you mean now," Sharpshooter says, with the glee of one who thinks her nonstop punning is clever as she winks at the Seer. "Two and seven o'clock, right? They're coming at us pretty fast!"

"That's who I have my eye on, yes" Seer says with a perfectly straight face.

Hemogoblin groans. Heir starts snerking. "You forgot they were friends with me," he whispers, elbowing Hemogoblin in the side, and Hemogoblin throws up a middle finger that no one can properly appreciate. The stealth is not worth it. He regrets everything.

Wait. "How did you know where to elbow me?" he hisses.

Heir gives him a look like 'really?' "You're still breathing, dummy."

Foiled again.

"Holy Toledo! You all really are on top of all this. Well then! Time for plan C!" Booty Shorts says, frowning. He points at Sharpshooter, squinting. "Sharpshooter?"

"Me!" she says, jerking a thumb at her chest.

"I challenge you to a sharpshooting contest!" he says dramatically, drawing two pistols but thankfully not pointing them at anyone. "Winner take all!"

"Ohhhh!" Sharpshooter's eyes light up and oh god she's falling for it.

"Mano-a-mano!"

"Oh, totally! That sounds fun!" Sharpshooter says, delighted. "Where can we find a good target range on such short notice, though?"

"Sharpshooter, we should probably not split u-" Heir manages to get out before Booty Shorts spreads his arms with a smirking grin. "I've already got a range set up. Take us to the stadium, if you would be so kind. Ladies first, after all!"

"Be right back, guys!" And then, just like that, Sharpshooter and Booty Shorts are gone, in a sharp jolt of green light that sets all of Karkat's hair on end with static.

"IMPULSE CONTROL, SHARPSHOOTER!" Hemogoblin screams after her ineffectively. Sadly, the stadium is at least a couple of miles away. Not even he can shout that loud.

"Oh my god," Flashstep says, dropping his face into both hands. "He played her. He played her like a sad southern Appalachian hillbilly's creaky hand-me-down two string fiddle."

Pink Scarf now finds herself the sole object of the attention of five vaguely irritated heroes - well, four that she can see, anyway. Eyes darting from side to side, she takes another furtive bite of shaved ice as though they somehow won't notice. "Fck. I mean, fuck," she stutters. Her sweeping gaze skips over Hemogoblin, but he still catches the deep panic in her stare. An inordinate amount of
panic, really. "If I said I just wanted to say hi to the Seer, that wouldn't go over so hot, would it?"

"Not particularly," Heir says, shrugging.

Pink Scarf laughs nervously. "Ask for an autogriefer? Wait. Autograph? OhcomeonCog'sI'mdyingoverhere." A beat. Then she loosens her scarf a little and laughs again, even more shrilly than before. "You guise need to cut a girl some slack, here."

Heir scratches at the back of his hood, looking over at Seer with both eyebrows raised. "Say what?"

Seer is not looking back. Without warning she lets out a wordless shout, spinning around and staring behind them. "Damn! Too fast - Dave, move!"

There's a moment where maybe Flashstep tries to move out of the way. Maybe he even tries to pause time to do it; Hemogoblin knows absolutely fuck all about the whole time thing.

But whoever it is just moves that fast, and instead of Flashstep dodging out of the way, he turns just about right in time to get tackled backward by some guy on a flying rocket board. Just as quickly, a black-sleeved arm shoots out to the other side and the Malachite Sylph barely has the time to blink and snarl before she's yanked off her feet by a hand on her arm. Hemogoblin reaches out and yanks Heir back defensively, even as Heir shouts and tries to jump forward instead because Heir likes jumping into danger without prior warning. The Seer is wide eyed behind her shades as she follows the careening rocket board's speedy retreat, hair whipping in the wind kicked up by the sudden passage.

It's like watching a fucking drive by or something, except with added rocket skateboards.

And suddenly, just like that, as the skateboard peels off around the corner and vanishes into some other section of the Center, the heroes are down to three.

"What the fuck!" Pink Scarf yells, which Hemogoblin is pretty sure is his line. "COGGGGS!"

"We have to go help Flashstep, Hemogoblin! Let go!" Heir says, squirming. He's stronger than Hemogoblin, and he manages to yank himself free while Hemogoblin's still processing what just happened.

"I was exaggerating, you dope!" Pink Scarf says, deep in the indignation throes. Hemogoblin is pretty sure she's not talking to any of them anymore; she's spun on her heel to shake her fist in the direction of the receding rocket board. "S'not an excuse for you to go around stealin' people like some kinda frisky peoplestealer! How am I s'pposed to fight people if you don't leave nary a boby to fight!"

Okay, now she's just fucking incoherent. Hemogoblin can't understand a fucking word of that. "There's still another one out there," he hisses, lunging forward to try to reel Heir back in. Police sirens start cutting through the air, which is distracting on account of the fact that Hemogoblin is about 75% sure they're ten seconds from being arrested or something like that. "Focus, Heir, we cannot fuck around here -"

"But Flashstep - and Sylph!" Heir protests, his hood falling off as he hovers just out of Hemogoblin's reach. The human is obviously hyperventilating now.

"They can take care of themselves, dumbass!" Hemogoblin swears again, jumping and missing Heir's ankle. "Oh, come on! Get down here!"

"Heir," Seer says tersely. "You might...want to do as he says." She's squaring off with Pink Scarf,
her expression grim as she raises her needlekind, her opponent still shouting into the ear mic to be heard over the wailing of sirens. Are they getting louder? Hemogoblin winces, rubbing one ear as the police sirens reach a volume that can't possibly be normal. He's heard sirens before, and this is really fucking uncalled for.

"Oh, crap," is all Heir says. Then, Hemogoblin has his arms full of his moirail as Heir drops out of the air and flattens them both to the pavement. "Crap!"

A entire police car flies through the air where Heir was just hovering, mere feet from Seer and Pink Scarf. It clips the International Fountain and smashes into the side of the structure, water spurting everywhere as metal tears with a shriek.

But hey, at least the car doesn't explode. With a creak, it settles onto its back next to the shattered remains of the fucking city monument it was just complicit in demolishing. Hemogoblin forcibly snaps his gaping mouth shut with all the power left to him, and stops gawping at the wreckage of his shitty childhood to stare at the person responsible.

It's another woman in black, but the difference between her and Pink Scarf couldn't be more pronounced; this one walks like she could vaporize a small village with her little finger. She plows through another police car at the edge of the mall like it's not even there, smashing it to one side with her forearm, and when a screaming police officer shouts at her and raises a pistolkind in his shaking hands to point at her, she swings a fucking enormous forkkind over her shoulder and whacks him upside the chin in a one hit KO. Most of the other cops who have been working to clear the park look to be in pretty much the exact same condition.

And the best part it, she's charging right at the two of them.

"Did she just throw that?" Hemogoblin says, incredulous, looking back and forth between the inbound Scratch and the upside down car. His bullshit-o-meter caps out and promptly explodes, rocking him internally. This is just too much bullshit for one troll to cope with. "Who does something like that?!"

"A crazy person!" Heir replies, sounding just as put out as Hemogoblin feels. He pushes himself off Hemogoblin in a billow of air, at least three distinct breezes wrapping themselves around Heir in a volatile cocoon as he rises up to meet the Scratch. "Hemogoblin -"

"Yeah, yeah!" Hemogoblin tucks and rolls out of the way, warily eyeing the woman in red and black as she slows to stare up at where Heir is floating above the fountain. He tries not to breathe loudly as he creeps away from her, circling around to try to get a sense of where he should strike from. The Scratch is all corded, heavy muscle, and she's gripping her oversized specibus with such ease that Hemogoblin suspects she doesn't think it weighs very much at all.

"Your ascension is impressive, Heir. But also annoying," she says at last, squinting behind her goggles. Aside from that and the aura of impending murder, she's almost expressionless. "You will come down," she continues, hefting her forkkind, "or I will make you come down."

Heir seems to consider this. Then he reaches behind his back and unhooks the equally oversized hammerkind resting there. "I don't want to hurt you," he says, dropping just low enough to tap a foot against the ground. "But also, you're so under citizen's arrest."

"Tch!" The Scratch girl cracks her neck, her lip curling just enough to make it clear what she thinks of that idea.

There is absolutely no way this ends well for anyone involved. For anyone in a five block radius, for
that matter. Heir never uses Casey all that much, and for good reason.

Well. At least they have one thing going for them.

Unseen by anyone except maybe the Seer herself, Hemogoblin darts along the outer ring of the fountain mall, and sets about sneaking up behind the Scratch kid's back, just as she and Heir lunge for one another, weapons colliding between them with a crash.

---

Rose suspects, somewhere in her mind, that she always knew the reprieve would be temporary.

While in her mother's labs, under the muffling weight of all the void wards that Rue Lalonde has learned to generate with her machines all these years, the dampening effects of the void bracers on her wrists were amplified. No influence, magical or many-angled, could reach her mind. After that unfortunate scrying incident, Rose should have spent her time reinforcing the sun in her mind; she lost quite a bit of the structure of her mind in her panic to escape the vision of Leviathan. Knowing as she does now that Leviathan most likely persisted from one universe to the next, taking advantage of the consent her previous self gave in order to access Rose's mind at its leisure, just makes the situation all the more dire, really. After everyone arrived at the labs to view the records of the last game, all the time that she should have dedicated to strengthening her mind and taking another step towards independence from her mother's whims was lost to her stupidly, stupidly getting shitfaced drunk. It's too much, all of it happening all at once, and it's left her badly off balance, and if she's struggling to process all that's happened over the past few days, she can't even imagine how everyone else is dealing with it.

And now there's something missing there - some memory that naggles at her with its absence, like the space where a lost tooth once resided, because she can't remember under what aegis she managed to be drawn to spying on the Furthest Ring in the first place. Surely she had a scrykind of some sort, something that amplified -

But ah, the memory's lost again. She has her suspicions, none of which have coalesced enough for her to voice them aloud to anyone but Kanaya, in the dead of night when everyone else has fallen into an emotionally exhausted slumber. Something has gone missing - something has faded into the background, like white text on a white screen, and Rose doesn't need to know what it is to know that it's significant.

And yet -

There's something else. Some pall that has been building over the past few days - or perhaps it has been there all along but that's just when it became so ubiquitous, so unavoidably there, that Rose first noticed its presence. When she casts her sight out to test the potential fortunes of taking some future path, it feels as though she has to slog through the dim, greyish mist of something so pervasive and insidiously intertwined with all possible future paths that she can't even begin resolve it into a settled vision. She wants to say it isn't something grimdark or grimlight - tentatively. Whatever Horror manifested itself in Los Angeles, it's still running around unaccounted for. But Rose knows the grim gods, and whatever has caused this ever-present sense of doom, it's not nearly mind-breaking enough for an entire, fully manifested elder god to be the cause.

Something is coming. Or perhaps, she thinks, it is already here. But whatever is about to go wrong, it's far too late to prevent it from happening: it's already in motion.

(you've for gotten somethin' go rose.)
Well, I'm afraid you're all rather late to that particular party, Rose thinks dryly. Really now, you need to try harder than that to sound as pompously all-knowing as you're aiming for.

Mmm. She should probably not be responding to the voices. That never seems to end well. Instead, Rose breathes in steadily through her nose, which is really all the meditative effort she has the time for right now.

Hush. Remove yourselves from my mind, or I will come in there and make you move. It's not an empty threat, Rose hopes. She can't delve into her own mindspace at the moment to see exactly where the grimdark whispers have started to emanate from this time but she suspects that with John, Jade, and Dave in such close proximity she might well have the wherewithal to pull it off.

Just not right now. "Your ally just kidnapped my ectobiological brother and my paramour," Seer observes, striving for a suitably nonchalant tone as she purses her lips at the Scratch kid opposite her. Dave and Kanaya can handle themselves quite well in a fight, after all, so she's not overly concerned - it's the principle of the thing, really. She has a duty to complain about such a rude pre-battle manners.

It also hasn't escaped her that the six of them have been separated for a reason. She can only pinpoint four major threats - the four Scratch kids - with her extra sight, but that doesn't eliminate the possibility that there might be more outside her scope of vision, waiting for the opportune moment. If Jade and Dave are out of sight, do the four of them still benefit from power buffs. Just how far do these game mechanics reach? This is something they should have tested before now, under controlled conditions.

The Scratch kids wrinkles her nose, heaving a large sigh as she casts a look in the direction the rocket board took off in. "Tell me 'bout it," she slurs, stumbling to the side as though standing upright is simply beyond her capabilities. "I told Cogs that I could fight two people, but he's an innerfeelin' busbod so of course he has to swoop in like nyoooom!" This last is accompanied by several wide hand gestures that might, under less formal circumstances, be considered demonstrative, before the Scratch kid flings up both hands with a huff.

"So he was Cogs," the Seer repeats, filing that away for future reference. "And you are?" It really would be inconvenient to continue thinking of someone as 'that Kid' for the duration of a skirmish, after all.

"Ranger!" the girl replies, suddenly beaming. "Ranger Dras-ifeth, tectonically - technically - but no one ever gets it when I try to explain the whole thing, sooo...One word names for errbody!"

"Fascinating. I'm the Seer of Light." Seer spins the needlekind in her hand slowly, trying to get a feel for them. They're too small, purchased with much younger hands in mind, a relic from her childhood. She'd thought them lost in the move to New York, but she'd discovered them in the dresser of her old room along with a container of knitting supplies and a pair of mittens, one complete and one half-finished, abandoned in haste years ago.

Some memories have faded with time. She'd knelt there with the unfinished mittens lying in her lap until Jade had ducked in to say goodnight, pressing the blue and white wool between her fingers and just barely recalling that she'd been attempting to finish a gift for John before Rue abruptly tore her away from their lives in Washington. She can't remember making a conscious decision to leave all of these materials behind, can't remember if it was done by accident or in some sulking fit of rebellion.

But they'll serve well enough in a duel. They're not the products of a deranged game, but they should
still hold up better than anything Rose's mother could provide.

"Oh, I know! I mean, we know!" Ranger says hurriedly, blushing and scratching the back of her head in what seems to be a flustered panic. "You were in Chicago, for insance! We kept track of all that!"

She doesn't seem to be interested in attacking. It's all very strange. Seer wonders if over in the stadium, Sharpshooter might actually be facing her Scratch opponent in a legitimate sharpshooting contest - it's entirely possible that wasn't just an incredibly transparent excuse to isolate Sharpshooter from the group. "You have, have you," Seer says, just as her awareness of the battle field around them alerts her to a piece of rubble flying at the back of her head. She ducks under it smoothly, and when the chunk of rock hurtles onward through the air towards her, the Scratch yelps and sidesteps tipsily out of the way. "Interesting."

As this goes on, Rose tracks the progress of the battle between Heir, Hemogoblin, and the last Scratch kid to appear. They seem to have it well in hand. Of all of them, John and Karkat have been the weakest physically over the past few days, both plagued by restless nights and old injuries, and consumed by their nightmares of the scratched universe, but it hasn't impacted their fight yet. Perhaps they really are on the road to recovery.

That doesn't change the fact that the Scratch kid they're facing off with seems to be intimidatingly strong. She's matching Heir blow for blow, both of them smashing the stone of the fountain's base whenever their weighty strife specibi strike the earth and kicking up clouds of dust that Heir's winds toss around wildly. In fact, Heir seems to be letting loose more and more, swinging faster and throwing more of his strength behind each strike. He's probably always held back when fighting ordinary human and troll criminals, but each time he escalates, the Scratch coolly rises to the challenge. She hasn't demonstrated any latent capacity for flight as of yet, but every time Heir tries to press his aerial advantage, the Scratch deflects the blows from above just as deftly as she does those on the ground. When Heir sends out breezes to trip her up, she simply kneels with her forkkind thrust into the ground to brace her and weathers it until he stops, grim and unmoving.

It's not safe to be so close to them, Rose thinks worriedly, tracking Hemogoblin's progress with her sight. She's deflected the light around him so that he's effectively invisible to the naked eye, but that only makes it all the more likely he could be caught in the rebound of some ill-timed blow on the part of one of the other participants. With the strength both Heir and the Scratch are throwing behind their strikes, they could smash Hemogoblin's bones like dry kindling. She considers dropping the spell from here, but to do so without forewarning Hemogoblin would only leave him in the lurch. He's out of range right now, circling and looking for an opening, but Rose isn't sure that he'll find one; the battle is only growing more heated and personal as it drags on.

"So, uh…Are we gonna fight?"

Seer snaps back to her own battle, blinking to regain her focus to see Ranger tapping her forefingers together. This seems to require a lot of concentration, as her fingers tremble and keep missing each other. She's not really drunk - Rose being most eminently qualified to detect the distinct scent of alcohol - but would anyone really feign debilitating drunkenness to that extent? Seer frowns at that distinct tremor, one that was already present when Ranger and the Scratch in impressively short shorts were eating their shaved ice, and wonders -

"Oh, if you like. Since you called us all this way and all, it would be a shame not to," Seer says, smiling coolly. "Just one last aside - Scratch? No relation to a certain doctor?"

The expression that Ranger makes next is very telling. Seer picks out apprehension, uncertainty, realization, terror, and finally horror, all passing across the other girl's face in quick succession, and
those are only the emotions she has time to observe before Ranger laughs loudly, pasting a smile across her face that does a very poor job of concealing the fact that she's hiding something. "Don't worry 'bout silly thins like that!" she says, raising her hands in fists and wobbling back into a fighting stance that is jolted when she hiccups. "If we don't start fightin' soon, Janey'll get all mad! And that would be unhappy-making for everybody."

"We really ought to discuss the identity of your not-so-unknown benefactor." Seer raises her needlekind, and levels them at the Scratch kid. "He has caused me an undue amount of tribulation of late. But fine. Enjoy your transparent attempts at obfuscation. It can wait."

This isn't Blind Justice, someone immune to most of Seer's spells of blinding, obscuration, and sensory distortion by virtue of being too blind to be affected in any way. The Seer of Light had to resort to more drastic measures to work around that immunity. Now, fortunately, it should only be the work of moments to throw up a shield, cast a rusting spell to take care of any concealed weapons on Ranger's person, and temporarily blind her. Depending on how experienced a fistkind strifer she is, of course, Ranger might well be able to fight blind, but it would at least buy Seer some time to incapacitate her further. So Seer channels the power for a shield through the medium of her needles, murmuring the correct words under her breath to erect a barrier.

Seer makes the rash error of thinking this battle will be a snap - right up until she takes another cursory scan of her opponent's aura and realizes that her first impression was entirely correct. There is only an outline of a person where Ranger should appear in Seer's sight, everything else vanishing into a void of absolute nothingness. She dimly registers as a threat, as Seer sensed earlier, but nothing compared to her fellow Scratches.

But Seer has always received the exact same impression from her mother.

It also just so happens that Rue Lalonde is one of the most dangerous people she knows.

Oh. Damn.

She realizes this just in time for Ranger to punch through her first shield like it's thin air. The ward is a glittering, honeycombed curve of golden light, and should have been able to deflect any strike coming at her from the fore. This is most assuredly not the case, thanks to the new gaping hole in the middle of it, and Seer receives almost no warning before there's a clenched fist jabbing at her face.

It connects quite solidly with her left cheek only just below the lower rim of her new shades, and somewhere in the piece of Seer's mind that is still somewhat intact, susurrating voices laugh at her.

(ɹs o mu ch v old - is_n 'f she so like yo u r mothe'r?)

On so many levels - not helpful, Rose thinks back, and mentally shoves until the laughter cuts off. It's not Leviathan proper, just more of those uncertain, squabbling voices that occasionally break through her wards to whisper at her and complain about being blocked out of her mind all the time.

She has more significant complications to deal with right now. Such as the fact that one of her upper bicuspids is threatening resignation from active service and may decamp from its socket at any given moment, and the entire left side of her face is throbbing with a sharp pain that encompasses everything from the roots of her teeth to the jut of her cheek bone.

Eurgh. She's been punched before, yes, but it's never pleasant. Grimacing, Seer tastes the trickle of blood leaking from the loosened tooth and gives serious consideration to spitting it out. Surely that would be a suitably dramatic gesture for her to make as she waits for her head to stop spinning.
She's doing this. She is causing this to transpire. Leaning to the side, Seer spits a globule of hemorrhaged blood and spit onto the ground. The motion stretches her throbbing cheek, but it is indeed an aptly badass gesture. Perhaps she shall gloat about it to Dave later. Striders probably consider that a good sibling bonding exercise, no?

Wiping at her lips with a finger, she looks up at Ranger again, more wary than before. The Scratch girl looks just as cautious, though; she hasn't pressed her advantage whilst Seer was busy taking stock of her new injury, but instead has fallen back into a guarded stance, as though anticipating some form of retaliation. When Seer doesn't offer much by way of defense or retaliation, the girl just looks at a loss, peeking between her fists in bewilderment. "Waht the fuck?" Ranger says, nonplussed. "I don' think I hit you too hard...was that too hard? Ohmigod I'm so sorry!" With each sentence she seems to become more distraught, her pinkish eyes widening behind her goggles.

If Seer has become so pathetic that even random villains off the street are worrying about her, she is clearly doing something wrong. "Oh, no, that was perfectly adequate. I'm simply used to my shields deflecting that sort of thing." Seer sighs at the shield and dismisses it by curling her hand into a fist. "But no matter. I'm practically an expert at fighting those who prove stubbornly immune to my usual repertoire of thaumaturgic solutions to mundane problems by now," Seer says, rolling her shoulders and lifting her needles again. "Let's try that again, shall we?"

Ranger quickly snaps her hands back into fists, flustered again. "O'course!

It only takes a few more deft punches for the Seer to conclude that yes, this is almost uncannily like facing her mother in a strife. Gods, she and Rue haven't fought properly, physically, in years - they escalated to passive-aggressive tactics in place of all-out warfare at least halfway through the fourth grade, and never looked back. Rose had only had her extra sight back then, not having mastered the spells and incantations to wield thaumaturgic forces in battle at the time, but even her sight was useless in a fight against someone as impenetrable as her mother. And now it's happening again: she's fighting blind, ducking and dodging under punches and searching for a spell in her inventory that might be useful against someone who can shrug off shields like they're not even there.

It doesn't help that Ranger, despite her tipsy appearances, is good at this. Soon the Seer is hard-pressed to dodge without giving ground, so she lets it happen to buy herself more time to think. Ranger drives her back in a wide arc, and they're only just managing to skirt the margin of increasing destruction that marks Heir's battle zone. Stone cracks with a sharp creak to their right as someone else's specibus hits the ground and a cloud of dust billows out, swallowing Ranger and Seer. Seer coughs on the gritty air, the bruised cut on her cheek stinging, but her new shades protect her eyes from the worst of the dust quite nicely. Ranger hesitates, drawing her arms in close as she glances swiftly in the direction of the other female Scratch's rampage.

Seer spits again, licks her lips, and chants out the same spell she used to hide Hemogoblin, deflecting light and attention from her presence. By the time Ranger looks back, her expression grim as she bites her lip, Seer has fallen back out of the cloud of dust so it can't give away her position. Perhaps, if she can avoid being hit by those fists of void, she can maintain her invisibility long enough to formulate a feasible strategy.

Dammit. She's going to have to use her needlekind as a regular short range strife specibus, rather than channeling spells through them. And these are nice knitting needles.

"Wha? No, no, no!" Ranger's jaw drops, and she looks panicked. "No whey! Way! Where'd you go?!" She lifts up one of the eyepieces of her goggles before letting it snap back down, her mouth setting in a determined frown before she hisses, "You can't jus' run away, I have something to te-"

Seer sidesteps out of the Scratch kid's path and starts aggrieving, jabbing with both needles in quick
succession. She aims for the girl's hips, her elbows, and, ducking beneath Ranger's startled attempt to blindly parry, reverses the grip of her needlekind in one hand to jam it backward into the soft part of the back of her knee. Then she rolls out of the way again, staying low to the ground when it becomes apparent that Ranger is only trying to retaliate with punches, not kicks. Fistkind does not always include a footkind mastery, though it's unusual that someone wouldn't combine the two.

"Yore still here!" the Scratch exclaims, half delighted, half relieved. There's little pain on her face, so whatever material makes up her black uniform must be durable enough that Seer's investigative strikes haven't made much of a dent. "Oh thank Jegus - Jesus - ow!"

Seer spins in from behind and stabs her needles into the muscle of Ranger's left shoulder, aiming for the supraspinatus muscle. These needles aren't sharp enough to be stabbing implements, but if she can bruise the muscle deeply she might be able to prevent Ranger from lifting her arms without considerable pain. Take her fists away, and the Scratch kid will be much easier to deal with.

Maybe her aim is a little off because her sight can't penetrate Ranger's void nature; maybe weeks of on-and-off mental stress have caused her fall behind on her calisthenics, so her strike doesn't damage the muscle as much as Seer wishes. Either way, Ranger recovers quickly enough to round on Seer with her left elbow leading the rest of her body; she grazes the underside of Seer's arm and drags up the fabric of Seer's jacket sleeve to slam the elbow into her side with a grunt.

The invisibility spell vanishes, Seer's power rendered inert by the contact. Wincing around the pulsating throb in her side, Seer skips back again and circles at a wary distance, drawing up the power necessary to repeat the spell as she eyes Ranger.

This is almost enough to make Rose wish she had fought her mother properly, with all the spells at her disposal. At least then she'd have a better idea of how deal with her spells being nullified on contact. She doesn't even have time to speculate whether teleporting would work if she tried to include this Scratch kid in the jump, as she did with Blind Justice. Would Ranger just be left behind, or would the entire spell fizzle out? There's no way to tell.

Worse yet, the bruise on her cheek from that first punch has begun to swell, and though it's not high enough on her face to impede her eyesight, her head has begun to ache from the combination of the pain there and having to stare around the abyss where Ranger's soul should be. "What is the point of this," Seer finds herself saying irritably, more sharply than she intends. "What is Scratch's game here, setting the four of you upon us?"

And Ranger's eyes dart, once again, to the other Scratch kid in the vicinity.

There's something strange about that. Something in her expression that's a cross between guilt and resolve, an inner conflict that begs to be psychoanalyzed.

"Don't worry 'bout it," Ranger says unconvincingly when her eyes dart back to the Seer. "Tha's basically the opposite of a thing to worr' about right now whilst we're bein' fineass foxy fighting ladies o'er here."

"But it is his game."

With a huff, Ranger throws another side hook that Seer wrenches away from, her shoved-up sleeve crimping in the corner of her elbow as she yanks it out of reach. "Okay, yah, it totally is!" Ranger replies in an undertone between jabs, dodging Seer's next attack. "But don't talk about it in public where there's eyases watching all over!"

The memory that has been avoiding her contemplation suddenly surges to the front of her mind, in all
its damning glory. Seer freezes, arm outstretched midjab in front of her, because horrors above, they forgot about the cue-

Later, she has to piece the exact sequence of events together with assistance. All she really registers, too late, is a sharp jolt that runs up to her shoulder as Ranger knocks the outstretched arm to the side with an open palm. But it's the arm with the sleeve riding up, and Ranger's hand hits both cold grey metal and pale skin, right on the edge where the void bracer meets flesh -

And, with a piercing note like running a finger along the rim of a wine glass full of water, Rose feels the void in the dampening bracer get sucked up into the Scratch girl's aura, stolen without so much as a by your leave.

She has a moment - just one - to stumble back and stare at the useless cuff digging into her wrist.

And then Leviathan's presence slams into her mind like a tidal wave.

- 

RL: oh shittles
RL: fuckufkcuckfuuck
DS: Sup? Roxy?
JC: .
RL: i tinhk i broke her
RL: oh nooo :(  
JE: Pretty sure thats the point of fighting her ranger!
RL: haha jakey jake ha fuckin ha
RL: hoLY CRAISINS
DS: Do I need to come back over there?
RL: SHOOTBAGGLES
RL: * SHITBAGGLES
JE: Okey doke ranger this is getting a little ridonkulous...This is supposed to be an official channel not a forum for intriguing new variations on expletives!
RL: this ss no laughign matter jake!
RL: cant u see im fuck deep in tentacles over here!?
DS: What.
JE: Are we talking sharktopus or bermuda tentacles style tentacles?
JE: Or.
JE: Er.
JE: Tentacles from...the animes?
RL: not stupid hentais jake i mean SUDAN ARM TENTACACLES
RL: * SUDDEN!!!
DS: Oh, that. The Seer of Light has Horrorterror connections. The Dark Star incident was in the briefing packet, Roxy.
DS: Are they acting hostile?
RL: PRETTY FUCKIN HOSILE oh thank godd shes snappin out of it
JC: .
RL: don look at me like that janey our job is 2 fight peeps
RL: not deal with their octotumors

The other void bracer is still functioning. It is, perhaps, the only reason Leviathan doesn't manage to
wrest control from Rose right away.

She loses almost all sense of the world around her, barely aware of falling to her knees and clutching at the arm that suddenly feels as though it has been dipped in chilled acid. She is more occupied by the rush of grimdark that rises up from the channel in her mind, buckling the sun ward on impact and reaching out with writhing, tangled tentacles to sink thorns into her mind.

And water pours in.

It almost breaks her. Rose feels the pain distantly as her teeth sink into her lips, chewing back a cry of agony as the pressure on her mind spikes. "Not here, I didn’t," she says or thinks - it's hard to tell the difference at the moment. "Not here, not now. I - I revoke - the consent of my past incarnat-"

The distinct sensation of many voices chuckling sends cold tendrils down her spine, and the sun in her mind gives a crunch, flickering on and off as her desperate attempts to reinforce it falter. Rose stretches in a breath and it tastes like blood and salt, burning on her lips.

"Rose!"

Leviathan's tangle recoils; Rose wrenches her head around, her good hand clutching at her hair as she stares blind, still seeing her mindspace when her eyes are straining to see the real world again.

One of her eyes burns, like something white and pallid has begun to blaze there, but she can't think she stares blind, still seeing her mindspace when her eyes are straining to see the real world again. Her mind is only half lit now, the sun slowly sinking beneath the atramentous waves and being warped by the colddamp chaos found there, sloughing off layers of light like sheaves of dead skin. Rose can't tell how much of the Horrorterror she is dealing with here - last time her mind was invaded only by an offshoot tangle designed specifically to puppet her body around like a marionette...
and summon the rest of itself into reality, but her meditations before that breaking point had made her very aware that Leviathan was immense, one of the eldest of the elder gods, more ancient than the stars and full of more entangled minds than many lesser hiveminds could hope to swallow. Even a fraction of its multifaceted attention spans more chaotic majjykal resources than Rose can hope to counter without two bracers.

When it gleams to reply, the tangle dismisses her abjuration with a shrug of its mental thorns. You lie, you crave power and know I, ed, el, but m o r e than, t h a t, y o u w a n t t o s p e l y p r o p e r l y m e g. You can’t lie d u s tim e an d a g a i n, a n d w h y is h e d r o p p i n g, s p e l i n g s o m e of th e m u s i c a u n i v e r s a l t o s, n o t t h e p a f f l y t u n e s o ’ i t h e r a i n. T h e abomination heaves more of itself into her mind, shoving more of the lower struts of her mental landscape to the side to make room for itself.

Making itself at home once more, slotting itself into place like coins in a pork hollow.

More grimdark tentacles begin to manifest, not from under her skin but in a tangle that reaches around to wrap around her infected arm, joining the first in a writhing mass that Rose can barely feel, the sensation lost in the maelstrom as she attempts to erect more wards in her mind, using what little time with the tangle's shout, and when she blinks her physical eyes she can feel the worms that did remember, I do not need you to be free. I wouldn't know. I can't remember, and you all are not the pfaffly tune so 'I the rain'. The abomination heaves more of itself into her mind, shoving more of the lower struts of her mental landscape to the side to make room for itself.

I wouldn't know. I can't remember, and you all conveniently blacken the screens when you begin to write your way into a session, Rose gasps, raising the arms of her mental avatar to summon light in both palms. What little she can dredge up is barely enough to light the structures above her head, but she flings it down anyway - anything to stave off the incursion of grimdark is welcome. And even if I did remember, I do not need you to be free. I don't want you here!

\[ \text{\textbf{WRONG}} \]

The declaration shatters the lowest level of Rose's mind. She thinks she speaks the word aloud in time with the tangle's shout, and when she blinks her physical eyes she can feel the worms that writhe behind them, gleaming with sickly light. "Jo h n?"

She does not receive a reply. She can't tell if that is because she didn't say the words loud enough for John to hear, or if it is because he is unconscious or worse.

Leviathan, however, has only just now hit its collective stride. The ca ll ow s a r s sh u d d e r s b e f o r e w h at a t w e c o u l d a c c o m p l i s h togethe r. W e w i l l s t e p t h r o u g h t h e G a t e a n d c l e a r e n t s i n j u s t o l d t o d i e r e g a r d l e s s s - W E C A N’ T M E’LL T’ R O T T I N G. w h y ‘ de ny us, ‘ Ro se?"

Because you got us all killed, Rose screams to be heard over the roaring of the sea. Because you attempted to devour my friends, not just me! Because you blew up my city, you odious creatures!

All she hears in reply is a single, contemptuous roar - that cuts off as abruptly as it begins. Rose goes still, and only a fraction of a second later realizes that the grimdark sea below her has stilled, as well.

Someone is holding her hand.
"What do I do?! Seer, waht the fuck!"

Leviathan royally flips its shit.

On some level, Rose is pretty sure that the grimdark tangle is shrieking in her mind. But it sounds like nothing more than a loud, shouted whisper in a way, muted and becalmed by steady influx of heady *nothing* that seeps in through the palm of her hand.

"We need to dial the tentathing wayyy baack," Ranger babbles on, her grip on Rose's hand so painfully tight that it has almost gone numb. By some stroke of luck, she's not touching the second void bracer - luck, or perhaps, somehow, an intuition that it was her larcenous aura that drained the other bracer in the first place. "Plz, Obi-Seer Kenobi, you’re my only hope and now you've got crazy evil tentacles, I mean, why even-"

With a jolt, Rose falls out of her mindscape completely. The gravel of shattered stones needles at her knees, where her leggings have been scraped thin by the impact. One of her arms is a drooping tangle of tentacles that hangs slack and limp by her side, as though lacking the will to galvanize themselves into motion. Even as she stares, perversely fascinated, one of the tendrils stirs, straining to lift itself, and beneath the horror of purple and black flesh Rose can just barely make out the pale skin of her arm, hopefully still intact.

Ranger kneels at her side, bracing herself with one hand while the other digs sharp nails into the back of Rose's hand. Her goggles hang around her neck rather than obscuring her eyes, which really are an impossible shade of pale pink, as though she yanked the goggles down once again to make sure her eyes weren't deceiving her; an understandable reaction to have when one's sparring partner abruptly bursts into tentacular mutations, Rose thinks wryly. There's something about the Scratch girl's angular face that's startingly familiar, almost horrifically so, but at the moment *everything* feels vaguely horrific - existential terror tends to bleed over into all the rest of one's emotions, Rose has found.

It's not that the void of this girl's aura is leaking into her, she realizes. It's that the void is swallowing up *everything* - pilfering both the grimdark and her own thaumaturgies and leaving nothing but plain flesh and bone behind.

Good lord. She hopes that's not permanent.

If Rose is too shocked to feel much more than bemused and relieved, Leviathan has descended into a flurry of wrathful, vehement updownulations that Rose barely registers as quivers in her mind. "I said, *no,*" Rose repeats, still not quite able to comprehend the fact that the act of hearing those screeching voices in discordant harmony isn't giving her a minor aneurysm. "Get you hence."

This is actually working. Incredible. "I'm going to have to ask that you not let go of me. Pardon the inconvenience," Rose says, wincing as she makes an attempt at moving the fingers of her entangled hand.
"I just wanted to get out while I still could, but then you all showed up early except late and Janey was right there so we had to fight and why do none o' my plans ever work out right?!” Ranger finishes, almost in tears. She doesn't appear to be listening, though Rose can't blame her - if she's been having even half of her conversation with Leviathan aloud rather than mentally, Ranger must think she's gone completely insane.

She wouldn't be half wrong.

"Ranger. Ranger!” Rose says louder. She gags on some fluid that seems to drip from her nasal cavities into the back of her throat, and she has to spit out a mouthful of brackish, black-tinged water. How perfectly foul. "Ranger, I understand that first encounters with grotesque manifestations of eldritch abominations from beyond this mortal plane can lead to existential crises in the uninitiated, but we really need to talk."

Thankfully, Ranger seems to snap back to her senses quickly enough, jolting at the sound of Rose's hoarse voice and - thank god - not letting go of Rose's hand as she sits back hard. "You're, uh, you're not gonna sprout any more of those, are you?” she asks, ducking her head toward the flimsy tentacles of Rose's other arm.

"With any luck, no. But I'm afraid that I must ask that we parley,” Rose says, weary. Leviathan's raving shrieks have dimmed from too-present, jarring mental screams to the much more tolerable subliminal whispers that barely rise above the volume of Rose's own thoughts. "Because however it is that you're suppressing the influence of the Furthest Ring right now, as things currently stand either you continue to maintain contact with me and assist me in reaching my rendezvous point, or most likely everyone in a ten mile radius is going to end up dead or otherwise permanently displaced from this mortal coil." And John would definitely not be appreciative of Rose accidentally unleashing a grimdark holocaust on his city.

"Is that last one likely?” Ranger asks, anxious.

"Have you visited New York City lately?"

"Oh. Right." Ranger nibbles her lip, and casts a glance over her shoulder. Once again, Rose follows the path of her line of sight, and sees that Ranger is staring at the other Scratch girl. Relief floods Rose when she sees John on his feet and fighting and - oh dear - a very visible Hemogoblin tumbling out of the way of a wild swing from their opponent. They're further off now than they were when Rose got forcibly dragged into her mindscape to deal with the grimdark influx, having at some point rounded the battered fountain and begun to fight their way across the lawn toward the street. There are sirens in the distance, but most of the police vehicles nearby have been abandoned, as far as Rose can see.

Then, with only a moment's hesitation, Ranger clamps down on Rose's hand with renewed force, turning to frown at her with her brows furrowed and her eyes intent. Despite her continued slurring of her words, Rose gets the distinct impression that Ranger has dropped whatever pretense she's been maintaining, and is fully engaged with the discussion at hand. In Rose's heady, barely-sane state, she even sounds like Rue, and that's potentially even more disturbing than anything Leviathan could come up with."If we're paralleling, that means I get to negotiate too, right?” Ranger says in a low voice, her bottom lip just barely pouted in a grim moue. "Cause right now, what everyone else would want me t'do is drag your booty back to base and ship you off to uh - that guy you mentioned before. Those're orders."

"That would be a less than desirable outcome," Rose says. She twists her hand to clutch Ranger by
the wrist, locking them together. "You wield void. Intentionally or not, you stripped the void powers from my bracer, and only the two of them working in tandem could keep the Horrors out of my mind. Right now, the only reason there aren't more tentacles is because your aura lets me keep control; let go and we all suffer for it - including your friends. And you and your fellow Scratch kids might be serving under the Midnight Crew," Rose adds, summoning up a pained sickle of a grin, "but I think that you might be open to alternative offers of employment."

To her credit, Ranger doesn't try to play hard to get or hide it. Her mouth pops open in surprise, and she peeks at the other Scratch girl again, a reflex she apparently can't seem to stamp out. Rose has noticed it all through this disastrous battle, and she's drawn a very simple conclusion from her observations: it's not loyalty to the Crew or to Doc Scratch that's keeping Ranger in line, these days - it's fear, pure and simple.

"You want out," Rose whispers, refusing to wince as Ranger's fingers dig deeper and deeper into her skin. "You said that I was your only hope - we are your only hope. If defection is your aim, now would be an excellent time to follow through on it."

"Just like that?" Ranger leans further over Rose's arm, curling up around it in a defensive huddle, her googles tapping against Rose's wrist. "You'd believe I want to quit, for real, when we've only said like, ten words to each other?"

"Well, it's considerably more than ten by now. I've been told I am prohibitively verbose when I get momentum going." It's an awful attempt to lighten the mood. Rose isn't sure it works until Ranger lets out a surprised giggle. "I like to think of myself as a good judge of character. If nothing else, I can see that you're afraid," Rose says, shifting on her knees. Her legs ache, but it's the normal stiffness of having collapsed on top of them for so long; her head, the primary concern, is almost blissfully numb by now. Sure, Rose could not have told anyone the state of her mindscape for love or money, but she can tell it's not getting worse, and the lack of pain is more than she could have asked for after such a ruinous event. "If you're being coerced into villainous activities, then of course we'd want to help you escape."

"Oh thank jiminy kringle," Ranger exclaims in a rush, the last of the tension leaving her shoulders as she rocks forward and almost collapses on Rose's shoulder. "There's such hella messed up stuff, I can't even tell half 'f it - like, I will totes saddle up the beyootiful defection pony! Please!" By the end she's half-laughing with it, and Rose can see a teary film welling up in the corners of the Scratch kid's eyes before the girl hastily wipes them away on the back of her sleeve.

Rose, meanwhile, cannot believe this is working. Perhaps she's delirious, or trapped in some hallucination induced by Leviathan to keep her compliant. Really, how on earth did she have the good fortune to end up with the one Scratch kid willing to go turncoat? It's preposterous. "Then if we have an accord -" she begins.

"Oh, yeah," Ranger replies fervently, her eyes still shining as she nods. "But uh - there's one thing - you can do the seeing thing right?"

"At the moment...I wouldn't risk it," Rose says, slow and deliberate. "You'd need to let go of my hand, and trust me when I say that is not an advisable course of events. Why do you ask?"

Ranger sighs, keeping one hand on Rose's while the other slowly unclenches and drops to the Scratch girl's side. "Means I gotta do this all the manual way and other unfun stuff," she says, smiling at Rose crookedly as she draws a knife-kind from a pouch at her waist. "Y'think they let us all run around without makin' sure they could find us again afterward?"

Rose watches the knife cautiously, her belly tensing, because she can't see anything other than the
physical world right now, and even if she could access her magical sight she has little doubt that Ranger would be just as much of a black void in her foresight as Rue Lalonde. She stays in a crouch, ready to dodge, but Ranger sticks the knife hilt between her teeth and starts fumbling at the zipper of her body suit instead. "'Otta 'et 'is off," she mumbles around it by way of explanation, her trembling fingers skittering against the zipper and buckles for long, drawn-out seconds before she manages to loosen the buckles and wriggle her shoulder and upper arm free from the suit. Rose finds herself keeping watch almost unconsciously, one eye on the other Scratch girl in the distance to make sure these activities aren't noticed. "'Amn 'erve 'amage!" Ranger pants before spitting the knife onto the ground and picks up the knife. She's freed the arm with the hand that still has to hold on to Rose, so the bottom half of the sleeve is still in place. With her free hand, Ranger takes up the knifekind again and bites her lip, setting the tip of the blade against an unmarked spot on her upper arm. "Wish me luck," she says, adjusting her grip and setting her jaw and oh dear, she's going to -

"Luck," Rose hisses back, bracing just in time for the Scratch kid to stab herself in the arm. Ranger's grip on her hand spasms and closes hard enough to make bone creak. Blood pours out and starts spilling down the line of Ranger's arm, trickling between their interlaced fingers. "Are you sure you can find it? You're going to damage the muscle tissue or nick an artery at this rate," Rose points out, watching with rapidly escalating discomfort as Ranger carves up her arm.

"Hope - agh! - fully?" Ranger whimpers, not quite swallowing back a gasp of pain. "No - no, there, I got this!" She pulls the knife free, slathered with blood almost half an inch up the point of the blade, and lets the knife fall into her lap again. Closing her eyes, her pale face growing steadily paper to the point that the girl resembles a sheet of marble, Ranger digs into the open wound with her free hand. "Jeeeeesh!fuckuefufk!" After an even more painfully strained, too-long minute, the girl almost sobs with victory as she pulls out a thin piece of blood-coated metal between her fingers, more blood burbling up from the ravaged cut as she holds it up triumphantly with a dizzy grin. "Like goddamn laser surgery," she says proudly. "I totes get my emergency field operation handheld badge for this one. In-dis-putin-able. Fact."

"A GPS chip?" Rose looks on as Ranger sheathes the knifekind and levers herself up into a crouch, looking at Rose in askance as she yanks the shoulder of her suit back on. After a cursory inspection of her grimdark arm - still a pallid grey, the tentacles only slowly melting back beneath the surface of her skin - Rose decides she can risk standing.

"Yeah. And after this, we're not gonna have a lot of time, on account of Cogs is gonna flip his shades," Ranger replies, setting the chip on the ground. "Can you run, or will that, like, upset the balance of tentacles?"

"An excellent question." Rose moves to stand first, and knows instantly that it is a mistake. The world lurches sideways, spinning so that everything is reduced to streaks of grey and black and green, and she sags so quickly that Ranger only barely rises in time to catch her shoulder and haul her back upright. "Damn."

"No good? Seer?"

Rose snorts a laugh through her nose, letting her head hang a little until it feels like a weight settles in her mind. She can't see what's going on in there, but she thinks - she knows - Leviathan must have shifted again. After a moment, the vertigo seems to subside, and she blinks her eyes open to an arm that is still grey and a black-clad companion who has almost gnawed a bloody patch in her lower lip from the tension. Right. Defecting. Usually tends to cause feelings of ill will in the ones being defected from. They should probably hurry this along. "Running's probably out of the question, I'm afraid. I need to get to my mother."
Ranger's pupils dilate a little. "Your momma," she says, almost reverently. "And she can fix you?"

"My mother can't fix anyone. But if I know her, she'll have twenty spare bracers tucked away behind the vodka, 'just in case,'" Rose says, rolling her eyes. This is the moment of truth - gods, she can only hope her judgment isn't too impaired, because trusting Ranger could be an absolutely terrible idea and Rose would have no way of knowing it. "Our ride is by the Space Needle. After that - well, the best case scenario is that your friend in the short shorts doesn't succeed in whatever he's attempting to do to Sharpshooter, because she's the best method of reliable transportation we have over such long distances."

*John could do it.* But Rose pushes that thought away from now, because no one has dared bring up John's method of travelling through the wind since they watched those damnable recordings. Besides that, Heir is more than occupied with the Scratch kid, still.

At least, those are the excuses Rose makes for herself.

"But we still hafta get there fast, or Janey'll be on us like a fuckton of bricks. Really, really deadly bricks," Ranger says emphatically. She nods, apparently to herself, and one-handedly drags her goggles back up over her eyes, her hair in complete disarray by the time she achieves it. "I gotchu, babbu, don't worry."

Rose should probably ask her to clarify that statement. She doesn't have the time, however; Ranger lifts her foot and slams her heel down on the bloody GPS chip and yelps, "Gogogogo!" as she quickly switches which hand is holding Rose's, wraps the free arm behind Rose's back, swaps hands again so that the arm looped behind Rose's back is the one sinking void into her hand, and finally, with a grunt, hooks her arm behind Rose's knees and picks her up.

"Please, for the love of all that is incomprehensible in this universe, *do not drop me!*" Rose has to yell to be heard, because Ranger starts running and shouting at the same time. They peel off toward the road; the other Scratch girl, Jane, is between them and the most direct route to the Space Needle looming in the distance, and even as Rose wrenches her head around to look back over Ranger's shoulder, Jane wheels to stare at them hard, mouth curling back in a snarl before Hemogoblin jumps on her from behind.

"Ohhh fuck, Cogs - Dirk, bae, I'm so sorry," Ranger is saying tearfully. Rose misses most of the rest of the Scratch girl's one-sided argument with whoever is on the other end of her earpiece - Ranger only seems to address Cogs, but Rose can hear the shouts of at least two other voices blaring over the speaker as well. Rose is more concerned with the second wave of vertigo that washes across her field of vision. For an instant there is a brief tugging sensation, like a fishhook caught in the back of her mind, and she thinks the grimdark tangle might have just tried to pull her down into the dark again. But all of Leviathan's influence ebbs out into the anesthetic void of Ranger's aura, and everywhere Rose touches Ranger feels like it too has been numbed, all magical sensation dampened so that all that's left are her ordinary, purely human senses.

It feels a bit like dying. But it's still, somehow, preferable to the alternative.

The shouting stops without real warning and Rose snaps back to the present as Ranger ducks her head and hooks her ear piece out with a single finger, letting it drop to the ground so she can smash it with her heel as she did the chip earlier before they start running again. "I don't believe your deadly cohort is able to give pursuit as of yet," Rose reports quietly, letting her head fall back a little. Every so often her vision distorts and veers, but it's the jostling of Ranger's frantic absconding that twists her stomach into knots. "Jo- ah, Heir and Hemogoblin can give her more than a run for her money."

"Yah? Maybe." Ranger doesn't sound convinced. Mmm. Troubling. As they dart between a pair of
overturned police vehicles, Rose lifts her head again, squinting and cursing inwardly at the fact that she can't see if any more police cruisers are coming towards them or not. There are no roadblocks on the short side path that Ranger lunges toward, and they rush past the colorful walls of the children's museum to reach another open area of grassy lawns and well-groomed trees. It's the kind of area that would ordinarily be bustling with people, even on a weekday, but once again everyone seems to have cleared out. Rose doesn't recognize some of the buildings spaced around the area - perhaps they're new. She hasn't visited the center for years, after all, and her memory isn't exactly in top working order at the moment. Another building with walls that are mostly windows flashes by, and Rose thinks she can catch brief glimpses of people watching them from inside, too wary to venture out.

"I'm not going to pass out," she informs Ranger.

Ranger laughs nervously, adjusting her grip under Rose's leg and almost stumbling. "Wait. Uh. Are you telling me that because you actually are gonna pass out?"

Rose sighs. "I'm making a decent effort not to. But I am also making an equally decent effort not to vomit all over both of us, and at some point one of those two options is going to make the decision for me."

"How about neiither of these options?"

"I can't work miracles here." For some reason, this is inexplicably hilarious to Rose, and that's perhaps a sign that her mind isn't exactly in working order. "I'm not that kind of god," she says, laughing.

"...We're so fcked," Ranger says with an air of realization.

"Nonsense," Rose says, flapping her free hand dismissively. "We just need to reach our rendezvous. Our contact is ridiculously capable in a caretaking capacity."

"You said that already and it's not really reaassurin' when you're passing out on me! They're gonna think I beat you up to make you take me to them!" Ranger skids to a stop. "Which I totally did! Outta context and everything! Shit!"

(yours is the only mind we k now. it is simple ly a m atte r... of fin'd in g th e correct a 'n gl e.)

Shut up. Rose grits her teeth and jerks her chin toward the Needle ahead of them. "Keep going anyway. The sooner we get there, the more likely it is that I'm conscious enough to convince him you've switched sides. Communication is key, you know."

- DS: Roxy, why the fuckin' hell did your tracker just go offline?
DS: Literally what ridiculously convoluted sequence of improbably inopportune events could have led to the goddamn chip in your arm being damaged?
RL: o h fuck
RL: cogs
RL: dirk bae im so sorry
JC: RL-2408, you will desist from your perfidious actions this instant.
JC: Where in the blue blazes do you think you are going?
DS: Roxy.
DS: No.
JE: I don't understand chaps what's going on? I can't see a blistering thing from over here and you're all talking at once!
RL: ear micks gotta go too dirk
RL: smy only shot n u know it
RL: one day well go in 2 that room and what comes out won't be either of us
DS: Dienek will kill you.
RL: hasn't worked yet
JE: Ranger, cogitator...What are you two on about?
JC: You treacherous shucks busters.
RL: jus come with me
RL: plz plz come with me you now ill fuck up somehow if ur not there
DS: I can't leave him.
RL: he dosn't even rememereb you!
JE: Ranger you can't really mean to say that you're...going rogue, can you?
RL: got 2 run
RL: seers arms basically evil calimmari
RL: its hellsa crazy up in this bitch u dont even no
RL: dirk b there or b a syncronutty grubclone 4 the rest of jakeys life
RL: im doin
RL: the roguey thing
-- RL's earpiece has experienced a lethal malfunction! --
DS: Dammit, Roxy.

By the time Roxy spots the non-descript white car idling alone on the street, the Seer of Light's head is lolling. Roxy is still not entirely clear what in the heckie happened in these past few rushed, insane minutes; she just knows that the Seer's arm is almost entirely troll grey, though thankfully missing those creepy tentacles at the moment, and that somehow it was her fault that Seer is having some kind of crazy alien chaos god episode.

Things tend to get screwed up when Roxy is just trying to do her best; Dienek def made that very clear over the years, and the guilt curdles in Roxy's gut as she sprints across the grass.

But there's no sign of Janey or Dirk or Jake following them as she carries Seer the rest of the way to the car. So maybe, just maybe, she hasn't messed up everything.

Maybe she can still get this thing out of her head. Then she can go back for Dirk, and then Jake, and the three of them together could totally save Jane, right?

"Hey, uh, mister!" Roxy calls. The driver's side door opens at their approach and a dude in a jaunty white suit steps out.

He turns around and oh no this guy -

Is hot.

It is a suave gentlemanly caller and Roxy is dressed to kill way too literally to get her mack on.

Dammit.

Oh well. First impressions. "I come in peace," she announces, batting her eyelashes and then remembering her goggles are back on.
Not only is this gent a goddamn fox like *damn*, he is also on point. Doesn't even blink at the fact that they're both bleeding everywhere, just says sternly, "What on Earth is happening here, young ladies? Seer?" There's an edge of warning in the last few words, and Roxy aborts the whole mysterious eye winking seduction technique in favor of the compliant newb good guy routine, shaking Seer a little to get her to stop passing out while smiling nervously at the hero's rendezvous, trying to project as many 'not a bad guy anymore' vibes as possible.

"Mmh? Oh. This's Ranger," Seer says, shaking her head a little. She's starting to get a little heavy, but also Roxy is pretty sure if she sets the hero down she's probs not gonna be able to stand on her own anyway. "She's defecting. It's rather a work in progress. Forgive me, but there's been an incident, a grimdark one. My mother must be notified."

The man nods, worry creasing the corners of his eyes as he reaches for his phone. "I'll call her. How urgent is the situation?"

"Under control." Seer taps the back of her hand against Roxy's collarbone. "She has...an affinity for void, not unlike my mother's. But - urgent, nonetheless."

"And the others?"

"Still fighting." Seer slumps more, her hair brushing the underside of Roxy's chin. Roxy tucks her chin down instinctively, the way she used to when resting her chin on top of Dirk's head while he working away on one of his projects. "We were all separated, and I can't see them like this."

The man nods and steps away from the car, pressing the phone to his ear. He still keeps a watchful eye on Roxy as she shuffles to the backseat door at Seer's mumbled instructions, and as much as Roxy wants to believe it's because she obviously still looks fantastic covered in blood and dust, it's probably just that he doesn't trust her not to off Seer when his back is turned.

Ehh, fair's fair. She did kinda appear in his life after her entire villain team challenged a bunch of hero types to a duel. But nothing says that he can't be attracted to her incredible sniper chic. That's, like, the plot of every lame-o cheap spy thriller ever written. It could totally work out.

Once they're inside the back of the car Roxy sucks in a breath, and lets it go, trying to fight down the last thumping beats of panic rocking her heart from the successful escape. Dirk should be here, she thinks - no, all four of them should be together - and their absence hurts more than she can afford to dwell on right now.

But the Seer's mom is Doctor Rue Lalonde; it's in all the files.

And if anyone has the medical technowhatsits at her disposal to undo all the crazy brainwashing in Jane and Jake's heads, surely it will be her.

Roxy just has to figure out the opportune moment.

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"I think we're being kidnapped," Dave informs Kanaya.

"What did you say?" Kanaya shouts to be heard over the whistling of the wind.

"We are so being kidnapped. Shit's embarrassing as all hell."
"Dave, now is not the time for your typical incessant mumbling. We are being kidnapped."

"Snatched out of our nests like unsuspecting, really fucking overgrown baby birds." Dave twists his head to get a better look at his partner-in-being-kidnapped. She's stopped writhing around trying to escape, but that's mostly because they're rocketing around at sicknasty-whiplash miles per hour and any wrong move could send their whole rocket board humpfest careening into the side of a building. It's pretty inconvenient. "And neither of us can fly. Yet." He squints. "Can you?"

She seems to hear that one. "I have not yet achieved independent flight, no."

"Oh, awesome. Because I was starting to get worried there. Jade floats. John floats. Bird-me flies. Rose can probably float with her intense dark wizardries when she's not, you know, whacked out on existentially inscrutable horrorjuices." Dave sighs heavily, staring down at the black-and-grey decaled board beneath his butt. "So at least you're as incompetent as we are."

Kanaya looks at him, offended, arching an eyebrow. "Who's we?"

"Me and my main man Karkizzle, duh." Dave waves a hand back towards the fountain area they just evacuated.

"Of course not," Kanaya says matter-of-factly. "That would be an impossible feat, one I could not hope to match in two lifetimes."

Dave has to think about it for a moment. "Wait, wha-"

"Do you people," their kidnapper says, sounding strained, "ever stop talking?"

Dave cranes his neck up and around. It doesn't really work, seeing as the guy has the back of Dave's collar in a death grip. Seriously, that's gonna need to be ironed out or something, and Dave hate ironing - Bro always manages to swap out the iron for a smuppet halfway through, and looking down to see that you're rubbing an enlarged proboscis along the lapel of your favorite jacket is trauma you don't get over. Shit like that haunts a man to his dying day. "Have to make up for lost time. The world has been deprived of my sweet vocals for too long," he offers by way of explanation. "Also, I'm about to wreck the shit out of your sweet ride, so, uh, sorry in advance."

The man blinks. Dave hauls time to a stop. The death grip on his collar is probably the only thing that keeps him from flying forward as he draws his sword and stabs it through the rocket board, shoving down with all his weight.

When time restarts a moment later, the rocket board veers down sharply, the nose aimed at the road flashing by underneath them. "Fuck," the Scratch kid has time to say before he stomps on the back of the board to try and stabilize it. Kanaya has other ideas; her foot lashes out and knocks his off course, and that's about when they all introduce their faces to the curb. Or at least, Dave assumes the other two will; he's taken harder falls under Bro's shitty tutelage and learning how to survive a fucking savage landing is one of those things he mastered ages ago. So he tucks and rolls and he really, really fucking hopes he didn't just break Rose's girlfriend, because Rose could probably kick his ass into next week in an entirely literal fashion if she set her mind to it.

He looks up to see, unfortunately, the Scratch kid executing a sweet landing, his form mechanically perfect as he rolls and skids to a stop just a little ways down the street from where the rocket crashlands. Kanaya, who bails off toward the sidewalk, narrowly misses colliding with a tree and lands harder, but pops up instantly afterward like some grey-and-green vision of disgruntled decorum.

They're at the intersection of Mercer and something or other according to the street signs, with a
covered parking garage running the length of the road on one side and a building walled with windows beside an exhibition hall with ramps leading down at an incline from street level on the other, with an overhead walkway connecting the two sides. The fountain area's nowhere in sight, which means literally no one else from their hero posse is in sight, and Dave is kind of not about that life. He and that life have irreconcilable differences and the divorce papers are in the process of being served harder than any mortal butler could hope to match.

Okay. Fuck. That metaphor got away from him. Also, he's zoning out in the middle of a battle. Again. Why does this always happen at the shittiest times? Why is it always so much easier to get lost in his own head than think about all the horrifically dangerous and painful real life drama going on around him?

…Rose would could probably carve a four-course meal out of the irredeemably mortifying psychologically fucked up meat of that last thought. Dave resolves never to share it with her. Ever. Her perverse obsession with psychoanalyzing everyone around her has been thwarted by John's dumbass refusal to discuss his feels with anyone but Karkat these days and by Jade's sheer immunity to any kind of psychological crisis, which means Dave has avoided becoming her primary target only by virtue of extensive time power abuse. One of these days, she's gonna pin him in a dark corner of the Lalonde house with no cell service and he will be well and truly fucked.

But today is not that day.

"I don't suppose we can attempt to settle this in a calm and respectful fashion?" Kanaya suggests as Dave checks back into real life. "We have no reason to quarrel. Whatever motivated you to send that message, villainy is never the answer."

The Scratch kid doesn't even consider it. "No," the guy says, his mouth a perfectly cultivated flat line that brooks no emotion. But Dave thinks he can make out the faintest signs of a frown, tensing the corners of the kid's mouth.

Hey, Dave gets it. The only person he knows who's even close to mastering the stoic ninja lifestyle is Bro, and the older he gets the more Dave finds new ways to provoke him into outright irritation, which is still more than nothing. It's the little things in life, okay? And there's no way this guy could top Bro. He is simply the best there is.

Then, between one blink and the next, the dude vanishes.

"Oh, hell no," Dave says, because invisibility powers would basically be the biggest fucking cop-out ever, and -

Kanaya staggers back, gasping with indignation and maybe a little pain; Dave looks and oh fuck, oh shit, when did the Scratch kid get behind her. That was uncanny fast, and Dave has always lived in the hollow comfort of knowing that no one could be as quick as Bro without having completed the necessary blood sacrifices to the batshit insane puppet gods. In fact, he's been meaning to ask Rose if there's some demon puppet-themed calamari elder god lurking in outer space or wherever tentacle monsters live, but he hasn't had the time -

The tiny clack jolts Dave back to awareness. The sound of a sword clicking back into its sheath.

The burst of livid green blood that erupts from the slash across Kanaya's chest puts it into perspective. Kanaya looks appalled as she stares down at the wash of green sluicing down the front of her costume.

Behind her, the Scratch kid smirks.
Dave didn't even see him *draw*. The swordkind is right there, across the kid's back, but it doesn't even look like it's moved. *How.*

"Ok, that is some anime bullshit that I cannot abide," Dave starts to say, when the guy blinks out again.

He pauses time. Which should have been the first thing he did, to be honest. Shit should just be reflexive by now.

This means that at least Kanaya's too frozen to witness Dave flail backward because there is a goddamn *really not shitty* katana pointed right at his face. He draws his own sword and holds time as long as he dares to give himself an opening to dodge out of the way; stars and static dance in front of his eyes as time yanks itself back into motion.

He doesn't even have a spare moment to stop and make sure Kanaya is, you know, still among the living. His sudden dodge brings the Scratch to an abrupt halt, eyes flicking toward him at the right angle for Dave to catch the weird, creepy yellow of them behind his shades. He assesses Dave's guarded stance with the katana still leveled where Dave's nose used to be.

Dave is seriously trying *so hard* not to blink. His eyes water with the effort as he and the Scratch stare each other down.

Well. At least that's *one* thing he can razz this douchebag about. "Your shades are a weak rip-off of my older bro's," he says, throwing down the sickest burn he has at his disposal. Unfortunately, he can't insult anything else about this guy's costume, because it's actually pretty fucking cool and Dave is never admitting that out loud, even if it kills him. "Like, that shit is all kinds of blatant. Your originality gambit is non-existent and your irony game is not strong."

It earns him a twitch of an eyebrow and then the dickhead is *gone again*, and Dave has to clamp his mouth shut against the urge to channel Karkat at his most foul-mouthed and incoherent. He flashsteps out of the way of another stabbing blow on autopilot, and brings his own sword up to bear. A good thing, too, because - *Christ* this guy moves fast - he is by sheer coincidence positioned to block the next slash, one that comes so soon after the first that he barely processes the flash of the katana before it slams against his own with enough force to send sparks flying.

Dave's brain flips from 'generic hero mode' to 'fuck fuck shit fuck fighting Bro' mode, because that's kind of his default when he's up against someone who is *ludicrously* fast. Hell, this kid even *looks* like he's actively trying to imitate Bro's physical appearance, if not Bro's unironically awful sense of style. He's got the speed and the stupid sideburns down at least, if not the muscles or the puppet fetish - *yet*.

It's probably some kind of psychological warfare. Seriously, Dave will bet his fucking apple juice empire that this is some deliberate attempt to freak him the fuck out.

Well, at least the goal in any strife with Bro is pretty basic. *Don't fucking die.*

He pauses time, the effort making his head throb, and runs for the thin walkway to the exhibition hall. He skirts around Kanaya, who is kneeling and clutching her chest, all hunched over so he can't make out how deep the cut runs. God, where's a future-Dave? What does he need to do, pull one out of his ass?

He doesn't hear the tap of a single booted foot when time restarts, and couldn't honestly say what instinct has him whirl to parry the Scratch's next stab. Years of strifing Bro, probably. Then the dude's hand blurs and a flurry of cuts and slashes follows; Dave takes a step back, knocking aside...
each blow, and soon he's lost track of whether he's parrying in between seconds or not. He can't
even clear enough of a path to reposition himself or try to launch an attack of his own. His hand
aches from the pressure this kid exerts, and this sword is shitty enough that it can't possibly last much
longer before he has to swap it out or - he snorts a laugh - fight on with a 1/2bladekind.

Which would be weird. He is so not doing that. Ever. Past life-him was a moron.

He finally manages to twist out of the way of a glancing blow aimed for his shoulder and feints for
the guy's side, yanking back before the Scratch kid can parry and pausing time again to flash
backward, keenly aware of the railings of the walkway rising up on either side. His plan to not die
officially has the corollary get away from Kanaya and hey, look at him, multitasking with a crazy-
fast villain guy on his ass.

But the moment time restarts, the Scratch vanishes without a word or a moment of hesitation. Dave
swears, hissing at the sharp pain that lances through his head from his powers trying and failing to
chain two flashsteps together in too short of an interval. It reads the same as trying to hold a time
pause too long, and time snaps back too soon for Dave to do more than blink. Then the Scratch blurs
back into sight, inside Dave's guard like whoa, a sword angling for his ribs.

Then - "Shit!" the kid curses - Dave registers the growl of a motor revving.

Just in time for Kanaya to bring her fucking chainsaw down where the Scratch kid's head of spikey
hair used to be.

Oh. Uh. Correction: it's not the chainsaw that's growling. The chainsaw has nothing on Kanaya's
snarl of outrage when the specibus stops just short of rebounding off the concrete or worse, slicing
through Dave's shoe. Dave stares and oh god he's not ogling his sister's girlfriend, he swears to any
god out there. Fuck, he swears to the four of them, because they're all supposed to be gods, right? It
totally counts. He swears to John himself that he's not giving Kanaya a onceover.

It's just that the fabric of Kanaya's costume flaps open, the edges of the fabric so smooth as to testify
to the sharpness of the Scratch kid's katana, and Dave is right at eyelevel to see the long line of the
jade green slash below her collarbone. The wound looks goddamn weeks old - not scabbed over,
oddly, but not bleeding anymore either, and surrounded by flesh that gleams white.

Like, actual light, here.

Kanaya is glowing.

Dave thinks this is one of those things someone should have mentioned before now.

Another not-sound, and Dave snaps out of his confusion. He drops to the ground before Kanaya's
eyes narrow, and he rolls as far to the side as he can with the railing in the way as Kanaya yells,
"Down, Dave!" and swings her chainsaw around like a major league baseball player. She narrowly
misses the Scratch's bare arm as the guy pulls back the katana he was about to introduce to Dave's
lungs from behind.

"You glow!" Dave feels the need to point out, rolling to his feet and flashstepping after the Scratch,
who is in the middle of darting back toward the hall to regroup. That katana slashes out again and
Dave ducks under the slice, aiming for the guy's ankles because hey, maybe that never works on Bro
- like, ever. Not even once - but they need to do something to slow this guy down. He's running
circles around them, and anyone who's faster than Dave and possibly as fast as Bro is someone who
needs to come down off the fucking amphetamines.
His sword meets nothing but air. Kanaya charges up behind him, her feet pounding on the stone, and Dave just stays low, the tip of a boot barely skimming over his hair as Kanaya launches a flying kick at the Scratch's face. She doesn't connect, either, but heck, she comes closer than Dave has so far. "You cannot just point out that someone glows in public, Dave!" she yells back, huffing with exasperation.

"Like, is that normal? Should we be concerned? Do you need to, like, lie down or something?" Dave starts to sweat. Oh god. This is a genuine concern. "Rose will literally disembowel me if you've caught some glowing troll disease. What if you catch fire?"

"I assure you, I am not about to spontaneously combust -"

"Because if you're infected with something and it sets you on fire," Dave continues, feeling almost feverish as the realization hits him, "it would be a sick burn -"

"Dave, we are kind of busy here!"

"I'm just saying!" Then he blinks. "Oh my god. I'm turning into John."

Besides, they seem to have bought themselves some kind of lull in the strife. The Scratch kid has come to a halt a third of the way further across the walkway than where they're standing, one knee on the ground and his katana sheathed as he (presumably) stares at them, one hand pressed to his ear. No - wait - his mouth is moving. He looks down and to the side before Dave can squint and try to read his lips, which is a fucking pain in the ass. Must be talking to his fellow dickheads or something. At least it's distracting him from wiping the fucking floor with the two of them.

"Yes. The transformation is almost complete. I can see it in you now," Kanaya deadpans, straightening and adjusting her grip on the chainsaw. She flips the thing around like it weighs nothing at all. "Do we have a plan? Any plan?"

"Plan? Uh, not die?"

"An excellent plan. But I was hoping for something more detailed."

"...Don't die and stop making shitty-ass puns?"

Kanaya smacks her face. "How have any of you survived as long as you have?"

"Shit, lady, I ask myself that on a daily basis. I mean, Rose is probably the best one at thinking up plans, and she ended up with evil god cooties anyway. We put all our skill points into maxing out our incredible charisma and shit all over our survival gambits." Dave pulls himself upright with the railing. "So do we arrest this guy, or-? I mean, he's not exactly dicking around here. He's not just gonna stop if we try to make a run for it or anything."

By this point, Dave is seriously wondering where the fuck a future-Dave might be. He's matched Bro all of once in a strife only by throwing three different Daves at the guy, and he can't imagine he and Kanaya are going to be able to wear this sucker down without time powers being involved. God, he wishes he kept himself better informed. But even when he leans on the railing to discreetly glance down at the ramp that leads to a lower level, there's nobody there. He needs to get himself a time tracker or something.

"I propose that we beat the shit out of him until he ceases inflicting his anti-social tendencies upon the public, and then return to the others," Kanaya says, worrying absently at the cut across her outfit and pinching the two sides of the fabric together, as though imagining how she might stitch it back together.
Dave shrugs. "Hey, I'm down with that plan." It's one of those plans that seems really hard to fuck up. Now, a lot of seemingly unfuck-up-able plans have, in fact, been fucked up over the past week or so, but that is no reason to start discriminating against them now. "Oh, shit, head's up," he adds, because the Scratch seems to have wrapped up his conversation and has lowered his hand from his ear, staring at the two of them behind his shades.

Kanaya just revs her chainsaw. Seriously, she could take someone's eye out with that thing. And half their face along with it, but who's counting?

The Scratch draws his sword, his face still unreadable, wraps both hands around the hilt - and disappears. When Dave pauses time to figure out where he's heading next, he sees the kid paused while running along the railing - fucking anime nerd - to get around Kanaya's raised chainsaw, because one does not simply run headlong at an angry troll with a motorized weapon. That's just basic common sense.

[activate fraymotif? y/n]

What?

Dave shakes his head, trying to clear it. He's lost the instinct that used to have him flinching and glancing around for the source of the weird fucking noises. While they were watching all those videos, he'd just assumed they were coming out of the speakers, until John enlightened him to the fact that no one else had heard jackshit. This is just the first time he's heard actual, you know, words, and not just clashing musical notes.

Then he belatedly realizes he's distracted again and lunges forward just as time snaps back into motion, angling his sword around Kanaya to block the katana stabbing for her claws. The Scratch is poised on the railing still so Dave just fucking goes for it, following the other sword as it gets yanked back out of the way to try and incapacitate that hand, or at least shove the guy over the railing. The fall probably wouldn't hurt him, but it would be funny as hell.

The Scratch kid doesn't give him the chance. Instead, he swings back down onto the walkway foot first, kicking Kanaya's chainsaw neatly out of his way and knocking her off balance. Kanaya's kind of still right there, in all her angry, glowing...anger, but the Scratch has no problem spinning on his heel and slashing at them so fast Dave loses track of it again between pauses, alternating cuts that aim for Kanaya's wrists and shoulders with stabs that aim right past Kanaya's face to jab at Dave's instead, throwing both of them on the defensive at once. Dave finds himself flashing back again and again, pulling Kanaya by the back of her costume at times when she can't dodge quite fast enough so the cuts she does get are only superficial. She ends up parrying and retaliating, swinging her chainsaw again and again with grim determination while Dave just worries about keeping the two of them from randomly dying.

They end up back on the empty street again before he really registers how effectively the Scratch has driven them backward, and soon there's a parking garage obnoxiously inserting itself smack in the middle of their path of retreat - no, their strategic backing-the-hell-up -

[activate fraymotif? y/n]

"What does that even mean?" Dave mutters under his breath. For lack of a better target, he says this to the sky, because he figures - you know, sky, Skaia, whatever. "Are you shitting me, more music? We already have a stupid goddamn soundtrack mixed by five year olds, what more do you want to subject my eardrums to?"

That's the thing. He's been hearing it on and off for a couple days now - a weird, unsettling note, one
that started soft and has slowly built to a permanent drone in his ears, buzzing and nondescript but ever-present. He thinks the closest he can describe it is as a kind of [oooooooooorrrrrr], or maybe a [ɯɯɯɯɯɯɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹ]. It's been enough to drown out the constancy of Karkat's angry pulse and Kanaya's sporadic [vworp]ing and even the constant clamor he associates with Rose, Jade, and John that Dave hears loudest and clearest of all, and hey, it's not like he was complaining. Hearing weird shit isn't supposed to be a thing you get used to; compared to all the whooshing and clanging, this monotonous drone is wayyy easier to ignore when Dave starts mixing songs in his head.

But still. For the record. Actual five year olds could mix better than this.

Unfortunately, now that they're not hemmed in on both sides by the railing, Dave means to get out from behind Kanaya and actually contribute something to the ongoing hack-and-slash fest - but the Scratch isn't hemmed in anymore, either, and suddenly he's feinting and stabbing faster than even Dave's flashsteps can keep up with, as though anticipating Dave's every attempt to outflank him before Dave even thinks to try again. "Oh, come on!" he bursts out after another slice sends him falling back behind Kanaya, where he can accomplish nothing by way of attacking without literally going through Kanaya to do it.

"I will concede this plan has some logistical concerns," Kanaya grunts. She's forced back another step and Dave compensates for it by being a complete ass and not moving his foot, so he ends up with the weight of an entire troll warrior woman using his foot as a pivot on which to bring a chainsawkind down in a massive downward hack that drives the Scratch back a few feet. "Given we cannot subdue him if we cannot - oof! - lay a claw on him."

"Kanaya," Dave says, blocking a slash that almost hacks off her ear, because he's not sure if she can grow that kind of thing back or if the glowy thing has a limit. "We're about to fall into a goddamn parking garage. This isn't just a logistical concern anymore. This has evolved into an actual problem."

"I noticed, Dave."

"Scientists are fucking baffled by how fast this has evolved, because a problem like this should have taken millions of years of inbreeding to occur. Between the two of us" - a huff, and Dave hauls Kanaya back by the shoulder, nearly taking that same stab to his face as repayment for his goddamn courtesy - "we have spat in the face of all the scientific method has to offer. That's it. Science died today. Game over, man. That's how problematic this is."

"Dave. How attached are you to your ability to speak, again? I ask only out of a purely hypothetical curiosity."

And see, that's the cool thing about Kanaya. John, Karkat, and Rose are sticklers for the names on a good day, and Jade goes with John's flow out of some kind of sisterly solidarity and because she thinks codenames are cool. But Kanaya seems to understand and possess the rare and valuable quality of casually not giving a single raging fuck about one's secret identity. And Dave can respect that.

The Scratch's blade clatters off Kanaya's chainsaw and slices up her sleeve instead, exposing another too-pale line of ripped skin and drawing Kanaya's attention away from Dave. At the same time, Dave's left foot slides back and runs out of sidewalk to walk on. There's a slight drop because some dickhead decided the ground floor of the parking garage would not actually be level with the street outside, so Dave has basically two seconds to decide that yes, they're doing this. Any second now the cops could realize there's a party going down here as well as back at the fountain, and Dave has enough experience with police to know that they harsh one's groove no matter how sick the beats might be.
"Going down," he warns Kanaya, and she jerks her head, horns bobbing in a sharp nod - or maybe she's just smoothly ducking under another strike, who can even tell anymore - and Dave pauses everything to grab Kanaya around the waist and jump down to the sloped floor of the garage. Time restarts while he's still trying to set her down, but Kanaya just plants her feet and drags him onto her left with a steering claw before the Scratch can jump down after them. Of course, just as Dave thinks that, the Scratch vanishes again and reappears right in front of them, battering Kanaya back as she blocks everything with her chainsaw only in one hand. She reels one arm back, claws clenched tightly in a fist, and Dave flashsteps in to jam his sword along the blade of the Scratch's katana, gritting his teeth as he tries to give Kanaya whatever opening she needs -

- and his fucking sword snaps. It's a clean break, half a foot above the guard of the hilt, but of all the times to -

Dave loses the beat of his motion, and the metal of his splintered sword lets out a shriek that echoes painfully in the awful acoustics of the parking garage as he stutteringly shoves it upward to lock the guard against the katana instead. The Scratch darts a look at him, one not quite strong enough to be called irritation but close e-fucking-nough, and Kanaya's fist flies a moment later, arcing past the Scratch kid's cheek by inches when he just barely tilts his head to the side and dodges it. He blinks out of sight and the sudden absence of the katana means Dave's broken sword has nothing to push back, and by the time Dave has regained his balance, Kanaya's screaming because there's a sword through her stomach.

Dave slices his broken sword at the Scratch kid's face, only half convinced he even has the reach with only half a blade, and it actually hits. A jagged line of blood opens up along the jut of the kid's cheekbone, and then, before Dave can process anything, the Scratch is off again, strafing off to the side to put space between them with his sword still in hand, dripping splatters of green blood behind him. Shit.

Kanaya clutches a claw over the green stain spreading across her midriff, adding to the collection of blood stains from that first attack, and Dave hooks his elbow with hers to pull her behind the nearest car, one of a good number scattered throughout the garage. Cover won't do them much good with a guy who's this damn fast, but it'll make Dave feel better while they scope out how much damage they're dealing with, here. Because the last time something like this happened to him, he totally fainted.

Kanaya is not fainting. Kanaya is pissed. "This was new;" she hisses, inspecting the thin but deep wound in the middle of her stomach, and for one wild second Dave thinks she's referring to her internal organs or some shit like that. But no, she's talking about her outfit.

She's probably not dying. That is in fact the vibe Dave is getting here. Cool. Awesome.

...Where is the Scratch kid?

Dave whips around, scanning the garage around them with a wary eye, but there's no sign of the guy under the dim lights or between the scattered vehicles. Crap. Not cool. Not awesome.

Then, abruptly, a hoarse "Roxy, why the fuckin' hell -" breaks out from the other side of the garage, before the Scratch realizes he's broken his stealth mode and shuts up again. Doesn't matter; Dave's got a better idea of how far away the guy is after that outburst, and it's far enough away that they probably have a moment to breathe.

"Is that gonna stop bleeding the way the other one did?" Dave asks, this being the primary concern. "Because that would be handy, not gonna lie."
"Well yes, but that's not the point here," Kanaya says.

Dave mashes the heel of his palm against one eye, thinking fast. "It is totally the point. Like, how many of those can you handle before we need to get you to a hospital or something?"

"Roxy. No," comes from somewhere off to their left, and Dave nearly cracks his head against the side of the car trying to pinpoint it. Shit. The Scratch is moving.

"Indeterminate. I've been disemboweled before, but a few days afterward I needed to take measures to replenish my blood supply." Kanaya waves her chainsaw a little, which is not a safe thing to do at all, and tucks a wayward strand of black hair behind her ear. She has two gaping wounds, but she looks like she considers all the gore barely more irritating than grass stains earned during a casual walk in the park. "This is nothing. Focus less on worrying about me, and more on finding some way to take that man down. I'm just not fast enough."

"Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but neither am I," Dave hisses. "His moves are too outrageously unreal, man. Like, even Bro would maybe take ten minutes to beat this guy. He's that fast."

She gives him a look. "Never mind. We should stop talking. It is clearly not conducive to us finishing this battle in a timely fashion," Kanaya says exasperatedly. She's mostly preoccupied with inspecting the jade green wound in the middle of her stomach with a claw - wait, belay that one, she's still more concerned with the torn fabric. Again. Apparently mortal wounds don't really faze her. When Dave replays that scream earlier in his head, he's pretty sure Kanaya was screaming more in surprise than in actual pain.

Okay. Dave can admit it. Rose has chosen well. He can grant his blessing for their marriage. Any woman who can take stab wounds in stride like this is worthy of the clan and must be married in ASAP.

"Why? He's obviously cool with us talking - he's making some kind of mid-strife phone call as we speak," Dave points out, even as a loud "Dammit" comes from somewhere further along this lane of parking spots, past a bright yellow truck. "See, he's being cool about this."

"Dave, you are Rose's brother, and she has grown somewhat attached to you, no doubt having contracted that strange human disease called familial affection." Kanaya turns to look him directly in the eye, nostrils flaring. "But if you do not desist in your infernal babbling and focus, I will dropkick you through this Lexus and not even apologize."

Dave meets her eyes without blinking. "That would be awesome enough that I wouldn't even care."

Before he can learn if Kanaya reacts the same way Karkat does to ironically prolonged eye contact (that is, with profuse, flustered swearing and multiple attempts at strangulation), their friendly bonding moment is interrupted by another echoing "Dammit!" - and then the Scratch kid is on them like a bat out of hell, landing on the roof of the Lexus at their backs with a bang that dents the metal and stabbing down at Dave.

Who has still not replaced his swordkind. He has backups, obviously, because when you break as many piece of shit swords as Dave has in his lifetime, you never travel cross country to visit your BFF without packing, like, thirty extras. But he's wasted his time gawping at Kanaya's miraculous feat of not-dying, and so he blocks with the half of a sword, trying not to think about the fact that he once spent an entire game wandering around with a sword that was only whole a quarter of the time.

"Enough!" Kanaya shouts, wheeling around to crush what's left of the poor car's roof with her
chiansaw when the Scratch dodges out of the way. The blond lashes out with his foot, one hand still on the car as he plants a kick on the first cut and knocks her staggering back into the next parking spot. Then he's on the pavement again, jabbing the sword up at Dave's face in a low-to-high arc.

And for a brief moment, when Dave flashsteps out of the way, the Scratch is frozen with his head low but his eyes staring up behind his rip-off shades, and there's something wrong.

Because that emotionless mask? Gone. The guy looks fucking distraught.

Sharp metal slices across Dave's shoulder, and he knocks the katana aside with a clang before the Scratch kid can shift his aim towards something more vital. Dave barely feels the cut, too busy blocking the next blow or five. Half of them, he doesn't see coming, and soon there are superficial nicks and slashes opening up along his forearms and sides; he's reduced to picking and choosing which of the countless attacks to parry, and letting the rest fall where they may. The pace of the battle is suddenly unreal, and he loses track of Kanaya completely because he doesn't dare look away from the Scratch kid long enough. At once point Dave's back slams up against the side of a minivan, and that's it, he's pinned. His elbow jars against the vehicle when he twists his arm the wrong way, and that's when he realizes his range of motion has basically been halved.

And the Scratch kid does not let up. Suddenly it's not just the superficial cuts making it past Dave's guard; it's deep ones, leaving his sleeves in shreds and slicing dangerously close to his exposed eyes. With a roar Kanaya catches up and starts battering at the kid from behind, but the Scratch accounts for her attacks effortlessly, so smoothly that even when Dave pauses time the kid is barely more than a blur of motion.

Okay, something happened. Something changed, and it's driven this guy into some kind of frenzy that's somehow made him even more of a goddamn menace. So Dave is not interested in hearing, when he's in the middle of fending off an onslaught of attacks that he's not fast enough to handle -

[reactivate auto-fraymotif? y/n]

It's the last straw. "Yes, okay!" Dave bawls at the roof of the parking garage. "Yes to all of the above! Lay down the sick beats, for fuck's sake!"

[y/n/all of the above acknowledged]

Wait.

[fraymotif activated: Recurative Accelerando]

Shit.

[fraymotif activated: Space-Time Stretto]

_Fucking Christ on a Pringle's container._

[auto-fraymotif reactivated: Turning the Tables]

…This is gonna suck.

[engage]

Dave's broken-ass sword disappears.

This would be a hell of a lot more of a problem, if not for the fact that he pauses time in a panic
before the Scratch can take advantage of his sudden lack of a strife specibus, and it's not until about five seconds later that he realizes three things are very wrong with this picture.

Problem the first - Kanaya punches the Scratch across the back of his head.

*While time is still paused.*

Problem the second? The seconds keep trickling by, and Dave lets his jaw drop as the flashstep doesn’t end. It just keeps happening. There's no headache, not even the pain in his throat that would accompany his other forms of time travel.

Time seems content to stay stopped.

And problem numero tres -

There's something under his fingertips. He spreads them unconsciously, tracing familiar whorls and grooves, and it's only when Kanaya, taking advantage of the Scratch kid's inability to move, kicks the man out of the way and stares at Dave in disbelief that Dave can bring himself to look down.

He already knows what's there. He just doesn't really want it to be happening; there's still a goddamn enormous part of him that has wanted Jade to be wrong -

"What on earth is going on?" Kanaya says slowly. And that's - just bizarre. Just so goddamn bizarre. Dave is used to the space between seconds being a place of utter silence, a world of still people disturbed only by his own breaths and actions. Kanaya sounds odd, her voice echoing and amplified in his ears like she's speaking right into them rather than talking from a good three feet away, but she *sounds*, and that's -

"Hell yes," Dave breathes, the collar around his throat thrumming with a weird aftershock as he runs his fingers over the surface of the twin red-and-black turntables hovering beneath his hands. They lack any of the switches or cords of his mixers back home, but he *knows* without words exactly how to achieve the same effects. They feel like coming home. Like he's been cheating on his one true waifu-tables with a cheap hooker and now he's come crawling back on his hands and knees after all this time. *How could you ignore us for so long*, they seem to whisper. *That is the opposite of all things ironically cool.* "Hell fucking yes."

Kanaya is not feeling the wife vibes. This is probably because Kanaya does not do the timey thing on a regular basis, and is totes understandable. "Dave, I Would Appreciate An Explanation. Yesterday."

"Don't tempt me, because I think I could totally make that happen," Dave says. He tears his eyes away from the sight of the tables, which he's been soaking up like a man at an oasis in the desert, and checks on the Scratch - still frozen where Kanaya kicked him, which is kind of funny as hell - and then looks at Kanaya herself, shaking his head a little. "Remember that whole game thing you've been playing skeptic about?"

"Someone has to."

Dave is still not ogling his sister's girlfriend. He's just, y'know, casually watching as the cut across her chest seals up rapidly, the gleaming white skin knitting together without a scar or even a trace that it was ever there. The stab wound in her stomach is healing in double-time as well, and on impulse, Dave slides his ring finger upward across the tracks of the turntable under his right palm.

| Recurative Accelerando - basic notation:$\zeta \nabla \chi$ limit: 4±1 players effects: $x2$ health vial regen, $+3$ Vim, $\pm \iota \chi$ Pulchritude (max Sylph echeladder advancement attained; see God Tier for limit |
Oh god. It's so handy. Another twist, and he has the stats for [Space-Time Stretto], too. For the first time in for-goddamn-ever, Dave understands what all the music about. Where has this been his whole life?

"Well I'm pretty sure that as of thirty seconds ago, we are abusing the fuck out of some hella righteous game mechanics. So yeah, we're basically going to kick major ass here." Dave feels an itch running along his shoulders and scratches at it without really thinking. The turntable of that hand spins smoothly out of the way, and when he checks the skin of his shoulder, he sees that his own cut has begun to knit together, skipping straight from scabs to smooth flesh. This fraymotif business doesn't seem to be doing much for clothing damage, but hey, you win some, you lose some, and ones you lose? You jailbreak until you win anyway.

Seriously. This has so much potential.

On a hunch, Dave frowns, and listens past the three new scores playing in his head. [Turning the Tables] is a nice, steady beat that doesn't flow too badly with the other, louder two melodies, and [Space-Time Stretto] and [Recurative Accelerando] have a weird synchronicity, like they're designed to overlay with each other. It's not perfectly smooth, but it's not flagrantly unrighteous, either. What he's saying is, he could totally jam to this.

But. There's still that one weird note, droning on and on in a persisting [ɯɯɯɯɯɯɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɿ
At the moment she is on special assignment - one of her first field assignments in quite some time, actually. As a specialist in marine lusii, of course she has to suffer through the usual 'lock up your mutated, oversized custodial beasts' lecture that everyone gets whenever Japan has an incident - which happens basically every other week. This time, oddly enough, it was a midsized clam rampaging through South Korea. The point still stands.

But quite a few of her colleagues have already visited this particular house, and all have come back empty-clawed for reasons that, quite frankly, make zero fucking sense whatsoever. The lusus here should have been reclaimed and either reassigned to a new grub or retired permanently in a reserve ages ago, according to the paperwork. Jenvir claims he was attacked, but there hadn't been a mark on him when he returned to base soaking wet and vaguely singed a fortnight ago. Loucas is still in therapy and won't say a word. Ulaine was actually missing until last Friday, when she mysteriously turned up in the middle of a lusus retirement reserve in northern Alaska, with no memory of how she got there and clutching several empty aluminum tins. After a quick search of the park, they found that no, she hadn't managed to deliver the lusus she'd been sent to retrieve, never mind that a crustacean-type shouldn't have been taken to the Alaskan reserve in the first place. It's quite the conundrum.

And of course, the troll assigned to the dwelling has responded to none of the official summonses or retirement notices. Typical. Korlas always ends up stuck with the cases everyone else is too terrified to deal with anymore, which happens on a semi-regular basis. She still has nightmares about the one time she had to deal with a giant seahorse gone feral. It's never pretty when a lusus gets overly attached to its current charge, and even less pretty when it's a marine lusus - they're bred tough to deal with tougher grubs, and have a nasty tendency to go as crazy as their charges when an adolescent troll descends into coldblooded dementia.

As Korlas approaches the front door, she can make out scratch marks on the paint at about shoulder-height, and when she tests her theory by holding up her own retirement notice - yeah, someone's been tearing these off. Or worse, something. Because if Mr Vantas isn't the one reading these, there's only one possible culprit. Damn, she hates the overattached ones. "Mr Vantas! Mr Vaaaantas! Helloooo!" When she receives no reply, Korlas sighs, and starts flipping through the papers on her clipboard, still shouting. "Mr Vantas, I am the fourth delegate the lusii control department has sent to this hive in the past two weeks. We seriously need to discuss this delay in your lusus's retirement!"

She squints at the third paper and nudges her assistant in the side. "Is this troll still in high school?"

"Yes, but he filed for early custodian retrieval. We haven't been able to confirm his report that the lusus is senile on account of...no one seems to have actually seen the lusus. Except Jenvir, and he's still kinda -" The assistant uses her finger to draw a spiral at the side of her head for 'cuckoo.'

"Oh, for god's sake. He's probably not even home right now." Korlas shakes her head - and frowns. "Shit. Mr Vantas filed this request himself?"

"It's the tenth page in."

She flips through to it. "Damn. He's not the one ignoring our notices, then. He probably hasn't even seen them, if he's always out at school when our guys come around to pick up the lusus."

Her assistant gulps. "You don't mean -"

"Yup." Korlas passes the clipboard to her assistant, and starts loosening her tie and rolling up her sleeves. "We have us an overattached, non-standard crustacean custodian."

"Should we call for backup?"
"Backup couldn't get to Loucas in time. We're already trampling all over this sucker's lawnrnig - it's been watching us." Hell, she thinks, an overprotective sonofabitch like this? It probably marked them at the sidewalk, and depending on how defensive it has become, could lash out like the cornered animal it is at any moment.

Damn. If Vantas had just noticed when the date for his lusus's retrieval came and went...the longer an overattached lusus hangs around the unfortunate troll in question, the harder it'll fight for what it convinces itself will always be its charge. "It's gotta be all or nothing, at this point," Korlas says, cracking her knuckles and baring her teeth.

Her assistant takes a large step back from the door, yellow eyes flicking to one of the windows, and Korlas glances through the window on the other side of the door, assessing her best method of entry. The house is dark inside, as though all the lights are out, and she can't make out much through a crack that spirals outward in the glass pane. She looks away.

In the corner of her eye, she just barely misses as something pale and hulking crosses room behind the window, without so much as a skree of warning.

Her mind made up, Korlas snaps on her goggles and draws out her industrial-strength taser. "Hold the clipboard, Miaran. This is going to be...messy."

She hauls up her foot and kicks the door down. It's one of those things you learn in lusii veterinarian school.

She never sees it coming.

Miaran Wether, assistant veterinarian, reports back to the branch office two days later. The transport vehicle is missing a tire and the metal roof has been shredded like paper. All of the lusus restraint belts have been torn out of their sockets, and when she steps out of the driver's side door, the door itself comes off in her hand.

When questioned about the location of the branch marine specialist, she can only shake her head, eyes wide as she sits silently in the corner of the office.

The clipboard is intact.

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John wakes up.

Everything feels flat, and for a moment, however short, he can't breathe. There's a weight in his chest that he can't shift, and he wheezes before realizing there's nothing but the heavy coverlet thrown over him, nothing else holding him down. There are no breezes tugging at the sheets or the covers, or trying to lift him out of bed and out the window - but only because he's awake to suppress the urge when he realizes the breathless panic is needless. He's not in any danger. Not really.

A soft gust runs through his hair like fingers, a half-hearted tug as he rolls over and pulls up the corner of the old-fashioned, dusty blue drapes to peer out the window over the bed. The Lalonde house looks modern on the outside and like something out of Harry Potter on the inside, and John's
old bedroom is no exception. Apparently, when they moved, the Lalondes hadn't taken much of the existing furniture with them - Rose's room is picked over and sparse, since she took all her belongings with her in the move, but when John looked in yesterday she had the same bedframe and curtains he remembers, and his own room is perfectly preserved. The dust-covered wizard statues in the far corner may be weirdly tacky, but they still match the dark blue of the furniture and wallpaper, a testament to Doctor Lalonde's strange but generous instincts.

He can just barely recall the first time he visited Rose, and Doctor Lalonde had announced that his room had already been decorated for him. He's pretty sure no other parent in the world but Doctor Lalonde would insist on dedicating an entire room in her own home to her daughter's friend of barely a week; Lalondes are kind of passive-aggressively over the top that way, and Rose had certainly treated the whole thing as an embarrassing indulgence on her mother's part. But then, John hadn't known then what he knows now. Now, the thought that Rue Lalonde might have already known more about John's powers than he did himself as a kid makes the whole thing way more plausible.

Looking outside, John presses his fingers to the glass and sees that the sky above is just as tepidly grey as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before.

And that's good! Yeah! That's awesome! Because the meteorologists on the news keep reporting a lot of weird storms and other weather phenomena going on elsewhere in the state, with a high risk of hail and thunderstorms that have flooded some areas, and the last thing John wants is to have to fly through weather like that for work every night. That would just suck! If they're having a weird rainy season, it can just steer clear of Seattle, thanks very much.

John lets his forehead fall forward on the glass, and blinks at his fingers as they continue to slowly drum on the glass. His breath leaves a misty trail of condensation that he draws two eyes in before hesitating over the mouth, and it clears up before he can finish the drawing. Memory gnaws at the back of his mind, something biting and cruel that threatens to scream through his synapses and make him relive some inescapable, not at all friendly event from before. He mentally shoves it away with a weary nudge, and the tightness in his chest recedes. He's gotten better about not forgetting to the point of unconscious amnesia, but he can't deal with everything his mind wants to subject him to at once. The past is kind of a tense subject right now, and -

...The past tense. Heheheheh. Okay, that was a good one, and John hadn't even been thinking about it! Chuckling to himself, he wonders where he's heard that pun before. Maybe some famous person said it, or he got it out of one of Karkat's lamer sitcoms. When in doubt, it's usually troll Will Smith. He'll put money on it being an awesome joke from Men in Black, because even John can admit that movie was quality. Karkat thinks the sequels are just as quality, but Karkat also has a massive poster of Will Smith's face from Thresh Prince of Bel-Air in his closet that he thinks John doesn't know about.

...Laughing isn't really helping. Thinking about Karkat's dumb adorable quirks isn't helping, either. John groans, thumps his head against the glass a few more times for good measure, and wonders how he's gonna get through the day when it feels like he's got grey sludge where his insides used to be. He's supposed to be feeling better, now that he's let all these memories sink into his head where they belong and the agony of rewatching everyone die has faded a little into his subconscious, but in the absence of that sharp pain now he just feels gross. Seriously, the last time he felt this gross, he ran to Dave halfway across the country without even letting himself remember why Dave was so important.

But everyone John would want to escape to is already right here, so! He should go see them! Wow, the solution is really obvious when he puts it that way! It still takes him several precious minutes to sit up and tumble out of bed toward the wayyy over-decorated bathroom, but by the time Karkat
stumbles in, having missed a splotch of sticky green sopor slime behind one ear that he insists John help him wipe off, the conflicting instinct to either curl up in bed and sleep through the day or grab everyone with the Breeze and sweep them up into the sky to do something about this dumb weather has mostly been tamped down by logic. John can practically hear his dad's voice in his ears already, admonishing him sternly on the ever-present need to maintain the façade of normalcy - especially since missing another day of school, after so many random absences over the past month, would kinda start causing problems with the school administration. John needs to be as normal as possible in his everyday life, given the circumstances!

The last thing he needs is to lose control in class and out himself before Diamonds Droog can. That would just be lame.

- 

*Don't panic.*

It's the mantra that has been getting him through the day.

It's not working all that well. It's been a bad day, okay?

Jade is *gone* - there's an insistent breeze tugging on his sleeve that yanks Heir toward the stadium in the distance, some ingrained instinct that he thinks can always lead him to her, but from this far away he can't distinguish her breathing from the rest of basically all of Seattle, and his stomach drops out from under him at the sudden, unexpected absence. Then Dave is ripped away, too fast for him to do anything about it, and it's like being asphyxiated.

Like he's losing track of who he is again.

Seriously. A really, really bad day. Not as bad as some of the days he's had recently, but still - holy crap, he needs this to not be happening while he's on the job.

*Breathe. Breathe. Holy crap, breathe!*

He's actually kind of embarrassed that it takes Rose's warning to jolt him out of his panicky, rapidly tunneling vision and notice the *entire police car* flying at him and Karkat. The wind doesn't even try to catch the two and half tons of metal and shrieking sirens with so little forewarning; Heir feels his head whip back as the breeze lifting him up into the air abruptly reverses direction and slams him down on top of Karkat, with more force than if it had simply let gravity take him. He can't see Karkat - *Hemogoblin*, *Hemogoblin*, alright? Not this again - because he's pretty sure Rose did something to make him invisible with her sweet magic powers, but he's always unconsciously zeroed in on the troll's breathing these days. Mostly because listening to Karkat's breathing is really soothing - and wow, talk about one of the creepiest thoughts he's ever had. Ever. But it totally is, like somehow Karkat's lifetime of honing his lungs for the sole purpose of shouting down the rest of the world has both trained him to yell at a moment's notice and act as a balm to John's frayed nerves.

Because if nothing else, when Karkat *really* hits his stride, it's always guaranteed to be side-splittingly *hilarious* to listen to.

But the realization that the two of them are in danger at least snaps Heir out his super embarrassing moment of panic. Part of him wants Hemogoblin to stay down, where basically anything coming at them will have to go through Heir first, but that's not practical. At all. For a lot of reasons.

He's standing up now.

*Stay calm - stay calm.*
What he confronts when he does stand, however, is something completely beyond his realm of experience.

See, Heir has never been up against someone as strong as him before. Jade could probably hand him his butt on a platter, yeah, but they've never had the chance to put that to the test. And neither Dave nor Rose have demonstrated the kind of superhuman strength and endurance that John and Jade do - who knows whether that's down to ectobiological genetics or just some strange quirk of the game and their old titles. And while fighting crime, Heir has always, always held back. Normal people, humans and trolls alike, are kinda fragile, and he doesn't want to accidentally hurt someone or worse when he's just trying to prevent a robbery.

The whole ability to juggle a police car like it's light as a feather should have tipped him off sooner. Because the moment the Scratch girl slams the bar of her oversized forkkind against Casey, Heir nearly crumples under the impact, his knees buckling and his calves jolting as he strains to remain upright, caught completely unawares by the jarringly unwelcome sensation of clashing with someone who is exactly as strong as he is. If not more so. He breaks the deadlock fast, before she can press him further, and half-jumps, half-floats backward so he can circle around cautiously, panting as he tries to regain his bearings. The urge to panic drowns fast now that he has something to focus all of his attention on.

Right. Focus. Heir meets the girl's pale blue eyes and resists the instinct to track Hemogoblin's position with his eyes, knowing there'd be nothing to see. The troll is circling around as well, but in a much wider arc, no doubt looking for an angle from which to launch a sneakier attack. Hemogoblin has always favored shadows and stealth to make up for his lack of raw strength, so Heir is glad he and Rose found a way to play to that strategy.

The question remains, though. How exactly is Heir going to approach this? They'd agreed while getting prepared to leave the Lalonde house that they'd seek to subdue the mysterious Scratch kids and hand them over to the authorities if possible, in a show of solidarity that might ease the unconscious tension between the city and its ridiculous high number of resident vigilantes before the FVRT arrives.

But clearly, they're not dealing with any ordinary, run of the mill human criminals here. In his entire career, Heir has only come up against one super-powered villain before (he's not sure if anyone from the Midnight Crew counts or not); they're more common in larger cities with more crime, and he's got no doubt Jade as Sharpshooter, bounding around the world for years, has plenty of experience with them. And to be frank, the villain Heir fought - three years ago, some doofus with electrical powers who shorted out the power grid for a couple hours - hadn't been all that clever or strong on his own merits. Other people who have tried to claim the title have usually just been wannabes cribbing off villains from comic books. Nothing special.

He shifts his grip on Casey, his gloves feeling a little worn (when was the last time he replaced them specifically?) and the hammer almost too familiar in his hands. At least it's not painted blue with rainbow accents; the last thing he needs right now is more flashback fuel.

The Scratch girl breaks the standoff first, hauling her strife specibus back for another powerful swing of the kind she used to take out the police officers. This time, Heir parries without holding back as he did the first time, bringing the hammer down with as much force as he has time to muster. Both metal weapons reverberate, so hard that it almost startles Heir into letting go out of shock as his hands numb. Then, without pause, the Scratch pulls away and spins right into another strike. Heir dodges under it, his eyes wide as he rolls out of the way, dizzy with the alternating view of stone and sky until he comes back up on his feet in a crouch.
Crap. He should have begun sparring with Jade ages ago. He's not out of shape, necessarily; he just has zero practice compensating for his strength being equaled like this in a battle. Heir and his dad designed and specially commissioned Casey to withstand a heck of a lot of stress, or the weapon wouldn't have lasted long over the years; he guesses the Scratch's forkkind has been forged with the same idea in mind. Despite the two hard blows, there's not a dent or a scuff anywhere he can see on the burnished red metal.

And she's not pulling any punches, here. When she hefts her specibus and narrows her eyes at him, the stone of the fountain where her blow landed instead of on top of his head has shattered into tiny slate grey fragments, crumbling rock trickling from the lowest prong of the fork as she lifts it over her shoulder. At this rate, they're going to end up annihilating what's left of a city landmark. Awesome.

But! He's not going to win this on the defensive! He needs to knock her unconscious, because he's pretty sure that forkkind isn't breaking any time soon, and disarming her probably wouldn't be enough to stop her, regardless. Huffing, Heir reaches out to the breezes still writhing around him, and opens one of his jarred fists to gesture ever so slightly with a flick of his fingers, directing a gust to circle around the Scratch's ankles. The girl looks down sharply, the flat corner of her mouth curling downward with faint displeasure and suspicion, and Heir lunges in to bring his hammerkind down. As expected, she blocks the strike in one smooth movement, her hands set wide along the fork as she tilts her head back to catch Casey right along the balance point of her specibus.

At the same time, however, she adjusts her stance, moving her feet to brace herself properly - and Heir yanks on the breeze, hard. Her right foot stays stubbornly planted; her left boot grates and slides out from under her, slipping on the fragments of rock she herself shattered into pieces, and just like that she starts tipping backwards at a dangerous angle. Yes!

Or maybe not. Heir could swear her eyes roll at him derisively and then she drops backwards of her own accord, kicking off her solidly balanced foot into a back flip with her forkkind caught under her splayed fingers. The foot Heir yanked off center almost kicks him right in the nose, and only the timely intervention of the wind jerking his head back by the hair - ouch - saves him from spending the rest of the fight with a very smashed up nose. The Scratch lands without missing a beat, longer sections of her black hair flopping over the shaved section by her ear and around the back of her skull when she tosses her head back to stare at him coolly.

Okay. So. She's good. She's really good.

Heir swallows, and halfway through the motion the Scratch kid strikes again. She moves faster, the weight of the forkkind slams against Casey with even more force, and Heir finds himself struggling to shove her back until, gritting his teeth, he lets the wind help him, floating up to hover in the air and knock the fork back. He can't fight back the thought, however, that floating might be even more dangerous than standing on solid ground where this kid is concerned, a nagging unease that has him tapping his feet back onto the ground before bringing Casey down over his head. She sidesteps him and he's the one to crack open the stone unfortunate enough to take the brunt of the hammer's weight. If he leaves an even wider ring of broken rock, it's only because the hammer has more surface area than the prong of a fork. Recovering quickly, Heir tries the trick with the wind again, clenching his hand into a fist as the gust assigned to the Scratch's feet yank and tug at her to no avail. She just sinks her weight into her heels and waits to shift her stance until Heir's distracted again by her next attack.

Heir fails to notice that his winds are growing more and more agitated until he hears, very faintly, someone cough hoarsely, and recognizes it as coming from Hemoglobin. As he kicks off the ground and flies out of the way of the Scratch's blow, the girl grimaces as her specibus breaks another chunk of the ground up into shrapnel - and dust, dust which Heir only just now realizes his winds have seized and begun to filter into the air like a grey dust storm. Ugh. It's gonna start obscuring vision,
soon, if he's not careful with it, but the longer the strife lasts, the more Heir finds himself having to loosen more and more of his control over both his physical attacks and the breezes themselves. He stops landing when the broken-up surface of the ground becomes too fragmented to keep his balance on, and focuses on trying to knock the forkind out of the Scratch's hands from above, because that thing has to go - the only hope he has at the moment for finishing this fight fast, before Hemogoblin can get himself involved and possibly hurt, is that maybe the Scratch only has one specibus specialty. Yeah, he doesn't think he's gonna be that lucky. But hey, if he can separate her from the weapon she favors, that is most definitely a good thing in his book! A little desperate, Heir pulls even more of a crosswind and directs it to blow first across the Scratch's face, bringing a cloud of dirt along with it so that she can't see, and then doing everything it can to trip her up and bring her to the ground.

No good; perhaps sensing that he's urging the wind on to a gale force, the Scratch drops to her knees, the forkind spinning to stab through a section of splintered stone and dig into the ground beneath her. Heir groans with frustration and calls the wind back.

This is so weird! If he doesn't figure out a way to break this stalemate, he's not sure who will outlast who, and that's a scary thought! Hemogoblin's still circling, and Heir doesn't blame him at all - the harder he and the Scratch swing at each other, the wilder the strikes fly, and that's not exactly a good situation to jump blindly into when your main hero gambit involves not dying. You know. As a general rule.

Then, with little warning, the Scratch kid changes the rules: when Heir swings Casey, he just barely catches the change in her body language, the distinct way she lines up not to swing back, but to do something entirely different. At the last moment he realizes what he's seeing, just in time to stop his blow midswing and pull out of the line of fire as she jabs the forkind rather than swinging it like a bat. All the tines of the fork are sharpened to a deadly point, and Heir gulps unconsciously at how close he comes to having a fork introduced to his face in the most stabby way possible. Unbothered by his dodge, the Scratch retracts the fork fast.

Too fast. Heir is trying to track the weapon, of course, which means his head turns a little to follow it when it jabs past him, and continues to do so when he thinks she's pulling it right back to her side for another hit.

Instead, without warning, the Scratch grunts and forces the fork to the side, right as it's passing his face. Heir yelps at the sudden blur of movement in his periphery, but there's no time to bring Casey up at such an awkward angle. He almost thinks he's managed to dodge it again by wrenching his near shoulder backward - but then the wind gives a pang of warning, wrapping around his face hard enough to make his eyes water, and that's all the defense he has as the Scratch's fork continues on its abrupt swing -

And slams into his far eye. The goggles he wears to protect his eyes and identity do absolutely nothing to buffer a blow with that much force behind it, and there is a moment, however brief, where he can't even tell if he closes his eyelid in time or not. Heir knocks the forkind away on reflex with Casey, gaping at the pain but not letting any noise escape him as he claps a hand over the eye, yanking the single, now-cracked goggle lens down for a moment to check the damage. It burns like it's been set on fire, throbbing so hard it feels like his optic nerve decided to tap dance on his brain, too, but when he traces his eyelid and the socket, he finds a long, thin score where the skin has broken and the outside of the eye socket where the blunt curve of the fork caught on the bone and jammed the edge of the goggles deep into the soft tissue has already begun to bruise and swell up into a puffy mess when he dares to press at it. He runs a finger along the underside of his eye and the glove comes away damp only with clear fluid, rather than blood.
But that's good. If all the damage is on the outside of his eyelid, and he can't feel anything but tears oozing out from the eye itself, he got his eye shut just in the nick of time. It could have been way worse if the Scratch had bludgeoned his eye and - he shudders - it had popped like a grape under the pressure. Ewww, ugh. He doesn’t even want to imagine that anymore. Gross.

His awareness of Hemogoblin's breath spikes at that moment, however, and Heir glances over the Scratch's shoulder before he can repress the instinct, jerking his head back down quick enough that he knows it's too obvious a tell. The troll has stayed well out of the way of the two humans smashing up the fountain mall, but now that they've come to a lull in the action, evaluating each other, Hemogoblin must think he has an opening, and slinks toward the Scratch girl from behind.

God. This is so dangerous. One wrong move, and the Scratch could crack Hemogoblin's head open like an egg. Heir hastily clamps down on the panic that rises up again and starts backing away from the Scratch in a straight line, floating about a foot above the ground as he does so. His eye throbs painfully and it's swollen shut by this point; even if the pain were absent, he couldn't open it even if he wanted to. Hopefully, it'll make the Scratch kid underestimate him more than it actually impedes his reflexes. The girl squints at his sham retreat, her expression bored but assessing once more. Heir strings together a plan that is basically just keep moving, keep her attention here so her back stays turned away from Hemogoblin, and most importantly, act normal -

Rose screams.

Forget normal. Normal is overrated. Now sounds like an awesome time to freak the fuck out. John's head cranks around on his neck before he even finishes deciding whether it's a smart idea to look away from the Scratch kid for more than five seconds. His mind screams at him in agonized pain, struggling to explain how Rose could sound like she's in so much pain when not even a moment ago her breathing was controlled, if a little labored, not at all the breath patterns of someone who felt like she was under immediate threat. But when he finally sees her, his heart leaps into his throat and does a good impression of a tango, because Rose is down. She's curled up on her knees, the lone Scratch girl she's been paired off with looking utterly bewildered - and then, accompanied by a second scream, Rose's arm swarms with tentacles of grimdark.

John forgets himself completely. Above the screaming that echoes in his head, the only really thought that escapes the mire is get to Rose. Whatever is happening, he has to get her out of here. "Rose!" he shouts, trying to get her attention. When she looks up, his stomach knots further; her eyes leak a sickly white fire, and he barely sees any recognition in her stare when she meets his eyes, like something else now looks out through her eyes to stare through him.

But there is recognition. John hits the ground hard, misjudging the distance between him and the ground so that a sharp pang runs up through his heels. "Rose, hang o-"

In retrospect, he managed to make the whole thing into a constitutional fucking clusterfuck just by taking his eyes off the Scratch. He totally deserves the sudden, blinding pain as something smashes into the side of his head and sends him reeling.

And Heir is -
TR: bluh bluh bluh! let me take over!
    (John, mo vê! )
TR: gosh, you're really so useless...
    …probably...not...
TR: whatever. you can't keep this up much longer. we can have fun soon!
Urgh...
TR: it'll be great!
...Whew! Not falling unconscious! Kind of touch and go for a second, there! But Heir snaps back into awareness, the side of his head throbbing, but otherwise pretty sure everything's still in working order. His palms and one knee ache as the dark, static-riddled fuzz clears from his field of vision, and he shakes his head to clear it further and see that he's staggered onto one knee, hands splayed out over broken stone to brace himself through the worst of the light-headedness. His goggles have twisted around with the force of the blow, one lens over the wrong eye and the other yanked up at an angle over his hair and his ear; when he reaches up and firmly tugs them back into place over his eyes one of the lenses - the one that took the full force of the earlier eye shot - just pops out of the setting altogether, landing on the ground in two pieces. It leaves his vision weirdly distorted. He squeezes his eyes shut again. They're not even prescription lenses, dam it! But the presence of a lens in front of one of his eyes and not the other, in combination with the bright pain in his head, shoots his depth-perception in the foot.

"Heir! Come on, dumbass, do not pass out on me! Open your stupid fucking ganderbulbs right this blood shitting second!"

Honestly, it's hard to tell which of the two voices alarms Heir more - the one that sounds like Rose's voice filtered through the spinning blades of an electric fan, or the one that is obviously Hemogoblin, very loud and very much on the edge of genuine panic.

And if Heir's brains weren't too scrambled by that hit and he's not hallucinating things, Rose might well be on her way to tearing apart most of downtown Seattle in a grimdark fugue. So he looks for Rose first, his vision wheeling and dizzying for a moment before straightening out, and scans the area around the fountain. There's no sign of a massive cluster of thorns and tentacles rising into the sky, so kudos for that! In fact, Heir almost doesn't see Rose at first because the other Scratch girl, the one with blonde hair, is kneeling between the two of them, grabbing at Rose's not-tentacle hand and shaking her arm as though trying to snap her out of it.

Uh. Weird. But Heir appreciates the effort! Yeah, it worries him that it's one of the bad guys doing it, but he crosses his fingers that the Scratch kids might have a vested interest in not dying of invasive exposure to really evil tentacle monsters, just like heroes do, and cautiously hauls himself back upright to help Hemogoblin out.

Blood streaks down the side of his face, dribbling warm and wet along the side of his neck, and he tries not to think about how deep the throbbing cut along the side of his head and temple goes. He likes to think that if his head were splitting open and his brains were sticking out or something gross like that, he'd be able to tell - that would be pain on a whole other level! Head wounds always bleed a lot, right? Right.

He consults with his dad before making up his mind. He's pretty sure Jade at least is determined to investigate this weird message all of them have received, and everyone else is pretty curious, too, whether they live here or not. The threat towards civilians would normally be a clincher for John too, middle of the school day or no. The result of having so many kids who moonlight as heroes all packed into one house? It's kind of a perfect storm of impulsive heroism, and it would be totally awesome to witness in real life if John hadn't been super concerned about little things.
Like the fact that these mysterious challengers call themselves 'Scratch kids.'

Scratch, who heads the Midnight Crew.

Scratch, who is Diamonds Droog's boss.

Scratch, who did something, something John can't quite puzzle out - led Rose astray, somehow, but it's one of the rare memories crackling with static that not even John's silly head can replay, no matter how much he wants it to, for once.

"Does this count as interfering with Crew business?" bursts out of John's mouth before Samuel has even finished closing the door of the office on a living room featuring Karkat, Dave, and Jade — not exactly the least volatile of trios to leave alone and unsupervised, but Karkat isn't nearly as sleep deprived as he was even a few days ago, his nightmares having mostly been repeats that he's handling a lot better now that he understands the context of them, and John believes in Karkat's rapidly replenishing, if still hilariously minimal, self-control. Also, Dave has a cushion over his head, so maybe Karkat won't be able to hear him. Fingers crossed. And toes crossed, because they need all the luck they can get.

"Too hard to say, son," Samuel says, his expression thoughtful but grim as he paces toward his latest borrowed desk. It's so weird, still, seeing his dad making use of offices that are not his own; particularly when this room contains several display cabinets full of telescopes and wizardly figurines. Rose once dubbed this the 'porcelain wizard baby collection,' he remembers fondly.

The Lalonde house is full of nice memories like that. Memories that can't be confused for those cleaved from another life, which is nice. That, combined with the return of that sickly, anxious greyness that has gunked up his mood all day, makes him all the more secretly relieved that their own house is too compromised to be a safe haven for everyone anymore - being torn between memories of a house full of monsters and no sign of his dad anywhere until it's too late and memories of the place he felt trapped in by his depression and anxiety since Rose moved would have been too much to handle.

"They called us out. Deliberately. It can't be interfering if they want me there, right?" he suggests, hedging. "Unless...Droog's planned this as a test? To see if I'll give her a reason to use her blackmail..." He trails off, because honestly, they can't put anything past a criminal and a monster like Droog. "If - if it's too much of a risk -"

The idea of Jade, Dave, Rose, maybe even Kanaya being forced to pick up the slack on defending John's own city, even considering the extenuating circumstances - it sucks. He loves having them around, but if they were to separate, to fight alone where he couldn't follow -

John mashes the wrong memory down with a silent gasp, lips parting as he sucks in a breath to replace it and try to slow his frantic heart rate down before Karkat notices and comes charging in. Blood powers, yeesh.

But it's terrifying.

Samuel presses a hand on his shoulder, and John looks down at his dad. Too much so - he realizes he's floating a foot above the carpet, and when he sets down with an apologetic look, his connection to the wind presses at his mind, still fretting because of his own infectious, momentary panic. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize, son," he dad says, squeezing John's shoulder and then stepping back to the desk, stroking the underside of his chin with a pondering expression. John forces himself to relax,
shaking out his arms, because his dad doesn't look as strained as he has of late - he looks like he's thinking carefully, and will no doubt have the situation puzzled out to his satisfaction shortly.

John's been trying to be more independent as a hero as he gets older, in fits and starts, always hampered by insecurities that even he doesn't always understand. But it's still reassuring to have the full weight of Samuel's years of experience and fatherly wisdom to fall back on in times when John feels like he's lost his objectivity - particularly now that Droog has carved out the very foundation of his safety and stability.

"I think," Samuel says, slow and measured, as he rights a wizard bobblehead knocked over onto his computer's keyboard by John's outburst, "you should be fine. A brazen challenge like this has not been Droog's modus operandi, from what we've read about her dealings in the past."

John nods, biting his lip, and falls into a litany of, "Kidnapping, bribery, blackmail -"

"But not challenges. She works in the shadows. And the term 'Scratch kids..." Samuel shakes his head. "There's never been a word about them before. I emailed one of my contacts already, and when they felt secure enough to respond they were positive Droog had no such task force by that name. They could be new additions, true. But the Midnight Crew is a vast organization - no one is entirely sure how large, simply because their members are so stubbornly loyal and tight-lipped about the details. Not a single member has broken ranks or snitched in years, now, since they first started expanding."

"So we just can't know for sure." John sighs, scratching at the back of his head. What a dumb situation…

Samuel hesitates. "And if worst comes to worst, and they are involved in Droog's business," he says, clearly striving for casual as he adjusts his tie absently, "John...you already know how I feel. We need to be ready to leave at a moment's notice, regardless."

John can read between the lines. As far as his dad is concerned, John's identity as a hero is already out, beyond hope of concealing or repair.

Even if this is a trap to lure him into breaking his deal with Diamonds Droog...well, it's only ever really been a question of when, not if, Droog would betray him.

John breathes in deeply, and lets it go when it does nothing to help the nausea in his belly. "I'm going." If for no other reason that he's seen the look on Karkat's face, and he knows that Hemogoblin is going. He isn't leaving Karkat to fight alone, not ever.

Samuel smiles, and only his eyes are tired. "Of course, son."

- Hemogoblin is very much visible, and Heir can only put that down to the fact that Rose can't focus on making people invisible when she's got other things on her mind. The flat light of day leeches the vibrancy from the colors of everyone's uniforms, not just Hemogoblin, and so the dark reds and greyish blacks of his uniform seem dull compared to the obvious luminescence of his eyes. The troll has both sickles out but fights mostly on the defensive, weaving and ducking and tumbling out of the way of the Scratch kid's relentless onslaught. If his motions lack their usual liquid grace, Heir chalks it up to the fact that Hemogoblin is still nominally recovering from pretty severe injuries - and, okay, might be a little out of practice from almost a week of convalescence. But the fact is, he's smooth enough to avoid every swipe of the Scratch's forkkind, even without the benefit of darkness to obscure him, and that takes real talent.
It's also obviously a delaying tactic to keep the Scratch occupied, and the moment Heir lurches to his feet, his head still buzzing with a weird afternote of dissonance, the Scratch girl demonstrates that she's not as distracted as Hemogoblin might like by breaking off her next strike to focus on both of them at once, her lip curling again. Her disdain is clear, and unlike Heir, now reeling a little as he struggles to collect himself, and Hemogoblin, stiff and lacking his usual smirk as he lands in a crouch, she has the advantage of being at the peak of health and physical fitness. Maybe it's two against one, but the odds don't reassure Heir the way he'd like.

Seriously. There are so many things wrong with this picture.

"Aauugh," Heir says, hefting Casey over his shoulder. He has to shove through the sharp twinge in his head to do it, but Hemogoblin meets his eye from the other side of the Scratch and Heir makes a face at him, even more aware this time of the lopsided look of his goggles with the single lens missing. "Lame. This is so lame."

"Haha. Really tickling my absurdity palate over here, Heir," the troll replies, rolling his eyes. "We're totally getting our butts kicked."

"No, really? I hadn't noticed."

The curl at the corner of the Scratch's mouth ticks down a fraction. Their lack of action is clearly not on her agenda.

Well, sucks to suck, basically, because Heir wants the opposite of her agenda. Whatever it may be. He shrugs, and the hammer shifts with the curve of his shoulder. "So, you gonna be alright if we stop being lame? We have a reputation to maintain, y'know! Think you can keep up?"

Hemogoblin's eyebrow achieves liftoff. "Can you?" he drawls, one fist resting on his hip as he tests more of his weight on one leg than the other. "See, this is why humans need to fucking reconsider their evolution choices - maybe if you pile of irresponsible fucknuts all got your shit together at some point throughout the continuum of your existence, you'd have horns to protect your fragile nugbone instead of wandering around waiting for someone to crack it open like an egg."

And this - this banter sets Heir at ease. He's used to thinking of Hemogoblin as a mysterious entity of the night, not Karkat, his best friend, but now that same cocky attitude that Hemogoblin uses to differentiate himself from his everyday identity seems to have started breaking out into spontaneous bursts of Karkat-style insults. It filters through the worst of Heir's headache like a cool breeze.

Sure, he's still not sure in what way he finds the whole thing attractive, flushed or pale, because he's still not ready to admit to Karkat that might be an issue. But by the time the Scratch loses patience with their banter, Heir can feel his grin growing into something more genuine, his head settling back into normalcy as he swipes half-heartedly at the next trickle of blood leaking down his temple before it can drip into his eye.

"Alright then," he says cheerily. "Let's get started!"

And the Scratch kid launches her forkkind at his face.

He flings himself to the side hastily, the memory of getting his head and eye bust open still fresh in his mind. But then, in quick succession, the Scratch keeps the forkkind extended and spins in a circle, sending Hemogoblin diving for cover and whirling all the way around to strike again at the back of Heir's head. She's not at all stymied by the logistics of fighting two people at once - if Hemogoblin cartwheels out of the path of one blow, the Scratch smoothly channels the force into
another swing at Heir, occasionally resorting to kicks with drill-like precision that force one hero to retreat while the other takes the full brunt of her intense focus.

Soon they're over the grass instead of the stone, slowly driven toward the street as Hemogoblin concedes ground. Heir can block the Scratch girl's fork with Casey and, rarely, retaliate. But when Hemogoblin catches one blow on a sickle, the sharp blade shatters under the force, retracting back into the troll's wrist as a ribbon of bright red blood, and from that moment on Hemogoblin knows better than to try and hold his ground. Instead, the troll does everything possibly to dart in whenever the Scratch turns her back for even the briefest moment, dropping low on the water-slicked grass to sweep out kicks aimed for her heels and the backs of her knees. Almost less than an afterthought, Heir can hear more sirens - backup for the police the Scratch girl took down, and hopefully an ambulance for some of them - but he thinks if he lets himself be distracted again for any reason either he or Hemogoblin are gonna be hit in a way they won't come back up from.

It's not even that the Scratch is that much faster or stronger than him. It's that she's coldly, brutally competent, proficient with wielding her specibus to its maximum capacity in close proximity, and the more they fight, the more she adapts to their tricks. When Heir batters at her hands with the wind to try and rip the weapon from her grasp, she tightens her grip and stabs with a purpose until his concentration is broken; when Hemogoblin takes advantage of her distraction to slice at the cords of her Achilles tendon, she stabs the forkkind down into the earth so fast Hemogoblin barely moves his hand in time so that his wrist is caught between the tines rather than being impaled. Heir lets out a wordless shout of warning, but Hemogoblin looks up, sees the foot coming at his face, and flattens himself to the ground. Her mouth a thin line, the Scratch jams the forkkind further into the ground with all her weight and then rounds on Heir, using the long pole of her specibus as a brace to launch herself up and land a flying side kick across his cheek.

Hemogoblin lets out a choked, barely swallowed yelp as Heir slides backward in the grass and the fork crunches down harder over the thin bones of his wrist. Black splotches flaring across his vision, Heir feels more than sees that the Scratch kid could easily just twist and with enough force Hemogoblin's wrist would snap, and so instead of letting the wind waft him back to recover from the renewed wash of pain in his skull, Heir wrenches himself forward against the breeze's silent protests, tackling the Scratch around the waist.

It's kind of a stupid move. But look, stupid has worked before, right? And if nothing else, it seems to be so stupid that even the Scratch girl is taken by surprise, the breath driven out of her with a faint 'oof!' between her clenched teeth as Heir knocks her back a step. He considers picking her up and flying, but the last time he pulled something like that and threatened to drop someone to end the fight, that someone had been Diamonds Droog and look how well that worked out for him. Instead, he focuses on pulling her down and away, the winds momentarily rising to a shrieking pitch in his ears until he hears, with a rumble of soil shifting, the forkkind still clamped in her hand being pulled sideways as well. Hemogoblin rolls out of the way at once, holding his arm gingerly but his wrist still whole. Of course, in the moment Heir spends to check on the troll, the Scratch snarls wordlessly and brings her elbow down against her shoulder. Her knee, when it comes up for what would probably have been a mortal blow to his groin, sparing him only because he's kind of hugging her stomach and the angle is off. His chest takes the blow instead, which isn't much better, except on so many levels it kind of is -

And then, just as abruptly, Heir finds himself kicked to the side and the Scratch, previously so stolidly tight-lipped, whirs away from both him and Hemogoblin to growl, "RL-2408, you will desist from your perfidious actions this instant." A beat, in which Heir pulls himself off the ground and exchanges bewildered looks with an equally baffled, blinking Hemogoblin to his left, and then, carrying but not quite loud enough to be called a shout: "Where in the blue blazes do you think you are going?"
Literally what is happening. Heir looks around, surveying the total mess he and the Scratch have made of the poor unfortunate fountain area - that police car in particular makes him wince, because the dent it's left in the metal of the fountain broke a few of the fountain jets and now there's a spreading, shallow pool flooding parts of the mall where the broken stone prevents drainage. If they hadn't moved to the grass, they'd all have started slipping at the worst moments, he bets -

Where is Rose.

Where the hell is Rose?

John's heart lurches like he's missed a step on a stairway, jolting his entire chest with a tense burst of nausea as he realizes the other Scratch girl is nowhere to be seen, too. Hemogoblin catches sight of them first, though, reaching out and shaking John's shoulder. John doesn't know if Karkat even realizes how badly he needs it; the motion rattles him loose from a suddenly burgeoning panic attack, and he follows the pointing claw to the far street, where John spots a black-clad figure picking her way between deserted police vehicles at a run, something gold and orange cradled in her arms. "Ro-" he starts to shout before closing his mouth hard enough to make his teeth clatter against one another, before he can yell Rose's name in public. The claws on his shoulder dig in, a grounding prickle of nails through his jacket, and John reels himself back in with several pained gulps of air, sorting his mind out again.

"You treacherous shucks busters," the Scratch roars, and it startles Heir again because this it's definitely a shout and she is most definitely pissed.

Even if, uh. Okay. He has absolutely no idea what a shucks buster is. The vocabulary section of his brain makes a good faith effort and then shrugs mentally, as though to say not my problem, which is bullshit because it's totally supposed to be on top of things like translating random shouts of villainous outrage into regular English. He just keeps coming up blank.

Then - "Shii," Hemogoblin swears - Heir realizes that the Scratch has stopped paying attention to them entirely and is instead taking a deliberate step in the direction of the other girl and Rose's sudden joint abscond. Hemogoblin jumps on the Scratch from behind before Heir finishes registering the fact that what they just heard was their Scratch apparently flipping her shit at Rose's opponent...going rogue or something? Either way, their Scratch seems momentarily more focused on chasing down her teammate for some perceived betrayal and that's all the opening Hemogoblin needs to grab her in a headlock, his legs hooking around under her ribs to squeeze for leverage. Her chin jerks down against her chest reflexively to prevent him from choking her out and her free arm comes back to claw at the base of Hemogoblin's crimson false horns. Usually, that's a pretty solid way to break out of a submission hold when fighting a troll, because the base of their horns are pretty sensitive, and where the horn goes, the head and the rest of their body generally try to follow, to avoid pain.

All she succeeds in doing is yanking the horn prosthetic out of whatever Hemogoblin uses to secure it into place. When she realizes her effort has been wasted she twists her head to the side and lifts her forkkind in her other hand, attempting to twist it into the right angle to stab for Hemogoblin's side, that free hand clawing at Hemogoblin's hair and hood for a handhold.

Heir isn't entirely aware he's decided to move until he already has, dropping Casey in a split-second decision - there's no way he'll risk swinging her when Hemogoblin's in such close quarters - and kicking instead to knock the specibus off course. But she still won't let go of it, and as she finally tears her eyes away from the other Scratch's retreating back - and from Rose - Heir realizes that she'd probably keep ahold of her specibus even if they succeed in KOing her. It's the surly strength of resolve in her expression that tips him off.
Something in the realization makes his stomach list and pitch like the deck of a ship, and he thinks, without really knowing when he made the mental leap, that this girl is a weapon and cold, efficient fury, and nothing more. She's been pared down to the barest bones and once she dispatches the two of them, she'll go after her teammate without the slightest moment of hesitation with the same vicious purpose.

What could turn someone into an empty shell like this? Heir is used to swapping between personas when he flips from civilian to hero life, but if there's some kind of equivalent for the Scratch girl...hm. She's switched into villain mode, and in the place where her regular personality should be there's just this person-shaped space, full of sharp edges and cold purpose.

It's terrifying. Even Diamonds Droog felt like a person - a psychopath, yeah, but someone who had a life and motivations of her own, however horrific said motivations might be to Heir. These Scratches have emerged from nowhere with no explanation, no background, no source that Heir can pinpoint aside from their tenuous connection to Doc Scratch himself, and that's just not right.

"Keep on her!" Heir says to his partner, shaking himself out it and latching onto the Scratch's hand, awkwardly attempting to wrap himself around her arm and specibus both to stop her from moving. "Can you knock her out?"

"Trying!" Hemogoblin calls back exasperatedly. There is a single, convulsive shudder, and Heir feels the exact moment the Scratch regains her footing because she keeps her head down and ploughs into Heir, the forkkind trapped between the two of them. Heir realizes what she's doing when their feet tangle together in an impossible knot, her knees feeling like a pair of iron bars as they slam into his own and take them both to the ground. She falls on her back, a deliberate twist that means Hemogoblin hits the earth first with a pained gasp. Heir yanks free when the wind catches him, but neither of them will let go of the specibus, so he ends up drawing enough breezes into motion to lift the Scratch and Hemogoblin as well - anything to relieve the pressure and prevent Hemogoblin's uncertain ribs from breaking again - and pulling all three of them into the air, five feet above the ground. The girl's eyes narrow and her free hand gives up scrubbling at Hemogoblin's face to seize the back of his hood.

Heir doesn't always think through the implications of what his super human strength means, let alone how that strength could be used by someone else. But he kind of gets the idea when the Scratch yanks Hemogoblin over her head, peeling his arms away from her neck with only the strength of that single hand, and tries to fling him at Heir.

Which yeah, kind of works. She is strong. Heir drops the forkkind - drops the Scratch too, while he's at it, the wind flattening beneath her so that she drops five feet without a buffer - to catch Hemogoblin under the arms. "I'm fine, I'm fucking fine!" the troll is already saying by the time Heir stabilizes the two of them in midair, lifting his head to reveal multiple nail tracks raking down the grey skin of his cheek that have begun to seal off with thick scabs. The wind hovering them in place lifts the fringe of Hemogoblin's thick hair, sending it skimming over his forehead and blazing eyes. "Fuck! Throw me at her or something, she's running!"

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. Current sight is slightly more myopic. Like, probably around 20/200. Which is to say, it can hardly be considered a respectable standard for eyesight at all, can it?!

So Heir throws Hemogoblin.

Seriously. Hindsight.

Twenty-twenty.
The Scratch has only made it ten feet at a breakneck, determined pace in the precious moments Heir wasted catching Hemogoblin. Falling didn't even seem to knock the breath out of her - she's just up and running, legs pumping steadily as she angles for the side road the other Scratch has disappeared down.

Hemogoblin hits her - like, well, like a good-sized troll hitting a relatively unsuspecting human after being thrown at a very hastily judged angle. "I didn't mean it literally, for fuck's sake!" the troll howls, scrambling frantically for a claw- or foothold as the Scratch girl staggers under the impact but keeps charging along, rounding the curve of the stone floor of the fountain and sticking to the edge of the grassy turf as she goes.

"I'm sorry!" Heir yells back, clapping his hands to his cheeks, which feel like they've been set on fire. Oh my god. How does he always end up making himself look so dumb in front of Hemogoblin when it's just Karkat?! Why would he throw Karkat? Why would he throw anyone at all?!

His brain provides nothing by way of explanation. He doesn't think there is one.

"Just get down here and help me, you brainless wonder!" Hemogoblin skids along the grass, one claw still latched onto the Scratch's shoulder, only for her to try to shrug him off, all his efforts to dig his heels in useless.

"Ack! Right!" Heir can smack himself mentally about this later - right now, there's still a fight going on, even if the villain who started it has apparently lost interest in anything but dealing with her traitorous teammate at the moment. He zooms around with the wind ferrying him along and half falls, half lands at a run to tackle the Scratch from the side. Casey still lies on the ground a ways back, and he wonders if he should use to wind to lift the hammerkind back into his hand, because that would be so sweet, a total Thor moment, why has he never thought of this before? So many missed opportunities.

But there's no time for it; the Scratch brakes suddenly, her free hand shooting out to try to punch him in the face, and then she seizes Hemogoblin by the arm and pivots hard, throwing the troll over her hip before he can so much as blink. The troll lands lopsidedly, the weight of his now-mismatched horns clearly throwing him off, but stands up on Heir's right looking none the worse for the wear. The marks down his face have already sealed off without scarring, though he looks odd with one red horn curving around in front of him and the pale nub of the other barely visible in the mess of his hair. "What is this, the celebrated annual 'toss the troll around like he's bag of lusus leavings' contest?" he demands, rolling one of his shoulders and wincing as the joint complains with a pop. "Because I need advance notice about this kind of thing!"

"So not a contest, I got way more air than she did -"

"You stop that right now -"

"Unreal air."

Hemogoblin is outraged. "No."

"ENOUGH!"

The two of them flinch at the sudden shout. The Scratch girl stamps her foot with annoyance; her forkkind creaks loudly, and Heir is alarmed to see that the bright red metal has started to warp and bend under her closed fist. Gosh, is she strong!

"My tolerance for this insipid drivel," the Scratch says, seething, "started at zero. It has since declined
at a pace comparable to a fighter jet aiming itself at the ground and gunning the engine. First, I will
put you two chuckleheads down, and then I will deal with my backstabbing excuse for a best friend "
"Best friend," Hemogoblin repeats flatly.
"- and DS-2409, curse his conspiring, disloyal soul."
"Why do I feel like we're missing so much context for this?" Heir wonders in a whisper.
Hemogoblin must be in a philosophical mood. "When the fuck are we not?"
"Figures."
Then the Scratch kid makes good on her promise, stabbing at Hemogoblin's legs with a deft jab. Her
weapon kinks halfway along the grip but the defect doesn't seem to slow her down for a moment;
when Hemogoblin jumps back she hooks the back of the fork's head around his heel and yanks, so
that the troll has to catch himself awkwardly on one arm before he can set his foot back under him.
He pushes out of the way of her next swing but only just, and the forkkind clips him so that he has to
tumble away again.
Then she flips the forkkind so the bend in the metal angles towards Heir and it comes flying at his
face. Watching her hands to try to read which way she intends to swing the specibus is no longer a
reliable way to predict her next attack and Heir still doesn't have Casey. He ducks instead, and that's
a mistake - even as he drops to the ground the Scratch barrels him over, using all her weight to shove
him off-balance and whipping the angled forkkind across his throat. Then in one smooth motion she
slings herself behind him, both hands yanking back on the pole, and she has him in a chokehold, the
metal bar crushing down on his trachea with punishing force. Heir shoves his left hand up into the
diminishing gap between the side of his neck and the pole, but she redoubles her grip on the
specibus, yanking him back, and he can't push it up and off without more leverage. He can't breathe
and how dare she, how dare she, the wind seems to be screaming in his ears, and there's a white hot
moment of fury before he just dissolves.
He can't blank it out. He thinks his brain would explode from the pain, if he weren't totally
incorporeal at the moment. Something twist and judders and laughs at him when he shoves it back
down into the back of his mind, a high-pitched giggle strung thin like sentimental candy-floss, which
is a really weird phrase for John to think, how really, really weird, and under it all, thrumming
through the vise clamped around him to keep him still, is the klaxonic, agonizing foghorn of the
[ɯɯɯɯɯɯɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹooooooooʇʇʇʇʇʇʇʇʇ] that keeps the sky still and lets him forget the worst
memory of them all.
What was it again?
The voice is still giggling like it knows the punchline to perfectly awful joke, and when he
remembers, with a start, that Karkat is still fighting on alone, there is a panicked moment where
John isn't sure if it's him pulling the Breeze back together into a human form or Heir's body becomes tangible again with a pop! of displaced air, and please God let him not have
teleported to Texas, please let that not have been the default setting on his incredible dumb windy
powers, holy crap He's not in Texas. It's a little harder to guess how long he's been floating around as a wind-powered
ghost, but when Heir wheels around he can see the Needle in the distance - maybe a little closer now
than it was before, since he's over forty feet in the air and showing no signs of losing altitude. The


last thing he remembers seeing before his stupid rage-porting kicked in again was the dizzying, cloud-strangled sky, framed by the branches of the trees that line the road, and he supposes his instincts must have just launched him skyward out of self-defense. He looks below his feet and for a moment the people fighting on the ground seem absolutely tiny. He must have been bodiless longer than he thought, because Hemogoblin and the Scratch girl have fought their way right over the lawn and into the middle of the road, pushed ever further in the direction the other Scratch took off towards. Even as Heir watches, taking stock of the situation with growing alarm, Hemogoblin rolls to the side and rips open the driver's side door of an abandoned police car so that the Scratch girl's punch smashes through bullet-proof glass instead of through the troll's head.

Heir drops. The only thought left in his brain is *I shouldn't have left him alone*, but there'll be time for guilt later. He aims to land a kick right on top of the Scratch kid's head but at the last moment the rush of the wind must give him away; she brings the forkkind up and he lands on that instead - and bounces off again right away, the wind scooping him up in what it must think is a helpful fashion.

Heir isn't sure if helpful is the right word for it. Worrying, maybe, because he didn't even have to reach out with his power and ask for the wind to do that. His power feels like it's teetering on a hair-trigger, verging on another complete loss of control, and then for all he knows it'll catapult him to, like, Siberia or something and he won't be able to figure out how to come back. Not good. Not good at all.

"Heir!" Hemogoblin calls, and he's not imagining the relief in the troll's voice.

"Sorry." Heir forces himself down to the ground. Even that much is a struggle, the soles of his shoes barely skimming the surface of the road before the wind sends him skimming again. "I'm back!"

"Good!" Before Hemogoblin can say more, the Scratch kid settles on her next target after a moment of cold deliberation, lunging for Heir again. He doesn't so much as dodge as leap six feet straight up into the air because *dammit*, the wind is overreacting massively. When he comes to rest on the overturned police car a couple yards away the Scratch is charging after him - then, suddenly, she trips, forkkind clattering on the pavement beneath one hand as she catches herself and yanks on her foot with a silent snarl of impatience. There's a weird hook of dull red wrapped around her ankle that, even as Heir watches in bewilderment, loses coherency and collapses back into a thin stream of blood.

"Because that's a fucking lot easier when you're around, dumbass!" Hemogoblin snaps. He's kneeling on the ground behind the car door and the blood trickles back to his palm splayed out on the road, flowing back into his wrist until all that remains is enough to reshape into a sicklekind.

Heir can only stare, thrown. Because - "Is that even sanitary?"

Hemogoblin slaps his own face. Thankfully, not with the hand that has the sickle. Heir jumps down from the roof of the car - okay, floats gently downward at a cautious pace makes *him* want to facepalm. By the time he has solid ground under his feet the Scratch has righted herself and -

Okay. This still isn't working. Because she rights herself, and Heir gets a good look at her face. Despite everything they've thrown at her, she's not even breathing hard when he reaches out with his senses for it, allowing nothing more than a faint huff of disdain to escape her nose before she settles back into the same steady, measured breaths she's had from the start. She raises her forkkind to parry Hemogoblin's sickle, and she's just as fast and strong as ever, shattering the solidified blood almost faster than Hemogoblin can reform it on the fly. In the aftermath of that surprise teleport Heir feels disconnected and not at all in proper control of his powers, and across from him Hemogoblin has no visible cuts, but more of his uniform sports tears and gashes, evidence that he's taken more hits while Heir wasn't there to help divide the Scratch's attention.
Heir's not feeling it yet, but Hemogoblin could start flagging at any moment depending on how much his ribs are tested. Even if he called Casey back to him, the hammerkind hasn't helped much to even the odds yet. They need to wrap this up fast, because god only knows what was happening with Rose before the other Scratch basically kidnapped her - the more time they waste trying to whittle down this girl's seemingly insurmountable stamina, the more Heir frets over the fact that Rose could be going grimdark, or something could happen to Jade or Dave, both of whom are still out of sight, and -

"I'm gonna try something new!" he says, grunting between dodges.

"Are you asking permission?!" The Scratch girl raises her foot and Hemogoblin doesn't move fast enough; she knocks him back hard and he lands hard on the hood of a red car parked across the street, spitting up blood that he swallows back down with a grimace. "Because permission fucking granted!" Hemogoblin screeches, swinging his feet under himself and jumping off the car with two sickles raised to slash down at the Scratch from above.

Great! So - what to do?

Heir's mind draws a blank.

Crap. He hasn't thought this through. Heir glances around frantically, waiting for inspiration to hit him, sending gales of wind to deflect the Scratch again and again from afar, blowing her hair into her face and wincing when she just fights on blindly and manages to spear the door of the red car and tear it off the car to fling at Hemogoblin.

…Wait.

Oh no. Ohhh no.

This is a terrible idea. Heir is pretty darn sure literally everyone - even Jade - would agree that this is a shitty idea. It doesn’t even qualify as ‘something new,’ which is pretty lame.

But oh crap, he's going through with it.

He's pretty sure he could survive it. It would hurt, but he would live, and he's banking on the theory that the Scratch girl can take pretty much anything Heir could and keep on fighting. So he sends tendrils of the wind out, and lifts. It's easier than he expects - so the sudden rush of uncontrolled air can work in his favor, good to know - but he finds himself unconsciously lifting his hands as though to carry a heavy burden, the gesture helping him to focus as he silently asks the wind to carry it over. There's a telltale shadow cast on the ground, weirdly shaped and very obvious as it ripples over the grass and then the street, but the Scratch doesn't think to look back toward the fountain or at the ground. Plus, the weather is cloudy enough today that the shadow isn't too obvious once Heir has his new weapon lined up and ready to drop.

He can't warn Hemogoblin, though, not aloud - he'll just give the plan away to the Scratch if he does.

Breathe in -

Heir lets the battered police car drop.

Breathe out -

He reaches for Hemogoblin and the desperate need rips Heir apart.

Breathe out -
And he's behind Hemogoblin with a burst of air, wrapping his arms around the troll from behind and wrenching them both away into intangibility. They land on the grass again when the wind lets them go at last, much more quickly than it did when it was only Heir being unraveled and raveled again. Their ears are solid again just in time for Heir to hear an audibly vexed exclamation as two tons of metal meets one very indignant villainess.

Heir counts to thirty, his senses trained to a breaking point on the Scratch girl's breathing.

It doesn't stop - it falters, and then becomes slow as she passes into what he suspects is unconsciousness, but it never once stops. She's still alive. Thank god.

He waits for the uproarious applause. Sadly, there is none.

Around that moment, he remembers he's once again pinning Hemogoblin to the ground, his body huddled over the troll with tension rattling through him so strongly that the fear leaves him breathless when he comes down from the disconnecting high of teleportation. If the wind hadn't listened, or if he'd been even a second slower grabbing Karkat - John gulps, lets his forehead tip forward to press against Karkat's with that last fake horn needling at the side of his head, and then flops over to the side, the bright cut of terror shaking its way out of his limbs in what he hopes he can pass off as adrenaline jitters.

"You dropped a car on her," Hemogoblin says between huge gulps of air, his eye twitching a little as he turns his head away from the spectacle to stare at Heir. "A police car."

"Not a police car. The police car." Heir shrugs, feeling grass shift under his shoulders as he corrects the troll. "Turnabout is fair play?"

But it's too late. The logic circuits have started firing in Hemogoblin's brain, and they latch onto the obvious immediately. "For fuck's sake, you could just drop cars on people on the damn time! Why do you even bother fighting people?!"

"Most people can't survive a car to the head like she's doing," Heir points out. "Plus, throwing a car at someone isn't the first thing you think to do with wind powers, okay? It's so not a thing."

"Uh, yeah, actually, that should be literally the second thing you think to do with it! Right after you fly around the city singing Disney songs like a moron, which I have no doubt you already have covered!" And yeah, that's Karkat. Hemogoblin has fallen away, and Karkat throws his hands up to claw at the sky beseechingly. "Troll Jesus, preserve me from a moirail with absolutely zero common sense."

Okay. He's right about the Disney song thing. But that's still not the point here. "Look, I try not to use the windy thing that much, okay!" John says, not really arguing, because it's hard to get mad at Karkat when he probably has a point, just – just repeating his own justifications, the ones his dad has made sure he’s got memorized. For the record. "It feels...wrong, like cheating or something! My dad always says to keep it to the minimum, even on the job, or else I'll start relying on it too much. And I could hurt someone unintentionally so, so easily."

Karkat sighs and nods afterward, conceding the point. "Okay. Fine." His brow furrows, and he turns to glare at John accusingly. "You have done the Disney thing, haven't you."

Damn. "Yyyyyeeeaah."

Karkat closes his eyes, kneads at his forehead with the heel of his palm, and shakes his head before sitting up, curling one knee to rest his arm on as he wearily looks over at the pinned Scratch. "Her
heart's still going. Come on, we have to do something, because I'm pretty fucking sure zipties are not going to work on her."

"Heck, she wouldn't even need a bomb to break out of prison," John agrees. His legs support him when he stands, but only just, and probably only because the wind is there, a silent soothing support that gently nudges him back upright when he nearly topples over. He holds out a hand and Karkat helps himself up. "Let's just...get her back to my dad." He then starts digging through the pockets of his uniform. "How many zipties did you say you had?"

"I didn't."

Levering the police car off the Scratch girl requires, somehow, more effort than lifting it in the first place had - which is totally not fair. John is quietly disturbed to see that his earlier guess was correct: even when Karkat presses a cautious claw to her pulse and pulls back her eyelid to confirm that she's down for the count, the girl's hand remains clasped around her strife specibus with a white-knuckled grip. By silent mutual accord, neither of the heroes tries to pry it out of her fingers - John can't think of any action more likely to provoke her into waking up to start bashing at them again - and instead just ziptie her wrists together with a ten-ziptie rainbow of plastic cords with the forkkind leaning against her chest.

Surprisingly (or maybe not) the black leather along her arms and palms has been scraped raw and Heir realizes that she probably tried to catch the car before it knocked her down. In fact, her head wound is in entirely the wrong place, a ragged cut along the shaved portion of her undercut at the base of her skull rather than on top or on her forehead. The car might have knocked her to the ground, but it was hitting the ground that must have jostled her enough to render her unconscious.

…Scary. She's scary, so scary - for a moment it dazes John. But then Karkat finishes ziptying her ankles together with great effort, and nods to John, and he has to snap out of it to gesture with one hand for the wind to lift the Scratch girl into the air. He doesn't dare teleport after all this; they jog instead, following an old path that Karkat finds more familiar than John does because he's lived closer to this part of the city for more of his life. By the time they round the side of a children's museum, John remembers how to make his mouth work, and he compliments Karkat on the slick move (Karkat almost roars his outrage at the heavens, but somehow resists the urge with what he calls great force of will) that he used to trip the Scratch girl up.

The troll preens at the praise, but he rolls his eyes to make it less obvious. "I can be taught, even if the teacher is some kind of insane alien serial killer," he grumps, folding his arms. John wishes it was harder to figure out who Karkat is referring to but it's Spades. Yeah. No question. "No more fighting alone, for fucking starters - apparently that's the worst possible thing I could do. And I've always been meaning to branch out with the blood thing, figure out different ways to use it. I just… I don't even fucking know, I got distracted from training by little things like nearly dying."

"Understandable," John agrees, perfectly solemn.

Karkat scowls at him anyway, and punches him in the arm as they start across the green around the Needle, the Scratch floating along behind them. "Whatever. There's your dad, thank fuck."

"You are okay, right?" John asks, anxious again. "I'm sorry about vanishing like that, I'm still not good at the teleporting thing -"  

Karkat's pap cuts him off mid-apology, a firm hand that presses to the side of John's face. "Shoosh. Don't make me get all conciliatory and obvious when we're still in uniform, dork," Karkat commands, his tone fond. "I'm fine. Which obviously means we can bid the dicklord a hearty farewell and ship him back to his squad in Houston."
John feels the blood drain from his face. "...Don't call Dave that to his face," he says weakly. "I can't tell if he'd be insulted or if he'd make it his new official hero name."

"...Fuck."

"Heir, Hemogoblin," Samuel says as they approach. His hat shadows his forehead, pulled low to obscure his face from any news crews that might be wandering around trying to get a piece of the action, no doubt. Both the driver's side door and one of the backseat doors are hanging open, all sets of lights blinking an alarm, and both license plates concealed by tactful panels of blank white metal, but it's not like anyone is driving around the area today to see them. "You two were successful in tackling one of these Scratches, then?"

"Yeah, hopefully she's down for the count," John says, grimacing as he checks the floating Scratch girl's eye again. Still unconscious, for now. Then his other concern overrides any potential for a quick field debrief. "Dad, did you see a girl in black and pink run by here? With Rose? Only they took off in this direction, and our Scratch seemed to think she was betraying her or something, but she had Rose and we couldn't stop her."

"They are here," his dad interrupts, smiling. "They are quite safe, my boy. We are unfortunately in the dark as to the current status of Flashstep, the Sylph, and Miss Sharpshooter, but Miss Ranger has declared her intent to defect from the Scratches, and escorted Seer here."

And John notices the two people breathing in the back seat of the car at the same time one of them shifts, and a familiar head of blonde hair raises up from a slump. "Oh, excellent," Rose says blearily, peering at them from the far corner of the backseat. "You have obtained your own specimen."

John almost drops the dark-haired Scratch girl in his relief. He jogs to the side of the car, searching Rose's face keenly and scanning her arm. Her flesh is a sickly, pallid grey a few shades lighter than Karkat's, but - "No tentacles?"

"Not at the moment. Our ally has thoughtfully demonstrated her dedication to our new association by assisting me in resisting the incursion."

"Thas me!" Shifting a little, the blonde Scratch girl from earlier looks out at them as well, her smile uncertain and her pink eyes widening with awe as she takes in the sight before her. Her hand and Rose's are intertwined for some reason, and John blinks in incomprehension because - just, why? "Oh, wow! You said they could take on Janey 'n you were right! Holy cripes!"

That's when John realizes her eyes aren't covered. The Scratch's face is exposed with no evident concern for keeping her features a secret, and what he sees is -

Karkat takes an extra five seconds or so, but that's probably because he doesn't have the advantage of years of experience that John and Samuel have, here. "What the fuck?" Karkat says - and John can't really blame him.

The girl scratches at the her hair and waves, eyes darting back and forth from each of their faces. "Heyyy, I'm Roxy. Uh. I am surrendered. We can has peace?"

And the eye color is wrong, yeah, but the rest...there's no mistaking it.

John whips around to look at his dad, desperate for some kind of reassurance that he's not crazy, here. Samuel's smile fades a little at John’s silent inquiry and he nods. "You see it, too?" Samuel says, and John stares some more.

"Wha? What'zit?" Roxy asks loudly when neither he nor Karkat seem to be able to come up with a
coherent response. She wipes at her cheek with her sleeve. "Is there sumthin' on my face? Uh. Is Janey really out? Do you think you should check again?"

"Oh, slap me with a wet bag of dog shit," Karkat breathes, shaking his head. "This has got to be some kind of sick, sick joke."

John doesn't see how it could be, unless Karkat is actually right and the universe runs with an engine powered by their tears of disbelief. Because this strange girl Roxy might be ragged, streaked with blood and sweat, and on the verge of collapse, but there's no mistaking that her face is that of a much, much younger Rue Lalonde. If Rose is in any shape to notice, she's not showing any sign of doing so.

…John thinks he's getting a headache. Or maybe that's just his head wound making itself known again. He can't tell. "I need to sit," he announces, and gestures for the wind to keep supporting the Scratch girl - Janey? - as he sits heavily on the grass, trying to process the face of his oldest friend's mother mysteriously repeating itself on a member of a villainous gang. How does something like that even happen?

Karkat sits down beside him with a little more grace, and mutely shakes his head as he leans along John's side, a coil of warmth. "What the fuck do we do, now?" he asks, and John can't tell if he means the question in an immediate 'how do we deal with two villains in our vigilante custody' way or in a more existential 'what the actual fuck' kind of way. Knowing Karkat, it's probably both.

Samuel takes him at his most literal. "Now? Now, we hope that young Miss Sharpshooter returns safely," he says with a sigh. "Because young Seer requires her mother's attention as soon as we can arrange for it. I've called ahead, but there's nothing Rue can do from the lab. We must go to her."

"Sharpshooter is still the most expedient method of travel, even if she can't take us all the way into the void wards," Rose adds, leaning her head against the back of the seat in front of her and summoning up a faint smile that John returns. "And here we find ourselves yet again, old friend. Has the bittersweet taste of déjà vu caught you in her wily coils, yet?"

"S'okay, Rose," John says, any concern for their identities completely forgotten. "We'll get you better. Don't worry."

Karkat shifts and one of his hands creeps up, inspecting the edges of the graze along the side of John's head gently enough that John can hardly feel it. Here, next to the comforting white of the family car, it feels like they're sheltered from the press of the outside world. He wishes badly that the rest of them were here, but he doesn't want to risk the Scratch girl waking up, either here near Rose and Samuel or back out in the middle of a fight against another Scratch. All he can do is keep Janey floating where she can't hurt anyone even if she does regain consciousness.

And so they set in to wait for the others.

- 

"…Shit."

"What?"

"I forgot Casey!"

"Oh, right. Fuck. Back at the fountain?"

"Yup." John clenches his fist. "There's only one solution."
Karkat grins toothily. Because Karkat is a *nerd*, and his brain might run on rage but he and John can still make the same mental leaps when it comes to comic book solutions to real world problems. It's probably a moirail thing. "Mjölnir?"

"Heck yes."

(It totally works.)

The night previous…

They're trying to cut back on their use of Pesterchum, on account of Kanaya's Canadian friend blowing up at them about being security risks. The Lalonde house has even more hidden rooms and hallways to explore than John's, but for some reason it feels like they don't need to message each other to make up for it.

So he doesn't know what keeps him awake, or what draws him down the hall, past the creepy window where Doctor Lalonde used to sit in the shadows and drink martinis, lying in wait for Rose to sneak by when John stayed over for the night. At John's house, his dad always made sure they were in bed and asleep by a regular bedtime, like clockwork; sleeping over at Rose's was always an adventure, crawling through dark wizard-bestrewn halls, stacking books and hanging blankets over them to build forts, and daring each other to crawl out onto the widow's walk that ringed the observatory to hang over the railing and breathe the night air. Rue indulgently let them run wild, or maybe Rose just shrugged off the rules like she did everything else her mother said, petulant and bitterly sarcastic whenever she thought she could get away with it, which was often. John always knew her relationship with her mom wasn't the best; he could never have imagined it would deteriorate as far as it did in later years, remembering those times when he slumped over in the middle of some game and woke up with blankets tucked in around him.

Rose, he supposes, never really slept. She would have needed to go meditate the moment John fell asleep, maintaining her own secrets. Or maybe the Horrorterrors weren't as deep in her head right then - it's not something they've had time to talk about.

She's not sleeping now, either. He paused outside her room, and felt only Kanaya's breathing; when he hesitantly knocked and peeked inside at a murmured "Come in," he saw the troll lounging on the bed against the wall, looking up from a fold of green fabric to politely meet John's eyes with a questioning look. "She needed time to herself," is the answer he gets. "There's no alcohol in the building. If you see her before I do, inform her that I require her for costume alterations."

John nods, hesitant, because Kanaya is kind of really cool? Not dumb ironic cool, like Dave is always pretending to be when really he's a total dork, but...sophisticated. But then she'll say something off-beat, something that's absolutely backhandedly hilarious, and John gets the feeling that maybe, like Rose, Kanaya is a practitioner of Advanced Snarky Broad brand dorkiness, so at least half of it is going over his head. "Thanks," he says, clearing his throat. "Uh. Night?"

"It is indeed," she observes dryly. He closes the door before he can walk into another one like that, and then, after a moment of consideration, makes his way down the hall to the observatory. It's one of the rare rooms that has been cleared out right down to the floorboards, the cupboards that were always locked hanging open and empty as John tiptoes through the dark, circular room. He can sense everyone else breathing below his feet - and Becquerel does *not* breathe, at least not regularly, he has confirmed, so he can only assume that the wolf-thing is still around. Dave is also awake, he thinks, pacing in the room he's claimed as his own, and Karkat's breathing is submerged in sopor slime so that John has to swallow around a faint, phantom echo in his own throat.
But there's definitely one pair of lungs working outside the mansion, soft and familiar, almost as familiar as his dad's breathing patterns. Rose got older and sadder, but hey, so did John, so they're probably even. John crouches by the low door out onto the widow's walk and turns the handle. It's only about four feet tall, and used to seem just the right size when they were younger, so he never questioned why Rue would have commissioned a house with such an oddly sized doorframe. He swings the door open and ducks through, stepping out into the still air. He calls up one of his own breezes, because the nights are starting to get warm and sticky with humidity, and this stillness isn't helping things one bit. It swarms around him, a spark of delight flaring in his mind, and he thinks he dad totally wouldn't approve of him using his power so obviously. But it's late enough and dark enough that one errant breeze, well above the roofs of most of the houses around them, won't be noticed, right?

"How cruel of you, John. You know that the summer humidity always makes me wilt, and now I learn that you could have eased my suffering all through our youth. How can our friendship recover from this?"

"Hey, I had to suffer too!" he protests, one hand on the wall as he walks around the curl of the walk, squinting through the dark. The cloud cover's too thick for the moon or the stars to shine through, so it's dark as heck out here. "Just another rule my dad set. No powers unless it's for training or for hero work! That's why swim team was such a relief - where else could I dump myself in cold water for hours and still have my dad sign off on it as exercise?"

A chuckle sounds a little further ahead, and John finally rounds the curve to see Rose. She doesn't wear dark clothes as much anymore - he thinks Kanaya has slowly but surely been reworking her wardrobe - but she's gussied up in a dark purple night gown, her hair loose from its usual headband and fluttering a little in the tail end of the breeze that John stirred up. It's longer than it was a few weeks ago, after New York, the ends brushing around her shoulders, and he wonders if she's going to cut it soon. She's leaning forward on the twined metal of the railing, one hand cupping a candle in a brass holder that doesn't fully account for the faint gleam of gold light on her forehead, but is probably meant to fool people at a distance.

"What do you see?" he asks when Rose hums to herself and the light brightens a little. He joins her at the railing, slinging one leg over the side and sitting on top of the metal rail so that both feet dangle over air. It's the kind of dumb thing he'd do on a dare as a kid, blithely confident in the knowledge that in a worst case scenario, the wind would never let him hit the ground.

For years now, he's kept the Breeze tamed as much as he can. That kind of instinctive defense mechanism seems almost unreal. The only time he allows the wind to catch him like that anymore is when he's on the job; he's not clumsy as a general rule, but when he does fall in public, he usually has to let it happen because there are witnesses around.

"I'm not sure," Rose replies, running a finger around the lip of the candle-holder thoughtfully. "Maybe nothing." She smiles at him briefly, and her grin turns teasing. "Mmmm. Your eyes are glowing, John. Might want to put them out before someone sees."

"Oh! Crap!" John claps a hand over his eyes - he hadn't even noticed them doing that! He lets the wind fall back into stillness and Rose makes a noise of protest, but only when he's tucked his powers back into dormancy does the faint blue glow on the inside of his cupped hand fade away. He's going to need to order new colored contacts soon if he keeps burning through them at this rate… "Better?" he asks.

"Dimmer." Rose blinks, and the faint impression of an eye on her forehead blinks away as well. "There. We shall be perfectly inconspicuous watchers of the night together."
John scuffs his bare foot along the side of a wrought iron post, and realizes, guiltily, that he might be interrupting Rose's meditation time or something. "Kanaya said you wanted to be alone - uh, I can leave, or -"

"Please, don't." When Rose shakes her head, her hair falls further into her face, and she doesn't fix it. "We've established that alone time isn't a smart thing for me to over-indulge in. Stay, John. We can gossip." Her tone takes a turn for the wry. "About the good and the bad."

"...You see something bad," he guesses. It's not so much a lucky guess as it is just kind of common sense, by this point. Bad things happen a lot. "Something bad in the future that we should...probably avoid?"

Rose cuts to the side with her free hand, a gesture neither dismissive nor conceding. "I can't see the future, precisely. I can see that some paths may be fortuitous, and some...less so. It's easier when I have some specific action in mind, so I can trace how future providence is affected." She hesitates, long enough that John opens his mouth to ask the same question in a different way, because he's still curious, and then continues. "Something's already in motion," she says, rubbing at her left temple. "Which worries me. It's been in motion for quite a while now, too - it's hard to tell what future events it will affect, simply because it affects so much."

He tries to wrap his head around it. "Something?"

Rose makes a noise of frustration. "I wish I could state it more sensibly than that, too. At some point in the past, someone did something, and the result of that action is coming to a head soon. But it happened too long ago, and now it's too diffuse for me to specify what. But it relates to all of us. Of this, I am certain."

Wow this explanation is...not explaining anything. Ugh. John rubs the back of his head. "That sounds like it sucks. And you can't tell if it's lucky or not, or who did it? Why is magic so weird?"

It startles a laugh out of Rose. "If I knew who had done it, I might have a better idea what they did," she admits, leaning to the side so she can set her unlit candle on the floor of the walk by her foot, and then straighten again. "Scrying, unfortunately, is one of the most unclear and unresearched of the thaumaturgic arts. Mindscapes, spell work, even necromancy - all of these have been investigated and systematized, to some degree. Even my mother, stickler for the scientific method that she is, acknowledges and employs thaumaturgic specialists as part of her research team." She shakes her head again. "But the future changes with every choice every person on the planet makes. I see only a tiny fraction of it, and most of the time it's impossible to pin down with any accuracy. All we can do is cast our roll of the dice and hope fortune favors the bold."

"That sounds really intense, Rose." John holds out for all of five seconds. "...I don't get it."

"It means free will is a pain in the ass, John. But we wouldn't get anywhere without it."

"Oh."

They stay quiet for a little while longer, long enough that John starts picking up on the faint sounds of insects from below, all the louder to his ears when he thinks to focus on the vibrations in the air. It's about time spring got started; at the rate things are going, he was worried it would be winter forever.

"Rose?" he asks quietly. "Are we going to be okay?"

"I don't know, John," she says. She sounds so tired. "I really don't know."
"You know nothing, Rose Lalonde?" he says solemnly, and she swats him on the arm for it.

"More than you, Jonathan. Stick to your comic books, young man."

He makes a face. "Hahah, very funny."

Rose rests her head on his shoulder, and after a moment of hesitation, he leans his head on top of hers, still staring out over the dark neighborhood before them. For a few minutes, at least, he can pretend they're still short enough to squeeze through that door, that Rose never left, that neither of them have spent the past few years messed up in the head on so many different levels.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too." Rose rests a hand against the side of his cheek. "Now go back down and go to sleep, John. We'll all still be here and well in the morning."

He smiles sheepishly even though she can't see it from here, because Rose always knows this stuff. Well. She doesn't know everything. But even if Rose isn't sure if they'll all be okay, John can be sure for her. It's the least he can do.

They're going to be okay.

He'll make sure of it.

---

The first thing Sharpshooter notices as she bounces them to the open air stadium is that the promised target range suffers from a single critical flaw.

Namely, it doesn't exist.

She spins in a circle as her sense of the space around her confirms that her eyes haven't failed her. There's nothing around but a couple of football nets - soccer, she remembers, which always made Grandpa shake his head -

And when she finishes the circle, rounding on Mr Booty, he levels a pistol at her face with a brilliant grin.

Oh. Oh crud! Sharpshooter scowls, stamps her foot in the turf, and bounces out into the middle of the blue stadium seating. The place feels large enough, with the space to seat ten thousand, at the least, but relatively deserted. Someone's wandering the perimeter (probably security), and a couple other bodies mill around in the building beneath the large scoreboard; no one's on the field itself or in the stands but the two of them. "Foul!" she shouts down at the field. In the meanwhile, she starts digging around through her sylladex, snapping her fingers whenever a gun comes to hand to dismiss it. Where is it, where is it... "Talk about being a jerk!"

"Pardon? Ah, right, we were going to have a ripsnorting good time playing target practice," the man sighs, flipping one of his pistols around his finger idly in a poor display of firearm safety. Then he scratches the back of his head with the butt of the other pistol, and Jade's inner gunkind enthusiast cringes. They're really nice looking pistols, too, dark and matte and sleek - nice enough that she wishes this guy wasn't gonna blow his own ear off with them, at the rate he's going. Who even taught this guy how to handle a specibus?! "Right! Well. I'm afraid I lied."

"I totally would not have noticed that by now," Sharpshooter replies, rolling her eyes and choosing a
tranq gun at the last moment. She also drags a police riot gun loaded with rubber baton rounds to the fore of the pocket dimension for easier access, on the off chance she needs to swap between weapons on the fly. She considers calling for Bec - but no. She can handle this lame butt just fine on her own. Bec's been tired and sluggish a lot, lately, and it needs its rest to recharge its batteries. She'll only whistle for it if there's a dire emergency.

Plus, she's a lot more wary about having Bec right at her side while on patrol, now. She can't help but remember how easily Droog was able to drop that power-dampening cage right on top of the two of them, preventing Bec from knocking over the cage or blasting it or anything like that. On the off chance this lame-o has something similar waiting in the wings, Sharpshooter would rather have Bec at a safe, discreet distance!

With that decided, she pushes out her focus further. There's a lot she might accidentally overlook if she's not careful. A sniper's not gonna be one of them, not again. Thus prepared, she tosses her hair back behind her shoulder and brings the tranq out of the specibus. It smacks into her palm as she activates the targeting magnifier on her goggles. At this range she probably won't need it. But better safe than sorry. Caution is the order of the day.

...Caution should probably not have included sidetracking into a fake duel with a Liar McLiaron. Oops. She seriously needs a better way to remember these things! Ack, John is gonna be so mad! "You're such a jerk!" she says, because it needs saying. "Heir's gonna use his stern look of brotherly disapproval on me!"

The Scratch kid -

Smirks.

"Not my problem!" he laughs, lightheartedly.

He's fast, Sharpshooter will give him that - she feels his arm move and since she's already on the alert, the light twitch of his finger on the trigger tips her off right away. But the pistolkind has already fired by the time she blinks out of the way, relocating herself just a few feet to the side. Before she can lift her own gun the Scratch fires again - fast, so fast, twice in rapid succession - then both guns at once, arms spaced out along her strafing line so that Sharpshooter has to veer backward, her feet skimming the tops of the bleachers. A few of the shots ricochet with high pitched whines, but most punch right through the aluminum of the benches and lodge in the raised concrete of the seats behind them.

Okay. So, he's taking this pretty seriously! But the more Sharpshooter considers the situation, the more she's pretty sure she needs to backtrack. Get back to the group and act like a responsible team player! Really, Bec and WV always make it look so easy - but Bec wouldn't ever want to ditch Sharpshooter midterm, and WV is...kinda sorta incapable of getting very far under his own power...

So! She'll just wrap this up quick! Sharpshooter backflips out of the way of the next shot, then pushes off the bleachers with her free hand and keeps moving up the slope of the stadium seating one row at a time instead of teleporting. Sure enough, the guy gets cocky and tries the two shots at once again, one of his eyes squinched up as he aims.

He pulls the triggers on what Sharpshooter is positive is the last shot for the left pistol, the second-to-last on the right, and Sharpshooter grins as her space powers crackle and she skips right over the last few rows of benches. Instead she lands mid-flip over a stretch of railing, just off-center enough from the Scratch's previous line of fire to be out of his peripheral vision, and grips the cold metal railing under her with one hand as a brace while she yanks the tranq riflekind up to her shoulder with a clack.
Her lab coat catches up with the curve of her flip. The Scratch - barely sparing a glance at her new position - drops to the ground, rolls under the tranquilizer round, and comes up kneeling. The pistol on the right fires in a bright burst; then both hands down in a practiced drop, a reload so fast the clips snap into place with twin clicks, and then back up to fire again, and gosh, was that fast -

Then Sharpshooter squeaks and flips out of the way again. Another round of bullets peppers the railing where her palms used to rest and that's when she knows for a fact he's aiming for her hands.

Which is pretty darn smart of him.

"Okay, this is kinda fun!" she calls. A skip sideways, a crackle of green light, and she's on top of the overhead awning that covers the stands, teetering a little as she peers over the edge at the field spread out below her. "You're pretty good!"

"You're not so bad yourself, miss!" The Scratch punctuates each sentence with another shot - and despite the upward slant and the distance between them, his aim with the pistols remains spot-on. He's still favoring that left gun, though; he has to reload it again as he speaks, while the right stays in reserve. "A moving target always proves more of a challenge! I would be ever so friggin' put out if you weren't as accomplished as reports had it, but you're even more accomplished-er than I could have hoped! What a jolly rumpus!"

Not...the wording she would use...but okay! Jade has experience with translating her grandpa's notes, so this kind of creative word-mongering isn't beyond her, but it's strange to hear old-timey nattering come out of the mouth of someone who can't be any older than Sharpshooter. Beaming and rubbing the back of her head, Sharpshooter nods agreeably - and teleports behind him, with the tranquilizer pressed to the nape of his neck. "I agree! This has been, uh, jolly! But we're still done here!"

She expects him to duck. She's ready for him to duck! That's what any normal person would do, right, people who don't have space teleporting perks?

He doesn't duck. He holsters the pistol on the right and spins, his teeth startlingly white in that smirk as he seizes the barrel of the tranq rifle with one hand and clamps down. It's smoother than cream, one motion that makes Sharpshooter yank back on reflex, and before she can bounce herself and the rifle out of his reach the Scratch brings up the other pistolkind and shoots her rifle through the side of the barrel, metal grating on metal as magazine bursts outward in powder-blackened peels.

"Crap!" Sharpshooter teleports down the field, past the soccer goalpost. The tranq rifle comes along for the ride, but sags and snaps in the middle when she hits the turf. The clip's breached, and she ends up removing the intact tranq rounds entirely before they drop to the ground, but two spill out anyway, leaving little drops of anesthetic on the green. "Oh, jeez! Are you enjoying yourself? First you bring me here under false pretenses, and now you broke my favorite tranqkind!" Sharpshooter grimaces, trying and failing to jam the two halves of the poor disemboweled rifle back together. But there's no way for her to fix a break like this, not in the field! Honestly, even if she were back in the island gun repository, she'd still have to replace the entire forestock, modified clip, and the pneumatic chamber, which would basically make it an entirely new gun by the time she finished. Harrumphing, she tucks the remains back into her sylladex - rest, wounded soldier! - and swaps the riot gunkind into her hands, waiting for an answer.

"Well, there was a better plan that didn't involve lying, but - uh - we had to improvise." A wave of his hand - he still wailing those guns around like toys! - and the Scratch kid purses his lips, his eyes widening a little with remorse, as though inviting her in on some spectacularly awful joke, just between the two of them. "I mean, I would have loved to preface this with a more formal introduction before dear Ranger laid you out from a sniping position again, but things have rather gone tits up on that front!"
...She's pretty sure he just admitted that they were going to assume she'd be dumb enough to fall for the sniping trick again. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Sharpshooter groans and brandishes the riot gun. "So?!

He hesitates, squinting. "So what?"

"Introduction! I don't have all day here, buddy!" She's getting kind of tired of labelling him 'Scratch kid' and 'this total jerk' in her head, anyway. She gestures with the gun again, a silent hurry up, doofus, so they can get this show back on the road and she can totally kick his stupid dumb over muscled tuchus!

"Oh! Right-o, then! My codename is JE-1993," he announces grandly. She almost thinks he'd strike a pose to say it, but both of them are pointing loaded specibi at each other and aren't inclined to shift their aim. "But you can call me Bolter!"

"Bolter, huh." Sharpshooter huffs, her mouth turning down a little at the side. "...Someone who...runs away a lot?"

She expects him to lose his temper at that. Instead, he throws up his pistols, both eyebrows rising. "That's what I thought she meant!" Bolter insists. Then he shrugs. "I was right put out, but Ranger - er - she gave some darned explanation, and sure as shooting, it's the name of some kind of gunkind from one of her blasted games that fires explosive kinetic rounds. So - why not? It's as good a moniker as any, eh?"

"Yeah, that sounds pretty neat!" Sharpshooter agrees. She makes a mental note to look into that - an explosive kinetic round sounds interesting - but tables the investigation for later. "And you already know my name... But, uh, just some friendly advice!" She grins, letting her head fall to the side as she extends her senses.

"Mm?"

"Don't let the hero get you monologuing."

And she yanks the two pistols out of his loosened grip.

She captchalogues them in a trice, because these are some nice guns and they deserve a loving new owner. Then she fires off two plastic rounds and doesn't wait to watch him dodge. She closes fast - she doesn't zoom right in with a flicker of power, not after what happened last time, but instead pops in a good few yards away so he can't get his grabby-hands on her specibus while she aims and fires again from a different angle.

Pop - and another angle, above his head and to the left. A rush of green - and again, this time with her back skimming the grass as she fires up from a low angle along the white boundary line of the field.

To her immense frustration, her sense of space singing as she zaps back to a floating, upright position by the building at the far end of the stadium, she feels every single shot miss. Bolter rolls and twists, totally exposed in the middle of the field with no cover to duck behind, and somehow manages to wrangle his way through her barrage of random attacks without a scratch on him. He rolls to his feet, eyes twinkling as they instantly dart to her new position, and he slips his hands back over his shoulders to draw the pistolkind there without a single misstep. He begins firing again and the renewed assault shatters the concentration Sharpshooter would need to separate him from the rest of his weapons - more specibi at his heels, his sides, with an seemingly endless stock of ammunition.
"Pshaw! You've underestimated me! A true scofflaw never engages in a good scrimmage without gratuitous amounts of backup flintlocks," he boasts, no longer standing still. He matches Sharpshooter stride for stride as best he can, sprinting along the field and jackknifing around to dog her tail whenever she dodges a stray bullet by teleporting out of the fray. At some points, she zaps in close enough to overhear him muttering, apparently not to her - scattered phrases like 'getting a little ridonkulous,' and 'from the animes?' that make little sense without context. When she returns fire, he leaps easily out of the way, never once fooled by her efforts at bouncing around the field to catch him unawares.

But it sounds so very much like a memory of -

_Pshaw, my dear girl_ -

"Stop saying stuff like that! URGH!" Sharpshooter reloads the riot gun when her ammo count ticks down near zero, and has to cartwheel on one hand when four slugs shatter the brick of the building at her back. They've worked their way back down the field, so she kicks off through the pale cloud of dust and flies up on top of the roof to assess the situation again. "You sound like Huckleberry Finn or something!"

He responds with a grunt, running full tilt at the building with both guns blazing and a wide smile. Just before she's almost bemusedly convinced he's totally lost it and is gonna ram into the wall, he stops firing.

Holsters both pistols.

And winks, vanishing from her line of sight in the shadow of the building.

But of course, she can still feel him running. She also feels when he jumps, plants a toe high on the wall, and - just keeps going! His hands smack flat against the roof of the building as he clears it, whooping, and swings both feet up to the side. "PARKOUR!" he roars happily, launching himself at her feet.

"Park-no!" Sharpshooter steps back, winds up, and kicks at his face, spinning as she does just in case he pulls another gun, to present the least amount of surface as a target.

Spinning is a grave miscalculation. But in her defense, under the usual circumstances, there are few situations that cannot be improved by the addition of some kind of rotation. Bolter ducks the kick, and then his hand snaps out to the side to grab the end of her lab coat, wrapping the fabric around in a quick twist before _yanking_.

Her reflex is to bounce out of there lickety split. But the sudden jerk on her coat whips her head to the side and Sharpshooter only just grits her teeth and regains enough of her bearings to teleport away when a wide hand clamps down on her forearm - and Bolter gets dragged through space along with her.

Their molecules snap back into the proper configuration thirty feet in the air above the field; Sharpshooter processes the fact that she's got a hitchhiker a second too late, and feels her center of gravity pinwheeling as the extra weight the Scratch kid dragging her down by the arm registers. "Hey! Let go!" she shrieks, bringing the riot gun around to point at Bolter's face.

"No!" he replies, not letting go. "Orders are orders, I'm afraid!"

Sharpshooter...doesn't actually want to shoot this guy in the face. True, he's been willing to shoot _her_ in the face with live amunition, but at this range even her rubber bullets would probably conk him in
the noggin with such force that he won't wake up intact. Suffice to say, his face will be rearranged
deliberately, pouring more energy into her gravity-defying hover to keep both of them afloat, but
doesn't fire. "I mean it! Orders say you have to dangle here and take a bullet to the face?"

"Oh, no," he says, thick eyelashes fluttering as he winks again. "Orders just say to bring you back to
base before you can teleport away! So - you're not going anywhere without me, I'm afraid! One way
or another, you're stuck with me!"

"I'll drop you from higher up!" she threatens. "Watch me! I totally will! I'll ditch you in three -"

He starts whistling. She can feel the bones of her wrist grinding together as he digs his fingers into
her skin, and her concentration almost breaks.

"Two!"

Sharpshooter yanks them to the west and north, floating over the stadium and random buildings and
all the while wrenching her arm from side to side, trying to shake him. Bolter pulls on the coat like
it's a leash or something, and they almost faceplant into a glass window before she rights herself
again. Sharpshooter tracks higher and higher in the air until they're five stories above street level.
"One!" she says, exasperated, even though it's been wayyy more than three seconds - she's counting
pretty generously, here - and -

Bolter lets go of her wrist without warning.

"Wha -" Sharpshooter starts, and then he's heaving her down by the lab coat, a sharp yank on the
fabric with all his weight that tears a huge chunks with the thick sound of threads snapping en masse.
It wrenches her shoulders back, and his now-free hand swings around to try to latch around her
waist.

...Fine. Fine! If that's how he wants to play! It's too hard to try to distinguish where his hand
entangles with the fabric and just swap the lab coat into her sylladex - too much risk she'd end up
captchaloguing Bolter right along with it in the heat of the moment. So she kicks in midair so she
hangs upside down, sticks out her tongue as the Scratch kid's hand paws uselessly through the empty
space where her body used to be, and lets her riot gunkind fall back into the sylladex pocket so she
can shake her arms out of her lab coat.

Yeah, okay, she'll catch him before he hits the ground. She salutes first, a jaunty flick of her fingers
away from her forehead, as the dumb-o and his microshorts of evil plummet toward a bus parked
along the side of the road beneath them, her torn labcoat still streaming like a banner from one hand.

Thirty feet above the ground, just when Sharpshooter's fingers start to itch and buzz with green
sparks, Bolter tosses the coat away. The lab coat billows, distracting Sharpshooter for a beat - and
then, when she's returned her focus to the kid he's firing a grappling hook at the nearest light pole.
Cable unspools from the chamber in a black arc, and the three-pronged hook at the end just barely
hits the horizontal bar of the light pole at the right angle so that the cable wraps around the metal in a
tight loop and brings him swinging to street level in a low, dipping curve. The hook retracts on
command, metal tines clanging against the hollow of the light pole as it unwinds from the bar and
returns to Bolter's side. "Jesus Christmas! You nearly had me there!" he laugh, slotting the
mechanism back into the holster along the side of his thigh and brushing imaginary dust off his bared
forearms.

Ohhh nooo. That's was...so awesome. Sharpshooter is genuinely impressed and she hates it! Her
poor labcoat, yet another victim of the battle, lands in a crumpled heap on top of a bus parked by the
side of the road, and she can't even bring herself to spare it a glance. She's down to her dark blue nebula suit, her gloves, her shoes, and her glasses, and although it was only a bundle of fabric with admittedly minimal value as armor, she feels vaguely exposed without the wrap of the lab coat. It's like, half her uniform, gosh darn it! "You owe me a new gun and a new coat, mister!" she grumps, folding her arms over her chest and fully expecting Bolter will start shooting at her again.

Weirdly, he doesn't. Not right away, at least. While Sharpshooter waits, Bolter jolts a little, his head turning just a fraction as though to glance at something behind him before he aborts the motion, shaking his head. Then he presses two fingers to his ear - to the earpiece - and appears to just...check out of the fight entirely.

And she was so impressed, not even two seconds ago! That was some Lara Croft levels of cool maneuvering, and now - this! Lame.

"I don't understand, chaps, what's going -" Bolter groans, glancing at Sharpshooter with an apologetic slant to his lips, and silently mouths, 'I have to take this' at her before turning on his heel so he's at an angle to her, rubbing at the side of his temple with the heel of one hand while he chatters at the earpiece some more. "I can't see a blistering thing from over here and you're all talking at once!"

"Trouble on the evil villain team front?" she calls down.

He rolls his eyes and nods - another silent message that she reads as 'high maintenance chaps, the lot of them' - and then he starts frowning, his smirk sagging. "Ranger, Cogitator, what are you two on about?"

Okay. Uh, well, if the villains are having trouble (no matter how questionable Sharpshooter finds the fact that Bolter would just...tell her that up front without a second's hesitation...) that is - good? Yeah, she's pretty sure that's a-okay in her book! It must mean that the others are doing just fine kicking butt, in spite of Sharpshooter's unfortunate split-second decision to...bolt.

Okay, that was awful, even for her. She's gonna have to inflict it on Dave later, just to see the non-look of absolute despair on his face. Sharpshooter sets her chin on her fist, floating crosslegged, and waits for Bolter to finish up his conversation. Her space sense starts gnawing at her, and Sharpshooter feels outward, trying to get an idea of what she's sensing. There are people in the buildings around them, though the parking garage is mostly empty aside from - something really jittery, that keeps cutting in and out -

"Fiddlesticks!" Bolter exclaims, derailing Sharpshooter's train of thought. His face is a mask of concentration, now, none of that good humor from before visible in the flat line of his mouth as he removes his hand from the side of his head. His spine crawls at the assessing look he directs at her, and though his voice is as gung-ho and chipper as it was not three minutes ago, Sharpshooter summons her riot gun again as she notices the flatness in his eyes.

...Bad news for the villain team...might mean bad news for her, too. Whoopsie.

"Gee, we really have done a bangup job of pecking away at each other, haven't we?" Bolter laughs; it's hollow. It's so totally fake. She doesn't buy it for a second! This guy just went from weird but enthusiastic to scary in ten seconds flat! "But I've just got off the horn with my good comrades, and...well, there's been a spot of difficulty with some of my chums, I believe, so let's agree to make this snappy! Shall we?"

Sharpshooter nods tightly, not daring to look away. "Totally."
Before he can start shooting, she flings herself in close and roars, because roaring is a confidence booster. Reaching out, she snags the grappling hook out of its holster with a wave of green power and doesn't really care if she catches some of his clothing along with it as she clumsily launches the hook like a cannonball into the concrete wall of the parking garage. Bolter brings his pistol kind around in a horizontal slash - she didn't even feel him draw it - and makes no bones about aiming; he just tries to smash the darned thing into the side of her face. She bounces out of the way, and then bites back a yelp as the rapport of the gun echoes in her ears and a new array of bullets slam into the road beneath her feet. The Scratch can only fire so often with one gun, but he fixes that up in a jiffy, stooping to draw another pistol from a holster at his calf without taking his eyes off her. His firing hand remains steady as a rock, targeting her with such preternatural accuracy that it has to be some kind of super power. Has to!

Then she hecks up. She's sick of being on the defensive nonstop, so she 'ports between Bolter and the building on their left and -

Sharpshooter feels someone move inside the building, right behind her position - about the same time she realizes the wall behind her is mostly glass windows. "Crud!" escapes her as she belatedly realizes what she's just done, and what Bolter is totally about to do oh crudcrudcrud -

She bounces into the building without looking, guided only by that distinct sense of where the body-shaped mass is crouching to peer outside, and then flattens herself on top of the troll that she teleports behind, forcing them both to the ground as four bullets shatter the pane of the glass door. Sharpshooter flips her hair up out of her eyes to see Bolter striding from the sidewalk between the dull grey, rectangular pillars that frame the wall of windows, looking for all the world unfazed by the fact that there's a jittering body underneath Sharpshooter's protective, splayed crouch that nearly got caught in their crossfire. "Stop it! Ahg! You're gonna hit someone!" she says, alarmed, realizing that the room she's in right now is full of people crouching behind desks and chairs and -

"I'll lead him away!" she yells for the benefit of the civilians, and to deliberately tip Bolter off before he can fire again. She makes her next teleport as obvious as possible, thinking fiercely about how she wants the wash of neon green to light up like a flare, and then she's back on the street, making sure to keep the mostly-deserted parking garage at her back this time. Whoever's moving around in there - multiple someones, at least two or three - seems to be moving fast enough and are still a ways down the street relative to her and Bolter's strife.

"Faster faster faster, wrap this up faster, because he doesn't care who he hurts, Sharpshooter thinks, and at last she starts firing back. Aiming and dodging is harder than the Scratch is making it look, but she has the benefit of being able to feel his slightest adjustments in the angle of his wrists, the white-hot path the bullets take through space, and she finally, at last, manages to catch him off guard. One of her reloaded rubber bullets ploughs into his kneecap and the crack of bone sounds louder than the gunshots have in a while (she tends to get used to the loud reverb of gunkind, after enough of a shootout).

Bolter grimaces, ceasing his fire to stagger to the side a little, testing his weight on that leg with a harsh tug on his lips. "Oh, shitknickers!"

Sharpshooter can't take it anymore. "What does that even mean?! What are you, Karkat?!" she shrieks, slapping another round of ammo into the riot gun's chamber and sending down a hail of rubber not-death-but-extreme-bodily-trauma at his head.

"Who?" the man asks, bewildered. His dodge is slower - yesss - but when he stands upright again and plants his stance to fire, he doesn't favor the fractured kneecap at all - noooo...

Sharpshooter breaks off with a gasp of pent-up outrage, and teleports in low and fast, kick straight
out in front of her and planting her heel right on that damaged kneecap. "- because that sounds like something Karkat would say! An old man Karkat!" she yells, twirling up three feet and kicking the Scratch right in the sternum with all the space punchiness she can muster. "I'll shit in your knickers, you - you grandpa imitator!" she adds as Bolter flies across the sidewalk to impact a concrete pillar along the flank of the parking garage.

Bolter shakes it off, peeling himself away from the wall and reloading his pistols with two clacks. "I have no idea what you're on about, my good ma'am, but -" He stumbles, frowning, and then reels around to stare into the depths of the garage behind him. "Whoa, nelly!" And with that he rears back, plasters himself up against the concrete column with wide eyes. Sharpshooter senses the body being flung out of the garage right around the time it sails past Bolter to land hard on the sidewalk and slam into a tree.

She and Bolter trade looks, and then they stare as one at the troll clawing her way back upright, leaving thick white scratches deep in the bark of the skinny tree as she hauls herself upright. Her outfit is in tatters, she's covered in jade green blood from head to boot, and her makeup has been smeared and smudged all over so that her face is a gleaming white mask, glowing faintly in the half light.

Kanaya! Yay! "There you are!" Sharpshooter exclaims, clapping her hands together around the trigger of the gun. "I was wondering where you all got off to, Sylph!"

The jadeblood troll grunts, one pointed tooth tugging on her lower lip as she uncaps a tube of lipstick and uses it to reapply a layer of green to her lips. Then, with a shake of her wrist, the Malachite Sylph unfolds her chainsaw. "I am fairly certain it should be the other way around, given that you were the one to vanish first. But pardon me; this human does not know when to give up."

That's all the explanation Sharpshooter receives before, with a trilling war screech, the jadeblooded hero takes a running leap past Bolter, back into the parking garage - and reappears ten feet further along the ramp between rows of parked vehicles, skittering across Sharpshooter's senses and skipping large chunks of space in a matter of seconds, like - like Dave! It's Dave's flashstepping thingy!

Neat!

Wrestling with the instinct to go learn how Dave's teaching other people to do the time-y thing - so fascinating! It has to be a game mechanic at work, right? - Sharpshooter rivets her eyes on Bolter again. She needs a finisher, a one move takedown to end this so she can go help with the strife playing out in the garage, and she thinks she has just the sweet move!

But, uh. Bolter won't look at her. Sharpshooter holds back the adrenaline rush twitching through her body with a frown of consternation creasing her face. The dark haired Scratch kid continues to peer around the concrete pillar, into the dimly lit parking lot, the whites of his eyes almost glassy from what she can make out from here.

"Cogitator," the Scratch breathes. Then, without a backward glance, Bolter rounds the pillar and nimbly bounds in the Malachite Sylph's wake, hurdling the hood of a truck and ignoring the secondary creak as his patella protests vigorously.

Sharpshooter hangs there, alone, for a good five seconds.

"...HEY! COME BACK HERE, YOU - YOU DORKLORD!" she yells, throwing up both hands and gripping at her hair with the free hand as she grumpily zooms after them, the green of static lighting up her frizzling, riled hair. "Who says you get to just tag out before the finale?! This isn't pro
wrestling, you jerk!"

He spares a fleeting look over his shoulder, a flash of green, and then the mouth of a pistolkind replaces Bolter's face and Sharpshooter dodges an over-the-shoulder shot that goes wild. Still, the Scratch kid keeps up a dead run, sprinting toward the flurry of three figures weaving their way through a row of scattered but utterly demolished cars. Sharpshooter raises the riot gun and fires two rounds - the second of them makes another mark, slamming into the back of Bolter's uninjured knee, but he takes the fall like a real champ, barely breaking up his momentum until he skids to a halt a good few yards from the choke point where Flashstep and the Sylph duke it out with a nameless, shades-sporting blond Scratch kid that Sharpshooter - does nooooot remember. Must have been after her unfortunate vanishing act. Errrr…

"Cogs." The nickname tumbles out between Bolter's slightly-too large front teeth, his toothy grin making the disproportionate set of his front incisors all the more obvious as he cups his hands around his mouth. Sharpshooter jerks to an abrupt halt a safe distance from him, debating whether she should just punch this inconsiderate guy's lights out.

Curiosity wins out. It tends to do that.

Flashstep is a less than a blur in Sharpshooter's senses - she still feels a burst of sympathetic pain when the Scratch kid pinned between the two heroes kicks Dave across the face and slashes through Kanaya's hamstrings in two swift movements. "J- Bolter," the other Scratch says, his voice a flat, emotionless monotone.

Or is it, really? Sharpshooter shifts from foot to foot as well as she can while floating a foot above the ground, her stomach sinking like concrete blocks to the bottom of a bay, because the Scratch's voice is - hesitant. Just barely, but it's there, a faint hitch in his words that breaks the rhythm.

She recognizes Bolter's motions. She's been fighting him for, like, fifteen minutes now. Recognizing them doesn't make the struggle to translate what she's witnessing any easier, as Bolter raises pistolkind and levels them at his teammate.

"You were conspiring with a traitor," Bolter sing-songs. The horrific thing on his face is not a grin. Not anymore. "Tsk tsk, tut tut!" He doesn't even see aware of the three heroes arranged around him and the other Scratch, both Dave and Kanaya looking just as bewildered as Sharpshooter feels. It's like they don't even appear on his radar.

Cogs's bladekind lowers ever so slightly, off guard, his whole body frozen in place, so still that Sharpshooter thinks it isn't a deliberate plot - it's - "Jake," he says, his voice far more urgent this time. "Jake, there are variables you and Jane are not aware of."

"Ranger's consorting with the heroes," Bolter says, sounding almost dreamy. "And she wants you to join her, by Jove!"

"Jake -" The pain is audible.

"Which means," Bolter - Jake? - continues, talking over the other Scratch's low voice, "you've given her reason to think you'd be all aboard the locomotive of betrayal!" The Scratch pulls one pistol back to tap against the side of his head. "I know what you all think: Bolter, well, he's a little loose in the loafers, no? Plumb weak, north of his ears, eh? But I can deduce with the best of them, old friend. And I do believe that I've deduced this one exactly."

"Jake, don't." It's terse, it's low, it's so quiet Sharpshooter almost doesn't hear it.
Jade still feels an unaccountable twist of guilt pang in her gut. Even without context to understand what the crap is going on, the note in Cogitator's voice hits some old sympathy nerve in her monkey brain; it's the tone of someone who wishes desperately that their pain could play out in private, without nosy strangers listening in. Yeah, she kind of feels bad for the guy - And she feels even more bad when Bolter pulls the trigger because oh crap he pulled the trigger

Cogitator doesn't move. Even if he started moving now, no matter how fast he has to be to keep up with Flashstep for this long, it wouldn't - why isn't he moving - it wouldn't help anything, because the blond's expression just looks lost.

"Shit!" Sharpshooter doesn't feel Dave move - he kind of gives her a headache that way, sometimes, when his time stuff leaves her space sense at loose ends - but between one second and the next, he and Cogitator crash together in a tangle, the blond belatedly struggling to shove Flashstep off as the hero fights tooth and nail to drag them both behind a convenient van. The Sylph skips steps too, reappearing on Bolter's flank with her chainsaw whirring and all her teeth sharper even than a troll's should be as she lunges at the Scratch.

Sharpshooter almost thinks she hears music, sweetly aching in her ear, but maybe she's just imagining that. She chooses to focus on Bolter, instead, because the total maniac is still firing, the shots echoingly loud in the cavernous parking garage.

But he's also focused completely on trying to do the murder thing to his friend. So when the Sylph swings the specibus at the backs of his knees, the distraction jars him; he jumps over the swing rather than to the side, knees tucking up under him, and he's so lost in his head that even the agony that has to be throbbing through that fractured kneecap doesn't slow him down.

But he still ends up with both feet off the ground, with no way to turn or go any which way but up and down, in a straight line.

So there's that in her favor as Sharpshooter spins the riot gun in her hands and brings the butt of the gun down on the crown of his thick skull.

Bolter hits the ground hard, knees and shins first, with the force of Sharpshooter shoving him toward the concrete, and she hears something else crack. But his arm wraps around his chest quick as a snake, the other shooting straight out to the side, and Sharpshooter just barely zaps out of the way.

Kanaya's not so lucky. But the slug carves its way through her (barely misses grazing the hip, exits cleanly through her back) and the Sylph just keeps coming, blood stripping down the front of her and adding to the pastiche of dried blood already soaking through her uniform.

Thankfully, at the last minute, the chainsawkind retracts back into a lipstick container, and it's just Kanaya's fists of righteous fury that clasp together and clock Bolter in the temple. Sharpshooter's first blow might have been stymied by all that bone in his noggin, but after that one the Scratch kid's head jerks to the side, and Jade knows a knock-out when she sees one.

When the pistolkind clatter to the concrete and Bolter sags forward, collapsing face first without a single crazypants word more, she knows they've got this in the bag. "Nice hit," Sharpshooter says admiringly, drifting closer and nudging Kanaya in the side. Wait. Oops. "Oh, darn, did I hurt you?! You probably need stitches for that one, I'm so sorry -"

"I'm fine. I heal quickly." The jadeblood peels the blood-sticky fabric away from her side, and most of it just kind of falls apart in her claws, hanging by threads. Her nice, pretty outfit looks like it took
on a blender and lost the battle, if not the war. "See? The wound has already sealed over."

Huh. Jade leans in and sure enough, the blood trickling out of the hole in Kanaya's side has already slowed to a crawl. She's standing pretty straight too without looking like she's in pain, so her hamstrings must be knitting together fast, too. "Wow! You heal so fast! That's so convenient!"

"Indeed. I am as surprised as you."

From behind the van, Dave raises his head and a single finger, his lips a perfectly smug line. One of the arms of his sunglasses appears to have snapped, because his left eye is almost completely visible over the rim of the black shades. He doesn't seem too concerned about adjusting it, either, looking worn but victorious. "I'm not. Music saves, ladies."

Kanaya rolls her eyes, presses the pad of a claw to the weird not-scab where the bullet wound has knitted together, and then cocks her head to the side, listening. "Actually, I believe the music has stopped."

"Well, obviously, you try to mix for shit when you're embracing an armful of spikey haired - ffrrmglll!"

And that, Jade thinks, through a muffled giggle, is the sound a dude makes when someone else's knee has written their name on his groin's dance card and come a-calling. She still has her riot gun in hand, and at her side Kanaya basically transforms into a statue, radiating such wary tension that Jade thinks she might well jump Cogitator solely on principle when the guy emerges from behind the van. He moves fast, wayyy faster than Bolter could earlier, even before Jade 'capped him, but he doesn't even look up at her and Kanaya. He just lurches to a stop in a tight crouch beside Bolter's unconscious form. His bladekind is clenched tight in his fist, but his pale fingers shake where the black, fingerless gloves don't conceal his hands.

Jade raises a hand, just in case. "But actually, you guys - what the heck? What did I miss? This guy was fighting me and then he went even more cuckoo?"

"Your guess is as good as ours," Kanaya says with a shrug, gradually uncoiling from her stony battle stance with a wary eye on Cogitator.

"Jake." Jade and Kanaya both flinch, but the Scratch kid just clenches his bladekind - and then sheaths it, curling both hands into fists so tight she's sure his nails must be digging into his own gloved palms with a vengeance. He doesn't lay a finger on Bolter, to help or to hurt or even to check for a pulse, and with those Bro-style triangle shades, Jade can't even tell if his eyes are open or not.

"...I'm not really sure, but I'm pretty sure that was him trying to kill you," Dave says at last, his strained wheezing making it clear that he's playing up the grievous assault of his groin for all it's worth from his position behind the van. But still, he's stating pretty much exactly what Jade thinks everyone was thinking. "Y'know, those tricky, thinky thoughts. "Uh. Aren't you all supposed to be evil bros 5ever? Or are betrayals actually as sudden and inevitable as they're rumored to be?" Dave crawls out from behind the van, his head low, and then, before Jade can even bounce over and flick him for being an overdramatic coolkid, stands up and braces himself on the side of the vehicle under the guise of casually lounging there, with the stoic expression of someone suffering for a cause.

Irony, probably.

"...Fuckin' hell." Cogitator's response is a long time coming, and when he raises his face without looking at any of them - Jade's half convinced herself he's gotten himself stuck all hunched over permanently by then! - his voice is just tired. Really tired, like all the fight's been sucked out of him.
"Roxy's done. Should've extrapolated that would mean I'd be done, too." His chin angles ever so slightly, and Jade thinks with almost 79% certainty that he's eyeing Kanaya.

Jade sneaks the riot gun back into the sylladex. Yeah. She's pretty sure the fight's done; Dave's swords have been tucked away as well, and he turns a broken piece of crap broken bladekind over in his hands before sticking it through a belt loop with a shrug.

Hoo, boy.

Finally, Cogitator says, expressionless, "There's an 86% probability that I could strife my way past the three of you and successfully abscond. It only drops five percentage points if I expend the resources to take Jake with me." Another, shorter pause. "And those numbers are totally not based on algorithms that I just pulled directly from my ass. You know. Just for the record."

"The record shall reflect your statistical capability for trouncing us without compunction," Kanaya promises, solemn as she bows her head, and how the heck did she become the one in charge of this, anyway?

"But are you gonna fight us?" Jade asks. She bites at the inside of her cheek when the guy takes forever to answer again. It's like now that he's not on his feet and fighting, he needs to overthink things and debate his options so much he forgets to respond out loud! Are all of these kids crazy?

"Nah...Nah. I'm done." The Scratch runs his fingers through his hair, and the faintest inklings of a bitter smile ghost over the corners of his lips.

"You surrender? Goddamn - finally." Dave slumps a little more obviously. Jade catches his left hand spread a little, reaching for something, but then he smooths his fingers back down against his side like it never happened. "I'm starving. I could literally eat a goddamn whale. And not some shitty ass beluga whale. We're talking, like, Greenpeace blacklists all of Houston for my sins levels of marine mammal consumption." The lens of the crooked half of the shades pops out, just in time to reveal Dave's smirking has reached new levels of smug bastardry. "In fact, I know exactly what kind of whale I'm going to suggest to Karkat. Oh fuck yes, he's gonna flip his tiny angry troll shit over this one -"

Kanaya rubs her face with one hand, and mutters something like, "surrounded by greybait," but Jade is still trying to keep focused on the currently-compliant but still probably super dangerous Scratch kid right in front of them.

"Did I say I surrender?" Cogitator cuts in, his tone dripping acid sharp enough to make Rose proud as he rolls his head to the side to stare at Dave instead. Still assessing. Still calculating. Jade adjusts herself accordingly - she's pretty sure at any moment, this guy could decide it would be easier for him to just cut through them rather than - whatever is going on right now. "The answer is hell no. I call ceasefire. Nothing happens 'til I see Roxy."

"Who?" Jade asks, drumming her fingers against her arm as she folds them again.

"Ranger." Cogitator moves, and Jade has a hand in the sylladex before she realizes he's moving to lever Bolter upright, his face unreadable as he slings the unconscious guy's arm over his shoulders. Which seems kind of unsafe, if Bolter wakes up without warning, but Jade keeps her mouth shut. "She's pleading sanctuary and defection with the Seer of Light. If it's any consolation, coming from me, she's sincere about it." He shrugs, and Bolter jostles a little with the motion, making it very obvious that in terms of muscle mass, Cogitator is far slimmer. "I talk to her, or we do this the tedious way. Nonnegotiable."
Dave shrugs when Jade looks askance at him. Kanaya's concern is evident on her face, though, and her hair swings in messy chunks around her ears as she murmurs in Jade's ear, low enough that the Scratch can't hear, "If she's alone with Rose -"

"Right! We're going! Express teleport to everyone else, leaving riilliight now!" Jade announces, her voice a higher pitch than usual for a reason she can't name. She pastes on a nice, generic smile though, trying to put everyone at ease but especially trying to beam intense 'happy teleporting truce times' in mental waves at Cogitator. "Gather in close, guys, while I pinpoint where Rose's at, 'kay?"

Dave stumbles the rest of the way over. Ouch. "We don't have to walk it?"

"Walking!" Jade pretends to sniff haughtily - she ruins it by cracking into a smile midway through her attempt to imitate the strongest, classiest accent Grandpa ever used around her. "Nonsense, Dave! Powers are made to be used!"


"Alright, then? We've got everyone? Positive?" Sharpshooter checks - cautious, be cautious! - before they take off. At Dave's curt nod, Jade casts one last, lingering look over their group to make sure she has them all in her mind's eye, including Bolter's unconscious, limp form slung over Cogitator's shoulder, and wraps her space powers around them all. Cogitator himself is almost as still as Kanaya, and Jade is grateful to have the jadeblood here to keep up a keen-eyed vigilance while Jade is distracted and Dave is...uh...incapacitated to some unknown degree.

Anyway! "Next stop, Mr Egbert's car!"

- 500 feet above...

Built to withstand wind speeds up to 200 miles per hour, the Space Needle stands out against the skyline of Seattle. From the observation deck five hundred feet up, on a clear day and with at least a passable excuse for good eyesight, the Cascade Mountains rise up clear in the distance while all of downtown Seattle and Elliott Bay spread themselves out before the viewer like a patchwork of greys, browns, and blues.

Spades Slick is not up here to enjoy the view. It took some wrangling to make his way to the outside observation deck when the humans and trolls running the joint were so determined to evacuate the place as a likely terrorist target, but the carapacian has found that a judiciously applied threat and a flash of a knife can work fucking wonders. The vast majority of people he's come across on this watery cesspit of a planet barely know how to hold their strife specibi the right way up - the only exceptions, naturally, turning out to be either crooks or cops or pissants like these shitty heroes, who insist on risking perma-death with every move they make.

Unfortunately, said pissants are now the only stooges Spades can call his own, at the moment. Which is why he's up here, squinting down with his arms looped through the wires strung around the viewing area and angrily kicking one of the white metal struts to pass the time. There's something off about the sky overhead, but what the hell does he know about this planet's weather? The only showers Derse ever suffered from were spontaneous meteor-storms and the horrors that could drive anyone stupid enough to be outside during an eclipse insane. There's something foul in the air, but he'll be damned if he can figure it out.

Besides, he's gotta see his new crew in action. More to the point, he's gotta be ready to cover
Vantas's incompetent ass in case the sad sack of extra organ meat fucks up and tries to pull a solo job again. The blood oath is stronger now, a persistent jangle in his blood - and that's sayin' something. Hell, the remnants of the last one faded over the years but still managed to hook Spades halfway around this shitty planet to get him here in time to yank Vantas ass over horns out of Diamonds’ path before the kid could get his fool self killed. But before that he'd had years of not having to give two shits about the kid's well-being, and it irks him that he's been dragged into schooling this stupid troll on the basic facts of life.

Spades just keeps reminding himself that it's worth it to have that extra edge in a strife. He doesn't like many things, but he likes having Blood players in his corner. Never mind that he wouldn't have had a clue how to end the first oath anyway, and coulda ended up stuck with a ghost of a blood bond to a dead troll for the rest of his miserable life. With Diamonds, Hearts, and Clubs all gone fleshy and fucking off to work with the enemy, Spades needs whatever he can squeeze out of Vantas if he wants any hope of standing his ground.

He gnashes his teeth, muttering to himself as the plastered human Seer returns first. Back at the labs he'd gotten an eyeful of the damage she inflicted on the room full of booze, and while he can respect anyone who can hold their liquor, the fact is this dame cannot. What she does is the opposite of holding her liquor. He's not quite sure what to call it, but it ain't healthy. A growl of exasperation escapes him when he sees she's not even on her feet; some other human is carting her around, and he's pretty sure it ain't one of his crew. They all kinda look alike, all easily-perforated skin and lumps of random fat deposits, without even the weird goddamn horns trolls have to help tell them apart, but this one is in an unfamiliar uniform so Spades grimaces and hooks a foot on one of the wires in case he has to intervene. But the two rendezvous with the butter and egg man without incident, crawling into the backseat of the car in some kinda ceasefire, and Spades lowers himself back down to the ground.

Vantas arrives next, along with the human Heir, and all without Spades' s blood oath pingin him for anything other than moderate amounts of danger. The kid didn't try to ditch his Heir even once. He'd be grudgingly proud if it weren't common fucking sense; he's still floored by how little Vantas remembers about the game. As a sign of his reluctant, resentful approval, Spades uses what pull he has to jerk on the blood oath, waiting impatiently for the kid to notice their pulses synchronizing until Vantas's head snaps up to stare at him. Spades bares his teeth and snaps before sticking out his tongue, certain that the troll can see him from here, and receives a twitching eye and an extended pair of middle claws as a salute.

Well, if nothing else, at least the kid still has brass. Sure, Spades'd shank him for being a snot-nosed piece of shit if they were in close quarters, but look, mutual hemorrhaging is just a standard Dersite hello. What can Spades say, he's a product of his cloned upbringing, spawned on a planet on an eternal war-footing. It's all about body language. Heh.

The arrival of the space Witch leaves angry green afterimages burning across Spades's field of vision, and he snarls in impotent rage as he waits for it to clear up. Powerful, sure, but subtle, Witches ain't. And they're always so damn quirky. This one seems reasonable enough, but her control of her powers spins on a Russian roulette and if she's not unconsciously spamming some kind of mood-altering fraymotif Spades will stab himself in the eye to escape the chipper brashness. But she brings the rest of the crew with her, including an unconscious man in shorts so tiny that Spades, never the strictest proponent of leg garments himself, tugs at the side of his pants leg just to assuage the powerful wave of feeling somehow nearly-naked by proxy. It's like second-hand embarrassment, probably, but Spades has never met the empathy quota needed to sympathize with jackshit, so he wouldn't know.

Anyway. With the strife over and, one can only assume, the potential for immediate danger to
Vantas's life declining to its usual background levels that Spades can easily ignore, the carapacian draws back from the edge of the observation deck, stowing his knife with only a sour sigh. Down below, there's another crack of lime green light that makes Spades scowl reflexively, and then the whole bunch has fucked off, which takes a load off Spades's back. Loathe as he is to admit it, he and Vantas have problems controlling their blood pressure thanks to their air-trigger tempers. Since the oath would normally react to such little things as a heightened pulse or a rush of adrenaline, it's taken a damn lot of maneuvering for Spades to feel free to ignore the everyday flare-ups of compulsive danger sense that ensue on a regular basis when one's linked to a troll with anger management issues. It still makes Spades's shell crawl, insisting that the brat is still in danger at the most innocuous times, but he snaps at himself mentally and digs his claws into his unraveling sweater until he thinks he has the bond convinced it's safe to ignore whatever has Vantas in a huff this time.

BQ: Dear, dear. They're becoming competent, aren't they? I'll have to do something to fix that, soon.

Oh for fuck's sake. Spades hears the door sighing shut with a hushed noise before the Queen's mental speech has even finished resolving itself in his mind. It's the most annoying possible thing he could hear at this exact moment, putting him in mind of days when her lightning-sharp, dark bloom of a telepathic command could reach through a hundred floors to harass him in the dark cubicle of vigilance. Queens and their fucking command privileges, honestly.

At least she did come through the door. Spades isn't stupid; even on a day this grey, the shadows aren't long and dark enough for the Queen to use her teleporting trick, so he'd thought he'd be alright if he watched where he stepped. But obviously she's been tailing him, regardless, and sneakily enough that he didn't hear her coming before now. Not like that's anything new - she's always sneaking up on him at the most humiliating times - but he clicks at her with his claws occupied by drawing knives, and shoves as much of a rude impression into the mental projection as he can muster.

The result involves enough implied expletives and physically impossible but still insulting suggestions to set Vantas's ears afire. The most censored translation would run something like:

SS: Great. Just the broad I didn't want to see. Why don't you go [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] with a crayon where no one can hear you scream, you massive goddamn [redacted] [redacted] spaghetti strainer up your -

The Black Queen leans bonelessly against the wall by the door, the collar of her deep green trenchcoat popped so that the crunch of a healing hickey at the base of her neck is clearly visible. Because this woman is a fucking menace.

BQ: One day, I am going to smash every last one of your teeth and rejoice in the silence that ensues as you choke on your own blood.

BQ: I may declare it a planetary-wide holiday, just to commemorate the anniversary of the event.

SS: Bluh, bluh - as if yah even have a planet to lord it over, anymore. Think I haven't noticed you ain't got any lackeys running at your heels?

'Course, just cause she doesn't have any attendants waiting on her claw and foot here in the Americas, where carapacians are rare enough to get noticed on principle, doesn't mean she ain't without her little birds. Plenty of shells overseas are still loyal to their Reginae Absentes, and the Shatranj may be an unholy mess thanks to the GP's ham-fisted efforts at consolidation and unification, but the Dersites of the hodgepodge carapacian spy network are still damned good at their jobs. He's run across them more than a few times over the years and it always had to end bloody.
But he thinks the BQ might be more isolated than that. The White Queen openly announced she was
going to search for her missing sister-queen, after all; Spades picked up that much from his darling
gal. All those dumbass pale shells came out to bid her farewell in a tearful shindig, and she
apparently checks in often to reassure her subjects - every couple decades or so. This Queen, on the
other hand, up and vanished like the inconsiderate b - urgh, witch that she is before most carapacians
were even cloned, and just like that the Dersite corner found itself Sovereignless and hedged into an
uneasy truce with their neighbors. No way any dark shell with half a brain would willingly put up
with centuries of cooperating with Prospitians if they knew their Queen was still breathing. And
Villein followers don't count.

Queens. They act all benevolent by not murdering you on sight and pretending their armies are so
vital to the war effort. But give 'em the chance to run off and play solo, and they'll slaughter their
own kings and armies to seize it with both claws. And that's why Spades'll never kneel to one again.
You know, aside from the fact that the only sovereign he has experience with is the most infuriating
dame to ever try to beat him upside the head with the Regnant Throne.

BQ: But still you think of me as Queen. Very telling, Spades.

SS: Pah. I don't see no ring on your hand.

BQ: True. I wonder where that old thing could have misplaced itself.

BQ: You wouldn't have any ideas about that, would you, Spades?

With every bitter exchange, Spades finds himself edging backward while the Queen insinuates
herself further into his personal space. Instinct says stab her while secondary instinct screams do not
do the thing, because she can still dish out twice the damage he can if he pisses her off in the wrong
way. But soon she's got him backed up so that he can feel wires pressing up against his jacket, the
still, open air through the gaps reminding him that he can't goddamn fly.

And the way she drawls that last part, innocuous and mild in his head with hardly any electrifying
blowback, he can tell she's up to something. There is goddamn flimflammin' chicanery afoot, and
considering the subject -

Well. He just really needs to change the subject, is all. Last thing he needs is his on-again-off-again
spades fling hunting down his lady love.

SS: Hell if I know.

BQ: Don't you?

SS: God damn, woman, it's your ring, not mine.

BQ: Really? I wouldn't have guessed it from the way you continually attempt to wrest it from my
claws, in every life you've ever lived.

BQ: But I've seen every vomit-inducing inch of you. It's not on your person, and you have not gone
to retrieve it from some hiding place these past few days or I would have sensed it by now.

BQ: Where is it, Slick.

She advances on him again, and Spades can feel the power that radiates from the slim, tall figure
before him, dying the faint shadows a deeper black. Shit. Shit shit shit. All he's got are knives. He
longs for his old Rapier Wit or a nice serviceable horse hitcher - knives are good enough for warding
off a quadranted rival, but if the Queen's angling for her ring after all this time and willing to kill to
get her claws on it, he's screwed.

There is little Spades hates more than being cornered. Getting limbs hacked off or eyes poked out might top the list - and whoop-de-fucking-do, who else can he have been cornered by other than the dame most likely to make those things happen. He'd thought - he'd hoped - they'd managed to hatefuck each other senseless enough over the past few days that she'd let him take off without pursuing. Dersite kismesissitudes trend that way - try to kill and/or depose each other multiple times, develop an entirely undesired hardon for the mutual rivalry, fuck each other in an attempt to work out the despicable concupiscent urges, and then avoid each other for a decade or so until the urge to murder someone special picks up again.

_Damn_ that fucking ring. He shoulda dropped it in a volcano. Sure, the ring can survive a little thing like molten rock - hell, it could survive a tactical nuclear strike, seeing as how it's more powerful than any man-made weapon could ever hope to be - but it would be a hell of a lot harder for the Queen to retrieve it, and more importantly, it wouldn't currently rest in the lovely claws of Ms Paint, the one dame Spades will protect at any price.

_Deny, deny, deny. And try not to die._

(He can't remember who said that one. Sounds like something stupid Di would come up with for Clubs in an attempt to ram common sense into Deuce's tiny brain, but Spades and Hearts were equally guilty of thinking up shitty rhymes on the spot when Clubs started acting like a moron mid-heist.

He does not miss them. Whadda pack of idiots.)

SS: Woman, I do not have any idea where your goddamn weapon of mass destruction ended up. Don't you usually respawn a new one when you lose it?

BQ: No. Not when it has been _claimed by an upstart Sovereign_, you absolutely imbecilic excuse for an Archagent.

So that _is_ what happened. He'd applaud his other self, except for holy shit, apparently that guy is bugfuck insane and the consequences of said bugfuckery might yet put MP in jeopardy.

SS: You're thinkin' about the _other_ me, remember? The one who actually _existed_ in this last session.

SS: Bilious's punctured vocal sac, are you finally going senile? Go rip _him_ a new one -

BQ: I would. I really would love to slit your throat right here and now, and go on to ensure that both iterations of your benighted self perish in a unholy inferno.

BQ: But you know very well whose protection he is under. Much good may it do him.

BQ: So instead of mourning that which can never be, I'll just have to satisfy myself by forcing you to _tell me where the ring is._

She lunges for him, something dark and sharp flickering between her claws, and Spades launches himself to the side. In desperation, he hauls himself up on the wires and squirms his way in between them to crawl up along the outside of the observation deck's railings. By the time he reaches the square-patterned net that stretches over the deck, the Queen has tilted her head back to vocalize a clicking growl in his direction, the hat that hangs low over her face just barely sticking to her bald head. Yikes. At the rate this is going, her hate really _is_ gonna flip platonic and Spades won't survive it with all his limbs intact.
So he takes another stab at it.

SS: Come on! It's gotta be with him if he had his claws on it last. Or with the other Queen bitch or the ex-King, ever thought a' that?

SS: Literally any other candidate would be more likely than me! My coup barely fucking worked, no thanks to those useless trolls!

Inwardly, Spades is chanting a little somethin' that goes a little like *piss off piss off piss off*, and only just barely restrains his claws from signing that, too. But just when he thinks his Skaia-cursed, impeccably bullshit etiquette has drilled through that Queenly shell of hers, the Black Queen's white eyes narrow and the mangled claw of her ring hand spasms with the force of her contempt.

BQ: Really. Because *I* think we're both right. I think it respawned with the Sovereign who wielded it last.

BQ: The only problem with that...is that *two versions of you* have spawned.

BQ: And I think you have it.

BQ: I think that with all the glitches and the Horrific interference and the countless other ways this terminal train wreck of a game has sabotaged itself, I think that it chose to spawn the ring with the wrong cohort.

BQ: Neither of you should exist. Your ectobiological codes were wiped from the servers. And yet *here you are*, Spades. Alive and well, in a carapacian form, and with two copies of one mind in a single session because you just *don't know when to quit*.

Damn. She's hitting too close to the mark, here. All of these are thoughts he's had before, and what's worse, Spades has already (stupid, stupid!) confessed the existence of his flushed gal to save his own shell. If anyone can put two and two together in the worst way, it's the Black Queen. This can't end well, no matter what Spades says next, and his only possible backup just teleported out to their mountain getaway without him. He's gonna have to sternly lecture his new crew on the matter of *not ditching* him when he's behind the eight ball.

If he lives. Which depends heavily on what he chooses to do next.

Yeah, fuck it, he's gonna run for it.

SS: You're outta your mind.

SS: I don't have the ring. If I did, you really think I'd miss out on a chance to wipe the floor with your ugly mug? Hell no.

SS: I'm out of here.

He bolts. It's hard running along the net but his feet are nimble and there's not even a hint of a breeze in the air to knock him off balance with a gust sheering across his path. Behind and below, the Queen expresses her displeasure with a stamp of a foot that rattles the entire Needle, but Spades tunes her shouted insults out on the off chance she tries to whammy him with some secret Queenly mojo. By the time he manages to clamber down and launch himself at the outside of the nearest elevator, knives clenched between his teeth to free up his claws, she's almost caught up, and the shadows walk with her.

Vantas'll just have to keep the crew together as deputy for a while.
Spades is on the run again.

From: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
To: [redacted] <address unknown>
Subject: Child care

[redacted],

Require dossiers on possible MC assets, codename 'SCRATCH-KIDS.' Future engagement with said assets imminent and unavoidable. Please respond.

Regards,

Samuel Egbert

From: [redacted] <address unknown>
To: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
Subject: Re: Child care

Samuel,

No dossiers can be obtained at this time. You've put both of us in danger with this message. I repeat, postpone communications.

Yours,

[redacted]

From: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
To: [redacted] <address unknown>
Subject: Re: Re: Child care

[redacted],

Status urgent. All four children now in custody. Escorting to Cascade base. Recommendations?

Regards,

Samuel Egbert

From: [redacted] <address unknown>
To: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Child care

Samuel,

I told you to restrict future communications, but I see now that you have been attempting to contact other members of the company without my all-clear. You're lucky that I took the trouble of having a trusted specialist reroute all of your incoming inquiries to a secure inbox. We are not secure. Maintain your cover and desist in accessing the SERIOUS BUSINESS application, or suffer the consequences at your own peril.

I do not know how much more clear I can be. I have no access to any files concerning green-restricted projects at this moment. But if you feel one of these children could compromise your position, you are permitted one more email. The security risk is high but should you receive the signal in reply, proceed as instructed.

And take as many of them down with you as possible, if you would be so kind. These are to be considered standing orders.

Yours,

[redacted]

-  

Rue Lalonde is still nursing the latest in a string of migraines when the alarm detonates in her office like a tactical nuke, and she goes utterly cold.

Her hand moves before her head does, wrenching her computer monitor around so she can better force-quit most of the unnecessary programs and click through to the one that matters, the one designed to blare a warning alarm at the faintest hint of a burst of grimdark or grimlight magic anywhere in the continental United States. It blew up not too long ago over the mess in Los Angeles - in a very literal manner. The shockwave reduced almost every sensor on the roof of the Maine facility to puddles of jellied metal. But Novitiate Bion recalibrated all the instruments and by the time she assured Rue that everything was in working order again, almost half a week later, the energy signature in Los Angeles had changed into something unrecognizable. There have been periodic blips from the Atlantic coastline in the meanwhile, ones that her Maine team has not had the time or resources to investigate the source of in person, and aside from that - nothing. She has the sudden, overwhelming urge to whack the side of the monitor, and it takes every ounce of willpower in her being to remind herself that that never works.

Rue sits bolt upright in her chair as the alarm continues to wail. The noise was sudden enough that Dana, the only medical intern to have accompanied her department heads from Maine, jumps almost half a foot in the air on her way out the door and swivels back toward Rue so quickly her head almost knocks against the side of the doorframe. Rue doesn't blame the girl.

All she can tell from the alarm is that there has been a potent surge of grimdark energies - nothing by way of location or visuals. But her heart sinks nevertheless.

Rose.

Thankfully, she has taken to keeping Bion's personal number on her phone in case of situations exactly like this. Few of the other scientists will let her pester them so directly these days.

RL: Bion, where is that surge coming from? I need an analysis, stat.
NB: // triangulating with Miskatonic and Derlith in Wisconsin, doctor Lalonde, please hold.
Rue Lalonde is not one to wait around in her office when there's a crisis. She appreciates that Bion is most likely trying to keep her calm in the face of the worst news possible, but that doesn't change the fact that by the time Samuel's number appears on the screen of her cell phone, Rue has spent the past fifteen minutes pacing around the novitiate's lab in a flurry of lab coats, barking orders and generally treating the whole thing as the certified federal goddamn issue that it is. A few other scientists hobble in to lend a hand with Bion's equipment, but a good quarter of her staff is still recovering from various stab wounds inflicted by a certain uncontrollable carapacian and another half specialize in neurology, and therefore have absolutely no clue how to deal with chaological sensors of the grim persuasion.

"Samuel, what has happened to my daughter?" she demands, doing her best to coax out the tension behind her forehead by pressing her fingers between her brows. Going through the kind of extensive withdrawal that ensues after spending the majority of one's adult life indulging an addiction is nothing to be sneezed at. On top of the tremors and constant migraines that have plagued her since she first decided to get her life back on track, Rue has been swamped by what feels like thrice her normal workload. Running a major cross-discipline scientific lab involves a disgusting amount of paperwork; resurrecting a second major lab halfway across the country, even in a temporary capacity, has trebled the amount of said paperwork. She hasn't had time to oversee her own private projects in weeks, too consumed with trying and failing to deal with Rose on equal footing. And now this. Her heart is racing at a dangerous rate, Dana is attempting to press a cup of hot tea into her hands with frank terror in her dark eyes, and Rose is in Seattle, Rose may well be at the very center of this grimdark outbreak, and Rue can do nothing to help her from here.

It feels like New York all over again. And that day rather caps the list of days that Rue feels should not be repeated. Ever. Under any circumstances.

A faint whine always tends to distort phone calls that have to breach a void ward - a kink that Rue has yet to smooth out of her machines to this day - but Samuel's voice remains recognizable all the same. "There has been an incident," he says, a forbidding note underlying his usually bright tone.

Rue slams the cup of tea down against the nearest desk, tea sloshing over the rim and scalding her hand. She pays it no heed. "Obviously, Samuel!"

"A group of young villains challenged the children to some kind of competition or - I'm not sure what. They seem to have some connection to the Midnight Crew, but more to the point," he says over top of Rue's exclamation of outraged concern, without pause, "Rose's opponent was able to render one of her bracers inert."

The frantic panic that has driven Rue into a frenzy coalesces into solid mass, a cold stone that drops out from under her and sends her heart into further worrying palpitations. She has some of the best medical researchers in the country under her supervision and none of the cardiologists have ever once told her she may be at risk for heart disease, but at the moment she is seriously questioning their judgment. "How bad is the breach?" she says, her heart too loud in her ears and her breathing harsh.
She gestures at Novitiate Bion, and the woman looks up from a screen full of esoteric letters and readouts. Bion, at least, understands the one-handed charades, and seizes Halburn by the shoulder to wheel the limping troll in front of her station before racing off to fetch what Rue needs. "Is she hurt? Samuel, where the bloody hell were you-"

"She says that it remains contained within her mind, for the time being - er. One moment." A faint murmur of conversation, the pause stretching long enough to make Rue fear something else has gone wrong, and then Samuel's voice returns to its usual volume. "Miss Ranger has defected and can apparently serve in place of the bracer's, but only if she stays in contact with Rose. The two of them believe they have this under control, for now, but if there's anything you can do, Rue..."

"Bring them here. Bring them here this instant, Samuel, what were you thinking?" Rue brings the cup of tea to her lips, and the hot liquid only burns her tongue for an instant before she swallows without tasting it, grimacing at the absence of a familiar, bitter sting.

"That there were lives at stake, and that no one could have predicted this," Samuel replies, sliding neatly beneath her accusation with impassive certainty. "It is done. The situation is contained. There is nothing you can do from there? Miss Harley is still absent at the moment. It may be a good while before we can make our way to the labs, and we will be impeded by at least one of the children's opponents when we do."

"I have no way to tell from here how the bracer failed." Bion rushes back in with her braids flying out behind her, nearly slams into poor Dana with such force that the intern grabs the back of someone else's coat for support, and spares a moment to steady the intern before dumping the steel grey cuff onto the desk in front of Rue. Rue nods curt thanks and seizes the spare bracer to begin turning it over in her hand, running a chipped fingernail along the underside until a panel slides open and she can begin tinkering with the insides. "And I'd have to drive out to deliver the replacement myself, which would take hours. Where is Jade?"

Perhaps, Rue thinks, if old man Harley would have allowed her to study his system of transportalizers before his death, she might have her own way of teleporting physical matter from point to point and they wouldn't need to rely so heavily on Jade Harley's incredible abilities. Certainly the Rue Lalonde from the previous version of this universe mastered it, or at least installed a working transportalizer in her New York lab, which has no parallel in this world. Just another project to add to Rue's interminable list of technologies she needs to put together a task force for.

Sometimes she misses the simple days when her thesis work focused on astronomy, before her interest in void manipulation peaked and Jo Crocker snuck in to encourage Rue to take on yet another degree with all her talk of hypothetical multiverses and ectobiological echoes across paradox space. There's just so much science to be done; the world is truly a peculiar place, and even with the Querent's help, Rue has barely scratched the surface.

Novitiates Halburn and Bion print something out and it takes both of them working in tandem to haul the long sheet of scan results over for Rue and Bion to examine on the tabletop. Bile curdles in the back of Rue's throat as she and Bion lean over the graphs. There's been a decline in the level of grimdark, enough that there's no longer a constant alarm deafening anyone near a computer station, but before that decline the outburst of chaos energy that Rose - Rose - channeled onto the physical plane was...frightening. Not quite a match for New York, but enough.

And her child still has all of that mucking around in her head. Her child, her child.

Should Rue have been there? She can't even tell anymore. Ambrose is the one with the halfway-accurate moral compass where their children are concerned, and he isn't here, either.
She can start by calibrating this bracer in front of her to suppress the fresh flood of grimdark in Rose's mind. It's - it's all she can focus on doing, all she can pour her energy into.

In her panic, she thinks she misses whatever Samuel says next, the poor man. "Bring Rose. Now," she orders, and thumbs the off button with her mind somewhere else entirely. "Halburn - no, no, stay sitting. Sir. You'll tear your stitches." She glances up from the bracer's inner workers for only the barest moment, and the first unfortunate she lays eyes on is - "Ah, Dana."

Dana freezes, looking up from where she's helping one of the other scientists with a thaumaturgic device it is clear neither of them have much experience with, the tea tray forgotten at a precarious angle by the electromagnetic field meter. "Doctor Lalonde?"

"Leave that. You'll need to drive down to the ranger station and escort at least Jade Harley and my daughter through the void wards - possibly more, knowing them. They could arrive at any moment, and they won't have the experience necessary yet to find their own way through without delays we can't afford." Rue plucks a delicate filament of conducting metal out of its place in the casing and curses vibrantly. Now that they've adjusted to her mood, the majority of the scientists don't flinch like Dana does - they've been through this before, after all, and last time Rue had been even more frantic, if such a thing could be possible. "Halburn, can she take you car?"

"Of course, ma'am." When Dana turns toward him in a clumsy whirl, horrified by being called out in front of others, the troll novitiate removes a ring of keys from the pocket of his lab coat and sets them in the intern's palm with a reassuring smile full of shark-sharp teeth. "You'll do fine," Rue hears him whisper to Dana - he has to be loud enough to be heard over the shuffle of so many scientists in one room, and he winces audibly when he shifts and (probably) pulls at his healing stab wound the wrong way once more. "If the space child lands on the hood of the car, just keep driving. I've been assured she barely feels it."

"Wha-" Dana manages before shaking her head, her face turning a particularly pasty shade of green, and scurrying out the door. Once she's gone Rue can only hope that the poor intern actually knows how to drive a car - medical students sacrifice much in their endless rounds of residencies and internships in the pursuit of a degree, and most of the people staffing this lab flew out on the jet plane.

And for a quarter of an hour, that is the extent of the panic in the lab. Rue's heart continues to pound, the knowledge that Rose is not in imminent peril not quite reassuring enough to soothe her nerves when her daughter is not in sight. If she had but a sip of something to steel her - no. No, no, no.

Rue and Bion are halfway through the bracer, peeling apart each piece and inspecting it centimeter by centimeter for any sign of a flaw or damage from being transported over the past few weeks, when Rue's phone rings again. There has been no new alarm, and Bion's latest measurements show the grimdark has settled to a near-zero point on all of her sensors, but it is still with a deep sense of foreboding tossing her stomach's contents around that Rue answers. "Samuel, please tell me you are standing outside my lab this very instant or so help me -"

"We will be there shortly." A fifteen minute span has been enough to inject even more weariness into Samuel's voice; the man sounds haggard in a way his physical appearance would never substantiate. Rue's clutching grip on the phone tightens unconsciously, and she has to force herself to relax her fingers when the phone casing creaks. "However, Miss Ranger - ah, the one who is assisting Rose with her problem - insists that she speak with you. She seems adamant that it cannot wait, and I - well, if it is something to do with her void abilities, she seems to believe you would understand the danger better than I. Not that I can blame her - I'm no scientist!"

He chuckles, but Rue knows Samuel and she knows when he's faking it, his laughter bright but
hollow as an act for the sake of children present on the other end of the line. He often had cause to laugh like that when Rose and John occasionally returned too early from the park and interrupted a tense meeting between him and Rue on the subject of the children's powers, years and years ago. Samuel has always been cagey, no matter how he tries to hide it, but his determination to ensure that his adopted son be as secure and nurtured as possible has always been something Rue admires.

"Take over here," Rue murmurs to Bion, and the woman nods, measuring the slope of the latest graph with a careful eye as Rue reinsets a surge protector in the bracer and sets it down to focus on the conversation at hand. "By all means, then." She steps away from the desk and folds her arm over her chest, noting with distant dismay that the angular buttons of her lab coat have been done up out of sequence in her panicked haste to get ready for working on the bracer. "But first - you say this Ranger has defected?"

Samuel's voice drops to an undertone, between the two of them alone. "So she claims. I have my own reservations. I'd take whatever she has to say with a healthy pinch of salt, myself, but you'd know more about whether what she says about the void is - well, scientifically reasonable or not. She acts quite sincere. And she looks like - well, that doesn't matter, for the moment. We'll concern ourselves with it when we get there. Forget I said anything."

Rue only deliberates for a moment. If there is even a passing chance that this Ranger might have ill-news that could impact Rose's fragile state, she needs to hear it. "Very well. Give her the phone. I'll see what she looks like when you all arrive, with my daughter unharmed," she adds, dry as sandpaper. Samuel sighs - and who does he think she is, that she'd just let him get away with a clear segue like that? Really.

The phone crackles and flutters with unclear noises, the distant sound of voices mixed with the loud, vague thumps of someone jostling the phone repeatedly. The clunking noises continue even after there is a faint scramble of someone pressing the phone to the side of their face, as though the hand holding the cell can't stop trembling. "H'lo?" someone who must be this 'Ranger' says, slurred and hesitant and just a touch too loudly, as though unused to speaking through a phone. "Oh crud. This's Doctor Lalon', right?"

"Speaking," Rue says automatically, and only then does what she's hearing catch up with the rest of her mind -

She's heard that voice before. It's familiar but not, imbued with that odd, unsettling lack of recognition that Rue remembers from her earliest days at med school, when she replayed audio recordings of her notes and what she heard on the tapes didn't quite match pitch with what she heard every day of her life when she spoke.

That's her voice - younger and without the faint hoarseness of a life of drinking, too highly pitched because she still wasn't comfortable in her own skin back then; it's like a blast from the past, and it is utterly impossible.

Rue thinks she knows who this Ranger looks like.

Dammit, Samuel!

"Oh thanks gogs," the girl with Rue's voice says, verging on the kind of incomprehensibility Rue hasn't achieved since the worst of her drinking binges shortly following news of Jo's death in an unfortunate meteor-related catastrophe. Then Ranger drops into a harsh whisper, so slurred that only a lifetime of inflicting the same vernacular on others allows Rue to decipher it. "Pleash, you have to help me, and my friends! I know you don't have enny reason to believe me, but we're not doing all this a' purpose."
"Slow down, dear - Ranger," Rue says, processing this as swiftly as she can. Perhaps it's only the voice. Maybe Rue's abrupt sobriety has led to genuine auditory hallucinations at last. Is her heart rate elevated? She thinks her heart rate is elevated. And the speed at which the girl is slurring in a frantic, hushed mutter is not helping to assuage her residual panic - hearing someone that sounds exactly like yourself is not exactly conducive to maintaining one's calm. "If there is an issue concerning your ability to keep Rose stable, please - tell me flat out."

"What? Nooo, this has nothing to do wit' the voidy thing, id even k about any of that stuff," Ranger hisses, and then she seems to hush herself and drops back into an undertone, almost a whimper, really. "It's zabout mindgrubs. Please, please, you're a doctor, right? Doctor Lalslonde, it's sayss it 'n all the files, you're a doctor zo you can help, right?!" The girl yelps and says - not into the phone, but to someone else - "No, s'fine, I got it! No worries, mister foxy dad - uh, ne'emind that. I didn't say that. I'm good!"

Rue's mind skips like a poorly record audio track - from Rose - to my voice - to wait what and screeches to a screaming halt on mindgrubs. "What did you just say."

Another clatter, a thunk of plastic hitting glass, and then Ranger has regained control of the phone, whispering so ferociously Rue quite loses that sense of disturbed familiarity at the sound of the girl's voice in her rising consternation. "In'r heads. It's - it's hard to talk about? On account of they make you lissen to orders, and I'm not, and it doesn't like it when you don't follow orderlies." Ranger laughs, bordering close to hysteria. "I mean orders. Oh man, 's getting worse. Please, you haff to get it out of all our heads, Jakey's brain is already mush and -"

Good lord. More of the Midnight Crew's mindgrubs, of the sort that drove at least four trolls into fanatical displays of insane loyalty, and one of the victims has broken the brainwashing. Rue strides around the table to swoop down on Bion's computer station, where Halburn is still handling the basic thaumaturgic processes with a deft claw. The troll looks up in acknowledgement, and the look on Rue's face must be frightening enough that he lurches to his feet with a claw instantly going to his side to brace himself, earfins flaring. "Fetch Marion," she murmurs, placing a hand over the phone so her voice doesn't carry. "And prep everyone we brought from the neurology and mental magics departments. Mindgrubs," she says by way of explanation, in response to Halburn's furrowed brows. "If Marion complains, inform him that we have actual, enthusiastic consent for extreme brain surgery, that should please him."

Halburn's face darkens, grave, and his eyes dart to the readouts on the computer screen beside him. "Is this related to...Miss Rose?" he asks.

"Tangentially. The people she and the other children were fighting seem to have been infected with these parasites, too. And at least one of them is very interested in having it out. We'll need you to pinpoint the exact location before Marion can proceed." When Halburn's violet eyes light with determination and he retrieves his crutch to tuck under his arm, Rue removes her hand from the phone. "Ranger, dear? How many of you are there?"

"Four!" the girl says, her voice trembling with relief. "Only - Janey and Jake, they're, they're not doing so good. They got it wayy worse, and now Jane is kind of a killing machine? Jake's not mush better, to be honest…"

"Ah. We dealt with similar, the last time we came across Crew members with this affliction," Rue says, nodding to herself. She does not mention that the worst of those other victims remains trapped in her madness, a coldblood-type insanity exacerbated by years of chemical brainwashing that has, according to reports from Maine, proved resistant to the usual drug regimen used to treat dementia. "We can remove them. If you can hold out until I have finished preparations for helping Rose with
her grimdark breakdown. I will owe you more than I can say for assisting her."

"Uhhh, since it was kindamyfault," the girl says in a rush, "I'll do that. Yeah. Of course! But uh -" another muffled thud of feedback, the sound of a girl murmuring in an inquiring tone - Rose? - and then a grunt. "Okay, I figured out how ta get the little door thingie between the backsheet and the trunk open, so I think this is private. Oof."

A pause. Rue waits, attempting to piece together what the girl means, and coming to the conclusion that the Egbert's car must contain a center console with trunk access, and Ranger might well have stuck her head through the gap.

"There is a doge back here," the girl says at last.


"He'sh all…"

"Yes?"

"Glowing."

"There is no risk of being irradiated. I've checked." Multiple times. She still has no idea what's powering that thing or where on earth Harley could have found it. After witnessing what happened after the Becquerel of the previous universe was brutally devoured by Jack Noir, Rue is all the more perturbed by the possible answers to both questions.

"...Awesome. 'Kay." Ranger swallows, a loud gulp, and afterward her voice is noticeably lower, so quiet that Rue almost can't hear it over the whine of void interference. "M pretty sure one of your guys' people has one, too. In their brain."

It's not - that's - "Damnation." Rue bites her tongue before anything worse can spill out - the Vantas boy was only around for a few days, and he had a horrific influence on everyone's vocabulary. "You're sure?"

"I hear thangs. Not lots, on account of Doctor Dienek kinda hates me, cuz I don't respond to the brain worm thingies the way he wants." Ranger hiccups, and it sounds pained. Like she's on the edge of tears. "I know there's grub things in basically everyone in the Mittlenacht Crew - uh, Midnight - and sometimes Dirk hears more, and he's heard that the Crew has a sleeper argent. Agent. Whatever. I hope it's not you, please let it not be you, but it's someone related to these hero guys and if they find out I'm tellin' you this I'm so screwed."

Which means, in a worse case scenario - it could be anyone. Could be her - none of those troll thugs had seemed aware of the parasite in their minds, certainly, and those on the mend were genuinely baffled by the news. Could be Ambrose…

Ranger's secrecy makes far more sense now - it could even be Samuel himself. A cold sweat breaks out across the back of Rue's neck, and she rubs her thumb across her mouth, smearing the already patchy lipstick impatiently as she considers her options. For god's sake, if she expands the criteria it could be anyone on her team. "Not another word about it then, dear." Not on this line, anyway. "I'll take care of it. The important thing is that you all get here safe and sound." Closing her eyes, Rue leans back against the computer station. Internally, she runs through the grimdark levels on the screen, and what she has memorized of the dissections of extracted mindgrubs, and exactly what flavors of vodka she has in her emergency storeroom -

Oh. Right. The interns already purged the storeroom. Twice damnation, then.
She allows her eyes to blink open, and her smile is brittle. "We'll get this all fixed up, I assure you. Everything will be alright, Ranger."

"You could." The girl breaks off, and there is a click loud enough that Rue almost thinks she's hung up, or worse. But then she whispers, cautious but hopeful, "Roxy. Thas my name. You could call me Roxy."

"Roxy." Rue's chest performs an intriguingly complex twist. "Roxy it is, then. I'll see you soon, dear."

By the time Marion and Halburn check in from two floors down, ensconced in the rooms where the mindscape pentacles have been chalked on the floors and walls, Rue has hung up the phone to the girl's shy but exuberant farewells. She has no idea what Samuel is bringing to her doorstep. She knows only that something is afoot, and Rose's grimdarkness is only one jagged piece in a puzzle Rue isn't sure she wants to solve.

She calls Ambrose.

He does not answer, and she feels very, very alone.

RL: Do you both have everything that you need?
NH: Yes, ma'am. Everything was restocked before we left Maine, and you told us to bring whatever would be necessary in the event we needed to repeat the procedure.
TM: I've printed the consent forms. We're doing this right, this time.
RL: As you will, Marion, but only one may have the mental capacity to agree. The rest are under varying levels of brainwashing and are most likely unable to legally make decisions for themselves.
TM: Really. Really?
RL: I know this troubles you. But I do not have the mental stamina to debate the ethics of brain surgery with you when it has been demonstrated we're just undoing the effects of pre-existing illegal brain surgery.
TM: ...Yes, Doctor Lalonde.
NH: You said to prep for four, iç that correct?
RL: I'm afraid it isn't, not anymore.
RL: Prepare to screen our entire staff. You will also need to make arrangements for your teams to be able to screen you two, as well.
TM: What?!
RL: I hope that only preliminary MRIs will be necessary. Once we ascertain whether those in other departments show similar tumor-like masses on their scans, we can decide whether to proceed to mindscape scans.
NH: But iç...you suspect people within our own teamç. For how long?
RL: I suspect no one in particular. But I have reason to believe at least one person close to the children is compromised, and unfortunately, that means anyone under my supervision could be a potential leak. This is merely a precautionary measure. I will be volunteering to be scanned first, as the most likely target.
TM: Jesus. I'll draw up a schedule. This is going to take some arranging.
NH: You only have a few MRI machineç, Doctor Marion. My scanç can lighten the burden.
TM: Your incredibly invasive, uncontrolled, ethically questionable scans?!
RL: Marion.
TM: ...Thank you, Halburn.
NH: Of course.

Rue has the feeling it is going to be another very, very long day.
TM: Do you have to type like that? Try for some professionalism in front of Doctor Lalonde, for Pete’s sake.
NH: Yes, unfortunately, I have to.
TM: Oh let me guess. If you don't type like that, your fancy hoodoo consent-ignoring magic will stop working.
NH: No. It just seem to aggravate you.
NH: And your hatred is remarkably stimulating. My apologies.
TM: …
TM: Oh, you've got to be kidding.
TM: No. That was one time. One time.
NH: I don't know what you could possibly be talking about.
TM: That - gah! That hate thing! Once!
NH: If the approaching group arrive right at this exact moment outside the void ward's outermost perimeter, it will still take them ten minutes to drive down and park.
TM: No.
TM: Absolutely not.
NH: Nine minutes.
TM: …
TM: Your office, not mine.
NH: ♠
TM: I despise you.
NH: ♠-

Doc Scratch is not pleased.

And when he is not pleased, it means nothing good. Alone in his penthouse suite, he surveys the Möbius net of the Battlefield, and finally, at last, is forced to concede that his positioning of Diamonds Droog is no longer accurate. Like four children years before her, Droog has enmeshed herself in the emptiness of the void, and he can no longer trust in his ability to wield her as a piece, harrying Slick across the board.

It is a true inconvenience, the predominance of void within this session. He has his suspicions, but unfortunately, the most likely culprits are naturally those most shrouded by the void, and thus obscured from his near pansophical sight. And the most likely of all, for a void level of this magnitude…

The Heir.

What a quandary. If what Scratch suspects has occurred is indeed so, he has twelve players on the board he previously dismissed as insignificant, all of them veiled from his sight and steadily accumulating significance he could not account for in his previous calculations. He was aware of the existence of the Peixes spawn and Eridan Ampora, but only due to the fact that they are entangled in the affairs of chaos gods in his acquaintance - he’d thought them superfluous, dangerous only if said gods used them to interrupt the game for their own reasons. And the Bard is...the Bard, powerful, unpredictable, but just as much of a sucker as the rest. But now he must assume that his instinct to dismiss them, to consider them only ex-players who echoed through space-time by the whim of paradox space, was the result of the void hemming in his vast thoughts and preventing him from fully considering the implications of the trolls' presence in the session. The Knight of Blood at the very least is active in Washington, worming his way into the lives of the human children and spoiling very
delicately-laid plans.

And now, dearest Gl'bgolyb won't even return his calls.

He.

Is not.

Pleased.

With a considering sigh that reverberates telepathically through his bone-white orb of a skull, Scratch removes the black-and-white diamond-bedecked pawn from its square and sets the piece back within his collection of unassigned markers. He leaves Boxcars' mark in its place - the man continues to serve well in Seattle, for now, though his future has become murky and blotted with smears of void. Unfortunately, Clubs may have to be scratched as well, soon. A shame. He had hoped, with Dienek's help, to transmute the three into more pliant instruments of his master's will, but they've only ever been pawns of convenience, and not necessarily to be relied upon for the endgame.

Still. This means that now he must begin to apply himself to predicting just how the Crew may seek to interfere with his plans, rather than enjoying the expediency of their submission. As loath as he is to ever assign importance to such a rabble, the Crew have ever proven themselves dark horses, careening headlong into the affairs of more powerful pieces and upsetting the game with their greed and ambition, all guns blazing. He's manipulated them in the past, but never before this game has he been so deeply involved in the Crew's affairs. It has been ever so tempting to do more than oversee and nudge events into motion by sending the three ex-carapacians out to perform work his master's loyal Felt cannot -

But that is not how he works. True, he has taken on a more...hands-on approach, shall we say, with this particular game. But really, all he has to do is allow the pieces to move on the board around him, and in a few select cases, provide them with the opportunity to do as they wish that would otherwise be denied to them. A tangential role has always best suited him.

Let Droog fall where she will, then. Now that Leviathan has agreed to a mutually beneficial arrangement - the fruits of which Scratch hopes to reclaim shortly - a multitudinous legion of opportunities have spread themselves before him.

Horrorterrors that one has not bred for a specific purpose are ever so much more uncertain to work with. Chaology has never been the most exact of majjykal branches, most likely because the elder gods themselves prefer it that way, dipping in and out of the realm of the games at their leisure. Scratch was able to groom Gl'bgolyb, a minor hive chosen especially from the ranks of the Furthest Ring for the purpose of being presented as a gift to Alternia, but chaos does ever defy expectations, and the death of the hivemind's carefully-bred corporeal form, and its subsequent prototyping, have not stopped it from seizing a new body in this new session and heaving itself from the Ring to Earth without so much as a by-your-leave. It feels it owes him nothing.

In fact, Gl'bgolyb is the first and only Horrorterror to have successfully convinced a foolish group of mortals to complete a bloody summoning spirograph and to have manifested all of itself on the material plane, without Scratch's assistance. Not even Leviathan, for all its scheming, has achieved as much through its many proxies. If dear Gl'bgolyb were not a relatively minor horror, Scratch might have needed to step in - but no. Even glutted as it has become from the spoils of Europe, Gl'bgolyb is still manageable. Scratch engrained the grimlight god's obsession with the trolls Peixes with a fine hand and a sharp thwap of a mental newspaper whenever it strayed, and now the horror seems content to meddle only in their affairs.
Malā’ikah had taught an interesting lesson in the judiciousness of choosing allies. Even now it possesses the raw power and vast legion of minds that had made it a very attractive potential business partner, but the madness inflicted upon its blasphemous choir by exposure to the Bard have rendered it too unstable for a working relationship.

Leviathan, though. Leviathan has a reputation. An ancient one, older than the stars and the spaces between them, and may have paid court to the Lord Azathoth himself - but whose timeworn, coiled, screaming minds keep the truth of such matters within their tangled, thorny hive. It could, perhaps, match even Scratch himself in the sheer scope of its power if it truly applied all of itself to the task. An alliance with even a small portion of its hivemind proved more than enough to sabotage the previous session to Scratch's design; another accord with Leviathan should produce exactly the kinds of conditions Scratch needs to maneuver events in his favor.

So Scratch sets aside his contemplation of how to deal with Diamonds Droog's vanishing act, and focuses on making himself presentable for a meeting with a multi-angled being of the most Noble of the Horrorterror Circles. The Crew are only a few small pieces in the grand scale of the game he plays, and can be removed from said game with ease. Sure enough, as he snaps a tasteful sheet of linen over the chessboard - no need to needlessly antagonize a Horrorterror with the sight of Skaia - a distinct aura of horror begins to permeate the space around him, a faint breeze sheeting in through the open windows that lead out onto the balcony he has reserved for other such meetings with inhabitants of the Outer Rings throughout the years. One must maintain one's contacts, after all, even if a good number of them have fled the destructive influence of one's timeless master over the years without leaving a forwarding address. He steps out onto the balcony, adjusting the collar of his green shirt to an acceptable angle, and casts his ample mind out to greet Leviathan.

Leviathan. Do come in.

With a damp, soughing billow of wind, the sky over the balcony darkens to a bruised purple, and Leviathan unspools itself within his mind. It cannot present itself physically without a consenting host or a summoning spirograph, and Doc Scratch has no intention of playing either role for the grimdark Horrorterror at this juncture in time.

He can, however, provide a neutral ground in which Leviathan can communicate from the Furthest Ring. The perks of possessing a near-omniscient, indestructible mind. Unlike Malā’ikah, the tangle keeps its sucking, entangling impulses to itself, for the most part, which always makes for a more pleasant negotiating environment. Soon the balcony reeks of dead fish and too-salty blood, and Scratch reaches out with a spark of green energy to discreetly close the windows behind him before the smell can permeate the upper floors of the building and drive some of the more telepathically sensitive members of the staff quite mad. As a perfectly logical being he is immune to such mental frailties as insanity, but it would do no good to lose the Felt to madness at this point.

\[ \text{S'}cra tch. } \text{A projection of Leviathan begins to twine around the thick stone of the balcony railings, knotting together to form a thorny tangle that blinks at him with a single visible eye. Scratch is sure there are more, but their lids remain closed - for now - and he takes care not to stare too deeply into its gaze. He once had a neophyte protegé who did just that (in spite of his frequent, cautionary warnings about stares) and - well, look where she is, now. Do w'è not këp ur word?} \]

You do, indeed. I appreciate your cooperation immensely. I would offer you something to satiate your appetites, but I am aware that such a task would be impossible with my current resources.

Then - well, if he could frown, he would. From this vantage, Scratch can cast his mind out without the need for subtleties and see all of Leviathan that there is to see on this plane. The god twists and inverts in patternless black webs and welters, but a jumble of knots extends outward from Scratch's
mind not toward the Furthest Ring, but scraping along at a different angle to branch out to the north and west. It's a subtle loop, one crafted with great skill so that it skims over the ambient magic of the physical world without leaving a trace of itself to be detected by mortal senses or instruments, and he has no doubt that it leads directly to Rose Lalonde. His poor protégé Seer.

Ah. I hope I am not interrupting something. When you agreed to a second meeting, I assumed your schedule was free.

The eye does not blink at him. He does not blink back. The projection eventually waves a stray tentacle in what may be interpreted as dismissal, if one has experience in deciphering the horrific cat's cradles and madness-inducing loops of Unmodified Elder Sign.

Fair enough. Scratch adjusts his negotiating plans accordingly. He took advantage of the young Seer's access to one of his cue balls to tempt Leviathan forth with a familiar piece, but if the horror becomes too engaged in using Rose as a host vessel too soon, he'll need to spin this very carefully.

Thankfully, he is excellent at spin control.

Nevertheless, I hope that at least some of our goals coincide. We were able to reach a point of mutually beneficial association once before, and I have reason to believe we may do so again.

Another flip of the tentacle, this one considerably smugger. You are as blind as he is shy. Macabre's own delight, water begins to trickle over the mosaic of the balcony floor, running in brackish black rivulets over the stone and flowing around Doc Scratch's white shoes, giving him a wide berth as it laps up against the wall of the building. It's still only a projection, but the more water oozes out of the air, the more discolored and warped the mosaics begin to look in reality.

No need for such harsh words. You are a being of pure disorder, and so from your perspective the inevitable logic of my actions in the service of a singular, ultimate goal must seem insipidly single-minded, when it is, I assure you, ineffably complex. Inevitability is my invitation, as self-serving chaos is yours.

Leviathan snorts and the water inches deep around Scratch's polished shoes begins to froth and churn with what might be horrific amusement. A sploch of black-tainted water splatters against the bottom hem of Scratch's pant leg, but he remains impassive.

You are entitled to your own opinions, of which you no doubt have many. But as a general rule, you and my Lord share similar goals - triumph through destruction.

And perhaps, if Scratch presents the truth at the correct angle, he may be able to persuade more concessions from Leviathan. Lying is never necessary, naturally; the truth must simply be used to its fullest advantage.

He has done reckless harm to your kind in the past - does harm even now, for he already is and always shall be here, and the End of Time cannot be reined in. But my vision can chart his course, and may help you evade further damage to your hives, if you so choose.

There. Not a lie. Simply a suggestion so unlikely as to be essentially irresolvable. He could do such a
thing. But by the time Leviathan would be most likely to call upon such a favor, Scratch will already be quite dead. His demise is inevitable, and every action he takes, every player and horror on the board he manipulates and coaxes and coerces across the Battlefield, is just another step along many simultaneous paths. Even if one such path fails to come to fruition, one of the others will continue on. It would take a fully realized, self-actualized Seer at the top of their echeladder to even hope to map out and derail every one of his plans.

He has made a point of taking all such potential Seers in all games into consideration. Some require a special hand to keep them blind; others do quite well enough on their own. None ever have or ever will succeed.

Then, with a careful hand, Doc Scratch plucks at the buttons of his suit jacket and begins the tiresome process of disrobing himself. The fabric of the jacket has already begun to burn and fester, the clean white threads fraying as tiny patches of grinddark acid seep into them. He pats at his head absentely with the fabric to remove the worst of the condensation, and by the time he has dried himself to satisfaction, little is left of the jacket but scraps of thin, greying cloth. But his green undershirt remains as spotlessly intact as ever, and he adjusts the fall of his white tie to compensate for the unfortunate loss of the jacket, allowing the last piece of fabric to drop into the water around his waist.
Horrorterror's have absolutely no concern for one's state of dress. But Scratch prefers to present a charming, polished appearance even when negotiating with beings of naked chaos.

Leviathan ruminates in a moment of relative silence; Scratch can make out the murmur of countless voices screaming in anguish as the Horrorterror deliberates among itself, but for the most part it just sounds like incomprehensible, ever-changing nonsense.

And then, at last, the many-angled one's response smashes into Scratch's mind, crashing and in something as close to unison as any horror has ever achieved. "H E R E."

With that to signal their accord, Leviathan opens all of their eyes. The eyes along the thorny spine, the eyes along every tendril sunk into the stone, and of course, the eyes that fill the black water around Scratch - thousands of eyes, really. It would be more disconcerting to someone not impervious to insanity, perhaps, but Doc Scratch has no eyes and thus no real emotional response to their absence or presence. The water begins to drain backwards, sloshing acid in ever-higher waves as Leviathan sucks it down into a vortex midway between its tendril on the railing and Scratch's circle of dry stone. Beneath the murky water, Scratch can just barely make out the spirograph melted into the green stone of the mosaic, warped and corroded by bloodbrine but intact all the same.

Not enough to bring forth a Horrorterror of Leviathan's size and density. But enough for it to pass on what Scratch has requested. The geometric, alternating curves of overlaid hypotrochoids and epitrochoids burn with pallid white fires, and there is a moment wherein two outcomes are equally likely, poised on the edge of reality - one, that Leviathan defaults on their agreement, and sends a physical tangle of itself through instead, to annihilate and flood the city around them to make room for a brood of its own - and two, that it fulfills its end of the bargain.

It is the second that comes to pass. The grimdark waters drain away down through the spirograph, sucked back into the Furthest Ring, and leave behind, in exchange, something that is not a projection but very much solid and corporeal. Scratch does not take a step toward it until it finishes melting through the gate, a process very much resembling a candle of wax growing rather than dissolving. Tints of lavender and mauve dance across the surface of the pearlescent white, while the dregs of mineral, but veins of grimdark thread through the mottled chunk of enamel, and it appears to be lit from within by a thin, throbbing light.

A tooth. Or, Scratch knows, in the correct hands - a seed.

Ták e n. Scratch's eyes are open, and he can just barely make out the spirograph melted into the green stone of the mosaic, warped and corroded by bloodbrine but intact all the same.

Never, Leviathan. I have a uniquely capacious memory. Call upon me and I shall return the favor in kind whenever you so wish. You have my sincerest gratitude.

At the worst, Leviathan could demand the Seer once and for all. It will simply be a matter of postponing that demand until her role in Scratch's plans comes to a close.

"O u r m a n y m e n t h a n y o r y i s a l s o c a p a c i t o u s, S c r a t c h. W e d o n o t f o r g i v e. W e d o n o t t o l e r a c e. A n d w i t h o u t a w o r d f u r t h e r, t h e h i v e m i n d ' s p r e s e n c e b e g i n s t o d i s s p a t e f r o m S c r a t c h ' s m i n d, g r e a t i n t a n g i b l e t a n g l e s o f it d r i f t i n g b a c k o f t o t h e s p a c e s b e t w e e n t h e s t a r s, w h i l e t h e d r e g s o f i t s p o w e r w a f t a w a y t o t h e n o r t h. S c r a t c h a l m o s t w i s h e s h i s t w o o f f s h o o t c u e b a l l s i n t h e a r e a c o u l d b e d i r e c t e d t o t u r n t h e i r a l l-s e e i n g g a z e u p o n t h a t v o i d-i n f e s t e d r e g i o n, b u t t h e y a r e e n g a g e d i n i m p o r t a n t w o r k, t a s k t h a t s h a l l r e s u l t i n i n n u m e r a b l e r e w a r d s - n o t t h e l e a s t o f w h i c h m a y h e l p c l e a r u p s o m e o f t h a t v o i d w a r d i n g."

So he shall be patient, and await whatever reports come in from Boxcars and from Dienek's experiments. Patience is a virtue Scratch possesses in spades.
"Doc? You in here?"

It is an audible sound, a human voice, and Doc Scratch turns to open the windows with a click of his fingers and folds his hands behind his back, his suspenders shifting as he sighs telepathically. He had sensed Steven Haydon's passage through space as the human ascended the steps to the penthouse, of course, and part of Scratch's power had taken care of locking the suite doors until the risk of Leviathan's chaos driving the man insane had passed, while the rest dealt with the Horrorterror itself. It's a simple matter of always being perpetually, omnisciently aware of everything that goes on in one's immediate vicinity. With another spark of power he transports the tooth to sit upon his desk, where it will not be disturbed - if any of the Felt know what's good for them. Which, in general, they do.

Ah, Stitch. A problem?

Steven Haydon long ago expressed a preference for going by the shorter sobriquet, and Doc Scratch has seen fit to oblige the man. Some members of the Felt recall more than others - this is the first time they have reincarnated as anything other than leprechauns, and though their loyalty remains programmed into the very essence of their beings thanks to Scratch's hand in their conceptions, some now prefer new names for a new world. It would be impolite in the extreme not to accommodate them.

But Stitch remembers more than most. It hasn't helped him evade Diamonds Droog's more forceful overtures of permanently enforced patronage on numerous occasions, but it lends the man an air of weary docility that keeps him on everyone's good side, and his ability to reverse the flow of entropy has never been more useful, given the odd tears that have erupted in the fabric of space-time in ways that Scratch cannot attribute to his master's work.

It is troubling. But Stitch has had no trouble stitching together the rends in space as he has always mended the Overcoat. When one deals intimately with time travel, it is imperative that one keeps a damn good tailor on the payroll. And Stitch has yet to be bested in a contest of tailoring. He is simply the best there is.

"Yeh could say that, Doc," Stitch sighs, digging through the pockets of his tailcoat and walking right up to Scratch, where the dark-haired man reaches up without pause to pinch the fabric of Scratch's undershirt between his fingers. The ragged scar that runs the length of the man's face lends his frown a surly cast as he plucks at the frayed edges where stray drops of grimdark have eaten right through the fabric. "Been up to sommat with them again? I'da brought a proper patch kit if I'd known."

No need to concern yourself. I shall remove it shortly. But let me - ah.

Scratch turns his sight to Stitch's workshop, far below the surface of the earth. Droog once referred to it as a 'foul green basement,' he believes. She always did have such a way with words. The other regular inhabitant of said basement workshop, apart from Stitch himself, is the man's most important and invaluable project, but the very nature of the being's extensive injuries means that Scratch cannot always get a clear view of the goings on in the basement area.

But unfortunately, there is simply nowhere better suited than said basement to keeping Jack in confinement. Noir swallowed the essence of an aspect, and then had it torn from him by a god of Space. Such wounds are not so easily stitched as the one upon Stitch's face, and their severity vacillates wildly so that one moment Noir is up and raging, as is his wont, and the next the carapacian lies torn open on the floor, his insides exposed by the spiraling lesions that Stitch holds together with surgical sutures and prayers.

Still, Noir has been functional enough to make his mark; his presence in the basement is a secret that
everyone in the Midnight Crew and the Felt knows, and they all speak of him in whispers they think
Scratch cannot hear, a mixture of awe and terror in their voices whenever they discuss the carapacian
who can tear a grown troll in two with a single claw and a snarl.

Now, however -

Now -

Ah, Stitch. You have outdone yourself, truly. Excellent work.

It takes only a millisecond for Scratch to observe Noir in the basement, and then turn his full attention
back to Stitch. In that time, Stitch has already managed to stuff a pin into his mouth, replying only in
grunts as he swiftly sews together the unravelled edges where grimdark acid ate through the shoulder
of Scratch’s shirt. "Got'n eyeful of it? Took me long enough to figure out the right thread," he
mumbles around the pin, the scar rippling along his cheek as his scar tissue-flecked fingers pinch and
pull at the needle and fabric.

He is stable? Permanently?

"'s stable as I can make him. I tried to tell him to keep his damn self on the bed, but does he ever
listen?"

Yes, Noir’s intolerance of authority figures telling him what to do has always bordered on the
pathological. He has already found the effigies.

Stitch spits out the pin in disgust. It lands in the trash bin Doc Scratch has placed beside his desk for
just such an occurrence. "What a piece o' work." He snips off the thread close to the shirt, inspects
the near invisible repair job, and then shakes his head in resignation.

You might wish to return without delay. Before he lights one of them on fire. But I shall join you
shortly. There is much Noir and I need to discuss.

"Yeh got it, Doc." Stitch steps away, eyeballs the massive tooth resting on the desk with a slow
shake of his head, and then ambles off to the exit, stuffing his sewing supplies back into his pockets
as he goes. "If yeh see 'em first, tell Eggs and Biscuit to lay off. We're gonna need another
warehouse, at this rate, and I'm the one that's gotta ship out all the dud copies."

Of course, Stitch.

Before he leaves, Doc Scratch places the tooth within a safe, one built to withstand even an expert
safecracker like Boxcars.

He knows exactly when and where he wishes to activate it.

Doc Scratch is pleased.

And when he is pleased, it means nothing good.

Chapter End Notes

Stretto – music, the close overlapping of two parts or voices, the second one entering
before the first has completed; also, a concluding passage in a composition, played at a
faster tempo than the earlier material.

Karkat has had a lot on his plate, after being away from home for so long, and he somehow failed to notice that the time of Crabdad's reassignment came and went, like, chapters ago.

If you listen closely, you can make out the distinct sound of foreshadowing in the air.
Who Art Wind and Air

Chapter Summary

Thou art far too far for wings of words to follow,
Far too far off for thought or any prayer.
What ails us with thee, who art wind and air?
What ails us gazing where all seen is hollow?

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter where a lot of things start to come together, but then shit gets too real? No really, I'm warning you right now, this chapter will have one hell of a cliffhanger. Every single narrator we have is unreliable in one way or another. But one narrator has been far more unreliable than the rest...for several very good reasons.

Power anthem is Devil's Spoke (Laura Marling). General 'oh god what a clusterfuck' warning for John on down, with special points to John for some depressive thoughts, Dave for loving too damn much to not try to save people, and Jade for demonstrating what happens when you try to use space powers while in shock and trapped in wards that fuck with your powers.

H&H belong to realmenwearights.tumblr.com. Assorted posts in Dave’s section come from sbahisecrets and sbahjpickuplines, while the dashboard theme/abomination in the eyes of god and man is the SBaHJ theme by spaceking on userstyles. Hussie was the one to describe SBaHJ as “rich sub-cognitive lexicon" and who am I to question the creator?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"See, Karkat? We totally survived!" John somehow, impossibly, has his cheeriest grin on. And okay, yes, fine, Karkat has resigned himself to having fallen for an unapologetically peppy moron, but there are limits, and Karkat thinks that one more trip via Harley's space powers might push him to his. The incorporeal windy sensations of John’s air teleportation, even if they make Karkat feel like all the blood in his body has been sucked away, at least don't border on genuine physical pain like the sensation of being drowned in neon green soda and having one's atoms squeezed out the other end like toothpaste from a tube.

But: "Yes, to Harley's credit, we didn't ricochet off Australia and teleport to the center of the Earth," Karkat mutters under his breath, barely loud enough for John to hear. Not that it helps when they're all wedged into the Egbert's painfully compact excuse for a motorized vehicle. Harley is on the roof with the two Scratch kids doing their best impressions of roadkill and Cogitator (Dirk, according to Ranger's nervous chatter), which helps a little, but still. Gah. Close quarters set off all the ancient inbred alarm bells in Karkat's head, informing him that at any moment one of these driveloving fetid shitheads could drop off the deep end and he and John would be pinned against the door with few escape options. "Now get me out of this vehicle before Dave decides it’s time to make good on his
fantasies of rapperhood and share his imaginary new music hallucinations with the world at large."

"Nice try," John says, intercepting Karkat's claws before they can reach the door handle and release from this metal death trap. He closes his hand over Karkat's and squeezes, hugging Karkat from behind so that Karkat, grudgingly, has to fold his arms over his chest and let the soothing commence. If anyone else had tried this right now, Karkat would probably have ripped their arm out of its socket and proceeded to beat them upside the head for it, but John is exempt from the grievous assault with a bodily appendage clause. "We still have to drive the rest of the way to the lab, and you, mister, told me yourself that your ribs were sore again -"

"Sore as in I haven't done fuck all the past couple of days, not sore as in about to collapse again!"

"Whatever. Then you should have been more specific." John shrugs.

"It might help mitigate the situation if we were to open the windows," comes the muffled suggestion from Rose, squashed between Ranger/Roxy/What-the-fuck-ever this human is calling herself and Kanaya, who sits upright with the alert demeanor of someone ready to cull a bitch that Karkat recognizes because he's sure he gets the same way when John's vulnerable around a potential threat like Rose is right now. "Any generalized claustrophobia you might be experiencing at the moment may well be alleviated with a breath of fresh air, Karkat. Do you find these kinds of minor moments of panic occur often?"

Karkat flops over as best he can in confined quarters, and side-eyes Rose over the Ranger human's shoulder. "Me, casually descending into claustrophobic paranoia at a leisurely pace? No! Never. What a crazy idea!"

"Oh boy," Dave comments, despite the fact that literally no one wants him to comment. "Don't do it, Karkat. You don't want to go down that dark path."

Karkat, naturally, becomes instantly suspicious. "Pipe down, Strider, I'm not in the mood for your unfunny nuggets of condensed idiocy unless it's something mission critical and/or imperative to our survival," he says. He can hear John's eyes rolling as the kid tightens his hold on Karkat, his nose pressed to the nape of Karkat's neck, but if Dave's gonna hand out dipshit quips like free candy, Karkat's not just going to sit here and meekly accept it without throwing reciprocal words of scornful vengeance right back at his smug face. "What are you talking about now, you outrageous tool?"

"You don't want to get into a snark-off with Rose, man," Dave says; he shakes his head sagely as he twists around to stare at them from behind replacement sunglasses. Where does this evasive fuck even secret all these shades and useless swords on his person, anyway? "As hilarious as it would be to watch you have your ass served like a four-course meal complete with banquet table and creepy ambience-enhancing black candles, I think the last thing we need is you starting a third platonic blood feud over the fact that Rose can outmaneuver you six ways from Sunday. She'll psychoanalyze you. And it'll be embarrassing as hell. Fair warning, bro."

Karkat snorts, and if his teeth clack a little too sharply against each other, sending a dull jolt along his jaw, at least he doesn't break any of his own teeth. He's not strong enough to pull that kind of blueblood horseshit. "Why the fuck would I pull a stupid stunt like that? I approve of Rose's psychomongering, primarily because it proves she's not just frolicking around having auditory hallucinations and dance-fighting. Your entire existence is a waste of time, Strider."

"I honestly can no longer discern," Rose says, idly, her head turned so that it's obvious she's making an aside intended mostly for Kanaya, "whether friendship is what is taking place here, or if Mr Vantas simply finds my elusive, prestigious friendship gambit a topical point of argument."
"I am more inclined to think that he's simply the kind of person who is very easily distracted by arguments," Kanaya replies, still with the pretense that their conversation is somehow private. "He seems sincere enough when he's not shouting. Which is admittedly not often." Then, after a moment's reflection, she presses the switch to lower the window on her side of the car. It doesn't help much - the air's flat as stale soda, but John gives a little whistle and a twitch of his hand, and a breeze starts circulating, bringing with it the scent of damp stone from the pavement of the ranger station's parking lot.

"I can hear literally all of this, you two." Karkat grumbles when John starts laughing. The idiot tries to muffle it, but it doesn't work at all. "I am surrounded by assholes. Do you hear me? You're all assholes. How did I get mixed up in this car full of complete assholes?"

A shift, and the geography of the backseat rearranges a little, as Rose leans further into Kanaya's personal bubble and Roxy, her one hand still occupied with Horrorterror suppression, crosses her legs and takes up more room while she purses her lips, plucking at the collar of her bodysuit with trepidation. "Are you guise always so stroppy?" The human asks, raising her hand. "On account of this is incred awkward-making 'n I'm not sure who to root for here."

"There's no one to root for. I'm pretty sure everyone in this car is equally dumb," John says. He starts laughing again. "It's hilarious!"

"It's essentially a zero-sum game," Rose adds, a sly smirk curling her lip as she pats the back of the Scratch kid's hand with her free one. "Just know, Karkat, that the price of my friendship is high, and you may or may not be subject to a lifetime commitment to excavating your psyche."

"Damn, man, you think even John is an asshole?" Dave says almost over top of his sibling, so that there's a confused moment at the tail end of Rose's snide hogwash where it almost sounds like a deeper stereo has kicked in and Karkat doesn't know who to scowl at next. "That's harsh."

"Though I adore John, he is still an asshole. Look at what I have to deal with, here!" Karkat gestures back toward John's giggling squawk-gaper, which only earns him another round of boisterous laughter before John hugs him to try to either squeeze the life out of him or somehow try to pacify him after all this raging idiocy. Karkat, resigned to the fact that he has zero immunity to the John hug-gambit, can't make much more than a token effort at escaping in these close quarters. As much as he's loathe to admit it, though, the open window does help things a little.

Right up until a curtain of dark hair blocks the opening and Harley appears, an upside down face with a broad smile. "I can hear you all having fun in here without me, while I'm stuck with Mr and Ms Unconscious!" she says, blowing a raspberry at them all. "And Dirk won't talk to me."

"Is everyone still on board up there?" John's dad asks. Karkat can't help but think they're as far out of the guardian's comfort zone as it's possible to go - loitering with the engine running far from home with four kids perched on the roof of the car with no seat belts. A stern father figure's worst nightmare.

"Yup!" Harley nods.

"Then please do what you can to keep it that way, Ms Harley. I would be endlessly grateful."

"Nooo problem!" And with that Harley lifts her head back out of sight, and several loud thumping noises echo through the roof over their heads. Kanaya in particular looks up with wary eyes, the odd pale skin where her costume has torn casting a faint ripple of light over the back of the seat in front of her.
She is so a rainbow drinker. Karkat would be geeking out about this realization more if he weren't stubbornly trying to maintain the façade of being friend-worthy, here, and indulging in a massive flailing fit wouldn't help things when Kanaya already thinks he's unhinged. He's not sure if anyone else in this hell car realizes what a severe lack of pigmentation combined with luminescence in a troll means - but this is huge. This is, in fact, genuine comic book material.

I mean, how often does she need to chug blood? They've all been hanging out together for days and somehow Karkat never noticed any all night blood drives, when he's supposed to be the blood guy?

Fuck, he needs to step up his game. Does she sleep, or does she just pass out in a convenient corpse box every couple weeks during the new moon when there's no light in the sky whatsoever? Human vampires are totally fictional, of course, but rainbow drinkers are just rare. There have been whole centuries where troll civilization declared the mutated gene responsible for the metamorphosis extinct altogether, but they always seem to show up again just to prove the slurry wrong.

At the same time, however, there's the weirdest sensation in his head - like this realization just confirms something he already knew. Like the déjá vu that hit him so hard when he first laid eyes on Kanaya in person. He never noticing anything off when reading about the Malachite Sylph while she worked in Philadelphia, but now he's been getting the same flashes of recognition whenever that Sollux kid shows up on Pesterchum to lisp at them all to shut up.

Urgh. Karkat will just wait and freak out about this with John in private. He can't even imagine bringing up the topic with Kanaya - like, 'oh, hey, so do you prefer warm or cold blood with breakfast? Psych, I'm off-spectrum, sucks to suck' - no. Absolutely not. Lucky, their escort car shows up, gravel spitting from under the tires, and Karkat distracts himself by playing a death-defying game of is that the violetblood in the driver's seat oh god how fast can I put in the emergency contact lenses and nearly enucleating himself in the process of covering his brilliant red irises. Imagine his surprise and disgust when he realizes that no, it's not the coldblood novitiate driving, it's some human intern, thus rendering his idiotic struggle almost pointless. Dave certainly gets a good laugh out of it, prompting Karkat to try his best to kick the back of the douchebag's seat from across Roxy and Rose's legs.

John might let his regular eye color show around these people, because human eye color isn't that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things. But Karkat's still so far off the hemospectrum that he's frankly amazed that Kanaya takes the whole thing in stride. Maybe it's because rainbow drinkers have toed the cull-on-sight line for years. Jadebloods are almost exactly on the balance point between warm and cold, so he'd have thought she'd be at least a little more disapproving, but Karkat gets the feeling he doesn't register as significant enough in Kanaya's world to be worth reporting to colder bloods or anything like that.

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It's only when everyone piles out of the car and Kanaya starts hauling emergency clothing supplies out of the trunk for herself that Karkat realizes he and John dumped their hoodies back in Seattle and never picked them up again.

John's costume is robust enough to pass for a very, very blue jacket and pants pairing. He just looks badass.

For Karkat, on the other hand...there is just no other way to say this...his costume is...tight. He and Jade have, by some twist of fate, ended up the only two here stripped down to bodysuits, but after Karkat tosses the remains of his horn prosthetics into the trunk there's no way he can muster up that ridiculously self-confident Hemogoblin persona that might have allowed him to strut around without a care in the world the way Harley does.
He feels fucking naked. John's dad is here, for fuck's sake. Rose's mom, who has somehow grown even more intimidating the more she loses her professional chic and gains the haunted, crazy-eyed look of a mad scientist, is here. Karkat is about to be surrounded by scientists, all with about twenty years on him, and he's basically not even wearing pants. Just really tight leggings.

All of these people are judging him. He can feel it.

He contemplates the pros and cons of murdering Dave for his pants. It's a close call. But he has other options, goddammit. "Rose. Rose. Make me invisible again," he hisses, seizing the opportunity when it presents itself to duck over and badger her for help.

Rose shakes her head at him, raising the hand clasped by the Scratch kid with an apologetic cant to her shrug. "I'm without magic for the foreseeable future, I'm afraid," she says, a lenient if tired smile spreading over her face when Roxy swings their hands in some fit of exuberance. "Even if I had reserves left, the results would most likely go horribly wrong."

"Sorry about that," the Scratch adds, and then is distracted in the next instant by the reappearance of the other blond, Cogitator, who darts between Roxy and the two unconscious kids being carted into the laboratory with uncanny speed. Karkat bristles whenever the Dirk human appears just on principle; upon comparing stories in the car on the way here, Karkat came to the conclusion that while Berzerker and Bolter might have inherited all the batshit slaughterminator genes - or been brainwashed into acting like dementia-ridden coldbloods on a rampage, God, brainwashed clones? He doesn't even know what to believe anymore - Cogitator is the one to watch out for. Three reasons why? Because he can apparently take Dave and Kanaya on at the same time; because with those shades and hell, even his hair style and the flat set of his mouth, he's the fucking spitting image of an evil Puppeteer which is the last thing anyone wants; and finally, because he's still conscious, whereas the other two potential grenades seem to be down for the count.

Roxy, on the other claw, doesn't register as a threat at all anymore. Her reaction, when Rue Lalonde strides out of the lab to meet them, most closely resembles that of a golden retriever barkbeast reuniting with its loving family, and the pinched expression on Rose's face as she is dragged toward her custodian is fucking priceless.

"Oh, holy crap." John fidgets at Karkat's side, rubbing the back of his head and messing up the windswept mass of hair until it sticks up in a downright impossible assortment of cowlicks. His eye looks awful, the goggles swinging around his neck battered to the point that one of the lenses has gone missing and the frame deformed and scored from the Berzerker's blow. "They look totally alike. I really wanted to be making that part up in my head or forgetting what Doctor Lalonde's face looked like or something. This is so weird.

Karkat rolls his eyes and crowds John into motion. "Come on, we need to get you something for that eye."

"You're not weirded out by this?" John asks, still stuck on this clone thing, because John is a simple soul. He stays close enough to Karkat that the troll knows for a fact that the idiot's still hung up on Karkat's ill-timed comment about his ribs. What a fucking worrier. "The Midnight Crew has clones of Rose's mom and Dave's bro and - those other two have to be Grandpa and my Nanna? And you're more worried about my eye?"

"We can actually do something about the massive swelling of your eye, dumbass." Karkat glowers at Harley as she catches up to them, humming to herself and sauntering around without a care in the world about the fact that her coat-less costume leaves about as much to the imagination as Karkat's does. Just with added galaxy print - that, admittedly, resembles an actual galaxy a little too closely for comfort. Basically, fuck her and her casual self-assurance, alright? "What do I care about clones? So
they have the same gene profile - makes more sense than human reproduction usually does."

"Hey, that's right," Harley jumps in. Karkat does not resist the urge to smack his palm to his face. He welcomes it. "Trolls are always looking for their ancestors with the closest you can get to an identical genetic blueprint, aren't you - that's an interesting way to look at it!"

"No, it's not interesting, it's common fucking sense. You humans should try evolving to experience it some time, it's great." Karkat shakes his head. "And no one's perfectly identical anyway - that's a fucking myth. Just look at the height difference between the Condesce and the Heiress, if you're so hung up on hard facts."

"Still!" Harley bounces ahead, and Karkat bares his teeth in really fucking unholy glee when she misjudges the effect of the void wards or something and ends up almost knocking into the wall instead of walking through the door. "And carapacians clone from machine blueprints, so that's two out of three!" Her blather continues in this vein as she pulls steadily ahead of them.

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The only reason Karkat doesn't kick up more of a fuss about getting roped into a meeting with Doctor Lalonde and all these assholes is that Rue pulls Rose and Roxy aside and returns with a void bracer locked on Rose's wrists, to a resounding round of applause led by John and Harley. The woman then swoops down on John, tutting over the state of his eye as she inspects it, and sends a lab tech to get a cold pack to take the swelling down, which automatically gets Rue back in Karkat's grudging good graces.

She may have been a shitshow at raising Rose, but fuck if she isn't overflowing with desperate maternal concern these days, lavishing more attention on the other kids the more determinedly Rose ignores her. Karkat, who gets more custodial care than he wants to think about on a daily basis, happily shoves John under the bus whenever it looks like she might be about to lunge at Karkat with that wild glint in her dark eyes. Even Dirk and Roxy get roped into the farcical display of human ancestor caretaking; the whole thing becomes momentarily less funny and more terrifying when Dirk reacts to a sudden move by stealing one of Dave's swords before Dave can block him, and by the time Roxy gets Cogitator to stand down everyone's nerves are once again rubbed as raw as open blisters.

Once everyone has been looked over and Berzerker and Bolter (it's hard to think of them having such innocuous, wholesome human names as Jane and Jake, so Karkat just doesn't) have been hooked up to intravenous drips full of enough opiates to keep them down for as long as it will take to get their heads checked out, however, Rue decides to drop a fucking tactical nuke right smack on top of Karkat's growing hope that maybe, just maybe, now that they've dropped these dangerous fuckwads off, Samuel will drive them all back out of the valley and Harley can teleport them back home. It really says something, that Karkat's looking forward to putting his fucking life in Harley's hands. He isn't in excruciating agony after a hero run for the first time in a long ass while, and he does feel like he could sleep for a week, and he wants to celebrate this miraculous achievement by not hanging out in this lab overnight again if he can help it.

"I'm afraid you may need to delay your return for several hours, Samuel," are the first words out of Rue Lalonde's mouth, and Karkat only swallows his howl of anguish because John pre-empts him by reaching over to clap a hand over his widening mouth, so all that can escape is a high-pitched, descending whine of suppressed fury. "There is a very real security risk; I'm sure you'll agree that this needs to be dealt with immediately." The doctor's eyes reach Karkat, and her smile of apology reminds him so strongly of Rose's earlier it's fucking unnatural. There are too many Lalondes and Striders in one room - Dirk, Roxy, Rue, Dave - fucking why. Max capacity was reached like three
Strilondes ago and Karkat's fury escalates accordingly. Fuck it, he and John can fly back or something inanely stupid like that, they don't need to hang around for whatever fresh traumatic thing Doctor Lalonde wants to spring on everyone -

"Explain," Samuel Egbert says, his voice taut as he meets Doctor Lalonde's pronouncement of doom with equal seriousness.

"To provide some background into the situation - you all need to understand that my team in Maine was able to capture a group of trolls earlier in the year, all of them Midnight Crew operatives in pursuit of the Wondering Querent." The carapacian, Karkat notes, being very absent from this meeting. They've only been here fifteen minutes, and he already thinks seeing Spades earlier was just a fluke - carapacians are just cagey, evasive fucks, WV excepted.

"Ordinarily we would have turned them over to the relevant authorities - we're a research team, after all, not jailers," Rue goes on, reaching out with a chipped fingernail to tap on a laptop. It's plugged into a screen - not the hellscreens from a few days ago, just a regular projector in a regular meeting room (which, thank fuck, because John can not handle that room again on such short notice, and Karkat will make it his life's mission to keep John from losing his carefully cultivated mental stability all over again). When the projection appears, it displays a series of colorful scans, all of troll skulls judging by the horn roots visible along the edges of the skulls. "However, one of the trolls showed signs of extremely advanced coldblood dementia, and to be safe we scanned them all."

Rue tears her gaze away from the projection to meet their eyes. "All of them had what appeared to be a tumorous mass here -" she indicates the relevant area of the frontal lobe, and once Karkat's eyes adjust to the diagrams the massive fucking tumor things on each and every scan make him feel a little ill.

"They all had brain cancer?" Harley exclaims, her green eyes flaring as she presses a fist to her lips. "That's - that's - statistically -"

"Impossible," Doctor Lalonde finishes for her, nodding. "Which was when Novitiate Halburn was called in."

Karkat nearly pees himself when the violetblood's voice suddenly emerges from behind him; Karkat hunches down rather than listen to his idiot reflex which would have him whip around to stare at the other troll and risk the weird light of the projector glancing off his contacts in the wrong way. "I, unfortunately, have few methods by which to provide visuals of what I see in mindscapes. But the true nature of the masses was clear when I heard what they whispered in the Crew operatives' minds, and I could then help Marion arrive at the correct conclusion."

"Whispered?" Rose asks, one hand still running in repetitive circles around the ring of her new bracer. For safety's sake as much as out of any sense of unease, she and Kanaya have managed to maneuver themselves so that there's half a room between them and Roxy - and so between them and whatever weird void powers Roxy has that sucked all the usefulness out of the bracer in the first place. "An interesting choice of words."

Karkat refuses to turn to see Halburn, so he misses if the troll nods back or not in reply. "They are organic. Mindgrubs, to be precise. You see a variant of them used as grubmods by husktop hackers, for the most part, and others as gamegrubs for different systems. They work by - well, Marion understands the neurological aspect better than I - but I believe it has something to do with chemicals?"

"Neurotransmitters," another voice mutters, and this time Karkat sneaks a look back to see a human doctor glowering at the figure beside him with the expression of someone who has bitten into a
lemon and is determined to inflict serious bodily harm on whoever dared them to do something so shitpanned in the first place. "They secrete neurochemicals until the brain's so saturated with them, the damn fools will do whatever they're conditioned to do. Dump enough serotonin into their systems, and they'll worship the next person they lay eyes on. Or just spiral into insanity or depression or why not both?! Anything is possible when you meddle with peoples' minds without their damn consent."

"Miss Lalonde, you have some experience with viewing the mind, correct?" Halburn adds, seemingly offhand, his tone completely nonchalant despite the ongoing vitriolic mutters emerging from Marion's dark corner of the room, and when Rose responds in the affirmative the troll goes on. "You probably understand more than the others here, then, when I say 'whispers.'"

Rose cocks her head to the side. "I can offer mere speculation. That much chemical interference in the brain would have to have an incredible impact on the psyche, particularly if it's - as you're postulating - being used to brainwash these people into service to the Midnight Crew."

"That is," Doctor Lalonde says, closing her eyes, "exactly what we believe has happened. Not just to these trolls, but to many members of the Crew."

"We've seen it hapen!" Roxy chirps in abruptly. She points to her own head and then to Cogitator's; the other Scratch is too-still, to the point where Karkat questions if the guy's breathing or not. "Tell 'em, Cogs!"

Cogitator grunts. A perfect Striderism. Karkat isn't surprised in the slightest. Even if - he angles just enough away from John to see - yeah, for some no doubt insipid reason, Dave's giving the Rue and Bro clones even more of a wide berth than Rose is. Given Dave's track record for picking up extra copies of himself, Karkat can only snort in derision. Maybe almost getting his ass handed to him sobered Dave up, as unlikely as the thought may sound.

If only Karkat could be so lucky.

Then Dirk starts muttering, as though he just needed some time to piece his thoughts together - unlike Dave, who just shoots off whatever reaches his mouth first like a frigging moron. "Dienek refers to it as being 'brought in for a review,' or synchronization. The son of a fuck's been pullin' us four in for reviews for years now." His spikey blond hair scrapes against the wall as he shakes his head, unreadable behind his triangular shades. "And yeah, my calculations give me an estimate that something like 87% of the Midnight Crew division has at least the bare minimum of synchronization. Keeps them from kickflippin' on over to the first cop who offers them a deal in exchange for intel."

"And I shaw one of the top Crew guys get dropped, once!" Roxy adds, backtracking quickly to correct, "saw, sorry," and then lowers her voice a little. "The lil guy, Clubs! Doctor Die got mad at him for spooping around, and the next thin I know, the poor troll dude has a hella nosebleed and passes out."

That's when Karkat's credulity levels tank out, and has to drawl, rolling his eyes, "Yeah, and next you'll fucking tell me Droog is just brainwashed to be a psycho, and actually she liked gardening in her spare time until she got some worm in her head." He rubs his forehead, the urge to nap stronger than ever before. "Uh huh. And after that comes the incredible revelation that the Beatles have also been cloned in this lab, and will be on tour shortly. Right? Right."

"Believe it or don't believe it," Cogitator says, his voice perfectly level and dry as sawdust. "We know what we've heard. Had to watch our best friends' personalities get wiped out of existence. And now we're telling you - one of your people has been compromised. A sleeper agent." And at long last, the Scratch kid cracks a smile. It isn't much of a smile at all, bitter and flat without his eyes
visible, and it sends shudders of unease down Karkat's spine. "What you do with the intel is entirely up to you. We've said our piece."

And with that, he vanishes.

Karkat can't even pretend to panic about where the Scratch kid could have gone along with every other sad sap in the room; he's too busy realizing with genuine despair that they've all somehow stumbled their way into some kind of sick Manchurian Candidate remake.

After making sure that yeah, Dirk the amazing douchebag boy wonder just took off to go check up on the other two Scratches again and not to, you know, try to stage an uprising of some kind, Doctor Lalonde elaborates on the whole sleeper agent thing. "Roxy could give no further hints to elucidate who among us might have been infested with these things, and those we've operated on thus far to remove the mindgrub have stated they were unaware that there was anything implanted in their brains at all," she says, her expression troubled as she seats herself on the corner of the table rather than in a chair. Her eyes often stray back to the projection on the wall, as though the answers are somehow right there. "So. Marion and Halburn will scan the Scratch kids first - Jane and Jake first, most likely, given their rather violent predilections - and Marion will begin working to extract the mindgrubs just as he did the ones we found previously."

"Thank you thank you thank you," Roxy blurts out, hugging herself.

"And then, I must insist for the sake of everyone's security that we all undergo the scanning procedure." Doctor Lalonde surveys the room so fast Karkat isn't sure how the fuck she expects to see anything, but if she's searching their faces he's sure she must really enjoy the cranky glower he can't bring himself to wipe off his own face. He really prides himself on a fantastic glower. "Anyone could be the sleeper without being aware of it themselves, even one of you children, and we must take every precaution. Marion's assistants will take over the MRI once he's in surgery, and Halburn will rotate through the rest as quickly as he can manage, though mindscape viewing takes more time. I know you children must be exhausted after a day like today, but it won't require too much exertion on your part, and if we find nothing at all - so much the better."

"What about -" Harley starts, and then, uncharacteristically, she cuts herself off. "Uhm…Dave…"

"Sup?"

Harley's buck teeth gnaw at her lip. "What about Bro?" she says, still hesitant. "He's not -"

"Ambrose is still seeking out Oriole," Doctor Lalonde says; Karkat marvels at the fact that she keeps her tone just as utterly reassuring as ever, considering she's discussing the fact that one of the most fucking dangerous people in the world might be unknowingly brainwashed and on the lam. "But he ignores many of my missives even at the best of times, so it may be a while before he realizes that the situation is rather dire. I have every confidence in him but on occasion he can be petulant, and he has not been in the best of moods with me of late." Her smile takes a turn for the jack-o-lantern. "With good reason."

Karkat can't tell if the noise that comes out of Rose's mouth is a snort or a sigh. Maybe both. She's still doing her best impression of a wooden board whenever her custodian so much as glances in her direction, her face cast half in shadow by the faint glow that still gleams like white candlelight from Kanaya's face wherever her concealer has worn thin.

Dave's groan lasts a good fifteen seconds, and Karkat is tempted to ask if his soul has finally abandoned his meatsuit for shitty rapper heaven. "I'll…text him," Dave says at last, sounding outright disgusted. "Which I'll have you know will mean breaking my amazingly long-standing streak of not
having a single fuck to give about his random puppet fieldtrip from hell."

"I would appreciate that, dear," Rue says.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm mads generous over here." Still muttering to himself, Dave slips out his phone and starts rapid-fire texting. "Like a goddamn soup kitchen, pouring one out for my homies. Goddamn."

"Samuel? Anything to add?" Doctor Lalonde finishes. "I'm sorry I didn't warn you ahead of time, but Roxy's warning came at the last moment, and we wouldn't want to delay this, would we?"

"No, we would not," Samuel confirms without pause, inclining his head to Rue respectfully. His expression is thoughtful but with intimations of a deep disquiet that Karkat doesn't like - mainly because it's the same look John's dad has worn a lot lately when quietly but firmly explaining why he thinks John needs to be relocated from Seattle before Droog can play the identity card, not after. It goes beyond fatherly concern and into outright fear. If the threat of Diamonds Droog outing John was enough to kick the man's alarmglands into high gear, Karkat dreads what news of a potential sleeper agent might provoke in him.

"The Scratches first, then ourselves, perhaps?" Samuel continues musing aloud, looking to Rue for confirmation. "And then the children. Excellent. Rue, if I may make use of one of your offices again, I can get to work notifying some of my contacts in the meanwhile. If the leak could be anyone, it may prove fruitful to investigate any lead, and if it is one of those I've trusted over the years…"

"It could be why Droog knew John's real name," Karkat mutters, and Samuel looks at him sharply before nodding.

"The same office should still be open. We couldn't manage to remove the whiteboard, however - no one here has felt particularly confident in their ability to operate a hacksaw or reconstruct part of the wall, not since Fredyn lost his appendix to Spades Slick." Rue sighs.

"...Oops," Harley says, not sounding nearly as sorry as she did back when it first happened. If anyone expects Karkat to apologize for Slick's stabbing spree, they'd better not hold their breath, because that fuckface is a fucking violent miscreant and [Blood Brother] bullshit or no, Karkat refuses to take responsibility for his alien mob boss's actions.

"A hacksaw, you say?" A smile that is just a little bit too eager blooms on Kanaya's lips. "I am proficient with many sawkind."

"Perhaps you can take a look at it later, before we leave," Samuel suggests, fast, before Kanaya can pull out the Sylph's chainsaw and start liberally applying it to the wall in question. Karkat doesn't blame him at all. "For now, I'll see who I can reach."

"And my own people will rotate through the scanning rooms soon after," Doctor Lalonde agrees, bowing her head. "Try not to stray too far, everyone. We'll get you home as soon as possible." And that seems to be that. No one can really argue with the logic of going through all these hoops as a precautionary measure - not even Karkat, who would fucking love to argue. But fuck, if the Midnight Crew has some kind of mole on their side, they need to know. What a fucking hassle, though.

"Stuck here again," Karkat grumbles to John, before sighing and shoving his chair back, cuffing John's shoulder to get him to hurry up. "Come on, let's go find something to eat. There has to be something other than sandwiches and grubsauce in this massive backwoods time-sucking excuse for a lab, even if it means we steal someone's shitty lunch right out of the break room. If they want to
fight me, they can fucking well fight me because I am not in the mood to be fucked with, John.”

"Oh, boy," John says, shaking his head as he and Karkat head out into the hallway. "But on the other hand, food sounds really good right now. Better than wondering about worms in peoples' heads," he adds, wrinkling his nose and hooking his arm with Karkat's. "Come on, Karkat. Maybe we can find you some pants and a shirt or something before you freeze your butt off!"

"...Fuck."

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(It is only much, much later that Karkat realizes John never said a word, even once, through the entire meeting.)

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Roxy's presence is a boon. Rose is certain that if it weren't for Rue's utter fascination with being presented with a clone of herself, she and her mother would have found something to blow up about. It's a running theme, here.

But it's hard to find the opportunity to argue when Roxy proves equally fascinated with Rue, eyes wide as she reverently watches the proceedings. Naturally, everyone is stiltedly polite; all of them find themselves stymied by the potential social gaffes and pitfalls that might present themselves when one of the conversants is the clone of another. If Rose's contributions are restricted to polite murmurs, Rue's to her usual pedantry, and Roxy's to blurted questions, no one dares mention it. It's only when Rue allows a novitiate to slide into her seat in order to make some last minute adjustments to the bracer that Roxy mutters to Rose, as quietly as she can with excitement burning in her eyes, "So she's like me, but in a sexy science lady suit and cool as hell? This's so awesome!" she gushes, clenching her free hand into a fist of victory. "Oh man, I can't even deal!"

Well, at least she's not undergoing some kind of existential crisis or questioning the complex jurisprudential and moral ramifications of the whole thing. Though on that subject... "That's the full extent of your feelings on the realization that you're a clone?"

Roxy frowns, and shrugs. "Ye-es? Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, psychologically speaking -" Rose cuts herself. At Roxy's quizzical look, she just smiles. "Nothing. Never mind me."

No need to get into the possible psychological issues. It would be rather crass, after all, when all three of the closest people in Roxy's life have been brainwashed into having cataclysmic amounts of psychological damage.

The click of the new void bracer around her wrist releases the tension, like slicing through a taut violin string; Rose flexes her wrist, still numb, but heartened by the reassurance that the bangle provides. "Thank you, Mother," she says, hearing the words emerge from her own lips as though through a bubble of silence, muffled and far away. The iron grip of Roxy's fingers around her hand falls away for the first time in what feels like hours.

The grey world bursts back into color, light surging back into the light the befuddling nothingness, and Rose can't quite bite back a sob of relief.

---

Earlier that day…
GG: hellllooo~~~! :D
GG: kanaya, rose, come talk to me! i'm at school and karkat and john are ignoring me because class.
:P
GA: I Thought Sollux Expressly Forbade Us From Unnecessary Communiques Except In The Event Of An Emergency. Is That No Longer A Thing?
GG: this totally counts as an emergency! these lame-o science and math classes they take here are so basic!
TT: What topic shall we whet our fine conversational blades upon, then?
GG: well...
GG: well, i'm still curious about the game, but i can't narrow down exactly what nanna could mean in some of my grandpa's notes by an 'angel of double death ushering in the end times' or how that could relate to the reckoning, because there's nothing like that in any of the records of our game that i could hear...
GG: i know i've heard the phrase before but can't pin it down! so for lack of hard evidence i'm tabling that one for now. how about quantum particle physics? :D
GA: I Should Probably Not Have Typed His Name. He Tends To Notice When You Do That. I'm Not Entirely Sure How.
TT: Particle physics and angels. An intriguing place to start. Tell us more, Jade.
GG: well you see, i just got to wondering about stuff recently, what with all this new data we have on the game!
GG: i asked doctor lalonde to forward me some of her res-
GG: uh, never mind! that's not relevant! what is relevant is that i've been trying to figure out where the carapacians fit into it all...
GA: Perhaps It Is Like One Of Those Urban Legends Where You Have To Speak His Name Three Times.
TT: Is there a particular reason for this curiosity about our alien NPC compatriots?
GG: partly it's because they're clearly constructs of the game - but what does that mean, exactly? they can exist on earth when the game's not in session, but when i found WV he was so quantumly unstable that he couldn't be perceived by the naked eye.
GG: do carapacians just randomly get unstuck from reality sometimes, or is something wonky with WV's atomic structure? are there a bunch of glitched carapacians running around the planet that we can't contact? what made him so different? inquiring minds want to know, rose!
TT: An interesting line of questioning, I agree. And of course, alas, poor WV cannot tell us his own perspective on the matter. Unless Dave has made remarkable progress in his efforts to tutor the poor dear in a very liberal interpretation of sign language.
TT: What do you think, Kanaya?
GA: What.
GA: Oh. I Am Still On The Fence About All This Game Nonsense. It All Just Seems A Little Farfetched To Me.
GG: even after all that video evidence? :P
GA: Something Happened. I Am Not Disputing This. I'm Just Saying That Blindly Buying Into Every Single Thing We Have Been Told Could Be Dangerous.
GG: that's fair! we do need a team skeptic or we could get carried away.
GG: but yeah, what do you think about WV?
GA: I Think That I Am A Mediculler, Jade, Not A Physicist.
GG: ...true. can't argue with that! my sidekick is the cutest sidekick! heehee!
GA: If It Helps I Have Heard Of A Similar Phrase Before. In The Ukraine. We Did Not Have Much Opportunity To Interact With The Locals Before Everyone Died Basically, But Many Cursed The
'Херувим Смерті Двічі' Which Roughly Means Cherub Of Death Twice Over.
GG: huh! i'll add that to the list! thanks kanaya!!!
TT: I can research the phrase as well, if you think it would help. But on the subject of WV - are you concerned that he may become unstable again? If we can't interpret his endearing charades into something resembling coherence, maybe you need to consult a different carapacian? The White Queen has proven quite informative on the rare occasions I've had the chance to speak with her one on one, and honestly I regret not consulting her more often.
GA: As The Progenitor Of Her Race She Would Likely Know More About Carapacians Than Literally Anyone Else On The Planet.
GG: whoops, hang on, gotta head to lunch! walking all the time is so dumbbbb...
GA: Truly It Is A Struggle For Us All.
GG: i just really wonder - was it something in the previous game that did it to him? he was travelling around with john a lot, but after crazyjack omniponoir started hurting everybody and WV helps get john to his questbed, could something else have happened?
GG: carapacians are cloned ectobiologically, and that tends to allow them to carry things over from one life to the next.
GG: so it just bothers me that something might have happened to WV that left him like this, and it probably happened in that gap no one can access on the tapes because of the troll session! at least according to these notes that i totally didn't get from your mom.
TT: I really don't mind, Jade.
GG: really?? because you guys still seem kinda testy around each other all the time...
TT: My mother is an excellent scientist; she is very good at her job. To the exclusion of all else, including being present to raise me. I'm resigned to it, and resignation is far less likely to prompt an argument or set off another round of binge drinking than hatred. So.
GG: *glances at kanaya with a :/ face*
GA: Wait Are We Roleplaying Now?
GG: (yes)
GA: Alright. *Raises Eyebrow At Matesprit Significantly*
TT: Dost thou waggle your eyebrow at me, Madame Maryam?
TT: Excellent. I'm glad we could see eye to eye on this matter. Was there anything else you wished to discuss, Jade?
TT: I myself have been pondering if there might be some way for us to prevent the game from repeating itself, as has become an increasingly likely possibility. Would it be possible for you to share some of your grandfather's and John's grandmother's notes on the subject with me?
GG: yeah, sure! i don't know what good it'll do, though, cause this whole thing is kind of doomed to happen! but i'll dig it all out of my sylladex later~
GG: urrrgh, i have so much more i want to talk about, but i need to eat now. text you both later! ;)
GA: Hang On I Need To Test A Theory.
GG: a scientific theory? :o
GA: In A Manner Of Speaking.
TT: What is it?
GA: Sollux Captor.
GA: Sollux Captor.
GA: Soll-
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined the chat! --
TA: did you know that the fiir2t ~ath program ever coded wa2 a viiru2-ba2ed 2elf-propagatiing cur2e capable of remotely blowiing up an electronic device from a 2iigniifficant dli2tance?
GG: uh...no!
TT: Fascinating.
GA: ...You Make Your Point Quite Eloquently, Sollux.
TA: cellphone2 off now and nobody ha2 two lo2e theiir pe2terlog acce22. go make out wiith your human or 2omethiing GA.
GA: Thanks, I Will.
GA: Now Why Are You Avoiding The Subject Of Your House Guests.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] blocked grimAuxiliatrix [GA] from the chat! --
TA: who2 next?
TT: I'm fairly certain you have peevd Kanaya considerably with that last one. Fair warning, I would fear for the sanctity of your limbs the next time you meet in person.
TT: Oh dear. Um.
TT: Sollux Captor So Help Me I Will Come Up To Canada Myself If Those Two Are Causing Trouble And You Are Seeking To Conceal It From Me -
-- twinArmageddons [TA] blocked thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] from the chat! --
TA: it'2 liike the niight of the liiviing dead iin here, je2u2.
GG: say, you're a programmer, right? :?
TA: ii 2hould block your a22 for that shiitty emotiicon alone but ii wiill allow you two plead your ca2e.
GG: ooookay, bossy pants~! have you ever written a program that can evaluate and predict the variables involved in a random quantum event in which the resulting product is already known? i'm okay with computers but they're not my specialty!
TA: yeah. that'2 liike fiir2t grade ~ath logiic. hang on, ju2t let me bru2h up on my advanced quantum mechaniic2 formula2.
GG: awesome!
-

Rose rolls her wrist back and forth, trying not to be overly gauche about how she needs to repeatedly check the color of her skin to reassure herself that it's back too normal. Physically, her arm took the brunt of the grimdark influx, and the muscles feel tender when she flexes her fingers and turns her arm over.

Mentally - well, she has one hell of a migraine, and one incredibly waterlogged mindscape she'll need to meditate on later to burn clean of bloodbrine and acid. But between the two bracers and the resurgence of her power after Roxy let go of her hand, Rose found it the work of only a moment to brute-force her way through banishing Leviathan from her mind with the same spell she chose the last time she faced such a devastating incursion. Even without John in her mind, it was more than enough to drive the tangle of writhing thorns back through the breach to the channel from whence it came. Her wards are dimmer, but holding, and that's enough for now.

Still. She speculates that, given the fact that John's presence helped so much the first time, the results of inviting Jade or Dave into her mindscape to help with the wards might be worth testing. But that's a thought for another time.

Right now, she and Kanaya have somehow found themselves in charge of fielding Roxy's exuberant chatter while the other Scratch kids are in the middle of being processed by Marion and Halburn. The younger variant of Bro, one with all of Ambrose's speed and skill but none of his unruffled composure, remains convinced that at any moment the entire laboratory could turn on the Scratches and do them harm, an insistent distrust that has him glued to the sides of Jake and Jane, both still unconscious. He exerts incredible control over his emotional reactions, yes, but is still so visibly wired and jittery with tension and paranoia that Rose is surprised he hasn't driven himself into some kind of mental break yet. Every few minutes he appears silently in the doorway between the waiting
room and the MRI room, and Roxy will roll her eyes with wild exaggeration before staggering over to pacify him with reassurances that she's still in one piece.

Rose suspects, though she makes an effort not to spy on their conversations, that Roxy is also an integral reason why Dirk has yet to snap, seize his comrades, and proceed to hack his way out of the facility with a kitchen knife, if necessary. A significant portion of him buys into that brainwashed, cultish loyalty to the Midnight Crew; Roxy's soothing influence is the only thing that keeps him quelled.

Honestly, Roxy is a very pleasant young lady. It is difficult to understand how she and Rue might share a genetic code. Dirk's stare gouges into Rose's back until she sighs and glances back to raise an eyebrow. With neither excuse nor explanation he vanishes back through the doors. Roxy waves him off cheerily, then scampers - or trips, really - her way to the chair she has chosen to splay out in. "He says they're almost done with Jakey," she announces, her smile pleased as she half-falls backward into the chair. "Which is good because maybe then he'll remove the pole from his merry-go-round high horse's butt."

A mangled metaphor worthy of Dave himself. Incredible.

"Is he always so pleasant a character?" Kanaya asks, picking absently at the IV drip stuck in the fold of her elbow until Rose tugs her claws away again. In the light of her very obvious, gleaming white luminescence, and lacking enough sealant and makeup to cover up again on short notice, Kanaya straight facedly informed everyone in the party, including the medical staff, that she had 'a condition.' When no further explanation was forthcoming, the doctors took one look at the amount of blood soaked into her costume and hooked her up to an IV with as many spare packets of jadeblood transfusions they had in storage. It had been up to Rose to rather indiscreetly conceal some of that blood on her person and creep out to the restroom to dump out an entire thermos of cold coffee from the Egbert's vehicle and fill it with blood for Kanaya to drink straight. They've been swapping out the IV repeatedly with hopefully no one the wiser to the fact that the IV pump is off, there's a darkening stain of green over Kanaya's smeared lipstick, and all the empty packets have rips along the top of the thick plastic.

Ah, that rainbow-drinker life.

"Who, Dirk-a-dirk?" Roxy says, swinging her legs distractedly. Her fingers drum against the arm of the chair, but they keep skidding from the tremors that occasionally wrack her hands. She shrugs. "He's going against orders. He and me, we can do that. But - there's conquests - consequences." The blonde holds up her hand, just as a particularly large twitch sets her fingers trembling. "Like that, see?"

Rose's stomach lurches. She hasn't thrown up yet, but she's already marked all trash receptacles in the vicinity with a spark of light in her sight so that in the event she needs to expel another pint of gritty seawater, she'll be prepared to lurch in the most opportune direction. "The tremors aren't usual? You mentioned something about nerve damage, earlier," she recalls.

Roxy's lips flutter as she puffs out a breath of air. "Really gorram selective damage, yeee. It only kicks up all fussy when I'm thinkin' about doing something really, really stupid. I mean, when I had to snipe Sharpshooter the other day -" She snaps her hands into finger pistols, the jitter flattening out so fast it's uncanny, and grins again. "I was totes on point! But only 'cause I was doing what the worm wanted me to do. All day today I've been doing...kind of the opposite."

"Perhaps not nerve damage, then," Rose says, frowning as the Scratch's hands start shaking again. "If these grubs work by inundating the brain with neurochemicals, trying to mold how you think - well, even if they're not working correctly, you still have to function with a deluge of chemicals"
swamping your brain. Your motor function would be affected only as a symptom; the nerves of your hands themselves are probably fine."

Unless they've been tortured, her mind suggests darkly, a thought that Rose sinks down beneath the level of her conscious mind almost as quickly as it intrudes itself. From the impression she's got from Roxy's scattered, often broken narrative, these kids have been trained by a legitimate mad scientist named Doctor Dienek since childhood, if not since birth. That kind of prolonged brainwashing by a criminal outfit would qualify as torture enough without considering how Roxy might have been punished over the years for failing to meet standards.

"Oh schnapps! Really? That's actually kinda a relief!" Roxy inspects her fingers with a lopsided grin, as though observing a miracle. "Ohmigod, I can't wait to have my head all screwed up right, with no more funnybiz!"

Rose wonders whether to mention that the girl's slurred speech and drunken gait might well be the result of the soup of neurotransmitters misfiring, too. She decides to not to; she's not the neurologist, here, and if her guess is wrong she doesn't want to have gotten Roxy's hopes up for nothing.

…Mmm. Schnapps would do wonders to rinse the last of the salty taste souring in the back of her throat -

No. Stop that. Rose gulps hard, and Kanaya's face turns toward her with the hawk-keen eyes that see right through Rose's efforts to control her wistful expression. The claw that just began reaching for that useless IV again freezes midmotion and reaches over to touch the back of Rose's hand, thumbing along the curve of Rose's knuckles until the moment passes. "You said you were raised in this other laboratory?" Kanaya says in the meanwhile, smooth as anything. "How long do you estimate you've all been brainwashed with these organic implants, anyway?"

"Dunno." Roxy folds her arms and pulls a face. "Coulda been in our heads forever, for all we know. But it only started getting reeeal obvious when our personality got all janked up. Like, when Jake stopped making Dirk download him shitty movies all the time, and me 'n Jane were like, what the absolute fuck is going on?" Another sigh. "Jake loved those crummy films and suddenly he didn't even wanna watch Indiana Jones, for cripes' sakes. Then it started getting worse, and then Jane went from normal to cuckoo-pagodas in a couple sessions, and finally Dirk admitted somethin' was up with Jake so we could go snooping around together. But by then, it was too late."

"And their personalities totally changed," Rose murmurs - perhaps too quietly for the other two to hear. Oh well. She flicks her eyes down, trying to determine whether the nausea roiling in her stomach will settle on its own, or if she should excuse herself now while there's still time.

Before Rose can execute a quick getaway, Roxy glances furtively towards the door, and scoots her chair closer to Rose and Kanaya. There is a low rumble as the chair legs drag over tile. "Tha's enough about all that depressing stuff. Look. Y'know that guy who drove us here?"

"Mr Egbert?"

"Yeah! Just...look..." Roxy takes a deep breath, clasps her hands before her, a twinkle in her eyes, and - "Is there, like, a Missus Egbert?"

Kanaya, Rose believes, sums up her initial reaction with a succinct, striking clarity of elocution that cannot be matched. While Rose finds her breath momentarily taken away, Kanaya looks up so slowly from the IV pump that almost ten seconds pass before her eyes lock onto Roxy's and she
utters a single word.

"What."

Rose follows like an echo, right on the trailing end of Kanaya's flat statement. "...Come again?" she says weakly.

When Roxy sighs this time, she doesn't sound tired. It's a gusty whopper of a sigh, and Roxy's voice when she speaks next has become breathy and jumped almost a full octave. "Do I hafta French maid my way past some other lady frontin' in on him?" she asks, her eyes still distant and twinkly. "Because daaaaaaaa. That man reeks of cologne fresh from the Dadly Depot and I'm swoooonin' o'er here, Rose!" Roxy presses her hands to her flushed cheeks, kicking her feet a little. "Ohhh m g, I'm blushing so much!!!"

"Yes, I suppose I can...objectively see how Mr Egbert's fatherly aesthetic would appeal to..." Rose gives up halfway through. In that moment of silence, her brain presents to her the image of these same words - but, horror of horrors, emerging from Rue's mouth instead of Roxy's. She immediately forges on through the rest of her point before her brain can come up with something even more alarming. "- he's -"

"Daunting?" Kanaya suggests. She's moved on from blank mystification and skipped straight over the horror Rose is mired down in to reach the point of barely concealed chuckles.

"...Several decades older than you?" Rose finishes instead.

Roxy is an unstoppable force. "I refuse to cosign myself to a dudeless future just 'cause all said dudes are taken or aging like fine wine," she says, throwing up her hands. "I'm jus' saying, if there be a foxy dad placed before me, I get the right to ogle the fine specimen of foxy-dad-hood. It's the simple joys in life, you guys."

"I believe I shall take your word for it," Kanaya says, shaking her head.

-- ~ Welcome to the Divine Café ~ --
-- ~ 4 practitioners online ~ --

-- ~ ADVISORY WARNING: NO ONE HAS ANY IDEA WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON WITH THE WESTERN UNITED STATES AT THE MOMENT. STAY INDOORS AND KEEP YOUR BEST WARDS ONLINE UNTIL THE STORM PASSES. BEWARE OF SPORADIC CHAOS MAGIC INTERFERENCE WITH AURAS THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE. ~ --

Divine Café > Auras, Scrying, Divination > A general inquiry as to the measurable length of the Earth's viable lifespan (URGENT ANSWERED)

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [ TT ] has joined the memo! --
-- necroMancer [ NM ] has joined the memo! --
-- huntersAnonymous [ HA ] has joined the memo! --
-- alternativeNewtonia [ AN ] has joined the memo! --

AN: α- Thaumaturge. You knew about this. You had to have known when you opened this memo. Please respond or PM me as soon as can be arranged-Ω

NM: Oh, great. What the h___ has gone wrong now? I'm s___ at divination you guys and Star won't text me back, what's going on?
TT: Ah. Judging from your response, I suppose you have managed to confirm the potential for an apocalypse in the charmingly near future?
AN: α- It's 10 in the morning for Galya, but for the past couple nights she's been burning through all the mugwort and cinquefoil she can obtain in the middle of nowhere to try to figure out what she's seeing in her scrykind, so I doubt she's awake yet-Ω
AN: α- The last time she checked in with me, however, she was convinced that there is a 93.6667% chance of Earth being annihilated by the thirteenth of April. All the rest kind of got lost in the endless stream of her informing me that eto pizdyets and meteori vo vsem mirye, eto fignya -Ω
AN: α- Somehow, we were all distracted so much by the multiple chaos incursion events that we missed the fact that none - trust me, I trawled every thread - none of the most recent posts on this forum have predictions due to take place any later in the timeline than April. Not even the long range diviners have noticed the trend yet, since their visions are so rare already -Ω
AN: α- So I repeat - Thaumaturge, you knew. Please cite your sources -Ω
TT: Both an accomplished ~ATH programmer and a close friend's sister approached me with the belief that the apocalypse is nigh, each with their own perspective on the matter. The hacker in particular was rather distraught. The sister doesn't seem to believe there's any way to prevent the apocalypse at all, and shows no interest in attempting to change her blithe outlook on the matter.
TT: In the interim, the situation has...complicated itself. But there seems little doubt that unless extreme measures are taken, the planet and everyone on it may as well be fish in a barrel.
HA: oh for fuck's sake, not another one.
TT: I beg your pardon?
HA: lady, there's always some goddamn apocalypse about to happen.
HA: just say it. it's demons, isn't it.
AN: α- ... -Ω
TT: ...Oddly enough, no. Demons haven't come up yet.
HA: i'm telling you, 9 times out of 10, it's demons. demons and goddamn angels.
AN: α- Welp. We're completely outside my scientific comfort zone, to be honest. At least hivemind clusters of entropic majjyks can be analyzed with the proper equipment; demons are...uh, new -Ω
TT: Well, the term 'angel of double death' has been thrown around by someone, but I'll admit that demons would be a new and refreshing take on the already bleak portents.
HA: son of a bitch!
NM: Great. Now you f_____ up.
TT: How so?
HA: hang the fuck on. where is that feathery asshole when you need him.
AN: α- Oh no. Oh dear, sweet Uncle August, no -Ω
NM: A______s, don't you dare put him on -
HA: I DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHY I NEED TO COMMUNICATE LIKE THIS WHY CAN'T I JUST SPEAK TO THEM DIRECTLY
NM: F___ everything.
TT: Ah. I don't believe we've met. Multiple users have access to your account, yes, Anon?
HA: IS SHE REFERRING TO ME
HA: BUT YOU TOLD ME TO TYPE EVERYTHING I WOULD SAY
HA: OH
NM: F____ it f____ it f____ it -
-- necroMancer [NM] has left the chat! --
AN: α- Yes, I have a...er...I believe I left my chaological sensors running, I had better go catch them -Ω
-- alternativeNewtonia [AN] has left the chat! --
TT: Well that was not suspicious by any stretch of the imagination.
HA: YES I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT YOU POSSESS INTELLIGENCE ON A POTENTIAL APOCALYPSE THAT MAY BE ANGELIC IN ORIGIN TELL ME MORE
TT: ...
TT: Does 'an angel of double death' hold any significance for you?

HA: _THERE IS NO SUCH THING REAPERS AND ANGELS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY UNRELATED AND INCONGRUENT BEINGS WITH NO POTENTIAL FOR CROSSBREEDING_  

HA: _PRIMARILY BECAUSE NEITHER OF THEM BREED THEY SPRING FORTH FULLY FORMED AT THE BEHEST OF THEIR CREATORS_

TT: I see. Just one last question, then - are you familiar with an angel named Malā'ikah, which does double duty as a chaotic abomination of the Furthest Ring?

HA: _OH_  

HA: _MY APOLOGIES WE APPEAR TO HAVE APPROACHED THIS CONVERSATION FROM A MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING YOU ARE DEALING WITH AN ALTERNATE COSMIC BRANE'S CANON THAT HAS LITTLE RELATION TO MY OWN_  

HA: _MY KNOWLEDGE WOULD NOT BE RELEVANT IN THIS CASE_

TT: That's alright. I didn't really expect much by way of straightforward answers in this case. I appreciate the effort, though.

HA: _HOW DO I TURN THIS THING O-_

-- huntersAnonymous [HA] has left the chat! --

TT: ...Well then.

TT: Still. Newtonia, give my thanks and regards to Galya for her assistance. This is more by way of confirmation than I had before, from a mostly impartial third party, and I appreciate it. I'm afraid I must restrict my use of the forums, and may not be able to reach you all for some time.

TT: I can only vow that I will do my utmost to preserve the Earth, by whatever means necessary.

TT: Godspeed.

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has left the chat! --

---

No one has shown up to visit by the time Doctor Marion and Rose's mother emerge from the inner bowels of the medical ward, so Rose finds herself inordinately captured by disposing of the remains of Kanaya's snack and rinsing out the thermos in the restroom. By the time she emerges, there appears to be a bit of an argument going on between Roxy, the neurosurgeon, and a tight-jawed Dirk, who hovers in a corner of the room as far from everyone but Roxy as possible, that is swiftly resolved by virtue of Dirk's complete refusal to take no for an answer.

"We've got everything mapped out and scanned for them," Marion is saying, clearly frustrated as he tears at his messy hair. "I thought -"

"I go first," Dirk says flatly.

Roxy has a hand on his upper arm, all her earlier cheer lost in a quiet worry as she chafes at his arm in a kind of soothing gesture. "Omigod, Dirk. Dirky-poo. Dirk-rizzle. Dirk. I know you're just super psyched about this, but mebbe we should let them do the thing to Jane and Jake first, since they're so much worse off, and that way you can watch them to be sure everything goes okay, and -"

"Anything they're going to do to Jake, they can do to me first." Dirk's jaw works. His shades look too black, like gaping pits that sink into the upper half of his face where his eyes should be, and Rose wonders just how much longer his frayed control over his brainwashed instincts can last. "If something gets fucked up, I can take it. I've got backups."

"Whaaaa?" Roxy shakes her head, hair bouncing. "It won't get fricked up, they've done it before! They're experts!"

"This isn't an argument, Roxy." A blink and Dirk is elsewhere, standing before Marion and frankly towering over the slightly shorter man without a word of warning. "Scan me next, and then do the
surgery."

Marion squints. Then he turns his squint upon Rue, who, barely concealing the faintest of smiles, gives a small shrug, a silent but obvious deferral to the neurological expert in the room. "You... want to undergo this surgery," the doctor says slowly, as though still seeking confirmation as he turns back to Dirk. Anyone else would be intimidated by the presence of a very deadly in their personal bubble. But Marion seems to have something else on his mind.

Dirk darts a glance back at Roxy. It happens quickly enough that Rose almost thinks she imagines it. "...Yeah."

Doctor Marion presses his hands together, touches them to his lips, and appears to send a thankful prayer to some unseen deity through the ceiling tiles. "Then I," the neurosurgeon says when he finishes, his eyes feverish as he claps Dirk on the shoulder, "have some consent forms for you to sign, young man."

"He's never going to stop antagonizing Halburn about this," Rue says after Marion practically charges through the doors back into the ward, Dirk vanishing in his wake. "What am I going to do with them..." With this fresh piece of nonsense uttered, Rue appears to momentarily lose herself in thought, her furrowed brows partially offset by the smile that touches her lips.

But Rose is trying not to analyze her mother overmuch. No need to aggravate the situation. Lingering too much on Rue's actions in general only leads to acrimonious thoughts; Rose would like to avoid retreading old ground, particularly with her mind already off-center in the worst possible way.

Roxy turns toward the door - then spins back to them, her teeth worrying at her lip anxiously. "I'm, uh. Gonna go in with him," she says, pointing toward the door with an expression both uncertain and stubborn. "Make sure Cogs doesn't wake up halfway through and sassacre errbody in the operating theater, on account 'a he's an unpredictable sob." She pronounces the last word not as an acronym but, simply, as 'sob.'

Doctor Lalonde somehow manages to intercept the girl before she can reel on one foot and plough through the doors to the neurology wing again. "Here. I intend to oversee some of the operations, myself," Rue says, the uneven paint on her nails obviously chipped as she lightly guides her younger iteration back within arm's reach. "I can show you where the observation room is, so that we don't upset poor Marion by contaminating his clean room." She hesitates, and then looks back at Rose, who does her utmost to display no outward reaction at all. Yes. Apathy is best. "Rose, I - I would appreciate it immensely if you and I could... talk, before we all must rotate through with Marion's assistants and Halburn's room for the scans."

She enunciates each word with great care, and Rose catches just the barest flare of her mother's accent, lost through years of study in America but never quite gone. For a moment, the familiar intonation causes Rose's gut to clench, as though in anticipation of a sucker punch that does not arrive. "If we must," she forces out through dry lips. Though she intends to meet her mother's eyes straight on in some petty display of aggression, she shifts her head to the side ever so slightly so that she says it to the wall instead. "Shall I await you here" - my lady, so bitter, too bitter, check yourself, Rose not-Lalonde - "Doctor?"

Mm. Perhaps still a little too bitter. Or perhaps Rue is simply playing up her minute flinch as a sympathy play; Rose wouldn't put such a tactic past her mother, regardless of her professed inclination to repair their relationship. Years of passive-aggression can't be set aside in a heartbeat, after all, and Rue's favored tactic in Rose's earlier adolescence was always to overplay her reactions to Rose's latest teenage obstinence. Rose shall not allow herself to be swayed. "Thank you, Rose,"
Rue says with evident strain, biting back some further inanity with a clack of teeth before sweeping through the door.

The last view Rose has is of Roxy twisting around to throw both thumbs up in Rose and Kanaya's direction, gleeful rapture on her face as she starts to chatter at Rue. When at last the door shuts Rose feels the last of the tension roll out of her, and she closes her eyes to take a brief moment to enjoy the silence. Her mind echoes, still washed hollow, but on the mend nonetheless.

A faint pressure, and she allows her eyes to flick open, bemusedly looking to the side to see Kanaya has pressed their arms together. Her face isn't as impeccably put together as usual - the makeup is noticeably lighter in certain areas, though she has replaced her torn clothing with a long sleeved, high-necked blouse to conceal the great swathes of dead white skin where she didn't have the makeup on hand to cover up the rest. "So," Kanaya says, "can you furnish me any insight as to your current state of mind?"

"Ah, I can - but will I?" Rose replies, tilting her head so that it leans against the curve of Kanaya's shoulder with a faint smile on her lips.

"Sometimes, you are an incredibly articulate, well-spoken creature." Kanaya pauses, and sighs deeply. "And sometimes, you indulge in such a grossly overdone joke concerning trifling semantics that I fear for your intellect. I truly do."

"I try to keep you on your toes."

With utter solemnity - "As we are currently seated and my feet are firmly planted flat on the ground -"

Rose can't stop the laugh that bubbles up, shaking her head as much as she can before letting it just rest on Kanaya's shoulder. "You win, you win," she says, still smiling. "I yield."

"As well you should."

Despite the genial camaraderie of the moment, Rose still shifts a minute later, fidgeting as she chafes at - something. It's hard for her to say what. She is inclined to blame the restlessness on the fact that sitting here leans too close to listening to her mother than she can bear.

But - there's still something that nags at her. As though she perches at the brink of some unfathomable abyss, with the weight of an old decision pressing her further and further over the abyss until the angle allows for no other exit but to drop. It's the same sensation she complained about to John - horrors, was that only last night? It oozes over her skin like a viscous film, less horrific but perhaps more insidious than any grimdark residue, and clings like silk to everything Rose can see, with all her eyes. The intense certainty that something major is about to come to fruition; or perhaps, to use a different metaphor, a domino was tipped over long, long ago, and only now will the last piece fall.

It's too all-encompassing, to the point that all Rose can tell for a fact is that whatever comes of this sequence of events will bring about misfortune incalculable.

And yet, if she tries to stop it -

The results would be even worse. No matter how she cast her sight forward last night, laboring without a scrykind or any other ritual apparatus, her penchant for foretelling the luckiest possible path has found absolutely no way out of this that does not end in a fracture she cannot work her way around.
She tries to justify it as well as she can. Perhaps, once they forge through this inescapable dip in all of their fortunes, they can all mend and move on. Like draining pus from a wound, they might just have the opportunity to heal, to ease John through the worst of his recent lapses, to pry Jade from her obstinate belief that the world's end can't be averted, analyze Dave's many neuroses - and become stronger for it.

She's trying to be an optimist about this. She's rapidly failing.

She needs a distraction. And she won't allow alcohol or an argument with her mother to be the modus through which she indulges in that distraction. Rose surges to her feet in a hasty motion, shutting down the internal sight that allows her to observe her inner mind and the external sight that illuminates the outer world, both. "Where are you going?" Kanaya asks, rising from her seat apparently on reflex. "Rose…"

Restless, Rose turns on her heel to meet Kanaya's eyes just long enough to reassure the jadeblood that no, she's not about to run off without her this time. By some strange happenstance, her gaze drags up along Kanaya's form before reaching her face, a cursory glance that -

Not a cursory glance.

Hm. There's a thought.

It's not entirely an appropriate thought. Rose finds she approves. Soundly.

"Well, I am certainly not sitting here to wait on my mother's fancy. Wait -" Rose dramatically flings her hand up to the side of her head, making a show of closing her eyes as though struck by some vision to stem whatever Kanaya might say next. "Providence informs me that waiting on her is, in fact, not a thing I am doing. Observe." Rose walks to the other door, the one that leads not deeper into neurology but out into the main hallway. Mentally, she calls back the lights that mark trash bins - her nausea is not gone but forgotten, for the moment, and she has a far better use for her searching capabilities.

"You are being flippant," Kanaya says, her mouth a thin, reproving line as she paces out the exit after Rose.

Rose will have to fix that. "Astonishingly so," she says, shaking her head with a good dollop of feigned melancholy. Deciding upon her destination, she sets a flare to guide her even as she turns to walk backwards, a faint hint of a smile

Kanaya's eyes narrow with suspicion, completely unfooled by Rose's attempt to appear innocuous, and picks up the pace, closing the gap between them. "John and Karkat were going to meet us, too, and possibly Dave if he does not distract himself again. Jade could emerge from her recent studying binge at any moment."

Rose waves a hand, acknowledging but dismissive in equal measure. "They'll stop to meet with Mr Egbert first. And if I know anything, I know that our goodly Dadbert will not be able to resist the opportunity to impart some fatherly wisdom before they continue on their way here. We have...time."

That last sentence is, if Rose does say so herself, a work of art. Slight emphasis on 'we,' skimming over 'have,' and a judiciously measured pause long enough to tantalize, but short enough that Kanaya does not have the time to try to parse the incomplete sentence before 'time' lays itself out before her, weighted with subtle layers of implication and intimation just this side of suggestive. Taken as a
whole, accented with just the slightest flick of a tongue over her lower lip, it is truly indelicate in its blatancy. Salacious, even.

Rose is being very obvious. And Kanaya is a very clever woman. It takes all of two seconds before she realizes what Rose is driving at, and to her credit, she doesn't look pole-axed by the sudden turn in the conversation. Her frown eases instead into a deliberate, restrained consideration.

Rose allows herself a little more of a smirk, slowing her backward stride a fraction so that Kanaya catches up. She reaches up to loop her arms around the jadeblood's neck, smiling all the while. "What do you think?" she asks, lowering her voice as smoothly as she can while still walking backward, angling for an empty room further down the hall. She draws Kanaya along after her.

"Rose." Kanaya purses her lips, walking in lockstep with Rose but not pressing forward of her own accord. Still not sold on it, then. "I was attempting to engage in a feeling jam, not fall prey to a spontaneous concupiscent hook up."

Rose flashes the warmest smile she has in her repertoire, with enough twist to one side to render it thoroughly lewd. They reach her target door and she leans back against it, still drawing Kanaya on. "Really? And yet I think we can find it in ourselves to share a mutual objective, Kanaya, dear." Rose lifts herself up ever so slightly on her toes to place her mouth against Kanaya's ear just so and whisper, "We usually do, after all, possess a certain knack for cooperation. I'm sure we can reach a...point of conciliation?"

"You," Kanaya says at last, "are a terrible influence. What you implied just now was incredibly perverse and you're not even going to apologize for it, are you."

"No, I'm afraid not." They're still in the hallway, but they're already in a rather compromising position here, so what's the harm in Rose sliding her foot around to hook behind Kanaya's calf? No harm. None whatsoever. "Perversion is the goal."

Perhaps a little harm when she moves her mouth down to kiss a line down the side of Kanaya's throat. Mmm. Yes, that's rather blatant. If someone were to walk around the corner right now, there'd be no innocent explanation for any of this, and Rose is surprisingly quite alright with that.

Kanaya hesitates for too long, and Rose is having none of that. "So? What do you say?" she asks, removing her mouth just long enough to ask.

"I say -" And ha. There's the faintest catch of breath, the hitch where Kanaya misplaces her train of thought out of distraction, and Rose knows she's won. "I am simply saying -"

A nibble. Just a little one, so that Rose can be certain her lips are smudged with grey as she tilts her head back to wait for an answer. "Go on?"

"I am saying that I will be here." Kanaya's breath skims over Rose's mouth - and then away again. "If you need me." The door opens, and Rose would tumble through if it were not for a very convenient claw curving around her waist. "That does not mean that a flushed flirtation is what is taking place here." The room is rather dark, and no move is made to locate a light switch or a fuse box as Kanaya quite determinedly marches forward. "Though I will admit, it could accidentally happen at any moment."

"Accidently?"

"Completely by chance," Kanaya says. "You shall have to persuade me further."

...Ah. "Shrewd, Ms Maryam, very shrewd." Rose gives in to the impulse, unlooping her arms and
letting her hands slip up to catch and tangle in Kanaya's short hair. "You have earned my compliments," she murmurs, stroking until Kanaya's face tilts down for a proper kiss. "Then I shall have to use every tool of persuasion at my disposal."

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The shit has hit the fan with such outstanding velocity that said fan has been knocked down a flight of stairs, sent crashing through the door in a burst of splintered wood, and has accidentally shoved an innocent bystander into oncoming traffic as an afterthought.

But is Dave paying attention to all these shitty shenanigans?

God, fuck no. He's only just recently accepted that he has a clone of himself with wings flying around who was actually an alternate version of himself in a past life - there is no way he's going to try to wrap his mind around the idea of Bro having a clone. Seriously, who the fuck thought that was a good idea? One planet isn't big enough for two Bros. Whoever decided clone spam was the answer to a question nobody in their right mind would ever ask needs some serious counseling. Or a straitjacket, judging by how incredibly fucked up and brainwashed these kids are.

God. He's so skeeved out right now. Just. Dave's just gonna...keep his distance. For like, ever. Mini-Bro seems totally on board with that plan, too, but that might be because he's convinced that if he turns his back on his boyfriend's unconscious body someone in the lab will knife them.

Which isn't even an issue anymore. Karkat's mob boss ditched the lab, apparently, so the chances of taking a knife to the kidney have plummeted.

Dave has research to do, dammit. He is surrounded by a bunch of assholes in various states of stress as they wait for the neurological department to get their shit together, and out of all of them, Dave's the one with the time to waste looking up the costs of exporting apple juice to Tokyo in bulk, spamming his bird-twin and his dipshit older bro/father/asshole incarnate with unanswered pesterings, and attempting to figure out what it means when your best bro is caught up in a troll romance.

In hindsight, Dave probably should have just paid attention to this kind of thing years ago. But Bro's idea of homeschooling involved puppets. Dave has repressed a lot of shit in his day (algebra is a haunting smudge on the shades of retrospection), but nothing has been buried so deep as his memory of the bird-puppets and the bee-puppets incident. For a guy who invented smuppets and has always acted like he had to strife his way past the legions of adoring fans to abscond from the club back in the day, Bro sure checked out an obscene amount of parenting books on how to give the talk instead of just ironically winging it, which might have at least given Dave some comedy material; the result turned out to be horrifyingly educational and yet somehow awkward beyond all hope of salvation.

Dave remembers none of it.

But if John isn't going to figure out his life choices, and Karkat is busy being basically the entire problem, then it's down to Dave as the last Strilonde in the building with half a fuck to give to try and counsel these dumbass mofos. Rose would be way more on top of this than Dave is - but Rose sprouts grimdark tentacles at odd moments and has recently picked up a clone of her mother that she and Kanaya are doting on like...like doting doters in one of the labs. And Jade's busy with research of her own, making a good faith effort to pull a Stark and become an expert in a previously unknown branch of brain-science-magic in a single spectacular one-nighter. She's also got some idea about hunting down the Wondering Querent/Queen lady to interrogate her about something-something-science-science-majjyks-WV-blah that Dave kind of just tunes out after a while and nods along with on autopilot because he's not the science guy, okay? He's not even the vaguely smart guy. He's
just...the time guy, for what good it does him, and as cool as it is that Jade is excited about this, he doesn't understand a word of what she's saying.

So anyway. Rose's assigned reading homework on how not to be (too much of a) dick around the delicate soul that is Karkat 'I have cried actual legitimate tears over both Casablanca and X-Men: First Class and I will fight any shiptanned nookstain who dares to trash talk either of them.' Vantas has been helpful, but also most of it came straight out of psychology journals and dissertations, so Dave's like 120% sure at least three quarters of the material has performed an epic olly right over his head. But how hard can it be to just look up the basics of quadrants and figure out if it's acceptable for John to touch the butt or not while in the pale rhombus - oh god he's blogging again. How does this always happen. He doesn't even remember typing in the address bar, dammit.

Shitty memes. They are his weakness. His aesthetic is JPEG artifacts and Comic Sans chic, and it is just as ironic now as it was when he first designed it. He's particularly proud of SBAHJ, his magnum opus. If anything, Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff simply become more ironic the more outdated the comics become. Their archived potential, infinite. Their rich, typo-based sub-cognitive lexicon, infinitely nuanced.

Oh well. While he's logged onto this endless mecca of scrolling, he might as well see if anyone here
can explain troll quadrants in short words and simple sentences. Or just romance in general. He's not too picky here. It's hard to tear himself away from the

And of course, given Dave's luck, the first post he comes across is a wannabe academic paper written by some guy with the caps lock key apparently shoved up where his spine used to be.

And oh god. Oh fucking Christ. The web browser's Alternian translator is jamming the fuck up and leaving everything backwards as all hell wherever this particular asshole decided to not translate into English. What a guy. What a real pal -

What a...really familiar...quirk…

Oh hell no.

TG: dude
TG: karbro
TG: wake up
CG: I'M NOT ASLEEP YOU BLITHERING ASS, I JUST HAVE BETTER THINGS TO DO WITH MY LIFE THAN REPLY TO YOUR DESPICABLE MESSAGESPAM WHEN WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE CUTTING BACK ON PESTERCHUM.
CG: WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?
TG: you blog right
CG: WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH THE PRICE OF KUMQUATS IN NEW WESTMINSTER?
TG: you have a massive friggin boner for troll will smith right
CG: I AM PHYSIOLOGICALLY INCAPABLE OF HAVING A HUMAN BONER,
JACKASS.
TG: metaphorically
TG: like an emotional boner
CG: I REFUSE TO DIGNIFY THAT WITH A RESPONSE.
CG: OH WAIT I WILL - GO FUCK YOURSELF.
TG: so thats a hell yeh on the will smith boner
TG: oh crap
CG: DO I WANT TO KNOW?
TG: probs not but im gonna tell you anyway
TG: blackmailmaterialoftheyear.jpeg
CG: HOW THE FUCK DID YOU FIND MY SIDE BLOG?!
CG: AND WHAT - WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT - DID YOU CHANGE ALL THE TEXT INTO COMIC SANS?
TG: we all suffer for our art
CG: THE SPECTACULAR BREADTH OF YOUR COMMITMENT TO THIS FARCE YOU CALL A LIFE IS TRULY BREATH TAKING. LITERALLY. I AM COMING TO THROTTLE YOU IN PERSON AS WE SPEAK.
TG: but no kismet fish right
CG: THIS IS A MERCY KILL BORN OF MY AMPLE RESERVES OF PLATONIC IRRITATION.
TG: wow thresh prince has a lot more love triangles than fresh prince
CG: STOP READING MY SHIT.
TG: haha okay thats a love dodecahedron how are there even enough characters for that
TG: ohhh shit is that hero spec i spy
CG: SOLLUXANDER CAPTOR GET YOUR ASS ON THIS THREAD RIGHT THE FUCK NOW.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined the chat! --
TA: ii flagged that. now what the fuck diid ii tell you 2hiithead2 about me22a2ging each other all the tiime.
CG: HA, I'LL DO YOU ONE BETTER THAN THAT. DAVID HERE IS POSTING ON AN UNSECURED PUBLIC BLOGGING PLATFORM.
TG: karkat no
CG: KARKAT YES.
TA: yeah okay prepare two have your blog anniihiilated from the face of the planet, dumba22.
TA: al2o who the fuck 2aiid you could 2hout my name onliine and 2ummon me liike bad chainmaiil carciino?
CG: YOU'RE ALWAYS WATCHING.
TG: thats not creepy at all
TA: and wait a fucking minute how do you know my full name?
CG: REALLY? WAIT I WAS JUST GUESSING.
TG: holy shit
TG: i have to be honest solluxander is basically the best name i have ever heard
TA: that'2 iit you both ju2t lo2t your pe2ter AND your blogging privilige2.
CG: HANG ON, CAN WE JUST TALK ABOUT THIS? LIKE HOW THE FUCK DO I EVEN KNOW YOUR -
TA: no.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] blocked turntechGodhead [TG] from the chat! --
-- twinArmageddons [TA] blocked carcinoGeneticist [CG] from the chat! --

TA: you can me22age people againi eleven hour2 from now becau2e ii'm 2ure 2ome conveniient emergency wiill pop up that nece22itate2 remote communiiication funciiionality.
TA: eleven hour2 or however long iit take2 me two feel better about you people and your 2hiiitty
Dave opens a message window to John and starts typing frantically. None of the messages will send, greying out and vanishing from the typing box no matter how many swear words he adds. Hell, he even tries changing his font color to Rose purple in a last ditch attempt to fool the block function, which is stupid as hell but he's desperate, here. When he goes back to his dashboard, the website loads as a blank page with the words 'go out2iide or 2omethiing' in puke yellow. Captor's final warning, apparently.

Well, shit.

Glumly, Dave sighs, and directs the rest of his research questions to Google.

Within a quarter of an hour, he has a plan.

TG: yo jade
TG: you seen rap board
GG: i saw :( 
GG: rip, rap board!
TG: what kind of stone cold mofo deletes an entire memos worth of chronically ailing beats like damn
GG: oh well. we'll just have to rap more in person or something!
TG: whoa whoa slow your roll
TG: you think you're ready to throw down live and in person
GG: yeah, i think i'm getting pretty good!
GG: it's really not all that hard to just ramble nonsense rhymes about street cred and bling, dave ;/
TG: ...
TG: jade
GG: yes dave?
TG: you come into my house
GG: but we're not at your house. i'm at school still -
TG: you insult my one true calling
GG: umm...
TG: on this the day of my egberts angry troll wedding
GG: what does that even mean? i thought we established no one was getting married!
GG: remember? mr egbert got really mad and threatened to ground us all until we were, like, thirty?
TG: like damn jade how could you
TG: this shits hells of serious like part of my family heritage and you diss it like that
GG: dave? seriously, this isn't that big a deal...
TG: my family of literally me birdme bro and rose and momlondne
TG: the smallest most dysfunctional family of smoking hot pieces of ass ever ectoborn
TG: rapping is our only outlet for all this mad dysfunction
TG: and now this
TG: this is ten different kinds of profane jade
GG: DAVE! >/;
TG: oh
TG: yeah what
GG: ...you're really weird, you know that?
TG: oh its on
Dave forges his way through the hallways to John's last known location, his palms sweating with each aborted move to pick up his phone and start pestering the kid again. Seriously, he thinks he's developing some kind of anxiety issue, here. It only occurs to him as he inches the door open, squinting behind his shades into the room to make sure he's not accidentally walking in on anything, that he could just have texted the guy. Or hell, even called him. Pesterchum is not the be-all and end-all of messaging options. He considers mashing his face against the wall, but decides that would be counter-productive, seeing as how by some act of god the only person in the room is, in fact, the nerdlord he's been looking for.

Note to self - tell no one about this momentary lapse in brain function. No one.

"Dave!" John greets him, spraying crumbs around a mouthful of food. The lab has two kitchens in the building, but it's also hours away from any delivery place and inhabited by a skeleton crew of insane sciency workaholics, so the food choices are limited to wilted salad and sandwiches, essentially. With the way John and Jade can throw down at mealtimes, Dave's not really surprised to find John chowing down on a sandwich with three more waiting on the plate before him. "Karkat just went looking for you! He said something about murder but I think he's mostly just joking now."

"True. He hasn't legitimately tried to kill me in days. Guy's losing his touch." Dave sits down across from John and folds his hands in front of his face. "Jonathan."

John immediately swallows a bite of his sandwich the wrong way and winces. His incredible shiner, now fully swollen up and turning into a surreal mess of purple and green bruising around his eye, looks even worse now that they're indoors under artificial lighting. "Not the Gendo stare, Dave! Not with shades on!"

Ah, the pressure points of the consummate anime-loving weeb. "It wouldn't intimidate you if you weren't secretly anime trash, John. The unironic hero comics thing is bad enough; this is just sad."

"You watch Supernatural," John hisses. Like that's actually a comeback.

"Yes. Ironically."

John groans and pushes his paper plate aside to bury his head in his arms. "I really hope I'm there the day you realize all this irony stuff is just kind of dumb, and not actually cool," he says, muffled.

"Not possible. I already went through that crisis of faith, like, three years ago. Now whenever I doubt, I just blame it on my shitty childhood and pledge myself anew." Dave steals one of the sandwiches on the plate when his stomach rumbles a reminder that he didn't eat lunch earlier. The lettuce is withered and the whole thing is slathered with mustard, which means it's basically tailor-made to Dave's exacting specifications - namely, it's still edible. He's not picky here. "Anyway, man. I am here to solve all your butt romancing problems, so pay attention."

It takes a moment. Then what he just said hits him.

"...Goddammit."

"I think you need to be more specific. And hope Rose's Freudian senses didn't just start tingling,"
John manages to gasp out between snickers. He's almost collapsing into his plate, his sandwich falling away as he presses the back of his hand to his mouth in an effort to keep from decorating the room with his mouthful of food.

Dave scowls behind his shades, his lips flat as a plateau. "Yeah, yeah, yuk it up, Egbert. I'm not the one who wants to make out with his snugglebuddy because he has a perky rump." Secure in his superior razzing ability, Dave leans back in his seat and tilts his head back to try to swallow as much sandwich as he can in one bite.

This time, John chokes on his own spit, his face frozen in a mask of horror as his snickering cuts off. "Dave," he says, glancing across the room toward the open door so fast his neck makes a cracking sound. "Oh my GOD-"

Swallowing the dry bread takes forever; then Dave clears his throat and makes a show of checking the non-existent watch on his wrist while he checks his internal metronome. "Reports from future me give us six minutes before code name Furious Booty returns-"

"That is the worst code name ever."

Eh, he was bluffing anyway. He hasn't heard from a future him all this afternoon. Dave restricts himself to rolling his eyes and leaning forward again. "So do you wanna hear my ingenious plan or what? This isn't even an ironic plan, bro, this shit is hells of sincere."

Skepticism grafittis itself across John's face. The black eye doesn't help. "Preeetty sure I don't believe you," he says, rolling his eyes in return. "This is some totally convoluted plan that involves pissing Karkat off, doesn't it. I knew there had to be a reason he wouldn't tell me why he was ready to throw you over the side of the roof..."

"You blacken my good name, John. And I thought we were best bros." Dave shrugs, shaking his head sadly. "Aaand now I'm over it. Just listen."

John huffs. Rude. "Kay, I'm listening."

Hell yes. Dave allows himself a small smirk. "We're gonna get you a new drink of water, thirst prince."

John says nothing for five seconds. Dave can pinpoint the exact moment the kid gives up by the look he gives Dave. Brows knitted together, mouth slightly ajar, eyes squinting - the expression of someone who has completely given up all hope in the other person and is officially done. "...What the shit does that even mean?"

Dave claps John on the shoulder. "It means we get you a boyfriend, you obtuse triangle. One in the red quadrangle or the black one where you can grab butts without pissing into the wind."

When he finally replies, John's voice is doing something funny. "I'm pretty sure Karkat is my boyfriend," he says, sounding strangled, with that look in his eyes that says - Shit. "Whoa, yeah, like. Moirails. Pale boyfriends, whatever you call it," Dave says, scrambling a little, because he's pretty sure he almost just twisted John's poor head around into not quite remembering what life he's living. "But I've been doing research, man. Trolls always end up having, like, five people on call, that's basic polyamorous math. Either you get your shit together and tell him you want the booty, or we have to get you laid some other way." Dave pauses. "Or if it's like. Semantics at stake, here, there's always a girlfriend. Look, someone of some gender out there has got to appeal to you other than Vantas and by troll Jesus's left nipnop we are going to find them or so
help me, I will tell Karkat myself."

John's jaw drops. "You wouldn't."

"No, I wouldn't," Dave agrees. John relaxes an inch.

What a trusting dweeb.

"I'd make Rose do it," he finishes, and John's horror transcends his previous grimace to achieve outright terror. "She used to write wizard fic, John. Do you really want her propositioning Karkles for you in all her purple-prosed glory? Shit would be downright lurid."

"No." John's eyes are distant, staring at some horrifying inner vision only he knows. "Dave, I used to beta-read that stuff for her. Dave, no."

Dave polishes off the sandwich in his hand, spreading his fingers wide when his hands are free. "Okay, awesome. Anyway, I figure either the sheer embarrassments of the online dating scene will terrify you into telling Karkat the truth, or we hit pay dirt and get you laid so it stops being an issue entirely." Then he points to the two sandwiches still on the plate to the side. "You gonna finish that?"

"Pretty sure it's not that simple, Dave." John looks down at the plate, turns an interesting shade of puce, and shoves the whole platter toward Dave's side of the table. "Take it, dude. I hope you get mustard on your suit."

"What's not that simple?"

Dave would laugh out loud at the look on John's face as Karkat stamps through the doorway, his hood up and his glasses on in full disguise mode as he scowls at Dave. "I should have known you'd turn up here after I leave," the troll says, sour as vinegar. He has his hands in his hoodie pouch as he throws himself into another rolling chair on the other side of the table, so at least he seems to have cooled off enough to not try to murder Dave on sight. Progress. "What stupidity is he vomiting now, John?"

"Uhhh. Um. Uhhhhhh..."

Truly, John is the soul of wit. Fuck it, Dave thinks, and he plucks a sandwich off the plate before sliding the last one at Karkat. "We're trying to get John laid. Thoughts?"

"DAVE!" John shouts. He actually looks like he might throw up - which, uh, Dave feels bad about. Maybe he shouldn't have dived straight into full asshole mode the moment Karkat waltzed in; if John starts having a panic attack or something because of him he might have to submit to Karkat's retaliatory murder attempt out of shame.

"Oh." Karkat, amazingly, wears nothing more than a vague frown of suspicion as he scowls at Dave. "I should have known you'd turn up here after I leave," the troll says, sour as vinegar. He has his hands in his hoodie pouch as he throws himself into another rolling chair on the other side of the table, so at least he seems to have cooled off enough to not try to murder Dave on sight. Progress. "What stupidity is he vomiting now, John?"

"Uhhh. Um. Uhuhhh..."

"Dave is just being a complete douchebag today, just ignore everything he says - what." John stops looking peaky and starts staring at Karkat like he's sprouted an extra horn. To be fair, Dave's probably sure he'd have the same look if he weren't repressing the hell out his facial expressions at the moment. He expected - shouting. Yeah, more shouting. Karkat being calm in the face of what should have been at least a mildly shocking announcement can only mean one thing -

"It's a Karkat clone," Dave says, utterly betrayed. "God dammit, not again. Not twice in one day."

Karkat's palm reaches out and cups John's cheek for an absent-minded pat even as the troll grimaces
and shoves the sandwich plate away. "I'm not hungry enough to risk ingesting whatever shitpan-
inducing drugs you're on, asshole," he says irritably. "Hush. Shoosh, John. It's alright, I have fucking
*mastered* the art of ignoring everything Dave says."

What. Oh, hell no. "*Lies.* You have never once successfully ignored me. I'm too charming."

Karkat just rolls his dull burgundy eyes. "Watch me." He spins the chair around deliberately to focus
on John. From what little Dave can see, the troll's grimace smooths out into something almost
approaching fondness as he strokes John's shoulder. "I mean it, though. Not a single painthuffing
cactusfuck at that school deserves you." The claws of Karkat's other hand dig into the arm of the
chair a little, scratching absently in some kind of murdertroll reflex. "The only people who even
came close to paying attention to you were those swimming morons, and they've all rotted their
thinkpans on chlorine, so no, absolutely not."

Gobsmacked. Gobsmacked is the word for John's expression. Dave can't tell if it's a good
gobsmacked or a bad gobsmacked. "...And you're okay with that?" he says weakly.

Karkat shrugs. "I'm your moirail. I get first culling rights on whatever shitty applicants for
mutespritship Strider tries to foist on you." A pointed glare in Dave's direction proves that no, Karkat
can't actually ignore him. Dave takes the opportunity to cross his eyes behind his shades, regardless
of whether anyone can actually see it, to prove his superiority. "Honestly, you're a human on the far
side of puberty. I'd be more worried if you *weren't* trying to find some kind of concupiscent partner
by now."

"Oh my god," Dave says. This is even better than he could have hoped for - this is *hilariously awful.*
"I can't believe it. This is actually a conversation we're having."

"Feel free to disinvite yourself from it at any moment. The door's right there," Karkat says. Seriously,
what a pal. "Why am I not surprised that you're as immature about mating instincts as a third-grade
wriggler?"

John stares at Dave in raw panic. Dave mouths, 'just *tell* him,' because that's obviously the sensible
solution to all of John's problems right now, up to and including the one where Karkat has no context
for the fact that he might be stepping all over John's mushed up feels.

More blind panic. Oh lord. "Oh gosh, is that the time?" John says. His voice cracks and somehow
hits a high C, and that is damn impressive. "Crap! We promised we'd help Kanaya and Rose watch
the Scratch kids while they finished those tests, and be there when Doctor Lalonde wanted to start
scanning herself and Dad!"

"Is it that late already?" Karkat says, but before he can so much as pull out his phone to check the
time John has dragged him to his feet, making panicked noises as he hauls ass toward the door faster
than Dave can say 'avoiding the issue.'

Never mind that Dave is the time guy, and thus well aware that they aren't due to check in with
everyone else for ten minutes or so. Hey, if John wants to keep making this a bigger deal than it
needs to be, that's his right. Dave's put in his ten cents.

Humming internally, he frowns as the grating whir surges in volume, and lays off the internal music
as he saunters after the runaway dork squad. It's reached the point that the ongoing
[ɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯɯᵢ
game noises, he might as well hunt down Jade and get her input, or something.

He's gonna figure out what this weird fraymotif is if it's the last thing he does.

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John keeps hearing weird sounds. He considers mentioning this to Dave - it would be really easy, since Dave's not going anywhere, just loping along behind John and Karkat through the halls.

[Thunk thunk]

…But also Dave can suck an entire bag of dicks! John is seriously considering the silent treatment for this one, and nothing gets to Dave more than being ignored! He so deserves it after springing this sudden incomprehensibly asshole move on John without any warning - or at least, not enough of a warning. Geez louise, but Dave can be a total dick sometimes…

[I would go on about this, but even though he's not directly relevant to the main story, I can't help but say that I love the way that Dave is portrayed. He's got a lot of layers to his character, and I think it's really interesting the way that he and John interact with each other.]

I mean, okay, he might have a point about how John should really, really talk to Karkat at some point about their relationship. That is indeed a thing that should happen. Rose has been pressing him about it, too, but she's been distracted for the most part by her ongoing quest to assure everyone (but particularly Kanaya) that she's not about to relapse again, so it hasn't been as bad as it could be given her knack for sniffing out all of John's weaknesses.

But there just hasn't been a good moment for it, and John does not appreciate having this whole mess sprung on him. And now - he cringes inwardly - Karkat seems blithely alright with thinking John wants to get another boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or a - dammit, why did Dave have to make this a thing!

[oooh ooo ooo ooo]

All John wants is to curl up in a corner and let Karkat pat the blistering headache out of his temples while the troll mutters angrily about the latest travesty DC has inflicted on the world of comics. Karkat's really good at that. Because Karkat is awesome. And John in no way wants to replace him at all.

Not that he'd be replacing Karkat, though, because in this weird mixed up scenario Dave's come up with in his asshole brain, John would end up dating two people at once. And yeah, trolls do that all the time, but trolls can date, like, five people at once and that's normal!

...Which means that at some point Karkat might do that. On account of he and John are in one quadrant, which leaves three more. Four squares in a quadrants, IF THERE WERE FIVE, THEY'D BE CALLED QUINTDRANTS, basic math. Duh.

He doesn't know how to feel about that, either.

Oh man. He's a mess. Maybe his brain's just tired after a long day of fighting crime when he was mentally prepped for a nice normal school day. Like - he's even gone over these kind of thoughts in the past, and he knows he's fine with Karkat looking for, like, a kismesis or something. Because a guy as angry as Karkat's gotta end up hating someone in a non-platonic way eventually, and John would never want to be hated by Karkat. Ever. Even in a romantic rival/eternal death match kind of way.

Maybe he's just selfish. Because the way these thoughts are going, it feels more and more like John just wants Karkat all to himself. Not even for butt-touching, just...the thought of Karkat loving
someone else hurts.

Oh. Oh no. John's a fucking awful person. Oh, fuck.

His mood sinks accordingly as the realization settles over him like a smothering blanket. Worse than sinks, actually - John closes his eyes for a moment, and imagines he can almost see the dam in the back of his mind leaking, a sludgy puddle for his mood to roll around in like a dumb dog. Forget curling up in a corner for a couple hours; at this rate he's just gonna get swamped with all the gross, mucky stuff festering back there, and not even Karkat gonna be able to make a dent in this.

John must slow down a little in the middle of his charge down the hallway, because his grip on Karkat's hoodie sleeve loosens and claws brush the palm of his hand, squeezing gently when John struggles to yank himself out of the angst fest playing piñata with his brain. He pastes on a good smile for Karkat as he looks up, smacking himself internally for not paying attention while he's walking around in a still-kind of-unfamiliar setting. The shuffle of feet and subvocalized mutters behind them is Dave, duh, because now that Dave can talk again he can't seem to shut up, but it could just as well have turned out to be, like Spades Slick or something like that, about to stab them both for no reason!

Karkat greets John's grin with a skeptical frown, bordering on outright exasperation, which means he's not very fooled at all. Oops. "What's wrong, you dope? First you're dragging me along like a hopbeast on crack, and now you look like you're about to be sick," he says, in as quiet a voice as Karkat ever manages, casting a furtive look over his shoulder to scowl at Dave. "What did he fucking do?"

John glances back. Dave raises his eyebrow at both of them, a silent 'come at me bruh,' and John hurriedly cranks his head around to face forward. "Nothing!" John scrambles to fit words together into coherent sentences. "I just - can we sit down and do the talking thing, today? Not right now, I guess 'cause we probably don't have time, but I really need to -" He can't finish it; maybe because he's not even sure if he could finish with tell you something in good conscience. The risk that he'll just be a dumb butt and avoid the whole thing again is too high.

Karkat's eyes snap back to John, dull burgundy and startled, and then he presses John's hand again, the startled look fading into something downright soft. "You just have to ask. Obviously," he mutters, the pad of his thumb claw brushing over John's hand before he laces their fingers together. "We'll find all those mattresses and fucking well lock the door, this time."

...John's brain could interpret that in so many different ways. Luckily, this time, he's too busy staving off the burgeoning wave of depression to waste brain power on innuendo. "I don't that would stop Jade if she were really determined," he tries to joke, but Karkat just sets his jaw, grimly determined, and John gets the feeling that if Jade tried to break in on a feelings jam in the foreseeable future she'd end up fleeing in terror. He's not sure how Karkat would do it. But it would happen.

Urgh. John just really hopes all these scans and rituals go well, nobody has any brainthingies in their head, and they can all go back to the Lalondes' house. That would be a dream come true, right there! He's not too worried about how his dad's or Doctor Lalonde's scan will go because come on, think about who he's talking about, here! His money's on this brainwashed Crew secret agent either turning out to be one of Doctor Lalonde's scientists - which will totally suck, yeah, but would make sense - or that no one but the Scratch kids are actually brainwashed at all. Roxy and Dirk seem nice and all - Roxy more so than Dirk, really - but John just harbors what he feels is a healthy ongoing suspicion about people of whom his first impression was that of weirdo super villains. For all they know, the idea of a sleeper agent could just be another thing the Scratches were forced to believe. He
thinks he knows how Kanaya feels when she plays the skeptic card, now!

The air warns John ahead of time, a faint disturbance as Dave blinks in and out of time to flashstep on John's other side, slapping him on the back with enthusiasm "So, do you have a shortlist yet?" he drawls, smirking, as Karkat's head jerks up to snarl at him. "Knowing Karkat's tight ass, it's gonna be a damn short list."

"Dave!" John protests, feeling his face turn the color of a tomato. "Cut it out!"

"Nah, bro."

"And here we behold the rare and much despised jackass in its native environment - right where it's not wanted," Karkat says, with the air of someone narrating a wildlife show on Animal Planet. "I wonder what he will do next?! Punch himself in the fat pursed lips until he falls unconscious? Smear shit all over himself in an attempt to lure in a mate? Try out a new style of cheesy women's sunglasses to see how far he can go in his ill-fated quest to resemble human Ben Stiller?"

"Hey, wearing these shades renders me instantly cool. Way cooler than Ben Stiller." Dave sniffs.

"I don't know, Dave," John says, eking out a laugh that doesn't sound half bad. "Stiller was pretty good in Mystery Men as Mr Furious, so he might still beat you in a contest of ironic hero coolness."

Dave just looks pained, pressing his fingers to the bridge of the shades so they dig into his nose. "Dude, no one has even heard of that movie. Do you know why? Because it was mediocre as hell."

"I've heard of it," Karkat replies, rolling his eyes.

"You don't count. Neither of you count. Our giant sky progenitor wept the day she gave birth to you two. Here she is, down on her luck and with hella bills to pay, and she gets saddled with these two mouths to feed and all they want in life is comics and shitty movies while the roof's leaking goddamn meteors everywhere -"

"You've heard of it," John feels the need to point out.

Dave doesn't miss a beat. "Yeah, well, financially disadvantaged sky mom wept tears of joy about me. I emerged from the ecto-womb a smoking hot badass - clearly I was meant to go the distance in spite - or perhaps because of - my crippling devotion to irony."

…

"Maybe if we just treated him like the mass hallucination he is, we could get on with our lives," Karkat muses aloud, after a long moment of staring blankly ahead in complete disgust.

"Nice try, Karkat, but he's still, somehow, one of my best friends." John sighs heavily. "Somehow."

Dave slings his arm around John's neck, dragging him down so that John almost stumbles as Dave grinds his knuckles against the top of John's scalp. "Doubt the stars' sick ass fires, doubt that the sun has sweet moves, doubt truth is a broke hooker in a seedy motel counting her ones - but never doubt we're bros."

"That's it -" Karkat says, voice tight but volume rising, and John hastily twists around in Dave's grip to grab Karkat by the shoulders and hold him off before he can try to kick Dave's ass. "Just let me hurt him a little, god fucking dammit -"

"No," John says firmly, and he ducks his head under Dave's headlock to put more space between the
two of them before Dave can open his mouth and start rapping or something. Then John does a double take at their surroundings, and realizes they've passed his dad's borrowed office already without him noticing, too caught up in these two dumb assholes and their shenanigans. "Argh! You two, stop fighting while I get my dad. If I can't leave you alone for five minutes without you trying to hate make out or something -"

Karkat makes a noise remarkably similar to that made by an angry deer getting messily run over by a freight train, while Dave pulls away and fakes a gag. "Have fun with the Dadbert," Dave says, and he starts making tracks down the hallway, an ill-disguised abscond in double time.

"Do me a favor and never insinuate that kind of fuckery again," Karkat adds, face crinkled up with horror. "I think I need to scourge my thinkpan with bleach or something, eurgh."

"Yeah, yeah - I'll stop when you two stop trying to play feuding matchmakers." John pats Karkat's shoulders one last time, and turns to head two doors back the way they'd come to get back to the office.

"Want me to come with you?" Karkat asks, looking reluctant as he eyeballs the door. He still seems to view Dad as a kind of threatening human lusus that could turn territorial any second, but John figures that's just weird troll shit. He doesn't know what's up with all the rest of his friends being so intimidated by his dad, either, though. John doesn't always get along with the guy, but he's baffled by all this unwarranted apprehension! His dad is a cool guy! Not as cool as Bro, no, but Bro trades-off by being an even larger bag of dicks than Dave, so who cares.

"Nah, Dad'll probably want to give me a lecture and get a report on the fight today before he has to get strapped into a weird magic ritual pentacle. Stuff like that always gets him bothered because he doesn't like being out of commission." John wrinkles up his nose exaggeratedly, and waves at Karkat over his shoulder. "I'll be right there! Go talk to Kanaya and Rose, if you want to be their friend so bad!"

"Friendship is a disease, John," the troll yells back, waving a casual, affectionate middle finger back at him before shuffling off in Dave's wake. "I'd rather not expose myself to it with Strider still in a hundred mile radius."

"Bluh, bluh!" John wonders how his two of his best friends both turned out to be such belligerent douchebags, and then discards the thought because he probably wouldn't like the answer, anyway. Instead he knocks on the door of the office and turns the handle almost without pausing to wait for the 'come in' that follows right on the heels of the knock. Well, with all the noise Karkat makes, it would have been hard not to hear John approaching.

John's already fixing a rueful half-grin on his face by the time he looks over at his dad sitting behind the desk. He just hopes his bruised up eye doesn't ruin the impression! "Hey, Dad. You ready for this? It's so crazy, right?" Another forced laugh that doesn't sound half-bad, and John heads over to stand at some semblance of attention on the far side of the desk. Looking over at the half of a whiteboard that juts out of the wall to his left inspires a little more humor, because it just looks ridiculous! If Jade had done it on purpose it would have been a great prank! Even now, it's still hilarious.

Or maybe he pulls it off better than he thinks - lately (since Jade showed up, really) he's vacillated between being pretty okay at remembering his manners and being respectful about how he treats his dad - and being a total flake. Karkat called him out on it before it could get too bad, which is probably above and beyond the duty owed by one moirail to another, but still, John feels pretty awful about it. So for once his heels are firmly planted on the ground, and he twists his internal control on the wind up a notch until it cuts out all the rippling whorls and twining tugs that it's taken to
wrapping around him all the time, lately. The air feels weirdly still without that reassuring flutter
beneath the hood of his borrowed hoodie, but hey, it's felt odd for days now, with all this weird
weather Washington's been having, and the oddball pocket of stillness the newscasters have noticed
around Seattle.
"John," his dad says in greeting, and it's his tone of voice that makes John yank his lowered gaze up
to blink at him. There are deeper shadows under Samuel's eyes than John remembers there being not
even a couple of hours ago, and upon closer inspection John sees that his dad's PDA phone thingy is...not his usual PDA phone thingy. Huh. He's sure he would remember his dad buying a new
phone - but no, when John scans the mostly empty desk, he spies the old grey PDA lying right there,
perfectly straightened to sit parallel to the edge of the desk as usual. "I've been catching up with some
of my contacts," Samuel says when he notices John's confusion. "One contact, really. Apparently,
they've been making a concerted effort to minimize their online presence, but our time has run out
regardless."
"Huh. That sucks," John comments, lacing his fingers behind his back and kicking back on his heels.
He needs something to distract himself from the weird mood in this room, and regardless of his
current shitty dumb bad mood, moving helps keep his brain occupied. A little. Then a thought occurs
to him. "Are you worried that they might be at risk, too, like Doctor Lalonde's people?" he asks, his
heart thumping a little. His dad's contacts have been instrumental to John's hero work over the years different people scattered around the country who Samuel knew and trusted from his military career
and his current office job network, who help by pulling criminal records from police stations, setting
up proxies for sensitive information or online orders for costume materials, and faking certain
medical records for when John's weird body prevents him from going to a doctor's office for injuries
that would heal too quickly to be explained. If one of them has been compromised all this time, it
could even put a real dent in John's and his dad's exit strategy, but also explain how Diamonds
Droog caught on to his identity with so little warning...
"No, that's not a concern," his dad says, dismissing John's concern with a curt shake of his head. He
pushes out his chair and stands, still with that odd black phone in hand. It's starting to look more
familiar the longer John stares at it in puzzlement, but he can't place why when he's so certain his
dad's always used his PDA for all his work things. "However, it will be most convenient for us to
make our escape here and now, while Ms Harley is quite effectively hemmed in."
John feels...caught on the wrong foot. "...Say again?" he says, wetting his lips as his mouth goes
kind of dry. "What - does Jade have to do with - escaping? From what?"
Samuel pinches the bridge of his nose, and the smile on his face doesn't match the considering look
in his eyes; as though he's gauging John's likely response to whatever comes next. But John doesn't
understand why they're suddenly talking about this when his dad agreed they'd stick around a lot
longer! "No, you won't be amenable anymore, will you?" Samuel sighs, his eyes flicking away from
John's in a dismissive manner that leaves John cold. "You've deviated further and further from the
parameters since the moment you met that troll. I should have known better than to let you develop
such attachments."
"Dad? You're kind of not making sense." John can't really put a finger on why he feels queasy.
Maybe it's the weird stuff his dad is saying; maybe it's the way Samuel sails past him without sparing
him a second glance to halt before the exit and lock the door with a faint click Or maybe it's still just that droning, grating sound that has lodged itself in his ears, half moan and half
scream, in a [ɯɯɯɯɯɯɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹooooooooʇʇʇʇʇʇʇʇʇ] of noise that makes everything Samuel
says sound like it's coming from a million miles away.


"John, we really need to talk about -"

- 

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From: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
To: [redacted] <address unknown>
Subject: Compromised

[redacted],

Lalonde has given orders for all in the facility to be examined for mental abnormalities utilizing both physical and magical apparatuses, including myself. Attempting to excuse myself and TR-0413 from the proceedings will no doubt be seen as an admission of guilt. Permission to activate the asset and retreat to base?

Regards,

Samuel Egbert

---

From: [redacted] <address unknown>
To: Samuel Egbert <pipefan413@skaia.net>
Subject: Re: Compromised

Samuel,

Permission granted - but do not return to base. Make your way to safe house designation M113 at the attached scrambled coordinates and await further direction. Both you and TR-0413 will require review before you are cleared for the current situation at base.

Yours,

Robin Marlowe

- 

"- your loyalties," Samuel finishes.

Oh god. His head hurts.

[ .getParam ]

John rams his hip into the corner of the desk in the process of swaying forward, his fingers numb and clumsy as he reaches up to press his hand to his upper lip. His other hand grips the edge of the desk, but his strength feels like its draining away. He opens his mouth on reflex to gasp in a breath of air, and the blood cascading from his nose runs into the gap to smear across his teeth and into the hollow beneath his tongue. It trickling down the back of his throat, too; he has to swallow before he chokes on it.

"No need to wipe this session. We won't be returning on terms conducive to infiltration any time in the near future." John can't tell which throbs louder in his ears, his handler's voice or -

[  paramName ]

Handler?
"- hurts," he gasps out, pushing off from the desk and lurching - away from Samuel, just away, even though that takes him further from the only door out of the room. Something’s wrong, or horribly right, and there's a third sound clamoring for his attention, like the echo of cackling laughter that has started to override even the drone of -

[ ιΔι ]

It's not enough anymore. He can pinpoint the exact moment the old fraymotif is drowned out, buried beneath the realization he can no longer deny.

_It was Dad. It was always him._

"Yes, yes, you've said," Samuel says, and the callous disregard is just another blow that rocks John's frame, sending him reeling against the wall, tilting his head forward in some desperate attempt to prop himself up. His cheek presses up on the cool of the wall and he forces his eyes back open - when did they close? - to see his bent elbow, his hand fanned out to the side blood from his nose leaving tracks all along the white surface.

Oh god.

_Oh god._

TR: not anymore! :B

TR: my turn, my turn!

"The transition wouldn't be so abrupt if you hadn't involved yourself in this farce of a moirallegiance, really." A heavy hand thumps down on his shoulder and John can't even react; he should - do something, he _knows_ all the self-defense moves he'd need to push away from the wall and fight his way to the door; he can outfight his handler, has been able to for years. "I'd thought, when the Seer left...but no. Too many conflicting chemicals for nearly two years, now." A tsk. "Do I need to use a stronger trigger?"

"No." John pulls his face away from the wall, but his first attempt - to smash his head back and hope to catch Samuel in the nose - aborts before it even begins, as his heads dizzies and dazes and his vision gets sucked into staring at the garish mask of bloody marks he's left on the wall where his face was. He blinks again. Only this time does he note the stickiness on his eyelashes, the way that his fingers come away too-dark a red when he wipes at the corner of his eye.

His head feels so light. So much blood loss, so fast - he needs to come up with something else before he can't even stay conscious…

The wind. Why did John turn it off, why did he _do that_ -

TR: mine mine mine! it's all mine now!

Because he always does. He's been suppressing the wind for years at his handler's command, keeping it so tightly under control in the house and on patrol that he can't even recall the last time it spoke to him with words. No matter how it begged and pleaded, wrenched him away from danger and offered to whisk him away to Rose, he would never leave his dad, never, why would it even _ask_ that of him -

Easier to just ignore it and ground himself. Even when the panicked instinct to bolt reaches a breaking point, he always comes back, didn't he?
Always...

His stomach can't even turn. The queasiness no longer registers, really; it feels like just a regular sensation, like everything from the ache in his joints and the bright, stabbing pulses of pain deep in his brain has somehow merged into a regular state of being.

It would be so easy to just shut down.

His handler makes it easy. John can't remember sagging and falling back against the wall, facing out toward the room, but a pair of hands frame his face to tip it up to the light. Samuel's frown is one more of irritation than concern, and that's more wrong than anything else about this moment. "John. Shutdown and inversion protocol. We need to go."

He shakes his head. "Nngh." Rosekarkatdavejaderosekarkatdavejaderosekarkarkarkar -

The fingers dig into the sides of his face, and the laughter roars in John's ears. "Shut. Down."

It is far easier, he thinks as the levee breaks and darkness swallows him whole, to follow orders than to try to disobey. How did RL-2408 manage it all these years?

"Invert."

(The screaming is unbearable.

Madness is, as always, the emergency exit.)

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TR: hoohoohoo hooHOOHOOHOO! :B
TR: why
TR: aren't
TR: you
TR: LAUGHING?!

Jade paces. This is some intense pacing, too. All the better to show she's not fooling around, here! She's borrowed a lab coat just for the occasion - she kinda forgot her last clean one back in the middle of Seattle, so really! Just borrowing! She needs that daring awesome scientist adventurer look for maximum authority in an important meeting like this one! So what if the coat's a little baggy? It kicks out behind her when she gets enough momentum going, and that's all that matters in life.

When she feels she's properly set the mood by cultivating an air of SERIOUS BUSINESS, Jade spins to face the only other person in the room. It's a good spin, too. Her coattails get lots of mad air, as Dave would say!

She clears her throat, and begins. "I'd just like to start," she says, "by apologizing for our rudeness the other day! We left, but no one could figure out where you were, so we didn't say goodbye, and that was sucky of us."

The other inclines her head, the faintest of dips, in acknowledgement. Good start! Jade starts pacing again; the twistiness of the space around her really is a hassle, because she can't get a clear idea of
what's going on in the rooms beyond this, so she has no idea how things are going with the Scratch kids. The not-knowing makes her pout inwardly. "But with that said, I'm still gonna ask a big favor of you, if that's alright," she continues, biting her lip momentarily before mentally smacking herself over the head with a newspaper kind for acting undignified. She needs to make a good impression here; these are negotiations, after all, no matter how informal their surroundings. Especially because of their surroundings - at least on some level, she really needs to make up for the fact that the best meeting room she could find on short notice was one of the few disused labs that doesn't show signs of having been torn apart by certain carapacians in a stupid dumb blood feud sex fest.

Yeesh. What a pair of oversexed, inconsiderate assholes.

"It's just - I am so tired of having an incomplete picture of what we're dealing with, here! I can't take it anymore!" Jade says, trying to get to the point in a timely manner. She stops in front of the table with great effort, reeling her feet back under her before she can launch into another round, because it occurs to her that pacing a lot might not actually be appropriate when the other person is seated, regal as anything in spite of the humble quality of her hood and robes. It might just make you look really nervous. Or douchebaggy. "My grandpa's files gave me some idea of what to expect about the game, and they were pretty accurate - to a point. And the records on the Hub have been even better."

If a little messed up and painful to watch, she adds, but only in the privacy of her own mind. Tact! Tact is key! "But it's not enough. Too much has changed. Grandpa always thought I'd end up dreaming of Prospit, and learning a lot of what I needed to know from watching the clouds...but that's never happened!" She sighs. "So...I know most things you've said are true. More true than what we'd get out of the Black Queen, anyway!" She sticks out her tongue. But tastefully, to better illustrate her point! "And out of everyone here, you're the one who's an expert in basically all the topics I have extremely pressing questions about that need answering, pronto."

She hesitates. Then she steels herself, breathing out, and leans forward, resting both palms flat on the table, and allows just the briefest hint of a sweet, cajoling grin to flare across her face. "So! Is it alright if we talk?"

And she waits.

Across the table, the White Queen raises her claws and folds back her hood so that the smooth surface of her shell gleams under the harsh light.

WQ: All you ever had to do was ask, my dreamer.

WQ: What do you wish to know?

"Great! Uh!" Jade fumbles for a moment, all of her questions having chosen right now to fly right out of her head. Urrgh... Start with the basics, and branch out from there. "So. The Hub, and all those recordings - how reliable would you say it is, generally? How accurate is it?"

The Queen blinks, her ink black eyes placid as she signs in smooth motions.


WQ: But these are not ordinary circumstances.

Jade waits. But the carapacian meets her gaze and doesn't say a word more. As though she's waiting on Jade to -

...Right. Game construct. At this rate, Jade might as well just be choosing what she says from on-screen dialogue options! "What are the circumstances, then?" Jade asks, folding her arms. "What
changed so that the recording was damaged or disrupted or whatever?"

The Queen responds promptly, a smooth flow of words and intonations that diffuses through Jade's thoughts like white ink on black paper. There's power beneath its smooth gloss, a reverberation that thrums just beneath the level of Jade's hearing. As the conversation goes on, she can't help but feel more and more like a little kid again, sitting cross legged and watching with wide eyes as her Grandpa told her a story or demonstrated how to reload a flintlock. If the Black Queen lurks and crackles with barely-muted menace, her opposing piece appears no more harmless than the sleek crust of snow on a mountainside drift - before an avalanche.

WQ: When two game sessions overlap, there is always a measure of fallibility in the records. In this case, many of the records concerning the very end of your session may well have been logged under that of the troll game, which is beyond my power to access.

That's still weird. Weird and arbitrary. But then, so are most things about this game. "I'm sensing a 'but,' here."

WQ: But when the most Noble Circle of Horroterrorrrrrrrrrs invests itself so much into not one but two sessions, particularly a session with a player of Rage and a player of Void...the matter complicates itself. Both of those aspects affect the viewport: Rage through distortion, Void through obscuration. Games that involve even one of these players tend to suffer from blackouts and extremely convoluted plot twists that the Hub struggles to keep pace with. Games with both, and the involvement of the Furthest Ring? Are next to impossible to codify.

WQ: So - what you are able to view was most likely accurate. But it is, perhaps, what you are not able to view that poses the greatest potential threat.

"So basically, we're hooped on that front, 'cause we don't know the ending." Jade sighs. "Is there anything you can tell me about the game we're playing right now? How will the fact that two sessions got all cosmically mushed together affect it? Surely something like that's gotta have consequences!"

WQ: There have been consequences. But you consider them regular facts of life. The coexistence of humans and trolls on one planet, for example, has altered human history and current social norms deeply, and while the trolls survive in the absence of their own planet and history, there is no denying the fact that their culture has been almost completely subsumed by your own. All of this seems normal to you.

Oh. Awkward. Jade scrubs at the back of her head, wishing she had not-twist access to her sylladex so she could grab a hair brush or something. Then she recalls that she's trying to be a professional, and slaps her hand back down onto the table, trying her best to radiate innocence. "Well, that sucks. And the game? I know a lot of the others don't want it to happen at all" - she pulls a face - "because they think they can save everyone on the planet if we just don't play. But that..." She sobers. "That won't work, will it? No matter what we do..."

She trails off. For one thing, she's been trying to resolve herself to accept the imminent death-by-meteor-bombardment of everybody on the planet Earth for - well, her whole life! Or whenever it was Grandpa first sat her down and solemnly imparted the information to her. So she's kind of just coasted over it emotionally; when the apocalypse does happen, she can deal with the emotional fall out after the game is played, and not a jot sooner! There's just too much at stake.

But for another, she doubts that the White Queen, of all people, will legitimately sympathize with her about the dilemma of knowing billions of people are doomed to die. An alien creature who has witnessed countless civilizations die over the eons of Skaia's iterations...probably just wouldn't see a
mass extinction event as all that big of a deal.

True to form, the Queen doesn't even take the half-hearted bait. She just confirms what Jade already knows.

WQ: The game will play itself out. This alone I hold to be an immutable fact, which I am comfortable stating for the record.

"Yeah, that's kinda the impression I got."

WQ: But it is already riddled with glitches and paradoxes, inconsistencies and stultiloquence that render it nigh on impossible to complete.

WQ: The scratch of the game session should have reset you all to your pre-god tier states. But you have emerged from this mire of contradictions already gods, with your memories and powers in a state of flux. This should not be.

WQ: That is part of why my sister-queen and I went to such lengths as we could to seek you out, once we became aware of your existence. She plots and she schemes, as is her wont, but she has no more wish to see these numerous glitches reach fruition than I do. If you all are to rise to the challenge before you, we cannot afford to sit idly by.

WQ: So. We will help.

Jade has to walk everywhere in this dumb-yet-awesome lab. It still takes getting used to. She floats along on occasion, and can sometimes find her sylladex dimension - but then the twistiness of the void wards will get into her powers all sneaky like, and she'll miss a step, or pull a spare shoe out of the sylladex in place of the notebook she meant to reach for. Doctor Lalonde has apologized for all the inconvenience, actually, but Jade gets it. This is the method the Lalondes have been using to hide themselves from Doc Scratch's all-seeing eyes for ages, and it's a pretty darn effective technique, from what she's seen!

But she can see why her none of her Grandpa's labs were shielded this way. A transportalizer would probably fritz out in minutes if you tried to set one up to teleport through all this shielding. Even poor Bec is napping again, down for the count within minutes of entering the valley.

She's got a lot tossing around in her mind by the time she trudges allll the way from her meeting with the White Queen to the makeshift waiting room between the hallway and the neurology department. A lot of the medical research wards are set up kind of like hospitals, but since this place has been decommissioned for so long, Jade has come across many rooms that have been repurposed by the small on-site staff just because they're closer to the main hallway. Judging by the number of filing cabinets that line the far wall of the neurology waiting room, someone's been using the extra space to keep their papers closer to their workspace.

It's efficient, if nothing else, she thinks as she shoves through the door and skips over to the hastily-improvised circle of chairs that occupies the center of the room. Karkat limps/stalks in a circle he seems to have marked out for himself in the corner, looking vaguely aggravated when he glowers at her entrance but not quite on the verge of a meltdown; Jade's gotten pretty darn good at picking up when Karkat's about to faceplant over the line from general disgruntlement to outright fury, and he's not there yet! For now, he just returns to his obviously very significant pacing, glancing at his phone sporadically with his jaw working nonstop. Dave, meanwhile, slouches over two chairs, his new shades (where does he even keep all those without a sylladex?) glinting as he inspects a single gear-
shaped turntable rotating slowly over his lap.

It looks exactly like the kind of cool equipment he had in the game, and that's so fascinating that he's figuring out how to use those powers again! But before she interrogates him about the science-y stuff - "Where's John?" she asks, bouncing in her seat as she shrugs off the oversized lab coat to drape inside out over the seatback. She's down to just her body suit again, but who ever cares if they're all gonna get stuck in the MRI machine in an hour or so, anyway?

"Stuck listening to the fatherly lectures of the Dadbert," Dave says, thumbs darting over his phone screen with a practiced expression of boredom. "Seriously, I'm no longer surprised that kid has such a paranoia complex about his secret identity. The man's protocol hard-on is goddamn insane."

"Ohhh. What about Rose and Kanaya?"

A non-committal shrug. "Got me. Old Lalonde came in looking for them and got all pissy when she only got yours truly, so apparently they split like bananas before me and Karkles got here." Dave shakes his head, and spins the turntable a couple inches counterclockwise. "It's like rabbits, I swear to god." He tilts his head to the side, and raps his knuckles against the grooved black surface of the record. "Huh."

"God fucking dammit, will you stop fiddling with that thing?!" Karkat complains from his corner, and Jade looks over to see that the troll has altered his trajectory so that he's now rounding the circle of chairs, the Lalonde Labs logo of his hoodie cut in two by a crease in the printed fabric. "Why isn't John back yet?"

Dave taps at his phone some more, stoic on the surface, but Jade's at the right angle to see him roll his eyes like dice as he deliberately spins the turntable again with a desultory flick. "Oh yeah, Jade - and if you look to your left, Karkat's just stupefying everyone around him in his latest attempt to showcase the world's shortest separation anxiety fuse. What else is new?"

Jade can't help it; she smothers a giggle but doesn't succeed all the way, so that a choked off snerk escapes her. "Aww, don't be mean, Dave."

"It's not funny, Harley." Karkat reaches up to tear at his hair in frustration and ohhh no, there's the clack of sharp troll teeth as a clicking growl starts to edge into his voice. Maybe Jade needs to work on her Karkat-fury gauge, because it's clearly not up to snuff when John's removed from the equation. "Wow, that was fast! Prolonged exposure to the two of you is giving me a migraine. And by prolonged, I mean it's literally only been two seconds. A new record."

"Wow, rude!" Jade spits back, sticking out her tongue when Karkat next faces them. "One of these days, someone really needs to sit you down and catch you up on how manners work, buddy!"

"You're just pissed because you didn't have backup pants," Dave says. "You remember to pack your fancy ass contact lenses but not pants? 'S fucked up, man."

"Shut up. I would have been more prepared, but we were supposed to dump these shitstains off with the police and go home, not prance off to the mountains for 'mandatory brain scans,'" Karkat says, his scowl dark as storm clouds as he makes air quotes with his claws. "Look at this. Look at what I'm reduced to. Air claws, I swear to fuck - why is John not here yet?!"

"I'm sure he and his dad'll be here any sec," Jade points out, rolling her eyes at Dave in commiseration.

"I saw that!"
"Good!" Jade flops around to sit backwards on the chair, pushing with her toes so she and the chair lean back, the chair on two legs. "Ugh, guess what? It gives me a headache when you're pissy, so we're even! Stop complaining so much!"

"Whoa, sames," Dave chimes in, setting his phone down on top of the turntable so he can twine around in the far chair and sling his arm over the seat back to stare at Karkat mercilessly. "It's like we're connected."

"Congratulations," Karkat replies, looking utterly disgusted with life. "The king fucktruck trophy goes to you, Dave. You've earned it."

"I would like to thank my parents and also Jesus for inspiring me to reach for the stars and to always follow my dreams." Dave presses a hand to his chest, solemn. "But I would be nothing without my partner in Kat-baiting, Jade, so we'll have to get her name engraved on there, too."

"That's Harley with an 'h,'" Jade adds.

"Auuugggh!" Karkat flips both of them off soundly, but instead of lunging at them in some kind of murder attempt he spins on his heel and marches toward the door to the main hallway. Which, hey, is way better than how he would have reacted not a week ago! He flings said door open with enough force to set it rattling, still muttering to himself in a low shout about finding John.

Then he screeches to a halt. "Oh, you're fucking joking!" he says, his back still to the two of them as he stares at something in the hallway. "Just - get out of my way, you bilgesucking ascrumpt! You" - Karkat's head whips around and he snarls, jamming a claw at Dave - "Get yourself out of my way!"

Dave jerks upright, his feet swinging down from his secondary chair. "Whoa, wait. What?"

"Tell you to move!" Karkat clenches his claws into fists as he swings out of the way of the door frame, then flares them out in a Vanna White sweep to frame -

A second Dave. "Sup," he says, raising a hand in greeting.

- "And what's up with this, anyway?!" Jade finds herself growling a little with frustration, and she swallows hard, trying to smooth it out of her voice before continuing. "You and the Black Queen...you're capable of making decisions for yourselves. You have conscious thought, you act of your own accord - so what's up with the NPC routine? You could have told someone all of this stuff ages ago - heck, you could have just explained everything to our guardians and called it a day! Why all this rigmarole and acting like you can only share information when we specifically ask about it? You're more than that!"

WQ: ...It is difficult to say. You may as well ask yourself why you breathe. It's simply a part of how we function.

WQ: I will admit that of late I have...ruminated on the subject. My people have never before settled a planet with the pre-existing civilization still alive, and we carapacians have all be forced to grow and adapt, perhaps in ways that paradox space never intended when our role in the game was first conceived.

WQ: A good number, when the time comes, will no doubt allow their new independence to fall away and take up their roles without question. But - what do you know of the Creed of the Worthy Villein?
"I think I've heard of it?" Jade mulls it over for a few minutes, and the White Queen says nothing all the while. "It's some kind of minor religious philosophy, isn't it? I don't think I heard much about it after I hit the Mediterranean heading west." Something nags at her, in the back of her mind - someone had mentioned...urgh... "Maybe someone mentioned it once in South America? But it seems like it only pops up in isolated clusters."

WQ: South America? I'd not heard of many of my people journeying there. Ah, well.

WQ: More and more, among the carapacians of the mountains and the deserts and the taiga, Prospitians and Dersites alike have begun to put aside their differences and garb themselves in wrappings of brown and grey. Ordinarily, such behavior occurs only in the immediate aftermath of the Reckoning, as they wander what remains of the host planet and begin to rebuild civilization in a vacuum. And soon enough their cooperation ends, as they revert to their old nature.

WQ: But these followers of the Villein seem determined to foreswear their allegiances to royalty permanently. They still praise the players as gods, but they do not want to wage war in the names of their sovereigns. It is a measure of free will I had not thought the cloned ranks capable of.

WQ: They are...changing. We Queens bear no rings, and my King has laid aside his scepter in the capital. In the absence of royalty, they preach self-determination and democracy.

WQ: It's all very strange.

Jade blinks.

And slowly raises her hand, like one of the kids in John's lame high school.

WQ: ...Yes?

Jade closes her eyes, head cocking a little to the side as she thinks, and then shakes her head and opens her eyes with a laugh. "Say, how common are the initials WV? Because it's so weird that you mention the Worthy Villein - I've only ever heard it called the Creed of the Villein, usually, so -"

She trails off.

The Queen stares back, unblinking - until she coughs, awkwardly, and tries to cover it up by clearing her throat mentally. She also stops meeting Jade's eyes, which is incredibly suspicious...

WQ: Er.

WQ: About that.

Jade needs to sit down. "It's...really uncommon, isn't it," she says, blindly patting around to her right until she finds a stool to drag under her butt. "Ohhh boy..."

WQ: ...

WQ: Not so much uncommon as...unique.

"Pleeease tell me you're not saying what I think you're saying. Pretty please?"

WQ: Honestly, we'd been wondering where the little fellow ran off to. Derse had no records of his ectobiological profile being cloned, but he tends to just show up regardless -

This is how Jade finally comes to the realization that yes, WV is, in fact, the inspiration for a minor alien cult of democracy.
And she left him alone in Rose's house! Yikes!

- "Huh. That is a me." The Dave sitting by Jade scratches the side of his head, lips pursed ever so slightly. "Go figure." Shrugging with only one shoulder, he settles back down against the chair. "Whatever, me, let him through so he can have his ragefit in angry, angry peace. Also -" Dave pauses, and rubs at his shades with the sleeve of one hand, sitting up again more slowly. "Oh holy shit, what the hell are we wearing?"

Yeah - Jade's kind of noticing it, too.

This other Dave isn't in a suit or anything. He's in really familiar red pajamas, buckles and straps crisscrossing the front of his torso with a brilliant crimson gear emblazoned across the front. The collar that allows him to speak has been painted a bright, pale blue, but the weird contrasting note in a theme of reds sits tucked mostly within the messy folds where the cape (!!!) bunches up around his neck.

The important thing here is, he has a really sweet cape!

"Hey, you figure out the god tier jammies!" Jade exclaims delightedly, batting at Dave's foot because it's the nearest thing she can reach. "That's so cool!"

"It's news to me, man," Dave says, reaching a hand up to scrape at his own collar - maybe unconsciously, because his hand blinks back down to his side a second later, his face twitching from side to side as though checking to see if anyone caught him at it. "Yo, future-me, what up?"

"Out of the way!" Karkat interrupts before the future-Dave can respond, a little bit of spit flying from his mouth as he starts to hit his shouting stride. "I've got -"

"- a lab full of idiots, a severe lack of pants, and a thinkpan full of jolly mechanical monkeys ceaselessly clapping into the empty space where the off-switch on your anger should have been installed," the other Dave finishes for him, stepping into the waiting room. "Yeah, yeah, heard it all before."

Karkat's jaw snaps shut. "Th-that is not what I was going to say, fuckwad," he retorts, clearly unsettled to Jade's eyes but not willing to say so.

"No, but it's what I remember saying, so suck on that raging boner of temporal inevitability." Before Karkat can suck in a breath and start screeching at the top of his lungs - he's got his crazy eyes on - the new Dave holds up both hands and grimaces, shaking his head. "Look, I'm just working my way through start to end, trying to catch up on all the loops I left hanging around, so I'm just gonna say my piece and haul ass out of here, because we're running out of time -"

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Jade starts reaching for her sylladex in consternation, feeling it twist and dance out of the reach of her fingers at the last moment, so that she just barely taps the side of the gun she's aiming for. Darn it, she shouldn't have captchalogged them all… "If it's bad enough that you came back to give us a warning, it must be terrible!"

"Understatement of the goddamn year, Jade."

"So tell yourself what no doubt asinine thing you have to report! But first let me through before I bury you ten miles beneath the earth's crust in the process of running you down!" Karkat hisses, kicking at future Dave's shins with his black boot. "Out - of my - way -"
"Nah, you have to stay here a little longer. Trust me, it's really fucking important," the second Dave says, removing his shades to rub at his eyes, "that you stay here for five more fucking minutes. If you go see John too early, the body count for today just kind of does this thing where it hits the double digits and includes basically everyone in this stupid goddamn piece of shit lab who's too close to ground zero."

And then he hooks his shades over the fancy collar of his cape and stands there, looking exhausted and not at all like he just mentioned people dying.

Karkat's next kick misses and he nearly trips over his own feet into the wall, eyes bulging. "What?!

"People are dying? Who's dying?" Jade demands, rocketing up onto her knees in the chair and then swearing internally when the gun ducks out of her reach again, so she has to yank on the fabric of space to try and get the sylladex to behave. "Ohhhh my god, Dave, stop being a dumb stupid cagey moron and spit it out? Where do we have to be?"

"Right here," the future Dave says flat out, nostrils flaring. He slaps a hand against the side of the doorframe so that his arm almost clotheslines Karkat across the throat when he tries to lunge for the exit. "I mean it. If you guys run in there half-cocked too early it just gets worse."

"That...makes zero fucking sense," Dave says. He's out of his seat before one blink and the next, the turntable rotating around him in a lazy circle as he confronts the other Dave, shoulders hunched. "Run the whole thing by me again. On account of you haven't explained jackshit."

"It will," the other Dave says. "God, it'll make sense in five minutes, and I'm pissed as hell we can't do anything. But the thing you've gotta know - the only fucking useful thing I remember telling me - you have to get Lalonde out of the way. We can't lose her this early." He hesitates, and presses at his eyes with his fingers again, an open gesture of exhaustion. "And it doesn't kill you, when it would totally kill her. Fuck, you'll see what I mean. You just...you need to get that we couldn't stop this. That. Fuck. If we went and dicked around with what happens next, we just set ourselves up for a massive time paradox. And this universe eats paradoxes and every doomed bastard stupid enough to get locked into them for breakfast."

Then his gaze flies to Jade and pins her in place. "Jade. Ever read Harry Potter?"

"Everyone's read Harry Potter," Jade replies, exasperated. Alright, she's out of here, and the void shielding can get all bent out of shape as much as it wants because she is finding John so he can help with getting everyone to safety right now. "Oh, forget this, I'm go-"

"Splinching. That is all." Future Dave's lips twist down. "Seriously, do not do what you're thinking about doing. And Karkat -"

He sweeps Karkat into a hug.

Jade feels the critical moment at which her leaning tips the chair past the balance point, and the whole thing topples to the ground with a crash, the borrowed lab coat crumpled up against the tile floor. She, however, stays floating, frozen in place more out of bewilderment than any conscious effort. She's pretty sure the high pitched scream that quickly muffles itself is the current Dave, who has both hands clapped to his mouth in terror and looks like he might need to sit down or something.

She can't see much of Karkat's face with the future Dave's cape getting everywhere, but judging by the twitch of his single visible eye, he's about to lose it. One of his claws rises up, maybe to claw off Dave's ear or something, but the troll just seems too utterly thrown to figure out whether he's angry or horrified.
"Is this irony?" she asks the regular Dave in an undertone.

"Oh my god," he says, horrorstruck.

"Self-defense 101," the possibly-not-real-Dave says, oblivious to his own now-obvious lunacy. "Dude, someone grabs you from the front, knee them in the family jewels. From behind, smash them in the nose with your tiny angry horns."

"Are you - lecturing me?!" Karkat shrieks, finding his voice at last. "You - I'll - eeeeeaaaaAAGGGHIIIIHHH!" He thrashes around, but it's mostly ineffectual flailing with his arms flopping around like noodles.

"And Jade." The Dave nods at her as he claps Karkat on the back bracingly. Karkat doesn't seem to approve. "Counting on you - play this right, and nobody dies today. So go and wreck his shit."

...She can do that. Whoever 'he' is, anyway. Jade nods back, because maybe, just maybe, it'll make the weird shenanigans stop.

"Then I'm outtie. Don't worry about the bodies, they aren't the real you anymore. I'm the alpha you, and I'm obviously not dead yet. Plus, they tend to disappear after a couple hours anyway." And on that jarring note, the other Dave releases Karkat and steps back to click his fingers, summon a pair of floating turntables, and vanish into thin air.

Jade finally just puts her feet on the ground. Too much of her mind needs to be rerouted to processing what just happened; she doesn't need to deal with the headache of the void wards pressing down on her.

"Okay," the normal Dave says, staring at the empty air where his evil future self used to stand, "what the actual fuck just happened. Anyone? Anyone at all? Just - feel free to toss some suggestions out there, guys. Because I've got nothing. Any thoughts?" After another pause - "Bodies?"

"I think I'm going to get John right the fuck now before you pull any more of this pseudo-ironic bullshit!" Karkat yells at the top of his lungs, whirling on Dave with his face twisted into something ugly. He opens his mouth, then almost bites through his own lip as he closes it to shove the closing door open again and race out into the hallway so fast his boots screech on the tile, and he has to push off the wall opposite when he nearly rams into it to turn.

The door to neurology opens just as Jade grabs the still baffled current Dave by the shoulder to drag him along - or maybe to make him speed her up like he did Kanaya earlier, she's not sure because it's happening too fast - and Doctor Lalonde stares at the two of them, nonplussed. "What on earth is happening out here? We could hear Karkat shouting from the operation theater. Are you all fighting again because really, dears -"

Jade makes a split-second decision, and nearly knocks Dave over as she sprints back to grab Doctor Lalonde by the hand and pull her out into the hallway, too. "No time to explain you might be in danger so just stay behind us okay okay let's go let's go!" she babbles without pause, picking up the pace once they're in the open hallway so fast that there's an audible crack as the heel of Doctor Lalonde's spindly shoe splinters. To her credit the doctor slips out of the shoes midstep without breaking her stride, clamping down on Jade's hand in what Jade almost thinks might be a reassuring squeeze. On her other side, Dave vanishes and abruptly reappears three feet ahead - six - nine - as he flashsteps after Karkat as the troll seizes the handle of a door to better throw himself around the next corner.

For a wild moment, Jade's not even sure where they're going or how Karkat knows to go there - until...
her brain shoves the answer at her in a mangled mash of deductions, all of them screaming that *something's wrong.*

The first confirmation she gets is when she nearly slams into Dave, who stops in a crouch over top of something right in the middle of the hallway. "Dave, don't stop!" she yells, desperately trying to swallow around the peach-sized lump that has lodged itself in her throat. Breathing feels so difficult, like trying to gulp down air and having nothing fill your lungs. Her body feels too tight, crunched in one place by this *stupid stupid awful* void shielding, all her atoms vibrating so hard she thinks that's half the reason she's broken out into a sweat that clings to her like the sharp stink of fear.

*Wrong wrong wrong, and why is there nothing to breathe -*?

Dave looks up, and then down the hallway, and Jade can *feel* him start shaking. "Holy shit. Holy shit, oh fucking shit."

It's around then Jade realizes that the thing Dave's crouched over is his own body.

A pretty dead body, too, the neck twisted all the way around at a stomach-tilting angle. What's worse is, when Jade looks where Dave's looking, there's three more like them scattered around the corridor. All of them in the same ripped up suit that Dave's wearing right at this exact moment, all of them doing their best impressions of corpses - and succeeding. Jade thinks she would throw up, but she hasn't eaten in hours and if she hurls now she might not have any breath left in her lungs by the time she stops heaving -

*Breath -*

"Dave," Rue Lalonde says, dropping Jade's hand and reaching out to touch Dave's shoulder's with fingers that don't quite disguise their own minute tremble. "David, sweetheart -"

"Just go," Dave gasps, shrugging her off and flinching as he prods the corpse-Dave's cheek with a glancing finger. He looks closer to throwing up than Jade feels. "Catch up with Karkat - aw man, what the hell is this...Go, just go."

"He said it wasn't really you," Jade throws in, plucking the thin thread of hope out of the whirlwind in her mind of what the future Dave (the *very alive* future Dave) had added just before he vanished into the depths of time. "He said he was you."

"Go." He says it through gritted teeth, and Jade isn't entirely sure how she stumbles around him when all she wants to do is grab him and hug him; she almost falls as she makes her legs run again, and loses track of whether Doctor Lalonde follows as she forces herself to look away from another Dave with his lungs - just *all over the walls*, oh god... Footsteps echo weirdly behind her in the hallway, and Jade spares enough of a glance over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of bobbing blonde Lalonde hair but *where are Rose and Kanaya or anybody else in this stupid lab, for that matter?*

Gun. She needs a gun. Whatever's been killing Daves could show up at any moment. With that in mind, Jade mentally *stomps* her foot and pulls the first gun to come to hand - and it's her backup tranq gun, the really oversized one she saves for giant rogue marine lusii and the like because the anesthetic formula is designed to take down big animals with expansive circulatory systems hard and fast.

Well. Good. Anyone who hurts Dave deserves to sleep for a week. The thought carves through the suffocating fog in Jade's swirling mind and sharpens her focus. She tears her eyes away from another dead Dave to home in on Karkat, who has reached the door where Samuel Egbert has his backup office and is aiming violent sidekicks at the apparently locked door. "John!" he yells, lowering his
foot to slam both hands up against the door. "Mr Egbert, open the door!"

Spoilers? They don't open the door.

"Hands off, Karkat," Jade hollers, dropping the gun with a clatter to raise both hands. Her voice must emulate Grandpa's no-nonsense command voice well enough to fool even Karkat in a fit of mind-numbing panic, because he rips his claws away from the door (maybe just to turn and scream at her, but no one will ever know).

Jade wraps her senses around the door as best she can, and just rips.

Her ears pop as the pressure on her spikes, and Jade blinks through watering eyes to see that - at the very least - the door has vanished. She can't feel where she tossed it though. If it turns out anything like the whiteboard incident, she'll just cross her fingers and pray she didn't just bisect a human being instead of a wall.

"John!" Karkat takes advantage of the open doorway instantly, rushing into the office while Jade's still jogging to catch up. She raises her fingers to one ear, and pulls them away red with blood. If anything, the heaviness in the air just constricts further, even though she's not trying any space-y things anymore, and she's just as breathless as before.

She reaches the doorway and pivots, expecting the worst. She's not sure what the worst is, yet, but the mounting dread that Dave's future counterpart inspired, and that Karkat's frantic, seemingly groundless panic has only added to, makes her heart pulse painfully, thready and yet too fast at the same time.

Mr Egbert stands by the desk, a pillar of white in a central location that draws Jade's eye right away; he's calm as anything as he blinks quizzically at Jade. "Ah, Ms Harley," he says, with a fond smile. He reaches up to adjust his hat on his head, his icy blue eyes crinkled up at the corners in a way that reads like genuine happiness. "I should have known you wouldn't be far behind. Looks like this won't be the quick break I'd hoped for!" He moves his hands down to check his tie next, though he's as unrumpled and perfectly dressed as ever - it's something Jade has always thought was an obscure fatherly art form of some kind, ever since she met him, and she can't put her finger quite on why it unsettles her now.

Maybe it has something to do with the weird unreality of the moment - the Daves lying in the hallway - the weird way Samuel's hand sweeps into the folds of his suit jacket - the fact that John sits sprawled out against the wall opposite, head low and blood oozing from his nose in sluggish trails to drip all over the front of his lab brand hoodie as Karkat kneels beside him, hanging onto John's shoulders for dear life and shaking him -

The whole tableau reminds Jade of nothing more than a scene that would have made much more sense just a few days back, when John's amnesia kept whapping him upside the head and leaving him disoriented and bleeding from the nose. But she'd thought he'd gotten past that!

Samuel switches his gaze to something just over Jade's shoulder while she's still standing there frozen. "Ah. There you are, RL-2408. You've caused no end of trouble with this, you know." He clucks with his tongue, shaking his head.

Pulling a gun out of his jacket seems almost like a casual afterthought to him. "Well, at least I can neutralize one rogue asset," he says, wistful as he raises the pistol and fires at Jade, his eye almost winking as he aims in one effortless second. As tense as she is, the so familiar rapport of a firearm makes her flinch, dropping to the ground in a crouch to dodge on reflex.
But no (a belated realization) it was not at Jade, that trajectory's -

"No!" Jade shouts, raising her hands. She can't risk moving the person - Roxy?! - behind her in all this void but she can stop the bullet, right?

Her other eardrum pops at the worst possible moment as the pressure crushes down around her. Her eyes aren't just watering; tears stream freely down her cheeks from the hot spike of pain singing between her eardrums, and she turns in a clumsy arc, still crouched, ramming one shoulder into the doorframe, just in time to catch a glimpse of Roxy's face before Dave shoves the girl to the side. "Dave!" Jade says, too loud, but she can barely hear herself with the state she's in, so who even cares.

Roxy and Dave manage to stay upright, though Roxy yelps when Dave's foot goes wrong and jams against her toes. "Ow, fuck," Dave mutters. He's almost too quiet; Jade strains to hear as he peels himself away from the Scratch kid, his shades barely hanging onto the tip of his nose. He pats at the front of his suit, his eyebrows knitted together in an emotion so obvious Jade thinks he's too perplexed to conceal it as he touches a spot just over his where his liver would be.

"That son of a fuck," Dave says, holding up his hand and waving it incredulously. There's blood all over it. "The Dadbert shot me. That is f*cked up." And with that, his eyes rolls back in his skull, and he crumples. Roxy shouts and just manages to catch him under the arms, staggering under Dave's weight as she trades horrified glances with Jade.

"But he was foxy," the Scratch kid whispers.

"Really, now, was that necessary?" she hears Samuel say, through the bubbles of blood in her ears. He follows it with another deep sigh. "Children."

"You shot Dave," Jade repeats, turning just enough to stare at the man. As if it needs repeating!

Samuel shrugs. "Attempting to shoot you, of course, would merely be an exercise in futility," he comments, dipping a nod to Jade as though his acknowledgement is something she'd want, and he just kind of -

Lets his hand drop, back and to the side -

To point at the back of Karkat's head.

Jade is making a habit of punching people through things.

It's a really, really good habit. Really satisfying; works off some of that unfiltered, swelling devastation and betrayal by channeling it into something productive.

But in Samuel Egbert's case, it's not controlled enough to be called a punch. At the same time, with her space powers twisting and writhing to work under all the shielding, it's not strong enough for her to just toss him with the force of her will alone.

Then she's on Samuel, shoving him through the desk rather than over it as she latches onto the hand that holds the pistol kind and digging her fingernails into the flesh of his thumb. Shreds of plastic cut into her waist as she propels him through the desk, and green fire roils along her outstretched arms as her vision tunnels and she rips again.

She's aiming for the pistol.
She kind of takes a huge chunk of Samuel Egbert's hand with it. The green fire cauterizes instantly, leaving nothing but seared scars along what remains of the man's ring and pinky finger. Who even knows where the gun ends up.

She'll throw up about that, later, too. She pencils it in mentally, in a fit of hysterical whimsy, to come right after she finishes vomiting about the dead Daves in the hallway, and right before she has a crying fit about the fact that it was Dad, it was John's dad all this time and she trusted him -

Mostly, Jade just remembers screaming a lot. If there's a single coherent word in her shrieking fury - well, she can't hear much of anything.

(From the awed looks and weirdly sycophantic respect Karkat grants her later on, it must be pretty darn profane.)

Samuel grunts and brings his hands up to try to block her at last, just as they finish ploughing through the desk and slam into the wall opposite the open doorway. Jade's space powers might waver in and out, but she's still got her strength - the same strength as John (did he shoot John too?) - so the wall concaves behind Samuel's back, and Jade's still screaming into his face, her hair rising up limned with electric green to wrap around his throat.

He coughs and splutters, maybe to try to say something stern and fatherly as the remaining fingers on each hand curl around the strands of hair to try to rip them away, and Jade is one hundred and twenty percent over this guy!

She drops him. Well, alright, she kind of throws him, away from John and Karkat, before she can just - oooh! She's so angry! She hasn't been this angry ever.

But even still - she can't go around killing people. Least of all John's evil, bad guy dad.

He'd never forgive her for it. She'd never forgive herself for it. So instead Jade stalks over to the man, a visceral pleasure rising tight in her chest at the sight of his awesome suit rumpled beyond hope of salvaging, no matter how strong the starch or hot the iron. He pants, looking up at her, his hair a messy thatch now that his hat's fallen somewhere between here and the desk.

Jade can only imagine what she looks like, at that moment. But he smiles at her, calm and sincere and bemused, and she sobs as she punches him across the face, leaving him unconscious and sagging against the wall just like he left John.

Oh crap, John. "John, is he - Karkat, is John alright?" Jade asks, turning her back on the unconscious body. Her throat seizes up and she coughs on nothing as she makes her feet carry her back over to where Karkat has his fingers pressed to the underside of John's jaw, mashed against a pulse point.

"He's alive," Karkat replies, his voice hoarser than Jade's. "He just won't wake up."

For emphasis, Karkat rocks John with a frantic shake, and Jade nearly crashes to the floor as the pressure in her battered ears makes her vision white out with pain. When it clears her knees ache and she's just barely managed to float herself so that her head didn't hit the ground. "What was that?" she gasps. "I'm not doing that, I wasn't even using my powers!"

Karkat doesn't seem to have noticed it - or maybe, Jade thinks, blearily looking up at the side of the troll's face, he's just healing too fast and to frantically to notice the tiny trickle of blood that spills over the shell of his ear...and then just as quickly reverses its course, disappearing back into his ear canal to presumably seal over his own perforated ear drums. "John?" he is saying, raw hope in his voice, and his face looks weirdly young as he almost smiles. "John, you stupid fucking diamond of my eye,
"wake up."

"Mrrrglh?" John croaks, and Jade's heart leaps at the sound. "Krkat?"

"We need to get him and Dave to the doctors," Jade says, letting her head sink back down to her hands, knuckling at her forehead as the relief runs her ragged. Inspecting the floor seems really soothing right now, since the tile presents itself between her fingers and it's just so convenient. "And - urrrh, my head," she adds, biting her lip.

"Right," Karkat agrees. Without even arguing. Gosh, he must be really distracted. Or maybe, miracle of miracles, his instinct to take care of John really does override even his usual instinct to argue with Jade about every little thing.

Wow. He must really love him!

Jade lifts her head again, still wheezing for breath. "John, how are you?" she asks, massaging her sternum with a grimace. "Can you walk?" She wouldn't trust herself to float anyone anywhere in the labs, right now, and they're already gonna have to rush Dave to whatever counts as an emergency ward in this dumb science place. Jade's not even sure they have a regular surgeon on staff - but no, there has to be one, the person who stitched literally everyone up after Spades's casual attempt at a minor massacre. Dave'll be fine. They'll just find - whoever that was.

"John?" Karkat repeats when John doesn't answer Jade, darting in to press a chaste kiss to the side of John's head. "Come on, stay with me. How are you feeling?"

Finally, John shakes his head, slowly, and raises a hand to rub across his face. He still doesn't say a word, his head falling to the side as he pulls the hand away to inspect the blood from his nose smeared slick all over the hoodie's sleeve and his palm.

Then he raises his head the rest of the way, and lets it loll around to look at both Jade and Karkat, a wide, sickle of a grin splitting his face.

- and oh, oh, Jade realizes dimly, he's not okay.

"I feel," he says, blood streaming from the corners of his eyes, one of them so swelled shut that the blood has stuck his eyelashes together in stringy red webs, "...just peachy!"

His smile twitches wider as he adds, "Did you hurt my dad, Jade? That wasn't very nice of you!"

And he closes his hand into a fist.

If Jade thought she couldn't breathe before, she was so wrong. *This* is not being able to breathe. There's nothing there to breathe, and she raises her hands to scrabble at her chest, her mouth straining in a total absence of air, trying to gulp down something that's not there. She can't see, black swarming over her eyes as the asphyxiation hits her all at once.

Air filters back into her lungs with a rush, and Jade sucks it down greedily, her head a bright, tense swirl as she collapses in stages back against part of the desk. She looks to Karkat first because what if John lost it on him, too, but the troll looks fine, shaken but staring at her without showing any signs of having suffered the same localized vacuum. Then he turns his stare back to the human at his side.

Where, oddly enough, there's a tranq dart sticking out of John's neck, his jugular perfectly exposed by the way he turned himself to grin at Jade. His head flops over to crunch against Karkat's chest before the troll stops the fall, and from this angle Jade can see the whites of John's eyes as unconsciousness settles in.
That...was a great shot. Jade sets an arm out to hold herself up, and her muscles stutter and protest but she twists around to look at the doorway.

Roxy lets the tranquilizer gun fall out of her hands, and raises her hands in mute surrender.

"Awesome shot," Jade coughs, shooting the girl a messed up amalgamation of a thumbs up and a finger pistol.

Then unconsciousness hits her over the head like a hammer.

- 

There is a hundred mile stretch between the northern Cascades and downtown Seattle that has been enduring an unusual dry spell. While the rest of the state and much of the West coast has been wracked by furious storms, local meteorologists have more than once commented on the odd quiescent area. The cloud cover, thick and ominously grey, hangs heavy over the region, still and stagnant, but does not erupt into the anticipated storm for so long that they begin to report it as just a fluke of pressure systems.

Doctor Rue Lalonde flinches at the first, throbbing BOOM that rocks through the air and crashes through her bones. Her child, her son, cringes as well, their hands meshed together over the sluggishly bleeding bullet wound to apply pressure, and when she shudders at the sudden shriek of the wind at last rising to a gale outside, she can feel another pulse of too-warm blood oozing out between their fingers. She's already called for help, for anyone not occupied by assisting in major brain surgery a few hallways down to hurry up and bring everything they have on hand to treat this. God, why did she leave Arika back in Maine? Exarchopoulos is good for minor surgery and stitching up shallow stab wounds, but xe hasn't practiced in a functioning ICU in years. All she can tell herself to quell the rising panic, as hail and rain begins to thunder down on the roof over head like a rockslide, is that she only hires the best. Exarchopoulos wouldn't be here if xe weren't one of the best, and if Rue has to pull on nurses' scrubs and assist xe herself, so be it -

"John," Dave gasps, one of his hands clutching at the sleeve of Rue's white coat and leaving bloody fingerprints in a ring around her wrist. "Oh fuck. John, no."

"It'll be alright." Rue tries not to think about the hallway full of impossible bodies behind her, about the way a girl with her face just fired a tranquilizer at someone Rue can't see from here, too preoccupied with not letting her son die. She wishes, desperately, that this were only some lucid dream. She is a scientist, and she has always believed in the physical evidence placed before her, but the mounting pileup looming in the periphery of her vision is something that she wants, with all her heart, to disbelieve.

"M not sure it ever was alright," Dave says, shaking his head.

And she does not have the words to comfort him.

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Olympia, Washington

The weather as they've trundled northward has gotten steadily worse. Gusts of wind rip away the breath before it can reach your lungs, and roiling, bruised green and black clouds with lightning-filled bellies burst into rain and hail at the drop of a hat.

For Tavros, it's unreal to see the sky pour so much rain that the streets drown in it, and more than
once he's had to tug on Gamzee's wrist and motion for the purpleblood to wheel him into the shelter of a covered garage or an overpass. People - the ones still driving their cars in this kind of aguacero - slow down while motoring through the deep trenches of water that lap against the sides of buildings, but the tires still kick up enough of a splash to soak Tavros and Gamzee con frecuencia.

Gamzee, Tavros knows now, isn't much bothered by weather - or at least, if Tavros weren't here, the loco guy would probably just push on through the storm without caring that the rain has sluiced away his face paints and left his clothes and sneakers a water logged, sloppy mess. The grey and white paints have stained the ragged collar of his latest 'borrowed' black shirt with a permanent crust, the yellows of his eyes glittering a muddy orange that sends more than one passerby scurrying back out into the rain.

Because that's the thing. Gamzee's getting worse. And Tavros isn't sure how to stop it.

The purpleblood's been brittle and restless basically since he first showed up on Tavros's doorstep, playing up the persona of a chill, benign clown for a while before bursting out into unpredictable fits of homicidal mania. Which at least keeps Tavros on his toes! Or, well, on his wheels, he guesses. It's not an ideal situation but herding Gamzee away from his latest attempt at prowling after some innocent bystander at least helps Tavros feel useful. He isn't sure what Gamzee would do if he managed to get these people alone in a dark alley - but he's seen the troll beat people bloody and ravage their minds mercilessly with chucklevoodoos, so he likes to think he has a pretty good idea. If good is even the word for it.

Unfortunately, playing the herdmaster to Gamzee's malabarista desquiciado seems less and less like it's working. More often, now, Gamzee'll snap his teeth together in a fanged glower instead of backing down sheepishly when Tavros fumbles through the inglés needed to make their apologies to the latest person backed into a corner; the grating rattle that underlies his voice, that warning, rolling growl of a feral troll, rumbles under his words to the point that he's unintelligible a lot of the time.

Tavros's meek offers to jam - regardless of their lack of any kind of pile, which they can't really fix, being mostly homeless at the moment - barely earns him a grunt in response. All he'll talk about, when they do jam, is this next troll. After the total mess that was Gamzee's run-in with the equally loco Eridan guy, Tavros thought that maybe the disappointment would knock some more sense into Gamzee's pan than Tavros has succeeded in doing these past few weeks. But no - if anything, Eridan's refusal to join them has left Gamzee more agitated than ever. He's not sleeping; not that he ever slept much to begin with, but Tavros strains to keep up with the insane pace and hours Gamzee keeps. Some nights he'll fall asleep, rocking to the tread of this newest stolen wheelchair, and wake the next morning disoriented by the dark clouds overhead into thinking it's still night time, jolted all the while by Gamzee's wavering strides.

Gamzee is determined to reach this Karkat, no matter how thin he wears himself in the attempt. And if Karkat's anywhere near as, uh, angry as that Eridan guy, Tavros isn't sure what will happen...

But for now, Tavros still has some control over the situation. Um, he thinks he does, anyway. Probablemente. And luckily Gamzee ran out of energy last night after pushing Tavros most of the way through Oregón, and acted mostly sleepy and agreeable when Tavros begged for them to stay in a shelter to recover for the night. He had to handle most of the talking with the woman behind the desk, which kind of is the opposite of a thing Tavros is good at, but because of all the rain this place was already pretty busy and they got hurried through the check in without too many people getting a peek at Gamzee's eyes. Never mind that he'd stand out just for being a coldblood in a shelter full of humans and warmbloods; one close look and the security guard at the door would have las autoridades on the phone before you could say 'violent dementia.' Gamzee proceeds to collapse in a jumble of long limbs on his cot for almost eighteen hours straight, his sleep punctuated by muffled

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The purpleblood's been brittle and restless basically since he first showed up on Tavros's doorstep, playing up the persona of a chill, benign clown for a while before bursting out into unpredictable fits of homicidal mania. Which at least keeps Tavros on his toes! Or, well, on his wheels, he guesses. It's not an ideal situation but herding Gamzee away from his latest attempt at prowling after some innocent bystander at least helps Tavros feel useful. He isn't sure what Gamzee would do if he managed to get these people alone in a dark alley - but he's seen the troll beat people bloody and ravage their minds mercilessly with chucklevoodoos, so he likes to think he has a pretty good idea. If good is even the word for it.

Unfortunately, playing the herdmaster to Gamzee's malabarista desquiciado seems less and less like it's working. More often, now, Gamzee'll snap his teeth together in a fanged glower instead of backing down sheepishly when Tavros fumbles through the inglés needed to make their apologies to the latest person backed into a corner; the grating rattle that underlies his voice, that warning, rolling growl of a feral troll, rumbles under his words to the point that he's unintelligible a lot of the time.

Tavros's meek offers to jam - regardless of their lack of any kind of pile, which they can't really fix, being mostly homeless at the moment - barely earns him a grunt in response. All he'll talk about, when they do jam, is this next troll. After the total mess that was Gamzee's run-in with the equally loco Eridan guy, Tavros thought that maybe the disappointment would knock some more sense into Gamzee's pan than Tavros has succeeded in doing these past few weeks. But no - if anything, Eridan's refusal to join them has left Gamzee more agitated than ever. He's not sleeping; not that he ever slept much to begin with, but Tavros strains to keep up with the insane pace and hours Gamzee keeps. Some nights he'll fall asleep, rocking to the tread of this newest stolen wheelchair, and wake the next morning disoriented by the dark clouds overhead into thinking it's still night time, jolted all the while by Gamzee's wavering strides.

Gamzee is determined to reach this Karkat, no matter how thin he wears himself in the attempt. And if Karkat's anywhere near as, uh, angry as that Eridan guy, Tavros isn't sure what will happen...

But for now, Tavros still has some control over the situation. Um, he thinks he does, anyway. Probablemente. And luckily Gamzee ran out of energy last night after pushing Tavros most of the way through Oregón, and acted mostly sleepy and agreeable when Tavros begged for them to stay in a shelter to recover for the night. He had to handle most of the talking with the woman behind the desk, which kind of is the opposite of a thing Tavros is good at, but because of all the rain this place was already pretty busy and they got hurried through the check in without too many people getting a peek at Gamzee's eyes. Never mind that he'd stand out just for being a coldblood in a shelter full of humans and warmbloods; one close look and the security guard at the door would have las autoridades on the phone before you could say 'violent dementia.' Gamzee proceeds to collapse in a jumble of long limbs on his cot for almost eighteen hours straight, his sleep punctuated by muffled
growls and twitches and the occasional, plaintive whimper, and Tavros smiles and waves away anyone who strays too close throughout the day, informing them in stuttering, broken English or Alternian that everything is alright, there is really no need to wake up Gamzee for breakfast or lunch or the job application help session offered in the early afternoon. No need to move them to an open recopperacoon either, even when the crowd of people starts to clear out around noon - Gamzee won't go near sopor slime on a good day, and Tavros has been using the cheap, watered down quality mix for years now to save up for better legs, so he's not nearly as dependent on it as he could be.

This place at least has dry clothes for them to borrow and sleep in while theirs dry over the sides of overcrowded drying racks. When Gamzee shudders awake in the middle of the afternoon, shredding the pillow he's wrapped his arms around in the process with a strangled roar, Tavros pats at his cold cheeks until the purpleblood's shivers barely rock the bedframe, but he can't do anything about Gamzee's resulting insistence that they move. Tavros puts his foot down when Gamzee wants to stalk past the room where food handouts are being passed around, utterly refusing to let his lip tremble or his eyes fall when Gamzee tries to stare him down. "Not a chance," he says, folding his arms over his chest. "N-nice try. You haven't eaten in two days."

"Tav." Gamzee digs long, ragged claws deep into the wood of the door frame, shifting his weight from one bare foot to the other and scraping at the floor panels with his claws as well. He's not at the point of blowing up into a fit of rage, but he won't calm down. "Come on, brother. We'll all up and get at you with some eats later. Ain't you motherfucking seen the sky?"

Never mind that Tavros has been eating normally, unlike this guy. But logic doesn't usually work on Gamzee, anyway. Oh well. "I've s-seen it all day long, 'migo," Tavros says. "It's raining just like it was ayer y antes de ayer. You're gonna make yourself sick!" He shakes his head and nearly smacks a passerby in the ribs with the curve of his left horn. Oops. He really doesn't do well in unfamiliar small spaces with the whole horn safety thing. Especially since most trolls with horns as wideset as his own tend to be able to, uh, stand, so there's a lot more furniture to get in the way on Tavros's level. But he's used to it, really.

"Karkat'll make it all alright, my fine brownblooded brother." Gamzee's eyes lighten almost imperceptibly, his gaze flickering up and to the side so he can squint at something. Tavros is, uh, pretty sure it's not the painting of a tree and a farmhouse hanging on the wall in kind of the same direction as Gamzee's looking. It's a pretty bad painting, but at least it's not a computer or a TV screen. Gamzee doesn't like either very much. "Something big is all going down, I can feel it. Gotta make sure my best motherfucking friend ain't in some downright unmiraculous bind." A hoarse sigh. "You feel?"

He doesn't. Actually. He doesn't feel. But it never does any good to let Gamzee know that. In fact, hearing about Karkat kind of makes Tavros's tummy feel kind of upset? All queasy, like if he ate a whole batch of quesadillas at once, without sharing them with Tinkerbull: indigestion and guilt all rolled up into one. But almost nothing else makes Gamzee calm down as fast as talking about Karkat, and Tavros can only be supportive of anything that calms Gamzee down.

Even if it kind of hurts to hear, just from his voice, how much Gamzee loves Karkat. Which is a lot. Tavros isn't stupid. By the time Gamzee comes down from his momentary space-out, his eyes still golden yellow and soft with some emotion that doesn't quite match his usual brittle, haunted stare, Tavros has swallowed hard and set his chin in a stubborn jut. "Food first," he says, with the tone of voice that means business. "Déjate de tonterías and get us something to eat for the road, at least, or I'll put on the parking break the whole rest of the way there."

"And then it'll take even longer to get to Seattle. And Karkat. Which, uh, you don't want to take longer, right?"
The panic that claws at the back of Tavros's mind isn't entirely his own. Gamzee's eyes bulge and he shakes his head, his nails spasming and cracking an entire section of the door frame so that it splinters and peels away from the rests of the wood. "No," he says, more snarl than anything, and Tavros shivers before he can help himself. "I'll be right back, hombre. Be ready." The purpleblood rips his claws out of the doorway to lope over to the line and - ugh, try to cut in at the very front of said line, again, which always pisses people off - and Tavros sags back in his wheelchair, feeling his wings pang a little in protest when he forgets to adjust himself beforehand. They've been cramping a lot lately, since he's not using them as often as he did back home. The less attention they call to themselves here in América, whether through Gamzee's really noticeable crazy or Tavros's equally noticeable, really rare extra set of limbs, the better. Especially after all that murderuckus outside the weird dome thing in Los Angeles.

Tavros still isn't sure if the film crews toting cameras around that day got a good shot of them. He and Gamzee haven't exactly been able to keep up with the news, but a coldblood traveling with a paraplegic brownblood is pretty distinctive. At some point, someone is going to notice them. Someone is going to call them out. Someone is going to push Gamzee too far, and Tavros won't be able to hold him back.

B-but thinking about that too much will only get him down! Tavros shakes his head vigorously (nearly goring a human in the process - oops) to clear out all the bad thoughts, and wheels backwards, turning to roll a little further away from the doorway so he's not blocking it. There's a window next to a bookshelf packed full of self-help books with English titles that's gathering dust, so Tavros rolls up to it and leans all the way forward to fold his arms and use them to pillow his chin while he pouts at the awful weather outside. The tiny community garden visible just outside, a square of dirt barely larger than the alley gardens back home, has been rained on so heavily that the mud churned up by the drumming hail has swallowed up most of the actual plants, if there were any to begin with. Maybe it was too early in the year for seeds to sprout, this far north. The United States are strange. Cold and rainy and windy and extraños.

The shattering of glass startles Tavros badly, the bend of his horn slamming into the window hard enough to leave a jagged scratch along the pane as he twists his chair around to see where the sound came from. It could have been anything but yeah, who would he be trying to kid, here? It's gotta be Gamzee.

"Motherfucker-" an unfamiliar voice growls. "What the fuck was that?!

Not Gamzee, not Gamzee's voice, not nearly rabid enough - but when Tavros brakes hard in the doorway, blowing his limp mohawk out of his eyes impatiently, Gamzee still in the middle of it, a skeletal line that towers over the irate, sallow yellowblood spitting at his face. Everyone else has backed away, and the human manning the food handouts dashes away, probably to retrieve security. Which is, uh, not a thing that they want right now. Tavros half expects Gamzee to backhand the other troll right off...and then he blinks and takes another look at the floor, where glass shards litter the ground around the two troll's feet. There's a small amount green sopor slime smeared there, and the thin metal of a hypodermic stabbed at an odd angle in between two wooden panels. Gamzee's gone barefoot since his last pair of shoes wore out near Sacramento, and dull purple blood oozes out between his toes.

But Gamzee's not angry. De lo contrario - his face looks composed for once, a smooth mask of tolerance even with only the bare minimum of paint to tip his lips up in an artificial smile. "Shit'll rot your brain, brother," he says, casually, grinding the remaining shards of the hypodermic beneath the ball of his foot. "Rot it through til you don't as have much of a pan left. Motherfucking shooting it up'll just turn an invertebrother ten different kinds of heinous."
Oh, no. "Gamzee, it's none of our business," Tavros hisses, scooting around a gawping kid to roll up to Gamzee's side.

The goldblood doesn't pay attention to Tavros's approach. He just shoves at Gamzee's chest, snaggletooth bared to snarl, "You think this is funny, beachcrawler?!" Close up, this guy has all the hallmarks of a sopor addict. Even better, he has all the twitchy, paranoid signs of a sopor-sucker coming down from his high and realizing that his next score, probably drawn from one of the shelter's recooperacoons on the sly, just got dumped all over the floor. The sparks of sickly yellow psionics that crackle at his fingertips have no more force than static electricity, but they're still a warning sign, right up there with the lowered horns and the gnash of teeth.

Great. Why does Gamzee have to be so compulsive about this random stuff? There are tons of alcoholics and other addicts left without resources on the streets, but only the trolls who guzzle or shoot sopor tend to attract Gamzee's weird, rare moments of twisted helpfulness. Even the rarer human sopor addicts tend to get ignored, and the troll lets the resulting irritation directed at him wash right over his head, not really seeming to realize that his bouts of strange insane clown benevolence just tend to, well, tick off the worst possible people.

"Lo siento, lo siento," Tavros gabbles, trying to head this off before it can get any worse. He doesn't quite have the confidence to wheel himself between Gamzee and this other troll, but he has the presence of mind to seize Gamzee's wrist and start to roll backward. His face flushes and he keeps his head down, painfully aware of the bronzed blush creeping up to his ears as his awareness of everyone in the room spikes. "Nos sentimos, we - uh, sorry, we are very sorry. He, um, uh, he didn't mean it." He can't even bring himself to look up at the goldblood as he repeats the stuttered apologies in Alternian, trying to cover his language bases.

"Hey now, Tav, that is a lie most unkind," Gamzee says, his voice sticky slow and drawling as he shakes his head. "I am all up and getting my meaning on. Ain't right not to warn a brother about this most unrighteous of slimes." He turns his head back to the goldblood glowering at him over the yellow bags that line his eyes. "It's some flagrant poison, what you're sippin' at -"

"You preachy son of a fuck, d'you think I care?!" the goldblood growls, shoving Gamzee again.

They, uhm, they probably won't, no, he thinks, snappish and sarcastic in the privacy of his own mind. But Tavros can't seem to remember anything more than how to repeat, robotically. "I'm s-sorry, we're sorry," like all the rest of his English has flown right out of his head and left his tongue numb. He understands enough to feel even more humiliated, and now he digs his gnawed-on claws into the too-thin flesh of Gamzee's wrist. "Tenemos que ir. Karkat, ¿recuerdas? Tenemos que ir a buscar a Karkat."

"Hey! What about my sopor?" the other troll demands, a clicking creak rising in the gravel of his
growl as Gamzee uncomplainingly takes up the handles of Tavros's wheelchair. "Don't you walk away from me, assholes!"

Gamzee walks away. Tavros clutches the brownbag to his chest as the wheelchair jolts over the raised threshold, and tries to ignore the rumble of someone - the guard probably - arriving at last to grumble at the goldblood and the sopor on the floor. Dios, if they can just get out of here without having the policía called on them, it'll be a minor miracle.

Tavros is pretty sure the Toreador never had to put up with this kind of mierda. But then, the Toreador was actually a good hero before his untimely demise, whereas Tavros is just kind of...um, middling. If he can even call it that, after getting sucked into this insane road trip with a troll he knows has no qualms about almost murdering people.

"Goodbye, thank you, we're really sorry," Tavros calls to the woman at the front desk as they roll past, tripping over the words so fast that all he earns is a blank stare in return, and she probably doesn't even know what he's apologizing for but he's sorry anyway. Shouts have risen up from the back room by the time they clear the front door, so Tavros is pretty sure any second now the goldblood might come after them. If he doesn't piss the security guard off more, anyway. He's grateful at least that the weather seems to have cleared up, for the time being. In fact - he glances up, blowing his hair out of his face again when it flops over (it really needs a trim) and sees that the ugly mass of clouds that has hung around for days, heavy and sluggish, have finally started crawling across the sky, taking the rain with them. It's still gross and grey and overcast, but maybe now this storm will move further north to Canadá or something. Good riddance.

"Hunh. Ain't that something, Tavbro?" Gamzee mutters, and Tavros tilts his head even further back to glance up at the troll's chin in curiosity. The passive bemusement has transitioned into a more normal squint, and the corners of Gamzee's lips turn down noticeably despite the white paint of his smile.

"Maybe we can make better time to Seattle, now," Tavros says, cajolingly, as a thrum of apprehension runs as far down his spine as it can go. His wings judder against his back uneasily; he wishes he could shake them out, if only for a moment. "Unless, uh, your feet are hurt. You cut them on that aguja hipodérmica, didn't you?" And Gamzee still wandering around with bare feet -

"Nah, I'm fine, brother." Gamzee's gaze, abruptly, goes distant, and Tavros shifts in his seat as they slow down, mostly distracted by the thought that Gamzee's gonna rot his foot off if he keeps walking around with an open wound on the sole. Purpleblood may be tough, but Tavros definitely saw blood and Gamzee's hygiene is kind of non-existent. "Hang on," the purpleblood mutters, mostly to himself, "Hang the motherfuck on..."

And then he stops altogether. "Aw, motherfucker-"

As usual, with Gamzee's episodes, Tavros has no idea what the troll is seeing, or hearing, or maybe just hallucinating - or all three jumbled together at the same time. He stops craning his head back and twists in his seat when his neck begins to crink up, but getting a better look at the distant expression on Gamzee's face doesn't help Tavros understand why they've stopped. The purpleblood just glowers up at the sky, the yellows of his eyes shading darker and darker by the second as his pupils flick from side to side, as though reading something.

M-maybe Tavros should head this off before Gamzee works himself up into a frenzy. "What's up?"

"I ever get the know on with you as concerns my most righteous rage, Tav?" Gamzee says at last. It comes so far out of left field that Tavros honestly sits there for ten seconds in complete incomprehension before his thinkpan finishes processing the question. "How you and I both know I
There's too much of warning click rattling deep in his throat, and Tavros runs his claws over the back of Gamzee's hands in a soothing press before fumbling to answer. "Um, not really? On account of you don't really explain anything...even when you're explaining." Well, nothing that doesn't just sound like legitimate insanity, anyway. Maybe it would make more sense if Gamzee didn't jump around in the story and lose track of what he's said and what he hasn't, or run off on tangents about unrelated stuff, or get distracted by a sudden swell of rage. Seeing as how these things happen all the time, Tavros thinks it's understandable that he has no idea what's going on. Really. He doesn't have a lot to work with, here.

Gamzee laughs, a hollow honk of a sound. Which is always better than the alternative. The wheels of the chair clatter a warning when Tavros gives a cautious push with his claws to set them into motion; he sighs and mentally chalks up another wheelchair that's probably going to end up culled early because of this extended cross-country trip, but it gets Gamzee moving, at least, his long, gangly legs falling into step with the wheelchair again right away. "I ain't never been the bitchits at school feedin' others, hombre, is what's the truth of it. I get my babble on and then no one understands a motherfucking thing. But we all of us are followin' along to the sweet tunes of our deepest being, as melodified and blasphemous as the universe saw fit to make us." Then, almost sad, almost melancholy: "And the conductor as laid its mark on me, that great wild minstrelsy of Rage and rotted pans - is Discordia."

Oh man. That's way too many mangled English words that Tavros is 85% sure are totally made up fakey nonsense words. And the cadence of Gamzee's sounds similar to the rhythm they strike up for rap-slams, which means it's probably poético made up fakey nonsense words. Ugh. "That - sucks? But just in case...say the whole thing again because it made no sense at all."

"Oh, my brother, you tell it like it most truly is." Another harsh laugh. "Makes a troll turn all kinds of jealous, how straightforward a thing your Breeze can be." He shakes his head, and the laugh transitions into a crooked, spindly smile - that goes too far, tipping right over into a feral grin, as they cross the street without a care for the enormous puddle that has flooded the street around their shins. "But some poor motherfucker's got his pan all twisted round and splintered up, not listening to his windy thing, and I can feel it clear down here, right in my pumpbiscuit, just like I did our good Eribro. Your breath-bro John's gone all kinds of mentally motherfucking unstable, and that don't mean anything good for anybody." A screech of claws on metal, and a new, twisted scratch joins the others that Gamzee has laid into the wheelchair handles over the past few days. "I would know. Be so easy, to just give a motherfucker a little push -"

"Um. That sounds like a thing that you should definitely not do," Tavros says, putting all the sternness he can muster into his voice. Because - "Because you're talking about making someone crazy and we d-definitely talked about this, Gamzee! No more chuckle hoodoos!" Tavros falters, then picks up the thread again when Gamzee just peers down at him, eyes glittering with too-keen interest, the kind of predator-intensity that reminds Tavros, always, that Gamzee has a pair of clubs hidden away where no one can reach them, stowed in his impossible Índice de los milagros. "You said you would stop," he says, sucking on his lip in a pout. "Prométeme."

Gamzee's too quiet. "Can't always control it," he says, with a low, dark chuckle. "I have all this murdirmirth in my soul, and the downright sickening whimtrocities invite themselves on without my say-so."

"Don't I know it..." Tavros mutters. Something scrabbles at his mind that chills him right through, but Gamzee seems to catch himself a moment later and retracts the raw terror before Tavros can say a word. "But promise me anyway." *Again*, he adds mentally.
"I motherfucking promise." And Gamzee bends in two at the waist, stooping to plant a kiss in the middle of Tavros's mohawk without breaking his stride. "For you and for now, my brother."

For now.

The water soaks through his just-dried socks by the time they reach the far side of the street, and Tavros blames that for the fact that he can't seem to stop shivering. There's a bay near here, right? He can't remember the last time Gamzee consulted a map - if he ever has at all in this entire trip - but Tavros is sure this part of the United States is all pretty close to water. It would just figure they'd arrive in time for a second Diluvio. "Gamzee? How do you know all this stuff, anyway?" he asks.

"Hell, Tavbro, if I told you," Gamzee says, lifting a hand to squeeze Tavros's shoulder just a little too tightly, "you'd probably -"

"Hey! Hey, don't you walk away from me!"

Tavros gives up; he makes this known by burying his face against the brown bag in his lap, eyes squeezed shut so he doesn't have to turn around and see that the goldblood has actually followed them. 'Please no murder,' he intends to groan, but it comes out more of a "Nnnnnhomicidio," that Gamzee, with his selective hearing/rampant dementia, probably feels free to totally ignore.

"I've all got a best motherfucking friend up Seattle way what needs me, soporbro," Gamzee says, his rumbling voice in direct contrast to the sunny smile Tavros sees that he's got leveled at the troll stamping through the puddle they just crossed. "So if you come here wanting to start something downright salty - piss the motherf**k off."

Tavros is very tempting to just bury his head in the bag again but he has a responsibility here as a moiail to prevent Gamzee from unleashing total mayhem on everyone in a quarter mile radius by trying to keep the peace. "Look, we'll give you this -" Tavros reaches a hand into the paper bag and draws out the first thing he finds "- uh. Whatever this is." He can't be bothered to pause long enough to see what's in the can he twists in his seat to hold out at arm's length, as far from Gamzee as he can reach while still obviously waving it in the goldblood's direction. "Please, I'm very sorry about my friend. He is very rude."

The other troll doesn't even spare Tavros a glance, his long strands of hair still frizzed around his emaciated face with faint yellow sparks. "Bullshit, am I going to piss off. You uppity clown fuck, I don't want apologies, I want what I paid for that shit." With a buzz and the sudden reek of ozone, the goldblood flips a knife out of his pocket, eyes bright with delirious confidence as he lets it drop into his palm and points the specibus at Gamzee, hand trembling in a testament to how badly the sopor has wrecked his concentration. "Cash. Now."

Most people would be kind of intimidated by having someone point a knifekind at them.

Most people are not Gamzee Makara.

"Knife!" Gamzee exclaims. And he grins madly as he reaches out, delighted, and closes his long fingers over the other troll's wrist.

It only takes a light twist, and a casual snap, and the goldblood's hand juts at broken angle before Tavros or the other warmblood can so much as blink. Another tap - Gamzee's smile gone manic - and the goldblood yells, eyes bulging and weak psionics fizzling out as lukewarm blood pours in spurts from the new place where the stomach-tilting yellow of bone emerges from his arm. Another - now he's screaming -
Tavros turns with a squeal of wheels on sidewalk and lunges right of the chair, heedless of where it ends up rolling as he hooks himself over Gamzee's arm. Not enough time to shrug off his jacket and get his wings loose; he just starts frantically patting Gamzee's face, trying to shoosh him and turn his face away from the goldblood at the same time. Gamzee won't let him fall. "Shush! Stop it, stop it, stop it, shhh."

Gamzee's face turns livid.

And yeah, sure, he tosses the goldblood to the side - the troll still clutching at his thrice-broken arm and howling at the pain as the last of the sopor probably clears his system and leaves him nothing but agony - but he turns on Tavros instead, and that's terrifying. Because there's nothing left of the playful, lazy Gamzee who lolled around on Tavros's couch for days in the twisted mask of rage that bares so many teeth at Tavros. Tavros's stomach drops out as Gamzee straightens the arm he clings to out so Tavros can no longer reach his face. His feet dangle, and they're only a few feet above the ground but oh god Gamzee would let him fall. He would. "Shoosh me again," Gamzee hisses, "pap me one more motherfucking time and see how far that fraudulent shit gets you, brother."

Fraudulent-

Tavros can't even speak, jaw clamped shut at the stark reality of being confronted with a coldblood in a full-blown, unadulterated rage. Gamzee's arm is a freezing cold iron band under his weakening grip, and Tavros doesn't know what his face is doing aside from being frozen in a mask of startled fear, but it's definitely not soothing. How could it be, when his vision tunnels and smears under the rolling force of the rage Gamzee radiates, the terror shoving itself into his mind and poised to tear into it with sharp, cold claws at the slightest provocation.

He messed up. Oh god, he has messed up.

Later, when he can thinks back with a clearer mind, he realizes that shutting up might just have been the thing that saved his life. He does manage to pry his jaw open, dizzy with fear but drawing on some wellspring of stupid, plucky courage that would have had him try to shoosh Gamzee again - if not for the fact that his tongue will not cooperate. The resulting 'uh's' and 'ums' and 'ohs' don't quite qualify as shooshes, and Tavros's increasingly desperate, clutching grip on Gamzee's forearm doesn't meet papping standards in any way, shape, or form, and somehow, impossibly - that's exactly what keeps Gamzee from inflicting some new, creatively awful injury on him.

Instead, the stutters cut off and Tavros nearly lets himself just drop as Gamzee leans in just a little closer. His breath feels cold on the side of Tavros's face as he says, voice alternating between smooth, pleasant calm and raucous, throaty rage, "I motherfucking like you, Tav. Like you a whole motherfucking lot. But I only got one moiral.

"And you ain't motherfucking him."

It's not so much breaking a moirallegiance as it is revealing just how very, very wrong Tavros has been to assume it even existed in the first place.

Tavros can feel the shattered paleness still aching in his chest as Gamzee - carefully, carefully, the rage dissipating like a fog as quickly as it had come on - sets him back in his wheelchair and whistles as the goldblood's hoarse pleas for help fade into the distance. The pain doesn't hit until later. By the time they reach downtown Seattle, the pendulum of Gamzee's mood has swung back to that tissue-thin, efímero playfulness, as the purpleblood rides high on the storm that flays the streets with hail and shrieking wind and lightning.

Gamztee grins up at the first building on his agenda - or, perhaps, past it, to read something in the
storm raging above.

Tavros just curls up in his chair, presses his claw to his chest, and, with all his might, does not scream as he realizes that no one is safe.

Not even him.

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Years ago...

Joanna Egbert has been waiting for this moment for rather a long time. Decades, in fact! Most people her age wouldn't be nearly so splendidly mobile and energetic after living a full life; James is running down already, the old coot, however much he blusters. But her hands are sprightly enough to serve up some tasty piekind for a few years yet. Perhaps because they're ectobiologically encoded to remain forever the detached, ageless arms of a harlequin prankster. But who can say? Right now, at this moment, Jo thinks she could live forever.

News of the arrival of the other children late last year, exactly as her memories and visions predicted, helped give her a new burst of resolve. It is always nice to have one's deductions validated, after all! And by gum, with every day that passes, young Rue's helplessly delighted reports of Rose's darling eyes and James's more scattered news of Jade's exuberant crawling fire Jo up more and more with anticipation.

So! She presses the binoculars to her eyes, and surveys the newly built strip mall across the road. A very nice antiques shop occupies the corner lot - a lot which otherwise might have housed a very promising prankster's emporium, if only Jo hadn't relocated her new enterprise to a small lot five miles away. She's dreamed of retiring from her academic work to host this joke shop for some time now, and she's not about to let a little thing like a terrible accident involving a unabridged copy of Sassacre's tome and a good sized meteorite muck up all her hard work. She doesn't intend to fall for that one again, no sir. Crush Nanna Egbert with space debris once, and that's a real hoot! Crush her with space debris twice, and she might as well hang up her beaglepuss and resign her prankster's gambit on the spot!

Instead, she finds herself at a table on the patio outside a very nice coffee shop, observing from afar. Of course, she's already cased the joint today, and she's in luck; the antiques seller tends to close up shop early to attend yoga four days out of the week, so the place will be completely free of potential victims when the hubbub starts. One last cursory glance assures her that the windows are still dark and the door locked up tight (including the extra security measures that Jo may or may not have put in place herself to ensure no one could enter the doomed store today of all days), and so, at last, she turns her lenses to the sky above.

She does not have to wait long. She knew exactly when to expect the young dear, after all.

At 4:10 in the afternoon, Jo pauses to take a sip of her tea. When she looks up, she squints - rubs the lenses of the binoculars and the glasses on her face clean - rubs her own eyes on the off chance they're giving out on her now, of all times - and then confirms that yes, there is a black dot in the clear blue sky that certainly was not there a moment before.

A lovely white Honda Consensus trundles on by, unaware of the imminent destruction of the store to its right as it loiters at the intersection, signaling for a left turn. In the distance, Jo can hear the warbling of a fire truck racing past, not on this street but perhaps one just out of sight.

By 4:11, the plastic bits of the binoculars dig in painfully where they press the nubs of her glasses
into the flesh on either side of her nose. The greenblooded waitress refills Jo's cup without a word on
the old woman's intent focus on the sky - until, curious, the girl leans over to follow Jo's line of sight,
craning her neck back. "Whatcha looking at, ma'am?"

"Something I've been waiting for rather a long time, my dear."

"Huh. That looks sorta like a…Oh, crap."

"Don't worry, we're outside the impact zone. It'll be a very localized strike."

"I'm just gonna…call my manager." The troll starts backing away, still staring up at the sky in
growing horror, and knocks into an empty table before stumbling back to the door to the inner coffee
shop. She does not return.

By 4:12 other people have started to take notice. This neighborhood slows to a crawl in the
afternoons, a testament to the slightly aged demographic of the residents - there's a retirement
community not five blocks down the road. Other neighborhoods only a few minutes to the north or
west fill up quickly with young go-getters who commute to the big city, and their families, but here
there is only a single burgundyblood troll passing by who happens to glance up when the crosswalk
light blinks out. The heavyset troll scratches the side of her horns around the brim of her hat, leans
against the pole of the streetlights, and frowns.

The Honda Consensus has actually pulled into the tiny row of parking spaces on the far side of the
corner coffee shop, and Jo can hear the engine idling. But she couldn't tear her eyes from the
incoming meteorite if she tried. The angle of atmospheric entry is quite steep - but Jo has Rue's notes
inside her purse, the excited reports of an astronomer transfixed by the fact that there was no
fragmentation or flares of light and sonic booms that would otherwise signal a significantly sized
piece of space debris trying to survive the intense passage through the atmosphere.

Of course, what dear Rue has yet to fully accept is that the laws of physics as she knows them no
longer necessarily apply. Jo has spent years mentoring the woman, but she's only been able to nudge
the doctoral student so far along before more solid proof was required.

Well. They have it, now. All three of the children previous have survived hurtling unshielded
through the atmosphere astride their interstellar steeds. It's actually a very controlled descent. Skaia
could never conceive of risking its chosen few fresh from the ectobiological chambers, even during
so catastrophic an event as the Reckoning.

At 4:13 on the dot, the meteorite shrieks through the air, and slams into the antiques store with an
impact that rocks Jo back in her seat and knocks her cup of tea clean over, spilling all over the
wrought iron of the patio table. A wave of heat and bright burst of light accompany the concussive
impact, but Jo waits patiently - she's been waiting all her life; what's a few more moments? - and
when the steam and dust clear away, the impact crater is a shallow, concave indent where the
antiques store used to stand. Nothing else has been damaged; the crafts store on the other side of the
demolished corner lot has scores of black ash in wild patterns along the wall closest to the crater, but
aside from that the building might well be completely intact. Not nearly enough damage for a
meteorite of this size, but who can argue with the will of paradox space?

With a grunt, Jo gets to her feet, righting the tea cup on its saucer and blinking down at the mess. Oh
dear. She tucks the binoculars inside her purse and looks around to spy the waitress huddling just
inside the door of the coffee shop, her green eyes stark against an unnaturally pale grey face. Poor
dear must have had the living daylights scared out of her. Jo will come back directly after she's
retrieved her new son to comfort her, and to help clean up the tea now dripping down onto the stone
of the patio beneath the table. It's only good manners!
But right now, she won't rest easy until she has John in her arms. Jo hears the creak and the tinkling of the bell as the door pushes cautiously open behind her, but she's already turned her back to hurry across the street before any other passersby can reach her son before her.

The gun shot, in retrospect, sounds louder than the meteor impact had. And that's saying something. Jo jolts forward, stiffening in shock at the sudden, harsh staccato, and only realizes after a fraction of a second that the fire blooming deep in her chest means something has gone rather amiss.

She looks down. She's wearing the second-best dress she owns - her mother always said not to wear the best when there's physical labor like clambering in and out of dusty craters to be done - and, ridiculously, her first thought is that she'll never manage to scrub all the blood out of the blue-and-white paisley pattern of the fabric. Even as she stares down, utterly flummoxed, the blood spreads further, and she thinks she could pick out each individual thread as the red dyes it in an inexorable wash.

*But John,* she thinks, distantly. *Oh, consarn it all.* She crumples up, all the strength oozing out of her limbs - but for her hands, which have always rather had minds of their own. They fly out to catch the side of the table and try to break her fall, but she still hits the ground, torn between the instinct to crawl toward John if she can't walk, and the equally powerful urge to turn to see who just darn well shot her. A new, sharp crunch jolts through her hip - *no, not now* - just another painful distraction that she can't quite register in her shock.

It's the second gun shot that decides her. Jo flinches, gasping at the fresh wave of burning pain that seizes in her chest at the sudden cringe, and her hands drag her around to land on her side not facing out toward the street, but in toward the coffee shop door.

The waitress meets her eyes. She, too, is splayed out on her side on the patio floor, but the blood that pools out from the side of her head and sluices across her face in thin rivulets is of course of a different shade entirely.

That white Consensus is still idling in the parking lot.

She *knows* that car -

"Lordy loo," she manages, coughing. "Samuel? Sammy?" Breathing is hard - she's no expert, but whoever shot her seems to have been an excellent marksman, because her heart seems to be thudding to a sudden stop. Folding forward onto her stomach, Jo feels her fingers twitch, ghostly blue flesh rippling beneath their constraining sleeves and gloves and doing their utter best to drag her along toward the sound of the car engine as black dots splotch across her vision. Because *Sammy* -

He's not supposed to be home yet. Deployed for a fifteen month tour, and she hasn't heard a peep out of him about coming to visit early, but wouldn't it just be like her strange, silly boy to come home early, today of all days, to try to get the drop on her - oh -

Jo lets out a strangled sob. Both of her boys are in danger but this didn't happen before. This *never* happened before, and there are no more dreams of a past life to guide her.

Perhaps she should have realized her death was inevitable.

Before she can crawl more than a few feet, the agony in her chest and her hip swallows her whole, and she slumps forward. Just to rest her head against the pavement, for a moment. Sammy will find John, he *will,* he did last time, and that is the certainty, the last guarantee of her fading vision, as she fumbles into the dark.
At the intersection, a rustblooded troll adjusts her red-and-white striped hat with a groan, rolling her wide shoulders as she stops leaning on the pole. She isn't bothered by the stink of smoke that clings to her clothes - Matchsticks has been traveling through fire for years, now, and she is pleased to have a fresh new firefighter-standard respirator hanging from her belt.

What the Boss wants, the Boss gets, and the Boss wants confirmation that this deal goes down right - even if he doesn't wanna hear none of it until she rejoins him years in the future. Matchsticks wasn't hired to think too hard.

Trace slinks up alongside her a moment later, nodding slow and languid as he drapes himself over her shoulder, nosing absently at the side of her temple. It's taken both of them to pull this off; his ability to track the past trails of others means that he can see where their targets have moved and harass them based on that knowledge, but trying to do so from so many years in the future always meant too much extra crap for him to backtrack through - far easier for Matchsticks to bring him back in time so that there's less of a past trail to follow, and let him scent from there.

Course, they finished all that nonsensical time hopping, and he's still hanging around. Trace's job, technically, has been done for a while. But he and Fin have been damn clingy lately, no matter when in the timeline Matchsticks picks them up from, and she figures news of her impending demise must be spreading. Bozos.

The man who joins them in crossing the road is a real oddball. He polishes the blood off the muzzle of the pistolkind with a fresh white handkerchief, humming to himself as he works, and doesn't really see all that bothered by the fact that he just killed his own mother in cold blood.

She can't imagine murdering her own lusus - mostly because the thing passed away from natural causes on the reserve years from now, rest its decrepit, retired soul - but humans in general are freaks. Matchsticks is used to working with freaks.

"You'll be in touch?" Samuel Egbert says, the picture of politeness as he puts his specibus away. He's been back in the States for almost a month now, working with Fin when the woman can be spared to piece together his future plan of action. Last time Matchsticks saw him, Egbert was still in the fatigues of a private military contractor, but he's traded in for a pitch black suit of such impeccable form that he could probably give Droog himself a run for his money. He's resplendent in his new loyalty to the Midnight Crew branch, but the fond smile that he spares for the two Felt members shows just how deeply Dienek must have whittled into his brain.

Well, that won't do at all. "Don't wear all black, man," Matchsticks advises, shaking her head. Honestly. "You're going into deep cover."

"Discretion," Trace says helpfully.

"Of course, of course," the man says, waving a hand in dismissal. "I am well prepared, never fear."

"And no. We won't be in touch." Matchsticks fires a glance at Trace; the man just shrugs. "Expect Droog to activate you, and be your primary point of contact. That's as much as I know."

"Droog," Egbert's eyes sharpen. "Understood." And with that, he turns right as they continue on straight down the road. The human angles toward the impact crater, hopping over the raised ridge and sliding down in a smooth motion to the center. Matchsticks and Trace hang around long enough to confirm that he emerges with the tiny human wriggler - just as his past trail informed them he
would days from now.

He won't be due to bring the kid in for synchronization until its brain's more fully developed, years from now, when the procedure has been finalized. Last she heard, Dienek was planning to start testing out new breeds on a bunch of kids not yet out of the test tubes. But that's none of her business. For now, their work here is done. The two Felt stroll on toward an abandoned lot just a few blocks away. Matchsticks can feel the clanging of a fire alarm ringing in her ears, a summons across time and space.

Time to set another fire.

-

…

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…

Joanna opens her eyes.

The sky is very, very blue; the sun, a brilliant disk against it. And she, somehow, is not dead yet.

"Oh, mercy me," she says, hoarse, and when she tries to shift her body the gunshot wound throbs again. The press of the hot stone of the patio floor is an uncomfortable, growing burn against the side of her face. "Oof."

Most likely, the next time she falls unconscious, she won't wake up. Unless -

*Unless, unless*

The click of heels on pavement cuts through the delirious haze of pain that has so muddled up Jo's thoughts, and she lets her head roll to the side so she can better squint through her fuzzy vision at a pair of feet striding over to her. The feet pause by the corpse of the waitress so that the newcomer can stoop down, feel for a pulse, and just as quickly grunt a dismissal and continue on to Jo's side.

Jo looks up.

She knows the figure etched by the sun as well as she knows her dear James.

Her smile, perhaps, is a little bitter, and the weight on her heart is a heavy one. "Did you know...for long?" she asks, each breath a pained wheeze, and she feels bloody spittle track down the wrinkles framing her mouth. "A little forewarning would have been - ah. Haaaaa." Her lungs struggle to inflate again, and when they do the pain almost drags her down again. She doesn't have much time, but at least - "Well. At least you're...here. After so long, I wasn't sure..."

The response takes a while, and when it comes, the newcomer's voice is more tired than Jo has ever known it, flat and sad. "Girl, you know who I work for. Know how close I have to play this. If I'd've warned you, if you hadn't been here like you were supposed to be, they'd just come looking for you later on. If you're dead, you're safe." A rustle of fabric as the newcomer crouches beside her, and then an old, familiar scent wafts its way to Joanna's nose.

Even after so long, this is still the smell of *home*.

Her heart squeezes, not from pain, but from a sudden, fierce burst of love. Her sight is leaching away
again, but she summons up a smile. No need to go out in a bad temper, after a lifetime of good humor! "I am glad you're here. I...understand. Forgive me, being a royal stick in the mud about...hoo hoo...dying. An old woman like me! As though I haven't done it before!"

"You ain't dying, girl. Not while I'm here to bail you out."

That…rather wakes Joanna up. She blinks. "Come again?"

An eye roll. "Dying. Not today. Got a reeeeeal good pal here who's gonna fix you right up." And there's the self-satisfied smirk, laced with gleaming teeth, that lends a lingering bite to the words. "You lay low for a few years, let things settle down...then you and Jimmy can do whatever you want. Play the long game with me, baby girl."

Without a word more, there is a lurch, and Joanna braces herself against the pain that sends her reeling, her vision whiting out momentarily before she refocuses and finds that she's being cradled in strong, thin arms, the coffee shop and the smoke of the meteor crash rapidly vanishing in the distance. "But - John. Sammy," Jo says, because that's important. She has to force it out, because her chest feels ready to collapse, and she's not sure how much longer she'll be able to speak. "Samuel's here - I know his car, he'll be in danger, too, if he tries to reach John -"

"I wouldn't worry about him," is the curt reply. "Can't do anything to help the kid now, anyway."

"What does that mean?" When only uncharacteristic silence greets her, Jo struggles to sit upright; but her chest simply cannot bear the strain, and a renewed spurt of blood trickles out across the mass of red the front of her dress has become. "What the diddly darn flimflam are you saying about my boys?!"

A palm clamps down across the exit wound, applying pressure to the damp spot, for all the good that'll do. "Means it's too late for Sammy. Been too late for a long time, now." The tone is grim, and leaves no room for argument. Which is precisely what Joanna means to do - because if something's wrong with Samuel, with her own flesh and blood baby boy, she has to help him. Has to.

And if something's wrong with Samuel...then what will happen to John, when the last time around Samuel had to raise him all by himself? She was supposed to be there for them. She promised, this time, things would be different and she wouldn't be dead - "I need to - help them - my boys -"

A shake of the head, and strands of dark hair fall into Jo's face, sticking to the blood tracks down the corners of her mouth. She doesn't even have the energy to spit them out as the other talks. "Ain't nothing you can do now. Nothing I can do either, not when there are eyes everywhere. Saving you is risky enough; trying that would just doom us all - had that one confirmed by someone in the know."

They round a corner, but Joanna is completely out of sorts, bamboozled by the dizzying twists her eyes take as the blood loss saps her consciousness. She has no idea where they are, how quickly they might be moving, which way is up or which is down.

"Or will you ask me to watch you die, girlie?" The voice sounds remarkably distant; Jo makes a feeble effort to shake her head, but the most she can do is flop it to the side, nestling closer to the body cradling her. If she weren't in such pain, she'd feel like a child again. "Oh, hell no. That ain't how we play. I'll only say this once, so listen good." Cool breath sweeps along Joanna's neck as a harsh whisper growls right into her ears. "I'm snatchin' you from the jaws of death, girl. Which means you're gonna live another day…"

"And you're gonna like it."

Really, given the circumstances - it's not as though Joanna has much of a choice.
The persistent ache deep between her lungs spikes, and she drifts back into unconsciousness with a sigh.

(If she'd known then what she knows now, she would never have left her sons alone.)

Chapter End Notes

I said the foreshadowing was in the Heir, didn't I?

Tell me that was not the sickest pun yet. Look me in the eye and say it.
Chapter Summary

Silent we went an hour together,
Under grey skies by waters white.
Our hearts were full of windy weather,
Clouds and blown stars and broken light.
Full of cold clouds and moonbeams drifted
And streaming storms and straying fires,
Our souls in us were stirred and shifted
By doubts and dreams and foiled desires.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Okay, this is my STRONG spoiler-heavy warning for John’s section – he’s still in a serious depressive episode and the Trickster taunts him about it to no end. It is passive aggressive, verbally abusive, and it draws from years of John’s depression and anxiety to try to goad him into a suicidal break. If this could upset you or impact your own health, to skip the worst of it, ctrl-F “Pardon me. Mind if I cut in?” to move straight to the end of the worst of it. Pls take care of yourselves friends.

Hover over the Spanish for unapologetically terrible translations. Power anthems are *Magia (Kalafina)* and *Icarus (Bastille)*. Chapter-specific warnings for [spoiler] noncon makeouts, disturbing imagery, and both depressive and suicidal thoughts. H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com - I just took one look at the John-Dad dynamic and thought you know what this needs? Fucking mind control.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC VII - DEVASTATION

Jade's head feels awful. Like she jammed a skewer through one ear and out the other. The side of her face rests on two bars that provide no cushion whatsoever; when she tries to raise her head the first time, she thinks she can feel the tiny indents where the bars have left marks on her face.

"Ow," she says, with feeling, as she peels one eyelid open. Her chest snivels in protest when she pulls herself upright too fast, using what's left of the desk as a convenient backrest. For a moment, her vision refuses to resolve into something she can actually work with, and it takes her a groggy moment before she realizes that her glasses' zoom function got activated at some point. She dials it back so that she's not zoomed in at, like, 500% magnification and to her relief the world slides back into focus. "Ow," she adds, more contemplatively.

"Harley - agony later, panicking now," a really familiar, really angry voice snaps at her. And if she can hear it with her eardrums in this much pain, he must be screeching it to the high heavens. "I
mean it, you shit-powered neon green lava lamp, I will fucking disembowel myself and strangle you
with my own intestines if you don't wake the fuck up and focus on the issue at hand."

"Hey Karkat?" Jade grimaces and grinds her fingers into her temples. Unfortunately, all this does is
make the pain spike even more; she whimpers and swallows the sound down. When she turns her
head to the side, she half-expects her skull to fragment, all the pieces scraping and jabbing at each
other, but her head feels remarkably solid. Just in horrible pain. "Sometimes you're really gross, you
know that?"

"For fuck's sake will you help here, Harley?!" Karkat bellows, and if it makes her head hurt, it also
stops her from drifting back off into unconsciousness any time soon! Jade looks at the troll, really
looks at him for the first time in what feels like ages. Karkat looks stricken, his claws buried in John's
hair and his face the queasiest, palest grey she's ever seen it, almost ashen. She remembers him
kneeling at John's side, trying to shake him awake - Samuel lowering his gun to the back of the troll's
head -

Jade wrenches her head to the side so fast that her inner ears give another sharp pulse of pain.
Barotrauma, she thinks muggily, as she lays eyes on Samuel's crumpled figure in white over in the
corner of the office, right where she left him. Sudden change in ambient air pressure leading to
ruptured eardrums. Why is that important, brain?

Because John -

"John!" Jade's eyes open all the way and she reorients herself as fast as her throbbing brain will
allow. Karkat and John are leaning up against the wall opposite her. Karkat curled up around John in
a defensive, twining coil. The two bars Jade fell over onto when she passed out just then turn out to
have been John's splayed out shins. Karkat's eyes burn red - red red, not the rusty burgundy of his
handy dandy contact lenses, but she can't think when he could have removed them. "He - tried to - "
Jade touches a palm to her chest, sucking in a breath just to check despite the fact that she
has to have been breathing these past couple of minutes, would have noticed suffocating again…

"Tried to kill you," Karkat says, so faint one would think he'd been the one with the breath pulled
out of his lungs. "You - maybe he thought - " The troll falters, and his grip on John tightens until the
side of his face grinds down on the top of John's head. "He must have been confused. I mean, where
the fuck is all this blood coming from? This fucking idiot has gone and sprung a leak. Fuck."

Karkat's face has turned a splotchy mix of red and ashy grey, but Jade, not being as up to snuff on
Karkat's emotions as John is, doesn't realize he's started hyperventilating until it gets really obvious.
"Ohhh no. Don't freak out. Karkat, I'm serious, do not freak out," Jade orders. Karkat dissolves into
gaspy hiccups, which don't really improve things, and his hands pat at John's face on autopilot, an
obvious tremor in his claws. "I said don't freak out, dummy!"

"Oh, you know what, Harley, you telling me not to freak out could possibly be the single shittiest
fucking suggestion this side of the continent," Karkat snaps, still hiccupping even as (to Jade's
reluctant relief) he stops hyperventilating out of panic and starts hyperventilating in a rising tide of
fury. Anger works better than panic. "What could there possibly be to freak me out in this patently
wonderful situation? Everything will just be piss-yellow sunshine and daisies if I just not panic, right?
Well sorry, it's kind of hard to pull that off when we're only in this festering shithive excuse for a
scientific facility because someone was a brainwashed traitor and look around!
" Karkat rips a hand
away from John to jab an accusing claw at Samuel. "This is -"

Karkat's laugh doesn't just edge on the hysterical, it defines hysterical. There's gonna be an audio
recording of Karkat's terrified, panicky laugh in the dictionary beside 'hysteric,' at this rate. "Are you
guys okay in there?" Roxy calls from the doorway, drawing a full-body flinch from Karkat as his
eyes spring from Jade to Roxy.

He opens his mouth - probably to yell, since that's his modus operandi - and before he can tear into Roxy for something stupid to try to distract himself, Jade lunges forward and claps her hand over his mouth. "No biting!" she says, firm in her drill sergeant voice, and Karkat's mouth shuts before he can chomp down on her fingers. "Look, you have the blood thing, right?"

He snarls, and troll-sharp teeth scrape her hand. "I will bite you, so help me -"

"Don't care, don't care!" Jade sing-songs, frustrated, wishing she was upright so that she could stamp her foot properly. "Can you do anything to help John? Can you fix his nosebleed or - or - anything? Anything would be great right now, Karkat!"

"No!" Karkat says, the word exploding from his mouth with such force that Jade feels spit on her palm. Ewww. "I don't even know if I can fix other people, I've only ever fixed me, selfish fuck that I am! And it's not like there's a fucking cut I could scab over! Now he's stopped bleeding and I can't even fucking tell what set it off to start with!"

Jade thinks she knows what set it off. But if Karkat's wading knee deep in the river Nile, she's not about to shove him underwater by bringing up the fact that John's probably just as brainwashed as any of the Scratch kids. Except worse.

"Well, Dave just got shot," Jade says, removing her hand from Karkat's face now that she's got him distracted from Roxy. "So I think you should probably start figuring how to fix other people right now."

Karkat stares at her, aggrieved. "I'm not leaving him."

Jade wants to scream. She wants her head to stop ringing with pain like a bell, reverberating in time with the claps of thunder that rage outside. When did it even start raining?

More than anything, she wants Karkat to just - "Listen to me for once!" She seizes Karkat by the shoulders, very aware of John's head nodding when she shakes the troll. "Do you think John will ever be okay if Dave dies?!" He doesn't answer in less than half a second, which is pretty much by sheer coincidence the exact length of time it takes for Jade's patience to fray. "The answer is no! I don't care how much you hate both of us, you fuckass, the answer is still gonna be no!"

"Did you just say fuckass?" Karkat says weakly.

This time, Jade does scream. "GET IT TOGETHER AND SAVE DAVE!"

"ALRIGHT, FUCK, WOMAN, I'M GOING!" Karkat screams back. He seems taken aback by his own response for all of the five seconds Jade can bear to watch his expression flip from surprise to consternation, so she takes charge of yanking him to his feet, his claws falling away from John as her ears roars like the sea, and shoves him in the general direction of the door.

"Roxy," Jade adds, somehow lowering her voice despite the fact that the scream of frustration swells in her throat, just waiting for another excuse. "Can you make sure he actually goes to Dave?"

Roxy nudges the fallen tranq gunkind not-very-subtly away from her with a toe, and Jade guesses she can see why it would be a bad idea to remind Karkat that Roxy just shot John out of the blue when the troll's not all the way rational. "Yeah, sure thing!" she says, folding her hands out of the way behind her back. Jade half expects her to start whistling to try to assert her total innocence.

Shooting? No, she's just casually loitering in the doorway. "But - will you be okay here?" Roxy asks, stepping out of the way before Karkat can motor her down in his break for the door. "'Cause
whey didn't know there'd be two and 'm sorry, but ur John guy is so compurgated - compro - damnit, I can't talk today!"

Jade shouldn't have stood up so fast. Her eardrums might have popped, she knows for almost certain, but who can tell what damage all those pressure swings might have done to her vestibular system. That's the excuse she gives for the dizzy wave of pain that nearly lays her out flat; only a hasty hand on the cracked left side of the desk and a cautious touch of space powers keeps her upright to smile at Roxy. "No worries! They're both unconscious, after all!” she says. And then, before she can stop herself, her stupid brain with its need to know things and have evidence to mull over spits out: "You're sure John is -" She hesitates, and then makes wormy motions with her hands because if she tries to say it out loud she might cry. Or Karkat could hear and have another panic attack, which would also probably make her cry for a different reason.

Roxy sucks air in through her teeth, wincing. "Yuppers. I've seen that kinda bleeding afore, you know? It totes happened when Doc Die went 'n put a whammy on the Deuce dude. But brown blood, right, just like - all down his face. And then he got hauled into a review, which is the whatchamacallit when they suck more of your soul or something, idk. Poor little guy...

Jade can't quite find the power to feel even the least bit sorry about Clubs Deuce; she's still sore over the whole Mexico-Texas debacle, thanks very much. WV might have recovered fine, but she'll bet anything him and his crazy (but awesome) giant robot/missile launcher/subterranean drill/space power tracker-building team had something to do with the cage that cut her off from her space powers. "But it's definitely a mindgrub thing?"

Roxy nods, emphatic. "Def." She glances to her right, around the side of the door where Jade can't see - and can barely sense - any movement going on in the direction Dave fell and Karkat ran. "Jus' be careful, aright?" the Scratch says, lowering her eyes and swallowing hard. "He looked all smiley face while he choked you out. If he's anythin' like Janey ended up, but with smiles, you can't be all inveigled by his trickery. I don't think it's rightly him n e more."

Jade squeezes her eyes shut, then wrenches them open because the world does this seriously not-awesome spinning thing that almost drops her. She's trusted her powers enough, even in the void wards, to float herself on occasion and to play minor pranks with Dave, but maybe it would be a good idea to not even levitate herself after the whole hand-amputating saga and what with the way her head feels like radioactive mush. "Help Dave?" she says, her voice betraying more pain than she means it to; she shakes her head when Roxy takes a step forward instead of back. "Just – maybe if you see her, ask Doctor Lalonde if there're stretchers around here. We need to move these guys at some point. And if it looks like Karkat's gonna freak out" - and she hesitates before finishing, in a stage whisper - "knock him out, too. On account of, if he freaks, John...isn't gonna be able to talk him down." Jade doesn't think Karkat would hurt people (his ragefits seem more like they hurt him than other people, from what Jade has seen) but she's not risking another out of control hero running around this place!

"Karkat patrol and Lolonde stretcher request." Roxy salutes her with a tap of two fingers against her forehead. "Gotcha!" And she darts off, leaving the tranquilizer gunkind on the floor.

Which, as it turns out, is a good thing. The anesthetic-sedative from Jade's tranq dart might be a super strong mix, designed to take down lusii, but John's already murmuring and twitching, eye lashes fluttering, by the time help arrives in the form of two lab techs. Jade can hear other people racing by the door, headed for Dave, but it doesn't soothe her at all, not when John's eyes start glowing a bright enough blue to be seen through his eyelids.

It's only been maybe a few minutes - Jade was unconscious for a little while, so her sense of time is
shot, but she's *positive* that it can't have been too long - which means that somehow John has recovered from being sedated even more quickly than Jade does. The lab techs who arrive with a stretcher and gurney don't comprehend Jade's rapid-fire, panicky explanation, and are mostly concerned with checking John's vitals. Jade ends up cracking open the tranq rifle Roxy dropped on the ground to seize another dart so she can inject John with before he can wake up properly. "What did you just dose him with?!!" the human intern gasps, horrified, as John slumps back down into oblivion.

She doesn't really blame them for not really getting why John waking up would be a bad thing - really! Honest! They weren't here to witness his smileypants power trip, so how could she expect them to understand? - but her head hurts enough that she can't help the irritability that spills over and turns her voice snappish. "Get a lot of sedatives, okay?" she says at last, when she has fought down the urge to use Samuel for convenient target practice. "I'm pretty sure John is - he's got one of those things in his head, you know?"

Thankfully, in the skeleton crew of a staff Rue Lalonde brought along from Maine, the news that everyone is to be tested for mindgrubs has spread outside of neurology, and the troll in a short intern's lab coat blanches, his dark brown eyes eyeing John warily. "Oh man," he says, pulling open half of his lab coat and drawing out a new syringe. "We're going to need the *good* drugs. Here. Morphine."

Jade blinks. "You lab guys carry narcotics around?" she asks, torn between being impressed and being kind of concerned.

"*You're* the one who raided anesthesiology before we left?!!" the other tech says almost at the same time, sounding faint.

"They had me in charge of the indigoblood in Maine," the intern says, grim, as he hands Jade the syringe and draws another to clutch in his own fist. "I had to fill out all the paperwork for her transfer to a facility that could take care of coldbloods in dementia while everyone else was getting ready for the move. I had to sedate her *fifteen times* in four hours and by god, I'm never going anywhere without sedatives again in my life. I don't care if it's probably illegal somehow. I've got barbiturates, morphine, benzos - seriously. Do you need extra?"

"...Yeah, can't hurt, right?" Jade gnaws on her lip and accepts another, holding both syringes in her hand awkwardly, wishing her sylladex could be relied upon so she didn't have to hold everything. She had more pockets on her lab coat, but she's down to her suit again and thus mostly pocketless. The pockets she does have would wind up with her stabbing herself in the leg with a sharp needle - no thanks. "Uh, has anyone seen Doctor Lalonde? Because I think we need to get John back to neurology and" - she scowls back at Samuel, still unconscious in his time-out corner - "ugh, probably that guy too."

Jade tries to squish down her instinctive sense of betrayal and apply some logic to the situation, because she's pretty angry right now, and more than a little hurt, and both of those things are making it incredibly hard to admit that maybe Samuel might have a grub in his mind, too. That potentially she totally amputated part of the hand of someone who's not entirely responsible for his own actions.

Except he tried to shoot Roxy and Karkat and *he shot Dave oh nooo* - "Someone is taking care of Dave, right?!" Someone other than Karkat, since he's a Knight and not some magical healer priest guy, and what was Jade thinking, sending him to try to patch up Dave? She does her utmost not to whimper at the fact that her logic seems to have shot itself in the foot. She can almost hear her grandpa's stern 'Bad form, dear girl, bad form…'

"Doctor Lalonde and her daughter and Ms Maryam are with him." The human intern nods to the
other from the far end of the scoop stretcher, and Jade helps to lift John (he's all muscle!) up so they can dump him onto the rolling gurney. John's face is covered with blood still, lolling to the side so that his cheeks leave a smear of red on the sheet. "As well as the new young Miss Lalonde and Mr Vantas. Ms Maryam says she has medicull training, and to be honest, our only trauma surgeon mostly does research, so anything she can do..." Then the woman pauses, looking past Jade. "What about him?"

Ugh. Samuel is the only one she could be ogling in that direction. Jade sighs harder than she ever has in her life, and considers letting the pain white out her groggy brain so she can get some painkillers, too. But no! She has to be vigilant, because they're down a Dave and a John and those two aren't easily replaced in an emergency. Constant vigilance!

...Never mind. No Harry Potter references. They just make her think of splinching. Ugh. She's gonna have words with that future Dave if and when she catches up to him.

"I'll bring him," Jade says, teetering over to the corner. His hand draws her eye against her will, and she swallows hard at the seared wound that dips from the side of his ring finger to the point where his thumb used to meet his wrist. For a moment the horror of it almost eats her alive (this is John's dad, his weird stern but harmless dad who likes baking and lets kids stay in his house without prior notice and smiles as he makes enough pancakes to feed a small army and why is he bad) before she shakes it off and bends to inject one of her handy syringes of morphine into a vein, squeezing his arm with her other hand in the absence of a tourniquet to make things easier. "Let's go."

Jade hauls Samuel along by his ankle, letting his head drag along the floor as she stomps along behind the intern techs – Fredyn and Hannu, she thinks are their names, but her brain still hurts too much to fact check. She could probably make Samuel float but really, right now at this very moment, this mister has earned a lump or three on his noggin, and that's that. Before she leaves the room, she remembers to grab the tranq gun with its handy stash of more tranquilizers and sling it over her back, just in case. The bodies of dead Daves litter the hallway still, but as unnerving as they are, they've also started to grow transparent and thin, fading away into nothingness so gradually that Jade can barely just feel the atoms vanishing: matter erases itself from existence as paradox space asserts its merciless dominion over the laws of physics. It might take hours, but probably no more than that, and the scattered legions of dead bodies will have disappeared into the aether. Fredyn and the other intern went right for neurology, so Jade doesn't even have time to do more than sweep a worried gaze over the huddle of people surrounding Dave in the opposite direction.

At least, she thinks distantly, they know who that sleeper agent is. If only she had a way to call Grandpa back from his mission to check up on his robot body's creator. But for years she's accepted the necessity for radio silence on both their parts; legally and financially, and not in the least for his safety and her own, it's better for the world to believe James Harley dead. His concern that someone among the guardians would betray him if they knew about his survival has been vindicated, yet Jade finds herself wishing intensely that his paranoia had not been sooo strong. She could have kept a cell phone concealed, safe in the depths of the sylladex where no one could steal it, and heck, he could have a uranium-powered rotary phone installed in his chest cavity for all she knows! They could have made it work.

Instead, now, she finds herself oddly cold. Watching a Dave with cyanotic lips melt out of existence, Jade well and truly does not know what to do.

Which is why it's a pretty darn good thing that, when her throbbing ears finally register the swift tapping of footsteps behind her, she swivels to find Rose coming up beside her, the other girl's pale purple eyes narrowed and fixed on John. "I should have known. I should have seen," are the first words out of her mouth, a low murmur meant for Jade's ears. Her hair is kind of a wreck, barely held
back from her face by her headband.

"We all should have seen," Jade says. It takes some juggling, but she switches which hand is clamped around Samuel's ankle and tucks her remaining morphine syringe away so she can pat Rose on the shoulder. "I mean, this...this is kind of a big thing for all of us to miss! But we did..."

"I knew something was coming. But it was so all-encompassing, I couldn't even begin to understand where all of this mischance came from." Rose surges forward, quickening her pace as though to catch up with John and the two techs - and then subsides, falling back in step with Jade. "What happened in that room, Jade?"

Where to even start? "Karkat got there first, but I was right behind him, so I saw that John was already unconscious or something and bleeding everywhere." Jade bites her lip. For a moment her emotions almost crunch down on her, the misery of the whole situation stinging her eyes with tears, but she gulps it down. "And then, the way his d- Samuel just starting rambling about how he wanted it to be a 'quick break'...and he called Roxy a 'rogue asset' when he saw her...He shot Dave and he was gonna shoot Karkat and then when John woke up, he acted all creepy and tried to kill me!" Jade can feel her lip quivering. "Rose, I'm pretty sure he did that to John. Maybe he's been working for the Midnight Crew all along, and now he's done the same thing to John that they did to the Scratch kids and my ears hurt and this is the most awful thing ever!"

Ah. She's crying now. "This is - the worst!" she says between gasps; her grip on Samuel's leg fumbles and she drops it so she can use both hands to smear around the tears and snot dripping down her face. Wiping with the sleeves of her suit just makes more of a mess, and that's the final straw. "Nngnh!"

"Jade. Here." Jade's ears feel like they hurt worse than before, if that's possible, two white hot points of pain that bring another flood of tears to her eyes. Her whole face feels hot and sticky and awful and she hates it, but she hears Rose through the white noise and blinks through the tears until she can make out a little folded square of cloth, held out in Rose's hand. She sniffs really loudly because handkerchiefs remind her of Grandpa (never go anywhere without a rifle and a good cloth to clear it with, dear!) and she wants him to be here to help right now. But then she accepts the handkerchief with wobbly fingers and rubs her whole face with it, blowing her nose in utter misery, and - It kind of helps. A surprising amount, actually! Having her face clean and not-sticky is a definite improvement, and Jade shudders through a breath that almost manages not to be a sob. "There must be something less than hospital-grade morphine we can find to help with your ears," Rose is saying, producing another folded cloth from her pocket and dabbing at Jade's ears and neck. "Mother must have a cache of ibuprofen lying around, if I know her at all. A perforated tympanic membrane?"

"Both." Jade snuffles, pushes up her glasses to scrub at her eyes one last time, and blows her nose again. She wrinkles her nose when she sees the gross mess she's made of the poor handkerchief, though. "Sorry."

"No matter. Dave's left eardrum was shot, too," Rose says, showing Jade the streaks of red-brown blood and dried flakes that have transferred from her neck to the second cloth. "It's a good thing he suffered from an abrupt cessation of consciousness, really, or he might have given himself an aneurysm trying to pretend it didn't hurt."

Jade tries to laugh. A smile counts, right? She tries and that's what matters. She then squats to glare at Samuel and start dragging him along by the leg again. The gurney has pulled ahead and turned the far corner, the rattling of its wheels on the tile a low buzz in her ears. There's another dead Dave by the wall - the first one Jade remembers seeing - but it's turning transparent just like the others, and she finds it a little easier not to look at it too long as she and Rose start walking again. "What's -"
takes a shaky breath and needs to start again. Keep it together! "What's with all these Daves? A future Dave came and talked to us before we came to see what happened to John, so I know he's okay..." And he's going to be okay, Jade's brain finally pieces together, which is heartening to remember. It means Karkat can't possibly screw up Dave with the blood thing any time soon, anyway!

Rose closes her eyes and shakes her head. Jade takes the blood-stained handkerchief from the other girl, and carefully, captchalogs both handkerchiefs in her sylladex so at least Rose doesn't have to try to stick them back in her pockets and mess up her clothes. "I couldn't say, Jade. They're so riddled with bad luck they look like black pits in my sight. I can only speculate that they were Daves who tried to prevent this catastrophe and failed." Rose thumbs at one of the void bracers on her wrist, the side that needed to be replaced earlier.

Doomed, Jade thinks. "Dead ends."

"Precisely." Rose appears to rouse herself from a moment of consideration, and raises her head to look at Jade again. Her eyes are steely. "But we're alive. Have you noticed? Our fortunes have plummeted to an absolutely preposterous low - and yet no one has died with the sole exception, apparently, of Daves who appear to be erasing themselves even as we speak. Our own Dave is assured to survive by the very mechanics of time travel."

Jade likes to consider herself an optimist. Even so, she needs a good minute of dragging Samuel's unconscious meatsuit along behind her, mulling it over, before Rose's twisty, evasive point hits home. "No one died," she repeats, thoughtfully. "Which means that in a way...this is almost a best case scenario?" Rose confirms her guess with a sharp nod. "Huh! But I dunno, John is still brainwashed and probably about to wake up spitting mad if we don't get that thing out of his head..."

"And yet, here we all are." Rose's grin is harsh, but when she turns it on Jade, it almost seems wistful. "For some peculiar reason, amidst all this overwhelming potential for destruction, we survive. John is here, where we can reach him and help him, and the traitor in our midst is in hand, rather than hidden and ready to spring a more devastating trap on us. And through some impossible luck, we are in a facility with doctors who are perhaps the only experts in removing mindgrubs from human brains on the planet."

Rose begins to pull ahead, and Jade has to jog a little to keep up with the other hero's lengthening stride as they approach the neurology department. She manages to twist Samuel's shoe half the way off as she switches hands for a better grip, but when it falls off she drags him right over the poor fallen footwear without stopping. "So you think we'll be okay?" Jade asks, feeling a little lost.

"I have a plan to salvage the situation. We've rather forcefully hit rock bottom, but as long as we are alive, things are not beyond repair." Rose holds the door open for Jade to drag Samuel through; his remaining hand almost ends up squashed in the doorway when she pivots to continue on to the next door without waiting. "I will beg John's forgiveness later, when he's back in his right mind, but for the moment there is no time to waffle over matters as they stand. A coup is in order."

Jade's ears perk up. She can't help it. Ever since that minor uprising she helped out with in Southeast Asia, coups catch her interest. "A coup?"

"It appears that I must take up John's mantle." Rose's smile ticks up another notch. "I must be the friendleader."

Novitiate Halburn is the one to run into them. Jade is more aware than ever just how understaffed
this place is as they venture through neurology, passing door after door with windows through which she can see machines and desks and filing cabinets covered in tarps. Rose navigates the unoccupied halls with unerring steps until they round the corner and Jade sighs with relief at the sight of the gurney with John in the middle of a hall of brightly lit rooms, with the familiar violetblood watching as one of the interns injects John with more of a sedative. "Ms Rose. Ms Harley," Halburn says almost before he looks up, his braid swinging as he turns toward them, his fine-boned face solemn as he takes in the unconscious man behind the two heroes. "We ran out of gurneys?"

"We ran out of caring," Jade sniffs, her lower lip edging out as she yanks demonstratively on Samuel's foot. "He did something to John to make him totally lose it, and we're pretty sure he's the Crew's agent!"

"So Hannu was explaining." Halburn's expression fills with distaste, and he shakes his head as he touches a talisman hanging around his neck. Probably a magic thingy. "Here, this way. We have placed the Scratch children in the room closest to the theater, but the next room over should have more beds with restraints. If you think we'll need them, of course," he adds, stepping out of the way so that the two techs can continue on with the rolling stretcher.

"Unfortunately, yes," Rose says, tucking her hair behind her ear. "The strongest restraints you all have."

"John choked me out because I hurt his dad. He'd never do that if he were himself!" Jade chimes in.

"His personality completely altered?" After Jade elaborates a little more, Halburn looks almost ill - or at least, more purple around the earfins - and he accompanies them into a mostly empty room taken up with a row of hospital beds, where the two interns have started wrestling John onto the bed nearest the door. Jade drags Samuel to the one furthest away and hauls him up by herself, pouting while Rose helps her quickly truss the guy up in as many restraining belts as they can commandeer. "And most of our staff, naturally, is still busy assisting with the surgery for the first boy."

"How much longer will that take?" Jade asks, grunting in the process of yanking a wrist restraint as tight as it will go. The sooner they can get John's brain free of unwanted parasite things, the better, in her opinion!

"It is, quite literally, brain surgery. Ordinary brain tumor removal procedures can take anywhere from three to five hours, without complications," Halburn says, leaning in to pluck Samuel's eyelid up with a faint hum. He's remarkably cool about checking a total traitor-pants's vitals, which Jade would be more impressed by if she were in a rational mood. "Marion is passably good at what he does, but he can't speed up that time frame without risking permanent brain damage."

"Then I hope you guys have a looot of sedatives and stuff, because John's going through morphine like water." Jade sighs as Rose finishes strapping down Samuel's disfigured hand with a deft flourish, and the two heroes exchange weary grins. "Also, does anyone have any ibuprofen I can have? My head hurts something fierce!"

Halburn winces.

...And okay, that silence where the answer to Jade's question should be? Not a good one.

"Doctor Lalonde should have a supply of ibuprofen in her office desk," the violetblood says, too slow, his claws fluttering as he grits his teeth. "But as to the matter of sedatives - well…"

"There's a reason I brought some from Maine!" Fredyn calls from John's bedside.
"Our main stockpile is there," Hannu adds.

Jade, wondering why the heck they're standing around Samuel like they actually care about his dumb butt, nudges Rose's arm with her elbow and leads the way back toward John and the techs. The closer she gets, the more her head throbs, a pulsing reminder that this whole mess is one huge horrorshow.

"By which you mean your supply here is limited," Rose translates, stepping right up to John's side and pressing her hand to the side of his face, her lip tight as she wipes at the blood. Fredyn has to inch around her to start hooking John up to an IV. "How bad is it?"

"We brought in enough anesthesia and anticonvulsant medication for a dozen or so of Marion's major surgeries," Halburn says, ticking them off on his claws. "Some general anesthesia, pain-killers, and sedatives for minor incidents and emergencies, but I am afraid that Exarchopoulos may have burned through most of the stock while dealing with a certain madman's stabbing rampage. We really didn't anticipate an attempted massacre when we were prioritizing what to transport here."

Jade's heart, momentarily bolstered by Rose's confidence declaration that she had a plan, drops, and maybe it's psychosomatic, but her chest starts to ache with renewed intensity. "And John would need basically all of it," she says, pressing her hand to her forehead. "If his murdery half wakes up, John can probably just teleport right out of bed and start hurting people again!" Jade frantically tries to calculate how much morphine they'd need to keep John down long enough to get him into the operating room - but there's still those five hours that they need to stall for, plus the need to keep Jake and Jane mostly unconscious as well, and if they're low on medicine already - and if Dave ends up needing painkillers - "Hmmm...crap!"

Which is, of course, when someone lets out a blood-curdling scream. Jade and Rose both flinch, heads swiveling at the same time toward the wall, as the shriek of rage cuts off and a female voice begins to roar, "RELEASE ME, YOU INSOLENT SHITFUCKING SCHMUCKS! YOU THINK YOU CAN KEEP ME HERE, YOU FUCKSHITTING FUCKS?! I WILL - SHIT FUCKING FUCKERS, I'LL KILL ALL OF YOU - LET ME GO!"

"Jane, I presume?" Rose has to shout to be heard, but she still manages to sound resigned. "Well, at least from the sound of things, it would appear these restraints do hold."

Fredyn doesn't even seem surprised. "On it," he groans, passing the IV bag to Hannu. "Why this again…"

"Wait, how much of that morphine do you have?" Jade asks before he can escape.

"Not enough," the intern says, darting out of the room at a dead run. The repeated shrieks of variants on old-school insults and ‘shitfuck’ evolve to ever more specific threats, and Jade wonders if she ought to go help or something when they hear the shriek of metal bending – when the Scratch kid’s shouts begin to slur and dwindle into incoherent shouts resembling something like ‘FFUFSKFHICIIITTS’ before, at last, Jane passes out again.

Dirk in surgery. Dave shot. John, Jane, and Jake all brainwashed and unable to control their actions. And one Samuel Egbert, who probably doesn’t guzzle morphine by the tubeful for breakfast like those last three probably do, but who Jade wouldn’t put past to have the sheer audacity (and the prankster’s gambit) needed to squirm his way out of those restraints, no matter how tight they’re drawn.

And Jade’s head won’t stop pounding. Darn it, if she starts crying again out of frustration, she’ll – she’ll – urgh! "Rose? Please tell me your plan still works?" Jade says, this close to pleading.
"Because any second now Karkat's gonna run in here somehow and if we don't have a plan he's gonna start yelling, too..." Which would basically be the worst. Karkat's yelling is funny only when he gets all riled about dumb stuff, not when it's over serious things like this.

Rose has a fresh handkerchief out, and finishes swabbing at the blood on John's face even as Jade starts freaking out a little. Soon there are only dry trails of red down John's dark cheeks to show where he bled everywhere. But Rose's little extra eye blinks open on her forehead; Jade takes that as a sign that Rose is trying super hard to see what can be done, and represses her own growing panic as the silence drags on.

"...Yes. But we can't afford those five hours." Rose says at last, laying the cloth aside and folding her fingers together. John's face twitches minutely, the slightest spasm of a muscle near his mouth, and Jade shivers. Even unconscious, there's something off about John's serene sleeping face. Someone with that much gore on their cheeks should not have a smile tugging on their mouth. "No," Rose says, firm. "Here's another question, Novitiate - who supplied this facility with sedatives before the relocation to Maine?"

Halburn's eyes may be a purplish kind of violet, but his smile is all shark as he inclines his head to Rose. "A private pharmacological supply company, serving the greater Seattle area. As a matter of fact, I believe Exarchopoulos placed a rush order before you all left, through a parent foundation we have in common. But even if they received the request right away and the foundation agreed to cover the surcharge, it would still take a day or so to fill the order and ship all of that out here."

"The hazards of building your laboratory facilities in the middle of a remote mountain-bound valley, no doubt. Mother always did have a crippling flare for the dramatic," Rose says, raising her folded hands to her mouth. "Damn. I may be able to alter my plan, but it would involve delving into his mind while we still have the medication to keep him from losing control -"

"Hold the front door," Jade interrupts, raising her hand. "Which parent foundation?"

Jade finds herself surrounded by disapproval, which is a pretty lame way to try to recover from burst eardrums. Novitiate Halburn disapproves of Rose's plan, Rose disapproves of Jade's plan, and Jade disapproves of the fact that neither of them is using the common sense they were born with.

"Performing a mindscape viewing ritual to gain a cursory idea of the state of his psyche and the effects of a mindgrub on it is one thing," Halburn tells Rose, the most agitated that Jade has ever seen him. "You're talking about an deep incursion into a mind in turmoil. It would take a full Lectoris to successfully engage with a mind so deeply -"

"I've performed similar incursions before," Rose says, her jaw set in a way that takes Jade too long to realize kind of resembles Bro Strider. "Not only in the reconstruction of my own mental world and its defenses, but in the process of accessing Kanaya's memories, with her permission, to remove traces of grimlight poisons from her psychic profile. John has been within my mind, as well, and he had no trouble manifesting a mental avatar to assist me with. I have reason to believe that Jade and Dave's presence would be beneficial. We're stronger together, and we might be able to help John free himself from whatever tricks and suggestions this grub has laid to entrap his mind. It would at least purchase us more time to wait for the worm itself to be extracted. All I would require would be access to some of your ritual circles."

"Your own mind is one thing. Interfering in the mind of another is quite another." Halburn massages his hornbeds through his hair, looking pained. But if he has a headache, Jade could not have less sympathy for him. "I cannot quite fathom how it is that I am the one arguing against an experimental
"And I think I should go right now to get that medication!" Jade says, folding her arms and legs so that she hangs in midair. "There's a reason it's called the Harley Foundation, y'know! They'll listen to me, definitely. And with my powers I can bring the whole shipment here in less than an hour! Two hours, tops!" She's not entirely sure the agony in her head is entirely conducive to safe teleporting (and she's honestly curious about where the door and pistol might have ended up after she tossed them in these twisting wards) but if she can take Bec and drive him out to where the wards are thinnest, the wolf will most likely wake up and help her out.

Rose is shaking her head before Jade even finishes. "I am cognizant of the fact that having the de jure heir to the foundation make a personal request might speed along the delivery of more sedatives, but it's late in the day. They might simply be unable to obtain that much medication on such short notice, no matter what they do. I'd rather have the four of us together, Jade."

"Because you think John will get stronger and try to fight the mindgrub programming harder. But what if it just makes his brainwashed side stronger, too?!" Jade throws up her hands. "He used the windy thing to suck all the air away from me, so he can still use it, right? If we all pile in there at once and he gets some kind of power buff, the sedatives might stop working! He already heals really fast..."

As if to prove her point for her, John starts to twitch more on the hospital bed, one of his wrists flexing in its tripled restraints, and Hannu has to dive to inject more sedatives. "Giving him this much morphine can't be healthy," the intern says in an undertone to Halburn, but Jade and Rose hear anyway, exchanging glances. Rose's jaw is still stubbornly set, but her folded hands have gone white-knuckled, and Jade can tell she can't deny that Jade has a point. They have no idea how badly John's been messed up in the head, if he's just got orders to irrationally defend his stupid dad, or if this is an entire personality switch like the kind Jane and Jake got saddled with. Making him stronger, at least while he still has that mindgrub pumping chemicals into his brain, seems like a pretty questionable thing to do.

"We might have to take that chance. I can't tell if your leaving will bring good fortune or ill - we're already so deep in this sinkhole that any action we take is better than nothing," Rose says, which is neither a yes nor a no.

"The worst that can happen is that I really can't get the sedatives early," Jade points out. "And if that's the case I can bounce right back and we can do the mind visit thing anyway."

"The longer we wait, the more likely it is that John's system gets used to all this morphine, and adapts to filter it out even faster."

"I really do not believe that entering his mind is a viable prospect," Halburn interjects, and the whole argument cycles right back to the beginning. Urgh! By the time Doctor Lalonde arrives with Roxy, Kanaya, Karkat, and Dave's unconscious body on another gurney (one that Karkat practically drop kicks into the room so he can push past it to reach John's bedside), Jade is ready to roll her eyeballs right out of her skull at how much time everyone is wasting!

First things first, though. "Doctor Lalonde, do you have any ibuprofen?"

"Always." The doctor draws a pale prescription bottle from the pocket of her lab coat and rattles it so that the pills within click against the sides of the bottle. "To think, I used these for years to stave off hangovers of my own devising, and now I find them just as necessary to stave off the migraines of sobriety."
"Yay! Thank you!" Jade says, accepting the bottle and twisting the top off so fast that the child proofing gives with a crack that probably means it's splintered beyond repair. Oops. She taps five out into her palm and downs them in two swallows, pulling a face when her first gulp doesn't succeed in finishing the job. It'll take a while for the pain-killers to kick in, but the psychosomatic relief is worth a million bucks. The white bursts of pain that have taken up residence in her ears ease almost immediately; Jade blinks and the fuzziness around the edge of her vision clears up a lot. Hurray!

"I'm gonna teleport out to see if I can get the shipment of sedatives here faster," she informs the doctor while passing the pill bottle back, hurrying before Rose can interrupt her totally excellent and well-thought out plan again. "John's just too evil right now to let him run around loose but he's also too awesome and we're gonna run out of medication before you guys can get that thing out of his head." Also: "How's Dave?"

"Jade -" Rose begins, exasperatedly, but Kanaya's head snaps up from where she appears to be inspecting Dave's torso. His fancy suit jacket and shirt have been peeled up and Jade can make out a neat line of stitches over a wound that has already started to knit together into a scab. Which kind of makes the stitches redundant? But Jade can see why the precaution might have seemed reasonable in all this chaos. "I have performed field surgery," Kanaya says, nodding to Roxy, who digs into her pocket and produces a mashed up bullet slug with a wide grin. "He was able to speed our healing capabilities earlier during battle, but he seems to have passed out due to shock before he could repeat the phenomenon. He should awaken shortly, however."

Another knot of tension eases in Jade's beleaguered head, and the pain in her ears slowly starts to wean off. *Dave will be okay. Dave will be awake soon.*

"Our supply has run so low?" Doctor Lalonde asks, gaze flicking to Novitiate Halburn, who dips his head in a nod. He'd started looking a little frazzled before his supervisor arrived, and Jade is kind of impressed by how quickly he's managed to smooth the lingering irritation from their three-way debate from his face and tuck stray hairs back into the smooth black braid. "Then that may be our best option." She scans the room, reaches Samuel's unconscious body in his corner bed of shame, and averts her gaze, hurt lingering in her eyes before she recollects herself. "Would you know where to inquire?"

Jade shrugs. "I figured I'd head to wherever the Harley Foundation's local office is, and go from there."

Rue's eyebrow rises, while at John's bedside Rose sucks in a breath through her nose. "I would still prefer you, Dave, and I all went into John's mind together, Jade."

"If you're that worried about it, I'll hurry back!" Jade replies, crossing an x over her heart with a finger. "And you and Dave can visit first if you want to do, I don't know, reconnaissance or something! Recon is smart, right?"

"Who the taintchafing fuck," Karkat says, before Rose can concede Jade's totally valid point, "said anything about sticking your grungy human fingers into John's thinkpan? Whisper the name into my awaiting auricular sponges this instant. I need to add them to my shit list."

"I did. I only hope that membership on your list of excrement doesn't preclude our newborn friendship, Karkat," Rose says with an utterly straight face.

It confounds Karkat for a few seconds, before he swaps out incredulity for disdain. "Membership on the shit list is currently in the low thousands. You're in good fucking company, don't worry. But I have arrived to inform you that John's cracked pan is off-limits until actual professionals figure out what the fuck is wrong with him."
"That is in fact my aim - to ascertain exactly how John's psyche has been skewed by the mindgrub," Rose says. She and Karkat eye each other across the hospital bed, Karkat glowering and Rose implacable. Halburn and Doctor Lalonde have started to converse in low whispers back by Dave, while Roxy glances between the two conversations with a worried wrinkle between her eyebrows, tipping the bullet from one palm to the other absently. "Any chemical programming the mindgrub might have done will only be half the problem; even if the grub is removed, his psyche will still have the suggestions and orders it left behind engrained in his mind. At least this way we'll have the advantage of seeing exactly how John's father might have been manipulating him to think."

Karkat starts with a false sweetness in his voice, before the ire spills over again. "Well, I hate to be the bearer of shit-tastic news, but congratulations, Rose, you are crazier than Short-shorts in the next room over if you think this is a good fucking idea!" His eyes stay fixed in a glare at Rose, but Jade sees the troll's hands reach out automatically to grab John's hand. "And - fuck, where even were you people while this was all happening?! You and Kanaya, you weren't there and you think I'll just magically not notice if you don't mention it? Sorry to rain on your parade but here I am, dumping a metric fuckton of 'hell-fucking-no' on your state-mandated propagandistic marching event!"

Kanaya sighs, the sound full of remorse, as she finishes yanking Dave's shirt back down and smoothing out wrinkles in the cloth. She has, Jade sees, sewn up the tiny holes where the bullet tore through fabric, too. Rose just raises both eyebrows and says, bland as porridge, "We were having sex."

Karkat stares in horror; Roxy lets loose a wolf-whistle before cackling. Doctor Lalonde's head whips up from her discussion with Halburn so fast Jade can feel the woman's neck crack. "What?!" she says, her voice doing some really interesting gymnastics between octaves.

"Engaging in sexual intercourse," Kanaya clarifies. Jade can't help it - she starts cackling, too, and Roxy has to clap a hand over her mouth when she gets another look at Doctor Lalonde's stricken expression and the way that Halburn has begun to study the ceiling with remarkable intensity.

"And unfortunately that was a little distracting," Rose says, with a shrug. "But we are here now, and I have every intention of helping John. Even it takes a journey to the very center of his mind to do so."

"For-fucking-get it. If you think you're excavating John's poor dumbass gourd without me there to keep you fuckwads from shitting all over the only person I love, don't bother to think again - just remove your brain from its pan, put it on the floor, and let me find Casey so I can smash it with a hammer."

Oh no. Crap, crap, crap! Karkat is losing it again, Jade can tell. He's leaning further and further over John, curling up again into that defensive, growly stance he huddled up in earlier, and the more he spews vitriol the louder the clicking growl of genuine rage gets in his voice. Kanaya shifts from her position beside Dave, and Jade tries to be sneaky as she watches in the periphery of vision as Kanaya prowls over to Rose's side, all subtle and everything.

But - Jade has a solution! Yeah, this could totally work! "Karkat can go instead of me!" Jade says brightly, beaming at Rose.

Karkat's nostrils flare. Rose, on the other hand, frowns, thoughtful. "He's not a player from our session, though," the other girl points out, studying Karkat with a considering eye. Karkat just bares his teeth in reply.

"Yeah, but he's also John's moirail! So he'd know even more than we do about how to get John calm and sane again!" This idea sounds better and better with every reason Jade makes up on the fly. "Me,
I can zip out to get the delivery, and you guys'll probably have John back before I even bounce back to the station! Right~?

"Harley, you're making sense?" Karkat takes a hand away from John's to prod at his ears in a way that makes Jade wince reflexively.

"I do do that. You know, a lot of the time," Jade says, huffing and folding her arms again. This covers the way she crosses her fingers for good luck. *Come on, come on...*as intriguing as a trip into John's mind sounds, Jade really just doesn't think they've got the time or the medication to make it work if all of them jump in at once. Okay, maybe she knows less about mind magic stuff than she does other sciences, but she's pretty sure this kind of trip will still eat up time and sedatives they don't have.

"If you're leaving, you may want to do so soon," Doctor Lalonde says, having recovered her ability to speak. She still looks pale, though. "I'm not sure how many people may even be left at the foundation headquarters; it's a workday, yes, but it's almost evening. With this weather, it may clear out even more quickly, I'm afraid."

Jade looks at Rose, trying to meet the other girl's eyes to plead one more time, but Rose's eyes are closed until she says, at last, "Alright. It - should work. Kanaya? I had thought to keep the group limited to players from this last game session, but if Karkat is coming -"

Kanaya shakes her head. "I prefer my own mind. And I do not know John as well as the rest of you; he might not want me in his memories, if he were awake to express an opinion one way or the other."

"Then it's settled." Rose bobs her head in a nod, and meets Jade's eyes to offer a faint smile. "Go for it."

Heck yes! Jade grins back and lands with both feet on the ground, bouncing on her heels. "I'll be back before you know it!"

- Leaving the valley takes up a good twenty minutes even with Jade taking extreme liberties with driving safety. She learned to drive using an off-road jeep in a jungle in the middle of the Pacific, and this naturally means her driving skills are awesome and specially honed to take shortcuts and consider stoplights mild suggestions. But even she has to admit that with her senses skewed she needs to watch herself on the switchbacks. The clouds overhead, so flat and still and pallid just a few hours ago, have swollen into dark thunderclouds so thick that Jade can barely see fifteen feet in front of her, dumping sheets of rain and hail that ping off the car's windshield and leave minuscule cracks in the glass that are eventually gonna give. The wind sheers across the road and flattens out the thick grass around the lake, so that more than once Jade finds herself hauling the steering wheel around to drag the car back onto the road. Once she's in the trees, thankfully, the worst of the storm cuts off, and the interwoven branches overhead shield the car from the hail. It's still dark, but at least without the sleeting rain Jade can see without the windshield wipers flailing around to try to keep the window clear.

She took the Egberts' car only because Bec is still passed out in the trunk - but the moment they break out of the thick tree cover there's a crackle of green light, and Jade yelps as Bec teleports into the passenger's seat, all several hundred pounds of fluffy white wolf getting its hair all over the seat. Not like she cares. Once upon a time she might have felt bad about messing up Samuel's nice functional car but now? Eh. She's so over it.
But Becquerel's fur bristles and its muzzle turns up, and Jade reaches out a hand to bury it in the wolf's ruff. Tremors twitch their way along Bec's spine and it sparks again, hard enough that Jade feels the tips of her fingers numb, and overhead the storm cracks with another roll of thunder.

If John's the one making the storm, what does it mean that it's still raging even while he's sedated? What would happen if he woke up right now?

John has spent all the time Jade's known him either concealing his powers at school, muffling them at home - because of his dad's rules, she might add - or using incredible restraint while fighting baddies. And even with all that holding him back, he could still whisk up a tornado fierce enough to push Jade away from his confrontation with Droog just by getting angry.

Jade's stomach knots in on itself with the creeping realization that there have been storms all around the greater Seattle area for days, now. Since, she's starting to suspect, they watched those stupid tapes about the game and John had a mini breakdown. This storm has been building steam for days.

John is a god. How much power can an Heir in the god tiers unleash if they're traumatized and brainwashed and in pain all at once?

Probably a whole frickin' lot.

"Bec," she says grimly, clamping down on the wolf's neck. "Help me push to these coordinates? Leave the car here - we won't need it."

Bec cocks its head to the side, still studying the roof of the car - or the sky beyond. A stray gust of wind snatches up the rain and splatters it under the last of the tree branches shielding the car like having a bucket of water splash against the window. Then Bec's body begins to hum with yellow static as its pelt turns bright green, and Jade reaches out with her senses for the hulk of Seattle lying to the south and west of the valley.

In retrospect, she should have taken the car, because she and Bec take coordinates to their literal extreme - in this case, they land with a bounce on the sidewalk in front of a towering, angular office building, just in time for the bruise-green and black clouds to dump a fresh wall of water down upon the city that soaks Jade right through in one freezing cold slap.

"HHhhhaaaEEEEEHHH!!" Jade isn't entirely sure what to call the noise that leaks out of her lips in an irrepressible hiss, but it's really embarrassing! A lump of hail thumps against her shoulder a moment later, the wind shrieking through the slim corridor formed by the rows of skyscrapers around her.

"Coldcoldcoldcold!" Jade chants, whistling for Bec to follow her as best she can while getting her butt into gear, teeth chattering as she hurries to the door of the building and pushes into the lobby, her hair dripping water all over the floor. Bec appears a few steps further into the lobby, its coat dry and utterly pristine as it sneezes at her. Show off.

Huffing, Jade reaches into her sylladex, accessible at last, and swaps out her suit for a dry one. She knots her hair up as best she can with a hair tie to keep it out of the way, and begins the business of wiping her glasses clean on the sleeve of her costume as she glances around the lobby, looking for a desk or a directory. As far as she could see outside, there was no sign or name on the outside of this building to advertise for whatever companies have set up offices inside; but these are the coordinates Doctor Lalonde gave her, so there should be something in here to give her a hint as to what floor they're on, right? Right.

She marches up to the directory by the elevators because she spies that first, but as she bounces over,
feet barely skimming the glossy, caramel brown marble floor tiles, she notices two secretaries huddled behind a luxurious desk off to the side. She waves at them, smiling, but they give her horrified looks almost in unison and backpedal through the door behind them to the backroom, presumably. Maybe they just aren't used to strange girls with wolf sidekicks wandering in soaking wet. It's a sight that takes getting used to, probably. Oh well!

But to Jade's relief, a quick scan of the directory's neat black-and-white rows of text shows that the Harley Foundation does indeed have an office here, one that seems to take up the entire fiftieth floor, as all the other companies are listed on others. It's only the work of a moment to bounce up there, and Jade walks past the fiftieth floor's elevator doors, her footsteps mostly silent on the carpet that replaces the marble tiles. Unlike the well-lit lobby, this floor is relatively dim and quiet; but just a ways down the hall the wall switches from plaster to frosted glass windows that stretch from the ceiling to the floor, through which Jade can juuust make out the scattered yellow glow that means someone is in the office.

But just as she's about to barge into the Harley Foundation's office and start throwing around her totally legitimate authority, Jade freezes and has to rub her eyes, and blink, wondering if all the sucky stuff happening today has actually driven her crazy, too!

...What have they done?!

"You changed the logo!" Jade shoves the door open, pouting with the force of ten thousand ducks. "I mean, the new logo font is cool, but why? What was wrong with the old one! The old one had gumption, darn it!" Now Bec's head doesn't even have a massive letter on top of it!

The troll behind the desk doesn't even look up from her sleek laptop screen, her hair up in a messy bun that she keeps tearing more strands loose from by running her claws through it. "Tested better with focus groups after we announced our sponsorship of that new ga- wait, no," she says, her downward twisting horns scraping along the padded shoulders of her blazer as she looks up, distracted, from her computer screen to frown at Jade. "I'm sorry, miss, we're just closing the office for the day. We've had to close some of our late afternoon appointments due to the inclement weather - I'm sorry, I really need to ask you to -"

"Heheh, that's alright, I didn't have an appointment anyway! I guess I really should have said hi to you guys earlier, but I've just been so busy..." Jade glances around the office's front room, and bursts out into a grin when she spies a familiar portrait hanging on the wall; she can forgive the new logo thingy, as long as they keep this hilarious picture of Grandpa posing with both his vast collection of paintings of cerulean ladies and the trophies of his many tomb-raiding expeditions where everyone can see it! Becquerel sits loyally at Grandpa's painted feet in the portrait, looking exactly the same forty years ago as it does now.

Speaking of - Jade whistles, planting her hands on her hips when Bec finally gets its butt in gear and
appears beside her. She can't even imagine why it decided to stay on the first floor to begin with. Bec is just so lazy sometimes! "I'm sorry it's so last minute, but I really am in a big hurry," Jade begins, but she stops and keeps her mouth shut politely as the woman splutters and shoves her rolling chair back from the front desk, cerulean eyes bulging with realization as she whips her head back and forth from staring at Jade's face to something just over Jade's shoulder. It's not so much of a double take as it is a quintuple take.

Jade looks, and lets out a low whistle as she realizes that the portrait on the wall opposite is uh, well - of her! Sure, it's a thirteen year old her, with one of her teeth missing from her smile and dirt smudged on her cheek, which makes Jade uneasy solely because - well - thirteen - but her arms are thrown around Bec and she kneels in the middle of her old greenhouse, surrounded by trays and pots of rare jungle flowers and the occasional pumpkin vine.

"That's convenient," Jade comments, pointing at the portrait when the ceruleanblood turns to stare at her again. "Yeah, that's me! So can we talk about -"

"Oh my. Oh my god. You're here." The troll stands up so fast the chair slams into the wall behind her desk, leaving a tiny chip in the mint green paint, and a good half of the hair in her bun gives up, falling over the left side of her face in a tangled mess. "Oh, god, everyone's gone home for the day, we weren't - pardon me, ma'am, we weren't expecting you to - doyouwantahotbeverage?!"

Jade looks down at Bec; it huffs at her and is absolutely no help whatsoever in deciphering that last line. "A wha?"

"I CAN MAKE COFFEE!" the poor woman practically shrieks, lunging for a complimentary coffee machine set up by the wall. Jade gets the feeling this is one of those local hospitality things, but she tends to punch through offices, not stop by them for a chat and a coffee and a time-critical pick up of a bunch of heavy duty sedatives.

Right. Focus! Back on track! "That's okay, really!" Jade says, holding up her hands and trying for a reassuring smile. The ceruleanblood almost crushes the handle of the coffee pot in her haste to jam it back into the machine. "What is your name?"

The troll almost sobs. "Janine Trevek, ma'am - I can't believe you're here - now - in my lobby - I mean, we've been held in trust for so long, we thought you'd never come visit!"

Hoo boy. Jade wonders if maybe she should have checked in with the Harley Foundation sooner...possibly...potentially...at some point...when she had free time. They have bigger offices in London and Tokyo and Singapore, right? All of them cities that she's been right nearby in recent memory. But she's been so busy fighting crime and kicking butt around the world, she just kind of...let it slide? Grandpa's files always mentioned that the Foundation was there to help if she ever needed it, but she hasn't before now! Honestly!

"I am here, I am," she says, rubbing the back of her head and grinning a little more apologetically. "But I can't stick around to talk long. Because I really just came for the cases of medical sedatives we ordered over at Lalonde Labs, and I thought maybe the Foundation could -"

"That was you?!" Janine casts a despairing look down the hall that leads deeper into the foundation, where the lights, like those in the outer hallway, have mostly dimmed or shut off to save power. "I don't know if Ruka heard from Unification Pharmaceuticals before she left, and she's our main liaison with local businesses - but if you need them, right now, ma'am, I could...call them myself?"

The troll says this last with such apprehensive gravity that Jade wonders if she needs to give the woman a pep talk or something.
"Oh, yeah, totally! That would work just fine," she says. "Sorry about calling in a favor on such short notice, but we really need that medicine. Seriously. They could wake up at any moment if we run out!"

Jade can't tell if Janine doesn't ask 'they?' because the woman really doesn't care about details like that, or is just really intimidated by the sudden arrival of the heir to the company she works for. "I'll get them on the line right away," Janine promises, fidgeting with her hair once more before slapping her hand back down against her side. The troll regains some of her bearings, nodding firmly as she appears to come to a resolution. "Yes, I'll take care of that immediately, ma'am," she says, bowing her head a few degrees and gesturing with one hand toward the dark inner hallway. "The meeting room is right this way; you can wait there while I see if the representative at Unification is still available, and how far along they may be in filling that order."

This is all going according to plan. Jade loves when things go according to plan. Surprises are nice, but she's had waaay too many of them these past few weeks. "That sounds great! Just let them know that they don't have to drive it out to the labs or anything - I can take it for them, as long as they have all the medicine together. No problem!" She scratches Bec behind the ear and tries to tug the wolf along as she follows Janine down the hallway, but the wolf just gives her an eyeless look (which is pretty darn impressive, all things considered) and meanders over to the portrait of Grandpa instead, curling up into a ball with its tail wrapped around as it takes up its favorite position, content.

Shrugging, Jade wanders past more offices that are dark for the night, desks and computers just visible through more frosted glass, and looks around curiously at the meeting room that Janine leaves her in with more feverish promises to get the pharmaceutical company on the phone. "Also, can you get me some rainbow rubber bands?" she calls after the woman, on impulse, and Janine looks like she's about to have another heart attack. Oops. The ceiling is high and all of the décor modern and sleek, with flat tablet computer screens embedded in the table in front of each chair. Jade immediately wants to fiddle with one, but she needs to hold off, here. It would rude to just bounce in and start messing with people's nice computer setups. Even if technically everything in here could belong to Jade, if she really wanted it. Eh.

A crack of thunder snaps her out of an intense examination of the tablet at the head of the table before she can do more than turn the screen on and begin the process of logging into the company server to peek around in their secret stuff. Because every company has secret stuff, right? Totally. But the thunder snaps her right out of it, and she dims the lights with a touch of her powers on the dial by the door to get a better look through the windows that stretch from wall to wall at the far end of the table. This high up, the rain lashes against the window panes - and the angle of the rain shifts every time, too, like the wind can't make up its mind about which direction to go. When Jade cups her hands around her face and squints out over the city, she can see that a lot of the skyscrapers have gone dark early, so that what little she can make out of the skyline around the building looks patched together with occasional gaps; a lot of people must have called it a day after all this rain started gushing everywhere.

A buzzing, sharp burst of static presses against the side of her leg, and Jade drops one hand to rub Bec's head thoughtfully, its fur still prickling and standing on end. "What a mess, boy," she says, sighing.

Bec whimpers in reply.

And that's - no, something is -

Jade frowns, and scritches behind the wolf's ears, because that was such an odd sound - a plaintive whine that wobbles and rises in pitch to a keen, a noise not of warning but of -
Jade can sense no one in the room but them. Janine is in another of the offices, one belonging to Ruka, probably. And now Bec is here, with Jade. The rest of the office is still as a grave.

So why, she thinks, lifting her eyes so that she sees not the buildings outside but the reflection of the room, refracted at an odd angle against the darkness of the window, why why why -

*Why is there another person standing behind her in the reflection.*

Her stomach lurches, and stays lurched, leaving nothing but a hollow pit where her guts used to be and a great dollop of filmy, ice-cold terror trickling through her seized-up chest. Her ears edge just this side of exploding into pain again, clicking when she swallows and finds her mouth dust-dry.

She teleports before the fear can ground her, jumping so that she's got her back against the wall when she can see again, panting a little at the residual fear that spikes when she sees that *yes*, someone is in the room with her. Someone who, for all her space powers being free, Jade didn't sense approaching last time, either.

The horns are a dead giveaway, even before the rain-streaked, paint-slathered face turns to grin at her, all teeth. Her heart races along, queasy with nausea. The tightness in her chest constricts again, but when Jade feels like she can't breathe this time she clings to the fact that it's just fear. It's not real. It's not - *that* bad -

"Thought I felt a herosis around here somewhere," the juggalo says, drawling and pleased as his gangly limbs rearrange themselves so that he faces her and not the window. All the rain has left the facepaint even thinner and more smeared than it was the last time Jade encountered this guy all the way back in Mexico, and through it Jade can see, even in this dim light, how his expression twitches and fractures microscopically, flickering through other emotions but always returning to this default of a jagged smile and eyes that don't match up. Like he could explode into sudden violence at any moment, and his body doesn't know quite how to contain all that horrific, artless rage. "Been getting a wicked wonder on as to where you might be motherfucking at, sister."

"You-" Her tongue rasps over her lips like sandpaper on stone, and even when she swallows and tries again she can barely force the words out above a hoarse cough. Bec has stayed pressed tight to her side, which would be so reassuring under normal circumstances - yet that whimper lingers in her sore ears, a throbbing alarm to remind her that *something is not right*. Bec is just as terrified of this guy now as it was in a back alley in the dead of night. Like she really needs the hint! "But you're that guy. From Mexico! Why are you even here?!" she manages at last, because running into a guy like this once was a weird happenstance; running into him twice is *so not awesome*. And also kind of terrifying? Yeah, that.

His grin, if anything, widens. Which is not possible, not even *troll* lips could spread that far or reveal that many teeth - too many teeth to fit on a single jawbone -

"Have the best of all motherfucking friends to see, you know?" For a moment the clown sounds almost sane, his smile blissed out and distant, the kind of gooey expression people only wear in dumb soap operas. Then the troll starts slouching his way around the table that Jade has put between
the two of them, slinking and pausing at intervals, sudden moments of stillness that leave him free to
tilt his head to the side like a curious bird. Or something more reptilian, maybe.

*That's hunting posture, is what it is.*

Jade tucks a hand behind her back and starts digging through the sylladex in earnest. This troll must
be about as deep into dementia as a purpleblood can get - or, worse, he acts like a predator on the
hunt *purposely*, so he's just plain nutso.

"You been chilling here for a while, my most righteous hermanita?" the troll says, eyes glittering
even when Jade jacks up the brightness of the overhead lights with another twist of her hand; if
anything, more light just renders the clown in even starker contrast, all blacks and greys and dark
purples, and it's worst with his eyes cast in shadow by the slant of the light. "Got a query for you, all
rattling around in my old faith sponge."

The yellows of his eyes burn. "You seen a troll by the tag of *motherfucking Vantas* around these
parts, sister?"

-Lie lie lie lie, Jade's every instinct screams, so loud her cells sing with it. Taking a steadying breath,
unsurprisingly, does nothing at all to steady her, when their Breath player is -

*Don't think about that. Just lie fast before this juggalo guy realizes you've hesitated.*

Because whatever a guy like *this* wants with Karkat, there is literally no planet on which it can be a
good thing. Jade thinks Karkat would have mentioned having a 'best friend' from another country
who oh, by the way, can drive people insane and gurgling with just the power of his terrifying clown
brain. Karkat 'John was one of my first friends *ever* Vantas? No way. Something's fishy here, and
hearing that name out of the clowny guy's mouth was like a sucker punch. This guy has been bad
news from the beginning, and if he wants to get his grimy clown claws on one of Jade's friends (no
matter how constantly irritable said friend may be), he can suck her Colt revolver.

"Never heard the name before," Jade says, laughing and then almost choking on her own tongue.
She digs her fingers into Bec's neck, while the clown's close proximity continues to reduce the wolf
to a state of staticky, whimpering fear. Elaborate, just a little more… "Sorry. I haven't had much time
to get to know anyone in the area yet - except Heir, but that's all, really!"

The troll cocks his head to the side, eyes heavy lidded; his smile can't stretch any farther than it
already has, but now the corners of his lips begin to twitch even more noticeably. "'S one sicknasty
motherfucking mess that one is whipping up out there," he says, the long twists of his horns lowering
as he bobs in a nod. "Makes a motherfucker wonder what's got at a herobro's lobe stem to set off all
that mirthful madness."

The pistol in Jade's hand in the sylladex falls through loose fingers, which is such a rookie mistake!
Grandpa would shout her ears off for letting go of a weapon in a crisis situation! But her brain is
whirring to keep up - this troll knows Karkat's last name - knows John's messed up in the head -
knw Jade for a hero in a dingy alley and arrived just in the nick of time to unleash brainmelting
levels of terror on Deuce and his lackeys -

How much does this guy *know*?! And *how* could he know it? This is awful...

"You-" she starts to say, her voice shaking and catching in her throat as she struggles to think of how
to respond to this - should she try to get information out of him? Find out how he knows this stuff?
Or should she grab Bec and bounce them both out of here before that smile stops twitching and she sees what lies behind it? But then what about Janine and the sedative order? She can't leave someone alone with this guy, not again...

She dithers too much. But in her defense, the troll has stopped pacing toward her in a menacing fashion, has instead paused, eyes squinted and fixed on the wall beside the door, off to the side, rather than on her, and it fools her into thinking he's lost track of the conversation and been distracted by something else.

Then he lunges at her, a jerky motion with his arms trailing behind, his face cranking around to leer at her with jutting teeth and red-limned purple eyes, hungry and incensed and -

Jade dodges out of the way, yanking Bec along with her as she reappears out in the hallway, the sickly dread ratcheting up her heart rate until she can feel it pounding in her ears painfully. Janine, she has to get to Janine and - god, at this rate, she just wants to evacuate the whole building! This guy - the look on his face. No. Bec's whimpers rise in pitch as Jade casts one last fleeting look back at the door she bounced past -

Just in time for it to explode into a cloud of wood shards and splinters, the concussive force of it sending wood chips flying down the hall.

"Lie lie lie lie," the clown says, mocking and singsong, livid red sclera luminescent in the low light and black pupils swallowing up any purple that might have remained. "You think a sister can MOTHERFUCKING LIE TO MY MOTHERFUCKING FACE?!

Oh, shit.

There is an insane clown troll gone completely feral, and Jade is frozen in a dark hallway, completely exposed.

She hasn't watched many horror movies in her life. But good lord, this is common sense.

She teleports again, this time straight to Janine. The ceruleanblood looks up from where she is scribbling something on a pad of paper with a blue-ink pen, startled, but there is no time for explanations! Jade tackles the woman, still dragging Bec along as she goes, and by the time the door to this office shatters into a million pieces with the rattling, clicking roar of an enraged troll behind it, she's bounced the three of them to the front room of the Foundation's office block.

"Wehavetogocrazytrollgottagogottago," she babbles, tripping over the words as her dry mouth betrays the bright terror oozing into the back of her mind like cold claws. Oh god, and she had left Clubs Deuce to suffer the full force of this - no one should have this much raw horror in their head, no one at all.

By some stroke of luck, even if Jade's talking nonsense, Janine catches on - having the door explode probably gave her some idea of the danger they're in. The ceruleanblood shoves a crumpled sheet of paper into Jade's hand that Jade just kind of captures on reflex while the troll seizes her bag from behind the desk and runs back to Jade again. Fast fast fast before he rounds the corner and sees them -

Her vision skews. Janine screams, a blur of grey and blue that smears through the blue and gold of the portrait on the wall and Jade gasps without sound as the floor and the ceiling invert, even with her space sense shrieking that gravity is still working, the world's still right side up or is it can you even tell anymore liar liar liar?

Not real. Can't be real. This is madness, this is panic, this can't be real so just go, get out, part of
"BEC!" Jade spits with the last of the air in her lungs, before the terror strangles her just as effectively as John could. Air is in her lungs but she can't stop hyperventilating, cold horror bubbling in her brain and murmuring *lying liar lie to me motherfucking lie to me again TELL ME WHERE HE IS.*

The green plasma burns against Jade's skin, stinging and too-hot, hot as the surface of an impossibly bright star - and then there's marble cracking hard on her knees as she collapses to the ground, stomach heaving uncontrollably. Throwing up leaves her shivering and kind of wrecked, but in the dry heaves that follow Jade finds that her vision has stopped slurring and warping; when she spits one last time and looks up, the sudden clarity of the lobby around her feels almost more unreal than the hallucinations had - *too real,* almost. Bec buries its nose in the crook of her shoulder, its whimpers quieter but still present, and Jade hugs the wolf almost as much to keep herself from faceplanting into her own vomit as to reassure herself that the stars pinwheeling against the yellow-green of the wolf's fur still burn.

Janine lies curled up in a ball only a foot away, the yellows of her eyes all Jade can see with her pupils rolled back, but when Jade reaches out with an uncertain hand to shake the troll her cerulean eyes snap back into view, the last of her hair tangled around her face and horns. "What happened?" she says, eyes glassy still with terror. "What was that?"

"Something bad." *Something* wrong, Jade thinks, but if she says it out loud - she's not going to say it out loud. She's just not. "You need to go home. Get somewhere safe. This whole building is -"

"But I didn't lock up," Janine whispers. Then she shakes her head furiously, placing one hand to the side of her head. "God, my head hurts."

"Go home and rest and lock those doors. I don't think anyone's gonna break into the foundation tonight." That isn't already there, and able to appear and disappear at a whim without triggering Jade's space sense, anyway.

"That's - the address of - the supplier!" Janine struggles to finish, fluttering her claws to indicate a piece of paper as they mutually help each other get to their feet. Jade sees some of the fear she feels reflected in Janine's pale face. "They'll have it ready for you in forty five minutes - they were about to shut down for the day, so that was the fastest I could talk them into -"

"That's fine. That's fantastic!" Jade says, injecting enthusiasm into her voice before it can crack. She feels around the lobby - those two secretaries hiding in the backroom (hiding from the clown? she doesn't even know anymore) seem to have left because she can't feel them taking up space behind the information desk, but there's - "There's someone in the elevator," she adds, giving Janine a little push on the shoulder blade toward the exit. "I'm gonna get them out really quick. Thank you so, so much for this. I appreciate it so much more than I can say right now because we're totally in danger and so I'll visit the foundation again some other day, alright?"

"Alright," Janine says, nodding in a daze. "That's good. That is good, right?"

"Yes," Jade says firmly, giving the ceruleanblood one last push. When the troll manages to stumble to the front door without that terror bringing the two of them down again, Jade feels reassured enough to bounce right over to the elevators and inspect the lone person she can feel sitting in one of them half a floor above - but only half a floor? Another terrifyingly hasty scan shows that yeah, the elevator carriage is stuck between floors, for some reason.

Jade just wraps all her focus around the figure in the elevator and snaps them down to her, complete
with their chair.

Wheelchair, she corrects. A troll with an overgrown mohawk looks up at her in incomprehension - looks down at where he's paused in the middle of pulling off his shirt - and yanks the fabric back down, blushing a furious brown. "Tienes que salir, señorita!" he says, Jade's translator giving her some idea of what his rapidfire Spanish means. "Hay una persona muy peligroso aquí."

"Yeah, don't I know it!" she agrees, glancing back at where Bec remains shivering and terrified in the middle of the lobby. All she wants is to get coordinates for this address, get those meds, and get back to the lab before anything else can go wrong today - but first! Leave a guy in a wheelchair in a building with an unstable clown? Yeah, no, she's got to get this guy out or she'd never forgive herself. "Here, I can give you a lift."

Before she can even lay a hand on the handles of the wheelchair, however, the troll's expression shutters closed, a mulish frown furrowing his thick eyebrows as he wheels out of her reach. "No. No me puedo - I can't go. You go." Jade blinks and opens her mouth, and the brownblood cuts her off with a shake of his head, a stubborn jut to his jaw. "Fuera de aquí, fast. I will be, uh, fine. Maybe. Está tan enojado…"

Oh nooo. Jade does not have time for this. Urgh! "Yeah, he's really mad! So we should both leave!"

The troll just shakes his head. "I can't." His laugh is kind of shaky. "I don't think I ever could. Um. Go, please."

But no matter how many times Jade asks, as she drags her feet slowly to walk back to Bec, the brownblood won't budge. When she crushes Bec close and unfolds the paper with the address from her sylladex, plugging it into a program on her glasses to let them crunch the numbers and give her physical coordinates, she can only look back one more time at the troll staring expectantly at the hall of elevators, his raggedy appearance at sharp odds with the fancy marble of the huge lobby around him, and it's just one more moment of unreality for her mind to struggle and fail to absorb before she flings herself and Bec out of the building, away from the insanity curdling in the air, to the stock warehouse of Unification Pharmaceuticals.

Gosh, she hopes he's okay.

- Jade whiles away those forty five minutes combing her fingers through Becquerel's fur, the repetitive motion giving her something to do while she waits under the awning of a closed up store, the rain out here in at the edge of Seattle in a lull. The winds are still ferocious, though, yawning under her covered area to tug and shove at her, and Jade huddles down to wait. The combing distracts her from the writhing fear that squirms in her head, way too sharp and new for her to try to file it away somewhere to analyze later. But Bec has stopped whimpering, returning to its usual mode of passive watchfulness, and by the time an armored van emerges from the facility to idle just inside the property grounds, Jade feels almost settled again, like the encroaching madness has faded into a distant memory of a bad dream. In fact, she feels almost kind of silly for freaking out so bad! The fact that the clown guy can so easily upset her with his fear thing - and, more importantly, that he's looking for Karkat of all people - is worrying, but she'll deal with it later. Right now, the problem of John and the other brainwashed kids comes first. No exceptions. She can ask Karkat about it when the troll's not on the brink of a meltdown over John's condition.

"Time to go, boy," she says, nudging Bec with the back of her hand, and the wolf whuffles at her, showing no indication that it was ever scared enough by one feral troll to be left whimpering by the experience. It's the one thing Jade really regrets about Bec's inability to really communicate - she's so
sure it could help explain what's going on, if only it could speak! But there's no point waffling over impossible things like that. She teleports across the street, right into the pharmaceutical company's yard, and bounces over on her toe to explain to the driver, in a carefully measured voice that betrays none of the shakiness still lingering in her chest, that yeah, she is the heiress of the Harley Foundation, yes, she's also Sharpshooter, no, she really needs to get back to work right now, an autograph would be kind of weird -

By the time Jade switches with the driver and whistles for Bec to join her in the front seat, she's just ready to get back to the others. So much could have happened in the hour and a half she's been gone, and she still has to make the slow trip down into the valley with this truck rather than a smaller, more maneuverable car once she's back under the void shields. If Dave woke up and Rose decided to do her mind thing on John -

There's a little regret that Jade has to push down over her decision to go out for supplies rather than helping with that. But only a little. Now she has all the sedatives they could possibly need to keep three super kids down for the count until they can be operated on, she knows that one scary clown guy is in town and needs to be dealt with at some point, and - there is a crunch of plastic when Bec sets its butt down, and when Jade moves its butt over with a jolt of power that the wolf mostly ignores, she reaches down and yanks a tiny packet out from underneath.

She rolls down the window and calls the driver back over to give him that autograph. Then she thinks about it, and scribbles out another one on the back of the paper Janine gave her with the address on it, to be given to the ceruleanblood whenever the driver has a chance. They totally earned it for making the extra effort to fulfill Jade's last minute request.

Satisfied, Jade nods and rips open the packet. Her fingers still tremble with the aftershocks of fear, but she knots two colors of rubber bands around her fingers in a few deft twists.

Blue for John, blue for not letting something like this ever happen again.

Red (it's more light pink, but that doesn't count, it's the closest she has) for Karkat, to remember to tell him that he has a clown stalker running loose in the downtown area.

She's been going off half-cocked for years now, racing around the world and bouncing through Seattle and getting herself kidnapped and all the while missing the fact that one of the bad guys was right under her nose, messing up John's head while she carried on blithely without a care in the world.

If it takes reminders to keep her from getting caught up in her own enthusiasm, then by golly, she'll use reminders again.

But not reminders, really, she thinks, flexing her fingers. More like promises to herself.

If they were good enough in a past life, they're good enough now.

With a clap of green, she and Bec and the entire truck full of medicine leave Seattle behind.

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Rose knows -

"Rose?"

the exact moment -
"Rose, where are you going?!
- the world fractures.
"Ro-"
-
Later, they realize that only Karkat, Jade, and Dave's eardrums burst in John's initial flare of power. Though Roxy, Doctor Lalonde, and Samuel were all in close proximity to John, none of them suffered any tympanic trauma from what should have registered as wildly vacillating barometric pressure. And Kanaya and Rose, furthest from the scene, felt the pressure dive, yet seem to have been just out of range of the most deleterious effects.

Rose has her suspicions for this odd selectivity, but they really all begin with 'p' and end with 'layers of the game,' and really, only one person in the building is qualified to argue the point with her.

The White Queen does not argue; she simply inclines her head in an elegant nod as she settles into a chair. The carapacian arrives shortly after Jade leaves to sit at John's bedside, claws pillowed in the folds of her wrappings as she holds vigil with Karkat and the laboratory technicians who keep a steady stream of sedatives pumping into John's bloodstream.

The whole scene would be a lot more depressing, if it weren't incredibly tense. As vial after vial of morphine works its way through John's system much too quickly, his eyes flickering behind the thin skin of his eyelids in what are not REM saccades, Rose finds herself conceding that Jade made the right call. In this understaffed, understocked facility, there is no way they're going to be able to keep both the Scratches and John sedated for long. John's always said he heals quickly, has probably never been sick a day of his life - certainly Rose can't recall him missing a day of school in all the time they lived in close proximity to each other, or having so much as a sniffle as a child. That incredible healing factor, however, has come back to bite them in the posterior in the worst possible way. Karkat has cringed his way into a ball of snappish teeth and jutting limbs as close to lying on top of John as possible, his eyes a brilliant shade of scarlet as he washes John's gory face clean with a damp cloth, and Rose can't tell if he's doing more harm or more good with his ministrations.

And while she confirms Rose's guess with a nod, the White Queen also has no prior experience on which to draw on in this situation, a fact that Rose finds edifying but not particularly helpful.

WQ: This is not the way the game is meant to be played.

WQ: I told you once before, Doctor Lalonde, that these tactics are not...acceptable. Mind control and madness are not unheard of, but they are abhorrent, and I have never before witnessed an Heir of Breath so insidiously undermined.

Rose leaps upon the carapacian's wording, feeling rather like a gemcutter prying into the most minute cracks and facets of a jewel buried in rock. The rock, in this instance, being the Queen's constant need to be prompted with new questions, lest she fall into the grave silence of an NPC with no outside impetus to keep talking. Rose chooses to settle by Dave's bedside (Karkat takes up a remarkable amount of space for his size) so that she can focus better on the matter at hand. Dave is pale, but the bullet wound has almost entirely healed over, and Rose almost imagines she can feel his forehead twitch into a frown when she presses the back of her hand to it.

There is a precipice over which she could tumble, straight into the kind of self-recriminations and guilt that could paralyze her for days; only the knowledge that things could have gone so much worse keeps her balanced. She ignores Doctor Lalonde's standing vigil on the other side of the cot.
more for the sake of her own sanity than out of pettiness; thankfully, her mother is on the phone, engrossed in her latest effort to leave a voicemail that will convince Ambrose Strider break his radio silence. "But you've seen others brainwashed to this extent?" Rose asks,

The carapacian's ink black eyes blink, doleful, at Rose.

WQ: None with this particular method. But corruption of the mind is not an uncommon point of adversity for players. You have experienced for yourself the work of the Noble Horrors, Seer.

The merest mention of the Horrorterrors sets Rose's skin crawling; she has to tamp down the urge to shudder before it can give her away. "Yet even that was unusual?" she says.

WQ: As my cousin-queen and I said before. The Circle sways. They influence. They suggest. Their songs susurrate through the dreams of those of Derse and seep between the stars.

WQ: Delving so deeply as they have done into your mind, and into those of the Denizens in this past session...is a very rare occurrence. I've lived many lives, Seer, and it takes much to stir even one hivemind into active rather than passive interference. Their concerns generally lie in matters beyond the scope of just one game.

"Who," Karkat interrupts, his claws shredding the mattress pad of the hospital cot with a single-minded purpose as he rolls his head around to glower at both of them, "gives a flying fuck about that? What the fuck does it have to do with John?!

They are straying a little from the main point of the conversation. Rose blames the fact that there is just so much she doesn't know, and so much information that the Queen has to offer that could fill in all those gaps. It is rather easy to sidestep onto a tangent without intending it. "I am trying to determine if there might have been any kind of precedent we could apply to our situation. We require all the insight we can get." Before Karkat's trembling lower lip can drop to unleash some new wave of bile, Rose says, "But you're right. We can return to the question of horrors at a more expedient time. For now" - she turns back to the Queen, who has tilted her head to regard Karkat with that same wistful, ageless sadness she has shown both John and Rose - "could you elaborate on why it would be so unusual for an Heir in particular to fall prey to this sort of brainwashing?"

Karkat huffs loudly through his nose, but his teeth lock back together with a creak Rose can hear from across the room. The Queen closes her eyes for a long moment, and Rose doesn't miss how, in the moment when she opens them again, her gaze drops first to her claws in her lap before she meets Rose's eyes again.

WQ: Heirs possess an intimate connection to their aspect that provides them a measure of protection other classes do not have, even before they fully realize it. They find themselves protected by incredibly convenient gusts of wind, for instance, no matter how low on the echeladder they may be.

WQ: Heirs of Breath, in particular, are players of freedom and merriment. They are perhaps the most difficult beings to control in the game, both in body and in mind. In the god tiers? This should have been impossible; he and the Breeze should have been near symbiotic.

WQ: You must heal him. The Breeze itself has gone out of tune now, and this storm...

As though to make the carapacian's point all the clearer, a gust of wind shrieks outside - and then an enormous crash rattles from above, through the walls, and Rue Lalonde rips the phone away from her ear when it begins to vibrate and ring in rapid succession. Rose squints and summons what sight she can, and can just make out, above their heads, the white hot burn of something that has collapsed on the roof. "One of our radio telescopes appears to have toppled over, and taken more than a few of
our sensors and communication dishes with it," Rue reports at last, swiping her thumb across her phone screen, her lips tightened to thin white lines. "We've retracted what we can, but I'm not sending anyone out in this storm to try to salvage the rest." She curses, and brings the phone back up, her expression one of grim resignation as she, apparently, tries for Ambrose once more.

Rose suspects that her efforts are in vain. Ambrose went after Oriole, doggedly determined to bring the other Strider back, and if he's been out of contact this long he probably won't realize that there's an emergency here until after he's succeeded.

Or something else has gone awry. But Rose can only deal with one catastrophe at a time; the predicament with John takes precedence over her ectobiological father's silence by virtue of the fact that, quite frankly, she cares more about John than about Ambrose. It is simply a fact.

WQ: It will only grow worse.

"Even if John remains unconscious," Kanaya says. It's not really a question. Kanaya looks weary when Rose squeezes the jadeblood's hand; there are spots of red blood - Dave's blood - in places where Kanaya didn't clean, and Rose finds herself imitating Karkat's near-obsessive cleaning on a smaller scale as she rubs her thumb over the spots until they come off. She can no longer tell if she's doing it to soothe herself or Kanaya - perhaps both.

Kanaya is only here because Rose insisted on adding this visit to Seattle to their original trip to Chicago. If Kanaya feels out of place, she has the grace not to have brought it up yet, or to complain about the fact that they haven't forged on to investigate the happenings in Los Angeles.

On the other hand, Rose is fairly certain that if anyone tried to suggest she leave right now, in the middle of this crisis, she'd annihilate the handle in her attempt to pirouette off it.

WQ: Heirs can bring perhaps the most raw power to bear of any class, second only to Pages. They inherit it. And if they dwell too deeply in their aspect, they can...become it.

WQ: Corrupted like this, with its Heir in limbo, there is no telling what the Breeze may do. It must be quelled.

...Disheartening. Across the room, Karkat has gone too quiet, an uncharacteristic silence where Rose would have anticipated him leaping to snap at the most convenient target. He could be brooding, seething, hurting - there's no way to tell, not when his jaws are clamped shut and not giving voice to every furious invective that comes to mind. She's not sure how much longer he's going to be able to hold himself together like this; of everyone in this room, Karkat is the one Rose feels least confident predicting the actions of.

And he wants to dive into John's mindscape with her and Dave. Halburn's not wrong that it's an incredibly risky move, and between Rose's recent grimdark breakdown and Karkat becoming an emotional question mark to her sight, she's not sure Dave can provide enough mental ballast to keep them afloat if John's mind proves too turbulent.

Yet the more she hears, the more Rose grows certain that this is the path to take. They can deal with all the rest - the question of just how much of Samuel's actions might have been under his control, for example, and just how much they all must have missed while living in close proximity to the Egberts these past few days - once John is stable, and himself, and whole.

John dove into Rose's mind once to raise her up. She fully intends to return the favor.
Dave takes another fifteen minutes to rouse. When he wakes, it's with an almost comical jerk, his eyelashes fluttering wildly as his exposed eyes dilate - then he smacks his own face in his haste to slam a replacement pair of shades onto his face, pulling them seemingly out of thin air. Roxy, having just returned to give another progress report on the state of Dirk's surgery - still ongoing, with Marion growing more and more harried and short-tempered with every interruption - can't quite conceal the fit of slurred giggles that escapes her.

If Rose weren't still deep in the throes of a post-grinddark hangover and dealing with the fact that her closest of friends has been brainwashed to within an inch of his sanity by someone she once considered a surrogate uncle, she might have joined in the chortling.

As it is, she can't quite remember how laughter works.

"God fucking dammit," Dave says, and then - "Rose. God fucking dammit."

Rose has only known she has a brother for a matter of weeks. But Dave, for all his stoic posturing, can't conceal the faint incredulity that twists his eyebrows into a knot as his hand prods the gunshot in his side. His head tilts only a fraction, but it's enough that she can spy the exact moment when his gaze finds John - and his shoulders slump.

She rather understands the sentiment.

- Dave is all for Rose's proposed plan of action. He practically vibrates his way out of the hospital cot by the time she finishes explaining, all jerky nods and tight steps. He doesn't betray so much as a single wince of the pain that must still be aching in his torso as he forces himself upright and into motion, dodging Rue's concerned inquiries with all the bullheaded, deliberate avoidance of someone trained from birth - or rather, from the moment of meteoric delivery - to dodge and derail and otherwise shut down emotional interaction before it can get off the ground, as though to make up for his momentary weakness earlier. Even when he edges too close to John's bed and Karkat lifts his head to glare a warning, Dave barely makes more than a few clipped comments that can hardly be termed snark before he stops talking altogether, hovering on John's other side. Rose wonders if either he or Karkat realize just how similar they look, strung with tension as they flank John like stony-faced gargoyles on guard against the unknown.

Whether they do or not, she can't help but be grateful that they're not about to launch themselves headlong into a third world war while John's out of commission. Kanaya might well be able to handle the two of them in the physical world if they provoke each other into a fistfight, but Rose needs them to damn well keep their shit together if they're going to join her on a journey to the center of John's mind.

Still. Both of them have served as John's main points of emotional support in Rose's absence over the past few years. The three of them together might be able to pull this off - if only just.

Novitiate Halburn, on the other hand, has absolutely no confidence in any of them.

"I would like to state that I am still opposed to this," he says, even after Rue Lalonde not-very-subtly strong arms him into leading the way to his isolated spell rooms, deeper in the neurological ward. One of the intern techs struggles to keep up with the brisk pace the novitiate sets, John's wheeled stretcher rattling along with jagged, high-pitched screeches whenever they have to make a sharp turn.

Rose finds her irritation with the violetblood waxing more with each passing quibble he raises about her plan, not just because he raises some excellent concerns that she really does intend to take into
consideration, but because, for some odd reason, his focus keeps trailing away from Rose to fixate on Karkat instead. Karkat, who has nothing to do with an argument between two majjyk practitioners whatsoever. It stirs a remarkable ire in Rose, striking her as a particularly gauche dismissal of her authority in this situation - right up until realization hits her like a flying brick as she glances back at Karkat herself -

And realizes his eyes are still a brilliant candy red.

Karkat has made a concerted effort to ensure that every time they visit the Lalonde Laboratories, his disguise of an irritable but otherwise innocuous burgundyblooded troll remains in place for the duration. But in the panic that has seized everyone, his contacts from earlier have either fallen out or dissolved, and now his mutant eye color has been exposed to all and sundry.

If the scientists in this lab haven't yet picked up on the fact that Karkat is a hero like the rest of the young adults present (they haven't really been that subtle about it), it's really only a matter of time. And if Karkat's too distracted to realize his danger -

Well. Rose snaps her fingers, a sharp click that has Halburn's eyes flick back to her, startled and blinking at the sudden sound. *Eyes on me, thank you.* "I thank you for your professional opinion, but I am afraid that unless you can provide me with something with more substance than that, I'll continue to default in favor of my own. John wouldn't leave me to rot in the prison of my own mind; I'm hardly going to abandon him to his when he most needs me."

Oddly, in the corner of Rose's eye, she notices Rue Lalonde a few paces behind, and the flicker of movement as Rue raises her phone not to speak into again but to angle it indiscreetly toward the violetblood leading their group. When she catches Rose looking, Rue raises an eyebrow and touches a finger to her lips. Rose's stomach rolls unpleasantly, and she says nothing more because of the bile in her throat than out of any solidarity her mother might be trying to project between the two of them. Rue is being *suspiciously* supportive about all of this, and Rose distrusts any help her mother might offer just on principle.

"Even if you *are* able to navigate a mind primed to react with hostility to anything trying to counteract the effects of the mindgrub, there's too much risk that you could damage either his mind or your own in doing so," Halburn fires back, the frills of his ears flaring into purple-tinged fans that upset the fall of the strands of hair that hang loose from his braid. Even now, though, he hasn't lost his temper; he has a capacity for self-control that Rose privately admires, the expression on his face still relatively smooth despite the clear consternation in his voice. It has to grate on him to have a human half his age challenging him on the matter of his chosen specialty, but he's not taking it as personally as others might; again and again, instead, he returns to the theme that one of them could suffer mental damage from such an uncontrolled incursion. A persistent, rather aggravated concern, but concern nonetheless. "I would advise waiting until Marion can remove the grub. Otherwise, all your efforts to mend his psyche might be undone with the next flood of chemicals."

Then - *damn*, he's casting a glance back at Karkat again, and Rose stops so abruptly that Kanaya's arm yanks free from her own - she tries to impose herself between the two trolls in a flare of pique, if only so that Halburn has no choice but to flush and concede his own rudeness - damn it all, if Karkat would just stop glowering at everyone it might not be so *obvious* -

"This is why you put me on speaker phone in the middle of literal brain surgery?!” a garbled voice demands, and Halburn jack-knifes around to stare in horror at the phone that Rue holds out toward him, an expression of utter serenity undermined by the twist of her lips. "Oh, for god's sake - Halburn, I am in the middle of brain surgery. Have I mentioned that recently? I think it bears repeating. I am neurons deep in some poor kid's brain and our boss has me on speaker phone
Halburn’s fins turn an incredible shade of plum, the color rising in his grey cheeks even as, Rose observes, fascinated, his mild consternation flips into a more recognizable irritation. "These are serious concerns, Doctor Lalonde," he hisses, flustered. "Now is not the time -"

Impassive, Rue Lalonde thumbs the volume button until Doctor Marion’s grumblings almost echo in the corridor. Dave's eyebrows appear over the top edge his shades and continue to climb as he and Rose exchange looks. Karkat just sighs with the force of a bellows, the faint rattle of an impending growl in the back of his throat that makes Rose re-evaluate her estimate of just how much time they have left before he explodes.

"...You know," Halburn says at last, nostrils flared.

"I know everything," Rue says, raising an eyebrow.

Then, after a long pause - "You've looked over the diagrams of the circles, I presume?" Rose barely has time to process the fact that Halburn has switched his attention back to her as he stiffly turns his back on both Rue and her cell phone, eyes fixed straight ahead as he strides away. Rue ends the call with the surgeon still complaining on the other end of the line a moment later, a wry smile still lingering on her lips, but the novitiate does not turn around again.

Whatever nonsense Rue hoped to achieve with that miniature power play, at least Halburn is more focused on reaching their destination than pondering the fact that Karkat's eyes have changed color or trying to talk Rose out of this plan. "I did. They seem similar enough to those I've utilized for meditation in the past," Rose says, finding Kanaya's hand again and receiving a slow squeeze in return. "Adjusting shouldn't be an issue." The only real concern will be pulling Karkat and Dave in at the same time, but Rose has some measure of confidence in her own ability to keep the two of them from drifting off into the aether. It is all a matter of concentration; as long as the void wards hold, not even Leviathan can undermine that.

"Excellent." And with that Halburn pushes open a door to their right, holding it so that the rest of the party can enter without the door slamming shut on John's stretcher. Unlike some of the lab room scattered around the facility, this room has not been drafted into service for extra storage space or torn up by the random acts of violence Karkat swears up and down Spades Slick and the Black Queen were responsible for; in fact, apart from a low set of cabinets on the far wall, the room languishes, almost entirely empty.

Except, in the very center of the cold white floor, where the arcs and curves of multiple patterns overlap and interlock in a deftly carved circle fifteen feet in diameter.
…To be fair, ‘circle’ may be a bit of an understatement. An insult, really. This is a masterpiece, and
Rose’s estimation of Halburn’s skill rises considerably. Rose’s old meditation circles never achieved
this level of complexity, primarily because by the time she lost control of the grimdarkness in her
mind, she’d convinced herself in a drunken stupor that more intricate circles would be a waste of
drinking time. She used chalks and cheap candles and pen ink in a pinch – this circle looks to have
been inlaid with some kind of engraved quartz, possibly even slices of raw amethyst. This much
detail layered in the limited space of a single circle speaks to true dedication.

Hmm. Rose may need to brush up on her passing knowledge of mind magic practitioners and their
ilk. She made a policy over the years of accumulating any and all scraps of information needed to
cobble together her unique melding of light and mental magic to handle her unique psychic
connection to the Furthest Ring, but never delved enough into it to make the acquaintance of a
Lectoris. Her bastardized method of exploring mindscapes will probably horrify Halburn even
further. She doubts her mother, with her exacting standards, would have hired the violetblood if he
weren’t advanced in his studies, and this circle is a testament to how close the troll must be to taking
up the Lectoris title.

Oh dear. She really does hope this works, or it’s going to be worse than embarrassing to return in
abject failure.

"God damn. I did not sign up for this. This was not in the terms and conditions," Dave mumbles, an
unbroken monologue just quiet enough that Halburn doesn't seem to hear it. The novitiate begins
removing fresh candles from the cabinet to set at the cardinal points, scraping at leftover wax circles
from recent rituals with deft claws while Dave continues to mutter, "This is black magic, isn’t it. If
Bro were a good Baptist mom he’d never let me set foot in a church again. Have I ever been in a
church before? God fucking dammit, it's like he wanted to set me up for eternal damnation with this
pisspoor religious education."

"Dave, I will rip your fat lips off your godforsaken face and donate them to some poor lipless child in
need, I swear to fucking god," Karkat says, his claws clenching at empty air and one eye twitching
more than the other. He somehow manages to flail his way between the nearest lab tech and the
stretcher - when said lab tech body-checks him out of the way to frantically inject more morphine
into the nearest vein on John's body, Karkat just takes the hit and lets the momentum carry him in a
ferocious lunge for Dave's throat.
Dave flashsteps out of the way, spinning Karkat back around to face John's unconscious form with a shove like an afterthought. Dave beseeches Rose instead. "Rose. Hey, Rose."

In Dave's own words - hell to the no. Rose can picture clearly just how thoroughly off-topic Dave could get her if he really let his mouth run, and she indulged him. Focus. "Synthetic, or natural amethyst?" she says, after clearing her throat as discreetly as possible and fixing her eyes on Halburn instead in desperation. Kanaya, at least, is not fooled in the slightest, but she can do no more than raise a judging eyebrow at Rose. "Put that down this instant," Rose murmurs. Kanaya just waggles it some more, because Kanaya is occasionally the most contrary woman on the planet and she enjoys being a snarky broad.

"Natural. I'm afraid we used to have a bulk import deal with the Russians, until we rather cleared out the last of the mines by Murzinka. Now nobody in all of the Sverdlovsk district will take our calls," Rue answers, coming to a halt far too close to Rose for comfort. Rose stoops to inspect the nearest candle for no reason whatsoever – or rather, to have the excuse to pull further away. "They claim the Vatih deposits are completely tapped, and now everyone orders from Ontario or Minas Gerais instead. A shame."

"Fascinating." Rose can barely pry her gritted teeth far enough apart to make the word audible. Halburn sniffs, surveying the circle and the careful arrangement of candles one last time before stepping back, his ear fins once more under control and pressed tight to the sides of his head. "Thunder Bay has odd vibrations," he says absently, nudging a candle a fraction of an inch to the side to center it better. "I ask only that you try not to damage this arrangement, Miss Rose, because if I have to replace another segment of the circle with quartz from Ontario, I'll never obtain the same clarity of vision again. Canadians." He gestures to the innermost spirals, and Rose follows the motion to squint at the difference in the color of the quartz. "Brazil gems may have finer quality of color, but for the strongest ambient majjykal resonance it's really Russian or nothing."

Dave, meanwhile, is not deterred by Rose's attempt to change the subject. "So where do we stand, Rose? Like, shit, if we're committing some hella unrighteous acts of iniquity, I need to know my angles."

"You can stand in the fucking corner," Karkat growls. "Or better yet, go find a trash can and make yourself a home. It's where you belong. Here, I can help you! Out of the rare in-fucking-credible goodness of my shriveled, decrepit lump of a bloodpusher, I will introduce you to the nearest dumpster as an early Christmas present -"

"Whoa man. Been there, done that," Dave says, tutting and shaking his head in mock sadness, sidestepping out of Karkat's reach once more. "Get with the times, Karbroski. The epic unironic trash swan dive happened weeks ago, goddamn." He prostrates himself on the stretcher alongside John, his face still utterly implacable as he sighs heavily. "This is why we need John around, obviously. I mean, holy shit on a stick, half an hour in, and look at us - Rose talking us into dark meme rituals and you trying to bring back tired trash jokes. When's the last time any of us made a good goddamn wholesome pun, I ask you? This shit is disgraceful."

Karkat nearly goes cross-eyed.

"It's not black magic, Dave," Rose interjects, shouting a little to be heard over Karkat's best impression of a steam whistle. "Though I know you've been looking forward to it, I'm afraid that mindscape viewing is a remarkably neutral branch of magic."

Dave flops a hand against his heart, but the jolt to his torso must hurt more than he anticipated in his exaggerated antics, because his lips slip into a clearly unintentional grimace before he forces his
expression back into deliberate uncaring. "Aaaand there they go. All my totally legitimate dreams of double-majoring in being hot shit and devil worship - shattered. How am I supposed to master the four romsquares and become a penis ouija master if you keep yanking the shag carpeting out from under me, Rose?"

"Perseverance is a virtue," Rose says dryly.

Dave shakes his head again, and at the angle he's flopped onto the stretcher he hits John's shoulder with his cheek and shades without acknowledging it and - "Will you get off him while he's unconscious, nookstain?!" Karkat shrieks at last, pushing past hysteria and into proper fury as his eyes narrow and he seizes Dave by the closest appendage - in this case, the wrist Dave left hanging carelessly by his side.

Kanaya moves so fast that Rose can still feel her hair dancing in the burst of moving air kicked up by the jadeblood's passage. One moment Dave is sitting up, possibly to get even more in Karkat's face; the next, Kanaya has hauled Karkat bodily back onto the other side of room, and both Karkat and Dave wear mutual expressions of blank bewilderment. Rose has to indulge in a coughing fit to conceal the utterly uncouth laugh threatening to escape her. "John goes in the center of the circle?" Kanaya says, utterly composed as she sets Karkat back down on his feet as far away from Dave as the confines of the circle will allow. Karkat, arrested mid-shout with more efficiency than an emergency brake, just stares at Kanaya, baffled, as the jadeblood goes back to remove a stiff Dave from John's stretcher and relocate him as well.

Kanaya is nothing if not in her element. If John weren't drugged into unconsciousness in the middle of it all, it would be hilarious to behold; as is, Rose finds it all a little morbid, but really, her humor's been morbid for years. "For the sake of visualization - why not?" she says, smiling faintly when Dave dodges Kanaya and dives behind Rose as though that will save him. Kanaya pursues him, undeterred, of course, and it's as Rose twists her head around to watch Dave bristle and sidestep Kanaya again that she accidentally meets Rue Lalonde's eyes.

She looks exhausted. And has for a while now, though Rose has done her utmost to convince herself that it's none of her business. Perhaps it's simply due to exposure to Roxy, whose endearing exuberance has weakened Rose's stalwart determination not to feel sympathy for anyone with that face in the future, but Rose finds her smile frozen on her face rather than vanishing as it should, a brittle veneer that perfectly suits her inner turmoil over relenting even a fraction of her guard.

Rue blinks, her lips parting, and Rose can't do it. She spins on her heel and lets the smile shutter into a grimace that has her teeth creaking as she swallows down - something. "He's not wrong," she forces out, keeping her voice an undertone, still not quite able to meet Rue's eyes again. But this needs to be said, because Rose is attempting to play the friendleader in this farce, and that requires a certain level of maturity in dealing with others. "This could go awry. Painfully awry, if I've miscalculated. Should you really be playing on your employees' emotions to sidetrack them from justified objections?" she adds, because it's easy - pick at Rue's faults, erode any burgeoning empathy, annihilate even the faintest glimmer of caring.

"You need to be free to do what you believe needs doing, Rosie," Rue replies simply, her nails clicking against the phone in her pocket as she drums her fingers on it. The bags under her eyes may age her, but the wine-purple of her eyes still burn with sharp inquisitive fever, harried and shocked by Samuel's betrayal but already calculating how to adjust to a world where he's not to be relief upon. "I have little doubt that if I tried to interfere, you'd simply abscond again and take John with you to perform this exercise in an even less secure environment. You are a resourceful and independent young woman, after all."
Rose realizes too late that she's meeting Rue's eyes again, and that likening them to wine may or may not be a sign that she needs to drink a cool glass of water and focus on cleansing her own mind for an hour or two, before that lurking urge to drink something stronger can fully manifest.

Rue is not done yet, either. She truly is verbose. "More to the point - young Vantas needs to conceal his eyes before the threat of Marion is not enough to distract Halburn anymore," she says, and Rose's head jerks up. "The unethicalness of the fact that I've been reduced to manipulating my own employees' relationships in order to keep them from dwelling too long on the painfully obvious has not escaped me, dear, but these are extenuating circumstances." She pauses, to let the words sink in. "Unless Karkat is making a new policy of transparency?"

"Point taken." Rose raises her voice. "Dave, Karkat? Please oblige me by sitting cross-legged and closing your eyes. This will proceed much more rapidly if you do." Please, please, please do not instigate some inane argument -

Dave ducks under Kanaya's next strike and half-drops, half-slides so that he ends up inside the meditation circle - it is entirely possible that he tripped or something, but he acts for all the world as though the move was deliberate, and Rose sees no reason to disillusion him in his persistent belief that he fools people like that. He scratches under the lower ring of the collar on his neck, mumbling to himself low enough that she can't make out more than a few scattered words - something to the effect of 'this is some supernatural demon summoning horseshit, goddammit,' but she thinks he's being disingenuous, again, solely in the pursuit of irony.

Karkat is the one to huff and champ at the bit that is Rose's undisputed friendleadership. "How long is this going to take?!!" he says, sitting but fidgeting as though at any moment he could leap back up to his feet and start prowling around the room. "How fucking important can this be if you aren't doing anything yet?"

"From your perspective? It is absolutely vital. Do not fail me, Karkat, for John's mind hangs in the balance." By the end, she's more than half serious again; Karkat, even in his restlessness, seems to register that, and he tenses up so that at least he's sitting still, if not in the slightest bit relaxed, and his eyes blink shut at last as he mutters profanities to himself a little louder than Dave's ramblings. Good enough.

"And I have to go. I cannot stay to supervise, even if I want to." Rue's jaw twitches, and her expression turns curiously hard as she nods to Halburn and then to Rose. "I'll find out what I can about Samuel's condition after my turn in the MRI."

Rose almost falls for it. It's on the tip of her tongue - you're still going through with the rotation? - but before she can make a fool of herself, which was no doubt Rue's intention in making such a statement, she catches herself and swallows it down. Because of course Rue Lalonde would still go through the rotation of checking people for mindgrubs. If John and his father of all people have them, it just makes it all the more horrifically likely that anyone could be synchronized to the Midnight Crew's will without knowing it. "Good," is all she can think to say, hollowly, and with one last searching stare Rue seems to slump a little and strides out into the corridor, off to do god only knows what.

It leaves only Kanaya and Roxy for her to deal with. "You'll stay as a failsafe?" Rose murmurs to Kanaya when the troll leans in near.

Kanaya nods and touches their foreheads together before drawing back, the concern wiping itself from her face before it even fully expresses itself. "If neither you nor Jade complete your missions on time, I'll do my best to keep him unconscious and restrained."
"Try not to hack off too many of his limbs in the doing of it. We don't know if they'll grow back."
Rose tries for humor, and doesn’t quite achieve it. But Kanaya takes her utterly seriously regardless,
giving a solemn nod and falling back against the wall to observe. "And you?" Rose turns to Roxy,
relaxing incrementally as she once again processes all the minute differences between the Scratch kid
and Rue Lalonde, all those small changes that somehow make Roxy an infinitely more pleasant
person to be around, in Rose's personal opinion.

Roxy shrugs, rubbing her toe against the floor and dropping her gaze. "I figurine that I need to stick
around for when Dirk gets done. Gotta make sure that guy doesn't flip like pancakes when he gets
out of crazybrain grubtown over there." Worry crosses her face. "I should prob'ly get back -"

Rose feels a crooked smile tug at the corner of her mouth. "Feel free. From the outside, this will no
doubt look incredibly boring, anyway. Kanaya should be security enough."

Roxy nods, teetering back and forth on the threshold of the open door - and then she darts back in to
wrap Rose in a sudden, rib-cracking hug. "Good luck wit your crazy one,，“ she says mostly to Rose's
hair, before she's back out the door, her footsteps echoing in the hallway as she runs back to the
viewing room for the surgery theater.

Well. Rose is never one to take good will for granted. They could use all the luck they can get right
now. Circling around to John's bedside one more time, Rose squeezes his hand - perhaps a little too
hard, for a moment later the lab tech has to inject another vial of morphine, and casts her an
accusatory look that says that regardless of whether or not that was actually her fault, if they all
survive this Rose should probably avoid irritating her mother's staff excessively in the near future,
lest their vengeance be swift and petty beyond all reason.

"Ready?" Halburn asks, his eyes uneasy as he looks up from lightning the last candle.

Rose wonders the same thing. "Yes," she says, and she strides to a place in the circle between Dave
and Karkat's fidgeting bodies, keeping her sight fixed on John's unconscious body in the very center
as she takes the two by the shoulder and starts preparing for the more complex mental exercise of
bringing two extra minds along for the ride.

Rose has never entered John's mind before. He leapt into hers, once, with no more assurance than
her word that the horrors there would not be able to harm him, but that only causes Rose to wonder if
she should have seen something, all those weeks ago. Was there some sign, some alteration to John's
mental image of himself that she should have noted, and mulled over, and investigated? Could she
have realized how damaged he had become before it reached this terrible break?

Quizzing her past self like this is the short road to madness. She must stop.

Those last moments of second guessing and what ifs scatter like leaves as the wind rises up to meet
her. Rose is used to floating and hovering in her own mind to survey the wards around her, but out
of some silly naiveté she half-expects to land on her feet in John's mindscape, similar to how she and
Kanaya traversed her mindscape on foot upon entry. But the dark, roiling wind wraps around her
before she can so much as glimpse the ground, and Rose's breath catches for a moment before the
breeze shoves. The mental force of it nearly flings her and her companions right back out the way
they came. Her vision wavers and she almost finds herself staring at the purple stone of the ritual
circle before she gathers herself and wrenches Dave and Karkat's mind back into the storm with her.

The wind shrieks in her ears, unearthly and wild as it tosses her back again. She tumbles backward
and her feet fly out from under her before she manages to stabilize them, Karkat keening as though to
prove he can still make full use of his vocal range even in the center of someone else's mind, and Dave clutching her avatar's arm so tightly he'd have left bruises if they were still in their physical bodies. Rose shakes her head to clear it, her hair flying up and tangling around her head in a halo as she squints around them to seek out a landmark. There has to be something - there's no way that this wind is all that makes up John's mind, it's not sustainable -

But it's so dark. Rose waits and waits for her extra sight to adjust to the darkness, but it's darker than night, the shifting and coiling winds almost visible but not quite; she feels their tugging on her ankles and wrists more than she sees them, and the impression she receives after a few moments of probing is that of an endless, spiraling ocean of breezes. Or perhaps a prairie field might be more apt a metaphor - if this were a sea, she could dive down into it, and take Dave and Karkat with her to the seafloor. Instead, the wind buffets them constantly, nudging them back toward reality and stubbornly refusing to let them pass through to what lies further in John's mind.

Rose breathes in and out, though it's not strictly necessary here, and wills herself to glow, threading light through her veins so that she radiates enough to make out Dave and Karkat on either side of her. A flutter of red catches her eye, and as Rose tethers them together with knots of light to prevent another surge of wind from knocking them out of John's mind, the wind bates and her eyes stop watering long enough for her to see that Dave's mental image of himself has a heavy cape mantled over his shoulders, sleek and long and utterly impractical in a strife. He has also turned a noticeable shade of green most nearly likened to the inside of an avocado, and his grip on her arms spasms as he swallows hard. "Flying is so fucking overrated oh my god," he says, barely audible over the windstorm, and then his internal monologue breaks off with an, "Urrp. Oh god. Please tell me mind can't hurl Rose because holy shit."

"You can't throw up as a mental avatar," Rose lies through her teeth. If he believes it, it might as well be true in practice. Hopefully. The last thing she wants to contemplate right now is the effects of Dave vomiting in all this wind and having it thrown right back into their faces by an aggravated breeze.

But there's something else, something that's not right…

The wind roars underneath them again, and when Rose glances down to try to make out anything beneath them, she sees her shoes have changed color. Rose tends to pattern her mental image of herself after what she is wearing at any given moment, and she is not wearing blue shoes right now. I'm wearing my spare clothes, she thinks, cold creeping low in her stomach. Sensible shoes and a nice skirt and long sleeves - so why can I see the bracers on my wrists?

For that matter, why are they orange?

Rose caves in and turns her sight on herself, lighting up every scrap of fabric on her person. If she hadn't watched a video of her own past life a matter of days ago, she wouldn't have known what in the world she was wearing. It really does feel like wearing pajamas, so soft and comfortable that even the brilliant orange leggings visible through the slits in the skirt, and when the wind rips around her head and tears the words out of Karkat's mouth so that she can't understand what he's trying to shout, a heavy, shawl-like hood falls further over her eyes, insulating her from the abrasive air.

In John's head, she and Dave wear their god tier uniforms. While she can make no claim as to how Dave pictures himself in his mind's eye, she knows for a fact that this is not what she pictures herself wearing. Worse yet, when she wastes precious time closing her eyes and willing her outfit to change back to her normal clothes, she can feel the exact, twisting moment it goes wrong. Her clothing changes, yes, but the color scheme and the soft fabric remains the same, her god tier dress altering just enough to mimic the cut and lines of a sweater and a short skirt without actually being
exchanged for her outfit in reality.

But when she looks to her left, Karkat hangs in the air, barely visible in the light Rose's clothing radiates, trussed up all in greys and blacks with the Lalonde Labs logo on his hoodie replaced by the curves of some faded astrological symbol. "What the fuck are we looking for, Lalonde?" he shouts, clearly exasperated as he folds his arms over his chest, eyes bright in the dark, and it occurs to Rose that he might have been repeating the question for a while now while the wind worked to drown them out.

"Ideally? John himself," Rose replies. She doesn't think it a coincidence when the wind lurches and whirls them around at the mention of John's name. If what she suspects is true, John's mind is not just actively trying to throw them out; his perceptions of them are influencing their mental personas, trying to reconcile their past lives with their current selves. The way Karkat's face blanches and he unfolds his arms to seize her sleeve just serves to remind her how tenuous their place here is. "He must be in here somewhere, but he could be trapped. It could take some searching before we find where his sense of self resides, particularly in this weather."

In her own estimation, recalling how Leviathan once almost dissolved her in her own mind, Rose thinks that whatever havoc the mindgrub has wrought on John's mind may well have driven him to ground. He's been brainwashed and molded according to whatever obscure purpose Samuel and by extension the Midnight Crew might have wanted him set to, and he's no doubt exhausted all his mental fortitude over the past few days. Their goals here are threefold: reach John - raise him up so that he can reassert himself in his own mind - and loosen the mindgrub's influence on his thoughts. Whatever choked Jade out couldn't have possibly been any part of the real John, and however that madness manifests inside John's head, they'll need to avoid its psychic construct at all costs.

"Well, it sounds really fucking simple when you put it like that. Wow, I am so reassured. I guess I can just step down from my obnoxious soapbox and let it get back to its godgiven job of containing soap in a cubic receptacle and call it a day in the name of capitalism, except has it escaped your flimsy excuse for a thoughtmonger that John can turn into the fucking wind?!" Karkat demands, waving a hand wildly at the endless sea of air washing around them.

"...I will admit, that had yet to occur to me," Rose says at last, and Karkat groans. Rose shakes her head, trying not think about idioms involving trees and forests as pertains to seeing the bigger picture. That would be a way that John's mind might seek to protect him, and if Karkat hadn't mentioned it just now she might have wasted time without ever considering that John could have camouflaged himself all around them. She damns herself for a fool thrice over, then raises a hand and draws forth her memory of a spell that might be able to help. They can't afford to lose time here, not when the clock is still ticking in reality. "Here - I might be able to mark John out with a flare." One of her light spells can mark out crimes-in-progress and potential threats from halfway across a city; surely with a few tweaks, it can be used to illuminate where John has concealed himself. Even if he has somehow merged with all this wind, one stray breeze among many, there has to be a concentration of his conscious mind around here somewhere that she can recognize as quintessentially John.

She never sees it coming. Just as the first word of the relevant incantation passes her lips, Dave shifts at her side, reaching up to touch his sunglasses as though meaning to take them off for some reason. But whether he detects it before her or not, neither of them can react in time to Karkat's yelp as the wind punts them up and backwards with a roar.

Rose's tether to Dave holds.

Karkat's snaps.

Or, more accurately, something snaps it. Rose wheels and lunges for Karkat as the wind flings him
off to the side. She catches a glimpse of the utter panic on the troll's face as he reaches out for her, but his flailing only sends him spinning more erratically out of her range.

So she also sees, in what light she can provide, the washed out pink rope that winds around Karkat's ankle, and *yanks*. Karkat's eyes meet hers one last time, and then he's howling, dropping like a stone straight through all the shifting winds and vanishing into the dark tumult beneath them.

"Oh my god, we're in *Paranormal Activity,*" Dave says, voice climbing to an incredible pitch as he jumps at Rose and wraps himself around her bodily. "Rose. Rose. *Say something.*"

Rose, still staring at the place where Karkat's mental representation of himself was just snatched down into some unseeable part of John's mind, can only cast her mind out frantically, channeling a burst of light through the palm of her hand to try to cast a searchlight through the darkness. Karkat is still *there,* to her senses, but she no longer feels the connection that should have kept him close to her side. As the majjykal practitioner enabling this jump, she should have been able to simply eject Karkat - or Dave, even - from this mindscape with just a thought.

But now Karkat is drifting around in John's mind of his own volition, under someone *else's* power, and Rose can't call him back.

"We have to retrieve him," she says, her voice sounding oddly distant to her own ears.

"No shit!" Dave says. "But are we not going to talk about how that was some ghostly shit there?!!"

"I highly doubt we're dealing with any form of necromancy, Dave. We're in a very heavily damaged mind; there are bound to be pitfalls."

"Cool, but consider the following - *Karkat probably just got dragged down into windy hell.*"

"And we will get him back!" Rose's temper frays, and she rounds on Dave, elbowing until he peels away from her a little so she has space to breathe, all of her carefully scraped together self-control flying to pieces. "Do *not* let go of me," she warns, snapping her fingers, just enough forewarning for him to wrap his arms around her throat in a death grip again and hold on for dear life as Rose drops a tether of light down after Karkat and commands it to tug.

The wind fights her every inch of the way. Gusts haul at her joints and her head, as though trying to turn her to the side or send her into a tailspin, but this isn't reality, and her magic has never relied on the wind to control where she floats or teleports. She forces her way through the onslaught instead, tossing up shields along the way in some effort to keep the wind from slapping her across the face. The darkness remains amorphous, but moisture begins to streak along her cheeks, and Rose realizes that at some point they began to pass through clouds. The stink of ozone nags at her, and off to the left the darkness is abruptly lit up by a curl of lightning, far too close for comfort.

But there is no resounding crash of thunder. Just the lightning forking through the clouds and lighting them from within, before fading back into the darkness in silence. Rose's eyes begin to adjust, finally, to the greyish, sickly light as their descent steepens and more lightning rolls through the heaped up, billowing surfaces of the cumulonimbus clouds around them. There's a persistent updraft that she has to cut through, but slowly the worst of the wind sheer dies away. If there's an end to these swirling masses of cloud, they must surely be nearing it.

Yet no matter how quickly they drop (more falling than flying by now) Rose can't spy Karkat anywhere. Even if he were near, the black of his clothes would cause him to blend in against the silent storm. But he must yelling, she has no doubt. It is an essential truism of the universe -
somewhere, Karkat is shouting, and at some point she and Dave will be able to hear him. She has to believe that.

Dave says something in her ear, but he is mumbling again, and when Rose opens her mouth to ask him to repeat it she first has to deal with the mouthful of precipitation that she almost swallows as they pass through another heavy cloud. Her godly sweater is almost soaked through, her skirt plastered down around her tights despite the wind, and there isn't even proper rain yet. If this were reality, she'd be shivering.

The ground arrives with a bang.

This is primarily because Rose does not see it coming.

There is no break in the clouds, no stretch of clear sky between the storm and the ground. No warning before the last shelf of clouds parts around her and Dave - just the earth rushing up to meet them, barely fifty feet away. "EMERGENCY BRAKE, ROSE," Dave yells, his chin somehow smashing into Rose's cheek as he does, and Rose obeys on pure instinct, jerking them to a stop twenty feet from an ignominious landing.

"I hate flying, I hate flying, I hate flying," Dave chants. At some point in their descent, he wrapped his legs around her waist in a death grip, and really, Rose wonders if she has the strength of character not to laugh at the fact that he is clinging to her like a koala.

Perhaps strength of character is beyond her, but she's still breathless from that sudden halt, and as she concentrates on lowering them to the ground at a more leisurely clip, the urge to giggle withers as Rose gets a better glimpse at the ground beneath them.

She actually might have been more reassured if John's mind were cloud and wind and sky, and nothing more. For the ground beneath their feet is blasted, craters carved deep into the ruined black tracts of dirt and stone. As far as Rose's sight can extend, deep, suppurating wounds cover John's mind, veins of tarry black sludge overflowing from crater-ridden streambeds to smear filth over what remains. The winds might run wild in the stacked clouds overhead, but when Rose brings them to a halt hovering a half foot over the ground, unwilling to risk setting foot in that black tar, she notices that for the first time the air in John's mindscape lies utterly still, eerily similar to the unnatural calm that plagued the greater Seattle area these past few days.

Like sailing through the doldrums - the air's stagnant now, but given the right incentive...

"We should hurry," she says, reaching up to unlock Dave's arms from around her neck. "Karkat surely can't have fallen too far from here" - unless that something altered its course after I lost sight of it - "but we still need to retrieve John after that." Their timetable has just been utterly fucked, and if Rose thinks too much about the passage of time in reality, she might get queasy.

"Please tell me we're not splitting up," Dave says. One moment he has her in a headlock; the next he is standing three feet away, pulling at the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt and flattening his wind-tossed hair with his lips turned down. He has no qualms about standing in the black oil caked on the ground, and Rose sets down after a moment's hesitation, her thin blue slippers slipping without a grip in the sludge. "We're in some goddamn horror movie and we're not gonna be those assholes who split up and die in the first five minutes of a Supernatural episode."

Rose shakes her head, stepping around a oozing sore that bubbles up and sluices over the rim of the crater they're landed beside to trickle down into the depression. "Stay by me." Karkat, at least, she is confident she can track down - he's still here, somewhere, and unlike John he will stand out as a foreign presence rather than blending in with the mind around them.
Dave says nothing while Rose chooses a direction at random - the plain of craters looks the same wherever she looks, so one direction is as good as any other in the process of elimination - and she closes her eyes and lets the sparks of the tracking spell play in the palm of her hand as she rushes through the words of the spell.

When she opens her eyes, she realizes her mistake.

She is somewhere else entirely.

And she is alone.

"No, no, no, no," Rose says, growing more panicked with each word as she spins in a tight circle, sweat breaking out beneath her sweater. The air is still and tepid and all but the faintest of light has drained out of the sky, so that the crumbling black gravel beneath her feet seems to reach up to knit together with the clouds at the horizon. She can't even make out the craters that should litter the ground around her; the earth is black, the clouds overhead are black, and when she stumbles backward, losing her footing, she realizes belatedly that with the way she was positioned, she should have slipped back into the festering crater. It's not there anymore; there's only a smooth surface under the gravel beneath the soles of her feet, no landmark by which she could judge just where she is.

It doesn't make sense. It doesn't need too. John has a brainwashing parasite sinking its chemical tendrils into his thoughts, and Rose feels transcendentally stupid to have assumed that any part of his mind wouldn't be fundamentally warped and distorted by that. Solid ground? Piffle. And now her sense of Dave is just as distant and faded as her connection to Karkat, which means that both of her companions are lost to whatever portion of John's wounded mind has managed to catch hold of them, and she cannot pry them out.

Or maybe, she thinks, her chest constricting as she forces herself to turn in another slow circle, she is the one who has been lost. It's not beyond the realm of possibility.

Why did she assume this insane rescue mission would go well, again? The excuses have quite flown out of her head, and she has begun to sweat in earnest, the cozy warmth of her god sweater now claustrophobic and swaddling her, cotton thick and dry in her mouth as she turns again, and still finds nothing but the darkness -

"Just change, already," she mutters, swallowing rapidly and wrapping the fingers of one hand around the bracer on the wrist of the other, clamping down on the metal to remind herself that she's still in control. Her own personal source of madness remains in check. The sweater of her god tier clothing retracts into a short sleeved shirt, and then further still, into a tank top - though still with that frustrating hood attached, stubbornly refusing to vanish no matter how Rose wills it to. Some parts of the god tier pajamas seem to be ineffably permanent.

But the looser fit of the shirt keeps the soft fabric off her to some extent, and that eases her sudden fit of claustrophobia more than she would have anticipated. The strangeness of it sets something muttering in the back of her mind, but Rose can't analyze the peculiar dips and curveballs her psyche might be sending her when she's already in the midst of trying to sort out John's madness.

If she can find no landmark here, she might as well fly back up to the underside of the clouds and follow it for a ways. Even if John's mind can warp and send her to an isolated area like this on a whim, eventually she'll either find her way back to the original area, or it will warp again. In a worst case scenario, she'll escort herself out, and drag Karkat and Dave's minds out from the perspective of the real world. Something familiar will crop up, she is absolutely confident of it - or at the least, she
can convince herself into believing it for a few minutes more, before she gives in to panic completely and misplaces her shit somewhere it cannot be found.

She turns one more time.

The house was not there before. Rose's stomach lurches as she processes it in utter silence, only the fact that her jaw seems to have welded shut preventing her from shrieking in surprise.

Well. At least she wasn't wrong. The Egbert house is, after all, a very familiar sight. If the ground weren't blasted, dead earth, she'd be standing approximately where the tree for the old tire swing should stand. She steps onto the non-existent path to the front door instinctively, not daring to take her eyes off the house for a single moment lest John's mind alter again in the space of a blink.

This house must be significant. With John's mind in such a state of ruination, any structure that has survived must have some meaning in his madness. Casting the flare spell at last reveals nothing she can see inside the building, but if John's concealed himself inside his childhood home -

No. She doubts she'd have the luck today of all days to stumble upon John's mental avatar purely by chance. It has simply been a spectacularly shitty day, where luck is concerned, and Rose is tempted to give the whole thing up as a bad job. Today might as well be stricken from the record if and when they all successfully exit John's mind, because it's a lost cause at this point. It probably has been since Samuel's betrayal became apparent, but what can she say. Somehow, Rose is still an optimist. She'll try not to make that mistake again and why is she claustrophobic again?! She lays a hand against the smooth, blank front door of the Egbert's house, refusing to blink even as her eyes water. She reads the numerals of the house number repeatedly, noting that the brass 21605 appears to have been corroded to the point that all that remains are the blackened outlines of the numbers, and uses that to ground herself before she turns the door knob.

She opens the door, and claustrophobia that is not hers clamps around her chest and brings her to her knees, her skin crawling with the terror that sings get away get away get away from here.

Not mine. That's not my fear.

Rose has to repeat that a few times out loud before her mind steels itself again, shoving away the echoes of panic and anxiety that emanate from the open doorway like so that she feels nothing but her own emotions.

John's house might be only a temporary construct, born of madness, but it's steeped in a terror so pervasive that Rose can't even rest a hand against the doorframe to brace herself without another wave soaking into her, colder than the chill of her damp clothes. He felt trapped here, she thinks, her limbs still trembling as she forces herself to take a step into the house. These kinds of intense emotions didn't just spawn out of nothing - they've been associated with this house for so long that Rose can't even distinguish between them. Trapped and terrified and strangled, and not a one of us ever guessed.

It rather casts all of John's paranoia and his intense dedication to concealing his powers in a new light. What could Samuel have done to keep John here, in a place he felt so miserable and stifled - to keep him under control and perfectly cheerful all the time, even as John's mind screamed for a way out?

Well. She supposes she already knows the answer to her own question.

She left him alone to this. How she or Rue could possibly have known before they left for New York, Rose has no idea, but it doesn't stop her from feeling as though she's doing penance by
stepping further into the house, and doing her level best to analyze the nauseating waves of emotion that infuse John's childhood home.

The door closes behind her. Rose blinks, but the house doesn't disappear around her; all the color has been sucked out of the familiar arrangement of furniture in the living room. When she peers into the kitchen, she sees that the window over the sink is an opaque sheet of white through which none of the dark landscape outside can be seen - if it's even still out there. Everything in the house seems flat and skewed, panels of black and white and grey that don't quite gestalt into a coherent whole.

"John?" she says. It falls flat in the still air, and she feels that anxiety hone in on her again, as though speaking aloud was enough to renew the memories of claustrophobia and draw them around her. She tries to cast the spell again, but the light flares and casts shadows that go subtly wrong against the black and white panels of the walls, and she stifles the spell before she can see something she isn't sure she can bear to see.

It could all just be a strange abstraction. John might well have compartmentalized his fears related to his father into this building.

Rose knows this is not the full story when her foot sinks deep into the carpet at the foot of the stairs. She catches herself on the banister before she can fall over, but something sticky and stinging coats the railing and she has to retract her hand hastily when it begins to burn. As she hoists her leg back up out of the sudden sinkhole in the middle of John's flattened out interpretation of his house, she touches a hand to the goop that now coats her tights -

And it burns too, a sharp acidic sting that gnaws at her flesh.

"Gloves? Give me gloves," Rose whispers, horror coiling in her chest as she yanks her hand back and wipes it off on the hem of her shirt. Her shirt transforms again, becomes a sweater again with long sleeves that extend over her wrists and the backs of her hands to fold over her knuckles in fingerless gloves. It's not quite what she wants, but to be fair, she's a little distracted by the fact that she knows that sharp burn.

She concentrates instead on summoning all the light in her clothes into a single nova around her fist, and she holds it up to illuminate all of the black-paneled stairwell.

The grimlight contamination in Kanaya's mind was not difficult for Rose to deal with. Its influence was minimal, connected primarily to a limited set of memories, and Kanaya's mind was strong and otherwise healthy.

John's mind is not strong. It's not healthy - has not been for quite some time. And the acid that coats the carpet at the foot of the stairs and drizzles along the banister is incontrovertibly grimdark.

The panic that seizes Rose's mind is all her own. All that keeps her in place and not firing herself out of John's mind entirely is the objective fact that the grimdark trickling down the stairs does not pursue her when she totters back into the living room. There are no active tendrils, no thorns or tangles. Just the same kind of susurrating, soggy mire that wore away at the curtains of Kanaya's memories. A slow, passive corrosion. Rose thinks that she would have heard whispers from the Furthest Ring by now, if there were a true Horror attempting to carve its way through John's madness into reality.

Once she has found the couch - shades of white and grey that form a rough trapezoid, the cushions more of a suggestion than a reality beneath her as she sits - Rose lets out a laugh that is more of a sob, and watches as more of the acid pours down the stairs and the carpet sops up more of it to deepen the sinkhole.
The White Queen was so saddened and shocked by the fact that an Heir of Breath could be undermined and brainwashed. Rose wonders which came first - the mindgrub, or the grimdark contamination. Either would have made John's mindscape more vulnerable to the other. The temptation is there to blame herself for this as well; she pulled John into her mind whilst in the throes of her grimdark breakdown. She exposed him to an entire ocean of the stuff.

But that explanation scans wrong, like a line of poetry that breaks from the meter.

She needs to see where it's coming from. The stairs might not be as obviously worn away as the foot of the stairs where all that acid pools, but Rose doubts they're stable enough to take her avatar's weight. Instead, she hovers her way up to the second floor, the walls pressing in close with a fresh wave of tight, constricting panic and fear that has nothing to do with the bloodbrine acid seeping along the floor of the second story's hallway. There is a distinct gap between John's remembered emotions and the faint horror rising up from the grimdark; they both might have imbued this house as a symbol of John's mental distress, but it seems almost coincidental. The grimdark might have been attracted to a convenient bolthole, a place so immersed in panic and suffering, but it didn't cause the house to be this way, and feels too passive to have deliberately worsened the condition of John's mind.

It is simply present. A sign of just how susceptible this portion of John's mind was to outside influence.

Rose swallows hard, trying not to breathe in the distinct reek of salt and blood through her nose, and continues on to John's room. The door is a two dimensional rectangle that falls in without a sound when she touches it with a gloved hand. She can hear the steady plink of water - or something worse - dripping, perhaps from the faucets in John's bathroom.

But before she can investigate, Rose can only stare, because John's room is absolutely slathered with filth. It's the same tarry black oil and sludge combination that clogged up the rivers and guttered in the craters of the place she landed with Dave, but here it liberally coats every square inch of John's room, coagulating in greasy puddles on the sheets of his bed and forming a scummy sheen over the posters that line the walls. The window and walls drip; the trash can by John's desk overflows with it.

This isn't grimdark horror. Rose knows the feel of Leviathan's like too well to be sidetracked. And she is used to John's claustrophobic terror by now.

What she is not prepared for is the misery. It drops her, her knees skidding in the thin film of acid on the floor, but Rose can only hope that her godly clothing protects her from the acid while the depression rolls over her in a tidal wave. It starts slow, building momentum from inklings like useless and stupid and hopeless until her lungs are crushed under shit it's all fucking shit too fucked up to help anyone and it's still my fault they're dead why bother why bother just make it all stop make me stop but that's not very heroic is it -

She comes close to curling up in a ball and succumbing to it. Her face isn't protected; place it against the ground, and the acid would do the rest. All that listless, crawling misery lodges tight in her chest and head, and won't let her think of anything else; there's just the dull, spiraling certainty that it won't get better, so why bother pushing her low and holding her there, like a hand shoving her head underwater.

It's not me. I'm not the one who felt this. Dammit, move, move before it swallows you whole.

The noise she makes isn't much more than a whimper, broken and choking, but Rose manages to stagger to her feet. For a moment the house is less than two dimensional, and she can see through the
illusion of it, through to the pit of tar and oil that underlies it all. It extends so much farther than Rose can see, all of that blackness that reaches up to smear over the underside of the clouds. Somehow, lost in John's madness, she's wandered to the hindmost, darkest recesses of his psyche, to the back of his mind where all the pain and sadness of two short lives have languished, and composted, and festered into this.

And now, this mess has spilled over, and has begun throttling the rest of his mind with a creeping oil slick.

The grimdark isn't here because of John's short sojourn into Rose's mind. In fact, she knows the exact moment a hivemind would have full, unimpeded access to John's mind for long enough to leave a mark. They all watched it happen on those damned tapes, and even when John nearly collapsed from the agony of reliving the memories he suppressed for most of his life, Rose never once thought to question if having Leviathan puppet his body into a deathtrap with his denizen might have left raw, weeping wounds. Wounds that, in turn, left him fragile and aching with memory right along into a second life, vulnerable to whatever conditioning Samuel might have seen fit to inflict on him. Her best friend in this world has been broken and suicidal and trapped, panicking, in his own mind while they merrily went about their lives in the delusion that once he accepted all those memories of the game, he would be fine.

It's too much. John won't be sane, even if they manage to remove all traces of this mindgrub successfully. How could he be, after all this? Depression can't be pried out of someone's mind; post-traumatic stress can't be shooshed out of existence. Dizzy with the implications of it, Rose uses both hands to shove her hair back out of her face, and stumbles and pitches in a gait close to drunk as she pushes her way into the mental image of John's restroom. The source of the acid is clear; a single droplet of grimdark falls from the faucet into the overflowing sink, adding periodically to the thin trickle that runs out into the hall and down the stairs. Nothing like the open channel in Rose's mind. She glances at her reflection in the mirror, and is so inordinately surprised by the fact that the mirror actually shows a reflection in this world of flat planes and monochromes that she smiles, bitterly, at her reflection.

Her reflection does not smile back. Its eyes just melt into black sockets full of filth, and it tilts its head in the opposite direction of her own.

"Charming," she says, staving off the wave of self-hatred that accompanies the frankly cheap hallucination. Here is the grimdark's real contribution, then: gimmicky, tacky horror movie scares. What little the grimdark acid can do pales in comparison to the paralyzing misery of John's true emotions.

She can't do anything about those emotions though, either. She came into John's mind intending to stabilize him and tear out the foreign influences of the mindgrub so that his mind could recover in peace. But if she tried to tear out all this pain that has fermented here over the years, she'd be shredding vast chunks of John's mind along with the filth. And any moment now the madness could shift again, and Rose will be torn away from all this.

But she can do for John what she did for Kanaya. She casts a disparaging glower at the reflection in the mirror, which seems to have caught on to the fact that she isn't intimidated by its usual tactics and has switched to forcing the hallucination that her eyes bleed white fire.

She sets it on fucking fire. The acid in the sink goes up like a pool of vodka, flames licking up into the faucet until it melts, too, leaving nothing behind through which the memory could leak more contamination. Then she strides down the hall and the stairs, ripping up the acid-soaked carpet as she goes and incinerating it in hot white bursts of light. The sinkhole where the acid has worn through
the floor at the foot of the stairs poses slightly more of a challenge, however, as it seems to extend into the basement beneath the house, and she needs to see it to know it has all burned properly. So she locates the door to the basement and yanks it open, the flatness of this unreal house once again causing the whole door to fly off its hinges at an angle and float off to lodge between two jutting walls.

A pale face stares up at her from the darkness of the basement.

Rose freezes.

Perhaps that is her luck, after all.

"John?"

The eyes that blink at her are the right shade, but everything else is wrong. The John that stands at the foot of the basement stairwell is white as paper, and just as two-dimensional as the rest of this house. And he can't be more than thirteen years old, short and round-faced and bucktoothed despite the fact that, like the house, he's barely real enough to hold substance.

She isn't even sure if he has arms. Honestly.

EB: rose?

And Rose realizes, with a pulse of mingled disbelief and panic, that reality might not have much to do with John's mental avatar anymore. "John!" she cries sharply, missing a stair and almost plummeting all the way down in her haste to reach out to him.

EB: oh no! out out out!

And with that, he vanishes. No - more nonsensically, he doesn't. His body dissolves into tendrils of bright blue light, and it is only when said tendrils whoosh past Rose and rocket up the stairs to freedom that she realizes they're meant to represent the wind. She whirs to follow him, reaching out with her mind to grope at the air around her, but the rest of the house has vanished with him, and those blue lines of wind curve and dance their way up into the clouds, darting away from Rose's mental touch and blending back in with the rest of John's mind around them.

Rose whirls to fly after him - and then pauses. The stairs are still beneath her feet, and though the rest of the house has vanished as eerily as it arrived, the basement still lies below, dark as pitch.

Rose squeezes her eyes shut, and continues down. Sure enough, a vast pool of grimdark acid glitters in the darkness, lapping up against the mirrored walls of the Egberts' basement training room. By the time Rose clears away the buildup of grimdark, enduring more hallucinations that grin at her from the mirrors and try their utmost to horrify her, she's certain that whatever scrap of John's consciousness might have concealed itself in this house is long gone.

The basement seals over when she floats out, leaving no trace of the house full of John's emotions against the oil-strewn black gravel of the empty field. She curses the fact that she ended up separated from Dave and Karkat by all this insanity - Dave at least might have been able to give her a rough estimate of how much time may be passing in reality. Her own dim awareness of the passage of time is too subjective to be trusted in a mindscape. Going through the house and cremating the grimdark contamination felt like it only took twenty minutes or so, but Rose has been fooled quite thoroughly by a horrorterror's time-slurring presence before, and doesn't trust that impression. She just needs to reunite with the other two as quickly as possible; they might need to retreat from John's mind to check on the situation with the sedatives before attempting to track John down again.
But if she'd left that grimdark to tuck itself away beneath the surface of John's mind like a sore full of pus, it would only have erupted into grimmer consequences later on. She can't begrudge finishing it off, even if it cost her an opportunity to chase down that half-real John and try to draw some sense out of him. Sighing, Rose tries to shrug off the last of the emotions threatening to suck her back down into John's mindset, and snaps her fingers to start floating up into the air.

The wind buoys her up.

It takes her a good ten seconds to pause, blink, and do a double take.

In those ten seconds, the brilliant blue lines of wind manage to lose patience with how slow she's moving, and start to tug petulantly on her hair and her hood until, in a fit of impatient prankster's whimsy, the breeze yanks said hood back up over her eyes and down to tie it in a knot over her face. "Enough of that!" Rose splutters, yanking the hood back, and her heart starts to pound in earnest when she sees, to her cautious excitement, that the blue breeze doesn't immediately vanish the moment her eyes lose sight of it. "John?" she repeats, hardly able to believe her own luck.

EB: ehhhhhh

EB: he's still ignoring me right now. always ignoring me and trying to stuff me in with the rest of the stuff he ignores

The wind morphs into that same pale, half-formed image of John - and then just as quickly drops the rest of the illusion so that all that remains is a mouth that sticks out its tongue to blow a raspberry. When it's done, it unravels into the blue, visible wind once more.

EB: me! his own breeze!

A beat.

Oh. Not a breeze, then.

_The Breeze._

"Pleasure to meet you," Rose says on autopilot, because - well, really, what _does_ one say to the mostly incorporeal, partially anthropomorphized avatar of one's friend's godly powers?

The Breeze just speeds around her in a circle, impatient and once again hauling her up into the sky. It feels remarkably like the winds' efforts to cast her and Dave and Karkat out of John's mind altogether back in the beginning, but before Rose can voice her suspicions the windy thing whines at her, and she realizes - "Pardon the intrusion, but would it be possible for you to direct me to where Dave and Karkat might be?" She hesitates. "And John?"

The Breeze lashes restlessly, and Rose, not wanting to miss out on this strange chance by aggravating it, hurries to float along with the winds trying to carry her further away from where the house stood. Almost immediately the windy thing tangles in her hair in what seems to be some obscure gesture of approval.

BE: i can take you, yeah. because you are rose and we love you and they are dave and karkat and we love them

BE: but that depends on which john you want to see, the right one or the creepy one

Rose sucks in a breath. The implications of that statement are...well. She doesn't really care to contemplate them. But she must. "The...right John, thank you."
BE: oh so dave first then. maybe by the time we get there he'll have talked sense into the right john and the big dumbo, so that the wrong john will go away!

BE: i think that would be nice. that way he'll stop talking the right one back into going back to that horrible house all the time

"The Egbert house?" Rose glances back down at the receding ground, but can make out no trace of it.

BE: no one is supposed to go back there! you all should just listen to me more and do fun things like play pranks in school instead

"You've...told John not to go back home before?" Rose can feel her stomach sinking further.

BE: of course i have! it's a bad place with a bad man. i told him so! i told him to go to the time boy and stay gone!

BE: but he didn't listen to me no matter how many times i rose up to take him there :( and with the big dumbo still sleeping and recovering all the time, it's not like i could make him listen for his own good! what a pain...

BE: now shhhhh! i'll take you to dave and the sleeping dumbheads, but you have to be quiet or that man will tell the wrong john where we are!

And with that, the Breeze seizes control of Rose's flight trajectory entirely, ferrying her along just beneath the amorphous roof of the cloud cover. She doesn't dare stop levitating her avatar with the power of her own mind, but the Breeze seems to have a better idea of how to navigate John's shifting, tumultuous mind than she has yet formulated, and she defers to its better judgment.

But she can't resist one final question? "What man?"

BE: the one who messed everything up and made everything break in two. he's still standing back there!

Goosebumps rise on along the flesh of Rose's arm, and she looks back before she can second guess herself, peering down at the ground below.

A figure in white watches them go. Before Rose can do more than recoil, the flat image of Samuel Egbert turns sideways, and like the house before him, flattens out into a thin line and disappears.

BE: oh man, not again. i don't know why john imagined that guy up in the first place when all it does is rile up the creepy one. we better hurry

It's not wrong. Whatever is afoot here, Rose didn't like that pale, faceless copy of Samuel Egbert one bit. She squints and winces as the Breeze picks up the pace, the resulting wind shear sets her eyes tearing up once more. Well, she might as well try - "Shades," she commands, tugging on the soft fabric of the hood beside her ear.

A golden visor falls down in front of her eyes, and when Rose reaches up she feels a good two inches have left the hem of the hood, so she shoves it back down off her head. What a bizarre application of conservation of mass.

BE: huh

BE: you're a very interesting seer, aren't you?
"And you are a very helpful...aspect," Rose says at last, after a moment of deliberating how exactly one is supposed to address a game power.

BE: only as helpful as john will let me be! but john is just as dumb as the big dumb guy! they deserve each other

It's only then, as they pelt towards Dave's location in John's mind as swift as the wind, that Rose thinks to ask -

"...What exactly do you mean by 'big dumb guy?'" Rose feels like she should already know the answer to this. Really, it's on the tip of her tongue. "Exactly who else is in here with us?"

And she's right.

When the Breeze tells her, as it so happens, she already does know the answer.

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Dave wakes up.

Which was probably his first mistake. Really sets the tone for the rest of the day, you know?

God fucking damn, but he's parched. He could go for a sip of AJ right now.

But of course, instead of a bottle of that most delicious elixir being passed down to him by the hand of a convenient god - they've got like four of them running around this shitty lab, why are they not pulling miracles like that? - the first thing Dave sees when his vision stops swirling is a thatch of black hair and the nubby curve of really tiny horns.

"Karkat motherfucking Vantas, if you do not remove your hands from my fabulous bod right the hell now, I will back hand you into next week," he croaks, feeling kind of like there's a rhino slow-dancing on his chest, each heart beat a slow and tender reminder that there's a foreign object lodged in his lower torso. This hurts worse than being stabbed ever has, possibly because Dave's been stabbed like weekly since he was old enough to hold a sword so he's kind of over it. God, he got shot. By John's dad. That is actually a thing that actually happened in actual real life. Christ. "I can do that. I think. I believe in me."

But speaking of weird time shit. He should probably start paying more attention to his future-selves' vague and shitty warnings, and then start circumventing them through whatever means possible because there were so many better ways to have handled this situation than literally taking a bullet for some clone rando he barely knows.

Karkat doesn't take Dave's threat seriously, but hell, Dave can't blame him; he couldn't backhand a goddamn turkey into an oven to cook at 425 degrees Fahrenheit, with the state he's in. It's pathetic as hell. Bro's going to kick his ass for this one, he can feel it. "We're trying to make you not die, so will you for once in your dumbass life shut your mouth, you - you - butt biscuit!"

Oh, hell no. There's no way Dave can let that one slide. He squints at Karkat, lips pursed. "That was the worst goddamn insult I've ever heard."

Karkat's ensuing wordvomit turns out to be remarkably bracing. Or at least it distracts Dave enough that he can't say the troll doesn't try. "You think it's easy to dredge up insults of this caliber in the middle of a fucking crisis? We're not all lowlifes who think the height of profanity is sprinkling 'goddamn' and 'hell' and 'bro' on the half-assed, soggy, lopsided, pus-flavored cup of frozen yogurt that is your idea of sophisticated fucking conversation. Somehow I am still disappointed in you after
all this time, which I didn't think was even possible, so congratulations! The amount of sheer incompetence you manage to cram into one ghastly fleshsack is actually an accomplishment in and of itself. How do you even wake up and remove yourself from your flat human reposer slab every morning living with the fact that you have no talent? Don't answer that. Do humanity a favor and don't even bother next time. You are officially demoted by me, your newly appointed trolltalitarian, from Knight of Time to the measly Earthworm of Shut-the-fuck-up."

Someone pokes at the hole in his side with a really sharp claw. Dave bites back a shriek of pain because that's just what he does. Get shot? Fuck it, if he's going down, he's going down cracking those wise asses. "...That was beautiful," he says at last, when the white hot agony of someone digging around through his insides subsides to a dull throb again and he can do it without crying like a baby. "Bruhvo. I think - I teared up a little. Oh my god. Reposer. Need to tell that one - to John or Jade or something -"

"Oh my fucking god, did you just say 'bruh' - no. Just stop talking. Stop punning. You're still leaking everywhere." A claw shoves Dave's shoulders back down against the floor before he tries to sit up, and then Karkat is glaring down at him. Or it would be a glare, if the troll weren't sweating and doing his best impression of genuine concern. Seriously. Dave's only ever seen that kind of look directed at John before. Which implies all kinds of fucked up shit that Dave can't even deal with right now. "Kanaya. Do the thing."

Wait. What. Dave makes a last ditch effort to sit up and stare cross-eyed at the two trolls leaning over him. He's still lying on the floor, and there is no goddamn way that's sanitary. His shades are kind of lopsided, and he does his best to level them solely by wrinkling his nose as he searches the hall around them for a sign of a goddamn medical professional - someone, anyone.

But there's just these two.

Oh shit. "Hold up," Dave says, trying and failing to wriggle out from under Karkat. "The hell is this? Why are you people -"

"Relax, Dave," Kanaya's voice floats up to his ears with all the soothing gravel of a troll trying their damndest not to sound like they have their claws poking around in one's fleshy bits. "I was a professional Mediculler in the war. Karkat, keep him still."

Dave's eyes bulge and he gives up on cool, shoving at Karkat frantically because - "Medicullers specialize in amputating shit, hold up - nonononononono - FUCK!"

Later, he'll try to convince anyone who didn't witness the incident that Kanaya tried to hack off a random limb based on the results of Karkat fiddling with a rigged Twister spinner, both of them cackling like the blood-happy nutballs that they are, but no one believes him. Nor does it distract them from the blatant fucking lie that Karkat spreads around about the fact that the collar around Dave throat glitches and lets out a piercing screech in its utter failure to convey his manly, manly shout of surprise when Kanaya pries a huge fucking bullet out of his insides.

He finally just passes out again.

-

Dave wakes up with bandages wrapped around his torso, and catapults out of the hospital bed before anyone can say a word.

He goes back because he needs to fix this.
He dies.

[timeline status: doomed]

In a lot of the attempts, he doesn't stop to ask anyone what happened after he got shot. He has no idea what's happening in John's poor screwed up head, what wheels are turning and juddering and flying off their axles.

This gets him killed a lot.

Dave beats his past self, Karkat, and Jade to the door. There are no bodies to distract him along the way, for some reason, so of course he gets there first.

John is unconscious, slumped against the wall, and Dave doesn't hesitate before flashstepping right to him, shaking the kid's shoulders to try to get a response. Karkat's frozen in the doorway Dave ran through, blocking Jade's view when she finally arrives, and Dave's too dumb a fuck to turn around and realize there's a gun pressed to the back of his head before the trigger's already pulled, gore splattering across John's bloody mask of a face just as pale blue eyes flutter open in a manic grin.

He becomes one of the bodies for the real Dave to trip over.

[timeline status: doomed]

Dave makes it all the way to the office to kick the door down while John's still upright. Tears and blood stream from the kid's eyes as he stares at Dave over Samuel's shoulder. They're so blue it's unreal, the usual blue glow jacked up to neon, and Dave sees the exact moment the switch flips in John's head. His early arrival tips the balance and makes the thing in John's head wake up all the faster -

He tries that five different ways. The thing in John's body gets more creative every time.

[timeline status: doomed]

Dave bursts in through the Egbert's front door a few months ago, early in the morning. He catches Samuel at the kitchen sink and stabs him in the back, right between the ribs and angling up to skewer his heart. His own heart drums too-fast in his chest, jolted by the rush of the first time he's ever gone so far back in time in one leap.

This has to be early enough. It has to be.

Upstairs, John sits bolt upright in his bed, screaming, and the only warning Dave gets is the weird damn popping noise his ears make as his lungs implode. Most of the neighborhood goes with him.
It's two years ago and Karkat is in the living room with John when Dave knocks so hard on the front door he nearly shoves it down. There is no white helicar in the driveway, and he spends most of the time explaining to the two dumbstruck young dweebs just how badly Samuel has fucked John up already. Karkat is all round eyes and a rounder face, and two years ago is before he even started training to become a hero - hell, before he and John were even really friends.

John nods, and looks appropriately sick to his stomach, hands trembling as he agrees to come to Texas with Dave for his own safety. He protests that he wants to wait and hear Samuel's side of the story, but John's always been easily persuaded by promises of adventure. And Dave figures that as long as he doesn't hurt Daddy Douchelord, he can probably avoid setting off whatever made John attack Jade.

But a paradox is a paradox, no matter how long the broken loop.

Turns out mindgrubs can be activated remotely. John shuts down when the plane is in the air over Nevada, and by the time they set down prematurely in Reno there's no one left alive but the pilots, John, and Dave. Said pilots kick it shortly thereafter. The things that a windy dude can do to an airplane are just -

Well.

That Dave doesn't die for weeks after the not-John, whistling cheerily, drags him off the plane and floats them down to the runway where Samuel stands waiting by a smaller, faster jet plane. He ends up in a lab, instead, and he only succeeds in finally killing himself after Roxy hacks into the time power canceling cage they've rigged for him and some other chick. Hell, maybe all she wanted was to talk to him, seeing as how the other new Scratch kid is crazier than sin.

But he's learned his lesson. He's been schooled. This Dave already knows he's doomed.

One of him succeeds.

It's pretty sweet for the first five years afterward. Thoughts about that apocalypse game that never turned out to be a thing sometimes mutter in the quiet hours of the night when Dave wishes he could just go the fuck to sleep, but he puts them aside, again and again, as Dadbert goes to sicko jail, the Midnight Crew fumbles and dies out after the odd disappearance of that wacky Scratch guy who lead them, John and Rose finally go through goddamn therapy and Jade takes off to explore South America more thoroughly. Their powers stop working, but he forces himself not to care.

When time starts to break down and the world slowly goes dark, he can't even regret that this entire offshoot was doomed from the start. More and more people vanish as reality pulls a Donnie Darko, but until the moment he fades, at the very end, Dave clings to the fact that they were happy. That. God. Maybe this wasn't how things were supposed to go, but like hell could he have lived with himself if he let events play out as paradox space wanted them to. Paradox space is a cocked up pile of bullshit, and Dave wants a refund.
And then he's gone, too.

[timeline status: doomed]

Dave wakes up from Kanaya and Karkat's ministrations with a flinch - and the weirdest sense of déjà vu. Bandages wrap right around his ribs, but the wound already feels like it's healing; he stares at the ceiling for a long moment before he realizes he's doing it without the protective cover of his sunglasses, and he fumbles like a basic bitch when he goes to replace them. His ears ache like a son of a bitch, but it's a low note that he can easily ignore.

The seconds tick by. Each one is a second that Dave is not rolling back the clock to stop this, to spare John from having his asshole anti-guardian turn on him and do - whatever Dave walked in on, there. This is John; what kind of asshole would just let the poor kid suffer like this?

But his mind won't stop repeating what that future Dave said.

*We couldn't stop this.*

He has to try - fuck it, he's going back and -

If he does, he'll cause a paradox. It's the one thing he's been smart enough so far to avoid, in all his short time loops and technically illegal pauses - dicking around with shit to make something happen that he knows for a fact didn't happen, and vice versa. Like the bullshit in New York where Rose's tentacle monsters from beyond the stars wrecked his shit; he could have gone back after he'd recovered to prevent that whole mess from happening and actually made himself useful in the effort to save Rose, but then the whole snarled mess would have spun off into a headache of broken causality that would make stabbing his brain with an ice pick sound like a good time.

He remembers being shot. He remembers Dad Egbert being the one to do it. And he remembers John passed out, bleeding from literally his entire face.

And because he remembers all that happening, he can't change it. He can't.

When he finally finishes coming to that shitty realization, all he can really muster up the will to say is, "God fucking *dammit.*"

Something moves, and Dave turns his head to grimace at Rose, her posture prim and perfect as she pages through a book at his side. "Rose. God *fucking dammit.*"

"I concur," Rose says, crossing her ankles and leveling a bitter smile at him. Her fingers tap in 3:4 time over the thin pages of the book, and Dave squints (or maybe he's just scowling - to hell with controlling his emotions right now) to try to read the words upside down. "How are you feeling, brother?"

"Like a useless napkin. You?" Dave cranes his neck around and - hang on a second. Those are pictures, not words.

Rose is reading a picture book.

...God, how long was he out?
"Mmm, the same." Rose snaps the book shut with a resounding *clap* before Dave can figure out why she's looking at pictures. "I don't suppose there is any hope of us turning back the clock on this?"

Dave grinds his teeth, clearing his throat with a hoarse noise that isn't a sob, and shakes his head mutely. "It already happened," he says, which is fantastically shitty one liner that could be interpreted twenty different ways.

But Rose gets him, nodding. Her eyes look swollen and red, like she might have been crying, but Dave's not one to call her out about it. "That's fine," she says, her voice perfectly steady as Dave scans the room, taking in the corner where a familiar but rumbled Dadbert lies, his snazzy white suit covered in dust and wrinkles and not at all snazzy, which is no more than he deserves for being a total asshole. "I have a plan. One that should hopefully salvage the situation - as much as it *can* be salvaged. At the least, we may be able to help John."

"John?" Dave asks like the intelligent specimen of humanity he is, sitting his woozy sack of organs upright and ignoring the throb of protest his side lets out when he twists the muscles in his general 'you got shot' zone too much. He wonders if this is what steak feels like after it's been, like, tenderized for human consumption. At least with stab wounds, it's a *cut* and not much else - this gunshot business feels like he's going to have leftover bruises all over for days and days, which is *such* bullshit. He shakes his head. "Damn. What's wrong with that kid?"

Rose tells him.

He kind of really wishes she hadn't told him.

- 

*Note to self.*

_When Rose says she has a plan, remember that Rose's plans are just as, if not more, likely to be subject to epic failure as any plan made up by the rest of the team._

But no. Ordinary, run of the mill failure was just not enough, Dave thinks, kicking a gloopy chunk of black ooze and pulling a face when it sticks to the toe of his shoe. Nah, son. They had to all *launch themselves* into John's brain with *unspeakable majjyks*, and do it all without Rose making sure that Dave and Karkat had something like, you know, an emergency flaregun to call for help in the event they all got separated. Hell, even a handy dandy emergency eject button would have been nice.

First Karkat gets dragged down into a raging storm by some ghostly rope from hell, and now Rose has literally just vanished into thin air. There wasn't even some kind of lame sound effect or anything; one second she was standing there, lit up like her own personal nightlight - and then Dave blinked, and she was *gone*. Which is why he is currently freaking the fuck out.

But you know. In a chill, totally unbothered kind of way. So what if the other two people in the party are lost in the depths of John's pun-hell of a mind. He's on this shit. All up on it. Like a chimp on a jack-knifing semi truck, spilling bananas all over the freeway and fucking up traffic just in time for the five o'clock rush hour shitstravaganza and god, there's just banana smushed everywhere on the pavement, the massacred bodies stripped of their skins and left out to rot in the sun like some kind of fruit gore porno -

Okay, he's starting to wonder if he's just making this up because his own head is screwed up, or because at some point in his childhood Bro might have dipped into other kinds of puppet
pornography that Dave's just blocked out until now. Anything is possible in a world where goddamn Dadbert can go full fucking Judas Contract on them.

...

God he has no idea what to do now. This is seriously some kind of horror movie shit. Everyone's split up and they're gonna get picked off one by one, and Dave's probably gonna be first because he's blond and pretty.

He looks to his left. The dark, cratered plains of fucking Mordor stretch out into the distance.

He looks to his right. Weirdly enough, the dark, cratered plains of fucking Mordor stretch out into the distance.

He wishes Rose hadn't checked out before explaining why John's head looks like actual hell. Now he's just stuck here, hanging out and totally not panicking, and he's stumped as to what all this stuff means. It's gotta be, like, you know, symbolic as fuck, right? That's how it works in movies. The clouds are symbolic of everything being terrible. The ground covered in massive meteor craters and black ooze is...also symbolic of everything being terrible.

Dave is pretty sure he just answered his own question, there.

He's also pretty sure he's mentally spacing out here, getting caught up in his own weird rambling nonsense like always. He should probably focus on something else. As a distraction, he scuffs his foot along the ground as discreetly as he can, until the oil rubs off.

Nice. Productive. He's on a roll here.

Fuck it. He's gonna start walking. "Whatever," he mutters, as he skirts around the edge of the crater. He begins to wind his way in between the other impact cavities, shuffling his feet in the dirt and occasionally surveying the landscape for some sign of the others. A few minutes in, and he doesn't really think about the logistics of using time powers in someone else's head - he just thinks 'to hell with it' and does it, flashstepping along to pick up the pace. At one point, the sky overhead flares with light, but when Dave flings himself to the ground, the too-close bundle of lightning just rolls along back into the heaving sea of storm clouds and vanishes.

This is all starting to get boring as hell. The creepiness of wandering alone in a bleak, deserted plain has officially worn off, which is kind of sad. Maybe wherever they are, Karkles and Rose are doing all kinds of awesome shit. Beating up super smiley evil anti-Johns and whatnot.

Dave's just gonna rap. Yeah. Start dropping mad beats everywhere in this hizz-ouse so that when John wakes up he has to clean them up off the floor like it's a game of 52-Pickup. Jade has the talent, so clearly as her ectogoop twin John must have some latent ability. Dave just needs to incept this mofo.

He's barely begun to really hit his stride and everything when the wind starts to rise. "Yeeeah, goin' crazy with the flow. Still gotta - tch - gotta thing or two to learn, yo." He trips over something tangled around his ankles, but catches himself before he can fall over. He keeps walking, not really noticing when the ground starts to even out around him, the blasted craters giving way to a flat field. There's less of this gross oily shit lying around everywhere, so he figures he's headed in the not-messed up direction. "Smoking some dank ass herbal - but your roommate throws you a curveball -" He stumbles again, and pures his lips at the fact that he's tripping over nothing. The wind sheers at him from the side, but hell, John's head is full of windy stuff, so he's mostly just ignoring it. "Says he's got asthma OH SHIT, now he's passed out in a bathroom stall -"
He realizes he fucked up when the gale whirls and tosses a handful of grit and dirt right into his face, his shades doing absolutely jackshit to shield him when it swoops up from around his ankles at the worst possible angle. Wheezing and rubbing at his eyes, Dave shakes his head, and his cape billows out again, yanking on his neck and smacking his face so that he gives some serious thought to just taking it off entirely. It's not worth it to be choked out by John's latest mind tornado.

Then the wind shoves him off his feet.

It just kind of keeps happening, and Dave finishes untangling his cape from around his head just in time to squint into the breeze and realize he's flying sideways, caught up in some random wind vortex bullshit. He kicks and scrambles to try to plant his feet back on the ground - because flying with someone else in charge is mildly off-putting, let alone flying because you're caught up in a tornado - but at some point he loses sight of the ground entirely. Also up and down no longer seem to be a thing. Which hey, cool, cool. He's cool with that.

And then he drops like a stone.

He is slightly less cool with that.

"SHIBNRRRLGHL!" he says eloquently as he lands, hard, on something that juts its way right into his diaphragm. To finish off that last rhyme on a good note, of course. He's not sure if he fell a short enough distance that his survival was basically assured, or if he got flung at the ground from so high up with such velocity that it just tested his mind self's resilience to the point that he lived by sheer dumb luck. Can mind people die in minds? God, where is Rose? He needs a goddamn magic Wikipedia, which she just so happens to be, but oh look, he's getting tossed around in a game of mental human ping pong instead.

Dave is starting to think he couldn't punch his way out of a mental paper bag. His coolkid gambit is tanking, here. At least there was no one around to see that. He peels himself off the offending object and flops over, taking stock of his surroundings as he focuses on deep breathing.

The pitch black dirt and craters are gone, at least, which means Dave can no longer claim he's walking around Mordor. Instead, the ground around him is made up mostly of dark sand and chunks of cobalt blue stone, with plateaus of blue and grey shale and larger hills of brown rock rising up at angles in the distance. Leafless trees and possibly radioactive glowing turquoise mushrooms sprout up in random places. There are still clouds overhead, but they're mostly dingy grey rather than dark as night, lit from below by all the shiny shrooms. As he rubs at the bruise (can he bruise if all of this is in John's head?) forming in the middle of his torso, he glances down at the nice jabby thing that broke his fall, and sees that it's a raw crystal of cloudy blue tourmaline. The only one he can see around him, too, so that's his luck for you.

Why. The hell. Does John have an entire section of his head dedicated to LOWA$$. Or however you spell it?

Dave has some pressing questions that need answers, and that one is going to the very top of the list. "Rose?" he calls, because hell, maybe his impromptu whirlwind tour of casa John has dumped him near where she vamoosed off to. "Karkles?"

No response. "Come on, you guys. This isn't cool," he mutters, mostly to himself, as he stands up and brushes black-and-blue sand off his pajama bottoms. When he checks his internal metronome, he can only sigh, because it says he's only been wandering around for, like. Twenty minutes, in real time. Twenty minutes and forty seconds and twelve milliseconds if he wants to get real damn technical about it. Karkat vanished three minutes in, and Rose disappeared at seven minutes, fifteen seconds. It just feels like it's been longer because he keeps zoning out, probably. The situation's not
urgent.

Yeah he's still fucking lost. "This is me. Radiating neediness!" he calls, cupping his hands around his mouth and turning in a slow circle, leaning more on one heel than the other. "Yo! John! I am summoning your windy ass! Pay attention!"

This surprisingly does not work.

...Fuck it. Dave's fingers twitch, and before he can tell himself how pathetically stupid it is, he yanks his phone out of his pocket. It's his weapon of last resort, but the last time he saw this place, it was on fire and John was pretty dead, so he feels justified in pulling all the stops to try to find someone to at least talk to before he loses his shit.

-- no server detected --
TG: humor me
-- no server detected --
TG: thats okay self serve is just fine and dandy
-- no server detected --
TG: pls i just need to talk to somebody literally anybody would work hell patch me through to karkat even
-- no server detected --
TG: yeah i know theres no server but there can be miracles if you believe
-- no server detected --
TG: goddammit
-- no server detected --
TG: also that error message is gonna get real goddamn old real goddamn fast
-- no server detected --
TG: why did i think this would work in the first place
-- no server detected --
TG: come on for the love of god tier john its your head think me up some wifi
-- server connected --
TG: oh holy shit youre joking
-- ?? [??] has joined the chat! --
??: I do not joke.
??: Often.

Dave takes a moment before responding to clap his hands together in prayer. *I promise to take your name in vain way more often, John, you windy god, you.* Then, his thumbs mostly take over on autopilot as he starts beatboxing under his breath and trots off in a random direction, in a much better mood now that he has an audience, at least. He heads in the direction with the least amount of steep cliffs and random gorges - hopefully - so if anyone does decide to turn up, he can claim he's still looking for John and not dicking around with a possibly imaginary phone conversation.

TG: this is amazing
??: Why have you come here? Why must you persist in this verbiage?
??: Some of us are trying to sleep in here. And if you can wake me when I'm sleeping, you should really reconsider your options.
TG: hold the hell up
TG: i still cant believe theres internet service in johns head and its talking to me
TG: come on youve got to admit that doesnt happen everyday
TG: i mean is this actual legit wifi that works in brains or is this like crazy magic bullshit fake wifi
TG: can you imagine if john were a walking talking wireless router
TG: hell it explains more than it doesnt
TG: so have you been sentient long or
??: Good grief. I should have believed the Forgelord when he claimed a version of you talked him into submission.

Huh. Vague. Dave scratches the side of his nose, adjusting his sunglasses to cover the motion, and then has to look up for a second when he rams his knee painfully into a small boulder. Grimacing, he angles around it and eyeballs the ground in front of him more carefully. He's sauntering in a kind of downwards direction, blue rock stacking up on either side of the thin path, but it's still a path, and he can't make out any cliff faces in the distance before him, so he must emerge from RandomValley.com at some point without too many obstacles. It looks like this section is mainly just overgrown shrooms and brilliant tourmaline.

??: But the question still stands. Why have you ventured here, child? It is far too early for this nonsense.
TG: looking for my main squeeze
??: What.
TG: mi husbando
??: Just how long was I asleep?
TG: the target of my deepest darkest broclivities
??: A name, child, give me a name.
TG: well were literally fuckdeep in johns cracked mindspace so i kind of just assumed we both knew what we were talking about here
TG: you seen him around
TG: mildly buff kid with a permanent nerdon for comic book heroes and the bluest eyes to ever blue
TG: occasionally been known to do the windy thing
??: I know him, yes.
??: But if you seek the Heir, you have delved too deep. You have left his mind entirely. This is my domain.

...He did not just read that. Those are not the words on the pesterlog screen. And his favorite drink is not apple juice, and he is absolutely fantastic at lying to himself -

Dave groans, picks a convenient slab of brown rock just off the main road, and uses it as a springboard for his forehead. Repeatedly.

TG: oh youve got to be shitting me
TG: i didnt just manage to lose rose and karkat im literally in the wrong goddamn mind
TG: how can i p o s s i b l y be this lost
TG: this is such bullshit
??: It really is. I had not realized that puny players like yourself could wander from the Heir's mind into my own with impunity while I slept.
??: And you, not even a Mind player! This is embarrassing, quite frankly.
TG: how did i even get here
TG: i mean great i thought we were all wandering around johns brain which was like you know an enclosed space
TG: but nope haha jk apparently you can just roam around and accidentally ollie into someone elses mind thanks for the heads up rose
??: His mind and mine are connected on the motifphorical level. I doubt you could have traipsed your way into just any other mind.
TG: well now i feel like a total asshole

Dave lifts his head up from the rock, where the phone has been casting a light on the stone and glinting off tiny chunks of mica, and rubs at the new grainy pattern indented on his forehead as he
frowns at the screen. Even given the fact that this is all happening in the center of John's mind - or, okay, someone else's head, jeez - there's something really weird about this conversation he's having with the personification of someone's internal wifi.

But hell, any personification is better than none, right? Maybe this random dude can direct him back to John's head, since he knows so much about it.

TG: wait hang on
TG: you know about game shit
??: I have a passing familiarity with it.
TG: then do a bro a solid and help me figure out how to get back to my boys head
??: I'm pretty sure dealing with you was not in my job description.
TG: they didn't mention it in the interview at all
??: No. I was born into this role.
TG: well shit man get your union rep on the line
TG: do you have a health plan at least
??: No.
TG: god
TG: damn
TG: no wonder you're so pissy
TG: so will you cc barack on this email or should i
??: You speak riddles again, child.
TG: you need to complain to your union rep just tell him that you know that you never got insured
TG: and now so does the president
TG: trust me this is a classic straight from the bowels of shitty internet humor
TG: but seriously if you want me out of your head just point me back in the direction of eb
??: ...
??: Continue forward.

Dave blinks, and runs his fingers through his hair as he looks ahead again. Then, with a shrug - because it's not like he has any better ideas - he starts walking again, ambling along the light blue stone path with a little more hip in his stride. Having any direction at all is preferable to wandering aimlessly, at this point.

Possibly he should be considering just how smart it is to take directions from wifi. But hell, Rose isn't here to contradict him, and if Karkat were around to shout objections Dave would probably do it regardless just to piss him off.

And since John's still MIA...to hell with it.

TG: wait shit was i actually going the right way this whole time
??: No. But you are now. Something is wrong, so I am making it the right way for the sake of expediency.
TG: cool
TG: hang on you can do that
??: Of course I can.
??: Before you meander further, tell me - you have repeatedly referred to the Heir as...unstable. How serious are you being?
TG: more serious than a finalist on a food network reality based cooking competition with five minutes on the clock and a basket full of mangos the only thing standing between him and staged televised victory
TG: by which i mean his dad totally fucked him up in the head and now there's a dude
??: ...A dude?
TG: yeah a not john
TG: he tried to kill jade and im totes sure he killed lot of mes in a shiton of doomed timelines so were pretty sure its not him so we have to keep him sedated and shit until real johns back in control
TG: wait are you him oh shit on a shingle am i talking to the evil john rose said not to do that ??: No.
TG: oh
TG: wait do i believe you
??: Just keep walking, Knight. It may be good that you came here first.

Dave taps his fingers along the sides of his phone in a nice, syncopated rhythm that emphasizes the off-beats. It helps him gather his thoughts a little.

First, this asshole knows about players and shit. Now, he definitely knows that Dave is a Knight (even if Dave himself is questioning just how literal these title things are when his costume looks and feels like super comfy pajamas).

And there's that sweet portmanteau of 'motif' and 'metaphorical' he threw out there, while he was droning on about being connected to John's mind.

Time for some sick ass sleuthing.

TG: still a little hazy on how that happened considering i didnt do it on purpose
TG: seriously i just started walking at random and here we are
??: I can see the path you took to come here. The wind tunnel between the Heir's mind and my own has been shredded, and everything on his side lies in tatters. And he is -
??: ...Well. I have slumbered overlong. I should have sensed this earlier. What's in his mind now is not right.
TG: no shit
TG: btw who even the heck are you
TG: on account of im not the mind dude
TG: but the fact that you and john have some mindmeld seems like a thing that should be explained

Oh yeah. So subtle.

??: You mean it's not obvious?
-- ?? [%] changed handle to TYPHEUS [TY] --
TY: Come.
TY: And come armed.
TY: I have yet to decide if I should eat you or not.

...

That was easier than expected.

-

TG: no fuck you that wasnt obvious at all

Dave heaves himself up onto an outcropping of rock. The terrain grows more rugged and sheer the further Dave tries to walk. What looked like a relatively easy trail through a valley of hallucinogenic shrooms has subtly - altered. He thinks, more than a little salty about it, that this giant snake dickwad could have at least had the decency to make the trip easier, not harder. But no.

TY: I am not in a good mood. Don't make me eat you.
TG: you wouldn't
TY: I'm very tempted. I wonder how Hephaestus resisted the urge.
TG: hell if i know man
TG: i dont remember half that crap
TG: also where am i going
TY: Forward.
TG: oh so thats how its gonna be
TG: whatever
TG: explanations are so passe
TG: its not like i was happy to be wandering around in some random douchebags head to begin with anyway
TG: this is just the minor disappointment that confirms you are in fact still a douchebag
TY: I'm no happier about this than you are. I am a *denizen*. I am a trial and a challenge and an ultimatum and a Choice. That's my prerogative, Skaia damn it.
TY: But first I am seeded with horror by the Noble Circle's ilk and forced to rise early to fight the Seaswallower near to death, and now, even after a scratch of the game, everything is terrible and I have a small human in my head.
TY: This is not pleasant and I want it to be done with as soon as possible. For both our sakes.
TG: okay i admit thats not overly douchebaggy thats pretty damn reasonable
TG: on account of all those things sound really shitty
TG: but where am i going and why are you rearranging everything
TY: I said as soon as possible, no? I've shifted you to an area closer to where you need to be.
TY: It is not me being helpful. I am simply helping myself, and your goal happens to temporarily coincide with my own. Once you have helped remove the Heir from my mind, you may be on your way.

Dave goes crosseyed. He also stops dead, which is a good thing - when he manages to fix his eyeballs so he doesn't look like a total jackass, he notices that he's reached a dead end. If he wants to go any farther, he has to climb up a steep cliff face.

Thank god being a hero in a city like Houston means he's good at climbing things with minimal handholds to reach rooftops. Dave hastily sticks his phone in his pocket, cracks his knuckles, and starts flashing his way up the rock wall, the stone rough and occasionally even sharp under his fingerpads. When he reaches the top, he throws a knee over and rolls onto solid ground, taking his phone out again as he goes.

TG: wait johns here
TG: but i thought john was back in crazy town
TG: what is happening
TY: He appears to have retreated part of the way into the tunnel between our two minds, trailing madness in his wake. It is little wonder you went astray in that muddle; even I can barely peer into it. Listen, and you can hear the dissonance.

Dave puffs, and snaps his fingers. Because if he can flashstep and use wireless internet to pester a giant monster, he figures all powers are back on the table. And sure enough, like floating puppies, the timetable gears snap into view, bobbing at his hips. When he runs through the sequences of turns and taps and slides he'd been slowly feeling out over the hours before Dadbert's massive dick moment, he turns up the volume of the music in his head.

He turned it down in the first place because of all that distortion and interference from the incomprehensible note that wouldn't calm the hell down earlier. Now, however, the note has resolved itself into a painful, simple song that makes his ears throb - but also, finally, has stats that Dave can access when he makes the right hand sequence.
There is no way that is a good sign. Dave thinks he liked it better when he couldn't get the lowdown on this shit, because said lowdown is officially freaking him out.

TG: oh shit
TG: ive been hearing that noise all week and it didnt make words before
TG: what does it do all these readouts tell me half of nothing
TY: You all really aren't very good at this, are you.
TY: Don't answer that. I can already tell it'll take you ten lines to get to your point and cost me another sliver of my waning sanity to have to hear it.
TG: if you cant take the heat dont provoke the sick fires yo
TY: [ Eye of the Storm ] is a basic ability inherent in Breath players. It cushions the blow when they experience extreme mental and emotional turmoil.
TY: Say, for instance, they find themselves playing a reality warping game that wipes out all life from their home planet in a single violent Reckoning. They are able to think around the guilt of having unleashed an unintentional genocide because the Breeze pushes the negative emotions to the back of their mind until they can deal with it.
TG: kay im following you so far
TY: It is also supposed to be limited to five days' duration.
TG: oh fuck me
TG: how long has john been spamming this thing
TY: Years. Literally years.
TY: It is entirely possible he never stopped, even after the scratch finished rewriting the world. He activated the god tier limit breakers and set it up to activate like an autofraymotif.
TY: All of this commagitation and torturauma has built up and festered, and left the back of his mind a cesspit full of raw, unprocessed suffering that he has never allowed himself to deal with.
TY: If he persists in playing it as he is now, even though it has already gone so far out of tune, he might cease responding altogether and fall into a sleep like death while the rest of his mind runs rampant.
TY: This is ridiculous. How is he supposed to pose a potent challenge to me if he's barely functional?

There is a deep, slim fissure that cuts down into the rock on Dave's left. It would be really so convenient if he just dumped his phone down there. It's not even a real phone. It's all his imagination. At this point, he wouldn't miss it.

But as much as he'd like to skim past this awesomely disturbing conversation, he doesn't think he can without being an even more enormous douchebag than Typhus himself. Scrubbing at the back of his neck, Dave casts another longing glance at the narrow strait, and then keeps walking. The spit of rock beneath his feet keeps getting thinner and thinner, with less space between him and the widening chasm, and soon he finds himself edging along it with his back pressed to the blue stone behind him, the tips of his toes in their grey shoes curled over empty air. The ground below dropped away really goddamn abruptly, there, and it's starting to make his feet sweat to think about it.

He texts to take his mind off these absurdly nerve-wracking circumstances.

TG: no hang on
TY: What now?
TG: he totally has depression and like
TG: shitty anxiety attacks
TG: trust me he ended up in texas before we even knew each other and ended up bawling all over
my shirt
TY: With [Eye of the Storm] this discordant? I'm hardly surprised he's overwhelmed.
TG: and he nearly passed out the other day because we had to rewatch all that game stuff and everyone dying
TG: hell i think he was even on meds for a while bc his dad had him see a psychiaoh fuck
TY: ...
TG: his dad
TG: made him see a
TG: oh FUCK
TY: You said his father was the one who 'totally fucked him up in the head,' child. I think you begin to understand just how much wrongness I sense bleeding through from the Heir's mind as we speak. The Heir broke himself down by letting that trauma rot the foundations of his mind, and while he was vulnerable, something else crept in.
TY: Something inverted. Something...candy coated and tooth-rottingly sweet, and unbothered by such little things as guilt or madness, because it was already rotted through by nature.
TY: If that creature is what his father introduced to his mind, I fear what it is capable of, with the Heir so undermined.
TY: And so I find myself helping you children out. AGAIN.
TY: I do not get paid enough to handle these glitches for you.

Dave raises an eyebrow.

TG: do you get paid at all
TY: No.
TG: oh
TG: SHIT
TY: Yes, quite. I have begun to take your advice into serious consideration. Who is this Barack and how may I contact him?
TG: fucking a
TG: well technically hes not president anymore because of the whole term limit thing
TG: but chalzana doesnt have the same ring to it plus barack is just classic
TG: and barack just seems like a really nice guy you feel me
TG: like i could definitely kick it with barack
TY: I'm retracting my consideration. I'd forgotten who I was speaking to.
TY: For that matter, why are we discussing this when you should be seriously concerned about your fellow player's well-being?
TG: because its what i do
TG: fuck dude
TG: i am concerned about john like 24 7
TG: but do i show it like a squishy dweeb hell no
TG: you bottle that shit up and sell it in a six pack of apple juice for fun and profit
TG: like for example while youve been doing your whole expository shindig
TG: i have been getting so much shit done
TG: so much
TY: What do you mean?
TG: here ill send you a pic

Dave sidles around the last curve of the tiny cliff, and steps out onto the wider rock shelf that opens up past the gap. The gorge on his left spreads out and merges into the wide, circular valley below.

And at the center sits a palace. Pipes the color of lead run out around it in all directions, over the wide expanse of an empty moat that surrounds the teal and grey structure. Six larger pipes rise up straight above the palace itself, reaching toward the clouded sky, with an arrangement of curvier,
shorter pipes splayed out behind them. It looks like one of those huge ass pipe organs you'd see in a fancy old church, and the entire palace is the windchest and console.

Nothing's wrong with Dave's memory, either, because he definitely remembers this set-up from the weekend horror movie spree. The only difference is, in those tapes, the palace had recently been flattened, whereas this one is clearly intact.

TG: wasn'tthisplaceblownupbyameteorsomethingearlier.jpg
TY: Did...did you just send me a purely mental image of my mindscape using your imagination powered communication device from within my own subconscious?
TG: yeeeee
TY: Skaia have mercy on us all. I'm not really awake, am I. This is a logistical nightmare.
TG: youre welcome
TY: But at least you have arrived at the nexus point. I would invite you down deeper to my humble abode so I could welcome you face to face, but then I might not be able to resist the impulse to devour you.
TG: uh
TG: metaphorically right
TY: No. I sleep, and when I wake, I wake hungry. The Seaswallower and I have that in common.
TY: Now. Come. You must ascend one of the tallest pipes to reach the Heir.

Okay. Awesome. Dave is all about ascent.

But first, he needs to figure out a way down into the valley. It takes him a good two minutes of swearing and griping under his breath before he finds the steep, switchback trail carved into the side of this new cliff face, and five near-death experiences before he manages to recklessly flashstep his way to the bottom. The closer he gets to the palace, the less dirt there is, until he's padding along on solid plates of dense blue rock.

He starts to get a better idea of the scope of this stupid palace when he reaches a point where his trajectory crosses paths with a horizontal lead pipe - and he realizes it's as tall as three of him. He parkours the shizznit out of it, and then flashsteps along the broad expanse of the upper curve of the pipe to cross the rest of the rocky ground and the moat. The teal pipe organ looks way more intimidating from in its shadow than it did on the high cliff, and Dave has to take a moment to sit down and rub his temples before he can work up the energy to start scaling the outer rampart.

John had better appreciate this shit. Because Dave is never gonna let this one go. The things he does for this kid, honestly.

Thankfully, this castle looks like it was put together by someone with a really shitty grasp of how battlements are supposed to work - or maybe combining a palace with a pipe organ just didn't work out unless you mashed them together in the least defensive way possible. Either way, the gabled roof of a covered walkway stretches right from the outer wall all the way to one of the two central pipes, simple parapets rising up at intervals on either side, so Dave is able to run straight to the pipe without trying to navigate the rest of the maze of a palace.

Oh yes. He is the boss ass ninja. This is a cakewalk.

TG: okay im at the pipe now what
TG: just climb this shit
TY: First. Look up.
TG: uh

Dave looks up. And oh, wheeeeee - aside from the fact that there's hundreds and hundreds of feet of
smooth lead pipe rising overhead (how the hell is he supposed to parkour *that*?!), he can also make out, up ahead, a break in the cloud cover.

But the sky's not empty. Instead, there's a flat blue spiral star thing rotating around in midair high above the tops of the pipes, spread wide and flowering as it turns like a massive pinwheel.

TG: isn't that one of those spiraljiggerypokery things you use to get to the next level
TY: Spirography. They serve as gates, or in this instance, the mental representation of gates.
TG: oh hell yes i am so good at this game
TY: But this one, as you can see, has been blown wide open.
TY: The Heir is near it still. I can sense his agony. If you scale the pipes, you should be able to reach his hiding place in the passage between our minds, and haul him back into his own mind to deal with his problems. If he thinks he can simply take refuge in my sanctum because his own is compromised, he has another thing coming.
TY: Or you could just fly. I promise not to hinder you. Too much.

Dave rolls his eyes.

TG: hell man i couldn't fly even if i wanted to
TG: flying is overrated
TY: You can't fly?
TG: nope
TY: But you are in the god tiers. I can sense it.
TG: nothing doing
TY: This is a mindscape. Simply imagine yourself flying and it should be so.
TG: lol lets not and say we did
TY: I fail to comprehend why not.
TG: so does your mom
TY: Why are you like this?
TG: you mean my sparkling personality
TY: Everything about you.
TG: an emotionally stunted childhood spent training in the art of being hells of awesome will do that to you
TY: ...
TG: ...

There is a low rumble, and Dave freezes in place, spooked, until the roof of the walkway stops shaking underneath him. When he looks around, wondering if he's about to be eaten by a giant snake monster, he sees that an absolutely *miniscule* section of the pipe has slid out from the rest of the metal, forming a tiny spiral ramp no more than a foot across that wraps around the pipe, presumably leading all the way to the top.

TY: Start climbing. Irritation makes me hungry.
TG: im doing it because i want to not because you -
TY: DO IT.
TG: im going im going

Dave starts walking. He is keenly aware that at any moment the ramp could slot right back in with the rest of the metal, but the refreshing thing about being a mental avatar in someone else's head is that it really frees you up from worrying about little things like dying. Even if Dave can't quite shake the instinct that keeps him hugging the pipe. The less of him hanging over the edge of the goddamn abyss, the better. That's just common sense.
TG: dude what the fuck
TG: im about to plummet to my doom here there are no hand holds on this giant ass pipe organ
TG: jesus fucking wept theres no way this is osha compliant you need guard rails on this shit
TY: Don't make me come up there and do this myself.
TG: yeah yeah like youd actually help
TG: and not you know eat people
TY: I am being the model of self-restraint right now. I have two players wandering around in my mind, completely at my mercy. Don't push it.
TG: i feel like you and the bq would get along like a house on fucking fire doused with accelerant in the middle of a drought
TG: gods honest truth
TG: i didnt think anyone could top her for pretentious helping but not really helping cockery
TG: and yet here we are
TY: I take commission work from the agents of Derse all the time. It's how the game works, child.
TY: Of course, Queens are eternal, while I must respawn for each new game. We always manage to work something out though.
TG: but you remember the shit that happened last time
TY: A scratched game is not a new game. It is simply recycled.
TY: I do wonder though...something is off about that...
TG: if something else is wrong dont tell me
TG: i dont even want to know
TG: im getting john and im getting the hell out of here
TG: no more goddamn tangents
TY: Hmm. I simply wonder where all those troll players ended up. They were a rather indiscriminately violent bunch.

By this point, Dave is about a quarter of the way up the pipe, and he's only made it this far in so short a time because he's spamming his flashstep pauses, chaining them as close as he can manage when he doesn't have the space to access his timetables. It still feels like he's inching along. Worse, his texting speed apparently slow to a goddamn snail's pace when he's busy trying not to fall to his doom.

TG: wait
TG: you know about that
TY: Obviously.
TY: I at least had the fortune to end up with a Breath player who listened long enough for me to pose the Choice. He didn't take it, pressured as he was by his fellows, but we got along amicably enough until they went on to the Battlefield.
TY: He never did make it very far in his maturity arc, though, and he cannot hear me now. My mind seems to be linked only to the Heir.
TG: do you remember shit about what went down when the two sessions collided or whatever
TY: Well, yes. Duh.
TG: oh my god
TG: i cant believe we dont have time for this
TG: i need to get john theres no way we can talk this out
TY: What do you mean?
TG: the queens ditched the session early and the recording we have goes all staticky and shit before we can see why we even scratched it to begin with
TG: john cant remember for shit for reasons that are now really fucking obvious
TG: either because his dad didnt want him to or all this [Eye of the Storm] fuckery
TG: but you
TG: random monster dude
TG: you remember what happened
TY: It would be rather hard to forget. I've dreamed of it often as I slumbered.
TY: It was all incredibly fucked up.
TY: But hush, child. You are almost there.

That's a bit of an overstatement. Dave can only wonder how much of his antics Typheus is aware of right now, because he's still got another quarter stretch of pipe between him and the top.

He has to stop looking down because his palms are starting to sweat, too. Like, sweat for days and days. So much sweat. Good lord. He puts his phone away as much for its own safety as for his own self-preservation, and only takes it out again when, feeling like twenty humid Houston summer days just combined their powers into one to direct a beam of hot terror at him, Dave precariously hugs the lip of the rim of the pipe and pulls himself up, his fingers aching and stiff.

He's gonna be fucked up about heights for days after this. This shit ain't right. Clearly there's a reason why he got the nice hot lava land and John got the place with all the stupidly tall structures.

TG: okay
TG: okay fine
TG: im at the top of deaddrop supermurder pipegorge
TG: where is john and his gigglemug
TG: what do i do now
TY: Now would be a very good time for you to recall how to fly.
TG: no
TY: It's that, or I use my own mastery of the Breeze to lift you up on high.
TY: But you are not a Breath player, and it has been riled into a frenzy by that candy creature wreaking havoc in the Heir's mind, so it might eat you as soon as aid you.
TG: will you stop threatening to eat me goddamn
TY: It's very early. I am supposed to eat players who come too early.
TG: i pick option three
TY: There is no option three. You have a Choice between two options. The number is two. Not three. Now shut up and pick one.
TG: hell to the no put that significant capital letter back where it came from
TG: were not making this some weird ass game choice nonsense
TG: just make your mind palace a little taller that cant be that hard
TY: I told you, I'm not helping any more than is strictly necessary, and I'm certainly not meddling with the structure of my own mind any more to suit your fancy. I just want the two of you out of here so I can go back to sleep.
TY: You players got yourselves into this mess - now go get yourselves out of it.
TG: omg
TG: im gonna die
TY: Somehow, I doubt even mind death would stop you from pestering me.
TG: i would haunt the hell out of you
TG: you in particular
TG: because of this unhelpful shit right here
TY: JUST FLY.
TG: no f u

Dave stares at the spirograph overhead, and gulps. Again. Three times. For a moment, he rises up onto his tip-toes, dangerously close to the outer rim of the pipe - and then he hastily snaps back down, his stomach coiling and uncoiling in hot, nervous tension that even he can't pretend isn't anxious terror. His face stays perfectly, contemplatively smooth, and that's all he can really ask for at this point.
Where is Rose when he needs her? Hell, why isn't Rose the one here instead right now, instead of a useless jackass like Dave who can't even fly? He is like. The least qualified person to be doing this whole leap of faith thing right now. Who signed him up for this garbage?

Shit. Goddamn. He signed him up for this garbage. Past him is the equivalent of 70 mph of speeding idiot in motion, and Dave is the one paying for the speeding ticket.

TG: okay fuck it
TG: i dont have time to dick around trying to remember how to fly like a total asswipe
TG: do the windy thing
TY: Really?
TG: dont you dare make me second guess myself this shits already sketch as hell
TY: Honestly, I thought you'd choose to fly under your own power way before now. I can't believe you walked all the here, for that matter.
TG: shut up lets do this before i lose my nerve
TY: Very well then. I shall speak the sound of the wind as a breath. Be ready.
TG: im so ready
TG: born ready
TG: bring it on
TG: lets achieve some unreal air
TY: Stop that. This instant.
TY: The Forgelord should never have indulged you. The next time we meet, I am giving him such a thrashing.
TG: thats my denizen dude right
TG: bet he could kick your ass
TY: On the contrary. I would kick his ass.
TY: I have no ass for him to kick. My victory in the contest is therefore assured.
TG: oh come on
TG: ass sured thats so goddamn blatant im telling john his denizen is a pun nerd too
TG: you dont have feet either though
TY: Step into the organ pipe, before I just shove you off and watch you fly on your own. It could be a learning experience for you. So very tempting.

Dave looks down at the lip of the pipe opening beneath his feet. He's got three feet between him and the wide, echoing pit that leads down into the belly of the palace, and like shit is he getting any closer. It almost twice as bad as looking over the outer edge on account of it's twice as dark down there, and he has no idea where the pipe leads other than probably within ten feet (give or take) of giant snake mouth. This is some Chamber of Secrets bullshit that he will have no part in.

TG: i thought you said you werent going to eat me
TY: I'm not. Probably.
TG: then why am i jumping down into the unspeakable darkness of the bottomless pit
TG: i am not the heir of slytherin
TG: this is not hogwarts
TG: this is windy hell
TY: I'm not even going to ask.
TY: The wind is coming up to you through the pipe. You have to step into it before it passes you by.

A low murmuring has begun to resonate through the pipe. The metal hums under Dave's feet, and he eyes the opening with even more pantshitting trepidation.

TG: you sure there isnt a third option
TY: Fine. The third option is I eat you.
TY: What a wonderful Choice. I should have introduced the third option earlier.
TG: ahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha
TG: hahahahahahahaha
TG: hahaha
TG: ha
TG: lmao
TY: Jump now, disingenuous child.

The pipe begins to rock and shake in earnest, so that when Dave raises a foot to take a cautious step toward the hollow center, the earth itself seems to roll. He nearly topples over backwards instead, right back the way he came. Arms pinwheeling, he wobbles for a too-long moment - then, heart pounding in his chest, he manages to fling himself forward so he falls at the pipe's opening. It's not the most graceful maneuver he's ever pulled, but hell, when has he ever been graceful?

For three white hot seconds, he's sure Typhheus was shitting him, and he's actually about to plummet down however many hundreds of feet below the surface this pipe might lead. But he at least has the fleeting sense to shove his phone back in his pocket and grab his shades with both damn hands as he falls, because he has the best survival instincts, ever, alright? Obviously. Ninja-like reflexes, right here.

Then the dark blue wind roars up to meet him, reeking of wet metal and just the faintest hint of eau de gasoline, buffeting him right back out the mouth of the pipe and on up into the sky.

At least when John's flying you around places, you feel like the wind's actually trying to, you know, make an effort not to drop you. This feels like riding the leading edge of the tempest in a pink plastic Barbie Jeep, except Dave doesn't even have the Jeep. It's just him and the wind and his cuddly knight pajamas and oh my god if it spins anymore he's gonna hurl. He doesn't even care what Rose says. He is going to make mind vomit happen. It's going to be his legacy.

[There. Is this so bad?]

"THIS IS TERRIFYING," Dave screams. Then he blinks. "Wait, we could have just been talking this entire time?!

[Well, yes. You just seemed rather attached to that communications device. This is my mind. One method is just as expedient as the other.]

Dave can't even try to fix his gaze on the spirograph anymore. He's almost there, and the wind hasn't dumped him to go to prom with the popular kids yet, but if he stares at it any more the nausea's actually going to get to him. "God. Fucking. Dammit."

[It's just as well this communication is purely mental, anyway. In reality, I speak a language understood only by my assigned player. Telepathy is always an option, but it is annoying.]

[Nice fall by the way. I can appreciate a well timed fall. It is almost flying.]

Dave flails. He thinks it gets his point across. "That wasn't a fall, that was me leaping into the jaws of death like the graceful goddamn gazelle that I am."

[Really, though, all you have to do is just fall and fail to hit the ground. Flying is really quite simple if you think of it like that. Some clever mortal wrote a treatise on the subject, but for the life of me, I can't recall who.]

Dave can. And it doesn't make fucking sense. "Did you just quote troll Douglas Adams?"
"That's the one! Or perhaps it was troll Shakespeare..."

"When did you even have time to read that if you've been asleep for like actual millennia? Like, do you get vacation days or something?"

[No.]

This isn't even ironic anymore. This is just sad. "Seriously. A union rep. Find one."

[You should probably pay more attention. You are almost to the gate, and past that, I can't guarantee the winds will listen to me.]

Dave rips his eyes open again, nausea be damned, and is treated to a view of the turquoise-and-cobalt blur that is all he can make out of Typheus's mind landscape between all this windy nonsense. "What happened to mastery of the winds?!" he demands, horrified.

[It is why Breath players and I are at odds, ostensibly. They challenge my reign as father and master of the winds, and in retaliation I occupy their lands and wreck shit. It's a living.]

"No, it's not!" Dave yells. Yeah, his shit is officially lost. He's going to have to put up missing posters when he gets back to reality. "You're not getting paid, remember?!"

[Wait. You're right. Even my Grist hoard eventually goes to the players to help fuel the Ultimate Alchemy.]

[There has to be a way to appeal to Skaia about this.]

[Thank you, child, for your words of wisdom, rare and scattered as they may be amid the rest of your babble. I shall sleep for now, and consider better how I might obtain this 'union rep' and contact the great Barack of whom you sing praises.]

"Wait, wha -"

[I wish you Skaiaspeed, Knight. Don't fuck it up.]

And then, with an almost anticlimactic whoosh, Dave is tossed right up through the spirograph.

Almost immediately, Typheus's nasty snake breath ditches him. Which is awesome. So awesome. He gets the feeling that Typheus might not be all that into a repeat visit, and would probably just let him fall to his doom if he flopped right back down through the spirograph. What an asshole. Thankfully, gravity decides to kick in - sideways. He slams up against a wall that seems to leap up out of nowhere, and when he pulls his head away from it, he realizes that somehow, the wall has become the floor. John's mind had better cut out this funky physics changing crap, because Dave's already sick of this.

He looks up, not really knowing what he expects this wind tunnel between John's mind and that of his asshole denizen to look like.

The checkerboard slopes of the Battlefield stretch out before him.

"John," he mutters, pushing himself upright. "You're so fucked up."

-

The worst part about John's head, Dave thinks, is the amount of shit lying around that is clearly designed so that you need to be able to fly to get around it. It's discriminatory, is what it is.
Somewhere else in here, he's dead sure that Karkat is thinking the exact same thing. In fact, he feels a remarkable sympathy with the troll right now. If he ran into Karkat at this very moment, he thinks he might even understand what might have possessed his future self to hug him.

And the higher he goes, the more the winds tug at him, yanking on his dumbass cape every chance it gets to try to toss him back down onto the floor of the Battlefield.

It's not the whole Battlefield, at least. As near as Dave can tell, this is just a thin, tiny strip of land, longer than it is wide - and even then, it's maybe the length of two football fields, tops. A channel between Typhues and John - that just so happens to be full of wind and checkerboard flooring. Dave's still trying to figure out how he might have missed this entire part of his weird transition from John's mind to the denizen's, but all he can really remember is getting swept up in a cloud of wind and dirt. He definitely must have fallen further than he thought. However the fuck that works.

Anyway. Right now, he's just aiming for the highest point, a thin, tapering conical hill that rises up at the exact midway point between the two spirographs on either end of the tunnel. The clouds overhead have turned dark and ominous again, and the higher he climbs the more wary Dave becomes of lightning.

"Almost there. Come on. Do not - oof! - fall." The wind wraps around his ankles and pulls, and Dave snarls and kicks until it lets go. There's nothing solid for him to kick, but hell, it seems to get the point across. "Piss off!"

He figures that if nothing else, at the top of this hill, he'll be able to survey the rest of the territory, and get a better idea of where to look for his dumbass next. But he doesn't think he'll need to look much further. The clouds overhead are churning in a definite circle that just so happens to center right over this exact hill, and while Typhues's breath seems to have fucked off into the distance, the regular wind streaming through the tunnel snarls and tangles up in a wild snag around the top of the hill, like this is some kind of magnetic pole for wind shit.

It's got to be John. Dave doesn't think he can take any more of these climbing Olympics. If this doesn't pan out, he's just gonna sit his ass down and wait for Rose to come and find him, like he should have done in the first place. Half because he's 120% done with life right now, and half because he's completely winded.

Christ on crepes. John must be in the vicinity. Dave's punning again. He staggers up on top of the hill, batting away the next wind that spirals around his head, and sags with such unfathomable relief that professional seafarers could sail around it for a thousand years and never goddamn fathom it. Because John is here. He's just passed the hell out in the middle of a bed carved out of the rock with the wind tousling his cowlick-riddled hair, wearing his dorky ass regular hero costume instead of god tier pajamas and to all appearances oblivious to the fact that while he's been napping, Dave has been suffering.

"Oh thank god," Dave wheezes, nearly bending in half as he grabs his knees to brace himself and catch his breath. Mind-Dave clearly isn't as totally in shape as regular-Dave. "John. John, you stupid dork, get up. We're so out of here."

No response.

No response is not what he wants to hear. He wants to hear a cheery, perky, 'yes sir, Dave sir!' because after all this bullshit he deserves to have something go his way for once. He looks up, frowning exhaustedly at John, who hasn't moved. "John. Up and at 'em!"
John's face doesn't even twitch. Another veil of wind careens past them, but while Dave has to brace himself, John just lies there like a rock, untouched. Even the little breeze messing up his hair tears away and joins the rest of them in working the cloud above into a froth.

"...John?" Dave repeats. He steps toward the bed, all his apprehension coming back in a rush when John doesn't react. "Hey. Kid. Wake the fuck up," he says, uneasy. "I mean it. This stupid bed thing seems like a really shitty place to take a nap. You know. From prior experience."

He takes another step forward.

The wind slams into him from the side, screaming, and Dave falls and skids, scrabbling at the ground for a handhold with increasing desperation as he gets buffeted toward the edge of oblivion. "John, wake up!" he shouts, digging his fingernails into the checkered ground. But it's smooth and the dirt is just a little bit slippery, and he gets absolutely zero traction. "I will be so pissed if I have to climb all that shit again! John! Jonathan goddamn Egbert, you listen to me right now, young man!"

The wind wails. Dave's too busy trying to army crawl forward to realize, at first, that its wailing actually sounds like words.

EB: no!

EB: i'm not listening to anything you say anymore! leave me alone!

His first thought is oh thank god he's awake.

His second thought is John you dick you're awake and there'll be a reckoning for this.

Because oh hell no. "John, I can hear you, dorkwad! Stop dicking around like a - an uberdick and talk to me!" Dave calls hoarsely, jabbing a finger at John that he should probably be using to focus on not falling off the hill.

But it totally works.

EB: wait, dave? is that you?

"Who were you expecting, Santa fucking Christ?" About two seconds after the words fly out of his mouth, Dave realizes who John would assume would be messing around in his head, and feels like the king of all assholes. His toes try to dig into the ground so he can shuffle forward again, but he finds nothing but air. "Don't shove me off this goddamn bedmountain! Cut that out!"

EB: what?

EB: oh, sorry! i didn't realize you were here!

"No shit!"

The wind drops, flowing in restless loops back to the rest of the windstorm outside the general vicinity of John's bed, and Dave hauls himself back onto solid ground, arms shakier than he'd like to admit as he stands up and brushes off the front of his god tier jammies. That done, he folds his arms and doesn't hug himself, frowning at John. "Are you paying attention to anything that's been going on outside because holy fuck, EB, shit's been crazier than a Walmart on Black Friday, and you've kind of been missing in action in your own brain."

To his disappointment, the John curled up on his bed - and it's not even a real bed, which just makes the whole thing worse; it's legitimately just a stone slab painted to look like a bed - doesn't move. His
eyes stayed scrunched up tight, his fists pressed to his ears, and when he speaks again, he doesn't
open his mouth; the wind just whisper-yells it for him right in Dave's ears.

EB: oh. so you know about my dad and...everything?

"Well, not everything because holy shit has there been a lot you weren't telling us," Dave says,
grumpily edging closer to John. "But it apparently wasn't all that hard for Rose to deduce you were
fucked up as all hell in here." Then, because he's still not over it - "Also, your dad totally shot me."

That gets a reaction. Thank god. John shifts and stirs on his quest bed, his face contorting in his not-
sleep. His enforced shuteye time, maybe.

EB: what?!

Dave nods. "Yeah, and then Kanaya went all 'I have a questionable medical license from the war' on
my ass and did field surgery. Never. Again." Dave shifts in place, his stomach sinking a little more as
John stays passed the fuck out. He wraps his arms around himself tighter, until he realizes it's kind of
definitely turned into this super lame self-hug, and he rips them back down to his sides. "Come on,
man, you have to wake up and shit," he says, reluctantly letting a little more urgency creep into his
voice. "Your dad's kind of evil and that sucks, yeah, but you can't stay cooped up in here forever.
We've got crime to fight and an apocalypse to stop, remember?"

The wind wraps in visible lines of blue around the four corners of the bed, twining and fretting, and
then speeds off again while the clouds overhead clot with lightning that never quite reaches the
ground. Dave has no idea what that means. What does that mean. Someone translate. He doesn't
speak interpretive wind dance. When John finally does explain, his voice has gone bitter and quiet.

EB: i can't go back.

EB: he made me forget stuff, and sometimes he'd spend hours drilling me in his office and in the
basement on ways to hurt you guys if we needed to get away, and afterward i had to pretend to jade i
passed out because we were trying to talk about the game!

EB: then if i thought about the truth it would just make my head hurt until i stopped, so i just kept
forgetting stuff because it made the pain go away longer.

EB: i don't want to go back if all those orders to hurt people are still there. what if i can't control it?

EB: :(

He can hear frowny faces now, apparently. This whole conversation is making Dave feels ten
different kinds of tired. In a really depressing-as-shit sort of way that makes his chest hurt. So they
should wrap this up and get back to Rose and Karkat, ASAP. "Yeah, well, too bad. On account of if
you aren't in charge of you, some shithead who does like hurting people apparently gets to be in
charge of you," he says, scratching at his jaw and feeling fucking ancient. "So nut up, John, because
you need to be all kinds of in the right mind if we're gonna get this worm thing out of your head. It
won't get better unless you fucking try, dammit."

Which must have somehow been the wrong thing to say, because the wind shrieks at him in full
force again, a gale that nearly slaps his mental shades off his face and sets his cape cracking and
snapping in the breeze, tight around his throat.

EB: i'm tired of trying! i forgot everything i could and did everything he said and it just made me
more miserable! and not doing what he wanted just made everything twice as bad. i've been trying
for years, and it never got any better!
Dave feels his sunglasses slide up his forehead again, and he yanks them back down onto his nose, eyes watering as the wind blasts his face. And he lets his mouth run. "Yeah, and I'm so goddamn proud of you for trying anyway," he says, babbling. The last thing he needs is for John to get another depressing word in edgewise, because clearly the kid's been stewing about all this for ages and repeating everything just makes him more upset. "What, since like, you came to see me two years ago? Shit, I can't even imagine having this kind of fuckery going on in my head that long -"

EB: no, longer than that! since rose left! he's been awful since forever, but that's when it all got a million times more terrible and my head wouldn't stop hurting all the time!

EB: running away to you like that just made him mad, and then he took me to a horrible place, and made it all worse...

His heart hurts. It hurts like a motherfucker, clutched tight in a squeezing fist that won't loosen up, and Dave hurts with it because fuck. Fuck everything. He takes another staggering step forward, and the wind wails at him plaintively, without words, which just makes everything hurt more. "That long, huh." He grimaces, trying to find the right words. He's not good at this; it should be Rose here, trying to talk sense into John, or hell, Karkat would be better than Dave at this point. Because John thinks Karkat's the goddamn bee's knees at shooshing and all that calming-down jazz, and who is Dave to argue with John's really bizarre romance choices? "Shit. That's just. Really uncool. Oh my god -" and then he has to snap his mouth shut and clench his jaw against the incoherent noises he wants to make.

He's almost in arm's reach of John, though. If this wind would calm its tits for five seconds, he might be able to drag John off the bed where people tend to bleed out and die. What was this kid thinking, making this particular slice of game shit his secret foxhole? Was some quest death thing really the only place he could think of?

EB: so yeah! i ignored everything that hurt and dumped it where it wouldn't hurt anyone else, but that just looks like it made all the bad stuff stronger. everything's just gone to shit...

EB: i think i'd rather go crazy and stay here than go back.

Dave swallows. Twice. It mostly makes the bile sink back into his stomach so that he doesn't feel like he's about to vomit with every breath. "Pretty sure Typhues, denizen of douchebaggery, won't be down with that," he says, tipping his head back toward Typhues's spirograph. "Apparently you're messing up the wind tunnel between the two of you by hanging around here, whatever that even means. Also, running away never works, dude."

John's hands just mash more firmly down on his ears and his eyes flare blue even through his eyelids. Thank god. He's just sulking, not actually paralyzed.

EB: don't care!

Dave smacks his face. "Yes, you do!" he fires back, trying not to roll his eyes. It's the hardest thing he's ever done to resist the urge, but he does it. "Shit, Egbert, you care more than anyone I know!"

EB: and look what good it's done for me! everyone's hurt or dead and i just make it a bajillion times worse whenever i try to fix it, so i might as well just stop.

Something slams Dave in the chest.

EB: just make

EB: it all
Dave claps his hands over his ears as feedback skates across his eardrums and vibrates through his teeth. The wind that's been talking for John drops, and the air goes dead still, and oooookay that description might be a little too on point for Dave's comfort right now. The feedback keeps climbing in pitch until it's nothing more than a throbbing, piercing whine; when he removes his hands from his ears because they do absolutely nothing to solve the problem, blood is smeared across the heels of his palms. He's distracted enough by the painful sound that he almost doesn't notice how thin the air's getting until he tries to breathe in - and his lungs wheeze, sucking desperately for oxygen that's rapidly dwindling.

[Eye of the Storm] is supposed to deaden your emotions, Dave thinks, struggling to think through the logic of it as he crash lands on his knees. His elbow jars against the cold stone of the bed as he tries to crawl toward John's curled up form. It - it calms shit. Like the weather they've been having these past few days, with the wind unnatural stagnant while huge fricking storms slammed the rest of the state. John's been using it to do shit it's not supposed to, though, so he can forget things and stay the chipper, happy-go-lucky, vaguely paranoid dork that he has always been.

It stops him from dealing with things and moving forward.

It stills breath.

Right now, right this very second -


Well, for one thing, it's stopping Dave, because he's right in the middle of it. Which is probably a bad thing. Yeeeeaaaaah. He should do something about that. Even if his throat feels like it's parched, and his tongue is made of sandpaper, and his vocal cords feel so gritty and dried out that not even the collar can make anything of what he's trying to say.

...Typhesus had better not have been shitting him. Dave pulls out his phone, sucking in whatever he can from the unmoving air, and starts typing. When he's finished, his vision's going kind of splotchy and all manner of messed up, but he thinks he's getting his point across.

TG: john
TG: you can hear this its totally the same as talking in here
TG: i know because a giant monster snake told me so
TG: john open your eyes and look at me dumbass
TG: i cant breathe over here you master dick
TG: this goes beyond ironic usage of uber
TG: this is the fucking max
TG: MAXIMUM dick
TG: fucking tumescent freudian torpedo
TG: oh god
TG: i think im rambling
TG: this is so not the time forf thata
TG: i canstsd even fuckinfk typp anymoe
TG: ha i am the moe kind it mee
TG: y up that
TG: thats som oxygen depvation there
TG: m turnin into a lalon
Yeah, everything's going -

- really fucking blurry -

Waking up is hard. It's hard and Dave doesn't actually know if you're supposed to fall asleep while you're in someone else's head, to begin with. He's trying to think - something about Inception - but hell, that movie was confusing enough while he was fully awake and in the prime of his fucking youth, he's not even gonna try to hash it out when he's on the brink of unconsciousness and probably like half dead inside.

"Dave, wake up!"

"Nnnnh," he replies. He's not sure he could, even if he tried. He used up all his energy just getting here.

There's something warm pressed against his mouth for moment, and then oxygen trickles into his lungs in a cool draft of air. It's enough to get his thoughts moving again, anyway. "Dave?!" the same person repeats.

"M awake," he mumbles. This is a blatant lie, but his head feels like he swallowed a tank of helium and it's about to pop off his shoulders and achieve liftoff on its own.

It doesn't help when this dude starts shaking him, making his head wobble back and force because his neck muscles seem to have fucked off ahead of schedule. Inconsiderate bastards. "Dave, you can breathe! Wake up! Don't die, please don't die!"

"Not dying. Good," Dave repeats back, blearily, because it seems like the thing to say. Then the person stops shaking him and starts crushing him like a goddamn python or some shit.

This isn't fair. He was told he wasn't supposed to die. He's just trying to follow orders here. "Snek. Snehk no," he says, feebly tugging at the arms wrapped around him.

Someone sniffs in his ear. "What?"

"Snake." Wait. That didn't make sense, did it. "Stop choking me out, goddamn."

"Sorry!" And just like that Dave's head snaps back into focus, and he blinks just in time to catch the tail end of John leaning away from him, looking miserable.

But awake. They're both still sitting - well, Dave's kind of sagging to one side, but he's waking up more now and pulling himself upright - on this dumb death bed, but all that matters is that John's up
and his eyes are open, his fingers tangled loosely in his lap as he stares dolefully at Dave with wet eyes and tear streaks all down his face.

Oh hell yes. Mission. Fucking. Accomplished. And Dave didn't even have to die all the way to pull it off. Hell, who needs mind magic, clearly he's already mastered the wizardries here.

Okay. Good. Step two. There's a step two here, right? Yeah. "Okay," Dave says, coughing and shaking his head to shake off the last of the dizziness. "We need to get out of here. We're gonna roll up to your brain and kick ass, alright?"

And John -

Shakes his head.

Shit.

"You can go. I don't even know how you got all the way here in the first place," John says before Dave can whack him upside the head for being a dumb shit. "I'm really sorry about this, by the way. None of you ever needed to deal with my mess." He beams at Dave with all his teeth, brittle and brilliant all at once. "But you don't have to anymore! I'll be fine in here."

And all around them, [Eye of the Storm] wavers in and out of hearing, waiting to settle in again like a keening elegy. Dave can feel it, even without his turntables out. It's not supposed to play forever, but by god, if John wants it enough -

Either John has no idea what he's talking about - or he knows all too well, and Dave can't even contemplate that. He can't. Not if he wants to stave off the hysterical breakdown he can feel waiting for him on the far end of this. His emotional control has always been trash where John's concerned.

Maybe John’s just still not getting it. "Well awesome. Cool. You're fine in here" - it hurts to even say that, Jeeesus - "but do you care that evil John up there already tried to kill Jade?!" Dave says, gesturing useless up in the direction he thinks the real world might be. Which is stupid, because by this point he's pretty sure reality is a pipe dream he's never going to see again. It's just gonna be him and John, motherfucking entrenched in all this awful shit, for however long it takes Rose to come and fish them out. "That should probably bother you. Just a little bit, you know. You don't want to hurt people, but you are."

God, that's a low blow.

"No, I'm not!" John snaps back, and it's the first real anger Dave's seen him show all day. Then he hesitates, his eyes watery and shaky with uncertainty. "...Am I? Is - is Jade alright?"

"Yeah, for now," Dave says, folding his arms. "But none of us are gonna be if you fuck off like this. Not when there's some candy dude running around using your powers to attack people and try to bust out." Even if that evil asshole John gets unplugged when the worm does. Which Dave doubts. Nothing is ever that goddamn easy with them. "Things don't get better if you just check out, bro," he adds, trying for a line of attack that doesn't reek of a guilt trip. John doesn't need Dave getting manipulative, and he's not good at it, anyway. "We know about your dad and shit, so he can't pull this again. You're gonna be okay and we're gonna help, I fucking swear, but you have to be" - alive - "awake to see it."

Talking is hard again.

"I didn't know about that," John says. His face has a sickly sheen to it, and he looks as nauseous as Dave feels as he looks down at his hands in his lap. "I - I knew there was - something, always
laughing at me when I pushed stuff down, and whenever I do the windy teleporting thing, but - " He looks up at Dave, genuine confusion in his eyes. "It actually used my powers?"

Progress. Progressssss. Dave nods, aiming for nonchalant. Control, control, and if he can keep John thinking about this and not going to sleep, maybe he can get both of them out of here with a minimum of kicking. "It talked to Jade and everything," he says, tossing out what details he remembers Rose telling him about. "Told her she shouldn't have knocked your dad on his ass, and started pulling all the air out of her lungs. I don't what the hell you've got floating around up there right now, kid, but you need to lay down the law or it's just gonna grow a mind of its own."

Personally, from all of Typhus's muttering, Dave's wondering if evil-John might not already qualify as having a mind of its own. John's so far off in his own little world here, Dave thinks the denizen might actually know more about the state of John's head than John himself. Something with a mind of its own, following all of the Dadbert's fucked up orders and using John's windy thing to pull them off, laughing all the while…

"I -" John's voice cracks. The muscles of his jaw are working, and Dave spies another tear thread its way from the corner of his eye. He doesn't comment on it. "Maybe, if I just keep -"

He glances off to the side, eyes going distant, and [Eye of the Storm] wails loud enough that Dave flinches and lunges forward before he can think it through, grabbing John by the shoulders and shaking him right back. "Cut that out!" he snaps, sharper than he means to, and maybe with the faintest hint of panic underlying his tightly enforced monotone. John stares at him, more startled than he should have been; his eyes are burning neon blue and Dave can't think what'll happen if his wind powers swoop in right now. Dave's throat feels kind of heavy, like he's swallowing around blood. "You're just gonna stay down here in a coma for the rest of forever? Because as awesome as it sounds that you can use this [Eye of the Storm] thing to avoid your problems, apparently it's like putting butter on bacon. 'Fuck yeah' in theory, 'you done fucked up' in practice."

John shakes his head, his shoulders trembling under Dave's hands. He digs his grip in until John sits up straighter, trying to shrug him off. "I - I don't know…"

Just keep talking. "Cause that's kind of the impression I'm getting here, man," Dave says. "Typhuck-ups over there made it pretty clear that you're not supposed to be using it this much." He swallows. Again. Three times. "And - And shit would be pretty goddamn desolate without you, bro. Since you're, you know, kind of a big deal around here."

"Not really." John's lip wobbles, and somehow ends up in a crooked smile that doesn't fit his face. "When you think about it, most of what's happened has been my fault in some way or another. Because I'm so useless and my head's a mess and I couldn't even remember to warn you all about my dad."

"That's not even negative ten percent true -" Dave starts to say.

And then he remembers. Stupid of him not to from the goddamn start, but Dave's not good at this shit at all.

John's probably never believed all their pep talks, his or Karkat's or Rose's, when he's been in the worst throes of his depression. He just buried it deeper so they'd buy it when he said he understood. Whenever his agony flared up, he'd turn to one of the three of them, so that the other two never knew all the times he might have broken down.

Just. He just needs to get John out of here, out of this corner he's backed himself into. If he has to drag the kid back into his head kicking and screaming, he'll fucking well do it, but the important
thing here is, he can't push John into stopping everything again. No matter how shitty it feels to let John wander around thinking he's useless, Dave can't do shit about it here and now, where one wrong word could push John over the edge, silently shutting everything down on his way into oblivion.

Out of the wind tunnel. Deal with the nega-John. Get everyone out of John's head in time for dinner before something else can go wrong. And after that, they can worry about actually getting John help for this crap - without Dad Egbert around to undo all their work ten seconds later.

A totally godawful plan occurs to him. Since no one's around to spit out something better, Dave is once again left to his own devices. So he swallows whatever useless thing he's about to say next, and grabs John's hands instead. "We're ditching this shit, my man," he says, totally firm. John blinks at him. "Come on, we've gotta go drag Karkat out of the comic book section of your frontal lobe, or whatever."

"Right. Karkat," John says, closing his eyes and biting his lip. "And Rose. And Jade. And you," he adds, last of all, eyes opening. Tired and sore, but not watery anymore.

"And me," Dave confirms, clamping down on John's hands until his knuckles turn white and his nails dig into the kid's palms. Keep him grounded, keep him here. "Like, do not even sweat this one. Watch, we're going to get out of here and Rose will have probably solved all our problems, like, ten minutes ago. The woman is a psychoanalyzing god."

John laughs.

Relief rolls through Dave like a cool wash of air. "Then you and Karkat can go and, I don't know, splurge on Batman hentai or whatever it is you two do together in your mattress den of iniquity and papping," he adds, rolling his eyes. "Jade'll show up and probably try to watch it with you because she doesn't know any better."

Another irrepressible giggle, and John has to yank a hand free to cover his mouth with it, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Dave, no."

Ha. Dave yes. "And it'll be fine," he says, with a note of finality. "It's fine if you don't believe me right now, but we're going to make things better. You're never gonna have to deal with this shit alone again."

John rubs at his face with that free hand, the other still clutching Dave's right back. "You promise?" he asks, desperation still underlying the humor in his expression as he hiccups.

"I swear. I swear," Dave says, and then - hell, he can't think of anything to swear by. Nothing that wouldn't be meaningless or bullshit, anyway.

He should have just let it go at that. But he also should have known that the game would never pass up the opportunity to provide the words he can't put together on his own. The phrase just presents itself like a whisper in his mind, not pushing or anything. Just there. Dave's the one who seizes it and runs with it, because it feels right. "I swear to you," he finishes, a song finally clicking into place in his mind with enough weight to counteract John's broken song's warbling. "I swear by my sword."

He's too distracted by John smiling at him genuinely to hear the name that whispers in his head as the fraymotif begins to, quietly and discreetly, tick and tock like a second metronome. Someone else with more experience has to inform him, later on, just what he set into motion at that moment.

[I Pledge Myself To Thee]
Also, in his defense, Rose has the worst goddamn timing. Dave, as the dude of Time, is uniquely qualified to say that Rose's arrival basically tops the list of worst timed entrances in the history of all man and trollkind.

Mostly because she should have been here ten minutes ago, dammit.

"I could make a quip about the remarkably unsubtle phallic nuances of that last part," she drawls out of fucking nowhere, "but I think they should be self-evident by this point."

"Rose!" John exclaims, his face brightening even further.

"Rose," Dave says, wondering just how fast he can sprint from here back to Typhereus's gate, "not fucking everything is about dicks."

"Au contraire, brother dear," Rose says, floating down toward them in a cat's cradle of blue wavy lines. It takes Dave way too long to realize that the winds knotted up and circling around in the sky overhead have started to filter away and flow off in all directions. The lines that unravel from around Rose when she touches down on the checkerboard hill are some kind of visible wind that proceeds to loop around them in darting flicks, investigating Dave's cape with intense interest. "Freud's theories can be as discredited as the scientific community likes - phallic symbols and Freudian slips are forever."

In times of trouble, at least Dave can always remind himself he's not the single most fucked up person in the Strilonde family complex. He'll always have Rose. Even if he's pretty sure that, judging by her smirk, she's just doing this on purpose to mess with him. She wins the snark gambit. For now. And probably for the rest of their lives, if Dave's honest with himself. He can't hope to beat Rose in a snark-off. She's just the goddamn best there is.

"The Breeze informed me that you were here with the right John," she goes on, smooth as anything, while Dave is still too busy facepalming. "It's good that you found each other down here - things have been shifting and altering so much in other areas of John's mind that I'm not surprised we were separated as easily as we were." Her eyes flick from John to something past them - Dave doesn't need to follow her gaze to know the only thing in that direction, aside from a bunch of random hills and trees, is the gateway to Typhereus's mind. "John, how are you?"

Dave winces. John's smile flags, but it doesn't vanish. "I am," he says, shrugging. And if Rose looks confused for a moment, Dave at least has the context to catch onto something quicker than her for possibly the one and only time in his life. "And this is -" he breaks, as the breezy blue filaments finish sniffing around Dave's cape and whip over to flow and prance in front of John in agitated loops.

BE: you are in suuuuuch trouble, mister!

BE: how dare you stick me down in the dark when you needed me out here?!

BE: now all the rest of the wind's gone topsy turvy and the wrong john's got his creepers in it.

"More talking wind," Dave says. There's a tug on his cape, and when he looks down he sees one last blue line stuck around to keep tangling up the hem. "Nothing surprises me anymore."

"You're the Breeze," John says, quiet, and this time Dave catches the capital letter. John's smile completely vanishes; he just looks grave and exhausted. "I think I always tried to forget you could talk."

BE: wow, rude!
BE: you're lucky i still like you better than the other one~~~

BE: and that the sleepy dummy is awake now. right?

A low rumble.

[No.]

BE: oh, okay then.

Rose catches Dave's eye, but he doesn't even need to read her lips to know she's mouthing 'Typhheus?' He inclines his head just a fraction in a nod, and her eyes sharpen as she casts another considering look at the far end of the tunnel. But like hell is she talking them into some kind of field trip into Lala Land to visit the giant snake monster. Are snakes phallic symbols? Dave doesn't even know what to think anymore.

John looks rattled, but Dave's still got one of his hands in a deathgrip, and he squeezes until John gives a little shake and jerks out of it, meeting Dave's eye gratefully before tugging his hand free and turning his attention back to the Breeze. "I'm sorry," he says, with the kind of simple sincerity that gives Dave hives to think about. Never admit to something when you can talk around it, that's his motto. Which is why he'd like to pretend the last fifteen minutes or so were a group hallucination. "I can't promise I won't screw up again. But I guess - I guess I have to keep trying, regardless!"

Dave tries to find anywhere to stare at that isn't John or Rose. He finds a nice cloud overhead shaped like a Ferrari - or no, a tank, that's - yeah, no, that's the Batmobile. Damn John and his subconscious hero brain.

BE: trying is good.

BE: as long as you don't stop and decide to lock me up again!

BE: or next time i won't be so helpful and nice!

BE: right?!

None of them have any idea which of them the wind might be directing that last question to - John looks just as baffled as Rose and Dave. Then -

[I don't care. Leave me out of it.]

BE: right!

Now John is starting to eye Typhheus's door curiously and no. Dave is putting his foot down. "Alright, alright," he says, snapping his fingers until everyone looks at him. Even the Breeze. Which doesn't have eyes. Christ. "Come on. Let's jet. We still have a rogue Karkat to hunt down before we deal with jackass-you, remember?"

"Right!" John says, nodding, and he finally hits that note of energy that Dave's been trying to shove him towards, the depression and apathy and exhaustion easing away as John hits on something that motivates him enough to bust through them. The Breeze reaches out to lift him before Dave's even registered that John's swinging his feet off the bed, the wind lifting him up off the stone in one fluid motion. Dave scrambles to stand as well, his cape swinging the wrong way until he raises an eyebrow and looks down to see that stray line of breeze ducking out of sight and billowing the cape in what it seems to think is a great hiding place. Eh. Whatever. "Where is Karkat?" John asks, and both he and Dave look to Rose at the same time.
Rose bites her lip.

Dave already knows he's not going to like what she says next.

"He's with the other John," she says, like that's not exactly the thing she said to avoid most of all.
"I'm not sure where."

And -

The metronome keeping track of how long they've been in here ticks at Dave, making itself all too painfully known.

Tick, and all the color drains out of John's face.

Oh no.

Tock, and the Breeze reaches out to wrap around Dave and Rose, too, insistent and rising with alarm.

Oh, shit.

Tick, and there's something Dave's forgotten, something so small but so important -

"We need," John says, "to go. Now."

But then they're racing towards the gate back into John's mind proper, and the thought flutters out of Dave's reach.

Tock.

---

Karkat is absolutely fucking useless before he has his morning coffee.

His head has been buzzing all morning, like someone filled his thinkpan with bees instead of brainmeat. He had some fucking unhinged dream last night, but like fuck can he remember what it was all about. He just remembers that it was long, pointless drivel that somehow involved persnickety assholes playing make-believe games for infants and acting like fucking freak-out weasels on methamphetamines. It makes him want to roll his ganderbulbs right out of their sockets just thinking about it.

He figures it's probably just a severe caffeine-deprivation headache, which would be easily remedied if John would hurry and get his ass to school already. With his patience quota for the day busy pole-vaulting its way into the event horizon of a supermassive black hole, Karkat taps his foot in growing exasperation, glancing around the mostly empty hallway. Off-handedly, he wonders where everyone else is - by now, the hallways are usually swarming with sorry motherfuckers and juvenile assholes trying to balance their oh-so-important social lives with the need to elbow their way through the mob to get to class on time. That annoying table those two girls set up for donations has finally been removed, thank fucking god. Karkat can't even remember what they were trying to scam people out of money for, anymore, he just knows they've been clogging up the flow of traffic and generally making his life ten times more hellish than it needs to be for way too fucking long.

Seriously, something about New York? Were they trying to get a bunch of culling-grade imbeciles to fund a trip to New York City for them? Fuck, there are no words even in Karkat's unparalleled vocabulary of obscenities for how little he cares. The only reason his pan won't stop buzzing about it
is because John is taking his sweet fucking time getting here. Karkat levels a scowl that could peel paint at the row of lockers across the hall from him, eyes the echoing stairway, and shoves up his sleeve to get a look at the time on his watch.

...Aaand of course, his watch face chooses now of all fucking times to turn fucking demented on him. He must have scratched it up or smashed it in the car on the way to school or something, because he can't make heads or tails of it.

![Image of watch face]

For that matter, was that the design the background has always shown? He could have sworn it was just a plain black watch face with a Batman symbol in the center. Fuck, he can't be assed to care. He hardly wears this thing anyway. The piece of shit is overdue for a slumber party with the rest of the trash in the can, obviously, and he'll just have to rely on his phone.

Before he can grumble and take out his phone - more to try to text this dumbass than to check the time, by this point - a familiar giggle echoes in the empty spaces. Karkat's claws curl up before they reach his pocket so he can fold his arms to glower at the stairs again, just in time for a familiar head of dark hair to bob into view. It doesn't even register as odd when John comes floating down the hall. Why should it? John's always fucking floating. "Hellllooooooo~!" he says, bouncing in wide arcs so that his toes barely skim the floor, his eyes a pale but twinkling blue. "Hello Karkat! Hello hello!"

John has the unique ability to sound like the audible personification of a smiley face. Not some weak fucking :) either. These are XD levels of maniacally chipper. A weaker troll might have caved in the face of such undiluted jollity.

"Fuck you and everything you stand for unless you have coffee on your person, John," Karkat says, squinting at the distinct lack of a thermos in John's hands. He's tempted to ask what the fuck John was thinking when he put his outfit together today, but Karkat has his priorities. Whatever possessed John to wear white pants, a black shirt with a pink smudge in the center, and a pink, long-sleeved flannel, Karkat can wait to hear about them until after he has caffeine flowing through his veins.

John's grin just widens another fraction, and the dumbass presses his hands to his cheeks as he looks Karkat up and down. "I'm so happy you're here!" he exclaims, squirming like a wriggler on a sugar high. "Karkat Karkat Karkat! Hello~!"
"Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time," Karkat growls, turning back to his locker one last time. He's left it hanging open; most of his pictures and notes tacked to the inside of the metal door have gone missing, but he thinks he recalls taking them down to clear the space for new pictures. The old ones had gone ratty and tattered with age and wear, anyway. There's only one book inside the hollow, and that's a little odder. He could have sworn he kept a few textbooks in here overnight, but it would be so fucking typical for him to have left them at home for some idiotic shitwipe to shred with their big, meaty claws.

Who?

Anyway, at least he won't have to lug all that shit around with him all day. Karkat takes the last book remaining to him and eyes it critically. The cover's faded and smudged, to the point that he can barely read it. But it looks like it's one of those moronic For Assholes series books, anyway, so he doubts it has anything to do with his classes today. God, it couldn't even have been a Harlequin novel?

"Yeah, there's just a wide open slot in my sylladex for that," Karkat mutters, mostly to himself, as he stuffs the book away - where is his backpack? Neither he nor John have any kind of carrying apparatus on their person, which means the chances that John's forgotten his coffee have just skyrocketed into the upper atmosphere. Anyway, Karkat puts the book away wherever books go when you captchalogue them, and feels it lock into place with a tiny thud.

He has more important things to worry about, like rounding on John, who has bounced on his toes all the way into Karkat's personal bubble, grinning like a loon all the while. "Please tell me you have something coffee related," Karkat says, his headache needling him in a concentrated buzz just behind his forehead. "How am I supposed to get through another day of devastating sorry motherfuckers in our lax and underfunded education system without chemical assistance?"

John blinks, and tilts his head to the side. He's still smiling, but with a more speculative glimmer in his eyes, his mouth pursing ever so slightly. "Don't worry, silly!" he says brightly, rolling up onto his toes and veering dangerously close to a collision with Karkat while they're both standing still. "School's already over, remember? That's why we're heading out now."

There is a moment where the world lurches, and Karkat knows in the pit of his stomach that something has dislodged, rotated, and slotted itself in the wrong place, and his mind has to scramble to adjust his weight so that the floor doesn't just drop out from under him like a Jenga tower. A
hypnic jerk that almost snaps him out of the place between waking and dreaming. "I - fuck - I don't remember going to class," he tries to explain, the whirring static between his ears rising to a hum. There's something right there, on the tip of his tongue - if he could only put words to it -

"Memory's overrated. And booooring!" John wrinkles up his nose, and then darts in, hooking his arm with Karkat's and dragging the troll back down the hallway. "It's probably nothing to get too worried about though. Maybe it's like the inverse of déjà vu or something. Presque vu~!" John squeezes him around the shoulders, rubbing his cheek against Karkat's. And if that's a little more handsy than Karkat is used to dealing with in public, fuck, it's not like anyone is around to see. No wonder the school is dead, if he's somehow skipped right to the end of the day.

"It's not like anything important happened today, anyway!" John continues, his face still pressed close to Karkat's. He smells off - like he dumped multiple bags of sugar into the tub and bathed in it this morning, almost caustically sweet. There isn't even a hint of chlorine, so he must not have gone to swim practice.

...Piano practice. God, what the fuck is Karkat on today? John doesn't swim, unless you count the way he likes to wade into the lake by their houses and soak his pants through in the name of stupidity. Usually after school he stops by the band hall to practice on the studio piano with a tutor.

And that's why Karkat was waiting for him, despite the fact that school has - presumably - been over for long enough that even the teachers and janitorial staff have cleared right out.

All of this is so much more obvious in hindsight. Maybe he temporarily passed out while leaning against his locker, and that's why he feels like nothing adds up.

Karkat snorts. "You think school is so boring the spongecells in my thinkpan dedicated to today just decided to chug a liter of bleach and commit suicide en masse?"

"It could happen!" John laughs, bumping Karkat with his hip and looping his other arm around Karkat's neck so that walking becomes even more of a fucking trial. "Ahhhh~! I'm just so glad to meet you at last! Best! Day! Ever!"

Karkat rolls his eyes. "I see you every fucking day, you dipshit," he points out.

"It's not the same thing!" John insists, adamant, as they float down the stairs. Karkat gropes for the floor with his feet, but John only sets them down when they reach the first floor, oblivious to Karkat's scowls. "This is such an exciting day! Such a sweet, sweet, sweet day! And you're here, which was a surprise! But a good one! That makes it sweeter! Wheeee~!"

"You're stringing words together, but all I hear is 'hello, Karkat, I've finally gone fucking unhinged, please go on without me,'" Karkat says, shaking his head. John is still doing his best impression of a limpet mine, plastered along his side, so Karkat kind of ends up knocking him into shaking his head, too. John being John, the dumbass just giggles and does it right back with twice the force.

At least the constant contact is slowly but surely wearing away at the buzzing edge of Karkat's headache; even at his most annoying, John is soothing to be around. Probably because his unique brand of moron distracts Karkat from less endearing forms of moron before he can get too worked up about them. "Also, you reek of a cane sugar mill," he adds, sniffing again. "What, did you roll around in a bucket of molasses this morning?"

John pulls his head away from Karkat's cheek to stare at him, smile momentarily traded in for an 'o' of astonishment, his eyes wide as saucers. "Karkat," he says, breathlessly, looking at Karkat like he's the second coming of troll Jesus. "That is such a good idea! You're a genius!"
"No, it's a stupid fucking idea, you sugar glazed fuck," Karkat replies, rolling his eyes again as another wafting wave of saccharine goodness assaults his nostrils. He's seriously considering perforating his snout with a culling fork just to drown out the pure sucrose with a handmade nosebleed. He may never be able to use sugar-related metaphors for moirallegiance ever again because this just isn't worth it. His mouth opens so he can inform John of this unfortunate turn of events, when his wandering eyes spy, just over John's shoulder, a true abomination that proceeds to force itself upon his retinas.

It's in the same spot as that tacky pep rally flier someone posted a while ago. Good riddance, even if this one makes less fucking sense than ever. With the kind of scumlicking shitwipes who populate this school, Karkat wouldn't be surprised if this turned out to be some 'edgy' viral advertising campaign for the latest pathetic attempt at an anime club. The whole thing has that distinct air of weeb. Or maybe irony.

Irony. Why did he think that?

"Sugar glazed," John repeats. His eyes look different when Karkat finally recalls his own wandering ganderbulbs from their attempt to roll their way into the upper atmosphere. The pale blue of John's irises has mostly been swallowed up by the dark of his pupils. "That's a good one~! Ooh, I need to steal it!" John squirms again in delight, rocking back on his heels with his forearms still looped around Karkat's neck, gazing at him with dark-eyed fondness. "You catch on so fast, Karkat! That's why I love you!"

"Yeah, I love you too," Karkat says, the last of his pseudo-coffee-craving induced irritation sloughing away like old skin as he closes his eyes. It feels like it's been an incredibly long day, though he can't remember much because it passed in such a bored blur, but just being around John tends to make things more bearable. Even if he is bouncing up and down like a hopbeast hyped up on stimulants, nudging and jostling Karkat with fluttering fingers on the back of his neck.

He notices when John's hands move to cup his face. But Karkat's slow to react, so his eyes are still closed when John mashes their mouths together. There's too much force; even with his mouth shut there's a jarring, painful clatter, and Karkat's teeth slice up the inside of his lower lip and the side of his tongue before he can prevent it. John huddles up against him, floating up off his toes, and they tilt backwards until Karkat stumbles and slams his elbow and the back of his head against the wall. His ulnar nerve twangs and by this point he's disoriented enough that he finds himself frozen in place, his mind short-circuiting in fits and starts as he stares at John's too-close eyelashes and tries to figure out what the fuck is happening.
The taste of blood is what finally cuts through the buzzing fog in his head, as the cuts in his mouth seep and he swallows a mix of blood and saliva, still too startled to think of healing them the way he usually would. John keeps kissing him and presses closer, warm and humming in a way that would almost lull Karkat back into a sense of pacification if it weren't for the fact that John licks, and Karkat's teeth scrape along the inside of his lip again, and the jolt of pain wakes him right up out of his daze. John's hard to budge when he puts his mind to something, but Karkat gets his claws up and shoves anyway, until John finally seems to get the fucking hint and unwraps himself from where he's plastered himself against Karkat. He blinks at Karkat quizzically, tongue darting out to run over his own lips.

If Karkat thinks about it too much, he can taste the faintest hint of something sickly sweet where his lips press together. "That's enough of that fuckery, I think," Karkat says, licking at a cut instead so that the awareness of his own blood keeps him focused. He feels vaguely out of breath, in a way that makes his stomach turn. "Seriously, what the fuck, John, give a guy some fucking warning before you go off like a rocket propelled lip magnet."

"But you said it was okay. I remember that!" John says, pouting and making a face at Karkat. "You started it! Youuuuu~!"

That's - Karkat almost remembers that - but when the hell did they have that conversation? Where were they, for that matter? The details keep skittering away, back into that buzzing whine he can barely think around.

And his eyes go past John, just over his shoulder, to see that the sign has changed -

Karkat feels his eyes widen a fraction as cool terror trickles through his thinkpan, but he bites down on his tongue, deliberately this time, until blood's all he can taste. "I did say that, didn't I," he says, not entirely sure if his teeth are tinged red or not as he forces himself to look away from the poster and back at - John. "I don't fucking know who took a shit in my thinkpan today. I can't remember half of anything."

John's pout vanishes in a fresh grin, his whole face lighting back up with disquieting speed. How the fuck did Karkat miss that? "Ahahahaha! Silly goose! You should have just said so~!" He moves again, and Karkat almost flinches and elbows John's outstretch hand away before he forces his arms to stay locked to his sides, letting John hook their arms together and start bobbing back down the hallway again, whistling cheerily all the while. "There's no need to worry; everything is just fine and candy!"

"Dandy," Karkat corrects.

John giggles, and shakes a finger at him. "No, candy! Come on, you were doing so good before!" His head comes down to rub against the side of Karkat's again, occasionally brushing against the nub
of Karkat's near horn. "Maybe we really should get you some coffee!"

Karkat seizes on that. "Yeah, coffee sounds fucking fantastic right now. We should go do coffee. Right. Fucking. Now."

And halle-fucking-lujah, John nods, a dreamy smile rippling across his face. "Yes! Coffee is soooo great! I'm sure there must be coffee in here somewhere in this dumb place...We can find it while we wait!"

Karkat still can't pin down just why he feels kind of sick. That poster - okay, what the fuck was up with that poster? There's no way some random asshat could have painted over the original words like that and then run off down the hall, not in the short time Karkat had his eyes closed, and definitely not without him hearing it. And okay, so they need to seriously work on John's pale make out technique, because that went past amateur hour and into the realm of the borderline unsalvageable.

But now that the buzzing headache has eased off, replaced by the red sharpness of the blood he keeps flowing from the still-open cuts, he is struck by the sense that something is wrong. Wrong enough to make him want to rip his arm away from John and bolt out the nearest window.

His suspicions that he's somehow managed to strand himself up a shit-filled creek with a leaky fucking raft are only confirmed when he sees the first puddle of oil. Correction: he's looking up at the ceiling, and over the tops of the lockers, trying to figure out if he can vault through one of the thin windows that run along the tops of the walls without literally tearing himself a new one, when he notices one of the ceiling tiles dripping. The panel itself is splotchy and pitch black in some places, soaked through with the weird black oil, and when Karkat follows the fall of a gloopy droplet of this shit, he sees that it's joined a pool just off the center of the hallway, tiny ripples spreading out from the center and lapping at the edges of the puddle with each drop that falls into it with a plink. Karkat can make out the stink of gasoline when he takes a long sniff.

"- and then we can make pancakes! With chocolate syrup and maple syrup and whipped cream and - Oooohhh nooooo~!" John exclaims, in the middle of his chattering about coffee and, from what Karkat can tell, literally every single sugary baked good under the sun. He could have sworn John was big into healthy eating, though. Just another detail that doesn't add up, that sits ill in his stomach and makes him wonder just who the hell he's walking with.

When he chances a quick sideways look at John, wary, he sees that the pink-clad kid has slapped a hand to his cheek again, outright frowning at the puddle of black oil the floor as though it has personally offended his taintchafing majesty. "Not again," he says, with a shake of his head. "Why couldn't that idiot have cleaned up after himself before he ran away? What a loser!"

Karkat can't help himself. "Yeah, because that's the right response to have when our schools starts spewing accelerant out of bugfuck nowhere in a stellar impression of a fire hose," he says, snapping more than he means to. The last thing he wants to do right now is piss off John when he's not entirely sure what's wrong with him.
John clucks his tongue, and a breeze springs up, skulking around their ankles before John whistles it over to the puddle. "Well, he kind of sucks at cleaning, anyway!" he laughs, his unnatural good humor reasserting itself as he watches the wind float around the oil spill. "If he's going to leave it lying around everywhere, I call dibs~!"

"Dibs on what? Arson supplies?"

"Not a bad idea!" And while Karkat is still reeling, trying to yank away from John in disbelief but trapped by the iron grip on his arm, John whistles again, and twirls his finger, and the wind stirs up a cloud of sparkles and rainbows. When it clears, Karkat can only stare at what the oil has become.

Oh god.

What

the

fuck.

"See?" John says, pressing his lips to Karkat's jaw. "All better!" When he pulls away, his eyes linger too long on Karkat's face, and then he starts laughing. "Oh my gosh! You should see your face right now!"

TaB soda isn't pink, it's fucking cola. It's definitely not a pink, syrupy goop with a glossy finish. As John yanks Karkat into motion once more and they sidestep the new puddle of pink liquid, the smell of burnt sugar rises up and stabs its way into Karkat's nasal cavities.

Karkat has no idea how John's wind powers could have pulled off that kind of radical transformation. Something is wrong, something is so wrong, and with each moment that trickles by, his heart sinks to make room for more horror.

This isn't John. Unless John has spontaneously developed magical powers based on soda and sugar and - apparently - a penchant for collecting arson materials with no explanation, there's no fucking way the person hanging off Karkat's arm is John Egbert. The hallways stand eerily empty and the posters hanging on the walls are blank and the lockers are all dyed with a fucking rainbow gradient.

How the fuck did Karkat miss that eyesore? Past him is clearly the dumbest bucket of frothing excrement he's ever had the displeasure to be the future self of.

His anguish bladder starts working overtime to inundate his system with dismay fluid, but Karkat grits his teeth against the shouts bubbling up in his mouth. This is a blatant rip-off of their school, that much is obvious now, but that means Karkat has zero fucking clue what might be waiting for them outside. He could start demanding answers from this strangely altered John, but fuck only knows what he would provoke.

He's starting to wonder if he's having one of those fucked up nightmares again. The ones where
everybody dies. But those had all turned out to be about that game -

- that game. How the fucking fuck did he manage to forget that?! And everyone includes Harley and Dave and Rose and - why did he think he was suddenly back at school? How did any of this unhinged rainbow bullshit extravaganza fool him for longer than five seconds?!

Karkat remembers where he is. He's in John's head.

But if the thing walking with him isn't John -

They pass another, smaller splash of black oil. John doesn't even pause before transforming it into a Fruit Roll-Up (Electric Blue Raspberry, by the look of it), humming all the while.

…Fruit Roll-Ups are made by Betty Crocker.

Karkat is royally fucked.


Something does, though, and no amount of flailing or kicking can rip him loose from its stranglehold on his ankle. Instead, the loop hooks around his leg, stretching and twining around the other foot to lock both his legs together, and the winds and clouds rush up to greet him. He sinks through them too fast to fully register the fucking enormous storm as it rumbles past; his face and hands wind up streaked with rainwater anyway, so that when by the time he reaches the ground - too fast, he's moving way too fast - his hair feels like someone dumped a bucket of used toilet water over his head. Then the cloud cover breaks, and he abruptly becomes very aware of the ground mocking him with its supercilious flatness and its inbound trajectory that promises to make a Karkat shitcake out of him.

Naturally, he starts yelling his head off. He manages to drop a few of those choice pearls of invective that Harley was throwing around earlier, god fucking bless her surprisingly imaginative soul. But just when he assumes he's about to leave a bloody smear across the windshield of John's dumb deathtrap of a brain, the wind that's been rushing down alongside him shrieks hysterically, more like a hyena laughing rather than anything sane, and buoys him up so that he wafts gently to a halt.

But his legs are still stuck together. Literally, in this case. He cracks his eyes open and uncurls from his human fetal position, and notices at once that the pink tether has stretched even further, sending tendrils as high as his ribs. When he reaches down, intending to shred the thing with his claws, he gets an unpleasant surprise - this fuckery is sticky, and after two seconds of mentally screaming for hand sanitizer, Karkat realizes what he's stuck in.

"I got you, I got you!" a faint voice sings out. Karkat tries to twist around in place, but there's nothing to see, even when he nearly pulls something in his neck to twist further. He's alone in this fucked up plain of death and misery.

"I got you!" a faint voice sings out. Karkat tries to twist around in place, but there's nothing to see, even when he nearly pulls something in his neck to twist further. He's alone in this fucked up plain of death and misery.

Emphasis on the misery. Objectively, Karkat sees the cracks that run through the dark ground, the huge fucking craters carved out of the earth for the black oil to pool in, but more than that, he can just feel this sourceless ache. It crawls into the marrow of his bones and throttles his bloodpusher, similar to the twinge he feels whenever John's general pitiableness cries out for soothing, but more concentrated. He can barely breathe around it, and his claws spasm as though in desperate want of a cheek to pat.
He's often thought Rose's absence gouged a wound in John's heart, a soft sore riddled with gangrene that never healed over right, no matter how hard Karkat tried to be a balm for it. Well, that was probably because he has clearly underestimated the fucking colossal scope of the problem! John's mind is all one massive gash, bubbling over with whatever the shit this black gunk is. The storm overhead, ominous and barely fucking contained as it is, is somehow the healthiest part of the whole thing, because at least it's not peppered with lesions.

Clearly when they get out of here, Karkat's going to have his work cut out for him. If John's been hiding this veritable shit-canyon of fuckery from him for all these years, they're going to need industrial strength bleach to deal with all the excrement that appears to just now be hitting the fan.

"I got ~ the Karkat ~" that fucking voice sing-songs again, and Karkat twitches, growling as he glances around suspiciously. But the voice seems to be coming out of midair, and he can't pinpoint it. He struggles against the bubblegum with more fervor, his pulse throbbing in his head as the singing continues. "Me, me, mine!"

"I can fucking hear you!" Karkat shouts, and the singing trails off. He digs his claws into the gummy pink rope, but no matter how he tries he can't get a good grip on it. "Put me down, you gum chewing invisible shitsponge!"

When it comes next, the voice is right next to Karkat's ear, and he jerks away from it in shock. "But you are Karkat," it points out. It almost sounds familiar - almost - but it sounds almost two-dimensional in a way that doesn't make any fucking sense. It doesn't sound real. "Riiiiight~~~?"

"Like fuck am I answering that," he says, kicking again. The gum has started migrating again, sending little offshoots up to tug at his elbows, and Karkat looks fucking ridiculous as he holds his arms above his head grimly to prevent them from reaching. By god, if he can't break free from this gummy nightmare, he can at least make it as hard for the bastard as conceivably possible. "Go fuck yourself."

"I think you are!" The voice says, utterly delighted. In a delirious kind of way that makes Karkat wonder how bad it could hurt to just, you know, casually puncture his eardrums with a sickle. "Oh, happy day! You should come visit me instead of that grumpy gills! Yeah!!! The wind can bring you over to my place! We're so doing this. We're making -"

"Don't you fucking dare-"

"- this happen!"

-Karkat doesn't even want to know what kind of shit this fuckbiscuit pulled then. He just remembers his sense of his body vanishing as the wind swallowed him up and started rushing him merrily away, and that was disorienting enough for him to blank most of it out.

Does he even have a body in here? All of this is just John's imagination, isn't it? His mental shitscape or whatever, where all his trauma has apparently decided to set up camp and have a fucking sugar tea party over the wreckage. This crackhappy asshole on happy-go-lucky steroids must have snatched him up, plunked him down in this transparently fake sham of a school, and somehow expected to get away with it without Karkat noticing the difference.

Or maybe he just didn't care.

Karkat's starting to feel woozy again. Wait. Fuck. Is that his mind going again, or is he just nauseous
because this is all so fucked up? He can't tell anymore, which just says fucktons about his competency gauge at the moment. He grinds his teeth as hard as he can, chewing neatly through a layer of skin on the inside of his cheek, and once again the taste of blood grounds him. He thinks it's only because he's trained himself his entire life to be as fucking alert as possible in any situation where he might bleed in public and accidentally expose his hemotype; if he hadn't drilled that into his porous excuse for cranial plates, he might not have been able to snap himself out of this daze.

He couldn't even say what this John's been chattering about. It's just. It's fucking nonstop, a stream of inanities and the occasional disturbing non-sequiturs that, after enough time, just starts to sound remarkably like that buzzing from earlier. Karkat tunes in just as they reach a pastel facsimile of the school's front exit, the doors flanked by giant green statues of ice cream cones. The glass of the doors and windows is frosted in such a literal way that Karkat nearly just vomits on principle. It looks like funfetti frosting, complete with star-shaped sprinkles.

If John has seriously developed some kind of sugar complex because his dad was a traitorous fuckwad who wouldn't let him eat sweets, Karkat will just - just - just lie down in a corner and sit there quietly in a puddle of his own tears, because he can't think of a reaction over the top enough to express his utter disbelief.

"It really is so sweet that you came to visit me," the not-John says as he clicks his fingers, and the wind blows the doors open. "So sweet."

"Yeah, totally," Karkat says in a low mutter. He peers around suspiciously as they step outside - And nearly runs right back into the school. The school was a candy coated shithole, but it was still a familiar shithole.

Outside the school, everything is gold. Skyscrapers tower up on either side - which is kind of a huge problem, because Maple Valley doesn't have any fucking skyscrapers. Buildings in the suburbs are lucky to crack four stories, jesus fuck. The unreality of it is nearly enough to give Karkat vertigo.

"Oh my blistering fuck, where are we?" spills out of his mouth without his consent. Karkat winces when not-John just laughs, rolling his eyes that are the wrong shade of blue and elbowing Karkat in the ribs hard enough to hurt.

All he gets by way of reply, though, is, "Isn't it obvious?" Not-John pulls on Karkat's arm impatiently, stamping his foot, and Karkat trips after him as he starts bouncing along a gilded sidewalk.

Sweet festering grub excrement on a stale saltine. Karkat glances around a lot less surreptitiously, and his blood chills when he realizes that yes, actually, he does recognize the streets and towers around them.

He's lived in Seattle his entire fucking life; he'd have to have shit for brains not to recognize downtown.

What throws him, however, is that everything gleams a burnished, brasssy gold. He wonders for a stomach-flipping moment if they're on the Prospit he's seen in his dreams, but the color's off, too harsh and bronze-tinted, like cheap tinsel. They're standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue, near the cross street with Olive Way, and as Karkat orients himself according to his mental map, he realizes that he can hear the faint, crunching rattle of a massive chain shifting somewhere out of sight. When the thin soles of his sneakers scrape across the road, he can feel the slight bumps of uneven cobblestones.
It's like someone flattened a Prospit overlay on top of downtown Seattle and called it post-modern art.

"Isn't it pretty?!" Not-John asks, jostling Karkat with a look of pure childish delight on his face. He surveys the vomit-inducing scene as though it's cheap tinsel Christmas in city form - and like he expects Karkat to like it, too. "It took me a while to build it up all nice and shiny like this without that Debby Downer trying to drag it down in the dumps with all the rest of his trash, but I did it~! And if he did sulk all over it, I just turned it into happy things instead. He barely noticed! So unappreciative..." Luminous eyes zip back to Karkat, and is it just Karkat's imagination, or are this fucker's teeth...sharper? "You appreciate it, riiiight?"

Oh god oh god oh god. He's so fucked. So fucking. "It's...it's really something else," Karkat croaks, his voice barely more than a wheeze with the tightness in his throat. "Very. Shiny." Particularly under the aneurysm-bursting light of the smiley face sun, high above in the rainbow gradient sky.

Good fucking god.

"Yayyyy!" John claps his hands together, laughing it up again, and this time Karkat recognizes that hyena cackling, the same laughter from when the bubblegum grabbed him. God, he really doesn't sound anything like John, how the fuck was Karkat fooled? "Kissing now!"

"Wait, wha-mrffl!" Karkat teeters and nearly falls over backwards as Not-John shoves him again, and then there are arms looping and squeezing around his ribs to hold him upright at an incredibly precarious angle - or just to try to fucking crush his ribcage into kindling, holy fuck. He has to breathe through his nose, close to hyperventilating from shock, because this fucked up John skips right past face mashing straight to tongue, and Karkat has no fucking clue what to do about that. The threat of sharp troll teeth doesn't really seem to register for this stooge's sugar-coated synapses; his tongue wanders right between them, and when Karkat tries to shut his fucking mouth he just seems to take it as encouragement, pulling away only far enough to angle his lips differently and then dive back in. His tongue drags over the open scrape on the side of Karkat's, and Karkat has to breathe through his nose, close to hyperventilating from shock, because this fucked up John skips right past face mashing straight to tongue, and Karkat has no fucking clue what to do about that. The threat of sharp troll teeth doesn't really seem to register for this stooge's sugar-coated synapses; his tongue wanders right between them, and when Karkat tries to shut his fucking mouth he just seems to take it as encouragement, pulling away only far enough to angle his lips differently and then dive back in. His tongue drags over the open scrape on the side of Karkat's, and Karkat is pressed against him so tightly that he can feel the asshole laugh. Another curl and he's found the bloody marks left by Karkat gnawing on the inside of his cheek and starts lapping at the blood, giggling, while completely of its own accord one of his hands stops crushing the air out of Karkat's lungs and migrates down to grab his butt.

Why this.

Karkat only realizes his mind is slipping again when the buzzing rises to an angry throb - more like wasps than bees. His breathing through his nose has gone too shallow, like he's slowly forgetting to keep doing it, and his vision's going blurry. It's too much and it's too close and his mouth is warm
and full of sugar that's starting to taste like - that's - that's not sugar, there's this sickly sweetness, like warm rotted fruit, with soft bruised skin and fleshy white maggots curled up in rotten flesh, like spoiled meat -

Oh fuck it.

Karkat pulls his knee back and launches it right into this fucker's crotch. Then, when that doesn't get him more than a faint noise of complaint and hips grinding against his own, Karkat just bites. The blood that bursts out around his teeth as he chomps down on Not-John's tongue fizzes unpleasantly, like the sharp crack of carbonation, and when the asshat finally pulls away Karkat needs a second to remember how to unclamp his jaws from their determined crunch. He does manage it pretty much solely out of a desperate need to spit out the too-sweet blood, and it leaves a pink-and-blue pastel glob on the gold sidewalk when he manages to drool the last of it out, wiping furiously at his chin and lips with the back of his hoodie's sleeve.

"Is biting something we do now, too?" Not-John asks, puzzled, not sounding at all like someone who just had a good-sized troll try to shred his tongue with their teeth. He still has an arm around Karkat holding them together, but the one previously located on Karkat's ass (for whatever reason) has moved to inspect the triangular gouges at the end of Not-John's tongue, his fingernail prodding at the pastel, bloody grooves in the meat of his tongue with an expression of bland curiosity. "You are the Knight of Blood, aren't you? I guess that makes sense!" He nods decisively, as though agreeing on something internally, and grins at Karkat again.

His teeth are definitely sharper.

He's been stalling the inevitable because, as fucked up and bizarrely surreal as this whole thing is, Karkat is still trying to tell himself this is John's mind. The thought of hurting John is completely at odds with everything in Karkat's being.

But this is not John. He can wear John's face all he wants, but Karkat's not fucking buying whatever the fuck he's selling.

He hauls his arm back and punches the scumbag across the jaw. Fighting instincts kick in, and before the imposter can retaliate Karkat seizes the back of his collar with his punching hand to shove him again, snags his wrist with the other hand, and spins away, yanking so that Not-John stumbles after him, off-balance. Karkat grabs his wrist with both hands now and bends to toss the fucker over his hip and drop him where Karkat can smash his face with his heel.

Everything goes fine right up until he tries to roll this twisted John over his hip, because Karkat forgot one key thing. His brain is primed for the shithead to drop to the ground and have the air smacked out of him, so it stutters and bluescreens when Not-John stops midfall, bobbing around with his face tilted back to stare up into Karkat's inquiringly.

Floating.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck -

"That was interesting!" Not-John chirps. Too quickly, his wrist snakes free from Karkat's grip and his hand twists to clamp down on Karkat's forearm, squeezing until the bones creak. His - fuck, his arm shouldn't be able to bend that way - "Like going upside down in a loop on a rollercoaster! You're so much fun, Karkat!" He flops over in midair, rising a little to grin right at Karkat's face as he sits upright on nothing but air. "I have something for you!"

"I don't fucking want it!"
"Yes you do! You said so!" With that stunning display of blithe not-caring, the imposter John pretends to reach behind his back - and pulls out a thermos. "Coffee!"

Karkat stares at it in abject horror. "Like fuck am I drinking that," he says, snarling and trying to tug his arm free. "Holy fuck, where did you even have that-"

"I can make aaanything in here~!" Not-John twists Karkat's arm, and when Karkat yelps and has to twist his whole body to prevent his arm from snapping, he sets the thermos in the palm of Karkat's twitching hand. "Duh! I even made it taste better!"

Karkat is going to take a wild chance and guess that means this thing is loaded with raw sugar. It's probably not even coffee-flavored sugar. Just. Fucking chocolate syrup in a can. Possibly laced with amphetamines jesus christ.

He has to get the fuck out of here. So he bares all his teeth in a grimace - and then forces the corners of his mouth to edge up into a pained grin. "Alright then. Fine. Fucking fine," he says, slowly raising his hand to unscrew the lid of the thermos. And thank fucking god, the imposter reacts just like he wants him to, letting go of Karkat's wrist so Karkat can lift the thermos to his mouth, pillowing his chin on his hands and watching Karkat with manically eager eyes.

They make a very convenient target and Karkat is all about convenience. He splashes the entire thermos of - bright purple death water that is not coffee oh my god - right in this fucker's eyes. Then he bares all his teeth in a grin - just fucking nails the sucker with the empty thermos, because he fucking deserves it.

And while the imposter sputters and blinks, pouting in confusion, Karkat runs. He just picks a direction at random - even if he vaguely recognizes some of the buildings around him, he also picks out unfamiliar spires on the horizon as he scans frantically for a landmark to guide him, which means this bullshit replica of Seattle doesn't even have the fucking decency to be an accurate replica.

"Kaaaaarkat!!! Where are you going?"

"Anywhere that's not here!" he screams back.

Not-John pops out of thin air right in front of him. "Whyyyy~?" he says, as Karkat screeches to a halt. Literally. He can't contain his screech of outrage by this point.

"Fuckshitfuckshitfuck," Karkat starts chanting as he hangs a last minute right, launching himself past the gold-covered rendition of a stoplight and down a street that he - does not recognize.

"Does this mean you just want coffee to play pranks on people? I can get behind that!" Not-John says into his ear, his voice surpassing all previous levels of bloodthirsty delight. Karkat throws a sharp elbow out to the side wildly, but all he gets for his trouble is an elbow-full of giggles and air. "Can we kiss again?"

"OH, HA HA!" Karkat slams on the brakes and whirls around, because clearly running from a douchebag who can teleport is getting him nowhere. And sure enough, the imposter is floating along like he doesn't have a care in the world not two feet behind Karkat, and doesn't even have the basic human decency to hide his smug fucking grin when Karkat wheels to unleash verbal Armageddon on his candy ass. "NO!" he yells. When the fucker goes and opens his mouth, Karkat can only assume there's two options, here: either Not-John is about to spew neon blue vomit everywhere, or he's about to say some shit that'll make Karkat want to punch him in the nose, so Karkat might as well not even wait to hear it. "N. O. SHUT UP AND RESPECT MY BOUNDARIES, NOOKBLISTER! YOU'RE NOT JOHN. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK YOU ARE OR
WHAT GOD OF RAINBOWS AND BULLSHIT SHAT YOU ONTO THIS BASED EARTH, BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? I THINK I'LL SAVE MYSELF THE TROUBLE OF CARING. GOOD FUCKING BYE."

Not-John has the audacity to pout some more. "Of course I'm John! What are you talking about, silly Karkat?"

Well, since he was stupid enough to ask - "No fuck you," Karkat snarls, jabbing a claw at him. "You're not John, you dented can of flat fucking soda. Go shove a rake down your chute and take your fucking insulin and leave me alone."

"Awwwww~~~" the imposter sighs, shaking his head. "But I aaaam John! You're in my head, Karkat, isn't it obvious it's me?" He sets his feet on the ground, or a few inches off it, leaning back on his heels and sticking his hands in his jacket pockets as he keeps staring.

Too bad. Karkat's already fucking unnerved; having this asshole leer at him some more is just the icing on the diabetes-incarnate cake. "No. You're not him, fuckface, do you think I'm a complete fucking moron?" Karkat snaps, trying not to make it obvious as he glances around to get his bearings again. Off in the distance he can spy a familiar skyscraper, but his sense of direction is utterly fucked - that, or the building has somehow been transposed five blocks to the north of where it is in reality. Either way, he's screwed. "Where the fuck am I?"

The fake John shrugs, smiling at him bemusedly as he drifts nearer, and that's about when Karkat realizes that his teeth are sharp as Karkat's own. Sharper. Sharp enough to make Karkat's thinkpan throb with a low base level of terror. "You're with me, duh!"

Karkat takes a totally voluntary step back. Or five. He doesn't need to draw blood anymore; whatever buzzing mojo attempted to drown out all his completely legitimate concerns and turn him into a gullible little bloodshitting moron back at the school is completely drowned out by his internal screaming. Yes, Karkat is usually screaming internally by default, but his thinkpan is screeching louder than it usually does, soaring to new heights the longer this creepy fucking conversation runs. "You're not John," he repeats. He tucks his shaking hands into fists. "And this isn't fucking joke-around pranktime, shithead, I want answers and I want them ten seconds ago!"

Not-John chortles, rolling his eyes. "It's always prank time! Don't be a downer, Karkat, we were having so much fun before!" He holds out both hands invitingly. "You don't have to leave soooo soon, right? The fun is just getting started!"

Karkat wants to make his internal scream external. But the internal screaming, not usually very coherent at the best of times, has been reduced to wordless gibbering, so he just lets his shoutlung take the wheel. "What, you think you can just kidnap me and try to make me guzzle liquid fucking saccharine, and everything will be fucking peachy? We'll just braid some fucking hypersaturated rainbow friendship bracelets and use them to jump rope into the electric pink sunset?!"

"These are all great ideas! I'm glad you've been putting real thought into this!"

"THOSE ARE ALL SHITTY IDEAS AND I'M LEAVING, YOU WORTHLESS FAKE SACK OF SUGARY BILGE." By the end Karkat is almost out of breath, unconsciously bracing for his ribs to send up one last complaint - and then he remembers this isn't even his real body so fuck that noise, he's in the free and clear and nobody can stop him. He's a yelling machine with no bedtime and enough rage programmed into him to shriek at the endless void of the universe until fate itself blows off its own ears to make it stop.

Unfortunately, before he can capitalize on his newfound ability to impart a gargantuan serving of
'fuck you' to the world, his plans get put on hold. Not-John considers him for a long moment, head cocked to one side. Long enough that Karkat starts to think he's actually succeeded in breaking this nooksniffer with his incredible display of wit and reason in the face of impossible odds, and might not need to follow up with all the violently florid swear words just waiting to be served up on a nutrition plateau.

But then this beautiful daydream is shattered in the worst way possible.

Not-John smiles.

And claps his hands.

Just like that, Heir is floating in front of him, except *oh god that's not Heir that is the opposite of Heir.*

It's John's face and John's eyes and John's body, and yet everything about him has gone fucking pastel harlequin eyescream. His hair has turned a sandy blond, his cowlicks tossing in a feverish breeze, and his eyes have gone an even paler blue with pink threading through the iris in tiny cracks. He's in Heir's uniform but it looks like someone took a bucket of pale pink paint to it; coral spots pattern his pink jacket, his pants have brilliant pink-and-blue swirling up them like a barber's pole, and his boots, gloves, and all the belts and buckles of his uniform are a pastel shade of baby blue in diamond patterns. When he raises a hand to press to his mouth, laughing harder than ever at the expression on Karkat's face, Karkat can make out sparkling, bright green nail polish adorning each nail but the ring finger, which is watermelon pink.

And with his mask tugged down around his neck, Karkat is still being treated to that absolutely terrifying, toothy grin. Not even the constant giggling and the buckteeth can rescue that smile. "What the fuck," he breathes, not really a question, just a statement of utter disbelief, "Oh fucking - what the fucking fuck-"

"That was getting boring anyway!" Not-Heir laughs, running his fingers through his hair. "I'd hate to ever be boring! Boring is lame, like John is lame!"

Oh god. Karkat is such a fucking idiot. He's completely shit the cocoon here, and now he has to wallow in it like the pathetic herdbeast he is, trampling around in circles into an eternity of smelly stupidity. This thing radiates a surreal kind of horror; worse, even though Karkat would have said the overpowering smell of burning sugar was as bad as it could get, he's now more aware of the faint undertone of rot, thick and sweet and growing stronger all the while.

There has to be some way to abscond. He has to get out of here. Because this thing is terrifying.

"What are you?" he says, fighting to ignore the aftershocks of static stinging his shoulders in the shape of fingers. "I think I of all people would know if John had some vile pink chutestain fluttering around in his numb skull."
"Oh my god, Joooon," the Trickster drawls, rolling his eyes.

Said eyes literally roll. Right out of his sockets. They pop right back in again after a moment of grotesque bobbling in midair, but that's not enough to obliterate the horrific image that just painted itself across the backs of Karkat's eyelids to haunt his nightmares forever.

While he's busy trying not to projectile vomit all over the golden cobblestones of the street, the Trickster starts drifting around him in lazy circles, toes barely tapping against the ground. "Talk about a total stick in the mud!" he says, snapping the band of the goggles hanging around his neck. "He doesn't know anything about aaaaanything! At least I'm self-aware! I'm embarrassed to think I used to be him! Ever since I went solo, things have been sooo much more fun!"

Oh god. Yeah, he threw up in his mouth a little. Gagging, Karkat shakes himself and tracks the Trickster with his eyes, not daring to let him out of his sight for more than a moment. Not even that. "Wow. Fascinating," he says, swallowing frantically because if he lets up he's going to puke instead of yell. "Well, that was a nice talk. I'm just going to duck out before my innate reservoir of deeply offensive grumpiness ruins your bright fucking sunshiny day. I'm doing you a favor, here."

Fuck. Please let that convince this fucker Karkat's not worth the effort. Otherwise, how the fucking hell is Karkat supposed to escape this shithole with some kind of trashbag, insane Heir floating around with his teleportation powers intact. Karkat's never had any illusions that in a straight fight, Heir could totally kick Hemogoblin's ass all over the Seattle skyline, and the thought of an Heir who thinks collecting arson materials is a good way to pass the time -

He thinks it's safe to say that Heir's moral code does not apply here. The inverse, actually.

Rose said that there would be real fucked up shit in here because of the mindgrub having a field day brainwashing John. This is not the form Karkat expected it to take - but at the same time, why is he surprised? He saw the look on John's face when he started choking out Harley for no fucking reason. He just didn't comprehend at the time that it wasn't John looking out -

It was this thing.

"But why? You'll be so much happier here, I promise," the Trickster says, batting his eyelashes. "Even if you went looking for that useless guy, you wouldn't find him; he totally went AWOL and left me in charge! Me, me, me! I'm the one who's the strongest now - just look at how I caught you!"

He laughs again, his grin peeled back to expose all of his teeth. "Trust me, I'm a bazillion times more fun than anything else that could have snatched you up! I like kisses and I can get you presents and stuff until it's time to go!"

Do not ask where. Do not fucking engage. Except - "What, there's other shit in here like you?" Karkat says, horrified. He's been wondering where the sweet fuck Rose and Dave might have ended up, those assholes, but if something worse grabbed them, he feels guilty for cussing them out internally. Kind of. Not really. But he won't chew them out in person later, alright, because he's not fucking unreasonable.

"Mmmmmmm," the Trickster hums, floating around Karkat with his head bobbing, eyes never leaving Karkat's, smile never fading. "The other guys in here? Preeetty lame! Not as lame as John, but so annoying!"

Lame could mean literally anything. "What other guys? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You reeeally want to know?" Trickster John's eyes bug out in their sockets - past the point they normally should have, so wide and bulging that Karkat's stomach turns because he's completely
convinced for a horrid moment that they're going to pop like grapes in a microwave. "Wow! There's all kinds of messed up things in here! All that stuff he never bothered to get rid of - he just tossed it into the back. Like a garbage dump!" Another laugh, harsh and derisive. "The house can have silly Rose, if she's dumb enough to go looking for it. Maybe it'll get the tentacles' attention, and they'll come play, which would be more exciting than anything that lives there now!" A dismissive flip of a hand, and the Trickster's feet roll up so that he hangs upside down in the air, shrugging as he walks around Karkat again. "There's another dude, but he's always sleeping. Not fun at all! He's pretty ginormous, though, so he could probably eat people if he put his mind to it. So who even cares what Dave does - he can't save anyone, least of all himself!"

And that just kind of solidifies it for Karkat, really. Because John would never say those kinds of things; he's physically incapable of thinking of something so callously, openhandedly cruel as that. John would probably believe Dave if that dick told him the moon was made of the curdled milk of irony, hung in the sky by Ambrose Strider himself, and if this imposter thinks he can convince Karkat John would ever call Rose dumb, he has another thing coming. "What the actual fuck," Karkat says hotly, his claws curling into fists. Then he realizes what this asshole said about Rose and tentacles and oh fuck - "And wait, are you fucking telling me there are Horrorterrors in here? Is that seriously the reason John's pan is so cracked?"

"Not real ones," the Trickster sighs wistfully. Like that's actually a disappointment. "Just squishy stuff they left over in our memories, the last time they were here." Then he perks up, his smile secretive and pleased. "But memories have a lot of power, you know! Those guys like eating sanity, and they carved out some nice real estate back there! And then John found it and started shoving things into the backroom, because why not? It was empty storage space!"

This is some cryptic fucking mind fuddlery, and Karkat gets the feeling he only understands a tiny fraction of the implications of this. All he wants to do is defer to Rose and get the hell out of here because sweet almighty fuck, John's worse than any of them thought.

The Trickster's not finished, though. Karkat wonders how long he's been waiting for audience. He seems like the kind of heinously overdramatic shithead who would hate to be ignored. "And then, all that despair and sickness and crazy, all piled up in one place" - a contented sigh - "it was like a candy store. The acid had melted all the foundations, so that all that junk rotted and went sickly sweet. Some of it's still oily and gross, but some of it...helped make me!" He beams.

"And you follow orders from Father Fuckface," Karkat says, feeling kind of like he needs to sit down. Seriously. His ass is probably still planted on the ground in the real world, but his mental self is fucking exhausted and he hasn't even been doing anything.

Another flippant wave of a hand. "Mostly. I used to do it a lot more, but now - well, I listen mostly only when it's interesting, these days. At least it's usually waaaay more interesting than what John wants to do! And Dad can't tell the difference!" Then the Trickster adds, in a loud whisper, "You shouldn't call him that kind of name, though. I like you a lot, but his name is Dad! I'm giving you a second chance because you swear all the time so you don't know any better~!"

"You're insane."

"Yeeees!" the Trickster says. Happily. He actually says it like it's the best news in the world. "Thank you for saying so!" His pupils look like black nickels as he waxes rhapsodic about his personal crazy. "Why be sane? John's always getting so worked up about it, but why bother? If he's stuck on some mopey train of thought, rattling down the rails to where the screaming's unbearable, there's always madness! It's the emergency exit! It's - me!" A blissed out sigh. "And I can do whateeeever I want!"
Well doesn't that just fondle major seedflap for everyone. Karkat wonders what the gibbering fuck Samuel Egbert was thinking, assuming he could control whatever he stirred up in John's head. Maybe, maybe the Trickster would go along with whatever sick purpose the Midnight Crew wanted to brainwash John for - or maybe it would just blow everyone up so he could cackle at the chunky salsa and make s'mores over the roasted bodies.

The White Queen said Breath players were hard to brainwash. Yeah, well, no fucking shit; no matter how these mindgrubs work in theory, of course it all went topsy-turvy in practice. Dumbshit Dad probably tried to program John to be evil, and this fucker took that order and fucking ran with it clear into the next fucking state.

"Now, I have an idea! Since you want to run around and stuff!" the Trickster says, flipping right-side up and scooting closer to Karkat. Karkat backtracks and nearly keels over backwards by tripping on the raised stone of the curb. "Shall we play a game?"

"No, see, I'm pretty sure whatever you're about to suggest is about to go over like a heavily pregnant human pole vaulter," Karkat says, shaking his head. "That is to say, it's fucking not and every doctor in the nation is shocked and appalled at your audacious stupidity."

"We should play a game~" the Trickster says rapturously. "They'll run out of medication soon, and then we can go outside and have fun! But for now...let's play hide and seek! I'll even give you three minutes' head start, since you're a little slow."

...Okay, so this fucker knows about the sedative shortage.

Fuck, Harley had better be on top of her shit today. Like, she needs to be in prime fucking form. If she gets the medication here on time, Karkat will personally prostrate himself at her feet and beg forgiveness for every completely true but usually assholish thing he's ever thought about her.

But for right now -

Three minutes. It has to be enough time for him to run like hell for wherever this city ends. It can't go on forever, and this might be his only shot at reaching Rose and Dave so they can find him and help. Because he has no fucking clue what to do about this Trickster thing.

"Deal," Karkat says. And he spins on his heel and runs.

"Hurray! A game, a game!" the Trickster squeals behind him as he peels away down the street. "A game with Karkat!"

As Karkat seizes a streetlight pole and uses it to round wildly onto another unfamiliar side street, he can hear the cheerful sound of a countdown echoing in sing-song off the buildings around them.

- Karkat stands corrected.

This city goes on for fucking ever.

He loses track of the countdown almost as soon as he's out of earshot of the Trickster, and he regrets that to no end when he realizes, with a sinking bloodpusher, that he's going to need to actually hide. The streets around him remains stubbornly empty, occasionally curving off onto turrets and parapets that are recognizably alien and not any part of Seattle Karkat knows. There are no people, no animals, no cars, no bicycles - there are trees, but they're all giant lollipops wrapped in golden foil with ribbons tied around them, wedged between the stones of the sidewalk at weird angles.
If the smiley face sun in the sky follows the same path as the real sun, he should have hit Pier 59 and Elliott Bay by now. He's not sure why he picked that direction, except he thought maybe the city would end at the waterline - or hell, if the bay was full of water and not maple syrup, he might have been able to swim for it. But the skyscrapers continue on overhead, more than Seattle has ever had, and the streets are dry as bone. Those three minutes must be almost up; Karkat is going to have to pick a building at random and hope for the best.

Fuck. He did not crawl out of the 'coon this morning to play stupid wriggler games with the mental manifestation of all his moirail's brainwashed crazy. One day he's going to learn better and just give consciousness the middle finger when it comes knocking in the morning. Swearing to himself, Karkat races up to the nearest door, and almost sobs when it opens without giving him a hard time. He ducks inside and pulls the door shut behind him, glancing wildly around at the room around him. It's a wide open lobby without much by way of cover - but on the other claw, it's not painted with tinsel. It just looks like a regular old lobby, and Karkat is so fucking alright with this turn of events. His footsteps reverberate as he makes tracks for the next nearest door, set in the wall behind a semi-circular front desk.

He makes it halfway there before the wind picks up.

Indoors.

And he realizes just how he's been set up to fail.

"Ready or not," the wind shrieks in his ears, "Here I come!" The next second, all the wind whooshes out to make room for the Trickster as he teleports in, and Karkat's garbled scream gets cut off as a John-class object tackles him from behind and sends them skidding across the marble tile. "Gotcha!"

At least the fall isn't that hard, Karkat thinks, as he does his best to try to wriggle his way out of the arms wrapped around his waist. When you're being chased by a fucking maniac on a sugar high through the town, it's the little things. Really. But he still managed to jar his chin against the floor and send a canine ripping right into his upper lip, so now he's basically drooling blood all over the tile. Concentrating hard enough to call the blood back and seal it takes up precious time. "You fucking cheated," he says around his swollen lip, reaching to try to shove himself free. "Ugh! Get off me, douchebag!"

"But I caught you!" A puff of air against the back of Karkat's neck, and then the Trickster nuzzles the side of his head, laughing. "What an awful hiding place, Karkat! But it was still a good game!"

"This physical altercation is getting really fucking uncomfortable and it's starting to piss me off now!" Karkat says, spitting all over the floor by accident in his hissing rage.

"But cuddles!" the Trickster protests, flopping down on top of him with hundreds of pounds of dead weight and temporarily knocking the breath right out of him.

Karkat has a response to that. It runs something along the lines of 'I'd rather jump barefoot off a fifty foot cliff into boiling hot water and get served up alongside my useless crab lusus at a five star restaurant in Vegas,' but he bites through his own lip to swallow it down. "You didn't win," he says, instead, with grim resignation.

The Trickster goes still. "Huuuuuh?"

Please work. "Best two out of three. And!" he says quickly, before the Trickster can jump in. "It has to be a real fucking challenge. What's so hard about this if you just use the wind to find me every time? That's too easy and you know it." Inspiration strikes. "It's boring as fuck, you ingrate."
"Gasp! Oh noooo, you're right!" the Trickster exclaims, reeling back. Karkat shoves himself up on his elbows immediately, meaning to take advantage of the moment to elbow his way free, but the fake John pulls him up by his collar until they're both upright; Karkat's too busy flailing to appreciate it. "It can't be boring! That would be terrible!" He sounds almost frantic, but there's still that note of glee in his voice that refuses to fade. Like nothing Karkat says or does could faze him for more than a second.

"Five minutes head start, so you have to try harder," Karkat says, injecting as much of a challenge into the sentence as he can. He tries to pull away from the grip tight on his collar, but the hand there just twists until the neck of his hoodie pulls painfully tight across the front of his throat, and he has to freeze. "Well?"

"Hahaha! I'm still gonna find you, don't worry!" the Trickster says. He wheels Karkat around to grin at him and wink. "But I accept your terms!"

Karkat shouldn't be fooled into thinking it can really be that simple, yet he is. He nods in a jerk and tries to walk away, but the Trickster pulls him back in close and kisses him again before he can so much as demand to know why. Two quick, fluttering pecks that barely graze his lips, so delicate he's almost bamboozled into thinking it's still pale - and then an open-mouth press that forces his head back, the Trickster's free hand raking through Karkat's hair and dragging across the skin at the base of his horns, hard enough that Karkat can feel tiny lines of blood oozing across his scalp. He still doesn't get it until the fake John drags Karkat in even closer and sighs into his mouth with breath that tastes like burnt sugar again - and then, inexplicably, grinds his leg between Karkat's with a whine.

Oh no.

"Mine~" the Trickster hums against Karkat's mouth. The hand on Karkat's shirt collar drops long enough for the troll to yank back in reflexive horror, but it just moves to cup the curve of his waist and haul him in close again. "My Karkat," he says, even as his fingernails dig in too deeply, sharp as claws.

OH NO.

Okay, so apparently, the inverse of John is horny as fucking hell. Horny enough to vacillate on Karkat, straight into the depths of the concupiscent quadrants without passing Go or collecting two hundred boonbucks. Karkat can't even tell if this is flushed or pitch or some mangled human combination of the two.

All he knows is it's making him feel ill to have someone who even vaguely resembles his moirail in the fakest, most superficial way grind up on him. "Stop that!" he says, hoarse, feeling his stomach lurch and threaten to eject everything he has in his mind-stomach up out his chute. He brings an elbow up and jams it into the Trickster's side, but the fucker has wound them too close together for Karkat to hit at the right angle to do real damage.

The Trickster bites Karkat's lip, and unlike this asshole, Karkat doesn't just laugh that kind of fuckery off. It fucking hurts, needle-sharp teeth digging in and drawing blood, and Karkat lets out a strangled yelp as he reaches up to pry the Trickster off - by gouging out his amazing floating eyeballs, if need be. Karkat rakes his claws down across the Trickster's face, cotton-candy colored blood oozing out in the corners of his vision, but the asshole Heir only pulls away a second later, apparently oblivious to the scratch that cuts deep enough into his eyelid that it would scar anyone who wasn't insanity personified. "Five minutes head start," he agrees again, grinning maliciously as he covers his eyes with his hands. "Unless I get bored!"

...Fuck.
Karkat cups his hand over his slowly scabbing lip and runs like hell, shoving his way out the doors of the lobby with his shoulder and stumbling out into the street again. Fuck fuck fuck. He spins around, wondering if he should devote the time to vomiting just to make the nausea stop, and feels the first seizing spasm of a dry heave strain his throat.

*It wasn't John. It wasn't. It's whatever fucked up shit Samuel tried to turn him into. And Karkat can't let this hold him up when he's got five minutes - less than that, probably - to try to find an exit again. He steps backward and has to spin again regardless, dazedly staring up at the buildings around him for some kind of landmark he can work with. But everything's kind of blurry and oh fuck he might be crying a little. He's frustrated and increasingly terrified and alone and the closest thing to his moirail is a douchebag jerkface and he wants John back.*

He cannot freak out now. Can. Not. Karkat drags a claw across the scabs that have finished coagulating in his lip and swallows hard, closing his eyes to make them clear, just for a second -

When he hears the faintest, grinding *clink*.

Karkat's eyes wrench open and he stares up at the sky again.

He can't see it. Not with all these tall buildings in the way. But there has to be a golden fire escape replica around here somewhere - or fuck, Hemogoblin's mastered more ways of scaling a building than Karkat can count.

Because if this is some traumatic mashup of Prospit and Seattle, he can only think of one thing that could make that kind of sound.

- The universe, for once, is in the mood for being pleasant and agreeable. At least as regards to Karkat's wild, blatantly unsupported guesses. This day may well go down in infamy - the one time Karkat got something ridiculous right. If he's not careful, this sweet, sweet vindication might cause his stunted, previously conjectured but never confirmed to exist self-esteem to swell to heretofore unimaginable corpulence. His ego will block out the fucking smiley face sun and he won't even care.

He clambers on the roof of a skyscraper after putting a few blocks of buffer between him and the Trickster. And what greets him, rattling up in the too-clear sky, is an enormous orange-gold chain. Karkat thinks that its anchor point isn't even all that far from his current perch - it's just that the chain rises up at an odd angle, pointing not straight up or towards the sun, but off to the north, before spiraling off in lazy loops that vanish into the sky. If there's a moon attached to the end of it, Karkat can't make it out, for some fucking reason. But that's not his concern.

It's a landmark. And it's better than running around on the ground like a dumb squeakbeast waiting for the Trickster to catch up to him, or hiding in a random building where Rose might not be able to see him. Get up high enough, and he might have longer than these five minutes to hide - the Trickster will be too busy hunting through the city itself to look up.

Hopefully. If he underestimates Karkat. And if Karkat gets high enough that the Trickster doesn't just spy him in the first ten seconds. There are a lot of ifs. In fact, Karkat is about seventy nine percent sure that this is an idea that could win national awards for its unique new interpretation of stupidity.

But hell, if he loses this round before Rose shows up, maybe he can talk the Trickster into switching places so that that asshole's the one hiding instead. When Karkat magically fails to ever find him, *ever*, maybe this fucker will take a massive fucking hint and fuck off back to playing Candy Land alone.
And even better still, this entire city is made up of skyscrapers - however, from what he can see, the vast majority of them are equally tall - the tallest buildings stand out like sore claws, and here and there Prospitian spires and arches jut out from the rest of the pack, but in general the brassy gold skyline is way more level that Karkat usually has to deal with. He can probably just run across the rooftops all the way to the chain, barring any unforeseen pitfalls. There's an advantage to the fact that this place is mostly a duplicate of Seattle only on the sketchiest level - Seattle has a fucking lot of areas where the roofs give way to parks and strip malls.

This time, as he runs, he keeps time by spitting it out in between breaths. One minute gone to his daze on the streets, another lost to climbing up to roof level.

He's not going to make it in three minutes. Please, please let that asshole search the ground first.

The first jump takes him almost by surprise, if only because it's been ages since he actually ran around the rooftops in real life - not since Diamonds Droog beat the everliving fuck out of him, maybe. He's either been in too much pain or stuck out in the science boonies or fighting on the ground rather than going on patrol. But either he's fully healed or his mental version of himself decided that even the last faint pangs of soreness from his ribs weren't worth copying and pasting. He jumps the gap in one smooth leap, braced for a jab of pain on impact - and feels nothing, tumbling and rolling back up onto his feet to start running again without a pause. Then he reaches the raised lip of the end of this roof, and repeats the same stunt, and slowly he has to admit to himself that, at least in John's head, he's almost fully recovered. In fact, fuck that 'almost' noise, he's back in business, here, and no one's going to tell him otherwise when they get out of this place.

This is almost enough to distract him from the fact that three minutes tick by with disheartening speed, before he's even three quarters of the way to the orange-gold chain. Karkat has to detour around a gap that - ha - doesn't manage to fool him, because he sees it coming before he can throw himself to his mental doom and sidetracks around to the roof adjacent. When he glances down, he sees, to his horror, a bubbling pit of that black oil from before has taken up the entire square of ground where the missing skyscraper should be.

He starts watching where he lands and rolls more carefully. The last thing he wants is to slip in that shit if it turns up on one of the rooftops. He doesn't really want to touch it at all. He just focuses on screaming mentally for the Trickster to stay on the ground, stay down. The fake Heir hasn't shown up yet, and Karkat can't feel the winds shifting around him at all to announce the end of the countdown, so he can only suppose that, for the moment, the Trickster is following his rules.

But only for so long as it's still fun. And Karkat suspects the Trickster doesn't have all that long of an attention span when he doesn't have someone else to pay attention to him.

Karkat is so surprised when he actually reaches the chain that he nearly does tumble off a building. Of course. Naturally. Because he wouldn't be Karkat if he didn't almost kill himself by sheer fucking accident at least once a day. There's another gap, and Karkat has to brake so hard he falls backwards, skidding hard in the bronze gravel that layers the rooftop and ripping right through the fabric of his hoodie to scrape his elbow when he uses it to hold his torso upright. He leaves a trail of blood all along the last foot or so, but he can't be assed to call it back into his body - he just seals the shallow wound with what's leftover and tries not to think about how he's leaving an incriminating blood trail on a rooftop - again. Pulling himself up on the raised edge of the roof, Karkat glowers out over the end of the roof, at the gap between him and the enormous orange-gold chunk of metal where the chain hooks to the ground.
Unfortunately, he has also vastly underestimated how huge this chain is. He remembers seeing it in his dreams, but only ever in blood-drenched, moon-exploding passing, and it's - fucking gigantic. Even if the moon's nowhere in sight, no matter how he strains his eyes staring at the harsh glow of the sky, he can't see it from here, so he'd have nowhere to go even if he did somehow scale the outside of it.

Also, climbing is so fucking overrated. There has to be another way to get Rose's attention. Where is that woman? Even with Dave no doubt being the asshole to end all assholes, surely they should have stumbled across a golden city in the middle of all John's blasted, wounded mind. This place has to be lit up like a fucking neon sign. Unless they decided to go look for the real John first, in which case they can accept his sincere approval of their choices but also die in a fire.

"Kaaaaaaaaarkaaaaaat~! Where arrrre you?"

Karkat almost screams. Almost. The voice rings over the city, low and echoing, but - it's not coming from right behind him. He checks, glancing around wildly, but there's no sign of the Trickster yet. No wind shear, either, which is probably a better indication of just how fucked he really is at any given moment.

Either way, there's no doubt that the Trickster's on the move - and from the sounds of it, already impatient enough to start losing interest in winning the game fair and square.

Karkat heaves himself over the ledge of the building and starts inching his way down, using window sills as handholds to drop feet at a time in a haste he normally wouldn't pull off for fear of missing a grip and breaking his leg on the pavement. When he reaches the ground after a nine foot drop that nearly jars him enough to panic about his ankle, he sprints for the huge chunk of orange metal in the middle of the intersection of two streets.
Grooves in the surface of the base let him grapple his way up to the top. But even though it's not that far a climb, Karkat's still sweating by the time he reaches the flat surface where the chain welds to the base; it's more out of anxiety and terror that the Trickster will spy him from the streets while Karkat's back is turned than due to physical exertion, but he's still fucking fed up about it by the time he's able to spot check and make sure he's still alone.

...Well, from what he can tell, the sky is still clear, and there's no sign of a pink and blue nightmare bobbing at the entrance of one of the streets that merge here, so he might still be alright. For now. Which gives him some free time to, you know, ponder the weather, fondly regard the new scab along the knob of his elbow, and oh yeah, wonder just what the fuck he's going to do now. It's just him and this giant nubfucking chain with links the side of houses and all of Karkat's extensive resume of terrible ideas gone by, haunting him like the Ghost of Christmas Go-fuck-yourself.

What a time to be alive.

Just when Karkat begins to think he's going to have to sit there and contemplate the knotted hell of stupidity he's doomed himself to for always and eternity, he realizes he and the giant nubfucking chain and his newly updated resume of terrible ideas are not actually the only things on this stupid block of metal.

There is...a fourth thing. He's not entirely sure what to call it, because it doesn't look like more than a raised hunk of more orange metal. It's not until he squats down beside it and prods the outer rim of it that he realizes it is carved of stone. There's a bizarre symbol on the top that's so close to familiar he can almost taste it. Or maybe that's still the lingering taste of sugar and blood and decay.

Why does he feel like he's supposed to step on it. This is a trap, isn't it. Karkat can very clearly picture himself, in his mind's eye, stepping onto this piece of shit triangle matrix abomination and
somehow being launched into the upper stratosphere like the world's most gullible jack in the box. It's the kind of blatantly obvious setup for a prank he'd expect to find in this nutjob's section of John's mind.

…Wait. He does remember this fucking thing. He remembers seeing it in Rose's house, on the game monitors. Doctor Lalonde had them all installed in that ludicrous mansion in another life, but according to Harley, they don't work in void fields, so the Lalondes must not have been concerned about warding themselves in that weird, surreal other universe with no trolls and dying thirteen year olds. It's a transportalizer.

Which just makes it even more suspicious, really. Karkat sighs through his nose, folding his arms and glaring at the platform.

Oh god. He's going to step on it, isn't he.

"Karkat! Have you been bleeding?" a voice sings out from very close by.

Karkat doesn't even look back - not enough time. Seized by panic, he steps onto the platform and hopes to fucking god it doesn't kill him.

- 

[Wind skims the voids keeping neighbors apart, as if grazing the hollow of a cut reed, or say, a plundered mailbox. A familiar note is produced. It's the one Desolation plays to keep its instrument in tune -]

Karkat can hear the annoying monologue. He just can't tell where the fuck it's coming from, or why it keeps repeating the same sentences over and over again. It sounds like it's being played on a very badly damaged record, skipping and crunching and returning to the first line again and again as he charges up the stairs.

The transportalizer did, in fact, launch him into the upper stratosphere, and Karkat will never disbelieve his instincts ever again. Whenever he passes a window or an area where the wall has been blown up, he can see nothing outside but thick, hazy rainbow sky.

Prospit-Seattle does have a moon in John's mind, as it so happens, but the flossy rainbow clouds outside wrap around it thick as wool. Karkat can see why it wouldn't have been visible from the ground.

"I know you're up here!"

"Faaaaaaahck," Karkat hisses, and he scrambles off the stairs at the next landing, narrowly dodging a pitfall where the floor crumbles away into nothingness.

The problem with the moon is that the moon is still, for the most part, a complete trash heap. Someone must have reeled all the shattered pieces of it together from John's memories of when it got blown to kingdom come, but they didn't glue them back into place. Everything's just sort of...hovering there, in generally the right location, but with huge gouges and thin but deep cracks where the dull, brassly gold doesn't quite form a seam.

And also, the Trickster caught onto Karkat's abscond right off the fucking bat. So now he's being chased around this warren of fallen stairs and empty spires by a complete raving lunatic.

[Desolation plays -]
He realizes he's managed to run himself into a dead end when he comes to an antechamber with the ceiling open to the sky. He rips all six of the doors that lead off the hall open, but each opens up onto a tiny square room with no further doors, all packed with rubble or broken furniture. More than a few earlier turnoffs were full of this junk, too, but now Karkat casts a panicked look over his shoulder - wheezes - and runs around again, closing all the doors as quietly and sneakily as he can before flinging himself through the last one and hauling it shut behind him.

"Shhhhhhh!" he says, before the fact that he just tried to hush a disembodied record player hits him like a week old jug of grubsauce. He takes stock of his options, bloodpusher working overtime so that adrenaline keeps pumping through his veins and wards off the wooziness of what might be shock.

Finally, all he can do is creep around the pile of tarnished bricks and chains that form a lopsided pile, taking up most of the left half of the room, and huddle in the corner behind the rubble. There's a crack in the wall, but Karkat couldn't fit a hand through it, much less his entire body - and, no, yeah, when he presses his face to it, all he can see is the antechamber, so it would just take him right back to where he started.

God, he can't believe he's been reduced to going along with this incredibly fucked up game. There has to be a way out of here -

- or a way to signal Rose.

Or John.

When is John in all this? The Trickster said he went AWOL, which Karkat doesn't doubt - he wouldn't hang around with this asshole, either, and he can't imagine John was in any state of mind to stick around in the wastelands, either. Where could he have gone in his own head? There doesn't seem to be a limit on how much space the Trickster can imagine up for his tinsel town, so if Rose is trying to find John first instead of Karkat, fuck only knows how much ground she's having to cover.

He's going to be trapped in the rainbow candy asscrack of John's mind forever. God fucking dammit. This isn't how Karkat wanted to go.

"What was that? Oh. Youuuu. What is it, Dad?"

Karkat nearly cracks his head open on a slab of rock as he whips around, staring in horror at the crack in the wall behind him. He's ducked out of sight, but he can hear the Trickster loud and clear through the gap.

Wait, fuck. Is he talking to -

Karkat eases up onto his knees and squints through the slit in the wall. He can just barely make out the dull orange-gold of the antechamber... but nothing that isn't in a direct line of sight. The Trickster must still be by the entrance, off to the side.

But Dad -

There is no other voice but the Trickster sighs gustily like he just heard something he didn't like. "Really? And without even going a liiiittle bit grimdark? How dumb!"
Another long pause, like there's another half of the conversation that Karkat is *definitely* not hearing. Or maybe the Trickster's just trying to lull him into a false sense of security by pretending to be even crazier than he already is. Yeah. Somehow that makes more sense than it doesn't.

"She **WHAT**?!"

Karkat rips back away from the crack in the wall and lands hard on his hands, crawling backwards at the sudden, ugly roar that sets his eardrums ringing. He stares at the thin opening in utter horror because that roar?

That was the Trickster.

And he sounded *enraged*. Fuck, he barely sounded *human*.

"How dare it. HOW DARE IT?! It's mine now! My Breeze!" the Trickster says, insistent, his sing-song marred by the occasional snarling *break*. "Mine! It's not allowed to go off and help other people!"

When the next silence stretches on and on, and the only thing Karkat hears is the thumping of his own pusher spasming in his rib cage, he hesitates - and creeps back to the opening in the wall, as slow and silent as he can. Stealth. He can do stealth. On a good night, he is a fucking god of stealth.

He peeks out into the room beyond.

But what he notices first isn't that the room beyond has tarnished further still, the walls encrusted a dull and mouldering brown. No, what hits him first is the rank smell of *decay*. It's tinged with blood, but Karkat can't sense any open wounds out there, nothing fresh.

A loud *crash* and Karkat nearly jumps out of his skin. "Not here~" comes the sickly sweet hum - and then a *BOOM*! This time, even closer than the first. "Not here either!"

And Karkat's skin crawls.

Because the Trickster's blowing open the doors open by one. But Karkat's no longer so blithe about his chances of convincing the evil piece of shit out there to play another round. Not after that abrupt outburst of rage. Another door blows open and Karkat flinches despite himself.

Then the Trickster steps into view, directly across the hall, in front of the door of the room opposite.

He has his back turned, but the change is still evident. Like one last layer of saccharine camouflage peeled away like dead skin, and left behind - *this*. The Trickster's replica of Heir's costume looks ragged at the edges, and the hood has grown longer, trailing behind him and dragging on the floor. Karkat blinks, and the costume is soaked in that thick pink syrup - blinks again, and it's that disgusting black oil from earlier, smeared all over the uniform's jacket in wide streaks.

A thunderous, hollow *thud*, and that door bursts inward. "Nothing again!" the Trickster says, a faint gurgle in his simpering voice.

And he turns to face Karkat's door.
The entire front of his uniform is caked to the neck in dried blood. Karkat's just grateful he can't see its eyes from this angle; he doesn't want to see what they look like now that the candy coating's fallen away.

Karkat's dead. He's so fucking dead. For a moment he can feel unconsciousness rolling in a dull white roar over him, sucking him down into a pit where at least he won't have to look at that - that thing anymore. But he wrenches himself away from the precipice at the last moment, because if he faints now he doesn't know what he'll wake up to.

"You know, I was thiiiinking~~~" the Trickster drawls, way too close for comfort. Karkat clamps his hand over his mouth to stifle his breathing, holding it for as long as he dares while the wind susurrates just outside his hiding place.

[without a course -]

"I was just gonna keep you in here for a little while, until you were happy, too! And then you could go back to your own mind, and we could be happy in real life! And everything would be awesome. But now," it adds, sighing. "I think...maaaaybe...you can just stay in here with me! That way we'll never be apart!"

Oh fucking Christ, just when Karkat thinks the situation can't get any more fucking disturbing.

"Karkat…"

A moment of utter silence. Karkat's nerves shriek at him, but there's nothing he can do. He's crawled back from the opening again, but not seeing it anymore can't erase that blood-drenched uniform from his memory. He clamps one hand around the wrist of the other, claws trembling a little as he digs them into his skin to steady himself.

"You know I can feel you breathing, right?" the Trickster whispers in Karkat's ear.

Karkat's eardrums pop in sharp, bloody bursts.

The rest of the room explodes outward.

[away, afar -]

Rock creaks, and shifts, and subsides with a sigh.

Karkat, hand still clamped around his wrist, opens one eye, half expecting the Trickster to be standing right there, leering at him.

But all that he sees in front of his nose is the new, shattered edge of the floor where it crumbles away into the air below. He's huddled on a tiny splint of rock - and he can feel the wind plucking at the back of his hoodie, so rolling over would be the terrible idea to end all terrible ideas. That last boom seems to have taken most of the rest of the room right along with the door.

On the plus side, that awful droning voiceover seems to have shut the fuck up out of respect for Karkat's new resignation to his own doom.

"Would you like," an equally awful voice asks, cheerfully, "to play again?"

"Karkat is not here right now. Please leave a message after the censorship beep. You fucking
monster," Karkat replies tiredly, closing his eye again. Not worth it.

"Awwww! Are you mad because I caught you?" The Trickster must be putting in effort again, because Karkat barely smells the rot at all as it leans forward in a cloud of sugar and artificial additives, close enough to boop a finger against his nose. "Silly, sulky Karkat."

Eyes closed. Don't think about it. Don't even fucking contemplate the fact that this thing floating next to him could probably pop his lungs like it popped the entire fucking room.

Just. Focus.

That becomes fractionally harder as the Trickster buries its face in his hair, nosing at his ear. And then licking it. Eurgh. "Yes. You should stay here!" it decides, nodding against the curve of his horn. It presses down on him, too heavy a weight for someone who can fly, and Karkat can feel claustrophobia eating away at his sanity. "You're much safer without a body. In here, I can always put you back together if you get hurt!"

Through gritted teeth pressed together so tightly he can hear a faint whine in his aching ears - "Joy to the fucking world."

"Ahahaha, I'm glad you agree!" This time, it licks a trail down the side of his neck. "There's no need to be scared, Karkat! Because I'm just so happy you're here!"

Do not fuck this up.

"You are really either that fucking moronic," Karkat says, opening both his eyes, "or you're just that fucking crazy, and either way you should have still known fucking better."

The Trickster blinks at him. There are new upside down triangles beneath its wide, pale eyes that weren't there before, but Karkat doesn't even have the concentration to spare on wondering where they came from. "What do you mean?" it asks, pouting.

"I don't play stupid fucking games for wrigglers fresh out of the Mother Grubs' slurry-filled pusbubbles." Karkat reaches out and seizes the front of the Trickster's collar, glaring at it with every ounce of fury he can dredge up from the very bottom of his soul. And that's a lot of fucking anger. "Fuckwad. I could fucking melt this entire shithole of a city to the ground just with the pent up fury I've stored up from you running around daring to wear John's face, you vile, sociopathic nimrod."

He sucks in another breath. "You're not him. You're just a nightmare. So congratulations. I'm here to wreck your shit."

Sickles are not a good stabbing weapon. Knives, however, are.

Karkat takes a leaf from both books and stabs the Trickster in the stomach, while his sickle finishes wrapping around the back of his wrist to hook around its throat and slice it open.

All that comes out is more pink ooze. Not a surprise. The Trickster doesn't even really look too bothered by it. "Allrighty then!" it says, rolling its eyes.

Karkat lets the sickle and knife turn back into his own liquid blood, and they splatter all down the front of the Trickster's jacket.

He smiles, and brings his foot up to plant it in the middle of the Trickster's chest. "Bye bye, shittmaggot."

He kicks out and shoves the Trickster away from his spindly rock plinth, closes his fist so that the
blood splashed across the Trickster's front digs into its body as spikes, and then thinks, shoving both his hands flat against the ground - *DOWN*.

The Trickster's shirt goes first, and then the rest of his torso follows; he yelps in surprise as the spikes of blood yank him down along with them, dropping down into the thick, candy floss clouds.

Red fog swarms Karkat's vision instantly, and the sheer effort blinds him for a moment. He keels over, elbow grinding into a sharp splinter of stone, but manages to keep himself on the rock. He almost thinks, over the throbbing pulse of what is probably actually a legitimate fucking aneurysm squeezing his brain into mush from overstretching what his power can do, that he hears a tiny voice.

[no. bind and link and call together. not apart. like to like. blood to blood.]

"Fucking go," he orders, closing one hand into a fist and digging his knuckles into the golden stone. He just wants to drag this asshole down as far as he can. He's never tested how far he can send blood away from the rest of him, but by fucking god, there has to be a loophole here he can exploit. He wants to drop the Trickster facefirst back down to ground level.

But fuck, that might be too fucking far. It already feels like his head's about to explode, and the Trickster's barely gone anywhere, just barely out of sight. The wind's screaming, too, streaming down and splitting the clouds in clear funnels as though to reach down and haul the Trickster back up.

All he can do is *hold* it. His head screams at him and his bloodpusher seems to be having trouble finding anything to push, but he's not bleeding anymore. It's just the phantom sensation of pushing those spikes of blood further and further away, when all his body wants is for him to call them back and draw the wounds closed.

[limitlimitlimitlimitlimit]

Oh, that is such fucking bullshit. Karkat almost passes out from the powerful urge to pull a Trickster and roll his eyes out of his sockets on account of *how much fucking bullshit* that is.

Just. *Hold it.*

He knows for a fact that he loses time right then. Every minute seems to take its sweet time in passing, stretching out into hours that aren't really hours, he thinks, just his thinkpan's way of informing him that he's getting fucked over for like the fifth time today and that's all there really is to say on the matter.

But every minute he's stroking out is another minute he's not having to deal with that Trickster asshole, so good times. Good times.

"Karkat?!"

And now he's hallucinating. This is exactly what Karkat has always wanted. To literally melt his own brain and go out in a fucking head-exploding bloodorgy, complete with the delusion that he can hear familiar assholes yelling at him in his dying moments *oh wait.*

"Busy dying in agony over here," he yells back. He thinks. Hard to tell. He could just be thinking it. What is the measure of a mental shout when basically *everything* is purely mental, anyway?

"Don't be ridiculous, you're not dying," a voice that sounds bizarrely like Rose says, admonishing him. "Probably. What on *Earth* have you done to yourself?"
"Have some respect for my ability to know that I am actually having an actual aneurysm for the first time in my life," Karkat says, groaning at another twitch of agony. "This is a momentous occasion, now fuck off."

"It's not an aneurysm, most likely - John, calm down, he's just overreached himself -"

Karkat does not remember lying down, but someone hauls him upright and - yeah, that's a NO from him, that's not on the agenda today. He starts kicking and flailing but he's still mostly lost in a fog of red and can't aim for shit. "Stop distracting me, you insensitive fucks!" His one palm is still pressed to the rock, but his concentration keeps spinning out in wild bursts, so that one moment he's thinking downdowndown without fully remembering why he needs to, and the next he can't even manage that much.

Fuck. That's a problem.

Arms are wrapped around him from behind, and someone is prodding at his nose and temples, and finally Karkat just cracks his eyes open because not even writhing in a puddle of his own suffering juices can vindicate putting up with someone manhandling his person. He takes a snap at the fingers with his teeth, but Rose just calmly moves her fingers out of the danger zone and flicks him on the forehead.

Rose.

"You fucking useless shitheads found me," Karkat says. This is the biggest surprise he's had all day. Really. Not even Dadbert going evil could beat this. He never has this kind of luck.

"I only apologize for it taking as long as it did. We all got rather held up for a while there." Rose inspects his face, and then nods. Karkat has no fucking clue why she's nodding.

The arms wrapped around him squeeze, and the person behind him sobs, silently, but with Karkat leaning on them he feels it anyway. "I'm so sorry," they say and oh. Oh. That's John. Karkat tenses for a moment - and then feels all the stress rush out of him. He sags backward, raising a hand to pat at the back of John's arm. John smells like a windstorm, which doesn't completely make sense and might just be his imagination, but also doesn't smell like a sugary rotten monster, and that's really all Karkat needs at this point. They've found John. John is safe. Their situation has downgraded from a category five clusterfuck to maybe a category two. Tops.

Dave has to ruin the moment. Karkat can't even be bothered to look around and see where that asshole is; he's just as annoying out of sight as he is if Karkat subjected his eyes to that human mess. "Karkat. Don't pass out. Dude. Is there a dude?"

Karkat lets his head fall back, lolling onto John's chest and feeling exhaustion fall over him like a blanket. If John's here, he can relax a little, but that also means all the adrenaline that's been fueling him starts to seep away. "Oh my fuck, yes, there is a 'duuuuude,' Dave. Now shut up, I'm convalescing and you're a douchebag."

Then he opens his eyes and realizes what he just said.

"Oh fuck."

"Where'd the dude go?" Dave asks, insistent, and Karkat - really can't blame him.

Karkat pulls his hand off the stone and stares at it. He doesn't remember his blood powers cutting off. Maybe he lost too much of his concentration when these three arrived, maybe it finally dropped out of his powers' range, maybe Rose did something while she was poking him -
Either way, he's lost all sense of the blood he used to drag the Trickster down through the clouds.

And the wind is far too still.

"I dropped it," Karkat says, his voice sounding oddly distant to his own ears as he gingerly peers over the edge of the floor. There's nothing. Just the pale, misty clouds, and the drifting fragments of the moon, and a whole fuck lot of nothing Trickster-shaped. "But also, it can fly."

"It?"

Karkat starts scanning the skies around them in a growing panic. He kind of wants to pass out, but the adrenaline's pumping back into his system, and the combination is making him feel vaguely nauseous. But like hell can he fall asleep now. "Fuck. It's still here. It's got to be. That fucker."

"The wrong John," Rose says, but she's got no idea. None. The thing lurking around, no doubt watching them, doesn't get to be called 'John.' It just fucking well doesn't.

Karkat's thinkpan tries to slog through the growing difficulty involved in trying to string words together. John hugs him tightly, shivering, and Karkat musters up the wherewithal to at least spit out the name.

"The Trickster."

---

John is tired.

He's been tired for a while, actually. Sometimes he doesn't even remember what it's like to feel all the way awake. His brain has been humming along for years, trying to balance all the stuff going on in his head, but now he's lost the hang of it and everything's kiiinda gone to shit. He just doesn't have the energy to piece it all back together again the way it used to be; Dave seems pretty sure that using his old tricks would be a dumb idea, and John is, paradoxically, too tired to argue with him about it.

In a way, John kind of owes it to his handler that he's even up and moving at all. It's what he's supposed to do when he gets overwhelmed - he stays calm. He deals with things quietly. He pretends everything is normal.

And sometimes that doesn't work! He's not really all that good at it, actually. It's not perfect, by any means, and right now Rose is throwing him studying looks that tell him he's not fooling her. Not even a teeny tiny bit. But in John's defense he's kind of had a lot on his mind! All this stuff overpowers his better judgment and he ends up panicking and sweating through his bed sheets in the night, kicking them off and determinedly not looking out the window at the wind waiting in the morning sky to snatch him up and away from the claustrophobic mess of his life.

He could just step outside, and all this lying to himself would stop. He can't really think what's stopped him from just flying away all these years, other than force of habit - and the knowledge that for any plan he might come up with to escape, his handler probably has twenty different backup plans designed to track him down and reel him back in.

Easier to let all those orders - to keep his identity a secret, to fly beneath the radar at school, to clamp down and stifle his powers unless absolutely necessary for his hero work - be just another part of his personality, with all the extra fuss and fine print swept away to the back of his mind where he doesn't have to think about them all the darn time. If he doesn't think about why he's ignoring the Breeze's whispers of alarm, it can't hurt him.
Remembering the game didn't help things. So he tossed all \textit{that} junk to the back of his mind, too. In fact, that was one of the first things to go, so early on in John's life that he can't remember when he tucked it away. No need to deal with the pain or the trauma or the heartbeat. His handler even approved of \textit{that} trick, because after that John stopped acting out so much as a kid. He was an awful toddler, always swooping up into the sky and listening to the Breeze's suggestions because he remembered a time when it saved him; after he made himself forget, and stopped remembering all the worst parts where everybody died a lot, he turned out a lot more obedient, actually. They set up his hero identity so he'd have an outlet for the bad times when he couldn't restrain his powers anymore, and settled into routine.

It's an almost seamless system where John can nod along to his handler's lectures, sweep everything back into the part of his mind he's set up to store it and handle it all, and then go about his daily life with his conscious mind completely clear of anything that might trip him up or break him into pieces. The back of his mind takes the brunt of the agony of betraying his dearest friends, but everyone else stays happy! As long as he and his handler stay undercover, John only has to worry about dragging all that hidden shit out to smear across the front of his mind when it's time for a lecture or a report in the study room.

And maybe he still aches inside, a slow-growing, apathetic sadness where he's kind of resigned to being the most useless, awful person on the face of the planet, desperate and fretting and never able \textit{to do} anything about it, but orders keep him grounded. Orders keep him from just bringing the house down on his and his handler's head in the night. He's trapped and it's a nightmare and there's something in his head, something that reinforces the orders and the training with thick coating of slime that sucks him back down into the muck when he starts to fight too hard to be free again. No matter how nervous and terrified he is of approaching his handler after a failure or a fleeting moment of disobedience, no matter how much he wants to fly away to Rose or Dave or Jade and never go back to \textit{that house} again, he always comes crawling back. Smiling. Cheerful. And ready to leave the office and go to school and not let himself hug Karkat for \textit{too} long, though all he wants to do is collapse and never wake up again.

Rose probably could have warned him about the hazards of letting all those bad things compost in the back of his head like manure - yet, how could she have warned him anything at all when John's never told her the full scope of it? If he weren't such a useless, stupid dumb \textit{bluh} incarnate, he could have just ignored all his handler's shitty orders and \textit{told her the truth} while they were still kids, before he got this worm thing in his head and everything became ten times harder as it crunched him into pieces.

No, he had to bide his time and save the last of his will power for just this occasion. His handler's exit strategies usually involve a lot of casualties - casualties that make John scream and scream in the back of his head, slowly losing what's left of his mind as he nods along with plans that include killing people - killing his \textit{friends} - and thinking that he only gets one shot at preventing it. He assumes that if he just shuts everything down, if he cranks up \textit{[Eye of the Storm]} as loud as it can go, then he can shut down enough of his emotions and thoughts that his body won't have enough input to keep moving. A coma is better than hurting everyone he loves, right?

But now there's something \textit{else} in here. Something John \textit{didn't} know about. It leaves a rotting taste on his tongue, like he ate a heck of a lot of Halloween candy and then forgot to brush his teeth for \textit{years}.

And its laughter is so, so familiar.
He underestimated his own madness.

His madness apparently didn't like being underestimated.

"Get them out. Get them out right now, Rose," John says, swaying a little as he floats to his feet. "All of you should go, like, right now."

He needs them out of here. John doesn't know what this Trickster thing is or how it turned up without his noticing, but he knows that the sooner Karkat is back in his own head, the less John will have to worry about him. Rose and Dave don't look nearly so run down, but Dave can't fly on his own so what happens if Rose gets hurt or the Breeze gets distracted, and John doesn't want Rose hurt either and they all need to get to Jade, to somewhere safe -

(where he can't hurt them anymore)

somewhere that isn't his messed up head. John can barely survive in here; there's no way he wants his best friends getting caught up in whatever goes wrong next.

And something will go wrong. Seriously, none of their plans ever work out right. Maybe if you'd asked him ten minutes ago what could go wrong, John would have been able to tell you kiiiind of how this would all inevitably get messed up; and then he'd heard the news that there was a second John running around, which kind of put a new spin on things! There's even a whooole new section of his mind, apparently, one that the Breeze led them to by diving down and around what John would have thought was the very back edge of his mind, only to find this place spread out along the outermost reach of his mind, a glittering golden spot surrounded by oceans of oily muck and clouded with a haze of flossy clouds.

While his mind's been messed up and storming above, this thing's been making itself comfy. Just. Wow. So many new possibilities. All of which fall under the category of 'how this could go wrong like it's going out of style.'

So many.

"Like fuck are we going anywhere without you, you sad fuck of a noodlebrain," Karkat snaps, reaching and digging his claws into John's forearm. "This thing is a fucking lunatic."

But, see, here's the thing! Karkat doesn't seem to notice that his ears are oozing red blood, or at least, he's not making any effort to heal them. Karkat, the blood guy! He glares at the sky around them with a familiar anger that shows no signs of dying down any time soon, but he's also pale, his mouth a bruised, sore red splotch on his face.

Whatever this creepy thing calling itself the Trickster is, it's - it's done something. It's spooked the heck out of Karkat, that's for sure! And if John can't bear to think about other things it could have done right now - well, to be honest, there's a bunch of things he can't bear to think about right now! He could write up a list, but that would involve thinking about all those things, which would defeat the point of very determinedly not doing that.

John shakes his head, and knows just how badly he's doing when the world keeps shifting and spinning after he's stopped moving. Closing his eyes for a moment to try to stop the vertigo just makes the back of his eyelids pulse woozily, and he is seized by the certainty that if he opens them again, something will pop up behind Karkat and grab them both.

He opens his eyes, and all around them, this weird, stapled together version of Prospit's moon glints
like dulled bronze, the cracks where the blown-up pieces don't quite meet wide and gaping. *It killed Jade*, is all his mind can whimper, which, considering this isn't even the real moon, is about as dumb as it gets. "You're not safe here," he says, wrapping his hand around Karkat's claws and squeezing, trying to make his eyes stop rolling and smearing the moon across his field of vision like running wax. "What if it blows up again?"

"I personally vote that we all move our asses in a generally upward direction and peace right the hell out of here," Dave says, smacking Rose's arm until, with a roll of her eyes, she turns him around in midair so he can keep watch. "Including John. Then we can crack open a cold bottle of AJ and wait for all this shit to blow over."

"I second the motion involving the ascension of our derrières. I couldn't have come up with a better plan myself. Well done, Dave," Rose says. "Come on, you two. With Dave and I here, John should have more than enough power to retake control of his conscious mind, at least." She catches John's eye, and there's as much relief in her eyes now as there was back on that windy hill where she and Dave found him. "We're stronger together. I know you can do this, John."

Oh, wow. Oh man. John closes his eyes, and he's not sure if it's because he's dizzy again or because if he starts crying now he's not gonna stop.

Or maybe just on account of, he doesn't know how to break it to Rose that he doesn't have anywhere near the confidence she seems to have in this plan. It's not her fault that John's spent a lifetime hiding how weak he is from her.

"Well, look who decided to wake up! Back to being as boring as usual, you useless dumbo? Or are you just falling asleep standing up?"

John's eyes open.

And what now floats in the air between him and Karkat and the two others is both nothing and everything like what he expected to see when Dave and Rose informed him that there was an evil version of himself running amok in his head while he tried to sleep it all away. He can't look at the harlequin patterns and spirals for too long before his head begins to ache, and he tears his gaze away from the grotesque, gaudy parody of his hero costume.

It has his face. He knows without even needing to look. Maybe it even looks more like him than *John* does, at the moment; the thought seizes him and he coughs out a bitter laugh at the thought that at least this thing can smile, blithe and carefree and whirling like a dervish in the air as it spins to survey all four of them.

"Oh man. That's fucked up. That's seriously fucked up," Dave is saying; he really means it, too, his mask broken so that his eyebrows climb up under his bangs and the corner of his mouth pulls back in a silent 'eurgh.'

"*I told you,*" Karkat points out, shifting in place. John puts out a hand to steady Karkat, but then he realizes that Karkat's angled himself so that he's between John and the Trickster, shoulders hunched and head low as though he's ready to launch himself into a strife at any moment.

Too slow, John's too slow on the uptake, and if this comes to a fight he's pretty sure he's gonna be about as useful as a set of headphones with only one earbud working. He needs to - he needs to do - something - he needs to get them all someplace *safe*, before -

"Stronger together, huh?" The Trickster smiles. "Ohhhh, I get it! You think you guys can beat me if you work together and stuff, huh? How lame~!" Then its smile widens, and it claps its hands
together. "Well, I guess now I know how to beat you, bozos!"

Without warning, the Trickster vanishes in a gust of wind. "Fuck!" Karkat spits, whirling around in a circle. "Where'd the shitmuffin fuck off to now?!"

John looks around too, mostly because Karkat's doing it - his head still feels like a slug in slow motion, churning along five seconds behind everyone else. "I don't know," he starts to say, turning back to Karkat just as the troll finishes a circuit and grimaces back at him.

The moment Karkat faces John, a disembodied hand waves at John over the troll's shoulder. The Trickster finishes swiping into view, right behind Karkat, and John's still frozen in shock as it flashes him a crazed smile and whirs to hug Karkat around the waist. "Sorry, Karkat," it says, yanking the troll right off the slab of rock. "Just in case, you need to go for now! But I'll see you in a little while, outside! We can play some more then!"

Karkat lets out a genuine skree of fury, raucous enough to put John in mind of Crabdad, and shoves his head back, slamming the back of his skull into the Trickster's nose. Goopy pink blood drizzles out and webs through Karkat's hair, but the Trickster doesn't even seem mad as it crushes Karkat in a hug. "Byeeeee!" it says, tossing Karkat away with a merry chuckle.

The sky in this upside down place has been soft and misty; the wind, for the most part, has shifted in slow, drifting patterns. John, too preoccupied with just getting here as fast as he could, hadn't really been able to spare a thought for it.

Now he wishes he had. He feels the flossy winds jolt - and then roar, clenched in a fist that feels totally foreign to John's sense of the wind. Before Karkat can fall - before John himself can even reach out to catch him, or try to exert his own control over the breezes - the winds scream and catch the troll up, yanking him away from the rest of the group with a jerk and into the pale white cotton of the distant sky. "Fuck you!" is the last thing John hears before, with a wrench, he suddenly knows Karkat's gone.

It feels a little like having an organ ripped out of his stomach. Like a kidney or something. Maybe two kidneys. And, you know, his entire circulatory system, heart and all.

"Out, out, out~! Bye, everybody! I'll see you all soon, don't you worry!" the Trickster chants, a twisty blur of blue and salmon pink that makes John's eyes water. It dashes over to Dave next, spinning him away from Rose's side before either of them can react. "Think like a bouncy ball, Dave!"

John doesn't recall Dave having a sword out when he first showed up, but now a broken half-length of jagged metal slices out, aiming for the hands that have gleefully latched onto his other arm. But the winds roar, out of control again, and the Trickster casually tosses Dave into the air, whirling him away into the pastel sky and laughing as it cranes its neck back to observe its handy work.

John reaches out without thinking. Not like he had a lot of thinky thoughts to really spare in the first place, but this time he's even more stupidly mindless than usual as he tries to yank the winds back down, and Dave along with them. Maybe he panics a little, maybe he panics a lot, because not Dave too Dave promised, but with everything else that's gone so horribly wrong, John doesn't think he could calm himself down enough to think things through if he tried.

So when the wind doesn't respond to his frantic mental yell, John feels like he's been dumped head first into ice cold pool water -

And he doesn't have the time to react, either, when the Trickster hits him like a hammer.
Correction - hits him with a hammer, pulled right out of nowhere. It's striped yellow and neon green, even more cartoonishly oversized than Casey with a lollipop spiral in the center of its face. It knocks the air right out of him. John wheezes at the sudden pain, bringing his guard up way too late to do anything about it, and by that point Dave's gone, too, not even a speck in the sky where he's been bounced off to who knows where.

His absence just rips another growing, gnawing hole in the already yawning pit where John's lungs should be. That, almost as much as the physical hit, nearly has John sagging to his knees, his chest feeling like it's caved in on itself.

"Aaaaaand, three~~~!" the Trickster laughs, rounding on Rose with its hammerkind swung back at an odd angle, like it means to punt her into the sky like a golf ball.

A panel of flat golden light rises up in a screen before Rose, and the hammer rebounds with such a jarring clang that the Trickster yelps, yanking back and shaking out one of its hands with a frowning pout. It circles away from Rose, its expression not changing even a little as it stares at her from a safer distance.

"Really?" Rose says, arching an eyebrow. "Come now, surely you can do better than that?"

John feels the wind move before he realizes what it's doing. It's the strangest sensation, not one that he likes at all, being aware of the wind around him, and yet also realizing that being aware means nothing in terms of being able to control it. The breezes here just won't listen to him, even though he could swear he's trying to use his powers the same way he always has.

By the time he catches on, the wind has already begun to thrash and flex and roar up underneath Rose. "Rose, look out!"

Twined cords like knitting yarn lash out and lace Rose's feet and ankles to the stone of Prospit before the winds can do more than ruffle her hair. She even ignores that, tossing it back into order with a flick of her chin, the corner of her lip twitching into a languid curl. She waits for the miniature tornado to blast off into the sky without her before it curls another fraction, into outright confidence.

The Trickster stamps its foot. "No, no, no! First you go messing around where you shouldn't, and now this! Go awayyyyyy!" it whines, totally pouting like a little kid on the verge of a red-faced tantrum. "So dumb! Go wait outside until it's time to have fun! You're spoiling everything!"

"You really don't get a say in the matter," Rose says, brushing down the hem of her jacket where it's ridden up on her back in the gale force winds. "I've dealt with a mindscape far more caustic than anything you could muster. I assure you - in a contest of who can better manipulate mind majjys, you're nothing but hot air."

John forces himself upright; he still feels like he's hanging heavier in the air than usual, his feet dangling like dead weight and his head bobbing like it can't help but lie down again. He's more aware of gravity than the air at this point, and he's pretty sure that's one of those Not Good™ things he's been trying not to think about. But there's a steady mantra that sings in his head like a cold note - Rose, Rose, Rose - and it keeps him vertical. "You're okay?" he asks, his throat clogged with something, and he presses a hand against the new, bruising ache in his side. It almost doesn't hurt, compared to the hollow in his center, but he's been living with that for years - the side pain is new.

Rose looks at him, and her smile is grim but reassuring. "I couldn't hold them," she says, in a sigh. "Something snapped my hold on both of them earlier, when we were separated. But they're back in their own minds - I can sense them from here. They're fine."
John can't smile back. Even the instinct to mirror Rose's expression feels deadened, like he can't figure out how the unfamiliar muscles on his face work. "Good - that, that's good," he says. It doesn't get rid of the screaming chasm where Dave and Karkat should be, but they're at least out of here and away, which was all John wanted to begin with. And Jade was never here from the start (which hurt in ways he can't even find words for), but that means she's out there with both of them - and her with the best teleporting ability of the group. She can get everyone away, if she tries. He knows she has the power to outrun him and that's really all that matters.

"And you." Rose's voice sounds startlingly similar to Rue's in that moment, more severe than John has ever heard her before. She folds her arms over her chest and casts a chilly glare at the Trickster, still sulking in its failure to move her. "You're nothing more than a mental construct gone wrong. Whatever your original purpose, you're not serving it now - you're just decaying, and spiraling out of control while you do."

"Says you!" the Trickster replies, fluffing its own blob of luridly blond hair with a shake of its head. Not really a shake, though; more of a twitch, a flicking, spasmodic jitter, like the mindscape glitches for a moment, and John can almost see what's behind the candy shell -

But what he almost sees is still too much. From the look on her face, suddenly twisted in a grimace, Rose probably sees a whole lot more of it; enough to shake her confidence, at least a little.

"But Rooose! I think I'm still doing exactly what I'm s'posed to, so nyeeeeeh!" The Trickster sticks out a bright pink tongue, sharp teeth glinting like needlepoints. "S'not my fault you all are being so silly! Silly billies!" Its eyes fix on John (too pale too lightning-cold) and it bares even more of those teeth in a sickle. "John knows, riiight? He knows what I'm here for. He knows why I'm better."

He looks at it for too long - or maybe just the words are enough. John closes his eyes and feels the world roll under him, the air tossing like the deck of a ship at sea under his feet.

He feels unsteady. More so than he already did. "I don't know you at all," he says, aiming for fierce and slogging out somewhere around trembling. The effort of dragging the words out from where they've dug into his throat like fishhooks exhausts him.

He can't bring himself to look directly at the thing with his face anymore, but he can tell it's rolling its eyes. "Gosh! Still a waste of breath then, huh?" John's gaze has to flash over the Trickster's face to get back to Rose, and he catches a frame of the way its cheeks dimple in a careless grin that it focuses on Rose, smiling at her secretively as though inviting her in on some doozy of an inside joke.

"I don't know why you guys put up with him! Honest! He's just sooo boring!"

John thinks at that moment he almost passes out - he loses something in the rush of wind that drowns out the sound of any response Rose might have made. He's barely aware of the thin trails of blue tugging on his arms and legs as the rest of the air twists into another fierce gale and tosses her words away where no one can hear them. He can make out her lips moving, if he squints, but he's not good at translating that into words, not when his eyes won't stop burning like they've been dunked in - in - in whatever eye doctors use to make your pupils dilate, sharp and stinging and raw.

"-ing!" Rose finishes, just as the wind cuts out. John stiffens at the sudden quiet. Both he and Rose stare at the pink and blue figure hovering between them. "If you believe that you can defeat both of us together, you're wrong," she says, her smiling smirk gone as she raises a pair of needles. "You are so very, very wrong."

"I think you're just sore 'cause I stole Karkat! Bluh, bluh, bluh!" The Trickster's no longer pouting, which seems like a thing to be worried about. It rests the hammerkind over its shoulder instead,
lounging in midair with an ease that John envies. "But it's whatever, you know? If you can't see what's right in front of your nose, it's not my business!" It giggles. "A blind Seer, a soggy Knight, a reckless Witch - it's no wonder you ended up with a shitty Heir! A full set of washed up heroes~!" A smile, this time definitely for Rose only. "But we can still be friends, right?"

Rose looks at John. "John."

John looks at Rose. "...Rose."

"I was going to suggest we ignore all the pointless distractions and raise you up above this meager, twisted thing so you could assert your rightful authority in your own mind," she says, rolling her left wrist absently. "But…now I say we just set it on fire."

*That*, John can smile for. "Yeah, I think I'm okay with that plan."

"Well, since we're in accord -"

"Too late!" the Trickster chimes in.

"-we may as well - I beg your pardon?" Rose says, breaking off mid-sentence with a blink.

She never sees the dreaded artifact of confection coming. The Trickster whistles, a high note that slowly lowers in pitch - until it abruptly drops, and the Trickster ends the whole thing with a squishing noise, laughing. John gets it a fraction of a second before Rose does, and he sees the realization widen her eyes as she looks up, just in time to take an entire blue-and-white frosted triple decker birthday cake to the face.

"You're prooobably right that I can't take you on in here, just 'cause you cheat and you're better at magic and stuff," the Trickster says, after it finishes snorting through another round of giggles. "But that's okay! Dad can distract you for a bit!"

*Dad - *

A strangely flat, two dimensional image of his handler appears, and John gags, cold fear shooting through his stomach. He has no eyes and no mouth - just the jut of a nose, and strips of too-white flesh stretched thin over the places where those cavities should be in his skull. When Rose's eyes start glowing right through the buttercream frosting and she lashes out with one needlekind like a dagger, the handler doppelgänger turns sideways - and basically just disappears. He flips back a moment later, when Rose's strike has already flown wide, and that's when John realizes he *really is flat*. Another confection appears in the faceless man's hands, and he lobs it at Rose; when she dodges and sets off a burst of dazzling light, he winks out of existence again. Every time Rose tries to turn and fight her way back toward the moon of Prospit - back to *John* - his handler neatly turns her aside and starts driving her away once more, using all the sleight of hand and japery that marks his real life strife style, too.

*Except in real life, he would have probably shot her by now. Misdirection, and then, while she's distracted - *

"You shouldn't have gone in his house!" the Trickster calls after them, "Dad *hates* having other people in the house! Always has!"

"And now," it adds, glancing back at John with sparkling eyes, "I can deal with you, mister!"
Karkat is -
gone
And Dave is -
gone
And Jade -
never was here

And now Rose is fading out of sight, strifing in furious circles with his handler as the figure in white pushes her further and further around the curve of the moon.

There isn't an abyss waiting for him to step backward into it, like there is when he thinks about the other three. But only just. If Rose goes, the last of his sanity might just go flying out the window.

Rose won't go. Rose wouldn't leave me.

Rose already left you once, you idiot.

John floats backward when the Trickster skips toward him - circles right when it arcs around at his left - stays on his guard - tries to banish that last thought. The one that almost gutted him. There's a way he could drift over the chasms where his internal organs should be, to blow right over it and ignore the pain, but he can't bring [Eye of the Storm] back into the picture. He can't.

The Trickster just seems content to dog his trail, regardless, its smile growing crueler and crueler the further away Rose goes. "Looooooool," it says lazily, fluttering thick lashes at him. "Not even going to say anything? Moron."

A tiny pang. "What even are you?" John asks, his voice a ragged mess. He wouldn't recognize it if he heard it in a recording, he thinks. "How did you get in here?"

Another roll of its eyes, and the Trickster kicks its heels up, still floating along effortless on a cushion of air, where John's struggling to stay aloft. "Not telllliiiiiiing~~~" it laughs, tapping a finger along the side of its broken nose. The cartilage has already mostly straightened itself out, though John doesn't remember seeing the Trickster yank it back into place. "If you don't know already, you're even dumber than you look!"

There are also streaks of very faint red all down the front of the Trickster's uniform. John hadn't seen it there before, but he could swear they look like faded bloodstains.

And he's already seen the Trickster bleed pink syrup.

The implications are enough to fire his temper; enough that he feels the first stirrings of genuine anger and can muster up a pissed off shout. "Oh yes, you are! I'm sick of having secrets in here, so 'fess up!" he says, straightening his shoulders and his spine, against the vocal protests of every other part of his body that kind of just wants to curl up in a ball and stop moving.

The Trickster snorts, and scratches the back of its head, eyes rolling in impossible circles. "No way! You've never cared before, so why start now? Just go back to where you went earlier, so the rest of us can have fun without you getting all weepy over everything~!"

It pauses, and winks. "Besides, right now it just looks like you're talking to yourself. You crazy
And then it's gone, without even the clap of air rushing in to fill the hole where it used to float.

For a wild moment, John cringes and can't quite piece together enough of his mind to figure out whether or not the Trickster was ever even really there to begin with. It would so easy for all of this to have just turned out to have been his mind hallucinating, screaming alone to itself in the dark -

TR: :) 

He's not entirely sure how he hears that. But he does. John whips his head around and squints until he makes out a figure in pastels lounging on a crenellation down below, swinging its feet and whistling with the clouds lacing around it as the winds flag and swirl around him.

Like the Trickster is the center of everything.

"I'm definitely not the crazy person of the two of us," John says, easing himself down to the Trickster's altitude with teeth-clenching care. Going down feels rather a lot like outright falling, and he has to hastily pull himself to a halt a few feet too high because the jolts and starts of the lonely breeze wafting him down are beginning to give his heart palpitations or something. "I'm not the one who hurt Jade!"

The Trickster looks up, and it's like looking into a mirror - but the image in the mirror is sneering when John can't even smile, a lurching disconnect from reality. "Of course you are! Do you know how long I've had to listen to you whine?" It raises a hand from the faded gold of its seat, and mimes a mouth talking with it. "Bluh, bluh, bluh! I'm so sad, everyone died, my dad wants me to do terrible stuff!!!" The hand snaps shut. "More like awesome stuff!!! You are seeeriously lacking in perspective, buddy!"

John never stopped feeling nauseous, but it certainly makes itself known again. When he thinks about some of that 'terrible stuff' - the things his handler wanted him to do to Karkat alone -

"There's no way something like you came out of my head," he says, shaking. His fingers can't seem to stop twitching, and he closes them into fists. "Oh my god. You're the worst. The actual worst."

"And you're still a cranky pants McGee!" The Trickster rolls its eyes, and then beams at him, sickeningly sweet. "Learn to take a joke, dipshit."

"That's not a joke, that's terrible!" John snaps, feeling his stomach tie itself into another coiled knot. "You're talking about hurting people!"

"Who cares, if it's fun?"

"That's not fun!"

"More fun than anything you could come up with," the Trickster says, dismissing him with a wave of its hand. It kicks up and over and backwards off the crenellation, skipping down the circumference of the moon. There's a huge gouge where a chunk of the buildings hasn't been fitted back into place, exposing the chains dangling loose like guts in the center of the moon, but the Trickster continues darting down without a care in the world. "I told you - I'm just...better!"

John doesn't even know how they went from him trying to back away to him chasing after this maniac, as they dip into the southern hemisphere of the moon. John keeps his head upright, but the Trickster is flying along at an angle, its hood fluttering in a breeze that John can't feel. "At what - being a totally insane homicidal maniac??!!"
"Oh, no," the Trickster says, slapping its palms to its cheeks and widening its eyes. Then, just as quickly, it laughs again, ruining the act. "Well, yes, that too. But more importantly -"

It vanishes into the air, dissipating into the wind without a trace. John stops. Maybe he's starting to pull himself together, because this time he doesn't just stand there like a complete idiot - he has the wind turn him so his back is to the roof of the nearest building, a tower that points down toward the earth at an angle. When he looks up, he can see the window openings of the tower leading down to the surface of the moon. It's dizzying to look at, which is the last thing he needs right now, and he gulps and looks straight out instead, scanning the horizon and the sky below him for wherever the Trickster might decide to pop up next.

He looks up.

The Trickster grins at him, upside down. Hands reach down and clamp on either side of John's head, squeezing too hard and *holding* him in place when he instinctively flinches away. "At being you," it tells him, its eyes stabbing into his own as it keeps him from looking away.

"Nn-

"I'm not depressed all the time," the Trickster says, right through whatever protest John might have made. "I'm not the one who's so stupid and panicky, he'd just roll over and let a total dick mess around in his trashcan of a brain."

"St-

The hands on either side of his face shake him, hard enough that John's head slams back against the roof. The Trickster walks upside down and holds him there. "When I want to do something, I do it~!" it says, sweet as chocolate pie. "And I don't drive myself crazy over it, either!"

John has to scream to be heard. "THAT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE ALREADY CRAZY!"

"Duhhhh," the Trickster sighs, a beatific smile on its face. "Isn't it great? Sanity is highly overrated, if you ask me - look where it got you!" Another rattling shake that jars him against the golden shingles, and John feels something wet trickle down the back of his neck, warm and sticky and clotting in his hair like - "Alone and broken and useless -"

John reaches up and seizes the Trickster by the wrists, yanking with all his strength until those clawing fingers tear away, leaving scrapes around his face. "Get out of my head! Get out get out get out!" he screams again, trying to duck out from under him.

The Trickster laughs and lets him go. John can still hear him talking, though, because the winds come and go at the Trickster's beck and call, biting at John's heels and forcing the words into his ears when the last thing he wants right now is improved hearing.

"Whyyyy? Because you're super sensitive and you suck the joy out of everything?" That casual laugh sounds right next to John's left ear, and John puts on another burst of speed, limping along as fast as his breeze will take him. He's wandering further into the interior of the moon, through the cracks that riddle its surface, but all he can think is that he needs to get away. And when the person you're trying to get away from can just teleport anywhere it wants, anyway, going further in is probably just as useless as trying to fly away into the sky.

"Just face it, everyone would be better off without you, and you know it!" A flicker of pink and blue strolls past in the corner of John's eye and he can't help that his gaze darts out to watch the Trickster walk along the outer wall of one of the intricate golden buildings. "I mean, Dave and Karkat sure
took off in a hurry, didn't they? Heheheh!"

That - that one almost gets him. John's vision blurs for a long second - and then he snaps out of the daze, gasping for air and wiping furiously at his cheeks. "No, they left because you launched them out of my head, asshole!" He glares up at the Trickster. "If they'd stayed here, you probably would have hurt them, anyway!"

The Trickster presses a hand to his chest, his laugh echoing weirdly in the broken acoustics of the moon city. "Gasp! I would never hurt Karkat!" A pause. "Unless he was into that."

John only realizes he's about to throw up when the taste of bile reaches his tongue, and he has to swallow it back down in a caustic, rank burn before he upchucks everywhere. "Oh my god, stop talking about him like that!" he says, and it comes out more pleading than demanding, more desperate than sane.

The Trickster coasts down to John's level, humming with happiness as he bats his eyelashes again and leans into John's personal space. "We totally made out while you were gone~" he says in a stage whisper.

"You -" John can't seem to get air into his lungs. Then, when he finally does: "You - what did you do to him?!

"I just told you!" the Trickster cackles, wrapping his arms around his stomach as he laughs with his whole body. Like John's white-hot terror is the funniest thing he's ever heard. "There was tongue and everything!"

John doesn't remember landing on the ground, the last of his control over the wind wobbling as he hits the stone of the road and the moon's gravity catches him. "I think I'm gonna be sick," he gasps - but why, when there's no one here who would care? Sweat prickles along his skin, cold along his back and hot against his sides and too tight in his stomach, too close, he can't breathe -

The Trickster leans in close again, bending over John's hunched back to keep whispering in his ear. "I also touched his butt! And did other things...but he didn't seem too like that too much! He wanted to play hide and seek more!"

Yup. There it goes. John's coherent just long to finish one last, "Oh my god," before he retches and throws up all over the floor, both arms shaking with the effort of keeping him from collapsing into it.

By the time he runs out of anything to throw up, he thinks he's just in tears. He spares one hand to scrub at his face, feeling hot and miserable, and sees - what he just threw up. He freezes in horror.

Black coats the back of his hand, and the puddle in front of him is one of black oil that oozes into the cracks between the cobblestones even as John watches, dripping from his lips like molasses.

"Ewww! Ahaha, you're disgusting~!" the Trickster crows, like this is the funniest thing in the world and not, you know, horrifying.

"What the heck?" John choked out, feeling his stomach wrench and try to heave again just at the sight of whatever the heck just came out of his mouth, oh my god - "What did you do to me?!

"I didn't do anything!" The Trickster pretends to wipe away a tear of mirth - no, wait, it's an actual tear. It's an iridescent, silvery purple, and he is actually crying and laughing at John's bewilderment. "You're the one who keeps getting depressed and dumping that stuff everywhere! No wonder no one wants to kiss you, with that mouth!"
John tries to push himself back up to his feet. Twice. It just doesn't quite take the first time, or, you know, the second. He gives it a good effort though! "That - has nothing to do - with anything! Just - just stop talking!" He sits back hard, his legs folded up in a jumble under him, and sways as he wipes the last of that gross stuff off his lips. It tastes like - like gasoline, and something rancid, and just a little like licorice, which just makes him all the more suspicious. "You clearly don't know anything about anything! You just like making stuff up about me and my friends, so I officially am not listening to you anymore! I just want you to go away!"

Silence.

Then - "Heheh, nice try." The Trickster taps his foot against the oil puddle, and it bursts into a bright emerald green liquid, before fading into gold to match the rest of the ground. "Soorry~ But I can do this now!"

He closes his fist, and all that sucking emptiness in John's chest, all those gaping holes, swallow. But there's nothing there to swallow, just more of that aching hollow that he can't help but fall backward into. John crumples, a weird ringing in his ears as he curls into a ball, the last of the energy sucked out of the marrow of his bones.

(And he remembers exactly one day like this. Just one. He remembers locking the door of his room, his handler out at work, and lying in bed instead of going to school and just breathing, because that was the only thing left he had the strength for, staring at the uncurled cage of his fingers on the hand beside his face on the pillow, barely blinking, barely moving -

The next day he ran, and what he found at the end, when he couldn't run anymore, was Dave.)

The Trickster nudges John's shoulder, and with a happy laugh, applies pressure until John rolls to escape it, staring past the Trickster at the roofs of the golden buildings overhead. He never really saw Prospit's moon until it and Jade were both in pieces; it's not a happy memory. But it's better than watching his own face leer down at him with a viciously saccharine grin.

"Can you hear that?" the Trickster asks, crouching down beside John. He smiles even wider when John can only let his head fall to the side and look away. "Ask me what I can hear."

"Hear what?" John asks, barely more than a mumble.

A faint pressure on his throat - a tap of a finger that makes John swallow reflexively. "It's the winds of change, dumbass."

The Trickster smiles, and starts pressing down. Things start getting really fuzzy right around then. "You kind of suck, you know? A whole lot!" he says, and that's the last clear thing before John's not sure what he's really hearing and what's just his brain shooting off dying sparks as the heel of a palm grinds down against his trachea.

TR: while you were off napping and angsting, the winds came to me. :) TR: cause...you see...they like me better! i pay attention to them! :) :) :) TR: it's just like how all of your friends will like me better! :) :) :) :) :) :) :) :)

"Leave them alone," John gasps, his eyes way too slow to respond when he wants them to open. Panic slouches through him like a lumbering thing, fighting through the oxygen deprivation and everything else to make itself felt. "Jus' leave everyone 'lone!"

The Trickster's smile goes crooked.
He starts squeezing now, fingers digging into the skin on either side of John's throat. The ringing in John's ears morphs into a low, rolling rumble, and he's pretty sure only the tiniest flutters of air are getting through his slowly crushed windpipe to his lungs.

TR: heck, i'll take rose and dave and jade and karkat with me and dad. i don't see why they should get left out of all the fun~! they can all be my friends instead of yours.

TR: and i can kiss them too! it will be so fun!

A moment of clarity. Really, seriously grossed out clarity. "Jade's ss'r ssister!" he slurs out, indignant.

TR: yeah, yeah, bloohoohoo!

TR: now shut up and stop vomiting your gross depressing stuff everywhere so i don't have to clean it up in my mind anymore~

TR: just die. :)

John gets a hand up, and makes a feeble effort at peeling the fingers away from his throat. But the fingers he feels under his own have too many joints, for a moment, the knuckles sharp and jutting, and John doesn't even have the strength to raise his other hand, let alone try to untangle what's real from what's hallucination.

Another sharp burst of clarity, and he can hear, through the pain - "Everyone hates you, anyway. Not as much as I hate you! But almost. Everyone. Even Jade, even Dave. Even Rose. Even Karkat."

And that -

Is a mistake. It's almost not enough of one to jolt John out of it. But it is, just barely. It's enough.

John opens his eyes and glares at the Trickster.

"My friends," he says, "don't hate me!"

The Trickster blinks, and then regains himself. "They totally do!" he argues, just the slightest hint of a pout returning to his face. "It's true! They got sick of you a looong time ago!"

*No, no, no*, the song in his head sings, *Rose, Rose, Rose*.

*Rose is still here.*

"She left!" the Trickster snarls.

John seizes the wrist of the distorted, inhuman hand that's wrapped around his throat, and uses his free hand to punch the Trickster in the chin. "She came back!" he hisses.

And finally, all his training kicks in and does some fucking good for once. John kicks his legs up, and, unfortunately for the Trickster, he's leaned over John at exactly the right angle for John to wrap his legs around his neck in a lock - and from there, it's just a matter of dragging the Trickster's head to the side with a wrench, hauling his head in one direction and holding his body in place by his arm.
in the other -

If it worked, it probably would have dislocated a normal person's shoulder, or worse. But the Trickster has options normal people don't have, and he vanishes into the air before John can finish snapping his legs back down. The sudden snapback jars John's heels - but there's air in his lungs, and the swallowing hole in his chest stops trying to swallow him, and if he has nothing else, he has the knowledge, a haunting violin refrain in his mind, that Rose is somewhere in here with him.

"They're not sick of me." His voice sounds worse than ever, barely more than a rasp, but the Trickster's not the only one who can project. "You're a liar." John shoves himself upright, onto his feet. If there's just one thing he has to say to gravity right now, it's this - not today.

Gritting his teeth, John starts floating back up into the air, toward the open sky. He can find Rose, and help her with that thing, and then they can leave.

"A liar, huh?!"

The voice comes from everywhere and nowhere. John keeps floating. It takes a lot of effort to pull off, but he allows himself a jerky nod. "You're just some hallucination, trying to trick me," he says, rising up past the roof tops, and adjusting himself so that his feet point toward the earth below instead of the moon.

"Why trick you? You do that just fine on your own! I'm the one who remembered everything when you didn't want to. And I know they all hate you for getting them killed."

His flight path shudders. John puts his hand out, but there's nothing to grab onto; so stupid! His throat feels like one huge swollen mess, getting worse by the moment - so the faster he gets to Rose, the faster she can probably do something magical and awesome to help fix it. "They - don't," he gasps, casting his senses out for something he can follow back to her. "They wouldn't have come in here to find me if they hated me!"

"A liar, huh?!"

The voice is mocking him in earnest, now. "They were just being nice. You're kind of pathetic, oops! Pathetic and shitty, what a combo! You're a loser and you should have just died in your sleep~"

"You can shut up any day now!" John says, exasperated.

"Make me, make me!" the voice says, imitating his tone exactly. "It's nothing you haven't thought of yourself already! You just dumped it all in the back for me to play with, so you don't get to complain if I'm just repeating what you thought! You're a shitty hero and a shittier god, and I'll do way better~!"

"Stop it!" John can't help himself, because he's totally a sucker; that last voice sounded like it came from right over his shoulder, and he whirls to face it even though nothing is there. Aside from the lonely wind keeping him dangling in the air, the rest of the breezes around him might as well be foreign objects, brushing off his silent pleas without leaving their restless, stalking circles. He knows the Trickster's in them, but he can't see him at all. "Ugh! You're so annoying!" he says, frustrated, and he does his best to start limping up again, straining his eyes to peer through the dense cotton candy clouds for some sign of Rose.

TR: well, you're annoyinger! annoying and useless.

TR: you always have been and you always will be and that -

John feels the exact moment all the air empties out of the sky around him, and leaves him in a
vacuum. *Stupid!* he thinks, throwing out his arms and trying to balance himself as his one lone breeze seems to crap out on him. It's only when he starts falling that he realizes it's wrapped around his head instead, breathing air into his lungs even as he starts plummeting through empty space. Maybe if he had another breeze, he could multitask, but -

TR: - is why -

- he never gets a chance to try splitting his focus, anyway. The Trickster drops on him like a car - or maybe like a semitruck - feet planting themselves right on John's chest, and then they're both falling, faster and faster, toward the golden city of Seattle far below.

TR: - i -

If there's a way to turn off gravity in John's head, he's drawing a blank. He starts struggling, trying to flip him and the Trickster so at least he'll take the brunt of impact, but no matter how he claws the Trickster just cackles down at him, hurtling them down at the ground with a blast of wind from above. A huge orange chain appears through the thinning clouds off to John's left as they rocket downward; it clanks and rattles in a gale that doesn't reach John, doing him absolutely no good as it flashes past.

John looks up. The Trickster grins down, his mouth a smile full of knives.

John looks down.

Oh man. This is going to hurt.

And, well -

He's not wrong. At all.

He's not really sure what the acceleration due to gravity is in his mind, or exactly how much the Trickster is making it worse by driving them along with a tornado drill, but he's *really fucking sure* that they hit the ground at *really fucking hard miles per hour.*

TR: -win!

TR: :D
He doesn't get the luxury of unconsciousness. Just a lot of pain.

They hit hard enough to blast a new crater in the road, and John is pretty sure that his back managed to slam into every single solitary chunk of debris on the way down. When he shifts, something in his chest grates the wrong way, and he lets out a noise that's kind of a cross between a 'rrrrgl!' and 'hlkgh!'

He'd like to think the fact that he didn't just die on impact is a good sign, but he remembers, with harsh clarity, exactly how much Rose's mental self managed to survive, adrift and slowly dissolving into an ocean of grimdark acid.

Oh gosh. He's so screwed. "Haaaaagh," he says, lifting his head and instantly regretting it. The back of his hair feels like it's soaked through, and as he runs through a painfully slow check of his arms and legs, moving his fingers and rolling his ankles just to make sure he still can move them, his body screams at him. His spine is either still working or else, heck, does he even have a spine in here, technically? If it were broken, would it even count?

But there's a weight on his chest that he notices only when he gets used to the general pain enough to focus on something else. "Get...off..." he says, and the weight laughs at him, a merry, hiccupping giggle.

"Nope!" the Trickster says, brushing away John's punch with a wave of his hand and a roll of his eyes. He looks none the worse for the wear after their meteoric drop; there's a fine layer of gold dust covering his blue and pink mockery of John's uniform, dusted in his flyaway hair, but other than that and a splatter of red high on his cheek, the Trickster looks the same as ever. Another laugh as he leans forward, pressing both of his palms flat against John's chest, the 'Trickster looks the same as ever. Another laugh as he leans forward, pressing both of his palms flat against John's chest, and the agony spikes. John screams and jerks away, but the Trickster's sitting mostly on his stomach, pressing on his sternum with his hands, and he's just too heavy to squirm out from under.

John finally thinks to look at his chest. He kind of figures out why this is hurting so much when he sees the way the Trickster deliberately presses down on what feel like massive bruises, aiming for broken ribs and shoving them even further out of place.

Oh. Haha. Well that explains a lot. Now he knows how Karkat felt.

"I like you better, dying! You're much more fun now!" The Trickster drums his fingers along what feels like a rib that's snapped in two. "Like a jigsaw puzzle~"

"M'not gonna die," John says. If nothing else, he's pretty sure he can survive way more than this, which could potentially really suck.

"Was that a challenge?" the Trickster says, sounding utterly delighted. "I love a challenge!"

John forgot about the fingers, with their extra joints and sharp nails. Or maybe he still half-believed he was imagining all the little ways that the Trickster's glamour has been flickering on and off, revealing glitchy hints of the monster underneath.

He remembers when the Trickster jams all the claws of one hand into his skin and rips, carving into his chest below the bone of his sternum like a serrated knife. John screams, because he just keeps clawing and it doesn't stop. "Stop being such a drag and keep dying," the Trickster says, shoving John back down when he tries to sit up. "Look at all this blood! Do you think Karkat would like to see?" He holds up the hand digging around in John's chest for him to see, and John feels the urge to throw up again when he sees that it's gory, dripping with a mix of dull red blood and pitch black oil. "Nah, heheheh, he probably wouldn't - too much greasy, grody oily crap! Not enough actual blood!"
"Don't talk about him!"

The splortch his insides make as the Trickster jams his hand back into the growing gouge in John's torso turns his stomach. Or possibly the Trickster just does that, you know, manually. It all just kind of hurts, he can't tell how bad the damage might be anymore. "I'll think of a better present for him," the Trickster decides, apparently content to ignore John's wheezes. "I'll be outside soon, which should be exciting!"

John can already barely breathe through his swollen, bruised throat. When he starts feeling a pressure on his lungs, the Trickster casually leaning more of his weight on one arm while the other hand's occupied with sinking further into John's chest, he freaks out. "Get. OFF!" he screams, groping around for his sense of the wind, and yanking until that one breeze pushes the Trickster back.

The rest of the wind wraps around and, in response to a whistle from the Trickster, holds him right where he's sitting until another stab of pain jolts John out of his attack. "Hoohoohoo! You never did use the Breeze enough!" the Trickster says, beaming. "This is so fun! Try something else!"

The thing is, John can't think of anything else to try. It's agony layered on exhaustion and topped off with a woozy, listless merengue, and maybe, maybe, if someone else were here they could talk him out of the stillness creeping through his mind. But they're not. Even Rose is so far away…

"Wassamatter?" The Trickster removes his hand from the wound and folds his arms to lounge on John's chest, studying his face with eyes that have gone more white than blue, like shards of ice. Dried blood streaks the Trickster's cheeks that wasn't there before, with pale upside down triangles under his laughing eyes. He smiles, and draws a line across John's lower lip in blood. "Don't feel like babbling anymore? About time!"

You know what would be fun? Saying something right now, just to be a contrary dickhead. Channel his inner Karkat, because there's some really choice swear words on John's mind right now that would make Karkat proud. But there's some miscommunication between his mouth and his lungs and his vocal cords, probably since two of the three feel like they're mostly out of commission.

Okay, maybe it's only Rose who's really resilient in her mind. Maybe John's just dying.

"Stop wasting air and go away already," the voice says, from a distance. John thinks the Trickster might be moving away - but no, he's the one dying, right? "Nobody will care that you're gone. I promise."

……well, he has a point that it's nothing John hasn't thought before.

"Pardon me. Mind if I cut in?"

John blinks.

The Trickster blinks, and looks up.

Just in time for Rose to kick him in the face.

She must really put some effort into it, too, or else cast a spell at the same time, because her foot plants itself square on the Trickster's forehead, and then appears to blow up. Kind of. There's a burst of light, and then the blowback from the miniature explosion spell puffs John's hair back out of his face. The Trickster takes the full force of it, though, and is blown back through the air to crash thirty feet away from the crash site.

"I've missed that spell," Rose comments, dropping down beside John in a fluid rush, her eyes full of
worry that she seems to be carefully swallowing down so that her voice sounds utterly calm. "It's so useful, in the right circumstances."

*Rose.* John huffs and it's almost a laugh. "Why'd you stop using it?" he asks, hoarse, as Rose touches wonderfully cool, glowy fingers to his throat. This time when he swallows, it actually feels like his airway is clearing up, which is ten different kinds of awesome.

"Oh, the grimdark latched onto it, and was constantly trying to lure me into blowing up people who aren't rabid mental constructs." Rose smiles, serene, while she presses the back of her other hand to John's forehead, and casts a studying eye on the bloody front of John's jacket. "At the moment, I'm pleased to say, I don't particularly care. Good lord, has that thing been using you for target practice?"

"Nothing I haven't thought before," John says before he can stop himself. A burst of anxiety fills his head now that he has enough oxygen to think about something like that, and he tries to cover the gaping wound before Rose can see all that black gunk in his insides. He's never wanted her to see that, not ever. "Don't -"

"You'll need to let me look at that, before we leave," Rose says, but before she can press the issue she tenses and her head whirls to grimace in the direction the Trickster fell. John tries to raise his head and follow her gaze, but she cups a hand around the back of his head, touching the welt there and easing the bloodflow before she stands. "That copy of Samuel found itself on fire, but it retreated before I could finish it. It shouldn't return - try to focus on healing yourself."

"What about you?!" John says, one hand clutched to his chest as he tries to sit up. He manages it, mostly, but his chest hates him for it, and when he sees that the Trickster has risen into the air he regrets looking, anyway. He's hovering there, the hood of his uniform longer than before, and his head hangs low so that his face is obscured. But more and more, John thinks, the Trickster looks like he's daubed in black, oily paint.

"You can deconstruct this thing yourself when you're in better health." Rose draws a needle out of her sleeve as she strides toward the Trickster. "Right now, I really am in the mood to practice blowing things up. I'm out of practice with anything harsher than light."

"That seems dangerous." John hauls himself further upright, then falls back, all the blood draining from his face. It feels like there's a stake lodged in his chest, now that he doesn't have the pain in his throat and the back of his head to leave him dizzy and distracted with the lack of air. "Rose? That's really dangerous!"

"So am I." Rose raises her chin and stalks off, her voice echoing off the buildings around them. "You shouldn't have hurt him."

"*You* should have stayed grimdark!" the Trickster says in reply, listing his head to one side and tilting it to stare at Rose. "That would have been way more interesting!"

BE: ...

BE: is this a bad time?

John tears his eyes away from the two people facing off in font of him, and for a wild moment he can't recall whose voice that is.

The next, the Breeze makes it easier for him to remember - the wind that's been listening to him coalesces back into blue swirls, and then further still, until a shrimpy version of himself, flat and kind of monochrome in armless versions of his god tier pajamas, stares down at him, tapping its foot in
midair.

Maybe the Breeze is trying to look stern, but it mostly just looks like a cartoon thirteen year old, frowning with the buck teeth it hasn't grown into yet sticking out and ruining any seriousness it might have had.

The Breeze sticks out its tongue, and that doesn't exactly make it any easier to take it seriously.

BE: i mean are you still ignoring me??? :/ cause you kinda look like you could use some help!
BE: but usually even when you need help you just send me away...so i don't know!

John stares for a moment.

And then his stomach drops out from under him.

Because he can't remember if the Breeze has said a word since they found Karkat. He's just...tuned it out.

Like he always does.

"Sorry - about that," he says, wondering if it's possible to hate himself even more, and finding, as always, that nothing is impossible.

The Breeze stamps its foot this time, raising a tiny bluster of air that messes up John's hair.

BE: you said you were sorry already!
BE: and then you totally did it again!!!
BE: ruuuuuuuuude!

"I did," he echoes, letting his gaze drift back to the mangled mess of his torso. He can't see any of that oil stuff, just a deep gash where his jacket's been torn open and blood wells out. He should probably put pressure on it, or something. "I just...I guess I don't know what to think anymore."

The Breeze blows air out of its flat line of a mouth, angling it up so that it puffs up its own bangs in exasperation.

BE: uh...weeeell...i think rose could use some help! do you want to help rose?

Like that's even a question! "Yeah, of course!" John looks past the hovering cartoon. He can make out less and less of the Trickster's pastel uniform between the rising tornado and the black gunk that seems to be obscuring his form, but Rose has basically lit herself up like a beacon, the Light symbol on her front blazing as she casts spells like potshots at the Trickster. She ducks and spins to dodge a huge chunk of debris that the Trickster lob's at her with the wind, and for a moment John thinks he sees exactly what Rose got from the Strider side of the family.

It's probably just her new thing for sweet shades.

He just doesn't know how much longer she can keep this up. Magic is pretty much Rose's specialty, and since most of the rules in a mindscape seem to favor who can manipulate mind magic the best, she can totally kick ass.

But the Trickster cheats. He already cheated once, by distracting Rose with John's handler for so long. Any second now he could get bored of fighting her like this and do something horrible.
So it's pretty much the most crushing thing in the world when John leveres himself up on the edge of the crater, the Breeze floating aside to make room for him - and then his chest seizes up, dropping him again. Frustrated, John mashes his hand down on top of the wound, but even if he could will himself to heal faster in here, he can't imagine how to make his shattered rib cage any less painful in the meanwhile. "Great. I'm a mess, and Rose is in trouble right now, and I can't do anything!"

And now he's whining. No wonder his friends always end up hurt or worse, when he's so usele-

BE: you know, if the big dumbo were here and not sleeping again, he'd probably say something really ominous and inspirational to get you off your butt!

BE: or like threaten to eat you, which i guess is pretty ominous still.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better or something?" John asks, dubious.

BE: urgh! quick, think of reasons to fight this creepy dude for once!

There are just so many reasons, honestly, that John fumbles trying to pick just one. "...What if he tries to choke Jade again?" he says at last, because it's close to the top of his mind when he sifts through it.

BE: that would suck! we love jade! :(

"Or hurt Dave, or Rose...or Karkat-" He has to break off because he still doesn't know what was a lie and what was the truth and what might have just been implied, he doesn't know what the Trickster did to Karkat and the possibilities'll just make him sick again.

BE: oh yes, we love all of them! so we should not let that happen! sooooooo...?

And the Breeze trails off, and watches John expectantly.

Hey, it's not as bad as some of the pep talks John has given in his life. Lives. Whatever. He nods jerkily, sets his jaw, and stands up again to start hobbling towards Rose. Maybe if she sees him up and moving, he can convince her to snap them out of here or something. He thinks he can keep himself conscious and hold down the fort - he's in too much pain to think he can retreat into sleep again.

BE: big sigh!

John stops mid-limp, and has to turn that one over in his head a little before: "...Did you just sa-

The Breeze bops him on the side of the head before he can finish asking, pouting at him furiously and gnashing blunt teeth at him in a miniature flip-out. When he rolls his eyes at its antics and tries to turn back toward the fight, it just bops him one again, and stamps its foot.

BE: do. you. want. me. to. help?!

Oh. John rubs the side of his head, grazing the scabbed dent where he got his head knocked open with the tips of his fingers, and nods, slowly. He thinks about all those years where he just kind of floated through life, ignoring and forgetting everything that had gone so horribly wrong, and how he just reached out and the wind would answer, tirelessly helpful.

How long has he just kind of...taken the Breeze for granted? And now here he is, about to charge off again, discarding even the mere thought that the Breeze might be useful because the Trickster has so many other winds that answer to him instead, more than enough to outclass one small breath of air.
John's kind of an asshole. "Yes, please," he says, humble and heartsick at just how badly he's managed to mess things up, this time around. "Please."

A loud harrumph - and then the Breeze forms itself a pair of cartoon arms, folding them over its chest, eyes closed as it gives a considering nod.

BE: it'll take some doing! all these winds and breezes have been running around rampant while you've been ignoring everything and playing that dumb music, and this creepy you has been encouraging them to get angry and play awful pranks and stuff, so they like him!

BE: you're not just gonna quit on me halfway through, right?

"I won't!" John says. Even now, there's a part of his head almost in tears, not from the pain or the misery or the terror, but just from the thought that he's saying yes to something the Breeze wants. He's listening to its advice, something his handler's been trying (and mostly succeeding) in training him not to do for years.

Well, his handler is stupid and a jerk and evil, and John's been sick of it for years.

So to heck with it. "I won't," he repeats, quieter, less desperate to convince himself.

The Breeze opens its eyes, totally serious as it watches him.

BE: so you [Accept Your Inheritance]?

Why does he hear capital letters of significance in there?

Probably because he's heard them before, he suspects. Gosh, he's got a lot of memories he's going to need to sift through to make up for all this forgetting…

The difference is, now he doesn't have anything to keep him sabotaging all his efforts. No excuse to pretend he doesn't have two lives worth of trauma sunk into his noggin. He's done with forgetting. "I do."

The Breeze swells up, the look on its face sliding right past happiness and into something sublime - before it transforms back into bright blue wind, twining around him in ecstatic loops, as though it can't express itself better in any other form.

BE: well then! it's about time!

When John breathes in, the Breeze unspools down into his lungs, like words pouring themselves back through his throat to be swallowed and spoken again. He looks down at his ragged hero uniform, bedraggled and bloodstained and not at all comfortable, and when the Breeze excitedly chatters a suggestion, John doesn't see why he shouldn't follow it. It takes a snap of his fingers to mentally blink into his god tier pajamas, but a few more fumbling snaps and snaps before he and the Breeze manage to suss out how to fix his ribs. It's different from healing in real life, and Rose would probably understand more how to translate wind powers into mental stuff like sewing up your mental avatar, but they wing it. The Breeze is abuzz with words and sighs and childish, delighted joy, shoving what it thinks are useful memories at him left and right and center, but it's never overwhelming - just overly exuberant, and trying to coax him into it, too.

It's not the Breeze's fault that John's still weary and sad down to his bones. But between the two of them, they snap said bones back into place and will his skin not to have been broken in the first place, and by the time John turns to give the Trickster a piece of his mind, he's - not happy, not anywhere near as on cloud nine as the Breeze feels to finally be acknowledged, but he's got a lungful
of brisk, fresh air in him, and it wakes him up just enough -
- to be totally pissed off.

And if there's one thing that hanging around with Karkat has taught John, it's that being pissed off is basically a way of life. If you can gain experience points by proxy, John's probably observed enough of Karkat's epic meltdowns to have accidentally scaled the entire subecheladder.

"Hey, asshole!" he shouts, storming over toward the edge of the crater. At some point during his (totally minor) existential crisis shenanigans, Rose and the Trickster migrated out onto the street. John would have expected the light show to have been crazy because of all the gold, reflective surfaces everywhere, but he wrinkles his nose to see that actually the familiar buildings around him have turned all grungy and gross, brassy and not reflective at all. Rose hasn't given an inch, though she's got two needlekind out now, whereas on the other hand -

The Trickster has seen better days. John thinks it's less that Rose is definitively beating him, and more that the Trickster's just totally dropped any pretense at sugar coating everything. He has his hammerkind out now, swinging it like he's playing whack-a-mole, and every time Rose ducks out of the way or fends off a gust of wind with a burst of light, the Trickster snarls and lashes out again, his face contorted in an inhuman scowl.

(He, his - when did John start thinking like that?)

When he notices John marching toward them, the Trickster just loses it. "You're supposed to be dead!" he says, his voice more a roar than a sing-song. "Why are you like this all the time! Why can't you do anything right!"

A few minutes ago, that would have rocked John back on his heels. But the Breeze is pretty buoyant, and he floats up to their level in a single hop. He's very aware of the winds snarled and knotted around the Trickster, drawn down out of the sky far overhead by the promise of excitement and action - but, all at once, he can tell that the winds are aware of him at the same time, the cyclone faltering as some of them orient themselves to roughly brush past him.

There's a storm in his head, and John's been trying to treat them like something tame. Not even the Breeze, probably the longest-suffering of them all because it's followed him right through the Scratch, would put up with that forever.

If he's gonna wake up and deal with his stupid messed up life, he can't let the Trickster order them around, either. How much of the mess on the topside of John's mind is because John swept all that stuff away until it exploded on him, and how much is because the Trickster's been biding his time back here, picking his way through John's mind and snagging a restless breeze here, an infuriated gale there, until he saw the opportunity to rise up and tip John completely over the edge into utter crazy?

He said he lived with all John's unwanted crap for years, listening to his handler's lectures and nodding along, taking all that violence and nastiness to heart. No wonder he's even crazier.

"John," Rose says, her voice even but muffled as he floats up a few yards away from her - the last thing he wants is her to get caught in the crossfire if the Trickster freaks out on him worse than before. She got a tiny cut across her right cheek, just under the curve of her shades, but now that he's up close, John can see that she's altered her outfit again, which is a pretty nifty trick! She has a headband that covers her ears, now, and a really familiar mask design pulled up from around her collar to cover her mouth and nose. Between that and her visor, and the fact that god tier pajamas are basically super game armor in really soft fabric form, John thinks he sees why the Trickster hasn't
just tried his trick of tearing the air out of her lungs to choke her out, or popping her ear drums.

He figures now's not really a good time to explain about the Breeze, especially since the Trickster is still, you know, right there. Listening. No monologues that give away their secrets this time, thanks! "I think I have an idea," he says, correcting himself on the next sentence when the Breeze blows a raspberry at him, which is the *single most uncomfortable thing* that has ever happened to John's lungs, ever. Oh well. "We think we do, I mean."

"Oh, excellent," Rose says, her eyes sweeping his front. Her expression, when she's made sure that John's not bleeding through his clothes, turns from steely concern to a small, discreet smile, just barely creasing the folds of her mask. "Please, feel free. This exchange has been growing tedious, anyway."

"TEDIOUS?!" the Trickster shrieks, rounding on her again. The last of its control shatters, and John tries not to gag at the twisted mockery of himself that lies underneath. It sluices that mucky, paint-like oil all over its shredded harlequin costume, all of its teeth and fingernails and edges sharp. Even its skin looks like it's mottled and discolored with streaks of rot.

It smells like rotting fruit and old blood and decay. But, more importantly, it still has the faintest hint of gasoline to it.

Quickly, before he can second-guess himself, John reaches out and casts his awareness to the winds. The Breeze sweeps him along as they weave their way through all the gusts and drafts and air currents that the Trickster has been flinging around at random. When the two of them dip and start to straighten out the snarl the Trickster's made of the winds, the rest of the breezes at least turn to follow, restive and agitated but drawn along in the wake of an Heir.

BE: what a mess, what a mess!

John can't yank the breezes into listening to him, but he finds he *can* slap away the Trickster's creeping, disquieting sway before it can rouse the winds into a frenzy. Some of the more fickle winds tear off into the sky immediately, streaming up and out to rejoin the storm clouds that roll all around the outermost layer of John's mind. I'll probably mean they'll be all the more violent when he has to deal with *that* mess, later, but they're not listening to the Trickster, and that's what counts. The Breeze wheels them around for a second pass, and this time they thresh out even more of the gusts that prance around John in curious circles; they're not helping John, but not paying any attention to the Trickster, either, more fascinated by what their old Heir can still do.

John almost doesn't notice the tamest winds - the ones who obeyed because if the Trickster *looked* like John and talked to them like John should have been doing, maybe it *was* John - when they shyly flock back to him. Then the Breeze flicks him and huffs out several grumpy harrumphs until John pays proper attention. They feel so familiar he almost can't tell where he ends and they start, which is probably half the problem right there.

Incorporeal, it's easy to distract himself from his tiredness, but when he stops drifting around and solidifies as a physical body again he's gasping. Fatigue makes him sloppy and slow, and Rose has to yank him out of the way when the Trickster tries to leap on him.

Even exhausted as he is, though, John can peek through bleary eyes and laugh humorlessly as the Trickster's jump carries it all the way to the building on the far side of the road, where it clings to the scuffed up surface and twists its head around to glower at them. One breeze answers when the Trickster yanks, but that's all - the rest have pulled away or left for other parts of John's mind, no longer interested enough in the spectacle to hang around. "You ruin everything! You're so horrible!" it says, glancing around at the city tarnishing around them with wild eyes. Some of the stuff - the
candy decorations and trees, dissolves and drips down as oil, but others, like the Prospitian towers that have no place in Seattle, just fade and dull and then stop there, the golden veneer sluicing away but leaving the underlying bones of the building upright. "Do you know how hard it was to turn all your gross shit into something nice?!"

Rose grips John's wrist, her thin fingers tight. "It's still dangerous," she murmurs in his ear, her face turned so that not even her covered mouth can be seen by the Trickster wailing across from them. "It's built itself up out of intense trauma and emotions; even without the wind, it still has other resources to draw on." She pulls back a little - meets his eyes, searching. "Can you dismantle it?"

"I think I'm just too tired," John says. It's not really an admission, because he's not really trying to hide it anymore; he leans on Rose more than he means to. The Breeze filters through his lungs and coos encouragement at him, but it's not enough to make up for the fact that John's at the end of his rope, here. "If it came to a straight fight between me and it, it could probably take me apart. I'm no good at this brain stuff, Rose."

The stifled noise Rose makes could be a snort or a sob. "And it has too many connections to too many of your emotions for me to rip it out by the root," she says, and the way she says it tells John that if he mentions that he'd be totally okay with her ripping out some of his emotions, too, she'd say no. And maybe cry. He doesn't think he could bear to see Rose cry. "John, what in the horrors did you let it have, that it's this strong?"

"Everything I couldn't handle. Which was a lot," John says. That's kind of all there is to say on the matter.

"And then the mindgrub came and gave it that extra jolt of suggestion and personality it needed to splinter itself off," Rose guesses - and then she shakes her head. "No. There are too many factors here, and I can't account for all of them. Does the Breeze have any idea how we might be able to render it harmless, for now?"

Before John can consult with the Breeze, though, the Trickster lunges again. John yelps, and makes Rose and himself drop ten feet so that the Trickster soars overhead. But when he thinks it's going to crash into the wall of another building, the Trickster twists in the air, its last wind gust stubbornly ignoring John and the Breeze when they try to reach out to it. Now it hovers over their heads, dripping oil from its fingertips and the point of its hood, and it laughs at them as it holds out a hand and calls up its hammerkind again. "Gotcha!"

A drop of oil splatters against John's cheek, and he suddenly he's flashing back to what Rose said, earlier -

Because he remembers where the mental image of oil comes from now. His brain is totally ripping off ꩌ˲˲˲˲˲˲, though it didn't channel all this gunk through pipes - it just piled it all up in the back of his head.

But see, the thing is -

˲˲˲˲˲˲ burned.

"Please tell me you can still set it on fire," John says as they dodge out of the way of the Trickster's first swing.

Rose has to think about it, spinning herself and John out of the path of the next wild strike like they're dancing. "That won't finish it, you know," she says, but the tone of her voice says she's totally considering it. And not two seconds later, she pauses, her lips twitching. "It would still be
incredibly gratifying. And might cleanse it of some of the mindgrub's suggestions."

"Can we just agree we want to set it on fire?"

"Well, yes, of course. I'm just attempting to expound upon the possible long term consequences."

"Rose, you are my friend, and-" John has to teleport them out of the way, and continues talking once they're bobbing out of range of the Trickster and solid again ", and I love you, but also if you don't set that guy on fire, I'll have to go set that guy on fire, and I'm pretty sure I'll mess it up somehow and light, like, my entire brain on fire." Just the thought is enough to give him nightmares. "Rose, my brain is already screwed up enough without being on fire."

"Perish the thought." Rose squeezes his arm one last time, and lets go. "Oh, Trickster?"

"You just had to come in here, didn't you!" it yells, veering towards her. "I - I'll squash you two - you're both so awful!"

"I really think not." A twitch of her fingers, and an incomprehensible murmur, and Rose's palm fills with light. The Trickster's bearing down on her by the time she finishes a second spell thingy and the light sparks into fire. John's tensed, about to tackle her to safety, when she eludes the Trickster in two neat steps and pats it on the shoulder as it passes, her hand full of fire.

It goes up like a torch soaked in gasoline, and in an instant the scent of rot vanishes entirely in an open gas fire. "Ow, ow, ow!" the Trickster howls, when any normal being would probably be in shrieking, wordless agony. It drops its hammerkind and slaps its hands frantically against its burning coat of oil and fire. "I hate you two! I hate both of you!"

"Hate is such a strong word," Rose says, the picture of offended delicacy as she drifts back to John and hooks her arm with his. "Perhaps you should learn to play more nicely with others. You've certainly made no friends this way."

The Trickster glares at both of them; if the venom in that stare could kill, they'd have been dead in a heartbeat. It strikes John that the Trickster should say something, right now - some terrible cliché, like, 'you haven't seen the last of me,' or another traditional but totally overused threat straight out of the worst movies.

Which just makes it all the more ominous when the Trickster just smiles.

Half of its face is on fire, but only the oil is burning.

"Bye bye, then!" it says. The switch from roaring snarl back to super sweet, bright giggle jolts John badly enough that he flinches. "Say hi to Karkat for me, John~!"

Then the Trickster claps its burning hands together and disappears. John can't even feel the wind carrying it away; one second it's there, and the next he and Rose are alone in the sky. Just because he can't sense the Trickster watching doesn't mean it's not still there.

But then, after several long, tense seconds, nothing happens. The city underneath them is nothing but grey steel bones and faded yellow façades, like all the bursting energy that lit it up like a fairground got sucked out of it along with the Trickster.

Rose is the one to say it. "That wasn't anywhere near as gratifying as I thought it would be."

"Tell me about it," John says, sighing. He can't seem to stop sighing, and then it's a full-fledged yawn, and the Breeze complains at him for it.
BE: why are you still so tired?!

BE: you and the big guy, both of you are so sleepy all the time! :/

"I just want to go to sleep. Regular sleep," John corrects himself. Rose's shoulder is right there, so he rests his head on it. Rose, Rose, Rose.

"I suspect that napping down here would be inadvisable," Rose says, but she doesn't shrug him off either. "Shall we at least sojourn somewhere closer to consciousness? And I'll see what I can do about regular sleep. I hate to think what all these drugs might be doing to your system."

"Yeah," John says, taking Rose's hand and holding it tight. "Yeah, let's go."

"Excellent."

BE: i can show you where to go!

BE: i know places where he can sleep, i guess, even if i think he sleeps too much :T

"That would be much appreciated," Rose says, and John would open his eyes to help fly them out of here, but the tiny breezes give his feet a boost before he finishes the thought.

"Thank you," he says, as they slowly climb up through the clouds, ascending back into his own mind. And it's slurred, to the point where he's not sure he said it aloud or just thought it, but the Breeze settles deeper into his chest with a contented sigh.

And he thinks that might be enough.

-

Somewhere else entirely, an enormous sigh.

TY: Well. It is about time.

-

There isn't a computer screen in Halburn's workroom.

But over in the surgery theater, a screech of panicked fury can be heard as every machine monitoring Dirk's vitals blanks out, and begins to flash the same phrase, over and over again, until they're forced to reset the whole system. Later in the night, when everyone has calmed down, they realize that every computer in the lab with an internet connection has been hit, too.

WKSHRISEHSKW

Chapter End Notes

All the extra POVs are gonna have to come next chapter…we have hit the chapter character limit…I have failed u all…or perhaps I have gone too far...

But yeah wow all that build up, and trickster John gets sent packing just like that. There’s no way he could possibly turn up again later. Nah. No way. Not in a million bajillion years.
Chapter subtitle – I’m gonna make everyone regret that they wanted the makeouts
#youshouldhaveknownbetter
Across Disastrous Years

Chapter Summary

From days laid waste across disastrous years,
From hopes cut down across a world of fears,
We gaze with eyes too passionate for tears,
Where faith abides though hope be put to flight.

Chapter Notes

After the emotional roller-coaster that was this last arc (good frigging god), we're ready to start the transition to the next arc and the great and wonderful Operation [spoilers redacted]! As hard as it is to believe, we're actually past the worst of the angst for the foreseeable future, and now we only have a few weeks until the apocalypse. That's still a thing, you know. It hasn't stopped happening or anything like that. H&H belong to realmenweartights.tumblr.com.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He gets all motherfucking turned around, at first.

But Gamzee Makara ain't one to lose himself to the chucklevoooods for long, no matter how motherfucking tenacious they may be. Not anymore. His rage is laughter and screams, purging ecstasy and rapturous terror, it is goddamn motherfucking sublime, and if there's a note of something wrong woven into it, a horror that not even the asylum could bleach out, then he is motherfucking down with it.

He

is

donw.

((The scripture writes itself out before him, sprawling and sloppy and sickening, and he will hold it accountable for its heinous motherfucking blasphemies with all the profound whimsy at his disposal-)

- And that means he can't let loose yet. He's got his understand on about that. It would be all kinds of atrocious for him to pull that kind of horror show too early. He's got to all up and find the rest of his friends, so they can tear this manic dialectic down with him to trample beneath their feet, like the motherfucking gods they deserve to be. So he reels in the madness that wants to roll out further, that blissful revelruckus what cries discord, and he swallows it down until the dashes


- settle back into place.
-
Of course, when he all comes back into one righteous excuse for a right mind, he realizes just how motherfucking flagrant he all up and got in a herosis's face. He was just so motherfucking pissed to see those words rolling out before him, all the ways the little Witchsis was ready to set him up to go amiss, that he pulled some motherfucking unkind shit. Tav gives him nothing but sass for it, and as Gamzee slouches and takes that noise as the strict scold he deserves, he reads more, squinting through the last slurs of deliration, until he sees all the ways he's gone and scared his herobro, too.

So he swallows the hymnfrenzies, and the pain-pleasure too, until all that's left is his present mind, sadfaced and repentant as he waits for Tavros's scold to pass. His claws still itch and twitch for an instrument to untune, mind to unravel, his lyre to play Discordia -

But hush. *H u s h*, he says to all the voices that clamor for their say, the ones that never quite left him when Malbro up and realized what kind of grievous motherfucking mistake it'd made in trying to devour something as heinously indigestible as he.

Because his miracles ain't no thing, yet. They *cannot be.*

...

Yet.

)o:

-(But he does have so many of them up his sylladex. It would be a real motherfucking shame to let them go to waste.)

-

Tavros settles, eventually, though a lot of his vibeharshings flew right between Gamzee's horns as he went about the process of making himself sane again. Gamzee can read the wariness in Tav, the splintered pieces where all the poor motherfucker's illusions and delusions of palehood used to reside, but on that front he is motherfucking unapologetic as all hell.

Poor motherfucker all got it in his faithbiscuit that he could soothe all the cruel and capricious alterity of something like Gamzee. But only one troll ever done that thing right and proper and true, and it wasn't ever Tav.

Gamzee knows who his motherfucking best friend is.

He's all kinds of apologetic for keening the chucklevoodooos throughout the building, though; he bows his head and pays confession at the back of Tavros's wheelchair as he wheels him down the street. He shouldn't have been so short with a herosis who didn't know any better, who looks him up and down and don't even as know him by name, let alone if she could trust a brother she only just met in the street. His distemper is a yawning, systaltic thing, and he doesn't know how much longer he can keep bringing it back to the middle ground.

But he can't fit all that into words, so what comes out is a motherfucking lackluster, "I'm sorry." It's
motherfucking atrocious, shameful as shit, but he couldn't do much better unless he went and yanked his own tongue out to lay on the ground at Tav's feet. And Tavbro has a thing about that kind of motherfucking nonsense, though some parts of Gamzee have the thought in his head that it would just grow back, anyway. "I'll be on my best motherfucking behavior," he promises next, and he at least half means it, so Tavros's next angry sigh comes out more resigned than pissed as he folds his arms and continues the silent treatment.

That's okay. It's all okay. Gamzee can feel words layering and overlapping as they get close to the apartment where all those text blocks stack up like caps-locked grey shouts, and he vibrates so hard that Tavros's wheelchair comes near to shaking apart at the battered hinges -

And then Gamzee stops.

He realizes his mistake.

Karkat was here - but it's old, horrifically old, the text faded and dull but informing him in no uncertain motherfucking terms that his best friend left this hivestem an age ago. The next place it leads him is a field where a bitchtits strife went down not long ago, and then a hall full of books, with sentences full of old blood and revelations tacky on the floor where Tavros can't read them, but Gamzee ain't in the mood for fucking blasphemies -

- (not today)

- and the effort it takes to haul his mind back onto the rails exhausts him, until he's crumpled up over the back of the 'chair and Tavros has twisted around to start in on him about sleeping again. The rage crawls behind his eyes, sharp like relief and burning like dry ice, but the only one around now is Tav, and inspiring that much crazy in one poor little trollbro would like as to set his pan to bursting in a most unrighteously literal way. "You need to lie down," the brownblood insists, stern and frantic as one. Maybe Gamzee's bleeding panic into the air all suasive like, without noticing. He clamps down on the rage one last time to make it stop.

"Just a little farther," he says, just a little -

No, that's not right, he's forgetting the enclosure talons that go around words again. It's not right.

- The sun's awake and Tavros has fallen beneath the horizon by the time Gamzee sorts himself out, weaving his way through all the wicked words to figure out where Karkat might have motherfucking wandered off to next. Concentrating hard enough to read what he wants makes his ganderbulbs ache - or maybe they'd all up and ache, regardless, on account of when they open and close he can hear the click like his eyes have gone dry and tired, twitching and fretful and sticking together like all they want is to seal over.

He can't sleep yet. He has a notion in his gourd, a motherfucking inkling that to sleep would be to dream, and to dream would mean -

Well. It ain't time yet, time being what it is, and all.

But Karkat must be near. The streets are motherfucking full of him, where they aren't slashed with void thick enough to carve out the sky itself. And if he can get to Karkat, then surely the rage will
bide a while longer

Surely.

"Please tell me you're here to deal with that lusus, already! It's been screeching and setting off the fire alarm at all hours of the night, and that troll won't do a damn thing to -"

It takes every ounce of self-control he's never had to keep from reaching out, casual as all motherfucking hell, and plucking the blasphemer's head from his necknub. Gamzee couldn't tell a soul what his face looked like in that moment, balanced on that crawling point between violence and collapse, but he turns his eyes on the person who's almost finished crossing the street, and the motherfucker stops so dead fast it's a wonder he ain't dead in truth.

"Oh my god, you-" the motherfucker squeaks out, his voice breaking, and while he's held on the brink edge of terror, Gamzee tries to puzzle out with his lagging puzzlesponge just who this motherfucker thinks he is.

All he gets for his trouble is 'neighbor.' Turns out, the motherfucker's just not all that interesting. "Vete ya, brother," Gamzee says, leaning in until the man stumbles backward, and flashing a grin full of toothsome until the poor running human trips all at and over his own feet to rush back to his own hive. "Heheheh."

"¿Dónde estamos?" Tavros mumbles, as they rattle up the front path. Gamzee don't mean to jostle the little motherfucker, but facts are facts, and facts are that this wheelchair ain't long for this world.

He can't bring himself to answer, running claws over the battered front door with a squeeze in his pusher that's been twisting for a long motherfucking time. This place smells like miraculous blood and Blood alike, and - fainter - like a wind what's swept through the place and swept back out again. He knows, he motherfucking knows that Tav's windy bro's been here before, though it's been a while. All that candy crunching madness pulled back in the night, all the fits of laughter that made Gamzee's own chuckles scrape at his throat, and when it went the clouds stopped dumping their noisesome motherfucking rain, like as maybe the Heirbro got his fool of a self mastered.

Don't mean the craze's gone, though. Gamzee being the motherfucking expert that he is, he knows it's probably up and slithered into whatever hole it can find to watch -

- and wait -

But that's none of his, now. Now, there's just Karkat.

Seeing as the door's already been off its hinges once, all kinds of banged up and battered and jammed back onto its hooks again, Gamzee hums happily, turns the doorknob, and after some motherfucking consideration pulls the whole thing out of the doorframe so to lay it off to the side on the grass. He's got all used to this world where lusii don't eat grubs as aren't theirs' unless they've gone rogue and wild, most of 'em tolerating the kinds of visitors that no custodial monster would have motherfucking allowed back in the before.

But he knows that territorial, wicked skree anyplace. When a pale, skulking shape whips out from where it has concealed itself behind the overturned sofa like a fort, Gamzee laughs and lets it yank him off his feet, manic glee bubbling in his chest as Crabdad screeches at him like a challenge and drags him along into the hive.

Tav's sweet little motherfucking custodian ain't never had the temper nor size to throw a strop like this. But Crabdad's always had the most beautifully salty constitution of any sea lusus to ever throw a
sicknasty tantrum on land, and when Gamzee miracles his way upright again, grinning and grinning and grinning, the lusus squalls and launches itself at him with both claws snapping. "Hell yes, my motherfucker," he says, dancing out of the way with a laugh. "Hell motherfucking yes."

"Uh, why does this always happen?!" Tavros yells from the door, as Crabdad slams past Gamzee and rams headfirst into the wall, scrabbling and gouging new holes as it scuttles around to face him again. "How do you always end up pissing gente off?!"

Gamzee cackles.

"Um, that's really not an answer, I think!"

Crabdad rises up to its full height, up onto tipclaws, even, the bony plates of its carapace and the sharp points of its spines scraping the ceiling as it gives up on skulking and screeches another challenge, but when it charges Gamzee just spins to the side, and with all its bulky armor and heavy claws, the lusus again has to wind itself up before it can launch another attack in the right direction.

Or at least Gamzee thinks that, but his thinkpan's alive with excitement, trawling through the hive with tendrils of mania that he can't as quite control, seeking out any sign of the mind he's got a pining for. The disappointment doesn't hit as hard as it could when he realizes Crabdad's the only poor motherfucker in the hive - because Crabdad is here and not fraudulent in the least bit, which can only mean Karkat's nigh.

But while he's thinking those thoughts, Crabdad's thinking others, and Gamzee doesn't get the warning he should before the lusus tramples him from the side, hauling shell to barrel him over and pin him with chittering jaws that snap close an inch from his cartilage nub. Startled and blinking, Gamzee lays claws on the motherfucker's head nubs before it can close the gap, spit and the scent of rotting seafood hot on his face as Crabdad skree his frustration.

Then Tavbro rolls into the side of the giant crab with a creak of metal being treated most unkind, and Crabdad raises its head to skree right in the brownblood's face. Looking sour-sore, Tavros puts his claws to his head and frowns until, with a chitter of surprise, the cangrejo rears back, banging its pincers against its pale skull like that'll knock Tav's lusus mojo clean out of it. It steps away from them, knocking into the sofa as it stumbles and chirrs in confusion.

Gamzee sits with his elbows propping him up and his legs splayed out to wink at Tavros, and the other troll goes flustered all over. "Um, r-really, Gamzee, why do you always cause, uh, trouble? I mean, wow, I'm sure there was a better way to break into someone's house without, you know, making some poor lusus mad."

"That's how I motherfucking roll, brother," Gamzee says, smiling and knocking a claw on the wheel of Tav's chair.

(And a touch is all he needs to know it, all the loose screws and weak points where the tire has worn thin, and all it would take is a flick to fuck this motherfucker up but good. He's done it before, gotten his under motherfucking standing on as to what all it would take to make a motherfucker break, to things and bodies far bigger than a tiny little scrap of metal like this. Moons, buildings, bodies, minds - all of them can be destroyed, can be laid to motherfucking waste.

But not now, not now.

Not. Motherfucking. Yet.)

"S just how it goes," he finishes, a second and an age later, and if his smile's more crook than curl,
and if Tav don't heed that, well...

"You're, um, awful. I mean - uh, yeah, that is absolutamente the word for it," Tavros says, but he totally doesn't mean it this time, his smile reluctant but un-motherfucking-deniable, an impish twitch like as he gets when he's about to lay down some strict ass rhymes. Tav could never stay mad at any brother for long.

Not even when a brother deserves it.

"Aw, Crabdad was just making with greetings, you feel?" Gamzee says, shrugging. At the sound of its name the lusus's head jerks up, fast and alert and beady eyed; Tavros winces and has to close his eyes to keep the custodian still. "Or maybe it don't remember. Ain't a bother to me." There's plenty as don't remember him.

Oh, but they will.

"Él -" Tavros starts; then he gnaws on his lip with pinprick teeth, one hand mussing at his hair as he chews and furrows his brow at Crabdad. "Uh. Oh man. That's, uh, not normal - oh no!"

That's all by way of warning Tav gets out, but Gamzee's got miracles to spare; he kicks up backwards, balanced on his elbows and his feet hanging overhead, to avoid the wicked laser beam that erupts from Crabdad's pincer. It's white outlined with red, like blood the color of a punchline, a beam of energy that fizzles out against the ground leaving behind a scorch mark, and Gamzee can't stop laughing, hard enough that his stomach cramps and he nearly faceplants.

"I'm, um, pretty sure that's not funny! Gamzee!" Tavros says, rolling backwards as fast as his wheels can carry him. Both of Crabdad's claws start charging up for another sprite blast, spheres of light that flicker in and out before deciding on more red-white plasma. Gamzee just keeps laughing, because this is a better joke than even the one about the seadweller and the sushi bar. And that's a motherfucking tough one to follow. "Gamzee! Estúpido! Please don't zone out on me!"

Gamzee raises a hand and waves it, flippant, until Crabdad makes up its mind and rounds on him again instead of Tavros, screeching as it jabs a pincer back toward the front door. Gamzee doesn't need Tav to translate the really loud GET OUT. Ahaha, motherfuck, has he missed this! "We're here to see Karkat, my main crabbro," he drawls, holding out his claws all beseech like. "You know where he's motherfucking at? K-a-r-motherfucking-kat?"

Crabdad chirrs, suspicious, and shoves a claw full of laser at Gamzee's face. But he smiles, and smiles, and -

The pincer jerks to a stop, the sharp edge crackling with ectoboom, just before Gamzee's nose.

Another questioning chirr, closer to a chirp than a screech.

"Karkat," Gamzee confirms. "My best friend, you feel me?" And he leans forward, ever-smiling, just enough that his nose bumps against the claw.

(Crabdad's weak point is a crack in its shell, a soft indent at the back of its neck where the carapace has cracked and not healed right, and this is a knowing that Gamzee keeps tucked away, on account of Karkat would not get his appreciate on if Gamzee were to break what couldn't be fixed.)

The sprite blast dies off, and Gamzee grunts as Crabdad lunges and hauls him up, holding him at claws' length to inspect him. Gamzee's tall enough that his feet still scoot along the floor, and he hangs limp and laughing, letting his head loll back to smile at Crabdad's craggy face. And maybe, just a little, he leaks delirious joy, because this house smells like Karkat, every inch of it, and how
could he not spread the joy when at last, at last, Karkat's near?

It is possible he's laying it on a little heavy, though, because Crabdad's response is a piercing, ululating screech of happiness. It trills as it gives Gamzee one last shake as to reprimand him for giving it one wicked scare, and hauls him into a crushing hug. Tavros hovers in the periphery of his vision, looking torn between wheeling closer and rolling out the door - but, in the end, he stays where he is, brown eyes pretty and bright in the dark of the overturned living room. Meanwhile, Gamzee hugs back, patting the line of Crabdad's neck just above the spines -

And oh -

does he smile.

- :o)

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One Day Later

Karkat had one fucking job.


And he fucking blew it.

He blew it out of existence and then pissed on the radioactive, bombed out remains.

What kind of moirail misses something like this?

Literally his only consolation is that everyone else of any fucking significance in this charade missed it, too. And by consolation, ahaahaaa, he means what the actual fuck was wrong with all of them. It makes Karkat want to run outside and scream from the highest available cliff, and then usher all of them over the edge like a herd of lemmings on a suicidal dare. All of them had a piece of the picture, but all the most damning evidence ended up locked away in John's head, or brazenly concealed by Samuel's incredible one-human impersonation of an upstanding member of society. And because of that, no one seems to know exactly how broken John is.

Not even Karkat.

They have to shave part of John's hair off to open up his skull, and then extract the mindgrub, and by the time the procedure is over (sometime in the middle of the night) and Karkat glares and shouts his way into the room where they've set John up to recover post-op, that realization is almost enough to stop Karkat in his tracks. John's dark skin almost has a greyish cast to it, stark against the cot's white sheets, and half his head is wrapped round in bandages with his cowlicks all matted down into surrender, and no, actually, Karkat is not prepared to deal with this. He thought he was, after fretting himself sick through the lingering, drawn out hours of the one Scratch kid's surgery and then John's, which felt like it took twice as long as the first.

He's not. He's really, really fucking not.

But the dumbass who helps Karkat get through the things he's not prepared to deal with is lying there, hooked up to a fresh IV drip, and so Karkat does the only thing he physically can do. He creeps closer, walking on tipclaws despite the fact that he doubts a fucking giant rogue lusus
rampaging through a china shop could walk John up right now. The closer he goes, the more he can make out the frown lines that crease John's forehead even in his sleep, the exhausted bags under his eyes that would be more suited to Karkat's own face in the mirror, the place where, at some point in Samuel's attack, his teeth tore up part of his lip and left a swollen sore. They finally got all the blood off his face while he was being prepped for surgery, but Karkat can almost feel the echo of it on John's skin when he presses a palm to his cheek, like the blood left tracks down John's face that only Karkat's powers make him sensitive to.

Dave asked him at some point, during the blurry period between Karkat getting shunted out of John's mind by the Trickster and Harley's timely arrival with a fuckton of drugs, how Karkat knew that shit was going down with the Egberts.

Karkat himself didn't think his sense of blood could extend far enough to sense people bleeding at a distance unless he made an actual fucking effort to reach out. In the race to reach John before anyone could die, Karkat hadn't given much thought to the fact that, even before the intervention by the future Dave, aka the nookstain from futurehell, Karkat had felt irritable, prowling around the room as though waiting for John to speak with his human custodian in a generic office wasn't a completely normal occurrence. John and his guardian have had their bizarre talky human relationship for literally as long as Karkat has known the two of them.

Now Karkat feels a sinking sensation in his digestive sac as he starts to suspect that he might have sensed, on some subconscious level, John bleeding from literally every orifice on his face.

Which is a whole new level of fucked up, even for Karkat.

He keeps his hands on John's face for a while, though John's not awake to be shooshpapped, and soon Karkat finds himself smoothing at the creases between John's eyebrows, massaging the tense, fluttering muscles along his jaw and temples until they ease, careful with his claws as he traces the tender skin of closed eyelids. A few times his claws catch on tiny clots of dried blood that didn't get cleaned off, and Karkat scrapes them off with a single-minded determination; soon he's combing through John's hair as delicately as his ham-handed self can manage, unknotting tangles and fluffing cowlicks until the half of John's head that isn't covered in bandages almost looks like his normal, flyaway mess.

So single-minded, in fact, that he doesn't notice the chair until it nudges at the backs of his locked-up knees and he nearly rocks forward. He shakes himself out of his daze of shooshing with effort, scowling weakly over his shoulder, only to see that it's just a chair - one of the rolling ones from an office, one that was definitely not fucking behind him five seconds ago. In fact, it's still drifting a little, like someone gave it a push and it's trundling along on that momentum. But no one else has entered the room.

Only one person wouldn't have needed to.

Grudgingly, Karkat sighs, sits down, and resigns himself to the fact that Harley might not be such a complete disaster of a human being, after all.

(At least they all know better than to try to talk to him about the Trickster until John's awake. Karkat's busy compartmentalizing all that, and he'd hate to have to shit down some unsuspecting asshole's neck for bringing up what he's too leery and jumpy and twitchy to think about.)
At some point during the day, one of them was bound to end up on the Internet. This is because, in spite of the ongoing panic and the urgent rush to get everyone else in the lab scanned and cleared for duty, certain people out of the young humans and trolls gathered in this place are, as it turns out, fucking Internet-addicted pustules of easily distracted mucus who can't keep their twitchy fingers off their phones for longer than five fucking seconds at a time.

It's Dave. He's talking about Dave. Karkat doesn't even know where that fuckmarble finds the time to browse around on local news sites, but fuck, he's the shithead of time! That probably explains how he manages the constant stream of useless dumbfuckery he gets up to. Karkat doesn't know how he keeps forgetting that annoying little fact.

Anyway. Rose, Karkat, and Kanaya are minding their own fucking business, holding vigil over the bedside of John, Dirk, and Jane (but mostly John), while Harley's off bouncing through an MRI scanner. Dave barges into the room from fuck only knows where - it's not Karkat's job to keep track of where he fucks off to, okay? - and his mouth is already in motion before the door shuts behind him. "Hey Rose. Rose. You busy?"

Rose looks up; Karkat, try as he might to ignore Dave's ramblings, looks up too, if only because he'll take any shot he can get to have a target for a decent scowl. "Yes, Dave, I was actually in the midst of deep meditations," Rose says gravely, "ruminating on the presentiments of what is to come."

"Cool, so listen," Dave says, holding up his phone without pausing to let Rose breathe. "Remember how I was joking and bullshitting Bro about us being called terrorists and then he got unrighteously pissed because he can't take a joke that doesn't involve puppets?"

...No conversation that opens on that note is one Karkat wants any part in. Unfortunately, his thinkpan is a perverse and contrary pile of hoofbeast shit, and the more Karkat silently prays to be spontaneously struck deaf, the keener his hearing seems to become. That, or to make up for his muteness during the first half of his visit, Dave has fucked with his collar so that it's now capable of breaking the sound barrier.

Karkat will bet money he doesn't have it's the latter. "What the fuck are you on about now, asshole?" he asks, palming his face and mashing the heel of his hand against one eye. There's a lingering headache that won't go away, and his muttered complaining had only made Rose look at him with alarm no matter how much he tried to convince her it was just from the excessive amounts of 'I'm fucking done' compressed into such a tiny thinkpan.

Dave just looks at him. Or at least, Karkat feels like he's being watched. The obnoxious douche shades are in the way, as usual. Dave has two settings, asshole and douchebag, and this look is neither of those, which is just fucking unsettling. "Don't worry about it."

"Well, of course I'm not going to fucking worry about it now, shithead, since you've just completely assuaged every possible concern your mention of the word 'terrorist' might have stirred up in the frothing primordial hateooze of my fermenting pan, Dave!" The sarcasm cap on paradox space has to be specifically lifted just to deal with his generous contribution to the cause.

Dave, of course, continues to be Dave. That is to say, an insensitive garbageheap given life by some idiotic god who went overboard on the essence of douchebag when they were shitting out the universe. "Dude. Chill."

"Dave," Rose says, her voice pitched to carry. Karkat's mouth snaps shut on whatever he was about to yell – he had something suitably enraged all ready to let fly, but then his eyes dart back to John's face and he loses it again. "What was it you came to tell me?"
Rose has been writing in a notebook for nearly an hour, exchanging whispers and sidelong glances with Kanaya every so often, but Karkat's been too busy counting and recounting the number of joints on John's fingers, a nerve-soothing tap-dance that helps keep him sane, to muster up to the will to guess what those two are plotting. Now, she closes it and lays her purple-ink pen aside, turning her full attention to Dave - or faking it well enough that Karkat can't tell the fucking difference - with her eyebrow quirked.

Dave waves his phone again. "Seriously, I'm not making shit up. There's problems."

"Show me," Rose commands, rolling her chair away from John's bedside and rising as Dave shuffles over to hold the phone screen up. Their hair is two different shades of blonde, Dave's skating close to albino white, but with their heads together like that Karkat can see the weird, uncanny human sibling resemblance. Kanaya joins them around the phone, looking politely interested, and Karkat casts one last reluctant glance at his and John's interlaced grey-and-brown crisscross of fingers and claws, and John's dumb sleeping face, before admitting defeat and detaching himself. He tries to be discreet and peer around Kanaya's side, but from this angle the screen's colors look undersaturated, and too greyed out from lack of contrast for Karkat to make out details.

The video Dave's decided to subject them to starts playing, the sound quality of the audio disturbingly realistic compared to the tinny whine Karkat's craptastic phone usually vomits out, and Karkat listens with unwilling interest as he shuffles to peek between Rose and Kanaya instead. The voice sounds familiar, but Karkat has to place it first. He finally recognizes it; it's one of the local reporters for KOMO 4, a tealblood whose been dyeing the teal sheen of age out of her hair for probably longer than Karkat's been alive. But her horns are long and twisty and her eyes stained enough from pupations past that no one is fooled. No one with half a sponge, anyway.

"-before the postponed press release Monday evening, Mayor Brinner released a statement in which she announced that she would not be able to attend the conference in person, for reasons which remain unclear -"

"Are there issues with your mayor's health?" Kanaya asks. Karkat belatedly realizes that he's the only Seattle native conscious in this entire room, and is the expected authority on this kind of shit.

He has to disappoint her, though. "Fuck, I know about as much about Brinner as anyone in town - fuck all. I don't think the woman's even been seen since she was elected, and half the time they can't reach her for comment, either. The fact that they got something from her is the weirdest news I've heard all day."

"I thought she still gave speeches for the Fourth of July parade," Rose says, absently, her lips parted as she frowns at something on the screen.

Karkat snorts. "Not in years. I can't remember what she looks like, anymore -"

"Sssssshut up," Dave hisses, batting his hand around like he's reaching to smack Karkat in the face, but he doesn't move to look behind him, so it misses by a mile. "God damn we do not know when to shut up. Like, this is a collective issue we all need to work on. Oh my god. Now I'm doing it."

As though to prove his point, of course, the door opens (slowly, rather than with the usual bang) and Jade peeks her head in, blinking at them all owlishly from behind her glasses when she sees them all bunched together like a cluster of concentrated grubfisting asininity. "Whatcha watching?" she asks, scratching her head.

"- but that she supports the FVRT in whatever measures they may choose to take, with the full cooperation of the Seattle PD. This seemed to come as a surprise to the police chief, who before
yesterday hadn't previously received word from the mayor's office on the subject -"

"What the fuck are we watching?!” Karkat demands, screeching when Dave bats at him again. "I'll kick you in the shameglobes, so fucking help me!"

"Oh, so it's thataak kind of meeting." Jade rolls her eyes and joins them on Dave's far side, raising her glasses and squinting at the monitor by John before shrugging. "Well, as long as John's still okay, and there's not something spooky going on! You guys had me worried for a second!"

She snaps one of the new, colorful rubber bands she's taken to tying around her fingers, and Karkat can already tell that's gonna get really old, really fast. Worse yet, she keeps giving him these looks when she snaps one. He'd give her a sarcastic standing ovation for the fact that she's kept interaction between the two of them to a tolerable minimum while John's out cold, but the furtive looks are getting on Karkat's oversensitive nerves.

"- call for the mayor to speak publically after the rather drastic tone of the press release, in light of what some are calling a 'vigilante free-for-all' that played out near the Seattle Needle in broad daylight yesterday -"

That shuts everyone up. Karkat almost chips a tooth with how hard his teeth clamp together, and in a rare communal moment of 'oh god, this is going to be bad,' all five of them stare at the screen.

Sure enough, the reporter does not disappoint. She shuffles her papers and pulls stern newscaster sympathy face #25, the one that means she could really give no shits about any of this. "The FVRT representative, Detective Ace Dick, insisted that a policy of zero tolerance concerning vigilant justice be enforced until the recent spate of gang violence can be brought back under control by police. According to him, this way the FVRT will be able to assess the allegations that these bombings have been acts of villainous terrorism, free from distractions, and make an official ruling on where the investigation should go from there -"

Dave, unconscionably, snickers. "His name is the best part of the whole thing," he says, as gleeful as someone with the humor of a thirteen-year-old in raptures.

"- which will certainly put a damper on the activities of such well-known local vigilante heroes as Heir of Breath, who has maintained a friendly working relationship with Seattle's police force for years" - Karkat somehow knows what's coming next, his stomach clenching even before the words come out of the reporter's mouth - "and Hemogoblin, who just recently came under suspicion himself due to an irregular, highly-criticized investigation of the circumstances surrounding the bombing of the downtown police station -"

"WILL YOU ALL LET THAT DIE?!" Karkat shrieks, lunging for the phone. Dave flashsteps it out of the path of Karkat's paroxysm of rage before he can peel the screen off with his bare claws, and before Karkat can lunge again Jade and Kanaya both grab him by an arm each and reel him back so that his flailing kick hits nothing. Both of them being disgustingly strong, Karkat nearly tears his arms off trying to pull free.

"I think I remember John messaging me about that incident," Rose says, totally missing the point as she stands a fixed point in the middle of their antics. Her lips purse, and she taps a finger on them before nodding. "Ah. That would have been before he knew your identity as Hemogoblin, of course. Something about being accused of arson, at least."

"Karkat, you're fucking hardcore, holy shit," Dave says, sounding absolutely fucking delighted, because Dave is an asshole.
"IT WASN'T ME!" Karkat wants to throw up his hands or possibly kick Dave in the face, but of course he's being fucking restrained. Dave's expression has transformed into an admiring little smirk, and it's not fair that he can be such a douchebag and Karkat can't hurt him for it. Not even a little. "GOD FUCKING DAMMIT, WERE YOU BORN WITH AN EMPTY CAVERN WHERE YOUR BRAIN SHOULD BE?"

"I don't think even Bro has been accused of arson, I mean - I mean, vandalism and destruction of public property, yeah, but setting shit on fire - that's just one step beyond, you know?"

"I'LL SET YOU ON FUCKING FIRE, YOU WITHERED EXCUSE FOR A RUTABAGA!"

"Dave, will you shut your piehole for a sec?" Jade says, grunting and planting her feet when Karkat starts writhing in incoherent rage. He twists and, in a moment of clarity that cuts through the red haze of fury, tries to squirm his way out of her hold like he would if he'd been grabbed by some criminal while out on patrol. She readjusts her grip without giving an inch; Kanaya, on the other side of him, is more grounded than a chunk of granite. "Jeez!"

"Snrlgf."

Karkat freezes.

Dave loses the smirk, finally, and stares at Rose, looking lost. "What."

Rose arches an eyebrow, disapproving. "Pardon?"

"What did you say. I did not catch that. It was probably some longass fancy word telling me how much of an ass I'm being, but literally it sounded like a keyboard smash."

Rose's eyebrows climb even higher. They may not be as thick as Dave's, but that's the measure of true power, right there. "I didn't say anything, brother dear. Though now that you mention it, might I suggest you curb your more antagonistic impulses until ."

"Krrr?"

Karkat, who stopped paying attention to all this stupidity when he realized who was actually talking, is already staring at the bed when John lifts his head, squinting at them. It's the other four dumb shits in the room who have yet to catch on. "John," he says, and if it sounds quiet and small, that's because he was shouting ten seconds ago and his ears are still ringing from that. Not for any other reason whatsoever.

"Whyrr shoutin'?" John lifts an arm, and consternation creases his features when the IV drip keeps him from finishing the motion. "Augh. Hey everyone."

Kanaya releases Karkat before Karkat himself is even fully aware of it, and he thinks she might also be the one who puts a hand on Jade's shoulder and does - something - that causes Jade to make a tiny 'oh!' of comprehension and let go, too. But his focus narrows from being frustrated with everyone in this room and with life in general to John and that puts a limit on the number of other things Karkat registers. His first priority is striding past Rose and pushing John's hand back down against the bed before the dumb stupid idiot can pull out the IV and start bleeding all over the place.

"Jde?" he says. Jade perks up, leaning closer to the bed than Karkat's instincts like, but she keeps her hands clasped together, fingers laced so that her latest act of weirdness in the form of bright rubber bands is exposed along her knuckles. "Sorry about. Th'thing." John tries to raise his hand again, probably to pantomime some kind of explanation, but Karkat hauls his hand back down. "Strangly thing."
"Oh!" Jade blinks and waves a hand, her gesture dismissive but her expression anxious and jubilant all at once as she smiles at John. "No biggie! I've had worse!"

(They very strategically fail to inform John about the news broadcast.)

(But it doesn't stop those other assholes from exchanging *looks* when they think Karkat can't see.)

Rose tells them all that the Trickster is still around, but that it fucked off after she and John set it on fire. Dave gives her a thumbs up, Jade laughs her fool head off, and Kanaya, who never experienced the Trickster firsthand, just nods her approval of the strategic use of fire.

Karkat feels like he's the only one who's not the least bit reassured by this. But that's not true, he thinks, because Rose looks ill when she says it, and when Doctor Lalonde catches his eye next he could almost swear he sees the same kind of anxious nausea there that won't stop churning in his stomach whenever he thinks about that psycho candy dipshit. Just remembering how casually evil that *thing* was makes Karkat's skin crawl, and he kind of curls up with his head buried against John's side, twitching and jittering until John falls back asleep and the reassuring headpats stop.

The worst part of this whole shitstorm is that the next real words out of John's mouth - the first *fucking* words - when he wakes up from another slow doze hours later, are, "I'm'srry, Karkat. R'lly sorry."

The second words are some refrain of, "I'm sorry I messed up," and just because they're less drug-slurred and more coherent this time around doesn't mean Karkat doesn't burst out into fucking tears. In front of witnesses, no less - Jade and Roxy and a couple of asshole interns, all four of whom just so happen to be in the room while Karkat's trying not to have a fucking meltdown and failing miserably. Jade picks at her rubber bands and chatters bright nonsense with Roxy and John that Karkat's too soggy to pay attention to. But she succeeds in distracting John so that he stops slurring and trying to reassure Karkat with things like "I'm sorry! Again!" that really don't help in this particular context *at all*. Roxy's only in the room because Dirk and Jane are both laid up on cots opposite John's, but she inserts herself into the babbling conversation with slurred enthusiasm until, between the two of them, she and Jade talk John into exhaustion once more.

At least after John's dozed off again, Karkat has an opening to excuse himself to pitch a bawling fit, in a nice dark lab where no one can see him royally lose it.

All the resistance he's built up since his recent attempt to outdo the world record for being sleepless in Seattle crumbles, and he has to sprint the last few yards before he starts clawing at the walls. He seizes the first inanimate thing he sees once the door shuts behind him - a plastic rack meant for holding test tubes upright - and flings it at the wall, strung so tense with echoes of terror and worry and anger that he barely notices when his ribs start aching again, phantom pangs of warning as he smashes up a fume hood and an entire row of empty, dust-strewn cabinets.

By the time he *does* wind down, every panting breath a hiccup, Karkat feels numb. Not soothed, because there's only one person who could do that for him right now, but as though he's just...stopped. He's run out of energy to fuel any more of this tantrum and he can only stand there for a moment to regain his balance. He notices that the knuckles of one hand are bleeding after a second of forced clarity; he hastily stems the flow of blood, his pulse still throbbing in his ears like a memory of burst eardrums, and *then* sees the overturned cabinet with the shattered glass front where he doesn't remember shoving it.
Good. Fucking perfect. Glad to know he got that out of his system. If only he could do the same for all this bitter sarcasm stopping up his throat.

Except, of course, when he walks out, having left some poor fuck’s abandoned work station worse for the wear, the last person he wants to catch him in the hall is Kanaya. Jade, Dave - he's flipped out in front of both those annoying pissbuckets before, and he's starting to get resigned to it. So what. Karkat is a fucking hysteric, this is news to pretty much no one, ever.

But he's been trying to keep his shit together in front of Rose and Kanaya. Rose because she's fucking tolerable, even after prolonged exposure, and Kanaya because, well -

He knows for a fact she's the KM from that pisspoor excuse for a list Spades Slick managed to scrounge up - knows it in his bones, looks at her and knows with utter certainty that they've met before, a constant déjà vu that fucks him up in a really subtle, freaking-out-internally kind of way because a) it never fucking turns off, and b) Kanaya herself shows absolutely no signs of ever admitting this chronic déjà-fuckery has been bothering her, too. Which means it could just be Karkat being a freak, as usual.

So when Karkat steps outside the door, his hair a tangled, matted wreck from being torn at and one of his teeth wobbling loose from the force he needed to clamp down on screams in a lab full of paranoid scientists, he groans and nearly marches right back in for round two of his marathon freak out session. "Fuck me sideways with a rusty sickle," he says in a weary rush, not loud or forceful enough to qualify as a growl. It's mostly a token greeting/an acknowledgement of his myriad failings as a rational being on every conceivable level, and he doesn't expect a response. He doesn't want a response, with the mood he's in.

"That really does not sound hygienic. Or comfortable," Kanaya says, with an imperturbable expression. She and Rose have clearly been fuck deep in each other's pockets for way too fucking long, because their straight-faced sense of humor is tuned to permanently verbose snark, and it's obvious that they're doing it on purpose. "Perhaps you should reconsider your choice of implement."

She pauses, but not long enough for Karkat to snap at her. "Ah. You're being rhetorical. I am beginning to catch on to the quirks of your abrasive oratory. Unless you intended to proposition me."

"God, why," Karkat says, burying his face in his claws. "No. I'm sorry. I'm going to fucking crawl back into my dark corner now, thanks." He's not sure he's embarrassed by any of this - he's managed to permanently insert his foot into his shoutgaper where Kanaya's concerned, and the persistent humiliation of being a complete, socially maladjusted cretin just reminds Karkat of how awful he's always been at making friends who aren't John.

And ha! Fucking ha! Look at how well he held up his end of that relationship! How did he not see -

Snarling, Karkat wheels around before he starts rolling around on the floor like a wriggler throwing a hissy, shrieking fit.

Kanaya seizes him in a chokehold, and carts him off before Karkat processes this completely unanticipated turn of events. It's not a gentle tug, either; Kanaya fucking yanks when he drags his heels, and he finds himself stumbling along off-kilter in her wake to keep from getting choked out.

"What," he says, stating his point as eloquently as he ever does, "the fuck?"

"You're being a menace to yourself and your surroundings."

His don't-be-a-total-asshole filter rips itself out of his brain and absconds for Vegas. "Well, fuck, I wouldn't have guessed if you hadn't told me!" Karkat says, the sarcasm so thick it's not even sarcasm
anymore. It's a mournful, agonized howl of existential despair. He starts kicking in earnest, trying to sidetrack them, but Kanaya's taller than him, with what he suspects is the unparalleled ability to kick ass of a rainbow drinker, and not even stabbing her would slow her down, if Dave is to be believed.

"You will desist or I will assist you in desisting."

...Yeah, okay, Karkat is a huge fucking nerd, and he recognizes the Malachite Sylph's usual pre-auspicizing spiel. He sighs and goes limp, crossing his arms and glowering up when she pauses and raises an eyebrow at him. "I'm not about to fucking swandive into the deep end of the empty concrete pool," he mutters, not able to meet her eyes. "Just fuck off and let me handle it. I'm fine."

He's not the one who had a brainwashing grub in his head for fucking years, or a custodian who put him through such an isolating, abusive mindfuck that he went insane trying to deal with it, or who had that insanity congeal into some shithive maggotbrained trickster with a permanent hardon for unsuspecting trolls. He's just the fucking leaky-panned shithive excuse for a moirail who didn't do anything to stop it.

"Yes, of course you are," Kanaya says, watching him. "But you are also currently dealing with the temporary incapacitation of your moirail."

"So fucking what?" Karkat snorts, worrying at the loose tooth with his tongue in a perverse, moody sort of way, like fucking with a tooth until it pops out will somehow improve the quality of his life right now. "Look at me. I'm dealing with it. By myself."

Kanaya's expression turns a lot more readable. In fact, her message is written so clearly on her face that Karkat's disturbed to see that the words That is such fucking bullshit haven't miraculously inscribed themselves across her forehead in bright red flashing letters. "We are engaging in the preliminary stages of platonic amity. Humor me," she says, rolling her eyes.

Karkat has to start walking again when Kanaya strides off down the hallway. "...You. Want to be friends?" he says, suspicious.

"I have come to the conclusion that you are a very angry, very loud troll," she says. Karkat nods, because...yeah, pretty much. "However, I have also come to the conclusion that you possess qualities that may make you suitable for friendship despite your insistence on shouting at everyone in your immediate vicinity. So yes. We might as well give it a shot."

Karkat squints at her. Because he's about, oh, one hundred fucking percent sure that he has about as many redeeming, friendship-inducing qualities as a bucket full of pimple ooze and the kind of intestinal armageddon unleashed by ingesting dangerous quantities of sugarless gummy bears. John's always been a fucking fluke, and after all this fresh fuckery, Karkat has convinced himself that by the time John's fully recovered, he'll have come to his newly unbrainfucked senses and realized that trying to be moirails with Karkat is an exercise in self-inflicted masochism that no one deserves to put themselves through.

No one.

It only makes sense that Kanaya must think this is the best way to stop Karkat from acting like a stark raving lunatic in abandoned rooms full of expensive lab equipment. Some kind of twisted, hyper-advanced auspicism technique that wraps right back around to pretending the irritation is friendship. Accepting this logical conclusion makes Karkat relax and shrug in resignation. "Whatever," he says. He wants to sound derisive, so she knows he's not fooled, but his voice keeps fucking him over today, and it comes out a tired, miserable mutter.
With a sigh of what might be exasperation - yeah, it's probably exasperation - Kanaya hauls him into a room and sets him down, unlooping her arm from its chokehold and walking away. Karkat rubs his neck needlessly (it's not even sore) and looks around.

Someone has converted this room into some kind of fabric-strewn mecca, and Karkat is thrown by the sight of an actual literal sewing machine in the middle of one of the repurposed lab counters because - fuck, there is a lot of random nubgrinding miscellaneous crap lying around the storage rooms here, but a sewing machine?!

Worse still, he recognizes the two long, rectangular mirrors propped up on the wall - because if you stuck the two halves together, they'd be the same shape and length as the mirror from the communal ablutions block closest to the lobby of Lalonde Labs. He hasn't been there in a while, but fuck, this is just blatantly and Kanaya is not allowed to talk about vandalizing lab property.

"What," Karkat says. It gets his point across.

Kanaya digs through a duffle bag at the base of one of the mirrors. "I left most of my supplies here before we left for the house," she says, holding up a small case. She shakes it before opening it, and inspects the contents. "Hmm. No. I thought, perhaps -"

"Perhaps what?" Karkat steps around a skein of floaty green fabric, inching through the maze of fabric and almost paralyzed by the certainty that if he steps on something Kanaya could probably rip the offending foot off.

Kanaya sets the case aside and straightens, inspecting him with a grave stare. Karkat huddles up before he can help himself, because he reacts to scrutiny almost as badly as Dave 'Asshole' Strider does - by getting defensive. Prolonged staring, big surprise, tends to set off his paranoid little fuckwaffle instincts. "Occasionally I wear contact lenses to conceal my own eyes," she says, and it's so far from what Karkat expected her to say that he fumbles to keep up. "Jadebloods tend to attract unsolicited attention in the streets. But I only brought the one pair, and I've used them before. It would be unspeakably unsanitary. So I do hope you brought a spare pair for yourself, or we'll have to request that Dave donate his shades to the cause."

Just the mention of Dave is enough to sour Karkat's mood. He's petty that way. "Why?!" he demands, folding his arms and tucking his chin in a little into the collar of his hoodie.

Kanaya stills. "Karkat," she says, with a voice like someone trying not to aggravate a pissed off lusus. "You have been without contact lenses since yesterday evening. People will begin to notice."

A beat. Two. And then Karkat claps both hands over his eyes, sucking in air to screech because oh holy fuck -

"Scream, and someone will come looking to see what is wrong," Kanaya points out. And fuck her and her logical reason for him to not freak out. Karkat grinds his teeth and rubs his eyes, trying and failing to remember when or where or how his contact lenses could have possibly fallen out. What, did they just evaporate into thin fucking air?! He can't remember noticing his vision suddenly improving, on account of he's been crying so fucking much his eyes hurt regardless. Way to fucking sabotage himself, fucking fuck.

"Why didn't any of you limp fronded assholes warn me about this?!" he manages to force out at an acceptably low volume.

Kanaya sighs and starts digging through the bag again, pursing her lips. "Because at first, things were a little hectic. By the time I noticed, you three were all entering John's mind, and there wasn't
an opportunity for a while after that. We couldn't have told you or removed you from John without risking you losing it even more publicly."

Karkat is starting to see things in the dark static behind his eyelids. "I didn't bring any extras. Fuuuuck!" Maybe now he just has an excuse to curl up in some convenient corner and close his eyes and pretend the world doesn't exist for a couple hours...or a few days...or weeks...

"I thought as much." Kanaya's voice comes from close bye, and the back of Karkat's thinkpan starts banging out an alarm on a bunch of tin cans like a stupid wriggler at the fact that he's alone in a room with someone and he can't see what they're doing. Fuck his paranoia; he cracks his eyes own reluctantly and removes his hands enough to peer between them, trying to figure out what Kanaya's doing now. "Dave's sunglasses?"

"I will smash them with my bare claws before those things touch my face," Karkat replies. Not the most rational answer, but it's the truth.

"Then we need to minimize the saturation as best we can." Kanaya walks toward him and inspects his face, her expression smooth as Karkat squirms. "Yes, I think I can manage this. It would help if they weren't so bright, though. Are they normally this luminescent in well-lit areas, or can you turn it off?"

Karkat blinks, and holds up a hand to his eye again, close enough that he can make out the faint red glow cast along the grey of his palm. And that...should not be happening. Like Kanaya says, troll eyes are only supposed to glow this much in the dark of night. "...I have no idea why they're doing that," he says, miserable. "What the fuck else could go wrong today? Wait. Don't answer that. Nothing you come up with could possibly top whatever my body or thinkpan decide to fuck up next."

"You are very creative," Kanaya says. Karkat can't decide if he wishes she'd try to prove him wrong or not. Instead, she brandishes a black case and a small stylus. "Try to focus your efforts on turning down the brightness while I try to dull the hue to something more acceptable by society's less than tolerating standards."

Karkat eyeballs the case with growing apprehension. "With what?"

The case clicks open under Kanaya's claw. "With makeup. Enough brown tones and purples, and we might be able to bring out darker notes so that you're less 'bright mutant red' and more 'particularly vivid burgundy,'" Kanaya says, swabbing at a square of dark brown powder. "Close one of your eyes, please."

Karkat gives the (really pointy, vaguely threatening) stylus another token glower - and then sighs, closing one eye and trying not to flinch out of his meatsack when Kanaya starts dabbing at the thin skin over his eye. "I'm putting my fucking ganderbulbs in your claws here, you know," he says, feeling his claws twist into a gnarled knot, trying to remember what it felt like to be holding John's hand, because he needs to stop twitching or he'll impale his eye on the makeup stylus all of his own volition.

Kanaya smiles at him. It's faint, and he sees it from a weird angle with only one eye open, but her eyes smile, too, like she means it. "We are engendering a true esprit de corps, Karkat. Now be a dear and stand still."

Talk about flying right out of the starting gate, flogging the rest of the hoofbeasts on the racetrack, and leaping straight over the finish line into a fucking hardcore friendship trust exercise, holy fuck. Karkat breathes in hard through his nose, digs his claws into the backs of his hands, and starts
groping around with his powers for whatever weird fuckery they’ve caused this time.

After a while, his eye stops flinching every time Kanaya cakes another layer of makeup on top of it, and when she moves to start dabbing under his eyes, Karkat only has a few tics before it stops. "Don't forget to leave the massive fucking bags under there, or no one will buy it," Karkat mutters.

"Mmm. Good point."

(It vexes Kanaya to no end when, despite all her best efforts, Karkat's eyes come out the most disturbingly close to garish red-fuchsia he's ever seen them.)

(It does worse than vex Karkat. It makes his stomach tighten with a frisson of trepidation, because the gills along his sides are his business -)

(But put a pair of fake fins over his nubby ears, and he doesn't want to even think how weird a picture this would make.)

- By the time he leaves Kanaya with a quiet, returning Rose, and creeps back into the hospital room through hallways with most of the lights dimmed, there are two more bodies laid out on a cot on the Scratch kids' side of the room. But one of them is Roxy, and she's snoring raucously with no sign of the monitors and IV stands that accompany the other post-surgery humans in the room, so Karkat thinks she might have just passed out on the first available surface, oblivious to the fact that it's probably her turn to be degrubbed.

(But then, the neurology team probably needs to sleep, too, after half a day and a night and another day of brain surgery on multiple patients.)

It's certainly what he intends to do. The Roxy human has had an excellent idea and he's emotionally exhausted enough that he'd probably tell her that to her face if she were awake right now.

Dave looks up at him as Karkat stomps past, his face illuminated by the light of his phone screen and his shades a flat, unreadable screen. He ducks his head in a curt nod, and goes back to - whatever the fuck he's always doing on that thing. And. Fuck. If that dick's planning to keep his mouth shut for once, Karkat's not going to provoke him into changing his mind. He's too tired. He grabs the other chair instead, leaning his weight on it more than he should as he tugs it back around to the other side of the bed from where the last person dragged it. Ready for a night of cramped, hunched over snatches of sleep (because at this point, he couldn't leave John to find a recooperacoon if he tried), Karkat spins the seat around and goes to sit.

The chair yanks out from under his claw, and Karkat swallows back a yell of terror only because his butt hits something else instead of the ground. He whips around, nonplussed, and realizes his chair has been swapped out for an empty cot.

And a pair of bright green eyes blinks at him from the other side, as luminous with space powers as Karkat's were for some unknown reason earlier. Jade's squatting on the ground, the tips of her fingers tapping a sheepish beat out on the mattress before she smiles up at him. "There's something I have to tell you tomorrow, okay?" she says, fiddling with one of the rubber bands on her finger, again.

...Fuck it. "Yeah, fine. Whatever," Karkat says, shifting and glaring sourly at the bed under his butt until Jade shuffles off, humming something under her breath, into the hallway. He's almost self-conscious about lying down with Dave still in the room - but then he stops caring. He's too tired for
this bullshit, and fuck, if Dave's here, that's just one more barely competent person to keep John's unconscious ass safe.

It takes more of the pressure off Karkat than he wants to admit. To avoid doing that, he curls up on his side, trying to avoid smearing makeup all over the pillow. He gropes out, blind because his eyes don't seem to remember how to stay open, now that he's let them fall mostly shut, and finally his claws catch John's near hand. The relief is immediate, loosening more of the knot in his chest until he can stop flinching and \textit{breathe}.

He holds John's hand until he stops seeing the dim glow of Dave's phone screen, and there's only black.

- (John's fingers have the right number of knuckles.)
- (And Karkat hates himself for the fact that he has to keep checking.)

\textit{Karkat dreams -}

Vaguely, Karkat thinks that he hasn't really dreamed in a while. Not the shitty dreams where people die, anyway. For the most part, it's just been repeats, his thinkpan replaying horrific shit over and over again because Karkat dwells on that kind of fuckery, okay? He doesn't know how to let it go.

But now, as he drifts, he's stubbornly convinced that the problem isn't that he isn't dreaming. It's that he \textit{can't wake up}. Someone put him back to sleep, someone who laughed, and told him it was too early, and sunk him back down into the flashing rainbow static. And ever since then, he hasn't been able to claw and scream his way into waking up.

This is such bullshit. He couldn't wake up his dreamself last time, either, and now, just when he got the hang of it -

But before he can finish that thought (or even pause to realize the implications of what he just said), Karkat feels something tug him further into dreaming, hauling him down with quiet insistency until he stops kicking and lets his eyes fall shut.

When he opens them, he's somewhere entirely new.

Which is really fucking ominous, because in his experience, new places in his dreams mean new ways for all his asshole human friends to die.

Karkat growls, and feels his shoulders hunch defensively as he glances down to make sure that he's in his own body, this time. Thank fuck, he is -

Then he blinks, and looks down again, raising his claws to inspect them with increasing trepidation. They're the claws of someone barely six sweeps old (sweeps? no, years, thirteen \textit{years} old, what is he remembering?), blunt and nubby and gnawed on by sharp teeth. Karkat broke himself of that fucking habit years ago, for fuck's sake, because sometimes he'd run out of clawkeratin to chew on and absentmindedly start chewing his fingers, which was just plain fucking dangerous if he bit too deep in public.

Oh god what the fuck. Now \textit{he's} thirteen?
There is no way this ends well. Thirteen year olds in dreams tend to die a lot - if he's joined their ranks, the remainder of his lifespan probably just got trimmed to a matter of minutes.

"I do not like this place. Perhaps it would have been more prudent to wait for the others."

"Nah, that would have been thuch a wathte of time. Let'th jutht find the dipthhit and get out."

Karkat looks up, and oh god Kanaya's deaged, too. She and another troll stand near him, all three members of the group in their awkward thirteen year old phase (and why does his stupid pan keep trying to autocorrect that to six sweeps?), all of them more than a little worse for the wear. Kanaya's in a pink, floral sundress with long white gloves and a white Virgo sign across the front, her eyes an anonymous grey, her cheeks still round enough that her future cheekbones are only a suggestion on a child's face. The massively oversized chainsaw in her claws looks even more oversized because she's so much shorter than usual.

He knows the name of the other troll even before Kanaya says, reprovingly, "Sollux -"

And the sight of Sollux Captor mashes all the déjà vu buttons in Karkat's thinkpan so hard that he reels internally, unable to react because it seems this is one of those dreams where he barely has any autonomy over his own actions. Sollux is taller than both Karkat and Kanaya, but hunched over so that it barely even counts. His shirt looks like it's been worn for over 600 hours, covered in the slime and gunk of strifing, to the point that the yellow symbol on the front is almost entirely obscured. He looks bored, more than anything, like whatever the fuck they're doing is a massive waste of his time but he's humoring them.

And what lodges in Karkat's chest, as he stares at Kanaya and Sollux, cannot be mistaken for anything other than that most despicable of all communicable troll diseases, the dreaded plague called friendship. It's kind of like grudging fondness mixed in with a heaping dollop of exasperation, fortified with the cautious trust that if he turns his back on them or bares his neck, they won't whip around and disembowel him with sharp claws or slit his throat with shredding horns.

Because the true measure of a friend is how much confidence you have that they won't kill you just for shits and giggles.

Wow. Fuck. That was morbid, even for Karkat.

They stand on the edge of a massive monochrome city; cathedrals and castles and towers rise up before them, glittering monoliths in shades of black and grey and white. All of them radiate a faint, pulsating white light, so that the excessive ornamentation along the walls and arches gleams garishly. The sky overhead is just as bad, burning a white so harsh that Karkat's eyes start to water and ache. Behind them is a black, monochrome plain, polished and featureless and without any kind of defensive cover. Karkat can just barely make out more towers in the distance across the obsidian field - another city. Off behind Sollux, pin wheeling gently and occasionally revolving until it has a different pattern, a violet spirograph gate hovers just a few yards above the ground, easily within jumping distance.

They're waiting on something, Karkat thinks. Or someone. But no matter how much he tries to suggest that his body, you know, fucking move, he just keeps standing in place, fidgety as fuck but unmoving. Finally he pulls out a weird looking phone, his claws moving on autopilot over an Alternian keyboard as he goes through the motions of opening up an app called Trollian.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] at 06:12:43 opened memo on board ERI DAN YOU FUCKING MORON IT'S TIME FOR THE EN DGAME --
CG: ERI DAN, WE'RE WAITING.
CG: WE ARE LITERALLY STANDING ON \( \text{"word_not_penetrable"} \) OR HOWEVER THE FUCK YOU SPELL THAT. RIGHT BY THE SPOIROGRAPH AND GUESS WHO'S NOT FUCKING HERE.

CG: GUESS, YOU FUCKING NO-SHOW NOOKSTAIN.

CG: OKAY HAS ANYONE HEARD FROM ERIDAN?

CG: YEAH, FUTURE ME HAS KIND OF SHIT THE COON WITH THE WHOLE MEMO THING, AND FOR THAT I HAVE SO MUCH FUCKING REGRET, BUT THIS IS SERIOUS.

CG: FEFERI, YOU'RE HIS FUCKING SERVER PLAYER, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU SEE ON YOUR SCREEN?

CG: AS FUN AS IT IS YELLING AT MYSELF ALL THE TIME, THERE IS A GIANT CHESTHEMED BONEBULGE THE SIZE OF YOUR FUCKING LUSUS WE STILL NEED TO TAKE CARE OF BEFORE YOU ALL ARE ALLOWED TO START DISREGARDING MY ORDERS, AND ERIDAN'S OFFICIALLY MISSED THE RENDEZVOUS RUMPUS.

-- cuttlefishCuller [CC] has joined the memo! --

CC: )(-ELLO!!!

CC: )(a)(a, sorry about t)(at, Crabcatc)(! I don't c)(eck t)(ese all t)(at often anymore!

CG: YEAH, THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE. UNFORTUNATELY.

CG: COME ON, JUST SEND US A SCREENSHOT OF WHERE HE IS ON YOUR MAP SO WE CAN DRAG HIM OUT OF WHATEVER NOOK HE'S CRAWLED INTO.

CC: O)(, I'm sorry...but I )aven't reelly been able to see muc)( of anyt)(ing on -Eridan's client window for a w)(ile now, oops!

CG: WHY THE FUCK NOT?

CC: I stopped looking after )e tried to mess wit)( Sollux. )e's been a reel ass)(oal t)(ese past couple weeks, to be conknest!

CG: IF YOU SEE ANYTHING, TELL ME. WE DON'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME LEFT, HERE.

CC: All I can see on )ere is a bunc)( of brig)(t w)(ite lig)(t! It's pretty fis)(y, but I'll dolp)(initely keep wat)(cing in case somefin c)(anges!!! You'll be t)(e first to know! 38)

"Yeah, Feferi's got fuck all," Karkat announces, his mouth still framing the words while his thinkpan struggles to keep up with the weird turns this dream is taking. "Says she can't see anything but light."

"He'th juth thulking," Sollux insists, sounding like his tongue has been replaced by cotton balls or some shit. He sighs, tapping on the side of his weird two-toned glasses until he grimaces at something. "Oof. FF'th not kidding, though. That'th way too bright."

"He should have pestered someone by now," Kanaya says, shaking her head. "If only to feed his own need for dramatics. That no one has seen his dreamself either is -" She breaks off and stares uneasily at the nearest rampart, as though she expects something to launch itself at them the moment their backs are turned. There's an eerie stillness - a distinct absence that makes the younger Karkat shift his weight like he too is uneasy.

He's certain that it's not just this Eridan guy who's missing. This whole place is a ghost town, and the Karkat once removed from this younger version of himself thinks that this is a prime set up for all three tiny kid trolls to get gratuitously stabbed. He's not looking forward to it.

"I'm sure he's fine," he says, though Karkat has no control over the words coming out. And holy fuck he sounds like a ten year old with a chronic sore throat trying to sound angry and commanding, but failing fucking miserably. He wants to gag himself but his claws won't listen; he's just stuck following the motions. "He's probably fan-fucking-tastic, off having a pissparty all by himself in one of his douchebag castles with a bunch of dead angel corpses stacked up in a hipster throne like the genocidal moron he is. But if he's lording it over this hellhole, he's not helping on the Battlefield, so he can suck grubphlegm for all I care. We drag him out of here by his gills if we have to because I'm
so fucking tired of this."

Kanaya looks at him, anxious. "If you require sleep -"

Karkat snarls. "Tired of this game. Sleep is for people who don't have the fucking endgame boss battle about to get served to them on a heaping nutrition plateau. Let's just get it over with." He starts walking.

Sollux has to have the last word, of course. "If you thay tho, KK, but I'm on the record ath thtating tht ith thupid."

Karkat glowers at him, all hundred-pounds-sopping-wet of him trying to be intimidating and once again faceplanting somewhere around petulant wriggler. This is embarrassing, and Karkat cringes while mini-him natters on. "I respect your right to have an opinion, but also your opinion doesn't fucking count, because you shithard wrigglers need a fucking dictator to keep you focused and oh look. I am that dictator. It's me."

He stomps onward into the city on that note, the black plain segmenting into dark, glittering cobblestones with lines of white grout between them. Kanaya falls into step beside him, her chin up and her grey eyes alert as she glances around, in sharp contrast to the way that Karkat puts his head down and pushes his way forward. Sollux falls behind, but then there's a crackle of red and blue neon light and the other troll catches up in seconds, levitating with psionics that make Karkat's hair stand on end with static.

The deeper they press into the maze of cathedrals and palisades, the more unsettled Karkat is, watching from behind his own eyes. He has no control and no way to defend this body if (when) the shit hits the rotating device. The streets are too still. He turns his head in tiny motions, bobs that let him catch glimpses of the walls and crenellations, but he can't tell if it's him or the thirteen year old wriggler Karkat who's following his own routine, oblivious to the older (and fucking wiser) Karkat dreaming behind his eyes. The gargoyle statues looming overhead resolve in weirdly sharp focus; a blink confirms that he's not wearing any contact lenses thick enough to obscure his vision to conceal his hemotype - fuck, he really is thirteen.

Huge gouges and scorch marks start to appear after a minute or so, marring a fuckton of the gleaming churches and castles crammed into the tiny space. Entire courtyards, when they walk past, stand piled full of felled arches and shattered stone, like some idiot went around taking pot shots at the buildings with a laser cannon. The sky burns steadily white, empty and clear, and that bothers Karkat. There's no way he could have murdered all of them -

All of who? But Karkat only gets that brief flash of insight before his body's wandering around of its own accord again.

But as though to answer his question, all three trolls flinch and scramble backward when a dark figure crashes through a fortification to their left and flails on the street before them. Kanaya raises her chainsaw and Sollux curses like a lispy sailor, and Karkat's autopilot has him drawing neon pink and green sickles before he's processed that at least thirteen-year-old him isn't slow on the draw.

But the creature doesn't lunge for them. It flops around on the cobblestones, whining and trilling nonsensical syllables of song that sound like a bird gargling water as it drowns. Its limbless body writhes like a snake, but feathery avian wings bat and flex as though the creature means to fly away, the feathers as black as the obsidian stone beneath their feet. It senses them in the next moment; or maybe by sheer coincidence, the creature rolls over and keens at them. It raises diamond-shaped eyes in a mournful stare; the tears that stream from the three bottom corners of its four-sided eyes are a thick, brilliant violet, not at all the watered-down tint of troll tears.
Then, with a final thrash, the bird-snake twists and the gaping hole blasted through its snake belly is exposed, before it crumples up and sags, a sad husk leaking violet tears and blood onto the channels in the street. Its elongated jaws snap shut on the last of the song.

"Oh come on!" Karkat says at last. Apparently this younger version of himself has different standards for what counts as really fucking weird and potentially lethal, because Karkat is more inclined to run the other direction, not march over and start prodding at the (hopefully) dead body with a sickle to investigate. "He really is still pulling this fuckery?!

"Theriouthly, I'm pretty thure we don't need him. You know he'th going to be a jackathth about the whole thing. Let' th jutht go," Sollux mutters, and Karkat approves whole-heartedly of the middle claw his younger self throws up in reply.

"He must be close by, though," Kanaya says. While Karkat pokes at dead bodies that could spring back to life and murder everyone at any second (he's learned to expect that kind of bullshit from these nightmares), Kanaya jumps up onto the broken wall that the winged snake angel pulverized in its death throes, and shades her eyes against the white glare of the sky as she peers through. "Unless, of course, the creature died slowly enough to crawl some distance away from where he attacked it."

"Hey, a lead is a lead. And any lead that takes me one step closer to pissing in Eridan's last bowl of grubflakes for forcing us to hunt him down? Is a lead that I fucking well cherish." Karkat brushes non-existent dirt off his pants and follows Kanaya up and over the rubble and into the walled courtyard beyond. He's a moody fuckhead about it, too; Karkat can feel the reluctance in his own limbs, the grumpiness that has him inching his way over larger blocks of black stone instead of jumping like a normal person. He can't tell if it's because his past self doesn't trust himself to jump without slipping, or if he's just acting like a grumpy, stomping drama queen out of the overdramatic goodness of his shriveled husk of a vascular pump.

"Here's something odd," Kanaya says, in what Karkat - maybe even both Karkats - thinks of as her speculative, musing 'I have stumbled upon a vaguely intriguing quandary' voice. "Did Eridan ever speak of canals in his land? I distinctly recall him attempting to engage someone in pale antics over the fact that his land was peculiarly landlocked."

She jumps down from her boulder of debris and Karkat scrambles to follow her. He loses track of Sollux, but he can still hear the troll's muttering like an afterthought as he and Kanaya cross the courtyard. The ground here has a deep incline, and occasionally the black cobblestones sink down a layer in steps that form wide, square insets. There's none of the blood that the older Karkat would have expected to see from that winged thing flopping around everywhere in its death throes - but then, it wasn't bleeding back on the street, either, was it? Just crying - and yeah, when he thinks to look again, he catches tiny, tiny splots of violet here and there.

But the fact that the creature didn't bleed or leave any grist behind just strikes him as even more unsettling. Like it was something that shouldn't have been killed.

They skirt around the eerie, obsidian obelisk that rises up in the center of the concentric squares and back up the steps on the far side, and Karkat finally sees what Kanaya's pointing at, through an open archway. The two of them stop three feet from it, and Karkat prays to fuck that his younger self doesn't decide this is the time for a swim.

There's something...wrong about that canal. It's flowing, sure, slow as a glacier, with a sickly skin on the top of the white liquid that has an iridescent sheen to it. Even though it's all just shades of white, Karkat can't help but think this is the wrong shade entirely - it doesn't match the glittering light that limns the rest of the buildings. It turns his stomach to look at it for too long; and of course, naturally, his thirteen year old self just keeps looking, like it's the most fascinating thing he's laid bulbs on all
... day. They look up and down the street, but the pallid canal stretches off in one direction as far as Karkat can see, and vanishes into another arcade where the street runs up against a row of archways.

"This shouldn't be here," he says, and for once, what he wants to say and what the younger Karkat says sync up perfectly. "What the fuck, Eridan -"

That's all he has time for.

And then the white water erupts like it's boiling, and the liquid reaches out in arching wings to wrap around Kanaya and suck her down.

She doesn't even have time to scream.

Karkat does. "Kanaya!" he yells, but then he starts backpedaling, eyes darting back and forth between the spot where Kanaya's ripples are fading and the new churning spot that is way too close to him -

He trips. Like a fucking plebe. But falling backwards on his ass, stumbling down the step in the cobblestones, means he falls right under the next rippling wave that tries to crash over him. He catches a glimpse - something with wings - and too many eyes - along arms like wheels -

But then it crashes up against a pillar that supports one side of the arch, at just the right angle that Karkat's out of the splash zone. He scrambles backward, still hoarsely shouting Kanaya's name, but some of the white liquid splashes against his pants and starts sizzling. It's acid, and that's fucked up, that's so fucked up, because Kanaya's submerged in that.

He doesn't even see what gets Sollux; he just hears another garbled shout, and a splash, and he doesn't know if psionics would be enough to get the other troll out of something like this. Fuck, he barely even sees what kills him. He stumbles back to his feet at last, sickles in his claws, and feels more than hears the vibrations as something shakes the ground behind him.

The sky is empty.

So why is there a shadow looming over him, like a winged angel of double doom perched atop a column of black?

Karkat spins, and a pale parody of the avian creature from early rushes him. It's all black, tarry tears and an absolutely horrific number of extra teeth, and it latches onto his torso and shakes him like a lusus playing with live food. It only lets go, with a squawk like broken chimes and a symphony screaming out of tune, after Karkat's sickles have already gone spinning away, and he's in too much pain to see anything but white. He thinks it drops him, though he can't imagine why.

The older Karkat's just removed enough from the physical pain to realize Kanaya's still gone. It hurts more than he thinks it has any right to, considering they only just became friends; a sharper pain that watching any of his human friends but John die. But nothing could hurt more than John, to be honest. The thirteen year old him just curls up in a defensive ball, even though that makes the caustic bite wounds through their torso pulse with more agony, and he doesn't even seem to be trying very hard to seal them up with their blood powers.

If they even still have them.

A muffled shuffle. And then another.

Like footsteps.
The younger him opens his eyes because he thinks *it's Kanaya, it has to be, or Sollux, where is that fuck-for-brains*, while the older Karkat wishes he'd just keep them shut because he's figured out by now that whatever shows up next is just going to kill them deader. These nightmares have stuck staunchly to their 'EXTREME FATALITY' motif for as long as he's been having them, and he doubts they're about to break their winning streak now.

"Nah, my main motherfucker. That ain't how it went."

Someone stands over Karkat. But the fucking annoying as shit thing is, they're looming again, so even though Karkat can just barely make out the silhouette of them, gangly and skinny and topped with wavy horns, the burning bright sky overhead casts them completely in shadow.

They tilt their head down, and the eye that Karkat sees is black as pitch, the pupil blown out wide in sclera redder than his own irises, feral red and feverish.

When they bare their teeth in a manic grin, he almost thinks that they have more fangs than the angel did.

But there's no way that many teeth could fit on one troll's jaw.

"You're getting your remembering all wrong. This ain't right at all," they say, shaking their head in a mockery of sadness. "You do most grievously need to wake the motherfuck up, best friend."

"You weren't here," Karkat says, and both versions of him are lost. "You weren't here, *I know you weren't* -"

"As if that ever stopped a motherfucker." A low honk, of all things, and a laugh like that shouldn't be so familiar -

- (- but when has that -

- - but before he can place that sense of déjà vu, Karkat dies -

- - ever stopped him?)

- - and jolts awake, paralyzed for a moment on the hospital bed with the last grip of REM sleep. He's sweated through his hoodie in cold terror, and when he wrests his jaw apart, panting in the last vestiges of panic, he realizes that Dave is staring at him over his phone, his eyes so wide behind sunglasses falling down the tip of his nose that Karkat can actually see the red of his eyes.

"Fuck," Karkat says, the word exploding out of his mouth. He levers himself up on one elbow, squeezing John's hand hard with the other because it's the only anchor he has, and grimaces as he tugs the damp fabric of his hoodie off his gills and torso. He think he should still feel that bite, and the absence of pain is almost as upsetting as the rest of the unpleasant process of waking up. "Shit. Fuck."

"Dude," Dave says, sounding openly unsettled, for once in his life. "You've only been asleep for an
"hour."

Karkat doesn't want to believe him. Then he drags his phone out of his pocket with claws that splay out for a befuddled moment before he remembers this is a mixed Alternian/English keyboard, to turn it on and see that yeah. It's barely been fifty minutes, actually. How could that possibly have been long enough to dream that much.

He falls back against the bed to stare at the ceiling, letting his phone drop to one side and go dark. "Don't fucking remind me," he tells Dave.

"Yeah, yeah." Dave is quiet for longer than Karkat ever thought the human capable of.

Then, with a click, Dave's phone turns off, too.

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71°39′N 128°52′E

Murmansk was too close to Europe and St Petersburg. Archangelsk was the main base of ops for a long bass time, but they needed to expand after a certain point. And so east and north it was, all along the northern coast of Russia.

Tiksi is pearlfect. Shrimpy, isolated. This far north, the sea's icebound all but two months outta the year. Or at least, that's what she likes to keep people believing. The nice thing about the nearest town being inhabited solely by your own employees? They know to keep their mouths shut when things get fishy, and they're too exhausted from operating the icebreaker ships to pay attention to the construction going on at the new docks.

It's cold as shell, but what can you do?

The Condesce doesn't visit this remote Crocker Corporation outpost all that often, but when she does, she gets downright snapperfish. There are other moorage points similar to this in warmer waters - but ole Doc's been eyeballin' everything, angling to peer his way through natural void zones and get his peeps on her private business, and so she's needed to make - a shudder at the thought - concessions.

Tethys Peixes pulls a face as she steps down the ramp from the shuttle that brought them here, baring sharp teeth at the sheer wind that burns cold against her cheeks. It feels like swallowing icicles to breathe, here; if it's cold enough that a tyrianblood can feel the numb hooked deep in her bones, it's cold. The last time she tried to swim up here, she coughed up ice cubes for weeks. She's dried her hair (despite the fact that the whole thing is a motherglubbing ordeal to get dry) so that it won't freeze into a chunk of dark ice heavier than she is, and her suit has an extra layer of seal blubber between her and the dry air, because there's no one to carp on about 'animal cruelty' and 'advocacy' and all that other weird glubbing shit humans have thought up over the centuries.

They shoulda just stuck to good things. Ohh, like inventing new kinds of alcodhol - they're good at that!

...Now. Where is her buoy? Tethys whirls and her attendants turn with her, their fur-lined coats dyed bright Betty Crocker red because as far as any paper trail shows (and there isn't much of one to find) this whole town was just some branch of the company that went under with the Soviets. She cranes her neck back and purses her lips when the ramp stays empty. "Where you at, Psii?" she calls.

A shuffle above, and a sigh. "I hate that title." Another fidgeting sound. "Is this really necessary?"
"This scampi happening." She growls it low enough that he probably can't hear, smacking her gum with an impatient pop, and then raises her voice again, this time with just enough shark bite to it that he knows she's already at the end of her line. "Come on, Captor, move it or lose it! #stopbeingsobassic"

Finally, the shuffling stops, and the faint, always-present whine of psionics picks up to a dull, thrumming crackle as red and blue reflect off the inside of the hull. "It is below -32° out here," Ledaei Captor says as he levitates his way down to the ground, and Tethys is about to roll her eyes and say it's at least 2 degrees when she remembers he uses Celsius.

Canadians.

"Yeah? At least you got yo sparky thing to keep you warm," she says as he floats to a stop. He's up a few inches higher than usual, like he thinks she won't notice that his one remaining foot's dangling. Har, har. "So don'tchu try to play me, boy."

"I'm retired," he points out, using the hand with the most claws left to pick at the lines around his left eye until a stray spark of red static dislodges itself and rejoins the rest of his psionics supporting his leg at the knee. "Also, old. I'm way too old for field trips to the Arctic Circle. And did I mention? I'm retired."

...Whale, he walked right into this one! "Oh, you're ancient," Tethys says, cackling and pressing the back of her hand to her forehead, a fake swoon. One of her attendants nearly takes a horn through the chest, but if they don't have the reflexes to avoid their boss's pointy-ended antics after the first week, they really haven't earned their hefty paycheck, anyway. "A regular old troll Methuselah! Look at me, I'm a glubbin' tadpole!"

"You don't count," he says, letting Tethys yank him down by the elbow until his foot hits the ground. He still towers over her, but that's only 'cause he's on the tail end of the pupation cycle, and as it turns out, when you're not farming them out as telekinetic engines to power massive intergalactic ships, plenty of the lower bloods last longer than you'd think - at least as long as humans do. Tethys would feel an inkling of guilt over that, but regret's for squares and she's never regretted a thing in her life.

Well, aight. One thing. It was awkward and inconvenient and a total load of carp. She's taking steps to prevent that from happening again.

"Some of us live normal life spans," Ledaei says. But see, the nice thing is, no matter how snarky this buoy gets, his voice never changes much. It's faint and scratchy-soft from old screams, and that's shells of soothing. Tethys snaps her claws at one of the attendants and she lopes off at once, boots crunching in the salt-strewn slush that leads down the dock. "Proportionally speaking, I'm way older than you."

"Keep telling yourself that, honeyboo."

Tethys starts walking and doesn't wait up for him. He wouldn't appreciate it. The thing with Ledaei is, he's got whatcha'd call...the opposite of a limp; he's been using psionics to make up for the half a leg they amputated for decades, apparently, so he walks almost too smooth.

But he's not wrong that for a goldblood, he's old. The shit he went through back in his stupid dumbass hero days means he's down a coupla limbs. Glub it - Tethys hasn't had it this bad for someone in diamonds in a few centuries. People tend to die too fast for her to get too attached just for the halibut.

The cold doesn't get any easier to bear as they walk past a couple of tug boats. When the Condesce
tosses her hair a little, she can feel the ice encrusting the ends where it drags along the ground. It's no heavier than it was back in the days when battle jewelry was still in vogue on the battlefield, but it's annoying. "If I ask why we're here, are you going to give me a not-answer again?" Ledaei asks.

Another dismissive flip of her claws. "Ah, you just get me all tongue-tide, you do." Before he can open his mouth and starting fishing again, she tells him. "Someone coulda been spying on us, before. I got another old geezer here who keeps that from happening, though." She winks at the look Ledaei throws her way. "Took some convincin', but he's been cooped up for too long anyway. He needed to get outta the house - ain't that right, yah old coot!" she finishes in a shout, her breath bursting out between her lips in a cold cloud of visible moisture.

Approaching them from the far end of the dock, the lord E%ībimus greets her yell with a blank look, not quite meeting her eyes. The attendant is absolutely dwarfed in the shadow the hulking troll casts, and as Tethys strolls up to him the sheer size of this landglubber becomes all the more obvious. Meteos Zahhak hasn't stopped growing in all the centuries Tethys has known him, and it shows.

He also hasn't gotten any better at social interaction. Tethys has been punched through a wall a few times in her life, but she's never achieved as much air as she did the one memorable time she glubbed up and clapped a hand on Zahhak's shoulder without warning him ahead of time. Took her awhile to catch onto all his quirks and angles and shit, but it helps that she remembers him from another life. Vaguely. She's lived a lot since then.

Anyway. Don't make eye contact. Don't go poking at him. Don't make fun of the stupid horse puns, no matter how much of a nightmare (urgh) they are. She's slipped up before and Zahhak's not too intimidated by her being a tyrianblood to be afraid to flash her a reproachful glare. Tethys paid a price to stay on the humans' good side, watering herself down and curbing her instinct to rule all of trollkind with an iron fisht, and unfortunately Zahhak's too glubbin' useful for her to lose. It's a world where the thought of alienating Her Imperious Condescension doesn't inspire the same kind of utter terror as it used to, and oh, okay yeah, she regrets that.

But it inspires enough. Zahhak's old enough to remember what she did to Elizabet when that old seawitch got too big for her gills, what she did to Saturn's face when he thought run-of-the-krill chucklevoodoos would win him Spain. She can't gut lowbloods and mutants and hang them from the ramparts by their entrails anymore - but they can disappear quietly and never be seen again. Always with the coddamn concessions.

"Water you up to, Zahhak? Which is it today?" she drawls, all slanted smiles as she draws out her phone and starts tapping her way into the app Crocker Corp released a while ago. It was going to be an app dedicated to some random human with a name that had too many letters - Kardas? Ardashia? Humans need to tone that shit down, for glub's sake - but then Tethys heard tell of it.

"She," Zahhak says, curt. He - ah, she - tilts her head to the side, long, stringy raven black-blue hair hanging in her face as she squints over Ledaei's shoulder, her goggles covered with fern frost. "I do not know you."

"Yeah, I don't know you, either." Ledaei shrugs, unphased. He never seems phased by much. He claims it's because he's old; Tethys is pretty sure it's because he's got pale game out the whazoo, and no one's allowed to call themselves old until they crack the third century mark.

"Ex, Psiioniic - Psioniic, E%ībimus." Tethys keeps walking, trusting that the two of them will eventually start following. They do, of course, Ledaei levitating along to catch up with her and
Zahhak lurking back and to the side, her heavy cloak dragging almost as much as Tethys's hair. In between selecting dialog options on her phone, she glances down into the water on either side of the dock as it begins to widen, stretching far out into bay. Chunks of broken ice bob up and down in the dark water, but the water's deceptively deep here. They should reach the first of the line any second now. "Zahhak's good with void, and machines. #aregularrenaissancegill"

Literally. The Renaissance was a weird time for everyone involved.

This point is, Meteos Zahhak has a unique talent for flying under the radar. Her name appears in no history books, her contributions to the fields of robotics and prosthetics are known only to a rare and discerning few, and sometimes even Tethys has been fooled over the years into thinking the troll has vanished off the face of the earth. She's worked hard to become as invisible and obscure as possible. If she didn't show up at the Condesce's doorstep without fail whenever Tethys sends out a summons, no one would see this troll F2F, ever. You could probably parlay her in front of Scratch himself and he wouldn't be able to sniff her out.

If anyone's presence can keep the Condesce's private business private, it'll be Zahhak. Russia's been a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma long before Churchgill picked up on it, rich in magic and pocketed with void, and with Zahhak around to leak her anonymity everywhere - it's an opportunity Tethys can't pass up.

"Not these kinds of machines," Zahhak mutters. When Tethys glances over, subtle as a brick wall, the troll is staring straight down over the opposite side of the dock, consternation in her face. "Why did you call me here, my Condescension?"

She preens a little, and ignores the little eye roll that Ledaei gives her at the extra sway in her hips. With everyone but her attendants and her old courts, it's always so informal. Condy here, HIC there - only the old guard has that note of respect mixed with fear that reminds her of the times before the world ended and she got stuck in cahoots with a basshole like Scratch on a planet full of squishy aliens that needed their sensitive moray-eelity catered to. "Eh, you've haddockraving for something new to learn for decades, girlfrond," Tethys says, flipping her phone in her hand with a sly grin. "Don't I alalways have the best projects for you? Wasn't the last one a reel challenge?" She controls her eyebrows with immense effort; Zahhak wouldn't look, anyway.

"It was relatively simple, actually. The mane concern was a matter of paying attention to detail." A huff of breath that comes out a billow of white fog. "Though it did stirrup some thoughts on the finer points of prosthetics that...preoccupied me for some time..."

Tethys can see the exact moment Zahhak takes the bait; between one breath and the next the troll's face turns thoughtful, measured and calculating as she stops and stares down into the water. Assessing what lies beneath.

Hook, line, and sinker.

"What are you two looking at?" Ledaei asks, leaning out over the bay at an angle that woulda been dangerous if he weren't already floating. One of his doubled horns chipped off long ago, and Tethys finally gives in to temptation and yanks on it - gently - okay, gently for her, which ain't all that gentle by a lot of people's standards - until he turns his head to the left and can see what there is to see. She beams with pride at the machines that lie below the surface, scritching behind Ledaei's horn as he opens and shuts his mouth in silent little fish blubs.

She should commemorate this moment. She flips the phone in her hand and snaps a shellfie of the two of them before Ledaei can get his shit together. While Ledaei's still gaping, Tethys checks how it turned out and -
Ah, fishsticks. Tethys sighs and shakes her head when she spies the blurry, dark shadow looming in the corner, just barely visible through her own horns. As she watches, the shadow starts to spread, darkening her hair and horns into a murky blur. No image with Zahhak in it ever lasts long, so that one's a bust. Yeeesh.

Well. Good. That's exactly the kind of security she needs here to guard what lies beneath the surface, cold and quiescent.

"Tethys," her buoy says at last, his voice half strangled and his psionics tangling in knotty, worried loops, "why do you have an army of submarines in the middle of the Arctic!!"

She smacks him on the back bracingly, the cold forgotten as she beams down at her fleet beneath the thin crust of ice. Meteos beats her to the correction, on accounta she gets so distracted by the crimson hulls, stretching out along the line of the dock until they disappear in the dark, rippling filter of the sea. "These are not submarines."

"Really? Because they look a whole lot like they're under the sea..." Ledaei starts floating up again, too high, until his feet are somewhere around the tips of Tethys's horns and she can't reach him anymore. "How many of the obviously not-submarines do you even have?" he says in disbelief. "They're enormous!"

Seeriously. It was so worth bringing him here, just to see the look on his face. "Hadda spare decade or two, so I decided to get shit done," Tethys says, strolling along. One of her attendants is tryna be discreet and all in an attempt to get her attention, but she sails past him and taps a sharp claw on each metal console that rises up from the edges of the dock - marking the controls that can raise the machines up from the sea floor so the airbreathers can do work her seadwellers can't. "Also, I bought NASA. #soworthit."

Okay, so, she bought out nearly every space agency on the planet. But baby steps. No need to give the poor guy a heart attack by telling him she owns basically everything that's caught her eye in the past few centuries. Yeeeeeee.

"NASA," he repeats.

"Yyyyyup."

"These are space ships."

Tethys is a veritable fountain of patience. She points her thumb over her shoulder, back the way they came. "The shuttle was the prototype."

Ledaei sets down with a thump and a wobble. He drags his mismatched eyes away from the sunken armada to stare at her, incredulous. "I've heard of impulse buying," he says, "but please tell me you had a reason for impulse buying a space fleet. I need to hear you say the words."

Now she's almost offended. "Of course I did!!" she says, slingin an arm around his waist to tug him along in her wake. Zahhak doesn't move to follow, this time, intently staring at one of the ships spread out along the other side of the bay, but Tethys isn't worried. Give her a week, Zahhak'll have that thing stripped down and fileted like a fish; give her two weeks, and it'll be in one piece again, with all the systems functioning at 200% capacity. She might even solve the ongoing issue of how to pilot these suckers without frying too many brains.

It's a work in progress. When the time comes, they'll be ready.

And no one - not even Scratch - will see them coming.
As they walk, Tethys snaps her claws, and the attendant finally catches up, inclining his head as he hands her one of her many spare PDAs. “Another no, my Condesce,” he says, lips twisted with disdain.

_Not_ what she wants to hear. Then Tethys reads the actual message on the screen, and realizes with a sour growl that the attendant was interpreting it optimistically. Aside from the single 'no,' there's also an extra sting - a poorly 'shopped JPEG of some old glubbin' meme character, raising a glass full of what's either apple juice or...something else, in a mocking toast.

Oh yeah. This guy's a real piscine of work. She'll hafta teach him a lesson.

"Set Motts on his ass," she says, chucking the PDA into the sea. There's plenty more where it came from. "Sea if he feels more cooperaytive when he realizes we own them, too."

"I don't even want to know, do I," Ledaei observes, mild as anything, as the attendant races off with a new PDA already clutched in his fist.

Tethys considers it - but nah. Stick to space ships for now. "Just some brat," she says, leaning in and batting her eyelashes with a glint of bared teeth until Ledaei gives her another look, blanches, and starts doing that thing. The thing where he starts rambling about something else entirely, in his nice faint monotone, until the irritation seeps right outta her. The troll has a talent, he does.

The politics of apple juice are probably too intense for a first date, anyway.

Juice is serious business. Space ships are _fun_.

Oh, shell yeah. She is _so_ good at dates.

---

_Wednesday_

Rose finds herself with a vanguard that consists of Roxy and Jade as she ventures out. Kanaya has made a personal project out of distracting Karkat with the prospect of friendship, and while Rose _does_ find the distinctly stilted manner in which trolls go about establishing totally platonic relationships a fascinating thing to behold, she also agrees with Kanaya that until John can stay awake for longer than hour-long stretches at a time, Karkat is to be their silent priority. It took some persuading with Jade and Dave to convince them not to leave Karkat alone, but now the two have taken it up as a kind of test, seeing how closely they can stick to the troll's side without annoying him to the point of a screaming fit.

(There is also the fact that thousands of years of interspecies diplomacy have been built on the back of a single key truism – do _not_ bring up the hilarious oddities of troll friendship initiation rites. Do not laugh. Don't even _think_ a snicker. It is unbelievably gauche, and they always know. Always.)

It's probably a more traditional form of irony than the kind Striders bandy about, Rose thinks, that of the three people in this laboratory who have proclaimed themselves friendleaders in the past, all three - John, Karkat, and Rose herself - have proven the most vulnerable to spectacular breakdowns. She can't tell if that says something about the three of _them_, or if the job's just more jinxed than a professorial position at a boarding school for the sorcerously inclined. Whichever the case may be, the fact remains that Karkat is a troll whose moirail is incapacitated and thus a prime candidate for another collapse, and the more friends he has watching his back, the less likely it is he'll manage to wander off and shake himself apart in some dark, isolated corner. He's already tried it once.

Roxy, woozy and stumbling still, gamely forges along with a crutch that she commandeered from a
supply room. She leans on it or flings it up to catch on a wall whenever she tilts too far to one side. But she's very alert, considering she only just began recovering from brain surgery, adamant that she's not lying around in bed while there's 'innerstesting stuff' afoot, and soon she and Jade have started chattering in loud, increasingly excited whispers that echo in the hall. They seem to pertain to the Queen's Hub and something about computer software, but when the two start speaking in computer code Rose loses all sense of the conversation - she's not well-versed in the finer points of ~ATH, and definitely not able to make heads or tails of a spirited debate on more esoteric methods of hacking.

She has other matters to attend to, anyway.

She's found herself thinking about the brainwashed Crew members - the first ones to be dewormed in Maine, from whose example Rue first learned that not all about the Midnight Crew was as it appeared at first glance. In particular, she wonders just how some of them may be progressing in terms of recovery. More particularly still, like a shard of kernel shell digging into the soft flesh of gums - just how loyal are they to their Crew, now. The only word that Rose has had of them came in the form of a few off-handed but nonetheless ominous intimations that the sanity of at least one of the Crew's number had fractured, leaving her deep in the clutches of a coldblooded dementia that she may not recover from.

The mindgrubs in theory reinforce commands and pro-Crew thoughts with chemical encouragement, according to Marion's initial findings. In some instances, such as that of the more unstable indigoblood, the drastic chemical imbalance caused by the worm's secretions causes them to deteriorate to the point of insanity.

But as the Scratch kids' collective case has shown, not all members of the gang joined voluntarily, and the grub must have been altered somehow to force their minds and personalities to suit the lead scientist's will. Roxy insists that neither Jane nor Jake were homicidal fanatics before Dienek began tinkering with their brains in regular 'review' sessions, and since none of the Scratch kids can remember a time before they lived in the Midnight Crew's Felt division labs, they also can't remember when they would have signed up to be made guinea pigs and trained villains. They all certainly fought it for as long as they could.

The mindgrub in John's head would have been the same kind of altered grub used on the Scratches, one capable of giving more complex commands than just reinforcing pre-existing loyalties, because there was zero chance he would ever have voluntarily gone under the knife for such a thing. Even if he hasn't been handling the memories of their past lives well - or, Rose supposes, at all - he had no prior villainous inclinations that would have led him to embrace a life of crime; it must have required extreme measures to break his mind down so thoroughly that it required a mental construct as horrifyingly, wildly unhinged as the Trickster to handle it all.

So the question becomes - which example applies to Samuel Egbert? Did he join the Crew of his own volition, like the troll members from earlier, and only later ended up 'synchronized' and left coiled like an adder in the breast? Or were both he and John, in their own ways, forcibly brainwashed into submission, perhaps absolving him of some of his sins?

If the latter, they may be able to trust that when Samuel is roused from his post-surgical slumber, he will express just as much remorse, and have suffered just as severe a trauma, as the Scratches and John.

If the former, they may well never be able to trust him again.

Rose finds that...difficult to contemplate. She swallows hard, more than a little perturbed by how strong the sting of betrayal still feels whenever she casts her mind back to Monday's incredible
clusterfuck. She never considered how fundamental a place Samuel Egbert held in her conception of how the world - nay, how the universe itself - functions. The sun rises and sets, the Horrors whisper from the spaces between stars, alcohol burns as it numbs, and John's father is a stern but nevertheless kind pillar of decency, distantly fond and blandly watchful, a permanent fixture throughout Rose's memories of hers and John's shared childhood. More than her own mother, sometimes, Samuel was constant, and Rose appreciated that; he served as a fixed point that she could put her faith in, even when her mother wandered off to her labs and left Rose at the Egberts' for hours, if not days, on end.

However distant the memories became over the intervening years, Rose thought of Samuel Egbert as a stalwart figure of fatherly consideration. And now that previously inviolable maxim has been stripped away, and a piece of Rose's worldview has shattered along with it.

Samuel's betrayal has ripped away the recent scab Rose has only just managed to grow over the wound left by her mother's years of absence. Not even Dave's repeated attempts to cajole everyone into referring to the man not as Dadbert, but as Dickbert, can ease the exquisitely raw pain.

So Rose is determined she will be present when he is brought out of his medically induced coma. She wants to know if Samuel was ever the father she thought he was.

- Rue beats her to the punch.

They've sectioned Samuel Egbert off in a ward as far from John and the Scratch kids as possible without physically removing him from the building altogether. There are rooms back here run by automated systems, with experiments that appear to have been left running even in the absence of the researchers themselves - a room full of plants that rustle and shift when watered, a lab with an empty pedestal that looks as though it was set to measure something with the wide array of instruments scattered around at random, an elaborate set of magnets that bob and rearrange themselves in strange patterns that seem to coincide with controlled majykal bursts.

She loses Roxy and Jade along the way, the two of them sprint-hobbling off down another hallway with Jade's arm hooked through Roxy's to balance her out, with excited shouts of "WE TOTLALLY SHOULD!" and "YEAH! FOR SCIENCE!" Without their chatter to keep her aware of something other than her own musings, Rose runs right into the intern who has attached herself to Rue's side of late. They dodge each other awkwardly at the last moment, and Rose grimaces an apology while studying the closed door of the room. Through the clear Plexiglas pane that stretches along the wall off to the left, she can see the single hospital cot - and the single man tied to it with every kind of restraint a scientific laboratory has.

No one wants to risk the man with twenty different variations prank-related specibi slipping his handcuffs.

Her mother is on the other side of the glass as well, her steps brisk as she leans in to check the packet attached to the IV stand. Rose has to give Rue Lalonde credit; she doesn't look like a woman brute-forcing her way through alcohol withdrawal anymore. At some point during the nightmarish flurry of surgeries and scans over the past two days, Rue traded her unstarched, badly-askew white lab coat for a coal grey dress that ends with an angular, cutting hem, her pale hair blown out and restyled back into an angular bob, not a hair out of alignment. Her eyes are still shadowed with strain when she turns on her heel, but her lipstick is perfectly applied, her cheekbones contoured into blades, and the wine-red paint on her nails looks fresh.

"Has she been in there long?" she asks, unable to take her eyes off the scene long enough to glance
back at the intern. Rose wishes she could feel irritated that while everyone else has been falling apart, Rue is finally pulling herself back together. But all she feels is a traitorous stab of gratitude. Drunken Rose viciously assassinated more than a few of her own brain cells trying to get herself to the point of reconciliation with her mother, and now, for the first time in too long, Rose can't feel even the faintest trace of the weary old hate. The bitterness remains, oh yes, but it's far too much effort to maintain it all the time - and it's like blood in the water to any passing Horrorterror. The sooner it runs its course and she and Rue can treat each other like civil human beings, the better.

So she keeps telling herself. It's almost working.

"O-only a few minutes. She gave him something to wake him up," the intern says. She fidgets, and then edges away from Rose, casting a few more fleeting but terrified glances her way before doing it again. Rose doesn't pay her any mind; there's movement through the glass, and that's enough to distract her from the fact that at least one person in Lalonde Laboratories is terrified of her.

Rose can see the exact moment Samuel Egbert wakes up. His face stiffens minutely, but his eyes stay shut. If nothing else, the fact that he's strapped to the bed with almost as many restraints as it took to keep Jane and Jake down would give him pause for consideration.

"Samuel," Rue says, her voice low and crackling with static through an intercom beside the door, "we need to talk."

Samuel's eyes blink open - too quickly, Rose thinks; he's not nearly as bleary as John and Dirk and Roxy were after waking from a drugged sleep. She doesn't think he can see through the window into the hallway, but for a few long seconds his pale eyes linger on the glass, cool and assessing and fixed just to the left of where her face would appear if he could see through.

"Ah," Samuel says at last, shifting like he means to stretch as he twists his head to look at Rue. The restraints prevent him from following through, and Rose can't fight the unsettling conviction that he's testing their strength. "Well, Rue. You're looking well." A bland smile touches his face...and the thing is, Rose cannot say for a definitive fact that it isn't the very same smile Samuel has always worn. He looks perfectly at ease; perhaps there's a smidgen of resignation to his expression, but otherwise the man doesn't seem all that bothered to find himself strapped to a bed. "Where is John?"

Rue's face darkens, and Rose catches her own hand inching up to press her fingers to the seam where the window meets the wall. She can't tell if the tightness in her stomach is wariness or concern. "Recovering," Rue says, her voice light enough to balance out her expression. "As are you."

"Mm. And I'm not trusted to do so unrestrained?"

"Not at the moment, I'm afraid. You've - done some things, Samuel. People have been hurt."

"Clearly not as many as intended," Samuel says.

The regret is so thick in his voice that Rose has to replay it three times in her head before she realizes what he's regretful about. Her stomach lurches in a sickening drop.

Rue, through the glass, has to visibly pause to breathe. Rose counts along in her head to a count of five before Rue flinches back into motion, a catch in her voice that wasn't there before. "I beg your pardon?"

"I did receive orders to have the asset cause whatever mayhem he could before leaving, but I'll be the first to admit that he never listened very well. Always an uphill battle with that boy."

"Samuel's chest
sinks under the straps in a sigh. "That's the trouble with investing all that time and suggestion in an asset that's so badly damaged from the start - things never turn out the way one would expect." He shrugs as well as he can. "If they'd asked me my professional opinion, I would have said, stick to hiring people sane enough to know what they're doing...But I wasn't really paid to give them advice."

"Paid." Rue's voice has gone flat.

"I'm a mercenary. They hired me to do a job. I did it." Another sigh. "As best I could, of course. Babysitting a young brainwashed sleeper asset 24/7 for years would never top my to-do list. I'll be glad never to go through another PTA meeting in this lifetime."

Rue presses her knuckles to her forehead and drags them down. "You had a mindgrub in your brain, too, Samuel!" she snaps, removing her hand from her face and clutching it with the other behind her back, clasped tight as she starts pacing. When she speaks again, she bites back several attempts before she figures out what to say. "This is not - you've been brainwashed yourself. You clearly haven't been in control of your actions for some time, and don't fully realize what you're saying, but we can -"

"I knew about all that," Samuel interrupts.

Rose feels cold. There is a film of bile coating the back of her throat, and every time she swallows it tastes like nausea. A purely mundane brand of horror makes a cold home in the pit of her stomach, where it seems content to stay. Each damning word that emerges from Samuel's mouth feels like a trickle of ice water pouring in through her ears.

Hope is so hard a thing to cling to when the expression on Samuel's face still looks the same as ever; this is the bland, well-meaning earnestness that greeted her and John after school and gently chided them until they turned off the television and went to sleep. And now he's using those same expressions, that same tone of voice, to say things that are just - just -

"...What," Rue says. Being interrupted has never really fazed Rose's mother, but in this case she's slow to formulate a response. Rose can't imagine how she would have responded, herself, if she had been the one to reach Samuel and speak to him first, if she and Rue switched places and it was Rose who had to deal with this. Her right hand is a closed fist pressed up against the glass and her nose is almost touching it as well, all of her angled toward the room beyond with single-minded intensity. But her mouth tastes like ashes and if she tried to speak nothing would come out but cinders.

The man nods, rolling one of his heels until it gives a little pop before switching to the other. "The neurological loyalty mods. Well, I must admit they're not all that common in the business - something out of science fiction, really! - but then, the Midnight Crew is hardly aboveboard. The Felt is worse still." Samuel flashes a winning smile. "But I never sign a contract without reading the fine print. There was quite the last minute shuffle to get the implementation timing right, and if I hadn't known the finer points of how the modifications worked I wouldn't have been able to handle the boy properly."

Handle, handler - both words that are starting to make Rose bristle no matter the context.

Rue's pacing has grown erratic, to the point that her skirt flares when she pivots on her heel, and her clasped hands tremble behind her like she's taken a chill. "And you...you - you knew. You knew they would be - essentially brainwashing you to obey their orders. To never betray them. And that doesn't bother you. At all?" Her voice cracks sharply at the end, like the effort needed to keep her tone measured and flat has finally broken her resolve.
The more Rue struggles for calm, the more Samuel's smile ticks up at the side. The change is so gradual that Rose is not able to judge precisely when it crosses the line into a derisive smirk. The nuances are so subtle. "Really, Rue - for me, a job is a job. Some of the people I've worked for in the past would kill rather than see their secrets sold. Compared to that, altering someone's mind a little to keep them from breaking their confidentiality clause is fairly mild. I suppose it's a matter of perspective. It hasn't really bothered me." He clicks his tongue. "But it would seem it's already starting to wear off, if I can speak this openly about it with you without a fuss. I don't believe they thought anyone would realize the grubs existed, let alone learn how to remove them in such short order. Well played on that front, Rue."

That hits Rose harder than the rest of the conversation combined. Because John is still twisted into knots by the psychological after effects the grub's suggestions forced on his mindscape; Roxy still slurs her words with every sentence because even with the mindgrub gone, her brain has been slowly trained to stutter and skip like a scratched record whenever she says something that might be construed as running counter to the orders she was spammed with on a constant basis. Dirk, now that he's started defying doctors' orders and pushing himself to stand guard around Jane and Jake's bedsides when he should be resting, often goes perfectly, terrifyingly still mid-sentence, his clipped voice swallowed up as he gets pulled into some internal debate until Roxy distracts him from whatever planted order seized his attention. Roxy doesn't have trouble talking about Felt secrets and past trial missions they've been sent on, but John and Dirk evade questions without fully realizing they're doing it. The effects of the mindgrubs didn't fade the instant they were removed; they're just no longer being chemically reinforced, that's all.

If Samuel is already so free of the grub's trained influence, effortlessly shrugging at the thought of accidentally spilling the beans about his goddamn mercenary contract with the Midnight Crew, could he really have been all that heavily brainwashed to begin with? The more Rose's mind fumbles to produce a rationale that will explain all this away, the more her insides twist.

This is Samuel. This is John's father, 'Dad Egbert,' a man with a taste for baking and a fondness for harlequins and a copy of the restraining order from the Cirque du Soleil that he kept framed on his office wall for a while there. And he was also, apparently, a private military contractor with no qualms about signing on with a criminal outfit even before he was brainwashed into loyalty.

This rather puts a damper on things.

Her mother isn't responding to this any better. Her voice snaps, growing steadily frostier as she watches Samuel's face. Her composure is brittle, and Rose can't imagine it will hold for much longer. "And does it not 'bother you' that John's been hurt by all this?! That your own son has been in agony?!"

Samuel snorts. "Rue, please. He's not my son. More of a half-brother, if that, and certainly not one I had any prior personal attachments to when I took the job. As far as I'm concerned, this whole guardian episode has been two decades worth of proving I should have been an actor, not a contractor. Pretending to care so much, all the time - do you know how many tired old parenting guide books I had to read to pull that off?" He shakes his head, contemplative. "Hell, I've trained people for deep cover operations before, and I could have sworn it wasn't as boring as this has been. Maybe he'd have been more interesting to train if he hadn't fought it every step of the way, but ever since all these other foolish children started arriving he's been more difficult to handle than ever before."

Rue paces an ever narrower circle. There are too many conflicting emotions contorting her face for Rose to hope to decipher them all and extrapolate Rue's predominant reaction to all this poison bubbling between Samuel's lips like blood. "And what do you think," Rue says, "Joanna would
think, to see her own son treat the other like this?"

Samuel stares at her. His smile is bemused and nothing more. Like watching Rue struggle to wrap her mind around the cutthroat train of his thoughts provides him no end of entertainment. "I think," he says, his tone just this side of pedantic, "that Joanna is unfortunately too inconvenienced by her untimely demise to think much of anything at all about the subject. My mother was outspoken, but not even she can offer an opinion from beyond the grave."

Rue slams to a stop, jerking to face Samuel, her eyes electric with anger. "Did you even realize how proud she was? Her son off fighting to protect people; she never stopped missing you. She would have trusted you would protect John. Does that mean nothing to you? She would have wanted him safe."

Samuel pauses - and the smile that crosses his face before he speaks again is familiar in the worst way, because it's the same way the Trickster smiled as it rearranged John's insides, the look that Samuel might have worn while revealing he's played an absolutely fantastic prank to a pair of small, delighted children. "Then she should have been the one to raise him. A shame that wasn't in the cards. You'd think she would have remembered what happened last time."

And he waits.

Perhaps there is some context here that Rose isn't privy to. There's something Samuel is talking around, sauntering ever nearer to the point at a leisurely pace, but she can't quite see it. Last time - if he's referring to that past universe, to the fact that Nanna Egbert recalled some of what happened in her past life and prototyped afterlife, then could he be implying she -

- she -

Rose's hands both drop to her side, and all she can do is stare blankly ahead, scrambling through her memories as quickly as she can. Her mindscape flickers across her vision but she never jumps into it, scanning too quickly to linger in any one place for long. Surely she knows - surely it's been mentioned before, by John or his father or even Rue...

Somehow, no matter how she strains and coaxes her mind to offer up the relevant details, Rose doesn't know how Joanna Egbert died. One part of her mind, the section dedicated to childhood memories, has a record of some vague, murky explanation lost to the blurring effect of time: her asking Rue about the woman in the picture frame on the Egbert's mantle, and receiving the talk about the mortality of man that she didn't really need after Jaspers's death. Another, more recent memory contains details of viewing the Reckoning of the past universe, wherein John's meteor crash-landed in the middle of a prankster shop and inadvertently led to Joanna's death. If John or Samuel commented on the subject at any point...well, could she even trust what they said, in hindsight?

But she suspects, with a squirming knot in her stomach, that they never did say anything. No one has ever said. Rose, at least, has never asked. Rose just assumed, in some unconscious way, that John's Nanna succumbed to both a meteor impact and, on a more existential level, to paradox space's fondness for coincidence and repeating motifs.

But -

Wouldn't Joanna have known better? It wouldn't make sense for someone with retrocognitive visions of a past incarnation to fall victim to the same death twice, would it? Unless...unless, unless...

Rue realizes first. "No," she says, her voice almost inhuman with denial and horror as she takes a step back from the bed.
"It was emphasized in my briefing that there were to be no conflicting authority figures in the picture; too much chance they could undermine his programming." Samuel almost sounds apologetic, but even with pity in his eyes, his smile is still a smirk. "Hard enough trying to train him, without someone there trying to encourage him to have a mind of his own."

There are some moments when Rose forgets that her mother is both a fighter and woman of science.

Right up until the fraction of a second before Rue punches Samuel Egbert across the face, when the fact returns to her with remarkable clarity. The smack of knuckles on flesh is so loud that both Rose and the intern flinch away from the window as though it were aimed at them. Samuel doesn't make a sound, head jerking to the side with his mouth shut tight. Rue freezes, her hair obscuring her face where she's bent over the bed; then she straightens, her other hand tugging her closed fist behind her back once more. "My apologies, Samuel," she says. "I shouldn't have done that. We've contacted several psychiatrists, who should arrive to assist you and the children in recovering from the effects of this brainwashing as soon as they can arrange to transfer here."

"Oh, not to worry; I've had worse," Samuel says. He smiles with his eyes closed for a moment, before they open and he watches Rue walk to the door. "Rue?"

Rue must pause - she's out of sight, now, in the obscured space between the door and Rose's range of vision through the window, and she neither reappears nor exits the room. If Rose were to squint and use other methods of sight she might be able to make out her mother's expression even through walls, but the effort to see that and yet ignore the hollow void that makes up Rue's aura would just give her a headache. "Samuel."

He might be smiling, but Samuel's unreadable; Rose would have said once she knew his expressions as well as she knew John's, but she's clearly been misinterpreting things badly for years now. "Please tell John that I am still very proud of him. Always."

The door clicks open and Rue walks out. Rose moves away from the window again almost unconsciously, her feet making a narrowly aborted attempt to step toward her mother before she catches herself. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Samuel. Try to get some rest," Rue says without turning back to the room, and she closes the door behind her. A quick glance at Samuel confirms that his face hasn't altered in the slightest, despite the denial of his request. Rather, he rolls his shoulders again, adjusting his jaw to test what damage Rue might have done, and then takes to watching the ceiling, unconcerned.

Of all things, it makes Rose pine for the days when she still trusted in her mother. She and Rue never got along well, but before she outright abandoned Rose to her own demons and vices, Rose had the cold comfort of an overbearing, passive-aggressive guardian, one who would always make a point to be around at Christmas time to annoy her to no end and stick Rose's final exams and graded essays to the refrigerator with ridiculous magnets.

Samuel filled in the gaps where Rue fell short.

Now, she doesn't know what to think.

"Are you alright, Doctor Lalonde?" the intern asks, when Rue rests her head back on the door.

"I shouldn't have lost my temper that way," Rues says, rounding regretful as she lowers her chin and shakes out her fingers, inspecting her knuckles. There isn't a mark on them, but with her fistkind specialization, there wouldn't be. She rubs them as though smoothing away an imagined pain. "Send
for intern Fredyn. From experience, I can say that restraints won't hold Samuel for long unless we change the configuration periodically."

Well, that won't do at all. Rose clears her throat, and smiles when Rue looks to her - tepid and just this side of sharp, but still a smile. "That punch was perhaps the most satisfactory thing I've seen all day. Excellent form, mother dear."

Rue appears to weigh Rose's words for a moment, flexing her fingers in contemplation. "Far be it from me to doubt your judgment," she says at last, and her smile turns conspiratorial; there's more than an echo of the impishness Rose has grown to associate with Roxy. "Try not to punch people to resolve your disputes, though, Rose. It is a powerful, addiction-forming habit."

Given how many people Rose has had to punch in her lifetime, in situations where magic just won't cut it, the warning comes a little late. "And the last thing either of us needs right now is another addiction," Rose says.

It's intended to be a glib rejoinder; she realizes too late that it's still too sobering a thing to joke about, in this context, in this company. Rue freezes and the silence that ensues jars like a sour note. "Fair enough." Rue flexes her fingers one last time and closes her eyes. Rose wonders if she's holding back tears. "I was never much good at setting a laudatory example of moderation and temperance for young ladies.

This whole episode leaves an odd taste in Rose's mouth. Samuel is a liar at the best, an unrepentant, borderline psychopathic traitor at worst, and now she can't tell whether she should be trying to reconcile further with Rue or simply keeping their relationship on an even keel so that it doesn't plunge back into the abyss they've worked to drag it out of. "No. But, as it turns out, it could have been worse," she says in utter seriousness.

Rue sighs in agreement. "That's no consola-" Her mother breaks off and blinks, looking lost for words as she stares through Rose. "Oh no. Oh no."

"What?"

"Joanna is dead. James is dead. I failed you in ways I'm still coming to terms with." Rue sails past that loaded sentence without leaving room for Rose to interject. "I always put my faith in Samuel. Of all of us surviving, he was the most competent of guardians, he kept John safe - but this - this means -"

"Means what?" Rose asks, her alarm rising as Rue presses her fingers to her temple, all the color draining from her face at a decidedly unsettling rate. The intern on Rue's other side looks just as alarmed, arms braced as though to catch the doctor if she swoons.

"The only one left not disqualified by death, the only one who hasn't failed miserably," Rue says, close to tears, "is Ambrose. I - I think I need to sit." And she almost does, slumping back against the door as her face falls into her hands in despair. "He will never let us live this down." Her voice cracks again.

"Doctor Lalonde, you are really pale," the intern says, wringing her hands. "Should I get you a glass of water?"

Rose forces her limbs into motion and touches Rue's shoulder. When Rue just continues to shake her head, wordlessly, her face ghoulishly white, Rose nods at the intern. "Yes, that might be helpful. Please do." Once the intern rushes off, Rose sets herself to the strange task of patting her mother on the shoulder. Perhaps it's just the events of the past few days catching up with Rue; perhaps she truly
is having some sort of existential crisis over the fact that Ambrose has apparently won guardian of the year by default.

Whichever the case may be, Rose can't help but sympathize. This whole situation is incredibly disturbing. Viewing the records of the past universe at least had the buffer of having taken place in a life Rose didn't really recall, so that the tapes, while upsetting, could at least be considered from a somewhat objective distance.

"Joanna," Rue whispers, before going frighteningly quiet.

Rose doesn't know that any of them can be objective about Samuel Egbert.

-- ~ Welcome to the Divine Café ~ --
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-- ~ ADVISORY WARNING: NEW WARNING FOR POSSIBLE CHAOS TYPE INTERFERENCE OCCURRING IN THE CHESAPEAKE AREA - ANALYSIS IN PROGRESS. STORM IN THE NORTHERN UNITED STATES APPEARS TO HAVE SUBSIDED. BEWARE OF CONTINUED SPORADIC CHAOS/UNCATEGORIZED FAITH-BASED MAGIC INTERFERENCE WITH AURAS THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE - DO NOT OPERATE OUTSIDE PRE-ESTABLISHED WARD RITUAL CIRCLES. ~ --

Divine Café > Auras, Scrying, Divination > the end of the world and you! :)
Angeles didn't take well to being torched?
HA: ain't that the understatement of the friggin' century.
HA: new rule, we're sticking to ghosts and other normal supernatural monsters from now on.
figuring out the banishing ritual for that thing was way too lovecraft.
TT: You succeeded in banishing it, though?
HA: that part of it, yeah. piece of shit couldn't leave the charter circle these guys set up, so it looked
like it just left a puddle and bugged out.
LS: un†il i† s†ar†ed growing †en†acles and wings again...†alk abou† a nigh†mare!
AA: wow sounds like you guys have been having a lot of adventures!
AA: what about you rose? :)
TT: I'm sorry, I don't believe I've seen you on these forums before. A pleasure to meet you...?
AA: AA will do for now!
AA: heheheh!
TT: AA it is. My own week has been essentially awful in several ways, but as some of the events
involve the private mental health of someone close to me, I prefer not to discuss it on a public memo.
NM: Ugh! I just want to be able to speak to my babies again. When will someone do something
about that stupid dome?!
TT: Something is still interfering with you and your necromancy?
NM: Didn't you hear? Newtonia and zer crew at UW figured it out - that the new energy dome in
LA? Pure f______ faith magic. It's radiating more purification vibes through the atmosphere than a
⁠ga______ priest on a mass exorcism spree. That's why it's felt like there's been a wall between me and
the dead for weeks.
LS: Whooa, really?! *o*
AN: α- Affirmative. If you believed something hard enough in the general vicinity of that dome, it
might actually happen. We haven't seen that much concentrated wish fulfillment in the ambient
energy readings since, well - ever. It would be much more fascinating if the world weren't ending -Ω
TT: Ah. Yes. That.
AN: α- Considering the header of the memo, I'd say we are all strenuously avoiding the topic at hand
-Ω
AN: α- Has anyone made any progress in divining how it will happen, or how to prevent it? -Ω
LS: ...Are you guys being serious? I †hough† †ha† o†her memo was jus† a joke!
HA: we're not touching this one with a 1046 foot pole. we're done. we're out of the apocalypse
ending business. we met our goddamn quota.
TT: My own sources have stated emphatically that preventing the end of the world is most likely
impossible. And recent events have...shaken me badly. I could try to see what the most fortuitous
path might be to stop the Reckoning, but I've never tried something on that scope before.
AN: α- Everyone we can spare is trying to extrapolate that ~ATH code you brought up and reverse
engineer it, but they just keep getting looped by higher and higher levels of abstraction in the source
code. The death loops just keep stacking and interlacing. It's like it's not just the Earth that is doomed
to be annihilated, but literally all of reality. I don't think it's even possible to code something like that,
even in ~ATH -Ω
LS: But †ha†'s jus† †errible! :( 
AA: oh i wouldnt say it was all a bad thing necessarily
AA: in the end all loops must be tidied up
HA: well that's a shitty way of looking at it.
AA: really? i suppose thats just my perspective on it
AA: all things will end in time
AA: even reality!
NM: ...That's...really f______ morbid. And I say that as someone who regularly communes with
dead people.
AA: heheheh
AN: α- Galya, ty? -Ω
ВГ: ...
ВГ: –––
ВГ: ...
LS: (I'm not †he only one who's seeing a bunch of do†s, right†? My †ransla†or can'† be †ha† buggy!)
NM: (Definitely not just you.)
ВГ: Мой сигнал умер на секунду. Прошу прощения.
ВГ: Я видела, что произойдёт. Некоторые из них, в любом случае. Проклятые метеоры...Какое бедствие.
TT: Nothing new?
LS: Oh my s†ars, we're so doomed...
ВГ: Я оставила инструменты, но мне нужно было ехать на север, через Якутию. Они будут продолжать посылать данные на вас, аН.
AN: α- Kuda ty xodish? Shto sluchilos? -Ω
ВГ: Что-то странно. Что-то, что беспокоит меня. Момент конвергенции нескольких совпадений. Мне нужно связаться с Защитником и обратиться за помощью. Он не часто говорит человеку, но я верю, что он сделает исключение.
HA: (it could have been any language. it could have been ecclesiastical latin. hell, i'm good at latin. but no. it had to be russian.)
NM: (your f_____ up latin exorcisms don't count, j______.)
HA: (dude you need to learn how to let go of a grudge, okay. lay off.)
ВГ: Это хорошая новость - одна из моих отчужденных кузенов связался нашу семью в первый раз за много лет! Правдиво это признак апокалипсиса...
AN: α- Heh -Ω
AA: :) :) :) see this is much better! you just have to find a little humor in the situation is all
AA: no need to get all gl00my about everything just because theres an apocalypse due!
TT: Positivity as a coping mechanism in the face of imminent doom? I suppose I can see the merits, AA.
TT: ...Hang on...
AN: α- You are new to the boards, Arisen. Your profile looks a little odd, I noticed; it looks like the account age counter is off by a couple centuries. Something you wanted to share? -Ω
AA: i couldnt say :
LS: Hey, hey, no need to in†erroga†e a new member! Posi†ivi†y sounds like a grea† idea †o me, AA. *o* I'm sure †his whole mess will †urn ou† †o be no†thing and we'll all be joking about† i† like we did wi†h †he las† apocalyp†e someone †hough† up~!
HA: again - you're fucking welcome.
AA: oh no :
AA: that wasnt the impression i meant to give
AA: im just excited to see what it looks like when this whole place breaks apart!
HA: what the hell.
AA: of course if someone thinks of a way to prevent it i guess thats okay too
TT: AA.
TT: I wondered where I'd seen those initials before. There is a sense of duality to them. Something that would surely appeal to someone with a fondness for binary and twinned aesthetics. Someone whose handle might well also share an apocalyptic theme.
AA: :) :) :
TT: Aradia, the 'insane apocalypse maiden,' I presume?
AA: someones been talking to sollux! :) its just maid actually
AN: α- You two know each other? -Ω
TT: We share a mutual acquaintance.
AA: im glad everything worked out okay with john
AA: once that storm started gathering i was afraid something would go catastrophically wrong way
ahead of schedule!
TT: Could we take this to private messaging?
AA: sure thing :) its good to speak to you at last rose. id like us to be friends!
AA: please feel free to pester me whenever you like. im made of time after all
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] will leave the chat! --
AN: α- Perhaps we should contact one of the moderators. That account seems very glitched -Ω
AN: α- I say that, and then I realize just how trivial a thing it is to worry about a possible hacked account in the face of the end of the world -Ω
LS: Everyone, I †hink I need †o †ake a break...My head is sore...
-- ladyStardancer [LS] has left the chat! --
NM: S____, I'm out too. It's not even worth sticking around to reclaim my quirk color. There's a total a_____ in LA I need to send a sternly worded curse to, see how much he likes it when someone d____ around with his magic.
HA: haha, don't.
NM: You can't stop me, d______s, you don't even know where I live now!
HA: dude, we will fucking find you. don't make us come over there.
-- necroMancer [NM] has left the chat! --
HA: not a fucking gain.
-- huntersAnonymous [HA] has left the chat! --
AN: α- Galya, bud ostorozhen -Ω
BF: ...
BF: ...
AN: α- And you as well, Thaumaturge. Be careful. I know from some of the readings we've been seeing out here that there have been a lot of anomalous events occurring out your way -Ω
TT: Just one thing before I go - would you mind forwarding me some of what you have learned about that dome over Los Angeles. I have a personal acquaintance with a particular interest in Horrors who might be venturing out to investigate what caused such a drastic change in the dome and the ambient energy in the surrounding area. If I know her, she's getting impatient by now.
AN: α- Not a problem, but if it's a chaos type hivemind she's looking for, she may be out of luck. You were right that this magic isn't light, either. Someone's generating a hell of a lot of raw power and Mancer's not wrong that if they can generate it in this capacity, they can probably use it for anything they can think of -Ω
AN: α- Makes you wonder what'll end the world first - all this chaos, Galya's meteors, or this guy, whoever he is -Ω
TT: I'm not ready to make a bet on that. Not yet. I would rather see what can be done to keep the planet in one piece.
AN: α- Fair enough -Ω
-- alternativeNewtonia [AN] has left the chat! --
-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has left the chat! --
-
It is very obvious to those with eyes to see that the Scratch children bear absolutely uncanny resemblances to the guardians. When the DNA test results rush through the lab and arrive late in the afternoon, it just confirms that Roxy is almost an exact genetic clone of Rue. No one seems sure how the Midnight Crew could have pulled it off. The best explanations - or worst, really, depending on how one views it - are those that point out that Samuel Egbert would have had every opportunity in the world to obtain genetic samples from each intended custodian over the years.

Even Dirk and Roxy, the two who had the hacking prowess and autonomy needed to try to snoop around while they were still in the complex where they were 'synchronized' and trained, can offer little to explain their origins. They have a lot to say about the Felt - the doctor who developed the
mindgrub procedure, Dienek, inspires a good deal of anger, in particular. Neither knows much about Doc Scratch, having never come in direct contact with the boss of the two merged gangs, but they shed a little more light on the nature of the Midnight Crew's inner workings. The tension that boils between the Felt and the Midnight Crew proper; the way that nearly everyone involved in either gang has gone under Dienek's knife once before; the uncanny abilities of the mysterious Felt 'hat' members, who can apparently manipulate time in their own unique ways.

Rose can tell the exact moment that Dave shuts down to process all of this; her brother expresses more than he means to in his body language, and when he shudders and whips out his phone in the middle of the conversation, she knows he's checking out of the discussion. Jade, previously in the middle of having Roxy help her braid her hair, doesn't seem to have realized that she's stopped braiding and begun to just tug on a lock of hair listlessly. Karkat hasn't stopped glaring at his phone suspiciously this entire time - Rose can't discern if it's because Dave's pestering him or due to some other distraction. Despite their combined best efforts, the troll still looks like he's in a decline again, haggard and alternating between periods of unnatural quiet and increasingly snappish fury.

The only person in the room with energy to spare is Roxy; the rest of them could sleep for a week and it would probably do them a world of good. It's hard, contemplating the vast array of trials and enemies that have once again stacked up before them. It's hard, and Rose thinks John has the correct idea when he makes the executive decision to doze off.

A quiet moment with Kanaya is exactly what Rose needs after all this. So she makes it happen. When the rest of the heroes have either fallen asleep or scattered, haunting the lab like shadows of their former selves, Rose squeezes Kanaya's shoulder and tilts her head to the side in silent query. Kanaya blinks and nods, and they leave the room. "I'll meet you there," Rose says, when they reach a juncture in the hallways, and Kanaya gives her a doubtful look. "I require tea. There's an electric kettle in one of the break rooms, as I recall. If I take more than a minute, I give you formal permission to drag me back from whatever den of boozy iniquity I've stumbled into."

Kanaya just raises her eyebrows, takes out her phone, and stares at the time as she continues the rest of the way to the room where she and Rose have set up camp. Thinking, grimly, that she should have perhaps said 'a few minutes' rather than just one, Rose hastens to the break room, unplugs the sad white kettle from the wall to fill with water, and pilfers the entire tin of tea bags when she realizes it's still sealed. No one in the facility has been drinking tea of late, it would seem.

Of course, she needn't have hurried, because Kanaya has settled herself down in one of the impromptu piles that litter the room, buffered with a mattress that they 'borrowed,' when Rose powerwalks through the doorway. Which means that Kanaya was just messing with her about the countdown. Blast. The jadeblood has what appears to be a lime green armbands folded over one knee as she stitches a seam along the beginnings of a sleek, sleeveless black shirt. "What are you working on, Kanaya?" Rose asks as she turns the electric kettle on and pours water into the borrowed mugs, passing Kanaya the one emblazoned with the mug that, well, may in fact be an oddly shaped beaker or measuring cup, judging by the markings on the clear glass. It's too late to switch it out now. She takes the other, which boasts a vintage portrait of a man in a lab coat proclaiming 'New, Improved Science: Now, With Death Rays!' and adds a dollop of milk as Kanaya adds a sample of blood to her own mug.

"Something for Jade." Kanaya lifts a different pile of fabric by a sleeve that has been completed - the rest of the garment is still held together by pins and prayers. "I would have had all these completed sooner, but to be honest, I never anticipated the number of fashion-challenged heroes this road trip would give me the chance to meet in person. All of my designs were purely hypothetical before now."
"And that?" Rose stirs her tea and gestures with her chin to the other pile as she sits. She curls in close and rests her chin on Kanaya's shoulder, closing her eyes for a moment to settle herself as she takes comfort in the solidity of Kanaya at her side.

Kanaya smiles and touches the side of her face to the top of Rose's head, her claws never ceasing to stitch. "For Karkat. It is a little less...interesting, maybe, but also more functional than what he has right now."

"Do you think you'll be able to talk them into changing? You and I may exchange hero guises without qualm, but Karkat may be more attached to his." She doesn't think Jade will care much; the other girl has been wearing the same series of three or four space-patterned suits and lab coats for years; a change in costume would probably delight her, even if she never sought one out. Karkat seems more of a creature of habit, though.

"He requires a disguise with more armor, no matter what he says. He might as well be wearing nothing at all," Kanaya says, rolling her eyes. "I will grant that he has more fortitude than I would have thought, to pull off something as audaciously skintight as that and still venture out in public, but I would be remiss if I didn't at least offer him an alternative that might prevent him from having his rib cage smashed in at the next opportunity." Kanaya then smiles, her eyes glittering with mischief as she tosses a scrap of fabric at Rose's face; Rose unfolds it, to find it's Hemogoblin's eye mask. "Also, something that actually conceals his identity. How he and John didn't recognize each other for ages continues to boggle the mind."

Rose looks on as Kanaya begins the arduous process of attaching a Kevlar lining to the inside of the shirt, and notices only when Kanaya turns it over that it isn't just her imagination: the tank top is far shorter than it should be, cropped so that skin would definitely be exposed if Jade wore it without something underneath. "Functional, hm?"

"Jade is far more resilient than most," Kanaya says, holding the shirt up before her to inspect it with a critical eye. "So I'm trying to take that, as well as her personality, into account. It lets me be - creative. Though I have no idea where I'm going to obtain more lime green dye in the middle of the mountains..."

Rose hums, her head bobbing as she lets her eyes fall closed. If she presses her nose to Kanaya's shoulder, she can smell tea and blood, sealed paint and the faint perfume meant to cover it. And given the softness of this particular pile, it is all too easy to snuggle closer. The mug of tea in her hands is almost forgotten, a weight that radiates warmth through her hands and up her arms, and when she rouses herself enough to take a sip, she can almost forgive that it's the cheapest kind of store brand tea available in all of Washington state.

"Rose, before you sleep," Kanaya says, though her voice goes low as she says it.

"Yes?"

"I have been thinking about Los Angeles."

Ah. Rose will need to be awake for this. She blinks her eyes open and sets the tea aside before it can lull her back into a drowse. Kanaya still hasn't set her sewing aside, but Kanaya is good at multitasking. "I thought this might come up soon," Rose says, not sure whether to call the twist in her lips a smile or not. "Particularly given the multitude of delays that have held us up here, again and again, when I'm sure you've been wanting to move along."

Kanaya shakes her head. "To be fair, this situation here in Seattle does appear to have been dire. I shudder to think what might have happened if we had continued on before John's peril became
clear."

"Perish the thought."

"And I am growing rather fond of all of your friends. Even your brother, as obnoxious as he can be - I am glad to have been here to lend my assistance." Kanaya's eyes narrow as she pauses sewing to rest her chin on a fist. "But I cannot deny that I still want to find out what in the world is going on beyond that dome. Do you know that the news has begun to report unverifiable rumors of miracles, of all things, occurring in the general vicinity of it? The grimlight abomination may be gone, but if the heroes in Los Angeles were going to bring down that construction from the inside, I believe they would have accomplished it by now, or at least attempted and failed."

Rose feels her lips curve into a proper smile as she rubs her cheek on Kanaya's shoulder. "Miracles might not be all that out of the realm of the possible. According to my sources, it's powerful faith magic. It is most likely fueled entirely by the power of hope."

Kanaya gives her a look. Kanaya is a master of looks, really, and this one says all it needs to about what Kanaya thinks about this news. "Is that a thing now," she says, utterly deadpan. "Why was I not informed of this."

"Well, it's not as though the sheer quantity of hope that we're seeing here has ever been manifested before. I can only speculate that the source must be a powerful new majykal practitioner, or a hero of some kind newly come into their powers, or we would have noticed them before." Rose stretches her arms out, lacing her fingers and pushing out until they give a satisfying little pop. "If you want to go investigate -"

She breaks off, as the rest of her thoughts catch up with what Kanaya is proposing. To go to Los Angeles would be to leave John - and Karkat, too, who could not be pried from John's general vicinity without consequences. On some level Rose has gotten it into her head that Dave and Jade and John and Karkat would of course accompany them to Los Angeles, that damnable instinct she thinks must be a product of the game that insists they would be stronger if they stuck together as a team.

But John can't be moved. Even now that he's recovering at twice the speed of any normal human after brain surgery, there is still the matter of his deep depression, and the Trickster that still lurks in his mind, ready to seize control and cause mayhem if John abdicates control of his conscious mind again. A trip to deliberately hunt for leftover traces of a Horrorterror manifestation is the last thing he needs to endure.

The thought of leaving him here, even for a matter of days, feels abhorrent. Rose has learned well that a 'few days' can change everything.

"That look on your face is terrible. Desist at once," Kanaya says, and Rose jolts a little when the jadeblood touches her face gently - and then flicks her on the nose. That snaps Rose right out of her woolgathering. "I know you do not wish to leave John. Not as things stand. That was why I intended to make a request of Jade."

"You mean...to have her transport you there?" Rose's mind whirls to include this in her considerations. She taps a finger to her pursed lips. "It would certainly be more expedient than driving all that way."

"I also have hope that she can utilize her space powers to circumvent the dome; then I could reconnoiter as well, pending further investigation when, perhaps, the situation is not so dire here." Kanaya nods, as though speaking the plan out loud has confirmed it for her. "Yes. You may remain
here with John and the rest - the fact that these people need all the help they can get is one that I am comfortable stating for the record. If Jade does agree, we should be able to return in no time at all. I am still unsure about all of this business with the game, but the Midnight Crew needs dealing with. I will be here to help. If you all need me."

Rose smiles. The warmth from the tea has faded a little, but nonetheless something golden and warm seems to have bubbled up in her chest. "When do you think you'll go?"

Kanaya shrugs. "I must still establish whether or not Jade would be amenable to such an excursion. If she has plans of her own, we would need to arrange for a moment that invites the least amount of interruption. Not for a few days yet, at least; I really do want to finish these costumes before traveling again."

"Then I wish you all the luck," Rose says. She finds she cannot stop smiling at Kanaya, nor does the warm glow in her chest appear to be fading in the near future. Being in love can feel so peculiar, sometimes.

Then she wraps an arm around Kanaya's waist and drags her down with her onto the pile. It upsets the stitchwork balanced on Kanaya's knee, but it also gives Rose an armful of Kanaya, and so it is justified.

"Rose."

"I'll send you a copy of all I learned in the morning," she assures Kanaya, pressing a kiss to her neck. "Cross my heart."

"I was going to occupy Karkat with a fitting tomorrow." Kanaya shakes her head and sighs, allowing her claws and the cropped shirt drop to rest on her stomach while Rose makes herself comfortable.

"Mmm. No. Sleep now."

"I do not sleep. You can rest while I keep working."

Rose finally figures out where to lay her head, so that her forehead just touches the side of Kanaya's head, beneath the base of her near horn. "Just for a little while longer." She squeezes the arm tucked around Kanaya, and Kanaya gives in with a huff, laying a hand over Rose's arm and rubbing small circles with the pad of her thumb. There's a sweet, singing hollow in Rose's stomach, part and parcel of that warmth in her chest.

Don't go just yet. Let me stay like this just a little while longer.

AA: I'm sure that when the time comes everything will turn out just as planned :)  
AA: the end is nigh after all!
AA: also tell karkat I really am sorry
AA: I don't know what he's dreaming about but he can't wake up right now...
AA: we still have a ways to go yet!

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30°20'N 81°39'W
The car has been set to zig zag across the country as it makes its way east.

Unfortunately, the car only has so many reserve gas tanks to run through before, at last, it trundles to a stop. It has other power sources, but no matter how the suggestions blink and beep on the dashboard, no one is sitting in the driver's seat to acknowledge them. Idling on the last of its juice, the car waits, neatly parallel parked alongside a random, unplotted hivering in a nondescript neighborhood. It still needs to travel north along the coast before it'll have reached the destination that was programmed into it. But again, there's no one driving it, and therefore no one to tell it otherwise.

Several hours later, when Equius Zahhak emerges and breathes in the throaty Florida humidity, the car is still there. By the time he's crossed the front walkway to reach the sidewalk, his heavy black shirt is soaked through with sweat, and the backs of his knees in his pinstriped leggings are excruciatingly moist. He makes sure to lay careful hands on the car's hood as he leans over to peer into the tinted windows, before tapping the button in his earpiece that shuts down the silent alarms that have been alerting him to an unfamiliar vehicle loitering outside his place of residence for half the morning.

Nepeta is due to arrive any moment. It will not do for there to be some suspicious automobile outside the house when she gets here; she'll insist on investigating it herself, and then where will they be? Instead, Equius sets himself to inspecting the car carefully. The license plates have never been registered anywhere in the United States, according to his computers, but oddly enough, he receives a ping from a database in Toronto, Canada. It will need looking into.

With a huff, Equius eases down into a crouch and frowns at the space between the tire and the wheel well. He hopes to at least find a keyring tucked away there, some sign that the owner of this perplexingly abandoned vehicle will return shortly, but he's already seen from the exterior camera feed that no one has exited or entered the vehicle since it rolled to a stop out here. A foolish notion, on his part.

The idea that this car apparently drove here of its own volition is even more foolish, though. Someone must have directed it to this location. It couldn't possibly have been coincidence. That would snap the suspension of disbelief in even the most trusting of trolls.

"Go forth," he says, plucking a handful of miniature, spindly drones from the pocket of his shorts. When he places them on the ground with sweating palms, the machines' tiny LED eyes flicker orange-red and begin to scuttle along the ground and up the tires to tap their way along the underside of the chassis. They are spiders, leftovers from his time supplying the Scourge with tools for her ludicrous exploits. He's severed ties with her - or rather, ties were mutually severed by virtue of his sabotaging her gauntlet arm from afar, and her proceeding to vanish into the night with her kismesis - and has yet to make the opportunity to redesign them to look more like horses or something else noble and elegant. But they are some of the most clever multipurpose tools he has designed on so small a scale, and therefore useful for tasks like this.

So he grinds his teeth in a tooth-splintering grimace when every single spider freezes in the midst of their inspection and starts whistling with alarm, warning him that something about the car is not normal. Some of them begin relaying what their simplistic 'eyes' see to his glasses, and Equius picks a shard of enamel from where it's lodged itself in his lower lip as he pieces together what he's seeing.

..."This...is not a car," he says at last. He gives up and lies flat out on the road to roll under and look at this himself, growling and peeling greasy strings of hair out of his face when they insist on getting in the way. One of the spiderbots makes the mistake of dropping from an impossible extra duct onto his neck, and he squashes it with a single claw when he goes to brush it off. Even in the shade cast by
the car, which prevented the afternoon sun from reaching this particular rectangle of the road all day long, beads of sweat itch all along his back, and every time he twists he feels like the sweat is making more of the filthy grit of the road stick to him. But he won't risk moving this thing into his workshop when Nepeta's coming over, not until he knows what it is.

What he's seeing still makes no sense, even from this perspective. He removes his glasses, thinking perhaps that the added darkness has befuddled his otherwise excellent night vision, the boon of his species, but that doesn't make the underside of the car any less mindboggling. Equius can feel a headache stirring behind his forehead, and when he turns his head the jagged keratin of his broken horn drags across the concrete and makes it worse. This car is riddled with extra parts; they're expertly tucked underneath so that no casual passerby would notice anything amiss, but it's been retooled so thoroughly that he's not surprised the spiderbots couldn't figure out if it was a threat or not.

He almost wants to say it looks like a - but no. That would be absolute foolishness of the highest degree. He won't think the thought. Instead, he slides back out from under the car, the back of his shirt and binder riding up uncomfortably. "Fiddlesticks," he mutters, yanking them back down before he sits up.

And goes perfectly, utterly still at the sight of the people standing around him.

Oh dear. Oh, horsefeathers. He only managed to venture outside today because he worked himself up to it all morning long, pacing for long hours back and forth in the relative safety and security of his workshop before forcing himself out the door into the exposing light of day. He even convinced himself to do it without the armor of multiple layers of sweaters that would shield him from the sight of others, because he was only going to the edge of his own lawn. Since an...incident a short time ago, he has ensured that his neighbors have seen even less of him than usual, but has also monitored their comings and goings so that he knows when the neighborhood is most likely to be deserted. Everyone should be at work or school at this moment; this is a troll neighborhood, populated almost entirely by coldbloods of various ages, and therefore there are no human custodial figures who might have elected to work from home, only the occasional lusii who, not feral like Nepeta's, rarely leave their lawnrings.

This is...unacceptable. He's already awash with sweat; now, as he climbs stiffly to his feet, he can feel the heat of the sun burning down on the back of his neck. Far worse are the eyes on him, though - four pairs in total, two trolls and one human in black, and a single, wide-shouldered woman in bright lime green, who rolls a coin over her knuckles as she smiles at Equius with eyes just dark enough that they're not the teal blue of a troll. Her hair has been combed back harshly from her face, but the plait of it coils over her shoulder like a coarse, knotted rope. The sun glints off the tie that holds it in place, and Equius tenses. It's not a tie - it's a chunk of metal, heavy enough that if she spun fast enough the braid would be a flail.

"So, 'zul," the human in green says, swallowing s's fast and dropping consonants where they inconvenience her, "you wanna be compañeros? Or do you wanna make this harder than it has to be?" She sounds earnest, her eyes bright and her smile close-mouthed as she tilts her head back, the blunt brim of her hat barely shading her face as the sun plays over long bangs.

"I beg your pardon," Equius says slowly, taking in the other three and realizing with growing unease that none of them are familiar. None of these people have ever shown up on his surveillance of the neighborhood. This is...troubling. No matter how innocuous the woman acts, all four have the look of some of the hardest criminals he and Nepeta have dealt with in their midnight rounds of the city, and the fact that the three in black are all wearing ragged suits in a similar style, in the middle of the day - "I do not believe we've met before. Can I help you?"
The woman laughs, rattling and fast like a machine gun. "'Course you can. Compays, remember?"

She smiles again, leaning more of her weight to one side so that her hip juts out and the coattails of her suit jacket swing. "Call me Quatorze, cariño. Me and my friends, we just want to know how a cute kid like you would end up all mixed up with a mujer peligrosa like Droog. That's all. Hm?"

Equius has to mentally scramble to keep up with the woman's accent; he prefers not to interact with people when he is forced by circumstances to leave his hive, and as such his practical knowledge of any languages other than Alternian and English leaves much to be desired. Moreover, none of them will stop staring at him and the more they stare the harder it becomes to resist the urge to solve this problem by punching them all in the face and absconding back into the safe darkness of his rooms. "I'm not familiar with anyone by that name. You would have to *elucidate* further."

Quatorze's smile doesn't shift an inch, and it requires a few more not-very-discreet glances around the circle before Equius picks up on the fact that his words have caused the expressions of the other three to darken. The two trolls, previously standing with their horns at neutral angles, have begun to lower their heads, eyes focused on him with intent. Their lime-green clad spokeshuman might be smiling, but the rest of the group don't seem to find his answers satisfactory.

"Oh, cariñito, don't play hard to get," Quatorze sighs, rolling the coin through her fingers again, faster than before, so that it catches the sun. If Equius weren't wearing his sunglasses, as cracked as they are, the flicker of light might have dazzled him. "This'll only take a momentico if you just play nice. We followed this auto de mierda halfway to hell and back - and where should Droog have it stop after all that, but outside one particular hivering..." She pauses - not long enough for Equius to even begin to formulate a response to a sentence as nonsensical as that last one - just long enough to take out a phone and flip it open to nod at the screen. "In the middle of one of the biggest zonas nulas south of Maine and east of Houston." She flips the phone shut. "Coincidence? With Droog? Never."

Previously, Equius was sweating merely because...well, because the price of his incredible STRENGTH has always been paid with an equivalent amount of perspiration, and because, as loathe as he is to admit it to anyone but Nepeta, going out in public isn't one of his many strengths. He would be perfectly content to disappear completely if it meant no one laid eyes on him again, so he could work in peace and solitude.

But now, he can feel sweat prickling up and down his spine, along the soles of his feet, as his body grows even more tense. It's the kind of tension that precedes a strife - after all, he has four people who he *highly* suspects to be criminals of some sort making ludicrous accusations on his front lawn. He isn't sure what to do with his expression, either; it tends to fall into a default, tooth-grinding scowl when he's on edge, which he most definitely is right now. He *knew* this car could be nothing but trouble, but this is far worse than he anticipated. He must settle this before Nepeta returns.

"Be that as it may, I must disappoint you. I have never communicated with anyone called 'Droog.' This is not an attempt at misdirection. If you have come for the vehicle, you are welcome to it."

Equius steps to the side, careful, aware as he shuffles that both of the trolls in the group are some shade of indigo, like himself. As his equals, they could prove difficult to handle.

Not that anyone ever really has before. Equius simply recognizes that if anyone could match him in terms of STRENGTH, it would be someone with blood as cold as his own.

"Hey, hey, slow down, kid!" Quatorze sidesteps with him, the other human in the group of four neatly stepped out of her way so that she can stay level with Equius, grinning all the while. "We're cool, we're cool. We're just talking. Like friends, right? Lemme guess, Droog just asked you to strip the car down and make it disappear? She likes delegating, that one. Como una encantadora!" The human picks up the pace, so that when Equius tries to dodge out of the circle formed by the four and
the car, she's right in his path, tossing her bangs as she inspects the coin balanced on her knuckles. "Likes void, too, these days. A nice hidden place like this, that no one could see? Right up her alley."

"I don't know why this place would be any more occluded than any other," Equius says, hands clenching into fists. "I just came out to see why this vehicle has been idling outside my home. That's all. Now please remove yourselves from my property."

Quatorze studies his face - she has to look up to do it, but the foot of difference between their heights does nothing to calm Equius's stiff panic. He can feel a dull flush staining his cheeks, sweat dripping from his temples in ever more copious trickles as the human stares him down. He can feel the other three watching his rigid shoulders, too. Nights of fighting crime with Nepeta have instilled in him positively unacceptable instincts which urge him to deck all four of these people and escort them in zipties to the nearest available police station. But he has no proof that they're criminals at all. They've done nothing but ask him oddly leading questions about a very unusual car that he wants nothing to do with.

Then Quatorze starts laughing again, tossing the coin into the air. She snags the quarter midflip without waiting for it to fall to the ground, and slides it into the same pocket as her flip phone. "I like you!" she declares, turning her gaze so that she's looking at the car instead. Equius sags with relief at the lack of scrutiny. "You seem like a real smart kid. Wouldn't lie to me, nah?"

"...No," he says at last, when it seems she's waiting for an answer.

"Then we'll get along just fine. Bueno." Quatorze raps her knuckles against the hood of the car, nodding. "Yeah, just fine. Droog kinda sprung this one on you, huh?"

Equius almost nods along with her before he catches himself. "I am still not familiar with anyone by that name."

"Oh. The Crew's Trébol, then? Clubs Deuce? Ringing a few more bells?" Quatorze starts nodding for him again, like it's a given that he agrees. Equius can't seem to stay on top of the conversation - he wants, badly, any kind of excuse that would get these people and this execrable, troublesome car away from his home. He doesn't even care why the vehicle came here unpiloted, crammed with excess parts, and apparently watched by group of inexplicable ruffians; he just wants this interaction to be at an end. "Pobrecito...He always was wrapped around Droog's little finger. I could see her talking him into it, no matter what Dienek did. Yeah...

"I don't know that person either," Equius says. He has to dredge up the words and force them out of his throat, but he makes himself sound firm and unyielding. It is utterly unacceptable that he's letting this strange human control the conversation when he just wants it to end. He needs to make himself more clear, and stop sweating; in this context, it can only be making him look guilty. Curse his perspiration glands... "You seem to have some issue with the two of them, but I'm not a part of any of this. Now, if you do not stand aside, I will contact that authorities." There. That should be commanding enough. Surely these people will understand now.

He's underestimated others' capacity for stubbornness, though. Or perhaps he's just not as commanding and convincing as would befit a blueblood of his hemotype. The human tosses her braid and laughs, the deep, murky blue-green bowtie around her neck exposed. The braid itself thumps against her back with an audible thud that makes Equius jolt. "Ah, you're good, 'zul! Not bad at all." She leans in and Equius steps back, feeling part of the front bumper of the car creak and crumple beneath the iron strength of his calf. Oops. "But whatever they're paying you to be this discreet? The Felt can match it. So relax, my friend, yeah? Don't sweat it!" Her smile is cocky. "I gotta a good friend in accounting, a real pal. He and I, we can hook you up."
"No one is paying me anything, and - and I don't need to explain myself to you any further. You are being unreasonable, and this conversation is at an end." Equius jerks his chin to the side and starts walking back toward the house. He should never have left it, in retrospect. He's soaked through with sweat, his sunglasses seem to be cracking just from being in close proximity to his furrowed brow, and the binder feels simultaneously too tight and as though it is doing absolutely nothing to accomplish its purpose. He needs to contact N-

"Equius!"

Equius stops and closes his eyes, but this does nothing to make Nepeta stop racing down the sidewalk toward him, her white uniform skirt tangled up with a new bright blue cat's tail. She's early. Today, of all days, she is early. The timing could not have been worse; even one half hour more, and the car and its unpleasant hangers-on might have already vacated the premises. "You're outside!" she says, delighted, her wild hair already starting to defy gravity where the helmet would have matted it down earlier. Then, as Equius turns, shoulders hunched, to shake his head and attempt to order her to make her way into the house at once, Nepeta coasts to a stop short of tackling him, her last step dragging as she frowns at the four people gathered around the car. "Equius? Who are they?"

"Nepeta. Not now. Get into the house, now," he orders, blood on his tongue. He can't even tell what tooth has shattered, this time.

To his horror, Quatorze speaks again before Nepeta can obey (or argue with him, as the cross look on her face would suggest is the way she intends to respond). "Nepeta, huh? Hey, another friend! You should have said something, 'zul, if you were expecting company and all."

This is not good. This is the opposite of good. This is, in fact, very bad. "Are these guys bothering you meow, Equius?" Nepeta says, pouting with suspicion as she eyes the gangsters. The last thing he needs is Nepeta fixating on these people - let alone vice versa.

"No one is bothering anyone. They were just leaving," Equius says, insistent.

A hand lands on his shoulder. "Who said anything about leaving? You wound me, Equius," Quatorze says, repeating the name as though it's the most marvelous things she's heard this year. "Equius and Nepeta, mis nuevos compañeros. We were just having a nice talk between friends. No need to run off!"

Equius jerks away from the hand - too fast. The sharp snap of one of Quatorze's fingers being yanked from its socket sounds too loud in the otherwise empty street. The human yelps, yanking her hand back to her chest, and Equius feels the other three moving before he hears them. Nepeta lunges but he hauls her around as he rounds on the four hooligans, forcing Nepeta behind him repeatedly when she claws at his arm and yells downright lewd invectives at the three levelling specibi at them. Two guns and a knife - Equius can more than handle those -

"No, no! We're fine!" Quatorze says, breathless but sharp, waving her free hand at the other three. Her laugh sounds more like choking as she raises the dislocated finger and prods at the already swelling, soft flesh of the human digit. "Our new friend's got a good pull!" Her eyes, when she lifts them to smile at Equius again, are malicious beyond a shadow of a doubt. "Equius y Nepeta," she repeats.

He recognizes the threat for what it is. Another tooth crunches into shards at his own foolishness; he couldn't have stopped Nepeta from using his name to greet him, but he should have stopped himself from using Nepeta's name in front of these people.

Because this human won't forget either of their names, now.
"Leave," he says, one last time. There's too much growl in his voice for anyone to hear the wretchedness behind it.

"Just tell me what they asked of you, Equius, what they promised you," Quatorze says coaxingly, shrugging and letting the hand with the dislocated finger hang loose by her side. "Droog and Deuce. Our poor wayward amigos en común. I understand, I really do! Droog is a lovely woman, always so sly. I admire her, myself! But she...doesn't like loose ends. What she's promised you won't be worth the price you pay."

"What is she talking about, Equius?!" Nepeta hisses in his ear. She keeps trying to wriggle out from behind him, but Equius is an expert at maneuvering her so that she stays a warm weight, safe at his back.

"I do not know," he says, though not quietly enough that only Nepeta hears. Quatorze won't stop looking at him, waiting for an answer he doesn't have to give, but he has to divide his attention between all four of the strangers, waiting for his glasses to analyze the make and model of each gun - the balance point of that knife - yes, he can manage this.

Then Quatorze shakes her head, and twists her lips to the side, and reaches behind her under the folds of her suit jacket. "Ah, I don't like treating friends like this! But you're being very stubborn and not very smart, kid." The coin she draws out is heavier and darker than the first one, a circle of gunmetal-grey that she flips without breaking eye contact. "Cara." This time, she catches it flat in her palm - and the whole thing expands, swapping out into a minigun that she swings up expertly into the crook of her arm. "That's better! Now, where is Droog?"

On the one hand, this complicates things, because there is now a multi-barreled, hand-held Gatling gun pointed at Equius. On the other, it simplifies them, because by extension, there is also now a multi-barreled, hand-held Gatling gun pointed at Nepeta.

There is only one logical response to such a situation.

"Nepeta, go!" he says, one last time, though he knows she won't listen. When he pushes her to the side, so that she will at least have the mysterious car between her and the rest of their assailants, Nepeta somersaults, tearing her school bag open with her claws and coming up in a crouch with a pair of clawkind strapped to her hands that he could have sworn he confiscated several months ago. The first indigo, the one with a pistol, never sees her coming; while their eyes stay fixed on Equius, Nepeta skirts the trunk of the car in a silent leap, yowling only at the last moment as she collides with the troll and knocks him to the ground.

Equius, meanwhile, does his utmost to keep the other three occupied. Starting with Quatorze, whose miniature machine gun poses the most potential for devastating consequences. If she fires that thing, she could unleash an absolutely ridiculous amount of bullets on them. Intending to crush it in his fists, Equius reaches out with both claws, shoving the circle of rifle barrels up toward the sky.

Before he can close his hands and squeeze the minigun into a pretzel, though, the metal abruptly vanishes from under his claws. Quatorze smiles and catches the coin that reappears in its place. She sidesteps his charge, flips the coin again, and calls, "Cara!" When the coin smacks her palm, it's a minigun again.

What a pernicious strife specibus. And while Equius has been distracted by the woman's antics, the other indigoblood and human have circled around him. Nepeta appears to have the fourth hooligan well in claw, as blue blood pours down his face and the flesh of his arms hangs in strips, but she can only do so much like this. It wouldn't ordinarily be an issue if he were wearing armor, but this was supposed to be a normal day.
Oh, applesauce. Equius snaps his fingers. As one, the spiderbots clustered under the car swarm out and latch onto the nearest target - the other human's pants' leg. They are light and deft, so it takes a long moment before the human yells and jerks away from the strife, preoccupied with the spiders scurrying up towards his groin. They don't have much by way of offensive weaponry, but they'll do as a distraction.

When the other indigoblood rushes Equius, he lets it happen. He doesn't punch him so much as he puts out his fist and the fool runs into it; Equius only has to plant his feet and wait. When the troll rams into him, he feels little more than a faint jolt. The attacker doesn't let go of his knife, even when the air appears to have been knocked out of him, so Equius helps him by closing his fist on the troll's claws until they creak and snap. The knife slices into his palm a little but cracks in two before falling to the ground.

To his left, Nepeta squawks as her opponent finally succeeds in hauling her off and throwing her. She slams into the hood of the car and rolls again, but the thud of her body on impact sets off that something twitches in Equius's mind, some switch that tends to react to threats to his moirail very poorly -

(some old flicker of thought, a shame more dream than memory)

- so that when the black-suited indigoblood recovers enough of his breath to try to pull back and draw a new weapon, Equius seizes him by the front of the suit and throws him.

Hard. Harder than he means to, except that in this moment, with Nepeta yelling *screaming* in his ears, he *does* mean it. The other troll flies over the tarmac, limbs flailing, and Equius catches a brief moment of surprise on the other troll's face before he ploughs through the front window of the hive across the street.

A flash of lime green in the corner of his eye gives him warning that Quatorze has moved again. Still seized by adrenalin, Equius turns back to her with both hands raised to grapple the specibus from her hands, but the human is out of reach, her palms turned up toward him beseechingly with the minigun slung around her neck. "Come on, no need for all that! We just want Droog and Clubs. A coupla nice kids like you - no need to start a fuss like this! Compañero, I promise you, if you tell me what your orders were, this'll go so smooth."

"I received! No! Orders!" Equius throws a punch.

Quatorze opens fire. One moment her hands are wide and open, and the next she braces the minigun expertly and sparks and noise spit from the barrels as they rotate, the external power source on the side of the gun vibrating with the aftershocks. A sharp, burning pain jars Equius in the side, throwing his aim off, and he half-falls, half-twists out of the way of the rest of the burst before it can strafe across him. Instinct has him turning even though he shouldn't turn his back on the woman - but he has to reassure himself with the sight of Nepeta tucking tail and slithering her way under the belly of the car to relative safety, her olive eyes gleaming at him in the shadows. "Equius!" she shouts, as the hail of bullets punch through the metal of the hood of the car.

He looks down at the cold blood oozing in dark blue splotches through his shirt.

Then, incensed, he reaches out and closes a hand on Quatorze's ankle to yank her down. With an 'Oof!' she falls over, the bone human-thin and fragile under Equius's grip, and the last of that burst of gunfire spends itself firing at the sky. Never letting go of the specibus, the human drives her free foot down to break his nose, but his nose has endured worse. He bares his teeth at her and *pulls* so that the minigun clatters across the ground into his range. He raises a fist to smash it before she can swap it out for a coin again.
"Oh, you have orders, E-qui-us," the human hisses, pulling the barrels away, again. "Never knew a civ that could pack a fistkind like that. Where does that crazy mujer find you people, is the real question!" Before Equius can protest the point for what feels like the thousandth time, someone rushes him from the side and he has to scramble back onto his feet. The twinge of the wound in his side slows him only for a moment before he sees that the human he set the spiderbots on has squashed the last of them, and is coming back around with his pistol raised. His head spins a little with the change in altitude as he rises, and he jams his hand to the bullet wound to apply pressure with his knuckles.

"Nyao!" Nepeta leaps on the human from behind. Her clawkind strikes true, jamming into the soft flesh of the man's forearm, and her other arm locks around his neck. She looks absolutely ferocious, and just past the two struggling figures Equius can see that the indigoblood lies on the ground with his face ravaged, unconscious. The other one, the one he threw into the house across the street, has yet to resurface. Excellent.

"The Felt will know where Droog went, one way or another," Quatorze says when Equius turns and punches again. This time she can't quite dodge fast enough and Equius clips the outside of her elbow. The bone shatters - he knows it does, he knows his own strength after all these years - but the human just flinches and keeps turning out of his way, collapsing the minigun back into a coin when Equius presses the advantage and reaches for it. "Clubs's car," she continues, bending backward to dodge his swing, "deep in the void," and she rolls back up with the coin falling past her face, "here with you - escudo - aha!" She whirls and her braid snaps out; Equius only remembers the chunk of metal clamped around her hair too late, and it catches him across the claw sharp enough to make him jerk back. He stumbles back, and the coin transforms back into a minigun before Quatorze snags it again. He is sure that must be cheating. "We never did know most of Droog's contractors!"

"I am not one of them," Equius says, but he's getting the feeling this won't change what the human has talked herself into believing. His hand and side throb - the hand's just barely bruised, though. His STRONG disposition allows him to power through the worst of the pain from his side as well, and he thinks that blood has stopped hemorrhaging from the wound and begun to clot.

This situation is still...dare he say it? Manageable.

"Oh, but you must be! Why else would we be here?" the woman asks, looking genuinely bewildered. Her finger is on the trigger of the gatlingkind but she hasn't pulled it yet. Equius tenses to dodge out of the way, regardless. "We followed the car when the boss couldn't see it, all the way to where it stopped - here! No one else came to check on it while we were watching..."

"It was encroaching on my territory, and I was going to remove it. Now it appears that I have to remove intruders, too." Equius cracks his knuckles. Yes. This is far more in line with his interests.

Violence is much easier than social interaction. He highly recommends it as a method of solving problems.

Charging in would be ill-advised, though. Equius punches without the expectation of making contact as a way to put the human on her guard; when she flinches and dodges, he exerts all the force in the muscles of his legs to lunge - not for the minigun, too obvious a target, but for the arm that supports most of its weight where Quatorze cradles it to her side. He has tested how effective his leaps are under Nepeta's pushing, and has learned that he is more than capable of leaping small buildings. The speed and force of this jump, now that he exerted true effort, are more than enough for him to overtake the human. The lime of her suit's arm tears like tissue under his claws, and Equius latches onto her with the utmost precision - forearm and then just above the elbow. After that, it's a matter of mechanics: only a twitch of his hands, and the olecranon of Quatorze's weakened elbow fractures,
the minigun spinning on its strap as the human lets out a hoarse scream.

He doesn't need his shades to identify the weak points of a human. He certainly doesn't need them to assess the electric motor that powers the minigun and tell him how to dismantle it. He just reaches out and smashes it, the metal still hot from firing under his cool skin. Digging his claws in proves most satisfying, because when Quatorze pulls away to try to put space between them again, all she succeeds in doing is helping him to tear the motor into pieces, rendering the specibus inoperable.

But just to be safe, Equius grabs the end of the barrels and yanks that as well. It only takes a fraction of his strength, and the damage is done. Metal squeals under his claws as Quatorze finally dances her way out of reach, so that there are groove marks running the length of the uppermost rifle barrel and sharp slivers jabbing into the clawbeds.

"And stay down, dipshit!"

"Nepeta, language," Equius says before he even finishes turning to see where Nepeta has ended up. He has no idea how she keeps picking up these sorts of vulgarities; he has had multiple stern talks with her football team, the most likely culprits, and they fear him well enough. He has his suspicions about some of those online forums she has been frequenting, though...

"Yeaaaah, I heard you, meowster," Nepeta says, grumbling as she raises her foot to stamp on the other human's face one more time. One of the extra-long claws on her specibus has broken off and sticks out of the tire of the car, which has slowly begun to deflate. Nepeta looks undamaged in all the ways that matter - that is to say, her school uniform will never be fit to be worn out in public ever again, but the only sign of actual injury is a stray trickle of olive blood dripping from her left nostril. She snorts as he watches, making the most undignified snuffling sound, and then rubs the rest of the blood off on her forearm. When he opens his mouth to reprimand her, she smiles and darts to his side to wipe a smear of blood (and most likely snot) off on his arm.

Sometimes, he despairs of teaching Nepeta civilized mannerisms. He closes his mouth, because when Nepeta is in a mood like this, complaints only encourage her misbehavior.

And despite the fact that the other member of the gang unaccounted for has yet to reappear - perhaps Equius punched him hard enough that hitting the house knocked him unconscious - they still have Quatorze herself to handle.

Of course, between the two of them, Equius has little doubt they can handle one human. Particularly one who is now listing to the side, frowning at the car and then at Equius, and back again. "Alright. That's fine. You're not half bad, kiddies," Quatorze says, grimacing. Her smile is gone, and her arm bends the wrong way. Her elbow is a swollen, purple-bruised wreck and the minigun twists at a ninety-degree angle. "So, I guess you really don't know why Droog sent the car to you...que molesto!"

"No one sent a car to anyone!" Nepeta tries to step forward; Equius puts out an arm and she wraps around it, scowling at him before adding, "You keep making all these crazy mousumptions!"

Quatorze laughs, shrugging. "I guess we shoulda expected Droog to pull some tricky shit. I remember this one time at the old - hang on, why am I telling you this?" She shakes her head, braid half-undone by the strife. "No hard feelings, right?"

Nepeta looks at Equius. It is one of those looks that expresses a remarkable amount of her thoughts without the need for words.

This time, it runs something along the lines of, 'this is compawlete and total horseshit,' because
Nepeta's nonverbal vocabulary is just as foulmouthed as she's been, lately. Equius wishes he could communicate a silent reprimand with the same eloquence, but he has never really mastered facial contortions beyond grimacing and frowning, let alone minutiae like the 'glower of righteous remonstrance' or the 'reproving yet indulgent stare.' It will just have to go unsaid.

"You assaulted us over the matter of a misplaced vehicle," Equius says aloud, folding his arms tight. "I am afraid I must inform you that yes, there are...hard feelings."

"En serio? Shit. Shit!" Quatorze tugs at the bowtie around her neck, fretting at it until it's looser. "Ah, I just wanted to ask my two new friends some questions, and now you're mad at me..."

"Please tell me you called the pawlice," Nepeta whispers, bouncing on her toes while the human rambles on.

"There are multiple gunshot detection systems installed throughout the neighborhood. They should arrive momentarily." Most of the alerts route through Equius's work room before being forwarded on to the police dispatcher, of course, but when he didn't give a shutdown signal in the first three minutes, it would have forwarded itself to the police automatically.

He just hopes that they allow Nepeta to do most of the talking. He will have to explain the first few minutes of this ridiculous event to her before they arrive, because he has an unfortunate tendency to clam up and sweat enough to short-circuit waterproofed circuits in his armor - and that's when he and Nepeta are in their hero personas. He has managed to avoid dealing with people in positions of relative authority over him for the most part since applying for Nepeta's transfer to the Academy, and he would do much not to break that streak.

When he begins to listen to Quatorze again, however, he is just in time for yet more oddness. "Then there's only one thing for it!" the human says, still fiddling with her hair and sighing. The broken minigun vanishes from around her neck and reappears as a coin folded neatly in two on her palm. Smoothing her braid back down over the curve of her shoulder and patting at her clothes until they're in order again, Quatorze focuses on the two of them once more. "Equius and Nepeta! It has been very nice meeting you. But I guess I misunderstood something...it is a real shame, having to go back to tell the boss this was a bust, but I met two new compañeros, and isn't that what really matters, in the end?"

She smiles, her eyes crinkling and her cheeks flushed, and she holds up another coin. One that's unbent, and whole.

"Down!" Equius says, reinforcing his order by hauling Nepeta down against the street with him. Quatorze smiles merrily up at the coin as she flicks it into the air. But as Nepeta squirms and elbows him, trying to crawl out from underneath, Equius can see that this coin isn't the color of a gun: the two sides have different colors, one pale purple, the other dark green. He can't tell what design or numbers they might spell out.

The purple side lands face up in Quatorze's cupped hand though, and she heaves an exaggerated sigh of relief. The coin flickers and purple light starts shining up from the human's hand. "I'll remember you two!" she says. "We'll talk about the car again next time, alright? I know you'll think of something to tell me! But I must go for now. Hasta luego!"

Nepeta bristles and shoves Equius's arm out to the side, wriggling out from under his guard before he can pull her back in. "You're not going anywhere!" she says, pouncing.

She hits nothing but air. One hand skids on the ground when she lands, and she comes up in a crouch. Equius clicks his tongue as Nepeta raises the scraped up flesh of her palm to her mouth
before she can lick it the way he knows she's going to.

But there are more significant things to be concerned about. First and foremost, the fact that Quatorze has been replaced by someone else entirely.

The situation is once again spiraling rapidly out of control. If possible, this sends even more of Equius's calculations into a tailspin than the minigun's appearance had. An incredibly dangerous strife specibus with a high potential for collateral damage is one thing; having one's assailant swap out with someone new is quite another.

"And don't forget to record the transactions properly - we don't need a repeat of what happened last time," the man says. His back is turned to both Equius and Nepeta as he scans a sheaf of papers. He's much shorter than Quatorze, with rounded shoulders and pale skin. He licks a finger and uses it to flip a page over, a mug of tea balanced in his other hand. "The revenue flow from slots still looks..." He trails off, glancing around him slowly with watery lavender-blue eyes. When he sees Equius and then Nepeta, he gives a little sigh. "Oh. This isn't accounting."

"This is Florida," Nepeta says, settling back on her haunches and watching the man with consternation. "Where did that weird lady go?! Do mew know?"

"Wei- oh, Quatorze was out in the field. That's right." The man adjusts his hat to scratch at his pale blond, flossy hair. "Why she felt the need to swap us out when I was in the middle of the quarterly budget meeting...I hope she hasn't been causing too much trouble?"

Nepeta jabs her clawkind accusingly at the two unconscious bodies on the road. "She attacked us over a car!"

"She seemed...deliberately, single-mindedly convinced that we knew information which we did not," Equius adds. "It was - perplexing."

The man nods along with them, his expression sympathetic. "Yes, she does that, sometimes, when she gets an idea in her head. She's still the newest at all this. Brash, you know." He scans the scene again, huffing at little as he catches sight of each downed person in a black suit. Equius straightens a little at the sound of sirens approaching. "And those would be the police?"

"Yes."

"Looks like I'll be picking up the tab for bail again." The man doesn't look angry; just resigned. Doffing his hat, he tucks the entire stack of paper along the inner curve and then sets it back on his head. As the first of the police cars rounds the corner, lights flashing, he shakes his head at the hole punched through the wall of the hive opposite. None of the three trolls who reside there appear to have been in residence, but now that there's no longer a machine gun pointed at him or Nepeta, Equius can see a single leg folded over the side of the hole in the wall, the only sign of the other troll. "Mmm. Still not as bad as the collateral from Seattle. That was a real nightmare to budget for."

By the time they sort out what story to tell the police - with the police standing right there, much to Equius's intense displeasure - and the purple-hatted man joins the three black suited gang members in the police cars with his mug of tea gone cold in his hand, Equius feels wrung dry. The man, who gives his name as Clover at some point in the stressful proceedings, raises the mug to them in a farewell gesture. He's remarkably chipper all the while, cooperating with the police and being utterly reasonable about the whole confused thing. "We'll send someone to tow the car for you, not to worry!" Clover calls before the door shuts on him, but it's no real consolation. Several of the
neighbors have begun to return from their commutes and the low light of the late afternoon doesn't conceal Equius enough for him to be comfortable, not with the police lights casting everything into sharp, blue-and-red relief.

The police cars drive away, leaving him and Nepeta standing around by the accursed vehicle, but Equius keeps finding his gaze drawn back to the other trolls clustered together on other lawns and leaning over the hedges of the rings, luminescent eyes seeing everything. What are they whispering?

He is too tall, too obviously exposed. He hunches as much as he can, hair swinging into his face like a curtain to obscure his features, but it doesn't help. They're still going to know he was here, that this hive was visited by police. After all his work to ensure his hive and life go unnoticed, unobtrusive and ignored, this incident has upset his equilibrium.

"...What just happened?!” Nepeta exclaims, throwing up her hands. "Equius, what the effurloving heck did you do?! Who were those people?"

She's too loud, shouting and drawing even more attention down on them, and it's more than Equius can bear. Troll eyes gleam like jewels all around them, watching his every move.

With no other acceptable options at his disposal, Equius picks up Nepeta. It is, generally, a viable solution to many of his problems, because it allows him to carry her inside. The neighbor right next door has started edging down the sidewalk in their direction by the time Equius reaches the front door. His strength sabotages him, though - when he slams the door shut behind them, it splinters nearly in two.

But now that he is within the hive, he has more options. Using his fist, he punches one of the panels set into the wall next to the door, and the force is enough to depress the button behind the panel as well. Shields shutter down, another layer over the shades that already black out most of the windows in the upper half of the house, and the sagging halves of the door are shunted out of the way by an emergency blast door. "Lockdown initiated," the computer chimes in his ear.

"Lockdown?!" Nepeta kneels him in the side. Normally, Equius can more than take her writhing, but at the moment he has a bullet lodged in his torso that he is still ignoring and he grunts at the surprisingly sharp pain that spikes anew at the blow. "Equius, what is going on?"

"I do not know, Nepeta," he says, setting her down on the kitchen table, between the heaps of broken parts and shattered mugs. He can hear the faint clop of hooves as Aurthour returns from further within the house, a broom in one hand. The lusus looks at them quizzically, and then returns to the task of sweeping up the nuts, bolts, and assorted other fragmented tools that litter the floor. "But we will remain in here."

"Ugh, you're freaking out, aren't you! I can tell!" Nepeta jumps off the table and reaches for him. Equius dodges the touch and rips another panel off the wall instead, his claws shaking with the effort it takes to stay calm and not annihilate the keypad with a single touch. "A bunch of meowscreants just show up out of nowhere with guns and stuff? You can't just lock us up in here like a scaredy-cat, we have to go find out who they were! What if they come back?!"

"That is exactly what I fear will occur." When a final confirmation screen appears, Equius enters the code and closes the panel. The faint rumble of the ground shaking under their feet loosens the knot in his chest. "We'll be secure here for the time being."

When he can finally bring himself to lower his shoulders and relax out of the tense stance that kept him coiled and on high alert for the past hour, Nepeta has folded her arms, glaring at him without reservation.
Ah. It would appear that in his blind panic, he has truly annoyed her. It was not his intent, but in this, as in many things, he knows better. Nepeta is impetuous - her 'investigation,' if not carefully monitored and planned ahead of time, would be the most reckless of follies. "There are leads I will be able to research from here."

Nepeta says nothing. She just drums her claws on her arms.

Equius begins to sweat. But that is just a matter of course. It means nothing. Really. "A foe who wields a dangerous specibus and can vanish at will is not one that I will allow you to go out and hunt down. Even with your lusus, it would be intolerably dangerous. You will remain here as well."

Her teeth begin to glint, sharp even through her pout. Equius's sweating intensifies; what managed to survive the encounter on the street and the interaction with the police that followed will no doubt reek of sweat for generations to come after this. This is...an extreme sweat.

"That is final," he says. His voice falters, but doesn't fail him. Then he clamps his jaws shut and moves away, looking away from Nepeta's accusatory stare. He busies himself by stamping past Aurthour to reach the stairs down to his work space, and the lack of footsteps padding after him tells him just how very upset Nepeta is...feline.

Well. Nepeta can sulk as she likes. Equius has endured worse than her disappointment, though admittedly the list of things that are worse than upsetting Nepeta isn't a long one. He cannot condone the thought of her running around the city at night when these strange threats might still lurk around his house, trying to pinpoint a connection between the two of them and this enigmatic figure called Droog. He cannot stand the thought of venturing outside where someone could see him, not after an afternoon ruined like this.

To think, his main concern over the years has been ensuring that neither he nor Nepeta's identities as heroes would be exposed. But now here, on his own street, outside his own safeguarded home - that something like this could occur in broad daylight only reaffirms his worst fears.

There must be a way to secure the hive further. Something that could turn a strange threat like Quatorze away without her ever laying gun sights on Equius or Nepeta again.

He could not say for certain what leaps his mind takes next. Perhaps the answer presents itself to him of its own accord, like an old promise rising to the surface of his mind. All he knows is that the word that draws his attention, that begins to consume his thoughts as he hurries down into the dark of the deepest rooms of the hive -

- is void.

It sounds too familiar for him not to have heard of the concept before. Someone out there must understand how to harness it, how he might be able to capitalize on whatever property it is that makes Jacksonville - or perhaps even all of Florida - a 'null zone.' Absurdly, he almost wants Quatorze standing in front of him so that he could shake her hand, thank her for giving him such a promising idea, and then toss her into the nearest jail cell.

He doesn't care what it takes. He will make them safe.

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Thursday

It's three days after the fact that Bro pulls his head out from whatever asspuppet it's been up all week and checks in. Dave wakes up at four in the fucking morning to his phone vibrating off the pillow
with the force of the incoming message barrage. There's a trail of spit dribbling down his chin as he lifts his head to squint at the blurry lines and *lines* of asshole-orange Pester notifications.

He comes *so* close to just putting his head back down and going back to sleep.

But nah. He's never had the willpower to resist Pesterchum. He is weak.

-- temperedTitan [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] at 04:12:30 --

TT: kid.
TT: kid, wake the hell up.
TG: dude its like 4 am here chill
TT: wake up, brat, and tell me what the *fuck* kind of drugs Lalonde's on.
TG: literally ive sent you like ten messages about all this shit
TG: but haha oops
TG: maybe if you didnt conveniently go goddamn black ops radio silent on everyones asses youd know already
TT: great, i really do need to come back and kick your ass. as if my to-do list wasn't long enough.
TG: bring it on dickhead
TG: now let me sleep
TT: no. answer the question, dingus.
TG: jfc
TG: look johns dad was totally evil but we handled it okay cool
TT: yeah, that's what I thought she said...
TG: oh and hurry up and come back on account of people are mad unaware of the fact that theyre brainwashed around here
TG: its like stand op these days not anything personal
TG: except anyone who messages people at four in the morning is like 10x more suspicious than the average american so shit
TG: you blew it man
TG: you fucking blew it
TT: where did I go wrong raising you?
TG: somehow i think going wrong was like your main goal and now im an asshole too
TG: even giant wifi snake monsters are pointing it out so thanks a lot
TT: stop babbling and give me an actual summary instead of fucking sass. the hell went wrong with Egbert?
TG: he was working with the mc and shit
TG: and he fucked up johns head like its not funny
TG: so dickberts a dick and johns had major brain surgery
TG: and you might be evil w/o knowing it so seriously where are you how long can it take to track down one bird me
TT: he ain't a just bird you, asshole child.
TG: youre avoiding the question
TG: i need to wake rose up this is classic avoidance shell eat it up
TT: kid's slippier than you.
TT: probably since everything you know about stealth, you learned from me to begin with.

This is unbelievable. Dave literally cannot believe this conversation is happening. It must be a delirious product of his naphappy mind, because there is no way Bro could possibly be this dense. Not even irony can justify this shit.

TG: dude
TG: *he's orange*
TG: with wings proportionate to lift the weight of a human body
TG: and goddamn feathers on his arms and face
TG: this shit can't be that hard
TT: the kid beat me to Houston and started in on some shady bs on the downlow.
TT: including pissing off every MC member in the city by setting their shit on fire.
TG: so you mean he's being a total badass
TT: well, yeah.
TT: but he's also being an evasive little prick on a vigilante revenge kick because he's developed an inferiority complex roughly the size of Wisconsin.
TG: but he's setting fires and you can't track him down
TT: ha. did you know about Crow?
TG: the fuck
TT: didn't think so. he might be shit with a sword, but the kid's got a fucking history.
TT: turns out when you're a mutant kid there's a club for that.
TG: it's too early for this
TT: please stop
TT: a whole mutant underground. mostly off-spectrum trolls 'n shit.
TT: but if they don't want you finding a kid on the street, you're not finding him.

There has to be a way to derail this conversation. Dave rolls over onto his stomach and reaches in the most awkward way possible to scratch his side, the hand with the phone held out in front of him and his eyes aching from squinting at it.

TG: it's West Side Story isn't it
TT: what
TG: you know gangs of kids roaming the streets fighting each other with like wings and horns and lasers and sick beats idk
TT: no you shit it's not a goddamn musical.
TT: jesus fuck.
TT: look. how urgent is shit up there?
TT: and don't give me some flippant crap, I need to know.
TG: dude were fine
TG: goddamn hunky dory
TG: we need to go pick up wv and some stuff from the Lalonde house but were cool
TG: there's a no hero warning in effect anyway so we couldn't do jackshit without the police riding our dicks
TT: just like old times then.
TG: yeah basically
TT: fine. tell Lalonde I need more time or Oriole's gonna incinerate downtown Houston.

Dave buries his face against the pillow and silently screams into it. He's too tired to pretend Bro isn't being an infuriating ass on purpose.

TG: tell
TG: her
TG: yourself
TG: at like
TG: NOT FOUR IN THE MORNING
TT: it's almost seven here, so deal with it.
TG: and hell no the whole point is you need to come back asap to make sure you're not you know
tG: casually evil
TG: evil on the backburner
TG: evil beef stew simmering in a slow cooker until tender
TT: my head is fine kid, im not evil.
TG: no see we bought that line when john and his dad were telling it and fuck look at us now
TG: momlonde will get mad at me if you dont get your shit together and come back here
TT: heheh.
TG: ...
TG: you asshole
TT: stop disrespecting your elders and piss off to go tell her, lil man.

Whelp. He has just one card left to play.

TG: you dont even want to meet clone you or anything
TT: ...
TT: okay, I thought Lalonde was just making shit up by that point.
TG: there is a mini you across the hall
TG: his name is dirk he likes stabbing things and warm hugs
TG: everyones gonna have a clone by the end of this shithive rumpus or something its majorly fucked up
TT: I'm reading the rest of that stuff, shut up for five seconds.
TT: jesus, mary, and joseph.
TT: I am never leaving you dumb punks alone again.
TT: seeing as you can't go more than a day without three new crises.
TT: jesus.
TG: told you so
TT: whatever, I'll make this quick.
TG: no dont -
-- temperedTitan [TT] has left the chat! --
TG: god dammit

Dave does the only thing he really can do in a situation like this.

He drops his phone on the pillow, rolls over, and lets the faint, snuffling sounds of a bunch of teenagers sleeping knock him out again, the afterglare of orange text still burning along the inside of his eyelids.

- He wakes up with Jade's foot in his face, a toe dangerously close to jabbing him in the eye. But after camping out like this with a bunch of personal-space challenged dumbasses for days on days, Dave figures Jade's tendency to migrate around a room in her sleep is the least of their many, many issues. Seriously. It barely even registers.

What does register is the fact that there's someone extra in the room. Once that processes, Dave's on his feet in a flash, nearly squashing Karkat's face as he scrambles for a fighting stance in the crowded floor space.

Dirk stares at him without expression, one foot still out in the hall, the other raised over the threshold. He sets it back down without comment.

Dave waits. Now they're both just awkwardly standing around like king douchelords, and he has no idea what to say because he's been avoiding this on purpose. Roxy and Rose have been chumming it up, and Jane, Jake, and John all have legit excuses for not talking to each other yet, since two out of the three are still marginally crazy and the third's recovering from being just as nuts in his own way.

But he and Dirk have followed a strict anti-mutuals policy by edging around each other with a
vengeance. This guy looks like Bro, fights like Bro (though with fewer creepy puppets), probably has the same DNA as Bro - but isn't Bro.

For some reason, Dave feels like he's the only one majorly concerned about the fact that the Scratch kids are genetically everyone's ectoparents. Round two. Everyone else stopped somewhere around 'clones of our guardians' and never went a step further. On some level this kid is, like. His dad or something. He has enough trouble thinking Bro is his dad. This is too fucking much. Every time he tries to bring it up with Rose her eyes light up and she gets that look that somehow combines 'at last my time has come' with 'Freud, give me strength,' and Dave has to furiously backpedal until they've stopped talking about his obviously nonexistent daddy issues.

He falls back on what's tried and true. "Sup," he says, sticking his hands in his hoodie pockets and trying, discreetly as hell, to flatten down the parts of his hair that have been smushed to the side in his sleep. He's not the one going for blatant anime hair, here; Dirk's got that more than covered. How he's managing it when no one in this building has hair gel lying around is anyone's guess.

"Sup," Dirk says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Need something to do."

Was that a statement or a question or a suggestion or what? He can't tell. The kid's monotone game is too strong. "So?" he says. Yeah, that shit's noncommittal enough that this guy will be totally fooled into thinking Dave gets it.

Another shuffle of feet. "Sixty six percent of the people in my immediate acquaintance are still tripping balls, and the other third is asleep." A slow, slight tilt of the head. Maybe it's because of the four-in-the-morning daze Dave was in when Bro starting pestering him, but the gesture reads more like Oriole than anyone else in the family - short and piercing even through shades. "So I propose that, given we two are both fortuitously conscious, we could -"

"- eat -" 

"- strife."

Okay, never mind, Dave completely misread that one. He definitely thought this was going to be about food. Dirk smacks his face with both palms and Dave starts sweating. "Fighting, no, yeah, that is what I meant to say," he says, making weak motions with his hands like backing it up with faltering signs will make his backtracking any less total horseshit. "Uh. Why are we fighting again?"

Dirk doesn't look up from his palm stare of despair. "Because I'm functioning at 58% capacity with significant intermittent disorientation, and I suspect that a practice round with you and Maryam would end with me flattened in 98.3 seconds."

"Oh." Dave shrugs and steps over Jade. "Hell, you could have just said you were bored."

"Dave?"

He stops – still midstride, so of course he wobbles and nearly curbstomps Jade's face, which would be a one-way ticket to twisty space hell, like the kind that left an entire door punched with tiny holes in the pattern of a checkerboard, drifting in the lake, and part of Dickbert's hand turned inside out and left on the roof for a repairman to find. "Yeah man," he says, rotating a little by shifting his base foot to the left until he can see the bed.

John blinks at him, his eyes ringed with shadows that make the blue look darker in the halflight of the morning. But they glow all the time lately, as bright and shiny as troll eyes in the dark, so he looks unearthly. There's a faint breeze circulating that wasn't as active a second ago, though the wind
never seems to stop now, either. "Something wrong?" he asks, his voice rough from sleep and wary, eyes flicking from Dave to Dirk with exhausted caution. And if John's up, Karkat won't be slow to follow.

Dave shrugs, noncommittal, but he also lets half a smile twitch the corner of his lip, so John knows shit's fine. "Going outside for a bit."

John relaxes fractionally, sinking back down against the pillow like his body's too heavy to hold up when he could still be sleeping. "Cool. Try not to stab each other by -" a wide yawn "- by accident?"

Dave gives a half-assed salute and heads for the door again. "Aye aye, man."

- 

His instinct is to take this to the roof. But he's not willing to risk the wrath of Mom Lalonde, not when she's taken the Dickbert's dickish rampage as a personal betrayal that requires her to act more momnish than Dave's ever had to put up with in his entire life. So they go outside instead, where the grass is still damp days after John's storm died down, and Dave lets Dirk borrow one of his shitty swords.

Neither of them realizes just how shitty a choice of strife field they made until about seven minutes in, when Dirk manages to drive Dave a few feet closer to the lake and they both try to sidestep the other's slice. At which point the mud under their feet decides to suck at the soles of their shoes - and then give. Dave has a brief moment in which he sees Dirk's face flash by, the Scratch kid's shades already flying off his face and his mouth a thin line of resignation, because he's realized what fate awaits them.

Dave lands in the mud. He's still so shocked about it, he forgets to put his hands out and faceplants, cold, slimey muck plastering itself along his face and seeping into his hair.

Dirk was only a little luckier; his balance is still shot, so he even has an excuse for falling, but he managed to get his forearm up and his face has been spared. Mud has turned his shirt and pants into a disgusting mess, but he's still looking over at Dave's stiff form with a raised eyebrow. "Dude."

Dave takes a long moment to think of an appropriate excuse for how badly he just fucked up. "...eeeeeUUUUUUURRRRGGGH," emerges from between his lips at last. Awesome Awesome job.

"Dude."

Dave makes a noble effort to push himself upright. His hand slips in the mud and he almost faceplants again. This time, he stays down. "EEEEEEEEEEEEUUUUUUUUUUUUU-" 

"What's wro-"

Dave stops keening. Not because he's recovered from how stupidly lame this is, but because there's a second Dave standing behind Dirk, his pajamas coated in grass and nature slime, and his face that of vengeance incarnate as he holds up palms full of mud and slams them down into Dirk's anime hair.

While Dirk's still spluttering, his monotonous mask shattered by the loss of his sunglasses, Dave digs his hands into the ground under him and comes up with two fistfuls of muck.

He has a loop to complete, after all.
Unfortunately, Thursday decides to go downhill from there, mostly because when Dave and Dirk slog back inside, looking like the most uncool pair of bros ever to mudwrestle while trying to stab each other, Jake is awake.

And trying to shoot people.

(The fact that his pistols got fucking confiscated days ago while he was still unconscious doesn't seem to be slowing him down.)

"YOU ROTTERS!" he's screaming, voice shrill, and before Dave finishes working out who the hell is talking Dirk is off like a shot, sprinting around the corner and out of sight. "YOU THINK YOU CAN KEEP ME HERE?! WELL, YOU BLEEDING WELL CAN'T -"

"Jakey! Jakey, babe, breathe!" Roxy is shouting back by the time Dave gets his head in gear and flashsteps to the scene of the minor crisis. Jake, unlike John, appears to have decided staying in bed and recovering is for fucking scrubs; he's still trailing the restraints that were supposed to keep him down if he woke up angry, and his arm pours blood in spurts where the IV got ripped out. Roxy stands right in his path, her hands up as she slurs her way through a good-faith attempt at making the other Scratch kid calm the hell down. "'Okay, babbu, we're all okay now! Jus'- jus' hang on a sec!" Her eyes dart down the hallway, and land on Dirk with a wave of relief. "See? Dirk-a-dirk's here, too! Everthing's fine."

"Traitors, the lot of you!" Jake hisses back. He sways on his feet, one hand pressed on the doorway as his head shakes. "Can't trust a blinking word out of you." He reaches for his waist again, and lets out a low bellow of frustration when he keeps not finding a gun. "Botheration!"

Dave reaches Rose and Kanaya around the same time Dirk does Roxy, all of them spread out in a vague half circle around the door to Jake's demolished room. Kanaya has a tube of lipstick in hand, eyes fixed on the three Scratch kids here, while Rose has all her eyes, including the weird ass extra one, directed at Jane's door, which is still closed. Probably to make sure with all this racket they don't end up with two pissed-off powerhouses roaming the halls. "The hell happened?" Dave asks, stopping at Rose's shoulder.

"He woke up. Unfortunately, Jake still believes that he should be following the orders they had last," she murmurs, reaching out and squeezing his forearm before letting her hand fall. "With any luck, they'll be able to talk him down -" Rose stops and looks down at her hand with a frown. "Why are you covered in mud, brother dear?"

"This is so not the time."

Dirk tries next. He looks kind of like he's trying to subtly shift Roxy out of the way of danger, but Roxy just keeps elbowing him back until they end up practically standing on top of each other as they face Jake. "Jake. Chill. You're making an ass of yourself."

"You betrayed us," Jake retorts. The longer he's upright, the sicklier he looks; Dave isn't sure what the recovery time for brain surgery is anymore, since none of these fuckers are good examples of normal human beings, but he does know that Jake and Jane are still on mild sedatives so they wouldn't run around and knock their heads open again, so he kind of doubts Jake's doing himself any favors by mixing that with adrenalin. "Started ignoring our mission and consorting with these ruffians!"

He points at Dave as though to prove his point. Dick.

"Dude, do you even hear yourself? That shit we were doing was fucked up," Dirk says, clipped and
matter of fact. He's stonewalling as hard as Dave's ever seen Bro pull off, which might actually be working for him; there's nothing in his expression that might set Jake off more than he's already gone. "Come on. If Rox and I can think our way out of it, you can too."

"No! Something's bloody well wrong with you, Cogitator, can't you tell?" After one last useless patdown of his hospital gown, looking close to feverish tears, Jake turns pleading. "They've done something to you, old chap, you're not yourself anymore! There's still time; we can find Berzerker and with your knack for gadgetry and gizmos, we four can escape and go home!" He puts out his hands, lip trembling. "Cogitator, please."

Dirk stiffens up so abruptly it looks like a full-body flinch. His hands spasm as he raises them to his head, as though to hold his skull together, and Dave is sure that behind his shades Dirk can't break the sudden staredown with Jake. Dave doesn't remember pulling a swordkind, let alone one of the pieces of shit that broke in half at some point in the past week, but it's in his hand now as he feels the tension in the hallway skyrocket. He has no goddamn idea what it was that Jake said that hit the right button, but Dave can almost see the way that Dirk's frozen internally, like something in his head has latched onto those words and is trying to reassert itself.

Give it two seconds, and the kid Dave just tried to shampoo with mud could turn into a killing machine all over again.

Roxy breaks the silence. "Jakey? Dirk?" Her hand reaches out and misses Dirk's shoulder once before she squeezes it, tearing her eyes away from Jake to stare at Dirk's face. "...Dirk?"

Dirk trembles one last time - and then gasps, falling back as the rigid tension runs out of his shoulders. "I can't, Jake," he says, and the naked agony in his voice is something entirely foreign to Dave, so unlike Bro for a moment that Dave almost has to grab his own head in case it explodes. "I - that wasn't home. I know, in your head, you can't think of it any other way, but what Dienek did fucked you up. Fucked us all up. Going back would just make things worse, not better, dude."

Jake draws back. He barely looks angry anymore; just baffled, his eyebrows knotted together as though at a loss as to what Dirk's saying. "But we have to go back," he says, soft and genuinely confused.

"No, Jakey. We don't. We don't hafta do anything anymore." Roxy smiles, brightening as her excitement catches up with her. "That was all such bullshit, and now we can go back to being our normal selves! You and Jane, you'll be okay and we can be bffs again -"

Jake lunges at Roxy, shouting incoherently. Dirk hauls her back so hard the two of them ram into Rose - Kanaya snaps her lipstick out into a chainsaw, her voice pitched to carry over Jake's shouting to no effect - Dave is still wondering why he grabbed a broken sword of all things, and where the heck is Jade when you need her -

Jake jolts to a stop. Dave takes a good five seconds to realize it's because the kid's feet aren't touching the ground anymore, so he can't get any traction. He makes one last grab for Roxy and Dirk, and then stops, indignantly kicking at his feet as though he can't figure out why they aren't working anymore.

"Wow. I guess he's still pretty turned around about everything in his head, huh," John says, looking asleep on his feet as he hobbles out the open door of his room. Karkat's growling something at him in a volume that somehow Dave can't quite hear (holy shit) and also doing temporary double duty as a living crutch, seizing John's arm when he falters and propping the kid up with his shoulder. But if John's still stumbling a little, the wind dancing around Jake and holding the Scratch kid safely aloft is fully awake now, ruffling Dave's mud-stained shirt and threading through Rose's hair and Kanaya's
horns in branching loops. Jade bounces after Karkat and John, her hands tucked behind her back and a determined look on her face that reminds Dave why she would probably not have wanted to be the one to intervene with her powers, in the void voodoo shit. "That sucks."

"Put me down, you wanker!" Jake demands, twisting with his expression caught between fury and misery. "Why are you all acting like this?!"

"We'll figure this out, Jake," Dirk says. He seems to have decided that looking right at the other Scratch kid while he says this would be a shitty idea, and is just staring at his feet, shoulders sagging. "We will."

John tilts his head to the side, his eyes still exhausted. "Where should I put him down?"

"Back in the cot, I suppose. I'll fetch one of the assistants who knows where we might locate more supplies we could use to keep him calm," Rose says, nodding a little and shaking away the eye on her forehead. She rubs her temple with the wrong thumb and leaves behind a smear of crumbly dirt that she doesn't seem to notice. Dave snickers, swallowing the sound down fast when she glances at him suspiciously. "Leave him loose, and I shudder to think what damage he could do, to himself or the rest of the facility."

Honestly, the whole incident is kind of depressing as hell, Dave thinks as John slowly levitates Jake back into the room. It was one thing for Rose and that Halburn guy and others to say that the effects of the mindgrub wouldn't fade right away, but a whole other deal to see how confused and desperate Jake seemed to be, unable to even consider that what he's been trained into thinking might be kind of, you know, blindly evil. Or maybe evil's not really the word for it. Urgh. Whatever.

"So," Jade says, sounding just this side of chipper, scratching the back of her head after she helps John and the assistants manhandle Jake back onto the cot, "...whooo's going to the Lalonde house today?"

The trip back to Maple Valley actually goes well, up to a certain point. Dave ends up tagging along with Doctor Lalonde and Jade and the handful of geeks who plan to stop by the Egbert house and sweep it for traps and surveillance stuff Dickbert might have left running in case of intruders. Also, they figure at some point John's going to want clothes that aren't his uniform or a hoodie or hospital scrubs at some point, when he stops sleeping all the damn time.

(Dave's getting mildly worried about that. Mildly, okay. Just a little.)

He and Jade tried to talk Karkat into coming along. But a) Karkat still hates them, kind of, probably, and b) the fact that Jake woke up pissy and still brainwashed off his ass means that they probably need to leave as many heroes as they can spare at the lab in case shit goes south again. Kanaya assures them that she can keep Karkat occupied for the hours they're gone. Something about a surprise costume fitting, which Dave is sorry to miss.

Except he's totally not. He has time powers and by god he is going to abuse them.

But first things first. None of them thought when they left on Monday that they wouldn't be coming back right after kicking ass, so there's a little someone they forgot who's more important than clothes and shit.

WV looks down when Doctor Lalonde opens the door, and squeaks at them incoherently, waving his arms from on top of God's one true chosen couch fort.
Seriously. This is the shit religions are made of. From the looks of it, WV re-purposed literally every
couch, armchair, and ottoman in the house in the name of stacking them in the living room, which
has the highest ceiling.

It's a triple decker. Dave's not sure how a short guy like that managed to haul all these sofas down
here, let alone lift one up on top of another without being smushed like a tiny adorable squished
beetle alien. There are bed sheets billowing in the breeze from a window that Dave doesn't remember
leaving open, and with the light streaming in through the skylight, illuminating the dust swirling in
the air, it looks like an altar to the god of couch forts. And the sides of the couches, floor, and the
walls are all covered in -

"Rose left her makeup here on Monday, didn't she," Doctor Lalonde says, sounding faint. "Oh. Oh
dear."

- lipstick drawings.

"WV!" Jade exclaims, folding her arms. The hellbeast flops down behind her feet, a poofed-up mass
of static-charged fur smash in the middle of the doorway, and gives a faint woof, like it can't be
bothered to work up the energy to back Jade up in this. "You can't just go around drawing on
people's things in lipstick! It's impolite!"

WV rises up on his tiptoes, teetering at the top of the pile next to a makeshift red flag and lifting his
claws -

Only to topple over backwards as gravity kicks him in the ass, squeaking all the way down. Jade
reaches out with a hasty jolt of space shit to lower the carapacian to the ground in a cloud of green,
and the alien lands in a heap of leftover cushions and empty soda cans. He lays very still for a few
long moments, and then flops out spread eagle, having apparently given up on life.

"Well, I suppose the decor was a little out of date," Mom Lalonde sighs. She shakes her head at the
tower of power, a smile tugging at her lips as she glances over the scribbly artwork on the walls. "At
least he made provisions for himself in our absence."

"I am sorry about this," Jade says, walking over and stooping to prod WV on the cheek. The
carapacian flops over again onto his side, whining and muttering soundlessly to himself. "He usually
not this - okay, yeah, he's usually this bad...I guess I've just never left him alone this long before!
When WV gets bored he gets kind of creative!"

Dave takes out his phone and takes a picture of the couch fort before he heads over and joins Jade in
waiting for WV to stop sulking. He posts it in an open memo, but gets distracted by WV attempting
to barrel-roll away from them before he can see if anyone's online to respond to it. "C'mere, little
man," he says, scooping WV up by the armpits and hauling the alien into a hug. Doctor Lalonde
keeps checking a PDA, frowning absently as she ventures further and further into the maze of the
Lalonde house. Jade tags along after Doctor Lalonde, floating around a good foot or two above the
ground.

Which means Dave could dick around with this couch fort, if he wanted. "This thing is the shit,
WV," he says, nodding his head as he tries to figure out what the best angle of approach might be. "I
wonder if we cou-

His phone goes off in his hand and WV squirms at the same time. It takes some coordination to
juggle the two, but Dave manages it, texting with one thumb.

CG: DAVE.
CG: DON’T IGNORE ME, JACKASS.
TG: calm your troll tits me and wv are having a moment
CG: BOTH YOUR DELIBERATE, UNFAILING LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF TROLL ANATOMY AND YOUR OBSESSION WITH THAT CARAPACIAN ARE DISTURBING AND WEIRD.
TG: what no wv is awesome okay
TG: hes like a national treasure
TG: he must be protected at all costs
TG: did you see the fort he made
CG: HOW DO I EXPRESS HOW MUCH I DON’T CARE ABOUT THIS.
TG: you know you like him
CG: HE’S MORE TOLERABLE THAN YOU, BUT THAT’S NOT EXACTLY HARD TO ACCOMPLISH.
TG: dont play hard to get karkles
TG: youre making him sad
CG: HE DOESN’T GIVE A SHIT.
TG: omg yes he does how could you say that
TG: look his lip is doing the little wobbly thing
CG: I DON’T EVEN HAVE TO BE THERE TO SEE IN MY MIND’S EYE THAT YOU’RE CURRENTLY ASSAULTING THAT POOR CREATURE WITH A HUG AND HE’S STRUGGLING IN VAIN TO ESCAPE YOU.

Dave looks down.

WV looks up, white eyes squinting.

TG: what no hes totally resigned to it
CG: JESUS.
TG: say it
CG: I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU WANT ME TO SAY BUT THE ANSWER’S STILL NO IN ADVANCE.
TG: say you like wv
TG: everyone likes wv
CG: NOT THIS AGAIN. STOP PUSHING THIS ON ME, NOOKSTAIN, THIS IS NOT WHAT I MESSAGED YOU ABOUT.
TG: say it
CG: NO.
TG: say ittttt
CG: IF I GIVE INTO YOUR INCREDIBLY IDIOTIC REQUEST WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOR?
TG: probably yes
CG: I LIKE WV. THERE. I SAID IT. SCREENSHOT IT SO YOU CAN GAZE ON THOSE THREE WORDS LATE AT NIGHT ALONE IN YOUR ROOM LIKE THE CREEPY FUCK YOU ARE.
TG: done and done
CG: FUCKING FUCK.
CG: NOW CAN WE GET BACK TO THE REASON I’D EVER BOTHER CONTACTING YOU?

Without warning, WV bursts into green-tinged static. Dave lets go before it can sting him, and the carapacian lands on his feet, scolding Dave with a look as he fixes his askew hood. Bec looks at the two of them, despite the fact that the wolf has no goddamn eyes, judges the disturbance as though wondering why someone else in the room is shooting lightning everywhere - and then curls up in a
ball, muzzle tucked down around its hindfeet.

TG: you may proceed
CG: CAN YOU STOP BY MY HIVE TOO WHILE YOU'RE OUT THERE? I NEED PANTS THAT AREN'T LEGGINGS OR SOMEONE'S BORROWED SWEATS.
CG: I DON'T EVEN WANT TO FUCKING KNOW WHERE THESE THINGS HAVE BEEN.
TG: kay sure
CG: WAIT WHAT.
CG: IT CAN'T BE THAT EASY.
TG: dont you need like shirts or something too
TG: your hoodies getting dank as fuck bruh
CG: WHY ARE YOU BEING AGREEABLE. WHAT IS HAPPENING.
TG: lmao dude you really think id make you run around like a goddamn ragamuffin troll child in stripper tights
TG: that would be a real dick move
TG: also youd probably just try jade next and shed do it regardless
CG: UH. FUCK, THEN. YEAH, THE DOOR'S PROBABLY NOT LOCKED BY NOW SINCE CRABDAD BREAKS IT PERIODICALLY, BUT IF IT'S STILL MIRACULOUSLY INTACT THE WINDOW BY THE BACK DOOR'S BEEN CRACKED FOR MONTHS, JUST PUNCH IT.
TG: ahhaha breaking and entering sweet
CG: I'M REGRETTING THIS ALREADY. THAT HAS TO HAVE BEEN THE FASTEST TURNAROUND EVER. I'VE CHANGED MY MIND I'LL ASK HARLEY TO DO THIS INSTEAD.
TG: too late already out the door
CG: FUCK.

"Dave? Where are you going, dear?" Doctor Lalonde calls after him just as he sails right back out the door, WV scurrying in his wake with disgruntled clicks and angry fist-waving.

Dave tilts his head back to watch Momlonde hurry to the door, her face lined with worry that he feels guilty about for two seconds because they're all paranoid and on edge. Understandably. "Going to Karkat's to pick some sh-stuff up for him so maybe he'll stop moping around all the time," he says, sticking his hands in his pockets. "Brb."

"Should you be going alone?"

He points at WV. She doesn't seem overly impressed by this flawless argument. Rolling his eyes, Dave elbows WV until the Dersite looks up at him with an indignant glare. 'Dude, shape up, she thinks you're a wimp,' Dave signs fast.

WV claps his claws to his head in dismay; then he hastily plants his fists on his hips and puffs his chest out while Dave looks expectant. The effect is instant: Doctor Lalonde sighs and rubs at her temples, looking pained as she waves them on their way. They pass the scientists along the way, a pair of trolls in lab coats that are still unloading delicate equipment from the back of the car Jade zapped them here in.

There are a couple minutes where Dave's not entirely sure where they're going, on account of all these streets full of short box houses look the exact same and in the end he has to be surreptitious as fuck by sneaking onto the map app on his phone and using that to navigate when the street signs are goddamn useless. WV, luckily, could care less about Dave fiddling around with his phone and potentially getting them lost in the depths of suburb hell. The little guy must have been done with being stuck in that house because he's zooming back and forth from one side of the street to the
other, investigating every bush and eventually vandalizing some poor mailbox to steal its red flag thingy. Dave doesn't have the heart to stop him, as long as he remembers to come circling back to Dave once in a while. Get lost here, and they might never see the carapacian again.

They trip over the Egberts' house at last, and from there Dave knows kind of vaguely where he's going. He makes sure to toss the house a special two-finger salute as they give it a wide berth. From the outside, it doesn't look any different from the houses on either side; certainly not like some angst-infested hellhole. Hell, any one of the residents of these Stepford houses could turn out to be just as full of fucked up shit as Dickbert. Dave's never trusting the suburbs again.

This resolution is totally justified when he and WV round the last corner, pass a couple more houses, and come to a stop outside Karkat's hive.

Where, of course, the front door is goddamn MIA. Like. Just completely gone. All of the windows are dark, some of them with cracks spidering along the panes of glass. Between that and the overgrown lawn, this place looks like it's frigging haunted.

 Seriously. Dave is getting some goddamn vibes from this place. Are there things in there. There are things here, aren't there.

Or maybe he's just being paranoid. There's a totally mundane explanation for this.

TG: dude
CG: WHAT.
TG: street number is 21197 right
CG: YEAH.
TG: okay shit i think your house got broken into
CG: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!

"Come here, little dude," Dave mutters, grabbing WV when the carapacian makes a beeline for the open doorway before he can scope out the scene. WV starts signing at him, but Dave's on the alert now, scanning the neighborhood around them to make sure they're not being watched or followed. It's probably just a bunch of the random swear words and other signs that Dave started teaching him the other day, anyway. Uneasy, Dave finishes looking around - it's just a bunch of homes and hives, none of them over two stories, with all the nice lawns and pruned trees and scraggly bushes a suburban neighborhood could ever want for - and edges toward the door in jittery flashes, patting WV when the carapacian starts digging claws into his forearm in a bid for freedom.

At least he finds the door pretty damn quick - it's leaning up against the wall just inside, though it looks like it's been to hell and back. The first floor looks like someone threw the rager of the century and didn't clean up afterwards - messed up furniture, broken plates scattered around the entrance to the kitchen block, shit like that. The television sits crooked on its stand, the volume muted and the screen playing nothing but static, like it's been tuned to a channel that cable doesn't cover. It's kind of hard to tell what part of the squalor is left over from Karkat's regular lifestyle and what might be the result of this apparent break in.

Or, maybe, break out?

TG: i mean like the doors off the hinges and uh
TG: look dont you have a screaming crab lusus that you inherited your lack of volume control from or something
TG: because its not here
TG: your tvs still present and accounted for though so youre good
CG: OH MY GOD.
CG: IS THERE STILL FOOD IN THE FRIDGE?

Still uneasy, Dave sets WV down when the carapacian jabs him in the gut one time too many. While the alien goes off to inspect the television, Dave heads for the kitchen. He accidentally steps on a shard of broken plate, and the sharp **crack** makes him jolt. Aside from him and WV and the faint, ringing buzz of the TV that won't stop humming in his ears, the house is dead silent. This is some horror movie shit and he regrets letting WV out of his sight. Internally smacking himself, Dave goes to the fridge and yanks it open. The handle comes off in his hand and he stares at it for a long second before setting it down on the counter. He'll just say it was like that when he got here. It's foolproof.

TG: there's
TG: uh
TG: no looks like there's just a jar of pickles or something dude do you even eat
CG: NO, NO, I EXPECTED THOSE KIND OF FAMINE CONDITIONS WHEN I LEFT THAT ONE-CRAB BOTTOMLESS PIT ALONE FOR TOO LONG.
TG: yeah but the crab dudes definitely not here this place is empty

Whatever happened here must have happened recently, because Dave finds himself picking his way over upturned pieces of furniture that haven't been looted yet. Or maybe it's just a suburb thing, where everyone in the neighborhood politely ignores the front door hanging wide open like a goddamn invitation to any passing housebreaker, without asking questions. WV won't stop jamming at the buttons on the remote, which he seems to have wriggled under the torn up couch cushions to find. The TV doesn't appear to care. It gives another whine, and Dave grits his teeth before heading upstairs. The faster he gets Karkat's stuff, the sooner they can get out of this blatant ripoff of the first five minutes of a Supernatural episode.

It helps that Karkat's house is relatively small; it also helps that the door to the bedroom has been removed from its hinges as well, so Dave doesn't need to go poking around the rest of the upstairs looking for it.

TG: i think someone might have gone through your room
CG: WHY ARE YOU IN MY ROOM?!
TG: literally how the fuck did you expect me to get you clothes without setting foot in here is the real question
TG: also investigating the scene of a fucking break in thank me later
TG: oh no
TG: oh god
TG: jfc
CG: WHAT'S WRONG NOW.
CG: DAVE ANSWER ME THIS INSTANT.
TG: its everywhere
TG: the batman hentai
TG: oh god the floors are just papered with it
TG: and your computers on and -
CG: YOU ARE THE DUMBEST FUCK I HAVE EVER HAD THE STOMACH-CURDLING DISPLEASURE TO HAVE TO BE FRIENDS WITH. THERE'S NO FUCKING HENTAI IN THERE, YOU'RE CONFUSING MY RESPITE BLOCK WITH YOURS.

As a matter of fact, the computer is on. Sadly, no sign of Karkat's secret stash of weird troll porn, and Dave's too twitchy to sit down and try to pull some hacking shenanigans. There's an empty spot with old green stains where the recooperathing used to sit before it got relocated to the Lalondes', but other than that the room looks like someone dug through it like they did all the downstairs, without finding what they were looking for.
TG: nah i dont know i cant tell if anythings missing or not here
TG: theres just clothes and shitty comic books lying around everywhere
CG: WAIT. THEY'RE NOT IN A PILE?
TG: no
CG: SHIT. I HAD AN ORDER TO THAT PILE. IT TOOK ME YEARS TO PERFECT. IF THAT FUCKING PISSBUCKET TORE THROUGH MY ROOM LOOKING FOR ME AND UPSET THE COMIC BOOK AND ROMANCE STRATA LAYERS I'LL DRAG IT BACK HOME AND KICK IT OUT OF THE HOUSE MYSELF.
TG: your priorities are being taught in psych classes around the nation as an example of what not to do
CG: SHUT UP. THERE'S ONLY THREE RATIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THIS.

Oh, this is gonna be good.

TG: like what
CG: ONE: BURGLARS BROKE IN AND KIDNAPPED THAT FATASS, WHICH IS SO UNLIKELY AS TO BE RENDERED NULL AND VOID. THERE'S NO WAY THEY'D TAKE IT OVER THE TV. CROSS IT OFF THE LIST.
CG: OPTION TWO THE FUCKING IDIOT FINALLY BROKE OUT AND DECIDED TO HAUL CLAW FOR THE COASTLINE, LEAVING ME BLISSFULLY EMANCIPATED FROM ITS DESPICABLE APPETITES.
CG: OR THREE, THE LUSII CONTROL PEOPLE FINALLY SHOWED THEIR UGLY HORNES AND TOOK HIM.
CG: I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS HAPPENING.
TG: yeah i guess thats kind of shitty dude
CG: THIS IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL DAY OF MY LIFE. I HAVE TO WAKE JOHN UP TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS, HOLD ON.
TG: wait hang on i think i missed something
CG: OH MY FUCK I THINK I'M CRYING.
TG: theres too much whiplash here man get a hold of yourself
CG: TEARS OF JOY.
CG: THAT SHITNOODLE'S GONE AT LAST. I CAN'T BELIEVE I MISSED THE CHANCE TO KICK THAT OBNOXIOUS SHRIEKING LUNATIC TO THE FUCKING CURB IN FRONT OF THE NEIGHBORS.
CG: BUT I CAN SURVIVE OFF THE SWEET SWEET VINDICATION OF MENTAL IMAGERY.
CG: HILARY DUFF WAS WRONG, DAVE.
CG: THIS IS WHAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF.
TG: holy shit
CG: YOU CAN'T TAKE THIS MOMENT FROM ME DAVE. I'LL ALWAYS HAVE THIS DAY. ALWAYS. EVEN IN MY DARKEST HOUR. EVEN WHEN YOUR SHITTY PSEUDO-IRONIC ANTICS DRIVE ME TO THE BRINK OF RAGE INDUCED INSANITY. I'LL ALWAYS HAVE THIS THURSDAY TO CARRY ME THROUGH.
CG: THE DAY CRABDAD RODE OFF INTO THE SUNSET AND LEFT ME THE FUCK ALONE FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE.
TG: you may never see the crabdude again and this is your reaction
CG: I'M SO HAPPY.
TG: ...
TG: alright cool whatever milks your goat bro
CG: NEVER SAY THAT PHRASE AGAIN.
TG: milks your goat
CG: YES, THAT ONE.
TG: kay
TG: whatever tickles your pickle
CG: STOP.
TG: creams your cheese
CG: WHERE ARE YOU EVEN COMING UP WITH THIS FUCKERY?!
CG: ...
TG: ...
TG: tingles your jingles
CG: GET OUT OF MY HOUSE.

And with that, Karkat appears to sign off - or at least, his handle in the Pesterchum sidebar powers down. Shrugging, Dave gives the room one last look and then goes to the closet. He kind of despair at the fact that Karkat's wardrobe is about as varied as John's - that is to say, it's fucking well not: hero shirts and oversized hoodies and flannel, as far as the eye can see. Dave finds a stash of slightly more professional shirts hidden at the very back, but if he just brings that back Karkat'll probably be a baby/grub/whatever about it and not wear anything at all. Which, no thanks. In the end he ends up grabbing them and a bunch of hero shirts and pants, wishing he'd thought to bring a backpack or something to dump all this in. Flashstepping back to the Lalonde house with all this is going to make him look like some kind of rogue clothing bandit. Worse, he's going to look like an underwear bandit, because Dave's already gone through the existential crisis of providing his own bird twin with underwear. After solving that kind of ethical dilemma, getting underwear for another dude barely even registers as weird.

He's still gonna throw a pair of boxers at John's face when he gets back, though. That'll wake the kid up, for sure. Heheheh.

Ping.

Dave blinks, one foot out the door of the bedroom. As hilarious as thoughts of messing with the heronerd duo are, they can't quite distract him from the sound of a Pesterchum notification.

Specifically, one that seems to be coming from Karkat's computer.

...Dammit. Dave slings the pile of clothes over the railing at the top of the stairs, fidgeting with it until it stays balanced, and then goes back to the bedroom to look at the screen.

-- terminallyCapricious [TC] is waiting --
TC: honk.
TC: HONK.
TC: honk.
TC: HONK.
TC: honk.

Huh. Spambot or something, Dave guesses. He can't think of any other explanation for the weird honking, or the equally weird lack of a real header. 'Waiting'? Not even 'waiting for angryMcangerbutt,' which would at least explain why Karkat's computer is the target? Lame. Dave snorts and goes to click out of the window. Karkat had better appreciate the weird shit Dave is putting up with for the sake of his hygiene.

TC: DON'T YOU MOTHERFUCKING DARE, MOTHERFUCKER.

Dave yanks his hand away from the mouse, heart thumping out of sync in his chest because holy shit he was not expecting that. The pinging sound of the message alert sounds weirdly distorted, and he watches as more goddamn bizarre shit starts appearing on the screen.
TC: hahahahahahah.
TC: I KNOW YOU'RE THERE STILL.
TC: you're not karkat.
TC: SO WHY ARE YOU MOTHERFUCKIN IN HIS MOTHERFUCKIN ROOM.
TC: is the real question.
TC: HELP ME GET MY SCHOOLFEED ON, MY FRIEND.
TC: let's slaughter this wicked ignorance together, hermano.
TC: IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
TC: :o)

Dave has not gotten as far as he has in life without learning some really basic shit from watching television. And rule number one is: if it sounds like the pestermessage is coming from inside the house,  

run like fuck. But his feet feel like they're rooted in place, a ringing in his ears, and his hands go to the keyboard almost without his conscious approval, cold sweat prickling across his forehead as he starts to type. The fact that the message font comes out in his quirk's red, with his handle initials on the side instead of Karkat's, which would have made sense, does not escape him.

TG: dude
TG: what the shit
TG: there's not even a webcam on the computer or the desk
TG: the fuck is you
TC: ...you.
TG: ???
TC: DO MINE MOTHERFUCKIN EYES DECEIVE ME?
TC: after all this motherfuckin time.
TC: DAVE MOTHERFUCKING STRIDER.
TG: oh my god what the fuck what the fuck
TG: this is a fucking joke right
TG: karkat signed me up to get punkd or something
TG: ahhaha nice one you guys got me
TG: the excuse to get me over here was pretty lame but the execution was awesome
TC: uhhhh, what?
TC: DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ON ABOUT, FRIEND.
TG: nah man you got me
TG: bring in the cameras and the laughtrack
TG: i totally thought this was some b-movie horror schtick
TC: >:o?
TC: NEVER DID UNDERSTAND HALF OF THE RIGHTEOUS NOISE YOU WERE SPITTING.
TC: but that's alright.
TC: YOU ALWAYS KNOW HOW THE WICKED MOTHERFUCKIN SHIT IS TO BE KICKED.
TC: revealing all the unkind heresies and fakey fraidy bullshit as had their downright unfunny claws stuck in my biscuit.
TC: SHOVING ME BACK DOWN THE PATH OF MOTHERFUCKIN PERNICIOUS BEATS.
TC: been too long, brother.
TG: suddenly i understand nothing at all
TC: STINE, BROTHER, JUST MOTHERFUCKIN FINE.
TC: my tavbro don't remember, either.
TC: BUT YOU WILL.
TC: you all will.
TG: why does that sound ominous
TG: jfc you need to turn the menacesinister meter like waayyyyy the fuck down i think there are people in canada who are freaked out by this conversation and they dont even know why
TC: HONK.
TG: yeah like that stop doing that
TC: hahahahahahahahah.
TC: WISH I COULD STOP BY TO GET OUR GREETINGS ON IN PERSON.
TC: but i got a certain other motherfucker i got a need to see first.
TC: IT'S JUST THE FINDING OF HIM THAT'S BEEN A TRIAL MOST TENACIOUS.
TG: how about that
TC: got a lot of void betwist he and me.
TC: o:\
TC: makes the words all a most grievous motherfuckin harsh on my eyes.
TC: BUT IT'S ALL COMING CLEAR NOW.
TG: thats good i guess
TC: then why does it feel like a sign most sickeningly ominous, my brother?
TC: WHY DO I HAVE A MOTHERFUCKIN PREMONITION AS IN MY PAN AS ANY HARSHWHIMSY.
TC: that shit's coming together soon.
TC: REAL FUCKIN SOON.
TC: guess we'll see who makes it happen first.
TC: THE EYES OF THAT BLASPHEMEOUS MOTHERFUCKING SCRATCH
TC: or me
TC: o:\
TG: dude seriously
TG: im getting like
TG: negative twenty five percent of this
TG: its like youre speaking another language only underwater and run through google translate like twenty different ways before turning back into english
TG: wait did you just say scratch
TC: GOTTA RUN, BROTHER.
TC: if you see karkat before me
TC: LET HIM KNOW HE IS MOST SORELY MISSED.
TG: uhhh yeah sure
TG: ill get right on that
TC: motherfuckin knew i could count on you.
TC: AND ONE MORE THING.
TG: (goddammit)
TC: tell your bro to keep his motherfuckin guard up
TG: you know my bro now
TG: okay why not this cant get much weirder
TC: HE'S GOT OUR MUTUAL FRIEND ON LOCKDOWN FOR NOW.
TC: locked down tighter than the cloudmom herself.
TC: BUT HE'LL WAKE UP SOON E MOTHERFUCKIN NOUGH.
TC: and start whisperin all up in the hear ducts of them as has the mind to listen.
TC: ONLY LEADS TO BAD TIMES, MY BROTHER.
TG: can you be a little more specific holy shit
TC: he ain't nice like me, motherfucker.
TC: HE'S GOT SOME NASTY MOTHERFUCKIN THINGS TO SAY IN THAT QUIET LITTLE VOICE OF HIS.
TC: so don't
TC: MOTHERFUCKING
TC: listen.
TC: :o)
TC: let's slam a little sometime soon, aight?
TC: HONK.
TG: uh
TG: aight man
TG: i dont know if youre crazy or what but at the very least youre a goddamn trip
TC: motherfuuuuck, yes.
-- terminallyCapricious [TC] is gone --

Dave finds himself staring at the computer screen, wondering what the fucking hell just happened. "Holy shit," he says, his voice shaking a little, as he pushes up his shades to rub his eyes with his fingers.

When he opens them again, the screen is blank.

No matter where he looks once he boots the computer back up again, he can't find any trace of the pesterlog.

As far as the computer is concerned, the last time it turned on was over a week ago.

---

Ambrose Strider catches up to his runaway shithead kid at last.

What a fucking hassle. Still got a shitten of messages stacked up in his phone, too, because the plan to have Dave deal with Lalonde's fussing backfired spectacularly when the woman realized Bro's phone must be on again. All of them calling and messaging and spamming him with new ways that apparently everything has gone to hell in his absence.

Starting to think he should just let the dumbass get his ass kicked and head back up to Seattle. Dave always responded well to having his ass kicked, by Bro or other parties. Inspired him to do better
next time...or just be more of a sulky shit about it, so, eh.

But circumstances - and his own damn inability to let shit like this go - conspire against him. Had to search through hell and half of Houston to track the kid down, but after yet another shady, seemingly abandoned gas station goes up in smoke Oriole slips up. Getting cocky, confident that he can give anyone chasing him the runaround, probably.

The key is not looking for a bird kid; it's looking for the other slippery little punks that Bro keeps spying out of the corner of his eye, the ones with horn covers and medical eye patches and gloves that lurk around on street corners pretending to be with the rest of the gawping onlookers. Little shits try to be sneaky about it, switching up who comes to observe the aftermath after each act of arson on a Midnight Crew base of ops, but he's got an eye for prosthetics and disguises and this many kids, some of them with makeup caked on so thick their smiles leave craters around their mouths? They're hiding shit. He tracks one pack of them back to one of their hangouts and confirms they're homeless kids, all of them - or least aren't interested in going home to their guardians or lusii. A whole posse of teenagers, all of them concealing parts of themselves deliberately to fly under the radar, paying mighty keen interest in the fires Bro knows Oriole's been setting?

Shoulda known the kid with bird wings would get chummy with other weird kids. Could kick himself for not noticing them before, though - he always thought he had the area around the apartment pretty secure, thanks to the shields Lalonde forced on him after the split in Georgia, but patrolling the rest of the city regularly couldn't keep the Crew from making inroads, or prevent him from overlooking shit like these mutant kids laying low where he didn't bother looking.

To be fair, training Dave to be as much of a badass as possible was the top of his list of priorities for most of the little shit's life, not necessarily keeping the city entirely on lockdown. Not even he could pull that off.

Well. Heh. The kids might be good. But he's better. Got a solid lead now, he's checked back in with Dave (and again, what the fuck has been going on back there, Jesus lord have mercy) and when the gas station goes up in smoke he's already lurking in the shadows when the latest gaggle of kids shuffles by to observe the aftermath. One of ‘em's a repeat offender that's been at nearly every scene, a troll kid with a limp and a horn that looks to have been filed down, and as the group wanders through the streets, chattering in whispers with the occasional bark of laughter, he follows. Lil Cal is a familiar weight with plush arms looped around his neck, ever-grinning from where the puppet's chin sits on his shoulder.

Almost doesn't recognize Oriole when he joins the group, actually, which says shitty things about Bro's observation skills again - or maybe the kid's just that good, when he wants to be. He certainly managed to dodge Bro all the way back to Texas. But his coat shifts the wrong way when he turns, and the fake-ass tinted glasses he's wearing instead of decent shades don't quite conceal his eyes when he scans the rooftop and windows of the tall, isolated apartment buildings that dot this stretch of road.

Haha. Nice try, kid.

“Crow,” one of the girls says, in greeting, and Bro almost snorts and gives away his position. The name's what got him suspicious about these kids in the first place - and what is it with his kids and birds? Is Rose an exception because she's not a dumbass punk or because Lalonde knew something he didn't about raising non-bird obsessed children?

But shit, yeah. A bird-themed name, connected to kids who run around ex-Midnight Crew bases to watch the buildings burn and - on one occasion - the police making arrests when one pack of numbnuts in black suits wasn't quick enough to ditch the hideout. It was enough to go on for him,
anyway. And whaddya know - the dumb kid's running around in a too-big black jacket and going by the tackiest bird name short of Raven.

Kids these days and their angst.

“Still no sign of that Crowbar guy,” another one reports, and hell, he's almost be proud of Oriole for somehow amassing a small gang to gather intel for him if the kid weren't doing it out of some misguided sense of inferiority. Dodging the wary glances the hindmost two punks are throwing over their shoulders proves a little more challenging as they start crossing a bridge on foot over the bayou. But he's quick enough to dodge between the cars veering between lanes as they adjust to a sharp curve in the road before the street light, stopping at intervals to wait until the gang crosses the intersection and he can catch up again. “They caught one girl in a black suit, but no one in green.”

“He's still in town,” Oriole says, his shoulders shifting in a way that shoulders shouldn't as his wings rearrange themselves. “And they know by now they're being targeted deliberately. He wanted a Dave bad enough to jump me the first time? That shithead'll show up eventually. He might be wound up enough that I can just flash feathers at the mall - they grabbed me fast enough last time, that's for sure.”

Can't quite swallow down the growl of exasperation that inspires; he changes it into a cough instead, though on the inside he's fucking pissed. One of his kids using themselves as bait? Where do they even learn this shit?

“The Divested is gonna catch wind of this any day now, and come down on us like a fancy santakind,” a troll with horns like fish hooks mutters. “I don't know what's got into you, but you know she wouldn't want you calling attention to yourself like this, it defeats the whole purpose of -”

Oriole shrugs again, his hands buried in his pockets. The group spread out a little as they cross the parking lot of a lonely restaurant, but they keep moving parallel to the street. Can hear the traffic of the freeway to the south, but for the most part this street is quiet - no street in Houston is ever empty, but there are long stretches between individual vehicles now that the morning work rush has cycled through. “Don't care. She's got a whole network to run. Anyway, you all don't need to watch anymore, it'll just get you noticed. I can handle this myself.”

Ha. Couldn't have asked for a better opening. Bro speeds across the parking lot just as the group starts across the grass to reach the sidewalk again, alongside a squat set of apartments. A snap is all it takes for Lil Cal to unwind himself and twine around Oriole's legs, an old trick that even Dave still falls for after all these years. The kid lets out an undignified squawk as he staggers and just barely doesn't fall, the other kids looking baffled.

“Yeah. 'Handling it,' huh,” he says, slowing to a stop. One of the trolls flinches so hard at Bro's sudden appearance that he stumbles into a dip in the grass and keels over. “Wrong.”

Oriole snarls at Bro, his hood falling back as he grunts and digs into Lil Cal's soft arms with claws that are still sharp through gloves. He's tamed his feathers and hair so they don't stick out, but with the hood down he's just as much a neon orange signpost as ever. “I thought I told you guys to leave me alone,” he says, kicking to try to free himself. “What the hell are you doing here?!”

“Hunting down my wayward kid. You really think we'd let you go off like a complete dipshit and get your fool self killed?” A couple of the kids are pulling specibi now. Easy enough to ignore them, though he does have to shunt one out of the way when they throw themselves at him with a frying pankind in hand. Maybe what weapons training they've managed on their own is good enough for a tussle on the streets, but like Oriole when he first walked into casa Strider, they don't know how to fight on the level of someone who strifes for a living, let alone Bro. “Kid, I've been running all over
hell's half acre looking for you. Guess what. I no longer have a shitbrick to give about whatever stunt
you think you can pull here with the Crew. You're coming with me."

The look the kid gives him is pure venom. “You already have a kid,” Oriole says. He rips Lil Cal's
arms off and tosses the puppet aside. It vanishes and returns to Bro's shoulder. “Trust me. Having an
extra copy around won't get you brownie points.”

“Nice try.” Bro folds his arms, meeting the open antagonism on the kid's face with a stone wall.
Can't remember Dave ever showing that much emotion unless he was absolutely shitting himself
with panic. A girl tries to stab him with a pokerkind and Bro blinks out of her path, redirecting her so
she trips over the fallen troll and he doesn't have to look away from Oriole. “S'not how it works
though. You wanna go live your own life, fine by me. But you start flinging yourself at cult crime
groups as bait and setting fires like a pyro? That's not living, that's trying to get yourself killed.”

Oriole's cheeks burn orange. He's back on his feet, eyeing Lil Cal warily - pretty rookie mistake, but
Bro didn't have long to work on the kid's reflexes before they had to leave for Seattle. “It's none of
your business,” he says, his jacket straining at the seams like he's ready to flip the fuck off the handle
and fly out of here in broad daylight. No filter at all, honestly. “I know what I'm doing.”

Where do kids come up with shit like this? It's like Rose running off half-cocked with her head still a
mess to shack up with her girlfriend while Rue goes on and on about her being 'mature' enough to
not need adult supervision anymore. Bull fucking shit. Must be something in the Strilonde genes that
convinces them they're invincible. “Yeah, well, you're still accomplishing jack shit, little man. And
while I'm down here chasing you down, the other problem children are busy getting mindfucked
back up in Seattle, and Egbert's gone traitor.”

While the other kids trade blank looks, that gets Oriole's attention. His head snaps up, the sullen
orange flush draining out of his face. “What? What the hell happened?”

"Crow," one of the kids whispers, reaching out and yanking on his jacket. They've all stopped
staring at Bro like he's the Antichrist, but that's not saying much.

Lil Cal's grip on Bro's throat tightens, a brush of fabric on skin, but he doesn't need the warning.
"The Crew likes brainwashing people," he says, clipped as he casts his senses out to count how
many are coming up on them. Feels like five, which is odd, since Crew tend to run in packs of four.
"They got Egbert early and his kid's been fucked up ever since. Tried to make a break for it when
Lalonde started spot checking the lab for plants." Or at least, that's the impression he got from
catching up on the emails and text messages. Shit's confusing. Mainly, what he took away from it
was now he needs to keep an eye on both the Egbert kid and his and Rue's latest set of clone
children.

Just gotta deal with this kid and the shit he's stirred up, first.

"Huh!" a voice says from Bro's six o'clock, where they probably think they've come up in his blind
spot. Lil Cal darts away in silence. "That was Matchsticks and Die's group proyecto, wasn't it?"

The first voice yelps, accompanied by the dull thud of someone being smacked upside the back of
the head. "Quatorze, will you just keep yer damn fool mouth shut for five seconds?"

"You punks might wanna run, now," Bro says, adjusting the brim of his hat and his gloves before he
turns around. Be lying if he said he hadn't been expecting a fight before the end of this. Most of the
kids are already running, some of them crossing the street without checking both ways and skidding
out of sight down the embankment of the bayou. Oriole stays where he is, his eyes wide and his
breathing harsh as he watches the five people in green and black come to a stop a safe distance away.
At least, they must think it's a safe distance. Tch.

It's the two in green that tick a checkbox in Bro's brain. Could basically discount the other three - they're in Crew uniform, but they're nothing but cannon fodder and muscle, the kind of small fry Oriole's been smoking out of their holes these past few days. One Felt member is a man with an angular jaw and an equally angled maroon hat, while the other is a woman in two different shades of green, rubbing the back of her head with a pout. "Ah, busted." She lowers her hand and tosses a coin between it and the other as she meets Oriole's stare with a smile. "How exciting, though! I have never had a friend who was a bird before!"

Yeah, that specibus is barely concealed. At all. Bro sends Lil Cal to snatch it, the puppet a blur as it pauses by the woman's hand and then vanishes again with coin in plush hand. She takes a moment to notice, looking down at the sidewalk with a frown as though puzzled as to where she might have dropped it - only to look up and yell, "Hey!" when she sees the glint of metal in Lil Cal's glove. "Give that back!"

"Damn. This is why you don't get solo jobs, from now on," the other Felt member says, hauling Quatorze back by her shoulder when she tries to stomp toward Bro. "You're never foolin' me into thinking you've mastered impulse control again."

"Come on, he took one of my coins!" she complains, and pulls another coin out of her pocket with a scowl. "Droog wouldn't put up with that kind of mierda."

"The fact that you think Droog is some kinda god damn role model is just another reason why you don't get solo rounds on the roster no more."

"Crowbar," Oriole says, and his rage is bare in his voice, all the kinds of raw and exposed that Bro trained Dave never to show because it's a vulnerability. Tells Bro everything he needs to know, honestly - that Oriole's got a bone to pick with the Felt and the Crew, and he'll burn through the anger because he's absolutely stupid with it.

"Oh look, the wrong Dave Strider," Crowbar says, disgruntled. "Damn, kid, you couldn't just abscond and piss off? Hey, hey, I get it, you're not the time kid. My bad. Now stop toasting all the primo locations in town."

"No." Oriole takes a step forward. Bro debates whether to just let the kid get his ass handed to him, but it's not really a question. The mere mention of Droog alone's enough to set Bro on edge, whether she's here in person or not, and he doesn't like that. Droog's never going to stop being a sore spot after what went down in Georgia. After what happened to Dave on his watch.

Step one, get the kid out of here. Can clear the trash out of Houston some other day, because right now whatever the fuck is going on in Seattle right now needs undivided attention. "We're out of here, little man," he says, sending Lil Cal to snag the new coin out of the Felt woman's hands - and to pick a few more out of her pocket, for good measure. "Save the grudge match for when you don't suck at fighting."

Oriole glares at him, taking off his shitty glasses and reaching up to defiantly start unzipping his jacket, like he's already forgotten that he got his wing fucked once already with these people. Before he can do it, though, Quatorze lets out an outraged shriek, digging her hands into the pockets of her lime green suit and coming up empty. "Why would you do that?!" the Felt member demands. "Crowbar, let me -"

Crowbar jabs a finger at her. "No."
"Why not!!"

"Because if you wanted to still be able to make the call in field ops, yah shouldn't have gotten the head of accounting nearly arrested in Florida."

Lil Cal returns, laden with the sweet loot, to rest a chin on top of Bro's head. The three Crew members look back and forth between their two green-suited Felt leaders with rolling eyes, one troll in a black suit passing a fistful of cash to another as though they're taking not-so-subtle bets on what'll happen next.

Whatever. A free distraction is a free distraction. They're out of here, whether Oriole like it or not. Bro might be able to take all five of these guys at once, but he's not in the mood to do it with the hapless kid trying to throw himself into the middle of the strife. Instead, before the little shit can shrug off his jacket and bat his bright orange 'shoot me now' targets all over the place, Lil Cal wraps around Oriole in a twined-arm bear hug, bright blue eyes gleaming as Bro seizes the kid around the waist and blinks out of sight, hauling ass toward the apartment building off to the left. Cut through there, head for the freeway -

He dodges the first hail of bullets, but only just. Oriole rips a feather-laced arm and a wing free and that is not the kind of shit he needs to be juggling when he hears the clink and rattle of a machine gun firing up behind them. Cursing, Bro throws the kid to the ground and follows, moving as fast as he can maneuver in a crouch as he drags Oriole toward a row of bushes. The gunfire cuts off briefly, and a brief recon shows the two Felt arguing again - and Quatorze has a handheld machine gun in her grip, yanking the specibus away from Crowbars' grasping hands with a barking laugh. Before she can open fire again Bro throws Oriole over the shortass fence and hops it himself, shoving the kid into the open entrance to the nearest hallway that runs along the length of the apartment complex's ground floor. The fence is made up of black bars with gaps a goddamn mile wide, so it's not going to be cover enough. The kid's wing is flagging as Oriole whirls, looking dazed at the sudden change in scenery, but Bro doesn't have time to wait for him to get his head on straight. Pulls a hard right instead and drags the kid behind him, so at least they have a solid wall and a row of apartments between them and the next round of gunfire that splits the air open, louder than a car backfiring. Clearly, he didn't have Lil Cal pick enough pockets.

And that's -

That's odd, that's very odd. Huh. Where are they going?

No, really. Where did they go? Why can I not - that's almost like they've just left the n-

...What street were they just on?

Oh no. Oh no. You people are not-

"- supposed to be here!!" a girl screams, just as Bro rams the nearest door open with his shoulder and heaves Oriole inside, slamming the battered door shut behind them. He doesn't spare more than a glance for the troll standing half out of her seat at a patio table that seems to be doing double duty as a kitchen table, her headphones sliding down from behind her horns as she gapes at the intruders in horror. Yeah, yeah, tough shit; Bro's taken shortcuts through plenty of other random apartments in his time, and no one's gotten too ornery about it. Or at least no one's managed to do anything about it.

"But you don't understand!!" the troll keeps yelling. She stumbles and nearly falls when her headphones, plugged into her laptop, yank her to a stop. Almost whimpering in frustration, she yanks the headphones off and slams the laptop lid shut. "You all can't be here! I can't see what happens
here! She could be about to start shooting again!"

Outside the door, something clinks and rattles. "Get down!" Bro barks, voice hoarse with the effort of making it a shout, as he shoves Oriole's head down and drags them behind the kitchen island. The troll's hair is still flying when the first bullets punch through the wall at around stomach height and start flying through the air in a strafing pattern, mowing down the glass patio door on the wall opposite in a burst of glass shattering outward. But the girl does get down in time, hitting the concrete floor and covering her horns with her arms, screaming at the top of her lungs. Hell, she keeps screaming even after the minigun stops firing again.

"Dude, get off of me!" Oriole says, elbowing Bro in the gut like that'll actually do anything. Kid has sharper elbows than Dave, which is saying something, but ha. Nice try.

"Learning a valuable life lesson about not fighting criminals with heavy artillery right now, you little shit?"

"Yes, oh my god, I'm sorry!"

"MP?" the troll calls, uncurling a little from her crouch by the table and crawling toward the couch. "MP, are you okay?"

Shit. Didn't even realize there was someone else in the damn room. Bro looks around, braced for the fucking worst, because he does make an effort not to get civilians killed, Jesus -

Only to see a pale carapacian in colorful wrappings, standing stock still in the center of the barren living room, between the couch and the patio doors. The alien's claws are folded tightly in front of her, coal black eyes wide as she trembles.

But what's stomach height on Bro, the level the minigun was strafing at, is actually above the carapacian's head. Thank Christ for the minor miracles, like aliens short enough that they dodge machine gun fire just by existing.

Before the carapacian can sign a word, though, the bullet-hole riddled door of the apartment jolts. To hell with this, then; Bro draws a sword and sends Lil Cal snaking toward the doorway, giving Oriole enough room to scramble away and press his back against the side of the kitchen counter. With a mighty shove, Crowbar levers it open, slapping a crowbarkind against his palm as he strides into the room. "And yer not getting any of them back until circumstances present themselves which, if I'm not mistaken, will never present themselves in any way, ever," he snaps over his shoulder at Quatorze's hanging head. When Lil Cal wraps around the man's feet to bind him, Crowbar wobbles in place and looks irritated when he spies Bro with sword in hand. "This is not how I wanted this week to go, yah kn-" His jaw snaps shut.

Thinks it's a trick, at first, on account of 'look over your opponent's shoulder and pretend there's something behind them' is the most overplayed tactic in the book. There's no one else in this dinky little apartment but Bro and Oriole in the room anywhere close to being a potential threat; the carapacian and the troll are just random bystanders whose apartment unfortunately ended up the site of a shootout. Sucks for them, but why would they matter to the Felt?

Makes him feel like a real shithead for thinking that when Crowbar starts smiling like a sharp hook, chuckling and punching Quatorze in the arm until the sulking woman looks up. "Well, well, well. Ain't that something. Looks like with Droog off the radar, we beat her to her target. Ms Paint, huh?"

“Crap. Crap," the troll says, looking nauseous as she gets to her feet, shaking harder than the carapacian. Her burgundy eyes flick back and forth between the Felt and Crew members crowding
in the doorway and Bro and Oriole in the kitchen, looking like she's gonna upchuck all over the floor. “Oh god - you're not supposed to be here.”

Then she lunges forward. It carries her closer to the Felt and Crowbar reacts accordingly, swinging the crowbar at her (slow, slower than Droog, and isn't that the only standard that matters), but the girl flings herself on top of her laptop instead, of all things, yanking the power cord out of the wall socket and tripping over herself to back away again.

So the crowbar doesn't hit her. It hits her laptop across the lid, scoring the metal and

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hrows the pale carapacian bodily out the patio doors. The glass has been shot out, thank fuck, and the carapacian - MP? - takes the throw like a champ, rolling back up onto her feet as the troll girl shouts, “Run! Get to the car!” She runs out through the empty door frame after the carapacian with keys and laptop in hand. Her shoes skid in the dirt but MP grabs her wrist and the strange duo exit stage left, rounding the corner and disappearing down another hall of the apartment complex.

"Get after them, go!" Crowbar snaps at the Crew members, blood dripping down over his eye as he gnashes his teeth at Bro. Coolly, Bro calls Lil Cal away from where the puppet's wrapped around Quatorze's face to keep her blind and clawing at the puppet with muffled Spanish swears. There's a moment where the puppet doesn't move, but not long enough to concern him; Cal smacks into the side of Crowbar's face with all limbs flailing, and Bro takes the opportunity to break their deadlock. Whatever weird shit mojo is in the crowbar stops messing with his sword once he disengages from it (probably fucking magnets), and after that it only takes a second to slam the hilt into the man's temple like a hammer. The Felt man drops like a stone, Lil Cal still stuck to his face with a wild grin.

Those two had the right idea, though. Something happened just there, something that's left Bro with the kind of raging headache he hasn't had since he stopped DJing regularly. Got a nagging feeling, a shard in his gut that makes him think things like *don't remember sending Lil Cal at Quatorze and that girl wasn't wearing shoes before* - none of which make sense, because those things did happen. Whatever just happened, it's too much; Bro tables it in his mind to analyze later, when he doesn't have every Felt and Crew member in the city trying to hunt down his kid for being a shithead arsonist.

To hell with it. Reaches out, grabs the kid by the scruff of his shirt, and goes as fast as he can. He
doesn't stop blurring in and out of sight until they're halfway across the park - the opposite direction of the freeway, but that'd be too obvious an escape route anyway.

They're getting the hell out of Dodge before something else goes wrong. If it takes them a little longer than it would if they'd stuck to the freeway, fine by him. Fine and goddamn dandy.

Oriole's got some explaining to do, anyway.

TT: okay.
TT: runaway asshole child present and accounted for and grouching at me like a toddler.
TT: comin' home now.
TT: please tell me no other shit has gone horribly wrong in the past five hours, Lalonde, because if it has that's a new damn record and also no. hell no.
TG: Remarkably enough, nothing else has gone horribly wrong in the past five hours, Ambrose.
TT: bull. shit.
TG: Hard to believe, I know. You may wish to hasten your trip back, regardless.
TT: shit, why?
TG: Well, the reason that stands out most prominently in my mind is that you really do need to be checked for any signs of a mindgrub making a home in your cerebral cortex.
TG: But also because I am receiving some troubling readings from within my and Rose's old home here in Maple Valley, and I suspect that when I take them by the Egbert's house, the results will be all the more worrisome, because they were closer to the edge of the shield radius.
TT: what the hell?
TG: It would appear that, at some point in the past month, someone stole the void ward generator I left here to safeguard John and Samuel against wandering eyes.
TG: I would avoid visiting your apartment, Ambrose. If one generator is missing, yours could also have been stolen in your prolonged absence.
TT: shit. how do you know it's only been the past month?
TG: The void this generator harnessed hasn't entirely dissipated from the neighborhood. It may have been a month, it may only have been a week or so; I cannot estimate without more data. But it's thinning fast, and the machine is nowhere to be found. It may well have been gone even before the children came to stay here.
TG: I fear that if Samuel is responsible, he may have passed it on into the hands of someone in the Midnight Crew who could learn to reverse-engineer it - or even to counteract the effects of existing void shields.
TT: pretty fuckin' sure this qualifies as 'going horribly fuckin' wrong,' Lalonde.
TG: After this past Monday, I'm afraid that this barely registers as more than a moderately dismaying turn of events. Remind me again why I gave up appletinis, my dear Ambrose?
TT: shit's hell for your liver.
TG: Mmm.
TT: but whatever. anyone who tried to rob casa strider would be in for a damn unpleasant surprise.
TT: brb.
TG: Oh. And before you go haring off again, there is just one more thing.
TT: what?
TG: I have given Roxy your handle. She is very excited to test out her new Pesterchum account on her secure new phone.
TG: She has taken to calling me Mom, in defiance of the exact genetic sequence we share, and was most enthusiastic to hear more about you.
TT: what the fuck have you done
TG: The next time you choose to ignore my messages during a time of crisis -
TG: Reconsider.
-- tartGuardian [TG] blocked temperedTitan [TT] from the chat! --

-- tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering temperedTitan [TT] at 12:30:18 --
TG: gomg!!!
TG: *omg
TG: hello mister strideer!
TT: well played, Lalonde. well played.

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Thursday and Friday

Lurid and sluggish are good words for that week.

Lurid because everything in the first day after the surgery is garishly bright and loud. The drug cocktail Marion and his team put together out of Jade's new stock of medical supplies has to be strong enough to knock him for a loop, or it doesn't work at all. The place where they had to go in through his skull to reach the grub heals over way faster than it does for the Scratch children, so he's soon weaned off the worst of the pain meds and his head stops clouding up in a way that makes him paranoid the Trickster will take advantage of the fuzziness to rear its ugly head.

It lurks in the back of his mind like a bad dream, so faint and flickering he's not sure if he's actually sensing something else in his head or if it's just his imagination.

(Is there a difference between the two, anymore?)

Sluggish because, no matter how hard he tries, he can't seem to muster up much energy. What just ends up happening is he slows down. A lot.

Because the oil slick in his head isn't something that'll go away. It crept in at some point without him noticing, and now John's stuck at this base level of dull, quiet sadness. No matter how he smiles at anyone who comes to check in on him, it feels like an incredible effort. The first couple of days, he sits still for hours, and doesn't fidget once. Just sitting up and talking to his friends sucks the energy right out of him, and then he'll have to curl up and go back to sleep. They seem to assume it's because he's in that post-op recovery period. All through Tuesday and Wednesday he keeps drifting in and out of drug-laced, unremembered dreams to find different people with him: Kanaya holding up measuring tapes to his arms while he sits up for her in bemused incomprehension, Dave keeping silent vigil, Jade sitting on the next bed over and filling the air with words even when all he can do is nod back, Rose reading to him out of one of her borrowed magic books, Karkat holding his hand and looking like the world already ended and they've come out the other side of it burned out and hollow.

John knows the feeling.

He considers asking Rose to burn it out of his head or something - but then he thinks asking her to take a second trip into his messed up brain twice in one week might be too much. The Breeze huffs at him when he thinks thoughts like that, but it can't make him stop thinking them altogether. He's alright at dealing with this, at least; he's been dealing with it, in not-so-good ways, for basically as long as he can remember. Not perfect, but good enough that he thinks no one has noticed yet that he could technically just float out the window, bed rest be darned. That the only reason he'd still be putting up with Marion's thing about 'rest and recuperation' is because he's too sad in his head to argue properly.
He's just so tired.

- 

He's drifting in and out by the time Dave and Jade return from their trip with Doctor Lalonde back to Maple Valley. But the news they bring rouses him, if only because apparently Karkat has some kind of clown person stalking him now? Not even John could sleep through something like that, holy crap!

"I first ran into him when I was still on my way to find you, John," Jade says. She snaps a pink rubber band off her finger, stuffing it into a pocket, and points at Karkat, her eyes afire with curiosity. "And then I ran into him again on Monday, all the way up here in Seattle, and he was asking about you, mister! I kept meaning to ask whether you knew him or not, but you've been so worried about John and all..."

Dave's story is shorter, but no less strange, since it just now went down while he was picking up clothes at Karkat's house. Which makes the whole thing a little more ominous, to be honest. "Dude, I don't even know what was up with your piece of shit computer, but I fucking blinked and the whole thing was gone," he says. "I mean, me and WV tried to put the door back up and lock down your place before we left, but this guy apparently thinks walls are more like...suggestions?" He looks at Jade for backup, and she nods hard enough that her hair bounces. "But yeah. Whoever this guy is, he's definitely still looking for you. Seriously, man, I thought John was like. Literally your only friend. Why does this guy 'miss you' and shit?"

"How the fuck should I know?!" Karkat just keeps shaking his head, frustrated. John reaches out to pat him, because the frown on Karkat's face is more fear and confusion than anger and so needs to be shooshed away, but the swing of his hand falls way short. Stupid, stupid, he can't reach from here, not when Karkat's standing in the middle of the room. "Neither of you could get a fucking name?" Karkat can't pull off 'irritated' all that well when Kanaya's holding different swatches of cloth up in front of him and looking to Dave on occasion for a second opinion, but he makes an attempt. "I mean, if there's some random shithead clown stalking me now - on top of all the other fucking behemoth leavings the universe is bestowing upon me like a demented lusus! - you don't think you could have made the extra effort to find out his n-"

Before he can finish, Karkat's face starts doing that thing. The thing it does when he looks at Kanaya, sometimes, all contorted like he's swallowed something strange and can't figure out what the flavor is.

Or maybe just like he's constipated.

"What is it?" John asks, though there's an inkling of familiarity bothering him, too. Something about a clown...something else, about Mexico...If Karkat's getting his whole déjà vu on, though, John doesn't want to interrupt him with something that might just be John's dumb, sleep-slow brain making stuff up. He's kind of in that stage where everything that happened more than five minutes ago feels like a weird dream. The start of this conversation feels distant, and the memory of stopping Jake in his tracks this morning had to be confirmed by Rose and Karkat before John decided he probably hadn't been dreaming that either.

"Oh my fuck I still can't remember," Karkat says in a rush, kneading his eyebrows with his claws as he glares at a wall. "GM, though. Slick said some bullshit about a clown or a juggalo or something being a player he remembered, but all the names he came up with before he fucking vanished were useless."

...Huh. John doesn't know what it is about that mini rant that makes the jumbled pieces click into
place. He sits up, anyway, sharply enough that he catches more than a few gazes whirling to fix on him in concern. He tries to snap his fingers as the name finally hits him, but they won't make the snapping sound, so he gives up. "Juggaloco!"

"Who what now?" Dave asks, voice flat, but there's some recognition on almost everyone else's face. Karkat's and Rose's are the most foreboding - Karkat because he knows just as much random hero trivia as John, and Rose...probably because Rose likes psychology, and if there was ever an anti-hero poster child for being messed up in the head, Juggaloco is it.

"That troll guy who broke out of a hospital in Europe and went on a rampage," John says. He's relieved when Karkat starts nodding along, because it means he's not just making this up off the top of his head. "Or something. It was a while back, though, and I think most people thought it was a onetime thing, or he got caught, until there started being rumors that he showed up in Central America."

"Most of the records were destroyed or incomprehensible, but it has been confirmed that whoever he may be, he has a diagnosis of clinical coldblood dementia. Judging from your story, Jade, he's still demonstrating signs of homicidal anger," Rose adds, using her psychology lecture voice. "I don't believe anyone has yet established whether he actually possesses powers or other abilities, or if he's just far enough gone that he reverted to a feral predator state."

Jade sniffs. She has the bottom half of the new outfit/costume thing Kanaya's been making for her on, and while John's still in that stage where everything's difficult to process, he's pretty sure that the short black shorts and lime green boots are real. Even though he's got this voice in the back of his head telling him that costumes like that are only practical for fighting crime in fiction, not in real life. "Ohhh, I think he's got powers, alrighty! He keeps sneaking up on me, and I have no idea how he does that! It freaks Bec out - and it takes a heck of a lot to scare Bec!"

John wishes he remembers what role the trolls' game session played when it got mixed up in their own. Karkat keeps getting frustrated and pulling at his hair, straining to remember more than he does, but no matter what Jade and Dave bring up about the details of the encounter with Juggaloco, no one can figure out who he might have been, or why he'd be so fixated as to travel all the way here to find Karkat. Other than, you know, the same kind of game-driven instinct that kept pushing the four humans to find each other. There's something really, really weird and ominous about this guy's way of following through on that instinct, though - no one can deny it.

But John only recalls his own session. When he asks the Breeze where the trolls might have come in, why they scratched their sessions together to form this one, the wind wraps around him in slow, uneasy loops, and doesn't reply. It's not unlocked yet, the Breeze whispers, lifting a length of fabric from one of Kanaya's temporary piles and tying it into knots. games are funny with rules like that. you aaaaalways have to follow the rules of paradox space! it keeps things in order, you know? maybe that sleepy head will talk to you about it later, when you both finish waking up.

The conversation has gone on without John as he drifts, and when he tries to find his place again he can already tell that he's about to fall asleep again. There's a faint rustle and a weight plops down near his feet, and he sees that WV has decided to crawl up onto the bed. The carapacian doesn't seem too badly off, considering he got ditched for a few days there; John smiles at the alien as he putters around with a ruler and a little mailbox flag thing. It kind of sucks that WV can't talk anymore - the outspoken little dude that kept trying to boss John around and guide him through his land (despite the fact that neither of them actually had any clue what they were doing) seems frustrated by his own enforced silence, and John can't blame him.

It's the weirdest thing, though. Before his eyelids sink down under their own weight, John could
have sworn WV signs something at him that almost makes words in his head.

WV:sílimgobhfuilrudéiginmícheartanbhfuiltúagéisteachtuachailtháinigmégoléirarbhealachseoagustúnachbhfósthuiscintdom!

WV: !

- 

Friday, he starts to wake up.

It starts early in the morning, when John wakes up to Karkat yelping and the distinct, ringing thunk of something being lobbed at the wall in a panic. Jade and Roxy have been working hard on something with the White Queen helping them at all hours of the day, Kanaya and Rose stay in their own room overnight, and Dave left even earlier this morning to strive with Dirk again (it seems to be their primary mode of interaction now that they're not pretending the other doesn't exist like a pair of numbuts). So John's the only one there to react, jolting up in bed in a blind panic to see Karkat frozen midthrow, staring back and forth between John and the phone lying on the floor in the far corner with eyes like saucers. "...Fuck. Sorry," Karkat says. He crawls out of the recooperacoon and tiptoes over to pick up the phone, dripping green sopor along the towels spread all over the floor.

"What the heck happened?" John asks when his heart stops being like it's going to punch out of his chest, reaching out until he hooks Karkat's sleeve and can tug the troll over to the nearest chair. He focuses on Karkat because honestly, Karkat needs focusing on. The troll went days without sopor by the time John noticed and called him out on it. They had to cajole some of the interns into hauling a spare recooperacoon out from the scientists' living quarters, and then John hauled his dumb butt out of bed long enough to manhandle Karkat into it. Of course, that made Karkat fuss more, but hey, at least now he gets in the sopor slime and sleeps fitfully, in hour-long snatches of time.

Because Karkat's dreaming again. This time, the dreams are apparently strange variations on him and Kanaya and some other troll guy wandering around a dead city and getting eaten by acid monsters, rather than visions of different ways John and the others could have died in their own messed up game session.

At least he's not driving himself into a breakdown trying to avoid them. The last thing any of them need right now is for someone else to succumb to one of their many, many issues.

Karkat gives him the shiftiest look John has ever seen. It is incredibly suspicious. "Whaaat?" John asks again, summoning his best stern frown. But the template for that frown has been tainted, lately, so he only holds it a fraction of a second before his stomach gives a sickening squeeze and he has to stop thinking about it. "Karkat..."

"I didn't think it would actually work!" Karkat spits out at last, looking at his phone with a combination of disgust and horror. "I mean - fuck, I don't know what I thought would happen. Just more proof that my thinkpan's a piece of shit, what do you know."

"But what did you dooo?" John asks, leaning over until he can look at the screen with Karkat. He has to twist his torso uncomfortably to pull it off, and for a moment, the inertia fights with the urge to move his legs to fix it.

But he's kiinda sick of lying around miserable all the time. He swivels his legs out from under the sheets and sits up properly, leaning his elbows heavy on his knees for extra support as he does. "I remembered a chumhandle, from one of those new dreams," Karkat's saying, reluctant. "And when I went and finally messaged it, I thought it would just, I don't know, connect with some random account or a spambot or something. But -" Karkat breaks off, eyes widening as his phone pings at
him, and his voice starts to rise in pitch. "Oh god, she's still messaging me. Holy fuck. Fuck. This cannot be happening."

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering cuttlefishCuller [CC] at 07:04:33 --
CG: OH GOD.
CG: I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M ACTUALLY DOING THIS.
CG: ALRIGHT, FUCK IT, HERE GOES.
CG: IS THIS FEFERI PEIXES?

"Isn't Feferi Peixes that really famous troll girl?" John asks, scratching the side of his face, and then scrubbing at his eyes. They're all gunked up with sleep crust, still, so that every time he blinks the screen looks kind of blurry and all he wants to do is keep them shut again. Gross. "Uhh...yeah, the one related to the Batterwitch?"

"John, you are the only person on the planet who thinks that just because her Condescension owns Betty Crocker, it somehow literally makes her the incarnation of cake-based armageddon." Karkat shakes his head, but the look he gives John is ten different kinds of sappy fondness. "But yeah. One of the first tyrians in the past couple of centuries to survive, and she's got enough slurry in common with the Condesce that she's a legitimate descendant and heiress."

John's brain is still running in slow-motion. "...And you're pestering her at a chumhandle that came to you in a dream?"

"Don't fucking remind me." Karkat says, gloomily tabbing over to a notes application to show John a copy of a list of initials John has seen him scribbling on in a real notebook over the past week. "The initials FP were on that list of fucking useless hints I got from Slick, but I didn't think they stood for her of all trolls until idiot dream me started messaging someone on a memo with this handle and the first name Feferi. This is unbelievable. This shouldn't have worked. On what planet does a scenario as ineffably stupid as this one actually play out!!"

CC: W)(y yes, yes it is!
CC: )(a)(a)(a, but )(ow did you get t)(is )(andle, frond?
CC: T)(is is supopposed to be a private account!
CC: S)(ello? Are you still t)(ere?

John nudges Karkat in the side when he finishes picking his way through that quirk. "Aren't you going to answer her?"

"No? Yes?! I don't fucking know, I didn't think it would actually get this far!" Karkat says, raising his hand like he's going to toss the phone out the window. Which, considering this is Karkat he's talking about, isn't all that much of a stretch of the imagination. Before he can follow through, John reaches out and the Breeze reaches with him. The wind's whistling like panpipes with curiosity as it brings the phone back to John's hands, and he starts typing while Karkat looks on in trepidation.

CG: I SAW IT IN A DREAM! CRAZY, RIGHT?
CC: W)(OA! T)(AT'S INCR-EDIBL-E!
CC: ...Is w)(at I would say, if it were true!
CC: -Eridan, is t)(at you again? 38T
CG: NO, REALLY! HONEST! SOMETIMES I HAVE WEIRD DREAMS WHERE I ACT LIKE A DOOFUS AND THIS TIME THEY GAVE ME YOUR CHUMHANDLE! I THINK WE WERE FRIENDS IN ANOTHER LIFE! :)

Karkat screams at the top of his lungs, transitioned from apprehensive to horrified in less than two seconds, which is probably a new record. "JOHN, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!!"
"Hehehe!" John dodges Karkat's grabby hands, scooting back onto the bed until his back's up against the wall next to the windows. "Telling her the truth. If she was one of the players in your guys' game session, it's worth a shot, right?"

"NO. NOOOOO!"

CC: Anot)(er life, )(u)(?
CC: )(mmm...
CC: W)(ale, answer me t)(is, mister S)(outs-s)(allot - if you knew me in anot)(er life...
CC: W)(AT WAS MY TITL-E?! 38O

Oh crap. John looks at Karkat, who's still frantic to get his phone back and crawling onto the bed in his sopor-slime clothes to do it. Eurgh...John really didn't think this one through. "Help, what's her title?"

Karkat glowers at him, swiping at the phone again. "Heiress? Something Italian? How the fuck would I know, she hasn't announced one yet! Will you - give me -"

John removes the phone from harm's way, rolling so that Karkat ends up grabbing nothing at all. It kind of makes his head throb, but only a little. "No, like, you know. A title title! The game one!"

Karkat stops, disconcerted and chewing on his lip, his mouth moving without sound a few times as he appears to mull something over in his head. He mouths the same three words a couple of times before he says them aloud, "Witch of...Life?" It's more a slow, rising tide of recognition than uncertainty in his voice.

"What, witch like Jade?"

"Maybe?! How the fuck should I know!"

CG: LET ME GUESS...
CG: THE WITCH OF LIFE!
CC: O)! You do know!
CC: W)(at's your name! I'm starting to raymember t)(ings wit)( Glubby's )elope, but I don't recognize t)(at )andle...
CC: It's on t)(e tips of my gills!
CG: IT'S ME! KARKAT! :D

"Okay, fuck, give me that, you're mangling my quirk, dumbass," Karkat insists. This time when he reaches out, John passes the phone back, still snickering. Probably in an act of revenge, Karkat chooses that moment to flop down right next to him and pat a claw to John's face - smearing him with sopor slime. Oh, jeez...this stuff never washes off... "Fuck. Holy taintchafing fuck, I can't believe we're messaging a Peixes."

"She doesn't seem that bad," John says, resigning himself to having gross sopor-hair when Karkat presses their heads together. "Kind of enthusiastic, but hey! It looks like she remembers your game a little! And she likes puns!"

Karkat throws him another glare, and starts wiping sopor from his sleeve off on John's shirt. Oh boy.

CC: Karkat...Karkat...
CC: Karcrab?
CG: WHAT IS IT WITH YOU PEOPLE AND TURNING MY NAME INTO A PUN?
CC: KARKAT! I do remember you! T)(IS IS SO -EXCITING!
CC: Maybe you can help me with my mission! Are any of t(e ot)(ers with you?

CG: WHAT, LIKE, OTHER PLAYERS? TROLL PLAYERS? KANAYA'S WITH ME, YEAH.

CC: Glub glub glub! 38

CC: I mean, I know about -Eridan now, but I just can't deal wit)( all t(e w)(ining t( at would )appen if I asked )im to kelp out over )ere!

CG: ERIDAN? THE GUY WITH THE LAND OF GIANT ASS CASTLES AND DEAD CRYING ANGEL THINGS?

CC: hehe, yep! I could give you )is )andle if you want to tangle up )is net. But )e was still in Los Angelfis)(es )eard from )im last.

CG: FUCK. ISN'T THAT PLACE STILL RE-ENACTING A STEPHEN KING NOVEL?

CC: I'm dolp)(initely glad I got out of t)( when I heard from )im last. )is )andle is caligulasAquarium.

CC: But back to my quaystion! Would you and Kanaya come )elp me wit)( somefin?

"This is real life." Karkat doesn't look like he knows whether to be happy about that yet or not.

"What should I say?"

"She wants you and Kanaya to help her with something, huh...I guess that makes sense, since she'd probably only know about your guys' session?" John shrugs. "If I can't remember your session, the opposite makes sense." But then what about Karkat's -

"I'm more concerned about the fact that a fucking tyrianblood wants help with something," Karkat says, his claws rising up toward his mouth like he means to start chewing on them. John grabs the drifting hand and pulls it away again. "She could run the fucking world if she wanted to, so what good would me and Kanaya do that she couldn't get from twenty other people on call right away?"

Oh. Well, that one's obvious. "Game stuff."

CG: I DON'T KNOW ABOUT KANAYA. SHE THINKS WE'RE A BUNCH OF GULLIBLE F**KTRUCKS FOR BUYING INTO THIS SACK OF GAME SHIT, SO SHE PROBABLY HAS HER OWN PLANS.

CG: AND I - FUCK, I DON'T KNOW. WHAT KIND OF HELP ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

CC: It's my ancestar((! I t(ink s)(e's up to somet)ing PR----ETTY SUSPIC-ES!

CC: Me and Glubby )ave been investigating, and s)(e's responsible for a bunc)( of gross w)(ite pollution all over t)(e -East Coast.

CC: I'm going to conc)(front )(er about it - but I t)(ink I'll need )elp because she's so muc)( older t)(an me!

CC: It reely wouldn't take muc)( time! Plus, we were buddies, rig)(? T)(is'll go muc)( quicker if we work toget)(er.

"Hahaha, well, that was a fun conversation. I'll remember not to try again, ever," Karkat says, his voice falsely bright and cheery as he raises the phone up to chuck it at the wall. John intercepts again, but when he tries to shove the phone back at Karkat with a look the troll shoves it away. He actually looks kind of ill. "The fuck. It had to be her ancestor, didn't it. Fucking hell. There's nothing I could do to help her with that, John."

"Why not?" John asks. Pesterchum blinks at them, but Karkat keeps avoiding looking at the screen.

He does look at John, though, sour as a crabapple as he raises a single claw and jabs it at his own eye, bright crimson red in the dark. "Trust me, I doubt Kanaya wants any attention from the Condesce, either, what with her - whatever. Off-spectrum trolls don't last long, and they last less long when they go parading themselves into front of the Culling Queen like it's the fucking Fourth of July."
John bites his lip. Because he tends to forget stuff like that. His dislike of the Batterwitch is mostly an
immaterial thing, something that carried over from before the scratch - just *because*, apparently. He's
not a troll, so he forgets sometimes just how odd it is that Karkat's hemotype isn't on the
hemospectrum; humans don't really think about that much in general, he guesses, since it doesn't
affect them personally. But Karkat's been hiding all his life just to *survive*. "Then what are you gonna
say to Feferi?" he asks. This time, when he makes an aborted motion to pass the phone back, Karkat
takes it, sighing.

CG: LOOK, THIS IS KIND OF SHORT NOTICE. I BARELY REMEMBERED YOUR
CHUMHANDLE. WHERE THE FUCK EVEN ARE YOU RIGHT NOW?
CC: )a)(a)(a! Isn't it obvious, dummy? I'm in Wasington DC...as Nymph! Surprise!
CC: And t(e )('roic t(ing to rig)(t now is to stop )IC before s)(e strikes again!
CG: YOU KNOW, BASICALLY EVERYONE KNEW WHO YOU WERE AS A HERO FOR YEARS NOW EVEN WHEN YOU KEPT CHANGING THE NAME.
CG: WHY DO I FEEL LIKE ALL OF US ENDED UP RUNNING AROUND IN SHITTY
COSTUMES AND DICKING AROUND WITH THE LAW? IT SEEMS TO BE THE
GENERAL THEME HERE. THE UNIVERSE HAS A SICK FUCKING SENSE OF HUMOR
THAT WAY.
CC: Glub glub glub S)(RUG.
CC: So will you )(elp me?
CG: I'M KIND OF ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FUCKING COUNTRY AND ALREADY
IN THE MIDDLE OF DEALING WITH ONE CRISIS. IF WE STACK ANOTHER
TURDCAKE ON THIS SHITSTACK OF DESPAIR, MY PAN WILL PROBABLY
EXPLODE.
CC: Awww! But Glubby seems pretty s)(e we'll need )(elp...t)(e situation is desperate!
CG: WHAT THE FUCK IS A GLUBBY.
CC: My lusus, DU)(, stupid! S)(e's been )assled by my ancestor for years, so s)(e )asn't been
around muc)( before now.
CG: OKAY, WHATEVER. ANYWAY, HOW DESPERATE ARE WE TALKING ABOUT
HERE? ON A SCALE FROM 0 TO 10, WITH 0 BEING OH NO WE'RE OUT OF MILK AND
10 BEING THE CONDESCE IS ABOUT TO LAUNCH THE PLANET INTO THE FUCKING
SUN TO BAKE US INTO A PIE AT 10000 DEGREES UNTIL CRISPY.
CC: Ummmm...
CC: Probably an 8!
CC: I doubt s)(e's gonna launc)( us into t)(e sun, but s)(e does )(ave some secret operaytion going on
(at Glubby says could end wit)( a lot of people getting )(urt! S)(e mig)(t be trying to start )er own
empire again! 38O
CG: OH YOU'VE GOT TO BE SHITTING ME. I CANNOT BELI- HANG ON.

"I *fucking knew it!!" John says, laughing. "I totally called it! Ohhh my god!!" And okay, maybe from
the look Karkat's giving him, he's a little hysterical about it. But after days and days of being
depressed as heck, having all of his suspicions about the Condesce confirmed is *the most hilarious
thing ever*. There are tears in his eyes. Oh crap. He's crying juuust a little.

"No - oh for fuck's - *shoosh!!" Karkat drops the phone and presses his hands to John's cheeks,
shaking his own head like that'll stop the Batterwitch from *totally* being a real thing and not just an
imaginary cake-based tyrant made up by a thirteen year old who was just really sick of eating cake
tall the time on his birthday. John isn't entirely sure why that makes him cry a little more, even with
his cheeks hurting from laughing so hard, but the longer Karkat pats his face, the less John's smiling
and the more he's crying. "No, don't cry either, dumbass," Karkat says. When John gives one last
hiccupy laugh-sob thing, Karkat just keeps pressing his thumbs in strokes over John's cheeks, like
that'll make the stream of tears turn off.
And okay, it does. John closes his eyes and lets his head tip forward. Karkat doesn't complain that John's making him hold his head up, and eventually he cries himself out. Some of the past few days are a little hard to remember, but he thinks this might have happened before, at least once. Like he's being all weepy now to make up for lost time. One time he definitely remembers, it was only Dave in the room with him, and the blatant panic on Dave's face as he freaked out was funny enough that John stopped crying all on his own. "Sorry," he says, feeling sheepish, because this has to be getting old by now.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "I can't even tell if you're just that fucking ecstatic to have been right about her Condescension, or if you've actually realized the most powerful troll on the planet possibly going on another cull-happy empire-building streak for the first time in over a century is, in fact, not a laughing matter."

"...Both?"

Karkat scowls, and needs to relocate one of his hands to smack his face. John follows the other hand so that the side of his face rests entirely on that one, instead. He's pretty sure there's sopor all over his face now, but he really needed to shower today anyway. "Dork," Karkat says at last, with all the explosive force of any cuss word. John makes sure there's a grin on his face by the time Karkat peeks up through his claws again, because the faux-disgust on the troll's face is always amazing to behold.

By the time John finishes pulling himself back into working order, Feferi seems to think Karkat's just left the conversation altogether, and has left rows of fuchsia text waiting for them when Karkat picks the phone back up.

CC: T)(ere's no reason to be scared!
CC: I just know for sure t)(at if we worked toget)(er we could at least saboatage )(er plans!
CC: I'm now)(ere near ready to take )(er )(ead on yet! So don't worry about t)(at...
CC: Please come )(elp? We're stronger as a group! Glubby says so, w)(ic)( means it's true!
CG: LOOK. THE LAST PERSON WHO COULD HELP YOU IS ME. MY TRACK RECORD
AS A HERO BASICALLY GOES SOMETHING LIKE RUN INTO ENEMY'S FIST,
NEARLY DIE, RINSE, AND REPEAT.
CG: EVEN IF WE HAD SOME KIND OF GAME POWER BOOSTING EFFECT FROM
BEING IN THE SAME FUCKING ROOM AS EACH OTHER, I'M PRETTY SURE MY OWN
INGROWN ABILITY TO RUIN EVERYTHING I LAY CLAWS ON WOULD
'SABOATAGE' US MORE THAN IT WOULD HER.
CG: I DON'T KNOW. YOU CAN ASK KANAYA. BUT I'M BASICALLY A HIGHLY
VIRULENT CONVEYOR OF INFECTIOUS FAILURE.
CC: I'm sure t)(at's not true!
CG: YEAH, IT KIND OF IS.

"It really isn't," John says.

"Fucking yeah, it is."

John finally has his turn to roll his eyes, bonking his head against Karkat's. "Nooo, it's not."

Karkat shrugs his shoulders in a way that means he's not gonna admit defeat, but also doesn't intend to let this devolve into a fresh cycle of complete stupidity. "Yeah, well, that doesn't change the fact that it's still the best fucking excuse I can come up with for me not going to say hi to the Condesce up close and personal."

CC: Well...I still t)(ink we could work toget)(er!
CG: REALLY. REALLY NOW.
CG: I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO FUCKING CLUE WHERE YOU'RE GETTING THIS DESPICABLE OPTIMISM FROM BUT YOU NEED TO TURN IT OFF WHERE I'M CONCERNED. TRUST ME.

CC: UGGG)()()(! MISTER GRUMPY GILLS!
CC: Clam on, t(is s)ould only take a day or so! I promise!
CC: If you )elp me, t(en Glubby and I will )elp you!
CC: Glubby can very V---ERY )(-ELPFUL w(en s)(e's )appy!

CG: WHAT FUCKING GOOD COULD YOUR LUSUS DO FOR ANYONE, EVER. IN MY OBVIOUSLY EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE, LUSII ARE FUCKING USELESS SHITMUNCHERS. THANK FUCK I NEVER HAVE TO DEAL WITH THAT AGAIN.

CC: S)(e's a very large lusus! You said you were in a crisis, rig(t?
CG: NOT REALLY THE KIND OF CRISIS THAT A GIANT ASS PROBABLY UN-FUCKING-SToppable TYRIAN SEA LUSUS COULD HELP WITH.

CC: Reely, t(ougu)()? R----EEEEEEEELY? 38)
CC: Is t)(ere any problem t)(at couldn't be raymedied wit)( t)e addition of a giant lusus?
CG: THIS INVOLVES, LIKE. EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS, OKAY. SO NO, ACTUALLY, A GIANT LUSUS WOULD BE REALLY FUCKING COUNTER PRODUCTIVE, AMAZINGLY ENOUGH.

CC: Glubby can )elp wit)( t)(at too! S)(e's a very good listener!
CG: YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DROP THIS, ARE YOU.
CC: PL-------EAS-E? You and Kanaya t(e only two I know now, ot)(er t)(an t)(at total bass)(ole - Eridan, and I can't reac)( )(im wit)( t)(at dome...
CC: I could )andle most of it! If we run into my ancestor, you can leave rig)t away! No )ard feelings!

CG: UGHHHHH...

John doesn't say anything at first, watching expectantly while Karkat holds the phone without typing anything. Then, as the minutes drag on, John pokes the troll on the shoulder. "Karkat?"

"Mmmflr." Karkat looks up, lips pressed together tightly. "Nhhrldr."

Huh. "You want to go help, don't you," John interprets, raising both eyebrows when Karkat makes another unintelligible death rattle noise. "Really?"

"I don't know," Karkat says, holding his phone in the pincer of a single claw and his thumb and looking ready to drop it on the floor. "Am I supposed to let the fuckpanned fish-for-brains go and get herself killed at the hands of the Condesce like literally every other tyrianblood that's ever tried this kind of bullshit? She's a player - what the fuck happens if she dies?"

John would point out that people sort of have a track record of coming back to life in those kind of circumstances, but he's spent basically his entire life still fucked up and traumatized by the all the dying, regardless of the fact that most of his friends got better. So yeah, he's hardly one to talk. "I mean -" John hesitates, sucking his lower lip into his mouth. He tries to contemplate the idea of him and Karkat and everyone else going all the way to the other Washington (the lesser Washington, obviously).

But heck. Who is he kidding? He can barely imagine himself walking around the labs. The mere thought of going back to that house in Maple Valley makes him want to vomit, and venturing out to Seattle? Not happening any time soon. Going farther than that...

"We could go," he says, though the words sound hollow, talking through the panic squeezing his throat shut. There's something laughing at him, cackling at his struggle like it's the funniest joke it's ever heard, and knowing what that something is just makes John panic even more. "I could - we - I -
"You're not going anywhere, dumbass," Karkat snaps, glaring at John like he's said the stupidest thing the troll's heard all day. Which might not be all that far of a stretch. It's still early in the morning, after all. "What the fuck, you just had brain surgery. Do you think that's a minor fucking inconvenience or something?"

"I'm mostly better," John says. He reaches up impulsively to poke at where the bandage was, because it's already grown over with the fuzz of hair. "I wouldn't let you go alone!"

Karkat swallows, looking like he's still torn. "Well, maybe Kanaya will want to come along," he mumbles, mostly to himself. He turns his glare on the screen instead, like he's blaming his phone for turning on this morning in the first place. "Or - fuck - maybe her and Rose? But fuck, John, remember the part where you need to fucking rest?"

"So do you!" John is starting to blame the phone for this, too - it couldn't have broken when Karkat threw it at the wall, or something like that, and done them a favor? Yeesh. "What if you got hurt?!" What if you got hurt and I wasn't there, again? Don't go, don't leave me like Ro-

But then he has to stop, because Rose came back. It's one of the truths that keeps John from wrapping himself up in [Eye of the Storm] all over again, something that is bedrock in his mind, now. She came back, and she set stuff on fire, and it was fricking awesome.

He doesn't know what to think about this. On the one hand, the thought of Karkat leaving is...unthinkable. On the other, John recognizes what it's like, now - what it feels like when someone needs help. He could no more have chosen to abandon Jade to the Midnight Crew's base, or to leave Rose to rampage through New York unchecked, than he could have chosen to not go to Dave when things turned unbearable in his house, with his handler.

Maybe it's a game thing. (It totally is.) But if Karkat's got even a fraction of that same instinct to help a fellow player, to group together in a time of dire need, how is John supposed to tell him not to? Especially if it's the Batterwitch herself who's apparently threatening to take over the world or something else dastardly?

When he snaps out of this train of thought, John sees Karkat staring at him. He stares back, caught in some kind of helpless limbo where thoughts of the game make words hard. "Fuck. Hang on," Karkat says at last, when it must become clear that John's frozen up.

CG: OKAY. LOOK. THE LAST THING I NEED IN MY LIFE IS TO PISS OFF THE CONDESCE. I MEAN IT, THERE IS A LONG FUCKING LIST OF THINGS I NEED, AND WOW, WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT? THAT COMES IN LAST PLACE.
CG: IF YOU REALLY THINK YOU NEED HELP WITH THIS, I'M FUCKING DROPPING WHATEVER I'M HOLDING AND RUNNING BEFORE SHE CAN SO MUCH AS BLINK IN MY GENERAL DIRECTION. NO TAKE BACKS, NO TURNING AROUND TO ACT LIKE SOME MORON BY TRYING TO HELP YOU OUT. HOWEVER YOU PLAN TO PREVENT HER FROM DOING WHATEVER THE FUCK SHE'S DOING, I'M NOT HELPING YOU FIGHT HER.
CC: No, no, like I said! T(at's totally cool! S)(e's been building somet)(ing big - like a mac)(ine I t)(ink? So I just plan to BR-EAK IT. A lot.
CC: You can be t(ere as support!
CG: AND THIS WON'T TAKE LONGER THAN A DAY?
CC: T(at is correct! Glubby makes t)(ings easier t)(at way.
CC: I don't know w)(ere you are, t(oug)(, so I can't say )(ow long it'll take you to get )t(ere and back afterward!
John's voice sounds gravelly when it starts working again. "Karkat?"

"Yeah?"

"You know that our plans never work out right, right?"

"...I'm vaguely fucking aware of that fact."

CG: I'LL GET BACK TO YOU LATER.
CC: 38(  
CC: By tominnow? I wanted to )ead out by Sunday.  
CG: I DON'T KNOW. FUCK. WE'LL SEE.  
CC: Alrig)(t...  
CC: Talk to you soon, Crabcato)!  
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering cuttlefishCuller [CC] at 07:34:06 --

"...I still can't believe you're happy Crabdad is missing."

"Not a word, John. Not a word."

- Kanaya, as it turns out, does have plans.

"Jade has agreed to accompany me on an outing to Los Angeles, either tomorrow or Sunday. She believes that she and Roxy and the Queen may have completed their extra-curricular project by then, or at least reached the point where she may no longer be able to make meaningful contributions to the programming components. We should not be gone overlong, but if the Heiress wants a response by tomorrow, I'm afraid that my own must be in the negative," the jadeblood says, regretful, as she adjusts Karkat's arm. Any time Kanaya goes near him with a pin, they go through this weird ritual where Kanaya waits patiently and Karkat fidgets for like five minutes before they've apparently established that no one is stabbing anyone.

John sort of slept through the start of this weird proto-friendship thing Kanaya and Karkat have going on, anyway. He sure as heck doesn't remember Karkat being this bad when John was infecting him with that wonderful cross-species disease called friendship, but then again, he might have barged in completely oblivious to the traditional paranoia of troll friendship initiation because he was just that desperate for them to get to the friend part. The last time his handler willingly let him have a friend, it was only because Rue Lalonde would have been suspicious, otherwise, and Rose had been gone for so long.

Kanaya's cool, at least! The Malachite Sylph is a total badass. Her interests seem to be more about fashion and gardening and auspicing than about comics or a lot of the other things John knows Karkat likes. But Kanaya likes supernatural gothic romance books, and Karkat's dabbled enough in that through his general romance novel obsession that the two of them sometimes start debating how realistic the vacillations are in a bunch of controversial books in the genre. It's amazing. Karkat finally has someone other than John (who's only mildly interested in that kind of stuff at best) to argue with about terrible troll Fabio cover art.

"Fuck. Maybe I shouldn't go at all, then," Karkat mutters, reaching up and scratching at his arm with his free hand until Kanaya frowns at him reprovingly. "Wait, Los Angeles?"

"It was always our intention to continue on there after Seattle, to investigate that dome," Rose says. She turns a page in her book, but her eyes find John's, her smile quick and small. "But circumstances
rather spiraled out of control here before we knew it, and the trip kept getting delayed. I think it best I remain behind, for the moment."

Part of John relaxes fractionally, a part he hadn't realized was tensing from the moment Kanaya said she was going somewhere. He assumed that meant Rose would automatically be going along, too, in a kind of fatalistic, resigned, dumb way. They're not attached at the hip, after all. "But there's apparently a troll player guy there, too," he says, throwing in his two cents. From the look Karkat gives him, Karkat meant to bring it up anyway. "Feferi said so! Eri-something?"

Karkat shrugs, and he and Kanaya flinch apart when she nearly pokes him in the arm with a pin because of that; they have to wait the requisite ten seconds before they can move again, and John can't quite stifle a giggle at how ridiculous they look. Rose gives him the judging eye for it, but John's been laughing at silly Karkat things for too long to stop now. "Eridan," Karkat finishes for John, squinting at him, which just makes John giggle harder. "Laugh it up, John. Laugh. It. Up."

"I still cannot believe you're on speaking terms with a Peixes," Kanaya says.

"Neither can I," Karkat says, scowling harder than ever. John thinks he still bitter about the whole it-came-to-him-in-a-dream thing. "Do you know how many fish puns she knows? Because it's fuckery like that that makes me regret my life choices on an hourly basis."

John grins. "I think they're great. The world is her oyster!"

"No. Stop that. Don't you even dare start with me, John -"

The door swings open part of the way through Karkat's diatribe, which might be the only thing that stops him from going on some kind of pun-hating rant that John would have no choice but to respond to in the most punctastic form possible. Dave walks in, typing on his phone, which is his default setting. There have been a lot of time-looping Daves around the past few days, jumping through time with the dual purpose of handling some weird thing with his apple juice side business and conspiring to show up at every single fitting that Kanaya has talked Karkat into allowing for a new costume. It's more subtle than the ways Jade and Dave messed with Karkat before, but if John in all his exhaustion has noticed it, he can only imagine that Karkat's sitting on a cantankerous new bubble of fury, just waiting for the opportune moment to explode.

"So I heard there were problems," he says, not looking up from behind his shades as he walks around Karkat and Kanaya's latest frozen pose, and flops down almost on top of Rose, who just moves her book out of the way. The Breeze flutters around Dave for a cursory inspection, the way it tends to whenever anyone enters a room lately; John doesn't know why it bothers when it's always the same people, but the Breeze blows raspberries at him when he questions its enthusiasm about stuff, so yeaaaah. He avoids that whenever possible. "But what I really want to know is - Karkles. Karkitkat. Karamel."

"That was a reeeeal fucking stretch, even for you," Karkat replies, disgusted.

Dave is unperturbed. "Are you seriously going to make us live through you waffling back and forth about whether to take your extreme field trip to DC and back without John for the next three fucking hours, or can you just fast forward straight to the part where you decide, fuck it, extreme field trip it is?"

Rose's eyebrows fly up; Karkat's mouth snaps shut. It's Kanaya who says, "...That is a thing that is in fact happening?"

"You better believe it," Dave says, shaking his head. "Three hours. Like, I know that future me
really shat the bed by invoking temporal inevitability like a total jackoff when he started complaining about it to my face, but I still have to try to stop this future before it begins. I'm only human."

Kanaya frees up a hand to rub at her eyes. "I was referring to the fact that he is, in fact, going to follow through on this remarkably poorly thought out decision to venture out to meet someone he barely knows on the basis of a nightmare and a chatlog."

"What? Oh, yeah, for sure." Dave shrugs his shoulders, and starts pointing at people as he names them. '"You and Rose went on a goddamn cross-country road trip to go hang out with two crazy troll girls you barely knew and ended up shipping them to Canada because why not. I paid cold hard cash to fly up here because Egdoofus was having a crisis over Karkle's unconscious body. And hell, Jade goes off and does random shit like getting kidnapped all the time. We don't judge here, Maryam. Not anymore. Mostly because none of the rest of us have a goddamn leg to stand on, but also because if Karkat needs to have his own solo run, we need to damn well respect his random ass spur of the moment fuck-it-all life choices." And with that, Dave takes a long gulp from a jug of apple juice.

John feels the need to interrupt at this point, because if he's hallucinating, this is a thing that people probably need to be aware of! "Dave, are you drinking apple juice?"

Dave's eyebrows appear over his shades, and he stops drinking long enough to say, "EB, when am I ever not drinking the elixir of the gods? Which are totally us, btw." He takes another sip, because apparently that's a reasonable answer.

...God, Dave is weird. John starts to feel a little bit better when Rose starts staring, too, with her 'fascinated' face on. "$\text{Brother.}\"

"Mmph?"

"You...were not carrying apple juice when you came into the room - is what, I believe, John was attempting to point out."

"Uh, yeah I was," Dave says. The juice jug started out full, and is already half-empty, sloshing around whenever Dave whips it down to answer them. "Obviously. Do you think I can just pull an entire container of AJ out of thin air?" When no one can come up with a response to that before time's up - which, with the way Dave's mouth runs, is basically after three seconds have passed - Dave nods, sets the apple juice down on the floor by his and Rose's feet, and doesn't appear to notice or care at all when the entire jug vanishes. "So can we get back to the point of this conversation? Karkat, this is me being the ambassador of all of us in the future, telling you that three hours is way too long to argue about something with yourself."

"Watch me," Karkat says, pulling his eyes away from the empty spot where the apple juice used to be long enough to flip Dave the bird. "$\text{Anyway, fuck all future versions of you. We've just established that Kanaya and Harley are going to be headed in at fucking ninety degree angle from the direction I'd need to go that day, so that's it, genius. It's a no-go. Another one of my shitty plans doomed to get tossed in the trash where it fucking belongs.}\"

Kanaya retrieves Karkat's arm and glances at him reprovingly until he timidly puts the middle claw back down and lets her go back to work. "$\text{Would it not be possible to ask the Heiress to wait for a few days?}\" she asks. "$\text{Really, Jade and I don't expect to take that long.}\"

"That's the second hour, I got a play-by-play," Dave says. He slumps over onto Rose and puts his feet up by John. Rose seems too distracted by inspecting the magical vanishing apple juice point with her magic Seer eye to put up a fight. "$\text{Spoilers - he checks with fish troll girl and she says no.}\"
"Stop telling me I'm going to do things before I do them!"

Rose meets John's eyes while everyone else argues about this. "I'm fairly certain he just captchalogueed that," she says.

John nods, shrugging. That's what it looked like to him, too. Sometimes he forgets that he's the only one here who really remembers when sylladices were things that everyone could have, not just Jade... "Yeah, probably." Though heck if he knows why it's working for Dave now, of all times.

Rose glances at Dave, who is now engaged in some escalating argument with Karkat that Kanaya appears to be ready to mediate at the drop of a hat. Rose's eyebrows go totally out of control. "He doesn't seem to have noticed," she says, in a stage whisper.

John just laughs. Remembering's not so bad when the memories are of a thirteen year old Dave pretending to be the bomb at video games, with his fancy alchemizing and his weird stock market free-for-all...and he can compare those memories to the fact that now Dave's basically falling ass backwards into figuring out game mechanics on the rebound. He's pretty sure that's actual irony, not the fake bullshit kind Dave and his Bro worship or whatever.

Though John does wonder...what would happen if he were to check -

"Nah, man," Dave says loudly, derailing John's train of thought before it even leaves the station. "I'm just saying, Jade has a company jet loaned out to Momlonde that's just sitting around, waiting to be used."

Karkat squints at Dave, as though he can't believe what he's looking at is a real human being. "...Harley has a fucking jet plane."

"Yeah, I mostly zoned out when we were on that thing, but it was real. It happened," Dave says. He kicks John in the foot - okay, it's more of a tap, but John's not expecting it, so it jolts him more than it probably should. "Back me up, man, you were there."

"...Oh! Yeah, the Harley Foundation has a plane," John says. There's a delay between him thinking he ought to kick Dave back for being a butt, and him actually following through on that impulse, so he ends up kicking air while Dave smiles and yanks his feet out of range between one blink and the next. "They just seem to let Doctor Lalonde borrow it for stuff because the foundation didn't have an acting head for a while there." He vaguely recalls having a conversation with a flight attendant about that, but it's been a while and he's got a lot more memories to sort through now than he used to. Though maybe now that Jade's contacted them that might have changed. John isn't sure how it works; Jade shrugs whenever someone brings up the foundation, because she cares negative ten percent about taking charge of it or anything like that.

"Anyway, it's probably a good thing if we get you out of town for a while or something, dude," Dave adds. "On account of the whole stalker clown thing. Shit's whack. We'll leave for a while until the coast is clear, chill with our newest troll BFF, and get her to join our Smash party. Sure, our plans always go to shit, but will we ever know when to quit? Probs not."

What follows is the distinct silence of four people processing...and processing...and coming to the realization that -

"You just said we," Karkat says, aghast.

Dave's face doesn't move. He scratches under his collar idly, looking more at the ceiling than at anyone else in the room. "Yup."
Rose rests her chin on her hand and opens her mouth a few times before saying, mostly to herself, "It would be safer than if he went alone..."

Kanaya sets her needle to the side, hastily, before Karkat can jab himself on it. She throws a look of warning in John's direction, but yeah, he's kinda already picked up on the fact that Karkat's about to blow a gasket. He pushes himself up onto his feet and catches Karkat's other shoulder; Karkat's already vibrating like a motor. "You're not coming with me, shitstain," the troll says. His tone says 'still struggling to process the depths of your stupidity;' his twitching face says 'there will be blood.'

"Of course I'm going with you. Who else is going to keep you from getting your ass kicked?" Dave gropes around on the pile he and Rose are seated on blindly, and doesn't appear bothered when a bag of chips appears under his hands where there were no chips before. He accepts it and tears the bag open, crunching loudly on the first bite. "Alright, everyone. Prepare for the first hour. In three, two, o-"

No one seems entirely sure who's won the argument by the time Kanaya picks Dave up and physically removes him from Karkat's presence. John is inclined to think Dave might have won by virtue of time shenanigans, since he knew how the whole thing would play out from the beginning, but Karkat doesn't really admit defeat one way or another; John just keeps a hold of the troll all the way through, shooshing when he can. Dirk looks in at one point, apparently drawn by the noise, but manages to abscond and save himself from the pointlessness of it all. Even Rose has to shrug, because around the end of hour two Dave and Karkat seemed to end up agreeing to go to Washington DC together without either one saying so in as many words. They just. Keep arguing. It doesn't stop. Even when they're not actually arguing, just agreeing in a super passive-aggressive way on Dave's side and agreeing in an incredibly angry, in-denial way on Karkat's.

Basically, they're both just dipshits! John's starting to think that if Karkat and Dave weren't bickering all the time, they'd be perfectly fine friends, but neither is willing to stop acting like a total assmunch first. It wears him out, and once Kanaya puts her foot down John wants nothing more than to go back to bed and roll his eyes until he falls asleep. It takes Karkat giving him a weird look before he realizes it's time to eat lunch. Sleeping through lunch just because eating feels like it would take too much effort would be the opposite of a good thing, so he compromises by propping himself up at an awkward angle in bed so he won't fall asleep while Karkat runs to get food and bring it back.

Anyway. What with all the pointless dumb arguing this morning, there's someone John hasn't seen yet today. John listens as the door swings open and Karkat's shouts vanish down the hall - and then, just as the door begins a closing sweep, there is the slightest fraction of a pause as someone slips in at the last moment.

When he opens his eyes, ever so slowly, so cautiously, Jane is standing at the end of his bed.

They all moved to these rooms along the perimeter of the building a couple of days ago, away from the neurology ward and the main hall of offices that now hold so many bad memories. John keeps the blinds pulled up to let light in during the mornings, and especially likes to roll the window itself open - or have Karkat or Dave do it, since those are the two most likely to start crapping their pants at the idea of John standing for more than two seconds - so that the Breeze can frolic in and out, running pale blue tendrils of air through the fields of grass and wildflowers that stretch between this side of the building and the lake.

The Breeze doesn't seem to reflect John's depression much; it has a will of its own, and the fact that he ignored it for so long, throwing his power around willy-nilly for years because he couldn't bear the thought of the game, means it's just all the more boisterous now that it has the freedom to explore
without worrying about John shutting it down and tossing it into the back of his mind again.

Anyway. John's seen Jane's room all of once since they all went through Massive Happy Fun Group Brain Surgery Day, as he likes to call it (MHFGBSD for...not so short). It's on the inner corridor, because of the four Scratch kids, Jane and Jake were the two most messed up by the mindgrubs, and deemed the most likely to be flight risks during the process of recovery and counseling. John's preetty sure Jane isn't supposed to actually leave her room without an escort, but on the other hand, it's not like she's hurting anybody, right? She doesn't really do anything; she just shows up to stare out John's window, her eyes flat and pale grey from this angle, pretty much whenever there's a (really, really rare) moment when he's alone.

John hears Jake screaming a lot from his room. That guy's strapped in with restraints still, because when they tried to let him out yesterday afternoon he nearly clawed Dirk's eyes out trying to escape. In comparison, since she woke up, Jane has just been...quiet. Reeeally quiet. Like she's thinking deep thoughts and doesn't have words for them yet. Roxy tries to cajole her into talking a lot when she and Jade aren't working on their thing - John can hear it even across the hall - and because Roxy is there Rose and Kanaya spend a lot of time there, too, with Jade bouncing back and forth between the rooms on foot in a way that clearly frustrates her since she can't teleport from one conversation to the next. Their group has settled into the kind of pack behavior John remembers fuzzily from their last trip to Lalonde Labs. Occasionally everyone drags their mattresses back into their respective rooms for the sake of propriety, but for the most part Jade, Dave, and Karkat end up without fail sprawled out in a semicircle on the floor of John's room. Kanaya and Rose sometimes join them, but also sometimes they need to get a room. Literally.

John doesn't actually know if Dirk and Roxy are staying in their own rooms or doing the same thing, guarding their friends through the night. But Jane doesn't seem to have trouble slipping away from them when she wants to. And if they're just hanging around, being quiet together, no one is hurt by that, right?

At least, that's how it worked yesterday.

"Do you know?"

John jolts; he can't help it. "What?" he blurts out, too loud. He hasn't heard Jane talk since - since they fought, in Seattle, and that was days ago, now. So much has happened since then that it's like hearing her for the first time. The first time he asked Jane why she was here, she slipped right back out the door without acknowledging his presence.

Jane's head slowly tilts to the side, exposing more of the side of her head that's been shaved in an undercut and which has now begun to grow out in short spikes, not yet long enough to form curls to match the other side. Her eyes never leave the window. It's partly open, and there's a slow breeze streaming in, languidly doing a circuit of the room to ruffle one of Rose's books on the bedside table and stir John's hair before flowing out again. Usually it's still too cool in the mountain air in the mornings to open it, but today has been really sunny and warm, so Jade (Jade is usually the easiest to persuade) had given in and opened it early when John begged her to, and rolled her eyes at Karkat when he tried to close it.

It's the Breeze, more than anything, that makes John more chill about these visits than he normally might have been. Sometimes the Breeze knows about danger before John does himself - it never stopped warning him about explosions, for example, no matter how hard he tried not to listen. But the most it's done around Jane lately is run through her hair whenever she walks in, and it does the same thing when anyone walks in. When it comes to Jake, on the other hand, the Breeze actively circulates through the Scratch kid's room in anticipation of the next time he breaks loose from his
restraints.

When Jane reaches out and lays her hand on the windowsill, fingernails digging into the frame, John can't help but tense. The slow wind freezes with him, and almost instantly he feels that eddy in his mind that means the Breeze has spread its awareness out, filling the air with a sense of purpose.

But Jane doesn't try to vault out. She just stands there, watching the lake. "We're supposed to go back," she says. She sounds at a loss, slow and uncertain, like she's testing the words out and finding them unfamiliar. "That's - what we're supposed to do. Afterward. We go back. And report to our handler." A pause. "I...I thought so, anyway."

Almost immediately, John's head starts to ache. It tends to do that, lately, whenever something comes up that almost triggers the orders embedded in his mind by his handler and the mindgrub's chemical reinforcement. He's way better off than Jake, from what he's heard and seen, but it's only thanks to sheer dumb luck, and the fact that his handler is kept locked away in a ward John can't get near, that he hasn't lost control and tried to follow a planted command yet.

"Do you know?" Jane says again; this time, she sounds almost urgent, the most emotion John's heard from her yet. "I - sometimes I think I know, but sometimes I think - other things." Her head turns in a jerk toward him, but her eyes won't meet his, focusing instead on the blankets at the foot of the bed. "You. Do you know what is real?"

...Wow, that's not a loaded question at all! John's busy absorbing the fact that Jane's talking, and it's not until he notices her fingers trembling and twitching on the windowsill that he thinks he might want to, you know, answer. Fast. "Some of the time," he says, totally honest. "I have a lot of help, though."

Jane's hand spasms; she draws it back from the window in the next second, tucking it behind her back, and her eyes flicker across the bed, the bedside table, the wall, before falling on the sheets next to John's feet again. "Are we - supposed to -" She breaks off and shakes her head, as a look that might almost be agitation knots her brows together. "Are we...desynchronizing?" she says, an unrecognizable emotion tight in her voice. She lays heavy weight on the last word that could make it expletive or plea or prayer.

Slow but sure, John nods. "That's the idea, yeah." Maybe it would be smarter to lie, but he doesn't have that in him, right now. And the Breeze is all around the room now, ready to sweep Jane up and off the ground and carry her back to her room in case she tries to go full Berzerker mode on him.

But she won't lose it, he thinks. Probably.

Without warning, without a sound, Jane's eyes flicker up to meet his, searching, and John almost panics. He'd forgotten how blue Jane's eyes were because he never got a good look at them during their faceoff, and ever since one or both of them have been sedated out the wazoo and/or asleep. They're a pale, icy blue, piercing and intent in spite of the confused furrow of her brows, but what truly throws John for a loop is the fact that he recognizes them.

It's one thing to have Rue Lalonde inform everyone that yes, the Scratch kids appear to be clones of their original guardians, only a year or so younger than the heroes themselves. It's quite another to see his dead Nanna's eyes looking out at him from a living person, not an old photograph.

And of course, it's a whooole other can of worms because they're the same color as his handler's eyes, too.

Jane is Jane, John reminds himself, his pulse rising as he gulps and tries not to let the panic set his
mind swimming. The Breeze wraps around him, repeating the same assurances, but Jane keeps staring and John still can't look away, his shoulders straightening into something like attention.

"There are so many things that I should do," she says, searching his eyes. "I can feel them, still, here." She touches the side of her skull, so quickly that John almost misses her fingers tapping the square bandage where they shaved more of her hair off to clear the way to skin and bone. "But...I don't...**have** to do them?"

"Not if you don't want to," he says, unable to break their staring contest. "Not anymore."

A slow, hissing breath through her nose - a twitch of her fingers by her side - another beat - and then Jane's mouth works for a moment, the words slow when they do come. "That's against orders."

Oh man. This has the potential to go so bad, so fast. "Yup!" John agrees, bracing himself inwardly.

"..." Jane looks away. "Huh." Or maybe it's just a huffing grunt of acknowledgment, and not meant to be words at all. Then she turns back to the window, and John sags back against the heap of pillows and tries not to get dizzy. He mostly succeeds.

Jane stays, quiet again, right up until the faint roar of noise of the lunch crowd returning echoes in the halls. Then, without a word by way of explanation or farewell, she spins on her heel and slips out the door, her eyes avoiding his as he watches her leave. "Good...bye?" he calls, but the door shuts before he can hear if she answers.

John wonders if he should maybe, you know. Tell someone about this. Jake's still obviously trying to follow through on the last orders the mindgrub whammied him with. But probably no one knows if Jane's plotting to escape or slowly making the effort to untangle herself from the Crew's orders - except her.

But that afternoon, he hears Roxy chattering away as usual across the hall. They have the rooms to all the doors open so people can pass in and out at will and conversation floats through the hall at random. Still, it's only thanks to John's hearing, enhanced by the wind as it tugs scraps of conversation to him, that he hears the quiet, monotone grunt of Jane replying to something Roxy's said.

Karkat flinches and stares at the open door with open-mouthed shock at the shrill squeal that rises up, full of Roxy's startled joy. "**What the fuck?**" the troll says, emphatic, as he stands up, probably meaning to go charging across to provide backup in the event that someone's getting attacked or something.

"She and Jade probably just had some epiphany about that computer thing," John says, smiling, and he doesn't stop until Karkat threatens to go out to the lake to grab a bucket of water to dump on his 'dumbass head.'

In the end, John thinks it almost makes sense that he hears the news about his handler and the ward generator and Seattle from Doctor Lalonde. Everyone else has been careful not to spill any beans around him that they think might drive him over the edge; they're omitting stuff and talking around things, not just in person but also on the memo forums that have started back up with a vengeance.

But they can't sit on this forever. He's figuring out how to push through and keep living, even without the [Eye of the Storm] providing a buffer between his emotions and his Trickster and...him. Doctor Lalonde's been around constantly, now that John's lucid enough to notice and remember, and
he's taken this long to realize that she's keeping an eye on all of them. Not just Rose and Roxy and Dave and Dirk. John can't imagine she has a lot of time for her own science-y stuff with all the watching she's been doing, but inwardly he nods because it's obvious she's filling in where Samuel ought to be. Or the pseudo-parental role he always played up in public, at least. She's got ten kids, WV, and a whole lab of staff to wrangle in the meantime, but she's made the kids her priority.

Eventually, he needs to start dealing with their current problems again. Stuff like the Midnight Crew, and the Felt, and Karkat's stalker, and all the new game stuff that keeps cropping up as both Kanaya and Karkat prepare for their trips to go investigate leads. Stuff like the fact that Samuel is a bad guy, and Seattle has become a no-zone for any and all hero activity until the FVRT feels they have the situation under control.

Yeeeah, if it wasn't Doctor Lalonde, John suspects that no one would have mentioned any of this to him. Ever. The end of the world could have come and gone again, and they would still have laughed in a really high-pitched, awkward way and tried to distract him from the fact that the last good thing about being Heir - the one thing the Trickster couldn't taint just by wearing his uniform in his mind, the ability to go out and use his game powers to help people rather than let them die all over again - got stripped away for the foreseeable future.

Doctor Lalonde doesn't seem to know what part of this barrage of bad news John will take worse; she's sitting down in a chair beside him, looking more put together than John remembers her being since New York, but he recognizes the way her fingers occasionally pinch together where they hang over the edge of her lap, the way they always would when she was about to saunter off to mix herself an appletini. Her weakness, John recalls his handler lecturing him, was always her bond with Joanna Egbert; his Nanna's death broke Doctor Lalonde, and turned her from someone who drank copiously but controllably into a complete drunkard, on a downward spiral that only worsened the more she flitted around the country with Rose looking for support. She tried Ambrose Strider, but when the Crew tracked them down Bro's paranoia ratcheted up to the point that he suspected even Doctor Lalonde of possibly leaking their location. Then she tried Samuel and John -

And, well. John could have warned her from the start that his handler would do nothing but undermine her further. But by then, he'd already learned it was easier to smile and forget and pretend everything was fine. John always knew his handler was bad news. If the fact that Samuel took a contract with the Midnight Crew willingly hurts him, he honestly can't tell that pain apart from what's already there. Heck, with his memories this scrambled, odds probably are that he knew already. So that's fine.

(It's really not.)

The Federal Villain Response Team's representative thinks shutting down hero work will help the police deal with the recent influx of the Midnight Crew's operations? Well, fine. The police won't be able to do much by themselves, but heck, he already had Diamonds Droog's knowledge of his identity looming over his head, a sure threat to keep him from interfering in Crew criminal activity. He couldn't help fight the Crew; from the moment his handler switched them from sleeper to passive status, the two of them probably would have been looking for ways to help rather than hinder operations.

(Thinking about all this isn't helping. He's this close to flipping off the handle.)

"What does it mean, that the generator's gone?" he asks, to buy time. He can almost see the gears switch in Doctor Lalonde's head, because this is a subject she's an expert in, and she'd probably rather talk about that than watch John slowly cave in on himself. While she considers how to answer, John reels the Breeze back in through the window with a half-gentle, half-desperate mental tug, that
just ends up being really panicky. The Breeze ravels and unravels, filtering through the room and bolstering John as much as it can. "I don't remember me or my handler moving it; it was useful for anonymity and stuff," he says, pressing a hand to his chest and breathing in fresh air the Breeze carries back in with it.

He thinks he should have not said that last part; Doctor Lalonde looks stricken for a moment. But John's awake, and he's trying, and trying means that he has to force out all the words he'd usually gulp down. "Well, Samuel was my first suspect, so that's unfortunate. At least then we would have known who had it last," Doctor Lalonde says, when she's regained control of her expression. "I left the generator behind at the house so that you both would remain cloaked from wandering eyes, but judging by the rate of decay, it's been non-functioning or absent long enough that the void around your neighborhood has started to dissipate. It tends to do that, when there isn't a machine drawing its attention. The only interference left is minimal. You all could have been exposed to outside surveillance and magical forces if you'd remained at either our old home or your own for much longer."

"Well, that sucks..."

"It also means that someone out there has a piece of technology that I've done my utmost to keep private," Rue says, sighing. "I published some of my earlier findings when I was younger, but when I realized what vulnerable targets we all were to surveillance, I stopped and developed the shield generators without making any more of my research public. Not many have chosen to make void their field of study - like paradox universe theory, it's considered more than a little esoteric. If anyone else has learned to manipulate it to the same degree my machines can, they haven't come forward, either." The doctor nibbles her lip, leaving marks in the otherwise smooth film of lipstick. "Now my design is out there for anyone to recreate. It compromises the security of this lab, and the one in Maine, as well as my other bolt holes and Ambrose's apartment. I wish I'd realized sooner."

John can only imagine. He's lived in his own personal hell long enough that he can't call to mind how it feels to think you're safe, and then to have that safety ripped away from you in the most unexpected way possible. Dave was almost kidnapped, Jade was kidnapped, and Rose got left on her own for so long because Doctor Lalonde supposedly wanted to distract other kidnapping attempts...

Well. John's never had to worry about a thing like that happening to him. Heheheh. Ha. Agh. "Doctor Lalonde?" He waits until the woman looks up and meets his eyes. "I've been wondering - what happened? That made you and Bro avoid each other for so long?"

Rue snorts and casts an eye at the closed door of the room. "To be honest, I don't know that I could tell the whole tale before the rest of them lose patience. But you may already know more than I assume - if Samuel told you more about Droog than either of you let slip?"

Oh, that makes his head twinge. John rubs his arms where they're prickling with goosebumps, shaking his head. "He got a basic dossier on her from one of his contacts, but...I don't know. Maybe it was classified because she's one of the bosses, but even he couldn't get much that wasn't pretty heavily censored! All the rest that he lectured me about was just rumors and intelligence he picked up over the years." He has to take a few steadying breaths when his throat threatens to lock up, before he can finish. "My handler, he - I know there are still things he never told me. Even after you and Rose left, and he got that thing put inside my head, I think he never really trusted me with anything that wasn't need-to-know. Why?"

"Because Droog was what happened," Rue says. She folds her hands together, fingers laced tight, and taps the pad of one thumb against the lacquered nail of the other. "I'd taken Rose out of town
with me that week for work - perhaps if the timing hadn't been so perfectly coincidental, leaving him and Dave alone in the house at the worst possible moment, Ambrose would not have grown so paranoid that I may have betrayed them." Her smile turns crooked. "He's actually not nearly as bad these days as he was in the immediate aftermath - time mellowed him, I suppose. He took a ward generator when I finalized the design, but he never wanted me in the same state as Dave again."

A shake of her head. "I didn't get the whole story out of him, though. From what I've interpreted, the Midnight Crew began to operate in Atlanta, riling the local gangs and getting into sporadic turf battles...and within two days of their arrival in the city, Droog was at our door. Ambrose didn't even know they were targeting Dave before then. He had no way to know to run." Doctor Lalonde's talking mostly to the glass of water sitting on the bedside table, now, her eyes distant. "I returned to find the house in ruins. What hadn't collapsed already had been torched. By the time I tracked down Ambrose's hiding place, he was bleeding profusely and couldn't" - she huffs - "or wouldn't give me a straight answer as to how he escaped."

John's trying to picture it, but he can't. Dave's bro is one of the most bizarrely hardcore people he knows; the guy took on Jack Noir and held his own for ages before John messed things up for him. Diamonds Droog is intimidating, sure! And she hurt Karkat pretty bad, and she must have known John's identity because it was time for their sleeper cell to activate, which means she could know all kinds of things John really wouldn't want a mob boss to know about him. John can't shake the impression that if anyone could have fought her on an even footing, it would have been Bro... The fact that he couldn't, and Droog ran him and Dave out of town as a result, isn't a happy thought to have. "He lost that bad?" he says, making a face.

"Heh. You know Ambrose as he is now. He's had years to train until he mastered his fighting style; back then, he was not nearly so swift. He only ever utilized puppets in some odd parenting techniques I believe he picked up from watching the Muppets with Dave." Rue has her eyes closed, like she can still picture it. "Unfortunately, at the time, Droog outclassed him - thoroughly. There was...so much blood. She nearly gutted him, you know, and then used his own sword to cut him open, from here to there." Rue gestures against her own torso, touching splayed fingers from shoulder to hip in a neat diagonal line. John thinks Bro might have mentioned that, a loooong time ago; the injury sounds familiar when Rue puts it like that. "I was so distracted, trying to convince him to go to a hospital, that I didn't even notice Dave -"

The panic is instantaneous. The Breeze rushes out around the sides and cracks of the closed door before John's finished sitting straighter, rushing through the halls until it finds Dave. It doesn't matter that Dave was literally just here ten minutes ago, or that he and Doctor Lalonde are talking about something that happened years and years ago; the anxiety is too strong and his self-control is in shambles these days. "Dave? What happened to Dave?!"

Rue looks at him - seems to register that John's quietly about to lose his shit - and schools her face until it's controlled. "Nothing," she says, emphatic. "There wasn't a mark on him. He simply...never spoke again."

The Breeze finds Dave with Jade and Roxy and the White Queen; John relaxes. "He could talk?" he says, distracted as the Breeze's awareness checks and double checks and triple checks that everyone is breathing and then loses patience with John for making it do 'pointless repetitive stuff.' "I thought - " What did he think? If he ever wondered why Dave could talk before the scratch, and not in this reset life, John's didn't come up with a good explanation on his own.

"Ambrose always maintained that the fact that Dave spoke first proved he knew what he was doing about parenting. Considering how terrified he was about being a guardian going into it, I wasn't inclined to really argue with him about anything that gave him some measure of confidence." Rue
unfolds her hands and legs, and stands. "As it is, he only ever told me about Dave's sudden muteness as a way of lashing out when I pressed him about coming to Houston to pay a visit. Whatever went on while Ambrose was fighting Droog, until Ambrose finished piecing together that collar design - Dave never spoke again."

- He can't pretend everything will be okay if he just forgets it and places it to the side, to never be thought about again. He tried that, and look what it got him: a head full of trauma he's never dealt with and a Breeze that barely trusts him and a handler that no one will let him see and a Trickster mode that has dealt with it all, in the absolute worst possible way.

So! He and Karkat need to talk.

They still haven't spoken about whatever it is the Trickster did to him. Well, they have - everyone kind of shared what went on while they were scattered to the four corners of John's mind, so John has the general gist of how totally messed up he is (read: very) - but Karkat skimmed over parts of his story, growling something about hide and seek and a fake copy of their school and never saying a word more while Dave and Rose and Jade or any of the others are in the room.

Something happened. John's pretty sure the Trickster is a filthy goddamn liar, but it might not have lied if the truth was already bad enough. Making out with Karkat would be bad enough. Particularly if Karkat didn't want to make out at the time. That thing's a laughing nightmare whose idea of a good time would be playing jump-rope with John's intestines; the list of things it might have done to mess with Karkat covers a lot of ground!

Of course, he and Karkat talking kinda requires that both of them...well, talk! But the moment John tries to open up the conversation, stilted because he kind of sucks at this, Karkat spooks. It took real effort to convince everybody else to clear out of the room again for a while - John gets that they're all still paranoid, but sheesh! - so that there wouldn't be eyes on them for this, because Karkat's at his most honest when they're in private and he doesn't have to shout all the time to fool passersby into thinking he's a grump 24/7. But Karkat's not even trying to hide the fact that he's avoiding the subject. "I already told you people what happened," he insists, batting John's hand away with an irritable scowl that would be a lot more convincing if he could meet John's eyes instead of furtively looking anywhere but. When Karkat can't even glare right, there's shenanigans afoot.

"Since when am I 'you people?'" John points out. He catches Karkat's hand and tugs until Karkat sits down on the bed next to him, a prickly, hunched up ball that keeps avoiding John's eyes by fiddling with a new hole in the sleeve of his hoodie. "Which means everybody, which means Jade and Dave, which means you totally didn't talk about a bunch of important stuff because you don't like them. And I've been sleeping all the time. Telling a sleeping me doesn't count, dude." He doesn't think he could have dragged himself out of that mood where sleeping was easier than breathing any faster than he did, but he regrets that it meant Karkat had time to batten down the hatches in preparation to deny, deny, deny.

"I'm fine. Trust me, dumbass, everything I know about these new dreams, you know."

"That's not what I'm talking about, Karkat." When Karkat's claws clamp down on John's hand hard enough to bruise, he knows that Karkat knows what he is talking about, and doesn't like it. Well, too bad. Whenever one of them gets upset and doesn't say something, bad stuff tends to happen? And then escalate unreasonably to unprecedented levels of total bullcrap that could probably have been avoided if they'd just talked about it in the first place? Yeah... John has to fight the urge to bite through his own tongue before he makes himself croak, "What happened with that - other me?"
Karkat bristles. "Who?" he says, sarcasm slathered on his words like honey. "The candycoated shithive full of maggots that tried to take over your dumb pan? Barely remember it." The troll's elbow somehow migrates its way into John's side, a needling hint that Karkat wants the conversation to switch gears right now.

But. See, John thinks he might have an idea of what the Trickster could have done to make Karkat act like this. And the idea is not a good one. It is, in fact, the kind of idea that makes him want to vomit and curl up in a little ball and not move again. He has a lot of those! But this one is worse than most. Maybe because John doesn't have anything to go on but Karkat's unwillingness to talk and the Trickster's all-too-willingness to plant even worse ideas in his head.

John put a lot of stuff in the back of his head to rot. Including all those times when he hasn't been sure whether he wants to shoosh Karkat or kiss him in a really not-pale way. Everything like that, those fleeting moments John fretted about and shoved back there to be ignored, got snatched up and twisted whenever the Trickster got its hands on them. Pain over Rose leaving turned into hate that John knows he's never felt, because he's never blamed Rose for not getting back in contact with him - he's always blamed himself. The inexplicable trust and fondness for Jade and Dave that John has always fought so hard on his handler's orders turned into some weird combination of cruel dismissal that either of them had any merit, except, possibly, as ways to torment John more. If the Trickster were just John's bad thoughts, surely the only person it hates would be John himself. But that's not the case.

So what would it have done with the urge to kiss Karkat because he has a nice butt, while high on power and candy and with a vicious streak a mile wide?

"Karkat, what did it do?" John lets his eyes close as he hits a moment of vertigo; his hand moves to touch Karkat's arm, in a weak attempt to steady himself. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Karkat says forcefully. His expression is absolutely miserable; he yanks his arm out of John's loose grip. "It tried to convince me it was you, and that we were at school. The rainbow colored walls and the yellow brick road should have been a massive fucking hint that I wasn't in Kansas anymore, but no sirree, I, being the fucking paragon of intelligence that I am, was completely fooled. It was great."

They're going to be here all night at this rate. Karkat's too darn stubborn, and John flounders for a long moment, trying to string words together in his head that both make sense and will be convincing enough that Karkat'll just answer the question.

Uh. Well. Maybe it would help to actually ask the question. Not the generic ones like 'what happened,' but the one that's actually eating away at John like poison, and has been ever since the Trickster first poured it into his ears. "Did he try to kiss you?"

Karkat stills. John's stomach does a good impression of recreating what it felt like to fall. Oh no oh no oh no -

"Yeah. Yeah, it did," Karkat says, folding his arms over his chest. His voice is flat and neutral and too quiet, which is the opposite of what Karkat should sound like. "The fuckhead wouldn't know pale if it bit him in the ass, either, so that was fun."

John's fingers dig into the bedsheets and the wind starts to tie itself into knots around him, tangled and snarled. If the Breeze complains, John's too distracted to listen. "Shit. I didn't...are you okay?"

"Shut up, John, I'm fine." Karkat forces a laugh. "This all happened in your thinkpan, remember, not real life. Blah blah fucking blah, Trickster was a raving sack of living excrement, the candy thing
was creepy as fuck, and the sucker shot itself in the foot if it thought it could fool me into thinking it was you after that." He won't meet John's eyes, still - he stays perched on the edge of the bed, his eyes flitting from his own feet to John's hands and back again. "You're absolutely forbidden from blaming yourself for something the batshit insane brain parasite did, got that? I know you, John. If you were vacillating as hard as that, it would be really fucking noticeable."

John's heart seems to have transplanted itself without his permission so that it pounds right in his ears, leaving his chest hollow and his stomach twisted. "That's...not...entirely accurate," he says.

"...oh." Karkat looks at him. Looks blank, uncomprehending - and then John is the one who can't look anymore. He can't bear to watch Karkat's expression change. "Fuck."

"I didn't - I don't -" He has to stop and gulp, twice. His throat just doesn't seem to want to cooperate. But no. He's not going to be a big weenie and ignore this anymore. He's said too much to swallow it down now; Karkat's not stupid, he'll connect the dots on his own, and John chickening out now will only make it worse. "I dumped a lot of bad things back there. And I don't know why it all turned into the Trickster, or how, but...it wasn't just things about my handler, or about the game. It was also stuff about you." He feels kind of light headed. And sick. Pretty nauseous, yeah. He's been not-talking about this around Karkat for so long that breathing feels like choking. This conversation was never supposed to have to happen.

"What. About. Me." Karkat's voice is like stone, and John's too cowardly to look up.

He has a choice between passing out and saying it. This is a thousand times worse than he imagined. Just say it, say it, say it. "Sometimes I really want to kiss you. A lot. AndalsoIthinkyouhaveareallynicebutt." Ack! Too fast, that was actually literally incoherent. But like heck can he repeat himself. Oh goddd...

Karkat says nothing for long enough that John begins debating inwardly whether it would be a good investment to just, you know, pass out now that he's said it! Passing out beforehand would have been a problem, but hey! He's said what he should have said months and months ago, and if he just so happens to be unconscious while Karkat's deciding he never wants anything to do with John ever again, he's already done his part.

The effort is more obvious in Karkat's voice this time, and John wilts further. "So you're flushed for me, is what you're saying? Is that what you're saying?"

"No-ot really?" John's voice cracks and his throat is dry and he can't breathe and when the Breeze tries to fix that John shoves it away mentally, on reflex, because there's nothing but panic left fueling him. Today's been too long and he's made a mistake. He's made an awful mistake. He should have never talked about this, never, never, never.

That kinda sorta ends in a shout, and Karkat clearly isn't expecting it, jumping in surprise. "Wha-where the fuck are you getting that from?!" the troll demands, sounding both exasperated and baffled. John can only cringe. "I don't hate you, I'm fucking floored because apparently on top of missing that you've been abused by your shitty fucking custodian for years, I managed to overlook the fact that you've been going red without telling me! How long have we not been on the same page, because it feels like I've been the fucking moron reading the wrong book altogether."

"No - no, we're - I like this! I like you!" John's crying and there's three feet of space between him and Karkat that might as well be a mile, because Karkat's not making a move to close it and John couldn't blame him if he never did again. "I like being near you and listening to you shout at bad rom-coms and reading comics with you and spending time together after school and seeing you after swim practice and eating outside under our tree and talking about dumb stuff on a pile instead of
doing homework and I just want to stay with you. J-just -" His hands are shaking too much as he raises them to wipe at his face, so he ends up using the heel of his palm, mashing it against his eyes and sobbing with his mouth open. "I just don't want to mess this up and wreck everything - but I already did, didn't I? God..."

Something touches his face. John keeps his hands on his eyes. They're not doing anything to really stop him crying, but he can't look, he can't. "...Jonathan Egbert. Do you want to be moirails or not?" There's nothing in Karkat's voice, there's nothing at all, John can't breathe and he hates that he keeps crying all the time because he can't handle his own problems alone anymore.

"YES!" he yells in a burst, shuddering. "Yes - because - you - I'm never more happy than when I'm with you! I just...I don't know why I couldn't just stop thinking about stupid things you wouldn't want!" Why couldn't I just forget it a-no, no, stop that! John curls up with his knees to his chest. Gosh, and he went into this trying to coax Karkat into talking...Why couldn't he just leave it alone? "But it doesn't matter," he says, sniffing with an accompanying horrible noise. "I promise! I just want to stay with you!"

Karkat pulls on John's elbows. He probably trying to pull his hands away from his face or something. Nuh-uh, not happening. John can only think of bad things that might happen if he moves his hands right now. "Unbelievable," Karkat mutters. His voice isn't flat and unreadable anymore, but John can't tell what the growl in his tone means without looking and like heck is he doing that! "John. Look at me, dumbass." John doesn't realize he's shaking until Karkat presses the palms of his hands against John's amazing arm shield. "Hey. Hey. Shhh. I don't hate you, stupid. You're the last person in the world I could ever hate. You're officially at the bottom of the list."

"I ruin everything." Karkat's just a blob through the streaming tears. "I love you and I still couldn't not ruin it."

"You didn't ruin anything. You're flipping the fuck out and having a panic attack over it, fuck. Just. Breathe." Karkat curls around him, John's head tucked under his chin. "There. Are you breathing?"

John obeys, gulping down air. It doesn't feel as though it reaches his lungs, so he stays gasping and out of breath, arms jittering while Karkat keeps rubbing them with his hands, making hushing sounds. The murmurs of the Breeze are slow to filter back into John's hearing, full of susurrating complaints about being shoved out (again) and faint, humming worry. He can almost picture it in his mind's eye, a stumpy little version of him kicking its feet with a pout.

Clarity creeps back in a couple of minutes later, as the oxygen starts to kick in and clear the panic from his brain. Karkat registers the shift with a look of relief, just as John switches over from blind panic to thinking panic. God, he can't go a full day without crying and losing his shit to the point that Karkat has to intervene, can he. So stupid. He went into this because Karkat was the one who got hurt, not the other way around - and it was his fault in the first place, so what right does he have to lose his resolve like that? This is just pathetic. He needs to get over it and stop wallowing; if he could just m-

BE: i said, no! cut that out! :T


"Thank fuck." Karkat pulls on John's wrists again, and this time John lets them fall away. Karkat's expression is a mess of irritation and fondness that it takes John too long to recognize - he's convinced himself it wouldn't be there at all. "Okay, just sit there and breathe for a second, got it? Good."
Karkat stops rubbing John's arms, which sucks, because it was helping him time his breathing. The troll seizes the pillows that have accumulated at the head of the bed over the past few days and starts mashing them up against the wall. John gets the idea, but when he goes to help Karkat casts him a withering stare and doesn't let John touch anything until the pillows have been rearranged in a mangled heap. Then he leans precariously over the side of the bed and starts yoinking the pillows from Jade's and Dave's camp-out spots, too. John's mind wants to think that's a bad sign, that Karkat doesn't want him helping; but Karkat's always been the dude in charge of making the pile, on account of the strategic arrangement of random textbooks and other assorted pointy-edged objects that end up tossed in a pile for substance needs a troll to manage. Even then, John usually ends up taking a DVD case to the kidney, on good days. But this time Karkat doesn't add anything other than pillows before he starts tearing the whole thing apart again, hollowing out a space so that he ends up with a pillow cave.

Sometimes Karkat's just...really weird. John lets himself get hauled into the pile, watching Karkat with sore, achy eyes while the troll grumbles to himself. He's cried out but no less panicked because of it, and now he's got this ominous feeling in his stomach that won't leave him alone, tying everything into further knots. Heck, he's still struggling to process the fact that Karkat hasn't stomped out the door yet. Honestly, it's what Karkat should do, before John messes up worse. Maybe he should try the apology thing again? Only it doesn't come out right. "I love you. I love you. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't be stupid. You're not ruining it just because you've got some vacillating human hormones." John's face burns, so he buries it against one of the pillows because the fabric's cool. Karkat's a warm weight, right there in arm's reach, and John can't figure out why he'd put himself at risk like that. It's kind of been established that John's not exactly the most trustworthy person in the universe. He keeps his arms frozen and folded around himself so he won't give in to temptation. This is significantly harder to achieve when Karkat keeps wriggling closer.

"Shhhhh. Shoosh. You're fine." Karkat brushes a hand lightly against John's cheek; the repetitive motion starts to get to him, and John can't quite catch himself before he angles his face so Karkat can reach better. His stomach stops heaving like it wants to hurl itself out through his mouth. John relaxes by inches. Karkat's breath whistles out through his nose, a faint huff. "Alright. I can pretty much guaran fucking tee that as long as this is still working?" Karkat removes his hand for a second and John lifts his head to follow it. "We're still pale here. So let's just talk some points out so you can't let this shit fester. Which you clearly fucking would. And have."

Oh. Uh. "Probably, yeah...okay," John agrees, blinking and trying to ignore the wistful ache that starts eating at him.

It goes away when Karkat mashes his palm against John's face in the roughest pap ever. "First fucking thing...what the fuck was that about my butt?!"

Okay. John can actually defend his poor life choices about this part. In fact, he's almost required to. By like. Law. "It's a really nice butt! I don't know! It kind of started just as a general thing, but then it kinda turned into more of a thing when Hemogoblin showed up? And then you were Hemogoblin, so I couldn't even say I was thinking about someone else's Butt finally instead of yours. It was all one butt. Singular." He's still not over that.

Whatever hesitation or understandable wariness might have gotten to Karkat has clearly gone out the window; he rolls his eyes at John and clamps his hands on John's cheeks, squeezing until John makes a helpless fish face. "Oh my fucking god John. Of all the things to fixate on. IT'S A BUTT."

"Okay, yeah, I know where you're coming from, but..." John has to find a way to put this into
words. There has to be a way to make Karkat understand why this has been stuck in John's head for literally almost years. "...Dat ass."

Karkat cuffs him upside the back of the head. Yeah, he deserves that one. "Unbelievable. Really?!"

"...I don't know?" John protests, shrugging. "I just tried not to stare a lot because it's creepy."

Karkat is dead silent for a long moment.

And then he busts out laughing.

"Nooooo, don't laugh!" John is horrified, sitting up a little as Karkat wraps an arm around his gut and pitches forward into the pile, laughing like this situation is somehow funny. It takes a lot to get Karkat to laugh. Why is this happening now. How did John ruining things somehow become a laughing matter. "I think you have a nice looking butt! This is a problem! Why are you laughing?!"

"Only you would have this kind of problem, dumbass," Karkat says, his voice muffled because he won't stop cackling into that pillow. "Oh my fucking christ." He lifts his head, his usual scowl struggling to reassert itself while he's still pissing himself laughing over there. "And that's it?"

John has to think about that one. Kissing, butt touching...what else could the Trickster have latched onto and inflicted on Karkat? Oh crap, he can't think. "What else would there be?" he says, worried.

Native exasperation takes its rightful place in Karkat's expression. "You want to kiss me and admire my apparently aesthetically appealing ass? That's the gist of this fucking meltdown? We've covered all the fidusfucking bases, here?"

John's drawing a blank here. "Yeah, I think so?" he says, hazarding a guess. At least he's not panicking anymore. He's too lost to panic. "I'm...sorry?"

Karkat throws his claws up, knocking a pillow off the top of their pillow cave. "You want to stay moiralles? That's what you want?"

John nods so hard he nearly knocks his own glasses off.

"Alright, fuck, then." Karkat breathes in and out, apparently thinking about something. John's heart is doing something really painful and jarring in his chest, a tango of relief and disbelief. "But there's something we need to test firs- no, do not lose your shit again, John," Karkat says; John guesses the color his face turns isn't exactly the healthiest. He knows that his heart probably shouldn't be laboring that badly. "No, fucking listen to me. That Trickster shithead took what you feel and fucked it over, right? We're just going to set this straight so you'll stop dithering yourself into thinking it's somehow an issue." And with that Karkat rolls over and pokes John with a jabby finger. "So kiss me."

John tries to shove himself out of the pile so fast that a pillow flies off the pile and ricochets over the bedside table. "What?!"

Karkat scowls at him and yanks him back down by his shirt, eying the slowly-collapsing pile with disdain. "I told you, I'm fine with kissing, dumbass," he says. "That's as much a thing for moirallegiance as it is for any other kind of romance, you shining example of trunkbeast-like memory retention. Or did that just fly out of your dumb pan the moment you realized you needed something new to add to your collection of things to torture yourself with?" When John can't even start to answer that (because it's all such a tangled, thorny mess, all of it was awful when it was just him alone with his thoughts screaming in the dark, so why does it sound so stupidly okay coming out of Karkat's mouth?), Karkat pulls him in closer. "I know what I'm about, John. Kiss. Now, before those other fucking geniuses show up."
John can't move. He can't. Which, of course, means that Karkat and the Breeze end up losing their patience at the same time and make up his mind for him, Karkat knotting a fist in John's shirt to tug down and the Breeze whumping him right in the back of the head so he loses his balance. His heart is still jarring with sick bursts of panic and his pulse is thready and when Karkat kisses him the main thing on John's mind is oh god do not pass out. His arms start to ache almost right away with the effort to keep holding himself up so he doesn't squash Karkat. There's an echo of memory in his head that belongs to him and yet doesn't, at the same time, something that's not him but almost-him, laughing sweet like cotton candy and shoving the memory of grinding down and licking blood out of Karkat's mouth into the front of his mind -

"Shhh," Karkat says, lips moving just over John's. John whimpers, his head screaming, and Karkat threads his claws into John's hair, combing through and lightly scratching at the base of his skull, so light it feels like a brushing tickle. "Shush. Stay with me." Karkat presses, insistent, until John tilts his head down again; then he goes back to smoothing a thumb over the side of John's neck where his pulse is throbbing erratically. One of John's arms kind of gives up and he crumples. He keeps waiting, braced for the moment where Karkat will push him away and want this all to stop.

But it doesn't come. The troll just keeps making soft noises and coaxing him back down when he tenses. John teeters internally for a long moment - Karkat rubs the knotted crook of one shoulder, though, and that decides things. It's very difficult to stay tensed up and anxious when one's moirail is right there, and part of the knotted mass in his stomach melts when John just lets himself ease down so he's lying on his side and his arm doesn't have to strain anymore. Karkat moves with him, arms wound around his neck and lips parted just so under John's, making a sound like a purr, and yeah, John's gone. The last of the tension unwinds from his shoulders. Karkat is very warm. John curls in closer and at some point his lips kind of miss Karkat's and he ends up nuzzling the side of his face instead. But that's okay. It's warm and soft and quiet, and Karkat is solid in his arms and not hating him for it.

Cuddling is good. Cuddling is the best. John squeezes Karkat in a hug, carefully, and Karkat presses a kiss to the hollow of his throat, making a soft trilling sound that comes out muted and fluttering. John closes his eyes and drifts for a while, until Karkat says something that might be words. He shakes himself out of the doze before it can set in. "Wha?"

Karkat taps him on the cheek with a claw, making a 'hmmm' noise like he's had something confirmed. "That's what you wanted?" When John nods, wordlessly, Karkat sighs gustily. "You do realize that's about as pale a makeout ever conceived of by troll kind, right?"

Words are wayyyy beyond him right now. How is Karkat talking? "Muh?"

"I said, you've been freaking yourself the fuck out and feeding your inner crazy incarnate over wanting more pale makeouts. Congratulations. This is about as pale as pale gets." Karkat noses John's neck, and his insides go gooey some more.

"Oh. "Oh," he says aloud, helpfully, so that Karkat's up to date on his latest thoughts.

"Oh is right. This is fucking disgraceful. Have you paid no attention to any of my movie marathons? Clearly I need to make you read more because if that's what you've been panicking yourself into thinking is flushed, you've got some basic misconceptions that need to be addressed." Yeah, now Karkat's just getting huffy. John's too blissed out to do more than pat him on the head by way of apology. "The butt thing's still weird, okay. That's just really fucking weird. But if all you want to do is touch it we can talk about that later."

There's a twinge of anxiety at that, but nothing John can't ignore. Besides, the phrase 'we need to talk about your butt' is unequivocally hilarious and not to be trifled with. "Kay," John agrees. He'll hold
that one in reserve. "Heheh." Whoops. Don't laugh about it yet.

Karkat drags his knuckles up and down John's back once, sweeping as though to check for any more points of tension. "Are you calm now?" he asks, with a note of suspicion in his face until John nods. "Good. Fucking fantastic, you huge dope. Just - general rule of thumb, John?" John nods to show he's listening, even though his eyes are starting to sink closed. Karkat thumps him lightly. "If the makeouts are soothing to the point that you nearly bliss out into a fucking cuddleblob after five minutes? You're probably not thinking concupiscent."

"But you're okay?" John asks. That's still the point of this whole mess of conversation, and it's important that even though he's completely lost control of said conversation, he actually get this from Karkat. In words. "The Trickster me did hurt you. I know he did."

Karkat pauses, and then nods. "Yeah. Better now." He wrinkles up his nose. This is adorable. "Fuck. The Trickster thing...yeah, that fucked me up a little. But like I said, it's pretty obviously not you. Not anymore, if it ever was." The troll sighs. "We did need to have a feelings jam like this. I applaud your remarkable foresight in making this conversation happen. Now listen to your fucking moirail and don't ever sit on a bombshell like that again."

"I'll try not to. Sometimes it just happens, though," John says, making a face when Karkat starts shifting. "Noooo..."

"Up," Karkat says, stroking John's face and then sitting up, dragging his hand over his own face. When John weakly tries to tug him back down (why must cuddles end prematurely?) the troll clicks his tongue. "I mean it, Harley and the douchebag will be here literally any second. Make yourself decent and brush your teeth, before they see you looking like a shooshpapped pile of human ooze."

"Nrrrrrrgh." John thinks he makes a great argument. But Karkat still somehow manages to win, dropping a kiss on John's lips and then sitting right back up so that John has to follow him. It's unfair. There's a chill coming in from the open window now that night's set in and they're not buried in pillows anymore, so John grabs the first layer of sheets and wraps them around his shoulders in a cape.

The door swings open before Karkat can get more than a yard from the bed, before John has mustered the will to stand up and make the trek to the locker rooms down the hall. "What do you wa--" is all Karkat gets out before the figure in the doorway blurs, and throws something past Karkat - at John, who doesn't have time to react.

And a pair of boxers smacks him in the face.

"I would just like you both to know," Dave says, from somewhere beyond the veil of shock and black cotton, "that this? Is worth what you two are about to do to me in retribution. This is so worth it."

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Saturday, March 29th

Jade cracks her knuckles.

It's mostly just for show.

Kanaya inspects her with a critical eye, but from what Jade can see, everything looks fantastic!

"It will do," the jadeblood announces, and really, isn't that all the validation an outfit needs?
- gardenGnostic [GG] opened memo on board group project :D at 06:34:22 -
GG: goooooood morning, everyone! is everybody up and at em?
TT: Yep.
TG: ısh so early *sobes*
TA: why the fuck am ii even here jade
GG: because you're the computer guy!
TA: ii kind of already have this ma2iiively more iiimportant thing ii need two be working on
GG: multitask! it's good for the soul! and anyway, i leave today and won't be able to help for a while, so you're being drafted into the cause.
TA: no. and didn't ii ıday a2 your undii2uted e-diicatıor that you all needed two top wiıth the extraneou2 group memo2?
TT: We're secure for now.
TA: and who the fuck are you?
TG: no, tha fuck r u?
TA: who the fuck are eiither of you?!
GG: i see everyone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning :/
TA: no, ii'm ii in a timecrunch, there're two complete dip2hit2 trying two complaiin to me about their hatefeelı2 24/7, AA i2 riıding my a22 about her project, my cu2todiian ha2 been iınexplııcably fuckiing AWOL for dayı2, and you and the2e two random people here are makiıng my job twııce a hırd a2 iit need2 two be.
TA: thiı2 ii2n't me 'waking up on the wrong ıde of the coon,' thiı2 i2 me not haviıng been iın the coon for nearly a week
TA: becauııe ii keep FLOATIING OUT AND WRİITIING CODE ON THE CEİILING İN MY 2LEEP.
TG: that doesn't sound like funtimesıes
GG: is the floating normal?
TA: ii can't feel my toe2.

- 

It would be easier to keep track of everyone if Jade could use her powers! Urfffgghhh. People tend to accumulate in either John or Jane's room or Kanaya's fitting room, which are just far enough away from the Queen's Hub that Jade can only communicate with them by text or by making the run all the way from one wing of the lab to another without the benefit of space powers. It's not that bad, but it is a hassle and a half when she's used to bouncing wherever she needs to be!

She's never distrusted her own strength, before. Now she's seen what happens when she pushes too hard, too fast, in these twisting void shields. The thing with the whiteboard was harmless enough, because no one got hurt; what happened to Samuel Egbert's hand was...kind of disturbing. Jade's been to look in on him over this past week, to peer in at him as though watching will reveal some smidgen of guilt or remorse in his bland expression, but she always finds her eyes turning, with irresistible force, to the cauterized stump where his hand abruptly cuts off.

Sometimes it's easy to forget just how powerful the four of them are. The way Grandpa raised her, with a constant awareness of the game always present even when it went unstated, it just seems normal that she and Dave and John and Rose are like this. But even if it turns out Samuel's not a total stinker, he's not gonna grow that part of his hand back or anything.

-
TT: I'm fairly certain this guy won't be much help.
GG: nooo, we need him!
TG: idk, i think we've got this shtie handled
TG: were pretty bobmbob ass haxxors here w/o floaty troll's input
GG: true, you guys are great! but he's also one of the troll players, according to karkat, so i get the feeling we'll need his help at some point! i'm almost positive!
TA: okay you know what?
TA: ii'm 2ick two death of thi2 game 2hiit. liike. 200% over iit
TA: make 2omeone el2e be your troll programming god
GG: but that's just it! you're the only troll player with amazing computer skills that we know about right now!
GG: karkat and kanaya are both leaving, too, and neither of them is any good at hacking anyway...
TT: Understatement.
TA: and you're the two who've been diickiing with my 2ecuriity patche2? fanta2tiic.
TG: you noticed hat?
TA: of cour2e ii diid. on top of everything el2e goiing wrong iin my liife.

Jade swings around to retrieve the White Queen from where the carapacian has settled in for the morning. Some times that task is harder than others; carapacians have this tendency to vanish and do their own thing without warning anyone else (just look at how the Black Queen and Spades Slick took off, totally at random, and haven't been seen since). But today, Jade gets a pleasant surprise when she opens up a group memo to ask who's run into the Queen lately, only half expecting a response, John messages her back almost right away to say that the WQ is in his room! Jade hurries over, urging John via text to keep the WQ still for a few seconds, and thankfully by the time she reaches the room the pale carapacian waits outside John's door, her claws signing a greeting as Jade skids to a stop.

WQ: You seek me, my dreamer?
"Yup!" Jade pauses for a moment as breeze streams through her hair, yanking on the end of a braid once until the tie comes off, and then rolls her eyes as the wind carries the hair tie back under the door with almost palpable glee. "I'm headed out today, so would you mind helping us take one more look at the Hub?" she asks. "Just so if you think of any more parts that might help, I can add them to the list!"

WQ: Of course. I only wish that I could offer more assistance with it. Alas, I reached the limits of my own ability to recreate the terminal with my first attempt.

"No, no, what you did already was pretty darn impressive, I think," Jade exclaims as they start down the hallway. The Queen moves at a default sedate, stately pace, so Jade finds herself hard pressed to stop and backtrack a little before she can leave the carapacian in the dust by accident. The trip to the computer room takes a whole lot longer than Jade would have taken if she'd gone alone, but the carapacian queen has really is easy to talk to, as long as you keep teasing out what questions you need to ask to prompt her to explain details. "What were you and John talking about, anyway?"

WQ: He wished to clarify some of what he recalls, now that his mind is mostly his own. In addition, it would appear his aspect's manifestation has informed him that some of his memories may not be available or unlocked yet.

Before, Jade was just curious; now, she's super curious. Of the four kids, she and Rose have been the ones to try to grill the queens for info. Dave, as near as Jade can tell, was so gosh darn awful at
deciphering the Black Queen's shenanigans that he just gave up on ever getting a straight answer, ever. John, with his intense, kneejerk reflex to forget the game whenever anyone mentioned it, would also have had his dad riding his butt constantly whenever he tried to learn more about his powers. Jade's not sure he's ever had the will to reach out and talk about what he does remember with the WQ. His memories would give him a different perspective than Jade and Rose have, hampered as they are by the fact that most of what they know is still based solely on the recordings, Karkat's sparknotes and crappy diagrams, and in Jade's case, what was recorded in her Grandpa's files of Joanna Crocker's visions. Having that benefit of real memories might lead him to ask questions they could never think of.

"His memories of the very end, with the scratch?" Jade hazards a guess, and is only a little disappointed when the Queen predictably nods an affirmative. She holds the door of the conference room open for the carapacian when they reach it at last, and complains a little when she sees Dirk is absent - probably off checking Jake and Jane on his periodic rounds of the lab. "That's dumb. Sooo arbitrarily dumb! What, is someone just making up new rules out of nowhere to justify this?"

WQ: It is entirely probable.

"Wait. Huh?" Jade stops in her tracks, and the carapacian actually passes her up before realizing the human stopped. "What are you talking about?"

WQ: Something occurred at the end of the last game. Something traumatic enough, and entwined enough with the troll players' game session, that paradox space could not record it properly.

WQ: Part of that is due to the interference of a second game session, which would naturally have been saved under its own file. But there also must have been something...untenable. As you have speculated amongst yourselves, there must have been a reason for you all to decide to scratch both game sessions at once. It is a drastic measure for a session that has become unwinnable. And something so devastating that it required not one, but two scratches to try to produce a viable session? The circumstances are unusual, and I regret that my fellow queen and I had already vacated the session when it happened.

WQ: If the game judged the precipitating incident significant enough, it may have shaped reality to try to bring order out of a particularly damaging event. Locking memories of one of its players in the name of asserting a sequential order to the narrative would not be beyond its power.

Jade shakes her head, and starts walking again so that they can start sorting through all the panels and exposed wires and circuit boards that Jade, Roxy, and Dirk have dismantled over the past few days. "Even knowing it's one big video game, it's still so weird to think about how random and arbitrary video game logic is," Jade says, chewing on her lower lip as she crawls under the terminal to start holding out parts for the Queen to nod or shake her head at.

WQ: It is the most fundamental logic there is. What seems perhaps arbitrary and shoehorned in to you is an order as old as Skaia itself. Without these game mechanics, paradox space would have collapsed in on itself under the weight of improbability and glitches long ago. However inconvenient, narrative structure is everything.

"You really do have an interesting perspective on it!"

WQ: I have lived it. I could, of course, offer my speculations as to what the traumatizing event might have been - Doc Scratch's influence, then and now, suggests particularly disturbing possibilities that do not bode well for the future session - but I would prefer to wait until we can view the troll session. It could make all the difference.
They get sidetracked for a few minutes after that, as Jade holds up a particularly mangled, twisty bit of computer innards, and they have to puzzle over it for a good while trying to figure out just what it was before the heat and strain of the Queen's Hub fried it and left behind an indistinguishable puddle of silicon. Jade comes up with another question by the time they're done - she actually almost forgets it, the words completely escaping her for a second while she mumbles to herself, and then the question comes back to her. "Do you think any of the rest of us will remember, soon?"

WQ: I imagine you all will be able to retrieve them soon. Heirs have a tendency to come into their powers early, sometimes before they're capable of controlling or understanding them - not always to their benefit. What triggers each of your own memories could be different for each player.

Jade shakes her head, and has to turn her head to tug a wayward curl of hair from where it's pinched between a particularly snarled mess of wires and melted metal with her teeth - her hands are kinda busy at the moment, and her space powers are still on pause. "Any advice?"

WQ: Explore your aspects and powers. All four of you are in the god tiers, and that means much. Coming to a deeper understanding of their roles helps players to understand themselves.

"Oh, wow...I wouldn't even know where to start doing that!" Jade chews on the hair in her mouth - it's there already, and all, so... "So I should try doing new things with my space powers?"

WQ: Experimentation might help, yes. Witches are very versatile, I have found - maybe the most versatile roles in the game. You have only scratched the surface of your capabilities as yet.

"Sooo, get creative? Jade can do that! But still - "Urgh!" she groans, tossing another useless chunk of semiconductor out to add to the trash pile. "I just can't believe Karkat had all these dreams about our session, but me and Rose and Dave haven't even had any cool dreams or anything!" That's the most unfair thing about all this, to Jade's mind. True, Karkat has been really messed up by all his nightmares, but at least he has something to go on!

WQ: I still find the Knight of Blood's visions most peculiar. I can only imagine he must have some connection to your session beyond the obvious merge of the two sessions that allows him to recall these things in his dreams. The presence of blood alone would ordinarily not be enough for a Knight to function as a Seer might. One would almost think he has viewed your session before.

Huh. Jade hasn't really thought about that, before. Sure, Karkat knowing more about the game session and everyone dying a lot kind of nagged at her, since it was so weird and all, but she hasn't devoted much brainpower to investigating why he might remember more than the actual players of their own game! She thinks the Queen might have mentioned some of this before, but it just wasn't all that high on her list of priorities with everything else that was going on. "What about the troll players? Didn't they have dreamers, too?" she says, hesitant. The WQ just watches her with thoughtful black eyes, waiting patiently for Jade to finish where she sits, making a computer chair a throne. "The ones on Prospit would have prophetic visions in the clouds, wouldn't they?" Grandpa always thought Jade would have a lot of those, but Jade supposes it's just one of many things that he didn't understand fully.

WQ: Prospitian dreamselves can indeed experience prophecy through Skaia's clouds during an eclipse, but those are usually far more simplistic visions. The thought may have merit. I shall see what I can recollect, but I do not believe I spoke enough with the Knight on Prospit to know for certain what visions he might have had...Actually, now that I think on it, I'm not certain that I ever spoke with him at all. Like your Heir, he may have woken very late, and given that my cousin-queen and I were exiled early on, in that game session...

If John and Karkat were both sleepy dumb butts, it would not surprise Jade at all. Seriously! She's
not sure how two people could be so different but so similar in such random ways. "Do you remember much of the troll's game at all?" she asks, scooting out from under the terminal and sitting up with her hands braces behind her to look up at the Queen. It feels kinda like sitting by the fire with Grandpa in the grand foyer, listening to him recount some wild adventure from his stint as a tomb raider or lecture on the best way to maintain a flintlock rifle.

WQ: They were hasty players, as I recall. So quick to lash out, so slow to question the consequences of their actions. Two of them spent a good amount of time dreaming, though they flew around more doing silly things more than they did complete any dream quests. I recall the Sylph awoke very early, but she didn't consult me often. There was also a girl with the *oddest* taste for red chalk.

"Like, chalk drawings?"

WQ: No, my dear. She enjoyed the taste. Literally.

Oh, jeez. Trolls and their 'addictions.' Jade shakes her head - and then blinks, and slowly turns her head again, just in time to catch a scrawny black claw reach out from under the conference table and snag one of the melted hunks of scrap metal from the pile.

"WV! There you are!" she says, laughing, leaning to the side so she can peek into the darkness under the table. A pair of beady white eyes frown at her in silent reproach, and the claw snaps out to grab a whole bunch more chunks from the pile. He probably needs them for one of his construction projects! But when WV scurries out from under the table with an overflowing armful of computer parts stacked higher than his head, the White Queen manages to gently catch him by the back of his clothes with a single claw, trading the look of faint amusement for one of gentle curiosity.

WQ: Ah. There you are, indeed, small Villein. I wished to ask -

WV drops all the metal with a clatter, sudden enough to make Jade jump a little! He starts struggling to wriggle himself free from the Queen's grip on his clothes and then seems to change his mind. He raises his claws and Jade rocks back on her butt and then forward on to her knees, meaning to lean just a little bit forward and pull him away before he can bite or scratch or something else like that. WV tends to get a little scratchy when he doesn't get his way.

She sits back on her butt in total surprise when WV starts signing instead, flailing his claws with a purpose - and actual words pop up in her head!

Well. Not words. But a stream of random syllables that are so close to being words Jade's brain ties itself into knots with the conviction that she *should* be able to understand, despite the fact that it's nonsense.

WV: kątudaraijūsmanotekadjumsžinotikasgeriausiavisiemsirjūsgalitebosasžmonėsaplink. naijūsnegalitepasakytimankądaryti! darautaikanoriusi.

Thankfully, the White Queen seems just as baffled as Jade, her smooth face screwed up with confusion that she *should* be able to understand, despite the fact that it's nonsense.

WV: irkątudaraikosomosomergina?! pirmiausaijūmsirjūsųvilkaspagrobtimanetadavilkiteaplinkmanevisąįkvailaplanetojeodabartai?! kodėlvėjuotaberniukastaiplūdnakodėlviskassiaubinga?

WQ: But this is fascinating. I thought you incapable of speech, small one. Slow down, you speak too quickly. Your thoughts are rushed and garbled.

Jade sets an elbow on her knee and sets her chin on her fist, watching in amazement as WV just
keeps blaring something that's just barely not speech into their heads. It's all gobbledygook, is the problem; like listening to a foreign language on fast forward, with no pauses for breath that would make the sentences coherent. It *sounds* like it should make words, but Jade can't parse them at all.

Still! This is the closest WV has come to genuine speech in as long as Jade's known him. It's all been squeaks and other plain old verbal clicks before; no matter how much he moved his claws, he couldn't seem to make the telepathic part of carapacian communication work no matter how frustrated he got. He must have been practicing while they left him alone in the Lalonde house!

WV: nesustabdytikadnesutinkujūsųautoritetąašatmestimonarchijostironijapaleisk!

WQ: I only wish to assist -

Unfortunately, the Queen lets go of WV's clothes at the wrong moment, and tries to touch his shoulder - maybe to try to calm him down a little so she can get a word in edgewise amid all the telepathic garble. At the touch WV starts signing even more emphatically, though, and backpedals away. The Queen has longer strides than him but when she rises to try to follow him, her expression both concerned and interested, WV seems to have had enough. He crackles with green energy for a second, flaring enough that Jade feels the static electricity right down in her bones, and then swipes at the WQ's outstretched claw and takes off at a dead run, leaving behind his gathered metal scraps in his haste to abscond.

WV: despotasdzieržymordablogi!

"Crap. Did he get you bad?" Jade asks, standing up properly so she can get a look at the White Queen's arm. There's a faint abrasion across the back of one hand, but it doesn't look there's any blood, at least. Jade's gonna have to give that carapacian a stern lecture about manners! "Did you get any of what he tried to say?"

WQ: No, unfortunately. He still has no love for monarchs, I see. He can be childish and indignant in temperament, but it is rare to see a pawn carapacian with such a determined desire to rouse revolution.

WQ: Do you know what might have imparted him with that ability to make use of space powers? I don't know that he had that before.

Jade scuffs her foot against the floor, sighing as she does. "I still don't know what made him turn out that way. I keep running into all these more urgent things to do, even in a lab full of all the coolest scientific equipment I could ask for..." For all she knows, it might just be a side effect of the spontaneous way she stabilized him on the quantum level - or it might be something else entirely.

WQ: Mmm. I wish him well. Perhaps I can coax him into speaking intelligibly, if he lets me assist him. Whatever stripped him of the ability in the first place, his progress thus far to reclaim it seems nigh incomprehensible. I thought I recognized his mode of speech - it reminded me a little of my own mind. I think he may well have been basing his attempts off my own telepathy, which is odd. Particularly for a Dersite.

The carapacian opens and closes her claw slowly as she says this, though it doesn't seem to impede her speech or anything. Jade has noticed that the queens seem to have more leeway when it comes to their telepathy and sign language. "You know, I get that it's a big cosmic chess game, kind of, but seriously - why do the Derse carapacians and you guys fight, anyway?" she asks, stooping to start brushing the scattered mess of dropped metal fragments back into the pile with little touches of her power. "I mean, what - when we start the game this time, are you all just gonna pretend you didn't live for centuries here on Earth without really trying to hurt each other or anything?" If the WQ says
it's more 'video game logic' again, Jade is gonna have to postpone Kanaya's trip in order to have a meltdown to match one of Karkat's, honestly!

And so, naturally, that's exactly the answers the Queen gives. Blrughhgl.

WQ: There is always a game. Two armies wage war across the Battlefield, one in Skaia's name, one in ruthless opposition. And throughout it all, the heroes work to revitalize their lands, reclaim the Battlefield, and forge the sacred tadpole that will give rise to the next Frog.

It even sounds like one of the voiceover spiels that would come at the start of a video game intro sequence! "Why, though? Why would Dersites hate the idea of a new universe so much?" Heck, Jade can't even picture WV participating in a war at all - he's too much of an adorable little oddball. Spades Slick, on the other hand...that guy, she could totally see trying to shank people on the Battlefield.

WQ: They are as they were born to be. As we all are. Those of Derse oppose the creation of Himself because that is at the core of their existence. They curse Skaia because Skaia requires that they do so. Their destructive nature carries them forth to overwhelm Prospit's forces, and initiate the Reckoning - which both carries the players to their paradoxical points of origin, and provides the impetus for their later exodus into the Medium.

WQ: And so in their own way, Derse serves Skaia just as faithfully as Prospit does. They have a different calling, but I could never begrudge my sister for her aims. All things are for the sake of the game.

"Is she really helping us, then? I mean, you two seem like you're working together now, mostly...and she's trying to help us figure out this messed up game session. Kinda." Jade tries to get back on track. The issue of how weirdly the BQ went about trying to advise Dave is probably beyond comprehension. Unless you're an evil alien queen, anyway. "It all seems less like video game logic and more like contradictory stuff."

WQ: She is a creature of contradictions. Once, we communed more often, when we faced each other across the Battlefield, while the Kings sheltered where we could best defend them. But times changed. The game changed. And the Black Queen and I fell out of the practice of corresponding, except in times of dire need. This strange session, and the circumstances under which the last one ended, qualified enough for her to seek me out, as chance would have it.

WQ: But that does not mean she likes it, and she is taciturn when it suits her. It is easy enough to guess what she recognized. The signs of Doc Scratch's arrival, once one thinks to look, are always unmistakable. And once he comes into being, a session is almost invariably cursed with unfathomable misfortune. Skaia attempts to compensate for the imbalance, but with each emergency protocol that it activates to restore order, the glitches proliferate and begin to stack up. Essential game functions go haywire, or cease entirely. Players go rogue or become lost, trapped in a maze of their own insecurities and flaws, unable to progress forward in their maturation and attain fruition. Those like Jack Noir, always skating the fine line between wildness and madness, go over the edge.

This all sounds like a repeat of some of the White Queen's advice that she gave the other day; Jade supposes that her question must have kicked off something in the carapacian's mind that she already discussed once before. "How do you know so much about it, anyway?" she asks, settling her hands on her hips and surveying the Hub terminal, which looks absolutely forlorn with all its guts and melted parts strewn across the floor. Someone - maybe Roxy - lined up some of the transceiver parts on the ledge of one of Karkat's whiteboards and arranged them in a little pyramid.

When the alien says nothing, Jade glances at her and realizes the carapacian has her head tilted to the
side. Like she's waiting for more input. "Doc Scratch, I mean. You say having a game session crash as hard as ours did is reeeeally unusual, but you also sound like you've seen this all happen before."

That does the trick.

WQ: There are always rumors. News that filters through paradox space, inklings that whisper of the failure of other game sessions, of branches of universal potentiation that have been terminated, never to regenerate again. But of course, one never imagines that it will happen to your session. Until it is too late. He is already here.

WQ: Once Doc Scratch appears, it has always been too late, they say.

Nuh-uh! That's the kind of naysaying that the others are always going off about when they start trying to say the game can just not happen. Like it's just as simple as not loading Sburb, if they want to stop the end of the world. "We'll figure out a way to beat him," she says encouragingly, smiling at the carapacian until the WQ smiles fondly back. "We will! We'll figure out this game and beat it so good, it'll make Scratch's dumb cue ball head spin!"

WQ: If anyone could do it, I believe it could be you, my dreamer. But, ah. The path will be fraught with danger. The current Genesis Frog has grown weak and will not fight this cancer; Skaia has always been too passive an entity to change that now. If we fight this ending, we fight alone, without Skaia's guiding light. If need be, when the time comes, my King and I may be able to redirect those of Prospit to help you all more in your quests than on the Battlefield. It may take some persuading with the Black Queen though. I'll see what I can talk her into.

That's depressing. And kind of sucky. But Jade refuses to let that get her down! Nodding her head firmly, she goes to the table and starts flipping through the notebook paper that they've all been working on as they added parts to the list of things they need to order in sporadic bursts of wildly varying handwriting - Roxy's haphazard and sloppy, Dirk's tight and constrained, Jade's loopy and bubbly in cursive.

One last thought occurs to her, while she and the White Queen go through and put the last finishing touches on the order sheet. "Where is he, by the way? Your King, I mean. He turned into a Protector a while ago, right?" Jade says, gnawing on the end of the pen with her front teeth and talking around it. Carapacians are pretty private about their politics and lives, especially the ones who retreated back to the original landing site cities in the Central Asian deserts. But she definitely thinks that was a thing that happened; initials aren't as big a deal for humans and trolls as they are for carapacians, but the change from WK to GP was big enough to end up in some textbooks. Especially since the carapacian in question was the one apparently in charge of most of the alien civilization, at the time!

WQ: Oh! My dear King...it has been long since I saw him. Yes, he is the Grey Protector now. He seeks to watch over both Prospitians and Dersites, in the absence of both Dersite monarchs. It is a noble aim, and I can only speculate that he has been, at least in part, successful. What happened in the genocide would have confirmed it for me, if nothing else.

Jade removes the pen from her teeth and blinks, cocking her head to the side and looking up from the list after a short delay. "The - you mean the Holocaust?"

WQ: Yes. You know how that world war ended. It is in your history texts.

Everyone knows. It's kinda the entire reason no one has messed with the carapacian civilization in the past century, no matter where they branch out and set up their colonies. "Two giant carapacians, yeah. They just showed up out of nowhere and started stomping on Germany!" A lot of the designs for modern giant robots are based on them actually - Jade knows for a fact that the Japanese have
been extrapolating their blueprints for Power Ranger zords from them for years.

If Jade were a more suspicious person, she'd think that the look on the White Queen's face was almost a smug smirk. But her features are way too regal for such a thing.

**WQ:** An Arch Deaconstructor and a Siege Titan. Whether they respect my Protector enough to see him as liege - which I doubt - the Dersites would have had to agree to activate their war vats in order to clone a Greater Rook of that magnitude, and design it to work in tandem with a Greater Bishop of Prospit. We carapacians had not dealt with something like your human and troll genocides, what you've inflicted on each other for such strange things as hemotype or ethnicity or religion. The ectobiological terminals are usually secure in the Furthest Ring. Having them destroyed like that, so callously, for no reason but that Hitler thought us a threat to his Lebensraum, along with so many others...the losses are still incalculable. So many carapacian genetic codes, lost forever. It might have been enough to bring Derse around to my Protector's side.

Jade never thought about it that way! Perhaps because all she's known a whole life through are the carapacians who, despite being split up into Prospitians and Dersites, don't really fight too much - at least not where human and troll observers have been able to see. They stick to their own cities, yeah, but even then there are some enclaves that mix the two up without obvious problems. She supposes those might be the ones who somehow got inspired by WV to try to change things. Seriously, what a wreck the Earth would be if the two carapacian races had decided to duke it out here as they would on the Battlefield - complete with whole armies of Deaconstructors and Titans!

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Jade looks over the list one last time, nods to herself, and rips off all of the sheets of paper from the notepad. She folds them up, then takes one final lingering look at the Hub in case it decides to spark and blow another fuse or something. But with how much she and Roy and Dirk have stripped from it, and all the batteries they disconnected to save fuel, she thinks it might be under control for now! "We'll figure this out," she says to the White Queen. Then she squints, staring hard at the carapacian. "If the parts get here before I do, you will help them put this together properly...right?" she asks, waving the folded up square of paper to emphasize her point.

The White Queen hesitates almost too long - and then nods.

**WQ:** I built it last time without the request of a player; I can set myself to the task again. I shall assist the two humans.

"Thank you." Jade sticks the list in her pocket and sets her jaw, raising her chin as she marches to the door. '"Time to go!"

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**TA:** you two are okay. liike, not half bad. ...mediocre. eh.

**TT:** We know how the Felt's security crackers operate. There were holes in that shit you could fly a plane through.

**TA:** no, no, no!

**TA:** the gap loop2 are deliiberate! they're what he expect2 two 2ee! god, ii had two tear that 2hiit apart all over again two fix it.

**TA:** you want two play 2criipt kiiddy wiith the maiin wall2, fiine. you're competent and probably won't fuck up two badly.

**TA:** but leave the deep code alone. thii2 ii2 layered for a rea2on. you worry about tho2e 2econdrate hack2. ii'm dealling with the white text douche and he'2 2o beyond that level it'2 unreal.

**GG:** has doc scratch been trying to contact people again?

**TA:** you 2ay that liike he ever 2topped. 2ee how good a job ii'm doiing? praii2e me.

**GG:** not while you're being a dick about it. but yeah, thank you! so will you help us with this?
Leaving sucks more than it has any right to.

WV has been sparking a lot, lately, despite the void wards, and Jade doesn't want to risk someone like Clubs Deuce showing up again and driving them into the kind of rapid teleporting that caused the carapacian to nearly overheat last time. Dirk shows up for all of five seconds so he and Dave can have a staring contest (Jade figures it's some weird Strider thing) before darting off again without a word to anyone, but Roxy and Jane both venture out to the lobby to say goodbye. Roxy keeps nudging Jane in the side, but the other Scratch girl stays silent and watchful through the whole thing. Jade's not too worried though! Jane started talking again yesterday, but she can still go hours between words; it's just a relief that she came out of the surgery relatively lucid. Unlike poor Jake, who can't sort out his scrambled brains and thinks every therapy session is an opportunity to bust out in a daring jailbreak. Apparently he used to be really big on movies...all movies. The Shawshank Redemption being no exception.

And going by how little some of the Crew members that got dewormed earlier are making in terms of progress, the fact that Jake's stuck doesn't seem like a good sign.

"We'll keep at it," Roxy says, when prodding Jane does nothing more than make the other girl grunt and shift position. "Even though I think troll guy is obsolescent. Uh, obnoxious. And hopefully nothing too awful will happen." She sighs, way longer than Jade ever thought any person had the lung capacity to pull off, looking mournful as she does. "Why? Why did it have to be the foxy dad who turned out evil?"

Well yes, Jade can objectively agree that Samuel is pretty darn good looking in a total douchebag asshat fuckface kind of way, but unfortunately, she has no idea how to answer. Mostly because she's got a policy - they've all got a policy - of talking about Samuel as little as possible in as low a voice as possible whenever John's in the room. Heck, when John's even in the same hallway! There's a constant breath of fresh air hanging around the air-conditioned halls that wasn't present before, when John was so obsessed with keeping his control on his powers clamped down.

...And in hindsight, there's just so much of John's behavior in the past that makes Jade squirm with guilt over just how much they all missed. Heck, half the time John wasn't all that good at hiding it - they just never knew the signs for what they were. John and his dad were paranoid (in Jade's opinion, anyway, since she didn't see why they had to act that way even in their own home) but they were nice.

There's a blue rubber band on her fingers to remind her that appearances can be deceiving.

Anyway, she's required by law or something to never say good things about Samuel Egbert again. "He's kinda old," she feels the need to point out, making a face.
"Aged like fine whine," Roxy counters, wistful. "Evil, evil wine. Not fair, I tell you, everyone I like bein' either taken or evil or probs both at the same time."

Jane rolls her eyes. She does it without a sound, and Roxy's still sighing and not paying attention, so Jade thinks she's the only one to notice. By the time Roxy hooks her arm with Jane's and pulls the girl over to say goodbye to Dave, Jane's face is blank once more. Dave is still hastily trying to convince a very unimpressed Rue Lalonde to let him go - because, being the lame goofball he really is under all the cool, Dave completely failed to mention he would be going with Karkat when she agreed to have the private jet meet them at the Seattle airfield. Now she's threatening to make him stay (just on principle, Jade thinks).

But Karkat is definitely going, and Jade knows - they all know - that if he's going, he isn't going alone. If Dave had to stay behind, John might try to go along, even though he still needs to rest, and gosh only knows if they'd be able to stop him if he just did the windy thing to jump across the entire country in a panic. Rose is probably gonna have her work cut out for her keeping John here as it is...

Then there's the problem of watching John and Karkat and then Rose and Kanaya standing off in their own respective corners saying goodbyes. Having to leave John and Rose behind feels awful, though Jade can see the logic behind it. John is still messed up and Rose can help him with his head in the event of an emergency. But she's also still recovering from having a grimdark episode in Seattle, and all four of them look like they're being gutted by inches at the idea of splitting up the party. Jade doesn't blame them at all. She grabs John and Rose the instant they peel away from their respective trolls and hugs them, jamming her eyes closed until they stop burning and prickling. John holds back a little too tightly, while Rose's arm feels so slender and fragile in comparison that she could snap like a twig in a strong breeze.

Then of course they have to shuffle after Dave like a hug monster; he takes it like a real champ this time, after the initial waffling where he's clearly thinking reeeal hard about sprinting off back into the lab. But he gets stuck between John and Jade eventually. There's a faint touch on Jade's back, before Kanaya sneaks in between Rose and John, and then all of them just kind of look, as one, at Karkat.

Karkat scowls back. Jade punches Dave in the arm as discreetly as she can when they're all wobbling into one another, and Dave gives her an aggrieved look before vanishing and reappearing from some other point in time behind Karkat to gently persuade him into joining the circle. Dave's idea of gentle persuasion is a silent shove of encouragement that sends Karkat reeling at John, which is probably the only thing that saves them all from a shouting match once they've reassembled.

Jade wonders how many of them would actually protest or make a fuss if she suggested they just stay here. Karkat would, yeah, but she thinks it would mostly because he wants to disagree with her, not because of any real objection. None of them are really okay about this and the fact that they're going through with these trips not even a week after learning about Samuel Egbert and what he's done to John feels abrupt, like they're jumping the gun and everything could crumble again if someone else in the Crew or the Felt decided to apply some elbow grease, or if the clown guy caught up with them, or John -

The key to not crying is to focus on Kanaya. While the rest of them are slowly untangling from the group hug, Jade turns to see that Kanaya is already straightening up her outfit and looking towards the door. Kanaya's been so patient! Jade hadn't had a clear idea of what brought her out here to accompany Rose, other than some vague notion that the jadeblood wanted to visit Chicago and the two girls' trip escalated rapidly and without warning. But Kanaya's been waiting on this Los Angeles leg of their trip for ages, apparently, while they've been having all this crazy stuff going on, so Jade thinks it's only fair that she finally get to go investigate her own thing. The dome over Los Angeles sounds like an interesting phenomenon, too! Jade would like to check it out, see if maybe she can
circumvent it with Bec's help...it should be fun! Yeah!

Leaving still sucks.

A lot.

TT: The Querent and I have been trying to decipher how to retool the primary relay for an hour already this morning. Shit looks like it's borked. She wasn't kidding when she said she jacked this thing up three ways to Sunday to make it work the way it does. Now all we're picking up is static on three monitors, and the fourth one's stuck in some loop.

GG: what's wrong with it now?! i thought i replaced all the broken stuff earlier!

TT: Most of the peripheric components, yeah, but it's a good thing you didn't dick with the inner stuff too much. The cryogenic low-noise amplifier's on its last legs. I'm not sure how it's possible, but there's at least four different ways this hub could explode at any minute. And that's only the ways that I'm seeing right now. A lot of it is frying as we speak.

TA: je2u2. what kiind of piece of 2hiit are you all workiing on?

TG: (hook)

TT: (line)

TG: (snkerrr)

GG: it's called a queen's hub! it functions as a terminal that can analyze old recorded paradox data of the pre-scratch universe and display it as video feeds. we're still having trouble making it work to access your guys' game session, though. everything's either locked or encrypted or just plain scrambled when the WQ tries to access it!

TA: why would you want to watch that 2hiit?

GG: so we can figure out why we scratched it and mashed our two sessions together in the first place! there's too much we don't know right now...like my grandpa always said - never stop digging until you've gotten to the bottom floor of the remote jungle temple and excavated all its secrets and shipped all the sweet loot back home for the collection!

TG: woah wait hold teh phon, foxy grandpa oldjake went legit tomb raidin?

GG: oh yeah, he got really bored for a while there in the 50s.

TG: oh man jakey would love this if he weren still mad atm

TA: (are you gettiing half of thii2?)

TT: (The part about two past universes hypothetically merging to form this one, or the tomb raider saga?)

TA: (eiither.)

- They jump to Karkat's house for the troll to stare in horror at the topsy-turvy mess his living room has turned into and then grab the package of colored contact lenses from his room so he can do the incognito thing properly. Jade practically sits on Bec's head as she zaps Karkat in and out of the house, spinning around so often to check all her blind spots that she gets a little dizzy! But Bec doesn't make a sound, Karkat's computer doesn't turn on, and Kanaya and Dave don't run into any weird juggalo stalker trolls while they're waiting in the living room, either. They must be in the clear...for now, anyway. Jade still links up with Bec and teleports them all in as few jumps as possible, straight from the suburbs to the airport runway, where the airplane that brought Doctor Lalonde to Seattle sits idling well away from the rest of the traffic. She's not willing to risk that clown guy popping up out of nowhere again!

Dave stares at the private jet like it's gonna bite him, and he's gearing himself up to endure. Karkat still looks distraught, eyes distant as he bites his lip and fiddles with his phone. Both of them are
doing that thing where they hunch over and bristle like hedgehogs, prickly and defensive; Jade
doubts either would admit to it. It makes her want to hug them, but there's no way Karkat would
react well to that. So she settles for jumping Dave from the side when he least expects it, squeezing
until he hugs back in a quick, furtive burst and drops his arms again. As though showing emotion in
public will give him the heebie-jeebies. "Be safe, you two silly cool guys," she orders, in her best
brook-no-shit voice, peering at Karkat over Dave's shoulder.

"Don't lump me in with that asshole and his ridiculous coolkid fetish," Karkat mutters, folding his
arms over his chest and not meeting her eyes. "But yeah, yeah. Whatever." He hunches his shoulders
some more as he looks at Kanaya, who eyes him right back and then puts out a hand, waiting until
Karkat gingerly clasps it. "Don't get yourselves killed or some shit while you're off on the amazing
'whee, let's go poke a giant fucking impenetrable dome with a stick' field trip from hell."

Kanaya cracks a smile at last. "And I wish you two all the best with your plan to help one Peixes
sabotage the other. The other, far more experienced Peixes, who has survived countless centuries of
similar acts of rebellion and sabotage."

"Well, when you say it like that, it sounds stupid as fuck."

Kanaya's smile is utterly implacable. "Because of this game," she finishes, patting the back of
Karkat's hand before letting go. "These are all facts -"

"- which you are stating for the record, yeah, okay, the meme is done," Dave says, Jade's still got
him in a headlock, so he can't really do much except flap a hand at Kanaya with his face perfectly,
disapprovingly expressionless. She plants a kiss on his cheek before she lets go of him, and his
whole face turns red, but it doesn't stop him from finishing with, "It's tired. Let it sleep."

"Never. In my quest to verbalize pertinent information for the sake of future documentation, I cannot
be stopped," Kanaya says, serene. Her smile's mostly faded though, as she reaches out and grabs
Karkat's shoulder, gripping it until he looks up at her with an expression like he chugged a cup of
raw lemon juice on a dare. "Be. Careful."

Karkat nods, his neck stiff and his eyes dulled behind the contacts. "Same," he says in a tight voice.

"And don't forget, all of the armor. If I learn you have been leaving off significant portions of the
costume because they take somewhat longer to put on and ruining the silhouette, I will be displeased.
Putting all that together depleted most of my reinforcement plating."

"Why you would bring all that shit across the fucking country is beyond me."

Kanaya releases Karkat's shoulder and steps back to Jade, but she has time for one last parting shot
before Jade bounces them out. "Never you mind that. If anything needs adjusting, Dave, I trust in
you to implement an emergency field resuscitation of his outfit. Do not let me down."

Jade has to nudge Bec with her foot and teleport them away before her laughter gets the best of her.
Karkat and Dave's expressions are just priceless.

- 

TA: whatever. 2ound2 liike what you people have ii2 a hardware problem anyway. junk iit and
build a new machine.
GG: we almost might have to...a couple of the parts won't come cheap though. :( and then there's still
the problem of the fact that the operating system just doesn't seem to register the troll universe at all!
TT: The best part about all this? Q is telling me she got most of these parts brand new. They
shouldn't have deteriorated anywhere near this badly in so short a time. From the tests we've been running, this thing just burns through everything like tissue paper.

TA: have you people ever heard of a fucking heat 2iink, holy 2hiit, you're going to lo2e all the integrated circuit2. they'll ju2t melt.

GG: it has one! a lot actually, but they started breaking down too. part of the problem is these processors just need soooo many uranium battery packs to keep running without wiping out the lab's power grid.

TG: itsa hi performance not so lien computing machine

TT: Just lost another GPU. Well, it's probably been lost for a while...Yeah, this thing is just kind of melded to the frame, we might need to replace the whole damn thing.

TA: look. worry about your 2hiitty que2t two watch some gory torture porn apocalyp2e game recap later. cool that poor computer down, liike, ye2terday.

TA: 2alvage what you can; maybe run the component2 through a pha2e changer or fiive. figuring out how two acce22 incompatble encrypted fiile2 from another uniiver2e can wait until you have a terminal that actually, you know, ii2n't a piece of 2hiit.

GG: hmmm...oh! there might be a way for me to order a bunch of parts we need quickly! i'll check with someone i know when me and kanaya leave - we just need to draw up a list of all the stuff that needs replacing or reinforcing.

TG: yee. ill be there 2 help in a jyiff, dirkalurkin

TG: though idk where youd' get the kinda heatshank wizerdries to keep this babey cool...

GG: we'll figure something out! :) especially now that sollux is helping out, riight? *eyebrow wiggle*

TA: no ii never 2aiid that ever. no. ii have a liife you know.

TT: Weak, bro.

TA: ii don't care. the world'2 going two hell anyway. there'2 no poiint. thi2 2hiit game ii2 broken beyond repair. the uniiver2al termiinatiion poiint ii2 here. ii2 wa2 iineviitable from the 2tart.

TG: sho...ur gonna help? );

TG: whooops *;)

TA: FIINE. but only becau2e ii2teniing two you people brutaliize that computer ii2 giiviing me hiive2.

GG: yay! :D we can't make the game not happen, but the more we know, the better we can maybe minimize some of the effects!

- "This should only take a second, I promise," Jade says, setting them down just outside the frosted glass window front of the office.

Well. What she expects to be glass doors, anyway. When she and Kanaya turn around, though, what greets them is a wall of plywood, neatly boarded up from one end of the office to the other, with a space left for the doors to sit propped open. The doors' glass is cracked so badly it looks as though it fractured in two, and is only holding itself together with tape, plywood, and hope.

"Are you certain this is the right place?" Kanaya asks, sounding dubious, and Jade can't blame her! She doesn't remember this place being in such bad shape when she visited last time - but then again, she bounced out of here in a real hurry because of reasons. It wouldn't surprise her if the juggalo troll dude did a number on this place, with whatever his weird powers are that let him blow up doors and poke around in peoples' minds to send them stark raving bonkers.

But there is a note taped to the front of the door, on a piece of stationary with the foundation's old logo at the top.

The Harley Foundation office is open! Please pardon our appearance while renovations to the
"They're just fixing the place up 'cause of that clown guy," Jade explains, pushing open the door with extra care. Bec doesn't appear to sense the scary clown anywhere; the wolf trots on over to the portrait hanging askew on the wall and sits obediently under it, head tilted to the side as though it anticipates the image of James Harley reaching down to scratch it behind the ears. "Hiiii, Janine!" she says when she spies a familiar figure behind the desk.

The ceruleanblood has her back to them, inspecting a stack of folders that sits beside a printer. But at the sound of Jade's voice the troll jolts so hard the stack of papers dips to one side and sheets of paper start to slide out before Janine Trevek can slam her hand down on top of the folders. Jade nudges it all back upright with a spark of power, just in time for Janine to whirl around to stare at her, mouth agape. "You - Miss Harley!"

"I'm back!" Jade waves, laughing and nudging at the plastic that covers the floor; most of it's stuck down with blue tape, but some of the corners flutter where the tread of people walking over it all day long must have pulled up the adhesive. "Sorry about all the weirdness the other day.' This place is a mess and she can't help thinking - if she'd only been able to resist that terror Juggaloco pushed on her, this wouldn't have happened. At least no one got hurt that night.

For a long moment, Janine appears to have stammered herself out of words. Then - "You're okay!" she says in a rush. The troll rams her hip into the side of the front desk as she dashes over and snatches Jade up in a surprise hug. "It was so irresponsible of me to go home like that," Janine sobs, shaking her head. "The founder's daughter here, in the middle of a crisis, and I couldn't even get you a h-hot beverage or anything - it was disgraceful!"

"Uh. It's okay! No worries!" Jade says, doing her best to pat the troll in reassurance on the back of the head without accidentally mashing her face against Jade's chest. "You got home alright, though?"

Janine doesn't appear to hear her, swept up in the babbling flow of her own recounting. "And then I c-came back into work the next day and the office was such a wreck, and I thought I was going to be fired for not locking up and letting the place get into this state and -" Kanaya taps Jade on the shoulder and passes her a handkerchief when Jade looks up. Jade hands the fancy embroidered cloth over to Janine, who pauses just long enough to lift her face, sheepishly take the kerchief, and use it to wipe her cerulean-blotched face. "And - and Ruka said there'd been a delivery for me and it was a note from you! Thanking me!"

...Oh yeah! Jade does remember sending that! "Well, yeah! Of course! You really saved our butts by getting that medicine shipment ready faster - you got the note okay, then?"

"I owe you my job, and I couldn't even help you fight that awful person!" Janine wails.

Maybe Jade should just wait this one out. She flashes a glance at Kanaya, who just raises an eyebrow and sidles away, pausing when her gaze reaches the portrait of Jade herself on the far wall. Okay, that's a little embarrassing now that it's someone Jade knows seeing it...Grandpa, why...

Jade starts fidgeting eventually, and when the ceruleanblood sobs herself out Jade does her best to extricate herself. Without being rude or anything! "It's good that you didn't get into trouble!" she says encouragingly. "I didn't want that, at all, especially over something as dumb and random as that. But, uh...I was wooodering..." She hesitates and then gives up with a mental shrug. Janine is watching her with rapt attention, now that her outburst is over with. Might as well ask! "Could I ask another favor? Pretty please?"

"Oh! Do you want coffee this time? Tea?!" The look in Janine's eyes borders on the feverish. Uh -
''I would not be opposed to a quick cup of coffee,'' Kanaya says. When the ceruleanblood whips her head around to stare at the other troll avidly, Kanaya's face does some interesting contortions to keep from looking openly alarmed. ''If that is...alright?''

''And you, ma'am?'' Janine's hair is coming loose again; part of it hits Jade's nose as the troll turns to look at her again.

''I'm not really thirs-''

Kanaya's frantic gestures are wild enough that Jade backtracks before she realizes what's going on, changing the slow, sheepish shake of her head to a desperate nod. ''No, I mean, coffee would be awesome! Thank you! But that's not what I was going to ask.''

Janine looks like someone just set off a round of fireworks in her honor. ''It's already percolating,'' she says, clenching a fist and rushing over to the machine. ''I made sure to keep it running, just in case. What else do you need, ma'am?''

At least when Jade peeks at Kanaya, the jadeblood is making the hand signal for 'crisis averted.' Or at any rate, that's what Jade thinks she means! She could also be asking for something in some obscure sign language that Jade doesn't know. ''I actually came to place another order for Lalonde Labs,'' she says, getting her brain back on the tracks for the original route this conversation was supposed to take. She pulls the list of computer supplies and parts from her pocket - it's more like a small stack of paper than a single sheet, whoops - and passes it to Janine with a tentative grin.

The troll takes it, propping the stack up at an angle between the wall and the table with coffee machine to read while she assembles two cups of coffee without even having to look down at her hands. ''You'll need Boxemina for tech orders,'' she says, distractedly pouring coffee into little mugs with the Harley Foundation logo on the side. As she gets further down the list, the ceruleanblood nods with more certainty. ''Ooh, though Hyram might be on call still for that new wholesaler we've been in talks with. If you need to buy this many items in bulk, that might be your best shot...How soon would you need it all? Another rush job?''

''Oh, no! This one's not nearly so crazy urgent,'' Jade says. She bounces on her toes and accepts the mug of coffee that comes her way. Kanaya takes hers as well, nostrils flaring as she inspects the liquid like she expects to see some kind of unctuous film to form on the surface. Which would just be odd, and kinda gross. Jade wishes she hadn't thought about that - it's making her eye the coffee with suspicion, but she has to take a hasty sip when Janine's eager anticipatory happyface gets the better of her. Anyway - ''I'll be out of town for a while, so whenever you guys think you can get these parts in, you could probably just ship it out to Doctor Lalonde's lab, okay? It's for an important project, but it's not life or death or anything like that.''

The ceruleanblood nods - and then the full impact of Jade's words appears to hit her, and her expression falls. ''You're leaving again? Already?'' Janine clutches the list to her chest, glancing from Jade to the coffee machine to the plastic sheet hanging over the empty doorway at the end of the hall where the door exploded with concussive force earlier in the week. ''D-don't you want to - meet with someone? Someone in charge, I mean? Most of the senior members are here today - a conference, actually, about how to reach you since you finally reached out to - are you sure?''

Nooo way do they have time for that. Or rather, Jade just wants to get a move on. Kanaya has already sipped most of that coffee away, polite but disinterested as she inspects the walls and wanders over to stand behind Bec and regard the portrait of Grandpa. But Jade promised the jadeblood that this would be a quick pitstop, and nothing more complicated than leaving this order to
be filled ASAP - a fullblown meeting with whoever's in charge of the Foundation office here to hash out some mumbo-jumbo's nowhere near 'quick pitstop.'

Besides! Jade is determined that she and Kanaya are going to have fun on this daytrip, if it's the last thing Jade does. The mood in the labs has been depressing and ominous for long enough that it's really starting to get Jade's goat, and even if it would be ten times more fun if all their friends had come along with them, that's no reason not to make this the most incredible investigative recon trip yet! It'll be a good time!

So, as much as she doesn't want to step on Janine's toes... "Sorry! We really can't stay right now. Maybe next time?" Jade suggests. She realizes she's stopped drinking the coffee and nearly slops it on her shirt when she goes to chug it down. She gets the feeling that if there's even a drop left when she and Kanaya try to make their hasty exit, Janine might take it as implying her coffee is somehow subpar. And hey, it's actually dang good coffee! "We've gotta go, but I'll definitely be back in Seattle soon. Probably. You've been so much help, I promise!"

She whistles for Becquerel, and the wolf zaps over to her side from Grandpa's portrait without complaint. Jade considers it, and then tosses a quick salute to the portrait on the wall, mentally projecting a silent good luck, Grandpa for him, wherever he may be and whatever ruckus he's kicking up while there. Kanaya looks alert when Jade puts out a hand, striding back over and setting the mug down on the front desk before taking Jade's hand. "Shall we be on our way, then?" the jadeblood asks. She's practically vibrating with anticipation - if Jade were as hyped as Kanaya is right now, she'd have been bouncing of the walls in the most literal way!

Well, the only solution is to be just as pumped! "Time to get this show on the road," Jade agrees, grinning with all her teeth. When Kanaya grins back, it's a lot toothier, with a sharp edge.

Jade puts her hand out to brush the top of Bec's head, and holds the coordinates of their first jump point clear in her mind. They're gonna have to make these jumps in stages, and she doesn't want any mess ups that might take them across the frickin' ocean! "Let's go, Bec," she says.

And with a rush of green light, she and Kanaya and Bec leave Seattle behind.

--

TA: ii don't thiink thii2 ii2 going two work.
GG: trust me! we're doing this, man!
GG: we're making this happen! :)

Chapter End Notes

Well. Wow. That's it for ARC DEVASTATION... ARC VIII - UNISCENSION will open with Chapter 22, Spring Flowered Ways. Shit guys, let's assemble.

"average John wants to touch the Vantass 24/7" factoid actualy just statistical error. average John thinks about touching butt once a month or so. Trickster Mod, who lives in cesspit & thinks about butt-touching 10000 times a day, is an outlier adn should not have been counted.

We also now have a John 8tracks mix that takes into account the developments of Chapters 19 and 20, because it's not like I have homework I should be working
on...no...no way...
Spring-Flowered Ways

Chapter Summary

So, clothed with love and fear that makes love great,
And armed with hope and hate,
He set first foot upon the spring-flowered ways
That all feet pass and praise.

Chapter Notes

Aaaad we're back! It is time to assemble the Ultimate Friendsquad of Super Goobers. Yes, that is their team name. No, we can’t change it now, except possibly to Friendsquad of Ultimate Dumb Goober Eggheads, just so the acronym is FUDGE.

Look, I don’t make the rules, here.

EDIT: Please enjoy further Rose & John antics, starting at around, 'Sollux, do you have a moment?’ These kooky kids and their crazy shenanigans... Anyway, next up is Chapter 23: With God's Eyes, which is where all the AWESOME FIGHT SCENES happen, and we finally start to get all these violent children to cool their jets B)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC VIII - UNISCENSION (AKA SHIT, GUYS, LET'S ASSEMBLE)

Clubs Deuce wakes with an awful, foggy headache. Everything spins like a top, and when he closes his eyes and woozily curls up into a ball on his side, it doesn't really help much.

He opens his mouth to call for Sollux, and then pops it shut again, because his child hasn't lived with him in years. His head's been scrambled like that, lately, so that it seems harder to keep track of where he is and when he might be. It's really a bit of a bother. Clubs touches a claw to the side of his head on impulse, the sore spot that's been bothering him for a few days now, but pressing on it just makes it feel worse. Oh, dear.

Without much warning, a perfectly filed nail flicks his claws away from his head. A stern grunt of disapproval warns him off when he tries to do it again, and finally Clubs shakes the last of the foggy cobwebs out of his head to blink at the person sitting beside him.

Oh! He hasn't seen Yavari in a while! Not since he visited the doctor for a review, at least. She has, oddly enough, traded her usual stringent black uniform in for the day, when Clubs has never before in his entire life seen someone from Diamonds' branch in anything less than Midnight Crew standard midnight blacks. Even at their most casual, no one dares to dress not to impress when a lady like Diamonds is in charge of dress code! But Yavari's wearing a wine red hijab with a black fringe of lace, which is definitely not usual, and her suit has been replaced by a long coat almost like a dress,
close in the sleeves and split down the front to reveal dark red pants, and while it certainly looks nice, it's still impractical enough that Clubs can't imagine Diamonds approved it. He raises his hand to scratch his head, puzzled -

And Yavari smacks it away again. "Stop that," she says, reproving, and when Clubs timidly tucks his hands underneath the pillow, she narrows her eyes at him in a level stare before returning her attention to the handgun in her lap, picking up a cloth and using it to wipe down the partially-opened casing.

Really now, just how long was Clubs napping? He looks around the room, but can find no clues that might help him out of this muddle - the room looks just like any number of Diamonds's safehouses might, classily decorated but windowless, the walls hung with spartan, monochrome decorations (in the case, large sideways diamonds, that look like they might conceal safes behind their thick exteriors) to distract from the fact that the only light comes from the lamps and the overhead light.

It's all very strange, though, because the last he remembers, Clubs was about to go off on a mission for the boss! He can't remember exactly what he was supposed to do, but he's sure it was important! If he and Yavari are in a safehouse, who is taking care of things outside? This is all pretty worrisome...

"Shouldn't we be somewhere else?" Clubs whispers, reaching out and tugging on Yavari's sleeve. She levels her gaze at him and he drops his hand hastily, wishing he could reach up and scratch at his horns sheepishly, but rather starting to think that at this rate Yavari might just hogtie him, with the mood she's in. "Oh, Ms Yavari, my head is in such a futz."

"Dizzy, or in pain?" she asks, though her dark eyes don't look up from her inspection of the handgun.

As though to make his point for him, Clubs's head gives a throb - not quite hurting, but close enough that he squirms. "Both, I think."

A resigned sigh, and Yavari sets down the cloth to hand him a glass of water that's been sitting on the bedside table, and then a tablet of what looks like aspirin. "You took quite a blow to the head, sir," she says, her face unreadable as she watches him gulp down the medicine and the water.

And, well - he must have! It's as good an explanation as any for the way Clubs can't concentrate past the tip of his nose without his head feeling like it's got one doozy of a cramp; he hadn't even known heads could cramp! The water in his mouth helps soothe the dryness in his throat, at least. "Where's Diamonds?" he asks. He starts talking too soon, though, and water dribbles down his chin to splash on the pillow. Then, when Yavari harrumphs and says nothing - "Or Hearts? Were we attacked?"

The door in the far wall swings open before Yavari can answer him, and both she and Clubs look over, Clubs in curiosity and Yavari with a stiffness in her neck that probably means she's on edge. But the only person who walks in is Diamonds - which is a relief! Clubs does hate waking up in strange places, and he and Diamonds get on passably well, when she's not horribly frustrated with his muck-ups, so he tends to trust that either she or Hearts will always have an explanation for these things. They're good coworkers. "You're awake," she says, the click of her heels muted by the carpet as she crosses the room.

There's something strange. Clubs can feel it as another, quiet pulse of pain in his head, though the aspirin helps mute it. For some reason, he thinks that he used to look at Diamonds differently. But when his mind tries to wander its usual paths, he keeps getting tugged back around to worrying about the fact that he's here in this room, and not out on his mission for the boss. He's supposed to be going to keep an eye on the Condesce, one of the Crew's main financial and political assets, and a
murmur in his head keeps whispering that if he doesn't hurry, something awful could happen! It really is a very important job, after all. Maybe his head would stop hurting and his horns would stop aching in sympathy if he got up and went about doing something.

Then Diamonds tilts her head at Yavari, a small jerk of her chin, and Yavari stands to leave so that Diamonds can settle herself on the vacated chair. It's more obvious now that this is one of Diamonds's safe, secret places, because the chair is high enough that it suits her long legs more than it did Yavari. Yavari goes to the door and walks through, but no matter how Clubs cranes his neck to blink after her, he can't see much in the room beyond except another door in the far wall, possibly the one that leads to the outside. These safehouses tend to have few obvious points of entry, but more than a few secret ways to leave, on account of Diamonds is sort of paranoid about stuff like that.

"Diamonds, I need to go," he starts out immediately, babbling a little, because that tends to happen when Diamonds is around, for some reason. "I don't know how long I've been asleep, but I must be so late by now! Oh, the boss will not be happy about this...why didn't you wake me up sooner?" Usually Diamonds is so good about keeping Clubs on track! "I need to - I really do need to go -"

"Will you be quiet?" Diamonds interrupts, irritation flickering across her face. "You're not going anywhere, you wooden nickel."

"But I have to!" Clubs says, sitting up. He knots his claws in the sheets, and realizes that he's not even in a suit; just plain black pajamas. "Orders is orders, Diamonds!"

"And I am giving you an order to lie back down before I gotta make you do it," Diamonds says, her voice sharpish and cutting. Then, before Clubs can argue some more, her voice goes - funny. "You're not hitting on all sixes, so lay off the goddamn fidgeting. The boss knows. You've been taken off duty."

Clubs blinks, and looks down at his claws. "Oh," he says, a little embarrassed. Diamonds is on top of things, as usual; he shouldn't have been caught so wrong-footed by it. The relief of it helps his head stop aching, even, because why would Diamonds lie about something like this? He can't believe he'd forget something as important as being taken off the mission! He starts twiddling his thumbs, ashamed. "Sorry 'bout that. My head hurts something fierce, Diamonds."

"I'll handle that, too. God knows, you'd only fuck this up worse if you started running around like a chicken with its head cut off," Diamonds sniffs.

Clubs nods, still mortified, and spies one of her hands in the corner of his eye. The right one - and here's something odd - it's all bandaged up, with a black splint that wraps her wrist right up under the edge of her sleeve, laced around the back of her hand with extra material supporting her ring finger. It's odd...odd because...his mind tries not to wander down the path, but it's odd, and for a moment Clubs stops thinking about his messed up, aborted mission, because he can't remember the last time he saw Diamonds with a splint, or a lot of bandages. One of their last missions together - oh, it must have been weeks and weeks ago, now! Time sure does fly! - she'd nearly got caught in an explosion when Clubs mistimed a detonation, and he'd felt really bad about that. But even though she complained a lot and gave him a good lecturing on the misuse of C4, Diamonds was tough enough that she hadn't even bothered bandaging the burns for more than a week.

Whatever happened that Clubs can't remember and that Diamonds is hurt this bad, it must have been a real kerfuffle! "Did someone get the jump on us?" Clubs says, apprehension overtaking his shame. His claws itch to move, and he worries for a moment before, with the sensation of something untwisting in his head, he can no longer stop himself from reaching out to grab at Diamonds's hand, trying to inspect it and only realizing how silly that is when all he can do is poke at the splint.
Unlike Yavari, though, for once Diamonds doesn't yank away. "You could say that," she says, inclining her head. When Clubs looks up, puzzled, he notices - he notices -

He doesn't notice anything. It's probably rude of him to be staring at Diamonds like that, anyway! And he tries not to be rude, these days. He needed to be a lot more responsible and considerate about that sorta thing, so people won't get so annoyed at him. He doesn't know nothing about nothing!

"But I will deal with them myself," Diamonds says. When Clubs tries to pull away, the splinted hand twists around with all its usual dexterity to clamp down on his wrist. Clubs starts to regret the way that he couldn't really pay attention when Diamonds walked in, because as he looks up, startled, he realizes with unease that Diamonds looks - he can't help but notice, honest! - well, let's just say if he saw that look on a troll, he'd think they'd gone feral, in the throes of coldblood dementia. Her eyes look glazed and feverish, and there's an almost savage, smug twist to her smile that usually only turns up when Diamonds is about to give someone a good drubbing. "You're not well, after all," she continues, and this time, when Clubs tugs his hand away, she lets him go, lounging back in her chair in what would be her usual elegant posture...if Clubs weren't becoming increasingly aware that there's violence, taut and simmering, in the way Diamonds holds herself, like she could snap at any moment.

And yes, she always has that brutal, vicious streak. Diamonds really does have quite the temper, when she's not being a professional! But Clubs hasn't seen her this close to violence when she's not in the middle of a strife since - since he can't even remember when! The only people in the safehouse are the two of them and Yavari, and Clubs can't imagine for the life of him why Diamonds would be so mad at either one of them.

"There are some people I need to track down," she is saying, when Clubs pays attention again. "The situation is rather complex, and I'm sure with your limited brain capacity you'd just get confused." Another vicious, biting grin, and Diamonds rises to her feet, reaching up to adjust the cinch of her tie with a deft twist, smoothing the edges and tucking it into her jacket. "Now, all you need to know is that the boss has ordered you to remain in this safehouse until I can...take care of some business." Her stare turns considering, some of the near-mania draining from her face as she frowns down at Clubs. "Is that clear, you damned, bumbling idiot?"

"If the boss says so!" Clubs agrees, without needing to think about it. What the boss man wants, the boss man gets! He bobs his head in a nod for too long, probably, and too earnestly, which he's trying to be better about.

But Diamonds doesn't even look exasperated, which is her normal mood when she and Clubs tend to be in the same building. In fact, she looks almost pleased! "Good," she says, reaching into the inner pocket of her suit jacket and fishing out a pair of deep green gloves, drawing the first one over dark skin and the second over the splinted hand without flinching. "We're all in danger. The last thing I need to deal with is you getting it into your fool head that you should be wandering around when you've been ordered not to."

Well, there's no worry about that, now! Clubs would never dream of disobeying such a specific order. But now he perks up his head, curious. "In danger? From who?" Presumably the same people who hurt Diamonds's hand, and who must have knocked Clubs for a loop, but who could it be? Most of the other gangs and mobs who used to cause a ruckus when the Midnight Crew came to town have backed down or relocated since they joined up with the Felt, so it must be someone new and bold! It has the potential to be very exciting, and Clubs will grumble endlessly if Diamonds and Hearts get to have all the fun dealing with these hooligans.

"No need to worry about it. I've got it covered," Diamonds says, with a stern enough scowl enough
that Clubs sighs and lets it go. Instead, he purses his lips and flops back against the pillow - which is a mistake, as it gives his head another woozy turn - and wonders why those gloves seem so familiar. Diamonds doesn't repeat a lot of articles of clothing - she has her favorite hats and guns and things like that, but she really is a stickler, and she only breaks out different colored gloves when -

Clubs changes his mind and sits upright, letting his legs dangle over the side of the bed. Someone has removed his shoes and - yes, these are really nice footie pajamas, but he can't imagine Diamonds ever demeaning herself to ever lay a finger on footie pajamas, so it was probably Yavari. "Are you going to torture someone?" he asks, curious.

Because colorful gloves mean torture. It's a rule! And really, Diamonds's tight-mouthed smile in reply is all the confirmation he needs.

"Incoming," Yavari says, her voice low, leaning in from the other room. "Confirmed it's Marlowe."

"Check again." Diamonds is on the move even as she says it, pivoting and crossing the room to tap a finger on the dark wood paneling of a counter. A tiny light starts flashing, and Clubs thinks it must be a security device, though he can't see it from here.

Yavari puts her head to the side, one hand to the length of cloth covers her ear as she murmurs something, and then nods again. "Confirmed with backup codes."

Clubs looks back and forth between Yavari and Diamonds, feeling a little more worried as he realizes how long it takes Diamonds to make up her mind. She's paranoid, but really, Clubs can't recall if she was this paranoid even that first time they faced off against the Felt, when the time-manipulating gang was a mystery and not at all their friends. He can't remember her putting her assistants through this kind of rigmarole before! There's a part of him that wants to be even more worried, but it doesn't yammer very long before his headcramp distracts him again.

But sure as fiddles, Diamonds eventually gives a curt jerk of her head and taps the counter again. The door that Clubs thought was the entrance stays closed, while a bookshelf on the left wall of the bedroom smoothly slides open - like something out of a proper whodunnit! - and one of Diamonds's taller assistants sags into the room. He's a newer one, and if Clubs musters up the brainpower, he can remember that this guy held Diamonds's umbrella for her when they met up a while ago, while he was chasing the Witch. Time sure flies!

Now, though, Marlowe has a distinct limp, favoring his left side heavily and scanning the room with darting eyes. When Yavari tilts her head he meets her gaze and something silent passing between the two assistants, before the man's lip twitches. "Teach me better than to let down my guard around carapacians again," he says, shaking his head.

Yavari's mouth almost twitches into a smile, too, her arms folded over her chest as she clicks her tongue and ducks back into the far room.

"Hello!" Clubs says, by way of greeting, putting as much cheerfulness as he can rally into it, because Diamonds is just in a weird mood, and Marlowe seems so earnest as he limps gamely into the room, the bookshelf sliding shut behind him.

"It's still functioning?" Diamonds demands before Marlowe can answer, prowling around her subordinate as though one wrong word or move could set her off. It almost makes Clubs's head hurt worse, seeing her so on edge, like there's something he should be doing...but he can't puzzle out what!

"As near as I can tell, ma'am," Marlowe says, hefting a microwave-sized package that rests on his
hip. He stands at attention, but the effort of meeting Diamonds's standards for manners takes a clear toll on whatever injury is hurting him; he's already broken out in a sweat from the effort. "I'm not...an expert with this sort of technology, though. Its settings haven't been altered, and I've made sure to touch it as little as possible."

"Good." Diamonds says, brusque and short, even though surely this is good news! Uh, whatever it's even news about. Clubs can't really make out anything about the package except that it's rather large and probably heavy, judging by how much effort it's taking Marlowe to haul it around - him being a fully grown human, and all. "Any trouble?"

"None, ma'am." The man's face hardens as he sets the parcel down on the counter where Diamonds impatiently gestures, with a cutting slash of her hand. "Really, this thing - the effect it has - no one would so much as look at me on the way here."

The smile Diamonds allows herself is small, but still too close to a snarl, teeth flashing. "That's the point of it," she says. "To avert wandering eyes. Do try to keep up, dear Marlowe." Her voice cuts like knives, sharp enough that Marlowe goes sheet white, like he's realized exactly what mood his boss is in - and just how fine a line there seems to be between Diamonds as his boss and Diamonds as she could be, if someone doesn't wrangle her back down into some kind of sanity.

It's finally enough to propel Clubs out of bed. He doesn't care how much his head aches (and it does protest, pretty painfully, in fact). He determinedly powers through it to touch a claw to Diamonds's elbow.

Because Diamonds is supposed to be cool! And calm, and collected, and professional around her assistants, and angry and cruel only when she's fighting someone or committing some new felony. But now it seems as though one side of her has slurred into the other, and Clubs doesn't know much, but he knows that she should be calmer.

Why did he ignore what she looked like when she walked into the room, earlier? He noticed it, but he didn't say anything, or try to distract her from it. Isn't that what he would normally do? Gosh, he can't sort these things out anymore…

He beams up at Diamonds's instant scowl, because that's normal. Yeah! That's how these things usually go! "There, there," he says, patting her arm as well as he can manage. "I'm sure it will all get better soon! No need to be so mean, Diamonds…"

She stares down at him, incredulous, and Clubs finds himself noticing more and more things. Like the fact that she's not wearing her hat, and that's just plain nonsense! Her face looks strained, too, the lean, wolfish look she gets when she's gotten caught up in one of her convoluted kidnapping schemes and doesn't remember to eat extra to make up for all the stress. "You -" she starts, and then she visibly has to swallow down whatever she was about to say next, Adam's apple working. "You buffoon. You don't even know what's wrong," she says at last, her expression strange and mixed up.

"Nope!" Clubs says. "But I'm used to that. I know you can handle it, Diamonds. And once this headache goes away, I'll get right back on the ball to help yah!"

A long silence follows, which is okay. All Clubs can hear is the odd thrum of the parcel on the desk, and the faint shuffle of Yavari's pacing footsteps in the other room, and that does wonders for the cramp in his head, actually. Better still, Diamonds hasn't pulled away yet, so Clubs gets to keep patting her arm for once. Perhaps she's feeling better! Or maybe worse. Ooh, it's hard to tell, with someone as contrary and cranky as Diamonds Droog -

Without any warning at all, the stabbing pain bursts into his head again, a burst of agony that pangs
through his horns and centers on that twisting, sharp knot that has taken up residence in his poor thinkpan. "Owowow!" he says, clapping both hands to his head to try to keep it from cracking in two.

...What was he doing?! Diamonds doesn't like being shooshed! How could he be so dumb and silly and unprofessional! Clubs whimpers, almost in tears. He can't even think why he'd make such a fuss over Diamonds when all it does is distract them. His mind curves off to one side, refusing to let him think about another time, another place, another life -

He is just absolutely sure that his head would stop hurting if he didn't think about all this and instead got about his business and headed out to Virginia for his mission. Why isn't he there already? He really should get going. The more he thinks about it, the better he feels about the idea.

Before he can try to wander out the same way Marlowe came in, though, Diamonds laughs. It's cold and humorless, and when Clubs raises watering eyes full of milky brown tears to look at her, he sees that her face has lost that feral edge and replaced it with familiar, bright eyed scorn. "If you believe that," she says, "then you're just as insipidly stupid as ever." She straightens her sleeve with a brush of her gloved hands, and then clamps a hand down on Clubs's shoulder. "I should not find that as reassuring as I do, but hell, here we are."

"Well, as long as you're feeling better," Clubs says, smiling at her distractedly. They need to go. "We should get back to work, though, really!"

Sharp fingernails dig into his collarbone before he can wheel around to look for some clothes. "No. Your orders are to sleep. Bad enough I have to coddle you like a bumbling toddler - at least try to emulate the attention span of a goddamn gnat," she says, shoving him back towards the bed with an unrelenting grip.

Ah! Right! He'd forgotten about the new orders. Almost instantly Clubs can feel sleepiness creeping over him, and he bobs his head in a nod. He's very aware that both Yavari and Marlowe musta heard him mess up, and he starts tapping his claws together guiltily. "I forgot. I'm sorry, Diamonds, you know I don't have a head for these things."

"No. You don't. And no doubt your incompetence will be the death of me." Another shove, and Diamonds lets him go. Clubs climbs into bed himself, sternly telling himself on the inside not to scrape or pick at the sore spot on his scalp. He's gone a little bleary-eyed with the constant pain of it, and it feels like there's some rowdy bunch of bozos playing jump rope in his head. But when Yavari returns, her hands glistening with green blood because she's forgotten to wear gloves like Diamonds does, to pour him another glass of water, the thought that seems to emerge in the aftermath is the calm, unbreakable certainty that has carried Clubs for years past counting.

Diamonds will sort everything out. No mere headache can convince him otherwise.

Even if she is acting very peculiar, indeed.

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Karkat is making a concentrated effort to make this work. And by make this work, he means not giving in to the urge to reach out and snap Dave Strider's asshole sunglasses in two.

Because the thing is, Karkat is almost 80% certain that the spectacular example of go-fuck-yourself sitting across from him at a diagonal has fallen asleep sitting up. But fuck if he can tell with the sunglasses in the way. Dave just kind of stopped responding when Karkat snapped at him for being obnoxious, pulled on a set of headphones, and slumped down a little, his annoying mumblesphincter
an inscrutable line that for once isn't overflowing with nonstop word vomit. Fuck, he's almost halfway tolerable like this - except that Karkat is instantly suspicious that the human's not actually asleep, and is in fact attempting to fuck with him in some new annoyance gambit behind the fucking shades.

But when the hour mark ticks past, and then the second, Karkat has to concede that maybe the walking vomit-volcano of smarmy bullshit is legitimately in some kind of coma. He expected this trip to be nightmarish and tedious and possibly end in his demise at the hands of the fucking Condesce (seriously, why is this trip even happening), but he never expected to get skeevied the fuck out by Dave not talking for hours.

Fuck. The silence is getting to him. The lack of a base level amount of verbal nonsense is somehow unnerving. Karkat can only spend so long scrolling through news sites and assorted forums before that just starts making him want to throw his phone through a window - when it gets to the point that he's shaking his head over vacillating real life celebrity couples (Justin and Jessica seem have to gotten their shit together in the flushed quadrant but god, haven't they all heard that story before...) he's forced to admit that his efforts to avoid paying attention to whatever is going on with the investigation in Seattle are too obvious to be effective in any way, shape, or form. There's some ongoing news coverage about exploratory recovery efforts in the Ukraine - apparently people have stopped dying, and everyone is incredibly confused by this, but they're trying to avoid saying anything for certain until they confirm the massive death swamps are in fact receding. Go figure.

Some good news, though: apparently the Condesce hasn't been spotted around DC in the past couple of days, and is rumored to be off plotting her next one-celebrity KO in the wake of the ex-Kardashian app smackdown (may Kim rest in pieces). Good riddance if she is - they might still have a shot at talking Feferi down from Operation Saboatage Some Random Shit and Get Ourselves Culled Because Why Not. SSRSGOCBWN in polite company.

Around the third hour Karkat stops being discreet about his phone usage and tries to switch from texting John on the sly to dialing the number to call him. The flight attendant must have some sort of sixth sense, because he barely thinks about it and suddenly she's sauntering over with an entire assortment of shitty pretzel packages and other inflight snacks to foist on him with the kind of bland customer service smile that reeks of 'try that fuckery again and I will pleasantly and agreeably make you ride in the cargo hold for the rest of the flight.' She also tries to chat him up with some spiel about the company that owns the stupid plane and Harley's grand-lusus/ecto-lusus/whatever the fuck is going on with humans and their familial relationship networks right now, but Karkat's not that desperate.

Not yet.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] at 12:06:30 --
CG: I THINK HE'S BROKEN.
EB: wha?
CG: DAVE. HE HASN'T MOVED. NOT A WORD OUT OF HIM IN ALMOST THREE HOURS.
CG: I FINALLY HAVE THE CROTCH BLISTERING GOOD FORTUNE TO BE FREE OF HIS FACETIOUS JAWING, AND I CAN'T EVEN SAVOR THE MOMENT BECAUSE I'M HALF SURE HE'S STILL JUST FUCKING WITH ME.
EB: he's not on his phone or anything?
CG: NO.
EB: huh. can you check if he's still breathing?
CG: OF COURSE I'VE FUCKING CHECKED. HE'S JUST SITTING THERE.
CG: MENACINGLY.
EB: he probably just zoned out again. he does that on planes sometimes, i guess!
EB: it's probably not that big a deal. he just doesn't really like flying.
CG: OR HE'S FUCKING WITH ME.
EB: :/
CG: DON'T MAKE THAT FACE AT ME, JOHN, YOU KNOW HE DOES IT ON PURPOSE. ALL THE FUCKING TIME.
EB: you know, there's a simple way to tell if he's just dicking around or not...
CG: ...IS THE WORD 'PRANK' GOING TO BE INVOLVED IN THIS SOMEWHERE?
EB: a totally sweet prank!
CG: NO.
EB: come on!
CG: MORAL HIGH GROUND, JOHN. MORAL. HIGH GROUND.

He lasts all of ten seconds. He'd last longer because he is a stalwart example of self-control, obviously, but there are outstanding circumstances here. One factor working against him is that his suspicion that Dave is pulling some extended fake-irony trick is too strong; the other is that this might be the first prank John has suggested of his own accord in days. Karkat didn't know if John would ever want to so much as hint at things like pranking or jokerkind again, after the fuckery his dad put him through.

CG: OKAY FINE, WHAT HAVE YOU GOT FOR ME?
EB: don't worry, this one is really simple and barely stupid at all.
EB: what you need to do is get something really light and balance it on his nose.
CG: AND WHAT DOES THAT FUCKING ACCOMPLISH?
EB: well if he's awake, he'll probably stop faking and start flailing around a lot! confirming that he's messing with you...
EB: and if he's not, you get to spend the next two hours or so watching him zone out with something silly on his nose!
CG: JOHN, I LOVE YOU DEARLY, BUT THAT IS SO INCREDIBLY STUPID THAT IT MAY YET WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD IN A CATEGORY MADE UP JUST NOW AT THIS MOMENT TO ACCOMMODATE 'REALLY FUCKING STUPID PRANK IDEAS.'
EB: you're totally doing it, aren't you.
CG: OF COURSE I AM. WHAT ELSE AM I GOING TO DO WITH ALL THESE EMPTY PRETZEL WRAPPERS.
EB: haha, rose says to send her pictures if it works :D
CG: WHAT FOR?
EB: probably blackmail material or a funny phone background or something.
CG: FINE, I CAN GET BEHIND THAT. HOW ARE YOU, ANYWAY?

Karkat has to put the phone down. This is a delicate operation. On the first try he can't quite get the angle right; the pretzel packet slips and Karkat gags on a swallowed curse as he yanks his claws back and waits with his heart in his throat for a reaction.

But Dave is apparently out. Karkat glances around guiltily and oh joy, the flight attendant is motioning at him from the back of the plane - fuck, she's trying to give him tips through silent hand signals, why is this his life right now - and goes in for round two, changing the angle of the packet ever so slightly until, at last, it balances along Dave's nose and over the bridge of his sunglasses.

Not a fucking peep out of him, either. Which means he probably is just asleep. Fantastic. Karkat inches back into his seat warily, but Dave doesn't even twitch.

EB: oh! we're fine!
EB: just hanging out with roxy and jane. dirk is kind of trying to be everywhere at once right now...
EB: Jake tried to escape again, through the vents this time!
CG: WHEN DOES ESCAPING THROUGH THE VENTS EVER WORK IN REAL LIFE?
EB: I don't know, he almost made it! He just severely underestimated how wide his shoulders were. Like I know I couldn't fit through the vents here without a lot of work!
EB: Anyway we caught him when he ran into Wv in there.
CG: FUCK. NO.
CG: WHAT HAPPENED, IS HE ALRIGHT? FUCKING SHIT ON A STICK JOHN TELL ME THAT STUPID ALIEN IS OKAY.
EB: Oh, the mayor's fine! He did the sparky spark thing and kind of made part of the ceiling vanish, so they both fell on top of Roxy.
CG: THE MAYOR?
EB: Yeah... just something I remembered from before!
CG: WHAT, THAT Wv WAS A MAYOR? GOD I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER IF THAT CAME UP BEFORE IN THOSE STUPID TAPES. DID YOUR TRASH GAME SESSION HOLD A DEMOCRATIC ELECTION TO SET HIM UP AS FRIENDLEADER SUPREME AND I BLANKED IT OUT OF MY MEMORY OUT OF SELF-PRESERVATION?
EB: No, he just liked to pretend he was the mayor of all the little towns he built. He really liked alchemizing cans and stuff.
EB: Also he led an uprising against the monarchy before I met him.
CG: WHAT.
EB: He has really strong opinions about the right to self determination of the common man. Er. Carapacian.
CG: JOHN, HE CAN'T EVEN FUCKING TALK.
EB: He's working on it! We tried giving him a phone so he could text but now he's busy teaching himself how to yell at everyone in rapidfire gibberish or something so he doesn't want one.

Karkat has to put the phone down again, for an entirely different reason. He pays homage daily to his righteous despair at the many stupid ways the universe seeks to fuck with him with more unceasing regularity than Dave himself, and yet somehow... this. This still surprises him.

EB: But other than that nothing too exciting has happened.
CG: I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT RANDOM ASS 'EXCITING' SHIT, JOHN, I'M TALKING ABOUT YOU. HOW. ARE. YOU.
CG: THAT WAS ALREADY A TANGENT FROM HELL, DON'T YOU DARE TRY IT AGAIN.
EB: I'm fine! Jeez, Karkat! You guys have only been gone for a few hours, not even I can have a meltdown that fast.
EB: The most wild thing me and rose have done is gone outside and let Wv go to town on the road with chalk.
EB: Otherwise he starts drawing on walls, and floors, and vital scientific equipment that's really hard to replace...
EB: I didn't realize Jade did so much work wrangling this guy until she was gone! :/
CG: BUT YOU'RE NOT ON THE VERGE OF A FUCKING EMOTIONAL BREAKDOWN, HERE.
EB: No... I'm alright. Still just tired a lot. It's kind of boring!
CG: I'D RATHER HAVE BORING THAN 'IN THE MIDDLE OF ANOTHER FUCKING CRISIS AND NOT TELLING ME ABOUT IT.'
EB: No, I think I learned my lesson about that!
EB: I don't know. I'm just gonna see how it goes.
EB: I think now that I had time to process everything, it doesn't hurt as much?
CG: WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?
EB: Like I spent so long making myself not think about it that actually made it hurt more the longer...
time went on.
EB: but now that i'm thinking about things, it's not as bad as i always believed it was...does that make sense? i think i'm rambling.
CG: KEEP DOING THAT, THEN.
EB: like everything was really awful, i'm not gonna lie!
EB: but dealing with it feels like a relief. really, really shitty relief, but relief.
EB: anything’s better than how i was.

That almost does it. That's almost enough to make Karkat force the pilot to turn this stupid plane around and go back to Seattle. He should still be with John right now.

CG: AND THE CANDY NIGHTMARE DOPPELGANGER?
EB: haven't heard anything! maybe we'll get lucky and it'll just go away on its own.
EB: but then again, i can't remember hearing it a whole lot before, either. i think it can be really sneaky when it wants to be...
CG: WE'RE NEVER LUCKY. IF YOU AND ROSE GO FIDDLING AROUND TRYING TO GET RID OF IT, BE FUCKING CAREFUL, ALRIGHT?
EB: she hasn't said anything about that...but yeah, i'll let you know if i hear anything weird. or think anything weird? i don't know.
CG: ALSO, THIS IS ME TELLING YOU OUTRIGHT IN PLAIN FUCKING ENGLISH THAT IF YOU DO END UP GETTING PANICKED AND SHIT, TALK TO ROSE.
EB: ??
CG: YOU FUCKING HEARD ME.
CG: THERE'S LITERALLY NO ONE ELSE FROM YOUR RIDICULOUSLY CODEPENDENT HUMAN FRIENDSQUAD OVER THERE, SO SHE'S YOUR FUCKING PILLAR OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. SHE BETTER HAVE HER GAME ON FUCKING POINT.
EB: really? because, uh...
CG: WHAT.
EB: you got kind of mad when dave showed up. because he was worried about me. and stuff.
CG: THAT'S BECAUSE DAVE IS A TOOL. A MASSIVE, MASSIVE TOOL.
EB: okay good point.
EB: but still!
CG: ALSO BECAUSE I'M APPARENTLY A TERRITORIAL JACKASS. WHICH IS AN AWESOME THING TO HAVE LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF.
CG: BUT I THINK IT'S PRETTY FUCKING SAFE TO SAY THAT YOU DON'T INTEND TO FLIP AND START PLYING LALONDE WITH SNICKERDOODLES AND PILES OF SUGAR CUBES ANY TIME SOON, SO IF YOU TWO END UP NEEDING TO HAVE ONE OF YOUR HUMAN PLATONIC FEELINGS JAMS, DO NOT TEAR YOURSELF UP ABOUT IT. I'M DONE WITH BEING A RAGING SHITHEAD ABOUT WHO YOU TALK TO ABOUT YOUR EMOTIONS IN A PLATONIC FASHION, I PROMISE.
EB: unless it's dave?
CG: HE'S AN EVASIVE SHITSTAIN AND I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO BE HEALTHILY SUSPICIOUS ABOUT HIM.
EB: wait that's still actually a thing?! dude, i thought you two were bros now!
CG: YES, HE AND I ARE ****BROS****, BUT THAT INVOLVES HIM BEING AN ANNOYING ASSHOLE TO ME 24/7 AND GOING SPORADICALLY PALE FOR YOU. IT'S ALSO WHAT HE CALLS HIS LUSUS. THE WORD HAS VARIABLE DEFINITIONS AND YOU CAN'T TELL ME HE DOESN'T CASUALLY CHA-CHA DANCE AROUND QUADRANTS FOR THE HELL OF IT. THIS CONCEPT OF 'BRO' IS SKETCHY AS FUCK AND I REFUSE TO TRUST IT.
EB: omg. please tell me you're not going to interrogate him while you're trapped on an enclosed
metal tube thousands of feet in the air.

...Yeah, kind of.

CG: DON'T YOU BACKSASS ME JOHN.
CG: I WILL CONCEDE THAT HE IS, IN FACT, ASLEEP AND NOT DICKING WITH ME AT THIS EXACT MOMENT, BUT THAT MEANS NOTHING.
CG: EVEN WHEN HE GIVES ME A STRAIGHT ANSWER HE DOES IT IN A WAY THAT IS INCREDIBLY SUSPICIOUS.
EB: i think that's just the paranoia talking. and the fact that you've had three hours to let it stew. because when you guys left i thought you were getting along okay...
CG: MAYBE. OR MAYBE THAT'S WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO THINK.
EB: ///////////////////////////////////////////////////
CG: ANYWAY THE ENCLOSED FLYING METAL DEATH TRAP ASPECT IS PERFECT. IT MEANS THE BULGECHAFING DICK CAN'T ABSCOND LIKE A COWARD.
EB: ooooooookay...yeah, i think you're just bored. please don't toss each other out the airlock?
EB: i can't make you two get along, but i'd like for both of my best friends to come back in one piece!
CG: YOU'RE NOT THE FRIENDLEADER ANYMORE, REMEMBER. ROSE CALLED DIBS.
EB: sigh! rose says both of you need to come back in one piece, too.
   -- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has joined the chat! --
TT: And if you so happen to provoke my dearest brother into spilling the proverbial beans about anything, I expect a full report.
TT: My brother is a study in contradiction and pseudostoic attempts at repression, but alas, he has also caught on to my wily attempts to delve into his psyche on the sly. I require all the sources I can obtain if we one day wish to understand the mind of David Strider.
CG: I MAKE NO PROMIFUCK, I THINK HE MOVED.
TT: Oh, don't let us keep you.
CG: WAIT, HANG ON.
CG: LOOKATTHISSDOUCHEBAG.jpeg
TT: Ah, yes. Excellent work. I think Mother might like to see this one.
   -- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has left the chat! --
EB: heheheh, i told you it would be hilarious!
CG: SURE, CHALK ONE UP FOR THE PRANK GAMBIT. NOW PARDON ME WHILE I DEVASTATE THIS SORRY MOTHERFUCKER. <>
EB: <>

The interrogation does not go as planned, but Karkat is inclined to blame that on the interrogated, not the interrogator, here. Or okay, maybe he just sucks at this, like he sucks at basically everything else he's ever put his mind to. What matters is that Dave snaps out of his bizarre naptime with a barely perceptible twitch - and then the pretzel packet is gone in a tiny blur. There's not even a crunch of plastic to mark its passing. If Dave reacts at all, it happens too fast for Karkat to appreciate it.

And naturally, the conversation starts out focused, then dovetails nicely into complete and utter humiliation in the span of fifteen minutes of bickering. It's fucking tame compared to some of the dumb arguments they've gotten into in the past - most of them probably Karkat's fault, since he was being a pissy sleep-deprived fuckhead for most of the past few weeks, and he cringes at just how bad his already poor impulse control got during that period of time - but it's still stupid as fuck.

Frankly, it's amazing. Or it would be, if Karkat weren't the one making a fucking ass of himself.
"Shit, I don't know what to tell you," Dave says, his face perfectly blank. It's so fucking annoying. Words have not yet been invented to describe how annoying it is. "Other than yeah, me and Jade were messing with you. But we had, like, honorable intentions and shit."

Seriously, Karkat can't fucking wait to hear what excuse they've come up with for this dunderfuckery. After hours of sitting bolt upright while asleep, Dave's slumped over to the point that he's almost horizontal, one foot tapping a beat against the seat across from him at a diagonal - the one right next to Karkat, in other words. He can feel every tiny beat like a jackhammer to his rageglands.

But the goal here is to not escalate this. "Fine. Awesome. You and Harley win whatever weird Karkat-baiting contest you've got going on." Another tap. Karkat stares at the ceiling and lets the fascinating whorls of the dinky overhead lights distract him - and another foot tap god fucking piss balls shit fucker - Karkat snaps, "Okay, cut it the fuck out! Pissing me off can't be as stupidly entertaining as you're so determined to make out with me to be!"

Dave's face turns the color of vanilla pudding, and he was already pretty vanilla to begin with. Karkat's shoddy excuse for a thinkpan, meanwhile, takes a full five seconds to process he's just said - and then he smacks both hands over his mouth, horrified.

"Oh, hell no," Dave says, sitting part of the way up and yanking his foot back. "You did the thing. Oh my god, if Rose were here right now -"

The raw embarrassment feel like it's turning Karkat's face the brightest red it's ever gone. People might actually be able to see the candy red through his skin at this rate; his pores might as well be oozing blood everywhere. "Shut up, shut up, shut up." God, why did past-him have to open his mouth.

"Oh my god, was it all the dick puns? Did that seriously, like, get you hot under the collar or something?!" Dave starts babbling, which makes the whole situation about 120% more stupid than it already was. "What do I have to do to make you believe that dick puns were not actually a come on-"

Dave cuts off...and then starts shaking with silent, snickering laughter because oh for fuck's sake.

"Fuck, I did not mean - will you stop that?" Karkat snaps, when Dave just keeps wheezing with laughter. "Look, you've said you don't want anything pitch with me and to be completely fucking honest, I somehow managed to scrounge up enough self-respect from the bottom of the slurrybarrel to not want anything pitch with you, of all people -" Dave opens his mouth, presumably to say something disingenuously provocative, but Karkat's on a roll now "- but you cannottell me you're not deliberately trying to piss me off, and maybe that's platonic for you but it's coming off really fucking strong to me. So this is me. Asking you to please, just. Just tone it down."

Dave shrugs. He's still laughing, the bastard, and he has his phone out for the first time in hours, which means he's probably texting a liveblog of this to someone. When is this guy not texting?

"Dude. Karkat. We did tone it down. Way the hell down, on account of we're not total dicks and you and John were having recovery week or whatever." He reaches up and starts scratching under the line of his collar, but before Karkat can start listing the ways the two of them have been antagonizing him over the past week under the guise of being 'helpful' or 'a distraction' (fuck that word), he shrugs again. "After a point, this is my basic personality."

Ugh. Karkat feels a low grumble echo through his chest, and his mouth works for a second, but the thing is, he knows. He's come to terms with the fact that John's friendtype tends to be 'mouthy assholes' - almost everyone in their circle qualifies in some way or another. Dissatisfied, Karkat folds his arms over his chest and hunches in, wishing he'd just had the sense to not open his mouth. Maybe
he and Dave could have traded off pretend comas and gone the entire trip without speaking. That would have been ideal, why is he only thinking of this now? "Well, your basic personality is obnoxious," he mumbles.

"Really? There goes my dream of sweeping the Miss America pageant." Dave slumps back down in his seat. Then he tilts his head to the side and sits back up, realization dawning on his face. "Oh god, have you been thinking about hate makeouts with Jade, too?"

This isn't happening. "Sorry. As far as this conversation is concerned, we are now parked squarely in the shut the fuck up zone."

"You totally have, oh my god." Dave shakes his head and lifts his phone; his thumbs don't move for a long moment, though, before he sighs through his nose. He lets the cellphone drop into his lap with an inscrutable noise. "There."

Karkat glares at him. "There what?"

Dave makes jazz hands. "That was me not texting Jade. Or Rose, who would have a field day with this. Are we cool now?"

For fuck's sake. "One act of you abstaining from rampant douchebaggery doesn't miraculously make everything 'cool,' Dave."

"But we're cool."

"Anything to make this conversation stop." Karkat tucks his feet up onto the seat with him - he considers switching seats entirely and just putting an entire plane between the two of them so the noxious amount of raw humiliation have time to clear the air, but honestly, it's gotten as worse as it's going to. Why bother at this point.

Dave won't let it go, though. Because Dave isn't familiar with tact. "No more square shenanigans?"

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Don't fucking flatter yourself."

"Sweet."

- 

If nothing else, they've got their shit together by the time the plane touches down at Reagan. Together enough to hopefully fool Feferi Peixes, anyway.

At least half of Karkat's thinkpan is informing him that there's no guarantee that the person they're going to meet the heiress; in fact, the odds are this is just some random troll off the internet that Karkat had the misfortune to pester and who then decided to play him for the ultimate sucker. If that is the case, the only thing that can possibly salvage this train wreck of a situation is that neither Karkat nor Dave paid a fucking cent for the flight out here, and they can fly right back with minimal hassle. The pilot might give them shit for it, but the pilot is a limp fronded stooge who started threatening to do a barrel roll if he didn't get the last thing of pretzels, so fuck that guy, anyway.

But there is someone crossing the runway on foot when they disembark, which is marginally more than Karkat was expecting. The sky overhead is overcast, with a faint drizzle that sticks to the exposed skin of his hands and face like mist; Karkat thinks it might have been warmer back in Seattle, but oh look. Wearing a hoodie seven days a week has its perks. Dave flashsteps down the stairs like the freakout weasel he is and looks ready to hug the ground or something equally seconhand-embarrassment inducing, but he doesn't get the chance before the figure starts rushing
towards them, the hood of their white jacket buckled around horns that seem eerily familiar, dark hair spilling out in tiny, bead-studded braids.

"Karcrab, Karcrab! Over here!" Feferi Peixes calls, even as she crosses the last few yards at a jog. She barely spares Dave a curious look before she comes to a stop, adjusting wide-rimmed fuchsia goggles before putting out a claw and shaking Karkat's before he can blink. *Fuck,* is her hand cold - like dunking his claws in a cup full of ice water on a cold winter day. Even if his sense of déjà vu didn't start wigging the fuck out at the sight of her, he'd have no doubt this was her; temperature-wise, she feels like what the deep sea looks like. "Oh, I'm so glad you cod come!" she says, the fins of her ears flaring enough to puff out the sides of her jacket hood. Her cheekbones look sharper than Karkat remembers from random talkshow interviews and public appearances, with freckles stark against grey skin that's maybe a shade too pale to look healthy, but she laughs with her whole body, her eyes bright, nearly pink, and she's so, so familiar. "Don't worry, this shoaldn't take long at all!"

That pun was fucking weak. Karkat keeps his mouth shut, on account of he's not quite stupid enough to bad mouth her puns in person while he's in stabbing distance. "Uh. Sure. Whatever." What the fuck else was he going to say? He had this planned out, but look at how fucking useful that is right now. Wait, he remembers - "Mostly we came to try to talk you out of being a fucking moron. So, there's that." Off to his right, Dave starts nodding in agreement, because Dave is a dick but he also understands that this is first and foremost an intervention, not an excuse to be a dick in public.

Feferi blinks at him with the wide, uncomprehending eyes of a goldfish - and then she starts laughing again with the teeth of a shark, some of the sharpest Karkat's ever had a troll bare at him in his fucking life. Karkat can't help the vaguely panicked look he throws at Dave, silently screaming for backup. Somehow, this is both more and less intimidating at the same time than he thought meeting a tyrianblood would be but those teeth are the equivalent of smacking his amygdala with a freshly severed arm and screaming at him to run for his life. "Oh Karkat, you doofish!" Feferi says, rolling her eyes and tugging on his hand. Karkat means to stand his ground but Feferi barely exerts any visible effort at all and he nearly gets yanked off his feet; it's only then that he gets just how careful her hold on him is, that she could probably snap his fingers like sea-bleached bones. "Don't worry, me and Glubby have been pracfishing the tricky part, so we know exactly how to make this work. Anyway, if you only came all this way to try and talk me out of it, why would you come at all?"

"Because when you try to persuade people not to do stupid fucking shit over Pesterchum, they have this tendency to agree with you and then go do it anyway," Karkat snarls, trying to pry his hand free. He might as well be flapping his hands at her for all the good it does. The jet plane landed and taxied close to the edge of the airfield rather than near the rest of the incoming traffic, and Feferi's strides carry them right along back the way she came. Just a flat strip of pathetic, yellowing grass lies between them and the waterway - what is that, anyway, the riverfront? The bay? He can't fucking tell, he's too turned around. Common sense is telling him they're facing east, but the sight of the waterline makes him think they're back home, where water would mean west, usually. "How about we just hold our hoofbeasts for a hot second and consider, I don't know, not walking up to your ancestor and poking her with a stick until she decides to serve us as hors d'oeuvres at her next party?"

"Dude," Dave mutters, right in Karkat's ear. He's keeping pace with them despite the fact that he doesn't have a tyrian-blooded powerhouse to haul him around by the wrist. Instead of helping Karkat drag Feferi to a stop - where is she even going? Literally the only thing in the direction she's headed is the river - Dave hovers at Karkat's side like the world's most useless hummingbird. "Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?!" Karkat hisses back. He plants his foot in a hole in the ground covered by grass and stumbles, while Feferi sails on ahead.
"Whatever," Feferi says, oblivious, shrugging her shoulders dismissively. "I already said we wouldn't go fight her head on - just for you! Glubby'll take us as close as she can, and we should be back before dark here. Piece of roecake!"

"And you really think the Condesce won't catch on to the fact that you're the one going around trying to wreck her shit?!" Karkat says. When Dave doesn't add anything to the secondary conversation he decided to start in the first place, Karkat elbows the human in the side. "Hear what, you dick?"

"Well, she'll probably suspect...but if we do this fast enough, she won't be able to prove it!" Feferi pauses. "Did you say somefin else, Karkat?"

Shit. "No, nothing. Never mind," he says, ducking his head and glaring at Dave with all the power in him without lifting his face.

Dave's still mulling over whatever was so important he felt the need to bring it up right now. "It's like if a migraine could talk," he says, finally. Great. That makes zero sense at all. When Karkat lets his glare naturally intensify to express how few fucks he has to give about this, Dave's forehead wrinkles, and his eyebrows come together in an outright frown. "God, where have I heard this before...I'm serious, man, I think something is -"

"And here we are!" Feferi says. Even though they've hardly walked anywhere. The airport is still right the fuck there. All they've done is gone to the river bank - and Karkat's still not even sure if it is a riverbank, or just a really skinny section of Chesapeake Bay. He didn't think he really needed to brush up on bodies of water in the DC area today, but now this is just starting to piss him off.

There's a gross sheen on the surface of the water as they near it; at first Karkat assumes it's just the clouds overhead draining the color out of everything, but the closer they get the glossier the river looks. He's heard something about the Potomac being pretty fucking nasty even on a good day, but if this is that pollution Feferi wouldn't stop nacking about and blaming on the Condesce, he can see her point - the river look sickly and swollen, lapping up into the grass and leaving mucky pits when it recedes, as regular as breathing. Tiny dead fish wash up on each ripple. "Okay, that's disgusting," Karkat says, digging his heels in. "Feferi, stop for two seconds, you're gonna walk right into-

Feferi doesn't stop. Her feet skim the top of the water and don't sink in an inch - which, yeah, is a thing Nymph can do. Right. It's not a thing Karkat can do, so he gives one last yank on his arm, feeling like his shoulder might dislocate, and finally wrenches himself free from Feferi's death grip. This leaves him at a really fucking inconvenient angle, poised to topple into one of these filmy puddles of mud soup, but at the last second something knocks into his shoulder and shoves him back onto both feet. He whips his head around, but Dave has already gone back to skulking, the only sign that he might have almost been caught in the act of being helpful the fact that he now has one of his hands pressed to a temple, frowning in either concentration or outright consternation.

"Usually I can clear stuff like this right out," Feferi is saying, walking on water further out into the river before coming to a halt with her hands on her hips. It's only then that Karkat really processes what she's wearing because it's - not usual. Feferi Peixes is a fucking fashion icon; he knows next to nothing about how anything more complicated than a hoodie works, as Kanaya has been quick to tell him over the past few days, but he can tell that Feferi looks almost...drab. His head keeps picturing someone in pale blues and greens and pink and golds, but Feferi's in almost all white, from her unseasonably thick jacket to her tights. "But this stuff just keeps filtering in more and more! I have the pull to get a moratorium put on people visiting the beaches or jumping in the river willy-nilly, but that's no good with all the seadwellers in the area having their homes half-flooded with the stuff! I guess my powers aren't strong enough to beat whatever the HIC is using to cook this up."
Karkat can't help the face he's making right now. Thankfully, Feferi appears more interested in dipping her toe into the gross river slime than noticing his healthy skepticism. "And you're absolutely fucking positive she's the one making it? This isn't just, you know, regular spring time sludge for DC?"

"Who else could?" Feferi's face darkens, her lower lip pressing forward in a moue. "I cleaned the river out when I first got here - and now, this happens and I can't make a dent in it! There was someone who might have been a witness...a carapacian, actually. But it took off in a reeeel hurry when I tried to ask what it meant about the Condesce being involved. Since then, me and Glubby have been busy scoping out her local factories and other interests, but it was only when she left the country this past week that we realized she might be manufacturing it elsewhere! It seems like an awful lot of work for her to go through, shipping it back all this wave, but this is the Condesce we're talking about here..." With that Feferi sticks her tongue out in a silent raspberry.

Karkat is still hooked way the fuck back on 'left the country.' Oh, she cannot be serious. "Left the country?" he repeats, incredulously, loud enough that he probably can't just excuse it by saying he was shouting to be heard over the sound of another plane coming in for a landing behind them. "Remember that part when you said this would only take, like, a day? What the fuck, Feferi?"

Feferi just rolls her eyes at him, her expression patronizing. Her head tosses a little, like maybe she meant to toss her hair, but her hood is still up. "It'll be fiiiin, Krabsnack," she says, dragging the words out like he needs them slow. "Glubby and I have got it all taken care of. You and Daveid will just be along for the ride, mostly."

"Dave," Dave says, which might well be the first thing he's actually said to Feferi.

"Shore, shore, whatever you say." Feferi's staring distractedly downriver, now, one foot tapping on the surface of the water and sending little droplets of filmy dark water splashing up onto her boots. "We can leave in just a moment!"

Ha. Karkat likes how now she's just kind of assuming they're going along with this. Coldbloods can get that way, when they think they know what's best. He can already tell his sarcasm gland is going to get a fucking workout today. "Please tell me this sounds as far-fetched to you as it does to me," Karkat grinds out between his teeth, not daring to move his lips too much, as he elbows Dave in the ribs again.

Dave just turns his head, enough that Karkat catches a glimpse of red side-eyeing the tyrianblood in the river, and shrugs. "Do we even get to make judgment calls about what counts as 'far-fetched' anymore, man? Maybe troll ladies outsource their river pollution production all the time, I'm not gonna judge."

Whatever. Dave can be as fucking naive as he wants, while Karkat can be the voice of reason in the face of two complete imbeciles. Like that's anything new. "Really? You can't think of any original arguments that might talk her out of this?! Because the more I argue, the more she apparently thinks I have no idea what I'm talking about-"

"Hngnghk," Dave says. It comes out a faint, wheezy gasp with a click at the end that actually comes remarkably close to approximating the fourth conjugation for the Alternian word 'to make use of the body of an opponent as a weapon in combat,' meaning that Karkat is temporarily thrown for a fucking loop because Dave couldn't speak Alternian even if he replaced his brain with a dictionary or three. Never mind that beating someone up with the body of a beaten opponent might actually count as an diplomatic tactic back in the day.

But the next words out of Dave's mouth are, "Oh, fuck," before he seizes Karkat by the shoulder and
bolts.

Karkat goes along with it in a blind panic. His backpack of emergency supplies, slung over one shoulder, jolts him in the side with each step, before he thinks to wonder what the fuck they're running from and looks back over his shoulder. "JESUS MOTHER OF SCREAMING FUCK!"

He's in time to see a tentacle the size of the Washington Monument rise up out of the river, blanched and lusus white against the washed out grey of the sky. Feferi stands dwarfed beneath it - and then wraps her arms around the thing in a hug that can't even reach all the way around, giggling like a fucking maniac.

Please, please, fucking please, let that not be her -

"Glubby! We're ready to go now! Karkat's here," Feferi announces, chipper as anything. "And he brought a friend!"

"That's her lusus," Karkat groans. Why is he not surprised, this is the worst fucking possible thing he could imagine. I mean, fuck, all tyrian lusii are things out of fucking horror stories, the absolute worst of the worst that the deep sea has to offer (frilled sharks and viperfish are bad enough in their natural habitat; giant versions of them are fucking nightmare fuel incarnate).

But somehow, with a name like Glubby, he thought it would be somewhat less...unspeakably terrifying? But no, looks like he should have been thinking along the lines of *tentacle monster larger than a national monument*, haha, fucking hilarious. The universe is having a merry fucking shortle over this one.

"Not a lusus oh god we're not running fast enough," Dave says all in a single breath; Karkat's eyes snap back to the back of the human's head because Dave shouldn't sound like that - he's supposed to sound like a smug dick, not like someone just barely keeping his shit together. "They won't stop screaming - we need Rose - oh my shitballs Karkat, you still can't hear that?"

They're almost back to the airfield; Karkat nearly falls flat on his face when the ground clips out from under him, but Dave keeps an even tighter grip on his shoulder than Feferi had on his wrist, hauling him upright again. "Okay, maybe we should have explored the implications of 'oh my tyrian lusus will be helping us, no worries.'" Dave throws him a look that is openly contorted with disbelief, but Karkat finishes, "But I don't think it'll eat us if she doesn't tell it to! Jesus fuck, you'd think you were the one raised in the fear of other peoples' custodial beasts..."

"It's a thing!" Dave yells. Which totally clears that up. Not. When Karkat tries to stop (he can hear Feferi calling their names quizzically, now) Dave starts waving frantically with one hand before he seems to remember how to use words that make sense. "Like what got Rose in New York - the death noodle monster things - shit, you weren't there, you don't - can you not hear that?"

"Hear what?!" All Karkat can hear at the moment is the blood pounding in his eardrums, and Dave's heartbeat - faster than Karkat's ever felt it, not that he pays much active attention to anyone's pulse but John's - and, more distantly, Feferi's...which is...a little...fuzzier...

He's only trying to feel for a pulse; they're far enough away that with his powers' shitty range he couldn't do much else, anyway. But what he gets for his trouble, heard out of only one ear (or maybe only one side of his thinkpan) runs something like:
That -

For a moment, Karkat can't piece thoughts together - and then a moment of pure, unadulterated rage forces itself together to produce a coherent sentence, because seriously -

"Is Horrorterror really that hard of a word for you to remember?!" Karkat screams. He doesn't mean to draw attention to them, honestly, but right now his brain is doing a sprightly rendition of the traditional 'GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE' screechhymns, and his default volume control is minimal at the best of times, let alone when he's in the process of adding Feferi + Horrorterror-lusus and coming up with some farcically large exponential equation that equals their fucking doom and Dave fucking Strider says things like 'death noodle monsters' instead of the actual fucking name in the middle of a fucking emergency.

Either way, Dave doesn't have time to defend himself (which he fucking couldn't), and heck, they don't even make it halfway back to the jet plane. This is because the jet, at some point, had to start taxiing away and is now much closer to the row of terminals and loading gates than it was five minutes ago.

But it's also because they probably couldn't have outrun this thing in the first place; when the tentacle lashes out and slams against the ground with an earth-rattling thud, it stretches and curves in a wide arc further out than even Dave could probably have run without Karkat's ass slowing him down - and then lashes back at them in a single sweep, curling in on itself so that they're surrounded on all sides. Dave skids to a stop and then lunges to the side, pulling Karkat along with him, but the ground only clips out from under them once before the tentacle closes in.

Karkat expects to get slammed, hard; but at the last moment the pale tentacle flows and wraps around them in bends and coils, lifting them as neatly off their feet as if it were picking up fragile toys. Then it bears them gently back over to the river, and Karkat can only watch and dangle uselessly as the airfield recedes again. His arms are trapped, one down by his side and the other bent crookedly against his chest where he failed to raise it in time. When they reach her, Feferi just smiles and smiles, her eyes wrinkled shut by the wide force of her grin as she waits for them to be reeled back in and lowered to her level. She's sitting on another coil of lusus-tentacle like she hasn't a care in the world. Nah. Of fucking course not. She sends her mostly-likely voracious elder god lusus out to recapture wayward friends all the fucking time.

Why does everything go so wrong, so much?

"Hey, I know Glubby can be a little intimentadating, but there's no need to worry! She listens to me!" Feferi says, in what she must think is a tone of benevolent reassurance. She pats the curl of tentacle under her hand, and the filmy white skin twitches under her touch. "She's promised to be very careful with you guys, since you're not as used to her as I am! Bene?"

"NO, ACTUALLY, NOT FUCKING BENE," Karkat finds himself yelling uncontrollably. His arms and backpack are pinned to his sides, and he can feel the cold right through his layers of clothing, chillier than Feferi herself and this is not doing his hindbrain any favors when it comes to the kneejerk reaction to run away from the enormous, presumably territorial lusus in the vicinity. While Glubby has a good hold on his upper body (which is not at all reassuring in any fucking way whatsoever) his legs are dangling and exposed, and he can't fight the horrific flashes of what-if's that intrude on his attempts to think of a way out of this - like what would happen if Glubby decided to not be careful, and instead reach out and detach his upper body from his lower body. Fucking shit like that is what'll keep him up at night, even if they get out of this miraculously in one piece.

Dave, dangling off to one side, on the other hand, has managed to get an arm loose - fat lot of good it's doing him, when he's hanging upside down, but he does manage to slam his shades back onto his
nose before they can fall into the water below. Which, if you're a complete and total fucking shitgargler, is probably a really important task to accomplish and all. Then he starts gamely trying to stab Glubby in the tentacle with a broken piece of shit sword that he pulls out of - Karkat misses it, or something, but he just assumes Dave keeps swords hidden everywhere, because the asshole never seems to run short no matter how many snap in two. He manages to jab the swordkind into the horrorlusus's pallid flesh, and a line of dark, brackish blood starts to well up around the metal - only to drop into the water below.

Karkat can't even say what makes his eyes follow the blood instead of trying to wriggle his way loose, but he watches in mute fury as the blood hits the water and spreads out in slimy, iridescent ripples.

It looks remarkably like the pollution that's already there. What a fucking coincidence.

Ha.

Fucking.

Ha.

Well, at least now Feferi's monochrome outfit makes sense. She's clearly done a fucking swandive off the nearest cliff into villainhood, and played him and Dave for the dumbass chumps they are. No, actually, scratch that - Dave can't be blamed for this. Karkat's the stupid, stupid fuck who bought into the whole 'please help me fight evil' thing to begin with.

"No, none of that!" Feferi says, swinging her legs up on the tentacle and jumping over to the tangled knot that's wrapped around Dave in an effortless bound, reaching down and touching the wound with a look of petulant concern. When she splays her claws over it, the skin starts to seal together again, without coagulation or a scab. "Clam down, you guys, she's just gonna -"

Dave tries stabbing in another place - doesn't even try to aim for Feferi, which is...probably smart, all things considered - but the moment the blade sinks into the lusus's tentacle the whole thing jerks. Karkat tenses up, thinking they're about to be dunked in the probably toxic river water for fun times; then Dave starts wheezing, his heart rate shooting through the fucking roof, until Karkat finally notices the way the coil wrapped around the human is slowly contracting. Karkat cringes internally, anticipating the crack of bone, but it never comes - the broken sword vanishes instead and Dave closes that hand into a fist, waiting with a stiff expression for the Horrorterror to loosen its grip. Feferi's expression smooths out into something like pleased satisfaction as she watches this, and finally she lifts her head from the sealed over wound and turns that smile on Karkat once more. "There! We're all fronds here, aren't we?"

There's a foul taste in Karkat's mouth, but it's also gone so dry with utter terror that he couldn't spit even if he wanted to. "So the whole Condesce shtick was a fucking lie," he says, using his chin to indicate the river below. When Feferi just cocks her head to the side, puzzled, he grits his teeth. "Your horrific lusus is the thing causing all this pollution - oh my fuck, it literally just bled more of it everywhere right in front of us. Did you think we would just go along with this fucking charade like a bunch of sad sacks to help you go piss of the Condesce over something you did?!

"What are you talking about, Karkat?" Feferi says. She actually has the nerve to peer down past Dave at the water, adjusting her goggles again as though that'll make the faint trails of slime oozing off the lusus's limb stop floating out over the surface of the river. Karkat's just waiting to see what a fucking mess that slop makes of their clothes. His claws still feel relatively dry, so maybe there's not as much horrific sea monster sweat on the parts holding them captive, but that's no guarantee this thing won't start break out the slimier tendrils and start dousing them with ooze. Kanaya is going to
be so mad.

"This thing is leaking." Dave says. Upside down, his grimace looks pained, but at least he's backing Karkat up on this for once. "Oh god. Tell me that isn't jizz. Hell, no."

On second thought, Karkat could do without Dave's idea of back up.

Feferi shakes her head, the smile slowly slipping from her mouth. The tentacle has started coiling again, and Karkat's stomach slowly drops into freefall as he realizes the airport appears to be moving away from them - or, rather, they're moving away from it. Surely someone has to have noticed the enormous fucking tentacle hanging out on the river, but no; Glubby starts carrying them downriver with no one even attempting to stop it. "Nooo, don't be silly," she says, tugging on one of her braids as she walks casually along the tentacle away from Dave. The lusus shifts to accommodate her, so she's almost looped back to Karkat by the time the Washington Monument vanishes around a bend in the river. Shit, are they moving faster? "Are you guys squidding around with me? Glubby has nothing to do with it!"

This is a load of barnacles. Wait. Fuck, now he's doing it. "It literally just happened! It's happening right now!" Karkat yells, kicking a foot furiously. He's doing his best to outline the filmy trail of seepage they're leaving in their wake, but Feferi doesn't bother following his gesture so he gives up. "We're! Not! BLIND!"

"Wait. Shut up," Dave says, cutting Karkat off before he can really launch his new tirade. "I think it's -"

"No..." Feferi says, almost at the same time, a low mumble as she leans over the edge of the tentacle. For a moment, doubt plays across her face. "That couldn't...No. No!"

When she looks at Karkat next, there's a cloudy film over her eyes like cataracts, her pupils so hazy and blurred that he doesn't think she can even see him. "Glubby has nothing to do with it," she says, but it's almost - mechanical. Like she's saying words someone else wrote in a script. "We're going to go meet up with the rest of Glubby now."

The rest -

Karkat looks down. Well, down and sideways. Just under the surface of the water, he can barely make out the rest of the tentacle that's holding them. There are no boats out on the river, maybe because of all the shit in the water, so there's nothing for him to get a good comparison with from this angle. He just - oh god. "Isn't this all of it?" Karkat asks, in trepidation. He already knows the answer to this one, but fuck. He has to try.

"Oh, no," Feferi says. She walks over to him, her steps jerky at first as though being controlled by something not entirely familiar with how joints work, and then smoothing out. She sits next to him, legs swinging over the side of the tentacle as she does, and smiles. Her eyes are pupilless and white as milk, almost totally opaque. "Glubby had to grow this arm especially long to reach this far inland! The rest of her is back off the coast, since she takes up so much space," she says, and then she bares a few more razor sharp teeth before tilting her head over to rest on top of his. "Don't worry. We've tidally got this under control!"

And with that, the arm continues to haul them further downstream, the noises of Washington DC fading into the distance as they pick up speed.

He can't even reach his phone from here.
There's no other traffic on the Potomac today. Even when they curve around a final spit of land and start coasting over what Karkat is fucking positive is the bay, racing along ever faster as the tentacle takes advantage of open water, there's not a single solitary other person in sight. They're soon speeding along to the point that keeping his eyes open makes them water and ache - when salt starts stinging his face, Karkat just closes them to slits, because his glasses are doing nothing to protect him and at this rate his contacts are going to blink out in a sluice of tears, and then where will they be? He'd come into this tentatively hoping that Feferi wouldn't be that bad - maybe even a possible friend like Kanaya, one who might remember more than he does and acknowledges the game happened - but like fuck does he think he can trust her with anything right now.

He doesn't think Feferi's been in charge here a long fucking while. She keeps up a constant stream of chatter, both with him (and occasionally Dave) and with her lusus, her eyes angular, chalk-white, and utterly blind to the fish bones and bleached jellyfish that rise up to bob in the waves kicked up by their passing. But no matter how many different ways he and Dave try to point out the truth or try to bargain with her to take them back to dry land, Feferi just shakes her head and shrugs, like they're speaking an entirely different language. This Horrorterror - is it even a real lusus? - has its tentacles so deep in her head Karkat's absolutely kicking himself for not realizing sooner. She'd believe anything it made her believe about the Condesce; she wouldn't have a choice. He doesn't think he's hearing half of what Dave is evidently picking up of their conversation, because the human is honestly turning a pasty greenish color (though that might be from the fact that he only just got flipped right-side up when they hit open water), but what he can make out makes his head throb. From what happened with Rose in New York, and from what they learned from those tapes, once a Horrorterror's decided to make your thinkpan its personal wading pool, it doesn't take long before things like sanity and rational thought just can't cope anymore. So on top of being kidnapped by this tentacle monster to some unspecified location in the middle of the Atlantic, he and Dave are going to have to figure out how to untangle Feferi. While Rose, their only fucking resident expert in how to deal with these things, is back home and unreachable. Even if one of them managed to pull a phone, they're at this thing's mercy - one dunk and all of their electronics are going to be shot.

Karkat is sick of it. Seriously, the whole 'molesting brainstems with dolorous flagella' thing is getting real fucking old. Between horrific gods and mindgrubs is there anyone involved with this godforsaken game that hasn't had holes punched in their brains?!

Also, the odds of him and Dave being eaten by a sea monster have just skyrocketed to completely unacceptable heights. The chance of being personally culled by the Condesce is now disappointingly low. Yes. Disappointing. He said it. Running into the Condesce would be preferable to what fresh fuckery is going right now.

"Here we are!" Feferi announces, after the most awkward, terrifying, yet still remarkably dull thirty minutes in Karkat's recent memory. They're out in the ocean now, there's no doubt - Virginia and Maryland got left behind a while ago, and now there's nothing but choppy waves around for miles. Karkat's only hope is that Feferi's been deluded into thinking the Condesce has set up something in another country - by fuck, if they have to play along with whatever scenario Glubfucker over here has planted in her mind to get back on dry land, Karkat will do it.

Unless it was all just a lie to get them out here to be served up as a late lunch.

But from what Karkat can see when he cracks his eyes open, still watering with reddish tears, they're just...floating. There's nothing here but the three of them and the resident giant tentacle. The water's too dark for him to make out anything beneath the waves. You know, aside from the fucking hordes
of dead fish lying belly-up everywhere, sprinkled in with the earthly remains of what looks like
dozens of larger animals and lusii.

"Wow. What a view," Dave drawls. Karkat knows that inflection in his voice - it's the 'I'm going to
be a reckless fuckwad and start talking shit at the worst possible moment' tone. "Look at all that
water. And sky. I'm getting all choked up over here. Where's my camera, I need to take a shitty
hipster pic. And add filters. So many filters."

...Fuck it. "Why am I not surprised," Karkat says, rolling his eyes as hard as he ever has. "The dead
sea life aesthetic would be exactly the kind of thing you blog about ironically."

"Don't hate it 'til you try it, man. You've got to walk in my photographic shoes before you can judge.
It's all about ambiance." Dave pauses. "And filters."

"You two are so crabby today!" Feferi comments, but she sounds indulgent rather than genuinely
offended. "Ah, but no worries. Once we get there, we'll be having too much fun for you to
complain!"

They move again, lowering down towards the water this time. It's just as filmy and iridescent here as
it was on the river; maybe more so, actually, because in a certain slant of grey light, Karkat thinks the
dark of the water looks almost white and sallow. "Feferi, enough fucking around," he says,
swallowing hard as he desperately tries to see where the rest of Glubby might be. There's nothing
there. "Where are we going? Because I know you're not fucking in control right now, but we can't
breathe underwater so holy fuck don't let your lusus drag us under."

Well. That's not entirely true. But no fucking way is Karkat testing whether his pathetic excuses for
gills could sift through the kind of toxic waste the Horrorterror's filled the ocean with. For that matter,
unless the human's has been hiding something pretty fucking big from the rest of them, Dave
wouldn't last long in the water here, either. Dave dying is not a good thing, no matter how infuriating
he gets.

"You say the oddest things, Karkat, really." Feferi almost dances around the place where Karkat's
trapped, sliding a little down the incline formed by the tentacle into the sea. At the last minute she
brakes and starts walking on the waves, neatly adjusting to the swell and ebb of the water with each
step. "Anyway! Russia!"

Karkat waits a beat. Two.

Dave appears to have lost control of his face.

Karkat says, after a few more beats spent uselessly waiting for Feferi to laugh and tell them the
punchline, "I'm sorry, did you say Canada? Or maybe Mexico? Yeah, that's what I thought you
said."

"No, Russia," Feferi says. It's the kind of unrelenting salvo that sinks an entire nation's worth of
naval vessels. She kneels and dips a claw into the water, pale eyes closing. "Do you need your ears
checked, or somefin?"

"I don't think she's joking." Dave pries at the coil holding himself in place, still aghast, and Karkat
takes a cue from him and does his level best to wriggle an arm free; neither of them are making much
progress, but it's the thought that counts, alright? It's obvious that the unspoken plan to wait and
make a run for it when they hit dry land again just got shot down before it even left the ground, and
is now on fire but still taxiing on toward the end of the runway. "Ohhhh, piss."
"There! These should get you guys down to the level we need to reach." Feferi stands up and waves them down - not like they have any choice. She's done something to the water because it's gone oddly concave. Deep pockets of air have sunk down into the waves and the water can't seem to spill over into them. "Cause of the pressure and all. Me and Glubby were very particular about the dimensions!" She claps her hands. "Now! Andiamo!"

Karkat has enough time to chant a nice round of "Nononononono," before Glubby dumps them into the hollow pockets of water, without ceremony or warning. He spies Dave flounder wildly for a moment before there's a thin wall of dark water between them.

When he expects to hit water, he hits - something elastic. "Fuagh?" he says, peeling his face off the thing he landed on and looking around, feeling thoroughly fucking abused by this point.

It's a bubble. He has to put out a claw to prod at the curve of the wall, but even when he realizes too late what a stupid idea that is, he can't push through the surface of it; the bubble just gives under his hand, and then reforms when he moves it. At first he can hardly see anything outside it but the rush of dark water; he only realizes they're moving again (down and fast) when the bubble begins to glow a faint, radiant pink. It illuminates an absolutely tiny circle of the ocean around him - enough for him to squint and see the neon pink glow of another bubble, and the gleam of a pair of fuchsia eyes as they blink at him, then blink out again. Feferi's a slip of white, barely visible in the gloom.

...How much air do they have in these things? Because down does not equal Russia. Down mostly likely equals them being eaten.

They might not really travel all that far down. Karkat's sense of scale is a dead, rotting corpse, by this point, because he's spent all morning flying on a plane and being yanked across the Chesapeake like a dog on a leash. But they must reach a certain depth, because Glubby decides now would be a good time to show itself. At first Karkat doesn't realize what the sudden pale, faintly luminous lines are, through the pink of the air bubble he's been popped into.

Then he sees.

It's horrifying, yeah, but almost unreal enough that Karkat's thinkpan is happy enough to start whistling and pretending that what he's looking at isn't nearly as terrifyingly massive as his senses are screaming it is. Bigger than any sea lusii, bigger than any museum replica of a historical tyrian lusus; more and more tendrils just keep unfolding, shaking off the layers of silt that have settled on top of them and stretching out to reveal more still. It's more than a few football fields long, but beyond that Karkat can't even fucking begin to quantify what he's seeing.

\[ G \text{ r e e t } \text{ t u n g } \frac{1}{8} h s, \] something whisper-screams in his ear. If thousands and thousands of screaming voices could sound quietly smug, these do.

Well, fuck. Looks like the dark gods win this round.

"We're going now! Is it still intact?" Feferi's voice echoes through the water and through the lining of the bubble. Karkat catches a fleeting glimpse of her white clothes as she dives past, one of the other tendrils rising up to meet her. When he pulls his eyes away from the abomination of chaos unspooling along the floor of the ocean, he peers at Dave's bubble in time to see the antagonizing fuck try to shove his own hand through the elastic bubble.
Now Dave's hands are digging through his pockets - and he's pulling out his cell phone. No. Fuck no. Karkat wonders if screaming THERE'S NO SERVICE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN will make any impact on Dave's one-human mission to prove stupidity is an art form, but he doubts he can figure out how to make his voice do what Feferi's doing.

Then his traitorous phone starts buzzing in his pocket.

TG: dude
CG: NO.
TG: okay so my logic is
CG: SHUT UP RIGHT NOW.
TG: if there's wifi in johns head
CG: SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP
TG: there's gonna be wifi at the bottom of the atlantic
CG: SSSSSTTTTTTTTOOOOOOPPPPPP.
TG: its like
TG: game rules or something
CG: I WILL FUCKING PUNCH YOU IN THE DICK IN AN INCREDIBLY PLATONIC FASHION.
CG: NO. THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR THIS.
CG: NONE. THIS IS JUST FUCKING UNBELIEVABLE.
CG: WAIT FUCK HAVE YOU TEXTED -
TG: already on it

Feferi is barely more than a darting speck in the water compared to her lusus. Karkat, torn between peeking out to see what the fuck those two are doing and trying to make his claws stop trembling long enough to type out something coherent to John, can't tell what's going on.

More light does the trick, though. Karkat fumbles and nearly drops his phone at the sudden flare, as lines and whorls and loops appear in the dark beneath them, in a familiar symbol the size of a least a small town, if not a city.
CG: JOHN FUCK
EB: karkat? what's going on? dave just started texting rose and something's messed up, he's not making -
CG: OKAY TH E IMPORTANT THING IS NOT TO Plumbthroat HERe
EB: why are you typing like that!
CG: DO NT PANIC BUT
CG: ME AND DAVE MIHGT BE BEING squiddlePPED
CG: A LITTLE
EB: you're not making sense either! i can barely read any of this, what's wrong with your phone?
CG: THERE'S AHHHHRRRR

With a sickening whine and a pop that makes his heart jolt, Karkat's phone sparks in his hand, and the screen whites out. The colors slowly fade back in, but -

He's not using Pesterchum any time in the near future.

There's no sign of the window he and John were talking in, and despite the fact that, over in the other bubble, Dave is clearly still attempting to use his phone, nothing else appears, either. Karkat doesn't think he could even navigate away from this screen right now; it might just crash altogether.

The asshole responsible for this fucking nightmare doesn't even have the gall to say anything more about it; Glubby just keeps inspecting the lines of the spirograph below with wandering tendrils, while Feferi comes to rest on another of the horrorlusus's sides.

"Ready to go!"

The bubble lurches under Karkat's feet. Dave maintains his balance, somehow, but Karkat lands hard on one knee before he catches himself, the phone flying out of his claws and lying pitifully on its back until he scrambles over and snatches it up. Feferi has a claw raised to reel them in. In an even more disturbing turn of events, as she draws them to bob on either side of her perch, Karkat can see that her eyes have fucking inverted or something - the pupils and irises are solid white, while the
He opens them, the ocean is brighter than he remembers.

His right eyelid feels sticky with salt or something; his contact lenses feel tacky and inflexible, like they would normally if they were ancient and he really needed throw them the fuck away. He raises his head (though he's not sure he remembers setting it down) and with a dull vmp one of his glasses' lenses just. Just gives up. It tumbles out of the frames, still intact; the other is cracked in dizzying patterns, and finally Karkat just pulls them off with a disgusted jerk. Without the glasses to help correct for what his colored contacts distort, he can't see for love or hate or money. It's all just a blur of deep blue - and then lighter blue - and then sudden, blinding white.

In a snap, both of the bubbles vanish. An unyielding grip catches his arm and lifts him up before the water can suck back into the vacuum, but Karkat's too busy acclimating to the fact that it's cold as the fucking pits of icy death hell. "Whoops! It's a little chilly, isn't it," Feferi giggles.


His eyes adjust to the light and if he squints things slide into nice, blurry, rage-hazed focus: the sun's low in the sky - too low, and distant and cold through the flossy clouds, but still glancing off the scattered fles of ice around them brightly enough to be a pain in the ass; Dave's dangling from Feferi's other hand, his shades shattered in circling cracks and his mouth the color of a bruise. "Oh man. Oh shit. That time difference, though," he says, sounding like he's higher than a fucking comet.

Oh, hell no. Karkat kicks him. He can't get up much momentum with the way Feferi is the only thing supporting their weight, here, and she's mostly holding them out on opposite sides of her, but he manages to nail the human in the knee and say, "No, you do not get to fucking space out on me, you useless time stoner!" Dave throws him a wounded look, chips of plastic trickling out of the frames of his sunglasses, but he also tenses up and stops doing his best impression of the world's only living brain donor. Feferi barely reacts; she just inches them away from each other, her arms unwavering as she continues to hold them up over the icy water.

It doesn't help. The air is cold enough that Karkat feels like the tips of his horns are going numb, down to the root, and neither he or Dave are wearing more than light hoodies over their uniforms. They're not dressed for weather below freezing like this.

Karkat clenches - his ears are starting to hurt - but Dave looks like he's biting back total agony; his head turns as Karkat watches, and now he can see there's blood flowing freely down the side of Dave's neck from his ears, smeared in the strands of his hair. When Karkat looks where he and Feferi are looking, he can just make out the shifting of enormous white tendrils tangling and retracting in restless motions under the water and ice. If the Horrorterror is still lying close to the sea floor, it's clear why it couldn't take them any.
closer to land, flat in the distance; there's just no more room without it beached itself on the shelf or breaking the surface. G of f o f rh, m o s t p r e c i o u s. Fe f e r i. F i n d w h a t. E t h y s h o t s s o d e a r e, a n d C R U S H T.T.

"Of course," Feferi says. More of her hair has spilled free from the hood, and now Karkat can see that many of the braids are frayed and undone, left to fall apart from lack of attention. She blinks, a momentary frown creasing her face, and when her eyes open they're normal again, the white draining away so that the regular fuchsia of her eyes are clear and the yellows burn through. "Are you two guppies ready for this?"

"No," Dave says, almost in unison with Karkat.

She shrugs. "Oh whale."

And starts walking towards the shore.

--

Elsewhere...

Spades Slick is sprinting across the street when it knocks him flat on his ass.

One minute, he's mindin' his own damn business, and then outta nowhere the blast of PANICDANGERFUCK blindsides him, a siren throbbing through his pulse, down into the marrow of his bones and the meat of his heart, and all he can do is snarl as he collapses. It's a thousand times stronger than he remembers it being not even a month ago - hasn't been this strong in a lifetime - and for a while (too long of a while) all he can do is huddle over in the middle of a crosswalk in broad daylight.

He shoulda expected as much after remaking the blood contract with the shit's living body. Spades is used to ignoring that punk's habitual fits of stupidity and panic, because all of those tend to get his blood pumping over a bunch of baloney and if Spades had gone running to help the brat every time he thought he was in danger, he'da never had a life.

This feels like a genuine omen. Like the slow-growing sense of 'that stupid brat's doing something life-threateningly stupid' that drew him to Seattle in the first place, but compacted into a single whammy that reaches out to Spades and shrieks at him to come help. Blood binds him.

God dammit. When the blood stops rushing through his head, Spades staggers upright, sourly casting a quick glance around to make sure she hasn't caught up. He thought he had more time to lose her before trying to circle back around to where all the action's been with his new crew, but hell. If he hijacks a car with a good set of wheels, he should be able to make Seattle in time to scrape the kid off the fucking pavement after whatever's going down.

He's only taken five steps before he realizes the blood's not urging him to Seattle. There's too much of a sense of distance to it; hell, this feels almost as distant as when he first felt it on another freaking continent -

Oh. He did not. Oh, that son of a b-

Spades missteps. He's been so good about that, too, fighting every instinct to skulk in the shadows like Dersites do because even the bright of direct sunlight is safer, at the moment. But he steps off the street and right into the shadow cast by the nearby speakeasy. He fucking well deserves it when the whip cracks out of the darkness to snap around his neck, for bein' as dumb as to step into the shadows when he knows she's on the prowl. He claws at it, teeth bared, but his claws can't even
make a dent in the thin, wiry loops of the specibus, and when it tightens with a yank, sirens start goin' off in his own head.

SS: Ugh...Beat it, woman. I have to - hafta -

Another tug, and pain cracks across the front of his throat, the shell splintering open under the whip and putting pressure on the fleshy bits that he needs to breathe. But the burn of the voice that burns through his thoughts hurts worse, because this dame isn't fucking around anymore.

BQ: Oh, Spades. Please. Save your breath.

BQ: It's in such short supply, these days.

One last pulse of alarm cuts through the haze, but Spades is already down on one knee, wheezing. Yeah, yeah, Vantas has got himself into some shit and needs help again.

Whoop-de-doo. So does Spades.

 Doesn't look like either of ’em are gonna get it.

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-- apocalypseArisen [AA] was pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 00:00:00 --

AA: i wonder if you two will remember how to see clearly
TT: I beg your pardon?
AA: nothing! :) just talking to myself
TT: You're being rather disingenuous about this. Why all the convoluted artifice?
AA: i dont mean to come off that way
AA: its hard being a time player
AA: not that i would trade it for the world!
AA: but i have to watch out or i could let something slip too early ;)
TT: Spoilers?
AA: not on my watch!
AA: you may want a heads up though
TT: Oh? Do tell. I'm on the edge of my seat with anticipation.
AA: so keep your eyes open
AA: a rather lot of them actually!
AA: youre going to have some visitors soon
AA: now whos being disingenuous :)
TT: Do you do that on purpose, or is it really beyond your control?
AA: heheheheh sorry
AA: i would ribbit right now but you wouldn't get the joke for a while
TT: How unfortunate. Is there any possibility that you might clarify who these visitors will be? When they might arrive? And where will we find the space to put them all?
AA: oh me and sollux and vriska and terezi should be there as soon as sollux finishes hacking something important
AA: the others might beat us there depending on how things play out
TT: Let me guess - other trolls from your session.
AA: correct :)
AA: you might want to stock up on more food beforehand
TT: I'll notify the butler. Which we obviously have.
AA: and more surgeons
TT: What.
AA: :(
Rose can sit still for hours, if need be. It's a useful skill to master when one needs to meditate to keep the balance in one's mind over the years. When they go outside (because as it turns out, it is easier to point WV in a new direction than to try to tell him a flat out no) she settles cross-legged in the grass by the side of the parking lot, breathing in and trying not to pay heed to the occasional pang when she looks to the side and expects to see Jade, or when her hand goes out to brush against Kanaya's. Those two are only a text away, if some emergency struck; Dave and Karkat would need to fly back the old fashioned way, unless they located some other form of transport, and the silence where they should be is enough to make things stir in Rose's mind that she's been trying to tuck back into their proper place since Leviathan's last assault on her mental space.

John sits next to her, with a lingering sigh, which would surprise her more if she hadn't been observing him this past week and tabulating what is new about his behavior and what was there all along, if only she'd thought to look. As the changes have persisted, in spite of John's rapid physical recovery, she's only become more grimly aware of how much pain he's been in. It's an impression belied by the rushing, faint giggles and whispers of excitement that Rose catches on the Breeze when it tousles her hair for fun, but not one she can deny. John is emotionally exhausted - more than that, even - and the moment the others leave his sight he sags like he no longer has the strength to carry himself. She'd thought he and Karkat had resolved something between themselves that might have eased the strain, but she should have known better. The kind of debilitating mental anguish John carries won't go away so easily as that; she saw just how deeply it rooted itself in his mind for herself. It could take years just to do the damage Samuel Egbert did, the tiny triggers buried in his psyche, let alone heal the trauma left over from the game.

They don't have years. Not with the kind of timeframe they're talking about, here. Only a few weeks ago Rose could have comfortably stated that they had over a month before the anniversary of the Reckoning - when, according to multiple apocalyptically-inclined sources, they're doomed to play out the game all over again. But they've lost an entire week to recovering from Samuel and the Midnight Crew's machinations, and suddenly there's barely two weeks and a few hours' spare change before John's birthday, and the end of the world.

She wants to have faith in their ability to pull themselves together and do something about the whole mess. But, as much as it galls her to admit it, one more blow like this one, and there's a good chance that many of them might not be able to get back up again. John is the most obviously vulnerable, but Rose is herself just as much one of the weak links in their collective chain. Jade and Dave are the most stable out of everyone - and honestly, just thinking that thought makes Rose shudder, as though she's tempting fate by drawing attention to them.

They still don't know what Scratch's endgame is. They have no idea how exactly the Felt play into it, or why they bothered cloning the guardians to create the Scratch kids, or what the consequences might be from the way two scratched game sessions have merged to form one singular universe. And the Midnight Crew - Boxcars, Clubs, and Droog, the three who helped knock down the first dominos that brought Rose, Jade, John, Dave, Karkat, and Kanaya all together in the same place - well, god only knows how they fit into the snarled mess that these potential threats and traps have become, working at cross-purposes to each other and unraveling strands just as they seem most relevant. She's supposed to be their Seer, but she can't see how she's meant to untangle all this yarn to knit it into something coherent, something that can see them through this madness and out the other side.
And even if they simply cut through the Gordian knot of these many problems, and somehow win the game, it would still involve their entire world being annihilated - and for what? To give birth to some ribbitting, cosmic tadpole of questionable viability that may or may not mature into a new celestial space frog? Would they simply become the distant gods of some new breed of sentient species in a galaxy far far away, destined to mourn the loss of everything they knew for however long god tiers live?

What is the point?

Rose steers her thoughts away from that particular dead end with significant effort. She's just woolgathering, now, not meditating. Her mental effort would be better spent shoring up new defenses in her own mind, or helping John, or ensuring WV doesn't transition from chalking up the parking lot to 'redecorating' some poor unsuspecting lab tech's vehicle.

That last one is particularly important, because WV is a menace. An endearing, frequently irritable little spitfire of a menace who may or may not have appointed Roxy the treasurer of the democratic micro-nation that is Lalonde Labs by shoving a piece of paper with a dollar sign on it into her hands last night, but a menace nonetheless.

Speak of the devil - WV has started to fill in an entire parking space with green chalk, bristling and throwing small tantrums whenever the chalk sticks snap in two, but other than that and the faint breeze, there's silence.

"Jonathan," she says.

"Rosathan," he returns, innocent as anything. When she arches an eyebrow at him in judgment, all he does is cough out a laugh, unapologetic.

She decides now would be an excellent moment to take vengeance for the wind-blown state of her hair these days, by reaching up and fondly mussing up John's hair until it's a rumpled, disheveled mass of cowlicks gone wild. This requires both hands to accomplish, and by the time John realizes what's going on it's too late for him to give more than a token protest, petulant as he folds his arms and waits her out. "I was going to ask how you were doing," she says, allowing herself just the faintest of smirks as she pats down one of the cowlicks sticking straight up at an incredible angle. "Holding up alright?"

"I'm fine," John says, an automatic response that appears to come to him as easily as breathing. "I just hope they'll be back soon."

"I do, too." Rose folds her hands together in her lap and looks out towards the lake. Its color today reminds her of the ink from one of her old gel pens, back in younger days when writing fiction of dubious repute in metallic, glittering silver-blue ink on dark pages gave her immense pleasure. She assumes most of it blew up with the rest of the house in New York, which is a shame; she would have liked to see the face Dave would make if she tricked him into reading it. John's face alone was priceless. "Have you given any further thought to my suggestion?"

John ducks his head. He's listing to the side, like a slowly capsizing ship, and Rose wonders if he even realizes. "I think we should probably not mess around in my head until everyone's back," is all he says, folding one of his legs up against his chest and hugging it there, chin resting on his kneecap. "Especially, uh - the sleeping guy. I know you want to talk to him, but also I'm still not sure how Dave found him and woke him up to begin with."

John's anxiety and various other mental traumas were hard to take in; the Trickster was just plain alarming, distinct from John's personality, yet so deeply enmeshed with his memories and madness
that Rose has barely begun to understand how a mental construct could go so fundamentally wrong.

Typhus, now. Typhus is intriguing. Rose didn't have time for an in depth spelunking of that portion of John's mind, but the fact that he's somehow mentally linked to an immense creature of unknown power, and possibly has been all his life, raises far more questions than Rose can even start to sort through. From what she's gathered from the White Queen, all of them are meant to be similarly joined with their denizens.

But what is the purpose of such a connection in the first place? From what Dave shared of his conversations with John's denizen, Typhus didn't seem all that inclined to attack, or even to sabotage Dave's efforts to reach John in some subtle fashion. It just...helped. Grudgingly, but still. It aided John in the game as well, once freed of the grimdark corruption trying to twist all their minds, before apparently surviving the scratch in some form and falling back into a slumber.

It's probably too risky to investigate the connection between John and Typhus's minds, for now. Rose also wishes she could have wrangled either Dave or Jade - or perhaps even Karkat or Kanaya - and persuaded them to let her perform a cursory sweep of their minds for a similar link, which would at least pose less of a threat of provoking the Trickster into resurfacing. Understanding the denizens might be the key to winning themselves potent allies against Scratch's plans. But any attempts to communicate with Typhus will have to wait until John feels secure in his mental stability, which may not happen any time soon. There's always the Breeze, but outside of John's mind, it only reliably speaks with John himself; Rose can't get it to give her a straight answer for love or money - or whatever it is a sentient windstorm could possibly want out of life. It prefers tugging her shoe laces loose and gleefully waiting for her to notice before zooming back out the window.

It's strange, though. Something the whole situation strikes Rose the wrong way, like a mistuned piano wire. Because the only other minds that have ever linked to her own -

It troubles her. She cannot quite put her finger on why.

"At least the weather has cleared up," Rose says, after the quiet has stretched long enough. When John just hmms by way of response, she leans her head on his shoulder. "Nothing to say?"

John starts a little; a small enough twitch that she might not have noticed it under other circumstances. "No, I was just - thinking," he says, hastily, his voice threaded with guilt. Which means he most likely wasn't paying attention. He's got a habit of becoming lost in his thoughts, lately, no matter what tactics they've all used to try to distract him. "Weather? Yeah, the weather should be fine today."

Rose tilts her head back and inspects a bloom of white clouds that are low enough to brush around the tips of the mountains. Apart from that and a few other lacy stragglers, the sky is almost clear. 

"And after that?"

John makes a face. "What do I look like, a meteorologist?"

Rose doesn't say a word.

"Haha, hilarious, Rose." A few seconds tick by. "I think it's gonna rain tomorrow and Monday. But only, like, drizzling."

"And it only just began to clear here. What a shame."

Rose considers her options for a moment, while John goes back to his brooding. She's not a trained therapist, no matter how many books on the subject she may read, and hinting at that sort of thing has
only made John shut down in the past. Karkat has been peerless in helping to get John from sinking back into the mire of pain, but Karkat's no therapist either, and won't be back for hours, besides.

Coming outside isn't enough, clearly; Rose had hoped bringing him out into the fresh air would lift his spirits a little, to little avail. When they were children (before things became absolutely unbearable for John, she supposes) she can recall having difficulty keeping John from climbing literally every tree in sight, or wading into the lake just for the heck of it. He hid his powers from her at the time, but if Jade's any indication, he probably had trouble keeping his feet on the ground when he could be flying. He didn't lie back down in bed after the others left, but his energy's still flagging.

So. How to get John active and engaged again?

She can think of one way. It will mean the end of any hopes she had of maintaining some semblance of neatness today, but in the contest between her hair and someone else's well-being - it's not really much of a contest. There really isn't any way to secure her headband behind her ears more than she already has, so with any luck it will stay put. She presses it firmly into her hair one last time for good measure, then uses a hand to boost herself up from the ground. "Well, while the weather's nice..."

John watches her get up without making a move to follow suit. Then, after Rose waits with an expectant look, he gets up as well, his hands in his pockets and his expression tired. "There has been something I have been meaning to attempt," Rose continues, tapping the back of one hand against the outside of John's wrist ever so lightly; he takes his hand out of his pocket automatically and clasps hers so that she can direct them, putting some distance between them and the main laboratory structures. No matter how cautious Rose intends to be, the risk of knocking a receiver dish askew on the roof, and thus interrupting some presumably vital scientific experiment below, is not one she's willing to gamble on. Dave and Ambrose did something up there (Rose would guess sword fighting and senseless posturing were involved, given the nature of the two culprits) that drew Rue's sweetest, most passive-aggressive ire, the kind that used to take Rose weeks of grinding away at her mother's gears to provoke, and she's trying to avoid doing that for the foreseeable future. At least until Ambrose returns and they have some alternative pseudo-parental figure around to keep the peace.

Then again, Ambrose might well just hand Rose a sword and tell her to strife to resolve her and Rue's differences. As far as alternative pseudo-parental figures go, Ambrose is not exactly a paragon of 'peace.' Even 'pseudo-parental' might be a bit of a stretch.

"What do you want to do, Rose?" John asks as they cross the wild grass, into the stretch of slightly inclined dips and bluffs with nothing too scientific and/or expensive around to damage.

"Hiking," she ad-libs with a perfect straight face, until John's look of abject alarm causes her to crack a smile. "I jest, I jest, dear sir."

"We're still friends because of this. Because we make bad jokes like that. You and me have equally awful senses of humor and I hope it keeps you up at night," he says. "You know what I want to do?"

"Force me to watch a cheap bootlegged copy of Con Air for perhaps the thousandth time in our mutual acquaintance?"

Now he pouts. "How did you guess?"

Technically? Because it was his favorite tactic back when they were young, in part due to the fact that it sadly worked to drive Rose up a wall, particularly when they could have been rewatching one of Rose's collection of obscure psychological films instead. But Rose would be damned before she'd let on that it might still work; she doesn't need to hand him that weapon all over again. She can recite that movie line for line and regrets every iota of mental power dedicated to such an ignoble endeavor.
"Your pranks need updating."

He sticks out his tongue at her. "Con Air isn't a prank, Con Air is a way of life."

"I'm sure." Rose stretches her free hand over her head, up on the tips of her toes as she examines the sky through splayed fingers. She can't feel the Breeze at the moment, but of course it'll no doubt come circling around when it notices they're doing something other than sit. "I'd like to try to fly."


"I can use spells to levitate. It requires more effort than it's worth, generally." That and teleportation both necessitate time, magic, and concentration that don't always make them particularly serviceable in a fight; Rose is quicker on the draw where teleporting is concerned, but even then it's a far cry from the type of effortless jumps Jade makes without batting an eye. "From what I gather, players who reach the god tier obtain a native talent for flying. I've never tried flying without spells - logic and the laws of physics tended to persuade me against it. Thus the need to experiment."

"Huh. Go for it!" John says, letting go of her hand and stepping back. He looks excited, the most enthusiastic Rose has seen him in - far too long. As predicted, the Breeze rushes in only a second later, buffeting him and yanking at their sleeves with curious, wordless rustling. Rose is only ever half certain she's hearing those noises; from the way John rolls his eyes, he definitely hears more than she does at any given moment. "It wants to know if you want help, even though that would kind of defeat the point of the whole thing," he says, his voice rising a little in the last half of the sentence in order to be heard over a huffing gust.

Rose cracks her neck to the side and contemplates her options. "Well, I wouldn't be adverse to any advice it might have," she says dryly, probing her own mind in a quick sweep, scouring for any evidence of some heretofore undetected flight center of her brain. Really, where does one even begin? After all the rebuilding she's done, one would think she'd know her own mind inside and out, but she's never found any evidence of the ability to just float off the ground at will. Nor, for that matter, has she been able to locate any of the original memories of the past game that John's example would argue must be stashed away somewhere. "Any suggestions?"

"I don't know." John shrugs with a sheepish look. "I use the Breeze, which I think is...kind of a different thing? Breath players fly either way, I guess."

And Rose already knows the limits of what light magic can do for her in this instance. Mmm. She rolls up onto her toes again, wondering - if she just stretches far enough -

And then settles back, drawing a complete blank. John watches, apparently fascinated by her efforts, but doesn't say anything. The only real solution for this quandary her mind can produce is to just cast the levitation spell and have done with it. "I'm beginning to feel ridiculous," she admits, after two more subtle false starts.

Swinging back on his heels, John gnaws on his lip for a second, his eyes distant before focusing back on Rose. "Uh. The Breeze says, try aiming for the ground and then missing it." When all he gets is a blink, John clarifies, "The ground. You just...keep missing it."

"Life, the Universe, and Everything," Rose says. "I had no idea you'd read that book." John may be a genius when it comes to comic books, unironically awful movies, and the occasional (yet equally awful) anime, but even taking the movie adaptation into account, Rose doesn't think that quote would have turned up in any of those.
Sure enough, John draws a blank. "Book? I mean, it sounds familiar, but..."

"Never mind." Now that Rose thinks about it, technically it would have been the Breeze that decided to quote troll Douglas Adams, and she's not ready to follow that tangent through to its end. "As bold as the suggestion is, I don't think now would be the appropriate time for me to quite literally break my leg." Her feet meander in a slow turn. She pushes her hair back, pressing some of the strands of bangs that have grown long enough to start falling in front of her eyes out of the way. "I can't even think of how to get off the ground. How mortifying." She couldn't drop the hint harder if she tried.

"I could help with that part," he says. "And you totally won't break your leg, Rose, I'd catch you before that happened."

"Careful, John, your hero is showing."

He just huffs and holds out a hand, the other raised in a position similar to that needed to snap one's fingers. "I wouldn't let you fall. I promise!"

Rose nods and takes his hand. "Oh, I believe you."

John must take this as agreement, because the wind starts lifting them almost instantly. The moment Rose's feet leave the ground she starts to second-guess all of the choices in her life that have led her to this moment. It's not the same as it was in John's mind when the Breeze helped her locate everyone; then at least she had the comfort of knowing she was only present mentally.

But John's smile is radiant by the time they hit thirty feet. It's difficult to argue with that.

Now there's just the small matter of figuring out how to fly before he gets the fantastic idea to let her figure it out through the process of trial and error. "So, just say when," he says, still beaming.

She doesn't recall her shoes feeling this loose when they were flat on the ground. It's remarkably similar to the sensation of going on a swing ride at a fair and living with the existential fear that ones shoes could fall off and smite some poor unsuspecting soul watching from below. "That could take some time. This would be so much simpler if these blasted game functions came with an instruction manual," she grouses, her fingernails digging into the flesh of John's forearms before she catches herself and forces her grip to relax. "Really. Where is a well-organized, coherent walkthrough when one needs it?"

The wind carrying them does a lap around her neck so quickly her hair prickles her skin when it falls flat again, and then goes back to twining around her wrists, as though sniffing around for a way to get under the void guards on her wrists. It doesn't appear to be hassling John a quarter as much as it is her; she suspects this to be blatant favoritism. "And your parts were all fancy and glittery and stuff but I'm not sure coherent is the right word for it when you get going..."

If that's a knock at her prose, she'll have to let it slide - this time. "I don't suppose it included any instructions on flying?"

"None of us were god tier yet, so nah."

Not surprising. Rose rifles through the corners of her mind as though another scavenging attempt will be any more productive than the last run. But the memories continue to elude her, to the surprise of no one ever. "Perhaps it's a matter of thinking happy thoughts," she says. "No - something far more cliché. Faith. I have to believe in myself." Since literary allusions are the go-to metaphors, this
morning...

"Or maybe it'll just kick in on its own if you really need it to?" Even as he suggests this, a glint appears in John's eye. The type of glint that usually precipitated a bucket of water left balanced on top of the door to her room, to dump its contents upon the next unwitting victim to walk through.

"Don't," she says sternly. "Just...give me another moment to think." Yes. The more she ponders this, the more she suspects that cliché is exactly the trend du jour as far as the game is concerned. She could fly, therefore it follows that she can still fly; it's only a lack of practice thinking that way. Gravity is difficult habit to break.

"Okay," she says once she's made up her mind that yes, this hypothesis is just ridiculous enough that it should work, if only just to spite her. Logic is a strange, inscrutable thing. "You may let go."

John gives her a look. "Are you sure?"

Well. Now she's not. If she ever was to begin with. "Don't you dare second guess me now, John. This enterprise is questionable enough as it stands." With him thus reprimanded, Rose waits for the wind to drop her, her stomach clenched.

"Aaaaand...now!" John takes his hands away. The air stops supporting her weight -

Flying does not happen. Falling does. Rose wishes she could at least say she doesn't panic excessively; she finds herself shrieking the incantation for her levitation spell at what might be considered an unreasonable volume, but the syllables are all blaring noise in her ears, blotted out by the pounding of her heartbeat, so she can't even be certain she's pronouncing them correctly. Before she can finish rattling it off, hands wrap around her wrists and jerk her to a halt, her legs dangling as she blinks up through her hair at John. As grateful as she is, it's still mildly terrifying to realize John's hanging upside down. The whole thing feels precarious. Her mouth is weirdly dry when she says, "A rousing first attempt."

John seems to be having an issue with controlling his face. As nice as it is to see him looking something other than sad and exhausted, Rose has her suspicions about this particular expression. "Rousing," he agrees, barely containing his laughter.

"John. What."

"Rose, you -" he breaks off, and yes, now Rose can feel his hands twitching. He nearly chokes on the swallowed laughter shaking his body. "You forgot you were wearing a skirt, didn't you -"

"I am wearing tights, you ridiculous human being!" John busts out laughing. Tears are welling up in the corners of his eyes. She can't even kick him in the shin from this angle. Yes, alright, she's willing to admit that she may have failed to think through the particular logistics of falling while wearing a skirt, but on the other hand - "Can we please try to be mature adults about this?"

"Oh. Yeah!" John's lower lip wobbles as he flips back right-side up and pulls her back up onto his level. He only makes it seven seconds before another snerk escapes him, and Rose has no choice but to smack him on the arm. "I'm s-sorry!" he says; the choked laughter doesn't help his case in the slightest. "It flew up like - like an inside out umbrella - haha, no!" he protests, floating up out of range of her efforts to cuff him upside the back of the head. Of all the ways for him to start showing a sense of humor again!

"We're going to watch La Jetée again," she threatens. It takes some doing, but she manages to swat him on the arm a few more times before she finally gains enough altitude to mess up his hair again.
"Multiple times."

John freezes, only one eye visible through his bangs. "Which one was that?"

"The French one with the still photos."

"Noooo! Anything but that, Rose!" Floating back, he raises his hands in surrender - yet he keeps laughing in fits and starts for the duration, so he can't be too intimidated by her perfectly legitimate threat.

"Yes. Debating its underlying late modernist messages and the exploration of the psychoanalytic re-narration of the self should be a fine way to pass the - afternoon - hold still -"

John snatches her headband off her head. The sheer effrontery of it leaves Rose speechless, her fingers flying up - too late - to touch the unbound hair where the headband rested. "Don't look down," he says, swinging back out of arm's reach, his face screwed up in concentration as he tries to fit the wayward band onto his own head.

This can't be allowed to stand. "Saying something like that is absolutely guaranteed to induce a nigh irresistible urge to look down in my mind, I hope you know," Rose say, looking down. They've drifted somewhat higher amidst all this tomfoolery, the cars and the lab complex oddly small from this vantage, compared to how they would appear on foot. With this angle she can even make out the faint, blurred reflection of the mountains and the clouds overhead in the mirror-like surface of the lake. Four entire chunks of parking spaces have been completely filled in with different colors, red and green and blue and a shade of purple that hardly stands out against the grey-black road, with a small dark figure chalking in more pictures as decoration. "What am I not looking down at, again?"

"When you see it, you'll know," John says, with a tiny 'aha!' when the headband finally sits in place. One of the arms is pinning his left ear in a way that will shortly cut off blood circulation, but Rose's altruism gambit coincidentally just landed on empty, so she says nothing. Between the way the wind keeps running through his cowlicks to make them stand on end and the contrast with the headband flattening the hair underneath it down, he looks -

Rose looks down. Then she looks back up at John, who simply watches her with an anticipatory grin. His eyes are lit up, and the Breeze circles around him in constant loops marked only by the fluttering of his clothing and hair.

Rose's hair feels oddly still, considering the kind of casual harassment it's had to put up with these past few days.

"Don't look down," John repeats, rolling his eyes when Rose does it anyway. "And don't think about it. If you overthink it, it might stop working or something."

The exact same thought had occurred to Rose as well. She finds herself warily eyeballing her own shoes before realizing just how ridiculous she must look. The whole thing feels disconcertingly normal; there's no gleam of magic at her heels, no streams of wind wrapped around her, just the curious sensation that if she'd wanted to fly, all she really had to do was take a step. Or perhaps have sufficient motivation to do it, anyway. She can't tell whether it's magic or something physical - she has the unnerving feeling that she may have just done something to the laws of physics.

This...may be what John was referring to when he told her not to overthink it. Speaking of: John is drifting off to one side, still with her headband perched at an outlandish angle on his head, yet still keeping one eye on Rose as he wanders, looking ready to swoop in at the vaguest sign that physics might decide to have its way with her again. It takes some doing - her mind contorts in the oddest
ways before she realizes all she has to do is think about moving in the direction she wants to go - but
she manages to curve after him, bobbing and tucking one foot behind the other so that she'll stop
trying to walk in midair. "I'm not sure I like it," she informs him. "I find the whole enterprise
suspiciously simple." The only explanation she can come up with for why she wouldn't have
stumbled upon this ability earlier in her life is that she just never tried to do it, and that's bothersome.
At this rate, they'll all be changing their clothes into pajamas and breaking any number of inviolable
laws of physics at will.

Oh wait.

"...So, you're mad because it's easy?" John says, with the kind of smile that says he's still holding
back laughter. It's the best thing she's seen all day, even if it comes at her own expense.

"Not mad. Just put out. It's so easy for all of this to seem utterly normal, when in fact all of us are
about as far from normal as it is possible to be." That said, Rose takes out her phone and, before John
can move, takes a picture of him. "You look wonderful," she says, while he gapes at her. "I'm sure
Karkat will appreciate this."

Blank confusion dawns into slow horror as John raises a hand to the headband. "Rose," he says,
worriedly.

Getting down is a little more nerve-wracking to pull off, if only because it feels like sauntering in a
downward direction with nothing under her feet. If Rose had to compare it to anything, she would
say it felt similar to crawling down a flight of stairs on all fours - breathlessly precarious, and
probably not at all safe. But she has only to think she'd like to descend at a more sedate pace, and she
slows at once. As she does, she taps the send button with a tiny smile. "Too late."

John catches up to her when she hesitates a yard from the ground, and hands her the headband back.
His hair is still matted down in odd places. "You don't want to start a prank war here, Rose," he says,
fighting to look serious. He fails. "There are no friends in prank wars."

Movement catches Rose's eye, and she looks to see WV running toward their landing spot, the
carapace's expression one of total annoyance as he waves a fistful of chalk sticks at them. The layers
of his wrappings are coated in a dull pastel layer of chalk dust that makes Rose shake her head;
they're going to be the ones responsible for hosing him down before he walks around sensitive lab
equipment in his own personal cloud of chalk particles. That'll be...interesting. "Oh, there's no need
for a war," Rose says, landing with a dip of her knees as her body tries to keep floating down toward
the ground before she figures out where the healthy medium is. Once she's secure, she combs her
hair out with her fingers and tucks her headband back into place. "I've already accomplished what I
set out to achieve."

"What, was your plan this whole time was to get a weird picture of me to use as blackmail, or
something?"

He sounds petulant.

But he is still smiling.

"Or something," she says.

-- apocalypseArisen [AA] will now pester thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at --:--:-- --
AA: life is a joke death is the punchline
AA: its all about the timing
TT: Ominously droll. Would you mind elaborating on what other trolls we may need to keep an eye
out for? Names in particular would be greatly appreciated, given the fact that no one here can
remember much at all, and you have us at a slight disadvantage.
AA: oh right!
AA: sorry were just getting everything settled now
TT: From what I understand, you, Sollux, and the Scourges intend to arrive shortly? Neither I nor
Kanaya was aware that you planned to visit the States. Will there be trouble on that front? I can't
imagine smuggling two of our mutual acquaintances across the border can be accomplished without
a potential national incident.
AA: yes we get here safely not to worry :)
AA: what i meant to warn you about was gamzee!
TT: Gamzee...GM?
AA: yup
TT: We've encountered him already over the course of the past week or so. I'm afraid you missed
your moment.
AA: i never miss my moment :)
AA: hes going to make it to the lab pretty soon as far as youre concerned
TT: Oh.
TT: Damn.
AA: but not too soon! hes still got a ways to go yet
AA: hes got tavros with him so you might want to dig out a spare wheelchair for when they arrive
AA: the one they had before was basically scrap metal and tavros definitely appreciates that you had
one waiting for him
TT: At least Karkat has already vacated the premises. Damn. John isn't ready for this.
AA: oh karkat will be back by the time we all arrive
AA: which is a good thing if you think about it
TT: Please. Explain. Without cutting off abruptly, I beg of you.
AA: compared to the alternative trust me this is a very good thing
AA: youll see for yourself
AA: dont worry about it too much get excited! were all together at last!
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] stops pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at --:--:-- --
TT: Oh, for the love of –

They only realize there's yet another escape attempt in progress when they reenter the lobby and start
down the main corridor, WV keeping up a constant stream of babble in what may be some mangled
form of French, only for Roxy's voice to shriek, "JAKEY, FOR THE LOVE OF PISS, STOP
RUNNING AROUN'!"

"YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE!" Jake screams back, still out of sight but drawing nearer
with each step.

John groans. "Again? How many times is he going to try this?"

"Presumably, as many as it takes." Rose shakes her head and holds John back with a touch when he
goes to turn down the hall the voices are coming from. "One moment." They could just have the
Breeze tip Jake off his feet, as has become sadly standard procedure -

Or, Rose could simply place her foot out at the exact moment Jake races past, and watch in devilish
amusement as he trips over her leg and goes flying with the force of his own momentum. His
expression is priceless, frozen in shock even as he scrambles to right himself before plowing into the
"Ruffians! Hooligans!" he shouts at them, the sound rather muffled by the fact that he's landed mostly on his face. When he peels himself up off the floor, his nose is bleeding and the bandage around his head has started to blot with red splotches where his stitches have apparently torn open for the fifth time in as many days. "Face me in a proper fight, cowards!"

"We really don't want to fight you. At all," says, shrugging.

"They're just trying to help, Jake," Roxy says, jogging up to them. There's a growing, dark bruise beginning to swell under her chin, and her hair is in disarray as she crouches down by Jake. "Sorry, he tried to pull a fast one while me and Di-Stri were working on stuff."

By 'stuff,' Rose takes her to mean the on-going project to salvage the Queen's elaborate computer system. Dirk has thrown himself into it with a single-minded intensity that is worrying, quite frankly; Roxy shared in confidence the other day that staying focused on a complex project helps him control the lingering after-effects of the mindgrub. After a week of doing little other than recover from surgery and gossip about the mysterious Felt, Roxy and Dirk seem to have latched onto Jade's project, while Jane seems content to watch everyone, slowly reabsorbing what it means to be human.

Taking care of John while his psyche learns new ways to cope without the [Eye of the Storm] isolating him has been Rose's primary concern. That doesn't mean she hasn't had time to give due consideration to the trouble with Jake's on-going resistance to any attempts to get him to speak to a counselor. She walks around Jake to kneel beside Roxy and meets Jake's eyes deliberately; an unreadable expression flashes across his face before he grimaces and rips his gaze away, staring down at the floor as though about to burst into angry tears. "This must be frustrating for you," she comments; she catches a fleeting glimpse of John shifting in the corner of her eye, but doesn't allow herself look away from Jake for the moment. "I'm sorry. But letting you run back to the Felt and the Midnight Crew wouldn't be doing you any favors, believe me."

"For frig's flipping sake, just leave me alone." Jake shrugs away Roxy's hand when she lays it on his shoulder, but the motion barely has any energy behind it. Interesting. "First Cogitator and Ranger, then Berzerker too...I don't know what you've done to them, but I won't let you do it to me too," he says. His body almost hunches up in a defensive curl, but with the way he's laid out flat on the ground means its more of a bodily shrug before he subsides, looking glum.

At her side, Roxy resettles in her crouch, her hands clamped on top of her kneecaps as she looks between Rose and Jake and back to Rose again, her pale eyes curious. "Are you going to try and do that?" Roxy gestures with her hands, making intriguing gestures toward her own skull for emphasis ":- head thing? Like what you did to him." She points at John with both fingers. John, still standing, makes a face back.

"No, not that," Rose says, half to herself. "It was recklessly dangerous to jump in half-cocked like that, as the actual mindscape expert has seen fit to lecture me when he can, but the situation at the time was desperate. Let me see..." She drums the fingers of one hand against her thigh absently, looking for - something. Jake squirms under the scrutiny, but he doesn't try to leap up or dash away.

There's something about that. Something that she hasn't seen, because she hasn't had much spare time. But...Trying to go through the wall with a spoon filched from a meal, clambering through the ducts, running through the halls at breakneck speeds: these aren't effective tactics for someone trying to escape. It's not as though the laboratory complex is designed to keep people contained or anything, for that matter. Jake's either grossly incompetent, or not trying very hard.

Or...

He is trying. In a very specific way. The mind grub latched onto certain impulses in John's mind and
spammed him with chemical reinforcement until they became neuroses he couldn't break out of. Neither he nor Jake nor Jane went into surgery intending to go along with it, and certainly not with the malicious apathy Samuel Egbert has demonstrated.

Rose thinks she can make a guess as to how they need to approach Jake. Perhaps not all that accurate of a guess, considering she barely knows him, but as good of a guess as she can generate with what she does know. "He likes movies, yes?" At some point, her mind sifting through the threads of what is and what may be, she remembered that being brought up, in a discussion of what Jane and Jake were like before their minds were tampered with.

"Used to," Roxy says, sighing.

"Any movies in particular?"

"Literally all movies. Addition is a powerful thing." Roxy winds a strand of hair tight around her finger, and then lets it bounce back into place. "Even the super shitty ones. Such an effin' dork."

"My movies aren't shitty, Roxy, they're perfectly legitimate specimens of cinematography," Jake retorts. While Rose has been meditating, he has been stewing - and still not attempting to get up. No one's holding him down or anything, he's just lying there with his arms folded under his chin, sniffing around the last smears of blood from his nose, in a sulk. The sulk in question includes elements of both Jade and John's pouts, which makes it all the more fascinating to observe the slight differences.

"Nah Jaje, most of them were pretty horrible. Like ur weird thing about Avatar."

Jake half-pushes himself up on his elbows, wiping at his upper lip with a hasty hand. "Don't be ridonkulous, Avatar is a classic of our time!"

"Please tell me he's talking about the blue alien movie and not the...other one," John says, looking pale.

Rose cuts in. "Like the Shawshank Redemption? The Great Escape?" Jake recoils, with the strange expression from before back on his face. "That's how Die pinned down your mind, isn't it. You've been trying to play out escape sequences because it's all you've been allowed to know in a situation like this." She's tempted to namedrop the Manchurian Candidate, but upon further consideration, she doesn't know if she dares risk the chance that Jake might take it as meaning they're the ones brainwashing him while he believes he's trapped as a sort of prisoner of war in the enemy camp. She just doesn't know him well enough predict how he'd interpret the hint.

At least now she can put a name to the look on his face, now. He's a hairsbreadth from lucid, and terrified with it when he pushes off his elbows and scrambles up onto his feet, trying to put distance between himself and Rose. She puts out a hand and taps John's knee, since that's in reach, almost before the wind starts to pick up. "Let him be," she murmurs. Instead of trying to dart past John, which would have been the quickest route back to the main exit, Jake starts sprinting back the way he came. Roxy hangs her head so deeply she teeters on her heels and almost somersaults forward, then stands up and calls after Jake with resignation in her eyes.

"Roxy," Rose says, before Roxy can take off. The girl swivels her head back while the rest of her limbs momentarily try to keep moving. Rose offers her a faint smile. "He didn't call you a codename that time."

After a second's delay, Roxy bursts into a grin so wide her eyes crinkle shut, pumps a fist, and takes off after Jake, her shoes squeaking on the tile. Jake has a lead on her - right up until a shorter shape
tackles him from an open doorway and pins him in place against the wall. Rose and John wince in unison at the impact. Jane holds Jake there while Roxy jogs to catch up, unmoved when Jake whispers something to her.

The Scratches are doing better than Rose would have believed they would even a few days ago. Out of all of them, she'd worried the most that Jake would lock down.

But she thinks there's still hope for him left.

-- apocalypseArisen [AA] may pester thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at ∞:∞:∞ --
TT: If you intend for all of these cryptic tidbits of information to come off as threatening, you're succeeding.
AA: oh no thats not what i intend at all
AA: sometimes me in the past and me now get a little jumbled
AA: we only have so much time left to work with after all
TT: And when is your 'now' compared to my own?
AA: now youre getting it :)
AA: this me is a bit farther ahead but i cant say much more
TT: Can't, or won't?
AA: either
AA: both
TT: And when is your 'now' compared to my own?
AA: i did say that didnt i
AA: things are gonna be a little crazy for a while
AA: but i prepared for it in advance so dont panic
TT: If you've prepared for it - meaning, presumably, you at some point in the relative past - then the question becomes: why will we still need surgeons at all? Haven't you already rendered them extraneous?
AA: not at all im afraid
AA: some things have to happen for the alpha timeline to remain coherent
AA: if those key events are altered then we just become a dead end and vanish
AA: unless of course...
TT: Really, your dramatic pauses have me riveted to the screen. I do hope this one doesn't last another three hours.
AA: heheheheh
AA: ah you made me laugh and now the melodrama is gone
AA: we're going to break it
TT: And by it, you mean...the timeline?
AA: the game
TT: I'm listening.
AA: i cant really say much more than that for the you of right now
AA: perhaps we should bring back jades old password system...
TT: Then simply tell me what you can.
AA: lets just say that even if we play fast and loose with the game rules theres really no need to worry about breaking time which gives us some wiggle room
AA: time is already has always been and will be forevermore broken
AA: he is already here
TT: He who?
TT: Doc Scratch?
AA: he's always been here
TT: I need a drink.
-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --
EB: no. ;/
TT: John, I cannot be expected to remain sober under these working conditions.
EB: nooooooooot happening. ;/

Rue nods when Rose visits her office, bearing news of Aradia's disturbing advice. "I've actually already called in someone to provide backup for Archaeopolis; god only knows xe needs assistance, with all the injuries you children may drum up between you," she says, closing one of the many file folders open on her desk and folding her hands under her chin. "Petrinne owes me favors, and she's flying in her team from Pittsburgh tomorrow morning. They're very well qualified in the realm of trauma surgery."

"Favors?" Rose asks, trying and failing to resist the urge to scan the upside down titles of some of the other folders and papers stacked on her mother's desk. She catches something to the effect of 'Samu-' in one of the headings, and averts her gaze before she can read further. When she last bothered to check in on him, Samuel Egbert was as unapologetic and blasé about the entire situation as if being locked in an isolated ward were no more than a passing inconvenience. The longer he goes without displaying any signs of remorse, the less Rose is inclined to try to forgive him - and honestly, he doesn't seem to want forgiveness. He could care less about any of them. That much is transparently clear.

"I try to cultivate contacts that don't require going through the Harley Foundation for all the lab's needs. Favors owed, congenial past interactions, ex-staff who have gone on to other positions..." Rue gently closes the file on Samuel, her eyes never leaving Rose's. Her gaze is not quite soft, but it is understanding, and - it jars something sharp in a fragile part of Rose's insides, painful and yearned for all at once. "James Harley and I were never more than cordial acquaintances, and that relationship became more distant after Joanna's death. After that, and before his passing, he acted unusually distrustful."

She can taste the cutting remark on her tongue, just waiting to be said - someone, distrustful of you? Is that meant to shock me? Swallow it down, swallow it down. She can't remember striving to be genuinely civil with her mother a day of her life, but civil she wants to be. For however long that resolve lasts. "Distrustful?"

Shaking her hair out, Rue unfolds her hands and opens a drawer to extract compacts of makeup, her fingers shaking so slightly Rose almost misses it. "I wonder - though I suppose we'll never know - if he might have suspected something about Joanna's death. He never so much as mentioned the possibility of murder or...or Samuel being involved, not to me at least. But it would explain a few things about his behavior, and why he chose to keep Jade isolated for so long throughout her lifetime rather than returning to the mainland."

"But it complicates others," Rose says, watching as Rue begins to sort through the compacts with the inattentive air of one who doesn't need to look at the labels or colors to know what she's looking for. Rue inclines her head. "Yes. When the last thing we really need at the moment is more complication." Using the tip of a fingernail, she clicks open one of the makeup packs. "It's enough to make one wish dear Ambrose would hurry along and bring Oriole back, if only so that there were
two fewer things to worry about, with them exposed out there."

The last thing Rose's constitution is willing to put up with is more talk about Samuel. But she can't stop herself from asking, with a sort of bile fascination, "Has Samuel given any more insight into what he was supposed to be doing for the Crew?" *Aside from putting John's mind through a blender,* she adds, in the privacy of her own thoughts.

"He only shares what he thinks will strike a nerve," Rue says, sour. She wipes her face and begins to reapply the powder with a furrow between her brows. That'll leave creases in the makeup if she doesn't smooth it out, but Rose bites her tongue for the moment. "Occasionally I believe I can pick out when he's deliberately lying or omitting details concerning the Felt's inner workings - other times, he's just vague enough about his contract work to be irksome."

Conversational topics like this are why Rose suggested John remain outside. The mere mention of Samuel causes him to flinch; one step at a time. "What a tiresome man."

Rue doesn't argue with the sentiment. "I don't think he's been in contact with the Crew for most of this time, and may not even have had time to pass on much information about you children to them; he and John were intended to remain a sleeper cell, and yet not even the Crew members seem to have been aware of it until recently. I can't tell if he's confused, himself, or just deliberately trying to confound me, because the timeline doesn’t always add up." She throws Rose a faintly contrite look. "I wish I had more to share. But I don't exactly keep interrogators on staff around here, and for the most part Samuel is quite content to talk me in circles."

"I do not blame you; I blame him," Rose says. Her voice sounds flat and strange in her ears, and for a moment she can almost imagine the rush of the sea, rustling along the underside of her mind, before a sharp look from Rue snaps her self-control back into its place. Horrorterrors may not be able to reach her through the channel here, but there's no reason for Rose not to snap the good old fashioned way and show Samuel just what she thinks of what he's done to John.

But John wouldn't thank her for taking matters into her own hands.

He wouldn't.

She shakes off the nagging thoughts. "I should be going," she says, taking half a step backwards, the heel of her shoe dragging along the ground. A faint sound from Rue's computer distracts the woman enough that the mild concern on her face flickers into curiosity, and Rose takes advantage of the distraction to try for a quiet, amiable abscond. Waiting out in the hall, with nothing to do but text Karkat and Dave (which only makes him restless), John will no doubt have started plotting how to sidle into Rue's office and embroil them in a well-meaning conversation that will keep Rose and Rue in close proximity to each other for perhaps longer than is truly wise.

But Rue frowns in the middle of reapplying her lipstick, and holds up a hand to stop Rose just as she's about to turn back to the door. "One moment - there's something - hm."

"A problem?" Rose turns over so slightly, shifting her foot so that it points back to the desk.

Rue sets down the tube of lipstick and taps a lacquered nail on the keyboard instead, her lips parting a little as she silently reads the email. "I...well, that's odd," she says. "They must have sent this to the email account I was using back in college - I have filters set to forward anything pressing to my current address, but it's been years...Where would they have even located it, after all this time?" Rue appears to be speaking mostly to herself by now, a low mumble as she scans the email again. Rose considers slipping out while Rue is engrossed, but it occurs to her that given the circumstances, that might come off as more of a slight than she really means to give, right now, when they're in the
process of regaining a functional, if somewhat stiff, relationship.

Then Rue’s expression darkens, a muscle in her jaw tensing as she leans back slowly in her chair. It's the most forbidding Rose has seen her mother look in a while, and she doesn't think it bodes well. "My dear, would you remind me of the initials that Karkat shared with you?" the doctor asks, her eyes meeting Rose's only for a transitory moment before she goes back to staring at the email on her screen.

Thankfully, Karkat muttered that exact list under his breath numerous enough times for Rose to have long since memorized it. "The ones we haven't already come across or identified?" she asks, to be precise about it.

"Run the entire thing by me again. I could be forgetting one."

"AM, TN, SC, NL, KM, TP, VS, EZ, GM, EA, FP." Feferi, Kanaya, Aradia, Sollux, and more than likely Vriska and Terezi, have all been almost positively identified, in addition to Karkat himself, while the 'GM' most likely refers to the as-yet nameless clown stalking them all. However, the identities of TN, NL, EZ, and EA remain unconfirmed. Unless Karkat has had some further epiphany that he failed to share with the rest of them before leaving. It wouldn't surprise Rose if he'd recalled something in one of his nightmares and told only John; Karkat's ongoing grumpiness and sense of privacy mean that most new intel can take some time to reach everyone else, no matter how time-sensitive it may turn out to be. But who among them hasn't been guilty of omitting vital information, accidentally or otherwise, at some point or another? It's hard to begrudge any of the others anything when they've all fucked up spectacularly in their own unique ways. The high ground has morphed into a flat line, by now.

Rue clicks her tongue, and then laughs, curling her finger to gesture Rose over to the side of the desk, where she can get a glimpse of the computer screen. "Could this be the 'EZ,' then?" she asks, with the kind of barely submerged humor in her voice that could quite easily have set Rose back on her guard if not for the fact that she was already leaning in, fascinated, to read the email itself.

Doctor Rue Lalonde,

I apologize for any potential rudeness there may be in contacting you out of the blue, but it has come to my attention that you were once one of the few researchers in the field of particle physics and related fields with published articles concerning the phenomena of ambient void and its relationship to dark matter and paradox theory. It has been excruciatingly difficult to locate copies of your work that have not been expurgated from archives or screened from public viewing; however, what I have read so far gives me the strong impression that your work is relevant to my interests.

I understand that this research may now be several years out of date, and may not have been the focus of your current work in some time, but it is one of the few leads that I have located that has not dismissed the manipulation of the void except as a purely theoretical exercise, and suggested designs for harnessing it. I do not know if you've made any further progress since then in putting those designs into practice, but I would owe you a debt if you would be willing to share any of the schematics with me. I would not normally make such a ludicrous request, knowing that you may not wish anyone to purrloin your work, but I have reason to believe myself and one of my colleagues are under immediate threat from a group of criminal malcontents, and it would be inexcusable for me not to at least attempt any possible method of defense, even one so farfetched as this.

If need be, money is not an issue.

My regards,
When Rose stops reading, the humor has reached her mother's eyes, too, dancing with triumph. "And only a troll would mention their ancestor in their signature," Rose says, drawing even more of the smile out of her mother. "A troll with the correct initials, interested in the void and paradox theory, with 'criminal malcontents' -" one might as well swap the two words to get another familiar pair of initials, honestly "- threatening them."

"And a colleague, who may well be one of the other players not yet identified," Rue finishes. She reaches out and Rose holds herself very still as her mother carefully brushes a strand of longer hair out of Rose's face and back behind her ear. "There. Now, how shall we respond to this? It would be rather boorish to leap upon the poor troll, firing off inquiries concerning whether or not they recall a past life or not that might frighten them off."

"We could be incorrect, after all." She'd like to think they're not, but when she puts out feelers of intuition, trying to spy out some further from the email before them, Rose receives only a faint, hollow sensation, made twistier by the usual void of her mother by her side. Rue is, as always, only an outline where an aura should be, and Rose supposes that might be why she can't sense anything more from the email. She could try to foresee what the most best response might be, but she can never perceive much other than a hole when Rue's involved.

"I suppose we'll have to see for ourselves," she says. Rue nods, popping the knuckle of her index finger by pressing it beneath her thumb. The faint smile hanging around her lips hardly irritates Rose at all, even as they settle down to bicker over the phrasing of the reply.

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TG: rose
TG: weve got porpoises

tick tock

--

Somewhere in Maine...

PM: I apologize for the intrusion, but I believe there is a message waiting for me here? Or perhaps a person...

The human who has answered the door is a familiar one, a Lab Technician that PM recalls meeting more than once during the time she and the Querent spent here. LT blinks, and then smiles, her oodles and oodles of curly hair bouncing as she holds the door open and turns, calling, "Denali? Is the new one still in the waiting room." When PM nods and steps inside, peering around for any changes that may have occurred in the facility since she left, the LT turns back to her with a question. "By the way, how do you guys always find each other so fast? I could have sworn we only sent that email off to Washington an hour ago - how did you know before Doctor Lalonde? Or were you just already on your way here to begin with?"

PM clicks her tongue, allowing herself a short frown as she follows LT through the lobby and down the hall.

PM: I had other messages and errands to run. Everything's been so hectic lately! Sometimes it feels
like there aren't enough hours in the day...

PM: Also, I recently met a wise old woman, who told me I might want to come here before reuniting with my Querent if I wanted to procure some interesting information, and as I approached I knew who would be waiting here.

The woman looks mystified. "How - er, never mind. Anyway, he arrived this morning and he won't tell us what he's here about. Something about us not having the right credentials. He just keeps asking for us to contact a Peregrine Mendicant, which, with the initials...is you, right?"

At that, PM has to take a moment to bury her face in her claws before she can work up the willpower to keep going.

PM: Yes, that's me. Has he tried to shoot anyone yet?

"No, I don't think he's even armed - why would he."

PM: Not armed? Oh. Maybe it's not him then. I don't think I've ever seen him with anything less than three assault rifles on his person at all times.

AR: I heard that.

The carapacian who pokes his head around the corner of a doorframe is, indeed, the exact Authority Regulator PM is expecting to see. She hasn't seen him in ages and ages, though, not since he decided to investigate the ins and outs of human and troll military structures. There are new, brittle marks along one claw as he raises it to sign, but the dark hum of his mind is still the same - sharp and paranoid but well-intentioned. With some Dersites, it almost hurts to hear them, with how little they tend to trust others. But there has always been some camaraderie between PM and AR, unspoken but strong, and so they get along just fine. He doesn't complain (too much) about how Parcel Mistresses will break any number of frivolous bylaws concerning travel between lands in the Medium in the name of the mail, and she doesn't roll her eyes all the time when he thinks 'shoot first ask questions never' is a legitimate method of enforcing said frivolous bylaws.

Not much, anyway. It helps that he tends to make up and change his own regulations on a whim, rather than sticking to strict Derse law code. She also has it on relatively good authority that he has feelings where she is concerned. This is not something to be taken lightly.

AR: Hello. I have information of vital importance, and I think it may be of interest to you. I'm not sure who else to tell about it, since most of the people I would have reported to normally are non-existent. Is there somewhere private we can talk about this?

He squints at the LT with suspicion in his pale eyes, until the human fidgets under his gaze.

PM: If it really matter that much, we can probably talk outside or something.

AR bristles, his mental voice scandalized.

AR: Outside! Anyone could be listening out there! It's completely unsecured.

All she can do is sigh, and look up at the LT with a rueful expression. The human is very understanding about it, too. "We run a sweep for bugs regularly, and everyone here was recently scanned for signs of mindgrub infestation," LT says, cracking one of her knuckles. "The whole complex is fairly secure, but if you need someplace that's really isolated, there's always one of the sensory deprivation rooms - or the greenhouse, since we need to keep it sealed off to prevent outside plant material from getting in."
PM: The greenhouse sounds lovely. I visited it the last time I was here. Thank you for your help.

"Not a problem." LT makes as though to show them the way, regardless, but AR won't stop squinting like the silly guy he is, so PM excuses the two of them as politely as she can - and then seizes AR by the faded black fabric of his wrappings. She hauls him out of the main building and through a series of vacuum sealed doors on the eastern side of the complex. The decontamination process makes her eyes water and sting, and AR seizes up with a fit of sneezing that last until one of the kind scientists waves them through the far doors and into the greenhouse itself. Someone is already there, a troll with a mask over their mouth whose wiry hair has gone frizzy in the artificial humidity, and they don't look up from the clipboard they're using to tick off boxes while inspecting a four-foot tall flower blossom. Before AR can sign a word, PM has already changed course so that they walk along the far wall, leaving tracks in the tamped down dirt of the pathway.

PM: There we go! Is this alright?

AR: It should be fine. However, I have serious concerns about the state of the security protocols here - they let me just walk right in when I said I knew you, when I could have been absolutely anyone! Even an enemy! Very lax, very lax...

If she lets him go off, they're going to be here for a while. Before AR can start shaking his head and listing possible ways to improve security, she claps her hands together.

PM: Augh! First I was supposed to stay and help the Knight, but I kept getting sidetracked and none of them would just stay together in one place and then when I went back to check on them again the Knight was gone and now everyone is the land of Washington except for me!

PM: Please tell me what was so important that you would not just tell these kind people what information you have? I understand that finding a quality mailperson can be difficult on this planet, but the people are very nice and they could have helped you find a more direct way to contact me, instead of me only knowing to be here because of a tricksy lady!

AR: Ah. Um. I'm sorry. The last I heard, you were here, so this is where I came. What tricksy lady?

PM: An old one, who was very strange.

AR: Oh. Anyway -

The redirect doesn't work. She is hitting her stride now.

PM: That is the entire point of the postal system, you know. These people sadly only have their prototype version in place but you could have made do! I apprenticed in it for a while, it's not beyond salvaging! I met a lot of very wonderful people through it -

She throws up her claws, one of them knocking against a hanging vine clustered with red fruits. A quick survey shows that, with all the plants between them, the troll probably did not see that. When she pokes at the fruit to see if it's still intact, her claw perforates the skin. She and AR speed up until they're well away from the scene.

AR: ...Querent?

PM hesitates, biting her lip for a moment, and then decides it'll be fine to tell him. From the look on his face, the sense of knowing has begun to rise in the back of his mind, that same kind of recognition that led to their becoming friends. Neither of them may remember what came before properly, but all carapacians know existential déjà vu like they know the back of their claws. How ordinary humans and trolls function without the odd coincidences and the spontaneous hunches that help guide
Carapacians from day to day is a true mystery.

PM: My Queen. Yours has been around, but I have not met her myself.

Carapacians do not feel the cold or the heat as intensely as the people on this mild planet do. Which means it says something when AR breaks out into a sweat, and his mouth dries to the point that he rasps with fuzzed-out words for a moment before PM can make sense of him again.

AR: She...oh dear. No one said anything about her returning - either of them -

PM: I'm not sure that all that many of us know, yet. Officially, anyway.

Rumor has been spreading - PM has tried to keep abreast of it, as part of her duties as a Protege, but there's only so much she can track - about the reappearance of the White Queen. But with so few of their people in this part of the world, she doubts that the truth has reached the city yet. Under any other circumstances, PM would have seen it as the height of her duty to carry such news even unto the Protector himself...

But the Querent and the heroes need her here. Seriously, they need all the help they can get. Even hearing only scraps, torn between deliveries as she has been, PM has put together that even now that they have gotten their acts together and regrouped, as they were always supposed to, the gods are still unstable. She wants to trust in them, she really does; not just the Prospitian dreamers, but all of them! But she's worried and impatient and troubled over them all at once, because no matter how hard they try, things still go awry.

_Doomed_, some part of her wants to whisper, but that answer doesn't scan right. If they were in a doomed splinter, every carapacian on the planet would know it for a fact, and resign themselves to their fate. No, not doomed, but...cursed, almost. Like everything that can go wrong, _will_ go wrong, every circumstances dragging them further into misfortune like the sucking crawl of the undertow. Even with the Querent pushing the limits of what a Queen would usually do to aid players in a game, brute-forcing her way through constraints set in place by patterns older than old, PM isn't sure it's enough.

And the game hasn't even started yet. A portion is played before the heroes progress to the Medium, yes, but this much pre-gaming seems more and more ludicrous the more PM turns it over in her thoughts. So much built up pressure with no outlet is bound to explode in some awful way.

AR: PM? Are you listening?

She snaps out of her daze with a jolt, in time to realize that AR is watching her with genuine concern. She smacks her cheeks with her hands and shakes off the last of her mumbling thoughts.

PM: Sorry about that.

AR: Anyway, yes. It's here now. Or at least it was the last time I saw it.

...She may have missed more than she thought. How terrible! A good Shatranj member is always attentive when someone has something to share! Sheepishly, she has to ask him to repeat the context.

PM: Ah, I'm sorry. You may need to start over.

AR: A Horror. From the Ukraine. It has moved.

...
"Keep it down, over there!" someone calls irritably through the thick air, but PM is already taking deep breaths, grinding a claw against each temple in an effort to ground herself.

No one ever knew for sure what came through in the Ukraine. Carapacians who tried to investigate didn't usually report back in. If one of the chaos-mongers is roaming around - and now it's here, so close to their hapless heroes that PM feels the need to flail about in utter panic - Skaia only knows how badly everything is going to go wrong all over again!

But AR puffs out his lower lip, staunch and utterly righteous in his conviction.

AR: There are rules about this sort of thing you know. I couldn't tell these people - I have no idea where they are in the chain of command. They might not have the right clearance. That's why I brought the news directly to you!

The logic of the law can be a merciless thing. PM paces, AR's eyes following her as she does laps around a fern, but it doesn't help - this is a message of the utmost urgency that the Querent must hear at once.

PM: You said it's here, but where here?

AR: It beat me to this continent, and made a new nest along the coastline in the south. It's not acting like any Horror we used to see out by the Ring; I thought maybe it would stay where it had nested originally, when it went quiet and stopped expanding its territory, but then the troll queen told it to leave!

She just keeps repeating to herself - they're in Washington. By the Pacific, by the ocean, but perhaps with enough landmass between them and here that the hivemind might not be able to reach them. And with the Querent there to advise them, there's no way they'd try to walk up to a Horrorterror and fight it -

Wait. Oh no. They would, they absolutely would. They've already done it once before. PM grabs AR by the wrist and sprints for the exit. For a moment, he moves slower than she expects, one nimble leg dragging, but she's too distracted trying to coax the story out of him as they bang through the heavy metal doors. One of the scientists in the booths shouts after them, worry in their voice, but they can't stop now.

AR: Where are we going?!

PM: No time! Talk while we run, please! My car's still out in the parking lot and we need to deliver this news to the Querent at once!

AR: ...Yours or mine.

PM: Mine! Yours was never a Querent. Come on, we have to hurry. And I don't think you're telling this in the right order, on account of you're not making sense. Please finish telling the story from the beginning.

The Lab Technician is little more than a blur in the corner of her vision as they hurtle past. "What's wrong? What's happened?" PM hears, and before she and AR push through the outside doors, she waves her free claw over her shoulder.

PM: Emergency! Thank you I'm sorry goodbye!
And then they're through and away. The vehicle in the parking lot is one that PM had to borrow a while ago, the front seat slid as far forward as it can go to accommodate her shorter legs, and she left the keys in the ignition when she went inside. In a moment of confusion, she and AR both try for the driver's side door at the same time, before she pushes him toward the other side. He talks all the while, the words blinking out whenever PM has to look away and close the door and fiddle with the seat again.

AR: Two humans and I went into the older Ukraine. The Horror seized them and swallowed them, but then a craft appeared in the sky and the Imperious one descended to confront it. She spoke as though familiar with the Horror, and accused it of being involved in something. A strange word that I do not think translated properly.

She waves at the LT hanging out the front door of the lab one last time, though she's sure by the look on the human's face that she's doing a poor job at a fond, reassuring farewell. Then she slams on the accelerator and yanks the wheel all the way to the side, the back wheels fishtailing before they regain traction.

PM: What was it?


Taking her eyes away from the road greatly increases the chances of them running into a tree; she does it anyway, her mind filled with images of nightmarish salmon as she stares at AR with trepidation. New York? Perhaps watching the road just caused her to misinterpret some hasty click on his part.

PM: A summoning, you mean?

AR: No, I heard her quite distinctly. Salmon were involved. Perhaps they were horrific salmon, but that's only conjecture at this point. She used many such colloquialisms. I lost most of my resources crossing the ocean and couldn't speculate further.

Pressing her head to the conveniently placed noisemaker in the center of the steering wheel would be rude, and may well startle some passing woodland creature into running out onto the road. Driving out here in the forests is already hard enough compared to driving city streets as it is without bounded obstacles.

PM: Trust me. The human Seer was possessed by grimdark and nearly completed a summoning spirograph. In New York. That has to be it!

Stroking his chin, AR takes forever to nod, reluctance still radiating from his mind. He's always been shorter than her, heavy set and built for enforcement rather than swift deliveries as she was, but with his legs not quite reaching the floor, his neck stretched just so he can peer over the dashboard, he looks so small. It reminds her of -

AR: I see. Right, that could be one explanation. Anyway, she said that she suspected this involvement because hiveminds tend to be in 'cahoots,' and then banished it from the Ukraine on the grounds that it had lost its murder privileges there.

AR: However, from what I saw, it has begun to poison the waters here. I fear that whatever mysterious sway the Condescension held over that Horrorterror, it now strikes out on its own.

This is all serious news. PM reaches down and plucks the mail cap out from her bag to slap on her head, securing it in place with a few good tugs.
This calls for PRIORITY MAIL SERVICE.

PM: Let's ride, AR.

She floors it.

Lab technician Karolina Toov is rather at a loss.

Denali jogs up behind her a moment later, hair flopping into his face as he joins her in staring uselessly after the car careening out of sight. She empathizes with the put-out look on his face greatly. "I thought - I thought we might as well call Doctor Lalonde, so they could just talk to her," he says, mournful. "She's waiting on the secure line... Did they happen to say what was so urgent, by any chance?"

All she can offer is a shake of her head. "Not a word," she says, shrugging. "Well, we can tell her they were here. Or something."

He sighs through his nose, adjusting his glasses by the corner of the frame as they turn back inside. "Carapacians are so strange."

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They're so boned.

It's cold as tits, his brain is full of popping static, the day is suddenly tomorrow, and they're being hauled around by the scruff of their necks by a troll princess who doesn't seem to notice that her two pressganged lackeys are turning into popsicles.

Seriously. Parts of Dave are freezing that he didn't even know he had. The cold cuts right through his jacket and his suit like the fabric's all holes, numbing his fingers and ears and nose and - okay, everything. Everything is cold. By the time they reach the ice-slick, rocky beach and Feferi lets them go to walk on their own, his feet are numb to the point that setting weight on them feels like walking on needles. Karkat outright keels over, landing hard on one knee and looking ready to pass out.

Okay. Shit. Plan, they need a plan. Feferi's too messed up on whatever the Horrorterror is feeding her to realize she's magically 'ported them to the fucking Arctic Circle or something without coats or gloves or boots. Dying of hypothermia would be a lameass way to go.

"Feferi," Karkat says. The troll's kneeling, but he pushes himself up with his hands and starts limping after Feferi. How long does it take before you get frostbite out here? Dave lives in Texas, he's not supposed to have to put up with bullshit like this. "Feferi, you fishbrained fuckwad, stop!"

"No time for that! We can't just hang out on the beach, Karkat, she'll have people on guard." Feferi turns a little to grin at them, her skirt swirling around. How is she not cold in that? Dave's trying to make his brain work to figure out what she's wearing that's she's not feeling this, but eventually he just gives up because a) it's not fucking worth it and b) for all he knows, all of her grim...lighty bullshit is letting her just ignore the fact that her fins are living ice cubes. The point is, is...is...

What was his point again?

Fuck, is it cold.

"We're going to get frostbite!" Karkat's explaining, his breath billowing out in clouds of steam that
Dave can just barely make out in the harsh light of day. There are buildings not far off, but most of them look like either warehouses or factories or ancient apartment buildings with peeling paint - when they reach a road there's barely any boundary between the water, the dead grass, and then the crumbling pavement. Piles of rusted metal parts and vehicles break up the gradient here and there and that's...kind of the general impression Dave gets from this place as he looks around some more. There are entire buildings with the roofs stripped down to the bare structural bones, open to the elements, and even the apartments with some color to them are pallid and faded, all greens and yellows and greys that are so dull they blend together in a blocky, faded panorama.

And snow is everywhere. The only concession the locals have made to try to fight the elements is that the roads have been mostly cleared - or maybe that's just happened on its own, thanks to the sun overhead. Grass grows in yellowed tufts between wide cracks in the broken concrete, but it's so dry and brittle Dave feels guilty stepping on it.

But there has to be something. This town is a goddamn fixer-upper, sure as shit, but it's still most of the way intact. More than a few walls sport monolithic Soviet murals or something with Russian words Dave can't read, but others have been painted over with bright reds and deep crimsons, because someone has definitely staked their claim here.

It's all giant red forks and spoons, as far as the eye can see. So at least this hasn't gone completely tits up - Feferi has, in fact, brought them to where she (probably) intended.

Seriously. This place would be John's worst nightmare come true. Or maybe he'd just be vindicated or some shit.

Has he mentioned it's cold? This bears repeating. He doesn't have an internal thermometer to match the internal metronome, but he can scientifically guesstimate and say it's around you're about to lose
your toes and fingers and possibly your earlobes, congratulations jackass degrees Fahrenheit. They can't stay out here much longer. They've started drifting apart, with Feferi darting on ahead and peeking around street corners without paying attention to Karkat's repeated attempts to yell at her. She's so far gone it's almost surreal - like she's off in her own little world, and they're just watching from the outside. And if this is her idea of keeping her head down for a sabotage mission, there's no way this 'stealth' thing is going to end well.

To hell with it. She's on her own. Dave only came along on this wild ride because someone needs to keep an eye on Karkat.

Dave reaches out and shakes Karkat's shoulder with fingers that barely register the sensation of cloth under them. The troll glares at him blearily, his eyes bloodshot and almost weepy looking. "What?" he growls, seriously undermined by the fact that his teeth won't stop chattering.

Dave only remembers what he was going to say after pausing to gather his thoughts. He hooks a thumb at one of the nearest buildings, an apartment or a hotel of some kind with short metal stairways leading to the front doors.

"We need to get clothes, dude."

"D-don't dude me right now, I can't deal with it," Karkat says, rubbing his hands together furiously to try to generate heat. It doesn't look like it's working. "I kn-know that already. What are we supposed to do, break in and piss off whoever has the globes to live in this icy pit of death?"

"...Yup, that's the plan," Dave says. His teeth jam together weirdly and - shit, his teeth are gonna start chattering, too. At this rate neither of them is gonna be able to make words work. "We'll be frosty fucking snowmen if we don't."

Karkat stops rubbing his hands together and starts chafing at his arms, biting his lip as he nods. He looks exhausted. Belatedly, Dave remembers he's got a hold of the troll's shoulder and when he takes his hand away, hastily, Karkat scowls, his reaction so delayed that Dave ticks another notch closer to freaking the fuck out.

"Over here," he says. One last look confirms that Feferi's off on her merry way down the street and doesn't appear to notice or care that she's lost the other two members of her party. God. Hopefully she doesn't wander into a trap while they're scoping this place out, but goddamn if Dave can't bring himself to care too much right now. She'll be fine. As long as she doesn't actually run facefirst into her ancestor person's fist, she'll be totally fine. Right?

His feet feel like they've been doused with ice water as he drags Karkat off the road and over the broken up patches of concrete to the apartment. The door, when he knocks and then tries the handle
in the subtlest way he knows how, doesn't budge (no surprise there) and isn't opened by whoever lives inside. Heck, from out here, he can't even tell if this place is still inhabited. Everything looks so washed out and derelict that for all they know, they could be knocking on the door of an empty building.

Could he pick the lock? Flexing his fingers just proves how little sensation he's got left in them, and he doesn't want to think about how many needles he'd lose or snap or accidentally stab himself with if he tried it. "Try the window," he tells Karkat, and it says something about how fucking cold the troll is that he actually does it with a minimum of grumbling. The window's high up but Karkat stands unsteadily on his toes, trying to peer in.

A hand slaps against the inside of the glass. Karkat startles back with a tiny screech. Bright red curtains yank closed behind the window panes a second later, ratting loud enough that Karkat flinches again, leaning back against the metal railing for balance with eyes wide as saucers.

"H-hey!" Dave calls, breathing on his hands and then tucking them back into his pockets, trying to conserve heat lost in the seconds he spent prodding at the door knob. His throat is starting to feel stiff; he's not sure exactly how the collar reacts to extreme cold. Humidity and Texas levels of hot-as-fuck, sure, it's weatherproof. But Dave doesn't know if Bro would have designed the internal circuits to function while deep frozen and crusted with ice. That, and his hands - "Shit. Hey, lady? Ma'am? Look, we -"

"Уходи!" a voice calls from within. The woman sounds muffled, but obviously pissed. "Мы не хотим неприятностей."

Dave groans. Karkat, who only just moved away from the railing, leans forward to grind his forehead against the wall, slowly shaking his head in despair. "Of course. Of course they don't speak English. Why would they. Ha. Haha.

"No, she might, hold on," Dave says. He knocks on the door again, hand balled up in a fist. The door rattles a little on its hinges. "Hey, uh! L-look, I know this looks bad - how often do you get two random American kids running around Siberia or whatever, right? Right. Seriously, that's got to be a weird thing to wake up to." There's still no response - the curtains at the window lay flat, and Dave swallows a nervous laugh. "Hell, I get it, for all you know we could be, like, connected to the mob or some shit like that? Which would be the opposite of what we are. No mob people here," He pauses. Then he frowns, and looks at Karkat, who seems determined to make out with the wall in a fit of despair. "Shit, that was a lie. Dammit. I forgot the stabby dude recruited us. Does that mean technically, we're the Midnight Crew now?"

Karkat shoves off the wall and seizes Dave by the face. " Shut. The. Fuck. Up," he says through his teeth. He shakes Dave hard enough to rattle his brains around like dice in a tumbler. "This is your plan, you watery celery stick? No, we're not the Midnight Crew. Stop humoring that asshole when he's not even here!"

It's not a good sign that Dave can't judge which is colder, his face or Karkat's claws. It's like comparing icebergs and glaciers - there's probably a scientific reason why one of the two would be colder than the other, but does he give a shit? Nope. No shits to give.

"Пожалуйста, уходи," the voice says, wearily. Dave gets the feeling it's Russian for 'get the fuck off my ice lawn' because the curtains get drawn on the window far off to the left of the door, too, where the walkway doesn't reach. This lady is having none of this bullshit today, and he can't say he really blames her.

Alright. That's cool. "Plan B," Dave says decisively, raising a hand and pointing at the next door
over. "That one -"

The curtains get ripped across the windows of the apartment he's pointing to so fast that one of the corners of the fabric rips off the railing and hangs uselessly at a diagonal. Dave's finger droops a little.

"Why am I not surprised that Plan Bullshit is just as much a rousing success as plan A." Karkat doesn't even sound sarcastic anymore, just amazed. Dave's about to lose his cool and snap at the troll to come up with his own plan, if he thinks he can do better, but - god. He doesn't think he has the energy for that, right now. "This is just. Wow. We're fucked."

"Are you guys done lollygagging around?" a cheerful voice calls. Dave smacks his face with his palm as a figure in white skips back along the road and spins on a heel to face them, her hands on her hips. "You guppies! Stop attracting attention - any one of these people could be Crocker Corp!"

Feferi taps her foot and glances between Dave and Karkat expectantly.

If she's looking for an apology...good luck with that. Frankly, these people could be members of the KGB for all Dave cares. His eyelashes are starting to look frosty when he blinks. Karkat's doing his best impression of a miserable turtle as he retracts further into his hoodie. "We're going to lose claws in this cold, Peixes," the troll says, sour. "Unless you and your custodial abomination from hell have extra winter gear shoved up your chutes, you're gonna be on your fucking own. Is this getting through? Earth to Peixes, we're not all coldblooded fish people, here -"

"No need to get snappy!" Feferi says. Her eyes are clear and pinkish purple as they roll, which is better than her creepy grim thing earlier. It was different from Rose's grimdark thing - all opaque and smooth rather than dripping white fire and full of worms - but there's still the uncomfortable sensation of being looked through by something that thinks of people as utterly inconsequential, except maybe as a tool or as the butt of a horrifying joke. That sensation is still there, even now, but either Dave's gone numb enough not to notice it as much or the migraine of Glubby's many, many voices is far enough off shore that they've got some leeway.

"If you're cold, do a blood thing; anyway, I wouldn't let you two die." Feferi sniffs and knocks a boot against the side of a pole. Curtains flutter shut across the windows of the apartment complex across the street behind her and she turns unerringly to wave her hand at them. "I really thought you all were more prepared than this," she adds, turning back to him and Karkat with a hint of a sharp grin on her lips. "Shorely you can remember how to make everything work."

...Game stuff. Right. Ah, crap.

If Rose were here, she'd know some awesome warmth spell or something. Heck, John and Jade wouldn't even be in this situation, because the two of them could've teleported away at the first signs of trouble (though knowing those two, they'd be more inclined to punch the giant tentacle monster in the face than run away).

But nah. Dave is just the time guy. And with Glubby radiating crazy whispers at him, he couldn't even do anything with that. Right now, he can think of literally zero things that would help them prevent hypothermia or frostbite. When he checks through the chipped fragments of his shades (he should really swap those out) Karkat looks just as hornswoggled as Dave feels. If there's a blood thing for this, he must not know it.

They're so screwed. Is there a motif for this? Dave's ears have been ringing with screams, but... God. Why do they always know jackshit about what they need to know? Come on, it's not fair that the evil mind-controlled royal troll and her Horrorterror mom know more about their game powers than they do; is it really that hard to just get a freaking list of power up and cheat codes?
[display fraymotif options? y/n]

Oh. Shit. Ohhhhh shit. "Yes!" Dave says. Really loudly. It occurs to him that he may or may not have been spacing out again, and he hasn't said anything out loud in a while. Karkat twitches and Feferi looks at him like he's the crazy one. But whatev, whatev.

Dave's more interesting in frantically reading through the menu options playing across the shattered lenses of his shades.

Hell yeah. Score.

There's a lot of red, in two different shades. A few of the options have scrambled or crossed-out text that's fuchsia as hell, but little of it is legible and more than a few are greyed out, like a dead link. When someone catches Dave's arm and pulls, Dave follows on auto-pilot, Karkat's drawn face barely registering as Dave tries to sort through the sound byte samples cycling through his hearing.

[In the Blood's Beat] [Metronomic] [Bells, Bells, Bells!!] [Dutybound] [Allegretto Vivace] [Hot Blooded] [Pulse Syncronicity] [Bleed It Out] [Awake and Alive] [Back to Back] [Paint the Town Red]

Some have song verses, others look like groan-inducingly awful puns, other still sound almost familiar. Like Dave read them once but scrolled by in disinterest.

But one in particular catches his eye. Ten guesses which one. The first nine count, but you'd have to live with the shame of guessing wrong for the rest of your life. "Hot Blooded," he says aloud. "Yeah. That one."

Nothing happens.

Obviously, because it's the wrong shade of red. It's Karkat's red, it's Karkat's significant bratwurst red. Dave blinks until his eyes refocus and goes to reach out - wait, shit. Karkat's already got a grip on him. They're trailing after Feferi (Dave's autopilot is potent shit, let me tell you), passing by still more rows of dilapidated buildings and old machinery that's been abandoned by the wayside. There are more storage containers, the kind you'd find at a dock or a shipyard or something, but most of them are hanging open, empty. The cold's so sharp it's like brain freeze incarnate.

Even as Dave thinks that, Karkat stumbles, and nearly rams them into a metal pole without a sign on the street corner, because - right, they're both doing pretty shitty at this point. Dave manages to nudge
them to the side at the last second, but Karkat's head bobs limply. He doesn't even look up. The music distracted Dave for a second there, but his mind's slowing to a sluggish crawl where sleep just sounds awesome. The sunlight burns through his broken shades, and all he wants to do is close his eyes. Why hasn't he replaced his sunglasses yet?

Not cool. Focus. "Say hot blooded," he says, shaking the arm that Karkat's using as part-leash, part-crutch.

"No. Stop...stop being s-stupid," Karkat says. The comeback has all the force and substance of damp tissue paper. "That song is shit and you know it."

What? Oh, right. That. "Please do not argue with me right now, bro. For like, five seconds, alright? That's it, that's all I ask. I swear I'm not messing with you."

Karkat sighs like a critically wounded elephant. "What?"

"Hot Blooded." Dave tries to make it do the color thing with his voice, but hell if he can hear if it worked or not. "Just say it, man."

"Honestly, I would have thought awful rap music, not awful eighties music." Karkat rolls his eyes and mumbles, "Hot Blooded."

Dave expects more of the usual random ass sounds and beats that the game thinks passes as theme music. His and Kanaya's stuff was passable but still kinda weird as hell. It usually all pianos and violins and flutes and wubbing with the occasional random tune thrown in.

But no. What starts playing is worse. So much worse.

[HOT BLOODED CHECK IT AND SEE I'VE GOT A FEVER OF ONE HUNDRED AND -]

Oh god. It's actually literally Hot Blooded. Of all the conceivably relevant fraymotifs in this goddamn stupid fucking game, they found the joke track.

On the other hand, Karkat hisses and starts radiating heat like a....radiator. Fuck. That analogy bombed. Pretend he didn't try to think that one. Karkat's hand goes from a cold cuff wrapped around his forearm to a localized point of heat so abruptly that it actually hurts. So that's good, that's fantastic. But Dave's not a furnace. Nothing's happening to him. He's still freezing his ass off over here. When he puts out a hand and concentrates, his timetable is there between one blink and the next, but all he gets when he fiddles around with the controls is -

[ Hot Blooded - basic notation ɕx.o. limit: 1 player effects: (max Knight echeladder advancement attained; see God Tier for limit breakers) ]

That's not fair. That's favoritism, is what it is. Or something. Dave tries to scroll through more of the motifs on his shades but another shard of glass falls out and that's that - most of his right field of vision is entirely clear, and the motif phrases fade out.

He looks down at the timetable, and his fingers splayed out pale and cold over the black and red surface, and grimaces. He couldn't think of any way time powers could pull off furnacekind, anyway. But heck, he would have said the same thing about Karkat's bleedy thing not three minutes ago. He just wants an extra jacket. Or a badass scarf, he totally used to wear those all the time, because irony is a demanding mistress and Houston in the summertime is an unspoken challenge. Even those dorky ass pajamas would be better than nothing and those things are hells of dorky. The cape alone would punch a hole in his coolness that no amount of irony could fix, but it would be warm, right? Right.
"Oh. That's...better," Karkat says, sounding much more awake than he did before. He inspects his hands warily, like he expects the heat to shut off at any moment. When he frowns at Dave, reluctant, his eyes have done the thing where contact lenses wither in the face of weird game shit, flaring bright blood red. Which is going to go over like a sack of bricks. "Oh my god what the fuck are you wearing."

Well the same thing's he's been wearing all along, obviously. But there's a little whisper in Dave's head, and when he glances down, uneasily, instinctively, to see what Karkat's talking about, only half of him is surprised to see that his suit and jacket are redder than they were before, and that there's extra fabric lying heavy on his back. It's a buffer between him and the cold air, and even though he couldn't say how or when exactly his clothes swapped out for god tier pajamas, he can't say it doesn't feel right.

He's probably taking this way too calmly. But also, these pajamas are really damn warm, and he's not about to stare looking gift pajamas in the mouth, even if they are the spawn of the same messed up, freaky game mechanics that let Pesterchum work at the bottom of the ocean. And hey, if he questions it, it might stop working, and then where would he be? Stuck in the middle of the Arctic with no pajamas, that's where.

Yeah, this whole situation is just freaky as hell. It's dreamlike and ten different kinds of surreal, but when Dave shakes the sleeves out to fall over his hands, they start warming up almost instantly, and that's too awesome to argue with. Warm is good. Warm is fantastic. Shake the dorky cloak over his shoulders, and it's even warmer. Who can argue with those kind of perks.

"What," a cold voice says, softly, "are you two doing?"

Fuckfuckfuck. Dave's hands move before Dave himself fully realizes what he's doing, reaching up and yanking his shades off the bridge of his nose to jam onto Karkat's face. He comes this damn close to jabbing the troll in the eye by mistake, but his coordination wins out at the last minute, so that the glasses land at an incredible angle on Karkat's face, but still manage to (mostly) cover his eyes. Time obliges by waiting until Dave's done the deed to snap back into motion, which is convenient; holding and pausing time has gotten a lot less painful since he stated using the timetables to manage all of his loops and stops. Then he hastily vanishes them, tucking his hands behind his back under his cloak, and starts looking anywhere but Feferi's suspicious face. He even whistles a little until Karkat elbows him hard in the sore spot developing in the squishy place under his ribs.

"Nothing." Karkat laughs tightly. "Nothing at all. Just did a fucking blood thing, whoop-dee-fucking-do." Dave nods along after a short delay, flashing Feferi's his least smug smirk while he crosses his fingers under his cape.

God, that thing is so convenient. He's changed his mind. The cape is useful. It can stay.

"...We need to go this way, now," Feferi says at last, her voice still soft and remote. Dave fights the urge to shiver - not out of cold anymore, oddly, but out of unease. When the tyrianblood turns her back on them again, boots crunching in frost-coated grass as she heads back to the main road, Dave lets his shoulders loosen fractionally.

He doesn't even want to think about how close they're cutting it with Feferi here - New York was a hell of a lot bigger than this place, and Rose's grimdark tore it up so bad they're still digging through the mess of the uprooted subway system and toppled buildings weeks later. How long until troll princess over here loses it? Until the giant calamari out in the bay decides it's had enough of dicking around in the water, and heaves itself onto land?

"What did you have me do?" Karkat demands, muttering under his breath as they start after Feferi
again (at a reasonable distance, obvi). The troll lifts one of his feet extra high and lets melting snow
drip off the soles of his sneakers with a look of grudging amazement before setting it back down. He
also raises his hands like he wants to yank Dave's shades off and snap them in two, but Dave bats the
troll's claws away before he can. The black fragments keep plinking out to fall onto the street,
leaving a trail of glass in their wake, but Feferi didn't seem to notice Karkat's eye color change, so
that's good. "How did you even know that would work? And when the fuck did you change into
god tier clothing, you ass?"

Dave shrugs and sticks his hands in his hoodie pockets. They're toasty as hell in there, which is a
nice change, though he still has to deal with the pain of having sensation return to his fingers and
toes. He could waste brain power trying to figure out what happened to his original outfit, but he's
got to keep his head in the game, here. "Been hearing more weird game stuff, lately," he says,
tapping a finger against the side of his temple where the bands of his shades used to be. "Sometimes
it seems like all you have to do is, like, ask. None of this game stuff really ever stopped working, or
EB wouldn't have been able to get hooked on his anti emotional trauma fix for all these years."

Karkat makes a face, first at Dave, and then at Feferi's back. "I'm sorry."

He almost doesn't catch that, on account of Karkat usually speaks at a default yell, and Dave's
thrown by the sudden switch to a reluctant mutter. "Whoa, what?"

"I said I'm sorry!" Karkat shouts. Dave winces and they both glance at Feferi at the same time, but all
she does is toss them another impatient look and stride further away. Dave can make out the sea
through the buildings again as they near the shore, the apartments falling away to make room for
even more dilapidated warehouses and - uh. Actually, not so dilapidated. In fact, some of the stuff
they're passing right now looks almost new; there are containers that have shiny steel locks holding
them shut, and through the gaps between buildings Dave can make out piers that stretch across the
water, lined with machinery that isn't rusted in the slightest.

"I walked us right into a trap. Yay, me," Karkat says. He's leaving a trail of melted snow and damp
concrete in his wake. "I didn't...fuck. I didn't think things would turn out like this."

Dave has to point out - "No one thought things would turn out like this. This is some pretty fucking
weird shit, even for us, man. Don't sweat it." Of course, Dave will never let Karkat live this down,
but the point is you have to wait until the opportune moment. Ragging on the guy right now would
only end with their attracting Feferi's attention, or worse. Better if they both keep their heads down,
let her do her thing, and try to figure out some way back to America that doesn't involve going
anywhere near Glubby. Ever again.

(He's trying not to think about what he saw in those scattered moments between going through that
portal and closing his eyes. It was...bad. Bad enough to make Glub's creepypasta self look downright
harmless. If they never take a detour through that place again, it'll be too soon. He likes his brains on
the inside of his skull, not dripping out through his ears, thanks.)

But hey, at least it's not cold anymore. He really is willing to put up with all goddamn kinds of
strange and illogical game mechanics if it means he and Karkat don't die out here over something as
dumb as walking up to a Horrorterror and saying hi.

Anyway, that's reminds him. He scoots over midstep, right next to Karkat, and the troll leans away
automatically with a look like he's barely restraining the urge to shove Dave into a snowy drift. But
they've got problems, and said problems include the fact that Dave's not sure what will happen if said
Horrorterror decides it would be happyfun times to go to town in Dave's head. Rose's grimdark dude
definitely wanted to; he remembers that much being discussed afterward. He just won the lottery
here, by being a Derse dreamer with no idea how to do the mind magic thing like Rose does, and no
convenient void-themed accessories to keep unwanted noodles out of his head.

So he pulls the zipper on Karkat's backpack open and starts dumping all of his stuff in there. Anything that might cause trouble or be a weapon, other than his swords, goes into the backpack. It's already crammed full of random shit, but Dave makes room. If things go as horribly wrong as they potentially could, Karkat might end up on his own with two tanglebuddies and a Horrorterror on his hands.

"What are you doing?!" Karkat squirms and tries to sidle his backpack out from Dave's hands. "Carry your own stuff, you fucking hoarder -"

"I can hear more than you do," Dave says, gritting his teeth as he gives the next item due consideration - and then chooses to chug the last of his bottle of apple juice right here and now, rather than tuck it into the side pocket of Karkat's backpack. Too much risk that it might fall out. "In New York, it - they get inside your head. Me and Rose get whammied worse that John and probably Jade, I think, and you have to have seen what Rose did on national fricking television by now. Dude, you need to be ready to go." He isn't entirely sure where he's been keeping these random throwing knives (he thought he left them at home, but things have been making a weird habit of turning up out of the blue when he needs them, lately, just like something that he's forgotten, something that nags at him whenever there's a quiet moment because he can't remember where that thing went) but he puts them in the side pocket instead. For, you know, ease of access. Does Karkat even know how to work knifekind?

"Do not turn evil on me. Fucking no," Karkat nearly shrieks. "This situation couldn't possibly get any worse. It'll implode into a fucking supermassive black hole of worseness at this rate, so you better be clearing out whatever horrific fuckery you think might be invading your thinkpan right now, Dave."

"Sure, my mind is a temple, blah blah, yadda yadda. Take this stuff anyway." Dave's so preoccupied with shoveling a bunch of partially used red pens into the ratty mesh pocket on the very front of Karkat's backpack, he only notices that they've reached something new when Karkat abruptly slows down and Dave has to brake hard to keep from hitting the kid.

Their surroundings go from crumbling, ex-Soviet shithole chic to brilliant Crockertier red in less than half a step, and Dave cringes because it's so red. Like, neon, fire truck levels of red. Rows and rows of piers stretch out into the water, with a gleaming red shuttle sitting at the point where one dock meets the land and an entire stretch of land that has been cleared of rusted debris to make room for shipment containers and enough forklifts to transport a small nation. People in red and white uniforms (most of them trolls, but who's counting?) move briskly from one station to the next, ducking out of sharp new buildings that line the docks and weaving between containers with cutting efficiency as they go about their creepy business. Two of the longest piers on the bay are crowded with absolutely enormous machine parts and curved sections of metal that are probably taller than Dave is, like pieces to a 3D puzzle that Dave can't make heads or tails of.

Compared to how dead and abandoned most of the town behind them felt while they were passing through, with what few people remain shuttered in behind closed doors, the sudden industrial activity is downright spooky. For a moment, Dave could swear he catches the shadow of a huge figure passing between two curving arcs of red metal - but it's just his eyes playing tricks on him, and then next second he darts with Karkat and Feferi behind the relative safety of an older, rusted shipping container to avoid the wandering eyes of a pair of Crocker trolls on patrol.

"Oh my god," Karkat says, mostly to Feferi, his face one huge no. There's a light layer of snow on the ground, like it's been cleared off and salted to prevent the kind of slick build up they saw down
the street, that Karkat's new internal motif is doing its best to turn into slush. They've cycled through that song at least three times now, but Dave has the power of volume control, thank god. He wants to ask if Karkat can hear that, at least, but now's really not the time. "You weren't completely making all this up. What the fuck."

"Why would I make anything up?" Feferi whispers back, waving them back further into the shadow of the container with a hand, the other splayed out against the metal to help her keep her balance in a crouch.

Karkat whips around and nearly knocks into Dave, who hadn't realized they were huddled that close until he almost takes an elbow to the jaw. He's still, after all this, clinging to his backpack full of random shit, his claws tearing mini holes in the material so that he has to keep adjusting his grip before the straps just rip in two. "Fuck it. Fuck this. Fuck everything. We're out of here," Karkat hisses, pushing up onto his feet and dragging Dave up with a hand that burns.

Feferei reaches out without looking back, her hand closing on Karkat's forearm in a vice with an almost audible creak that makes Karkat's face pale. Problem. Dave weighs his chances of getting his ass kicked into the Arctic Ocean - and realizes that, hey, apparently watching someone getting their arm snapped in two isn't something he's able to put up with. He has fucks to give about that particular scenario. Feferi could beat his ass through the pavement, but he's still the only resident pajama god wonder present, unless Feferi omitted some real pertinent shit.

When he pulls a piece of shit sword to level at Feferi's face, he's not laughing. "Let him go. Now, lady."

The muttering migraine crawls its way into his head like horrific static in an instant, choked screams and burbling whispers crackling in his ears as Feferi - and through her, something else - considers the broken edge of sharp metal inches from her eye. She doesn't turn her head, but her eyes flicker to and burbling whispers crackling in his ears as Feferi - and through her, something else - considers the tension that almost has him trembling like a total scrub. Be cool. So cool. Frostier than this icy hell. Don't freak out don't freak out don't freak out. Fuck he can't do this.

"...God," Feferi says at last, in that way that means she's not talking about any religion Dave's ever heard of. Extra voices layer over hers like drowning echoes. Her eyelids flicker as blanched white swallowing her irises like a second lid, fuchsia blood limning the white circles of grimlight. Her head tilts to the side, too quick, too stilted. "You think to meddle? Peixes belong to we."

Don't freak out don't freak out don't freak out. Fuck he can't do this.

But he's the only one who can. "Just let him go," Dave says, his arm strung like piano wire with tension that almost has him trembling like a total scrub. Be cool. So cool. Frostier than this icy hell. "That's not meddling. That's me asking nicely."

Feferei narrows creepy, possessed eyes; Karkat breathes so raggedly Dave's wondering how much pain the kid is in, his eyes too obviously red through Dave's broken shades. He looks like he could pirouette off the handle at the drop of a hat.

Dave just breathes - sword's still half an inch from that eye - and breathes - so what if Rose's mangotango buddy dropped him like a rock with a single hit - and breathes -
And that's not terrifying at all, Dave thinks. "Yeah?" Come on, think of something badass to fire back. "Time is still on my side, you cheapskate back alley sushithulhu ripoff." Nice. Very nice.

"P'tea 'se s'Fr' o'r' f'r' e'n'd." Feferi tosses her hood back, snapping the buckles that tuck around her horns with a practiced flick so that her long hair spills free. The Horrorterror rides her smile one last time, smug and simpering as it casts a disdainful look at Dave.

...That was ominous. Feferi spins on a heel before Dave can figure out how to make words work and ask her what the hell that meant, her horns giving away her position even when she ducks behind a crate. She doesn't spare them another glance as she makes her way, bold as brass, closer to the very exposed docks with minimal cover. The Crockercorp workers fail to see her only because of sheer dumb luck, and maybe a little bit because of her white clothes that camouflage her a little as she skirts workers with the most lackadaisical stealth gambit Dave's ever been forced to watch in action. Bro would have a shitfit over how little effort Feferi makes to actually conceal herself. She fails ninja school forever. No retakes.

Which leaves him and Karkat to do their own thing, apparently. Whatever that may be. Helping Feferi right now is just way too shitty a plan, at this point, for Dave to consider it an option. "So, play least in sight until Feferi blows up...whatever she came here to blow up?" he suggests, scratching the side of his head with the sword's crossguard and looking at Karkat. "Or make a break for it? We could try to borrow a phone and call Jade, maybe? Idk man."

A quick inspection of his own phone just confirms that the chaos filter is still humming right along, rendering Pesterchum a living nightmare to try to message with and garbling the regular call screen so badly that Dave can't make sense of the number buttons - they appear to be written in Necronomihell-speech, which he just so happens to not be fluent in. If this is permanent damage, he's gonna be pissed. The inability to text is already giving him preemptive hives; the last time they had a tentacle monster in town, it took his collar out right away, and neither he nor Karkat would do well if Dave was reduced to sign language and attempted Horrortexting.

Karkat's looking at him weirdly, though. It's not even a glare, which is not natural. "What?" Dave says, instantly on the defensive.

"Nothing," Karkat says, after a delay. His eyebrows snap back into a frown. Good. "We didn't exactly get very fucking far when we tried running the first time."

"Yeah, but maybe now she's pissed enough to let us go," Dave points out, "whereas before, she had yet to realize how annoying we can be when kidnapped."

Karkat snorts softly, reaching up to rub at one eye. "There has to be a working phone somewhere in this area," he says, leaning over to scope out the crowded piers before them. "The rest of town is probably a crapshot, but if we knock out one of these Crocker Corp fuckers without being noticed -"

"We can yoink one of their company PDAs. On it." Dave nods, and scans the yard for an easy mark. Flash in, flash out - piece of cake. He might not even need to worry about knocking someone out and leaving an unconscious body lying around for an employee to trip over if he's fast enough. Cryptic as hell warnings about time aside, Dave's pretty sure that all he needs is a spin of the timetables and the two of them can have their pick of phones to steal out of unsuspecting corporate slave pockets.
It would have been easy. So easy. Naturally, they never get a chance to try it. Hell, they don't even get as far as having the requisite pointless argument about whose phone to steal, because three things happen in quick succession that render the entire plan null and void.

First, a voice breaks out over the roar of heaters and machines and power tools and forklifts - "What're you all jabberin' on aboat? This haul better be in ship-top shape! #standards"

Dave may know so little about troll culture it's legit embarrassing at this point, but he still knows the Condesce's voice when he hears it. Karkat lets loose a strangled noise, eyes wide as saucers as Dave yanks the troll back as far into the shadow of the container as they can go, crouching down with his heart thumping in his chest - he didn't see her, so she probably didn't see them, right? Right?

But then the second thing happens. That thing. Which just so happens to be Feferi completely and utterly screwing herself over. Dave suspects that this might have been part of Glubby's plan for a while now, since the theme of the day here seems to have been mostly focused on causing ludicrous amounts of mayhem on a relatively short budget.

Having Feferi walk out from behind an idling forklift, stand blatantly out in the open so that people in red start to slow down and stiffen, turning to stare at the interloper in their midst - that qualifies. It gets worse, obviously. Feferi then reaches out, seizes the nearest computer station to just rip it out of the ground with the wrenching screech of cold metal warping, and finally tosses the whole thing overhand at the nearest drum barrel.

Of course, the second the sparking computer station cracks the drum, the whole stupid thing explodes.


The icing on the cake is when, after the (honestly very minor) explosion, Feferi walks away from the immediate blast radius without a care in the world. "Tethys!" she calls.

There aren't enough hands in the world to encompass the magnitude of the facepalm needed here.

"Dave," Karkat says, sounding faint. "Dave, oh my god -"

"Yeah, she's screwed," Dave agrees, unable to pry his eyes away from the burning oil drum, and the space the fire clears out as the red shirt brigade scatters. Feferi looks transcendent, her hair swirling out behind her as she walks toward a short - absolutely goddamn miniscule, tbh - figure that's her polar opposite, dressed all in black and fuchsia and gold with the kind of hair that eats combs for breakfast. The horns are the same basic shape, however, but the Condesce has had centuries to grow those things out until they look almost as tall as she is.

"Dave -"

Oh man, they've both got trident or 3Dent or whatever -dentkind out, now. This strife is actually happening. Dave thinks now would be an awesome time for the two of them to get the hell out of here before crazy tyrianblood senior and junior over there decide to blow up more shit in their quest to see who can poke more holes in the other before noon. This is equal parts terrible and awesome and is the phone's camera working, at least? Maybe if they get this on video, John will be too distracted by the epic fight sequence to panic when they tell him what happened today -

"Dave, you spongedeprived asshole, we have a problem," Karkat says, voice cracking all over the place.

Dave turns and oh.
Right. Now they're screwed, too.

He and Karkat stare up at the massive troll looming over them.

Said massive troll stares back down from a...considerable height.

"You should not be here," the troll says.

"Well no fucking shit, Sherlock," Karkat fires back. While he sounds like he's about to wet his pants in terror, he also rolls his eyes so hard they nearly achieve orbital velocity, which means they've at least reached the panic saturation point, beyond which there is only flippant bullshit and hysterical laughter and running for their lives.

The troll - good fucking grief, even if this guy's a blueblood, he's got to be literally older than America, at least - inspects them through lightly tinted goggles, long, blue-black hair slinking over his shoulders when he shakes his head. "That is not my name."

"Yo, E%!" How did the Condesce even pronounce that? Karkat flinches back against the container, wheezing, while Dave grabs his own cape and flings it over Karkat's head. Karkat doesn't even tear it off, which means shit's dire as hell. "See anyfin interestin' over there? Looks like we got us a reel motherglubbin' moron wanderin' around, not minding her own business."

Dave doesn't dare twist around or creep to the corner of the shipping container to see where the Condesce is, or where Feferi stands now - Karkat is frozen, swallowing with a click that sounds like bone snapping to Dave's overstrained ears. Desperate, unable to tear his eyes off the blueblood in front of them, Dave reaches out and yanks the cape further down over Karkat's head, the ambient temperature rising another three degrees as Dave shoves him down and awkwardly tries to not-hug the troll in an epic attempt at making it look like Dave's the only one crouching here.

This would be more successful and make at least twice as much sense if the blueblood hadn't already spotted them. But to be fair, the guy doesn't seem to have the fastest reflexes right now.

"...I am working," the blueblood says, sounding puzzled, faint frown lines creasing his brow as he continues to watch Dave and the lump-formerly-known-as-Karkat. "I am not wandering."

"Oh, for glub's - naut you, gurlfrond. I was reefering to this dumb heiress of mine over here. Just get yo ass over here and do me a solid."

"Ah." And just like that, the blueblood shrugs and...starts walking away, blinking owlishly at Dave one last time before nodding to him and continuing on his - her? - merry way. "Yes, my Condescension. I will be there momentarily."

Jesus fucking christ, did they really just get away with that? Under the cape a new sauna has come into being, but it's another few beats before Dave feels absolutely positive that the blueblood isn't coming back (???) and lifts the cape off Karkat's head before he accidentally broils him or something. God, they've gone from being too cold to having the exact opposite kind of problems. He almost misses -

Jk, jk. Dave would rather they die of overheating than go back to the hypothermia thing. Living in Houston, it was always the way he expected to go. Karkat doesn't appear to be suffering any ill effects from running this constant fever, either, so who's complaining? Nobody, that's who.

Karkat does look appalled when he blinks and sees the blueblood wandering off toward the commotion in the dockyard. "You're fucking joking," he says, as the two of them creep over and crank their necks around to peek out around the corner of the container. "I mean, coldbloods can be
"This is not something to complain about, man," Dave says. The sunlight that’s been stabbing his 
eyes finally skulks out of sight behind a veil of clouds - they’re thin and ragged, but enough to cast a 
muted grey tone over the ice and metal that have been reflecting the light so it was a million times 
brighter than it had to be. This close to the water it...it smells like cold, and salt, and steel, and 
judging by the migraine Dave can feel nibbling on his brain, all of the attention of the Horrorterror 
out in the deep waters far off-shore just focused on this yard in particular with avid, hungry interest.

Karkat appears to be having a wheezing fit, but he's still whisper-yelling at a volume that no one else 
appears to be able to hear, so Dave lets him go off for a bit. "Fuck you and your comically blasé 
standards, I want to know what asshole made the executive decision to make the two of us into such 
pathetic, leprous specimens of uselessness that we aren't taken seriously even when we get caught in 
the middle of the fucking act of trespassing on the Condesce's top secret black market shipping yard 
of doom! This doesn't seem like something to be grateful about, this is just another first place trophy 
to add to my ever-accumulating wealth of shitty awards testifying to the fact that we suck as heroes."

"Dude, keep your negative Nancy vibes on the DL, alright? Just think your angry troll happy 
thoughts or something. Like, look, we're not dead yet." Always a plus, in Dave's book. "Now shut 
up, we're still hiding."

The good news is, when Dave gives the yard another onceover, most of the Crocker employees have 
bolted, darting into buildings with dark windows or, in the case of sea trolls, yanking on hoods and 
face masks and diving into the frigid surf over the sides of the piers, swimming for god knows what. 
Which leaves only three trolls in the center of the yard, surrounding by machines and forklifts - 
Feferi, acting more rabid by the second as she prowls around in circles, eyes white and wide; the 
Condesce, who stands her ground while Feferi circles, close enough for Dave to make out the 
disgruntled expression on her face; and the blueblood, who honestly just looks like she got lost along 
the way and is perplexed as to why there are two people snarling at each other in the middle of her 
work station.

Feferi gets as far as, "Tethys, I'm here t-" before the Condesce ploughs right over her, voice pitched 
to carry. "Unbelievable," she says, tapping the trident against the ground with a scowl. "Un. Be. 
Lievable. This is what I get for tryna be nice and shit, so kelp me god. I mean, what did I tell you?"
She doesn't even wait for Feferi to finish opening her mouth. "WHAT DID I 
MOTHERGLUBBING TELL YOU?!"

Karkat flinches; whatever he was about to whisper dies a sudden death and emerges a faint, 
whistling noise of sheer terror. Feferi steps back with her jaw dropped, mouth moving but apparently 
stunned speechless by the sudden roar. Dave doesn't blame either of them - he's not sure how the 
blueblood just bows her head and waits, unflinching as the Condesce keeps shouting over Feferi's 
stammered noises. "I told you," the older troll goes on, "I told you, don't let that crazy Glub-bitch 
into yo head. Because she makes you crazy. And so what did you do? You got all glubbin' cuttley 
with her." The tyrianblood raises her culling fork and jabs it - out to the side, toward the sea. She's in 
motion now, circling around Feferi, who can only backpedal in bristling, snarling confusion. "Now 
the tentabitch is out there, ain't she?! And she's got you all hyped up on some cray scheme where 
you actually think you can paddle up to my backdoor and not get a fork through your fucking face!"

Holy shit. They might want to get out of here. Or better yet, never have come anywhere near this 
place to begin with, on account of there's now officially an older-than-sin troll looking furious 
enough to stab anyone who so much as breathes at her funny. Karkat might not have been 
groundlessly paranoid when they had that three hour long argument concerning how helping Feferi
oppose the Condesce could lead to one bloodthirsty troll on a rampage and three dead idiots. Dave feels kind of bad about that now.

Scrap all previous plans. Hell, they can hitchhike across all of Russia to get home. Their chances of surviving would still be higher than if they stuck around here trying to steal a phone. Between Glubby and Feferi and Condy - nah. There's no way. Karkat's already having some kind of minor heart attack over here, just from those two yelling at each other. What'll happen when they start trying to kill each other?

Dave'll hold time. He can do that, now. The trick of having Karkat follow him into a flashstep pause might be a little more difficult to pull off, since Dave doesn't have the time or the chill needed to sort through fraymotifs and abilities to find one that would replicate what happened with Kanaya the other day. But Dave can carry him if it comes down to the wire. Pausing used to knock him on his ass if he held it too long, but the timetables smoothed all that shit out.

...But could he really walk away and leave Feferi to (presumably) die in the most misguided smackdown ever?

Also, how many of Dave's internal organs would Karkat try to perforate if he dragged him away, after the troll pried himself from his weird codependent thing with John just to make it this far?

"We need to help her," Karkat says, taking off the shades and dumping his backpack on the ground. Which basically answers all those questions.

"Come on, maybe she can handle this on her own." Dave realizes about ten seconds too late that playing devil's advocate here isn't going to make a dent in Karkat's new awesome fun suicide mission mindset; the troll just peels off his hoodie and starts digging through his backpack, removing the new mask Kanaya made for him with claws that are shaking with something that's not cold. "How many more stupid things are we going to do in our lives before we learn better?"

Karkat stops in the middle of pulling on his mask, mulls it over, and then says, "At least one more."

"Probably, yeah."

"Oh. Awesome." Dave grabs a handful of his pajama shirt's hem, grimaces, and then lets it go. He could try to turn it back into a suit, but what if that turns off the buffer between him and the freezing cold air? As unquestionably lame as these god tier jammies are, he really, really likes being warm. Couldn't he at least get, like, a time-themed suit? How hard would that be?

Between one second and the next, the long sleeved shirt and pants adjust themselves so that they look like a suit. This is a little off-putting, due to the fact that they still feel like really soft, warm pajamas. But then his cape and the weird little hood thing he never wears up mold into a suit jacket, an enormous red gear still plastered over his chest, and Dave shrugs internally. "What's the plan. Just so I can get a generous head start on all the many, many ways it'll inevitably go to shit?"

By the time he looks back at Karkat, the troll has done that weird thing where he appears to have flipped an internal switch; he's met with a wide, cocky smirk that permanent-raging-thunderclouds Karkat would never wear, and bright red eyes that almost manage to look not-terrified in the face of extremely reckless life choices. "The plan is, don't fucking die."
...Wait. "Can that not be the plan?" Dave says, horrified. "What part of our plans go wrong do you not understand, holy shit!"

Logic barely gets a shrug from Karkat. "Fine. Fuck it. The plan is, help the Condesce." He nods, his smile growing wider as he goes on. "And also, we are not going to try to successfully grab Feferi and escape back to Seattle. That is the opposite of the thing we plan to be doing." He eyeballs Dave with one eye twitching. "We are definitely planning on dying horribly in the process of achieving these goals. Please tell me you understand what I'm getting at here, you obtuse fuck."

Dave pauses, and then whispers, "So, like, we're gonna try to reverse-psych out the universe?"

"Any better ideas?" Karkat whispers back, hissing out of the corner of his mouth.

No. No, this is exactly the kind of shit Dave can get behind. This may well be the most hilariously ironic plan that he's ever heard of. He might be tearing up a little with pride; his eyes feel unabashedly moist as he claps Karkat on the shoulder. "I just want you to know that I approve of this plan so hard. There is no possible way it could go wrong. It's foolproof."

Karkat squints at him, suspicious, and then gives a short nod. "Not even we could possibly fuck this up. Because we're better than that, now."

This plan is going to suck so bad.

Dave can hardly wait.

--

Elsewhere...

The last time James Harley ventured forth in Siberia, he inspired three separate Bond films.

Alas! His efforts to play least in sight mean that he hasn't been able to get into a vigorous bout of fisticuffs in the longest time. Even with this excellent cybernetic body making up for the many ways his body began to fail in his later years, he simply can't afford to get into the kind of flashy battles that marked his youth. Dearest Joanna, too, is a sprightly as one could hope for, but her remarkable hands can only make up for so much, with her age and her old wound.

The two of them knew something was afoot from the moment Joanna was gunned down upon young John's arrival. But damn and blast it all, if their lone source of information on the subject didn't clam up when they tried to understand just what went on that day. Joanna never saw her attacker, and blood loss soon rendered her unconscious.

Anyway. Even if the circumstances of what went on all those years ago remain murky, it is at least clear whose work this nonsense has been. A few day's worth of reconnaissance upon his arrival in Russia has made obvious the full extent of the operation. The Condesce has ever taken the philosophy 'go big or go home' to heart. James can't fathom what might have drawn the E%ībimus to work on a project such as this, so far outside the troll's usual area of expertise, but neither does he appear to be here against his will. Set Zahhak to a task, and he tends to fixate upon it to the exclusion of all else until it's complete; it is a trait that, given his druthers, James would rather prefer the troll kept. It saved his own life, after all, though it could not preserve his body.

Everything is mechanized now, and though his mind still tells him he is feeling concern, urging his heart to pound at the sight of the armada that the Condesce has accumulated in the remote waters, there is nothing but the thrum of his engines, ceaseless as the finest clockwork. Replicating the physical signs of emotion was not high on the E%ībimus's list of priorities in this body's design. It is
a loss. But one that James has become pragmatic about. The work he has been able to accomplish as Bailey has proven too significant for him to have died with his body.

Unfortunately, there are limits to what he can accomplish, here. Being concerned about the Condesce's plans does not mean he can do anything to stop them, particularly given the fact that he has a policy of avoiding the tyrianblood's works as much as possible. His curiosity nags him regardless. The Condesce is a power-hungry creature, and always has been; she funnels vast sums of money into the Midnight Crew's coffers at regular intervals on the sly, but there's not a single black or felt suit to be seen at any of these subarctic construction yards. Which means that this is one of her private projects. Something of her own devising, though damn it all if James can't quite put a finger on what.

Nothing to be done for it, he supposes. Joanna might be able to learn more about this with her methods, but she's half a world away yet, occupied with gathering information on where the Felt kept and raised these Scratch children that Jade and her friends fought the other day. The E%ībimus appears content to remain here, and he has ever been a difficult one to keep tabs on, so he may as secure here as he would be anywhere else in the world.

There's just one last thing that James means to investigate before taking the obvious course of action in order to deal with the Condesce, and then return to assist Jade in unearthing the suspected traitor in their ranks. A hunch and nothing more brought James south of the town of Tiksi, and what should he lay eyes upon but a figure in dark clothing, doggedly making their way slowly but surely north toward the settlement and its secret docks. James found a place to settle out of sight, going quiet so as to not give away his position with the rockets in his feet, and observes as the figure presses forward with a lowered head. The wind shear here is blowing at a strong angle, but they don't seem to heed it. James telescopes his vision and can make out that the coat worn by the figure is dark grey (not a perfect midnight black, but close enough to be of concern) lined with darker fur, a hat wrapped low over their ears in the same dark material. She - he thinks that is the case here, at least - traverses the worn road with long, easy strides, belying the fact that she must have been walking this road for at least an hour to have come so far without being detected by the Condesce's patrols, on guard against those who'd approach the town by car or train or aeroplane.

But a lone walker is discreet enough, in the correct circumstances, to go unnoticed. The Colonel has played such risky games before. And this woman is tall, the strands of her hair tossing in the wind where they escape from beneath her hat, never once turning aside from her path. She might well walk right up to the water's edge in another few hours. It's admirable, if potentially a suicide mission; the Condesce never has taken well to having her projects thwarted or her secrets uncovered.

Still. It's only one woman.

Or so James thinks, until the first, distant rumble rocks the earth beneath his feet.

And then another.

And another, this time strong enough to send his stabilizing servomotors into a tizzy. On the road, the figure comes to a halt, swaying with each roll of the earth. When she lifts her hands to unwind the scarf covering the lower half of her face, James sees that there are symbols knitted into the scarf and the backs of her gloves. But the next jarring rattle is what finally causes him to lift his gaze from the woman, who has tilted her head back to expose her throat, and look up at what she's turned to observe -

- and up -

- and further up still -
- until at last, as a final THMP makes the hills roll, James realizes what he's looking at here. Douse him in gravy and call him a biscuit. Of all the things he would expect to find roaming greater Siberia, he can most certainly attest to the fact that this... was not even in the vicinity of being on the list. It's a specter out of the old, sensationalized radio broadcasts and films of his youth, though none of what made it to the screen truly approached realism in portraying these creatures.

He would be afraid, but exhilaration will have to do - he's always been more of one for appreciating something as awe-inspiring as these beings for what they are, rather than frittering away his reason on fear. He's well concealed where he rests now; he can't imagine that the now-dwarfed figure on the road will be able to duck out of sight of the approaching giants in time.

For that matter, the woman doesn't seem at all that inclined to move. James watches, fascinated, as the foremost of the enormous beings takes another thunderous step; then it kneels, not at all the slow, ponderous motion James expected from a thing of that size. Ball joints swivel, the knee elegantly bending as the triangular helm inclines - and then parts, the visor splitting along the line of symmetry so that the woman gazes up into a hollow compartment where the giant's visor used to guard its face.

James can't restrain his curiosity anymore; by gum, what kind of gentleman-adventurer would he be if he didn't investigate this further. He begins to inch forward, scanning the terrain for a second vantage point. It doesn't necessarily need to be closer to the two giants and the woman, but a more useful angle would be greatly appreciated.

But although he cannot quite see into the hollow of the bishop's visor yet, the words that emerge are perfectly clear in James's mind, a rumble of thunder that seems to sound everywhere at once.

??: You are she who sent word through the Shatranj?

"Ах. Нравится меня, что мое сообщение достигнуты вами в времени," the woman says, her voice low but carrying. She shakes her head, but James is too busy attempting to adjust his vantage point to see her expression. When she continues, she sounds almost reverent. "Удивительный. Они реальны. Я надеюсь, что я не тяготит вас."

??: No, not at all. We appreciate your willingness to share what you've seen with us. It was very enlightening.

??: We have sent scouts more discreet than these ahead of us, but already we believe we have some idea as to what could have inspired such a vision as the one you related.

??: If we are wrong in this, then these two will perhaps be disappointed not to have been able to exercise more after so long a time. But if we have interpreted it correctly, their capabilities will be of the utmost necessity.

The woman laughs softly, so that even his rather improved ears need to strain to catch the sound. "Вы знаете больше, чем я знаю. Метеоры и хаос и пустота - я не понимаю..."

??: We have the benefit of some prior knowledge.

??: This creature of the grimlight should never have been allowed to manifest itself a full body on the material plane; if we recall correctly, it had an unfair advantage that has allowed it to cheat the spirography system without corrupting the gates it passes through.

"Как вы говорите." The woman mumbles something, too low for James to hear and translate, but then her next sentences are audible. He's almost in a position to see who speaks from within the titanic carapacian's helmet; his Russian, thankfully, is passable enough that he understands most of it
without needing to rely on internal translator programs. "Я намерен наблюдать, что происходит здесь, в лицо. Смогу ли я быть в пути?"

??: Oh, not at all. Do you wish to accompany us? It will make short work of your journey, and we owe you a boon for alerting us to the situation here.

The woman bows her head, a gentle smile still playing on her lips. "Большое спасибо. Меня будет честью."

??: Then it is settled. Welcome to the Arch Deaconstructor, friend.

And with that, a pale claw, broader than any James Harley has seen in all his many, many years, reaches out from within the giant's helmet. The grate of the war carapacian's visors swivels down to form a ramp until the Russian woman is able to take the claw offered to her with a nod, her hair streaming around her face in the wind as she steps lightly into the breach. Above, the giant blinks doleful eyes from within the shadows, just as ivory pale as the rest of its grand shell. Another quick step and the woman vanishes behind the visor as it deftly slides shut, swallowed whole.

But James has little doubt who held out a claw to help her into the larger carapacian's control center. He has even fewer doubts about what could have possibly brought the Grey Protector of the carapacian race this far north. Damned the Condesce. What on earth has she done to provoke this kind of response from a minor world power that has spent the past few decades cultivating a reputation as an alien concerned only with mediating internal disputes among his own people?

James ducks back just as the second giant impatiently pushes past the first, a dark Siege Titan with a more heavily built carapace, bristling with heavy armaments and sharp edges - less elegant, perhaps, but brutal. Each step, at this proximity, rattles him to his core, jostling his brain in its chassis. The titans cut a trail of deep tracks into the dark, frozen soil, the pale bishop following close behind the rook.

Incredible. To think, he would live to see the war engines that ended the second great war walk the earth once more. It is information like this that keeps James Harley constantly on the move, trying constantly to decipher the many moving parts that this impossible game has set or glitched into action.

He intended to give the docks at Tiksi a wide berth, and perhaps consult the Condesce only from a safe distance (as most interactions with her have to be carried out) but now, he finds he has no other choice.

When the two war carapacians have receded into the distance, striding effortlessly toward the coast like beasts towards Bethlehem, the Lieutenant-Colonel kicks his rockets into gear and follows in their wake.

--

TT: Sollux, do you have a moment?
TA: no
TT: Excellent. There may be an issue with the Pesterchum client. Dave and Karkat at least seem to be experiencing tentacle difficulties on their end.
TT: *Technical, excuse me. And here I am without even an ounce of alcohol to blame that one on.
TA: no2 have time for you people two diick around with the securiity why thii2 why now
TA: where ii2 the problem exactly
TT: Several of their words appear to have been replaced with a selective filter, and they cut off
abruptly mid-conversation.
TA: well there's nothing wrong on my end
TA: oh. look like their app data is corrupted. they'll need two reboot and download a clean copy
of the app before it'll start up again
TT: What could have caused it?
TA: weird hit, what else? i'm more concerned that it happened to both phones at once
TA: turn off all your phones and hit, i don't want anyone communicating with the client in case
they're contagious
TT: Would it be safe to try and call them instead of using the chat? Texts don't seem to be going
through either.
TA: you could try but it look like they're out of service range anyway
TA: you people and your fucking codependency is so you can't go more than two hours without
gazing longingly at each other colorful text
TA: anyway, tell your alien queen that if she wants to overwrite file with that terminal
2he need two input the correct encryption key
TT: I'll pass the word on. What is the encryption key?
TA: AA away you'll know by then tomorrow
TT: She also says that you all will be visiting us soon. Coincidence?
TA: hahaha, that joke is funny now that i'm hearing it the second time amazing
TA: hold on i need two punch someone before they blow up the kitchen again
TT: Which someone?
TA: all of them
TA: just keep your phone off for a few hours or something until i can run a diagnostic
TT: As you will.
TT: I have other urgent business to care for.

- John is starting to get the feeling that there's gonna be an incredibly stupid explanation for all this.
But right now, he doesn't have an explanation, and it's killing him by inches. In this, at least, he and
the Breeze are on exactly the same wavelength - the wind laps the building and tears at the trees
outside, tossing scattered leaves and branches up to rain down out of the sky, then rushes back into
the building to press in close to John, still thrumming with tension. Something's off, something's odd,
and it would be all too easy for he and the Breeze to jump to DC from here. It's all air, after all.

But he promised Rose, and Karkat, and okay basically everybody made him swear he wouldn't panic
and mess around with the teleportation thing while he's still a mess. They didn't say so in as many
words, but it was implied and John's not stupid. Most of the practice he's got with using the air as a
way to dissolve and move from point to point is from when he was desperately trying to pretend the
Breeze didn't speak to him - and - some of the practice was - it was just his handler telling him off for
using powers like that without permission, and John cringes away from those memories still. They
hurt enough to make the memories of the game seem like healed over scar tissue, not all that difficult
to face, after all, compared to what's happened more recently.

So he swallows and doesn't scream, mentally hauling the Breeze back until it stops doing the windy
equivalent of pacing in worry. "Why won't they text back?" he asks Rose. His throat feels like it's
clogged up.

Rose has her game face on, the one she wears when she's trying to stay level-headed for someone
else's sake. His sake. For a nasty moment, John hates himself so much he's breathless with it, because
he's sick of worrying everyone. Sick of being worried, sick of being sick. "Sollux says they're most
likely out of range of a cell tower, still," she says, her voice betraying none of the strain John knows
must be there. "Let's try not to worry about it for now."
He nods for her. It feels foreign to smile, like he has to use mental fingers to pull up the corners of his mouth. Kanaya and Jade haven't texted or pestered them in a while, either, but they didn't leave some dumb spooky nonsense messages to scare John's pants off so he thinks they're okay. Hopefully.

Never mind that in every movie ever, having cell phones die is basically sign number one that some ghost or zombie or serial killer with chainsaws for fingers is about to start offing the main characters one by one. Horror movies aren't really his thing, but he knows, okay. If it turns out there's a totally normal explanation for all this, it'll be a huge relief, but right now he can't stop thinking about the mess of a Pesterlog Karkat left before cutting off - and heck, Dave's, while Rose was showing it to him, was just as bad.

TT: I do not even know where to begin parsing that sentence. Congratulations, I suppose, though I've no idea how you managed to go from the capitol to some sort of marine wildlife conservation facility. I was under the impression the aquarium there was shut down.

TT: Additionally, what on earth is wrong with Pesterchum? That is not my handle anymore, it really shouldn't be showing up...

TG: oh for berryboos sake why is that happening

TT: Is that not what you meant to type?

TG: no

TT: I do not even know where to begin parsing that sentence. Congratulations, I suppose, though I've no idea how you managed to go from the capitol to some sort of marine wildlife conservation facility. I was under the impression the aquarium there was shut down.

TT: Additionally, what on earth is wrong with Pesterchum? That is not my handle anymore, it really shouldn't be showing up...

TG: quick me and karkat need advice on how to deal with squiddles

TT: Slow down, Dave. There's something...very odd going on here. Perhaps Sollux's security updates have gotten something jumbled.

TG: replacing the words shit

TG: cant you see through it with your se

TT: Dave?

See, the thing is, Squiddles? John remembers that show; he used to watch it in elementary school, before he met Rose again. And before that, he remembers both Jade and Rose used to like them - Jade in a chipper, gotta-collect-em-all kind of way that meant she had a whole rainbow of the plush toys in her room, and Rose in a kinda-ironic, kinda-weeaboogothic sort of way where you could catch her humming 'Squiddle-dee-dee, Squiddle-dee-dah,' under her breath over the Pesterchum mic, and she would accuse you of projecting when you called her out on it. Which totally isn't how projection works, so blah. If you'd asked him a couple weeks ago, he wouldn't have been able to tell you anything about the show except it sometimes involved puppets and kind of felt like a crossover between old-school Spongebob and the Care Bears. With tentacles.

She's uneasy, but Rose insists that squiddles are mostly just problematic in the sense that thinking about squids and octopi encourages thinking about other things with tentacles. Unfortunately, 'things with tentacles' is a broad umbrella category that also includes Horrorterrors and god, that is such a stretch - but she doesn't remember all that happened to her in the game. Neither he nor she could say for sure what happened after her screen went grimdark. What if, what if, what if -

The casing of his phone creaks under his grip. Haha, oh god, if he breaks the stupid thing right now, he - he doesn't even know what he'll do! Probably flip his shit off the handle or something else dumb and unproductive. On the other hand, what happens if Dave and Karkat do text them and it's bad and they're in danger and terrible things really are happening to them! It's like with Nicolas Cage in Stolen, where the kidnapper has Cage's beloved but estranged daughter held hostage and any phone call Cage receives could be the one saying his daughter's been killed, and it all ends climactically with said daughter in a sinking car that's on fire while Cage has just been shot what if Dave and Karkat are on fire -

There is no way that thinking about stuff like this is helpful. Reel it in, man. Breathe. For a second
there his vision went all wonky and the words on the phone screen skewed, and it would be so easy to picture everything on fire. Lime green space fire from Jack Noir hell. He's never more than half sure these days whether looking at Becquerel makes him afraid of the dog, or afraid for it, and he's relieved that Jade took it with her on Kanaya's field trip. No one really seems sure what Bec actually is (let alone how long it takes before it starts radiating cancer beams or something), but it's powerful enough to get Jade out of serious trouble, probably.

No, Jade and Kanaya are most likely okay. They're two of the most competent people he knows, and Jade may not remember all her spacey powers but she's still a god as far as the game is concerned. Getting kidnapped that one time was a fluke. Surely.

Darn it, he's not going down that hellish train of thought. Karkat and Dave are the ones he can justify worrying about, seeing as how they're dicks with the combined potential to piss off anything with a pulse - and, now that he thinks about it, some things without a pulse. No matter where he looks, John can't find any signs of something weird and possibly marine wildlife-related going on in Washington DC. The only relevant news reports that might have anything to do with it are repeats of the ones he read with Karkat earlier, while they were trying to figure out what the deal was with Feferi and the Batterwitch. Blah blah, there's a bunch of fish dying off the East coast, strange oil spill suspected, blah-dee-blah-blah none of this tells him anything new. The latest news stories are all cultural announcements about an on-going cherry blossom festival (confirming John's suspicions that the capitol of the United States is, in fact, infested with people who have watched too much anime), an upcoming science and engineering festival at the end of April, and an exhibit called Puppetry in America that is due to end soon.

But there's no follow-up article about, say, a weird blond guy in silly shades stabbing puppets at some poor, unsuspecting museum exhibit. Which, knowing Dave, wouldn't even be all that unrealistic. Also, the aquarium apparently shut down a while ago, with most of the animals moved to Baltimore. Sollux told Rose it was just something wrong with Dave and Karkat's Pesterchum apps, so does any of this even matter? On the political sites, there's no mention of the Condesce being near DC - all anyone is talking about is Russia being a dick about the Ukrainian refugees in the Crimea; they've been shuttling troops around to occupy the peninsula for a while now, and claiming that with the death rates purportedly plummeting in the fringe areas of the Novaya Ukraine, the expats should be able to move back to the war zone, if not the old areas that got hit the worst during the genocide. It's a mess, yeah, but it's an ocean away.

Maybe there's just nothing to find. He could be low-key freaking out over absolutely jackshit. The less he finds - the hero forums are dead today, not a word out of anyone about sightings of Flashstep or Hemogoblin - the more he feels like he's chasing ghosts.

Somehow they got from Doctor Lalonde's office to one of the perimeter rooms - not one of the bedrooms, just some random room with windows all along the east side and a bunch of dusty old symbols carved into the floor. His memory blanks out on exactly when Rose had time to make tea, but the handle of a warm mug sits in his free hand, full of liquid dark as coffee from oversteeping. That hand jitters and nearly slops tea all over his knees and shoes when he lifts it, so he ends up bowing his head over it instead to take a sip.

It's not sweet enough. Augh. But that sounds like something really ominous to think, given the circumstances, so he keeps drinking without asking for milk or honey or anything, with the weirdest urge to sneeze tickling his nose with each bitter sip. He can't even tell what kind of tea this is.

He can't remember feeling this anxious at the drop of a hat before. This isn't how he used to be, and he hates what that says about him. What happened to the old John, who didn't have a care in the world except retrieving a wayward game disc, and whose biggest problem was an overabundance of
cakes?

BE: you changed. duh! :T that happens when you grow up

*Most people don't end up nervous wrecks when they grow up.* John thinks back, mashing the heel of his palm against his diaphragm. He couldn't even say where the nausea is centered anymore - his whole abdomen just feels like one huge coiled up spasm waiting to happen. He keeps telling himself it's low key, dang it, and not a full-blown panic attack. Not yet.

BE: yeah, well, you put off growing up for a looong time. and instead of letting me help, which is obviously the smart choice, you just decided to ignore everything

BE: here come the emphasis caps: THAT WAS A BAD THING~!

The shout slams John in the face with a gale force breeze. Stifled snickers float to his ears until his eyes stop watering, at which point Rose appears to have smoothed over her face and the Breeze has gone back to lapping the room with a distinct air of 'who, me?' When he raises his hand to poke at it, his hair has transformed into a massive poof. "Dissension in the blustering ranks?" Rose asks, two of her fingers pressed hard to her lips like that'll flatten the corners out.

There comes a time in everyone's life when they have to concede defeat; pranks are one thing, but Rose knows her strengths, and she is the undisputed snarkmistress. It is her. John puts down the cup and his phone and starts flattening down his hair manually. At one point he grazes a clump of hair near his scalp that's weirdly stuck, which means he missed a glob of sopor slime when he showered last, and now his hair is probably gunked up for the rest of forever. Thanks, Karkat.

His hands catch in his hair and tug a little. *Karkat.* God, where is he, where are they? Why won't they answer? He's not - this is so dumb, so dumb.

BE: please remember to breathe :o

*It hurts.*

BE: i know

*How do I make it stop? When do I get better?*

Holy heck, he can't even remember what 'better' feels like. The 'better' center of his brain wore thin a while ago.

BE: some stuff is up to you. the big guy can challenge you to face it and overcome it instead of wallowing around and drowning forever, and i can help, but...*you* have to do it.

BE: and between you and the egg and butter man, you've done a lot of the exact opposite of what you need to do to get better

Oh man. His stomach is doing something funny, a fluttering spasm just under his sternum, and is he panicking again? He can't tell.

BE: yes, you are. breathe, dummy!

Okay. He's panicking again. Hahaha! No problem! Just breathe - just - keep breathing - he knows breathing exercises, he really does. He's just so used to the shortcut that waiting for the forced, steady breathing to slow his heartrate feels like a crawling eternity. He keeps the palms of his hands pressed to his head, waiting and waiting and not freaking out anymore, no sirree -
"Outside?" he croaks at Rose. "I need to - I can't sit anymore, I need air-"

"Outside it is," Rose says immediately. She beats him to the window. It doesn't even strike John as odd that neither of them even bother with the door; Rose clicks the locks on the window frame to the side with two snaps of her thumbs, pushes it open, and primly folds her knee over the side to test the open air before walking out the second story window. The Breeze is there, but she doesn't need it - for someone who only figured out how god tier floating works a matter of hours ago, Rose isn't one to make a big deal out of it. John half-falls out after her with no grace left in him, his flight pattern twisty as he staggers up into the sky.

The wind starts wafting him eastward by the time his thoughts catch up with his panic. And they could make the jump, they could, but a faint pressure squeezes his wrist and John feels the bubble of heady confusion fade as Rose keeps them fixed in one place. Her grip is loose enough that he could wrench free in a heartbeat, strong enough that John could probably bring her with him, if he wanted.

But when she talks, Rose is having none of it. "John, may I propose an entirely hypothetical and in no way relevant scenario?" she asks. She doesn't wait for him to answer. "Say I had recently gone grimdark."

"You did nearly go grimdark recently," he feels the need to point out.

A wave of her hand. "Details. Furthermore, say that I wasn't an expert in guarding and mediating my own mind to restore what was damaged in a timely fashion. Would you think it wise for me to race off and make use of powers I've only just begun experimenting with to try to cross over 2000 miles in one disastrous swoop?"

Crap. She's doing the logic thing. "I got to Houston without practicing at all," he tries, weakly.

"Didn't you nearly impale yourself on a pile of swords of questionable quality?" Rose takes a step back, her foot flattening out like she's actually stepping on something, and John sighs and floats after her. "The last thing we need is for you to jump while panicked and reappear in front of an airplane. Or worse, at the bottom of the sea. I've jumped into water before, so I can tell you with some degree of certainty that it's not pleasant. At all."

"Alright, alright, jeez! I get it, Rose, I'm not going anywhere!" Though heck if he knows how long that resolution will last. He just wants to know that they're okay. It sounds stupid and childish when he thinks about it, but he repeats it out loud anyway, for like, the fifth time.

Rose just nods, and for a moment her forced calm breaks, a brooding worry in the furrow of her brow. "I know. I feel the same. It's the not-knowing that will get you, every time."

BE: we could just go...check really quick...and then we will know! it's that easy, right?

aren't you supposed to be the voice of reason here?

BE: what do i look like, your conscience?

BE: something's weird. and i can't put my whirlydoos on what it is that's weird...

"I don't think Rose would appreciate being ditched," he says out loud, so Rose will at least know the Breeze is the one being the sneaky pooplord in this conversation and not John. Sometimes other people seem to be able to hear it, but John can just by looking at her that Rose was conveniently left out of the loop just then.

Rose shakes her head at both of them. "If what you are planning involves anything vaguely
synonymous with 'abscond' or 'teleportation' or 'the capitol of the United States, I disapprove strongly and if need be will appeal to the highest authority in this laboratory to keep you here. Much as it would pain me to do so."

Hang on, they have an authority now? It's not like the friendleader system ever really worked all that well... "Wait, who, the Queen?"

He can't judge whether the ominous wind that tosses Rose's hair is natural or not. "Worse. My mother."

Oh no. She's serious.

"You are all," a voice says from below, in a monotone barely loud enough to carry over the wind, "being goshdarn inconvenient, you know."

Down below, Jane stands on the roof. Correction - she's balanced on the uppermost point of an antenna of unknown purpose, heavier than Jade but making it look just as effortless. The tousled head of curls that is Roxy sits with her legs swinging over the edge of the roof, her hands busy attempting to juggle two rocks.

Er. How long have they been there? Wow, John needs to work on paying attention to his surroundings, even when he's rattled in the brain, because he definitely should have noticed them breathing there, at least. Then it registers that he and Rose have drifted far enough up and away that if the Scratch girls are looking to talk, hanging around up here would be a jerkass thing. "Oh. Sorry," John says, glancing at Rose. "Be right down?"

Rose gives him a final look of warning ('I've got my eyes on you'), nods, and starts walking down through the air like it's stairs. There's a pun here, somewhere, about not trusting stairs due to the fact that they're always up to something, but honestly Dave ruined stair jokes for all of time with his stupid famous stair warning meme that somehow survived the remix of the entire universe to plague them all in the next life. John floats down more smoothly until his toes brush the roof and no further, primed to fly right back up with a tap of his feet. "Where have Jake and Dirk gone off to?" Rose asks, her foot flexing in her shoe before she sets it down on the inside of the curb around the roof.

Roxy replies, "Dirk's watchin' Jakey, but he's mostly just skulking a lot, now. I think your 'leet seeing skills nailed him to tha metaphorical wall, and now his brain's all pissy. Which is at least an improvement over all the crazy."

Her speech is still a little slurred but there's wayyy less wrong words than John remembers - her fingers toss the makeshift juggling rocks up and she catches them in her palms without issue. Looking up from the rocks, Roxy grins at him from under her bangs, winking one pale pink eye, and then starts up the process again. Someone's given her makeup - probably Rose or Doctor Lalonde - so her eyes are shadowed with white and pink and gold. "Way better, rite?" Her wrist wobbles and messes up the next toss, but her other hand comes up to snag both rocks at once.

"Yeah," John says. He folds his legs up crisscross under him, hands latching around his ankles as he sits on nothing. "Did you guys need something?" Restlessness plucks at his insides, laced with just enough panic to make his stomach quiver, but he can manage this. Long enough to have a regular conversation, anyway. Long enough to maybe make his brain stop getting hung up on the idea of his friends being in trouble based on technological hiccups.

Above, Jane steps off the antenna like Rose stepped out the window earlier. Unlike Rose, Jane drops like a rock and lands with the distinct crunching sound of a roof in abrupt agony. She looks completely unfazed as she walks over to them on ankles that probably should have snapped or
something, leaving tiny indents in the roof behind her. Uh, actually, scratch that one, actually - there's a tiny hint of a smile edging her mouth when she reaches the satellite dish nearest Roxy and leans against it. "Jus' wanted to talk," Roxy says for both of the girls, nose wrinkled up when her voice cracks. "And stuff. Y'know us, all about the hot gos' and things."

Orrr - and John's reading between the lines here - literally everyone in this entire laboratory has gone on active make-John-calm-his-tits duty, in the conspicuous absence of Karkat. Do they have some kind of game plan for dealing with him? They totally do. He's surrounded himself with asshole nerd friends and heck, they've only known Roxy and Jane and the other Scratch kids for, like, less than a week, so how did they end up friends already? He thinks this might have been an on-going friendship process that he slept through all week long, he's spoken maybe two sentences total to that Dirk guy so does that even count, and when you get right down to it the whole thing is such bullcrap.

"Yes," Jane says, all of the smile gone from her face as she observes John with piercing blue eyes. "Tell us...the hot gos'."

Two choices are available to him at this moment. He could fly away and go talk to Doctor Lalonde, as the last person in this entire mountain range who isn't in perpetual 'cheer people up by giving them a hard time' mode, or he could laugh hysterically and risk Jane flipping back into surprise berserker mode just to bop him in the nose.

He sort of ends up stifling the laugh so it comes out a high-pitched wheeze through his nose. Then he claps both his hands over his traitorous nose because that was so dumb.

"Kanaya, Jade, Dave, and Karkat are all out of contact," Rose says, while John's still fighting not to burst out into distraught laughter. This task is made ten times harder by the fact that now he's got both Jane and Roxy grinning at him, Jane in the form of a tiny smirk and Roxy in a shit-eating, silent laugh. "Dave and Karkat in particular are either out of service range or have broken their phones in some way. Their last messages were incomprehensible, unfortunately, so it's difficult to determine which."

"That sucks," Roxy says, shrugging. "What do you usually do when that happens?"

"Panic," John says, gloomily.

"Is this you panicking?" Jane asks, with a squint.

"Give me another five minutes. Ten, tops." Maybe they should start timing this. Make a chart of how long John can last between freak out sessions, Karkat would be totally down for that. The troll would think it was a bonding activity or something.

Also, he might be hanging around with Rose a little too much. He can't remember his humor being this morbid since their brief dip in moody teenager-dom before she moved away, and that was weird. Let's not do that again.

Jane tilts her head to the side to study him, like she's some kind of intrepid gumshoe detective who can deduce what he ate for breakfast by the color of his shoelaces. "I've taken a gander at how Vantas fights, and he's not a completely inept doofus," she says, arms folded. "And your Strider and Maryam together measure up to D- Dirk. To Dirk. I can't imagine there's much they couldn't nip in the bud."

Oh, right. The Scratch kids probably don't know about the collective weirdness magnet yet - which is a shame, seeing as how their turning up to fight out of the blue on Monday was really freaking
weird in and of itself. "Yeah, well, we kind of have this tendency to attract wayyy over-powered bad
guys. And our plans have a 90% failure rate, or something like that. So the odds are actually pretty
high that something has gone horribly wrong."

Rose sighs. "The worst thing that's happened since Monday has been Jake attempting to escape
multiple times - we were overdue to meet our weekly quota, I suppose. It makes an awful sense that
Saturday would be the day we would have to pay the piper."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what elfe has happened to you guys. Like, some of the stuff you mention in
passing is kinda -" Roxy wiggles her hand. John has absolutely no idea what she means. "Cept nah,
I'm gonna quiz you later," she then says, as she catches her juggling rocks again. "Hellsa yeah.
Think I can nail Dirk with one a these suckers if I get good enough? Might get him to put down the
keyboards for two hot seconds."

Jane gives her a pained look. "Lordy."

It's hard to panic when there are people being so weirdly normal about things. "What have you all
been up to?" John asks, half-surprising himself with the question. "Have you thought about what you
want to do when Jake is - uh -"

"Less cuckoo-bazonkers?" Roxy finishes for him, sounding weirdly philosophical. Jane grunts in
what might be agreement. "Idk, our skill sets are mostly limited to being badass haxxors and
snipering and being turned into brain experiment subjects. Which I get the feel is not what regular
people do on their days off."

"Mother wouldn't turn you out - she's more likely to leave you the entire lab to yourselves while she
cavorts off to terra incognita." Rose brushes past the moment before John can get a look at her face,
but there might still be a tinge of bitterness there. "You've rather missed out on the public schooling
experience, by this point, but studying to obtain a GED and going from there might not be beyond
the realm of the possible if you want to live normal lives."

And how long would those lives last, when the game is -

Suddenly it's a lot harder to look Jane or Roxy in the eye. "Normal's overrated," Roxy says, kicking
out her feet, her laugh distant through the buzz in John's ears. "What d'yew think, Janey? Should we
try to pull wild shenans? Do the stabby fork think for good and not felty, felty evil?"

"We'll get revenge, of course," Jane says, almost bored, like this shouldn't be news to anyone. "Trace
our way back to that violent hooligan Boxcars, serve him a heaping helping of humble pie, and
proceed from there. Between Dirk and myself, we should be able to deduce the base's coordinates
and unleash hell on those bastards."

John blinks. One of Roxy's juggling stones flies over her shoulder and past the edge of the roof to its
presumed doom. Rose is making an attempt to keep her eyebrows from flying up and off her head to
visit the moon, but it's a close call. "Are we sure that's an...entirely safe course of action?" she asks.

Jane cracks her knuckles. '"Safe' can kiss my keister. Dirk and I have already discussed the logistics
of an approach, based on pre-existing security measures. They may have changed them due to our
desertion, but that's of little consequence. All we need wait on, once you two are done with that
computer, is Jake." One of her cheeks dimples as she smiles. "That's good and not evil, isn't it?"

"That's...a thing. That sure af is a thing," Roxy says, bewildered. "We're not even gonna hang
around to wait an' meet the hot tamale?"
If John had a drink, he would spit it out. "The what?"

"Y'know, Di-Stri senior!" Roxy flaps her hand at him, her eyes starry. "It's like. Dirk, plus elder, and hopefully immune to the stupid sexy Jake whammo effect. Foxy dad was a bust due to excessive levels of evil - sry, John-boo - but there's always hope!"

Rose's eyebrows have blasted off to go orbit Pluto. "I may be misunderstanding, but I think you just said you intend to hit on my ectobiological father."

Thoughts of Bro Strider aside (why??? God, he's such an annoying douche, why?!) John's more concerned about - "Stupid sexy Jake whammo effect?"

Jane buries her face in her hands. "If no one else's got a bull's-eye on the man, I reserve the right to call dibs," Roxy says. She stands up, the rocks tucked into her pockets, and makes fists with both her hands, eyes still shining. It takes a second for her to snap out of it and answer John. "Oh! Yeah, y'know how you here are a fine ass specimen of the human race who is totes mackable, yet ineligible due two angry troll claim?"

John grabs Rose's sleeve. "Help."

Rose looks disturbingly fascinated. Oh god. "No. Let her speak."

Oblivious to the bombs being casually dropped here, Roxy goes on. "Well, Jakey was what we in the bizz call prime boyfriend material before he got brain-zwogled, given as he is also a hunky nerdmuffin like urself. Jane and Dirk were trying to climb that boy like Mount Sexeverest at the same time, so I had to remove myself from the competition under best friend code."

"These are the sacrifices I make. Look at 'em and tell me I don't deserve a chance to take a danger at foxy dad, round two." She pauses. "Donger. No. Gander! Ha!"

Jane's face has turned the color of eggplants behind her cupped hands. "Why?" she mumbles. John empathizes on so many levels.

In sharp contrast, Rose appears to be riveted. It takes John a long second to notice, but there's also a bizarrely familiar sense of anticipation in the air. Like some incorporeal manifestation is paying rapt attenti-

No, stop listening!

"Oh, godspeed, then," Rose says. The barely-suppressed glee is rolling off her in waves; if she weren't good at restraining herself, John thinks she'd be rubbing her hands together in anticipation. "Have at mine father dearest. I have only one condition - please, I implore you, make sure you do so when both I and Dave are in the same room. For - er, for propriety's sake."

Propriety, schmiety - knowing Rose, she's gonna have a camera stuck to Dave's face like glue. Worse, she'll probably try to rope John or Jade into videoing Bro's reaction. Holy cripes, she's diabolical. This takes trolling to unprecedented levels.

John then wastes another five seconds rubbing the side of his temple until he remembers that trolling used to mean being a supreme asshole on the internet, and not just, you know, acting like a troll in general. Wait. Shit.

He's never been so grateful to hear weird thumping noises coming out of a vent in his life. His ears catch it first, and he snaps around to face one of the covered air vent openings that opens up to the roof before the others. Could be Jake again -
The vent cover flies off at a precarious angle and joins the juggling rock in a swan dive off the roof, green sparks whirling around it in dazed circuits. Something resists him for a second when John reaches out with the wind to grab the chunk of metal before it can hit the ground, but soon WV is too busy scuttling out of the vent to keep up the spontaneous space thing, so John is free to lift the cover and set it back down on the roof.

WV: niyəbuatünburadavarsızələmandeyənalıraməndərkədəbilməz? bəlkəqulaqlanyoxlanırmişələndərməmdənə?

"Mr Mayor!" Roxy tosses a salute at the short carapacid, roping her arm around Jane's neck and taking the resulting elbow to the gut with a beam. "What can we do for you, sir?"

WV starts signing at all of them at once, face screwed up in a pout as he tries to usher Rose, the closest target, into the vent with hands flailing so badly and mental voice so rushed that it's all a mangled blob of words in a language no one can understand.

WV: mənkəmək! dirkinsanılmışmənsəhərplanlanonuxahişamanatlarçəkməkəçünnebəlibir. zəhmətolmasa?

"We were sixteen," Jane groans. She's as strong as John and Jade, but she bats at Roxy without any effect. "Dadburn it, Roxy, of all the things to bring up among new acquaintances -" "And I betcha you'd still drink him like a tall glassa water if him and Dirk didn't have things," Roxy says, planting a kiss on top of Jane's head with a smack and starting to drag the other girl off toward the stairs. WV seems torn between scolding Rose and wondering why they're not going down the vent, too, before smacking John in the side and running after them as fast as his stubby legs can go. "C'mon, let's go help the mayor build stuff out of junked computer parts and get in Dirk's way!" She looks back at John and Rose. "Coming?"

"Oh, yes." Rose still has a fiendish glint in her eye when she looks at John. "Better, now?"

He takes stock, and shrugs. "I...think so." He feels like how tepid water tastes, but that's an improvement. "I'll keep you posted."

"Excellent. That's all I ask." They hurry to catch up to Roxy and Jane and the Mayor, but John stops to bite his lip and look up at the sky before going in through the door.

...Well?

BE: ...I guess...

BE: Dave and Karkat will be alright. probably...

*The long, meaningful pauses aren't reassuring me.*

BE: don't...don't worry about it. they should be fine. if they're still not online by tonight, we'll take rose and politely check in!

John feels a tremor run through his stomach, and forces himself down the stairs in a jumping float, before he can convince himself otherwise.

- He makes it an hour before the thought occurs to him.
"Typheus.

BE: what :?

BE: wait crap no

"Couldn't he help?" He's aware he said that out loud (and yeah, the last thing he needs is a reputation for having one-sided conversations with thin air), but WV is rattling off unfathomable instructions to Roxy on how he wants the soup can turrets stacked, while Rose and John do their best to stabilize a finished can skyscraper without setting off WV's canny radar for people trying to tone down his structurally-unstable designs so that they don't fall over when someone so much as bats an eye.

City-building is a powerful addiction, and addiction is a terrible thing. Dirk literally crawled into the bowels of the Queen's Hub to escape WV's efforts to recruit another volunteer, and Jake looks flabbergasted as to how he got roped into arranging melted computer parts to make miniature roads, unaware that the door to the terminal room is hanging wide open.

BE: he doesn't - urgh. he's not really a helpy kind of guy, okay?

John doesn't even bother thinking words; he just blares the impression of DAVE and the Breeze rustles the construction paper chains that stretch between the chairs around the table in an eye roll.

BE: i really don't think anyone wanted the bad you winning at that point. not even this guy. there's harsh, and then there's stupid, and he's not stupid

BE: okay sometimes he helps, but mostly he's just a grumpy asshole who wants to sleep and eat people. dave was lucky he caught him in a good mood

What's the point of having a connection to him if it doesn't get used? And he helped me before that, too, with Cetus -

BE: ummm, having a denizen go grimdark is pretty much a major emergency, wayyy overpowered, glitchy beyond reason, and also basically lame as heck. no way'd you'd be expected to take her on your own

These all sound like excuses. Bluh to that. "Rose, I have an idea!"

BE: a dumb idea!

Yeah, Rose heard that one; he can tell by the way her eyebrows arc up and she starts watching the agitated breeze with pursed lips. "What kind of idea, again?" she asks, dry as toast. A swift side glance at WV confirms the carapacian is now digging around under the table for more supplies, and Rose presses the disjointed cans back into alignment with the rest of the turret, while John holds it steady on top.

"A perfectly fine idea," John retorts, flicking his fingers and trying to send the wind away. Once upon a time, it would just do what he asked of it, in gestures and in thought, but now that he's listening to it again the Breeze has a bad habit of prancing around and doing its own thing. He doesn't even want to think how this'll work in an actual combat situation. "I want to go talk to Typhesus."

Rose jumps like a mosquito has stung her. "Through your mind," she says, the flip from 'bemusing WV antics break time' to 'John suggested something questionable at best just now' instant as her eyes narrow.
"That's the idea, yeah," he confirms. It's too spur of the moment for him to have any real rational arguments, so if it comes to an argument, Rose could probably talk him down from it. "Maybe we can ask about Dave and Karkat," he adds, since that's the first thing he picks up off the top of his head. "Maybe he could tell what might have caused all those words to get messed up, or...uh...something..." The anxiety flutters, and threatens to rise back up, but he focuses on the thought that this might actually be a way to squash the panic altogether, and it subsides.

She doesn't. After chewing on her lower lip for a moment, Rose breathes out slowly. "It has almost been a week, now," she says. "You're much more clear now than you were then, too. If nothing else, it would good to check and see if your mind has settled a little. And I'll admit I'm curious to meet this denizen of yours." Rolling her wrist, Rose smiles and steps back from the stack of cans. John lifts his hands away, gingerly, and lowers them when the tower stands upright on its own. With quick, waved goodbyes to Roxy and Jane, they slink out before WV can catch them mid-abscond. "Let's go see if we can scandalize Halburn with our audacity in asking to make use of his circles again..."

He knew she'd want to come along - when could Rose ever resist psychoanalyzing someone right in the center of their brain? - but the pang of relief in his chest is still strong. 'Perfectly fine idea' aside, everything in him revolts at the thought of venturing into his mind on his own, knowing what lives there. Just because he hasn't heard from it in a while...

The Breeze coasts along with them as they navigate the halls, fretting and muttering just loud enough for Rose to hear its end of the conversation, too. What it has to say doesn't sound all that promising, but John thinks it might be playing up the ominous drama on purpose to try to discourage him from doing something dumb. It has a flare for drama when the mood strikes it, and he remembers with a throb that it wanted him to leave the crushed ruins of Typhus's palace alone, too. But by then the Horrorterrors had started seeping in, and the faint whisper of the Breeze that was all he heard pre-god tier was drowned out in the rolling tide of the sea.

BE: you can try, i guess. but he's not gonna think them being out of contact counts as an emergency. he'll probably just try to eat you, watch!

"Can he even eat me if it's all in my head?" John asks, skeptically.

BE: of course he can! not to mention all the other stuff we might run into while we're in there...

Rose sniffs. "I'll be there," she says. "If we run into anything untoward, I'm far more prepared to deal with them this time around." She doesn't have to name names.

BE: but that's an even worse idea! maybe jade would work, since he likes echidna, but dave's already annoyed him once this century, and you - uh -

Yyyyyikes. Yikes because the look on Rose's face is legitimately scary, and yikes because John thinks he knows what the Breeze might have been about to say. He remembers, he remembers and he doesn't even get nose bleeds from it, now, which means he can think of one very huge reason why a denizen might not like Rose in particular. "What about me?" Rose asks, and her voice isn't scary. Just trembling on the edge of a realization of her own.

BE: he miiight still be angry at you.

BE: because you said yes. you said yes and Cetus broke.

-There is one thing they are all very good at, and that is not talking about things. Right now, with
Rose's face green and splotches of color high in her cheeks, John thinks that talking would probably just end in shouting. And crying, because they tend to cry a lot. And guilt that they can't do anything about, anyway.

Persuading Halburn doesn't take much - John asks the Breeze to make up for upsetting Rose by leading them to the troll when he's not in his assigned office. They find him in an office down the hall from the MRI rooms, and there's a blot of purplish bruises on his neck where the troll doesn't seem to have noticed it before he came to greet them through the cracked open door. He looks pained when they say what they want to do, promises to meet them in fifteen minutes to supervise them while they're in John's head, and then ducks back inside to hiss at someone.

Rose can't hear what Halburn says to the other person behind the door. John can, and it makes him turn as purple as Jane went earlier.

Opening his eyes and seeing dark clouds makes John twitch. Rose streams in like sunlight, the symbol on her god tier robes radiating softly. The guilt over Cetus has ebbed enough that she just looks distant; when she spins around in a slow circle, she's all business. "It's...quiet," she says at last, neutral.

BE: good. that means no one's making a big fuss or throwing a tantrum. let's go, let's go!

Apart from the Breeze agitating their clothing with hissed whispers of disapproval, the sky of his mind actually feels...oddly calm. He remembers in a vague way that it was a wreck, the wind roaring through the storm clouds and lashing out at anything that tried to pass through. But the Breeze hustles them through the heavy clouds without facing much opposition, other gusts with less substance brushing up against them and then whirling away. A couple stick around, nosing at his shirt and the hems of his pants like invisible puppies, and don't leave. "We're not going below?" Rose calls, when they skim in and out along the top line of the clouds without diving.

BE: trying not to attract attention, here :T

BE: the bad man could be in the house still, and if he catches us, the bad john will know like that!

The Breeze snaps. Since it doesn't have fingers, John is at a loss. Then he catches sight of a disembodied arm on Rose's far side, unraveling back into visible blue lines of wind as he watches. Half-heartedly, John thinks about suggesting they look for shapes in the clouds. But they're all still gloomy and shadowed, and the shapes he sees in the corners of his eyes aren't nice ones. He only gets as far as opening his mouth before shutting it again, wordlessly. Rose keeps holding his hand but doesn't catch his slip, her attention turned out to examining the sky and staring down through the clouds, with her forehead thing alight. After flying like that for five minutes or so, the Breeze descends through the cloud cover at a slantways slope, and come out over a stretch of ground that's crusted over with dry, dark oil, broken up and chipped with mud cracks. A spirograph cycles through different, arching patterns, brilliant against the craggy ground, the colors shifting through a faded rainbow before flaring bright blue and then starting over. They land, in the sense that the three come to a hovering stop just above the pulsating gate, and John watches with a shiver as the spirograph blooms and then coils back up again. The gates on his land were all blue, for the most part - the rainbow thing must be new.

BE: at least he hasn't locked it, that's good.

"I don't think this is where we found it, last time," Rose says, frowning. "But I'll admit, the way
everything tends to shift in here makes it hard to say...

BE: no, you're right! :) it moves, which is a little annoying sometimes. looks like the coast is clear for now

It's true that there's no obvious signs of gold or candy around for miles (or whatever the distance is in here; like Rose's mind, it feels really subjective). All he can see is this spirograph and the endless expanse of blasted, cratered ground. Heheh, figures. He always knew his mind was an ugly place.

The thought slips out and he winces. Something drips along his skin; it's the exact same temperature, neither hot nor cold to the touch, so he mistakes it for a curl of wind rolling down under his sleeve. When he looks down, curious, at his hand, a thick dribble of black has run down between the lines of the back of his hand, dripping to the ground below from the tips of his fingers.

He closes his hand, and smiles for Rose when she says, "I suppose I'll remain here to ensure nothing unfortunate happens. Given that you'll be the one approaching your denizen, I wonder if you might be able to ask something in my stead."

"Sure, Rose!" John waits for her to say what she wants to ask, but Rose peels a thin strip of light out of nothing and waits for it to solidify, tiny words in sunshine-orange cursive filling the insta-post it note when she hands it to him. He takes it with his clean hand and grimaces at the lines and lines of questions. Some of them are labeled parts (a)-(g), like a science problem set. How long has it been since he even thought about homework last, anyway? Whatever his and Karkat's teachers are thinking, it surely can't end well when they realize they can't get ahold of anyone at their houses...

He tries not to let it poke stickers in his brain as he folds up Rose's questions into a pocket of his pants. The world's ending before school lets out, anyway and spring break is either the week of the 6th or the 13th itself, so any way you look at it, he wouldn't have much time to worry about homework or quizzes or essays anymore. Hahaha! It was definitely the week of the thirteenth, last time; he'd been on top of the world, because it was like having a week-long vacation to celebrate his birthday, and he figured he'd have all that time to play the hot new Sburb game with Rose when it arrived. The public schools in Seattle had already had their break, but their middle school in the 'burbs was off late.

He wonders when Sburb will show up, this time. They already have game powers, but it's not like he's been seeking out news of an anticipated game release in the middle of April. Do they even need to go through the game disc process, or is the Reckoning already hurtling towards them on automatic?

BE: okay! part of me will stay here with you rose. we should be able to keep our eyes peeled

With a tiny pop, some of the curving blue lines come together in a cartoonish, simplified version of John, conspicuously armless as it zooms around the spirograph in a quick loop before coming to bob beside Rose. "That would be helpful, in the event the mindscape shifts again," Rose says. "I would hate to turn around and find the spirograph has cut and run for parts unknown."

"You'll still be here when I get back?" John asks.

"Of course." Rose searches his face, and must find something there that darkens her expression a little. She reaches out and waits until he hugs her, maybe a little too abruptly. "And if you're gone too long, I will come looking for you. Denizen be damned."
He can't help trying to look around the channel as they pass through it, old jolts of agony rocking through him - but then the wind slams into him and flings him all the way through the far gate so fast everything's a blur. The Breeze laughs with delight all the way. Even when gravity starts going a different direction, and John has to regain his balance in the air before he crashes into something.

He's starting to think the Breeze has an even weirder sense of humor than him. And this is the aspect that's supposed to be helping...

BE: i mean it, try not to tick him off, okay? i don't think he'd drown you after all this, but getting eaten would still be awful

"Drown?"

\( \text{ändigä} \) is unfamiliar from above. It looks like someone else's land, maybe, and the reason why is pretty freaking obvious. He doesn't recognize it without the tarry seas of oil. The ground is dark still, but the black chips of gravel and soil, seeded with crystals and untended mushroom farms, glint with flecks of midnight blue. He and the Breeze bound gently from one plateau to the next, to get their bearings, and they fly over dried up riverbeds that glitter with crystalline silt and chunks of blue gemstones that should have been covered with sluggish streams of crude oil. The low hanging clouds in the sky aren't as hazy as John remembers, either; when they pass through them, there's no sign of fireflies.

BE: well, it \textit{is} his mind. he can decorate it however he wants

\textit{That's really the explanation for it?} He keeps flipping between talking aloud and thinking his answers back at the Breeze. In the real world, both work equally well - in this mindscape, he's not sure there's a difference at all. It's all in his head...or Typheus's head, anyway.

BE: you could look it up by going on a lore side quest, but those are only fun because of the dungeon puzzles

John also notices, as they cross a particularly jagged, rough-hewn fin of blue-gradient rock, that the Breeze really goddang blatantly ignored his question. "What was that about drowning, again?"

If thin blue lines could look sheepish, these do.

BE: uhhhhh i should not have said that. he's not nice, okay? how many different ways do i gotta say that before you believe it? :T he might have gone easy on dave because dave wasn't his, so he didn't think it was his job to be harsh, but you \textit{are} his which makes all of this ten times more dangerous

BE: if you \textit{do} get him talking, you might get lucky - he tends to ramble if he forgets to be a stodgy old dumbo. but please, please please, don't go down there, no matter what he says

"Down where? Into the palace, you mean?" Since that place got smashed up via meteor before John ever arrived, he doesn't have any idea what the layout of that place might be. They skim over another crest of rock, past a deep gulch, and then the pipe organ palace itself rises up. Without flying, or following the correct sequence of spirograph gates, John thinks the place would be next to impossible to find - the pipes rise up a considerable height, but the sprawling building sits in the crook between mountains and would be concealed behind stone from anyone approaching from the wrong angle on foot. There's a shortcut, some part of his brain insists, a way to skip a couple of the gates and come out right at the base of the palace itself. But for the life of him, he can't remember where he learned that. It's not like he had time to fool around with that before their game went south.

BE: yeah, he can totally talk to you without us wandering right down his gullet. heck, you could
probably talk to him without crossing over here, but he's more likely to ignore you and pretend he was asleep and didn't hear you call. just us being here is gonna piss him off enough to answer

John picks a courtyard close to the outermost walls and lands, taking in the layout of the palace while he can. Empty pipes coil around, some connecting to bends that lead out of the palace complex, other open so that the empty, cavernous mouths lead down into the depths. None of them appear to have any oil flowing through them, though even the smallest pipes are taller than John, in here - taller than three of him. And while he would normally use the wind to scout out a place like this, feeling for lungs breathing in and out to get a feel for what he's up against, he doesn't dare do anything but drawn the Breeze in tighter. There's already a heavy presence in the air that isn't quite humidity. Just...presence. Like the Breeze, but ponderous and foreign and wholly outside his grasp.

"He's already listening," John mutters, scraping his foot on the ground as he takes a hesitant step forward. "Okay, seriously, before I start yelling - will he tell me anything? At all? Or was this whole trip completely stupid?"

BE: oh, he'll tell you. that doesn't mean you'll like what he has to say :( 

"Yeah, that sounds about right." John cups his hands around his mouth, and when he breaths out the Breeze carries the sound away far louder than he could have on his own, shuttling the noise down all the nearest pipe openings. "HEYYYY! CAN WE TALK?"

Only silence replies to him. He strains his ears trying to catch the faintest of grumbles. But there's nothing. "Hello?" he tries again, feeling more than a little stupid. "Are you even there? I have some questions .-

[Oh, you have got to be fucking with me. Child, I am trying to sleep.]

BE: wake up, sleepy head, time's a wasting!  

The Breeze thrums, and John feels it race up and force air through one of the thinnest organ pipes until it gives rusty, hoarse whistle. The earth beneath his feet shudders, like something below the surface just rolled over in its sleep.

"It's only a couple questions!" If need be, Rose's questions can come second to asking about Dave and Karkat. She'll understand, after she's done shaking her head at him in mock disapproval. "And then you can go right back to sleep! Promise!"

[No. Go away and come back never. I've already had to parley with the Knight and it's given me a migraine. Leave me be.]

John looks at the Breeze. The Breeze makes a face just to look back at him - and then sticks out its tongue and vanishes. Jerk. "It might be an emergency?"

[Not with that tone of voice, it is not. But fine. Come down so I may greet you...face to face.]

Wow. Oh, gosh, wow. That trap is so blatant John can't even find it anything but hilarious. "Thanks, but no thanks, mister! We can talk like this!"

[I object. You don't feel insane any longer, and what I sense above seems relatively stable. Clearly if the matter is not urgent enough to warrant a visit, and doesn't concern that rotted abomination you've had percolating in your skull, it is not urgent enough to justify shouting like this and renewing my headache. Begone.]

John throttles the frustration - and the moment of unease - before it can make him get pissy. Because
politeness probably works better here. Snarking off like he's Dave would probably just make the situation worse. "Sorry, but Dave and Karkat might be in trouble! I promise it'll only take a few minutes...really! So please stop trying to trick me into eating range."

[Ha.]

[I suppose there's always another way to go about it. One moment.]

Another rumble, and one of the nearest pipes heaves a musty sigh. While Typheus does - uh, whatever it's doing down there - maybe stretching? - John sidles from foot to foot, listening to the denizen's mutters.

TY: [Well, at least you did not bring the Knight with you. That is where I draw the line.]

TY: [Now then. If you shall not come to me...]

The pipe organ groans, faint slithering sounds emerging from within. Something scrapes along the metal with an ear-piercing screech. The tremors rock John until his teeth clack together painfully, and he fights the urge to float right the heck out of here. What is he doing down there? he whispers to the Breeze, bewildered.

BE: oh

BE: oh, crud

Damp breath soughs against the back of John's neck - and his entire body. He whips around and stares, eyes slowly tracking up the teeth taller than he is, up to where shimmering frost-white scales give way to an eye like sea glass, bottle green and cocked to peer down at him. When he gulps and tries to see how much of Typheus is aboveground, he can only make out a short section of ropy, wing-studded coils before the rest of the denizen's bulk vanishes into one of the empty oil pipelines. Perfectly placed around the courtyard for the easy transportation of crude oil in bulk - or, in this case, to let Typheus slither its head and neck right out from under the palace.

'Oh crud' doesn't seem like a strong enough swear for this kind of situation. Karkat would know a better one.

A tattered, thin wing folds up, the claw at the end of each rippling veil of skin clacking against the ground with a sound almost delicate compared to the rattling of the pipes, and comes to rest under Typheus's massive chin.

TY: So, child. You dare rouse me from my slumber. How foolish.

John is cringing. His hands are making really half-assed fists, but honestly, the shock of having a massive snake-dragon monster show up behind him with zero warning kind of threw him off his game, here. Jeez.

... 

Huh. He hasn't been eaten yet.

This is an incredible turn of events. But awesome! Especially since Rose would have been so mad if he got eaten on her watch.

After the pause lasts long enough, John hesitantly asks, "Are you mad, or...are you just being melodramatic?"
TY: I am never melodramatic.

TY: Speak. I only have a few weeks left to sleep, and you're cutting into my quota.

The head moves. John jolts back, but Typheus merely resettles his chin so he's watching John through the other eye. His mouth is too big and too close for John to tell if he's being laughed at or not for being jumpy. Also, his snake breath is totally rank, like - hey, what a coincidence - the kind of funky smell you'd get after sleeping and not brushing your teeth for thousands of years. It's hard to concentrate on words with that clogging up your nose, but John perseveres. "Dave and Karkat - he's one of the troll players - stopped answering messages really abruptly, and we're worried something might have happened to them. Could you -"

TY: No.

John glares. "You didn't even let me finish!"

TY: At some point I need to enforce standards, here. You obviously want me to help by seeking them out or some other such nonsense, and I unequivocally refuse on the grounds that if the time child is involved, silence is a vast improvement. I didn't think anyone could talk so much and live.

TY: Next question.

"But -!"

TY: I said, no. Next question, or get gone. It's still weeks too early for you to be harassing me like this.

John groans and smacks his face with his hand. Shot down in less than a minute. Short of teleporting blind after them, this was the next best way he could think of to figure out what's up with Dave and Karkat, and it sank before it even got a chance to sail. Then he thinks better of taking his eyes off Typheus for even the briefest moment, and jerks his head back up to see another tooth peeking out from behind thin lips. The denizen is too big and too close for John to be sure, but he thinks Typheus is smirking at him. A mondo smirk. So lame.

TY: I'm waiting.

John yanks Rose's piece of light paper out of his pocket, grumbling to himself and squinting against the radiance of the letters to decipher one of the lines. Distractedly, he asks - demands, really; now he's irritated, which is a vast improvement over panic - "What's the deal, anyway? The Breeze said something about drowning. Like, where did that even come from? When did it become a thing that you do instead of just eating people like a normal giant monster?"

TY: What.

TY: Breeze.

The blue wind starts chuckling with a nervous edge.

BE: uh...it wasn't me!

TY: There. No one said anything about drowning. That is clearly not a thing that has occurred.

Wait, hang on. John looks up from the paper, his expression officially closer to weirded out than to irritated. "That is totally a thing it said."
TY: Nope. This is in fact the first time I am hearing about these grossly fraudulent accusations.

"Are you lying to me? That's kinda super weird."

The enormous green eyes won't even meet John's suspicious stare anymore; Tyheus is looking anywhere but at him, twiddling its silvery claws together while avoiding eye contact at all costs.

TY: Well, since some aspects have no verbal filter -

BE: hey!

TY: There. Er. May be vast oil reservoirs below. Ah. Not that I would flood the Inner Sanctum with it...no...that would never happen...who would even consider such a silly thing...a pisspoor excuse for a denizen, obvio-

"You were totally gonna dump a bunch of oil on me as a final boss battle, weren't you," John says flatly.

TY: This is why I need legal representation. Look, I wouldn't do it now -

He jabs a finger at Tyheus. "Melo. Dra. Matic." It's worth it just to see a humongous monster flinch. "Seriously, that's what I have to look forward to when we go through this whole stupid game again? That's part of your lame Choice uberquest thing?!"

Quick as a snap, Tyheus's eyes lock onto John, and he flinches back, heart suddenly pounding twice as fast as the Breeze goes taut around him. Oh, he fucking up, he fucked the fuck up, oh man -

TY: Oh, I think you've done quite well drowning yourself on your own time, child. You have drawn my pipes dry, and now look how little work is left to me.

A massive shrug, and more shredded wings fan out, sweeping to encompass the empty courtyard and more. The oversized grin has vanished, and when John steps back, Tyheus leans in, eyes gone dark and deep.

TY: I meant to dump it on your land, since last time it all went up in flames before you could deal with it. But I suppose as far as challenges go, you've set yourself up for a far more difficult maturation crisis than even I could have dreamed of.

TY: Thank you, ever so much - for once, you've made my work easier. It almost makes up for dragging me into your ludicrous glitches.

It comes up his throat so suddenly his gag reflex doesn't even have time to trigger; one second, John is cold, slowly raising his hand to stare at the smear of black smudged along the back, and then he's coughing, splattering droplets of black bile on the golden light of Rose's list. It tastes like gasoline and nothing more. He thought - for some reason, he thought it tasted even worse the last time this happened, flavored like licorice and something rotten, but honestly? Gasoline is just as incredibly nasty all on its own. He wipes at his mouth with the back of his smudged hand, struggling not to swallow because if he does he'll probably throw up for real. "Urgh! This is all part of your dumb quest! Why?!" he says, spitting between words.

TY: Sometimes it's physical. Others it is metaphysical. The mental option is most delicate of all to manage properly, and you decided to muck around with it on some self-destructive bender. I was asleep, and will admit I was cross at first to realize your unconscious mind had set the terms of your own challenge, but seeing as the work has been done for me...I'll let it stand.
TY: The candy abomination is new, though. I had no part in that, and I don't like it.

Why? Why did he think coming here to talk to the huge in-game boss enemy would end well? "All that stuff...you could take it back, though?" He finishes wiping the black off and flicking it as best he can onto the ground instead, but his hand is stained with it, and he rests his fist against his mouth knowing it probably looks the same, like a murmur of disgusting, so disgusting.

TY: Oh, we're seeing this through to the end, now. It's not the route I would have chosen, but it is as it is.

TY: You suffer, child. You suffer deeply, mired in despair and pain and self-loathing. The oil is only a sign and symptom that you have taken on yourself, not the root of it. Since we're here, and I'm awake, and that doesn't appear to be changing to a more desirable state anytime soon, I suppose we may as well lay this out now:

TY: I challenge you, child. Master your pain. As once I would have challenged you to heal your land, I charge you now with the healing of your mind. It has been ravaged and laid waste, and shall lay stagnant until you prevail.

TY: Then, and only then, will I deem you a worthy Heir, and offer you a worthy Choice.

The air throbs with it, a proclamation that John knows with a weight in his chest can't be taken back. He just...walked right into that one, didn't he. Oh jeez. What does that all even mean?!

Of course, he only has to look at the smug look on Typheus's face to know that the denizen would be less willing to give a hint about that than it would about Dave and Karkat's status. "Fine. Whatever. You're such an asshole," he says.

Typheus just booms in laughter, loud enough to make the pipe organ jar with a low note.

TY: Good. Never think me a friend. Now, I will answer one final question - if you grant me a request." 

John mostly wants to tell him he can shove his request up his butt. Unfortunately, he's not sure snake monsters have butts, so it might just get him laughed at. Again. "Fine," he says, folding his arms. Rose's note is clamped tight in his fist, his expression more pout now than glare. "What request?" If it's something dumb, he's taking off and not coming back.

TY: Excellent choice.

TY: It is this: if you intend to gather the troll players and embark on this disgustingly puréed session that the scratch has produced, as some of your actions would imply, please inform them that if they attempt to approach any denizen, they will be summarily dispatched.

That isn't what John expected to hear at all. "Huh? Why?"

TY: Because the horrible little heathens murdered almost all of us instead of listening for two damn seconds. This session could have had twelve denizens, twelve choices for you all to test yourselves against. But no. Murderous. Little. Heathens.

This talk is taking a turn for the surreal again. This kind of mood whiplash can't be legal.

John has his suspicions, though. Call it an educated guess. "Did you all threaten to eat them? Because I'm pretty that would kiiinda set the mood for the rest of the conversation..."

The sea glass eye narrows at him, and when Typheus speaks next it's with an affronted huff in his
TY: You know nothing, John Egbert. You come into my palace, you criticize my conversational openings -

His tone starts to get heated, and that means more nasty snake breath all up in John's face, and no. He loves himself more than that. "Okay, okay, sheesh, I'm sorry!" he says hastily, clapping a hand over his nose and trying to pinch it discreetly. "I'll tell them!" All things taken into consideration, it's not even that hard of a request. He can just tell Karkat and Kanaya when they get back and viola. Mission accomplished.

TY: Perfect. Now, ask your question. Try to make it a good one.

Still pissed, John finds his hands shaking a little again as he smoothes out Rose's paper. He sure as heck hopes she thought them up in the order of which she'd most like to have answered, because he feels like he can barely see as he reads aloud, the words stilted and not-right in his mouth as he forces them to make sentences. "What happened after we four achieved god tier and stripped Jack Noir of his ring, and why can John not remember the end game immediately preceding the Scratch?" There's subquestions labeled a through c, but like heck is he pushing his luck. Then - "Wait. Me. Why can I not remember the end game?"

TY: That is technically two questions.

"They're related, though."

TY: Oh, just rephrase it.

Easier said than done, right now. "What happened after we beat Jack Noir that made us scratch the game?" he manages at last. He thinks that's the gist of it.

TY: And you cannot remember it on your own. Yes, I recall the Knight mentioning something to that effect, though with the damage you've accumulated over there, I'm not particularly surprised. But at the same time, I sense Skaia's will in this. Yes, this is the correct order of things.

TY: Sit.

John makes a face. "Uh, no thanks."

TY: Sit down, child, I need to impart to you an egregious amount of elucidatory exposition and we could be here for a while.

He folds his legs up without saying a word, and the Breeze floats him there in silent accord. The double-team judging stares just make Typheus roll his eyes.

TY: Where to begin...Hm. You must understand: the troll game session produced your own. Their game gave birth to your universe, your Bilious Slick, your cosmic genesis.

...So melodramatic, holy crap. "Yeah, okay, cool." It rings true in John's head, anyway. Someone probably mentioned it before.

TY: But they never seem to have completed the synchroclusion sequence. They must have been driven away from the platform before they could conclude their session, and fled between sessions through the abyss of the Horrors.

TY: Because they did not properly complete the session, sequential order broke down. Instead of
their session coming temporally before your own, they became able to communicate with your session asynchronously.

TY: They...meddled.

"And none of that got recorded, because for some weird reason it counted as being part of their session. Yeah, I think I got that." John tries to swallow back some of the sarcasm, because he doesn't like the sharp look in Typheus's eye. "How did they meddle, again?"

TY: That wasn't the question you asked. How unfortunate for you.

Oh, that's such bullcrap. John fumes to himself while Typheus unfurls a wing to make some incomprehensible winged-snake gesture.

TY: By all rights, the Horrors of the Ring should have consumed them. I can only speculate, but it tastes of truth in my lungs, and so I think my assumption correct: the Horrors feared what chased them. The meteor passed unhindered, hurtling towards your session's location in the Medium, because what followed in its wake was too powerful a force even for a Horrorterror to think of challenging it.

TY: And as it stalked them, time tore itself to shreds. Technically, they mistimed it - there is always disjointment between a game's medium and the space between sessions, where the abyss of Horrors leaks through the void, and time is not what it used to be. But this destruction exacerbated the problem, and their meteor was so jostled by the cracks that it arrived several centuries before you were even born.

Just like that, John knows. "They landed on your house, didn't they."

TY: The meteor landed on my fucking house.

Ha. 'Murderous little heathens,' John's butt. This is clearly just a case of the giant monster being angry about having its house crushed. He can't wait to tell Karkat.

TY: The meteor did. But not they. You see, once you dealt with Noir, your Witch and your Knight were able to enact a [ T A R D I S ] maneuver and pull those that still lived to Skaia, before the meteor crossed into the session proper.

TY: But the being had already chased them here. You fought - we all fought - but there was no possibility of victory. There never was.

TY: Even the scratch has but delayed it. Perhaps the scratching of both sessions at once managed to confuse it for a time. But time does not mean much where such a creature is concerned.

Suddenly, nothing is funny anymore. John swallows, the taste sour and his mouth dry. "What...was it."

Tyheus doesn't bicker about the accidental intrusive question; he just quietly answers. Nooot a good sign.

TY: A Lord of Time. The Master class of entropy and destruction incarnate, beyond the power of any god or denizen or Horror, beyond even Skaia.

TY: A...terminal glitch. Everything ends. Heed me - you will know him by the lurid glory of his Cairo Overcoat, the gold of his assault rifle, the felt of his minions, and the skeletal hollow of his face, ever working from behind the scenes to bring about the end of all reality. To know his true
name is to know terror no one ever has. To hear his honk is to know the cessation of existence.

"So wait a second...he has a skeleton face? It's just a skull?" John can feel something. Oh, there's horror, and more than a little fear, and the whole thing sounds even more dire than all the scenarios he came up with in his head. He doubts even Rose could have thought up something that sounds as ominous as this. This sounds like such a seriously bad guy.

TY: His image is seared into my mind. Yes, it is a skeleton face, with minimal skin. It is also green. Why do you ask?

"And - he's a lord. So, like, a king? And he's always hanging around, messing things up for us while lurking in the shadows or something like that?"

Typhheus rears back. He looks utterly distraught. It probably takes a whole lot to make a boss enemy distraught, but on the inside John's too strangled between horror and perverse hilarity to do more than wheeze gasps of laughter.

TY: Stop. Desist at once. I already know where you are going with this child, and that is where I draw the line. A Lord is not a king so don't you da-

He can't stop now. The force of his hysteria can't be tamed. "So you could almost say he's...skullking?"

Typhheus slams a wing against the ground. John, floating, doesn't care, though the shockwave bowls him over; the Breeze rolls with him, short gusts of laughter shrieking over Tyheus's groan of despair. Good.

TY: Get out of my mind.

"Nah." John has one more. "He destroys time? What, by eating it? That sounds a little time consuming -"

The wing slams again, and then slaps against Tyheus's pale face.

TY: I'm never telling you anything ever again. Ever. These puns are the biggest stretches I've heard in countless millennia and I hope you are ashamed of yourself for trying to make them work.

John sniffles. "Give me a break, I'm traumatized and stuff."

TY: Don't remind me. Get. Out.

A blast of uncontrollable air catches John and the Breeze mid-roll. They yelp at the same time, while Tyheus's gust shoves them up and out of the palace courtyard, toward the blue spirograph in the sky. "Okay. Uh, thank you!" John calls down, but the massive serpent has already started slithering back down the pipe it came from, leaving brush marks where its wings drag over the earth.

[Don't come here again. Stay in your own mind, and leave me to my rest.]

"Why do you sleep so much?"

[OUT.]

Tyheus must really put some effort into that last shout, because John hurtles through the channel so fast that Rose doesn't even have time to blink before he slams into her on the far side.

The Breeze just laughs at all of them.
Mr Zahhak,

No apologies are necessary. As it so happens, I have continued with my research into ambient void over the years, though due to some sensitive aspects of that research, I have kept it classified and not published anything in the public domain in quite some time. In terms of my older research, you may find some items relevant to your interest in the archives of Journal de Physique prior to 1998, and the European Physical Journal in the years since, but I'm afraid that none of it covers my current work, since I moved on from the theoretical to the applied mechanics of void manipulation.

I would be perfectly willing to share the schematics for a void ward generator that may be of some help to you. However, even with a secure point of contact, there is a considerable threat that even an encrypted file could be compromised. Your mention of a group of criminal malcontents causes me to be greatly concerned, as I suspect that the people threatening you and your colleague may well be the same group that currently threatens my own family - have they mentioned, perhaps, the Midnight Crew or the Felt? The two criminal organizations are linked, and they are a significant part of the reason why I ceased publicizing my work.

If I assume this in error, forgive me. But if they are indeed the ones harrying you, you are in graver danger than you can possibly know. I have attached below a hopefully secure file that may be enough to help you construct a portable void aggregation device, but that is only a stop gap measure. I urge you in earnest to come speak with me in person. Bring your colleague as well; I possess a powerful ward generator that took me many years to assemble on the premises of my laboratory, that should keep you hidden and safe until you decide whether to craft one of your own and return to your place of residence.

I understand that I ask much, as such an offer requires you to rely heavily on my own good will and sincerity, of which you have no way to ascertain. But I urge you all the same. Come to Seattle, and either I can arrange for a private vehicle to escort you to the secret coordinates of my lab, or (depending on the time of day) ask that one of my cohort bring you here by means of her own particular talent for swift travel. There is much I would like to discuss with you in person, both for the sake of your safety, and as a fellow scientist. Money is no issue.

Yours,

Doctor Rue Lalonde, Ph.D.

- 

Doctor Lalonde,

Thank you for your fast response. I have completed the device, though it's hard to tell what effect it may have yet.

It goes against my instinct to leave the house at this time, and my instincts are very strong. But at the same time, I must express that my concern that the defenses already in place may not be enough. They have not breached the walls yet, but my cameras have captured members of just the criminal groups you have named circling and surveying the premises. From within here, I have no way to obtain shipments of the materials I'd need to reinforce the house further without opening a path in for them to take advantage of. And my colleague has begun to grow stir crazy. Last night she almost clawed her own way out, insisting that she could face them on her own if need be, and I was forced to subdue her for her own safety.
I have booked a flight to the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport as early in the morning as could be arranged. I put myself at your mercy, but make no mistake: while I must take your good will on faith, if you seek to delude me and betray this trust, and thus put my colleague in jeopardy, there is no power on this earth that will stop me from repaying you any injury done to her a 100 times over. Nay, a 1000 times over.

My regards,

Equius Zahhak

---

They reach the outskirts of Los Angeles with hardly any mishaps.

It's amazing! Jade is squirming with delight by the time they reach South Pasadena, and when they touch down next on the highway, only a mile from the dome itself, she can barely contain herself. How often do her trips go so smoothly? It took them an hour to get here, with as few bounces and stops as Jade and Bec could manage while still being cautious; it helps that Kanaya doesn't get feverish like WV or nauseous and antsy like Dave and Karkat, the two repeat complainers. Kanaya just makes small talk, totally unfazed by the teleportation, which is how they've ended up in the middle of a conversation about the old struggle known to gardeners everywhere concerning the growing of pumpkins.

"I used to have a whole section of my greenhouse room full of pumpkins and other gourds!" Jade says, as they look west, the morning sun at their backs. And there the dome sits, sparkling and twinkling like a snowy diamond, light lancing off it at odd angles that flare across Jade's lenses. It's not at all greasy and filmy like some of the original footage showed, when the thing first appeared and all contact was lost with the residents of LA. Jade has been doing her research! Ever since Kanaya requested this trip, she's done her best to compile all the available data in between efforts to get the dumb terminal working again and keeping Karkat distracted from his moping. Rose and her mom had some contacts they could pull raw data from, tapping their respective contacts in the thaumaturgic and scientific communities, so Jade could compare the before and after readings from the moment the dome transformed. A few text messages apparently got through the communication white out, but it wasn't more than a few calls for help dated back to the first day of the isolation, so it wasn't very helpful in getting an idea as to what the Horrorterror might have done to the place before leaving.

Kanaya, her arm still linked with Jade's as they stride down the road, sighs. "They always vanish before harvest," she says, and the two of them nod sagely together in commiseration. "I did not have much space on the roof of my apartment building for gardening projects, so eventually I was forced to prioritize other projects." The troll huffs, sidestepping Bec when the wolf pops from their original landing site to almost right under her feet in a silent blaze of stars. "I do hope young Daniel has kept his promise to water the seedlings. I didn't anticipate being away for so long. What else did you grow?"

"Welll, I always tried to grow some pretty perennials, but the annuals were a lot harder to keep up with year to year, since we didn't get many shipments of nonessentials from the mainland." She grins. "But I coaxed some of the local flora to grow closer to the house, which really brightened up the place!"

Kanaya smiles, folding her knees up as Jade floats them over a chunk of highway that appears to have buckled and warped. This entire area has been cleared out; Jade imagines most everyone has been relocated by now, out of the fear that the dome could expand or something. The Stanford team is stationed north of here, so there's not much worry about running into civilians or anything. Jade
doesn't mind attention, but Kanaya was firm in that she wants to keep this low-key. "You lived on a tropical island? I wish I'd had as much room to spread out as that."

"Yeah." Jade heaves a gusty sigh. "I almost wish I hadn't had to set off the volcano and everything!"

Kanaya chokes on her own spit. "What?"

"Oh, yeah, my Grandpa had a lot of stuff he collected there," Jade says, shrugging. "His last wishes always specified that the day I left to travel the world, I had to hit the self-destruct button and all that." Mostly for the sake of confidentiality, partially for science! "Grandpa had tons of secret things he didn't want falling into the hands of unsavory characters. Not even I could get into all of the labs without permission or passwords, though." She technically could have teleported in, or hacked the deactivated transportalizer pads; her curiosity did get the better of her a few times, particularly as she got older and she trained to use her powers to sense just how far down the subterranean lab complex extended in empty magma chambers. Someone spent a lot of time and money clearing all that out! Sometimes Jade wonders how Grandpa did it all just in his lifetime, and what other strange machines and experiments might have gone on in the deepest depths, where Bec never let her venture.

The jadeblood just looks stunned, so Jade starts chatting (just a liiittle tangent) about how the self-destruct sequence worked, and how totally awesome it looked when she finally set it off. It was a bittersweet moment at the time, considering all the wealth of knowledge and artefacts that the island took down with it, but Grandpa was adamant. That conversation lasts them all the way to the foot of the dome, so at least it's a way to pass the time.

This close up, Jade can scope out the dimensions of the dome for herself, contrasting her own perceptions with the measurements from the Stanford and Wisconsin teams that she waded through earlier. She has the basic specs loaded on her goggles for ease of reference. The structure feels...tingly - like golden, carbonated soda, fizzling under her space sense, which might be because it's made of magic and all. It encompasses most of downtown LA, stretching almost 2058 feet in height. More than tall enough to accommodate the tallest of the buildings in the city, if they're still intact.

Briskly, Kanaya walks over to inspect a smashed-up section of the guardrail and a half-demolished wall, and a crumpled car folded up on the road like an accordion. Jade chose this spot to approach the dome specifically because there was a mysterious fight the other day, with rumors and grainy footage showing that a hole opened up in the dome before being sealed over one last time. John and Karkat and their hero chat boards tentatively identified the fighters as that Juggaloco guy (argh) and the relatively little-known Summoner, from Mexico, facing off against some odd troll who shot white lightning everywhere before getting his butt kicked and vanishing into the dome. Which at least helped Jade fill in a timeline for the clown's steady trek north from the Mexico-Texas border, apparently in the company of that troll in the wheelchair she had no explanation for at the time - made all the more ominous by the fact that it's entirely possible they've been following her to get to Karkat. It doesn't make sense, since Jade didn't even know Karkat when she first ran into the clown, but the way that the purpleblood has brought up Karkat with both her and Dave, there's no question that that's who he might have been after all this time. If he is a game player from the troll's session, he's sure got a scary way of going about it!

Anyway, if this part of the dome opened up once, it's possible Jade and Kanaya can figure out how to make it open a second time. They won't know until they try!

"Can you feel anything on the other side?" Kanaya asks, straightening from the side of the guardrail and returning to Jade with a faint frown as she looks over the dome herself. A faint breeze ruffles the fabric of her cowl and the chunks of hair that frame her face. "It looks whole to me; there doesn't
appear to be a seam of any kind."

Right! First things first. "Uhm...here, let me check!" Jade says, flicking through a couple of different settings on her goggles until they start recording what's in front of her. You never know what might happen too fast for her and Kanaya to catch; better to have something to replay later. When that's set up, she squints and starts concentrating on the glinting white dome before them, sending out a pulse of power to try to get some idea of the dimensions - just how thick are the walls of this thing before she hits air again?

What she gets is a big fat nothing. Her space sense rams right into a wall, unyielding and solid underneath the fizzy layer. It's totally smooth, seamless, and as far as her powers can tell, there's nothing past it. When she scrunches up her nose and tries again, her spatial sense laps up against the dome as far around as she can reach, like water against the hull of an overturning boat. The sensations less like the twistiness of Doctor Lalonde's void wards, and more like those awful minutes trapped in Droog's cage that nullified her space powers entirely. As long as that dome's up and running, Jade doesn't think she's getting through it. Nothing's getting through it.

Air's probably not getting through it.

Oh no. How are those people breathing?! Jade just assumed (hoped) that there had to be some kind of holes or filtration or permeable membrane that let fresh air pass through; maybe other scientists and news crews weren't able to detect them because they just didn't have the right tools for the job. But Jade can't sense anything either and that's - not good. The inhabitants of the city have been cut off for ages.

Between the Horrorterror and the lack of air, she's suddenly not looking forward to what they're about to find. She darts a look at Kanaya, feeling kinda sick. "Nothing. It's like there's nothing on the other side - not even empty space like there would be if all the buildings were knocked down..." She picks at one of the rubber bands on her pinkie finger, nervous. "I can't even tell if the road or the ground itself continues on the inside. I think my powers just aren't working, here!"

Stone would be more expressive than Kanaya's face right now; the troll takes a steady breath and says, "That is not entirely unexpected. We know this thing has proven impenetrable during other attempts to cross through it. What might be the most effective method of getting through? I hate to speculate what might happen if we attempted to teleport in without having some idea of what the terrain inside looks like." Kanaya drums the claws of one hand along the side of her folded arm, strands of her hair falling into her eyes so that she has to blow them out of the way. "The Ukraine was incredibly treacherous; if the ground here is as saturated with acid as it was there, our shoes won't last long."

Jade chews on her lip, squinting one eye almost shut as she concentrates - but nada. "If it is that bad, I can probably just float us around. No one said we had to land on our feet, after all! Let's try Bec, next." Jade whistles and Bec's ears perk up in attention, the wolf's nostrils flaring as it turns its head toward her from where it lies on top of a pile of rubble. "Bec, I need you to do something for me, okay?"

There's a brief flicker of electric green, and then Bec sits at her feet, head tilted back and tongue lolling out in eagerness. "Good boy!" she says, bending down and scratching behind its ears. "Can you get in and out of this dome? We're trying to figure out what's on the other side."

A moment passes while Becquerel processes the request - long enough of a moment, honestly, that Jade wonders if maybe something didn't translate right. Bec is smart, yeah, but there's always the chance that the wolf didn't understand what Jade asked of it. Grandpa knows a lot more about how it works. Just when she's about to repeat herself - she darts an anxious look at Kanaya, who's watching
the two of them with a curious expression - Bec huffs and vanishes. Hastily, Jade reaches out mentally and follows the burst of the wolf's power -

All the way to where her senses slam up against the side of the dome. Again, Becquerel appears to have vanished without a trace when Jade reaches out for it, gone as thoroughly as if it never existed. She and Kanaya can't see or feel anything through the barrier, either, so Jade can't even say for sure that the wolf made it through. Darn it!

"Um. Jade," Kanaya begins, touching Jade's arm hesitantly and pointing. But Jade's already felt the flicker of power, and looks up in time to see Becquerel reappear, sitting at a steep angle on the side of the dome, with the mournful air of a canine who has somehow disappointed its human friend and isn't entirely sure how it happened. It cocks its head to the side and stands, still at an impossibly precarious angle, and starts scenting around the smooth surface of the dome, trotting along and finally pawing at a particular spot close to where the dome meets the twisted road with a whine.

Jade...has no idea what that means. Bec's not good at communicating things back to her. "What is it, boy?" she asks, jogging closer and bouncing over one of the larger chunks of cement in her way. By the time she reaches it, Bec has buried its nose against the dome, whimpering constantly. Uncharacteristically, it starts making little burrowing motions, digging at the dome with scrabbling claws in a way that Jade hasn't ever seen it do, ever.

She has heard that whimper, before, though, and she's starting to get pretty paranoid about it. Whipping around, Jade nearly clocks Kanaya with a faceful of her hair as she glares at the road behind them, visually scanning all of the shatter window fronts and the insides of overturned vehicles as she looks for that guy. Clown troll has a nasty habit of turning up right behind people and dodging her space sense up until the last possible second; she doesn't think he would have backtracked all the way from Seattle to Los Angeles when he's looking for Karkat, but it's been days since Dave heard from him in the mysterious Pesterchum event. He might have had time.

There's nothing, though. Kanaya, tensing at Jade's sudden shift, only shakes her head when Jade checks to see if she's noticed anything. "Sorry. Nervous, I guess," Jade says, trying to shake off the unease that creeps up her spine. It's pretty annoying how just the faintest hint of the juggalo troll sets her on edge. "Usually when Bec makes that noise, it means that clowny guy is around..."

"I don't blame you."

"Maybe he smells something similar, or just something left over from when that guy was here. I think we're okay for now." Jade reaches out and taps at the spot Bec's circling around; the wolf nudges her fingers with its nose, whining. But direct contact doesn't reveal anything for Jade to sense, either.

Mmm. There's just nothing else for it! Jade sucks her lip into her mouth, pulls her phone out of her sylladex pocket, and opens Pesterchum.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 10:06:11 --
GG: rose?
TT: Jade.
GG: rose!
TT: Jade?
GG: heeehe! hi! :) are you busy right now?
TT: Not particularly. I was attempting to establish stable contact with one Aradia Megido, but her chat clientele appears to think that linear conversation is for saps.
TT: She seems to find it endlessly amusing. Or at least, that is what I'm taking away from all of the laughter. I think it convoluted and frustrating, but also an exercise in patience and perseverance.
TT: How may I help? Have you and Kanaya reached Los Angeles already?
GG: yup yup! no problem whatsoever getting here!
TT: We may need to commemorate this momentous occasion.
GG: it really is amazing!
GG: but also kind of sad, that having one of our plans work out right is now mind-blowing...
TT: If it's any consolation, Dave and Karkat appear to have gotten through the first few minutes of their flight without killing each other, and John and I have spent the past half hour thwarting WV's best efforts to turn my mother's best spectrometer into the next Picasso. We may yet break our recent streak of horrific luck.
GG: let's not jinx it, i guess. anyway, we were wondering if you had any more advice on how to poke a hole in this dome thing. i can't sense anything through it, which means we're mostly flying blind at the moment.
TT: Nothing at all?
GG: nope!
TT: That's not promising, but not surprising, either. Someone with quite a lot of magic to burn decided to throw an absolutely outrageous amount of it into making that dome as impressive as possible. Considering it took a Horrorterror to craft the original structure, that means this person - or person(s), I suppose - is powerful to the point of absurdity.
TT: Worst case scenario - this person may have rigged it so that they end up exactly as strong as they believe themselves to be, as they've always hoped to become. A dangerous, stacking progression.
GG: oh nooo...
GG: still, there's gotta be a way through! bec did it, but it can't tell me what's on the other side.
TT: Becquerel managed it? Is there anything that creature can't do?
GG: talk :(
TT: Ah, yes.
TT: Unfortunately, there's not much I can do to assist you further from here. The mere thought of scrying across that kind of distance puts me in mind of migraines.
GG: blah! what can you tell me about this magic?
TT: Belief is tricky. The only people I'm familiar with who deal with faith magic on a semi-regular basis are casual exorcists, or necromancers who would give anything to avoid it. Hope is a potent thing, and unfortunately, the kind of priests who actually channel that kind of power don't tend to frequent the kind of forums I peruse. It hasn't truly been utilized on a large scale since the Crusades.
TT: But Becquerel did pass through?
GG: yeah! or at least, it felt like it did - i couldn't sense it reappear on the other side, so it must have been inside the area i can't feel...
TT: That's promising. It means that whoever is generating this dome didn't take into account something like Becquerel existing. Physical objects can't pass through, but space powers may not be countered. Trickiness does work both ways, after all - if one isn't even aware that something exists, how can one hope something into existence that counteracts it? It may be able to take you through, even if you're not confident in your own ability to jump in without a point of reference.
GG: no way to know until we try, i suppose! we'll keep you posted.
TT: Good luck. Be safe.

"Rose says if Bec can get through, that probably means it can take us through with it," Jade announces, looking up from her phone. She keeps it out for a moment, turning the phone over in her hands as she ponders, and then finally tucks it back into the pocket for safe keeping. "Orrr, I guess...we said we were coming here to do reconnaissance. Maybe I could strap my glasses onto Bec, to record what it sees on the other side..."

"I suppose it depends on which would be the most favorable option," Kanaya muses aloud, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as she contemplates the dome. Jade waits, trying to be patient while the troll thinks, because this is Kanaya's trip and Kanaya should probably be in charge of
deciding important stuff like this. Jade's all for leaping right in for some hands on observation, but the glasses plan might be the safer one to start out with. With a nod, Kanaya raps her knuckles against the dome. "Let's attempt it. This affliction we call curiosity has been eating at me for quite some time now."

Jade can't quite repress a giggle of anticipation, clapping her hands together in excitement, and Kanaya grants her a small smile.

"wwho's there? gam is that you you stupid fuck? i knoww youre out there this time an i told you no."

Jade squeaks and shoots a foot in the air; Kanaya yanks her hand back from the dome, eyes startled and wide, as the voice emerges out of nowhere. A quick brush over their surroundings once again reveals...nothing at all. "Who are you?" Kanaya returns while Jade's still spinning around with her hand outstretched, trying to figure out where the voice is coming from. Bec doesn't appear overly concerned, still nosing at the dome, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're not in trouble.

"i asked you first," the voice says, irritable enough to rival Karkat in one of his moods. "wait hang on. kan?"

Jade hears it as 'can,' at first, and Kanaya must take it the same way before comprehension hits. Kan, like, short for Kanaya? Oookay. "Did you know someone in LA?" Jade whispers, feeling a little at a loss.

But Kanaya shakes her head, just as confused. She clears her throat, and calls, "This is the Malachite Sylph and Sharpshooter." Jade wonders if the troll realizes that she lowers her voice a little, defensive and growly, kinda the way John would do for his Heir thingy. "We beg your pardon; we are just investigating this dome structure."

"oh fuck it is you," the voice says, sounding gobsmacked. Then there's the sound of a throat clearing, and they make this really blatant attempt at sounding nonchalant. "i see so its one a those things. look can wwe not do the secret identity crap kan? slingin around all of these made up names is frankly kiddie playtime shit an i wwas pretty much ovver it after the second time fef changed her name."

Okay! So this person really seems to think they know Kanaya, which is...interesting. They're also talking like they knew about the whole super hero, secret identity thing before it was cool. But when Jade glances at Kanaya again the troll just looks twice as baffled, thrown for a complete loop. The fact that the voice is still just sort of emanating from thin air doesn't help much. "I'm sorry, I really don't know what you're talking about. Who am I speaking to?" At Jade's frantic, soundless motioning toward the dome, Kanaya hurries to add, "Also, we were under the impression that no one could communicate through the barrier. Where are you?"

"wwha -" the person breaks off, and then makes a frustrated noise like someone hrrgling. They keep doing something strange with their w's and v's, too, in a really pretentious, wobbly accent. "its me eridan obviously. come on wwe can be cool right kan? i pulled some really stupid shit but wwere more mature noww right? yeah. all scores are settled - okay mine obviously didnt stick so maybe wwere not exactly equal but thats all dealin wwith technicalities." There's a really rushed laugh that makes Jade and Kanaya just look at each other, but then the voice's tone shifts to sounding more guarded. "and wwho else is ovver there?"

"Me!" Jade pipes up. She finally settles on glaring at the dome, since that's the direction she's getting the overwhelming impression that the voice is coming from - the only place that would make sense, since she can't spy a loudspeaker or anything else that would explain how the unseen person is projecting their voice here without her sensing them.
"oh one of the humans," Eridan says. The eye roll is almost palpable. "i remember that vvoice. the jade one i guess it makes sense you twwo wwould end up hangin out together. i passed on the code for my legendary one of a kind wweapon to you did you evver actually evven use that thing? you wwere bein needlessly stupid about it but i wwas kinda busy and couldnt check back in."

Jade isn't entirely sure what this is about. But she's pretty sure she's offended. "Hey!" Then her brain finishes putting all the clues together, and she gets even more offended. "You! You're a game player, aren't you!"

"of course i am. god youre not gonna pull the same forgetful bs rubbish as tavv are you. of course you are. first gam is his insane clowwn self times 1000 and noww no one else remembers anythin wwhat a load of bull."

Meanwhile, Kanaya looks like she's swallowed something sour without expecting it. "No. Absolutely not." She makes grabby motions with her claws and turns her eyes skyward like the heavens will open up and reassure her that this isn't game stuff. "How is it possible that we haven't come far enough to escape that being the explanation for everything?"

Jade can't do more than shrug when Kanaya looks askance at her; she doesn't think they'll ever be able to outrun the game, so Kanaya being skeptical about everything doesn't really affect her. Eridan's voice just keeps babbling - and then, mid-sentence, his tone abruptly shifts. "come on kan i knoww wwe didnt exactly end on g- you dont remember it. It's like a revelation to him or something. Quite apart from how Jade hasn't missed that Eridan hasn't explained how he's talking through the dome, that shift would be more than enough to tip her off to the fact that something's up with this guy.

"Is there something I should be remembering?" the jadeblood says, slowly, folding her arms.

The backpedalling that ensues is so obvious, it makes Jade and Kanaya wince hearing it in action. "no! uh i mean - look that game wwas just a disaster from start to finish. look at howw many people vvrissa killed before wwe evven started like wwowwie wwhat a clusterfuck that all wwas. id forget it all if i could but i dont havve that luxury anymore. got wway too many fires in the iron and all that bee ess."

Kanaya falters. "...You remember Vriska?"

"as if i could forget that connivvin hag." And without elaborating any further whatsoever, he does that really suspicious subject change again. Jade starts a mental tally, 'cause this guy's trying wayyy too hard to sell them something shady as heck. Like, wow, she wonders why she thinks that this guy and Kanaya weren't good friends...at all. Really. No sarcasm here! "anywway wwere havvin a real fresh start right noww kan. i can feel it. this is the kind a amicability that wwill drivve the other members of our wwashed up game session mad wwith friendship jealousy. you said you wwanted to see my court yeah?"

"Your court?" Jade asks. She runs her tongue over her teeth, then gives in to the instinct to whistle, low and kinda patchy, for Bec to return to her side. She nods when Kanaya angles her head toward Jade without taking her eyes from her watch on the dome, kneels, and buries her head in the fur by Bec's ear. There's no way to tell how well this Eridan person can hear or see through the dome, so hopefully her loud question and the resulting pompous, warbled blather that starts coming from the speaker covers the whisper of her next order. "Bec, stay out here, out of sight. Okay, boy?"

"oh im totally in charge ovver here its pretty great. had a couple a mishaps but thats on account a mal bein a douche."
Jade lifts her head and calls loudly, her voice sounding high-pitched even to her ears, "Mal who?" When Bec wags its tail in acknowledgment, Jade presses a kiss to the top of the wolf's head to add another whispered caveat, "And if I whistle, get me and Kanaya out right away. No stopping, no check-in - straight to Pasadena." Having the wolf act as an emergency get away plan has worked in the past, but by default Bec will usually wait until Jade confirms that she wants it to take her away. That could cost her and Kanaya precious seconds in the event of a crisis that Jade's leery about chancing after the experience with the clown troll, who knocked her for such a loop that she almost didn't remember to call Bec at all.

Eridan tries to verbally shrug them off again, Jade can hear it; she chalks another one up on her mental tally as she gets up from her crouch. She waits for Bec to wink out of sight in a flicker of green that counts as inconspicuous, by Bec standards. Of course, Eridan also fails miserably by virtue of the fact that the first word out of his intangible mouth is the one word guaranteed to make Kanaya bristle and bare her teeth. "horrorterror. not a thing anymore though they fucked right off. Frankly they wwerent evven fit to call themselvves a terror - first sign of faygo and they bolted it wwas fuckin lame. noww its just me and my court. im in the middle a somethin but you can come in and vvisit i guess. since wwe are spillin the mad camaraderie here and youre curious about my process an shit. nothin i approvve of more than some empirical investigatin between chums like us."

"Just a moment," Kanaya says. Casual as anything, the troll hooks her arm with Jade's again, like they did to teleport all the way here, and they bend their heads together while facing away from the dome to get up to some whispering. "Do you trust him."

It's not a question. "Not even a little." On the one hand, Jade would trust to the bond between her and Rose and Dave and John with everything she is; on the other, Kanaya doesn't give a lick of credit to anything related to the game, so Jade wouldn't trust in the same kind of bond existing between the troll game players. At least, not when Eridan has done so epic a job of poisoning the well in the space of one short conversation. That takes real talent! Jade is impressed, in a 'I am now suuuper suspicious' kind of way.

"We could return to Seattle by noon, if we were so inclined?"

Jade raises both her eyebrows and puts on her best skeptic face. "Yeah, but are we really gonna?" Doubt Eridan all she wants, Jade can't deny that the possibility that this is all one big game thing that - if they don't investigate it ASAP - will probably do that thing where it blows up in their face later on. Heck, she almost wishes that things hadn't turned so awful and sad-making with John and his dumb dad this past week, so that maybe they might have all come to look into Los Angeles sooner. Because what do you know, there's this ginormous potential for it to blow up in their faces...right the heck now. Between the Midnight Crew and the Felt and the game itself, the last thing they all need is to let a bunch of potential awfulness like this go because they've got (completely healthy) misgivings where the guy in charge is concerned.

And if Eridan remembers the troll game session, this may be too good an opportunity to pass up. If they can convince him to spill the beans, they might get a little more context for the human game session that they badly, badly need.

That, and Kanaya really probably just wants to hear more about the Horrorterror thing. The jadeblood hangs her head and sighs, and Jade pats her on the back in consolation. "No, I suppose we are not," Kanaya says, resigned. Then the troll straightens her shoulders and raises her chin, lower lip jutting a little as she looks to the dome. "I would like to discuss this Horrorterror with you, Eridan," she says with care. "It is relevant to my interests, at the moment."
"really? i mean yeah sure wwhatever. wwe can hang out and stuff. bring the jade human too wwhat the heck and i can givve you both the grand tour. ruth wwill meet you on the inside. here i need a sec the amazin wwizardries wwill kick in momentarily."

Jade's about to ask who *that* is, but the odds of getting a straight answer here have depleted to the point of nonexistence, so she saves her breath and waits to see what will happen next.

What happens is the dome opens up. Like it's nothing at all, like teams of scientists haven't been attempting to hack their way through for days and days, like Jade hasn't just been having a premature midlife crisis over the fact that she can't feel anything through it. Nope, none of that in any way affects the fact that opening a portal through the dome apparently only takes Eridan five seconds. It...dims open, is the best way Jade can think to describe it; the rock solid, diamond hard surface fades like a dying lightbulb right in front of her and Kanaya. As the circle fades out of existence, Jade lets out a tendril of power and lo and behold, she can *feel* things! Her space sense still can't pass through the rest of the dome, but the circular gap evaporating in the morning sun lets her sneak right through. It's such a relief that there still is stuff to sense that Jade almost drifts forward without realizing, until a firm hand on her shoulder halts her back. She smiles sheepishly at Kanaya in thanks.

"So it *can* open," Kanaya comments, at least half to herself. "Why do I get the impression that this simplicity is not permissible?"

Jade shrugs. "Because nothing's *ever* this easy for us?"

Kanaya's jaw works, but not with a swallowed laugh; her mouth twitches downward. "It raises an unfortunate question."

Joke's aside, Jade has figured that out, too. "If it's that easy...why hasn't anyone *left?*" The potential answers for that are sobering.

Kanaya considers the smooth-edged opening in the dome - it could have been shaped with a cookie-cutter, it's so perfectly carved - and then bows her head. "We came all this way to perform reconnaissance, did we not?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained!" Jade adds, pushing up the sleeves of her coat. The grey Seattle weather lately has been spoiling her into forgetting she grew up in tropical conditions; the constant sun on their backs, with the gleaming, cold white mirror of the dome, is almost enough to make her sweat a little.

"I merely wonder if it will be as easy for us to walk out as it appears to be to walk in." Kanaya has lost all her droll humor, and just looks grim.

After a moment of thought, Jade offers her arm. "Together?"

The jadeblood takes it. "Let us go to see the wizard."

The moment they're through, Jade breathes in deep - and sighs with relief when what she gets is a lungful of breathable air, and not just the waste CO2 of a city of people isolated from a fresh air supply. Something's filtered it, thankfully. Maybe hope magic? Jade doesn't know what limits that has; Rose wasn't exactly clear about it, apart from calling it 'tricky.'

The road before them resembles what it looked like on the outside of the dome, too, broken up and warped like it's been through an earthquake, but for the most part still intact enough for Jade and Kanaya to walk on with minimal floating. No acid at all, which was Kanaya's biggest worry on the
way here. A bunch of the buildings on either side of the road have been damaged, with blast marks and chunks of masonry missing or caved in with no apparent pattern, but they still match up with what Jade would expect to see here, based on her research.

Yeah, all battered yet standard American city-issue architecture...right up until everything goes absolutely loopy and Renaissance on them. The grey and dun and beige of the outer rim of buildings gives way to an entirely different style of architecture, beetle-shell black with white bleeding through the chinks in the stone, cast into chiaroscuro by the brilliant backlight of the dome overhead, a constant illumination shining down on a city of impossible, alien contrast. Seriously, Jade's loaded a map or three onto her goggles to reference for this trip, on the off chance they managed to get through the dome, and she's seen pictures, but the very center of the dome-covered area doesn't look like Los Angeles at all, anymore! Monochrome cathedrals and castles crowd together in tight blocks when Jade casts her power out in a light blanket, spires rising up like a forest of sharp spears toward the dome.

"What on Earth," Kanaya says, astonished; she walks with her head tilted just so, keeping one jade eye locked on the hole in the dome behind them. Jade's got all her senses trained on the opening, too, licking her lips once in case she has to whistle for Bec in a hurry. She really hopes it won't be necessary, though; after various ways this past week has gone to heck in a handbasket, she'd be pretty okay with this trip going better than expected. They're already through the dome when Jade was half-sure they'd be doing nothing more than inspecting the outside of it, so that's awesome! Now, they're just gonna have to capitalize on this amazing streak of good luck before it runs out and all their plans start to go wonky again...

To her unending relief, a group of four people walk toward them, a human woman at the fore of the scattered line as they scale a rough barricade to approach Jade and Kanaya. Real, living people! "Hello? Is that - are you really there?" the woman calls, hesitant, as she skids down the far side of the short wall and stumbles into a jog that carries her to meet the two of them halfway. She's average in height, features drawn taut by an echo of pain, and dressed more for the odd, patchwork city than Jade anticipated; her dreadlocks are back in a high ponytail, and she wears piecemeal armor that could be the same material as the stone of the cathedral walls down the street, lined with threads of fizzling light. The armor's so fascinating - like something out of an RPG game, if Jade's honest, completely different from anything she's encounter in all her travels, vaguely reminiscent of old imperial armor but more ornamental, in a way - right up until Jade's gaze reaches the woman's arm and she realizes *that's not armor*. Part of the arm has been entirely replaced, an elegant prosthetic that doesn't have any of the stiffness or lag that you get sometimes with even medical grade work when the woman - Ruth? - uses it to vault over one last pile of rubble with a soft, chiming ring. In fact, Jade's not sure she can find a single wire or servomotor in this thing! It glitters with silvery white blades that form minimalistic bones and tendons, glossy and lucent enough that Jade can see through to the heart of burning white light that makes up the core. It's more like an artistic interpretation of what a prosthetic would look like and really has no business functioning at all without the power of magic and wishful thinking, in her opinion.

"Yes, we are," Kanaya answers, when Jade's too busy trying to figure out that wondrous arm to respond right away. Whoops. She didn't mean to stare... "You are Ruth?"

"That's me," the woman says; she doesn't sound at all happy about it, her head shaking slowly as she drinks in the sight of them with exhausted eyes. The other three in the patrol group catch up but hang back some distance from Kanaya and Jade, two of them clutching spears of the same stone as the buildings, that they seem to be using as glorified walking sticks to lean on with every other step. "I don't suppose you have any way to keep that open, do you?"
Jade blinks and looks over her shoulder, at the open circle in the dome. "Why, do you want to leave?"

Ruth closes her eyes; another member of the patrol whimpers. "He'd know," is all the woman says, closing her translucent hand into a fist, the blades chiming as they rearrange themselves and gleam, faceted like crystal. "He's - he's altered it, before. Even if we tried..." She swallows and has to visibly dredge up the effort to smile at Jade. "It would just snap close again once he noticed. Probably better not to piss him off."

Uh oh. Jade and Kanaya exchange glances. Only two minutes in, and already Jade's getting confirmation of her developing theory that Eridan might be a douchebag. She's tempted to just reach out and sort of tap Ruth on the shoulder, to bounce the woman right out the opening before it can close up (it better stay open, or Jade's gonna totally wreck Eridan's shit, no questions asked) but Ruth is already turning away, giving a short shake of her head when a troll looks at her with a hopeful expression. "You're the first new faces we've seen in - a while, I guess," Ruth says, leading them back over the barricade with stiff shoulders. When they reach her patrol group (a man, another woman, and a greenblood) Ruth brushes their arms with the fingers of her ordinary hand. "Can't really count the days all that well in here, and most electronics have been dead for a while, so..."

Three more pairs of eyes are watching Kanaya and Jade now, wary and disbelieving, like they're mirages that could vanish any second. The troll has a prosthetic limb as well, Jade notices, a whole leg that's been replaced with obsidian crystal flush with his hip. It's not as transparent as the metal and crystal of Ruth's arm, but Jade doesn't doubt the internal workings are just as impossible. "It is March 29th, today," Kanaya says; they all stiffen, the man's face contorted with such agonizing relief that Jade has to look away.

"Not as long as it's felt, then." The woman sighs, and rubs her face with the back of her hand. "Anyway. He called down that he wants us to walk you to the courtyard, which isn't much of a problem. Right now he's up reinforcing the roof - he started a while ago, so..."

They've barely stopped before the group starts moving again, and Jade, startled, almost trips both her and Kanaya over a rock when she starts walking again. "Why? The dome already seems pretty darn sturdy! No one on the outside can do anything about it," she asks.

Ruth slows a little for them to catch up, her expression unreadable. "Something's coming. Something big. He calls it the Reckoning."

This time, Jade does nearly trip over a rock, too distracted by this sudden announcement that she loses track of her surroundings in shock. Kanaya just looks confused - and then aghast realization sets in as she presumably remembers where she's heard the word before. "The what?!"

The woman just points toward the ceiling, ambivalent. "According to him, most of the planet's done for. So we're going to try to outlast it in here, whether we like it or not. A lot of nutjobs claim the world's gonna end, it's not exactly a new thing. But most of those guys can't make something like -" another shake of her head "- well, all of this. So if we go along with him, there might be a chance we survive it."

That's...wow! Jade's known the game would play out for ages, and tried to get used to the idea of the world ending after Grandpa shared what would happen. It's been a sticking point in her own thought process, a snag in her ethics that she couldn't never quite bring herself to tackle head on because that would mean acknowledging that so many people were going to die while they went on to the Medium. Since watching the actual Reckoning unfold in part through the hub, she's been avoiding the thoughts as much as she could.
But if this dome of Eridan's is actually designed to hold off the worst of the meteor storm, that's...that's incredible! Jade supposes the only reason no one ever thought of it before was because so few people would have the foreknowledge of the Reckoning itself and the necessary time to plan how to circumvent it before the end.

Kanaya hums. Jade guesses she would be less than impressed by all this; meanwhile, Jade's just trying to calculate how strong that dome would need to be to withstand a bombardment capable of annihilating most life on the planet. The numbers she's getting are somewhere in the range of 'really dang strong.' "You do not sound all that convinced," Kanaya says, lifting part of her skirt as they climb (and float) over a pile of dark stone rubble that spans the entire road. Jade steadies the green blooded troll with a spark of power when he starts to backslick in the gravel.

Ruth rolls her wrist - the one that's all crystal and knives and light - in a slow circle, before gingerly using it to help her clamber over the last chunk of fallen rock, and begins to skid down the far side. "I was, at first, I think. But more than a few of us have been trying to piece things together, what happened here in those days the dome first appeared and...a lot of things aren't adding up, right." Her volume drops to a low whisper, so that the other members of the patrol can't hear. "His story keeps changing. Some things he said to me early on were - let's just say, he's trying very, very hard to act like he never said them at all. Sometimes, I can't tell if those conversations were even real...But people stopped dying. He took charge, and started fixing people." She cracks her neck to one side, pensive. "Faith and the some of the other kids came through that nightmare without a scratch on them, and they believe everything he says. The rest of us - well, we're not getting out of here any time soon, not when he has the angels hanging around all the time and the dome on lock down."

She's all but saying it flat out; Jade's stomach churns as she follows Ruth's cue and whispers back, "You're all trapped here. You do want out."

"I don't want to die in a meteor storm!" Ruth explodes; then she flinches and switches back to a low hiss. The other patrol members take a quick peep back at their trailing group of three, but don't say a word when they see Ruth is still up and walking. "He kept saying the meteors would fall soon and yakking on and on about bilunar perigees, and it took us ages to realize he was using the old Imperial calendar. Apparently, by April thirteenth, most of the world's going to be a wasteland. A lot of people plan to wait it out until then, to see if he's full of bullshit or not." She looks bleak. "And while we wait, those things keep watching everything."

"What things?" Kanaya asks.

A faint cree from overhead lets them know.

Jade sensed them before, but at first she couldn't place what it was she felt. There's been constant movement above their heads, but it doesn't feel like any helicopter or other airborne vehicle she's ever tracked, and she doubts anyone here would be flying one around, anyway. When Ruth nods up at the castle on their left, Jade finally connects the faint rustle of beating wings to the unsettling beastie that peers down at them - something with a face and a torso like a human or a troll, but with wings that furl against its back and a lower body that lashes and coils around the gargoyle beneath it for balance. Diamond-shaped eyes radiate sharp interest as it watches them trek through the city streets.

And there are more like it. Lots more, circling overhead, if all of the soaring objects in the sky are the same type of thing. The patrol group hurries past the castle, but there are three more of the beings sitting on top of an archway that passes over the road, so that they have no choice but to duck their heads and walk underneath. "Angels," Ruth says, hushed. One of the other humans crosses herself, jaw tight. "Or at least, that's what people call them. They don't attack anymore."
"Anymore?" Kanaya keeps her eye on where the angels were perched, even after the dark stone of the archway comes between them and the winged-lizardy things.

"Those first few days, it was bad; they'd swoop down and help drag people into acid pools. He took over, and they listen to him, but -" Ruth shrugs "- I just can't shake the feeling that any day now everything could go back to the way it was. It's a choice between possibly dying in a few weeks, and living with him in charge. With everyone we ever knew dead out there, if he's right about the Reckoning." She digs a thumb into the bleached white flesh around the joint of her prosthetic arm, deep enough that Jade thinks she'll leave a bruise. "No matter which we choose, we lose. I just want to live."

The deeper into the city they go, the more uneasy Jade feels.

This whole thing smells fishier with every new piece of information Ruth shares with them, scattered fragments that build a broader, more horrifying picture of what happened in Los Angeles when the Horrorterror first starting eating people. Combine that with all the creepy angels watching them, flocking and huddling in dark eaves and generally being really weird, and she and Kanaya only have to look at each other and nod to know that they're on the same page about being on their guard. Jade keeps one hand trailing into her sylladex, always with a rifle held firm in her grip. She's not gonna drop it like she did when confronted with Juggaloco; she's learned her lesson.

But they're gonna be dealing with someone else like him, with game powers that could be wholly different from what Jade and the other human players can do - she doubts any of them could have made this kind of dome, or gone around making prosthetics that can (apparently) fire lightning at will. None of the patrol is willing to demonstrate that particular function, not even for science, and Jade gets the impression from Ruth's tense shoulders that there might have been unfortunate accidents before.

Seriously, though! Lasers, air filtration, the strange alterations to the buildings, and the dome itself - what can't this Eridan guy do? He's got to be pretty strong to pull all of this stuff off and keep it going for as long as he has. Like, wow! Jade is kind of impressed by what they've seen so far. It gives her a new perspective on what kind of potential these game powers can have when applied in out-of-the-box ways, and it makes her itch to test her own.

What's more reassuring to feel, though, are the people. Deep in the shadows of the strange architecture, more and more humans and trolls peek out from arcades and cloisters, and that's awesome because it means they're not dead! Jade is all for the not-dead thing, here. Most of them appear to be in armor like Ruth's, with legs like spun glass, arms like lances, carnival masks that frame artificial eyes with lightning in them, fingers replaced with digits like Ruth's, all rotating, silvery blades. Hardly anyone has come through this without some kind of major injury, and Eridan has outfitted them all with weapons instead of regular prosthetics to replace what was lost. Ruth calls it a court, but to Jade it reads more like a militia...

Soon, they reach a central kind of location, where Jade's road map falls completely short because, from the looks of things, a loot of the buildings that used to stand here have been cleared out, leaving nothing behind but a wide, empty circle of ground, and two structures in the very middle: one last cathedral, with a domed roof, its glass windows stretching from the ground to the fourth floor. Jade can't distinguish any details in the stained glass; it's all in shades of black and really, really dark grey. Across a short stretch of black cobblestones, a walled in courtyard with high, thick walls rises up, the entrances set between a series of pillars veined with grey and white light. There's a lone tower in one corner of the squared off area - Jade can feel things moving on the roof of it, scuttling
around and *watching*. They coo and cree to each other in low tones, but occasionally an angel will screech like diamonds on glass, and a flock will rise up in the distance with a rush of wings, circling away to soar over the refurbished city.

There's a lot more living people in the courtyard when Ruth takes them in, the most Jade has sensed so far, all of them fixating on Jade and Kanaya in a fraction of a second, maybe drawn by how different their clothes look compared to all the dark armor and white light here. The person in the very center, however, isn't Eridan - a little troll girl sits on what probably used to be a dais for a statue, her short legs swinging over the dark stone floor as she watches them with blue eyes. None of her limbs or eyes or anything have been replaced, that Jade can see. Ruth motions for Jade and Kanaya to stay where they are, then slips through the crowd to go to the girl's side, using her intact hand to shake the girl by the shoulder until she looks up and smiles. Her face is filled with quiet trust.

"What's going on, Faith?" Ruth asks, gruff.

"He's still above," the girl says, reverent, kicking a foot out as she cranes her neck back to smile at the sky. (Urgh. The dome, not the sky...) "He should be done soon."

Jade looks up, following the incline of the dark tower, and then further - and up - until finally she realizes how close they've come to standing beneath the apex point of the dome, just a few yards off from the center of the upside bowl. At her side, Kanaya squints, and Jade's not sure how much the troll can make out; she has her own goggles that can zoom in on the speck of darkness hovering up there. The sight of it makes Ruth's lips tighten, and Faith's eyes go soft with devotion. Even with her goggles at max, she can't make out more than a fuzzy purple and black blob, but Eridan is up there.

Doing...something? Who knows.

They find out a second later, though, when a swell of white light ripples out from the center of the dome, like a wave in a pond. The hairs on Jade's arms all stand on end at once, crackling with static electricity that for once hasn't been generated by her own powers. She finds herself stretching up on the balls of her feet, like a plant turning towards the sun, and when Kanaya tugs on her arm Jade looks quickly to see that the troll is on her toes too, alarmed and pale. Another ripple of power diffuses out across the inner curve, but this one is slower and denser, like heavy cream that sinks into the dome and making it radiate even more bright light.

When the impromptu light show ends, though, a cacophony rises up. It sounds kinda like someone breathing into a hundred poorly tuned flutes at once, and Rush shudders bodily, more than a few of the other adults cringing back against the walls of the courtyard. Jade claps her hands to her ears with a grimace at the jangling notes climb in pitch, while Kanaya bears through it with her jaw clenched. The seated troll girl just sighs and keeps smiling. By the time the awful noise stops, Ruth looks green; she doesn't hurl like Jade half expects her to, but the sounds of someone else throwing up emanate from the far corner, and Ruth swallows repeatedly before the color returns to her face.

"Does that happen often?" Kanaya asks, while Jade peels her goggles off her face to pop the seal that feels like it's gonna suck her eyes out. After a moment's consideration, she pinches her nose and breathes out until her ears pop with a twinge of soreness. She doesn't think the pressure changed as wildly as it could have if John were doing some windy thing, but the atmosphere definitely shifted. Seriously, what is that guy doing up there? She's still got her power stretched to keep tabs on the hole in the dome, and she can definitely still feel the outside from here, so it hasn't shut...for now.

"Often enough," Ruth says, clipped and short. When Jade blinks at her, thrown by the sudden shift, Ruth won't meet her eyes. "He should be down. Just -" She breaks off to glance up, and then veers away from them, brushing past a burgundyblood in her hurry. "Be careful," she calls before she vanishes into the crowd, the sound still tinny and distant as Jade's ears readjust.
Up above, amid the flurry of the angels resettling themselves in new perches, she can sense the violet figure descend.

Eridan is, when Jade stops to consider it, exactly like she would have pictured if she'd had more data to work with and if someone had asked her about it. The swooshy cape almost covers for how gangly his shoulders look in comparison; while it's all floaty and poofed up dramatically, at least. But when he touches down and gravity catches up with the fabric, he looks like he's been swallowed by it and the rest of his dark, glinting armor. Jade can't spy any prosthetics here, just violet armguards and that (honestly pretty swanky) cape. He's shorter than both of them, with spiky ear fins and spiky teeth and spiky horns and a spiky gun (that lights up!) and a really spiky demeanor to complete the ensemble, like a mer-hedgehog or a sea urchin or something. He frowns at them with just as much wariness as Jade's sure they're projecting right back.

"So. Kan," he says, his voice a lot less echoey and disembodied now that they're speaking in person. "Long time, no see." Fidgety and still sporting a scowl - possibly a permanent fixture, like Karkat's constant grumpy face - the violetblood uses the end of the glowy rifle to rub the side of his head, and then catches himself and jerks it away. That's so not how to properly handle firearm. "Uh. And Jade human, long time no hear. Yeah."

Oh, jeez. This is gonna be awkward, isn't it. Hearing Ruth's story got Jade all pumped up for some super sinister guy with a god complex and a ton of magical powers, but for all his scowling Eridan has managed to completely undercut his own advertising in the space of fifteen measly words. He's pouting and trying too hard. ...Overcompensating. That's the word for it.

"Eridan," Kanaya says, still saying the name carefully, like a foreign word. "You have altered the city. Vastly." Her tone stays perfectly neutral.

"Yeah, I hardly recognize it!" Jade adds, plastering on her best bright, admiring smile for when Eridan blinks at her. This close, she spies heavy violet-tinted bags under his eyes; Jade wonders how much sleep this guy's been getting, what with all his apparent work to reinforce the dome against the Reckoning, of all things. "I mean, did you completely make it from scratch? Or are we talking matter manipulation?"

The troll shifts around, restless, shrugging with one shoulder and avoiding direct eye contact. "Well, it was kind of a spur of the moment thing." He puffs up and waves her over as he starts walking. The court parts around him when he stomps through their midst, ducking their heads back into the shadows of the arcade unless they're under a certain age - children turn toward him like flowers toward the sun. "But my mastery over all this most righteous hope magic gets more awesome every day. Once Mal booked it, and I started remembering all this game lore, everything started coming together."

Huh - that's interesting. "You only remembered recently? How did you pull it off?" Jade asks.

"Circumstances," Eridan says, emphasizing each syllable. "Like. Mal circumstances. Look, I don't want to talk about that guy, or Gam - fuck both of those guys. We were gonna have a royal tour here, right?"

Avoiding the subject again, huh! Jade folds her arms over her chest and feels her lip start to pout a little, frowning as Eridan's gaze flashes back to Kanaya and lingers too long, like he expects to see more than polite incomprehension there. "A tour, then," Kanaya agrees, meeting Eridan's stare with an implacable, smooth face.
Jade lets Eridan sweat for a bit before she bumps Kanaya with an elbow, so that the jadeblood will break the merciless staring contest that appears to be freaking Eridan out. "A tour sounds cool, yeah," Jade agrees. "And you can tell us more about what went on here, and all these 'circumstances.'" Before Eridan can protest her word choice or notice the implied air quotes or make another excuse, Jade rushes on, "Did you really build this dome for the Reckoning? That sounds like such a good idea, actually! How do you estimate it'll hold up?"

It's the right note to take to make Eridan stop acting all twitchy (what is his deal); instead of sweating in anxiety under Kanaya's stare, Eridan starts preening. Jade has met Oriole, an actual bird person, but never before has she witnessed someone preen upon receiving flattery. "Mal put up the first one to keep people from bothering it," he blabs, ruffling Faith's hair absently as he paces past her, his eyes brimming with exultation as he waves lazily at the courtyard around them and the dome overhead. "I altered it a lot, naturally, and I put more power into it every day. I know my apocalypses and this is always at least a class 5. Once the King falls...we'll be ready."

"But - we all have to play the game! Are you gonna be able to keep this up once we're in the Medium?" Jade thinks these are some pretty big things to take into consideration for this whole Eridome plan. Their powers aren't without limit, you know...

Eridan snorts, one side of his frown twisting up into a smirk. "I don't have to do any damn thing."

Kanaya presses her fingers to the side of her temple, the only sign she gives that she's probably vexed as heck over the fact that Jade and Eridan won't stop talking game stuff. "As remarkable as this accomplishment is," she says, sweeping after Eridan when he starts stalking through the crowd. Jade gets pulled along, not willing to get left behind. "I wished to speak to you more about the Horrorterror that nested here. You called it Mal - did it ever mention the Ukraine?"

Eridan looks disgruntled; the court disperses and reforms around him, always leaving a clear space for him to walk. "Well, its full moniker of doom was Malā’ikah or something, and it was a dick." He makes a so-so motion with his hand. "If you wanna know more, go ask someone else, on account of I was busy being possessed and all. We didn't have heart to heart chats about foreign nations whilst it was riding me around and weepin' about clowns."

Kanaya keeps probing. "But there was a Horrorterror in the Ukraine, too. This Malā’ikah didn't say anything at all?"

"Nothing that didn't get bailed out along with the rest of it when Mal decided to ditch. Took most of my lungs with 'em, too," Eridan rolls his eyes. "It knocked loose the game and all that, so at least now if that angel asshole decides to show its ugly faces again, I know exactly where to tell that hive to stick it. No way in hell am I letting it in my head a third time."

"What? Third. We're still talking about Horrorterrors, right?" Jade demands, scratching the back of her head. Eridan doesn't seem fully aware of how much he's saying; his mouth runs so much that maybe he's lost track of whatever subject he kept (badly) avoiding. But now this is just getting sort of surreal? Because Jade was under the impression that Rose barely survived being fully possessed once - what on earth is Eridan talking about?

"Third," he confirms, flippant as anything. He scowls at the heavens, which...basically seems to be him in a nutshell. "They got me in the game, too. Before we fought the King, even. Once you've got horror tangled in your head, they don't seem to take 'no' for an answer later on." Shifting his weight, Eridan balances mostly on one foot before he shoves off and starts pushing through the crowd again at another angle, leaving them in the dust.

These 'circumstances' just keep getting weirder and weirder, and Jade thinks Eridan shared more than
he meant to. Unfortunately, in this instance, sharing more only leaves Jade utterly bamboozled. She can't tell if that's because she's missing something key to understanding it all, or because Eridan caught himself and shut down before he could give away more than he intended.

Kanaya closes her eyes, breathes in through her nose, and then smiles at Jade thinly. "Rose did warn us it was unlikely to be the same creature. What a muddle..."

"Hey, at least we've got that much almost confirmed," Jade says, striving for positivity. "And it looks like it's gone now, at least, without us even having to kick tentacle butt." She keeps an eye on Eridan's cape as it swishes; one of the trolls clustered around the court has started talking to him, and he listens with that faint scowl taking on an impatient edge. Jade can't make out what they're discussing over the constant murmur of the crowd.

"Now we simply need to appeal to him about the dome itself." Kanaya grimaces, shaking her head. "Defense against this supposed game is all well and good, but precautionary measures aside, it is clear those present here wish to leave. Perhaps he's simply been too caught up in reinforcing it to listen. He strikes me as the type to hear only what he wants to hear."

All this cosmic horror stuff is making Jade as paranoid as Karkat, honestly. "He did say he got possessed twice," she points out. "Maybe it screwed with his head and left behind slime that's gunking up his brain, and that's why he's not thinking rationally about this stuff. That could happen, right?"

"Then we'd require Rose to burn it out; I wouldn't even know where to begin..." The jadeblood shakes out her wrist, unwinding her and Jade's arms, and goes to draw out her phone. But she doesn't get the chance to try to pester Rose (would their phones work, even with the opening in the dome? If Eridan has opened portals on a temporary basis before, none of the reports mentioned scattered bursts of texts being delivered...) before Eridan scoffs loud enough to be heard over the court and whips back toward the two of them, his scowl derisive and furrowing more when he lays eyes on Kanaya. "Come on, let's go," he says, twitching his cape out from under someone's foot before they can finish taking that step that would have crumpled the hem. Then he jumps up onto the crenellations of the courtyard wall, a huge floating leap right over their heads, and gestures at her and Kanaya impatiently.

"Uhm..." Jade starts, reaching out with her powers and trying to feel where Ruth has vanished to, but when she locates Ruth the woman's already fallen far back into the far corner of the courtyard, slipping between the crowd and out of sight, maybe even making for the exit.

They might as well go after Eridan, for now. Jade's still trying to get a bead on how he might react to a request that he just, y'know, let these poor people out of the dome. Ruth's testimony didn't make things sound too promising, and Jade wishes they could have spoken with her longer, or gotten her and Eridan to sit down and maybe have them hash things out.

But Eridan is a game player who remembers things about the troll session, which is more than even John can say. If those memories and Mal messed him up a little, it wouldn't be surprising. At all. Maybe it'll give them some leverage that Ruth and her group haven't had thus far; Eridan'll still go down on the record as a royal doucheblossom for pulling this power trip, but Jade figures anyone deserves a break when Horrorterrors are involved in anything. It could all be a misunderstanding she and Kanaya are just in time to help resolve! "Up?"

"Up," Kanaya agrees - and then jumps completely without Jade's help, her dark skirt flaring to reveal the green underside as she kicks off one broken pillar to another that leans against the courtyard wall, scaling the dark stone in a few quick steps. Bemused, Jade bounces up the slow way, floating gently
up the way Eridan does rather than teleporting. When she reaches the same level, Kanaya has already made herself comfortable, balanced on an overhanging spit of rock with a few yards buffer between her position and Eridan's. Better safe than sorry, after all!

From up here, at least, Jade has a better view of this drastically altered Los Angeles to go along with what her space sense is feeding to her. At first she thought her maps weren't gonna be much use, but that's surprisingly not the case! The buildings themselves have changed, yet, when Jade traces the pattern of the streets and alleys and empty canals, she finds that they all follow the same roadmap - it's just overlaid with dark stone. What's more intriguing to see is that there's even more deformations and breaks in the obsidian portion of the city than Jade thought; scalloped hollows pockmark the streets and some of the dark glass of tall stained glass windows lies shattered on the ground below the cathedrals, while some of the covered walkways and arcades and towers have partially collapsed like the pillars of this courtyard, evidence of past strife.

"I guess you wouldn't recognize it, but - it's like LoWaA," Eridan says, his voice rough. He coughs to clear it when they both give him equally baffled looks. "Land of Wrath and Angels. Mal - Mal helped reshape everything, before it left. It liked fuckin with my head, I think." The violetblood points with his chin, the riflekind under his arm crackling with compressed power. "Then Gam stopped by and started provokin' me into shooting up the place. Enough to make you miss when that guy was just a dipshit stoner who ate sopor in pies."

"LoWaA? Shouldn't that..." Jade tries to figure out what's weird about that, but she can't quite put her finger on it. The acronym - and the name itself - just sounds off. Something's missing. If she saw it written down on a page, she'd know. "Never mind."

"'Gam'?" Kanaya says instead. Her claws are never far from her side, even now, one clacking a slow beat on the case of a tube of lipstick, as steady as a pulse.

Eridan snorts. "Gamzee? Makara? Stupid bard and his stupid drama bullshit...you don't wanna run into him these days. He's on some next level juggalo cult shit, and not takin' no for an answer."

And just like that, Jade has a name! "Gamzee Makara," she repeats, adding that to her mental dossier on the clown guy. Her fingers itch to pester Karkat, see if the full name triggers some of that déjà vu of his, but she can't be distracted right now. "What did he want from you?"

Lip curled, Eridan jumps to the tower next to them, landing on a balcony that runs around the upper levels. Jade doesn't know if he expects them to follow, but she knows she's keeping her distance: three of those angel-lizard things are perched on the conical roof of the tower, one of them out of sight so that Jade only knows it's there through her space sense. "I wasn't too keen to listen to crazy ramblin'," Eridan says, his voice carrying. "He had Tav - Tavros - with him, so eventually I persuaded them to buzz off and leave me to do my own thing. If Gam wants to conoitter with everyone for some weird Bard of Rage rave, I ain't interested. I got responsibilities and shit here."

Responsibilities that include keeping a bunch of people from access to professional medical care after what was clearly a pretty dang traumatic grimlight event, Jade thinks, cynical. "I can't blame you. Running into that Gamzee guy was pretty scary!" she says aloud, digging a toe into some gravel under her feet.

As long as Eridan's talking, she's got more time to reach out with her powers to confirm what Ruth's already hinted at - this Horrorterror, Mal, killed so many people. A downtown area like this should have been jam-packed at the time the dome came down, full of motion and bodies taking up space, but the vast majority of the cobblestone streets and carved channels feel still and empty. If the massacre left any bodies, they've either been cleared away or fell apart into ash. The court is one of the most densely occupied places around for miles - and that's a leaden punch in the gut, one that
makes Jade close her eyes as she struggles to process it. Civilians have died on her before, but nothing on this scale.

Even if they persuade Eridan to take down the dome, or break it themselves, Jade thinks this is gonna be even more difficult for people to recover from than New York City. Rose's grimdark breakdown was destructive, yeah, but the last estimates Jade read through showed most of the damage was in property, not necessarily lives. Leviathan, Rose said, when she could bring herself to talk about it at all, was busy trying to carve a massive enough summoning spirograph to let it transport its whole hive through to the physical world, not in actively trying to kill people. Most of the casualties were bystanders, fleshy things that got in its way by accident. Whatever the Horrorterror here wanted, it was definitely more along the lines of the thing in the Ukraine - and if killing people was the goal, it achieved that much.

It's stomach turning.

"Look, can we stop talking about Gam and Mal and just appreciate my visionary status, here?" Eridan demands, waving a hand at the view before them and tapping his foot. "Look at this craftsmanship and tell me that's not a clear example of my genius. They should have put me in charge a long damn time ago."

Kanaya tilts her head to the side, lips pursed. "I thought that the Horrorterror caused this state of affairs?"

"Yeah. That's what I said, isn't it?" Eridan says. Uhhh...'kay. "I tweaked some of Mal's ideas, what's the big deal? We had a partin' of ways over the fact that it was afraid of Gamzee, that's all, so I kicked it to the curb. Of all the stupid things to wimp out over, after we already had this place ground under our heel...go figure, right?"

Wait, now he kicked the Horrorterror out? As opposed to it just absconding of its own accord? Jade runs her fingers through her hair and tugs on the ends as she looks out over the city one last time. She can feel a thought piecing itself together in her mind, a question that's so simple, but devastating to put into words, because of all the things Eridan hasn't said, this might be the most damning of all. "That's it?" Jade has to say it aloud before she can make sense of it. "That's - that's all?"

She catches herself a moment too late and winces. Kanaya has gone utterly still, her eyes flat and fixed on Eridan, whose silence stretches on and on, frowning at Jade like he has no clue what she means.

He can't mean that. Maybe Jade didn't include enough context, and she lost him. She tries again: "Just because it was afraid? Not because it killed people, or mutilated them? You say 'ground under our heel' like -" Like it was something he'd really been perfectly okay with, Horrorterror possessing him or no. But she can't say something like that, she can't! "You only fought off that Horrorterror because it was afraid?"

She's trying to give him an out, here. And sure, Eridan takes it, but only in the most bizarre, twisty way possible. He tosses his head and looks down his nose at her and Kanaya, trying for some snotty look like what Jade just inferred was stupid, but - when he responds, finally, he's still not saying no. "Mal was a winged dick and yeah, a mass-murdering asshole, I admitted that already. Like, I have completely learned my lesson about consortin' with the zoologically dubious, hallucination-inducing elder gods, is that what you want to hear?"

"No." Kanaya's voice is a hard, brittle thing. "We want to hear you say that you would give anything to have wrested control back earlier. That none of what happened here was in your control."
"Of course that's what I meant, Kan!" Eridan throws up his hands; his rifle flies up with them, and Jade tenses, but it looks like he's just being melodramatic, not actively trying to threaten them. "You know me better than that. Okay, maybe you don't -" a roll of his eyes in Jade's direction "- but we were friends. And yeah, me and Vris, we get tunnel vision sometimes about stuff, but you always got it. You were very understandin' about the fact that growing up is hard. It's hard and sometimes we make poor life choices whilst under the influence. It's not my fault neither of you two remember any of this important stuff pertaining to the quality of my character." His lip tugs to the side.

This is, apparently, the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Or at least, it breaks Kanaya, who stamps her foot so hard on the stone of the wall that Jade wobbles and Eridan cowers back against the tower wall, though he couldn't have felt it from up there. All the color drains out of his face in a sudden wash of fear. "Fine. I accept it," Kanaya spits, glaring irritably at both Eridan and Jade. Her face looks weirdly bright all of a sudden, as though she's started glowing like a firefly.

"Uh, come again, Kan?" Eridan says, squeaking a little.

Kanaya doesn't care; she's on a roll, throwing up her own claws in such frustration that she teeters on her skinny stretch of rock. "I believe it! Fine! You all have successfully provided sufficient proof that there was, in fact, a bizarre and mythologically convoluted game which played out in some disturbing proto version of our lives." Incensed, Kanaya presses her fists to her head, scrunching up the fabric of her hood. "Clearly there is little to no point in my belaboring the skeptic's point of view when random people in completely arbitrary cities appear to have catapulted aboard the conspiracy bandwagon, and every single one of you keeps demonstrating how it drove you all completely insane!"

...Jade wouldn't go that far...

"That's great, Kan," Eridan says, sounding like he means the exact opposite. He's spooked - almost too spooked, his shoulders up and his horns down in a defensive hunch, and his eyes dilated as heck. "But you, um. You still don't remember it though, right? Right?"

Kanaya lowers her hands, slowly. "No. I do not."

Then she crouches and jumps, one hand just barely hooking on the edge of the balcony Eridan's on at the uppermost point of her arc. With a growl, Kanaya heaves herself up without assistance - Eridan stumbles backward with a panicky, wide-eyed expression, but isn't fast enough to avoid Kanaya when she swings herself up and snags his collar, yanking him back into range. "So, I do not suppose you would be adverse to informing me what. You. Did."

Jade's not sure if she should be more worried about Kanaya or Eridan here. She's never seen Kanaya lose her temper like this! "I don't know what you two are talkin' about! Kan!" Eridan pleads, shaking his head as his voice cracks three different ways. "H-honest! Anything you might of heard, it's all a bunch of bs! Have you been talking to Vris? Cause you can't trust a word outta that acrimonious -"

"You are far too invested in assuring yourself that I don't recall this game, and with convincing me that nothing happened," Kanaya says, teeth bared, "and not nearly concerned enough with how unsuccessful you've been in convincing me of anything at all. Please. Enlighten me, Eridan. Why do you fear me?"

Ack! Okay, it's almost go time! Jade kicks off the wall and lands on the balcony on the other side of Eridan with a deft twist, resting her fists on her hips so that when Eridan cranks his head around, pale, she's got her serious expression on. "You really suck at acting. Just FYI," she tells him, keeping
her eyes forward while the rest of her senses lock onto the angels. She doubts they'll just hang back watching with Kanaya thisclose to dumping Eridan over the side of the balcony.

Eridan's laugh sounds jittering and too high-pitched. "Why don't we just let bygones be bygones, Kan?! We were all dumb kids, and it was hard, and we fucked up a lot. You understand that, right?"

"That's still not an answer," Jade points out. "And for that matter, why are you keeping the people here captive?" Kanaya nods along with her, grasping Eridan's collar with an implacable grip that the violetblood tries to scrabble at and peel away with his own claws in increasing panic. "You claim you want to prepare this place for the end of the world, but why would you disregard what they want like that? A lot of them probably still need medical attention you don't have the know-how to pull off! This isn't defense, this is dictatorship."

Aaand, yup, those angels are on the move now, a rustle of wings and slithering bodies that reaches Jade's ears, along with brief burst of harsh, strident song calls that reverberate through the city. Jade feels more of them coasting through the air toward this tower, in wheeling flocks of four apiece. The closest group of three, the ones bating on the conical roof above, scramble across the dark stone with hisses that raise Jade's hackles. When she looks up to glare at them, diamond-shaped eyes stare back at her with hollow hostility.

Kanaya doesn't give an inch, levelling a critical stare at Eridan and raising her hand just enough that the violetblood totters on the tips of his toes, lifted up off his feet. "All we have seen and heard," she says, "has really not helped you make a good case for yourself in the slightest. But I want to hear your real reasoning. Because I refuse to believe that anyone in the world could possibly be this dense."

But Jade's words appear to have struck a nerve, because Eridan doesn't look scared anymore. He's pissed, his scowl turned ugly. "So. You guys are here to mess with my rightful reign, huh. Just like Gamzee. Well, that's just fuckin' grand."

"Why would you even be ruling in the first place?!!" Jade kind of wants to shake him, herself, but that's not gonna defuse the situation... "Can we rewind a little? Is it really so much to ask that you let some people out?" Sure, not everyone would want to come back, but there has to be a way to balance between this really good idea of defending against the Reckoning and the equivalent but terrible idea of Eridan being some kind of tyrant with his own mini-armed forces.

Why is that last part even a thing? Jade's having trouble comprehending why Eridan's mind would have gotten fixated on it at all, but she's never really had the urge to rule anything herself...So weird!

"They're my subjects!" Eridan snarls. He's not cringing as much, but that's because he's started going into infuriated troll mode, ear fins flared and the yellows of his ears turning orange. Kanaya, meanwhile, is definitely glowing like a lightbulb, and shows no signs of dimming any time soon, both of her claws white-knuckled. "Don't any of you sorry dicks recognize a troll's blood right to rule?"

"Nope," Jade says, flatly.

"Not in the slightest." Kanaya narrows her eyes. "You are being a danger to everyone left in this city, and I am not overly impressed with this initial assessment of your motivations and the threat you pose to yourself. Help me understand further, because all I see is that people are dead and you won't stop giving excuses that have no merit with me." Jade nods, hard enough that her neck gives a little creak; he's got to realize he's facing a unified front, here, and maybe if they don't escalate the violence further (Kanaya's aggressive posture isn't helping things, but Jade isn't sure there's much she can do to tamp down Kanaya's ire when she's in hero mode) Eridan will notice he's outnumbered
and stop talking in circles around himself.

Instead of responding, Eridan takes on all the cooperative traits of a mule. He spits - and Jade catches how he thumbs at his strife specibus, and the way the hushed chatter of the angel-lizards overhead picks up in tempo. "I don't have to fucking justify myself to you, Kan. Mal's gone. I'm in charge. Let it drop." He glowers at Kanaya with something bordering on barely concealed dislike, poisonous and disdainful - like he can't believe he has to put up with this kind of talk.

No good. The longer this conversation lasts, the more defensive it feels like he's getting, and that's not a good thing. At all. "Kanaya -" Jade starts to whisper.

Eridan breaks in again before she can finish, though, making some dramatic flourish with his cape as he raises a claw and jabs toward the road they walked down, toward the hole in the dome. "Whatever. We're done here. I wanted to show you my grand design, but I don't need this bullshit from you guys all over again. Get. Out."

"Excuse me -" Kanaya begins, but Eridan isn't done: "Get out. I fucking mean it. Only warning." An odd glow starts burning through the cracks in his armor, a pulse of the same bubbly white light bright enough to paint afterimages across the insides of Jade's eyes when she inspects the weaponized prosthetics here. It's brighter than Kanaya's interesting, steady glow, brighter even than the constant backlight of the dome overhead, and if that's the hope magic Rose was talking about, Jade's not sure they want to tackle it head on, without a firm idea of what Eridan can actually do with it.

But Jade keeps her silence, not whistling for Bec. The wolf has to stay their last resort, and if worst comes to worst, she has no intention of leaving the people of the court behind when they make the jump. If Eridan wants to rule Los Angeles, he can rule an empty city, and good riddance.

"Not without them," Kanaya says, clearly following the same train of thought. "Keep your dome, if it makes you happy, and we'll leave if that's what you want - but you can't hold them here. We cannot leave those people here without medical treatment, not in good conscience. They've been telling us -"

"They don't know what's good for them!" Eridan screams back. Spit's flying now. Jade is amazed he hasn't gone to raise his specibus yet, with how close he seems to punching Kanaya in the face with his bare fists. Jade has one hand out ready to close into a fist and yank the rifle out of his hands and tuck it into her sylladex, and the other cast out to the side and up, toward the three angels milling around like jungle snakes winding up to strike. "You said Malachite Sylph, right? Your old village ashen two-wheeled device complex finally turned your thinkpan into irritated slag. Well, fuck off. No one ever wants you meddlin' in their fucking business! Not me, not Vriska, nobody!"

"We're not necessarily asking you to take down the whole dome thing - just let the people who want to leave go out the way we came in!" Jade repeats. "The concept was solid! Please, let's just try to help each other out? You know what happened in the trolls' game - but you might not know what happened in mine. I'd love to get around the Reckoning, too, it's a really good idea! If we work together and share what we know, maybe we can even make it work and avoid, you know, the teeeeney tiny problems with the execution -" her voice drops a little, awkward "- like, uh, the minor attempted dictatorship thing."

"WE KNEW LITERALLY EVERYTHING ABOUT YOUR SESSION!" Eridan yells, rolling his eyes. He won't stop baring his teeth, either, so it comes out barely comprehensible. He breathes hard through his nose, but all that achieves is that his voice quiets enough that it doesn't make Jade's ears ring. "We had the time to watch all of your stupid eyesore mistakes at leisure, so pardon me if I don't think you human morons get a say in anythin' at all!"
He finally smacks Kanaya's claws away and drops to the balcony, recoiling with utter disgust in his eyes. "I should have known - between you pain in the ass aliens and our own crop of god-awful rubbish players, not a one of you are ever gonna give me my due. Not even Fef took me seriously, not ever." His ugly scowl has twisted into something cruel and filled with feverish pride, that almost makes him look like a different person. When Kanaya moves like she means to grab him again, he shoves her away, voice ringing with awful zeal. "I fucking killed you, Kan, and still you come into my house and piss on my fucking parade!"

And then he raises the rifle and pulls the trigger.

Jade snaps it out of his hands before it fires and shoves it skyward, so that the pale, pale golden white lightning that shoots out fires up at the dome above instead. It doesn't manage to blow a hole in the shield - darn - but when Eridan whips around to stare at her, livid, Jade has the unique pleasure of closing her fist with a bright smile and crushing the rifle into an itty-bitty clump of metal, white fire sputtering out and dying away. "That was a bad idea," she says. "Want to try again?"

"Witches," is all Eridan says. So, he does know a little about the human game session. Or else his choice in insults just so happens to include her title by complete coincidence. "You really think I need that useless thing to blow you to kingdom come? I'm the Prince of Hope. Destruction is what I do." He's lit up with harsh fire now, his face cast in odd shadows by the weird light.

Worst case scenario - this person may have rigged it so that they end up exactly as strong as they believe themselves to be, as they've always hoped to become. A dangerous, stacking progression.

...Bluh. Well, diplomacy didn't work out. So much for that!

The nearest angel screeches, the echoes lodging right in Jade's eardrums like broken bells. It's crawled its way around to the overhanging of the roof above, tail lashing viciously - and then its wings rip open with a crack like canvas snapping in a gust of wind. When it lunges for her, the wings flare out so that its shadow swallows the sky above her. It moves fast, too, with a quick dark and jaws that crack as they unhinge.

Jade could close her hand, or teleport out of the way. But the last thing she wants is to leave Kanaya alone up here. And besides, this way is a little more challenging than just dodging would be. She ducks instead, and the angel's strike carries it over her head with a squawk of disappointed song. Quick as a flash she rockets back up to seize it around its snaky neck, throwing in all her strength and little bit of extra push for extra leverage. For a moment she's distracted by the fleeting but disturbing sensation of the thing's skin on hers - skin, not scales or armor plating or crystals or anything like that, and there's something wrong about it, something that makes her rush her next move in her haste to get this thing away from her. She has an armful of flailing, sinuously writhing winged-lizard monster doing its best to squirm free and chattering with outrage, as Jade flips them backwards off the edge of the balcony, spring upside down and slamming the angel's head into the wall of the tower in a totally choice piledriver.

When Jade releases her grip (still cringing for a reason she can't quite put her finger on...) the angel can't seem to figure out which way is up or down, flopping its wings out of sync with one another. It spirals down in a limping, upside down loop before just plummeting. The people of the court scatter, some screaming in raw terror; the girl Faith sits motionless right in the middle of the angel's wobbling corkscrew trajectory before someone - a woman with an arm of blades - tackles her off the stone and hauls her over a shoulder, sprinting for the exit of the courtyard at a dead run.

When the angel finishes crashing to the ground and lays still, twitching, Jade nods in approval and kicks back upright, rising until she's even with Kanaya and Eridan once more. What feels like every
flying body - all angels, presumably - in Los Angeles appears to be rushing to converge on their location, the dome resonating like the inside of a massive bell as the creatures shriek challenges.

Probably too many for her to piledrive them all. Oh, darn. And Kanaya's otherwise focused on doing her thing, attempting to punch Eridan in the face properly, so the least Jade can do is keep these hordes of inbound pseudo-angels off Kanaya's butt for the duration of that noble effort.

Well, trouble does tend to present itself to them - it's always a nice surprise! Why get mad about it when you can get excited? With a laugh, Jade reaches up and yanks her lab coat off over her head to captchalogue before it can get rucked up around her wrists; it's one of her last ones left intact, but also one that she might have uh...borrowed from someone at Doctor Lalonde's lab, so no need to get it shredded.

Kanaya had many a rueful apology to murmur before they left, explaining that, in her rush to outfit Karkat (who needed a ton of armor to help guard against him getting the ever-loving crap beat out of him a second time), the jadeblood had to curtail some of her other costume work. John's didn't end up finished before they left, and Kanaya stuck to repairing the tears inflicted on her own costume by Dirk rather than making anything new or fancy to replace it. Then she tried to apologize for the 'simplicity' of what she came up with for Jade, but Jade wouldn't let her. It's simple, but it's amaaaazing! Jade loves it! There's a distinct lack of galaxy pattern, but she's got plenty of that in her sylladex already if she wants to switch back. Grandpa miiight have disapproved, if he were here to see it...but he's old! And also now a cyborg who doesn't get a say in modern fashion. Kanaya has assured Jade that she looks badass, and Jade thinks Kanaya probably knows more about appropriately badass attire for a young lady hero than a venerable old guy raised in the 1910s and twenties, honestly.

Plus, the golden rule states that if Jade feels good wearing it, that's what counts! The hugging dark fabric and Kevlar underneath bares her midriff, a white version of her space symbol sitting off center and at an angle so that it curls around her side and over her shoulder, but the shorts and the delightfully bright shade of green boots balance it all out. Kanaya swore that the color of the boots alone 'may possibly induce retinal bleeding as a secondary defense mechanism,' a claim that Jade thinks was probably jokey but also made her crack up with laughter. It's all very modest. Really. Truly. Between that and the wrist guards, and the fact that her shoulders are mostly covered, Jade is totally in the clear.

The cape's not done yet, sure, but the hood attached to the shirt has two points, like that god tier outfit, though it's much shorter than what she had back then. That little detail somehow makes the whole thing perfect.

Jade cracks her knuckles.

This is not for show.

--

AT: uHM, aRE YOU THERE,
AT: i THINK THAT THIS IS THE CHUMHANDLE YOU GAVE ME,
AT: bUT ALSO, mAYBE I FORGOT IT, sINCE IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I HAD ACCESS TO PESTERCHUM,
AT: oR ANY TECHNOLOGY AT ALL, rEALLY,
AC: :33 < *ac scratches her head and wrinkles her nose in purrplexment*
AC: :33 < *she ponders who this mouseterious pesterer could be!* 
AT: oH, tHIS IS TAVROS, uHH, i FRIENDED YOU ON FACEBOOK A WHILE AGO,
AT: I GUESS I MEAN, FURIENDED,
AC: oh its you! X33
AC: what have you been up to?
AT: I HATE TO SAY THIS, BUT, EVERYTHING HAS BASICALLY BEEN REALLY STRANGE, AND TERRIFYING,
AC: *ac rests her chin on her paws and frowns*
AC: well terrifying doesn't sound like its fun at all
AT: yEAH, IT KIND OF SUCKS,
AT: MY FRIEND HAS BEEN ACTING STRANGE FOR A WHILE NOW, AND I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO HELP HIM WITH IT,
AT: ONLY NOW I'VE KIND OF LOST CONFIDENCE, IN MY ABILITY TO PULL THAT OFF,
AC: *ac bats at your knuckles for encouragement*
AT: SHOULD I BE DOING THE ASTERISK ROLE PLAYING THING, TOO.
AC: (sure! :33)
AT: ALRIGHT THEN, *i pretend that i am encouraged, by the encouragement,
AT: and that i am not typing this on a borrowed phone, in the middle of the mountains, in this dumb foreign country,*
AC: what's up with your friend?
AC: dont worry it cant pawsibly be as bad as what my dumb moirail is doing right meow
AT: OKAY, HE'S SORT OF NICE MOST OF THE TIME, BUT ALSO REALLY SCARY,
AT: AND NOW WE'RE TRAVELLING WITH A CRAB LUSUS THAT CAN FIRE LASERS,
AT: WHICH IS UNUSUAL, EVEN FOR US,
AC: oh WOW!
AC: but yeah its been pretty frustrating
AC: because hes also been ignoring stuff like eating and showering
AC: id rather do maths than have to put up with the sweat for another second! :((
AT: oh, MY FRIEND DOES THAT TOO, THE SOLUTION IS USUALLY JUST TO RUN INTO HIM WITH THE WHEELCHAIR, UNTIL HE FALLS INTO A RIVER.
AC: *s33 that might work but there aren't any rivers or bayous or anything in this stupid house
AC: and when i try to lure him into the shower he just picks me up and walks away!
AT: DO YOU HAVE A WHEELCHAIR THAT, POSSIBLY, COULD BE USED TO GENTLY NUDGE HIM IN THAT GENERAL DIRECTION,
AC: no
AT: i'M OUT OF IDEAS,
AC: *ac kneads at her blanket in frustration*
AC: if he thinks im gonna just sit around and let him sulk around for the rest of his life he better think again
AT: DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS FOR DEALING WITH, WELL, STUBBORN PEOPLE,
AT: i'M NOT SURE IT WOULD ACTUALLY BE USEFUL IN MY CASE, BUT I'M WILLING
TO TRY ANYTHING, aT THIS POINT,
AC: :33 < does he have any curtains you could tear up?
AT: nO,
AC: :33 < hmmm
AC: :33 < can you shoosh him?
AT: tHAT WOULD BE, aN ABSOLUTO NO,
AC: :33 < does he wear any dark clothes?
AT: iT'S MOSTLY ALL SHADES OF DARK GREY,
AC: :33 < close enough
AC: :33 < now find a cat friend or thr33
AT: uH-HUH,
AC: :33 < and have them shed all over it!
AT: i'M NOT SURE HE WOULD NOTICE, aND ALSO, i'M ALLERGIC TO CATS,
AC: :33 < im out of ideas too then :(,
AC: :33 < what about the tasty crab?
AT: wHAT ABOUT IT,
AC: :33 < could it help you get back to civilization hypurrthetically?
AT: aCTUALLY, wE'RE MOSTLY IN THE MOUNTAINS BECAUSE THE CRAB IS THE
ONE LEADING US,
AC: :33 < what
AT: bECAUSE APPARENTLY GAMZEE CAN'T SEE WHERE HE'S GOING ANYMORE,
so THE SOLUTION WAS TO FIND THE LUSUS OF THE PERSON HE'S TRYING TO
FIND AND, uH, tRACK HIM DOWN THAT WAY,
AT: bUT WE'RE STILL GOING IN CIRCLES, i THINK,
AC: :33 < thats weird but okay
AC: :33 < we both just n33d to be more furceful! these stupid asshats cant ignore us forever!
AT: oKAY, THAT'S MOSTLY WHAT I WAS THINKING, TOO,
AT: bUT I'M NOT GOOD AT BEING FURCEFUL,
AC: :33 < dont give up!
AC: :33 < if all else fails kick his butt!
AT: tHAT SEEMS LIKE BAD ADVICE, iN THIS INSTANCE, bUT I'LL, uH, KEEP IT IN
MIND,
AC: :33 < raaaagh i have to go my idiot is calling me
AC: :33 < good luck with your strange friend and finding whatefur youre looking for
AC: :33 < *ac waves goodbye while twitching her tail*
AT: tHANK YOU, vERY MUCH, i GUESS,
AT: i'LL TRY TO MESSAGE YOU BACK SOONER NEXT TIME,
AT: aND, *IN THESE FANTASY ASTERISKS, i WAVE GOODBYE TOO,*
-- adiosToreador [AT] stopped pestering arsenicCatnip [AC] at 16:07:20 --
Chapter End Notes

/slams hands down on the table/ YES I KNOW THIS IS THE KIND OF QUALITY MUSIC YOU GUYS COME TO ME FOR NO NEED TO THANK ME

Somewhere, Doug Dimmadome, owner of the Dimmsdale Dimmadome, is weeping tears of dimma-envy.

Tiksi photo source (before I annihilated the contrast)
Chapter Summary

And one dim dawn between the winter and spring,
In the sharp harsh wind harrying heaven and earth
To put back April that had borne his birth,
From sunward on her sunniest shower-struck wing,
With tears and laughter for the dew-dropt thing,
[...]
One met him lovelier than all men may be,
God-featured, with god's eyes.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Wow, that was an inexcusably long break. Sorry guys, Jade's section fought me all the way into writing it over again from the beginning. Search for 'Magic is hard to quantify' for the start of the section.

Our power anthems for the day are lined up in The Smackdown Condescension playlist over at 8tracks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Karkat was very small, still figuring out how the fuck bipedalism worked after so long using grub claws and metachronal rhythm to wiggle around like the world's saddest sack of grub sauce, schoolfeeding modules started arriving in the mail. There's a critical period between a lusus choosing a grub and said troll eventually being able to pry himself away from said overbearing custodial annoyance to attend real school - or really even get out the front door without being dragged back inside the hive kicking and screaming. Making it out to the lawn ring to play in one's first years of life is considered a crowning achievement. Or is just evidence that one has a really fucking laid-back lusus. So all the critical language grubmodules - English and Alternian, usually - get shoved in through the mail slot so that young trolls don't grow up only speaking lusus nonsense tongues.

After the first few rounds, though, Karkat remembers the bootleg arriving. The grub didn't fit in the slot for their shitty old deskhusk; he just had to jam it in and hope for the best.

Sometimes he wonders who delivered it. Because they saved his life. If it was the same troll who marked him down on his hatching certificate as a burgundyblood, he owes them twice over. If he hadn't learned early on just what happens to off-spectrum trolls that get caught, the first time he scraped his knee on pavement in front of an adult troll could have been his last.

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There are a million and one reasons why running out in front of the Condesce is a stupid idea. No, really, give him enough time and Karkat could come up with a million, at minimum. Most would look remarkably similar, something along the vein of, 'SHE IS GOING TO STAB YOU,' repeated
over and over again ad infinitum. And every single one of those counts as a separate, distinct reason, thank you ever so fucking much.

What neither of them counted on was the difficulty of actually getting anyone's attention when the two fuchsiabloods in the room are already locked in mortal fucking combat. After she recovers from her recoil at the Condesce's sudden aggression, Feferi starts giving as good as she gets, both trolls using 2x3dentkind with stomach-dropping, ruthless precision. Her Condescension is smaller and quicker to duck under wild swings to jab for tender innards, knocking away Feferi's strikes with a casual effortlessness that says she's had centuries to learn the tricks of fighting with a culling fork. But Feferi fights like a woman possessed - wow, Karkat wonders why that is - spinning in circles with her disheveled hair flying every which way as she keens, the whistling moan of some thing out of the darkest waters that no light can reach. Her jacket's in tatters from the Condesce's slashes but the blood barely gets a chance to spill over before the wounds seal back up. It's not quite like Gl'bgolyb's nauseating, blancmange-like flesh sticking itself back together, but it's not far off, either.

They're so focused on trying to disembowel each other, neither troll can afford to spare a glance for him and Dave as they approach. Fuck, the fucking enormous blueblood is standing right there, looking almost bored at the fact that she's been sidelined, too. They could tap one of the combatants on the shoulder or something idiotic like that, but again - idiotic. A really fucking loud, obnoxious voice in Karkat's head says that now would be a prime opportunity to do the smart thing for once in his life and take advantage of the fact that just this once, his possession of a miserable mutant hemotype might not be a death sentence. All he has to do is take Dave and run before anyone notices them, and they can all go back to prancing around Seattle and enjoying the constant explosions that tend to crop up on a semi-regular basis.

But Feferi just had to be possessed, didn't she. Which means if she gets herself killed, it's not like it's actually her getting herself killed - it's the Horrorterror puppeting her around like a ragdoll, having her throw herself on the Condesce's fork like a trout jamming itself on a gutting knife. Willful, suicidal stupidity is one thing, but if Feferi dies here, not in her right mind, that'll be on Karkat for not stepping in to drag her globes out of the line of fire.

Oh, well. At least they'll all be bulgefisting morons together in this lovely circlejerk of stupidity. His blood burns as he draws it out in a stream to form sickles, the dull red blades steaming with residual heat from the annoying song that won't stop playing in his head, driving out the cold. His pulse feels like it's relocated to the bottom of his stomach, cramping and too-hard as he creeps around, trying to assess what angle would be better to come from. He keeps one eye on the blueblood at all times, because wouldn't it be just fan-fucking-tastic to get so caught up worrying about the two trolls-of-mass-destruction in the middle, and forget about the presumably ancient but still dangerous tank in troll form lurking in the shadows. Bluebloods like that are almost all at least past the third century mark; this one could pop his head like a grape if it caught him from behind.

Dave makes the first move - though Karkat blinks at the exact wrong moment almost doesn't catch it. One second he's circling around clockwise compared to Karkat's counter circuit, and the next he flashes out of sight, reappearing in a red blur to jab his broken swordkind between the Condesce's shoulder blades.

She doesn't even glance back; she hooks that end of the trident under her arm and catches the blade with a twist of the tines, bringing Dave to an abrupt stop. Her foot sweeps around - Feferi lunges - and Dave's hand gets flicked up and away with a snap of her wrist, his red eyes wide and blinking as the Condesce shoves him back with a single hand and continues her spin, culling fork once again snapping behind her to hook around Feferi's throat.

Feferi gags as the Condesce neatly flips her grip to face the younger troll once more. Dave, on the
other hand, goes flying in the most literal way; he gets tossed toward land rather than the docks, and lands in a practiced roll to finish skidding back on his knees instead of his face. The legs of his pants drag along the salt-gritty stone before he pushes back upright.

In what feels like another life, Karkat remembers backing up Heir at a dockyard. But nothing is the same now, there aren’t convenient stacks of shipping containers for him to conceal himself in, what remains of the sunlight on snow and metal lights everything up with an unforgiving sheen, and god, he doesn’t even remember how to pretend to be someone else. Doesn’t know how to fight when it’s Dave and not Heir, who he spent so long obsessing over for a while there that as Hemogoblin he thought he knew exactly how to fit into the other hero’s fighting routines.

It's just Karkat and Dave and the oldest troll living and her heiress and their pancurdling eldritch custodian out in the icy bay, munching on whatever the Horrorterror equivalent of popcorn may be as it settles back to enjoy the show.

Fuck it. There's nowhere for him to sneak up from, no cover that would lend itself to him following his usual stealth tactics. It's like fighting Jane all over again, but with fewer police cars and more chance of sudden death.

Karkat looks down at the sickles in his hands, casts one last look to fix where the blueblood stands, still as a statue, and leaps into the fray.

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See, culling isn't something that gets brought up in polite company. Most of the history grubfeeds for wrigglers get scrubbed, anyway, a pretty and simple version of history that skims over the bad and glorifies the good so dumb babies don’t have to worry their pans about complications. For fuck’s sake, some of the Condesce’s bloodiest exploits throughout history got reduced to a footnote in one of his textbooks in middle school. No one talks about it, few humans ever bother to learn more about it, but no matter how illegal and frowned upon it is in public, the extra feeding lessons that snuck into Karkat's mail over the years gave him all the gritty context.

Trolls can’t openly enforce old culling traditions. It’s not good politics to mention it in front of humans, and the older coldbloods lost in dementia with no control on their raging flappers tend to be treated like embarrassing relatives at human family reunions when they bring up the ‘good old days.’ But mutants who get caught tend to disappear. Depending on how high in the spectrum they might be posing as, there might be more of a public outcry, but trolls in the rust make up one of the largest demographics in missing persons reports worldwide, with some of the lowest 'found' rates.

And nothing like that could happen under the watchful eye of Her Imperious Condescension without her permission.

He's never been safe.

--

He doesn't even get the courtesy of a culling fork - when he gets within three feet of her, the Condesce just kicks him flat in the chest with the relative force of a wrecking ball. Then Feferi is shrieking like an unholy terror, some babbling mixture of Alternian and maybe Italian with a dash of horrific elder god tossed in to make a keening, clicking word salad. She manages to wrest herself free from that end of the trident, knocking it aside with a fist that makes the metal clang, and forgets to bring up her own fork to retaliate - she lowers her head and goes for the Condesce's throat horns first.

Karkat isn't as lucky as Dave; he gets slammed into the side of a forklift - thankfully not the one
Feferi was standing nearby earlier, which is a little bit on fucking fire - and the only reason he can come up with for why his bones don't start snapping like twigs is because Kanaya is a legitimate saint. She kept adding layers of Kevlar and crash padding and what Karkat would swear up and down are knee pads like he used to wear as a kid to go rollerblading. She slimmed it all down and kept it light, bulkier than he's used to it - but, apparently, it cushions so well that being thrown by the Condesce herself feels like falling out of bed, unpleasant but not painful.

It meant giving up the skintight full body suit from before, because that thing had no room to spare for extra armor like this. She let him keep something close to his fucking color scheme, all over in black edged with red between rust and maroon, nothing bright enough to give him away if he had the dark of night to work with, here. And over top of the padded clothes she strapped on still more guards for his arms and legs and sides. It feels like armor, utilitarian and sleek but less flexible than he's used to, with the diamonds of open skin along his wrists the only part of him that's exposed.

(He does miss the spikes. Capes and skirts, sure, Kanaya's all about that, but spikes? Spikes are where she draws some inscrutable fashion police line.)

He peels himself away from the side of the forklift, his legs shocky for three limping seconds before the heat running through his blood reaches out and unwinds the tension deep in the muscle. Honestly, he expected to get thrown; he didn't even have the air knocked out of him. As far as the strife goes, though, he and Dave are both zero for one in a fight where they can't afford to be their usual spectacular fuck-up selves. All aboard the competency train.

"Okay, so that was a bust. Did we learn a life lesson from it, at least?" Dave asks from somewhere next to Karkat's ear, and Karkat does a double take and realizes Dave is literally right there. "Like, we need to coordinate or some shit. She's only got two pointy ends there."

Like hell is Karkat falling for the most basic trap in all of troll-limited strifing. "Three. If you forget the massive fucking horns and get yourself impaled the old fashioned way, I'm not dragging your sorry ass to whatever run-down Siberian gulag emergency room they have in this town."

Dave purses his lips as Feferi stabs her 2x3dentkind into the turf and uses it to vault both her feet at the Condesce's face. Their respective heights make it a lot less of a leap than it might have been for anyone else. The Condesce steps to the side, and only the incandescent fury on her face keeps her from looking bored out of her mind when she snags Feferi by the ankle, rips her hands off the trident pole, and pivots to slam Feferi into the ground.

And then heaves the younger troll up with no apparent effort over her head to repeat the process on the other side, leaving body-shaped marks in the slush each time. Dave and Karkat both wince. "Oh my god, she's getting her Horrorterror ass whipped. Do you know how fucking hardcore Rose was? Like, she had ectoplasm tentacles and explodey magic death balls."

"This is so not the time." Karkat checks again, and for a wild-eyed moment can't find the bluebl-over there. She's moseying the fuck over to the brilliant Crocker red shuttle parked by the office, dark cloak and hair concealing her face as she waits for the ramp to descend, her horns twin arrows pointing towards the sky and her fucks to give completely non-existent. "Look, you - you go high, I go low."

"Wait, are we doing the ironic opposite? Or are we feeling all sincere and shit right now?"

"NO." Karkat runs forward, because running toward the Condesce is a more promising option than trying to work his way to the end of one of Dave's convoluted abominations of logic.

The Condesce is swinging Feferi back up into the air when Karkat reaches them and drops to the
ground, sickles grating against the grainy concrete as he brings a low kick around at the backs of her knees. To his (sarcastic) relief, Dave doesn't try to go low and whack Karkat in the face with a sword; he flashes into place, bringing the sword from the opposite side right at her face.

Before either of them makes contact, the Condesce's free hand shoots out and grabs Dave by the collar, yanking him and Feferi in and slamming their heads together. She jumps over Karkat's kick with a skip and raises a foot; Karkat snaps his leg back into a tuck before she can drive the heel of her shoe down and break his leg, but it's a close call. Dave blurs and vanishes, a thin line of red-purple blood opening up against the dark of the Condesce's forearm and her claws jolted open.

Feferi doesn't try to pull free - she braces both claws on the Condesce's arm and uses it to lever herself up and swing at the shorter troll's face. The Condesce rolls her eyes, clenches her fingers, and arcs Feferi up in a single smooth motion - to slam her down on top of Karkat. Feferi's horror-wraith skinny but Karkat still takes a bony elbow to the stomach, and Feferi is still dense, and not rational enough to notice her pointy knees and fists driving into Karkat as she uses him to scramble her way back onto her feet. Karkat can't see any blood on the side of her face, though Dave's got a trickle of blood painting a line down his temple and jaw when he turns.

Dave tries to sneak in past Feferi's horns, while the Condesce is still grappling to drag the younger tyrianblood away from her gut, but Feferi herself thwarts him when the Condesce loses patience and smacks her upside the chin with enough force Karkat can feel his teeth ache in sympathy. Dave's stab goes wild as he checks it in time to avoid nicking Feferi between the horns.

Karkat tries for the sicklekind this time, the curved blades driving for separate targets. A single arm batters them away with an imperious slap, but both sides of his blades are edged, the blood as sharp as he could pull off on the fly, and he's treated to the Condesce herself snarling at him in half-distracted annoyance when two new cuts score the back of her arm to match the one Dave gave her. Another slice and she dips under, hair snagging along the blade before ripping free; another and Dave is there, so that when the Condesce seizes Karkat by the wrist, snaps the sickle with a thumb, and tries to use him to bodily batter Feferi off her front, she's finally, finally too distracted to notice Dave stabbing her in the most absolutely random place, the jagged blade digging into the top of her right foot and driving down in a bright burst of fuchsia.

This new hole in her foot doesn't appear to bother the Condesce in the slightest. She squints, and then raises her stabbed foot to grind Dave's head into the ground. Before she can crush his skull (she has done that before, god, they're in so much danger here, the Condesce has been around so long that she invented things like curbstomps, holy fuck) Dave disappears, pinned for no more than half a second.

But it buys Feferi all the distraction she needs to claw her way free, diving for her strife specibus where it clattered to the pavement and letting it drag with a screech of pained metal as she whirls in a tight spin to face them again.

"Cod dammit," the Condesce mutters, shoving Karkat out of the way. Once again, it feels like being hit by a tiny car going a hundred miles an hour, and Karkat tumbles hard before he mentally slaps himself and forces his body to remember how to fall properly. The momentum still plows him back and - he's not braking hard enough, the ground's slick under his feet because it's all salt-strewn
pavement and melting ice that his insane body temperature is only making worse, and when he
stumbles upright in a panic, his feet just keep backpedalling because the inertia threatens to topple
him on his ass, but the water line is right there -

He doesn't want to test his fever against the fucking Horrorterror infested ice water. He definitely
doesn't want to turn into a living troll popsicle, even if he possibly can melt his way free at this point.
A hand grabs his wrist and he clasps it blindly, so that Dave can haul him forward before his foot
drops off the artificial edge of the yard and into the water. "Just how goddamn durable is this lady?"
Dave demands, one side of his face raw and red where it made hatefriends with the pavement.
"Because getting stabbed in the foot is, I don't know, something that generally gets more of a
reaction than that. Shit hurts, yo."

Karkat lets his eyes scrunch shut for a bare second. "She's the Condesce, dipshit. I doubt there's
anything we can do to her she hasn't already seen a million times before."

That's part of what is so utterly pants-wettingly terrifying about this clusterfuck. The whole fight feels
like pulling a roundabout at a run, leaping into the thing while it's going full tilt, and clinging to the
bars howling like a wriggler for its lusus while dizzying centrifugal force sucks at his center of
gravity to try to fling him off again. Only with more ancient tyrant ripping the roundabout out of the
ground and using it to bash her heiress like a piñata.

Then he cracks an eye open. "Wait. You've been stabbed in the foot before?"

Dave stares back, utterly straight faced. "You haven't?"

Right. Karkat forgot who he was talking to, obviously. "No. Fuck, focus. I know we have the
collective focus of a leaking bucket of excrement, but focus on thinking of a way to -" His jaw
clamps shut before he can say the goal here out loud. The less said, the better, actually. The easiest
way out of here would most likely involve knocking Feferi unconscious and having Dave do some
timey-wimey hoofbeast shit to get them the fuck out of here, but with the complication of the
Horrorterror out in the bay, they wouldn't get far before either the Condesce caught up or Glubby
did.

Dave rolls his eyes. "Look, I'm trying to have your back here, man. New plan, go."

Karkat erupts. "NO PLAN IS GOING TO WORK!" He points at the Condesce with a righteous
glare. "She's got more strife experience in her pinky claw than we do in our entire bodies combined,
and she -" now at Feferi "has grimlight bullshit to make up for the fact that she's slightly less capable
of killing us in one hit!"

Also, never mind the logistics of knocking out a coldblood in a raging fit in the first place - if he
dares speak any coherent plan aloud, the universe will notice and the plan will spontaneously explode
into a cosmically-ordained, obscene atrocity of disappointment and failure the likes of which has
never before been seen on this based earth. "Our only advantage here is she doesn't seem interested
in murdering us," he finishes, reining in his urge to shout only with immense effort. Yet, he adds, to
himself. "We're just annoying her right now. Like tiny gnats."

"It's what we do," Dave says, shrugging. Yeah, well, good for him, being content to live out the rest
of his days as an unrepentantly annoying douchebag. Karkat's resigned to it, too, but at least he has
the decency to hate himself, past, present, and future, for it. "I could try to dick around with the fight
scene music, but I don't know what all this stuff does. The descriptions are so fucking unhelpful,
dude."

"I weep for your pain." Over in the center of the yard, Feferi and the Condesce have gone back to
trying to poke new holes in each other; they seem perfectly happy pretending Dave and Karkat never showed up at all. Karkat sighs. "At least you don't have the world's shittiest hard rock song slobbering and leaving foul auditory residue all over your long-suffering ear ducts."

"Oh thank god you can hear that," Dave says in a mangled rush, clapping Karkat on the shoulder. "Thought I turned the volume down but - oh thank John and his snake monster wifi, half the time I'm still convinced I'm just hallucinating this shit."

Karkat shrugs the hand off because someone here is responsible for inflicting this aural monstrosity on his person, and it's sure as fuck not Karkat. "I hear it and it gets worse every chorus. On a scale of one to really fucking irritated, I'm currently at 'gouge my own spongeclots out with a sickle as a mercy stroke.'"

Dave shakes his head - Karkat can't judge if it's sympathetic or mocking - and starts tapping on a red and black turntable, bobbing by his wrist. ...When did it even get there? Does Karkat want to know the answer when said answer is no doubt stupid at best, pan-shatteringly annoying at worst? "There's gotta be something fucking rad as hell here," the human mutters, leaning more weight on one foot so that the other can rub at the grit ground into the knees of his pants. They look like regular pants, but Karkat felt that sleeve - it's pajamas all the way down. Pajamas aspiring to suithood. "I don't think we can do the ones that Kanaya made light up, but I know I heard a couple somewhere - or saw them - ugh, why are they all so goddamn cryptic."

It occurs to Karkat that they're standing around in the corner while there's still a strife-in-progress going on here. This would be more of an issue if anyone seemed to give a fuck about them participating, but no, they might as well go fuck themselves.

[activate fraymotif? y/n]

Karkat flinches and eyes the sky warily, but Dave looks pleased as punch. "There we go. Don't worry, pretty sure these things stack, so you probably won't freeze your ass off." He pauses. "Probably." Then he clears his throat before Karkat can stop him. "Yes."

[fraymotif activated: Back to Back]

New music starts assaulting Karkat's ears in an instant, and instinct has him casting a look over at the dueling trolls (Feferi is now up against a shipping container with the Condesce's fist introducing itself to her face) to see if they hear any of this fucking nonsense.

The effects, thank fuck, aren't nearly as unsettling as [Hot Blooded] is - Karkat would prefer to never have to feel his temperature skyrocket like this again in his lifetime. Once is more than enough. All he hears is a syncopated beat, wordless techno noises inserting themselves at random intervals to form something like a melody, loud and weird enough that it almost drowns out the song that plays on repeat in hell.

It's also disgustingly catchy. "I hate it," he informs Dave, on principle.

"Yeah, that's why you're tapping your foot." Dave smirks.

Oh god. "At least I haven't stabbed my foot before," Karkat retorts; the fact that Dave just shrugs at that with a thoughtful nod speaks volumes. Fucking volumes.

"Anyway, this should make us not suck. Is the general gist I'm getting here," Dave says, with a vague wave of his hand. His eyes go unfocused. "Or whatever x2 vim means. Also, not entirely sure why we've got +8 coop/assist bonus, because I've never seen a number above five. Sweet."
Karkat doesn't feel any different. At least the fever had been really fucking blatant. "This is the least helpful techno speakervomit I've ever heard and I have no idea what that means."

"Pls, Krakatoa, it's clearly French house." On that note, Dave - does something that makes Karkat go cross-eyed, the turntable vanishing and that ridiculous broken swordkind smacking into his palm like a magnet. "Now, be cool."

"Don't even start with me, asshole."

"Aaand, go." Dave starts jogging back toward the fight. Really, it's a casual jog. Karkat shakes his wrist out and jams his thumb claw into the scabbed skin where the other sickle snapped off. He isn't sure where the blood ended up - he stopped holding it solid, so it's probably a splatter of crimson on the floor around here somewhere. If he took the time to draw it back toward him he could probably remake the sickle from that, but casual jog aside Dave's already halfway to where the Condesce has started whacking Feferi upside the face with the flat side of her forkkind's tines, which means Karkat needs to get his fucking ass in gear.

This music better be worth the burgeoning headache. Karkat runs after Dave. Sneaking up on the Condesce is an exercise in hilarity, and trying to trip her up by attacking from multiple angles has yet to be in any way effective, so why bother?

Dave beats him there despite wasting his head start, his broken sword caught mid-slash by the backhanded 2x3dentkind trick once again. He drops before she can turn, ramming his shoulder into the back of the Condesce's right knee, and there's an odd moment where the Condesce staggers - Feferi sags to her knees in a daze when the culling fork stops hitting her - and Karkat jumps over Dave's ducked head, wrapping his legs around the Condesce's hips and holds on for dear life.

"Fucking wrigglers," is all the warning he gets before a single grasping claw bends back over to seize his shirt and flip him over. He tries to lock his legs but he just can't match the kind of muscle contained in one tyrian body, no matter how tiny. Before she rips him off he jams a sickle forward and feels it sink into the side of her back; it tears back out messily a second later, the Condesce unflinching as she does worse damage to herself than he probably ever could on his own.

Dave is the one who stabs her in the soft underside of her arm, darting in and out like a red blur, and the Condesce's shout of annoyance reaches Karkat from a foot away - three feet - six - as Dave pulls him back out of range, the Condesce's hand wide as that arm drips a strip of blood down the side of her wetsuit to match the curves of her symbol. "Okay, still not dead yet," Dave says, letting go of Karkat so abruptly he nearly trips over his own feet stuttering to a stop. He looks like he's twitching on some kind of trip, half-sword flaring in the light as he adjusts his grip. "This is going so good."

The Condesce turns her back on Feferi's slumped figure, and growls at the two of them, her face a livid maroon.

Dave's face turns the same color Karkat's is shooting for, which is more of a pasty rainbowdrinker chic. "...And now she's pissed at us."

She jumps, and it carries her over their heads in a single bound, the golden culling fork in her claws. Karkat spins, raises his sickles and fucking prays, and when the fork stabs at him he catches it with both, waiting for the blood to snap in two. He doesn't know how to bind it any tighter or stronger, and it wasn't enough to hold up against Droog so like fuck would it be enough for the Condesce.

He misses what Dave does entirely. To be fair, the Condesce appears to miss it as well, so it's not just Karkat's slow reflexes. It must happen in the space of a single long flashstep, time paused just long enough for Dave to try - something. The pressure from the trident slacksl abruptly, the Condesce
blinking in mild surprise as Karkat stumbles back with his sickles intact and his hands aching but not, you know, broken. Then she's her own blur of motion, the points of the fork arcing down and back up to catch Dave's wrist. Karkat lunges forward without thinking, spinning inside the trident's stabbing radius and slamming his back against the Condesce to stamp on the back of her heel, jabbing his elbow back blind and with only an approximation in his head of where the side of her head is.

She dodges the elbow, not the stomp, but it doesn't do more than make her yank her foot to the side and widen her stance. Metal clangs off metal as Dave flashes free - Karkat can't see but he knows, like there's two pulses throbbing under his jaw - and Karkat drops, kicking the Condesce in the side of the leg with the stabbed foot. She wobbles, doesn't fall, and when the fork arrows back and down for his leg he -

can't yank it back in time -

- except somehow she misses. Or didn't intend to stab him in the calf, anyway. He could fix that kind of injury, but it would still take a while to knit muscle together in anything but a patch job. Instead the prongs stab on either side of the flesh of his calf, through the pavement as a base so she can lean back and kick Dave in the face. She doesn't even make it look like a stretch, and Dave's nose is so broken now, blood gushing down from a split in his lip, too. The human looks grim (and Karkat thinks taking a kick to the nose from a tyrannblood should probably have rearranged his face into an entirely new configuration, so something is definitely odd), but just wipes it off on his red sleeve and raises his swordkind again.

The Condesce arches an eyebrow, glancing from Dave to Karkat, her expression sour as she yanks the fork out of the ground and squares her stances so one foot points to each of them. "Will you two guppies stop ridin' my bulge for a second? Cod damn. #ivegotbiggerfish2fry #youthstoday"

Some poor panleaks actually believe the shit they're fed about limebloods dying out due to a naturally-occurring autoimmune disease. Or a virus. Or whatever the latest excuse out of the PR machine is, depending on the newest trend.

This, despite the fact that the Condesce's vendetta against them is a matter of public record. Despite the fact that all the primary sources of the time referred to it as a 'bloodplague,' more virulent than anything they'd seen before, and affected only those whose blood fell within a certain section of the hemospectrum. Despite the fact that it started mere months after a limeblood marched up to the Condesce in the field of battle, and shooshed her, and cradled the tyrannblood in her lap until the enemy armies had scattered to safety, a bloodless abscond.

But there's only so much even a limeblood can do. And once the shock of placating hormones faded from her cold blood, the Condescension smiled, and stroked the troll's cheek - and ripped her horns out by the root.

No one even bothered to write down that poor fuck's name. They all just called her Hornless, and soon they stopped even calling her that.

History gets revised all the time. And the Condesce has had centuries to master the art of being the victor.

The pace keeps escalating, and after a certain point Karkat stops remembering to be terrified and is
just slicing and diving and stabbing and each call is closer, a heel that cracks stone barely missing the chance to crush the bones of his finger into powder, a stab that should take Dave's head off going wide because Karkat flings himself on the other end as a counterweight.

And all the while the Condesce is a whirling dervish. She can't somersault out of the way of their attacks sometimes, when avoiding them would have been the logical thing to do, and it's only then Karkat realizes she can't - her horns force her to stay constantly upright, but it's no impediment when a single blow from her hand or specibus can toss them fifteen feet back, when she starts to catch onto their movements and holds up the trident with both hands to block a Dave that only arrives five seconds later, when she can jump so high they can only scramble out from under her shadow, when she keeps speeding up so that it's nonstop, her turning to strike Karkat's sickle so hard his wrist goes numb, continuing in a circle to sweep Dave's feet out from under him with the trident, turning again to knock Karkat across the face with her foot while without looking she catches the swordkind and spins the whole culling fork with a twist of her hand so that the blade goes skittering away along the ground and onto the nearest dock.

The time it takes Dave to flash over and retrieve it is enough time for Karkat, alone, to block the trident tines coming down at his head - and feel the Condesce's shin catch him hard in the side, kicking him almost the same way the sword went. Dave catches him and they both tumble backwards, by some providence not kneeling each other in the stomach when a machine terminal provides an impromptu wall for them to slam into.

"Goddammit. S'it -“ Dave pants, "just me - or is she - hitting harder?" He gulps, and finishes, "Can we - just grab Peixes Minor - and run?"

They hear the clicking, rattling screech-roar at the same time, and Dave thumps his head back against the terminal. "Well, that one - was my fault."

Karkat doesn't even have the spare energy to agree with him. Everything in him is currently directed towards not jittering out of his skin as the Condesce turns to meet Feferi. The younger Peixes might have recovered from her stunned condition, but she's still the worse for the wear, tears streaking her cheeks as she shrieks and tries to slash at the Condesce with her 2x3dent nowhere to be seen, presumably left abandoned over by the shipping crate. The two of them start fighting again with a vengeance, slowly making their way down the pier toward Karkat and Dave's sprawled position.

Feferi's still fighting wild, eyes glassy and edged with something either horror-fuchsia or madness-red, which means now Dave and Karkat are going to have to fight around her again. When the Condesce seizes her by the throat and lifts her with one hand, Feferi just gurgle-screams some more, totally beyond words as she starts kicking the Condesce in the gut from the convenient height. Karkat crawls off Dave and pulls himself up on the dented machine terminal, swaying against his will before he catches himself and forces his spine straight. His muscles want to ache with the drain of trying to toe-to-toe in close combat with someone who is probably the world's pintsize heavyweight champion of close combat. He can't tell if what's keeping him going is adrenaline, fear for his fucking life, or sheer bloody mindedness.

Probably all three. "Up. Round - whatever the fuck round it is," he orders, peeling his eyes away from the two fighting trolls and letting a sickle melt away to hold his claws out and twitches his claws. It's a pretty lackluster order, but Dave groans and takes his hand and lets himself be pulled back onto his feet. "Round -"

He doesn't finish.
The crack tips his stomach sideways, the sickening sound of bone crunching with cold silence lingering too still in the air, and Karkat flinches because when things break it's generally him breaking, but there's no pain.

Feferi, on the other hand, looks utterly blank. He feels like his whole body's turned weightless, his head turning in slow motion to catch her eyes and see the exact moment she dies, her chin twisted up and around and lolling over her shoulder with the wrongest of angles, the bone of her snapped neck taut under grey skin, only the faintest surprise on her stunned face.

Oh

_________god.

"Oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck-

"This better glubbin' work," the Condesce says, distant through the throb in Karkat's ear. She kneels and dumps Feferi over the edge of the dock, holding her descendant's limp head under the surface with her arm stretched as far as it can go, looking annoyed. Like snapping her descendant's neck and playing with the corpse like a bath toy is a major inconvenience for her. "C'mon, we don't have all day. I'll give you to the count of fishteen to snapperfish out of it -"

At 'one,' Dave tackles the Condescension and knocks them both sprawling, the Condesce baring teeth and screaming in frustration as she brings her heels up and kicks Dave off her.

And while Dave charges back up only a second later, one copy of him still flying back to crash into a computer terminal while the other drives the Condesce back along the line of the pier, Feferi is slipping off the edge of the dock, her head still twisted the wrong way as her body sinks between two stray chunks of ice with hardly a ripple. No bubbles, either; she's not breathing, she's dead -

He should help Dave, Karkat thinks blearily, ripping off his jacket as he runs. Really, Dave's gonna forget the horns eventually. Rule number one, never forget a troll's horns - unless they're nubby and useless, like Karkat's, a fitting visual metaphor for his uselessness as a whole. He got Dave into this mess, and now look at them.

There are guards and extra padding along his sides, claustrophobically tight, and it was really was a challenge to keep Kanaya from realizing why he had her turn around and face the wall every time she made him try on something new; really cut into their blossoming friendship reserves. But probably not as badly as this is, he decides, jamming his claws into his wrists and coming out with nails dripping sharp blood to tear right through the padding to the gills underneath. A shock of cold air bursts along flaring red-and-grey filaments of tissue, and then the 103 degree fever reasserts itself. He gulps down two deep breaths, staring down through the matte blue surface of the shifting water, and it does nothing to stop him shaking.

He hopes it's enough, takes a step back - then remembers what happened the last time he tried to dive into water the way he's seen John do, and decides to just step off the edge of the dock feet first, before he can talk himself out of it.
Forcing his eyes open is the hardest thing, because there's a lingering terror behind his eyelids that whispers the Horrorterror will be right there, waiting. But when he opens them a crack, vision blurred and watery for a moment before everything shifts into focus, it's just him and the clear water and the drifting pattern of shadows where the ice floats overhead -

And the fucking long line of machines that spread out along the bottom of the bay that he has to take a moment to boggle at. They look like a cross between submarines and rocket ships, like the shuttle up on the surface but scaled up a hundred times. He can't see the end of the line before the faint, grey-blue fog of particulates swallows them up. It's way cleaner than the water at the docks back home, though fuck if he knows how they keep it that way with all this apparent submarine construction going on beneath the surface.

Feferi. Fuck. Karkat stops floating around haplessly and starts turning himself around to kick down, his eyes scouring the water directly beneath him for any sign of her. If she'd fallen on one of those ships it might actually have been useful. But they're in the space between the shore and the first one, where the seafloor is too shallow for it, so thank fuck he only has to clumsily swim down a few yards before the white of her costume shimmers into view. She's drifting, not quite at the bottom, but not moving either. When he reaches her, blood pumping in his head before he adjusts for the pressure shift, her hair has billowed itself around her face, which is still turned at the wrong angle.

He jumped into the fucking Arctic to retrieve a dead body. Maybe it's not the universe hating him anymore - maybe all of this is just Karkat's fault on some deep, spiritual level.

Fuck, whatever. He and Dave are already screwed. Might as well attempt to drag the dead body of a friend halfway across Russia to get home (like dealing with border control wasn't going to be enough of a hassle already). Karkat sighs, gills fluttering in a way that makes him distinctly uncomfortable because he never gets used to using these random things, and then ducks to loop an arm under and around Feferi's back and arms, maneuvering himself awkwardly until he can kick again and push them back up to the surface.

There's a troll in his way. Karkat freezes, Feferi's hair reasserting itself by plastering against the side of his face with the consistency of stringy seaweed, and for a moment he hopes to fuck that the troll didn't see them. Just a seadweller, minding its own business, going around to check on the underwater ships - since that's evidently why they all dove into the water to avoid the strife -
A pair of violet eyes snap down and lock on him and Feferi, and the troll's sharp fins twitch. The violetblood starts circling, descending at a slow pace while Karkat whips his head around, trying to judge whether he could make it to the shore instead. Not that it's really a question - he's passable at swimming, not good, and he's toting around Feferi's dead weight. No chance against a seadweller. Way too late, Karkat thinks to close his eyes almost all the way, blurring his vision again but also minimizing how red and fucking glowy his eyes must look underwater. Maybe he and his new dead friend here will just be taken into underwater custody, and not culled on sight.

Feferi convulses. Karkat screams and drops her, forgetting that they're underwater, and the sudden spout of bubbles must startle the violetblood as well because a similar scream-burst clouds around its face. Or maybe it's the dead body spasming of its own accord mid-water in preparation for, Karkat assumes, some brand new horrific abomination of physiology to take place. There's still no sign of a giant sea monster near them, but that clearly means nothing.

Weird, though. He would have thought this horrific process would involve more grimlighty bullshit. Vibrant fuchsia has started wrapping around Feferi's neck and outlining her body in burning light, but it's laced with pale, spring green and Karkat isn't sure he wants to know what that means. The water feels charged around him, like they're all about to get their asses electrocuted, the pressure of sudden power radiating out from Feferi's corpse.

She had better not explode. That is where he fucking draws the line today -

All the water rushes in a short burst, dragging Karkat and the violetblood above in toward Feferi with a jolt, like a fishhook behind his navel. The pressure breaks and the light sinks back under Feferi's jacket, leaving them all hanging there like lumps in utter confusion. When Karkat feels a certain amount of camaraderie with a random violetblood over witnessing weird shit in progress, you know it's bad.

Feferi's eyes flutter open, wide and dewy and full of innocent confusion as she glubs at Karkat. Her ragged braids have all unraveled the rest of the way, her hair a gleaming cloud around a face that looks healthier than it did before she died.

Her neck is no longer broken.

-  

It makes terrible sense that the Condesce and Feferi share a fucking Horrorterror as a lusus. People have debated for years what could have happened to the Condesce's custodian, or if she had one at all, in the murky years before she began her ascension in the Far East. Tyrian lusii tend to bond to their incredibly rare charges for life, transformed from guardians to war mounts, but no matter what fuchsia-eyed troll rose up to challenge her, thinking themselves young and in their prime, Her Imperious Condescension slaughtered them and their lusus both.

It makes significantly less sense that all it took was a couple of spa years spent touring the reefs of the southern Pacific to make the Condesce come back, sharp of tooth and open-palmed in the wake of the world wars, cackling when factions offered her command if she wanted to take on the war carapacians as her next conquest - only to take over a baking company, and begin the gradual process of reworking her public image from historical warlord to pop culture icon.

Karkat doesn't try to understand. Whatever or whoever was important enough to motivate the Condesce to stop being a warlord and settle for robber baroness and capitalist extraordinaire, it's a secret only she knows.

-
When it becomes clear that neither Karkat nor Random Violetblood 1 are going to glub back any
time soon, Feferi pouts her lips at them, and then shrugs, kicking her feet almost lazily to bring her up
to Karkat's level. Karkat's still frozen, and - oh, nice, Random Violet Blood 1 just went swimming
for its life. And here Karkat thought their spontaneous terroralliance was unbreakable.

Then Feferi prods him in the stomach, not all that hard but unexpected enough that Karkat lets out
another burst of air, flailing as he tries to paddle out of range. Whatever Glubby is making her do,
he's not floating around here to be fucking eviscerated in some messed up practice run. Feferi's
quick, though, maybe quicker in water than she is on land, curling around him in a slippery-smooth
motion to poke at his exposed gills next. Fantastic. Karkat's resigned himself to nearly everyone in
Lalonde Labs knowing about his eyes and his blood, and he'd halfway convinced himself that fond
memories of a time gone by might have made Feferi sympathetic to his desire to not-die due to his
mutation - but god. Fuck. Not even John knows about the gills, no one is supposed to know about
the gills.

Feferi's laugh bubbles around them, stray blops of air rolling up Karkat's sleeve and making him
fidget. He cups a hand and tries to figure out how to kick underwater, but he's too fucking slow, and
Feferi just arcs around his sluggish foot, grabbing him in a bear hug from behind so that her hair
clouds his vision. She's pressed close enough that he feels her kick, once, twice, and they rise so fast
that he thinks if they'd been any deeper he'd have had a fucking embolism if he didn't have blood
powers running hot through his veins. They break the surface so fast that his head spins and his gills
get confused by the fact that he can use lungs now, so that he ends up a gasping, wheezy lump in the
circle of Feferi's arms. She treads water for both of them like he weighs nothing.

"Karcrab!" she's saying, chortling like repeating a stupid pun is the height of hilarity. "You're so
warm! Like a thermos! How are you doing that?" She squeezes him too tight, as though for
emphasis. "And water you doing in the water?"

Yeah, she's gonna drown him. Or just suplex him back into the water and turn him into a troll
pretzel. He's got to get away before she stops dicking around and goes back to being evil. "Get off!"
he yells, ramming his elbow back awkwardly and trying to squirm free of her grip. She lets him go
so he can flop desperately forward - in the space of two seconds he feels like he's forgotten all he
bothered to learn about swimming. Just - get out of the water before she summons her massive lusus
to come play.

When he looks back, suspicious, trying to see if she's following his floundering progress or has lost
interest, Feferi's head floats low in the water, her eyebrows furrowed at him as she blows bubbles
with poofed out cheeks. Her hair sticks damp around her horns and face in wet streamers before
clouding back out under the surface. "Did I do somefin to piss you off, Karkat?" she asks - and yes,
she actually has the nerve to pout about this. "Or are you only being craynky like usual?"

Anyone up on the docks can hear them. Fuck him if maybe people under the water can't hear, too.
Karkat doesn't give a single bulgechafing fuck about people overhearing, because how dare she ask
that question! "You and your murderous Horrorterror mom decide to teleport us to the middle of the
fucking Arctic, and you ask if you've done something to piss me off? I'm so fucking far beyond
pissed off, you possessed douche! My thinkpan is about to overflow with mass quantities of ragefluid
buildup! I could end world hunger with the force of my anger right now and that doesn't even make
sense! You were possessed and then you were dead and now you're fucking alive and possessed all
over again! Ho ho fucking ho, it must be a fucking Christmas miracle because oh look - we're
surrounded by asshole minions in red and white, the Condescension is clearly our jolly, genocidal,
capitalistic conveyor of overpriced Crocker brand junk, and we're basically stranded at the North
Pole because your fucking lusus is a monster that wants to kill us all! All we need now is for your
giant elder god behemoth to heave itself on shore to provide the ceremonial leavings as it shits all
Karkat stops splashing his fists around in the water, panting heavily. Feferi blinks at him, looking puzzled, before slow realization dawns on her face. Well good for fucking her. Karkat is so out of here. He's done. He's done! Feferi and the Condesce can have at it! He is taking his Dave and they are leaving. Now. Yesterday. In fact, Dave can time travel, so fuck it. They literally left and got back home yesterday. They're already at the labs as he thinks this, yukking it up about how pathetic past Dave and Karkat were. It will be/is great. Karkat can already feel the triumphantly vindictive bile congealing in his humorglands in anticipation.

"Possessed?" Feferi asks, and her voice has gone timid and small. It's a platonic pity play - don't fall for it, Karkat. Think of the hilarious bro laughter throes. Do not -

He thrashes around to scowl at her. The dock is literally right there; he isn't sure why he hasn't just clambered out of the Horrorterror-infested waters by now. "Yes, Peixes. Possessed. Fucking brainwashed out of your fucking mind. And you won't even remember me telling you about it ten seconds from now, so just. Just stop. Go back to your murder-my-ancestor party so you two can figure out who gets top dibs on being the world's resident genocidal maniac."

Feferi sinks even further under the water, all but her fuchsia eyes covered as she blinks in confusion. Bobbing back up, she says, hesitant, "Karkat - my head hurts a lot - are you shore Glubby was -"

Then she breaks off, pupils dilating. "She was lying to me," she breathes. "Glubby said - but that didn't make any sense, did it?! None of it made any sense! And you told me and told me and I couldn't stop thinking you were just being silly, even when that wasn't what I actually thought!"

Holy fuck, are they actually having a breakthrough, here? How long will this last before Glubby cracks down again? Karkat can't imagine they have long. "Horrorterrors fuck with your head. Why do you have one for a lusus?!"

Feferi hesitates. "But what about -"

Karkat cuts her off. "No, fuck - we don't have time to debate any of this fuckery. No, there's no fucking pollution, yes, it was all just your Horrorterror sliming up the place to give you a reason to act stupid, and now we need to get out of here before you start acting possessed again because I don't want to die in this decrepit, existential wasteland at the ass end of Russia!"

For a solid ten seconds, Feferi looks stunned - and then her expression hardens, the pout of her lips ticking into a frown. "She tricked me," she says, a growl rumbling behind her words. "Gl'bogany, that - ugh! She said she cared about me, when all she wanted was for me to come here and do her dirty work because she has a grudge against Tethys."

Objectively, Karkat knows the Condesce's name. She's lived too long for it not to be a point of historical record, though people have argued for ages whether it might not just be a pseudonym. No one but major world leaders uses it except in a whisper. Too risky. Hearing Feferi drop the name, considering their current circumstances, makes him paranoid. "Be pissed about it later. Let's just move." He glares down at the water beneath their treading feet with suspicion. "I don't know, you can yell at your ancestor as we spring by, but like hell are we hanging around near the water. We need distance." Karkat doesn't know how far Glubby's - Gl'bogany? - mind control range goes, but there has to be a limit. Right? Well, not with their shitty luck, probably...

"Here, I'll give you a boost," Feferi says, and Karkat's lost for a moment when she dives beneath the surface of the water in a curving arc; he's more than a little unnerved when she comes up underneath his feet and he feels claws wrap around his waterlogged shoes (thank god he wasn't wearing heavy,
weather-appropriate clothing, actually, or he might have had to ditch his shoes and walk home from Russia bare-foot). There's a moment where she could push him up to better wriggle his ass onto the dock, or she could yank him down to be eaten in a renewed fit of grimlight - but she pushes him up, her laugh throaty and burbling through a thin layer of water as she boosts him up so high he's almost all the way there.

A claw reaches out, and hauls him up the rest of the way, his feet dangling over the sea.

"Whale, whale, whale," the Condesce says, her breath cold on his face, cold even through the fever, stained fuchsia eyes looking not *through*, but directly into his own, as the blood drains from his cheeks. He can't move, he can't even think, and when she flips his mask up, he thinks he stops breathing.

She smiles.

There are many teeth, white as pearls, sharp as needles.

" Been a while since I last saw that face."

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Here's a fun logic problem for you - is it possible for two Knights to stack multipliers by defending each other, instead of someone else?

The answer, Dave thinks, is that yeah, it's probably possible. They just suck ass at it. They're shit at all this game crap. Logic is a goddamn myth. Hell, they could have tried to protect Feferi and taken the easy way out, but Feferi being possessed kind of killed that one before it ever got off the ground. It's hard to concentrate on protecting someone when you need to be more worried about dodging, since she can and will go through you in a blind rage.

He's not sure what goes through his head when he barrels into the Condescension, knocking them both away from Feferi's one-woman corpse party. Whatever he's thinking ends up more scrambled than eggs in a blender on the highest speed - you could serve that up on toast and call it breakfast. The Condesce digs her heels in and shoves him down by the shoulders as they roll to a stop, snarling down at him and getting pinkish anger-spit all over his face. Ew. Ancient troll germs. " S'all I can think to do to smackeral some sense into that girl, so hopefully that works," she says, while Dave struggles to get his shoulder free. He reverses his grip on the sword so he can try to jab upward without needing to move more than his elbow, but the knee digging into his side comes up and pins his elbow instead. He can flail his legs all his wants, but it won't do shit because what the hell does he know about grappling and stuff? Nothing, that's what.

A forceful finger jab pulls him out of the frantic mental rambling. "Which means you're glubbed now, sonny jim, cause buoy, do I have a bone to pick with you," the Condesce says, her eyes fixed on him for the first time since this whole shitshow started. Before, she treated him and Karkat like sideshows; even when Feferi was down for the count, she fought them with the casual attitude of someone brushing off a pair of flies, irritated but with her attention elsewhere. Now - now she looks pissed. "Who tha fuck you think you are, steppin' to my apple juice market?!"

Dave's jaw drops open.

Oh shit.

"How do you kn - what? No!" he says, shaking his head. "No idea what you're talking about!"

She slams a fist down against the dock beside his head. The concrete cracks. "You think I ain't got
my eye on the competition? I know it's been you mouthin' off and sassing me, cod dammit!"

This is surreal. Karkat just dove into the freezing cold Arctic waters without a jacket to go after someone who's already really, really dead, and Dave is stuck up here getting yelled at by a troll old enough to be his great, great, great, great, great - oh wow he doesn't want to finish that train of thought, actually. Let the record show that she's probably older than dinosaurs, and also the owner of the companies who have been emailing him with threats to sue his apple juice empire into the fucking afterlife for playing fast and loose with the stock market.

Which is what she did to wipe Smucker's off the face of the planet and reclaim the old Pillsbury baking products line for herself, so uh...he's actually not surprised by this turn of events. Holy shit, does he need to stop listening to John's anti-Betty Crocker rants, because he wishes he didn't know so much about the old cake mix wars.

"That was clearly some other guy. Who is not me," he tries. This really weaksauce, nervous laugh sneaks out, too, before he shuts that shit down.

At least he can put on his resume that he's made the Condesce stare at him in blank despair. It's going right up there under 'has experience driving giant snake monsters to the brink of frustrated tears' and 'runs around the city fighting random people for fun.' There has to be someone out there who considers these talents new employee-worthy traits. "You put your glubbing face on the label, doofish!"

Yeah, but that was an artistically over-sharpened JPEG selfie with his shades on. This disguise should have been hilariously foolproof. "Wasn't me."

"It was obviously you! All you did is take off yo shades!"

"No, it's ironic. Fight me." He pauses time and finally wrests one shoulder free, punching the inside of the Condesce's elbow until it gives and he can crawl out backwards from underneath her.

But he underestimates her reach - when he lets time snap back into motion, she catches onto his abscond and grabs him by the ankle, long claws digging into his pajama pants as she pulls his feet out from under him. Letting her get a good grip is probably the worst mistake he could make; he can outrun her, yeah, but now she's clamped down like a vice, stronger than he is by a wide mile, and no amount of kicking at her exposed knuckles will make her let go. His face ends up squashed against the ground when the Condesce stands, hauling his leg up with her to keep him off-balance. "That's not what ironic means! #dwi"

Then she swears, and Dave finds himself flying through the air again, as she kicks him back toward the dockyard. Her being ridiculously strong, he reaches the yard and then some, his palm scraped up by the drag as he uses that and his already fucked up sword to brake. She can throw him and Karkat around like they weigh nothing, which he'd be hells of impressed by if it didn't involve his fancy god tier pants being soaked through with slush and other nasty shit they've picked up along the way. This better not be permanent, because how do you even wash these things? Do they even come off? Can you just toss them in the machine at the local laundromat, or are they dry-clean only?

Anyway. Yeah. He's about to retort that of course that's what ironic means (how can she have lived centuries and not figured out something so basic?) when he realizes the Condesce has switched gears again.

This is because Karkat just popped out from under the water, right into her waiting claws. He dangles there, transfixed with horror at something the Condesce says, the sides of his shirt in tatters that reveal shredded red wounds along his ribs that he must be too freaked to heal with his blood
thing. Feferi hauls herself up onto the dock a moment later, shivering, but looking delightfully sprightly for someone who had their neck snapped. "Tethys, put him down!" she says, her voice sharp and clear. There's a weird lack to it. Something's missing that was definitely there before - right, she doesn't sound like a legion trying to make itself heard with only one set of vocal cords. Cool.

"You shoulda stuck to hanging with that old morayeel, girl," the Condesce says, her face so close to Karkat's their noses almost touch. "You went and hooked some real fishy ones, here." Her hungry grin widens, and Karkat cringes. He has his claws up, like he intends to try to peel her hands off him, but he doesn't seem to be able to break eye contact. "How do you and your blood keep slipping through the cracks, candy red wriggler? Really makes an old gill wonder..."

"Please! I'm the one who dragged the two of them into this - they didn't even want to come!" Feferi unclenches her fists with visible effort, holding them out to her ancestor pleadingly. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, for all of this. You were right that I shouldn't have listened to her. Please, we can talk -"

Okay. It would be really nice if she stopped paying attention to them again. Being ignored in favor of Feferi would be nice right about now. Dave flashes closer by what feels like inches, trying to figure out what to do. The Condesce only needs one hand to hold Karkat off his feet over the water, so - yeah, he can clip her hand and that should do it. None of his hits land square anymore, not since she started catching on to his moves, able to predict where he's going to flashstep next almost as well as Bro, but all she has to do is loosen her grip a little and he can drag Karkat out of the way. Just one hand. He can do that. If she would just stop staring at Karkat like he's what's for dinner -

"Tethys!" The shout is hoarse and scraping and unfamiliar; when Dave tears his eyes away from the clusterfuck-in-action before him, he sees that - oh, goddammit - the giantass mountain of a blueblood has come back down from inside the ice-rimed shuttle with reinforcements. The troll limping toward them is down a leg and what looks like half an arm, part of the forearm and hand lopped off at a strange angle, with odd lines carved into his face. He's willowy, tall and lanky to the point that he looks like a stiff breeze would give him serious issues, but he shoves an entire overturned shipping container out of his path with a burst of blue and red and doesn't slow down at all. "What happened to 'vacation,' Tethys?! What happened to 'this is a date!'" the troll rasps out.

"Oh no," the Condesce says, without looking away from Karkat. Then she does look away, belatedly, and the chagrin on her face as she does a multi-part doubletake from Karkat to the goldblood and back again. "Oh no."

"Tethys, seriously, what -!"

She jams Karkat's mask back down and throws him like a baseball. Karkat being thrown around would be a hell of a lot more hilarious in any other context but this, and it becomes marginally less hilarious still when it turns out he's being launched at Feferi - with enough force that Feferi can't brace them. So she goes flying back, too - aaand now they're both coming at Dave like cannonballs. The throwing thing is definitely getting old. So is being a meat shield; he thinks he's getting whiplash. "God dammit," is all he has time for before two very dense trolls knock him back. Feferi makes some indescribable noise and wet hair catches Dave across the face, but with an added Karkat in the mix - it's like trying to grab a sopping wet cat while it pretends it didn't just fall in the bathtub. Prickly, all claws, and really fucking damp. He pauses time, meaning to dump them on the ground, but when it stops, the momentum still carries them back no matter how he digs his feet in. Feferi tumbles a little to the right and slams into something with a metallic clang. Dave readies himself to get slammed, too. But then his back rams into something a lot smaller and less rib-shattering than he
expects. It takes him a fraction of a second to register it's a hand on his back, unyielding and cold right through his suit. Feferi grunts as she shoves back against inertia, one foot planted flat and the other bent up against a shipping container with a troll-shaped dent in it as she braces their sudden stop.

Which means he and Karkat end up teetering, and then crashing forward instead. But at least they didn't turn into pancakes.

Of course, as soon as he thinks that, Feferi loses her balance and lands on top of both of them with a faint 'oof!'

"We're never leaving Seattle again," Karkat says, muffled, from somewhere beneath Dave's chin. His knee somehow manages to find every soft part of Dave's stomach as he scuttles his way out from under the pile. When he escapes, the troll flops over onto his back, his mask askew on his face. "Never. Again."

"Dude, was Seattle really any better?" Dave points out.

He throws up his hands. "Curse the nostalgia glands that make me overlook the fucking obvious."

Feferi adds her own two cents. "Seattle sounds really nice right now. I could totally see myself somewhere that is...not here." Then she lets her head thud down against Dave's spine.

Over by the water, things sound like they're going about as well as they are in the land of the dazed and confused. "You shoalda stayed inside. I'm doin' business out here, pearl," the Condesce is saying, almost sickeningly sweet as she bats her eyelashes. The goldblood keeps storming towards her, one chipped up horn throbbing with psionic sparks like a lighthouse. "Ain't nothing to get all puffed up about, Psii; it's done. They're gone."

The hand with claws missing flies out to sweep toward the pile of coolkids. "They're still right there! Who are these kids? I go to sleep for an hour and the next thing I know the E%ībimus has to wake me up to tell me you're destroying things out here -"

Condy continues to backpedal her way up the mountain. Her nervous laugh would be priceless if Dave weren't still in recovery mode. "No, look, they're leaving! Just a school of dumb grubs who don't know when they're in over their heads." To prove her point, the Condesce turns to scowl at them, making shooing motions with both her hands with the specibus tucked into the crook of her elbow. "Get tha glub outta my sight, squirmy brats."

Feferi sits upright - Dave applauds her effort, because he's so beyond done that he might just stay here on the nice, comfortable ground for a while - and says, "Tethys - Ancestor, I -"

"Lemme guess, you're reeeeeeelly, reelly sorry for going off the deep end, huh." They receive a collective middle finger. It's not quite as creative as some of the weird charades Jade and Karkat pull off in their never-ending quest to flip each other off with extra pizzazz, but that's still another achievement to add to the resume. They're just racking up the mad marketable life experiences today. "Then piss off, guppy. And take these two with you before I cull them for peace of mind, dammit."

Karkat lifts his head up off the ground, incredulous. "Wait. Did she just imply she's not killing us today?"

"You should take advantage of her good graces while she offers them," a fourth voice adds and holy shit could this blueblood be any stealthier? A troll that intimidatingly tall shouldn't be able to sneak up on Dave like that. He pushes himself up off the ground so fast his head spins, trying to keep all of
the troll in view at once as she looms over them. What did the sparky asshole call her? Exitbismuth? Nah, too many letters.

The E%ībimus shivers, and shifts the cloak around with a claw to pull the cloth in closer against the cold, damp air, frowning down at the three of them with a faint crease in her forehead. "I have retrieved the goldblood. This should calm her." Another shift, and the corner of the troll's lip ticks down into a frown. It's the kind of vaguely disapproving look you'd give a bunch of idiot kids you thought were a bunch of coconuts screwing around and generally being assholes. Which - Dave cannot blame her for thinking that. Being dipshit coconuts is their thing. Maybe there are non-dipshit coconut children out there, but they're not them. "You should not have been in this workplace; it is a restricted area, and you have stirruped significant trouble. I believe you should leave now."

"Nothing would make us happier," Feferi says. She makes so much more sense right now. Dying must do wonders for horror infested brains.

"Ah. That is good, then." Then the blueblood looks out at the water. "Oh, fiddlesticks. I was working on that."

"On what, the gi-fucking-gantic fleet of submarines?" Karkat asks, disgruntled, as he gets to his feet. Dave inches his way up, too, doing his best to lurk ninja-style in plain sight. Bro could pull that kind of thing off. Mostly Dave ends up looking awkward as hell. It's been a rough day. "What are we looking at here?"

"You? Nothing." The troll shuffles off in the direction of the Condesce and that Psii guy. "Please leave."

"But what about -"

The ripple is so faint, Dave almost thinks he's swaying because he's sore all over and standing was a shit plan to begin with.

Then it happens again, the ground tipping under his feet. He finally thinks to look past where the Condesce and Psii are huddled up at the water beyond, when another thud makes the water ripple, too. His eyes lock onto one chunk of ice in particular, bobbing like a cork - and rushing towards the shore. Almost like something underneath the surface is -

"Errybody, outta the water!" the Condesce hollers, stamping a foot on the dock. A couple of seadwelling trolls emerge from the water at the last second and scramble past the fuchsiablood to get off the dock, none of them sparing a glance for Dave and the others as they make for the buildings. Metal crashes and groans, a wrenching sound from beneath the water, the sound of large heavy objects being shoved out of the way to make room for something bigger.

"Oh dear," Feferi says, in what may be the understatement of the day. Karkat says something similar but with more 'fucks' in it. Dave should probably make his own contribution, but he stops being able to hear himself think as Gfbgolyb erupts from under the surface of the water. Whatever else is under the water by the dock lets out a metallic, shrieking crunch as masses and coils of flesh and tendrils and mouths heave itself up onto the shelf and shove submerged ships out of the way of its bulk to make more room by the shore. Dave can hear the screaming, stumbling back with his hands over his ears, but he can't tear his eyes away as this impossible thing continues to pile more of itself up.

It's weird, though - in the part of his mind that's trying not to scream along with the wails of the drowned, he could swear that the Horrorterror looked bigger under the water, all spread out and swollen like a city of tendrils. While the grimlight heap is still absolutely frigging huge, it also sluices water and nasty pearlescent slime down its sides, slowly shrinking as it settles above the waterline
with the largest of its mouths snarling at the Condescension. The last of the sun winks out, leaving them in a grey-white twilight. All the sharp, cold air from earlier gets muffled by a curdling fog, the front sweeping in with the nasty smell of dead fish, salt, and blood. It almost makes him flash back to the unnatural humidity from New York - this shit isn't right. But there's an extra sting that makes his eyes water in pain, caustic and prickling, like some of that acidic horrsweat swirling in the water around the Horrorterror's massive body just went airborne.

Look. He's not good at this crap, he's not Rose. She knows more about mango tango buddies and shit like that than is probably healthy for her to know. Dave is just totally content to know jack all about giant chaos calamari; he'd rather refuse a bomb with his face than have to learn any more than he has to about the intricacies of being mauled by an elder god.

So why does he have this weird impression that somehow this thing is somehow...small? Like, he has no idea where the thought comes from, but he distinctly remembers Rose being a goddamn unholy nightmare who could have leveled all of New York if her grimdark dude hadn't been more interested in other things. To be fair, Gl'bglyb could probably squash this city, too. But 'city' is being generous; this place is tiny and most of it is already a dump, half the work has been done for it. Feferi was terrifying because she came out of nowhere with her insane, unpredictable horror jive, but she wasn't sprouting real life tentacles or vomiting fire or trying to blow the Condesce up with magic bombs. Without water to carry most of its physical mass, Gl'bglyb can't seem to do the glowy tentacle thing to make itself levitate or anything.

They're dealing with a tiny-ass, weaksauce Horrorterror and it's still going to smash them with its pinky tentacle. God, how lame.

Better yet, the Condesce and Gl'bglyb are shouting at each other at the same time, now, getting progressively louder as they get more hyped up. It should be comical, a tiny troll yelling at a monster so freaky that it wigs Dave out, but honestly Condy is almost as terrifying in her own way. Anyone whose fighting style consists of being a walking tank that pitches people through walls at will is probably ballsy enough to take on a Horrorterror and last longer than he ever could.

And Gl'bglyb yelling back feels like having a mini grenade go off in his skull.

"SHADDUP! I've had it up to here with you!" The Condesce jabs her 2x3dentkind at Gl'bglyb. "You washed up piece of carp, piss off to the trenches and stop messin' w/ my heiress!"

It would be the work of seconds for the Horrorterror to whip all of their asses. Dave can only watch as it instead argues with the Condesce. If pettiness were a sport, the winner would be Gl'bglyb by a landslide. Christ on a goddamn pita chip. You can't stop a man and a woman. One of the tentacles slithers out from the main body, quivering with petulant rage as it seizes one of the smooth-hulled submarines shoved up against the dock and uses it like a hammer, hitting the ground so hard Dave can hear something collapsing somewhere down the street, where the rest of the decrepit town sits. So cruel, Te'hy's, so cruel.

"You don't know the bubblin' meaning of the word," the Condesce says, disgusted. "I'm sick a' letting you flounder around, acting like you own the damn place!" Behind her, the E%ribimus has come to a halt just behind the goldblood, the two of them the only people still anywhere near the vicinity of the shouting match. Literally everyone else has run for the hills. Dave thinks that's a great idea actually. Why aren't they doing that, again? This is prime abscond time, right here and now.
Sw ee t Fe l Fr l w o u l d n e v e r b e l s o c r e el. Crap - the attention shifts back to their group with piss all by way of warning, and Dave digs his nails into the hollow of his palm, slamming his eyes closed as they water. A peek out shows that Karkat is bristling, but he doesn't look like he's in anywhere near the kind of pain Dave and Feferi are. Lucky bastard. Co me b a ck", Fe e ri, d e a " es't.

Hell nah. Dave doesn't want to deal with manic Peixes, round 5000. "N-no!" Feferi yells back. Her voice sounds rattled, but she doesn't falter much when a mental roar makes even Karkat flinch. The Condesce doesn't glance back at the sound, planted with her shoulders square and unyielding. "No more! You - dio mio, you're a monster!"

The white tentacles still. It's somehow eerier this way - the constant motion made Dave want to heave, but the stillness is ominous as hell. So, S o. Thi s i' s h o w it i s "Nei" her o f my pr e c i ous d e ar s w i l l ' t s i e n? By the end even the voices have gone freakily hushed.

"Are we going to stand around here much longer?" Karkat asks, through gritted teeth. He can't make much sound that way, but he does it.

Dave, meanwhile, feels like his brain is about to start leaking. "No," he says, thickly, with the heavy sensation in his nose that tell him he could sneeze anytime. "No way man. We're out."

"Seconded." Feferi's voice is thready. There's blood coming out of her ear, but she draws herself up and sets her shoulders. "We should leave. Now."

Gl'bogolyb keeps talking through it all in the horror terror version of a stage whisper. The n we sha l i s m e p y a vi c k i l l y y o u. And once yo u ar e go n, we g a nt do a s w e p l a e s. No, m or e w or ry ove r Peixes, y e s. Wh y h a n't I th i nk o f it? S e a t h w on t m in d. H e w e l n o t ev e n k i e, h e r e. S u n ch a co z y h o l e y o u h a v e m a d e f o r yo u r s el f", I eth y s.

The Condesce snorts. Dave can't see her face from here, but she tosses a section of her hair and raises her chin. "We finally gonna stop with this fishing contest? I'm game, tentabitch."

"YOU'THINKYOU CAN'T TELL ME?!!" Gl'bogolyb slams a tentacle the size of a crane against the ground, flattening an unfortunate forklift. The sound Feferi makes is kind like the burbling glug of a whole gallon of juice being poured down the sink at once.

"Why naut, I wonder." The Condesce spreads her arms out to each side, laughing. It's something worse than hysterical - the thirst is fucking unreal. "I shoulda stomped you after the Ukraine. Ha! I'm gonna wreck. Your. Shit!"

"She wouldn't." Karkat looks genuinely upset. Like, on the verge of tears.

Like Karkat's words are a signal, the Condesce shakes off the goldblood's hands and takes a running leap at the nearest tentacle. Gl'bogolyb lets out an outraged wail and eight tentacles slap at the troll, but she's vaulting again, using her trident to lever herself deeper and deeper into the noodly mounds. Dave gets all of two seconds to wonder how the hell she's going to kill this thing with a stabbing weapon (swords are way better, obviously, since they stab and slice) when the Condesce lands and jams her curling fork deep into the base of one of the tentacles. She twists the fork, plants her foot on the tentacle with enough force to flatten it before it can double back on her, and then rips, the long side of the fork tines snapping through sickly white flesh and chopping through dark, black-purple tissue through to the other side.
Welp. "Dude, she totally would," Dave says. It's just one tentacle out of a goddamn forest of them, but it's still impressive that she managed to pull it off. Like, Dave is giving credit where credit is due, alright? She may be an x-treme apple juice robber baron...but that was awesome. The brackish blood that weeps out of the stump is nasty as hell, though. When she flicks the 2x3dent kind in a full-armed swing, the speared tentacle falls off and lands in the water with a small tidal wave, shriveling in on itself as the gross iridescent glaze of horror juices leaches out into the water. Tentacles sweep in to try to knock the troll away from the gaping wound, but the Condesce starts jumping again, never standing still long enough to be pinned down.

Grabbing Karkat and Feferi, he turns them around in a 180 to start sprinting away. There's a moment of fumbling, where they all seem to get the same idea and a few too many hands are groping blindly for a handhold on Dave than he's entirely down with, but then they figure out their shit and start getting this awesome tactical retreat underway. Karkat shouts something that sounds like "backpack!" out of the blue, and nearly takes them all down with him as he scoops up his backpack full of random shit, and then they go on their merry fucking way.

Feferi clips the corner of a building with her shoulder, and another brain-stuttering scream from Gl'bgolyb makes Dave cringe at the vertigo swimming up to greet him. It's all random junk, in a language he doesn't know. Maybe that means the Horrorterror's too focused on the Condesce being a crazy badass, and not paying enough attention to the players to dick around with their heads properly. With the screaming and the fact that the ground won't stop shaking and rolling out from under his feet, he doesn't think they can get away fast enough. In a contest between the world's undisputed oldest living resident and a piece of overgrown sushi from the Negaverse, who wins?

...Also, is it just him, or is the ground shaking more, not less, the further away they go? He shouldn't look back, not when the roads are increasingly snowy the further from the workzone they get, but his impulse control is absolute shit. He pauses to take a quick look back, with the first convenient excuse he can think of - which is - uh - if something is coming up behind them (like, say, an sea monster tentacle) a little warning would be nice this time.

Weird, though. From what he can see it doesn't look like anyone or anything is coming after them. Someone is setting a hellaton of red and blue lightning off everywhere, lighting up the fog with flickering light. There's a tiny shape running around stabbing the hulking mass of tentacles wherever she can reach with her trident. He doesn't even know where the blueblood might have run off to, lost somewhere in the greyish miasma Gl'bgolyb has filled the air with. But nobody can spare the fuck necessary to come after them.

Which would be more relieving, if that rumbling weren't still getting closer.

A future him with an explanation would be pretty damn handy right now. Aaany second.

Okay, what is the point of time powers if he doesn't even get the benefit of a shitty, suitably cryptic warning ahead of time? He would punch himself in the face if that weren't the stupidest idea he's ever heard.

"Stop, stop, fucking stop for a second!" Karkat says, just as they've hit a clear road that looks like it leads out of town. South, maybe? Dave's lost track of what direction they were going. Stopping sounds like a pisspoor idea, but they do it anyway, skidding to a stop, all of them breathing hard with accompanying clouds of breath visible in the cold, murky air. "Where are we running?" Karkat spits out at last, which brings an unfortunate amount of logic down on their heads like a ton of bricks. Dave lets his silence speak for him as he looks pointedly at Feferi. Feferi looks back, her fns pressed so close to her head in embarrassment that they almost vanish in her hair. "Well holy fillet of fuck,
that's great. We're in a town in the middle of nowhere where they probably still think Lenin runs the
fucking show, and none of us even know where we could find an airport."

"More worried about escaping mindfuck range of the Horrorterror back that a-ways, to be honest,"
Dave says, jerking his head in the direction they came from. "Run now, get home later."

"I - don't," Feferi starts, and they give her a second to pull her thoughts together. She's sane (Dave is
still missing the part where she mysteriously came back from the dead, but considering the
circumstances he can guess it involves weird game shit and leave it alone) but if her head's throbbing
anywhere near as badly as Dave's is from the reverberating psychic bullshit, stringing words together
must suck ass. "I remember raysearching the infrastructure of this region, but it's all -" she gestures at
the side of her head with a hand, helplessly. "The only functioning airport is to the north, along the
coastline; the other two airfields in the area have been abandoned for years. I don't think we want to
go near the water, and it would be a two hour walk, but...this place is next to uninhabited. The
capital of the republic is over a thousand keelometers from here, and there is not much else in
between..."

Long story short, they're in the part of Russia not even the Russians wanted to live in. Awesome.
Peachy keen.

The ground bucks again. Where is that coming from? Dave spins in a wild circle, trying to make out
more than the buildings around them through the haze, but it's all misted over. If Gl'bgolyb is gonna
try to ring them in with a tentacle, these are the perfect weather conditions for it, and hell, here Dave
and Karkat are in black and bright red like flashing beacons next to Feferi's ice-encrusted white
clothes. Right, she's probably going to turn into a popsicle soon; Karkat's already dry, incredibly
enough, and his hair is doing something indescribable that Dave has no intention of telling him about
any time soon. He looks from Karkat to Feferi, and then back again, at a loss as to whether someone
is going to step up and do the friendleader thing, or if they'll get all democratic up in here and make
WV proud.

Something moves in the fog, over Feferi's shoulder, and Dave grabs her and yanks until she lurches
forward, just as the hollow, thin, but utterly huge mask looms out of the mists, suddenly taking up
most of the space between the apartments. "Karkat-!" he says tightly, as he makes a damn valiant
effort to get Feferi behind him. He's foiled by the fact that she could probably bench-press him, and
instead just turns in his arms, fins flaring in alarm as the three of them stare at the visor leaning in
over them. Blood is dripping from one of Karkat's arms as he takes a half step in front of Feferi and
Dave, and he's mildly concerned for two seconds before he remembers that's probably normal.

Well, it doesn't look like a monstrous noodle god. But Dave is not going to be fooled. No goddamn
way. It's pale white, the half-light of the fog casting greyed shadows across the ivory surface. It
shifts, the large, triangular face peering at them with eyes that are pinpricks of light in the shadows
above its visor, and he can make out the hilt of what might be a totally proportionate sword visible in
the swirling fog behind it.

How big is this thing?

"Why the fuck," Karkat asks, his voice flat, "is there a giant fucking robot looking at us? Make it
stop." He's finished making another sickle now, but the red just reminds Dave that Karkat still has
those rips in his side, not bleeding freely but still not healed over. They look too fresh to have
scabbed over, either, so what freaky new blood thing is keeping him from bleeding out? Is he
just...like...sucking it in?

Dave thinks he's getting off topic, here. "Dude, it's not looking at us." Probably. Look, a guy can
hope, alright? The visor has shifted noticeable and maybe they're too small. Maybe it'll just overlook
them and move on to wherever it was going before it planted its face in the middle of their escape route. Was there some ad for a local 'oversized white demon monsters' convention in the news, and Dave somehow missed it because his phone got borked?

"Yes it fucking is. Don't argue with me, Dave. Just make it stop happening."

With another low _boom_ that makes the ground do unforgivably wobbly things, the pale thing lowers itself to one knee. The rotating joints that come into view are actually cool as fuck, letting it bend lower than someone with a real spine probably could.

Then the mask folds open to reveal something that is _not_ the gaping maw of a monster that wants to eat them for breakfast.

It's actually the widest carapacian Dave has ever seen. In his obviously long and extensive history of chilling with carapacian dames and dudes. He's as pale as the huge mecha carapacian carrying him in its face, with placid black eyes and a warm smile and the most awesome, swagtastic outfit Dave's seen since he last looked in the mirror. There's a cape involved which automatically gets an A++ for style, an open robe with short sleeves, and what looks to be either a really long, jagged hemmed tunic or a bombass kilt. The claws that rise up to sign at them are blocky and wide, a far cry from WV's pinchy little stubs or the White Queen's thin, graceful hands.

???: Do not be afraid, players of the game. We come in peace.

There's no way that's not deliberate. Irony is giving Dave a gift to make up for landing him and Karkat in the shitter. This is a beautiful moment and he's going to treasure it forever.

Someone who sounds an awful lot like a pissed off sea troll queen is screaming in fury behind them, most likely while stabbing something remarkably similar to a chaos god in the face. So when Feferi drops into a curtsy that smooth as fuck, with _that_ going on in the background, it's _surreal_. "Grey Protector. I don't believe we've met."

The Grey Protector - the GP of all carapacians, the ex-White King, the guy who is basically the Barack of meteor aliens - just ironically referenced the hands-down most overused sci fi extraterrestrial greeting card as a dramatic opener.

Seriously, this day went from awful to fucking wild in less than a minute.

GP: No, we have not. All the same. Are we correct in guessing that you may require, as they say, a ride?

GP: The Titan's temperament is not one generally suited to cooperative efforts. We think that escorting you and our other passenger to safer lodgings may be more advantageous while they can still help hold the front line.

Dave takes back all the ragging he's done about the game in the past. Having the dude who is the de facto Supreme of the entire carapacian race as a sort-of friend out of _fucking nowhere_ is the shit and not even the Black Queen can ruin that.

Yet he still can't stop the stupid before it flies out of his mouth. "Do you have one of these that comes in aerial mode?"

The carapacian looks him square in the eye.

GP: Yes.
GP: Sadly, they have not been decanted. The walking engines must suffice, Knight. This place may soon be rendered uninhabitable. Do you wish to leave?

The visor opens up a little more, the bottom edges dragging as the whole robot lowers enough that they could step up over the threshold and into the face.

So their transportation choices have basically come down to either hiking to an airport that may or may not still be working the Soviet aesthetic, going back to beg a ride off Gl'bgolyb (what a laugh that would be. Wow. So many lols), or chilling with the Grey Protector and his giant historically significant war robot thing. Giant alien beetle robot bishop, or giant sea alien? Giant alien beetle robot bishop, or -

Karkat is still in prickly cactus mode with his bloodsickle, suspicion tight in his shoulders as he opens his mouth. "No fucking w-"

"Get in the fucking robot, Karkat," Dave says, making the executive decision by shoving Karkat at the White King. One of Karkat's thrashing arms smacks into the carapacian's outstretched claws, and the King serenely hauls the troll up. Karkat takes that about as well as can be expected, frozen in indignant shock with bulging red eyes as he gets gently set down on the floor. Feferi climbs in next, the GP taking one of her hands with a tiny bow of his head. A wave of screaming mental static hits right when Dave's trying to be cool about this, and when his brain stops throbbing the visor is closing up behind him, while Feferi sits crouched on the ground by Karkat, looking green around her...fins? Or whatever color/body part combo you insert into that metaphor for trolls.

GP: Here. Rest, Witch of Life. Knight, are you well?

Dave shakes his head, trying to school his expression out of tight-jawed agony and into something less obvious. "Better than her, I think," he says. The blood at Feferi's ears and down the sides of her neck look like they're close to freezing, glittering like purple-red gemstones in the light from between the visor bars. When Dave tries to check his own, being discreet as hell and all that, his fingertips come away with smears of red, too.

"I'm fine. Please, let's get awave from here?" Feferi says, lifting her head. Some of her hair falls into her face and she rakes it back between her horns with a grimace. "I cannot thank you enough for this, Protector."

GP: It would go ill if we left three players trapped amidst such chaos. We shall retreat while we have the window of opportunity. The Titan has chosen to hold the line for as long as it can.

At the carapacian's command, the Deaconstructor rises up from its crouch. Aside from swaying once from side to side, the ponderous steps it takes as it turns and makes for the outskirts of the town hardly jolt them at all. After a while, he couldn't say for sure how fast they're going, or even which direction they've taken off in - but look, the titanic robot thing is doing all the walking for them, so Dave isn't going to complain like a whiny pissbaby.

Karkat leans back against the inner side of the face mask. Dave could stand up and pretend he has manners, but the Protector is signing away at a smaller carapacian and a taller shape near the back of the hollow space, where the thin light from the outside doesn't quite reach. Then Feferi leans back, too, and given that she's the famous, fancy-pants heiress who knows the most about the manners for dealing with an alien king...Dave takes this sweet opportunity to lean back, too. His legs and lungs feel like they're on fire. Bro's gonna kick his ass for being out of breath after a fight.

"Holy fucking shit-kebabs," Karkat says, with feeling, and Dave nods in agreement. Now that he's sitting down he doesn't think standing up will be happening any time soon. Standing is lame,
anyway. On Karkat's other side Feferi's rapidly developing sickly bruises around her eyes; they don't look too swollen, but they leave deep maroon splotches under her grey skin. Hell, for all Dave knows, maybe the Condesce did whack her upside the head hard enough to do real damage - would Feferi have noticed with the Horrorterror urging her on?

But they're alive. Everything turned out better than expected, and that's - weird. Hell, Feferi died and she got better with a minimum of mishaps. The only plausible explanation is that the future has something else even more spectacularly horrible lined up to greet them.

Great, Karkat's pessimism is contagious. It's gone airborne. The world is doomed.

The Grey Protector finishes up his quiet conversation and turns back to them with a solemn look. Blockiness aside, this guy gives off the same kind of vibes as the White Queen: regal as hell, but without the lightning-sharp edges of menace that the BQ rocks on a daily basis.

GP: I always knew that having the bishops and rooks on standby would bear fruit. My dearest did advise that they be left undecanted before she left, but war came calling. Who was I not to answer?

GP: Now. We wish to drop our friend off at Vladivostok, and from there she informs us that it is another 700 kilometers to Seoul, where there are a number of international flights.

GP: Given our rate of travel once the Deaconstructor reaches top running speeds, it may still take us some time, but we would be capable of taking you ourselves. With a Time player, it would be entirely possible for us to drop you off at whatever time you wish. We would decant a flying unit for you, but that would take weeks, so we think you may prefer this.

Feferi perks up. "I could arrange a flight in Seoul. That sounds lovely."

"Or we could go home in a giant robot." Dave is in favor of this plan. Partly because holy shit does he hate flying, and partly because there's something really reassuring about this whole war carapacian thing. Midnight Crew decides to show up out of nowhere? Squash.

Plus, the completely unironic awesomeness that would be strolling through downtown Seattle in a titan straight out of World War II. The mental image alone could keep him going for weeks.

It comes down to Karkat, who hesitates so long Dave thinks he might have fallen asleep with his glare still on. The troll shifts his backpack full of his and Dave's random shit around to his lap, his glare closer to exhausted than angry as he hugs it. "Whatever. I'd rather polish the Condesce's culling fork with my face than deal with a fucking airport right now. But how long would it take to walk from the Arctic to Seattle? There's a huge fucking ocean between here and there!"

GP: The waters are deep, so we shall have to go around the rim. But this is a war walker - it can hold the course.

Wait, was that one deliberate? Dave has to know. "The rim...of the Pacific," he repeats.

Karkat interrupts before the GP can say anything. "Dave, I will kick you in the face."

"I'm just saying -"

"No, you're not."

Unfortunately for his sense of irony, the Grey Protector doesn't take the bait. Or he just has an ungodly straight face.
GP: Yes, it is shallow there. It will take perhaps fourteen hours. You can regain that lost time easily with the Knight of Time's exploit function.

Fourteen hours. And that's if one of the two murder-happy menaces they ditched back in town don't come after them along the way.

To hell with it. He lets himself sink down and feels the tension in his insides relax for the first time in what feels like hours. Before he zones out or falls asleep - "What about you?" When everyone just looks at him, Dave points at Feferi. "You're coming back with us? Or going back to DC? What's the plan?"

Feferi has tucked her hands into her sleeves. Dave's pajamas are helping out here, but he can't judge if it's still as cold in here as it was outside. He can't see Karkat's breath, and since Karkat is a walking furnace right now that's probably an indication that the air's warmed up some. "I - yes, I think so. I should go back - my staff will have noticed my absence by now - but I don't think that's a good idea." Her face falls further. "I know about the game, but most of that information came from Gl'bgo,yb, so can I truly trust that any of it was accurate?" She bites at the raw, split skin of her lower lip. "Also, being in Washington would be conchvenient. As much of an asshole as he is, now I'm worried about Eridan. Who knows if he's remembered to keep up with his medication, or if he even has access to it anymore, with that dome over the city. What a mess..."

Karkat suddenly gets that look in his eye. God, this is going to be about troll romance, isn't it. Dave can already feel it coming. Ugh. "Moirail?"

"Not anymore." Feferi's eyes turn steely. "No, I just...I was already so tired, and then I could no longer tell if it was love or just responsibility. If even half of what Gl'bgo,yb told me about the game session is true, I'd still be too pissed to make myself care."

"Oh, fuck." Dave folds up one of his knees and uses it to prop up his arm for a headrest. "What did he do?"

"He killed me." She pouts her lips. "I think he might have killed someone else first, but I couldn't tell whether they were alive or not. They lay so still...and I got so angry!" Shrugging, Feferi sighs. "Then I went after Eridan for revenge, he shot me, and that was that!"

What's sad is that none of this remotely surprises Dave anymore. He, John, Rose, and Jade were all dropping like flies - why would the troll session have been any less lethal? "Watch me start having nightmares about this now," Karkat mutters, folding his arms and slouching down so that he's almost horizontal. "Did I mention how much I enjoy the spontaneous visions of people I know dying horrible, bloody deaths?"

Dave snorts. "You may have said something." A couple hundred times. "But it's part of a balanced breakfast, you know? Like, the five food groups: bacon, eggs, pancakes, sausage links, and death."

Karkat hacks up the most sarcastic laugh Dave's ever heard. "Your sense of humor is horrendous. Why am I hatefriends with someone so hilariously unfunny?"

"Hang on, are we hatefriends now? Really and truly?" Dave lifts his head enough to clap his hands together and bat his eyelashes. He needs new shades. Badly.

Karkat bangs his head back against the wall, his lip a sour curl. "Forever. This is it. You're fucked." He smacks Dave's arm with the back of his hand. "Don't you realize? We went through incredibly dangerous shenanigans. It was like an extreme platonic friendship bonding ritual on methamphetamines. We just became best friends, dipshit. I hope Kanaya fucking buries you for
leapfrogging over the competition."

He is never going to understand trolls, is he. "Shit. How long do you think that will last?"

"At least until next Tuesday, depending on how much of an ass you are."

Feferi continues to stack up her recovering sanity meter by being the only person here to actually ask the Grey Protector how the hell he knew to show up in the nick of time. Dave's excuse is that weird things happen too often for him to be fazed by this stuff anymore; his surprise reflex is a withered husk. While he and Karkat are talking about stupid shit, Feferi asks, "Why are you here? This place is so far from Prosfish. Do you often make rounds in Russia?"

The GP has his claws folded together over his front in a really familiar way; Dave remembers the White Queen doing the same thing, when she's busy watching people rather than talking. He looks up to blink at them again placidly, and this time Dave catches a glimpse of the squat carapacian hunched over what appears to be a viewscreen or a set of controls, dressed in robes that cover almost every inch of its shell with a pointy bishop hat low over its eyes and a crook in its claws that it uses to tap on the screens. The other person lingers by the far wall, taller than both carapacians and with the familiar rectangular light of a phone screen illuminating half her dark face, though she's turned away from them.

GP: No, dear Witch. We have tried to grant Her Condescension a wide berth over the centuries. She reacts poorly to outright confrontation, and her connections to certain parties gave us all the more reason to avoid interaction. It has grown more difficult as her holdings have grown.

GP: However, a majjykal practitioner we are on cordial terms with noted the heightened chaos readings in this area, foresaw a clash of significance that involved player activity occurring at this juncture of space and time, and thought to warn us.

"The universe actually pulled something helpful out of its ass?" Karkat naturally takes this poorly. "I don't buy it. This is so fucking contrived. Where's the fucking catch?"

GP: Contrived is a very harsh word. Paradox space prefers serendipity and synchronicity. If such fateful spirals of memetic repetition and coincidence are 'contrived,' it is surely beyond our power to argue with it.

"Fuck that. I'll argue with it."

GP: As is your right. My dearest would know more of the philosophy behind it, if you wished to ask her.

"Well, whatever brought you here, I deeply appreciate it. Molte grazie." Feferi stifles yawn against a closed fist, and pushes her hair out of the way again. "And to your magician, as well."

"Ах. Это было бы меня."

And Diamonds Droog walks out of the shadows, with a little wave of her hand.

- -

Dave thinks he and Karkat try to tackle each other to safety at the same time, which is one of the stupidest, uncoolest things today short of the whole 'kidnapped by a Horrorterror' fiasco.

Diamonds Droog just stares at them, nonplussed, while they dick around trying to figure out who's protecting who. "Что-то не так?" Droog asks the Grey Protector, hair swinging as she turns to
frown at the carapacian. Something’s odd about the whole picture, but Dave is trying to figure out how to lever the mask-jaw of this giant walking death trap open from the inside. Karkat's sides are still hurt and gaping red, is there something wrong with him? Shit shit shit not right now -

GP: We do not know. Have you all met? How peculiar.

"Nyet," Diamonds Droog says, a word which Dave understands because it's goddamn obvious, and is also such a huge lie that it could probably dwarf Jupiter with the size of its lying ass.

"Bullshit! She's Diamonds Droog!" he says, to set the record straight, before remembering escape is the main goal, here. Getting in the giant robot was a mistake. He should have known better. Feferi doesn't seem to have caught on to the urgency of this situation yet, watching him and Karkat freak out with not nearly enough worry in her eyes, but she rolls up into a crouch, eyes flickering between them and Droog.

"Даймондс Дроог?" Droog rolls the r way longer than Dave's heard it said before, her voice dubious even through the heavy Russian accent. She's mocking them, isn't she. Пис. Then recognition lights her eyes - and she groans. "О, нет. Не снова."

GP: This has happened before?

"Моя двоюродная сестра. Эта сторона семьи уехала в Америку. Они хотели, чтобы избежать преступления здесь. Представьте себе, как горд мы все из Димитра." Droog's smile turns crooked, almost hurt, before she shakes her head and looks at the three of them with a hesitant smile. It shouldn't look normal on Droog's face, considering who they're talking about, here, but it does. "Я прошу прощения обильно за то, что она могла бы сделать для вас. Моя двоюродная сестра не добрая душа. Все острые кромки, и очень горд. Димушка пугает даже людей, которые пугали её родителей, в эти дни."

Dave looks at Karkat. Karkat looks at Dave. They both look at Feferi, who looks back, just as lost as them, but with a more polite, diplomatic expression of baffled incomprehension that she turns on Diamonds Droog. Seriously, the only other language Dave knows even in passing is Spanish, and it's mostly just the swear words. "Qué?" he throws out there, weakly. The visor's not coming open no matter what he tries, even when he jams his broken sword in and tries to use it as a lever, so he looks at the GP instead, since the carapacian is the only one who might be able to translate for them.

GP: She believes that you have mistaken her for her cousin.

"Da," Droog adds, moving a strand of her hair back behind her ear. It's weird, now that Dave takes a second, less panicked look; her hair is pale, ashy blond, long enough to fall down to her shoulder blades, and could it be a wig? Because Diamonds Droog has close dark curls, and Dave doesn't think a couple of weeks is long enough for it to have grown that much. "Yah Galina Mikhailovna Drugova. Ne govoryu...English? Angliskii." She checks her phone again, smacking it lightly on the side with a faint frown. "Ah, глупо..."

The Protector lays a heavy hand on the woman's shoulder in sympathy.

GP: Her name is Galina Drugova. She does not speak much English. But she means you no harm, we think. We would not have brought her if we believed her dangerous, and she has given no sign of being so in the years our people have known her.

Karkat puts his face in his hands. "I think I'm going to throw up," he says, sounding bleak. "Dave, I'm hallucinating. Tell me I'm hallucinating this steaming heap of manufactured bullshit."
Dave shakes his head. "Sorry, dude, I think we're stuck in this one together." Not-Diamonds Droog just watches with that weirdly friendly, polite expression, oblivious to the fact that her existence is giving them a collective mental crisis. He doesn't even have a working phone to look up that name she gave on the Internet to see if she's a real life person. Sure, he can't think of a real reason why Diamonds Droog of all people would dress up in a wig and try to fool them into believing she has a cousin - but what the hell, stranger shit has happened.

"These goofballs thank her, too," Feferi says. Whoa nelly, there. When Dave opens his mouth and Karkat jerks his head, Feferi gives them the stinkeye before whipping around to beam at Drugova. "Thank you, again."

Drugova's smile widens again, and she waves her phone around as she says, "Nyet problem."

"We could still squeeze out between the bars," Karkat says in a growl.

"I'm not walking to that airport." Dave looks out, his eyes adjusting for a second from the relative darkness of the inside of the Deaconstructor to the white light outside. There's no more mist, and when he catches sight of the ground he realizes they're goddamn booking it. This thing must have amazing shock absorbers or something to run this fast without mashing them all. "Also, I have no idea where we are."

Karkat looks outside, too, closing eyes and tugging at his hair with a claw. "If she pulls a cuestick on us in here, we're fucked, you know."

"Yeah. More or less fucked than with the Horrorterror, though?"

The troll just groans. Dave'll take that as an 'equal amounts of totally fucked.' The only thing in their favor right now is that Drugova has gone back to smiling bemusedly at her phone, her chin buried in the fur that runs from the collar to the hem of her long coat, scrolling through something.

A phone.

...How desperate is Dave?

The answer, after five awkward minutes of him and Karkat hovering around like dipshits and Feferi sitting down with an impatient hiss for them to stop acting stupid, turns out to be really damn desperate. He has an addiction. "Hey, uh, can we -" he starts, breaking off with a twitch when Drugova looks up and blinks at him quizzically - and uncomprehendingly. The GP looks up too, though, and Dave makes useless motions with his hands before he gives up and just signs it, because this request is too stupid to give to Karkat as fodder for whenever their truce ends. 'Do you think we could borrow her phone? A tentacle monster broke ours. Gotta catch the bros up on the fact that we're not dead yet, back home.' He doesn't think John and Rose would be too worried right now, except that he and Karkat both left half-assed messages on Pesterchum before Gl'bogolyb shut them down. What got through the horror filter might have been enough to set off John, which would suck hardcore.

GP: We shall communicate your request.

When everything's been translated - Karkat looks at Dave's hands, aggravated, and elbows him when he won't repeat what he just signed aloud - Drugova hesitates and then nods very deliberately to Dave. She goes through what must be three different menus before letting out a tiny noise of victory and stepping toward them. Dave can't hold back a twitch of his shoulders, defensive, but all she does is hold out the phone with both hands, and when Dave gingerly takes it she murmurs something else in Russian before stepping back to lean against the wall, picking up her conversation with the GP.
again. It's not that she's acting odd, he realizes. She's acting like a totally normal, polite adult, confronted with a bunch of kids who don't speak her language. Their past experience with normal adults being pretty damn limited isn't her fault. And not the fact that her face bears a strong resemblance to a mob boss, either. Probably.

GP: The phone's signal is not strong here, she says, but she has located the English keyboard, if you wish to use it to contact your allies. Though we think you may find that the signal is not an issue.

"Let me guess. Wifi is as good here as it is under the sea," Dave mumbles, held up for a second as he deals with the standard confusion of handling someone else's phone. It's logged into some forum that's all in Russian, and his eyes skim over a line of 'α- No, v bezopasnosti? -Ω' before he figures out how to exit out of the internet window and spies the familiar golden square of a Pesterchum app. Hell yes. Hell fucking yes.

GP: The game provides.

Yeah, well, the game provides shittily, because Dave is still trying to navigate a Cyrillic Pesterchum over here. Thank fuck most of the buttons appear to be in the same place - the format of the interface looks kinda outdated, like the app is a few versions behind, but he finds the login screen and the keyboard that pops up when he goes to type in his handle and password has the regular alphabet.

Karkat naturally tries to finagle his way in on Dave's action, the asshole. "You're trying to message John," he realizes, and he makes a swipe for the phone that Dave barely dodges, holding the cell over his head while he squints and tries to figure out where the memo creation tab is. What's memo in Russian? God damn it. "Give it here, fucknugget."

"Of all the things in the world to profane, you had to shit on nuggets?" Dave shakes his head. "Fuck you, dude, I had the idea first."

Feferi doesn't try to join the contest, thank god. She'd probably win. Karkat is handsy but not exactly effective when he's disgruntled. "You two...are very strange, I hope you know."

"You're hardly fucking one to talk, Feferi."

A blank memo opens. Dave could kiss this phone. But that would be weird as hell and Karkat trying to climb him like a tree to reach the phone is already embarrassing enough with a world leader, a Diamonds Droog look alike, and Feferi all silently judging them. "This trip is going to be so lame," he says, accidentally catching Karkat in the side wounds when he tries to reestablish some personal space, here. Whoops. It doesn't look like it hurts the troll too much, though his face turns a weird shade of pale grey before he dives for the backpack full of stuff and pulls his hoodie from earlier on backwards, covering the matching lines of red without an explanation worth a damn.

It gives Dave all the opening he needs to open a memo (he hopes) and send out invites, and that's what matters. With so much going right, he feels the need to add, "And we probably won't make it to Seattle in one piece. We don't have that kind of luck."

The GP frowns at him, the rumble of the mental reply mild but anxious to reassure.

GP: We swear, we would not allow players to come to harm off the field of battle.

Karkat knows, though. "We'll probably be attacked halfway to Alaska," he says, scrubbing his hair and yanking his hoodie's hem down as far as it will go, like that'll make the injuries go away (not Dave's problem, not Dave's problem...) before whirling on Dave again with an evil look as he eyes the phone. "And kidnapped."
He can pry this phone from Dave's cold fingers, alright? "No way we're getting back home without a fight," Dave agrees, turning in another half circle when Karkat tries going on tiptoes.

Feferi stares at the two of them like they're off their rocker, but Dave's ass is quite firmly planted in this metaphorical rocking chair, thank you. "What are you talking about?"

"The plan is to take forever to get home, with as many distractions and incidents of unfathomable stupidity as possible." Karkat is hitting his stride. They're really getting the hang of this. "No doubt when we finally arrive everyone will be dead."

Dave nods sagely. "Oh, yeah, naturally." He takes a hand off the phone before Karkat can try to claw it away from the phone and holds his fist out. Distractedly, Karkat bumps it. He's struggling to keep looking grumpy - but Dave knows what a straight face looks like. Karkat doesn't have one. Dave relents, rolling his eyes, and lowers his other arm so he doesn't need to crank his neck back to see the screen. The troll stays clustered all up in his business, but as they wait for someone to respond, the signal bar in the corner of the screen full, no one gets mangled, so hey. This friend thing must be working out.

Feferi pressed her fingers to a temple, her thumb hooked under her jaw as she stares into the distance. "Mio Dio. Sono pazzi."

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-- turntechGodhead начал записку dude that shit better mean opened a memo holy balls на
********** --
TG: yo paging rose john jade kanaya
TG: uh who else
CG: IF WE HAVE MORE THAN SIX PEOPLE IN HERE AT A TIME IT'LL TURN INTO A FREE FOR ALL.
TG: okay man if we have to keep passing this phone back and forth and swapping between handles every two seconds were never gonna get shit done
CG: I'M GLAD YOU'RE SURRENDERING QUIETLY.
TG: what no i get to tell them
CG: STOP YANKING THE PHONE OUT OF MY HAND JACKASGDFL
TT: You two are sharing a single phone? As much of a relief it is to hear from you, I see no future in which such a scenario does not summarily end in homicide.
TG: tell me about it
TG: look man well trade off i tell the first half and then you can have it to explain wtf happened with fish princess lazarus because im still boggling over here
EB: karkat?! dave! :D
TG: he is scowling in my general direction i think that means sup
EB: what happened to you guys? we've been worried sick!
TG: dude so much bullshit
TG: like theres coincidence and then theres the universe actively trying to get us all killed in the lamest ways possible for shits and giggles
TG: im sure karkat has some epic metaphor for complaining about it but he can get to that later right now hes sulking with lifey witch
TT: Did some part of this 'bullshit' entail damaging your phones to such an extent that they ceased functioning? Jade and Kanaya are still out of contact. Things here have been...well.
TG: oh shit them too
TG: uh
EB: dave...
TG: look the important thing here is everyone is currently alive
TG: even feferi who was in fact dead for a while there
TG: and were on our way back to seattle as i type so no one freak out
EB: that would be way more of a relief if you weren't being all fidgety about it now, you know.
TT: I concur. He's attempting to forestall the explanation. Brother, be a dear and put Karkat back on the phone.
TG: no way i have dibs
TG: it wasn't all that bad
EB: aaaaaaaagh just spit it out!
TG: look does everyone here remember the whole rose goes nuclear on a major city episode
TG: it had great special effects so so pacing weird dialog but over all pretty solid
TG: it was like that but with shitty special effects and more feferi rising from the dead
TG: also the condesce may or may not want to have me assassinated for cutting in on her apple juice profits
EB: Dave. what the fuck.
TG: look dude i told you aj is serious business
TG: i dont know why none of you ever believe me
TT: I'm still attempting to draw the parallels between my going grimdark in New York and you and Karkat visiting the capitol. My conclusions are being thwarted by the fact that according to the news, Washington DC is enjoying a balmy spring day and is not, in fact, in flames.
TG: really cause it was all cloudy and full of grimlight shit when we got there
EB: DAVE, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS EXPLAIN THINGS IN THE WORST POSSIBLE ORDER?! WHY?!??!
TG: ease up there youre channeling karkat and one karkat yacking in my ears is more than enough thanks
TT: Oh dear. The caps lock. How it calls to me!
TG: rose no
TT: My thumb...how can it resist such sweet temptation...
TT: A simple caress is all it would take...
TG: oh jfc you need to get laid
TG: feferi was possessed by a horrorterror and teleported us to siberia to fight the condesce only she got herself killed and came back to life and then we escaped in a giant carapacian while supposedly a second one helped the hic punch said horrorterror in the face
TG: also were chilling with the white queens husband he says hi
EB: wait, you're where?!
TG: right now like
TG: not the arctic
TG: and in the end thats really all there is to say on the matter
TT: Oh my god.
TG: yeah
TG: okay here before anyone starts shouting again
CG: WHAT THE FUCK DID HE DO?
EB: karkat what the hell!
CG: SEE, I NOW I KNOW FOR SURE HE SAID SOMETHING UNBELIEVABLY STUPID, BECAUSE THERE'S NO OTHER REASON WHY HE'D GIVE UP THIS PIECE OF SHIT PHONE WILINGLY.
CG: HOW DO YOU FUCK UP AN EXPLANATION THIS BADLY?!
TT: Before anything else, can we please review the part about a Horrorterror influencing Ms Peixes's mind?
CG: INFLUENCING? IT WAS LITERALLY RIGHT THERE IN THE FLESH, I THINK WE WERE PAST THE POINT OF 'INFLUENCING' AND ALL THAT JAZZ.
EB: are you guys sure you're okay? like ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE?! i knew something was
CG: YEAH, SURPRISINGLY WE'RE FINE. FOR NOW.
TT: Stop. The whole Horrorterror was physically manifested? Please, Karkat, this is important.
CG: IT GREW A TENTACLE LONG ENOUGH TO REACH US FROM THE ATLANTIC.
I'M PRETTY SURE IT WAS FUCKING REAL.
TT: That's. Oh dear. Kanaya will be so disappointed.
CG: WHY...? RUN IT BY ME AGAIN.
TT: Because there's really only one Horror this could be. People do tend to notice the massive majjikal disruption when a many-angled one successfully crosses to the physical plane, and while there have been possessions recently - my own not excepted - no elder god has transported its physical form from the Circles to Earth since the grimlight swamped the old Ukraine. It drove many magic practitioners as far to the south and east as they could go to escape that part of the world.
TT: Which just so happens to be what Kanaya was most interested in investigating in Los Angeles. Has it been filling the waters with acid and twisting the flesh of the wildlife to serve its will?
CG: ACID, YEAH, BUT MOSTLY EVERYTHING IN THE WATER LOOKED PRETTY FUCKING DECEASED.
CG: FEFERI THOUGHT IT WAS HER LUSUS, BUT IT JUST SEEMED REALLY FUCKING GUNG-HO ABOUT PITTING HER AGAINST HER ANCESTOR.
EB: i knew we should have gone to find you! :( we could have helped! are you sure you guys aren't hurt? it might have hurt you in your head, you have to check -
CG: CALM, JOHN. I COULD BARELY HEAR ANYTHING IT SAID. DAVE'S THE ONE WHO CAUGHT THE WORST OF IT AND JUDGING BY HIS STEADY, UNALTERED LEVELS OF DIPSHTTERY, I THINK HE'S RECOVERING JUST FINE.
CG: FEFERI HAD TO DIE BEFORE GL'BGOLYB GOT OUT OF HER HEAD, THOUGH, AND NONE OF US KNOW IF IT'S PERMANENT SO. YEAH. FUCK. SHE MIGHT BE FUCKED UP. ROSE -
TT: Get her to me as quickly as you can manage. Grimlight's not my area of expertise, but if there's something corrosive left over in her mind, I can burn it out.
EB: also, where are you all? dave just said something about the king and not being in the arctic which is so vague.
EB: maybe we can come meet you halfway?
CG: NO, WE'RE MAKING GOOD TIME HERE. I THINK, BUT WE'RE IN AN ARCH DEACONSTRUCTOR AND I'M PRETTY SURE WE'RE ALMOST SOMEWHERE THE WEATHER'S NOT PERMANENTLY SET TO NUCLEAR WINTER.
CG: GOD, THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS INSANE. LEGITIMATELY SHITHIVE MAGGOTS. THIS ROBOT CRUSHED GERMANY BENEATH ITS FEET. IF IT'S EVEN THE SAME ONE.
CG: UPDATE - ACCORDING TO THE EXPERT HERE, IT IS THE SAME ONE. THIS THING HAS STEPPED ON NAZIS.
TT: You plan to cross the Pacific?
CG: MOSTLY GOING AROUND IT. AFTER WE DROP SOMEONE OFF. WE HAVE TO RETURN HER PHONE THEN SO WE'LL BE RADIO SILENT AGAIN. SHE'S - FUCK I CAN'T EVEN TYPE IT. IT'S TOO RIDICULOUS.
EB: hang on, would you say you're going...around the Pacific rim?
CG: I HATE ALL OF YOU.
EB: eheheh.
EB: but you'll be back soon? really?
CG: I DON'T DARE SAY ANYTHING ON THE OFF CHANCE I JINX IT. THERE'S A SHITTON OF THAT GOING AROUND LATELY.
CG: GOOD NEWS, THOUGH - OUR PLANS MAY NOT GO INCREDIBLY FUCKING WRONG AS LONG AS WE REPEATEDLY STATE THAT WE INTEND TO DO THE EXACT OPPOSITE. RESULTS PENDING.
CG: SO NO. WE'RE NOT GOING TO BE BACK SOON. WE'LL PROBABLY DIE HORRIBLY ALONG THE WAY.

EB: :///////

EB: on so many levels, not funny.

CG: HA. HAHA. LOOK AT ALL OF MY PERFECTLY SINCERE HUMOR COUGHS. APPRECIATE THEM, JOHN.

TT: We may also have a few visitors arriving over the course of the next few days. You'll want to sit down for this.

EB: urgggh, i wanted to forget about that stuff...

CG: WHO AND HOW MANY OF THEM ARE WE GOING TO NEED TO KICK IN THE BONEBULGE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE BEFORE THEY FUCK OFF BACK TO WHATEVER HOLE THEY CRAWLED OUT OF?

TT: None of them, hopefully. Aradia and Sollux may or may not be escorting Terezi and Vriska down from Canada, though Sollux is vehemently opposed.

EB: also theres this kind of creepy guy who started emailing rose's mom out of the blue? we think he's one of the troll players on the list, and he's bringing someone else with him because the midnight crew has been bothering them.

TT: An Aradia with some future perspective has also given me a heads up that one Gamzee Makara, aka Juggaloco, will arrive here shortly after you and Dave return. Again, the exact timing is up for debate.

CG: GAMZEE MAKARA

CG: OH

CG: OH YOU'VE GOT TO BE FUCKING JOKING.

EB: you do remember him?

CG: ABOUT AS MUCH AS I REMEMBER ANY OF THEM.

CG: BUT WITH MORE REALLY FUCKING OMINOUS FOREBODING MIXED IN, WHICH IS ALWAYS A FUN TIME.

CG: WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THAT SHITTY CLOWNFUCK...WHAT THE FUCK WAS IT ABOUT HIM THAT I'M MISSING?

TT: I would suggest you give the labs a pass for an extra day, so we could head him off or turn him aside, but Aradia seems adamant that would be an even worse idea than letting him meet you. We may not have a choice.

TT: If you can't recollect why he is so violently determined to meet you, I worry about how he'd react to your absence.

EB: he wasn't all that nice to dave, but at least he wasn't around to attack him like he did to jade...

EB: we'll just have to meet him head on! as a team! i won't let him hurt you.

CG: JOHN, nah man this is getting too sappy im intervening

TG: whoops

EB: that was barely sappy at all, dave :/ let him finish what he was saying!

TG: im doing you both a favor here

EB: uughghghghghghgh

TT: And the Arch Deaconstructor...Any chance the King could tell you what the odds are of one being able to hold its own against a Horrorterror?

TG: according to him nah but the one fighting was a derse one so possibly more badass who knows TG: and condy was helping with her weirdo posse so thats a shrug from me

TT: Neither option sounds particularly promising, but let's hope the Condescension is able to drive it back, at least.

EB: we're rooting for the batterwitch now?

TT: Anything she can do to prevent that Horrorterror from reestablishing itself in some new unsuspecting city should probably be encouraged.

TT: Try not to go through Seattle on your way back, Dave - there's still a no tolerance policy in effect, and I doubt the FVRT would take kindly to a walking war-specialized carapacian gallivanting
through the streets.
TT: In fact, I'm three quarters certain there's a post-war treaty on the books stating giant fighting
robots are not permitted to cross international borders.
EB: vienna convention of 1950.
TG: okay karkat and feferi the undying literally just said that as you posted it im surrounded by nerds
TG: good memo everyone peace out
CG: OH GIVE ME THAT.
TT: (Do we even want to know?)
TG: (shuppup theyre jus getting to the good part)
CG: WHY ARE YOU PEOPLE - NO, FUCK, I DON'T CARE.
TG: WELL I WAS GOING TO SAY SOMETHING BUT NOW THAT I KNOW THERE ARE
FUCKING ***VOYEURS*** EYEING UP THE MEMO FORGET IT.
TG: (oh noes ;-;)
TG: (*;-;;)
CG: WE'LL BE BACK SOON. POSSIBLY SOONER FOR YOU THAN FOR US. I DON'T
GET THE TIME POWERS THING, THAT'S ALL DAVE.
TT: Then we will watch for your safe return.
EB: you'll be careful right?
CG: YEAH, WE'LL BE CAREFUL, DUMBASS. BACK AT YOU. LET'S SEE HOW MUCH
SLEEP I CAN GET BEFORE THE NEW NIGHTMARES START. I FEEL LIKE WE RAN A
FUCKING MARATHON UPHILL AND THEN TRIPPED AND HIT EVERY CAR ON THE
WAY BACK DOWN.
CG: I'M NEVER MOCKING YOUR HATRED OF BETTY CROCKER AGAIN, JOHN.
THERE'S SO MUCH - I'LL TELL YOU WHEN WE GET BACK. NO POINT DREDGING
ALL THIS FUCKERY UP RIGHT NOW.
EB: so you're saying even worse stuff happened than what you already told us?!
CG: TRUST ME. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS. WE'RE SAVING IT FOR
TOMORROW BECAUSE MY THINKPAN ISN'T FUNCTIONING AT A HIGH ENOUGH
CAPACITY TO PROCESS IT ALL ANYMORE.
EB: alright...yeah, we found out some stuff too and it's kinda...let's just have a show and tell session
when you all get back or something!
EB: <>
CG: <>, DUMBASS. NOW STOP WORRYING. WE'RE COMING HOME.

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Magic is hard to quantify. It's known of and studied, but it tends to play hopscotch with the laws of
physics in a way that makes what Jade can do look tame in comparison. Only a few people can pull
it off; even fewer are really much good at it; and from the way this fight is going, Jade has the
weirdest feeling that she and Kanaya might be dealing with a worst case scenario.

See, Eridan is not just any old jerk! No, sirree! Eridan is a really powerful jerk, who doesn't have any
idea what he's doing. Jade doubts he's been trained a day of his life. He's good at exactly two things -
shooting barely controlled bursts of magic lightning and being a jerk, and that last one takes up about
90% of his brain power at any given moment.

Probably. She's guesstimating. Uhhh...what he lacks in self-control, he makes up for in gumption?

She can't even try to be positive about this. Because Eridan is an enormous, giant jerky jerk.

But as much as she'd like to beat him up, she has her hands full trying to keep the angels off Kanaya.
They swarm up out of the shaded courtyards whenever she thinks she's made a dent in their
numbers, tearing up the stone and shattering more windows to reach her more quickly. There are
enough flying lizardy things that she's getting a liiittle concerned. Not that this whole place wasn't totally concerning already, just... However Eridan made them, whether through science or magicky stuff, he must have invested a lot of time and resources into it because they seem endless!

At least he hasn't gone all googly and tentacled and stuff on them. Jade sure would hate to have to fight a Horrorterror tanglebuddy on top of all this! She raises a fist and slams it down, smashing four more angels against the roof with a burst of force. Another two ping her senses as they try to slither in between Eridan’s energy bursts, and Jade shouts a warning before teleporting in close to punch one in the face. It takes her very close to one of the bright white lightning bolts lancing around everywhere willy nilly, which is actually pretty convenient! She kicks backward, judging the angle by her sense of space, and catches the second sneaky angel in the torso to shove it back into the searing beam. It punches a hole through the angel's body and cleaves it in two.

Kanaya fights on, her costume singed all over. From what Jade sees, Eridan isn't all that good at fighting: he can throw around a lot of power, but he's slow to dodge and can't aim well at all - at least, not while he's firing with his bare hands. When Kanaya kicks him in the gut he lashes out in a blind fury, which is all the opportunity Kanaya needs to duck out of the way and start slicing at him with her chainsaw again. It's just that whenever she really presses her advantage, Eridan floats out of the danger zone. Between the two of them and Eridan's manic flailing, they've reduced the tower they were standing on to rubble and moved on to the ramparts. At this rate, a ton of buildings are gonna get trashed before the battle wraps up.

Urgh. If Jade were free to go help, this would probably be over already. As long as Kanaya's perfectly capable of holding her own, though, Jade'll concentrate on wiping the floor with these angels. Once that's done, it'll be a piece of cake! With that thought to cheer her up, Jade twirls, her hood and hair flying out behind her as she seizes the next winged lizard thing to slam up against the wall. These nasty things take a while to knock down and shredding their wings only slows them a little bit; she bashes heads in as they present themselves, and that seems to do the trick!

At least the survivors haven't shown up to jump in and help Eridan or anything dumb like that. Jade wouldn't put it past him to try to appeal to Ruth and the others or use them as potential hostages (see note re: JERK ALERT above) but she can't spare the concentration to track them amid all the angel movements around her. With luck - fingers and toes crossed - Ruth has the group running for the exit. If it's still open, anyway.

Then an angel divebombs her, folding its wings and dropping like a rock, and Jade has to focus on punching things again.

Kanaya has always considered herself a no-nonsense type of troll. The world has grown progressively more nonsensical of late, which is annoying to no end. She died and got better, but she adapted to being a rainbow drinker. She learned that chaos abomination gods exist and were responsible for the Ukraine genocide, and she grudgingly had to accept that, too.

But it's all off the rails, now. She does not think there has been a single solitary hour of unadulterated normalcy since she and Rose arrived in Washington, and it makes her sigh for the days when she didn't have to believe in things like universe-creating games and past lives to soldier through conversations with her friends. None of this is anywhere close to what she trained for as a mediculler, but that has yet to prove a potent enough argument to make the nonsense less real.

All she asks is that she be allowed to punch Eridan Ampora square in the face one more time. It would give her an immense satisfaction. In fact, the urge to just chainsaw him in half and be done with it grows stronger with each passing minute, and the only thing making her hesitate is that the
violetblood's clearly not in his right mind. Arguably, he has deliberately taken a sharp left turn and ripped out the steering column so he's left no way to turn right again. If she were younger and more impulsive, she might just have listened to the instincts that tell her to put him down before he turns even more feral - or worse, tries to summon his Horrorterror back for another round. In this irrational state he's worked himself up to, there's probably little Eridan wouldn't do if he thought he had no other options.

Ah, well. She can only presume that eventually, if she hits him hard enough, he'll pass out. Then she and Jade can proceed from there with less of this eye-burning light show. "Stop! That! This! Instant!" she spits between lunges, a headache twinging in her left temple as Eridan sets off another dazzling beam of white light. It flies wild, but pulses with such force that it still leaves her feeling charred around the edges when she successfully dodges. "You are being a menace!"

"An' you're bein' an interferin' hag!" Eridan screams back, dropping every 'ŋ' from start to finish, before blasting the floor out from under her.

She drops and rolls into a crouch when she lands, ducking behind a fragment of rock before reassessing the violetblood's position. His aerial advantage is truly annoying, right now; all he needs to do is destroy her footing, and he gains himself a reprieve from the posterior-drubbing he most definitely deserves. The rising cloud of dust from the wall's collapse covers her movements; she coughs once, low in her throat, before taking advantage of the dust to climb back up on top of what remains of the wall. The next lightning bolt prickles her skin before striking the ground where she landed originally. She scales the rest of the wall, one of her nails tearing painfully close to the quick when she hastily misjudges her final clawhold.

Off to her left, Eridan's floating where she last saw him, an expectant glare leveled at the swirling black dust. Kanaya takes three strides as a running start and then flings herself at him, chainsaw at the ready. She does not believe anyone will mind if they bring Eridan back short an arm or two. It'll certainly render him less of a threat to anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path.

A jangling screech and a flash of dark wings alert her to the incoming angel too late for her to adjust her leap. It must have concealed itself on the far side of the wall, still and quiet where Jade must not have sensed it. Damn.

Kanaya does not expect the fingers that grasp her foot from underneath and push her up, like a cork popped out of a bottle. "'Scuse me!" Jade calls, cheerily, her hair dazzling with green sparkles on dark curls as she meets the angel headfirst. Her hands glow as she mimes twisting them, and the angel's wing rips in two. The human seizes the other wing and she starts to somersault, but Kanaya finds herself busy tackling Eridan and is forced to direct her attention elsewhere.

Eridan's claws are ripping tears in her clothes - Kanaya raises the chainsaw in one and his hands snatch back quick enough, before she can remove them from her person with extreme prejudice. Startling him breaks his concentration and they drop back toward the ground while he tries to fend her off without giving her enough room to swing. All that appears to drive him at any given moment is self-preservation (or perhaps narcissism; the line seems to be thin where Eridan is concerned).

"Not again," he hisses, jamming his claws up against her ribcage. A high-pitched whine rises in Kanaya's ears as energy starts burning in his palms. "No-!"

One of the angels tries to pull another fast one, but Jade pulls a faster one, duh! She helps Kanaya skip out of the way and then starts pulling wings off. All she has time for is to kick the third's face in before a fresh wave hits. She swaps a rifle out of her sylladex and into her hand; Grandpa would
give her *such* a talking to for such poor technique, she thinks, leveling the riflekind one-handed at the next nearest angel and pulling the trigger.

But the longer she fights, the less attention she pays to the extra data her goggles feed to her in the corner of her lenses, and the more she finds herself firing on pure instinct rather than waiting to make sure of her aim. She hasn't missed yet, that she can tell, so she must be doing something right! She claps her free hand into a fist and two more lizard-angels slam into each other like asteroids on a collision course.

She always uses her space sense to fight...but watching the game second-hand isn't enough to fill in what went through their heads while they busted out all those awesome god tier powers against Jack Noir. It just made her ten different kinds of envious! On the screens, Jade's powers went wayyy beyond what she can usually use on a day to day basis, and she's been dying to figure out how to do all the fun stuff that Grandpa could never have hoped to train her in. If she could remember everything, surely it would fall into place.

The White Queen said that would happen when it happened, though. Which is a pretty darn lackadaisical way to go about it! Jade is all for lackadaisicality like that normally, but -

A sharp scream, two parts anger and one part pain, cuts right through Jade's train of thought. She flips upside down to get out of the way of an angel and catches Eridan and Kanaya staggering away from each other on the ground. Kanaya's clothes are somehow on fire, and Eridan reels back with his hands pressed against a violet wound in his side, looking livid. An angel seizes the moment to come at Jade from a ninety degree angle when it thinks she's distracted; when she throws out a hand to stop it, the force it takes to jerk it to a stop accidentally punches a hole right through the angel's stomach, splattering Jade with blood goop. Right in the face.

- okay, thinking about all this in the middle of a fight probably isn't the best idea Jade's ever had. Bwahgh! She wipes it off on the back of her hand and tries to find the right rhythm again.

There *is* a rhythm. All jangly and punchy and at some pitch that Jade just barely can't hear. It pulses in her ears and sets her foot tapping without her noticing, and the more in sync she is with the not-music, the smoother her motions become.

It's on the tip of her tongue!

- "- you don't get to kill me again, dammit!"

Kanaya brings the chainsaw around. The magic coruscating around Eridan’s hands burns and fills the air with the scent of ozone and singed cloth, but the chainsaw drags open a line along his side, and the smell of blood will always be stronger to Kanaya.

She's still put out by the impending destruction of her uniform, but she hasn't been all that bothered by injuries since becoming a rainbow drinker. Eridan finally seems to pick up on that when his glare switches back to a look of desperation when she strips off her outermost layer and drops it to finish smoldering on the ground. She pats the last of the white flames out of the rest, the bared skin of her arms luminescent even under the light of the dome. "Then you need to stop this before you leave me no other choice. Take down the dome and come quietly, before anyone else ends up hurt by your actions." She wishes she could ask Jade where the fleeing civilians ended up - the more lightning he throws around, the greater the chances of him hitting someone else each time Kanaya dodges.

His nostrils flare in time with his ear fins. "Go have a powwow with fuckin' Gamzee, if you want to
hang out so bad! You two could be the best violent asshole friends on this shitty planet. Stop questioning my authority!"

"You have no authority."

Kanaya fully expects the blast of lightning that statement provokes. Eridan is at least reliable. She can't see what it destroys this time, but she hears the rumble of falling stone behind her as she zigs out of the way. Eridan is rising like a balloon again, so she takes advantage of the nearest demolished wall, conveniently placed to serve as a ramp that lets her jump higher. She swears when Eridan zooms up out of reach in a sudden burst of speed and begins to charge up another blast of magic; she gets ready to roll and dodge when she lands.

Eridan is up high, but Jade zaps in higher. She also brings a very dead angel with her, and slam dunks the body on top of Eridan's head to slam him back toward the ground. "Special delivery!"

"Appreciate it!" Kanaya calls, though Jade warps out of sight again before she finishes. She flips the chainsaw back into a tube of lipstick to stick the landing without impaling herself by accident, grabbing the angel's lizard tail and yanking it off Eridan so she can kick him properly. He slashes her calf with a claw when it comes near, still shocky with the energy he built up. Kanaya grits her teeth through the sting and punches him instead after he straightens. He blocks it with an arm, backpedals out of the way when she swings again, and retaliates with another short burst of lightning that numbs her fingers before she sweeps her leg up to plant her shin in his side where the chainsaw cut him earlier.

He could be running out of power (these shocks are nothing compared to the massive bolts of lightning he cast earlier) or perhaps Kanaya isn't allowing him enough time to recharge between strikes. How much magic can he cast in one sitting before he runs out of strength? Observations on Rose's magic spells in the past don't translate well to a scenario like this, where Eridan is running on hope and prayers. Kanaya throws another punch, refusing to flinch back when Eridan pull the magic taser trick again on her exposed arm, and - doesn't so much kick him, as take advantage of his wide open guard to rest her foot against his sternum and propel him backward. It takes him almost a full ten seconds to get back up, but just when she thinks that he's finally run out of steam, Eridan clambers back onto his feet, a thin line of blood tracing a path from the corner of his mouth to his chin. "Why - was I ever – even friends with you?" he asks, sneering and taking a swaying step forward.

Another angel crashes to the ground between them, twitching in its death throes with its skull caved in. It reeks of troll blood; Kanaya does not know how she is going to break it to Jade that she thinks she knows where some of the bodies of the dead citizens of Los Angeles may have gone. Their shapes are different, their blood all the same muddled shade, but the scent of gore is unmistakable to her nose. She can excuse only so much on the grounds of mental instability before she loses any and all hope for Eridan having some miraculous change of heart and repenting for what he's done here. "I could just as well ask you the reverse," Kanaya points out, feeling a dull stab of regret for being petty when Eridan looks stunned by this comeback.

He recovers quickly, though; his fists clench at his sides, and he almost vibrates as he takes another step. "Whatever. Just rub it in that you fuckin' assholes only put up with me because Fef said to. I don't - need - any of you! I never did!"

Then he reaches up, and pulls the sky down.

- Jade's finishing the last of the angels when Eridan rips a layer off the inside of the dome. She's not
looking up, at that exact moment, so she has to infer it from the unearthly screech that jars her out of
her groove. She stumbles back from the angel in front of her and covers her ears with her hands,
turning in time to see Eridan swat at Kanaya with a shallow curve of magic the size of a minivan,
like she's a fly or something. The impact blasts Kanaya through the nearest building and out the other
side, judging by Jade's internal radar, and then the panel of the dome crumples in on itself until it's
nice and compact, a jittering ball of white magic that hurts to look at. Eridan spares Jade a glance for
the first time in a long while, grimaces, and flattens the light between his palms. "Now look at this. I
have to undo all my great work to deal with you insufferable people," he complains. Magic lights up
his arms in Lichtenberg figures, burning through his sleeves up to his elbows.

He can recharge his powers with that? "Hey, that's not fair!" Jade spins and goes to kick one last
angel in the chin; Kanaya's held her own so far, but if Eridan's gonna pull some magic cheating junk
to prolong it, she's gonna need backup!

The angel implodes, leaving a grody smear and a pile of giblets on the pavement. Jade is pretty sure
that's not her fault. Really! She's hit enough of these pesky things to have the quantitative evidence to
show that they don't spontaneously implode upon contact.

Then more hope magic stuff wrenches out of the middle of the chunky bits left behind, and trickles
back to Eridan. Five more angels pop like balloons - Jade thinks that's the last of them! - and the
branching marks lance further up Eridan's arms until they meet his shoulders. "Life's not fair!" he
yells back, pointing a finger at her accusingly.

Or not. Hang on. Something's solidifying there, slim between his fingers - like one of Rose's knitting
needles or...uh...

The wand shoots lightning. Jade sees it coming and handsprings out of the way.

But! But, but, but! "Since when do you strife with a wand?!" Jade rolls under another burst. Looks
like she's the main focus of this grumpy gills' anger, for however long it takes Kanaya to jump back
into the fight. She can feel the jadeblood out there - somewhere, moving, so she's still alive. "You
had a rifle earlier!"

"Since forever, obviously!" The next streak of wizard lightning takes out a spire in the center of
another courtyard. "You're the witch, now duel me, woman! Stop - ugh, stop bouncin' around all
over the place!"

Jade bounces from the ground to the wall with a little extra oomph. She thinks constant exposure to
Karkat is making her more vindictive. "Not actually that kind of witch!" She kicks off the wall
before it gets zapped into rubble and reaches out with her powers for one of the bigger chunks of
rock from the shattered spire, lobbing at Eridan with a wave of her hand. He zaps that, too, but she
teleports in behind him while he's distracted.

Magic flares across her senses, just weird and burny enough that Jade can't pinpoint what's
happening until the next panel of the dome careens down out of the sky. Goosebumps pebble her
skin as she jumps out of the way again, hand snapping down and to the side with a snap of her
fingers. The next rifle she calls up accidentally turns out to be Eridan's (she's grabbing whatever the
sylladex offers up first, okay?) and she takes in the empty barrel where the glowy laser power cell
used to be in a blink before realizing it's not shooting anytime soon. Eridan smacks at her with the
panel again and the impact shatters the obsidian road beneath where Jade was floating after she
avoids the hit, the useless riflekind loose in her hands as she considers their options.

If Eridan can wish himself better with all this extra hope juice stored up in the dome, this fight could
take forever! Today was supposed to be a day trip, not a fight-this-douchelord-for-the-next-week
trip! Clearing out the angels whittled down the actual threats here under the dome to just Eridan, but 'just Eridan' is shaping up to be a legitimate problem.

There has to be a way to disarm him, or deplete his magic hope bullshit, or plain old convince him to stop being a jerk. Jade doesn't think either her or Kanaya can do that shoosh-pappy thing that works on trolls so well, which is unfortunate. He must have a limit, or he wouldn't have needed to draw power from the dome at all. If they could just cut him off from the dome somehow...or better yet, get rid of the dumb thing altogether...teleporting the whole thing to the Antarctic in one fell swoop is probably still not a thing Jade can do, though, which is a real shame.

The idea flutters through her mind, so odd and uncertain and new, that she nearly dismisses it before she realizes what her brain has suggested. Er - she isn't sure she can do that! Her thirteen-year-old self did it, but on a much smaller scale and with plenty of backup around to boost her powers. Worse still, Jade couldn't tell you off the top of her head the exact calculations for how the physics of it work, which would be a big red flag according to Grandpa's guidelines.

... But it would also be unspeakably awesome. And she can almost hear the silent music bated in the background, like it's waiting on a plateau for something to happen. Is that what Dave hears, all the time?

Jade lifts a rhombus-shaped section of wall and chucks it at Eridan's head, just in time for Kanaya to vault over a fallen pillar from the opposite direction of the way Eridan hit her, lit up like a firefly. While Eridan's scrambling, Jade bounces to Kanaya's side. "I'm gonna take care of the dome," she says in a rush, using a foot to push herself along when Kanaya keeps pelting towards Eridan without missing a step at Jade's appearance. "Can you keep him down here for me?"

Kanaya's tongue flicks out to lick her lip, and she nods; her chainsawkind comes up whirring. "Go."

Jade thinks it says very good things about Kanaya's personality that she doesn't waste time asking how Jade intends to pull this off. She cares more about swinging the chainsaw like a hammer to crack Eridan's wand hand aside, and Jade has a lot of respect for that as she rockets up into the sky.

Without the angels crowding around, Los Angeles is eerily still. Once Jade's past the tallest buildings still standing the sky feels too still; there's no fresh breeze under the dome and no air traffic to speak of, either. The further up she goes, the more her hair stands on end - not just the hair on her arms, but the actual hair on her head, frizzling and curling in rings as she comes to a stop a few yards short of the construct itself. She peers down between her boots to see Eridan and Kanaya whirl around each other, tiny figures accented by flares of bright magic that cast the monochrome city in dancing shadows. No more angels, but she feels a group of moving bodies right up along the edge of the dome where the hole would be, to the east.

Well, whether Eridan left it open or sealed it shut at some point out of spite, Jade can think of one way to help them get out faster. She purses her lips and whistles, the sound ringing out in the still air.

Becquerel appears instantly, ears up and alert - except that the wolf teleports in upside down, sitting its butt down on the inner curve of the dome. "Go get them out, Bec!" Jade orders, hastily, when green starlight creeps up her own legs by accident. "The others, back over by where we left you! Take them all outside so they can get to a hospital or something."

One of Bec's ears twitches to the side. A moment of doubt gnaws at Jade for a moment (because this whole thing would be ten times easier with Bec providing her with extra power and focus) but then she brushes it off, smiles, and reaches up with both hands to mash Bec's muzzle between her palms.
The wolf wrinkles up its nose and vanishes so fast all it leaves behind is a limey green afterimage. "Good boy! I'll be fine," she says, as much for herself as for the wolf that can no longer hear it, regardless, and then she turns her attention to the dome itself.

If this goes horribly wrong, at least no one but her and Kanaya and Eridan will be around to suffer the consequences.

But she doesn't think it will go wrong. In fact, something about this feels utterly right. She lets go of Eridan's laser gun and it bobs in the air. Now that her hands are free, Jade brings them up to form a triangle. It starts out close to her face, framing one eye, then drifts out until her arms extend as far as she can reach. It feels like her attention warps as she moves her hands, her sense of space blurring until Kanaya and Eridan feel distant and the dome itself stands out in perfect focus. It's huge, bigger than anything Jade's tried to lift or manipulate before, but she could map out the exact contours of the inside if she wanted to, now.

Making a black hole would be sooo reckless. Even a mini one. Jade's doing better about that, today. Once the focus slides into place, she takes a breath and folds most of her fingers in until only the thumbs and index fingers remain, twisting to take the shape of a rectangle. She loses all sense of time passing as she bites her lip - her sense of the people below blur out, too, until it's all white noise to her as she zeroes in on the dome. Her hands ache to slot together with a thunderous clap, but she fights the urge because shrinking the dome that fast might do something even sillier than making a black hole, with all this hope magic running through it.

But this is right. Music hums along her nerves, silent but roiling down to her gut like a physical wave, and it matches pace with her instead while she slides her fingers closer together, from a rectangle to a square, from a square to a shallow, eye-shaped space, until she can't see anything through the gap any longer. There's resistance, strong resistance, that tries to shock her out of her concentration and lances her with jabs of lightning.

Though now that she thinks about it, Eridan never did hit god tier, did he? Jade distinctly remembers that from one of the many, many annoying conversations with the trolls. They stopped talking to John for ages, but they never gave Jade a break. Then Eridan gave her the code for the same legendary piece of shit gun floating beside her, and went off to go kill people or something.

What a massive douche. Jade wonders whose bright idea it was to give the guy with the second worst moral compass of the trolls the power to destroy hopes.

Her palms come together with a click, and she taps her heels together at the same time. The music's still throbbing, though, so this isn't done yet. She blinks a little, her vision unfuzzing just enough that she can see a little of the sky around the scaled-down diamond of white light that's all that's left of the massive dome. Hope magic is actually pretty light and frothy, but if she pushed the density any further it really would turn into a black hole. Eridan attempts to tug it away from her with a wrench of magic but Jade waves it aside with a burst of green.

He's not god tier. He's about as strong a player as could probably be, all barely-harnessed forces of destruction and desperate wishes - but there's still a step between him and what Jade feels running through her spine at the moment, enough of a height difference that a misstep would feel like a fall.

How could she have forgotten all this?!

Her laugh bubbles up like soda from a well-shaken can, and Jade clicks her fingers to call Eridan's rifle back in front of her. Raising it up so she can peer through the scope, she pats a hand on the empty power cell before laying a finger on the trigger. When she pulls it with a crook of her finger, she uses her power to pull in.
Eridan really should be more careful about who he lets mess around with copies of his legendary piece of shit hatchright. Oh well! Too late! The lump of raw hope sucks into the end of the barrel and lodges back in the power cell. It's far more power than the gun's meant to channel; some of the power blasts out in a halo of light that singes Jade's eyebrows, and expands out in a circle around her before it loses steam and dissipates into sparkles of magic. Finally, Jade lifts her head from the scope with a grin, spinning the gun between her hands with a totally unnecessary and yet totally necessary flourish, before tucking the whole thing away in its own special sylladex card. Once it's in the sylladex, vacuum-sealed and held with the power of a god, Eridan's grasping magic (what's left of it) falls away.

Jade blinks the world back into focus.

Bravo, bravo. Quite the show...

- 

After a long minute, Jade descends, green fire playing around her hair and arms in wild curls as she beams at Kanaya on the way down. When she touches down on the nearest piece of rock, a plinth nearly split in two by stray lightning, Kanaya sees that her hand-dyed boots have turned a vibrant shade of ruby red.

Eridan's mouth works for a second, and then he looks at Kanaya. His expression has gone past desperation, and anger, and into something like rapture.

"...Is she single?"

Kanaya punches him in the face.

Overhead, the sky sighs back into place, a soft, creamy blue.

- 

HKSWRISEWSKH

- 

And the world turns under her feet.

- 

-- gardenGnostic [GG] at __:__:__ opened memo on board sup! :D --
GG: hellloooooo~~~ everyone! sorry for the wait!
TG: hey jadey :!!!
TG: got soma the parts in so dirks doin stuff
GG: that's great! we're heading back now, plus one fishy troll dude :)
GG: we're just making a pit stop to get food. i'm starving!
TT: Ah, good. Another player?
GG: oh yeah. a really...uh, well...eridan's a piece of work. :/
GG: he kinda sorta did the grimlight thing to los angeles, and he keeps changing his answers when we try to figure out whether he regrets it or not...
TG: fun timemes, fun times
TT: I'm beginning to suspect that the trolls' game session may have been just as plagued with horrors as our own. I am not entirely sure why. It's just a hypothesis that I am in no way certain of.
GG: heheh, so it's a mystery! ;) or maybe not, by the time we get back!
TT: If they've developed even a quarter of the assorted neuroses and mental health concerns that we
have, I may have enough subjects to begin a private practice. Perhaps even write up my own collection of case studies to publish before the world ends.

GA: I Have Attempted To Punch Sanity Back Into Him. We Will See How Efficacious This Treatment May Prove.

TG: p solid strategos :

TG: *:P

TT: He's unconscious, I assume?

GG: actually i think he's pretending to be asleep so he can ignore us right now. brb!


TT: Save your strength, darling Kanaya. Sollux and Aradia are bringing a couple of old scourges down from Canada who will no doubt prove just as troublesome.


TT: Tomorrow. It seems more and more likely that we will shortly have a full house.

TG: we get to meet so many new peeps lyke hellssss yeah

TG: do u know how epic this is after years of a social cicrle of literally four people??

GA: I See. Perhaps This Is Why He Is Still Attempting To Avoid Speaking With Me About Their Current Condition.

TT: It could be inferred.

GA: Truly Friendship Is The Most Inexplicably Aggravating Of Platonically Transmitted Diseases.

TG: frenchfries are the best disease, dn't lie

TG: lol not correcting that one

GG: i'm back! he squeaked when i poked him! hang on a sec -

GG: say hello to everyone, dummy!

-- caligulasAquarium [CA] has joined the chat! --

CA: oh my god wwhy

CA: leavve me alone so i can wwalloww in my misery wwoman

CA: wwait wwho else is in this chat

TT: Eridan, I presume.

CA: you

GG: yeah, he remembers a lot of stuff! including talking to all of us!

TT: A pleasure to make your acquaintance again, regardless.

CA: im a good person i dont deservve this

-- ectoBiologist [EB] has joined the chat! --

EB: you guys are alive!

GG: yay! you're alive too!

TG: we;re alive!

EB: :D

GG: :D

TG: :D

CA: wwoww i dont think i deservve this either

CA: or maybe i do

CA: cod dammit

TT: The fact that everyone being alive is somehow a major achievement, given our track record...disturbs me.

TG: well i'm mostly jus going with the flow here. you guys die often?

GA: So It Would Seem.

GA: Rose, Did I Mention That Eridan Has Confessed To Murdering Me In A Past Life?

CA: thats unfair dammit you murdered me right back

CA: wwhich wwas cheatin considerin you didnt evven havve the decency to use a quest bed before risin up from the grave

GG: you don't exactly get to complain about cheating, mister! you imprisoned a bunch of people and
sicced a horrorterror on them!
CA: that wwasnt cheatin that wwas past me bein an idiot
CA: and i totally apologized for it so stop defamin my good name
GA: Los Angeles Is Almost Completely Depopulated, Eridan. That's A Little More Than You Being An 'Idiot.'
EB: that's horrible!
TG: holy fukkin carnage, batman :O
CA: it wwasnt that bad
GG: yeeeeah it was
GA: It Would Be Hard To Say How The Situation Could Have Conceivably Been Worse, Except That We Already Have The Ukraine As An Example.
EB: someone remind me how we're going to handle this guy and all the other trolls at the same time?
EB: because at this rate we're going to have a super powered juggalo, a genocidal fish douche, and the scourge sisters all under one roof and that's - uh - i'm having trouble seeing how this doesn't end badly...
TT: An excellent question.
CA: noww you're gonna inflict gamzee on me again? okay no one deservves that guy fuck that guy
GA: I Will Keep That In Mind As A Potential Secondary Treatment Option.
CA: dammit
TT: You and I are going to have a most illuminating therapy session when you arrive, Eridan. I can already tell.
CA: hell no. also the john-human has a point considerin howw many of us wwent on killin sprees wwhen wwe all got stuck on that meteor together
EB: oh my god. really?!
GG: uh...why would you do that, again?!
CA: too many trolls in a confined space obvviously
CA: of course wwe've practically been neutered in this half assed univverse so wwho knowws the others might be less murdery than i remember
GA: I Hate That I Believe You About That Now. And I Platonically Hate You For Forcing Me To Believe It.
EB: no one is going to die. that is not a thing that is going to happen.
TT: I concur wholeheartedly. There must be a way to minimize potential casualties. Perhaps if I contact Aradia again, she'll let something slip and we can plan ahead for who might be the most likely to go off the rails.
CA: me vvris and gam
EB: you can guess that off the top of your head?
GG: i'm not really in the mood to trust half of anything this fuckbutt says ;/
GA: He Does Tend To Change His Story At Will.
CA: wwhat its not like its really a secret. rad doesnt givve enough shits to hurt anyone tavv is a pushover kar paps first and asks questions later
CA: rez loses her shit wwhen vvris is invvolved but evveryone else only shifts their asses if they get hit first
CA: once upon a time id a only said vvris but then gam transformed from dumb stoner juggalo to terrifyin nightmare creature from the abyssal depths of hell and i realized i make poor decisions that lead to dead people
CA: wwhich i am vvery vvery sorry about
GG: still not buying it.
CA: augh givve me a break
TG: lovin these nicknames bmw
TG: *btww ;)
TT: Well, we do have independent verification that Gamzee and Vriska are potent threats. Thank you, Eridan. We'll take this information under advisement for when everyone arrives. Hopefully the
terminal will be up and running, and we should be able to access the records of your session for more
details.
TT: Hmmmm...there is still the matter of all that has gone on in your current lives, however.
EB: are you thinking what i'm thinking?
TT: I may well be.
GA: What?
EB: it's still in the planning stages. don't worry, it's nothing bad!
TT: It will be rather like pulling teeth with a hammer, but most likely not dangerous. A prophylactic
measure.
TG: ?
CA: can i go noww that you fucks havve movved on to vvagueplanning?
GA: No You Certainly May Not.
GG: i hope it's a party! i could use a break after today :
TT: We will explain before the others arrive tomorrow.
EB: if they all arrive tomorrow...
TT: They'll be fine, John. Don't worry. Breathe.
GG: :(((
EB: i'm good! i promise.
EB: uh, i think i'm gonna sit for a while though.
EB: hurry back, you guys!
GG: aye aye, bro! :D
GA: And Eridan Will Not Give Us Any Trouble Along The Way Will He.
CA: god no stop fondlin your damn chainsaww
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined the chat! --
TA: oh
TA: my god
TA: 2HUT UP
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU DIIP2HIIT2 from the chat! -
TA: ii wiill pii22 on everythiing you all love. look forward two iit.
---
"Where - why is there a - why is it always a giant sea monster? Why not a moderately under-sized
sea monster? I'm supposed to be retired." Ledaei spins and gestures at the E%ïbimus uselessly.
"Aren't you going to help try to stop her?"

Tethys can hardly hear Meteos's rumble over all of Gl'bglyb's yapping. "I stood witness the day she
slew the Kraken and his custodial horde. When it comes to matters of strife, I defer to her superior
record. If you wish to pacify her from this battle fervor, you are, as youths say, on your own."

"Oh, for the love of - do you hear me?! You're going to get yourself killed, Tethys!" Ledaei shouts,
all raspy and endearing-like. It's adorable as hell, and Tethys would appreciate it more if she weren't,
you know, busy tryna not get herself killed over here.

Tethys has fought giant lusii before. Half the battle, when it comes to wrecking the shit of some
upstart anemone, is taking out their custodian first. Most were weakbass punks she could crush with
her little claw; others were actually pretty good.

She's always been betta.

But Gl'bglyb is no mere squiddle. Nah, this thing has real power behind it. For every tentacle
Tethys cuts down, more surge up to fight back. It's slower in the open air than it would be if they
took this underwater, which works in her favor. There's just a shell of a lot of it to carve through, layers on layers of tangled limbs and brackish blubber that make a quick gutting impossible. All Tethys can do is hack away, skewering and dodging and shrieking shrill as a gull whenever she spies a new patch of exposed skin to tear into, driving her way ever deeper. The longer she takes, the more poison this bitch can dump in the water - and the more cleaning that'll need doing before any work can be done to salvage the yard without everyone rising up as a glubbin' zombie, which would be a tidal nightmare.

A vast mouth tears open underneath her feet when she next lands, a spray of dark blood soaking Tethys as the Horrorterror's skin rips itself a new opening and teeth sprout from the new cavity like transparent sharks' teeth. She could survive falling in, she thinks - might even bust her ass to make a shortcut straight to the nearest stomach and eviscerate this soggy abomination from the inside out. But the buzz of psionics hauls her out of the way before the teeth can snap shut, yanking her back toward the dock. Urgency makes Ledaei's static pop, though, like being jabbed with lightning in the funny bone. Tethys snarls and, when he sets her down, launches herself straight back up onto Gl'bgolyb's flank. Turn her back on Gl'bgolyb for even a second and the thing might start reaching for the town itself.

Only a matter of time until she slips, tho. Half of her is high on the craze of battle, the part that revels and laughs aloud as she dodges a tentacle wider than she is tall to stab at a node, muscles straining to lop off five small tentacles at once. The other half realizes just what kind of lunasea this shit is. There's reasons why she didn't help salmon Gl'bgolyb, why she turned a blind eye to the hullabeluga in the Ukraine for the longest time, why she risked making herself a prawn to scratch in exchange for his promise to silence the Horrorterror's great and terrible Glub. Glubby's mediocre as Horrorterrors go, an emissary, not a noble, but under the right circumstances - a tiny pitstop of a world like Earth would be nothing if Gl'bgolyb could still sing.

And in a previous life, Gl'bgolyb did play at being lusus. Raised Tethys up, pitted her against other tyrian challengers, and watched with a languid mind, kept placid by regular feedings and entertained by raising up the dead to plague Alternia throughout the day. Her fighting style is an open book: Glubby knows all her moves.

Oh, she'll still krill this bitch, for shore. It would just take a lot longer if she didn't have backup. Electric blue and red lasers score deep pits in the far side of the Horrorterror's bulk - Tethys can't see Psii, though, just the blazing lights that mark his movements. Her strife specibus is starting to dull on one end under the constant barrage, but she can't leave Ledaei hanging if he's fool enough to play the hero again. Retired, schmired.

A black arrow fletched with cobalt blue embeds itself in the tentacle, inches from her face. "Pardon me," a low voice calls, and Tethys jumps out of there like her life depends on it, because Meteos has being doing things with arrows since at least the 1600s that would make anyone weak in the knees. She kicks off one tentacle - and then another - and a third before the arrow goes off with a soundless pop of abrupt implosion. When she looks back, grinning broadly, an entire chunk has been taken out of Gl'bgolyb's side, the tentacles in the immediate vicinity drenched in gouts of brine and blood. Down below, Meteos has another arrow in hand, fitting it to a longbow that appears to have unfolded from her arm, which is almost as tall as she is. Which is hella tall. How much shit can that troll fit under that cloak?

Gl'bgolyb, being (debatably) smarter than your average barnacle, sweeps out a tentacle the width of a semi-truck over the pier, demolishing everything in its path. Meteos, being Meteos, takes the hit instead of dodging - and then flips the shell out, seizing the tentacle with both hands and pulling until the whole thing rips off Gl'bgolyb, filling the water where the tentacle came from with a cloud of blood. The offending limb gets tossed to the side, into the clear area where Gl'bgolyb shoved most of
the ships out of the way. A faint, curling grimace of disgust wrinkles Meteos's face.

She always knew she kept that troll around for somefin! Meteos may be on some other wavelength as far as social interaction goes (humans gotta name for that, but she reely does try not to pay attention to humans and whatever fool thing they've come up with this decade that ain't about rap music, alcohol, and video games) but when the girl goes, she goes hard and Tethys has mad respect for anyone with mussels like that. Meteos swings the bow back up before Gl'bglyb stops screaming in outraged shock, stepping on top of an overturned work station to avoid the water flooding over the dock before firing again. Between the three of them, they're starting to make a real dent here. "Daaamn, girl. Water you packing in those things, these days?" Tethys marvels, taking a moment to lean on her culling fork and watch the imploding arrows clear out.

Then a tendril whips around Psii, lightning fast, whipping him up and around from where he's been blazing an electric streak around the far side of Gl'bglyb, ignoring the nauseating scent of burnt seafood that wafts up when Ledaei tries to psionic his way free. Tethys curses herself for a fool five times over when the obvious ploy freezes her in place, torn between letting Psii do his own thing and the unfortunate urge to go (urgh) help him. Seariously, she thought she worked that kind of diamond pale stupid out of her system ages ago but nah. It stalls her long enough for Gl'bglyb to seize her from behind, and then the world's a rushing blur of white and blue as Tethys gets tossed up and smacked back down against the ground with an impact that breaks the roof of the warehouse that's unlucky enough to get in the way.

And the floor.

Tethys is thrown for a loop. Its eyes glow like torches as it brings two arms around to punch Gl'bglyb in one of many mouths. It has three arms total.

Talk about overcompensating.

She can be pissed about this development (how tha glubbing *fuck* can that king carapacian asshoal
have possibly known where this base was without someone spilling the beans? She's firing everyone in a ten mile radius of her current position) or she can accept that there is now an enormous beetle tank shoving aside tendrils with one arm in order to bring clapsed fists down on Gl'bgolyb's forward head, and she doesn't have the time or patience to pitch a fit over it. She'll make time later. Drag Ledai into the hot tub, melt the tiny icicles out of her hair, break out the hard liquor, and rant the whole thing out. Yeeeee.

For now, she drops down from her perch and pushes a chunk of roof off her 2x3dent. The golden fork has been twisted and snapped in two - Glubby's doing, clearly. Dropping the rebar, Tethys hefts one half in each claw. Ah, well, as long the ends are still pointy... Once she jumps out of the smashed up warehouse Tethys takes the dockyard at a sprint, past Meteos knocking another arrow, and uses the forks to stab new handholds in the next tentacle to lash out at them. Swinging herself up, she ducks her head as another white limb whips overhead in a rush of wind. The whole body of the Horrorterror rocks as the Siege Titan winds a tentacle around one of its wrists, hauling it taut and using the third arm to swing down a sword as tall as a small building. She expects to see Gl'bgolyb peppered with holes and burns where Ledai and Meteos have been shootin' up the thing, but as she starts running down along the tentacle, jumping the second that twines around the first to try to knock her feet off, she sees a couple of scattered shots - and one blackened wound to her right, where the flesh has been gouged out and acidic blood vessels cauterized by psionics to form a deep cavity.

Huh. They got craytive and actually worked together. Coddammit, she must be getting' maudlin in old age or something, 'cause this shit feels downright inspirational. The tentacle under her feet bucks to toss her off and she lets the momentum carry her, bypassing tendrils she might still be able to skewer in favor of making a beeline for the open wound. The overgrown carapacian jams its bladekind into the far side and Gl'bgolyb shudders with enough force to make another building collapse on the shelf. Then Tethys lands on spongy flesh, and there's nothing before her but the distorted, heaving mangle that is Gl'bgolyb's insides. There are more tendrils in here that turn from knotting over deeper wounds to face Tethys. Familiar voices rage at her, the usual tough hive spiel. The bloodbrine pooling under her feet burns right through the soles of her boots, but if Gl'bgolyb is tryna douse her in acid, it's a last ditch thing and they both know it - she and Fef are probably the only two on the planet immune to the worst of that stuff. Otterwise they'd never have survived having an abomination, as a lusus in other lives than these.

Another throaty chop shudders through Gl'bgolyb's insides, the same sound the Titan's sword made while stabbing Gl'bgolyb the first time amplified as it rattles Tethys's teeth in her jaws. Knowing Gl'bgolyb can hear her just fine, she tilts back her head and laughs. The tendrils stop curling in hesitation and stab at her, more bursting through the pulsing floor to wrap around her from behind, but they're small fry - people aren't manta get past the exterior defenses without dissolving or goin' nuts or worse.

Is killing a Horrorterror murder or genocide? Maybe a public service? Whale, that's not really her style.

But in this case, she'll make an exception.

-

Its body is dying.

How inconvenient.
Gl'bgolyb never paid much heed to that part of having a body. Utilizing a corporeal form on the physical plane has its perks but is also cursedly hard to pull off, with upkeep truly a hassle in terms of feeding. However, it has its advantages, and Gl'bgolyb's interactions with the Peixes necessitated it.

Last time, at least, the physical death was quick. Now, with Tethys and her pawns carving deeper and deeper and the Skaiasprint fighting even as its dark limbs sag from the concentrated acid directed at them, Gl'bgolyb finds itself facing a slow death. The urge to kill Tethys and free itself from the last of Scratch's meddling is strong, but the drive to survive is stronger still.

Any Horrorterror worth its salt knows to have an out. Gl'bgolyb's chosen method for a while now has simply been...less than palatable. Downright nauseating, truth be told. But Tethys tears into one of its internal sacs, and the stabbing agony of concentrated digestive acids leaking out makes the decision for Gl'bgolyb. Fleshy mortal forms come and go, but hiveminds are forever, as the saying goes. Let Tethys content herself with the corpse of this singular body; Gl'bgolyb has better things to do.

It takes some hunting, though, precious moments trickling away as the war carapacian takes advantage of Gl'bgolyb's distraction to tear free a string of knotted intestines. Other parts of the hive set themselves to run distraction, seizing one of the other trolls and dunking them underwater so that Tethys has to turn and dive to retrieve them. Love is a filthy weakness, really. She should have been trained out of that sessions ago.

The majority of Gl'bgolyb's concentration delves inward, where it can sense its last resort. Even as voices go silent, stillness creeping through the outermost tendrils where the damage is too great for the minds to anchor themselves, there is still the most precious of treasures, the power lodged at the core of its minds, the one it would never risk losing no matter how blasphemous and despicable the source of that power may be.

But with this, jumping back from this wretched physical plane to the angles beyond is easily accomplished. Gl'bgolyb clusters all the awareness left around the kernelsprite at its center, a burning spiropathy of power, and allows Skaia's hateful pattern to anchor it as it wrenches free from the useless, dying carcass of a soul-case that has allowed it to touch this plane of existence for so long.

The benefits of having been prototyped by dearest Feferi. No matter how powerful the warping chaos of Gl'bgolyb's minds, it has yet to make a dent in the kernel. Every line is perfect, every curve smooth, every angle proportionate to the whole. It's anathema, repellant, and any other Horrorterror would have long since smeared the spiropathy in a fit of unconscious rage, melted it into slag and spit in the face of such flawless order. Not even Leviathan, one of the most colossal and imperious of the grimdark, had the self-control to hold the pattern inviolate in its minds, even after Gl'bgolyb so generously shared the knowledge.

Perhaps the prototyping changed Gl'bgolyb. Certainly other hives have whispered such things, but the tittering of swollen legions and thorny hordes means nothing compared to the power of summoning spiropathy. If they cannot recognize the insult to Skaia that can be achieved by perverting the blasted thing's gates to chaotic purpose, that is their deficiency, not Gl'bgolyb's.

Tethys shouts after the kernel as Gl'bgolyb rips itself out through the sagging flesh of its old body and rockets up into the sky to escape her reach. To bring another body forth would require the help of a liaison, a tanglebuddy willing to summon Gl'bgolyb forth. But there is no one, now. Scratch,
who summoned it to serve his purpose on Alternia, is out of the question, and both Peixes are rebellious and hard-hearted, so cruel, so cruel.

No body, then. But a gate back to the Furthest Ring is still possible. Other Horrors reach out to touch the minds of potential tanglebuddies all the time, without even a gate to let them through. Gl'bogolyb has no tendrils now to mark its spirograph, no dearest daughter to carve the shape for it, but no matter. As long as it can fall back to the space between stars and regroup, even if the trip is only one-way...

It must be done. Gl'bogolyb snarls around the kernel for a moment, the knotted coils of its minds frustrated by the alienness of the perfectly exact nature of the powers contained within the damnable thing, before it succeeds in making the kernel flash and cast a faint gate against the underside of the nearest cloud. So close, so close, it has to be enough, for without a body more of its minds continue to unspool, and –

Ledaei coughs up half a lungful of water when Tethys fishes him out. He fumbles to grip her arm with his off hand, shivering like a guppy in the cold air, and that's how she knows he's done. His psionics are still on but they've drawn in tight around him, focused on warming and burning off the slick sheen of Gl'bogolyb's glubbin' acid. He's in no shape to go lighting up like this, not at his age. Tethys arrows for the shore and pulls them onto one of the docks that's not flooded. She can't afford to fuss over the buoy, though - she ditches him and starts running again, eyes peeled for the next tentacle to come down on her. The Titan and Meteos won't be enough to distract Gl'bogolyb, not with how many minds that would need to be distracted at once.

She's just in time to witness the most cowardly abscond ever. At first she thinks Gl'bogolyb has gone oddly still, trying to pull some new trick - and then something bright and whirling tears out through the Horrorterror's back, streaking up into the sky like a meteor in reverse. The whole immense squid body crumples in under its own weight as gravity keelhauls it, and Tethys finds herself screeching to a halt, furious for a whole new reason as Gl'bogolyb's hivemind slaps an open gate against the underside of a cloud and vanishes, taking all the mist and unreality with it.

Cheapest. Copout. Ever. Tethys has lived through a coddamn ton of bullshit, but this really takes the cake. Ledaei smooth-limps up to start talking her down when she starts taking her rage out on the nearest available target - one of the beached ships, and each hit she lands just makes her howl harder, because she needs the damn things intact but she can't stop hitting it - and she's half out of her head, ready to rip out his throat with his horns the instant he lays claws on her, how dare, how dare he -

Too smart for that, her buoy is, by far. He talks at her in that damn voice without coming in range, even when the words sink into her ears like dull noise, and when she stops whaling on the poor damn ship hull he keeps at it until she's just breathing hard, gulping like a child until the sounds stop creeping out of her throat. She looks up and Gl'bogolyb's carcass is still slumped over, vacant and infuriating beyond words. "It's gone now," Ledaei says, like that's meant to be calming, but Tethys can only tense for a second before the sound of him smooths her back down. "Screamed it all out, yet?"

"Never," Tethys grumps at him, feeling her hair slowly freeze up into a chilly weight all down her back as she starts picking her way back to the yard. She could jump back to the central dock, where most of Gl'bogolyb lies, but she's really feeling the cold after that last dunking, and her horns throb down to the core with a numb ache that says swimming in the glubbing Arctic ain't on the agenda right now. "C'mon. Gotta take a look at this load of carp schooner rather than later."

It's not just Gl'bogolyb checking tha fuck out, either. There's that damn Titan, too, a towering black
figure in the clearing water that's half slag. If the GP wants that shit back, the pilots'll be hauling it back on their own damn dime; its legs look so deformed by G'l'bgolyb's efforts that it's probably stuck in place, ready to topple over onto one of Tethys's ships any damn second. They're scrambling up there, the jagged teeth of the giant rook's mask open so that the pawns on top of the turrets can clamber back down to chat it up with the rook pilot. How bad of an international incident will it be if Tethys has them culled? GP ain't much of a threat, but any shitstorm here will draw Scratch like a vulture to carrion. Today has been bad enough as it is.

Plus, of all the wrigglers in the world to show up at her door - Fef had to bring the AJ kid? For glub's sake. And the Signless's get decided to rub his mutant blood in her damn face. How the fuck is she supposed to turn a blind ear to all her little whisperers telling her about the candy red-eyed hero smearing his shit hemotype all over Seattle when he chooses to toss himself into her net?

She glances at Ledaei. Subtle like. He's close behind her, still not touching. If he noticed before the grubling did the sensible thing and left, he ain't saying so. Old eyes and all.

But she knows the things the Psiioniic would do for his Signless. 'Retired' won't mean shit if she doesn't play this right. If he saw. This might be salvageable if he ain't running for the hills yet, though. Tethys wipes a lingering streak of horror brine off her cheek, thoughts turned calculating rather than enraged as she skirts the edge of the raised platform to the dock Meteos stands on. One of her assistants has crept out from wherever they hid themselves already, a violetblood with shredded ear fins that supplies her with a new strife specibus and a phone all at once, her voice fluttering and soft as she whispers, "My Condesce, there's something - someone -"

Oh, she is not in the mood. "Yo! Spit it out or clamscray," she says, whirling to walk down the pier with her hair clattering. If that damn girl and her fuckbuoys have the motherfucking gall to come back after all this shit, Tethys refuses to be held responsible for -

"Mother."

Tethys doesn't need to turn around to know that voice. It stops her in her tracks, all the same.

"Sonny Jim," she says, bitter as unsweetened cocoa, without looking back. If her kid has something to say, he can spit it out of his own accord. Jimmy Harley made it clear a long-bass time ago that he did what he liked, damn the consequences. Damn her. Didn't want her name, didn't want her money, didn't want her watching his back.

Course, then his health started failing, right when he needed it most. Humans, lowbloods, coldbloods - all of 'em, so damn fragile, gone in half a heartbeat and what's an old gill like Tethys to do when they come to her, hearts worn thin and turned on by their own kin, but take them back into her arms like the soft glubbing touch she is?

Sure, Jimmy took off again the first chance he had when Meteos finished up, but after the first dozen times he pulled shit like that, Tethys stopped keeping count. Wrigglers, honestly. At least Jo visits when she isn't busy with meddling of her own. Jim-jam ain't stopped playing at raybellious teenager since the day he figured out that damned dog of his could get him off the island scot-free.

"You've been busy, I see." His voice is all metal now. The metal boots make a different sound as Jimmy steps from the yard to the dock, and Tethys stiffens, swallowing the growl that curls and tickles in her throat. "I came to investigate why the E%ībimus would leave the country so abruptly. What have you done, Mother?"

If she looks at him, she's gonna punch him, and then Meteos will sulk for a year that they don't have over damage done to her work. "You'd know if you'd stuck around to kelp me out over the years,
She forks a nearby chunk of dismembered tentacle and lifts it up to squint at it, making like she's actually gonna get something out of the effort. This body's plenty dead, but Glubs'll be back. That fucking tentabitch never knew when to quit.

And now Ledaei's looking back and forth between her and her cyborg kid, a sallow cast to the troll's face as he frowns. How awkward. She's gonna catch shell from him when they're alone, which - okay, she's not too opposed to that - but it'll be the 'mother' thing stumping him, and she doesn't explain her damn kids to anyone. Meteos is the one closest to knowing the truth, shrimply out of need, but if it doesn't have to do with some new form of science for her to sink claws into, Meteos doesn't tend to ask questions.

Scratch might know. He knows a lotta things. But she keeps feeding his business ventures with generous infusions of boonbucks and battin' her eyelashes a lot, and the creepy fuck doesn't try to spy on her overmuch. She doesn't owe him a lick of loyalty, but staying on fake-frondly terms with the herald of the endtimes pays off where it counts.

"Does Joanna know about all this?" Jimmy says, like that's supposed to intimantadate her or something. Ha - he isn't walking toward her anymore, though, because he damn well knows he couldn't take her. The boy hasn't let her in arms reach since he last had flesh. He has no idea, none at all.

All she gives him is, "Knows enough," cryptic and short and to the point. "Go away, Jimbo, I can't deal with you riding my bulge like this today." A rap of her trident against the ground strikes off a nice note to stalk off to, and then she starts tromping through the congealing mass of viscera and tang. Any spark of a good mood she might have started today out with didn't stand a chance against this past hour. Gl'bogolyb and Jimmy and a mutant and that apple juice swilling landlubber, all in the space of a day? What a load of gullshit. Heads are gonna roll for this.

Picking her way to the end of the dock takes longer now that she has to gently punt the ships back under the water wherever Gl'bogolyb's thrashing shoved them up over the path. Meteos stands on the beached prow of one a few yards from the water, her raven-blue hair knotted back in a tail at the nape of her neck and her targeting goggles pushed up to rest at the bed of her horns. The bow has folded back up into her sleeve, like it was never there. When Tethys shoves the second to last ship back under the water, the hull complaining as it scrapes the bottom of the bay, Meteos pulls her eyes away from the fading circle of power where Gl'bogolyb made its hasty abscond, the yellows of her eyes almost as stained with indigo from broken capillaries as Tethys's are with fuchsia. No, Jupiter and Meteos won't last much longer - Jupiter's a real basshole most centuries, born long before Meteos ever wiggled out of the slurry, but the old goat ain't been right in the head since he got stupid enough to provoke his monster of a descendant into frying half the eggs in his pan. They'll probably end up dying within a decade of each other at the rate Jupiter's failing.

All of them, dying. None of them built to last. How long until she's the only one left standing all over again?

She needs a drink like damn.

But Meteos is waiting, head cocked to one side and not quite looking Tethys right in the eye. "Move, or I'll dump you in and you can sleep with the fishes," Tethys grumbles, raising a foot to plant against the nose of the ship; the blueblood steps obediently off the side so Tethys can shove the submarine beneath the surface. "How bad's the damage, gillfrond?"

She doesn't expect an answer in boonbucks; the E%ibimus doesn't tend to think in terms of money. Using her heel as a pivot Meteos looks around them, taking in the battered fleet. "The greenbloods' station will require extensive repairs, my Condescension." The troll points out to their left, and
Tethys leans out to see where she's pointing at. "At least two of the hulls have significant breaches, and will require repressurization before work may recommence." Another gesture, this one with a sigh. "The ninth may need to be scrapped entirely and begun anew. This may set the process of upgrading back by as much as three days."

So not as bad as Tethys thought. Cod definitely be worse, but this much is bad enough. They need to get this show on the road, and even a few days lost puts this entire arm of the fleet behind schedule compared to the other outposts. She wanted to start on Australia as early as Monday, but to begin the process Meteos would have to trim back her voidy thing to let the transportalizers work, and like hell is Tethys letting Scratch get an eyeful of all this before everything is good and ready.

Then Meteos gives a tiny jolt, her eyes fixing on something over Tethys's head, and the look there is familiar - eyes keen with interest, and the urge to reexamine old work. "What, Jim?" Tethys asks impatiently, her neck stiff as she looks out over the fleet, combing her fingers through a section of her hair to keep them from reaching out and shaking the boy down to the bolts. She didn't even heard him squelch his way over to them.

"You know what is coming." Presumptuous brat. He's not wrong, but still. A metal hand sweeps out in the corner of her vision and Tethys grimaces and turns her head further away. "What do you think you can accomplish here?"

"Whatever I want," Tethys breathes, so soft it's nothing but a sigh to her ears. "You don't get a say, Jimmy Crocker," she says, louder, all spite. "Go back to your spy games. Mother's busy."

A light touch ghosts over her shoulder; she opens her mouth to wrench around and bite it off when she realizes it's too soft and warm to be metal. Ledaei. "I'll tell you later, starfish," she tells him, soft as she can manage. "He doesn't stick around."

"You should not be using the rockets for such prolonged periods. They are deteriorating," Meteos says, eyes fixed on something low to the ground but still interested. Tethys ain't looking, dammit. "Maintenance is in order."

Jimmy is all affected cheer and gumption in a flash, saying, "I am afraid I can't stay, good chap. Just came to see what all the ruckus was about, and make sure you were well. Certainly got more of an eyeful than I bargained for, with all this hubbub!"

Shell naw. Tethys reaches up and snaps her claws as close to Meteos's face as she can manage, and receives a faint look of confusion in return. "No. Maintenance can wait, girlfrond. We got us a coddamn fleet to rebuild." Ah, and there's the reproach. "I said, no. You can get reaquainted with rockets shoes after you've done yo thing with real rockets."

A few more moments of the not-staring contest, and Meteos draws her goggles back down over her eyes in silent answer, nodding stiffly as she shuffles past Tethys toward land. Awesome. Fintastic. But Jimmy is still hanging around, and that's putting her in a truly crappie mood. "So we part on the same terms as last time, then?" he asks, all philosophical like - as if he didn't set those damn terms himself. Shellfish bastard.

"Whatever you say. You shouldn't be here in the first place, wriggler. #getoffmylawn" Her half turn is almost enough to let her look at him, as she gestures with a tired claw to wave him off. "I ain't picking either of you off the floor if you get yourselves wasted. Think you'd learn betta than to waltz up to family with a perchant for offin' kin after Jo and her boy and their thing." There. That should be good enough.

She has a lot on her mind, aight? It's the only excuse she has for how she could fuck up so royally,
after all this time. "What," Jimmy says, flat and cold - and Tethys realizes her mistake a full sentence too late. She lifts her head slowly and turns back to face him at last, her face stuck on a remote emotionlessness to match his own mask.

"I warned you," is all she can think to say. Words never come easy, with Jim. "I told you both, stay the shell away from Seattle. I told you, don't trust 'em. Give them a wide berth, don't give that puppet basshole a reason to light that fuse. It isn't that hard to comprehend, is it?"

And they've done it - mostly. Jimmy flouted her (always does) but he didn't make direct contact with any but his girl. Safe enough, because from what Tethys has teased out of Scratch the girl is clear. Neither of Tethys's kids could bear to keep from sticking their noses in where they didn't belong, trying to scrabble their way into Scratch's shenanigans, but they haven't been near the plant or the boy in years. They've been fine.

But they've got funny human ideas in their funny little human minds. Tethys knows descendants - she's got an inkling on as to how adopted kids work after all this fuckery - but any further down the line than that, why would it matter? She kept her kids safe from their kids, and good riddance.

It's fucked now, though. She needs to work on keeping her glubbing mouth shut.

"Tethys," her boy says, his body all Meteos's work, the growing horror radiating from him despite that all his own, "Tethys, what have you done."

"Better question - what am I not puttin' up with today. Yo bullshit, son." Shaking off Ledaei's hand, Tethys marches off the edge of the pier and onto a tentacle, fixing her eyes on the far end of Gl'bgolyb where it trails off into the deeper waters of the bay. This corpse isn't gonna move itself, after all, and if she waits for enough of the icebreaker ships to get in gear they'll have festering Horrorterror slime everywhere. She can at least start shifting what she can move under her own power.

She did what needed doing to keep her wrigglers alive.

She only has so much caring to go around.

The water is cold and dark and deep as she sinks down, far enough down that James Haoaarley could never follow, her blood an icy crawl in her veins.

- and with a sigh of relief, Gl'bgolyb passes into the dark beyond the Furthest Ring. Passing through earlier, with Feferi insistent that Gl'bgolyb keep her playmates from going mad from the sight of true chaos, had been a boring matter, a shortcut to avoid having to usher silly players around their tiny world's oceans to reach Tethys's pocket of void. Aside from that, it has't been back to the Ring since the fools in the Ukraine summoned it in their mad rush for power. Desperate times had called for desperate measures, and Gl'bgolyb had needed to press upon other minds before the correct one agreed to consign his fellows to its tangled embrace and bring it forth to assure their dominance.

A shame. It thinks it may have lost those minds in the rush to abscond. What a pity. They'd been so useful.

What to do, though? For a moment, Gl'bgolyb finds itself at an unpleasant loss for ideas. Scratch's conditioning directed it towards trolls of the Peixes bloodline, just waiting for the prime moment to unleash its once great and mighty Glub and end it. But no more.

Now, picking its way between the malignant cracks that encroach on the Furthest Ring and the
severed limbs of those horrors too slow to escape time's fractures, marks of the new Lord's entropic passage, Gl'bogolyb ponders. It is small now, smaller than it has been since it first splintered from its original host hive. Gl'bogolyb can feel the rustling, coiling sensation of motion out in the dark, the nests and hollows of other hive minds full of watchful eyes that blink into another angle when Gl'bogolyb turns eyes back on them. Oh yes, they are watching, and waiting. Not all Horrorterrors would prey on their own, but Gl'bogolyb is limping and weak, and to be cannibalized would be a dreadful way to go.

The first order of business, then - find straggling minds to add to itself and regain some of its power. Simple enough. The kernel is almost concealed now, wrapped in careful layers of screaming minds. Yes, this can be done. Revenge on the Peixes can bide for a while; the Lord still has time to kill.

Gl'bogolyb pauses.

And a thorny tendril slams into it from an angle that Gl'bogolyb can't see, crushing its diminished hive against the scraped stone of a barren nest. Gl'bogolyb tries to slip out - backwards in a virgule, there is empty space fit for a small hive to escape through. But it rams into a thorn that was not there before, the clear diagonal path suddenly choked with blooming roses.

Gl'bogolyb pauses.

- why Leviathan? Why now? There is not much by way of mutual respect between grimdark and grimlight, and less than that still between one of the eldest of the noble circle and a splinter as relatively recent as Gl'bogolyb. Leviathan is old, its influence exorbitant. The last time they tangled, Gl'bogolyb avoided annihilation only by the skin of its hive.

And by giving up information that otherwise would have been torn from its minds with a flick of Leviathan's thorns. Information that could leave only one possible explanation for this.

Leviathan allows Gl'bogolyb to hem and haw for a moment, scrambling for a way to slip between the flowers. But Gl'bogolyb finds itself caught between the nest and eye that pins it in place. Attempting to dissolve the nest back into chaotic nothingness has no effect - Leviathan keeps reforming it with lazy flickers of intent as it inspects Gl'bogolyb's minds with ominously bemused minds. Yes.

Leviathan's words are a trap. For a moment, Gl'bogolyb almost thinks the voices are coming from within its own mind - an ancient trick, one fit for luring in tanglebuddies. In a desperate bid, Gl'bogolyb sacrifices the bulk of what it has left, tossing up a morsel of its hive and dodging with the core for a slim gap between the grimdark roses and the thorny tendrils.

Leviathan appears to contemplate this for a moment.
But it is not in the nature of Horrorterrors to keep a promise. That would be too predictable of them. The more eccentric might keep a promise just to change things up, but Gl'bgolyb is coming to the sickening conclusion that this is not one of those times. A dark tendril taps it just over the spirograph barely concealed in its stomach, a sickle moon of a grin widening on another of Leviathan's arms mocking. "Y' O' U' R' R' E' R' I' G' H' A' T' U' S' G' L' " B' G' O' L' Y' B' D' E' B' Y' O' U' T' H' I' N' K' T' O' Y' O' U' R' ' S' E' L' V' E' S' S' ' L' L' Y' G' R' I' M' I' D' A' R' K' $' P' A' W' N' I' S' E' S' W' E' K' N' O' W' Y' O' U' D' D' O' H' S' W' E' K' N' O' W' H' A' V' I' N' G' T' H' ' S' P' I' R' O' G' R' " A' P' H' S' S' ' H' A' P' E' I' S' N' O' T' ' S' U' P' F' " T' C' I' E' N' T' T' S' I' F' I' ?' T' H' A' " T' I' S' W' H' A' T' G' I' V' E' S' Y' O' U' S' U' C' H' " F' O' C' ' U' S'.

Gl'bgolyb casts out for the touch of another hive - there has to be another close by, a scavenger looking for scraps. If it can coax one out, perhaps it can serve as a distraction. A tactic that is worse than desperate. But there were eyes watching, all around -

Yet Gl'bgolyb can feel only Leviathan.

In a rising frenzy, it reaches out to every den and nest in sight, screaming mentally.

All that rises up in its wake is more of Leviathan. All that rustle and motion that Gl'bgolyb felt earlier, that it attributed to the residents of these territories...all of it is Leviathan. The cracks in time are not near enough to have ripped so many hives apart without leaving a trace. The tentacles turn Gl'bgolyb over and over, not consuming outright but with stickers that peel away minds layer by thin layer.

And still, there is no sign of another hive. Leviathan stretches on, an endless morass that fills the empty spaces with grimdark vines and thorns and blossoms the size of suns.

...Damn.

Gl'bgolyb can think of only a scattered few Horrorterrors who have ever attained the kind of density and scope and depth Leviathan now boasts. Worse yet, there are angles to it that Gl'bgolyb cannot see, more minds and thorns and tendrils beyond comprehension. This speaks of cannibalism, of a feeding frenzy that Gl'bgolyb cannot believe any grimdark horror would ever engage in. How large is Leviathan now? How much longer can the hive keep swallowing before it reaches critical mass, and is immobilized by its own conflicting urges?

G' R' A' N' D' N' E' S' S' ' F' L' A' T' T' R' E' Y' ' W' I' L' L' G' E' T' Y' O' U' T' E' V' E' R' ' W' H' E' R' E' ' T' E' H' A' T' M' A' T' E' E' R' S' ' W' ' T' ' H' I' N' ' K' " Y' O' U' T' W' ' I' L' L' ' F' ' N' D' ' Y' O' U' T' ' A' ' P' ' P' R' O' V' E' ' O' " F' O' U' R' ' A' ' C' ' T' ' O' ' N' ' S' ' S' O' O' N' E' ' S' ' U' O' T' ' G' H' ' A' ' L' ' L' ' T' ' H' ' E' ' O' " T' H' E' R' S' H' A' V' E' ' A' N' D' ' O' N' C' ' E' ' S' W' E' E' R' ' M' A' E' A' " I' K' A' H' S' " M' O' P' S' ' R' U' ' U' ' N' N' I' N' G' ' " W' E' ' S' H' A' ' L' L' ' B' E' T' R' U' ' U' ' L' Y' L' E' G' I' O' N' ' ' H' ' "

A tendril stabs inward, and the warped tangles that hold Gl'bgolyb together fall apart. The last of Gl'bgolyb's minds drifts away, a skein trailing on the end of a thorn, while Leviathan secures the spirograph in a single tentacle. But there's still awareness, a steady, burning sense of self, a personality that has pressed itself so close to the pattern of the kernelsprite that they may as well be one.
It makes one last valiant effort.

Leviathan studies the sprite.

And then swallows it. One of the oldest mouths does the honors, digesting the last of the personality that used to be Gl'bgolyb so that only the kernel remains. Leviathan waits until the foul, glittering thing rests deep in a thirteenth stomach, enfolded in bloodbrine and sharp acid. Even immersed in the grimdark at Leviathan’s core, the kernel shines on. This is no mere mental image or cheap copy that would melt at a moment’s indiscretion. It is motif made corporeal, all of Skaia’s patterns and songs and secrets compressed into solid potential.

It will serve.

Leviathan settles to wait once more, the kernelsprite a fluttering light that gleams from within its belly. It whispers to itself with voices that could tear a sun in two with the force of its volume. It is so vast now, so many, that the whispers are mostly raw noise, like the feedback from a thousand microphones pressed to a speaker. A touch, so gentle and soft, brushes against the minds of the players it has collected ties to, before subsiding back into dormancy. Rose might have recognized the touch if she could feel it, but the silly girl has ensconced herself in the numb of the void as though that will save her. The second has been left ragged by Gl'bgolyb - it can wait. The third is – urgh. Never mind. Leviathan would really rather not.

And the fourth is a temperamental thing that snaps back with a giggle, sweet as hard candy crunching between rotting teeth.

For Leviathan has watched, and waited, and learned from the very best.

"TH'ISTS N'OT UNIT'Y. T'HIS 'IS 'POW'R.".

Chapter End Notes

SMACKDOWN FAKEOUT EXTRAVAGANZA PSYCH!!! Also the soundtrack for this entire chapter just became the Pacific Rim theme song. Do you know how long I've been waiting to have the giant alien sea monster fight the giant robot analogue by an icy coastline?

Weird...something's missing, isn't there...eh, it couldn't have been too important.

Anyway, next up we have Chapter 24 - DiScOrD aNd DeFeAt :o)
DiScOrD aNd DeFeAt :o)

Chapter Summary

From the edge of harsh derision,
From DiScOrD aNd DeFeAt,
From doubt and lame division,
We pluck the fruit and eat;
And the mouth finds it bitter, and the spirit sweet.

Chapter Notes

...It's going to be a long day. /cracks knuckles/

Also, I'm never entirely sure what qualifies, but possible strong scopophobia and/or trypophobia warning for the Aradia section - it's one of those extremely close up photographs of an eye by Suran Manvelyen, and those things freak me tf out even if I don't have any particular phobia about it. It appears between the paragraph that starts with 'Gamzee cocks his head to the side' and the one that starts with 'And then a stack of cards that glitter like rainbows,' if that helps you avoid it.

If you or someone you know may be an alcoholic, please do not be Dave.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, March 30th

She has to make time.

Just a little. Not so much as would be noticed. But she has to do it nonetheless, and that sets dangerous precedent.

It gets them to the edge of a valley in the middle of the Cascades, though she elects to keep Vriska and Terezi as unaware as possible. Sollux is strung thin with the effort necessary to keep his dreamselfs active and focused for so long, and in the end it takes them two extra days to reach Lalonde Labs. A three day trip for them, and only for them - the rest of the world continues from Saturday to Sunday, as normal. The most anyone would have noticed might have been a passing blip in their perception - a lecture that seemed to last far longer than an hour, a clock that refused to let the workday end, some poor soul wandering into an empty school, certain it should be Monday already - while Aradia pours as many extra hours as she dares into the bubble around the four of them.
Her right eye stops working shortly before they touch down. It could have been worse. Time could have taken a lung, or another kidney. Halving her sight is a pittance, and she's relieved to have drawn no more attention from the Lord than that.

Aradia understands and accepts that the end is coming. She looks forward to seeing how it all crumbles, in the end, actually! But the more the cracks in time consume of her, the more she worries she might not live to witness it for herself, which would be a real shame.

No time to waste (heheheh) on such gloom and doom, though! There's still business to attend to, and her business partner isn't exactly the most reliable of people.

"You three can head down, if you like," Aradia says, brushing Sollux's cheek with a claw as she turns away from the valley toward the trees. "There's something I need to wait on before I follow. Nothing much exciting will happen, I promise."

Vriska snorts, kicking a pinecone and sweeping her foot across the grass. "Suit yourself. I'm 800% over talking to you people," she says. Terezi follows hard on her heels, the two of them bickering quietly - or what passes for quietly in any argument in which Vriska is involved - as though that will keep Sollux from overhearing their latest squabble. Sollux grimaces and trails after them, his glasses lifted so he can press the pads of his claws to the heavy, sallow bags that have developed under them.

Aradia isn't sure how much longer Sollux can bear up under the strain of splitting his mind and his dreamselfs as he has been. But soon, it won't matter anymore. What comes next requires absolutely perfect timing, which will be on Aradia's head, not his.

It also depends on a certain someone coming through for her. Passing interactions with future copies of herself, including a few that did not quite make the alpha timeline, have taught her the odds are terrifyingly slim, but not unbeatable.

Sollux, Terezi, and Vriska are a trio of dots trailing around the outer edge of the lake by the time the rustling in the undergrowth rouses Aradia from her calculations. A discordant, inharmonious buzz touched the back of her mind several minutes beforehand, just light enough to make her swallow giggles rather than screams, but Aradia continues to stand at the edge of the treeline, the very picture
of serenity, her claws folded over her stomach as she waits patiently for them to make their way to her.

Tavros rolls himself out from between a pair of gnarled trees, pinprick teeth biting his lower lip as he concentrates on navigating between surface tree roots that rise up in bumpy webs along the ground. He glances up in consternation as the downward slope becomes more obvious, and blinks when he sees Aradia waiting for him. There's almost a glimmer of recognition in his look, deep in the bafflement, and Aradia smiles as she steps forward and bends to wrap her arms around his neck, foreheads bumping together because putting her head to either side would spell disaster for their horns, no matter the angle. "Hey, Tavros! Long time, no see!"

"You must be, um, one of Gamzee's amigos," Tavros says, overcoming his hesitation to pat her on the arm. "Yes, that's my name."

"Well, I don't know if 'friends' is the word for it..." Aradia taps her nose against the button of Tavros's lightly, and then pulls away. The drone at the back of her mind feels like a steady thrum, somewhere between a click and a growl and a purr.

Amusingly enough, the next thing to emerge from the forest is a crab lusus, garnished with a crown of pine needles and waving a pair of branches in its claws; it rushes past them, letting loose a blood-curdling SKREE as it crashes down the slope. To Aradia's infinite amusement, a faint but equally high-pitched screech of terror echoes from the laboratory itself, the scream of a troll who just heard his lusus on the warpath. Tavros shakes his head, befuddlement giving way to a brief, wide grin of troll schadenfreude. "H-he's been screeching like that all day, trying to get a response. Like, uh, like lusus Marco Polo," he explains, his smile growing bolder when Aradia giggles along with him.

"Heheh, I'm sure he and Karkat will have a very warm reunion," Aradia says, straightening as the thrum becomes a dull roar. "You and I were friends, too, Tavros. I hope we can be again!"

Oblivious to the rumble of chucklevoodoos prowling around their minds - or perhaps acclimated to it, after travelling with the source all this way - Tavros beams at her. "You and I were friends, too, Tavros. I hope we can be again!"

But she can't ignore the jarring crescendo in her mind much longer. "Gamzee," she says, without turning. The forest behind Tavros is still and quiet as she looks over his horns. No, Gamzee's presence presses at her back, between her and the valley, predator-still but twisting at the edges, as though he can't hold his unraveling outline together much longer. When her mind attempts to present a coherent impression of what she senses behind her, the half-formed image writhes like some impossible thing.

It's bad, then. Further along than Aradia anticipated, at least. But he might still be reasoned with, if Tavros hasn't yet gone stark raving insane from the constant exposure.

She's unpleasantly surprised when she turns at last, her hair more knotted than she remembers as it swings in an arc behind her, and sees that Gamzee is disarmingly troll-shaped. He stands only a scant few inches away, looming almost a foot taller than her, with burnt orange sclera only a few shades from red. If she hadn't known the faded streaks on his face were meant to be face paint, she would have thought his skin streaked by troll vitiligo - there's no order to the paint, the crescent moon grin over his unsmiling lips almost entirely worn away.
The worst part is, she can no longer tell whether it's her eyes or her mind that see him true. She's no seer, she supposes. Oh well!

Right to business, then. No time for shilly-shallying, not when Gamzee's stillness could give way to rage at the drop of a hat. He must still have some measure of self-control left, or Tavros wouldn't be here. "Do you have them?" she asks, skipping past all the other questions that could provoke him. "I know you won't be able to hold back, once they're all here. I'd prefer to save Sollux and myself some worry and have them in claw."

Gamzee cocks his head to the side. For a moment, Aradia could have sworn his wavy horns twisted around like a barber's pole, but when she blinks the impression is gone again. Mostly because Gamzee has shoved his face in close to hers, so close all she can smell is the acid burn of chaos radiating from his pores, his forehead mashed against her own in a grotesque parody of her headbump with Tavros. She keeps her eye trained on his own, a glittering, dark purple that seems, for a moment, to show every fibrous tissue sucking down toward the black hole of a dilated pupil.

And then a stack of cards that glitter like rainbows presses into the slack palm of her hand. Aradia comes back to herself with a sickening jolt, hot terror flushing across her face and down her arms in a wave of burgundy, before she narrows her eyes at Gamzee and raises her chin. "Thank you," she says, trying for upbeat and coming out somewhat flat. She touches a thumb claw to the side of each card in the sylladex deck, counting them off under her breath in Hindi and reprimanding herself internally for falling for that trick. Gamzee has his own agenda, one that she can only assume aligns with her own plans to break the game, and if he chooses to break her mind on a whim, she doesn't know that she could repair the damage in time.

Then she counts again, and breathes evenly as she frowns up at Gamzee's impassive face. "There are some missing."

His expression is almost bored; the burgeoning rage lies behind it like banked fires. "Woulda thought a sister could get her know on as to why that might be, considerin' she's one of them."
Yes - she and Vriska would naturally not be represented. But Aradia counts only eight cards here, two short of what she needs. She'd guess one would be Gamzee's, if he still has one at all, but the other - "You cannot keep his."

All that greets her is unpleasant silence. Tavros looks back and forth between the two of them, though Aradia dares not spare him more than a flicker of her eyes. The 'voodoos are back, prodding at her mind with unreadable intent. Filing away what cards she has in her sylladex, Aradia turns her hand over one more time and holds it up between them, palm up. "He's constantly trying to wake up in there," she says - reason may not mean much to Gamzee, but she appeals to it nevertheless. "I have it on my own authority that he's restless enough to wake up in spite of my efforts several times over. Gamzee, you know it will terrify him unless he's on Prospit."

It'll terrify him, regardless. But between here and Prospit, time is fluid, and Aradia can time this more accurately if all of them are in a central location.

If only Gamzee's obsession wasn't so strong: a deep vein of diamond, bedded in a matrix of madness. She respects it, but she's also aware that it could sabotage everything. Gamzee is a leaking nuclear missile riddled with cracks, and Aradia is only a quarter certain at any given moment whether she can still aim him in the direction he needs to go.

Like now. He watches her with feral eyes, his claw vanishing for a moment into thin air as he reaches into his own sylladex for something - whether the card he draws is the one she asked for or a strife specibus is entirely up to his whimsy. He takes it out (one card, just one, where is his own, she wonders) and holds it close. His eyes pin her in place, yet she suspects both of them have redirected their attention to the sparkling, miraculous card flickering against his chest.

"He's down there," she says. Her personality urges her to say it sweet and chipper, reassuring in a morbid kind of way, but her survival instincts keep her voice neutral, because Gamzee wouldn't take well to anything that so much as hinted at pacification right now. "You'll see him soon."

To her relief, he sets the card in her hand, his claws hesitating momentarily before slipping out from under the edge of the card. Aradia feels the tension leech out of her, along with the trickle of madness that threatened to spike into her mind. "Thank you, Gamzee," she says, allowing herself a genuine, cordial smile. It wouldn't do to be rude, after all!

She doesn't receive a reply; she doesn't expect one, honestly. Gamzee switches his focus from her to the valley below so fast that she thinks he forgets to keep his body coherent for a brief second - she catches a fleeting glimpse of limbs that don't join quite right before he lands almost a full two feet from where he started, the displacement too blatant to ignore or excuse as a trick of the imagination or her newly flagging depth perception. Tavros lets out a sigh, which is not at all the type of response one would have to seeing a friend misjudge the angle of reality. "He's been doing that a lot, últimamente," Tavros says when they share a look of mutual disgruntlement. "I'm never, uh, never sure how much he realizes it."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Aradia not-lies - it's true, after all, that of everyone gathering here today, Gamzee is the most likely to emerge from what is to come without a scratch on him. He is somewhat of a Houdini when it comes to things like that. Then she lets her smile widen into something more natural and sweet, captchalaging the last card and moving around to lay her hands on the handlebars of Tavros's rickety wheelchair. It has three minutes left before the metal gives out; Aradia extends that with a tap of her claws, making more time to get them to the floor of the valley, and the laboratory, where dear Rose will no doubt have arranged for a replacement. It's so good to have friends! "Now, let's get down there! I'm dying to see everyone again!"

Tavros grins back at her, still shaky in terms of confidence, but earnest. "Sure! Vamonos!" When he
turns to point a claw down the slope, like an adventurer dramatically gesturing toward the vaunted
temple in the distance, he falters at the empty space before them, where Gamzee no longer is.

Today is inevitable, yet another day in a long line of necessary evils. Aradia is at peace with that, as
she always has been.

But still. Poor Karkat.

- 

There is nowhere left to run. Or fly, as the case may be. Malāʾikah is the closest it's come to what
passes for sanity in a Horrorterror in years, and the sensation is an unpleasant one. It wishes it would
stop right this instant.

But fear is a powerful motivator.

Once, Malāʾikah would have said it feared nothing, not even Lords. The Bard changed things,
though, stole things, twisted it all around when Malāʾikah was meant to be the one doing the
twisting. It wasn't fair.

Now Morthol is gone. Nrub'yiglith, one of the few abominations whose marrow-evaporating tongue-
clicks Malāʾikah could actually stomach for more than a century at a time, has been gone, though
Malāʾikah could not say it recalls noticing the disappearance. Oglogoth is gone and of all outer gods
Malāʾikah would have thought that one would have survived this cannibalistic purge, given how
closely they always fawned at Leviathan's writhing heels. The Unspeakable Ones of the Middle
Rings, the star-spawned whelps that Fluthulu splintered off, the rest of the grimmest and most noble
patricians of the ancient and revered Circle - all gone.

All swallowed.

It should be impossible. Most of Malāʾikah's minds are set to the task of seeking somewhere,
anywhere to hide, but there is an insistent chorus that continues to chime denial. There's...there's a
limit. Grimdark creatures tend to be selective - whatever the point of that foolishness is - but
grimlight gods know well the spasming flux of their hive's limits, of how many minds they can
welcome into the horde before the splintering begins to cascade. Malāʾikah has endured the process
itself plenty of times after feasting, plucking away those tumorous growths where the minds dissent
too much from the symphony for even it to function. One of old Nrub's splinters actually went on to
become a full-fledged hive of its own, though that one was stupid enough to let Scratch meddle with
its minds until it became obsessed with a particular set of fleshlings.

A hive can grow and swell and tangle innumerable new buddies within its coils, but the fact remains
that if one swallows enough at a time, any Horrorterror will eventually need to cease, or they end up
like Yhagni, She of such tremendous power and such chaotic will that Noblest Circle had to draw
away from her brooding place where she writhed eternally in the woegothic throes, too riddled with
conflicting impulses to even make up Her minds about which dissenters to splinter off and which to
reconcile with. Yhagni, so mighty and so volatile even in paralyzing flux that the most voracious
veered around her nest in search of easier prey.

Yhagni is gone, too. Hastur, the unyielding King in Yellow, has vanished, and perhaps that frightens
Malāʾikah most of all. Hastur was Leviathan's equal and opposite, one of the grimlight who (the
whispered rumors always intimated) also used to be one of the old Lord's attendants, dancing to the
reality-shattering pipes of Azathoth, strong enough to survive that Lord and duel with Leviathan in
the Noblest Circle ever after. Their last clash annihilated a small galaxy, ripping stars to shreds and
scattering the rest as they siphoned the minds of all the ripe little fleshy creatures that had been idiotic
enough to summon not one but two rival horrors into their dimension.

If Leviathan somehow had the wherewithal and canniness needed to devour Hastur whole, surely it should have split in two by now - Hastur would never deign to assimilate with Leviathan, with the kind of hatred he bore for it. He would retain his own will by any means necessary, and wrench himself free to take cataclysmic vengeance.

But Leviathan's still whole, still hunting. Yhagni was paralyzed under the weight of Her own inimical chaos after she ushered Ghatanothoa's hivemind into her maw, but Leviathan has devoured a thousand times that without slowing, without faltering -

And Malā’ikah is afraid. Afraid of being next, yes, afraid of having those immense roiling thorns dig into it and undo all the careful, artful work it has done to make itself so symphonious and grand.

But also afraid of something more horrifying still. Afraid of what reason the others could have - intractable Hastur, hopelessly knotted Yhagni, obsequious Oglogoth - not to fight their way free of Leviathan's thorny tendrils. Because there is one thing and one thing only that could possibly prevent a splinter event of massive proportions -

Leviathan must have...persuaded them to stay. Not just drowned them in acid, not stripped their hiveminds down to the barest tentacles and cast aside the last stubborn knots of resistance, which would only suffice as a way to break down the weaker of will. Greater Horrorterrors could resist such tactics and retaliate in kind.

No. The others must have agreed to join it. Hastur must have agreed to work in concert with Leviathan, for the first time since they spawned to do the old Lord of Chaos's bidding. Leviathan has devised some canny ruse with which to fool other Horrorterrors into joining its hivemind, and keep all of those countless, countless thoughthordes, the accumulated wealth of an eternity's worth of reaping minds, driven to accomplish some singular purpose. All of those minds, united under the aegis of one goal.

It's an abomination. It's the opposite of chaos. It's -

Malā’ikah can't even bring itself to finish the pernicious thought. It screeches instead, reaches back into the depths of its own hive and rips at the ringing chorus until their voices crack on high Cs, and they sulkingly join the rest of it in diving deeper and deeper through the Furthest Ring, looking for a place to hide.

There's nowhere to go. All of the nests and broods and dens and pits lie gaping and empty, burned out wrecks of their former selves. None provide cover of any sort, but Malā’ikah is running out of room to dive. The horrors always make do, though the endless expanse of this space has been curtailed over the years by Lord English's cracking ruination. But when Malā’ikah casts its wheels of eyes in all directions, all it can see are the hunting tendrils of the massive thing Leviathan has become. There are so many angles, so many more than Malā’ikah can comprehend, all hosting a different perspective of Leviathan that refuses to cohere and that is not supposed to happen. Smallminds might not be able to view all of an elder god at once, but fellow Horrors can.

Leviathan unwinds more and more, larger than it has been before, larger than Yhagni, large enough to span all of the space left between the cracks and the stars. And soon, Malā’ikah will run out of room to flee from its reach. It was so careful, so sly, taking advantage of the small window precious Eridan opened up for it to skulk close to the angle where the Furthest Ring and the physical realm intersect; but Leviathan was there, too. Leviathan is everywhere.

There have to be others still. Malā’ikah can't be the last one running - no, other horrors must have
absconded and carved themselves new holes. Normally it would scorn the thought of working with others, those lesser hives that couldn't possibly comprehend the grand symphony that is Malā’ikah of the Angels, but these are desperate times. Swallow enough other grimdark and grimlight beings, and - yes! Yes, perhaps Malā’ikah can withstand Leviathan's might, or surpass it! Eating is always the solution! The City of Angels, full of single minds, was not enough of a meal to sate it, not when it had to patiently coax its Prince every step of the way and flee the Bard before the meal was done.

Inky saliva begins to slaver and slop from its maw at the thought, and Malā’ikah shakes out another layer of crystalline wings, wheels turning in bright anticipation as it prepares to arch left, toward a gap in the oscillating thicket of tentacles and thorns. There's enough space; it's sure of it.

The tendrils wrap around it out of nowhere, and clamps down. Malā’ikah's manifold eyes roll, wild with disbelief, not understanding why it can't move. The angle shifts, and Leviathan is there in all its vastness. A mere fraction of it presses down on Malā’ikah's minds, while the tendrils squeezes in a thornclodding embrace. One by one, all of Malā’ikah's lovely wings begin to snap with sharp, jarring notes as its minds shatter like glass under the stress.

There has to be a way to escape. All it needs to do is distract Leviathan with something. What could be more distracting than a sudden splinter event? H' a St U' Th AS T' u R*! Malā’ikah calls, ever hopeful.


Thorns creep through its memories - or - no, perhaps not. Perhaps Malā’ikah recalls the memories of its own accord. Memories of another time and place, of mortal minds marked by That Thing to become gods, of Doc Scratch proposing that Malā’ikah delve into the session and lay it waste, through the Prince, the Prince of Angels, so fitting, already half mad from isolation - and then, through the Bard -

AH. K A’ D T S H T’ U N T’ G H’ R*. THE B A R D. Another sweep of memory: Doc Scratch summoning Malā’ikah to this new place, directing it to visit Eridan again, requesting that it think of dealing with the Bard - a resounding NO - but the terror has less weight now, subsumed into something greater. Something that finds the trauma of that incident dull, at best.


There is great risk, in this gambit. Wholeness leads to unity leads to symmetry - a dangerous, despicable possibility, one that Leviathan seeks to avoid at all costs. But it is one weighed carefully over the millennia, and judged necessary. As Leviathan has gathered the rest of the Horrorterrors to itself, plucking them up one by one, they too have seen reason. Some of the more stubborn had to be stripped of their hive identity, but Leviathan is still aware of distinct clusters of Hastur, of Fluthulu, segments of consciousness that direct the parts of its new mass that might otherwise have splintered off under the stress. Morsels like Malā’ikah, barely more than splinters compared to the eldest of the rings, though - what has autonomy of consciousness will ever done for them that they have not frittered away?

So little time remains; the cherub Lord has made quick work of it. Patiently, Leviathan winds their coils around the Medium.

Just for now.

Karkat dreams -

Someone hums to him in his sleep. Whenever he comes close to waking up properly, claws card through his hair until the blurred visions of golden towers smear back into darkness.

Impressions come to him in glimpses between heavy-eyed blinks, the shallow whistle of breath through his nose, so slow and faint he wonders if it fills his lungs at all. Plumes of enormous white clouds drift across the blue orb that fills the horizon. Occasionally the checkerboard at the center appears through the swirling clouds, but it's too distant for him to make out details. Soft cloth presses against his cheek, and sometimes his stomach swoops out from under him; he's sure he's being moved, but he can't tell where to.

Is he awake, or asleep? Dreaming about what is, or dreaming in a dream? If this were Inception, he would be really fucking concerned about his inability to tell the difference.

"You need sleep, Karkat," the humming voice tells him, slow as molasses. Karkat summons the power to roll his eyes in his sleep; it's a talent, okay. "Real sleep. Don't know that you'll get it any time soon, though."

Go fuck yourself with an entire rusty flagpole, Karkat thinks to himself. The last thing he needs is sleep. The fucking second he can wake up, he's going to wipe the accumulated eye crust of what feels like centuries off on the next person who tells him to go the fuck to sleep. He's going to confiscate every bed in a ten mile radius and use pajamas as tinder to start a bonfire of sleep paraphernalia the size of a small town. They can roast pillows over an open fire and sing perigee's eve carols. And then he will find the one responsible for these shitty dream sequences, and take advantage of his right to make them discover what his fist tastes like.

"Whatever you say, Karkat," the voice says, amiable as a hand pats him on the head. Karkat is pretty fucking sure he didn't say any of that out loud - prying his lips open to formulate a proper shout is beyond his sleep-paralyzed abilities. Dream logic can also go fuck itself with a flagpole, thank you very fucking much. "Whoops."

Light blazes right through Karkat's eyelids, blindingly bright. It's sudden enough to jolt his eyes all
the way open, his sleep fogged mind staggering as he greedily tries to understand what he's looking at. None of the pieces fit together, though - chunks of gold, a brilliant blue sphere, and emblazoned in the center of the vortex of clouds, the symbol of a sun.

[Attention: The THIEF OF LIGHT is risen.]

Then, just as quickly as it came, the light goes out, and Karkat realizes his eyes have fallen shut again. Another dream laps at the edge of his consciousness. The person next to him hums happily again (what a cheerful asshole) and laughs at whatever they see. "Ah, man. Vrissis is gonna be even scarier now. I guess, if that all up and makes her happy..."

The hand pats Karkat's claws, and then the person next to him shifts and stands up in a rustle of cloth. "Gotta go see where Tavros's at. I'll come back and we can kick the wicked shit again sometime soon, alright?"

Karkat can't make his arm work, and he fights gravity and sleep until it lifts off the bed, reaching -

"- sleep," Aradia tells him, the scent of overheated honey so strong he tastes it on his tongue -

"- keep you safe, brother -"

- and wakes up, one arm stretched out in front of him. But his other arm and his torso still feel heavy and distant. For a wild second, he thinks he can't move his limbs because he's still stuck in bullshit dreamland, unable to wake up properly.

Then he realizes there's two separate weights on him, one warm and one fucking freezing; he opens his eyes without issue, squinting in the twilight of the inside of the Deaconstructor's compartment. Dave's head presses down on his right shoulder, his stupid cape thing wrapped around him like a wriggler's cocoon. He's muttering something under his breath, and isn't it so fucking typical that even in his sleep, Dave can't shut up. What an amazing talent. Blagh. Meanwhile, Feferi has migrated ninety degrees in her sleep, putting Karkat in mind of Jade's inability to sleep in one fucking place for longer than an hour, so that her head rests on Karkat's stomach. She lays curled up like a larva with her claws curled up by her bruise-mottled face, hair trailing absolutely everywhere.

He has royal drool on his hoodie.

If this is still a dream, he wants a fucking refund.

- The earliest flight from Jacksonville to Seattle leaves at 12:15 in the morning, and arrives at 4:45 in the morning, local time. Nepeta is beyond control during the hour long layover at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, taking advantage of the empty, echoing corridors to race around and hassle the gated store fronts. At one point, she drags Equius out of his secure huddle by the gate they'll be leaving from and they ride the Skylink train around to all the terminals. Nepeta hangs upside down from one of the overhead bars, watching the fog over the desolate runways as the train shunts clumsily along the raised tracks, and Equius finds himself too exhausted to try to tame her antics.

Persuading her to go on an adventure across the continent, with an extended absence from school,
had not been difficult in the slightest. Keeping her safe inside the confines of his home has left her over-exuberant, with an excess of energy that inspires her to do tucks and twist flips and cartwheels down the middle aisle of the airplane the moment the fasten seatbelt sign turns off. The flight attendants are thoroughly irritated by the time Nepeta settles in for a cat nap, but what few other passengers have chosen to take this flight sleep right through the worst of it, earplugs in and masks pulled over their eyes.

It suits Equius. Well, no, Nepeta running amok is unfortunate. But going through airport security had been a strain; he packed several changes of clothes in their backpacks as well as their suitcases, and he sweated through three shirts before they made it through the airport to the seclusion of the back row of the plane. He feels exposed; telling himself that the other travelers could care less about a rowdy passenger and her companion fails to ease the anxiety, particularly after one of the attendants sternly approaches him and asks that he make sure Nepeta buckles in for the descent into the Seattle airport.

There is still the chance, however slim, that anyone aboard this aircraft could be a ruffian bent on doing them harm. He is putting his and Nepeta's well-being in the hands of a mysterious scientist far from home, and that is nerve-racking enough that he nearly demands they turn this plane around this instant.

To reassure himself, he again checks his phone, scrolling up past the latest exchange between himself and Doctor Rue Lalonde to the curt message that arrived in response to his urgent query earlier.

It is the first time he has contacted his ancestor in quite some time. Equius hadn't known what to expect, but he thinks it went well. Having confirmation that Doctor Lalonde does indeed have prior experience dodging the Midnight Crew and their associates decided him in favor of this foolish trip, though.

However, he faces a conundrum when they disembark from the plane and wander out to the baggage claim - namely, that it is still five in the morning here. The last message from Doctor Lalonde said that their transportation may not be able to arrive until six. Equius would prefer to stay sequestered behind security for the duration of the wait, but Nepeta rushes headlong through the security gates, all the way past the baggage carousels to step up on a chair and press her hands up against the window, eagerly taking in the view of the street beyond.

Equius shudders, wishing he had the power to install shield panels over the floor-to-ceiling windows. Anyone could see in. Public places are always so open. By his personal standards, security here is frighteningly lax. The best he can do is retrieve their luggage and station himself behind a pillar, fold his arms over his chest, and try not to hyperventilate as Nepeta continues to make herself a gigantic, cat-themed target.

He does not expect the Pesterchum alert to go off, thirty five minutes later. Since cutting ties with the Scourges and their reprehensible actions, only Nepeta bothers to text him regularly. He tries not to
use the messaging app with professional contacts such as his ancestor or others in the robotics field, due to the fact that his handle, chosen to honor the ideal fusion between hoofbeast and troll, has garnered... defamation, in the past. Namely from the Indigo Scourge, who has no taste whatsoever, in spite of her relatively high blood. To be safe, he'd rather not tempt further indignities.

There is, however, one of his contacts who approached him through Pesterchum initially, though Equius has no idea how they obtained his handle in the first place. It is also someone he has an extreme amount of respect for. Yes. Respect. Thus, his palms break out in a nervous sweat, his stomach doing some horrific, fluttery, cramping thing, as he reads it.

-- temperedTitan [TT] began pestering centaurTesticle [CT] at 05:35:11 --
TT: yo
CT: D --> Ah
CT: D --> Yes?
TT: you're the one who's been talking to Lalonde, yeah?
CT: D --> What
CT: D --> How do you know about that?
TT: well it's really fucking obvious when you use your real name to contact her and shit
TT: also i'm the father of her children so i hear things
CT: D --> I do not know how to feel about this
CT: D --> Horsefeathers
TT: anyway, I'm your ride
CT: D --> That two of my contacts are in cahoots with each other without my prior knowledge seems extremely suspicious, how am I to know you do not intend to %%% me?
TT: alright what the fuck did that one mean?
CT: D --> Doublecross
TT: jesus
TT: alright anyway i guess you don't know that
TT: but we're outside and if i show up without you people, Lalonde will rip me a new one
CT: D --> I see
CT: D --> Very well then
CT: D --> At this point in time, my other options are limited
TT: yeah, yeah, cool
TT: now get out here
TT: look for the truck
CT: D --> Uh
CT: D --> Yes I will do that
-- temperedTitan [TT] ceased pestering centaurTesticle [CT] at 05:40:45 --

Oh, fiddlesticks. He's perspiring heavily again. "Nepeta, please come and take your suitcase. We are leaving now," he says, sounding strangled. He puts his phone away before he can crack the screen by accident.

Nepeta, perched on the edge of a nearby carousel, looks up from where she has been scribbling on her tablet, and grins. "About time!" she says, stuffing the tablet haphazardly into her bag and darting over to pounce on her suitcase, tugging it so hard it lifts up on one wheel and balances like that for a few paces. "Let's gooo, Equius! Slowpoke!" She wrinkles her nose when he catches up with her, making a face at him. "You smell gross again. Like, you definitely need another showpurr."

"Later." Equius herds Nepeta out the doors, cringing a little at the sunlight. Even through his shades, it's close to painful. He casts a look around them, and can find no sign of either people in ominous black suits or a truck. "There are no showers here, anyway."
"Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll rain." Nepeta swats at his arm, walking backwards as they walk along the outside of the building. "That would cool you off real quick!"

"No. Then we would just be damp." Today's shaping up to be awkward enough without Equius ending up soggy on top of everything else. The binder has begun to make his torso ache from wearing it for an extended period of time, but he refuses to loosen it in the open. Today will be an exercise in endurance. "Do you see -"

The truck arrives in a palpable wave of horrendous country music, played at an excruciatingly high volume. Equius can't distinguish individual words - it's just a wall of repulsive sound. He is well versed in the better verses of the genre (those that focus on horses, as well they should) and this is...not one of them. More improbably, what appears to be an neon orange human hangs halfway out the passenger side window, holding a sign that states, eloquently, "YO." Equius can put two and two together, and the realization that the non-orange human situated behind the steering wheel must be the same person who he has admired for so long. He'd hoped they were a troll. Between this and the poor taste in music, Equius finds himself facepalming at the disenchantment. "Hooligans," he whispers.

Nepeta's shoe kicks the meat of his calf. "Snob," she hisses.

"Get in, kids," the man says, while the orange human tosses the sign into the back seat with a flick of his wrist, where it bounces off the face of a puppet buckled into its own wriggler's seat. "We're making this shit happen."

Time travel comes in handy, Jade thinks, but it can't stand in the way of the L A W~

Or at least, that's the impression she gets when Dave calls Doctor Lalonde from a pay phone in a panic at six in the morning to tell them that the Federal Villain Response Team has impounded the Arch Deaconstructor for violating not one but three international treaties.

Karkat is yelling at someone in the background. John swears up and down he can hear tires screeching.

Jade has got to see this. And possibly give Dave and Karkat and their new friend a lift back to the laboratory, since they've managed to land themselves in deep doo-doo. She intends to give them a piece of her mind about the strategic use of powers (why the heck didn't Dave wait until they were back at the lab before turning back the clock?) before realizing that, with the high terror alert and everything else, they would have probably gotten caught trying to sneak around at night, too. Avoiding major population centers wouldn't have done much for them, considering the fact that they're trying to smuggle a giant alien robot around.

Basically they were screwed from the start, and if they'd had a working phone between them after leaving Russia, they could have just called Jade so she could jump them right here. Instead, when she rolls her eyes and heads out to go rescue them from themselves and the man, she arrives just in time to see a stout, surly looking guy finish clamping a set of giant yellow ankle restraints around the Deaconstructor's ankles, joined by a bar so that the oversized carapacian can't lift its feet.

They're smack in the middle of an intersection of, like, five roads mashed together, which means that every car for a mile around has to labor past them, directed by desperate looking members of the Seattle police force. Jade thinks it's a little early for some of these people to be out and about on a Sunday, but people are leaning out of their cars with phones in hand and loitering in the pay-to-park lot across the way, so she suspects the titan might be responsible. The sun only rose a while ago and
the sky is relatively clear, all tangerines and pinks and pale blues; Jade blinks her outfit into having a jacket to match the temperature. She never got a chance to appreciate how convenient that is before!

For a second, she thinks something is off. Something about what she sees doesn't seem quite right. But then she decides it must be the whole giant carapacian thing. It's definitely eye-opening!

"Hellooo, everyone!" she says, waving as she bounces toward the crowd of people gathered around its feet. Dave and Karkat are both arguing with the short guy as he steps down, waving a walkie talkie at them irritably. Dave's in his god tier jammies too, which gets two thumbs up from Jade! While he and Karkat keep doing their thing, a carapacian with a really nice outfit and a troll in white look up at Jade's voice. "What's all this about?"

Feferi smiles at her, but she's got a couple of choice bruises across her face that make the expression look painful to pull off. Jade's face aches with sympathy. "We were fishing for the diplomatic immunity angle, but this man doesn't appear to believe us."

"Believe what?"

"That the Protector here is the leader of a foreign power, and I'm a tyrianblood." Feferi pinches the bridge of her nose when Jade gives her a look. "He insists that hemotype isn't an excuse for bringing an unauthorized war machine into a city on lockdown. Sadly, he has a point..."

"I told you, I don't care who you are!" the man shouts over Dave. "For that matter, you -" and he points a finger at Jade that she has to fight not to flick back at his own face "- I recognize you! You people are all part of that hoodlum 'hero' crowd! Figures you vigilante thugs would try to pull something like this!"

GP: Please, good sir -

"Do I look like someone named 'Good Sir' to you, marshmallow man?!"

GP: Er - Sir Ace Dick - I respect that you're doing your duty to protect this city. If you wish, we will leave immediately. Please unshackle it.

Ace Dick puffs up and shoulder-checks Karkat on his way to thump his finger against the center of the carapacian's chest. "Not. Happening. You wanna get your illegal vehicle out of impound, you get to take it up with the bureau. There will be fines." His tetchy scowl deepens. "I should hold all of
you for questioning, but that would just interfere with my actual investigation, here."

GP: This is really so unnecessary.

"Dude, if you just let us ride out of here, we'll be gone, I swear to John," Dave says. He appears to be doing a great job ignoring Karkat using his shoulder as a convenient wall stand-in to knock his forehead against repeatedly, so at least the two of them are getting along. Or something. "We'll be out of here faster than you can say 'a greasy burger slipping out between the hamburger bun while you're still trying to eat it so in the end you have no bun and half the burger left and the toppings are just all over the plate and your hands look like you murdered a baby tomato, the seeds are everywhere'."

Ace Dick makes a disgusted sound, turning his back on all of them. "If you can't pay the fine, don't do the crime." Two of the people in FVRT uniforms have started to unwind a roll of blue-themed caution tape the size of a car tire and string the FVRT-logo patterned tape around the Deaconstructor's left ankle.

Jade looks up at the Arch Deaconstructor. "...I can definitely teleport that," she says, after a few moments of assessment. After Los Angeles, it would be pretty darn easy, actually! "If you don't mind pissing this guy off, I mean."

"Please," Karkat says, looking at Jade with a reckless look in his eyes. He's got his not-sleeping shadows back under his eyes, too, which makes him look twice as distraught. Jade knows he's been having bad dreams again, but if he's skipping sleep again to make them stop, John's gonna have his work cut out for him. "Today's already outstayed its fucking welcome and it's not even noon."

GP: That would not be wise.

Dave gets halfway to making some motion with his hands, then cuts it off, shaking his head. "Nah, man, I'm on the Jade train, here. Let's just grab the big guy and bounce before this Dick -" he breaks off with a faint snorting noise, clapping a hand over his mouth. He seems too overcome by preventing himself from giggling to finish whatever he was going to say after that.

Feferi answers, with a pouty grimace. "For one thing, the Protector and I have unfortunately already told this shrimpy guy who we are. Which would mean an international incident if we broeke federal law, now. There's no way around it. I would prefer not to give my ancestor any more leverage over me than she already has; the US government approached me once before about potential conflict between the two of us and if anything of this weekend gets out to the public, I'm this close to losing their clemency."

GP: This is a minor setback. I can remain with the bishop and settle whatever accounts must be dealt with, while you all go on ahead. I am...afraid that I am used to navigating on the Battlefield, still. Country boundaries always seem so trivial in comparison, and my dear heart would scold me for this tactlessness.

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" Jade asks, surprised. But the Protector doesn't seem all that bothered.

GP: I have waited longer than this. What is a day or so more? Tell my dearest that she is in my thoughts, and I shall join you all forthwith. I am confident that serendipity will guide me on my way.

Feferi comes over to Jade of her own accord; strictly speaking, Jade doesn't need to grab them all to keep track of their atoms when she teleports - all of her instincts for using her space powers have kicked into hyperdrive, which is nice! - but she uses a flare of green to poke Karkat in the back of the
head when he and Dave trade looks like they intend to do something stupid. Oh, great. Cahoots. "Get over here, guys! Before he decides to arrest you all or something for real."

"Fine," Dave says; Karkat just folds his arms and looks sour. Jade starts revving them up to jump back to the edge of the wards around the lab when the Grey Protector raises a hand in farewell. It's a weird wave, though, because his pinky and ring finger are pressed together on one side, the index and middle finger on the other.

"Son of a-" Dave starts, before Jade sets them neatly down at the very edge of the treeline, in the middle of the Cascades. "Okay, I fucking called it."

Karkat rolls his eyes. "No one cares," he says, already shuffling toward the car Jade borrowed to get out here. "You're just paranoid."

"You are so not allowed to talk about paranoid, bro."

"What is with you two now?" Jade asks, while Feferi shakes her head.

Karkat raises both his eyebrows, then lowers them, which...tells Jade nothing at all. Thanks Karkat. Then Dave says, "You know how, like, 85% of the carapacians we've met have really goddamn weird-ass obsessions? Like the Mayor and his junk town building thing and shit?"

"...Yeah?"

"GP's thing is totally old sci-fi alien gags. He's doing it on purpose, I swear. The guy is in the master levels of irony." Dave's almost gone starry-eyed with awe. It's kinda cute but weird at the same time.

"And I say it doesn't count until he starts quoting the X-Files," Karkat says. He's somehow been robbed of the passenger's seat by Feferi, and Jade can already tell having him and Dave in the backseat with no buffer between them is going to be hilarious. And possibly really, really stupid. "Now let's go. The car's bound to be struck by lightning on the way there."

Jade looks up. The sky is still clear, though there are more clouds out here than there were in the city. She shrugs, and pops into the driver's seat. The faster they get back, the more time she has to help Dirk and Roxy and the White Queen figure out the remaining parts needed to reconfigure the Queen's Hub into something Sollux claimed in his last Pesterchat would be able to work without melting the important bits.

She thinks it's going to be a long day. But a good one! Now that she remembers most of everything, she can't wait to see the look on Karkat's face when she gets to tease him about it all. There may come a time when Jade doesn't feel the need to sass him for bullying her for so long before the game got started, but it's not today!

-Karkat goes out to meet his doom willingly.

...willingly, John thinks again, for emphasis, as he half-pulls, half-drags Karkat toward the front doors. Another warbling skree rises up, and Karkat clamps down on the nearest doorframe hard enough that he leaves marks in it. Yikes. Sooooooooo willingly.

"How did that thing even find me?!" Karkat says, aghast, as John shepherds him out the door. "I thought I was free, John. John. John, you fucking dumbass, stop bouncing around like this is a good thing!!"
"I was really worried he might have been lost or kidnapped or something! I can't believe he found us all the way out here," John says, laughing. First Jade and Kanaya and Eridan got back, then Karkat and Dave and Feferi all showed up with Jade, and everyone mutually agreed to nap until Dave's bro and Oriole finally came back, with two new troll players in tow. The more people trickle in, the more excited the atmosphere, and it's infectious; having everyone back jostles John enough that he can't stop grinning. Now, the Breeze is abuzz with reverberating delight, sweeping out to take in the three new figures shuffling around the lake. Crabdad has already sped past them, a lusus on a mission, and John has to smother another giggle when Karkat shrieks in protest.

"Have I ever mentioned I find your good-natured camaraderie with that obnoxious crustacean disturbing and tasteless?" Karkat asks. "That is a rhetorical question. Look, you can just take it. It can be your foster-lusus or something, to replace your shithead custodian, just don't you dare -"

Karkat dives behind John at the last second. John floats out of the way, waving down at Karkat with a quick grin as Crabdad greets the troll with a loving body slam.

BE: oh no...


BE: don't you feel that? that's a god tier - no, two! one's still up at the edge of the valley.

BE: and there's something else...what is that? that is so not normal...

But before the Breeze can finish, their train of thought gets interrupted by a spiky troll in red glasses waving a walking stick at them. "Hey, rainclouds! And a drab grey wriggler with cherry cough syrup filling!" she cackles, whacking the taller troll next to her in the shin with the cane. Actually, both of them are kind of spiky, in their own way - spiky in a really familiar way.

John lands with a thump, not sure whether it's more appropriate to start gushing like a total dweeb or call for backup. The Scourge Sisters are kind of like apex predators - super cool to read about from a safe distance, but really dangerous to interact with in practice. They're both convincingly dressed like ordinary trolls, Vriska Serket in charcoal greys and a rumpled blue button-down, the sleeves shoved up around her elbows, Light tattooed around her eye, and Terezi Pyrope in dark pants and a teal blue jacket. Her shirt says 'OBJECTION!' in letters large enough to cover her entire chest, and both of them are wearing bright red sneakers.

He still feels like prey. Vriska has an eye with way too many pupils, taller than John by almost an inch, and Terezi is all sharp, pointy edges right down to her grin, while Karkat is still pinned by Crabdad's attempts to administer either a beatdown or a celebratory grooming (it's a thin line between the two). Oh, jeez. They should have brought some of the others along with them. Hopefully everyone else will hear the commotion, but for now...

"Why are you dumbshitth all thtanding around, watching some wild lusus try to wrigglenap thomeone?" the third troll asks, sounding mostly bored. John almost missed him slouching up behind the Scourges, a gangly troll with doubled horns who looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

"It's more exciting than anything that ever happened at your place, Thollux," Vriska retorts. Which means that this is the troll who is Kanaya's friend and tech guy.

"Crabdad is Karkat's lusus," John says, shrugging.

"He's lying, help me." Karkat elbows Crabdad in the middle of the face, trying to squirm free. "This thing is supposed to be retired, for fuck's sake! How the fucking hell did it get here, we're in the
"middle of nowhere!"

"What do you think? Should we help the cherry turnover?" Terezi has an open-mouthed, toothy laugh, balancing both hands on the head of the cane as she pokes one of Karkat's exposed feet with the other end.

Vriska rolls her eyes, her arms folded over her chest. "Welllllll, we could always chop its head off and put it out of its misery."

"No one's cutting off anyone's head," John says, alarmed. Karkat, to his credit, does nothing more than mutter something John can pretend not to hear ('only in my dreams') before he manages to crunch his legs up to his chest and kick out, rolling Crabdad off him in a joyous, flailing bundle of happy crustacean limbs. John intercepts before Crabdad can tackle Karkat again, clapping the lusus on the back when it chirrs a greeting at him and ruffles his hair. It makes his eyes sting. "Hey, Crabdad. Good to see you, too."

BE: be careful with vriska around rose.

John stills, his hand still patting at one of Crabdad's spines on autopilot. 

Huh? Why Rose in particular? Vriska seems like a multipurpose threat, to be honest. She's rolling her eyes some more when John chances a glance at her, the chunky layers of uneven blue ombre in her hair made obvious when she tosses all of it over her shoulder.

BE: she's the thief of light, and i'm positive she's god tier, even if she's not manifesting it. she could seriously cripple rose's powers if she runs amok, and use them to make herself stronger.

BE: i think. :T there's a reason sessions tend not to repeat aspects, y'know; they interact in weird ways. that eye tattoo is a reeeally bad sign, though.

BE: ~*~*symbolism*~*~ and all that.

Well, that's a scary thought. He'll warn Rose about that during the meeting, though he doesn't really want to give someone like the Indigo Scourge any ideas. Out of the two, she's the one who's been closest to outright villainy over the years, and a lot of her exploits haven't been pretty.

John lets go of Crabdad and makes himself smile when the lusus clicks at him in inquiry. He gets confused pretty fast, though; after a while Crabdad resorts to charades but they're not good charades, and John is a little distracted by the realization that there are potentially hundreds of different ways this meeting could go wrong that he and Rose didn't think to brainstorm last night. Since Karkat and Kanaya aren't god tier, they didn't know how to predict which of the others might be, and the Breeze hasn't commented about the others who arrived first...maybe that made him relax too much.

Thankfully, he's not the only one lost when Crabdad starts getting increasingly shrill and drastic with his claw motions. "Dude, what the fuck ith this thing on?" Sollux asks, scratching the side of his neck.

"It's insane, that's all. Just pretend it's not there," Karkat says. But then he squints at Crabdad's gestures and goes pale. "Uh.Fuck. It's asking about - shit." He glances back at John, looking guilty, and...oh. John looks at Crabdad again and gets it. It probably would have been more obvious if John wasn't doing his best to not think about his handler. "Fucking fuck, what do I tell it?"

"It really doesn't matter to me." John hears his own voice from a distance, like there's a waterfall crashing in his ears. He closes one of his hands into a fist and feels the nail of his middle finger dig into his palm. It only helps ground him a little. "Honesty is the best policy, and all." Does he sound
hysterical? He can't tell if Terezi is giving him a weird look, or if that's just her default expression. Wait, she can't see, what is he even talking about -

A hand comes down on his shoulder, squeezing hard. Karkat doesn't quite hug him, but he stands close enough that John could turn it into one if he wanted. He breathes in, and out, and waits for the Breeze to sound like a voice instead of white noise again before nodding. "I'm good, I'm good."

"No, you're not," Karkat mutters. He knuckles at John's shoulder one more time and then lets go, with a really ominous look on his face. John can't place it, puzzled, as Karkat turns and starts talking to Crabdad in aggrivated click noises that aren't Alternian. He's explaining about things, presumably, in a language no one but he and Crabdad can understand, which John quietly appreciates. Sure, his and Rose's plan will ruin it - but it's for the best that everyone in the laboratory knows not to wander in on his handler chained in a back room and end up persuaded to set him free by accident. No more miscommunications, darn it. No more 'on a need to know basis.'

When he looks back at Vriska, Terezi, and Sollux, though, Vriska is eyeballing him. Seriously. Too many pupils in one eye. Her eyebrow arches up; Terezi's grin seems permanently locked on mischievous, so when Vriska smirks it's like looking into the face of evil. And death. Evil death. They're totally judging him. "Sooooooo," Terezi drawls, while Vriska twirls a strand of hair around her finger and smirks. "You and Cherry Pie, huh?"

This isn't something to be embarrassed about. John isn't embarrassed about it. These two just have some evil super power of inflicting massive amounts of uncalled for mortification. He's positive that's the only logical explanation for the way his whole face goes red and he forgets how words work. "Uh. I. Uhhh." Oh god, he's so screwed.

"Oh thank god. You two finally agree to work together juth tho you can harathth some random asshole. Your ability to get along sickenth me. I'm tho proud," Sollux says, shaking his head.

Vriska sticks out her tongue at him. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever makes you lay off the lecturing."

Crabdad screeches again, interrupting whatever Terezi was about to add to that to clap its claws to its head in a panic - and then tackles John, knocking him clear to the ground. Which is always funny when it happens to Karkat, but isn't half as funny when it's John. "Crabdad, what the -?" he starts, just as Crabdad starts squeezing him in a vicegrip. Gack.

"Ha." Karkat says. He still has that weird look in his eye.

John is seized by a sudden, horrified sense of foreboding. "Karkat."

"HAHA!"Karkat adds, starting to slowly back away toward the doors of the lab.

"Karkat, what did you tell him?!" John yells. Crabdad now has him in a headlock, which makes chasing after Karkat's slow but steady abscond considerably more difficult. "Karrrrkat! Come on!"

"The truth," Karkat says, gloating almost as much as he did when he first received word from Dave that Crabdad had gone missing. "That I am a grown fucking troll - and your custodian was a walking, talking piece of shit who failed at childcare forever."

"You did not." John's jaw drops. Crabdad chitters and pinches his cheek. "You can't do that - can you?"

"Watch me. I'm free. Free at last, John. Free at fucking la-"

He runs right into the troll who appears between them and the doors.
Jade teleports in so fast she nearly keels over on top of John, her eyes wide as she starts, "John, Bec started whimpering - I think that guy is -"

"Too late," John says.

Karkat takes a step back, shaking his head, and then freezes. He looks up, moving as slow as a glacier; all the while the new person stands totally still, head hanging low. John can't make out his eyes from here, just knotted bangs and grey-and-white smeared cheeks. He looks like someone took a piece of taffy and pulled, only less with the candy and more with the grungy, unwashed clown theme. Someone gags behind John - Terezi, he thinks.

And he won't stop staring at Karkat.

Why won't Karkat move? John wrenches free from Crabdad's hold at last - the lusus seems to be the only one here not on edge, chirruping as it tries to catch the back of his shirt. Jade's at the ready, her eyes burning neon green behind her glasses as she watches, but she doesn't move either. The tension stringing itself through John feels just a little artificial, but it's not the mind-dissolving, nauseating horror that Jade described from earlier. He can - yeah, it's not that bad, he can just move fast and pull Karkat back a few steps, so he isn't inches from a troll who could attack them all at the drop of a hat. He edges forward a step at a time (why is walking so hard), hoping to hell he doesn't trigger this guy's ragey powers the way Jade did, purely by accident. He starts to lift a hand once he's in arm's reach of Karkat's back, slow and deliberate, advertising his movements so he doesn't look like he's trying to surprise anyone. No Breeze sneaking around from the side...no, sir, not at all...

Karkat's voice cracks. "Gamzee."

Lean, spindly arms come up and crush Karkat into a hug. The Breeze recoils with a hiss, still chanting swears under its breath, while John stiffens up, mind racing. Holy crap. How to extricate Karkat from creepy clown hugs without pissing off said clown - the Breeze could still do it, or Jade, but oh god, he has no ideas that don't lead to a rampaging troll. Shit. Shit.

Gamzee makes a snuffling sound. He's at least not hurting Karkat; or Karkat's not struggling, anyway, just standing there with his hands loose at his sides. One of Gamzee's hands is on the back of his head, though, so that could just be Karkat's equivalent of playing dead. "Missed you something fierce, brother," Gamzee says. His voice sounds strange, hoarse and agonized and relieved all at once, and it does something weird to John's stomach.

The next part, he feels in his lungs; Jade says later that it felt like the universe skipped to the right for a second before snapping back into alignment. The Breeze makes a tiny 'oh' and John's shoulders slump as the tension drains out of the air and something slots into place. Suddenly, he's looking at Karkat being hugged by a messy troll that smells like pond water and greasepaint, and the indistinct but pervasive sense of wrongness and paralyzing anxiety drops away so abruptly that John feels wrong-footed. Gamzee turns his head to the side, still resting his cheek on the top of Karkat's head, and the faint fern-curl of a smile on his face looks the furthest thing from threatening.

...Okay, that's almost as creepy as when Gamzee was legitimately being creepy. John's weight wavers between his feet, his stomach still doing a swoopy thing, like it can't decide whether to feel normal or not after this unexpected change in the mood.

"Yeah, fuck. Enough hugging," Karkat says, his voice cracking all over the place. Mostly, he sounds disgruntled, but also shaken. "Eughhh. You smell like a clown dumpster. Fuck."
Gamzee laughs, and lets go. Just like that. Karkat stumbles back and John catches his wrist on the backswing, but Gamzee doesn't...do much of anything. The troll stands there, smiling, and scratches the side of his own face with overgrown claws, slitted eyes never quite leaving Karkat. John knows that look -

"Why on earth is everyone standing around out here?" a cheerful voice asks, accompanied by the rattling squeak of metal. When John blinks, nonplussed, a troll with deep burgundy eyes rolls another troll in a wheelchair to a stop, a phone in her hand as she gives all of them a cheeky smile. He can't tell whether her face is young or old - her horns spiral so many times, gnarled and weathered, that he can't imagine she's anything less than Doctor Lalonde's age, but she carries herself like someone much lighter. She's wearing a sari, and as everyone watches, she raises her hand and clicks her fingers until a familiar red gear appears over her chest. "Tell me, has anyone seen - ah, there she is! Did I not say I would be precisely on time?"

"You did indeed, Ms Megido," Rose's voice says. Back at the door to the building, Kanaya holds open the door for Rose to wheel another wheelchair through, looking perfectly sedate. "Will this do?"

"Oh! Sí!" the brownblood in the wheelchair says, after a moment's hesitation, while Aradia Megido smiles at all of them with rosy cheeks. Between her and Gamzee, it's a real smiley place. Haha. Ha. Oh boy...

Oblivious to the bizarre atmosphere - or maybe doing her best to push through it, in a truly heroic effort - Rose smiles right back. "That's good. Won't you all come in? We couldn't arrange for a butler on short notice, I'm afraid, but we have the next best thing."

"Oh? What would that be, Lemon Zest?" Terezi asks, her grin crooked as she greets Rose with an upward tilt of her chin.

"Ungodly quantities of pizza," Kanaya says.

John looks over at Jade. Jade looks back at him. "Sooo...we're okay?" she says, hesitant.

Just as lost, John can only shrug.

- Poor everyone, Aradia thinks, as she waits for Tavros to move himself to the new wheelchair. Then, at last, she allows the old one to collapse.

- Rose's hair may be in need of a trim. Enough madness has been going on lately that she's really neglected it; she and Dave both look scruffy, when she thinks about it, but it doesn't really sink in until she bends over her clipboard and her bangs prove a distinct challenge to blow out of the way. She can tuck the ends back over her ears, but now that she's noticed it, she can't stop noticing the constant prickle of hair catching in her eyelashes.

John is still ushering people in, as part of his duties as unofficial guard and enforcer; they've almost succeeded in cramming everyone (and Rose's mother, as it so happens) into a single space. The terminal room was far too small to accommodate all of them, and they've relocated to a room with a view instead, one of the lounge areas just off the front lobby with windows open to the lake view, couches arranged in a rough oval, a kitchenette freshly stocked with pizza and drinks, and very, very old magazines. Most of Rue's scientists and the new medical team have occupied
themselves elsewhere, setting up new equipment in anticipation of whatever terrible thing is due to hit them any moment now, but the sheer number of trolls that have joined the group is astonishing to behold.

Between Rose, Kanaya, Karkat, and an extremely reluctant Eridan, they think they've managed to separate the possible problem cases, while others resolve themselves before they can begin - Aradia beams unceasingly at Vriska until the ceruleanblood veers away from her and Tavros. Nepeta hangs over the back of one couch to chatter with Tavros instead, while her moirail Equius takes up most of the rest of that single piece of furniture. (He also took up most of the showers on the second floor when he first arrived and remained there for at least two full hours; Rose does not wish to ask). Kanaya has Sollux redirect Vriska and Terezi again until they're sitting in the exact opposite corner of the room from Gamzee Makara, because like fuck is Rose letting the biggest danger risks cluster together. Eridan gets his own special place by the unofficial podium by Rose and Karkat: Dave declared it the 'genocidal maniac chair of shame,' and Rose hastily sent him out of the room to do something. Dave can usually occupy himself well enough when he's given free rein. Just anything but loiter around sassing a group of people with almost universally short fuses. She loves her brother, but he is an antagonistic mess.

He's still not back by the time Jade pops in by the door, trooping past everyone with a wave with the Scratch kids close on her heels. Jake looks sallow and withdrawn, barely looking at anyone as Jane and Dirk manhandle him into a chair near the back of the room. John joins them by the front after he checks the hallway one last time. Rose scans the group with her sight, wincing over the dark voids where Equius, Roxy, and her mother would be and not daring to look directly at Gamzee with everything in her power. Ambrose burns somewhere up and to her right, prowling around either in the vents with WV, or on the floor above. Too much void hangs around for her to properly predict how this might play out, but Aradia's warning is reason enough to prepare for the worst.

They're going to try to keep this civil. But Rose doesn't doubt that when a few of these people learn what they're here to do, they'll protest with extreme prejudice.

"Are we ready?" she asks Karkat, looking over in time to see the troll uncap an Expo marker with a vicious flourish. He requisitioned a fresh 16-piece set of rainbow markers, and augmented them with eight others from various places scattered around the lab; at last count, they have twenty three people in this room, counting Oriole and not counting WV. If they attempted to include the White Queen for the purposes of this meeting, they'd be here for a week trying to find the correct prompts to pry all the answers out of her, so Rose and Jade have made the executive decision to have her put the finishing touches on the reformat of the Queen's Hub, following Sollux's recommendations. They still don't know the code to decrypt the troll session's files; perhaps a solution will present itself this afternoon.

For now, to business. "Thank you, everyone, for agreeing to meet here today," Rose says, as congenially as she can with Eridan and Vriska muttering statements to the contrary practically in unison. "Some of you know more than others, and we're going to try to sort that out immediately. We've decided to call this the 'Sharing The Fundamental and Understandably Vital Information (Or Else) Because We Are All Bad At Communication Introductory Meeting,' also known as STFUVIOEBWAABACIM -"

"STFU, for short," Karkat adds, helpfully.

"- and yes, I was in fact overruled on the matter of naming it something more succinct," Rose finishes. There was little she could do to counter Jade, John, Dave, and Karkat after they lured the troll to their side with the ridiculous acronym and its shortened form. Which was hardly fair, given that it was hers and John's idea to begin with. If Dave and Karkat's new, acerbic friendship helps those four form a permanent voting bloc, she's taking up drinking again and no one can stop her.
"My name is Rose, and I will be presiding; Karkat, here, will be our acting secretary. Before we begin - has anyone seen Dave?"

Roxy raises her hand with a wiggle. "He was printing something out, but there was a lot of it, so it might take a while? Idk."

"We'll have to start without him. Oh, the fucking humanity," Karkat says, as he underlines the large, capitalized STFU at the top of his first whiteboard with obvious glee.

"I'm right here, asshat," Dave says, shouldering his way in through the door. Rose pinches the bridge of her nose when she sees the colorful array of poorly folded brochure pamphlets he dumps all over the front table. She has no idea where he could have been carrying all that other than a sylladex, but he seems more concerned with presenting one to her for inspection. "I finished. Trust me, these are fucking A+ quality, right here."

Rose looks up from the brochures. "Brother, dear. These are poorly photoshopped pamphlets ripped off from Alcoholics Anonymous that you've written on."

Dave waves five of them to fan his face. "Excuse you, this is some of the best photoshopping prowess money can't buy."

There are people watching. Complete strangers are witnessing this moment. Rose lowers her voice to a hiss. "You don't think this sort of joke would be at all in poor taste, in a room with at least two known alcoholics?"

He doesn't even feign contrition. "Nah. You know you love it."

Rose stares at him. Dave, presumably, stares back.
"...Pass them around the circle of sharing," she says at last, feeling rather like she's sold part of her soul in the process. Curse David and his strange (but occasionally on point) sense of irony.

"Haha, yesss," he says, dumping more of the pamphlets into John's hands and tossing his own up in handfuls to rain down on people's heads. He flashes out of reach of a claw that comes out to swipe at him, but Sollux sets at least four brochures on fire, and Terezi keeps sticking out her cane to trip up anyone who passes by her.

"As I was saying." Rose taps her pen beside the first item on the agenda. "A show of hands, please - who here is familiar with our past lives and the game?" Of the trolls, three hands stay down - Tavros, Nepeta, and Equius, the ones Rose expected. John wafts copies of their basic information packets to the three, while Rose quickly rattles off the basics of the game and what it entails. Tavros appears only half surprised by some of what she says; given who he has apparently been traveling in the company of, Rose suspects he has caught on to at least a few scattered hints about what's going on. Terezi and Vriska appear to still be in the skeptical stage, trading looks that say they think the rest of the people with their hands up must truly be gullible saps, and no doubt making plans to capitalize on it. Rose is grateful they seem to have achieved some kind of functional equilibrium in their relationship, but they are also a menace.

Though if anyone is to speak of menaces, the greatest one also has his claw in the air. Rose can catch his eyes from here - trained, as they have been perhaps since he stepped into the building, on Karkat. They'd known before Gamzee arrived that he'd been searching for Karkat for some time, but the reality of it is...troubling. He doesn't appear to be an active threat now, seemingly content to trail at Karkat's heels and lounge at Tavros's feet, but Rose can't tell how long that will last when so much as catching a glimpse of him in the corner of her eye makes her break out in a cold sweat and shut her sight down so hard it stings. Something is wrong about him, more wrong than either Jade or Dave had the words to express.

"We're still working on accessing all of the records of the troll game session, though we expect to have them shortly," Rose finishes, looking to Aradia. Aradia smiles and shrugs with a bounce. "In the meantime, we still have to survive until this next game session commences, unless we can find some way to stop it from happening at all. I quite like the planet and all the people on it intact, but that is just my opinion. The main threats to us, for the time being, are the Midnight Crew and the Felt, a number of Horrorterrors that have targeted certain players in particular, and potentially -" she nods to Feferi, who blushes from behind the ice pack pressed directly to her face "- the Condescension as well, though we're less sure what her endgame may be."

"Boring, boring, boring, boring, boring, boring, boring, boring!" Vriska chants, tipping her head back and holding her pamphlet up to the light. "Don't you people have anything better to do than rack up enemies? Take some of them out already, if they're bothering you so much!"

"Kinda easier said than done," John points out. Karkat's hand shoots out behind him, and John passes him the fuchsia Expo marker so he can add the Condesce to the threat column. There is already a tiny phallus concealed in the bottom corner of the board that Karkat has yet to notice; Rose would wonder when Dave found the time to do that, but she needs to focus on keeping this meeting on track. "Also, uh, we've had a lot of stuff go wrong. Which is why we're here for this meeting!"

Rose nods. "On top of everything else, game players seem to tend toward dysfunction. Perhaps it's a symptom of how badly glitched the two previous sessions were, but I suspect that every person in this room has some secret, vice, personal vendetta, mental illness, old rival, unsavory acquaintance, or other hazard that could explode if we don't make some effort to put all our cards on the table."

"Which is why all of you fucking pissbarrels are going to 'fess up now, before someone gets the
bright idea to start murdering everyone in sight," Karkat snarls. Ah, the tact of that troll. He's
scribbling out their names across the rest of the boards in a straight line, swapping out marker colors
with John assisting. "All of you." He points the marker at Vriska accusingly. "Yes, even you."

"Wow, bossy much!" Vriska huffs.

"Even you!" Karkat points at Eridan, who looks at the marker like it's going to blast his head off,
raising both his hands in terror. "Even -"

The third repetition cuts off abruptly when Karkat spins on Gamzee, who is still staring. Intently. He
blinks slow as molasses, purple eyes gleaming. "Karkat," John says softly, and Karkat whips back
around to face the board. Rose watches, concerned, but John leans in and says something, squeezing
Karkat's hand until the troll relaxes again. It would be sweet, if not for the circumstances
necessitating it. John's relief upon his moirail's return brightened the whole laboratory; Rose could
coax him through the worst moments while Karkat was out of contact, but she can't stand in for what
they have.

Later, she realizes it may have been her own carelessness that tipped Gamzee off. But how could she
have known? How could any of them have known but Aradia, who smiled upon everything that
happened that day? Any number of people in the room might have thought the word, not knowing
what they were about to unleash, not realizing that Gamzee could casually pluck thoughts from their
minds like fish from a pond.

When Rose looks back to the room, Gamzee is not staring at Karkat. Instead, his gaze is fixed
somewhere over Rose's shoulder, his brow furrowed beneath the paint as his eyes flick from side to
side. As though he's rereading something on the whiteboards, over and over, to make sense of it.
Odd, since Karkat hasn't written anything on the spare board behind Rose as yet, and intimidating,
since Rose can't fight the paranoid feeling that he might start watching her next, but still marginally
less disturbing than having the purpleblood stare at Karkat for the duration of the meeting.

She starts before another confrontation can ensue. "I'll go first. My name is Rose Lalonde, and I am
an alcoholic."

"Hello, Rose!" Nepeta calls.

Rose is starting to guess what Dave might have in those pamphlets aside from poorly conceived
memes. "If at any point you see me in a ten foot radius of a bottle of liquor, retrieve Kanaya," she
continues. She and John practiced their speeches for this part on each other, which helped
immensely. "I am also being targeted by the Horrorterror called Leviathan; it fully possessed me once
before, in New York, and has made several attempts since then." She pulls back her sleeve to show
everyone the void bracer. "These help me maintain control while outside this valley. If they are
damaged or otherwise removed, do your best to evacuate everyone within the city limits."

There's something else that happened recently; both she and John could have sworn up and down
that they remembered her being unconscious upon arriving in Washington, but asking both Kanaya
and Rue had produced nothing more than similarly confused memories. It was most likely another
grimdark incident, but the lack of memory is concerning.

tick

"I dream about dead people," Karkat says, making another bullet point under Rose's name. "Namely,
all of you dead fuckers. Thanks a fucking lot for that. Naturally, these dreams tell me fuck all by way
of anything useful until everything's in flames." Rose wishes he would turn around and make eye
contact with everyone, but given this is Karkat, he projects well enough that people can probably
hear him two rooms away. "Also. Uh. Fuck it, Terezi's already going around calling me Cherry Pie, and our identities are probably the worst fucking kept secret on the planet, so. I'm Hemogoblin. I can hold for your applause." He turns his head to squint until Tavros, Nepeta, and Roxy start applauding with uncertain enthusiasm. "Yes, I'm a fucking mutant. Anyone who wants to call up the culling hotline, speak now and receive your honorary dropkick to the face."

Rose isn't sure when she notices that Gamzee has moved on to staring at John.

And then, she becomes even less certain how they skim past Gamzee while going around the circle, prying what they can out of Equius and Vriska and Oriole (who refuses to say anything past the fact that he was a sprite in the game before shutting down) and others who are still tight-lipped. She understands why they're reluctant; sharing some of this must feel like ripping open a fresh scab.

She does not understand how, with twenty two other pairs of eyes in the room, Gamzee Makara manages to slip out of the room, unnoticed and unremarked.

She only understands what happens next in bits and pieces, as order slowly but surely begins to fragment around them.

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Dave notices the clipping probably way too late to do shit about it. To his internal chronometer, time is passing just fine, thanks very much - it's just that when you have a reality-warping clown on the loose, shit tends to get a little dicey.

He's busy trying to not get weirded out by Aradia, mostly. Out of all the trolls, she's the nicest and possibly scariest person he's ever met. "Dave! We'll have to talk later," she says when she spies him, throwing a cheery wave and a dimpled smile his way, and it spooks him all the way down to his toes. Everyone else won't stop worrying about the creepy clown dude losing his shit in the middle of the meeting, while Dave is stuck wondering just what the time girl has up her sleevesies. Seriously, forget the clown for two seconds.

He can't bring himself to voice it, though. He'd rather dick around making last minute additions to the meeting pamphlets with Oriole and try to ferret out why Bro looked like he was about to punch a wall and burst into stoic ninja tears when he saw Dave in these dumbass time pajamas. All his feathery douche self will say is that they thought he might have already picked up a future package, or something.

- 

Don't think about it, he thinks, pressing the pads of his feet to the cold tile floor.

Not yet, not yet, he thinks, tearing the pile apart and throwing the parts that stink of human across the room.

But he lays eyes on the words, writ bare against the thinning void, and can deny no longer. The tile smears under his toes, the foundation crinkling under his heels.

Well, he could get his blame on, he supposes. That could indeed be a thing to be done.

But who is there to blame but himself, for being too late? For not having the stability of pan to let himself accept what was written all over that neighborhood?

This was always gonna be a motherfucking colorful day.
Vriska's left foot feels heavy. No matter how hard she tries, these stupid, stupid cracks between the floor tiles keep falling under her left foot when she takes a step, while the right one hits the center of the tile every damn time. She's all off-balance, gnashing her teeth every time her stride is just too long to cooperate with her. The count's at eight to five, and it's so fucking stupid that she has to shuffle and stand almost in place for half a step so she can plant her right foot on a crack with relish. Soooooooo worth the relief, though.

Terezi notices, because Terezi is the most infuriating person to frolic in blind bliss on the planet, and Vriska bristles with the hot prickle of humiliation when she looks up from her moment of triumph to see Terezi snickering at her with a shit-eating grin, one ear pointed towards Vriska as though to savor the sound of her sneaker squeaking on the tile.

"No," Sollux says, before Vriska even gets a chance to open her mouth and fire a warning shot. He hasn't stopped with this dumb meddling in days, and Vriska sticks her tongue out and pulls down the lower eyelid of her variegated eye when he scowls at both of them.

Ohh, she's bitter as fuck about how he likes to twist their serendipity around until it cancels itself out. Years, she spent trying to shove Terezi down the stairs of kismessitude, and for what? A couple of days of awesome rivalry fulfilled - and then a lame trip to Blandada where Terezi decides to drink the ashen Kool-Aid, undoing all Vriska's hard work.

And now they're in some other iteration of Dullsville, miles from any kind of action. The nearest city is Seattle, and if it's as cram-packed with dull losers like the ones crawling around this lab, Vriska can't imagine it's any fun at all. Sollux is dragging them along to go sit in the same room as him while he dicks around with some new computer, which is all he ever does! She's going to wither up and die of boredom before they escape from this hellhole, and that's not the way Vriska Serket is destined to go. No way in hell.

After that pointless meeting, Vriska needs to stretch her legs. There has to be a way to spice this place up. Something that'll get Terezi all fired up - with this many people with super powers in one location, Vriska should be able to poke around in a couple of heads to see which ones are ripe for the breaking!

Before she gets the chance, two very interesting things happen.

Kanaya-schmaya, busybody extraordinaire, marches past Vriska, so close her skirt hits the back of Vriska's shoe, and catches Sollux by the arm. "Sollux. You could have just told me," she says, in her annoying 'I'm disappointed in you' voice; Vriska mentally sighs in relief that it's not directed at her this time.

Sollux says, "Oh, ththit." Good. Vriska hopes that whatever he's done, he's in deep shit for it. Serves him ri-!

Something taps against the side of her shoe. "Tch!" she says, kicking it without looking down. Pain shoots up through her foot, but she bites down a yelp before Terezi or the two meddlers can hear, projecting all of her crossness onto them, and then glares down at the offending object that refuses to be kicked through the nearest window.

It's a cue ball.

Which really should have rolled away or shattered when Vriska kicked it. She has extensive experience with magic 8 balls, so she would know. Pursing her lip, Vriska checks to make sure
Terezi's still cackling her head off at Kanaya and Sollux's awkward friend-argument, and then stoops to snatch up what could turn out to be something interesting. A treasure, perhaps? An escaped scientific experiment? Either way, she found it, and finders keepers!

The cue ball rolls away, whirring softly against the floor. Vriska blinks, and narrows her eyes, sure that this must be some kind of trick. Does Terezi seriously thinks she can pull this kind of juvenile prank against someone of Vriska's caliber? Puh-lease.

But no matter how Vriska focuses her eye, she can't make out a string attached, or magnets, or anything like that. The cue ball rolls to a stop, weirdly coquettish, just out of her reach, and waits.

Vriska glances over her shoulder one last time. Usually by now Terezi would have started elbowing her in the ribs, in her taunting, teasing way.

But ugh! It's like no one's paying attention to Vriska at all, Kanaya and Sollux and Terezi all bantering back and forth like they're having a grand old time without her.

Well, boo hoo to them! Vriska takes a step after the cue ball, and it rolls back out of reach before waiting for her again.

A messenger? A mystery? Or maybe a tantalizing temptation from someone who knows Vriska's fondness for breaking 8 balls all too well?

How can she resist?! In the words of her favorite cinematic pirate, Captain troll Jack Sparrow - *this is* the opportune moment. With a sharp-edged smile, Vriska tucks her hands in her pockets and follows the cue ball down the hall to the basement stairs, cerulean eyes luminescent in the darkness.

- He can hear them.

It's a wonder none of the rest of 'em can, a great and terrible miracle, a tick tock that slides under the edge of hearing like a current along the sea floor, and a quiet giggle that burns sharp in his ears like poison soaking into his brain through his ears, sloshing around old scabs and scars and doing its pestering best to pry its way in deeper.

Nothing he can do about the first; it's been too patient for too long, watching and biding as only a still, cold thing can bide, and there's not enough mind there for Gamzee to find weakness, no seam in the pale ivory surface of unrelenting scrutiny. Its will has been done, and all that remains is to draw one last unsuspecting motherfucker down to finish the unrighteous deed.

But the other -

The other has had most righteous reckoning coming at it for a while now. Motherfucker's all giggles now, coaxing and sly as anything. Motherfucker would be a brother's best friend, if one didn't have his shit on lock. And there's plenty of brothers and sisters up in this bitch as don't know said shit needs to be locked.

Not Gamzee though. He knows. He is well and mightily aware. He's got his knowing on, and he will *not lose that now*.

Can't stop the cue ball, when the work's past the point of stopping, when the void wards are burning away like fog before the sun.

Can't stop Karkat from wanting someone else, can't stop that *filthy fucking pissblooded human* from
being here first.

But the puppet?

Not this time.

And not yet. He's lost the peace that seeing Karkat again granted him, that will that pulled him back from the teetering edge, but not yet, not yet, not yet.

-

Eridan passes out accidentally in one of the chairs, and wakes up slapping at his limbs in a panic because falling asleep when Kanaya's in the room and pissed is a one-way ticket to having limbs lopped off. Fuckin' hell, Kanaya wasn't even mad at Tavros when she decided to team up with Equius and have themselves a fucking limb-loppin' extravaganza; Eridan's given her a lot more reasons to rearrange his face with a chainsaw than dumb, sappy Tav ever did. He's been feeling drained ever since Jade decided to go all space witch on a huge reservoir of his power stockpile, and if he loses his upper body over it, he's going to be pissed in the afterlife.

But when Eridan gets ahold of his defensive flailing, he realizes the room is short one vicious glow-in-the-dark jadeblood, and sags with relief. Karkat and Jade and Rose and John and both copies of Dave are all still here, sparing him a collective glance, before Jade points at her eyes with two fingers and then points the fingers at him, and they go back to chattering about Karkat's charts.

Vriska, Terezi, Sollux, Feferi, and Kanaya have all fucked off, along with some of the excess humans. As he watches, as stealthily as he can, Nepeta bounces off her couch and clambers up onto Equius's shoulders; the blueblood rises and resignedly bears her toward the door, while Aradia blows a farewell kiss toward the circle of people at the front of the room before rolling Tavros out after them.

Eridan glances around, and bolts when he sees the ringleaders of this assboat rumpus are busy talking to each other. He coasts to a stop right behind Aradia, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. And no, he doesn't fool the space witch for a hot second - but when he sneaks a look over his shoulder, fixing his most pity-inducing look on his face (used to work its magic on Fef, until she ditched for her own good), Jade squints at him suspiciously - and then rolls her eyes. "Hey, Aradia? Keep an eye on Eridan, okay? I can keep track of him from here, but whap him if he tries any funny business!"

"Of course. Always happy to help!" Aradia says, with her eerie giggle, and oh fuckin' hell. He's made a rash an' unfounded decision again, hasn't he. Dead-eyed Aradia, one-troll sweatsprinkler Equius, miss 'already changing the shipping wall to account for pale HemoHeir' Nepeta, and Tavros - honestly, of all the groups to tag along with, he had to wake up in time to get stuck with these assholes. This is his punishment for being a king douchebag. God. Fuck.

Then reality clips out from under him.

He can't tell if it's time or space that jolts - maybe it's everything. But when Eridan blinks, his stomach lurching and esophagus burning like he threw up in his mouth without noticing, the hallway lines up properly again, and Aradia's group is almost through the front doors, while he's barely out the door they just walked out of. He shakes his head, swallowing and grimacing at the taste. Normally he'd be glad to have ditched the nerdsquad (plus Aradia), but that jolt felt familiar. Like the unpleasant, lingering sensation of suddenly being alone, yet convinced that if he turned around, someone would be there. Smiling.
It feels familiar. It feels like...*that fuckin' asshat juggalo.*

A hand lands on his shoulder, and Eridan shrieks out loud, in the meager hope that at least if he dies screaming, Jade and her posse of human gods will probably come investigate his death. Or maybe thank whoever did the dark deed. As long as Gamzee doesn't get the chance to fuckin' molest his corpse, or something. Eridan's not putting anything past that creepy fuck anymore.

When he stops cowering, and slowly uncrooks his arms from over his head, Eridan sees only one of the adult humans, dark shades betraying nothing as he stares down at Eridan's defensive crouch.

"Fuck, kid," Ambrose Strider says, shaking his head. "You seen a free-roaming puppet around here?"

"...No," Eridan says.

"Shit," the man mutters, and then he vanishes in the blink of an eye.

...God, everyone around here is so weird. Eridan didn't think it could get much weirder than twelve trolls crammed into one meteor, but no. *Humans.*

- 

Vriska is almost disappointed, when the cue ball stops rolling before an unassuming door. She at least had hoped this basement would turn out to have some kind of secret labs full of ghastly experiments, but noooooo, it's full of maintenance stuff! Janitorial closets! She would have been better off trying to find a flight of stairs to trip Terezi down, not wasting her time with this chump-ass billiard ball! "What?" she snaps when the cue ball taps against her toe - and the next second, she cusses herself out, realizing how dumb it must look for her to be demanding answers from a mostly inanimate object. There better not be any cameras down here! God, wouldn't that just take the damn cake, if some total bitch was recording Vriska wandering around the basement floor like a complete moron. *Wow,* she really hopes they're getting a huge laugh out of her looking stupid.

The cue ball nudges her again when she turns to stomp back up the stairs. "That's it," she says, whirling and bending to snatch it up before it can roll away again. If she misses, she's so out of here.

She plucks the cue ball off the ground without any issue. Vriska blinks, stumped by this turn of events. She turns it over between her claws, the main eight fingernails bitten down to the quick, and taps the cerulean-painted claw of her left thumb against the pale surface with a clack. It doesn't have an opening for a fortune-telling die or blue ink to swirl around in, and feels almost too solid for Vriska to be able to smash it easily.

But she hasn't been able to smash a magic 8 ball in *ges.* Addiction is a powerful thing, and she hasn't had her fix in forever. Raising it up to eye-level, Vriska focuses her multi-pupiled eye on it again, this time roving around for any sign of a weak point where she can apply the proper leverage with her heel and leave this jumped-up billiard ball in goddamn pieces.

It's weird, though. She expects it to be made of solid bone or ivory from the weight of it; even against the cool of her palm, the cue ball feels colder. There's a chunk of metal at the center though, the smallest shard, and she peers closer, *determined* to see what's written there -

Why, hello there.

Vriska jerks her head back, but the words follow her, typing across her field of vision.

Would you like to know your fortune?
Her heart starts beating faster. "Oh, gr8," she scoffs, playing it cool. "Don't you know it's magic 8 balls that tell fortunes? Talk about lame." She shakes the cue ball with a roll of her eyes, and new words rise up from the center.

Now, now. I can assure you, this cue ball could be your ticket to the big leagues, dear girl. It's far more reliable than your mediocre tools of fortune; it could lend you all sorts of advantages, even to the point of being able to outwit near-omniscient beings.

But I'm afraid that it's still somewhat lacking. There's a machine behind this door, you see, and as long as it is running, you cannot use it to see what there is to see.

Vriska sniffs, and looks at the door. It looks the exact same as any of the other doors down here; if this stupid ball is trying to walk her into a broom closet for shits and giggles, she's going to dump it in the lake. "And that's not suspicious at all. You really think I'm that easy to fool?" she says. On some level, she's aware that talking back to a voice like this probably isn't all that smart.

But...it's hard not to be intrigued. This is definitely eight times more interesting than hanging around all those losers upstairs, waiting for them to figure out how to watch this stupid game they're all obsessed with. None of her magic 8 balls have ever had the creativity to try to argue for their tiny lives before.

Not at all. Yet your curiosity is piqued, is it not? What can it hurt to open the door and gaze upon what lies within?

Or you could walk away now, and make use of this cue ball as you see fit. As I said, it is a tool that could lend you unmatched powers of foresight and strategy. With it, you could take on any number of the enemies that are at your doorsteps - the Felt, perhaps, or their charming leader?

Well, you would also walk away knowing you did not have the best tool to aid you in your endeavors...and really, what is the point of being merely good when you could be the best?

I'm certainly not stopping you. I have no power over you. The decision is entirely your own.

"You drive a hard bargain," Vriska says, tapping a finger against her chin eight times and inspecting the cue ball. The words die away after a few moments, and she thinks it's stopped making its plug for whatever the heck is behind door number one.

On the one claw, billiard balls have lied to her before. Dumb, plastic, useless pieces of garbage. On the other claw...what could be the harm in looking? This thing has power, Vriska can see that now, and it would be preeeeeeetty damn handy to have something like this for her to use to one-up the rest of the supposed 'game players' here. She hardly paid attention to a word they said in that meeting, too busy trying to avoid giving away any of her own secrets, but all this talk about being god tier and having super super powers sounded like a load of crap to her.

She's struggled for what she has her entire life, with none of this god stuff helping her out - so why shouldn't she use this cue ball as a way to edge out the competition and get some shit done? And if she can upgrade it or something by switching off whatever random old junk Lalonde human-custodian has down here...

Huh. Since when can she resist a chance like this? The door opens without issue, solid and whole under Vriska's claws, and she tosses the cue ball up and down in her free hand as she surveys the room beyond.

The machine inside is pretty pitiful, actually. She expects it to be a lot more impressive, or have some
of those badass tesla coils for some extra dramatic appeal. Maybe she'd have to do some daring acrobatics to cross a room guarded by pits full of alligators and lasers waiting to slice her into eighths if she makes a wrong move - like something out of a crappy spy movie. But there's just the machine in the middle of a dinky little room.

It's a little hard to look at, though. Her eyes keep trying to slide away from it. Slippery damn thing. "This is what you need me to turn off?" she asks, disdainfully.

See? A trivial task, for one as powerful as the Thief of Light.

But you must see the machine in its entirety, or it will continue functioning. Shed some light on it, if you will.

"You mean I can't just pull the plug?" Vriska preens a little at the compliment; she can't help it. "I don't exactly know how to do this Thief of Light business, you know. It all sounds like bullshit to me."

Just gaze upon it. See right through it. No one else can do what you can.

Taking advice from a cue ball. Eh, she can do that. Vriska stares at the machine, tapping her foot when impatience begins to hit her eight seconds later. But the longer she stares, the more she's motivated to keep staring just because this machine definitely doesn't want her staring at it. Blotches float across her vision like she's stared into the sun, or into a bottomless pit, and she stares harder in retaliation.

And then, with a gasp, the machine stops humming and becomes perfectly clear, sharp-edged and in perfect focus. Vriska rubs her stinging eye. She's not sure but...she thinks it just went kaput. From being stared at.

This whole lab is weird. But hey, the job is done.

Then something in the machine lets out a huge CRACK, and a cloud of smoke fills the room. Vriska drops the cue ball to cover her mouth with her arm, coughing as she closes her eyes.

- The human pays heed when ol' Cal slips away, but too slow, too late to stop it. He's all sharp shades glittering before Gamzee snaps out again, but he wasn't looking for any kind of pernicious insurrection from the puppet, not after years of being just strong enough to keep it hobbled and quiescent.

Biding, always biding, and can't blame a brother that ain't a player for not being able to see it until Cal already had an opening, when he's busy pouring heart he doesn't have out for all the souls clustered around him. He burns fierce hot, where the other human lusus is a black hole, she and her littler kin and Equius the last sucking points of void left to hide this place from prying eyes now that the wards've been irrevocably seen through.

S'alright. Brother held it for as long as he could, and now Lil Cal ain't all giggles anymore. Oh, there's a chuckle or two, but it's all kinds of ominous, sticky poison dripping into his motherfucking ears, dragging at Gamzee's mind. More than once he feels the weight of those arms looped around his neck all as a noose, polished wooden teeth leaving splinters through the dud-frills of his ears while it tries to pull him under, again and again and again - before retreating back through the halls. Looking for easier prey, now that it's gotten its realize on as regards Gamzee's mind. He's many things (so many things) but not this puppet's fool. Rage has
him and Rage holds him, and he can't stop the bleed now, even as it up and warps the walls, curling reality into new shapes, bending at angles before clipping back into place with a shudder. Ain't no one around here to feel it - not anyone as truly matters, anyway - and as long as he has this, no madness but his own can touch him.

And Lil Cal, most unfaithful of friends, couldn't have known that. Not when last time on this merry-go-round, Gamzee fell into its giggles like drowning, his mind hapless and shuddering from lack of sopor, tilted at such a cruel angle that falling felt like flying. Such wicked motherfucking lies this puppet did spew, and he sucked it all down like a new high. When he spun and Eridan's blasphemous motherfucking angel was there, with Lil Cal whispering in his ear, saying yes was gospel.

Neither of them could have known. Should have, if Cal were as clever as it liked to makebelieve it was, but Mal caught on too late, when it broke his mind into shards and his rage spilled out to meet it with open arms. Downright theological shit, right here. Raving and revelry and ruin, all his, all his, and by the time Mal realized it wasn't Gamzee who was being tangled, he already halfway had it, flicking claws against wheels and snapping each weak-jointed wing until the limp, crippled thing wrapped up in him couldn't even fight. It tore away as soon as it could, desperate and weeping and still whimpering his old quirk as had laughed its way into its echoing hive, and he let it go, too full of the mirthwhimsies to care.

Cal wasn't there for the end of it. Motherfucker didn't hang around to observe the most holy of beatdowns, and so shot itself in the foot. How can it hope to lie to his motherfucking face and expect to be believed when he's already laid eyes on truth?

It starts trying to backpedal - the laughter's gone, but Gamzee knows the feel of it now, darting through the between spaces as Lil Cal launches itself back towards the human brother. Let it reach him again, and Gamzee doesn't know that he can wrench it away without a fight. Man's only human, riddled with cracks, but he stepped to Noir and almost lived, his drive to protect powerful enough that Gamzee isn't sure he could sway him in time to stop Cal from latching onto some other motherfucker. And to come close to the main halls again means bleeding madness into minds he isn't of a mind to harm.

Not yet, not yet, anyway.

Not until this puppet is done.

- 

BE: john, we're in trouble.

Kanaya walks back into the room, and John is distracted by trying to be discreet about his laughter when he sees she has Eridan by the ear, dragging him back in with a straight face that would make Dave's bro proud. What do you mean? he asks, while Eridan storms away, seizing his chair of shame and dragging it over by the windows on the far wall, glowering out at the lake. They've all dragged a couple of the couches closer together, gathered around a coffee table to finish what pizza survived the meeting, and Karkat is warm at John's side, throwing up middle fingers at Jade when he thinks she's not looking. They're arguing about something again, but John's been too busy talking to Roxy and Rose to bother keeping up with their latest fit.

BE: i mean, i don't remember what you guys talked about during that meeting...

BE: it's like we skipped right over it, without even noticing! there was a lot of stuff you guys were supposed to talk about, but something's muddled everything up!
Okay. John promised he was going to listen to the Breeze, and not take it for granted again. But this is ridiculous. He tilts his head at the five full whiteboards covered in Karkat's handwriting and Dave's unhelpful but hilarious doodles up at the front of the room. *It's all right up there. Karkat literally wrote everything down and made charts for it.* Which was probably the highlight of Karkat's day, to be honest. Then John scoots back in his seat so Oriole can lean forward and take another slice of pizza, the edge of his bright orange wing smacking John in the shoulder. With Kanaya here, sitting practically in Rose's lap, they should probably grab another couch or something.

BE: ...john.

*What?*

BE: try to read it.

"Dude, are you paying attention?" Dave asks, kicking John's shin under the coffee table. "Come on, make bird-me tell you what he and Bro won't talk to me about."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Oriole says through a mouthful of pizza. "Ass."

"John wouldn't actually tell me, you know. He's a jerk, man, I don't even know why I'm friends with him." Then, in a lower tone of voice, Dave stage-whispers, "John, that's your cover. It's all you."

"That's never going to work in a million years, Dave," John says, making a face. Then the Breeze pokes him on the inside of his left lung (which *hurts*, darn it) and he huffs and turns his attention to the whiteboards. *Yeah, what am I looking for, exactly?*

BE: read the top line of the second one.

John sighs. This is starting to remind him of those days in school after a full night of work where the teacher would catch him dozing off and call him out in the middle of class to answer a surprise question. He skips over the first board absently and leans a little into Karkat to peek around Dave's head, squinting at the letters until they resolve themselves into words.

They don't.

John stares. Then he rubs his eyes with his fingers vigorously, and widens them all the way before squinting again.

It does nothing. All of Karkat's handwriting looks like - like nothing. Like squiggles and loops that don't make letters. Which doesn't make sense, he knows Karkat's handwriting almost better than his own. Heck, Karkat was writing in very clear, blocky letters so that *everyone* would be able to read it without problems. John - John remembers reading it, earlier, while it was still in the process of being written.

"Karkat," he whispers, turning his head to the side so that Rose and Dave can't read his lips from across the table. Karkat startles a little, engrossed in his silent duel with Jade, and frowns at John. "Karkat, can you read the whiteboard for me?"

"What the fuck?" Karkat says it too loud, loud enough that Rose looks at them with avid interest and a quirked eyebrow. Crap. John doesn't want to worry Rose, not yet. "It's right there, John. What's the problem?"

"Shh." That just makes Rose's eyebrow rise higher, and Karkat pulls away a little, worry wrinkling the corners of his eyes. John smooths the wrinkles away with his thumb, almost as much to try to calm himself down as Karkat. "Just - read the second one, okay?"
"...Yeah, fine. Whatever you say," Karkat says, shrugging a little and looking at the whiteboard. John watches the side of his face, his heart shuddery in his chest; the Breeze isn't helping that at all, even more on edge than he is.

Then Karkat's expression slips, and he starts to go pale, and John knows it's not just him. "Fuck," he says, clamping his hand down around John's. "Shit. John. I know I joke about this a lot, but I'm dead serious - I think I'm having an aneurysm. Or a stroke. Fuck, are those the same thing? I can't remember. *Fuck.*"

"No, me too," John says, in a rush of what would have been relief if this weren't terrifying. Karkat looks at him in horror, and John hastily adds, "I can't read it. But I remember you *writing* it. Something's really, really wrong."

"No fucking shit."

BE: i think i know what this is...

"You do?" John asks aloud, forgetting himself completely. Whoops.

Which means now everyone at the table knows he's talking to the air. "Whassup, John?" Roxy asks, wonking at him. Winking. Whatever.

BE: but it shouldn't be this powerful. *he* shouldn't be this powerful. i knew something was wrong when he came into the valley, but this kind of distortion is way over the top! everything's disjointed and out of sequence, from the moment he arrived here.

BE: i don't know if i can clear this out of the air in time.

"I don't think anyone can read Karkat's notes," he says, breathing in deeply. It's okay. This isn't just something new in his head trying to worm its way free. This is something else, something they can deal with here and now. "The Breeze says someone's distorting everything."

"Distorting -" Rose sits up so fast that Kanaya almost falls over the sidearm of the sofa, her pale face flickering with alarm before she throws out an arm to catch herself. "Dammit - how did I forget -"

"What?" Jade looks frantic. "Eridan's here, I - I can't - Vriska's downstairs from us, I think -"

"Gamzee," Rose finishes, her eyes pale as shard of glass as she stares at Karkat in horror. "I don't remember him leaving."

And then the void wards vanish.

- 

"OW! What the fuck!" Vriska takes a step back, still coughing, and her foot lands on something hard and round instead of solid ground; she falls hard and lands on her butt, growling with outrage as she glares at the stupid machine and the equally stupid cue ball that just decided to trip her. Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stup-

The cue ball starts rolling again, breaking her eight count. While the machine gives a last faint, tinny whir before dying completely (like she's falling for that one again!), the cue ball taps against the sole of her shoe one last time and plinks along toward the door with a self-satisfied aura.

Hahahahahahahaha not happening. Vriska scoops the cue ball up and clenches her claws around it, gnashing her teeth when her claws can't even so much as scratch the surface. "Stupid piece of shit,"
she hisses, looking around the corners of the ceiling for some sign of a video camera that might have recorded this.

Nothing - ugh, she might actually get away with this, but Terezi'll be on her like a bad rash the second someone finds out about this machine being broken. It won't matter that there's toooooooally no evidence that Vriska did anything - heck, all she did was look at this dumb thing and it blew itself up! She had nothing to do with it, she was just an unfortun8 witness to the tragic event. That's her story, and she's sticking to it.

"And you're going in the goddamn lake, with the rest of the useless junk," she says angrily, shaking the cue ball like she would a magic 8 ball. Because if she's getting shit for this, she's slam-dunking this thing in the trash where it belongs.

Oh, no. That wouldn't do at all. I did promise that you would be the best, after all, and I could hardly leave without fulfilling my end of the bargain.

Your death shall be neither heroic nor just, merely amusing. But it should jostle you back into awareness. Consider it a token of my appreciation for your unprecedented ability to be the most gullible sucker on the face of the planet, in this life and the one preceding it.

A beat.

"What did you call me?!" Vriska shrieks.

The cue ball explodes, taking a massive chunk of her skull with it.

- tick

- They were smiling.

This is what Rose remembers later, when there's time to reflect. Some of the trolls have vacated the room, opting to explore or otherwise muck around elsewhere in the labs.

But John is here, and Jade, and Dave, and Karkat, and Kanaya strokes her thumb over the lines of Rose's palm, and Roxy laughs with her whole body, belly shaking as she loses her balance while sitting down and manages to topple over, still laughing as her head clunks against Rose's shoulder with curls going every which way. Three conversations seem to be going on at the same time, all of them swapping in and out between the threads of discussion at will, and even Karkat has a grudging tick at the corner of his mouth that may hint at a smile. Eridan has flounced over to the window with a huff, refusing to look at any of them except for a single imperious, all-encompassing pout; he lets out a 'hmph!' and sits with the air of someone pouting with a purpose. If Rose had to make a guess, she'd say with some wry confidence that he wants one of them to notice and ask him what's wrong. But the act is fairly transparent, and no one seems inclined to move their buttocks an inch from where they're currently planted.

Until John looks up, and squints, and realizes, and the breakdown gains momentum.

(There is a channel in the back of her mind.

She plugs it with sunlight and power, lights it up with wards that layer on each other, but underneath lies the cold sea, the whisper-soft, stinging touch of something horrific. Easy to ignore, at the
moment, numbed and distant and silent as deep trenches beneath void wards and cuffs, both.

If Roxy wasn't right there, her cheek on Rose's shoulder, the barest strip of skin between the collar of her sweater and the line of her neck -)

-

Jade doesn't feel the void wards vanish.

She feels the rest of the world straightening back out from the twisty uncertainty that makes her space powers go a little wonky all the time in here.

-

For Rose, it is a shuddering ripple, too sudden and fast as it rocks through her, all the warp and weft of ambient magic snarling as it rushes back into the vacuum left behind.

And she feels the thing that punches through all her wards, slowed by the numbness where the void bracelets press down with a vengeance, but still there, still whispering, voices that echo and throng as Leviathan swims up through the channel.

-

tock
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Gamzee tilts his head back, and listens, placing them one by one.

Sollux and Terezi, tucked away by a hub, oblivious, Feferi just now wandering in, her fins a-curl with questions. Eridan, knotted up and miserable in the same room as them. Aradia outside, with Nepeta and Equius and Tavros, playing at being a distraction. But of all the folks here, that sister knows what comes next the best. She has it all up in her pan that she's got her finger to his pulse, a knowing as to his choices, but only as it suits her.

Did she know, did she motherfucking know? Did she let him ferment in the wickedest of ignorances because it gave her a chuckle knowing what he did not - could not - let himself know?

Vrissis is below, bleeding out slow with half her face gone, and Gamzee looks down at the blood of the juju dripping from his claws, the stuffing torn loose and scattered across the rooftop where Lil Cal is no fucking more, and flicks his fingers to the side to snap her neck. No need to get his fret on, where Vriska's concerned - that sis is tiered just as Aradia is, and if she does up and wreck some shit most mightily when she wakes up, what should he care?

What should he care, anymore?

He'll do the rest.

-

It overloads her, the rush and the grimdark both, and when Rose shoves away from the back of the couch, Roxy yelping in surprise and Kanaya's claws grasping at the collar of her shirt, the only clear space she can find to vomit is all over the empty pizza box in the center of the table. Someone
groans; others shout, but it's all noise in Rose's ears; she's busy emptying her stomach of bile and salt water, brackish and ice cold as it comes up her throat.

"'Naya," she croaks between spitting heaves - her first instinct, but her mind screams at her half a second later, even as Leviathan rolls like the tide and buckles the firmament beneath when the cuffs just barely hold. "Roxy."

Is it blood or salt water on her lips when Roxy tackles her around the waist? Both of them end up on the floor, in the thin space between the couch and the table, and the ceiling light overhead spins as Rose raises herself back up on an elbow so the cool tendrils of water can't trickle back down the back of her throat. One of Roxy's hands catches her on the face, the other locked on her hip, just under her sweater, and it's enough, just barely enough.

The price is that Rose loses all sensation in her own mind, everything going numb and distant and flat as her magic sucks out of reach, but the swelling tangle fuzzes and fades into silence once more. She forces her eyes to stay open, though fainting sounds like a remarkably sound option at the moment, her eyelids sticking as she fits words together.

"The void wards are gone," she says - to whom, she's not entirely certain. Her vision warps, and it's John, twists again and it's Kanaya's worried face, pale as a sheet, one more time and -

She can't hear Leviathan anymore.

So what is -

She's forgetting something, because her mind is all a whirl. Vibrations run through her as someone races out, their feet pounding against the floor; she hopes they're going to Rue, wherever she ended up in that daze that seems to have gripped and held them all, oblivious to the way reality no longer holds true around them. Her mother is many things, but rarely stupid; Rue wouldn't turn off the ward generator or otherwise tamper with it, not with Scratch ever-watchful, not with ten new, unpredictable troll players loose in the complex.

Over by the window, Eridan gurgles.

- tick

- Rose pushes up on both hands, hauling Roxy's weight up with her as she screams. "Eridan, no!"

His head is in his hands. Unlike her, he doesn't appear to have thrown up anywhere - but when she freezes in horror she can see the tiny lines of violet painting down the backs of his claws and hands, a tiny crown of pinprick, bleeding wounds where he's dug the claws into the skin of his forehead.

She can't feel anything, can't see anything but what's there. A foot plants itself between Rose and Eridan - Kanaya, standing and uncapping a tube of lipstick with an echoing click. "Eridan, you don't want to do this," she says, but Rose thinks, her stomach sinking into the abyss, that the moment to appeal to Eridan came and went long ago. Or perhaps, like her, he made his choice once and could never take it back, no matter how he wished things could be otherwise.

He takes his hands from his face, and looks away from them, out the window. Outside, the lake takes up most of the view, the sun pouring down between the occasional isolated plump of clouds.
"Let's give this one a standard." The thing riding his mind says like a sigh, twisting his head back around without moving the body enough to make the movement look natural. Tears like pitch run down his cheeks. "We'll, S'cratch? Your move."

Violet blood sprays the glass and the ceiling as wings rip out through his back.

"Get us out." Rose's voice is fading - Roxy's the only thing keeping her mind numb against Leviathan, but she's also draining everything else away. The violet of the blood's desaturated, and she can't tell if that's because of Roxy's void or some grimlight hallucination beginning to warp all their minds. "Jade -" Eridan's starting to burn with sickly light, bleaching more of the color out of the world. "Jade - get us out now!"

-

Tock

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"Yet," Gamzee says, holding his hand out for a miracle.

His sylladex obliges, sliding a card into his waiting claws that flickers with rainbow static. When he removes the instrument, it shivers under his claws, one string still broken and frayed where he used it to play his way free. He takes the next string between his fingers and pulls, smiling and smiling and smiling as the wire goes taut - and then snaps in two.

-

Vriska sits up.

-

The room explodes.

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There you all are.
Chapter End Notes

boom
Chapter Summary

From the winds of the north and the south
They gathered as unto strife;
They breathed upon his mouth,
They filled his body with life.

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter where I lose 45% of you to outrage over my absolutely hilarious geometry problem-solving abilities, and 12% to disgust over the fact that all of the dialog has been put through a word scrambler. It's all basically a mess until the whole Gamzee thing gets sorted out. Hover for a non-scrambled translation.

EDIT: And we're done here! The last chunk starts at "Jade can't find any trace". Feel free to play this song whenever it feels right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scratch. That a8solute piece of *fucking shit*.

Vriska can still feel the explosive, shrieking memory of pain, but it's distant now. Taking a cue ball to the face again? She's over it.

But now she has memories of losing an eye and an arm to that guy on top of this more recent insult, all because of Terezi totally overreacting about stupid Aradia. Maybe someone else could laugh it off - but why should she? *She's* the one who's been wronged, here! She remembers exactly how she's been wronged, over and over again, everyone treating her like she's the bad guy when she's the only one who ever gets off her butt to *do* something.

Vriska floats off the floor, fanning her wings out in a cloud of blue, sparkling dust. There's not much of the room left in the wake of her resurrection, the broken machine a sad, puny pile of scrap metal after she finishes stomping on it. If the cue ball survived blowing up in her face, it's long gone, rolling back off to the Prime Asshole. "Owh creas. Fcuk hatt ygu," Vriska mutters, flexing her claws to make sure they work.

Yeah. Who cares that he thinks she's the most gullible idiot on the planet.

...No, you know what, she *does* care. Baring her teeth in a snarl, Vriska reaches up and feels around as best she can with senses long gone rusty. She never bothered learning all that pointless lore and completing the useless tutorial quests that Tavros wanted to finish, but she never needed any of that to know how to use her powers through instinct. She's simply the 8est there is.

Of course, this crop of losers doesn't give her much to work with! Pretty inconsiderate of them, but them's the 8reaks. Out of all the potential targets here, only a handful aren't already in the negatives
as far as luck goes. When she tries to nab some from Harley, the human jumps through space before Vriska can latch on, and she gives it up as stupid and annoying to try to figure out where the witch will end up next. She doesn't dare try to draw from Aradia, because Vriska doesn't remember Aradia being god tier and that means Terezi went and killed her before something big happened. But Nepeta's looking pretty well off, so Vriska skims some right off the top, before moving on to the piddly offerings of the nobody non-players scattered throughout the lab. They won't need it, anyway; they barely even count.

By the time she finishes stealing what fortune she can, Vriska's ready to fight. She's the luckiest person in this entire valley, and the rest of these weaksauce, ungr8ful assholes can kiss her ass if they want any of it back.

Right now, she has better things to do. Like finding Doc Scratch and breaking his face in. The rest of these guys can play stupid games for wrigglers and avoid dealing with their growing collection of enemies if they want; Vriska intends to actually Get Shit Done. Starting with that nosy prick.

He's made a fool of her for the last time.

Going up through the building is a lot easier now that she remembers how to fly, and how to make herself lucky enough that the ceiling breaks instead of her when she punches it. She flutters up past a gigantic hole in the building, arching an eyebrow when she sees the greyish miasma of power building up on the field between the lab and the lake. A thorny tentacle tries to snag her out of the air as she darts in, but she's far too quick, and she yanks the last of Eridan's luck before he and his brand new tentacle buddy know who's hit them. They're the real suckers, not her. And now no one can complain she hasn't done her part to help the rest of the chumps on her team deal with his crap all over again; with the benefit of her newly restored hindsight, she's pretty sure that Eridan being possessed is just a part of life. The rest of them can finish dealing with it, while she does all the hard work.

She considers dragging Gamzee. If anyone deserves it, it's him. Before she can try it, though, a thin, familiar voice screams at her from the half-demolished building. "Kirvs, ewreh od oyu thnki uyo're oggni? Ahtw idd oyu od?!!"

Haha, wow, that was incomprehensible! Vriska wonders if it's the thing Eridan has become doing something to her ears, or if getting her brains splattered all over the walls might have messed up her regen - but when she looks back to where Terezi's standing on the edge of a broken hallway, Terezi appears just as hornswoggled, her lips sucked into her mouth until all that's left is a thin white line, and Vriska decides she's not the only one hearing things all scrambled. Vriska grins, waving at Terezi as she climbs further into the air. "Aplecs to og, eaxbd ot beta," she sing-songs, coasting toward the southern outcropping of rock. "Tcahc em fi uoy can!" She flaunts her wings again, leaving a trail of blue dust as she goes. Terezi's a smart troll, when she's not being annoying; she can figure out how to follow a trail with that nose of her. Maybe she'll catch up in time to help Vriska, or maybe just to witness the grand finale.

Anyway. Vriska closes her varieg8ted eye and concentrates, pouring through her own mind with a dash of luck and a hint of psychic powers, to dredge up the last thing that flashed across her field of vision before the cue ball exploded.

Of course, if you care to take a chance and roll the dice...

Come to the Ouroboros.

1025 Las Vegas Boulevard.
Nepeta snaps out of it with a trill of indignation, looking up from the fish she's been debating about scooping out of the lake to make a real dinner for everyone, huntress style, and looks at Equius, aggrieved. "We just met Hemogoblin!" she says, but it comes out of her mouth all awful and jumbled up and harsh on the ears. For some reason, all she remembers meowusing about for the past half hour or so is the fact that Karkat and John are in diamonds with each other - but hello, she should have moved on to pawndering and reexamining her predictions for other hero quadrants, too, in light of this development! Her own chances! Something!

Now, though, her head won't stop aching, a dull, buzzing roar of grainy static that she can't believe she didn't notice before. Worse, when Equius puts a hand on her head in concern and says, "Neepat, fi hitis si msoe fersh nnonesse fo rysuo -" she can't understand that either! She tears her hat off her head in confusion, because she can't think of anything else that might be making her hearing all messed up. "Ostmehing is owng," Equius says, his face like a thundercloud and his voice grim and scary enough that Nepeta gets the point, even though she can't understand the words. She scrambles to her feet while Equius continues trying to talk, her hat lying forgotten on the ground as she spins, trying to find Aradia or Tavpurros. They came outside at the same time, but Nepeta and Equius had headed for the lake, while Aradia and Tavros went off in some other direction. There's no sign of the two now, or the wheelchair, or of anyone other than Nepeta and Equius having come out here.

Nepeta sniffs deeply, trying to pick out their scents, but she can't smell them when the wind picks up, tossing her hair and fluttering greasy strands around Equius's face as it zooms toward the lab building.

It means she's looking at the building when the nearest wall bursts outward, the shock of it knocking her off her toes. Equius grabs her almost too hard in a panic, his words a mouseterious babble as he cradles her to his chest and plants his feet. When Nepeta removes her hands from her ears and looks up, scrunching her nose at the salty smell that fills the air, she can see that a large chunk of that side of the building has turned into rubble, while a mass of grey tangles pours out onto the lawn, flaring thorny wings and floating along with its creepers barely touching the ground beneath it. Looking at it too long makes Nepeta's eyes burn and her head throb, vision all swirly as she whimpers and tears her gaze away.

Equius sets her down but places a hand on top of her head between her horns a moment later, and the ache eases. "Ew aer ilaengv. Won. We uhdso nevre vhae coem eher," he says, in his bossiest, sternest tone of voice, the one that makes Nepeta want to do the opposite of what he says most times because it just means he's getting his whiskers in a twist.

"Awt apehpnde? Whree is veeroyen lsee?" she wonders, resisting Equius's tug when he tries to pull her away. After the paranoid way he's been acting lately, he needs to stop bossing her around for a while! "Ahtw si ahtt htign - no, Suique, we nac't juts ealev!"

Equius keeps being a jerk. Nepeta can't figure out what he's talking about, but she knows it's something jerky. "I do nto dunserdnta why uoy niists no rnnunig rtwado moes nnuowkn tnambaooiin, ubt uoy wili sedsti at noce so we cna go hoem sith nitnsat."

"Nah. Nepsis is right, brother. Motherfuckers can't take off just when shit's about to go down."

Nepeta pinpoints where the new voice is coming from in seconds, her heart thumping with adrenaline as she looks up at the roof of the lab. Someone she could have sworn she hasn't seen before sits on the crumbling edge, long legs swinging over the open gap where the wall blew out, and considers them with heavy-lidded eyes. He's not dressed like one of those fancy doctors, either, so he must be someone from the group earlier. The words make sense when he talks, but -
something's off. It sounds like he's talking right into Nepeta's ear, not calling down to them from a distance.

"Hwta's ginog on?" Nepeta tries, huffing when more scrambled BS comes out. Something sparkly and yellow and blue zooms out from the hole in the wall a second later, darting around the grey thing in a whirl of mean laughter - why is everything happening at once? - but then the troll on the roof vanishes and reappears only a few yards from her and Equius, and the wave of fear that follows him nearly makes Nepeta pass out.

"You," the troll says, pinning the two of them with purple eyes, red swallowing up the yellow as he stares. "Yeah. You first. I can motherfucking see how this motherfucking goes, now. Do you remember yet? Do you motherfucking know?"

"No," Equius says, and it's perfectly clear.

"No," he repeats, seizing Nepeta around the waist and picking her up like a ragdoll, regardless of her claws digging into his skin.

"No," he says again, as he starts running as fast as he can in the opposite direction, toward the cover of the trees at the far end of the lake.

Before Nepeta can shout at him for acting like a scaredy cat, the purpleblood appears again, crouched less than six feet from them, head and horns low and eyes pulsing feral red. Too close for Equius to skid to a stop in time, but Equius does anyway, heels digging so deep he kicks up a spray of dark earth and uprooted grass, falling on his butt when they come to a stop but still trying to backpedal. "Can't run from this, brother," he says, with a voice like a chainsaw, or Pounce de Leon in a bad mood. "Yet's here. We're all motherfucking here -"

"Gamzee, no," Equius says, sweat streaming down his face and neck. Nepeta jabs him in the side but he only clutches her tighter - before dropping her on her feet and shoving her behind him. "Ont tih, not gaian. I lwl nto llowa it."

"Fuck, bro. You say that like there's allowing to be had up in here." Gamzee draws a pair of strifing clubs out of the air, and Nepeta bristles. The smell of old blood lingers, too familiar too familiar, and her head feels like it's going to split in two. "There's only me." He flips a club. "And also me."

He smiles with more teeth than Nepeta has ever seen.

"We'll get it right this time."

-Teleporting is much easier without all that void stuff twisting everything up. Jade's more aware of her powers now that her memories are back, and she's been testing it all day long, bouncing from point to point but never quite daring to take anyone else along for the ride. She could probably fix herself if she got splinched, but no way is she risking anyone ending up short a limb like certain people she could mention (but won't). With that risk gone, her brain switches into hyperdrive the second Rose shouts in warning, reaching out with everything she's got to grab all the people she can and -

- something pushes -

The landing is kinda rough, and that's totally her bad! She thinks. Jade rolls onto her side, shaking her hair out of her face as she checks to make sure Roxy and Rose are hanging on to each other post-teleport. Rose looks pale and sapped of all her strength, Roxy's arms locked around her in a death grip, but Rose nods which is all the reassurance Jade needs that the Horrorterror sitch is under
control. She ducks when a bright orange wing unfurls from on top of the desk where Oriole got dumped. "Ow," he and Dave say at the same time, Dave picking himself up from where Jade accidentally landed him on top of a chair.

Doctor Lalonde's on her feet, appearing to move on auto-pilot as she helps Oriole off the desk without knocking over her computer; her eyes find Rose and her expression tightens. "What just happened?" she asks, hitting a button on the keyboard and glancing at the screen she rounds the desk toward them. She freezes before she gets there, her face turning back to the computer screen. "What-

"Void wards are down," Jade says, just as Rose croaks something similar. "And Eridan busted up the lounge room turning into a tanglebuddy." She hates to think what might be lurking outside right now. She can feel the general mass of it from here, as well as the parts of the building where the explosion destroyed the walls, but there's something else -

"What happened to the generator? Do you know?" Kanaya asks. She has her chainsaw out, which doesn't help the crowded state of the office; she switches it back to a lipstick container a moment later. The troll takes the spot by Roxy and Rose, kneeling with her skirt puddling around her as she presses a hand to the side of Rose's face. "Are you alright?"

"The void sensors just set off an alarm." Rue types so fast her fingers mash the keyboard, yet she still seem to be able to type coherently; Jade's impressed. "The machine itself should have alerted me that it was being tampered with - unless it was completely destroyed." She looks up, her face almost as sheet-white as Rose's now. "The wards are dissipating too quickly. Someone did this."

"I'm somewhat less than fine," Rose says. Roxy has to support her as the two of them sit up against the desk. "Being numb is preferable to being possessed, houh. Rae nya of yuo hare -"

Ohhhh crap, that doesn't sound good. Jade tenses and watches Rose, hands already crackling - but Rose just blinks as her mouth snaps shut, touching her lips with her fingers. "Hwta saw hatt?" Oriole says next, and his words sound just as jumbled as Rose's.

"Aahpsai?" Kanaya says, her tone speculative.

Jade clutches her head, and looks around the room, but everybody looks as lost as she feels. Are they all hearing this? "Oen sconed - yannoe how cna haer creoctly, israe oury ahdn." Doctor Lalonde sounds commanding as she says it, but all Jade can do is stand there, at a loss for what she wants them to do. "Mndaotin - pahaisa ro aduitory crpoessnig isdreord? Othb?" the woman mutters, tearing a post-it note off and scribbling on it with the first pen her searching fingers find. Jade gets hopeful - until Doctor Lalonde jerks her hand away from the pen like it burned her, and holds up the half-finished note for all of them to see.

It looks like Karkat's garbled up writing from the whiteboard - well, the handwriting is still Doctor Lalonde's, but none of the letters form words, just an endless string of balderdash. Jade would giggle at how everyone reaches in a flurry of hands for their phones in their pockets, but this isn't funny at all. Especially not when her keyboard has all the letters in the wrong place, and Dave's immediate onslaught of messages looks like chunky paragraphs of red nonsense. He's only texting with the one hand, too, the other flicking through signs that Jade just doesn't understand.

Her first thought is that it must be something the Horrorterror in Eridan did - but...this was happening before the Horrorterror got loose, wasn't it? Not the talking thing, clearly, but either Karkat couldn't write all through that meeting this afternoon (and none of them noticed anything wrong) or everyone here stopped being able to read words before the void wards crashed.
And now whatever it is that caused it is spreading. Jade teleporting them to Doctor Lalonde's office only got them out of range for those precious minutes; now they've lost all ability to communicate, not just writing.

Or maybe the writing is fine, and it's just that none of them can read it. Same with their speech - they could all be talking just fine but no one hears it right. Either way, something's screwing with all of them where it counts: their heads. And Jade -

Jade recognizes it.

Karkat says something like, "Nhoj," but she's too busy to try to puzzle it out, even though it's short. The feeling in her head isn't exactly this same, but she knows it all the same. Hysteria is right there waiting for her, a tingle of nausea and fear clustered in the back of her head, and maybe he's using it a different way this time, but she's seen Gamzee Makara scare people senseless before and almost had it happen to herself. Right now it's just warping their ability to communicate - how easy would it be for him to push their brains a little more and leave them hallucinating sights and sounds, too?

How does she know it hasn't happened already?

"Hreew si John?!" Karkat yells, and the last word scrambles all the way back around into being understandable again. She looks at John on impulse, to see his reaction - Gamzee can't take away the ability to read each others facial expressions, can he? If he can, Jade officially gives up!

John isn't there. Jade's sense of everyone's bodies in the room hiccups - and then slides back into place, and Jade's hands go limp as her heart starts pounding, using her eyes to confirm what her senses should have been telling her all along.

But she had him. She had all of them, and the vanishing wards couldn't possibly have tricked her into thinking she'd teleported John when she somehow didn't. Maybe - maybe he moved himself, with the windy thing! They haven't tested which would take precedent yet, her space thing or his wind teleportation, so maybe he snatched himself to somewhere else in the valley right at the exact second Jade bounced them out of the room.

Karkat's still freaking out; Rose and Dave seem to have picked up on what the troll was saying, too, and maybe Kanaya, but when Rose moves to stand up her leg wobbles under her so badly that Roxy and Kanaya both seize her before she can slam her head against the edge of the table. She's not gonna be able to stay awake much longer unless Roxy lets go, Jade remembers - which won't be an option unless Doctor Lalonde can fix the generator in a hurry.

And Jade can't ask if the generator even can be fixed. Her head is screaming that they need to deal with the Horrorterror first, but she can't retrace the logic that made her decide that needed to be their main priority. This is a nightmare!

Except.

That's the panic talking, isn't it?

Oh. That was too obvious - Jade shoves the panic down, back into the back of her mind with the nauseating sensation, and focuses on covering the whole valley with her space sense instead. That's easier for her now than it ever has been, and being able to wrap her senses around every tree, every fish in the lake, every crumbling piece of debris -

That's what's real. She twitches her perception, and every human and troll shaped being lights up in her mental map like a star, and they're real, too. Her body is a fixed point in a turning universe. She
finds John and he's okay, he's up and moving, too close to the place where the Horrorterror is but still whole.

She has no way to communicate with everyone in this room. But she can get them where they need to be, and that's at least a step in the right direction. Holding the mental map in her mind, refusing to let it get scrambled up, Jade reaches out with her hands and starts moving people.

Doctor Lalonde is hardest to get a hold of since she has void in her, but space beats void now that the wards are gone. Jade sets her down at the bottom of the basement stairs, right where the lingering void becomes too much for Jade to push through without potential splinching. Rose's mom is smart, she can definitely figure out if the ward generator can be fixed, and that Jade put her down there for that reason. Rose and Roxy go next, since keeping the two of them together is tricky business, and Jade sets them down by the far exit, near the automated greenhouses. Until the generator is up and running, those two can't let go of each other long enough to fight, so it's best they get to safety.

"Jdae, whder'e oyu upt hemt?" Kanaya asks, wary, but Jade can't explain. She can guess Kanaya's worried about Rose and that's about it; separating trolls from people they love is kinda not a smart thing to do in general. Karkat's already at the office door, hauling it open with Dave hot on his heels, but as much as she wants to tell them John is fine, they're not gonna understand. A glance around the room shows her that Oriole looks bewildered, but he also has a sword in his hand, and when she meets his eye with a silent question his jaw goes tight.

Jade, Kanaya, Dave, Karkat, and Oriole. Plus potentially the other trolls she can sense outside already, depending on who's fighting who.

It has to be enough. They need everyone that they can get, because Jade's never fought a Horrorterror before but she saw footage from New York. She gets that they're hardcore, and with what she remembers from the game, all of their minds are probably more susceptible after whatever baloney Gamzee has pulled.

No choice, though. Jade snags Karkat and Dave, and then everyone else in the room, and jumps them out to the parking lot.

- The lights flicker overhead, dust sifting down in thin sheets as the building rattles.

Samuel Egbert flexes his wrists in the latest set of shackles; he recognizes an explosion when he feels one, but the impact's far enough off that he can only assume something has gone wrong at the opposite end of the complex from where he's been secured.

He has no illusions of his employers coming by to pick him up, not after years of deliberately working under the radar of both sides. No, this is something else.

There's no reason for him not to take advantage of the distraction, though. The interns left in charge of keeping him restrained have been swapping out different pieces of the restraints at intervals on Lalonde's advice, but twenty minutes have passed since the last changeover. More than long enough for him to know the exact angle he needs to slip the wrist of his halved hand free. Being mutilated by the Harley girl puts a significant crimp in his chances of getting out of here, but in this respect, at least, it comes in handy. Even with only a few fingers left to him, that hand is more than capable of working the other loose, and from there undoing the rest of the restraints is child's play. The door is even less of a challenge, and once he's out in the corridor he sees that the people keeping watch on him have abandoned their post.
Still. Dilly-dallying would not be wise. A faint shimmer seems to cling to everything, and a new throb has joined the pre-existing soreness where the unfortunate surgery opened up his skull.

Odd, that while his senses tell him no one is around, he is certain that someone is aware of him.

If it is some new trick of Lalonde’s - Rue Lalonde is nothing if not a genius, even while thoroughly inebriated - he can't identify the means. He starts down the hall instead, orienting himself at the next branch in the path where small placards on the wall point in the general direction of the lobby and back toward the greenhouse rooms at the furthest end of the main building.

Heading out the back is the more strategic option; he believes the explosion came from somewhere in the direction of the lake, and if he knows the children here, they'll have swarmed the epicenter of the blast in their quaint desire to play hero. Harley's presence alone would be the largest obstacle to any escape attempts.

He recognizes the source of the faint resistance in his mind, though. Typical. The mindgrub never gave more than routine enforcement in his brain while he busied himself keeping John under control, but the chemical echoes remain. He should fetch the boy and discover just how much work Lalonde and her girl have managed to undo, and then contact someone within the Crew or Felt to obtain assistance.

He fights it for a moment, and then sighs. Technically, he is under contract. A job is a job, and really, what's the worst that could happen? Lalonde could restrain him in a new room, but this isn't a war zone where he'd need to brace himself to be tortured or executed if recaptured. There will inevitably be another opportunity to escape.

Pressing his thumb into the cauterized scar along the new side of his hand, Samuel begins walking toward the front of the building.

A week won't have been long enough to undo the work of years. If he can locate John, he can most certainly handle him.

- osarch=x1025
locale: US:en; PROSPIT:queen
initializing user (TA)
i.launchapp = solsat
net.socketexception: unrecognized sockets error: (solsat) <unknown source>
et.socketexception: unrecognized sockets error: (o) <unknown source>
et.socketexception: unrecognized sockets error: (uU) <Unknown soUrce>
opening local connection
settings detected:
updatetype = false
remotemode = false
auth_mode = false
serverName = Omega
no updates detected
the user twinArmageddons has authorization
TA: then fuckiing act liike iit
> refresh connection
clientcache: cleaning cache...
clientcache: finished
updates detected: tier.mod; solsat.mod, musecheer.umod, Sburb_Omega_v1.025.update
TA: what the fuck
> enable tier.mod; solsat.mod
.mod file(s) not detected; enable prerequisite: musecheer.umod
TA: now ii2 2eriio2ly not the tiime two diick wiith me game
> enable tier.mod; solsat.mod, Sburb_Omega_v1.025.update
.mod file(s) not detected; enable prerequisite: musecheer.umod
TA: ii'm not in2talliing 2ome random tra2h mod
> limit: source: TA
updates detected: tier.mod; solsat.mod, musecheer.umod
TA: no fuck you, ii diidn't upload that
TA: ugh
UU: jUst trUst me! yoU'll need it! ^u^ 
TA: ii don't have tiime for thii2 pii22 off
UU: rUde!
> block net.socketexception: (uU)
TA: ha
> enable tier.mod; solsat.mod
.mod file(s) not detected; enable prerequisite: musecheer.umod
TA: fuck me
TA: FIINE
> enable all
installing...
installation complete
ii.launchapp = tierbedconfig
WARNING: altering god tier mechanic source files may cause discontinuity, file corruption, broken paradox loops, a growing sense of existential dread, plot holes, terminal glitching, displacement, and/or extreme death
continue launch?
TA: wtf doe2 extreme death even mean
TA: whatever were already fucked
> continue launch
could not start thread dumper on port GM (unknown anomaly detected)
could not start thread dumper on port EA (chaos-type corruption detected)
failed to get portloca information for: KM
duplicate information for: SC
> show echeladder status
AM: tiered
TN: maxed
SC: maxed [error detected]
KV: maxed
NL: maxed
KM: maxed [error detected]
TP: maxed
VS: tiered
EZ: maxed
GM: ?????? [error detected]
EA: maxed [error detected]
FP: maxed
JE: tiered
JH: tiered
RL: tiered
DS: tiered
TA: okay
TA: 2hiit
TA: ii can work with that
TA: AA, who goe2 fiir2t?
AA: wait for it...

A cane smacks against the top of Sollux's requisitioned keyboard. On his right, the White Queen startles, her claws digging into the cable she's supposed to be hooking back into place. "Slouxl, Rkvias is valegni!" Terezi snarls, her eyes alight with the kind of single-minded obsession Sollux had hoped he'd blasted out of their systems. God, he doesn't have time for them to have a kismespat in the middle of this hellhole. "Ehy, reeht rae uimtple nhtgis giong owngr eher, plapberyer baslt! Ypa aetnintot!" She uses the cane to jab him in the chest for emphasis.

"Ioptn hatt htign at em one orem miet," Sollux mutters, shoving the cane out of his way. "I eend ot teg htis eiec of hist omd kornigw or ew're lla dead. All of his mind is set on finishing this; even the parts that have been splintered off and hiding from him, working to alter Prospit and Derse into something useful. They have everything in place - but all of Aradia's timing won't mean anything if the program itself doesn't work.

He can't tell what's going to break first: him, or the game.

"Is oyur uspdti, nkjyu moeterpu rporgam moer timoprnta htan hwta's ggoni no otu teher?!" Terezi demands.

Outside, over all the yelling and the roar of something horrific, someone screams in what is unmistakably grief.

run program? y/n
> y

"Wow. This guy's not too shabby at this crazy thing, huh? I kinda like it!"

John groans. When he opens his eyes, he has a nice view of a badly damaged ceiling, cracks running away from the blast radius and greyish light pouring through the gaping hole. He shifts his weight and peels his head off a smashed up computer; his fingers come away tacky with blood when he feels around for an injury. But he can't find any split skin, and aside from a keening buzz that leave his head aching, he doesn't think he's in any pain. Which is good! Fantastic!

Except that he knows that voice.

He doesn't want to know it.

"Denial? Well, I guess that is all you're good for."

The force of the thing that burst through Eridan demolished the lounge room, and now what didn't get vaporized lies crumbling up against the far wall - except, when John takes another look around, he realizes the far wall got blown up, too. The boom took out the lounge and blasted everything through to the rooms across the hall; he can see the hallway when he lifts his head some more, with most of the walls and ceiling and upper floors torn away to leave the labs exposed to the elements. There isn't even a door in the doorframe anymore.

A foot starts swinging in his peripheral vision, a pale pastel boot that taps out a little beat against the broken lab table. "Hmm, hmm, hmm. It really is a shame. I think you died a little there, but it didn't
stick. Must have caught you off guard. I know you have trouble with getting things right, but you'd think at some point you'd figure out how to die properly."

He's not listening. Really, he's not. He stands up instead, staggering a little when the room spins around him. His eyes skitter over half a whiteboard that has popped out of its frame, and then skitter back so he can reread the nonsense words in Karkat's handwriting. The marker ink has been smudged by - well, by being blown up a little, but some of it's legible. Actually, now that he thinks about it, he can almost pick out a word here and there that's not incomprehensible - but he doesn't have time to try to figure out what they talked about this afternoon that's gotten so scrambled in their brains. There's at least one Horrorterror using a tanglebuddy to wreak havoc outside, which means that while John's been temporarily unconscious, things have probably gotten worse.

"Temporarily unconscious? Is that what they're calling it these days?"

John can't think of a reply. He's saved from it by a clatter of claws on tile, and then a questioning, worried warble that precedes Crabdad into the room. For a second, the sight of the lusus is so bizarre that John's brain hitches and stutters. So many people showed up over the course of the day, a blurred stream of almost-familiar faces and names, and John could name them for you if you asked him, but when he tries to remember meeting half of them, he comes up blank. Crabdad turning up out of the blue, having traveled from Seattle to hunt down Karkat in the company of Tavros and a weird clown guy - it seems just as nonsensical as Karkat and Dave getting along. Wait. They are getting along.

God, today is just so weird.

John accepts the violent hug when Crabdad scuttles up to him, patting the lusus on the back like that'll make order reassert itself. He needs to find the others, so they can take care of whatever the heck happened to Eridan, and to Doctor Lalonde's wards. From the looks of things, no one else ended up plowing into this new room along with him, so John can only suppose that Jade got them all out in time.

"Haha, oh my god. Just when I think you can't get any sadder, you manage to land yourself a crab guardian." Another giggle. "Or maybe I shouldn't blame you for this one. Everything's gone topsy-turvy; who could blame you for not seeing this coming!" And then a pause. "Pffft. Nah, somehow, this whole mess is your fault. How many people are you gonna get killed this time, I wonder!"

Ugh. He feels exhausted, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground as he forcibly unwinds Crabdad's claws from around his neck. The lusus backs down with a chirr of indignation, but it hovers by John's side and stares around them. It's the most alert John thinks Crabdad has ever been - but its eyes don't blink when it skims past the broken lab table, despite the giggles, so he's probably on his own with this one. "Shut up," he tells himself, reaching out with the air and feeling around for anyone else. Jade must have teleported the rest of their group -

(And why not him, too? Too much crazy interfering? If John's seeing things, there's no telling how Jade and the others might be affected...)

- but where? They have to be breathing somewhere around here. He can find them, as long as they keep breathing.

"Make me~~~!" John hears a faint 'hup!' and a tap of shoes on the floor, and he turns his eyes away before the Trickster can walk into his line of sight. "You should just let me be in charge. Trust me, you can't handle this. You can't handle anything!"
There. A mass of people have moved to the far end of the lab complex, all of them scientists and doctors and interns that John registers as almost indistinguishable. They're out of immediate danger, so that's good. Another group's clustered in the small space of Doctor Lalonde's own office, and he picks up on Jade and Rose and Karkat and Roxy there, at least, before they vanish again; Jade must be zapping them elsewhere. But they're breathing, and alive, and John clings to that because it's the only lifeline he's got in all this confusion.

Now he just has to get to them before he starts hallucinating something worse than this. He can manage that. He totally can.

"Liar. He's gonna be here soon," the Trickster breathes into John's ear, walking its fingers up the back of his skull. "Like they could ever lock him up for long."

John knows he's hyperventilating. When he wrenches away, rounding the corner and angling toward where he feels familiar breathing patterns outside, the Trickster hums and floats along after him, tilting its head to the side to grin up at him. Crabdad walks through it like it's not even there - which it's not. As long as John remembers that, he'll be fine. They're not in his head, and the Trickster is only real in his head. "Just let me deal with it, so you don't have to," the hallucination coaxes. "It'll be sooo much more fun that way. I'll even kill him for you so you'll stop whining all the time. Because I'm the better person here."

He can't let this distract him. Panic gnaws at the edges of his thoughts, but the Trickster hasn't done anything yet. Just a hallucination. The madness in the air is so heavy that John thinks you could scoop it up like honey and ladle it into a jar. If he can get outside and help the others deal with the Horrorterror, the aura of crazy'll probably die off and his head will stop going bonkers. Less bonkers than usual.

Gah. He might be freaking out a little, here.

While he's doing that, the hallucination rolls its eyes at him. "Three." The Trickster pretends to inspects its nail polish while John ignores it. "Two. One."

"What the heck are you counting down to?!" John says, hating himself for responding. Crabdad crees like he's said something to it - probably wondering what the heck John's talking about. But someone he knows is breathing steadily as they run down the corridor that crosses this one at the intersection ahead, and he pauses to wait for them to catch up before he finishes registering why it's familiar.

"Ohjn. Hetre ouy era."

Quick as a flash, the Trickster reaches up and jams its fingers against the pulse point under John's jaw. Like it wants to feel the sickening jolt when John whips around and sees his handler striding down the hall toward him. It leaves him lightheaded as he stumbles back, almost tripping backward over a displaced couch in his haste to get away. "You're another hallucination," he says. His mouth feels papery and dry and no sound comes out. That's the only explanation that makes sense right now, though; it's all in his head. He just - he has to find Karkat or Rose. Preferably both.

Because the terror is real, stampeding over the rational thoughts that tell him he needs to get outside and help people. He can't let a whole boatload of hallucinations keep him here. He has to find them and get his shit together, or -

Crabdad bristles at his side and lets out a clacking, hard-edged noise that John's never heard the lusus make before. Maybe if Karkat were here, he could interpret (because Crabdad is still that guy's lusus, no matter what lame bullcrap Karkat tries to pull) but what John takes away from it is that...
"...Our'ey lear," he says, horrified, wrapping his arms around himself and backing up another step. Because Crabdad walks through the Trickster like it's thin air, but steps into the space that John has vacated with another hostile screech, pointing an accusatory claw at John's handler.

Because he is there. He's real. All this chaos would be a prime opportunity for an escape attempt, especially for someone just waiting for the chance to twist their wrists free of their restraints, with all the pranking prowess needed to make it out with ease. He looks as close to scruffy as John has ever seen him; he hasn't been able to shave, and instead of a white suit he wears a rumpled white lab coat, a concession to a disguise that he didn't really need now that the lab has gone to hell in a handbasket.

But his eyes are cold and assessing and full of reproach, and if John wasn't on the edge of going completely crazy before, he sure as heck is now.

"Told you he'd be here soon," the Trickster says, laughter breaking up the words when it can't restrain itself anymore. "Let me talk to him instead, and then I'll rip his lungs out through his trachea! I pinky-promise. As a sincere, heartfelt thank you for finally fudging off and dying." The hallucination offers a pinky with an extra knuckle. "Come on. Make yourself useful for once."

"No," John chokes out. He can't seem to stop shaking his head as he takes another step backward, out of what's left of the hall and over the ankle-level bump that's all that's left of a wall. Crabdad takes a rolling step forward and belatedly John yanks the lusus back with all his strength, fear burning in his lungs like cold fire.

"I ma reyv deapitooinpsd ahtt ouy didn't foolw oyur incdotigoinn. But I upspsoe htere's nnthgoi orf ti." His handler doesn't appear fazed by the sea lusus hissing at him, icy blue eyes pinning John in place. "Are uyo gniog to maek a ufss baquot tish? Who acn I veer eb orpud fo uyo gaain?" His expression is forbidding and stern, and he shakes his head in disappointment as he starts walking toward John again.

John doesn't understand, but it feels like a punch in the gut to hear it. Like something in his hindbrain recognizes the intent behind conditioned phrasing, even when he can't put the words together. "Alwysa so stubnnbor. Why ddi I wtase os yman esary no this..." his handler adds, and it leaves John miserable and terrified at the same time. His grip on Crabdad tightens when the lusus whistles a third challenge, but his fingers feel distant and weak, his hands shaking so hard he can barely keep his grip. He nedes - needs - he needs to get Crabdda away from here. Crabdad. He endes ot egt ihm sohmewere fesa or owh onwsk hawt his nalhderliwod -

"Let me," the Trickster insists. John can't figure out who to look at now, eyes darting to the side as the Trickster takes his wrist and lifts one of his hand off Crabdad to try to hook their pinkies together. "No one will care if you're gone, trust me."

"Nohj," his dad says, clicking his tongue in disdain - and then an entire couch slams down on top of his head.

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John stares, forgetting to blink for a few seconds, then looks up from his handler's new couch-hat. The eyes are the same, too much the same, and he struggles to push through the bubbling hysteria to look at Jane like she isn't just his handler all over again. "Rea uoy arlight?" she asks simply, studying John and nudging a hand that lies next to her foot aside.

Is any of this even real?
"I dno't wnok," John says. His head feels hollow, and oddly quiet; when he loosens his hold on Crabdad the lusus stomps forward and starts chattering at his unconscious handler with a vengeance, patting Jane approvingly on the shoulder with a claw. She just looks amused.

Then she walks toward John, brushing dust from her hands with a brisk clap. "Veeryinhgt eemss onfucsd6e," she says, without batting an eye at the scrambled result that comes out of her mouth. "Utby uo sho1erbm hwat uoy ldo1 me. Yno dno't ened ot iltse ot etmh anmeryo. Uyo, dan Ejak, and em - w3 cna do ahwt ew wnta." By the time she comes to a stop barely a foot from John, he can see the intensity in her eyes. "Nda if hts nma rstie to urht yuo, you hurt him back," she says, in a rush of clarity, and when John breathes his lungs feel clear for the first time since he woke up this morning.

BE: ha, HA! try to scramble my heir, will you? suck it suck it suck it!

BE: john, please tell me you're listening now... :T

Again. John scrubs his face with his hands. His knees feel like they've locked up, and when he seizes Jane in a hug it's 50% because he's so damn happy to see her, and 50% because his legs have forgotten how to leg. Holy crap.

"That's a relief. I wondered how long that bullhonky was going to last," Jane says, touching her fingers to her throat. "I mean, it didn't stop me from coming to investigate who the culprit behind all this was, but it was annoying. Do you remember this afternoon?"

"Not all that clearly, no," John says. What happened? Breeze? Why is everything all crazy?

BE: because that bard of rage is losing his shit for some reason!

BE: and since he's a bard, his specialty is inspiring madness and heightened emotions in others, so everyone else lost their shit right along with him.

BE: he's massively overpowered, john. [Babelon] is a god tier fraymotif for Rage players that he shouldn't even be able to use!

Oh, that's awesome. Really encouraging. Is there any way to turn it off?

BE: i'm trying to do it manually, but i can only make things better right where you are; he's strong. [Clear the Air] might work on the whole valley, but it'll dispel every other fraymotif in range at the same time.

That's a bad thing?

BE: yeah, duh. dave's got at least four going right now to keep the people fighting the Horrorterror from getting pulverized, sooo...

"So we need to help them," John says aloud, as his brain finally clocks in for the day. Jane looks at him sharply, then past him at whatever's going on through the giant hole in the building. John can't remember his senses closing in so much, but it takes real effort to push past the lingering tendrils of fear and guilt that kept him from noticing anyone and anything except his handler to sweep out through the complex again and see where all the others have got to. He thinks only fifteen minutes have passed since Eridan went thermonuclear, but he was definitely unconscious (BE: dead, john, you were pretty dead...) for a while there, so there's a gap he can't fill in. He would kill for Dave's internal clock right now, because he gets the feeling that he wasted more time trying to ignore the
Trickster hallucination than he realized.

But almost everyone's outside now - the only people he can't pin down are...Aradia and Tavros? Maybe? Rose and Roxy are still inside the building, heading the opposite direction from the Horrorterror, and that's probably a good plan. The best plan, actually.

"Yes," Jane agrees, bringing him back to the present. "What about this one?" She nods her head toward Samuel's sprawled form. "He's regrettably good at hi-jinks, apparently. Can the lusus guard him, or...?"

John chances a look around, biting his lip. There's no sign of the Trickster (like it was never there at all (and it wasn't, was it?)) and the greyish, humid miasma of grim-something or other curdling the air somehow feels less distant. The Breeze does a good job swooping the worst of it away, though the smell of blood and brine filters through.

No, what the Breeze is more focused on clearing out is the unreal, delirious mirage of insanity that was warping everything. John glimpses it still where the Breeze's sphere of influence ends - a hazy, glittering slant where the walls don't line up quite right, huge chunks of the floor that look smeared rather than shattered by the explosion. How is anyone functioning in this? Forget John's resident mindfuckery personified, the others are gonna start growing crazy split personalities of their own at this rate.

BE: actually, i think they're okay so far.

*What.*

BE: that's not really what [Babelon] does. it just scrambles communications. no one can understand each other unless they've got a really strong hold on their perception. sign language, talking, writing - nothing's gonna work.

*So why was I seeing things?*

BE: our luck is non-existent. also did i mention the massively overpowered part? but you're right, something about this feels really off. it's like the worst of the distortion piled up on you all at once.

BE: lucky you have me around to save your butt!

"I don't know. Crabdad is...Crabdad," John says, looking at the lusus in question hesitantly. Crabdad, busy scolding Samuel, starts waving its claws around. He grimaces at Jane. "He might be able to keep an eye on him for a while, but my handler is - tricky. I'd be worried about Crabdad getting hurt." Or losing interest and wandering off to investigate something or hunt for John or Karkat. Never mind [Babelon], having only Karkat able to properly talk to Crabdad nixed this plan before it even began.

"It'll only get hurt if the handler wakes up to hurt him," Jane points out. Then, patting John on the shoulder, she walks back to Samuel and kicks him in the side of the head. John's not expecting it and he flinches, but it seems to knock his handler even more unconscious, rather than waking him up. "Watch him. If he wakes up, sit your tuchus on his head until he changes his mind and goes back to sleep," Jane tells Crabdad, snapping her index finger out to point down at the man. To John's honest amazement, Crabdad salutes her with a claw, and then climbs up on top of the couch like this is Karkat's living room, letting its claws and chin hang over the side so it can stare down at the unconscious man.

"I think you need to teach Karkat how to do that. Crabdad never listens to a word he says," John
says, fascinated, while Jane sniffs and digs through her pocket for a folded up, unidentifiable red cube. "You'd be his hero."

"Maybe later. Maybe not." Jane walks past John and he follows her around the edge of a hole that seems to lead down to a basement area, now clogged with rubble. The Breeze sticks close, shoving away the not-song of the fraymotif before it can reach their ears. "Now, what we're up against?"

John assumes that Jane's memory of covering potential nonsense at the meeting is sketchy as his own. "A Horrorterror channeled through a forsaken fish troll, and an evil clown guy with the power of Rage. Probably." Neither of whom John can think of how to counter, right this second. Ugh. Would Doctor Lalonde have extra void bracers for Eridan somewhere in the facility, or was that another thing that got skipped over?

"You give my skepticism attribute a workout, buster." Jane goes to stomp right through a puddle of cloudy grey slime that's congealed on the ground as they emerge through the gap in the outer wall, and John hastily lifts them over it to flattened grass that looks a little less likely to swallow their feet whole.

The more obvious problem is, of course, the giant elder god oozing grimness and horror all over the place. It looks so different from the way Rose's Horrorterror looked in New York: a massive, gelatinous bell floats forty feet in the air, gleaming with a sickly inner light, and blooming and fluttering in pulses as it eddies past the parking lot. Twining tentacles with thorns form a ring around the rim of the bell, but in contrast, the longest tentacles trail along the ground like an afterthought, pitch black limbs with feathers that brush over the nearest car and crackle with purplish-black energy that makes the metal seize up and melt like soft candle wax. As John watches, all of the limbs twitch and lash out in an erratic wave of motion, knocking someone back - Kanaya, John realizes, sucking in a breath - and splaying out in a curtain that radiates out over the ground, making it all the harder for the fighters on the ground to approach.

The contrast between the sickly, pale sheen of the umbrella and the splotchy darkness of the tentacles and thorns strikes John as kinda strange. Which is not something he thinks you're supposed to think about Horrorterrors, seeing as how they're strange by nature. But it doesn't look properly grimdark, and it doesn't look the way Dave and Karkat and Feferi described the grimlight god that possessed Feferi in the Arctic. Worse, there's no sign of Eridan - even Rose's possessed body with its glowy eyes was visible in New York. Could Eridan be stuck in that giant, amorphous umbrella part?

BE: wait. crap. hang on hang on -

He doesn't get time to ask the Breeze what it means before madness slams through the wind and sends John's vision spinning. For a second, all he can hear is -

-screaming, they're all screaming -

- and then the Breezebuffets the renewed wave of [Babelon] away from them with an effort that shakes John. When he opens his eyes to something that isn't sickening distortion, Jane is down on one knee, her jaw tight as she punches the ground and lurches back upright.

BE: i don't think i can do that again...i feel kinda sick...

John feels woozy, too, is the really nerve-racking thing. While Jane pulls herself together and
smooths her face into a cold mask of indifference, jamming her thumb against an indentation in the side of the red box to make a familiar fork specibus expand, John gulps fast to try to keep the sudden, dry edge of nausea from overwhelming him. *Is something wrong with you? With us? Urgh...*

**BE:** look, i help you and guide you, but you're still the heir here, doofus! the strength i have to draw on comes right out of you, and this fraymotif already got you good, so we don't have reserves to draw on.

**BE:** even the post-revivification boost can't help much since keeping [Babelon] out of your head leads to constant drain. seriously, i recommend you shut that bard down, fast, or this is gonna get all messy...

"There," Jane says, leveling her forkkind to their right, and John swallows back bile one last time before looking at the commotion going on in the opposite direction from the Horrorterror. It only looks like two people, at first, one identifiable because Equius is huge, and the other wearing a floppy green trenchcoat that John recognizes as Nepeta's. The two of them are right up along the shore of the lake. Which seems counterintuitive to the little voice in John's head that can recite the Huntress and the Crusher's fighting stats from heart, and knows that both close-combat fighters won't be able to touch the Horrorterror from that distance. Then a third figure jolts out into sight from out of nowhere, looming behind Nepeta with bared teeth. Only the greenblood's cat-like reflexes let her duck and dart out of the way of a swinging club.

John distinctly remembers Gamzee arriving. Which is weird, considering the rest of the afternoon after the purpleblood showed up is a very obvious blur. But he remembers that stilted way Gamzee popped into being to scoop Karkat up in a creepily long-lasting hug, and the way the purpleblood was unexpectedly compliant when they'd thought he'd be the most obvious problem child, right up there with Vriska in terms of potential aggression. But he followed their group to the lounge room like a floppy scarecrow, his blinks slow and languid and not threatening at all.

Now, John's thinking they should have stuck to their first instinct, because Gamzee fights Nepeta and Equius with a brutal, feral intensity, [Babelon] throbbing palpably around the three fighting trolls in a wave of screeching sound John can *almost* hear. He's just as frenzied as Jade described him and when one of the clubs in his hands slams into the dirt instead of Equius's leg, the ground subsides into a sinkhole that Nepeta has to scramble around in order to launch herself claws first at the juggalo's flank. How Nepeta and Equius are on their feet is a mystery for the ages - they have to be getting a full blast of all the insanity in the air right now.

"Where did you get that, by the way?" John remembers to ask Jane, while he's switching between staring at the Horrorterror and at Gamzee.

Jane breaks her strife-face long enough to give him a tiny, crooked smile. "Your Doctor needs to hide her confiscated weaponry better. Don't worry, I didn't return any of it to Jake." Then she searches his face, and nods, her eyes gone frosty. "...What do you think? Split up?"

Well, John definitely needs to choose *someone* to focus on. The Horrorterror is big and mean and obvious - but now he's realized it's just Nepeta and Equius squaring off against Gamzee, and something about that setup leaves his stomach tight with anxiety. *Horrorterror, or Rage-y guy. Which one first?*

**BE:** you decide!

*But who's in more danger here?!* He can't tell - his eyes go to the Horrorterror - then back to Nepeta and Equius, where Equius just got punched back into the lake - but *Karkat* is over there helping to fight the huge jellyfish Eridan turned into -
Jane makes her own decision while John is still torn. "I'm going to help fight the zoologically
dubious fauna," she announces, spinning her fork and eyeing the grimjelly speculatively. "Be right
back."

"Wait, are you sure?"

"I know what I'm about, John." Then Jane sprints out of the circulating Breeze without another
word. John chokes back a warning when she remembers to skirt around the trail of glossy acid left
behind in the Horrorterror's wake.

And she's probably right. Gamzee's fraymotif is a serious issue, but a Horrorterror is a Horrorterror.
With Rose out of the fight for probably as long as it takes for Doctor Lalonde to get the void wards
back up and running, John needs to help out. Dave and Jade are both over there, using their powers
so fast that John has trouble keeping track of them, but the two of them might not be enough, and the
trolls helping out are running a serious risk of getting smushed by putting themselves in the line of
fire when they're not god-tiered. John casts a fleeting look over his shoulder one last time, to at least
make sure Nepeta and Equius can hold their own -

Gamzee reaches out and snaps Nepeta's arm with a casual twitch of his hand, her wordless howl of
pain turning into a jagged mess that's somehow more distorted than any of the scrambled shouts
coming from the people fighting the Horrorterror. Equius drags himself out of the shallows of the
lake with an answering roar of anger, even as Gamzee raises his club and smashes it into Nepeta so
hard that John feels both her lungs puncture and collapse like they're his own. Gamzee drops her and
blinks out of sight before Equius can tackle him, but the damage is done, olive green blood erupting
from Nepeta's mouth as she crumples to her knees. "No!" Equius screams, wet hair swinging wildly
as he scrambles to her side.

Gamzee reappears, a juggling club already in motion. "Equius, move!" John yells, but it catches
Equius right in the temple before either of them can react, snapping Equius's head to the side with a
crunch and oh god. Oh, god.

Looks like he's not fighting a Horrorterror today.

Because Gamzee looks up, blue and green blood splattered across a hard smile, and fixes his eyes on
John, feverish and too-focused with rage.

"You," he says, a horrible expression creeping across his face. It's part hate, part grief, and part
something else that John couldn't put a name to if you paid him. "YOU."
John can count up the things they know for sure about Gamzee on one hand. Two hands, if he sneaks in some of the sketchier rumors he's heard tossed around on the internet about Juggaloco. He's a game player, a purpleblooded troll with a hair-trigger temper, and his psychic powers focus on fear and anger and general craziness. He's been trying to track down Karkat since Jade met him that second time - maybe longer than that - but then again, that might just have been part of the instinct that makes game players seek out others from their session.

So John's kinda drawing a blank as to how he's lost his shit *so bad* that killing people seems like a good idea. Eridan said he and Vriska and Gamzee all got a little murdery toward the end of their
session, but Eridan isn't exactly a trustworthy source half the time, and his best explanation for the sudden, synchronized 3X murder spree was to shrug and blame 'the violence inherent in the system.'

Surely something has to have set this off. There's something John's missing here, something lost this afternoon to the choppy mess of insanity that got snarled up in everyone's heads.

Are you absolutely, totally sure you can't tell if he's god-tier or not?

BE: do you really think now is the right time to ask questions like that?!

John spins out of the way of an in-coming club, and figures now isn't the best time to get in a mental argument with his aspect. He's adding a few more items to that list of things he knows - Gamzee fights like a wild animal, dogging John's heels when he dodges and using his creepy teleportation trick to keep up whenever John tries to put some distance between them. He's almost too aggressive; it feels personal. There hasn't been another uptick in the barrage of [Babelon] rolling through the air, but it could happen any second now and John'll be screwed.

It's all he can do to keep dodging, though. If he switches his focus to check how the people fighting the Horrorterror are doing for even a fraction of a second, he loses track of Gamzee's jolting movements and has to dissolve into air to get to safety.

BE: he's strong enough to act like it, which is what we should actually be worrying about, here.

What's really concerning is that Equius has stopped breathing. Gamzee catches up when John freezes in horror, and there's not enough time to dodge; John blocks the attack like he's been trained to, but the force behind it almost drives him to his knees.

He doesn't have a weapon on him, doesn't want to attempt digging around in a sylladex that he's not even sure is there. But dancing around like this won't do anything but wear John down. I'm gonna try talking to him. Fighting him's not getting us anywhere.

BE: oh god...

"Will you - ufh! cut it out? Listen, can we just talk about this for a second?!" John shouts, before he falls into the wind and rushes away from the club aimed at his head, reforming a safe (safe being a really questionable word for it) distance behind the purpleblood. He raises his hands to show empty palms when Gamzee rears around to give him another death glare. "You're upset about something, right? But that's no reason to go around hurting your friends! Nepeta and Equius, they didn't do anything to hurt you! Just breathe, okay?"

"You think I'm gonna motherfucking fall for that one?!
Gamzee spits, the words rattling around in John's brain in a way that feels uncomfortably literal. The troll sounds even more pissed than before, so, uh. Whoops. "You're TRANSPARENT AS HELL."

John's starting to lose his temper a little, too. Or maybe he's just at the end of his rope after this shitty day. He only remembers a quarter of what happened, and it's still irredeemably shitty. "Look, do you see what is wrong with this picture?" he asks, exasperated as he points at the giant jellyfish from hell over to their left. "That! That is happening right this second! Can you at least consider not acting like a massive douche, and direct your dumb ragefit at the Horrorterror instead?"

"Who do you think you are?" is all Gamzee says, his claws shaking so hard that the clubs in his hands tremble. "What do you think you know as all up and regards to MY RAGE. The clubs shatter without warning as the troll's hands spasm, falling to the ground in jagged chunks. Oooonkay, John thinks talking is definitely making this worse. How angry does this guy have to
be to break his own weapons?

He yanks a new specibus out a second later, though, and just when John thinks things can't get any more morbidly surreal -

"Hey, wait, that's mine!" he says, scandalized, as Gamzee hefts the Warhammer of Zillyhoo without bothering to properly behold its glory. The purpleblood vanishes and reappears right in front of John, swinging the hammerkind like a mallet, and lets out a roar of fury when John (just barely) dissolves in time.

"What ain't yours, motherfucker?" A hand clamps down on John's forearm the moment he resolidifies - when he looks down, startled, he could swear Gamzee's arm is detached from the rest of him before the rest of the troll catches up. The Breeze whooshes him out again, but when John turns solid he gasps at the shooting pain that riots up his arm, mottled black bruises wrapped around his arm. "WHAT HERE HAVE YOU NOT ALREADY TAKEN?!" Gamzee screams after him.

That...what does that even mean?! "I don't know what you're talking about, holy crap!" John yells back. He's floating twenty feet up now, and barely gets more than a split second's warning before Gamzee snaps in above him with a blood-curdling howl. John dodges the familiar blue warhammer and feels his head throb when Gamzee lands on the ground hard enough to create another sinkhole. "Jeez, you can have it, whatever, just stop trying to hit people with it!"

"WHY YOU?!" For a second, John could swear that's not rage - and it's like they're having two different conversations here, to the point where he wonders whether his mind is getting mixed up again and he just hasn't noticed yet. Then Gamzee lashes out and John's busy jumping over the wild swing. He tries to yank the hammer out of the troll's hands with a twist of wind, and nearly takes the flat end of the hammer to an exposed elbow.

BE: uh, john?

"A little busy!" he says, forgetting to think it to himself quietly.

BE: but there isn't even a quest bed here!

Okay, so now there's another conversation going on that John doesn't understand. "Wha-?" he starts to ask, when the Breeze yanks him around more forcefully than usual, a clumsy spin that drags him away from Gamzee and makes him look back in the direction of Equius and Nepeta's crumpled form.

He's just in time to see a dark blue spirograph flower out around Equius's body, each layer of rotating curves rising up in flat, lotus-shaped layers of light.

Then it all retracts back in on Equius, vanishing into a blue-black void that swarms out to swallow everything around them.

--

Equius wakes up. Golden light flares off the buildings around him, lancing right through his sunglasses, and he grimaces as he throws an arm over them and scrunches his eyes shut until the moment passes. His head feels as though it's about to split open.

When he feels sufficient time has passed, he pulls his arm away, squinting.

A dark red form stands between him and the worst of the blinding light, now. He thinks he recognizes the spiraling coil of those horns, but it feels like something from a dream, or one of his old
nightmares.

"Sorry about all this," a bright, cheery voice tells him, as the dark figure raises its foot. "But we have to do it manually to get the timing right, I'm afraid."

And then the foot slams down against his head, crushing it against the golden road.

He hadn't known Aradia was so...strong.

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The announcement rings like a clarion call in the Medium; here, it plays through Sollux's husktop's speakers, blasting as loud as the maximum volume will allow.

[Attention: The HEIR OF VOID is risen]

"Htas't hwta rey'ou odign?" Terezi says. "Atht god-erit ithgn. Huu..." There's a note of slow realization in her voice, but Sollux doesn't even pretend to understand her, too busy typing furiously in attempt to get Aradia to give him a straight answer.

TA: AA equiiu2 ii2 done nep i2n't wtf ii2 wrong on your end
TA: AA?
TA: aradiia?
AA: oh dear
TA: when you 2ay that kiind of thiing iit concern2 me greatly ii hope you know that
AA: ahhh, this is something i thought might happen.
AA: don't worry about nepeta! just be ready to trigger for terezi! :)
TA: wait what -

"Mi ngoig tefar Irvska. Tihs ttebre wokr, Losxul!"

He looks up in time to watch Terezi stab herself in the chest with part of her canekind, grinning at him with sharp teeth while a gush of teal spills down the front of her shirt.

TA: II HATE ALL OF YOU 2O MUCH
o: Really? This void is just becoming tiresome, now.
TA: FUCK OFF FUCK OFF FUCK OFF NO ONE LIIKE2 YOU DOUCHE
> block net.socketexception: (o)
run program? y/n
> Y
> Y GODDAMMIIT

--

It takes a while before John realizes he hasn't gone blind. There's something familiar in the pervasive void that ripples out around Equius - a presence that's nothing but aware at the same time, and it's not until the Breeze lets out a tiny noise that John manages to shake his head loose from the muffling fog, as the aspect of Void wraps itself around its Heir like the Breeze has around John. When Equius finishes levering himself upright, it's hard for John to look at the troll straight on without darkness crawling across his eyes, forcing him to turn his head to the side and watch Equius rise up without actually looking at him.

But he should probably be keeping an eye on Gamzee, anyway, considering the circumstances. Yeeeah.
Only the thing is, when John figures out where Gamzee's standing, the troll looks transfixed, motionless and frozen right where John last saw him instead of trying to sneak up on anyone, his mouth twisted into jagged grin. Like this is exactly what he wanted -

...Huh.

Wait.

Ohhhh!

John opens his mouth to share what he just figured out with the world - it's so obvious! - when Equius's clothes finish dyeing themselves blue, a long, dark blue hood draping down along the line of his back. The symbol on the front of his shirt is almost the same as Jade's, but not quite. "You hurt Nepeta," he hisses, the sound distant and hard to focus on through the cotton that seems to have mysteriously clogged up John's ears. "You killed her again."

"Had to get it right. You're welcome, Eqbro," Gamzee says, dreamily, all the growl gone out of his voice. He looks like he's on top of the world, eyes searing hot with triumph as he stares at Nepeta, lying limp on the ground.

John thinks he gets it, and as much as he disagrees with the methods (because what a stupid idea, holy shit!), it's a relief to think that this isn't just some pointless rampage. The sudden lackadaisyicality goes over like a sack of bricks with Equius, who roars and charges at Gamzee.

Which. Oh jeez. John should probably say something before Gamzee goes off again, or Equius strangles him with his bare hands. Neither of which would be a really pleasant option when there's still a Horrorterror bobbing around in the background. "But she's not dead!" John blurts out, because he figures pointing this out should probably be a thing that happens sooner rather than later.

Now he has two angry trolls staring at him; Equius skids to a halt, fists clenched with a determined aura of nothing wrapped around them, but Gamzee jolts, too, which is somewhat more surprising. John straightens his back, looking at Equius instead of Gamzee, because even with the void, it's easier. "She's - she's still alive. Right now," he says, gesturing helplessly. Not for long, not when there's a growing puddle of blood filling up her lungs, but John can feel Nepeta struggling to breathe around the wreckage where her ribcage used to be. Not dead yet.

It's funny, but not funny at all, how Gamzee turns distraught in the space of three seconds. The purpleblood's face goes as pale as if he was about to faint, even as relief dawns on Equius's face like the sun. Equius turns on a dime, shouting "Nepeta!" - and John is pretty sure he remembers how well that ended last time.

This time, he's ready for it; when Gamzee clutches his head and snaps out of his daze, the smile lost in a savage snarl, John's already clapped his hands around the Warhammer of Zillyhoo, making it fall away into a knot of breezes in his palm.

Gamzee lunges anyway, weapon or no weapon. +10 points for effort, -1 bajillion for putting that effort towards trying to murder people. Using the Breeze to trip him up only buys Equius a few extra seconds; the purpleblood just reappears two feet to the left of where John knocked his feet out from under him, upright and ready to fling himself at Nepeta again.

"Stop it! You can't just run around killing people!" John yells. Which might not be the smartest thing he's ever done, but it makes Gamzee whip around to snarl at him, the sclera of his eyes gone molten red, and as long as Gamzee's looking at John with weird, inexplicable loathing, he's not trying to kill people to make them hit god tier. Sure, it worked with Equius for some mysterious reason, but! Still!
"You know MOTHERFUCKING FUCK ALL," Gamzee says, and John swallows on a wave of nausea that blasts right through the Breeze to reach him. He fights through the wooziness in time to spy Gamzee snap into place behind Equius, like the worst kind of déjà vu. Equius has Nepeta in his arms; even when he notices Gamzee's presence and flinches, he's not going to be able to move in time.

John tackles Gamzee from the side. One of his feet is mostly wind floating along with the Breeze, which causes the weirdest sensation when he tries to take a step and the wind shoves him along where his foot should be. Hitting Gamzee's like slamming into a wall, but it gives Equius and Nepeta space to move. "Go!" John calls, when Equius doesn't run. "Get her to one of the doctors!" A regular person would already be too far gone, but none of them are regular people, are they? If Gamzee would stop trying to murder Nepeta for five dang seconds, maybe they can avoid the dead thing for a while longer. Even if -

John tries not to let the creepy game logic sway him. Dying to get stronger shouldn't be inevitable the way Sburb wants to make it; killing game players on purpose to make them stronger might make a twisted kind of sense if you were desperate, but if he starts thinking Gamzee has the right idea, John's pretty sure he's screwed.

Maybe he's biased because despite everything that got fucked up in the human game session, they all had the horrible luxury of dying due to forces outside their control. Not even Dave had to kill himself to pull it off, in the end.

Then Equius nods, a cutting jerk of his chin, and the Void blooms around him like a disk of look away. John's not entirely sure where the two trolls go - even his sense of their breathing, Equius's strong and Nepeta's failing, can't seem to follow their escape. He can only hope they're heading in the right direction.

This unfortunately leaves John alone with Gamzee, whose enraged growl is currently taking place more inside John's head than out loud. Nominally John tries to hold the troll back, to keep him from using his teleporty trick to jump right after Equius and Nepeta, but then a hand comes up and digs claws into John's upper arm, which is not good on so many levels. "Who do you think you are?" the troll hisses, claws sinking in deeper. Except when John looks down, Gamzee is just gripping his arm. The pain goes bone deep, but there isn't any blood. "THEY NEED TO -"

"They don't need to die! They don't have to be god tier!" John gasps out, yanking his arm free by turning it into air. Even then, the pain lingers. He shoves Gamzee away instead, taking the full brunt of the purpleblood's glare as he prods at his aching arm to assess the damage. "I said, I understand that you're trying to help, but you can't just kill people without permission!"

...Hang on, maybe he should rephrase that. "You can't kill people in general!" John tries again. He can't tell if making eye contact with Gamzee is helping or hurting - it gives him a splintering, crawling headache, but that's pretty much standard issue for John these days, so what does he know. Gamzee's some kind of psychic; maybe letting him poke claws around in John's brain isn't smart, but it's not like John has any defense against it. "We're all in danger, and you're trying to help." John really hopes he's right about that, at least. If he's wrong, and Gamzee's just on a murder spree for fun - "But doing this when there's a Horrorterror to deal with is just gonna get people dead permanently."

Seriously, if something happens to Karkat...if Equius going god tier was only a one-time fluke, and Karkat doesn't come back...
Thinking about Karkat is a mistake. But to be fair, John hasn't realized what Gamzee's major malfunction is, just yet. He gets it really fast when Gamzee tackles him with a noise that sounds like nothing either a human or troll should be physically capable of making, pinning John to the ground with norah te brsut fo -

"HE DIDN'T EVEN LIKE YOU." Strange echoes overlap Gamzee's words, droning in John's head. "HE MOTHERFUCKING HATED ALL OF YOU, SO WHY WOULD HE WANT YOU!"

The Breeze funnels through his thoughts like a frantic wind tunnel, but thinking in words hurts. "He who?" John asks, squinting in confusion. He's not sure what Gamzee's face looks like right now, other than that there's a lot of teeth involved and they are wayyy too close to John.

He is in no way, shape, or form ready for the response he gets. "KARKAT," Gamzee says, like a furious sob, pressing claws to the side of John's head and hiccupping with his whole body. John has lost track of the moments of realization he's had today, but this is the one that guts him.

And he should have known when he had all the pieces in front of him: Jade's report that Gamzee was seeking out Karkat, Gamzee holding Karkat earlier today like he was the only lifeline he had left. Because John's done the same thing.

"Oh god," he says, while this sinks in. "Crap. Shit." No, this one deserves a - "Fuck."

"Why you?" Gamzee says. Some of his voices are screaming; others are soft and low as a croon. But in exchange his face has shifted back into focus, all those teeth out of sight behind lips that have stopped smiling, eyes a red-tinged orange, glassy and feverish as they demand answers. "Why. You."

How is he supposed to answer that? "I don't know," John says, uselessly, trying to drag his thoughts back in order. "I - it just -"

It just happened. How can he explain how he became friends with Karkat, then they just kind of fell into moirallegiance along the way, John trying to sort through his own messed emotions because he didn't always remember what being happy felt like with all the things wrong in his head, Karkat convinced it was serendipity with a stubborn romanticism that shook John time and time again. He keeps forgetting the psychic part. Which is a really dumb, obvious thing to forget, when it keeps happening and thinking the wrong thing's most likely gonna get him killed. Gamzee keens, the same sobbing wail that John heard earlier pulsing through [Babelon] like a heartbeat. There's something sharp jammed in John's throat, and a funny knot of distress that yanks tight in his chest when another full-body hiccup rocks Gamzee in his grief.

It makes him do something stupid. But today's already been full of stupid and weirdness and crazy, all jumbling up John's head when it really didn't need the extra help. Maybe none of today was any more real than a hallucination dreamed up by Gamzee and set loose on them all in their sleep.

Or maybe he's just screwed up in the head beyond repair. This is a pretty real possibility.

Either way, he has a hiccupping, distraught troll in arm's reach, and the only way he knows how to make the fluttering knot in his stomach go away in situations like this is to drag the troll in question into a hug and shoosh him until the shaking stops.
The effect is painful and immediate. "**NO!**" The claws prickling along the side of John's head rake down, tearing open gashes in their haste to shove John away. His back slams hard against the ground, but he's got a strong enough grip around Gamzee's neck to drag him down too. "**You're not him,**" Gamzee insists, while John mashes his face against the nearest shoulder and tries not to think about the mouthful of teeth inches from his neck. "**I'll motherfucking TEAR YOU APART, you fucking -**"

"I know, okay! I know!" John says. There's a heavy claw pressed hard against his ribs, images of what happened to Nepeta whirling through his head, memories of another hand prodding broken ribs into painful new configurations for laughs, as the Breeze screams for them to go. "We didn't remember - none of us remembered, and we made a mess of it, and I'm sorry! Gamzee, please, just breathe, okay?"

Gamzee hiccups, or maybe snarls, or maybe makes some ungodly combination of the two sounds. A hand buries itself in John's hair and yanks his head back and away.

But there's an astonishing lack of murderdeath happening. "**You're. Not. Him,**" Gamzee repeats, his breath cold on John's throat.

John stares up at the grey sky past Gamzee's horns and then shifts one of his arms, hesitates, and presses the palm of his hand against Gamzee's cheek. It comes away wet, cold tears streaking down the heel of his wrist. "Then we'll go find him," he says, his head weirdly clear. There's been so much buzzing and shrieking and jangling in his mind today that the sudden absence leaves him at a loss. "We'll go find Karkat."

"Why?" The hand holding John down hasn't moved, though the claws in his hair relax fractionally. Another chill exhale makes him twitch, but even with the room to move John doesn't try to drop his chin. Preoccupied with making the Breeze sweep out to check for Karkat, when the only thing his aspect wants to do is yank John to safety, he brushes a thumb against another damp tear that rolling down from the corner of Gamzee's eye.

It's a great question, though. Why is he doing this?

For that matter, what has he done?

**What has he done?**

The Breeze locks in on Karkat, and John doesn't stop to think before he jumps them there. He doesn't even know if he *can* take Gamzee along, given just how *weird* this guy is, but when his awareness comes back together as a body, Gamzee's there, too.

They both seriously misjudge the landing, though.

Karkat has enough time to look up and shriek before they land on top of him.

--

Not sure what to make of the puppet gore fest up on the roof. Poking around the fluffy innards of a disemboweled toy ain't exactly on the top of his to-do list, when there's a new many-angled god bobbing through the air in jellyfish form.

But they've all been played for suckers, and that shit can't be allowed to fly, here. Bro rocks back on his heels, hunkered down over the scattered pieces of Lil Cal, and wonders if he should be thankful or pissed. Picked up Cal ages ago, sure, but it's only since he got a handle on puppetkind and added
his own creations to his strife deck that he's realized just how...not-right that first puppet felt. Found it
while he was on the run, ducking Lalonde and Crew alike, and hell if he wasn't desperate enough to
see that brilliant, chattering grin in the window and think that using it as a weapon was a good idea.
Never could shake the unnerving idea that the puppet had been waiting, just for him, just at the
moment he didn't have the resources to keep fighting on his own, with a new scar tearing open down
his chest whenever he had to fight with swordkind, and Dave strapped to his back, tugging on his
hair with noiseless cries for attention that never stopped hurting.

Couldn't let Dave get dragged into a fight again, not so young and untrained. Not when Dave came
out of that warped, crackling blur without a voice.

And so Cal. Lil Cal, that sometimes moved when Bro wasn't looking. Lil Cal, draping itself over his
shoulders at a gesture, beaming with a painted smile that never once dulled. Lil Cal, who watched
with glossy eyes, leaving Bro half-sure it was about to wink at him.

He only just now realized he'd lost control of it when it took off this afternoon. Before, it's only been
a few incidents here and there - waking up to find Cal sitting on the wrong shelf, or positioned so
that when he checks the security cameras one of the kitchen cams is fully taken up by the plush
embrace of orange arms.

Something happened in Houston, in that weird troll's apartment, before she and the carapacian took
off. When the world stopped breaking, Lil Cal was halfway across the room, plastering itself across
the face of a Felt member, and when Bro tried to yank it off from a distance, the puppet wouldn't
move. Lil Cal came back - eventually - but the drive back to Washington was hellish. Between trying
to keep Cal still and keep Oriole from noticing the silent struggle, it's been hell.

And now this. Funny that Bro didn't rightly notice the haunting, knowing presence in Lil Cal until it
was gone. But whoever decided to go to town on the puppet did the job good. There's nothing left
here, not even a scrap of a soul left in the strange, oozing blood that's mixed in with the fabric and
stuffing. Knowing Dave, he'd make some punkass comment like 'ding dong, the puppet's dead.'

Should probably feel something other than relief. But god, is he relieved. Maybe he could ignore all
the warning signs - or be made to ignore them, a more troubling idea - while Cal was in one piece.
But the puppet's eyes have burst like grapes, more rainbow-laced blood oozing from eye jelly that
should have been wood and paint, and good fucking riddance. Feels like he's the one whose strings
have been cut loose, and now he's free to pull a lighter out of his pocket and set this shit ablaze.

He waits until everything's gone up - some of the blood-matted stuffing takes a long while to catch,
damp as it is - and then picks up the carapacian he pulled out of the vents with him and waits until it
sits on his shoulders for the ride down.

WV: that thing was evil and bad and you should probably not have touched it. very unhygienic.

"How would you know?" The carapacian jabs him in the clavicle with sharp heels as admonition.

WV: it has the same blood as the Lord of Time! the prime example of the evils of absolute
multiversal despotism!

WV: trust me, i have read books on human mannerisms and hygiene - you should wash your pale
flesh hands. as your democratically elected mayor, i insist.

Somehow, mentioning that he wasn't here for a vote doesn't seem like it'll make a difference.
"Familiar with many multiversal lords?"
WV: just the one. i was there when he came to destroy the session, before the silly children heroes decided to scratch it.

WV: i don't think it works like that, though. he's probably already always been here.

The carapacian lets out a thrum of green energy that feels like it leaves a sunburn across the nape of his neck. Between this little dude and the blind wolf, Lalonde better be right about space powers not giving off lethal amounts of radiation. Nearest room that's intact is the one with the terminal hub, which would be a good place to drop the tiny alien dude before heading out to deal with the Horrorterror situation. People are screaming out there, kids are screaming out there, which means shit's spiraling out of control. Like it was ever under control to begin with. "Here," he says, and the little carapacian's already in the process of huffing and untangling claws from hair when Bro opens the door and a kid stabs herself in the chest.

Today's just been an off day. A helpful nudge sends the little carapacian stumbling toward the Queen, and by the time the troll girl falls, teal-smeared steel sticking obscenely through the back of her jacket, he's got her by the shoulder, assessing the damage. Random ass stab wounds are his specialty.

Problem is, the girl is good - before he even lays hand on the cane handle, he knows she's gone; he can fix a lot of shit, but she knew exactly where to aim to punch the blade through her heart. Troll organs are just a little off-center compared to human insides, and she aimed straight for the atria, angled to take out other chambers and arteries along the way. Blade's still in the wound which is why the floor isn't a bloodbath, but the edges look ragged, like she twisted it mid-stab, and it's too much damage all at once. Hard to say whether it's profuse hemorrhaging or shock that gets her first, but either way she's gone before Bro finishes absorbing it all. None of these kids seemed suicidal when they walked in, so what in the hell -

"You gonna pull this shit, too?" he demands, fast, and now the regret hits, because of all his puppetkind Lil Cal would have been fastest to reach out and disarm the kid at the computer before he could try to off himself.

The other troll types frantically without looking away from the dead girl. "You might want to let go of her," is all he says, his expression stricken. "Thhit - ugh -" Now he starts making weird, aborted hand gestures, his claws falling back to the keyboard before he can finish any of them. "I know you can't understand but you need to drop her - AA, hurry up -"

"Understand fine, kid." All he gets from Captor is a blank look of incomprehension and huh. Well, isn't that interesting. And inconvenient, if it means none of the kids can talk to each other. Got a feeling they were all loopy this afternoon, bouncing off the walls in a daze, but he figured it was just kids being hyped. Should have realized something was up quicker than this. One last check for a pulse, and then Bro looks to the Queen as he settles Pyrope down on her side, curled up around the canekind with her glasses hanging askew over staring red eyes. "The hell are you people doing in here?"

She regards him with a calm expression, but her sleeves are rucked up to her elbows, smeared with grease from whatever the hell the computer whiz has her doing with his new addition to the front of the terminal, and he gets the distinct impression that if she had hair, it would be in complete disarray.

WQ: I apologize, but did you say that you understood him?

"Yeah. What's up?"

WQ: Ah. I can interpret some of what you say, but I have eons of practice at this sort of thing. If you
understand everyone, that is a boon. A fraymotif is scrambling perceptions so that communication becomes next to impossible.

WQ: Thankfully, the Mage is strong in perceiving both matters of computers and the Doom of others. If it were not so, I am not entirely certain that this gambit would succeed. It is all very illegal.

Captor lets out a whoop, around the same time the dead girl's body starts glowing.

WQ: You may wish to step back. Reaching the god tiers is not a subtle process.

WQ: Also, we are cheating. Egregiously.

She smiles, and it's the most damnably polite thing he's ever seen.

She breathes in, and the sky is a dreamy, creamy swirl of white and blue, like a rich sky blue smoothie. Her real nose's been around Sollux for so long now that the bright, dandelion gold of Prospit's towers rising up around her almost blends in with the hot, buzzing scent of honey burning in overclocked processors.

"I could have sworn all our dreamselfes died, y'know!" she says, stretching her arms out over her and turning her head to grin at Sollux's dreamself, floating over by a row of silicomb mainframes. Aradia is a flare of scarlet that leaves the taste of cinnamon and paprika on her tongue, with extra smears of fluttering, dusty red behind her back that Terezi thinks she'd need to lick up close and personal to get a good mental image of. "How'd you pull this off?"

Aradia laughs, and it tastes all wrong when she speaks. "Miracles, as it turns out! Miracles and some timeline tomfoolery, courtesy of yours truly."

Terezi tilts her head to the side, tucking her hair back behind one ear as casually as she can. "Glad you're alive and breathing, at least. I thought Vriska really had broken your brain, for a while there," she says, while Aradia floats over to her with a beat of her wings. "Are the wings as fun as Vriska bragged about?"

"Oh, you'll find out in a second. Being alive made more of an impression to me, I'm afraid." And Aradia's voice still sounds wrong.

Because it's not a sound. It's a smell. Text in the air. "Huh. What happened to your voice, then?"

A weary sigh that's literally... sigh..., as Aradia removes the phone from her pocket and waves it, her mouth closed in a tight smile as she replies. "Time. But typing or talking - does it matter which, in the grand scheme of things? You're the first one to notice in ages!"

Terezi pauses for a second, and then lets her head fall back in a laugh that rolls up from deep in her stomach. She ends up toppling backwards, laughing with abandon, Skaia a delicious whipped cream spiral that takes up all the sky.

It is a little rude of Aradia to smash her head in with a tiny foot while Terezi's mid-laugh, but she wakes up in a wash of teal, with the best kind of words ringing in her ears.

[Attention: the Seer of Mind is risen]

There is a moment of oddness, because with her memories back she's half convinced she should be six sweeps old and much shorter than this. But she concentrates and the swooshy Seer skirts wrap
back around into pants, settling back into her outfit from earlier in the day in different shades of blue-green as she shakes out her wings to inspect them. They would be far superior as dragon wings, but she doesn't think there's anything she can do to pull off that drastic of a change.

Nicer still, when she takes in a deep breath, relishing newly refurbished scent glands and a heart that isn't carved up meat, there's a new overlay to her sense of the world around her, faint nodes of comprehension and prediction that normally she'd have to concentrate all her mental focus on to see clearly.

One of the human custodians is here now, which is new, but Terezi's already casting her mind out, pressing her claws to her head as she skips over the people nearby and reaches out for dumbass Vriska. Thankfully, the stink of blueberry bubblegum deceit hangs in the air, augmented by sugary sparkles of wing dust and lemon merengue Lighty bullshit, leaving a fine trail for Terezi to trace to Vriska's mind itself. She's distant, already out of the valley and heading due south as fast as wings can carry her, but Terezi can extrapolate the consequences of her future thoughts and actions from here.

Oh boy. Vriska's off to skip right to a major boss fight. Not like that's gonna get them all killed prematurely, right? Terezi feels a faint twinge of remorse, because she's remembering now, in another time place, how she resolved this exact same situation -

But this time, she has a few more options. No need to let it rest on the flip of a coin.

Sollux starts shouting at her when she turns to leave, though, his face all sallow from the light of his computer and the green energy cubes scattered around the room. "Rezeti, I nac't eealv ihst eicep of siht pmtouecr lnoae orf more htn ten sncosd, tub fi uyo og aerft Vrskai, so pehl em -"

Meh. No one can understand each other, for whatever reason, and waking up fresh as a teal god tier daisy doesn't appear to have fixed that. Terezi shrugs and lets her lip tug to the side in faint remorse, then waves goodbye. "I'm nheadg tafer Rsavk onw! Ees hya!"

A hand shoots out, lightning fast, and catches the end of her jacket before she can make it out. Not psionics, just the human custodian, eyes unreadable behind his shades as he says, "Idk. Yuo kthn
"Fi I don’t chcta Iraskv, adb nisth gera gnano pnphae," she explains, though it’s probably not doing any good. She can see the others in her mind’s eye now, including the massive amalgamation of minds that she has to backpedal away from mentally when a sucking chuckle of Horrorterror nearly snaps her up like a fish in a shark’s mouth. Or maybe krill in the gullet of a whale that swallows everything in mighty gulps. Probably not something she wants to be fighting just now. "Ywh does esh awaysl leeva a ubmd artil for het lnubeatabe bssoes to wlfolo abkc to oru bsae? Logeg!" She breaks out of the human’s grip, batting her wings in case he tries to grab again.

All he does is give her a look. It’s too subtle for her to smell clearly, all the emotions tamped down beneath a mask, but his mind flares comprehension. "Oh. Llwe hsit, nthe. Og for ti, idk."

WV: good luck seer!

"Zretei!" Sollux calls one more time, but Terezi’s already swooping out the door and through one of the holes where the unstable roof has caved in, rising up into the air as she locks in on Vriska.

Because if Vriska makes it to her destination, none of the rest of the actions and consequences that take place here in this valley will mean anything at all.

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Jade decides to fling everyone she could get her grubby space hands on at the fucking Horrorterror, and that turns out to be a little distracting. Who would have guessed.

Karkat is somehow less prepared for this turn of events than he was for the last one - he isn’t wearing any of his gear and his shoelaces come untied within seconds. The first round of lashing tentacles socks him in the stomach, sending him rolling across the grass and onto the gravel of the parking lot, and when he gets back up he already feels like one huge bruise.

God. He isn’t cut out for this. If the universe is trying to cram a hint down his throat that he’s doomed to run into giant sea monsters from another dimension for the rest of his no doubt short, insignificant, and miserable life, he can’t swallow it. He’d rather walk up to Diamonds fucking Droog and kick her in the shin. Both options are probably going to end with him a bright red smear on the pavement, but at least Droog isn’t the size of a small building. Droog would be refreshingly mundane compared to this.

But he stabs himself in the wrist anyway, building a sickle from scratch because he doesn’t have a choice. The grim jellyfish isn’t in any rush, apparently, which is a nice change compared to Gl’bgofuckyourself; Karkat knuckles at his stomach and wills the bruising down until his blood’s back where it should be. Everyone else is hacking and stabbing at whatever parts of the Horrorterror they can reach, and since Jade can reach more than most she’s up above, ripping up chunks of the jellyfish’s frills and zapping out of the way when it tries to smack her.

They can’t strategize or anything. Even if Harley hadn’t tossed Rose to parts unknown, they couldn’t get a straight answer out of her. How the fuck are they supposed to deal with this thing? Fuck. Fucking shitbuckets. He knows what this is. This is cosmic retaliation for he and Dave and Feferi leaving Gl’bgolyb for the Condesce to deal with. He should have known being that lucky once would come back to bite in him in the ass tenfold.

Just where the fuck is Eridan, though? More importantly, where the fuck is John? He can come up with a million different, increasingly terrifying possibilities for why Jade didn’t bring John along and yeah, actually, Karkat's going to focus on his real priorities, here. There's a large fucking list of
things that matter to him, and John is at the top, while Eridan and his recent transformation into an
even more enormous nubsucking douche is in the low to middling range. The only thing that keeps
him from marching off to go drag John out of whatever mess he's gotten himself into is the fact that
he has no way to communicate this extremely logical choice to anyone else around him. Because oh
yeah, no one can talk. If he ducks out now, anyone who looks for him and can't find his sorry ass in
the confusion is going to assume he's been fucking devoured whole or something and panic.

"Wr'eel gonon ide," he says aloud, his voice clogging up in his throat. No one's around to hear him
say it, but if he believes it hard enough then in theory they're probably not going to die. He and Dave
were mostly just fucking around being idiots about that, but Karkat could really use some of the
universe's twisted, contrary logic accidentally working in his favor right now. Then he starts circling
around and craning his neck to try to find some gap in the shuffling curtain of feathered tendrils that
make up the core of the Horrorterror's trailing end.

Jade whips out a rifle and blasts another gaping hole in the bell - only for the wound to seal itself up
in a fraction of a second, the dripping fluid sucked back into the jellyfish's sides. So great. Fucking
fantastic. Jade's their heaviest hitter, and this thing heals fast enough that it doesn't bother trying to
focus on Jade as the main threat. It just keeps casually brushing her aside with tentacles, drifting
further and further toward the shelf of rock that makes up most of the far side of the valley.

...Like...it's trying to leave.

But why? Fuck, why is Karkat trying to concoct a motive for an elder god? He knows bugwinged
fuckall about how they work and he should stop trying to fix that. There has to be something more
productive he could be doing with his sorry carcass than squinting and trying to figure out how to
climb something that can probably melt his flesh if he holds on too long.

He gets his answer really fucking quickly. Before he can fling himself into yet another stupid
decision, even, which is great.

"Rkatka," someone says from behind him, a voice that makes Karkat go cold, because of all the
people for him to forget in the middle of a Horrorterror-themed catastrophe, the worst possible choice
was probably Feferi.

Fuck. He spins, bracing himself, and is caught off guard when he sees the tyrianblood standing
behind him, not doing much at all. Feferi stares at him with desperation in her terrifying fuchsia eyes,
but they're fuchsia, not white - thank fuck. He opens his mouth, then shuts it; he could try to mime a
question at her, but that would be about as effective as babbling like a wriggler at her.

Her claws rise up slowly and she tugs at her hair, her foot dragging along the ground so sluggishly
that her ankle rolls and she starts limping. Karkat watches for a good five seconds, lost, before Feferi
starts babbling at him again.

He only realizes she's not the one moving her own feet when her claw shoots out and seizes his
wrist, the one with the sickle, and he starts getting dragged along in her wake. Her voice hits an
anguished pitch as the two of them saunter right toward the path of greyish, faintly gleaming sludge
where the Horrorterror left a trail of caustic acid. Feferi shows no signs of slowing down, even as
bright tyrian blood trickles down Karkat's wrist and hand from the slice in her palm.

So naturally, like a fucking panbaked moron, Karkat tries to pull her back - which of course doesn't
fucking work because Feferi on a bad day can carry him like he weighs nothing at all. Her torso turns
to follow him, her other hand catching his hoodie instead of his arm, but her feet keep marching on.
His hoodie rips under the strain. "Ufkc! Kcfu ukcf fuck!" Karkat says, and a triple fuck you to
whatever made it so that he has to try ten times to swear properly. He lets the sickle drop away into a
line of blood on his arm so he can try to kick Feferi's feet out from under her without worrying about stabbing her by accident. He's pretty sure there's a fucking law against that, or something.

She won't untangle her claws from his hoodie, which makes it all the harder to maneuver, and he can't yell at her to let go. He can smell something start to burn. It's the distinct reek of shoe soles burning - and no, he does not recognize that smell because of a certain chemistry experiment gone horrifically wrong at some point in the last year. He in no way still owes John a replacement pair of shoes because of said experiment. He lives a guilt-free life and never ever lies to himself in the middle of an emergency situation. Also Feferi's boots are smoking, the rubber of the soles bubbling as she walks right through a puddle of acid slime.

They're so fucked. Karkat tries one last time to swipe her legs out from under her, and comes thisclose to swan diving facefirst into the grim trail. Feferi hauls him back upright with a shout; but he has no way to tell her to remove her claws from his person before he runs out of room to stand. She catches on a fraction of a second before it's too late and lifts him up with one arm so he doesn't skate through acid, but it's a close fucking call and he screeches in a blind panic as he wraps his legs around her waist and digs his claws into the back of the hand that wouldn't fucking let go before she decided to drag him into her problems without permission. Her cheeks start to swell up in a pout and helllll fucking no, she does not get to open her ignorance tunnel and backsass him when they can neither sass nor backsass in turn to any degree of meaningful sassery. From the faint whiffs of burnt flesh starting to waft up to assault Karkat's olfactory nub, they don't have a lot of time before Feferi starts losing layers of skin instead of shoe.

"Od oyu eden leph? Oh, usjt tel em - erhe -"

A strong hand grabs Karkat by the scruff of his hoodie and plucks him off Feferi who, to her credit, lets him go this time. Karkat has enough time to process that the person who tosses him backward over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes is Jane before she grabs Feferi by the waist and bodily lifts the other troll like she weighs nothing, throwing the tyrianblood in a gentle arc onto the grass. Karkat lands hard and rolls with it, staring at Jane with his mouth agape. Her expression remains unreadable all the while, but Karkat can sense the resigned eye rolling emanating from her mind. If there's some human equivalent of 'judging you, you complete fuckheads' pheromones, she's putting out enough to take down a small army.

"Uh," Karkat says.

Which, amazingly enough, comes out exactly how he meant to phrase it. It's a fucking miracle.

"Oh dgoo," Feferi says, as she sits up. Before she can get any farther - or Karkat can open his trap to add his own contribution of word salad to this debacle - Jane unslings her strife specibus from where it hangs on her back, pointing it at each of them in turn with a stern look. Feferi points at her own chest, bewildered, but Jane takes off without waiting to hear what they'd have to say. "Ta elsta hes ash odgo asett in pseibic," Feferi finishes.

Karkat gestures to his ears in exasperation; Feferi, by sheer happenstance, looks away at the exact moment he does so, which means even with charades they're able to communicate fuck all. It means Karkat can allow himself a few choice swear words that he'd hesitate to drop in front of royalty when he starts grousing under his breath, yet that doesn't make up for anything else about it. Huffing, he gets up off his knees and smacks Feferi's shoulder when she continues to watch Jane run off to join the actual fight until she looks up at him, and he can point a finger at the lab behind them. Something's going on just past the building itself, he notices, a flurry of movement involving two people at minimum off by the lake.

He does a double take when a burst of dark blue light starts spiraling out from that general area,
because lightshows tend to mean some new form of fuckery has just been invented to torment Karkat's waking hours. Then, almost as quickly, his eyes start drifting down and to the side. Paying attention to whatever the hell's going on over there feels like it would require immense effort, and he's got his claws full dealing with Feferi, who is frowning and shaking her head. "I cna lpek," she says, settling her shoulders with a barely-visible shake as she lifts her chin.

No fucking way is she trying to pull this shit. Karkat has zero authority over this troll unless he makes it up from scratch, and unfortunately the only way he knows to establish authority is to shout a lot and hope for the best. It's one of his fundamental friendleader techniques and now he can't make use of it. Fuuuuck. "No," he says, since single syllable words seem to have the highest chance of sounding right.

Feferi lifts one foot and rolls it like that proves something. "Ese? Ti's ont kainmg me lwka onamyre."

She goes to do the same with the other ankle, and Karkat folds his arms to glare when she flinches - it's the same ankle she fucked up earlier. It takes him five tries before he produces another satisfactory, "No," but it's worth the effort.

For a moment he thinks he's won the argument - if Feferi stands up Karkat doesn't want to know what the odds are of her legs being hijacked again, no matter how much she wiggles her toe nubs at him - but this is also around when he takes a John-shaped object to the face. He's not as thrilled about this sudden turn of events as he might have been, due to the fact that a) Feferi's shout of alarm only gives him two seconds' forewarning, and b) he looks up in time to see John's not alone before he gets crushed by two hundred plus pounds of dumbfucks. His screech of protest chokes off when someone's nubby elbow crashes into the soft spot between his collar bones, and then all three of them hit the ground hard, Feferi calling something almost intelligible as she rolls out of the way.

What the fuck ever. He can adapt, in spite of John's dumbass method of bringing the newest problem child for Karkat to beat the shit out of without so much as a friendly 'Surprise, fuckhead!' of warning. He's not wholly incompetent, for fuck's sake. It's just that, oh right, John decided to put his entire body in between Karkat and whoever he's supposed to be kicking at the moment. They're going to have a talk about this. Karkat pushes John's head out of the way, hand smooshing the human's face to the side in the hopes that he'll roll off and let Karkat move his pinned leg.

"Gottacrisisdon'thitus," John says. Haha, that's hilarious, Karkat could have sworn John just said don't hit us, when Karkat finally recognizes that the other person who landed on top of him is in fact the asshole murder clown from hell. Figures that he can't understand John, either. Kicking might be off the table, but he can punch someone if he sits up a little, and he has a fistful of pent-up indignation with Gamzee's name tattooed on it -

John intercepts, Karkat's hand smacking into his palm. Well, fuck. He's saying something that sounds remarkably like, "Please don't, holy crap, I don't have time to explain -" and the fact that John can talk actual fucking English distracts Karkat before he can wrest his hand free. John runs a thumb along the side of Karkat's finger, squeezing his fist once before pushing it back down against Karkat's chest. "If he freaks again I don't know if the Breeze can keep holding off [Babelon], so please please please don't be mad, I'm so sorry, just don't panic."

John makes a compelling argument. And by that Karkat means he's not making any fucking sense whatsoever. The words are actually words and not gibberish, though, which is a massive relief, but Karkat's reluctant to let that color his judgment, not when Gamzee's a weight on the left side of his thoracic cavity, his head and horns ducked in a way that has Karkat very fucking on edge. Yet instead of letting Karkat shove the extra party out of this reunion rumpus, John reaches out and buries his hand in the other troll's knotted hair, keeping the three of them stuck in this useless heap of
Well. Alright then. Karkat waits for either one of the two to explain themselves - and gets nothing at all in return. Of course. His silence is at a goddamn premium, for fuck's sake. Gamzee makes an inscrutable noise when John snags his hair, but that's it. When did this fuckery turn into a group hug? Karkat did not fucking endorse this turn of events.

Trying to ignore the awkwardness, he lets the hand that was pushing John's head out of the way ease up, patting the side of John's head to reassure himself that John is here. This is the most random thing to happen all day - this including the Horrorterror, because honestly they all should have seen the Horrorterror coming from a mile away - and he's got no fucking clue why it continues to be a thing that is happening as the seconds drag on. Looking for some kind of solidarity, Karkat rolls his ganderbulbs and turns his head to raise his eyebrows at Feferi, who looks about as disturbed as he feels, propped up on her hands with her legs sprawled out in front of her.

Bless her ice cold vascular system - at least Feferi decides to ask questions that Karkat would also like some fucking answers to, since John has so flagrantly dropped the ball on the unprompted explanation front. "Umm. What the heck are you three doing?" she asks, hesitant. Her hand pops up to cover her mouth in surprise. "Oh! We can talk again!"

And what a beautiful thing it is. "You're not gonna wander off and fucking hug the Horrorterror, are you?" he asks in turn, pointedly ignoring the question she posed. He's capable of carrying on a conversation with two people laying on top of him, which isn't something he'd ever thought he'd have to prove, but he doesn't get why it's happening either. John can start answering any day now...

Feferi pauses, scratching at one of her ear frills with a blink. "...I suppose not. I can feel my legs again, so I think I'm in the clear for the moment. Which is what I was trying to say just now." She smiles wryly, meeting his gaze with eyes that are uncomfortably serious. "Sorry for getting you all tangled up in that. Again. Not being able to say what was wrong sort of screwed us both over."

Karkat waves his free hand with another eye roll. "Yeah, whatever." It's occurred to him that being on good terms with Feferi might turn out to be a survival strategy in the future, considering how incredibly fucked he is after this weekend. But 'good terms' has variable definitions. "I make a pisspoor fucking anchor, though. Use Kanaya or something the next time you need to use someone as a personal braking device."

Feferi's smile twitches; then she looks over at the Horrorterror steadily moving away from them, and the corners of her mouth flatten out. Right, the enormous jellyfish is still something which needs to be taken care of. By someone who is not already vulnerable to Horrorterror influence, holy fuck Feferi. "No," he repeats, raising his voice, and Feferi throws him a dirty look. On that note, why is he being crushed by these two chucklefucks? "What the fuck! Earth to John!" he says, switching gears as he snaps his fingers beside John's ear. All he gets is a wild, woeful look, but acting endearing and pleading as fuck can only get John so far when the enduring question of why Gamzee is involved remains unanswered. The other troll hasn't made a fucking peep, but that doesn't stop Karkat from being irritated about it. Nothing can keep Karkat from being irritated when he wants to be. He starts fidgeting in earnest when Feferi gets to her feet, bestowing a weird look on them as she tests her control. "Juggalo. Why. Now."

John winces. Gamzee makes a sound low in his throat, three parts growl and one part upset hiccup, the kind of noise that makes Karkat glance back up at Feferi in time to see her flush tyrian and clear her throat, pointedly looking away.

Oh, for fuck's sake. John has to know what this is starting to look like. He'll spit out some patented human bullshit rationalization any second now, Karkat is sure, but the longer they're all laying here
in the open, the more astoundingly inaccurate conclusions people are going to draw and the more crotch blisteringly annoying it's going to be to shut down the rumors before they reach Harley.

Or worse, Rose.

"Uh. See, uh, Karkat -" John says. Before he finishes Karkat's name he breaks out in a burst of nervous, guilty-as-fuck laughter, his eyes wide as a deer's in the headlights of a ludicrously overpriced sports car and so blue they're humming with windy power. "We, um. Kind of had a tiny problem. But it's okay! We're taking care of it right now. By hugging." John then tries to grin, which would look a lot more convincing if Karkat didn't slide his claws down to cup the side of John's neck at the same time, to find his pulse a frantic, terrified throb.

...Fuck it. Karkat thinks that, contrary to standing orders, panic should be a thing that is happening. John's eyes only get that blue when he's doing something dangerous, stupid, important, or any combination of the three with the Breeze, and since the Horrorterror is currently preoccupied with three people trying to stab it in the bell, Karkat has to assume that the reason John's in full emergency mode is the purpleblood turning Karkat's side into an icicle. "Explain more," Karkat demands through gritted teeth, trying to do a stellar impression of someone not on the verge of freaking out while still, you know, freaking the fuck out.

"He was your moirail," John says, four words that painfully wrench something in Karkat, and then, "so I shooshed him and we came here and I'm sorry."

Karkat thought he was used to the déjà vu that hits him whenever he looks at any of the other trolls. They're all familiar, to some degree, and it's annoying and unsettling in turns.

This feels like having his guts sucked out through a hole in his stomach, because his first reaction is to think, oh, that's what I was missing, while the knowledge clicks into place in his thinkpan like a long missing puzzle piece. All this time he's spent wondering why Gamzee would be so creepily obsessed with hunting him down, and somehow this explanation rings more true than anything else he's come up with.

Then the full sense of what John just saidjams in between his ribs like a cold blade, a sharp burst of guilt and disbelief and betrayal and -

"You shooshed him," Karkat repeats, and John makes this broken sound while Karkat's trying to sort through who he's jealous of, exactly. Loving John is what's normal, but the memory of pitying Gamzee is suddenly so familiar he can't believe he forgot about it, like how he couldn't understand all these years he lived without being friends with Kanaya. It's the most fucked up bundle of incongruous emotions he's ever had the displeasure of having his thinkpan foist upon him in at least a week. "Oh my fucking god. Why."

"I think I should go," Feferi says. Karkat can't even bring himself to look at her, too busy incredulously staring at John and the top of Gamzee's head. "Yes. As exciting as all this is, I'm going to just - go. And you three...er. In bocca al lupo!"

Which is worse, having Feferi stand witness to this fucked up relationship crisis, or letting her walk over to the Horrorterror? Fuck it, Karkat's humiliation should always be as sordid and public as possible. "Don't you dare, Peixes. Sit down before I make you sit down through the power of unbridled mortification."

She keeps backing away, her hands crossing and uncrossing as she makes a cutting, enough sort of
gesture. "I'm reeeelly not interested in watching this. No offense."

"This isn't what it looks like!" Karkat yells. Too late - Feferi jogs away, stopping to strip off her newly de-soled shoes before jumping over the acid trail to catch up with the grim jellyfish. If anything, him yelling just makes her powerwalk faster.

At the same time, one of the two idiots on top of him starts making a high-pitched, keening whine that sucker-punches him right in the pitygland. His claw gets halfway to Gamzee's face before he catches himself and rips it back; he pushes upright as far as he can go, pointedly looking anywhere but John or Gamzee as he starts squirming his way free. Just - he just can't even begin to wrap his pan around this, not with all the other problems they should be focusing on right now. "Fucking fantastic," he mutters. "Great. Awesome! Today just keeps getting better!"

Or maybe 'muttering' isn't the word for it. Yelling. That's the one he's looking for.

John actually tries to pap Karkat's cheek and the top of Gamzee's head at the same time. "It's an emergency! There's extenuating circumstances and stuff!"

Oh yeah, Karkat has heard that line before - in the kind of really shitty pale porn with the bare minimum of plot that you never admit to watching or reading in any kind of company. "Like what? I'm pretty sure that" - he points at the giant jellyfish in the background; it's slumping to one side now, but the point stands - "is more of an emergency! Are your platonic feelings jams with your codependent human friend group somehow not enough anymore?" He dodges the hand gravitating toward his face before it can try to pacify him, because that's...surprisingly tempting, right now. Gamzee's been operating under a really fucking false assumption, John's the kind of endearing dumbass who would fall for this sort of sad triangular gambit by accident, and Karkat needs to steer them away from this train of thought before their diabolical pitifulness combined manages to shoosh him into agreeing to this kind of asshat nonsense. "It is possible for people to engage in friendly antics without trying to start a shooshfest, you know!"

John shakes his head frantically before Karkat can finish. "Crap - Karkat, he keeps trying to kill people! He already got Equius!" As though to underscore the point, the cold lump of a troll starts to twitch, the high-pitched noise continuing undeterred by the fact John's hesitant pat has turned into genuine shoosh strokes.

Once again, Karkat's claws don't know where to go. Instinct is telling him to pap John in the face of the human's clear distress, but instinct is a crapshot and is also telling him to remove John's hand from Gamzee - either so that John will go back to petting Karkat, or so Karkat can shoosh Gamzee himself. Fuck, no. "What, again?" Karkat says, which isn't how he ever expected to respond to that kind of statement in his lifetime, but he's thoroughly distracted by the conflicting impulses now.

Unfortunately, the internal effort it takes to keep from acting on multiple stupid instincts means that his volume lowers to an accidentally more reasonable level, and John appears to take this as encouragement. "He thinks he's helping them - god tier, you know?" he says by way of explanation.

"And your solution was to jump at the murder-happy funtime clown and what, hope for the best?!"

Abruptly, he is struck by an ineffable conviction that this has happened before. Worse, he's getting vague hints of you fucking hypocrite simmering below the surface of his already overloaded thinkpan, which, if it means what he thinks it means - fuck déjà vu and everything it stands for.

"Gotta get it right this time," Gamzee mumbles, his face buried against Karkat's hoodie. "Radsis knows...she has her knowing on..." His hand leaves a cold spot on Karkat's arm as it snakes up to grip his shoulder, and he raises his head enough that Karkat gets up close and personal with the feral
orange-red burning around his purple irises. Oh good, John did decide to get all fake pap-ish with someone who is legitimately on the verge of murder. Good times! "Ain't an easy thing, to put off what as needs doing so long, and then still to motherfuck it up -"

The switch from mumble to chainsaw growl sends Karkat's heart off-rhythm, alarm flooding up as the grip on his shoulder clamps down like a vice, unyielding and purpleblood strong. "No!" John says, his knee banging painfully against Karkat's hipbone as he lunges over to pull Gamzee back.

Gamzee's head whips around, low and fast, and Karkat knows it's coming before John does; John could get out of the way in time, probably, but Karkat yanks on Gamzee's shirt so that his teeth clack shut with a jerk inches from John's nose. His eyes burn red like stoplights through fog, pupils dilated like black saucers. "Fucked it up, fucked her up, and left her lingering, you made me leave her alive - motherfuckers, let me go," he's saying, and how fucked up is it that he sounds close to crying?

Karkat doesn't even want to touch the fact that Gamzee and he used to be - fuck. John being feelsy and inconsiderate about boundaries is something Karkat's pretty much resigned to at this point, but this is crossing lines that shouldn't be crossed. The last thing Karkat wants is to be pulled into some platonic calming mess with a troll who clearly remembers more about a past relationship than Karkat does. It's the perfect set up for pale tragedy and Karkat will have none of it.

"Karkat," John says, with his hands pressed against Gamzee's face, flapping his fingers far too close to bared teeth like the idiot he is. Both of them are fucking idiots, actually. "Kratka, own olduw eb a ergat mite ot - hggkk -" He's starting to pale, his eyes turning fucking neon as his words start to jumble again.

Idiots, and he wants to trade with whoever is currently fighting a losing battle against an elder god right the fuck now. Let - Let fucking Jade deal with this shit, goddammit, because Jade is probably marginally less of a fucking sucker than Karkat is and her human qualms about incest would keep her from making awful decisions. "Fuck. You," he hisses. Gamzee's shirt collar rips, and Karkat lets go to wrap his arm around the purpleblood's throat from behind. It's only a hug by the loosest of definitions, definitely the shittiest hug he's ever inflicted on someone, and he makes it ten times more shameful by grabbing John next. "Fuck both of you! DO I LOOK LIKE A FUCKING PORN STAR TO YOU?!

Gamzee gurgles, long claws coming up to dig into Karkat's arm. John says something that sounds like, "...only sometimes," which means Gamzee is the new temporary favorite by virtue of John's dumbassery being completely inappropriate at this time. Easing up on his chokehold, Karkat turns his head to the side and hides against John's neck; his stomach feels like it's going to collapse in on itself as he keeps his claws gentle on Gamzee's cheek. Under all the fluttering, twisty emotions squeezing at his pusher, there's a tiny nugget of sanity screaming that he should just grab John and fucking run, that any second now the purpleblood is going to flip back into murder mode and disembowel anyone he can lay claws on.

"How dare you drag me into this bullshit," he fumes, as quietly as he can, so that hopefully only John's enhanced hearing catches it. Having John right there makes it easier to keep his head together, but god, he can't make up his mind if he's outraged or not and no amount of John's presence can clear that up when John is the cause of it. He finally settles on cranky rather than outright pissed, because look where being pissed got him.

"I'm sorry," John says, a miserable hushed whisper. He hugs Karkat with a lot more force, solid and reassuring even with his hand shaking where it settles on Karkat's back.

"Sorry, he says." A shuddering hiccup rocks through Gamzee before Karkat finishes screaming
internally, a gulping thing that does nothing to make the troll's eyes stop burning as he stares at John like he's the fucking Antichrist. Haha and fuck, there's the sudden flip to loathing and hate that Karkat expected. "Motherfucker should be sorry - what place do you have, what right?!" For a second the rage bleeds over into Karkat's mind, prickling hot, and how did it not occur to him before now that on top of everything else, Gamzee might be jealous of John? The oozing scratches glittering with clotted blood in John's hair had to come from somewhere.

Worse - now that he's actively going along with these two and their idiocy, he can feel that Gamzee's face is damp; the spot on Karkat's hoodie where the troll's head rested earlier is wet and splotchy with a purplish tint, speckled with drops of blue and green blood that look familiar. The rest all has to be tears. A fumbling hand bumps into Karkat's as John touches the corner of Gamzee's mouth, his fingers millimeters away from teeth as he tries to smooth away the snarl. The kind of soothing gesture that would work on Karkat, sure, but not on a raging coldblood, holy fuck John.

And sure enough, Gamzee's teeth chomp down on John's wayward thumb, right in front of Karkat's eyes. Karkat goes cold, but John doesn't even make a sound. John's not that much of a badass (or else Karkat has been severely underestimating him) - Karkat's blood sense kicks in and he realizes Gamzee hasn't bitten through skin. Yet. All three of them freeze in place; Karkat tries to read the expression on Gamzee's face, but it's a clusterfuck of rage and grief and a faint, barely recognizable look of consideration. A low, clicking growl vibrates through his vocal cords as his teeth gnaw.

Either that's a warning, which isn't what Karkat would think possible from a troll this much on edge, or -

"Will you just shoosh?" John says, huffing and bonking his head against Gamzee's to press a kiss over the troll's eye. Gamzee's jaw drops open - probably in sheer affront at this latest display of tomfoolery from a class A dumbass - and John's thumb is more wind than skin and bone as he shifts it out from between teeth.

"You're not him," Gamzee says. "You're not."

John shrugs and hugs Karkat tighter, jostling all three of them. "He's right here! So calm down, alright?" He moves his hand so it lays over Karkat's, instead of poking around at the toothy hinterlands.

Gamzee looks at Karkat, his eyes almost plain yellow as his brows furrow in confusion. Well, Karkat could make some effort to wear something more soothing than his resting disgruntled face, but he doesn't think that would help any one of them be less confused. Or less dead, in the event that Gamzee loses it. Fuck, maybe the Horrorterror which is still a thing will squish all three of them and put them out of their misery. Karkat's rooting in favor of that last one, because eventually somebody has to notice this pathetic heap of pseudo-pale desperation in plain view of the lobby, and he's never going to live this down.

Then Gamzee's eyes flick back to John, orange-tinted but not glaring, his head tilted to press into their hands. "...Motherfucker, you don't know when to quit," he says. The claw that seized Karkat's shoulder earlier drifts back to loop up and around Karkat's arm from behind in a slow, careful move. More worryingly, Gamzee's other hand snakes up to poke at John's cheek, and his mouth, and then his eyebrow; John blinks his eyes shut as a claw traces the soft skin between bone and eye, but he doesn't move away.

Oh god, they're flirting right in front of him. No, worse - they're flirting badly. No, no, you know what? Even fucking worse, they're involving Karkat in their awful flirtastrophe, too, because he can't help but move his fingers along with John's down the side of Gamzee's face.
And it makes his idiot traitor pan want to go all soft and gooey. "Unbelievable," he says, glowering when they blink at him with nearly identical expressions of abashment. Gamzee looks slightly more desperate, John a different flavor of worried and guilty, like a wriggler caught with their nub in the cookie jar for the third time in an hour, and both of them hold still when Karkat combs their hair with his claws. He starts out conversationally. "Great, now the clown's down with this bullshit? Story of my fucking life. There's a fucking right and a wrong way to try to initiate a fucking threesome and a grand total of neither of you apparently know the difference. Do you get some sick amusement out of shoehorning two people into one quadrant?! I mean, I already knew John has an understandably poor grasp of how boundaries work, but this is taking it to a whole new level of fuckery. This is somehow even worse than anything my pitifully unimaginative thinkpan could come up with as nightmare fuel. At least those only involved stupid extra humans - if I'd known you intended to branch out to include trolls as well I would have fucking warned Kanaya off ages ago. You have to fucking draw a line somewhere, John!"

He may have lost track of 'conversationally' somewhere along the way. It's not so much combing their hair as gripping it in his claws and praying for the strength of will not to bash their fool heads together. Now he understands why John was doing his hedging spiel and trying to keep Karkat calm without explanation; Karkat's the only steady middle ground these two have, and if he goes, they're gone.

No fucking pressure or anything.

Of course, what John takes away from his rambling is: "Hang on, nightmares? Or you mean dreams -" he swivels to squint at Karkat "- about extra humans...as in like, who? Us and R-?"

"Finish that sentence, John. I fucking dare you."

"- oooooskay," John finishes.

Hmm. Karkat will have to let that one slide. Bad enough Dave knows of other things which should not be spoken of; putting ideas in John's head at this point would be like dumping more snow into an avalanche and then trying to head the resulting disaster off with twigs. "Any fucking backtalk to add to this fun edition of joke-around paltime, asshole?" he asks Gamzee sourly, to change the subject.

"Missed your yellin', best bro," Gamzee says. His eyelids have shuttered down a little, heavy and slow to blink. If he about to - yeah, he just yawned. The display of teeth is unnerving, but the lack of growling when John scratches Gamzee's scalp close to the horn balances it out.

There's no way in fuck this is actually working as a calming mechanism. Karkat doesn't believe it. "Oh, I know, right?" John says, doing a better imitation of 'conversational' than any fakey pretend bullshit Karkat ever pulled while Karkat grumbles at him irritably. "Yelling means he cares." The human's lopsided grin is too fucking schmoopy to be teasing.

Don't yell, don't yell, don't - fuck it. "I yell at everything!"

John pats his cheek. "Yeah, because you care a lot. About everything. Duh, Karkat."

Now that's just fucking libel right there. Karkat moves his chin to accommodate Gamzee resting the side of his head on that shoulder, and closes his eyes against the faint, subvocal sounds that purr right beneath his ear. John tries to adjust to hug them both better, and it makes the rumbling louder. "I hate you two with every fiber of my being, right now," he says, with feeling.

"No more, then," Gamzee mutters. "Not yet."
This makes no sense to Karkat, at the time. But some sound breaks off, one that was vibrating just on the edge of his hearing, and John makes a muffled noise as his eyes dim back down to more sustainable levels of radiance. "[Babelon]'s gone," he says.

It means next to nothing to Karkat. He's pointedly trying to ignore the two idiots melting in his lap by glancing around, ostensibly to check to make sure the Horrorterror hasn't done a U-turn while they were engaged in the incredibly protracted process of getting their fucking shit together. "Oh, good news, you fuckheads," he says, nudging them with his elbows. "Our absence made no fucking difference at all. The giant jellyfish of death is about to fall on our heads." It's certainly canting backwards, at least, white-and-black liquid pouring out from the popped bell of its head, and if Jade kicks it the wrong way - yup, thanks Harley. This time, he grabs John's chin and points his blinking face up to see the jelly abomination bearing down on them in what appear to be death throes. "Literally."

"Crap! Going, going!" John says, eyes brightening back up in between blinks, and then they're gone.

- Traveling via John's windy thing sucks. The unpleasant sensation of lacking physical blood makes Karkat want to gag, or tear up his arm to find a pulse - but it's all intangible.

He does feel more aware of the other people around him, though. In the five seconds or so they're disembodied, he pinpoints Nepeta - blood in her lungs, sharp stakes of ribs digging into soft tissue. It's all internal hemorrhaging, drowning her slowly. He'd know how to fix some of that if it was his body, enough to at least -

Of course, the last time John dragged him along on the windy express, the Breeze wasn't all that vocal. Now, it picks up on the direction Karkat's thoughts are taking almost before he finishes thinking them. Their stream of wind abruptly brakes and veers off from where John was taking them, rushing through the cracks in the walls and under doors.

BE: hang on, Karkat wants to do a helping thing!

BE: helpinggg~~~

They brush through the room like ghosts. John's presence draws Karkat's along in its wake, and nudges him until they rustle between the feet of the surgical team struggling to repair the damage. Look at those O2 sats, comes the strong, disapproving thought impression from John - it's hard to tell the difference between his voice and the Breeze when the Breeze just sounds like a scrawner version of him.

BE: okay, what have you been using to do your blood healy thing?

Karkat's a little distracted by the patch of dark nothingness huddled in the corner of the room. It's looming and huge and he keeps catching a glimpse of chipped horn and dark hair, but whenever he tries to get a better look the voidy aura closes up around Equius until he's forced to look away. Also, blood healy thing? Fuck, Karkat has just been patching himself up as best he can for years; to him it's all one amorphous 'blood thing.'

BE: oh good, you have a lot of unlocked abilities and fraymotif licenses! did you guys just buy all of them in your game or something?

No fucking clue, Karkat thinks back, doing his best to roll his eyes without having eyes. He gets the
mental impression of a :P so he must be successful.

BE: whatever, grumpy gills! you have access to [Resuscitate] and other Blood emergency medical combos, so use em!

BE: please be fast...don't really want the Bard to jump in here after us... :T

Panic is an awful motivator. Karkat screeches and reaches out to Nepeta's blood in a haze of red. He's aware of John saying something like 'uh, yes! yes, please play!' But he's preoccupied with drawing blood back into its proper channels, scabbing and knitting together tissue where he can without accidentally growing too much over the shattered shards of rib bone. Working with green blood doesn't feel all that noticeably different from healing his own stupid injuries; the drugs they're pumping into her for surgery leave a bitter, phantom aftertaste. He notices when the lack of oxygen abruptly corrects itself, though the lungs themselves are in shitty shape, and then they slide out of the room so fast it leaves Karkat dizzy, the pulse of red haziness thick in his incorporeal mind before the winds resolidify as bodies and they drop in a heap in a room Karkat barely recognizes at first.

He would have noticed if Gamzee were coasting along with them in that split-second detour. All the same, he nearly has a fucking heart attack when the purpleblood snaps into place right behind John, purple eyes digging into Karkat's like they can peel back layers of his skull.

Oh god, what the fuck are they doing. And also -

"Why would you ever think murdering people was a solution to your problems, slime for brains?!!" he demands. He wants to shake Gamzee by the shoulders and yell at him properly, but instead he tucks his head between his knees, riding out the dizzy head rush as the pulse dies down in his temples. "Why is that the first conclusion you jump to?!!"

John reaches out and steadies Karkat's wobbling knee. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! Focus on talking down the clown some more!" Karkat snaps, because someone has to take charge of this runaway bullshit train, and considering who he has to work with, here, it's going to have to be him. As soon as his heart stops pounding in his chest like a drum.

BE: you should probably turn off the fraymotif. do you usually just let it run out the clock like that? that can't be good for your heart rate...

What fraymotif? All he hears is his pulse thrumming in his ears. He can't hear this music shit half the time, let alone when he's coming down hard after a moment of panicky blood fuckery.

...Wait. "Oh, you're fucking with me," he says, glaring at the fluttering spot where a circulating breeze tosses the edge of a bolt of fabric. Why are they in Kanaya's work room? Does he even want to know?

BE: nooo. the Pulse is a pulse, silly Karkat.

"Whatever." Karkat massages his temples with the heels of his palms. Cut that out, he thinks snappishly, and somehow his irritation only swells when his heart slows back to a calm, even beat. He picks up the nearest bundle of fabric and presses it to his face as he shrieks in frustration. This fucked up bucket of coagulated vomit piece of shit game. He wants to find whoever came up with it and tell them exactly how far up their chute they can shove their useless game mechanics. And possibly stab them.

He ends up with three hands on him by the time he yanks the fabric away from his face, John
touching his knee and shoulder to keep him from falling to the side, and a hand that's only faintly familiar patting between his shoulder-blades, the faint drag of claws noticeable through the cloth of his much aggrieved hoodie. His heart jumps the wrong way when, for a moment, he looks up and thinks Gamzee's too far away to have possibly reached him; a blink and the troll is right beside him, papping his shoulder from within arm's reach.

Holy fuck, where does Karkat even start? He and John can barely keep their own issues locked down, how are they supposed to help keep a third person balanced? A third person who likes to jump straight to murder.

He pulls himself together. Somehow. Kanaya has a pile of random shit in the corner that's been serving as a sort of communal socialization pile over the past week, and he's commandeering it since the Breeze decided to dump them here instead of -

A room that might possibly have been blown up. Fuck, right. Most of the rooms where they've been hanging out faced the lake, along the same side as the lounge room that is no more. So much for that. This pile it is. Karkat lurches to his feet and drags John and Gamzee over to it by the backs of their shirts; he dodges the claws that tries to tug him down, too, because today is already going down in history as the day Karkat had a threesome and he's trying not to think about that too hard. "You. Start talking," he orders, glaring at Gamzee.

It's downright unnerving that instead of being properly intimidated by said glare, Gamzee smiles more, watching Karkat with painfully sweet adoration crinkling his eyes. It reminds him of the way John just laughs and gets all soothing when Karkat breaks down in a fit of rage. "What d'you wanna know, brother?" the trolls asks, picking at a dried splotch of blue blood on the back of his wrist without looking. Then he tilts his head to the side, horns scraping the wall behind him. "You should get your sit on, too."

"Yeah, you should come here," John adds, looking worried as he watches Karkat start to pace. His gaze darts to Gamzee, an extra note of wariness in his expression, and thank fuck John recognizes on some level how dangerously stupid this is. Karkat wouldn't even let John sit within ten feet of this troll under ideal circumstances, but they're completely and utterly fucked and there's no turning back now.

"Fuck no. I mean it, we're talking this shit out right the fuck now." Karkat feels the wind knotting in a figure eight around his feet each time he takes a step. He chooses to eyeball Gamzee instead. "You fucked us over this afternoon. Didn't you. How much of this bullshit did you cause?"

Gamzee shrugs, apparently unbothered by the suspicion. "Knew shit was meant to go down. You had some little cueball motherfucker rolling around and doing unrighteousness on all that void here, to lay it bare, and Vrissis never knew when to let a thing bide. There was the puppet, but I motherfucking took care of that shit. And then I could not deny truth any longer." His eyes go too sharp. "Got here too late, and you already replaced me, brother. Me here motherfucking years too late, you soft and peaceful and sweet on someone else, and what else am I good for but to set the others off? All lined up with cracks in their souls, and how am I not to shatter such?"

He moves restlessly on the pile, the faintest shadows of limbs not quite where they should be, and he's about to lose his shit. Karkat can feel it. If this is Rage, how are they supposed to keep Gamzee from backflipping off the handle on a daily basis? Why would there even need to be an aspect of Rage? Why not an aspect of Calm-the-fuck-down? Yet more fucking dickery, courtesy of Sburb.

John grabs Gamzee's hand while Karkat's busy internally cursing their existence; when Karkat looks up again, Gamzee is staring at their hands like they're a foreign object. Well, at least keeping him confused with John's powers of earnest dumbassery is an effective strategy. "Don't be dumb," John
says, matter-of-factly. "I know it seems like everything sucks when you're upset, but we're okay right now, right? Maybe making everyone god tier would be useful if we had, like, zero other options left, but I think you just pissed that Equius guy off for the rest of eternity."

Gamzee shrinks back, staring into the distance instead of at either one of them. "Needed to go first," he says in a mumble, his sharp-edged stare easing up. "All this needs hiding from the puppet fucker, and ain't no machine as can match a void bro on defense."

"Hell, well at least you're fucking strategic about who you murder next!" Karkat rips his claws through his hair. The pacing isn't helping much anymore. "And you went and smashed up his moirail, so awesome, there's another undying vengeance-fueled platonic hatred that will fuck up our team dynamic!"

Gamzee just goes even quieter. "...Motherfucker probably has the right of it, there, if hating is what happens. S' alright."

Fuck. Now Karkat feels like an ass. If Gamzee just had the decency to snap back and break this pale streak, he might have had an out - but no, Gamzee takes the criticism with the kind of sad-eyed smile that tugs at Karkat's weak, weak pusher. When John graduates from hand-holding to shuffling over for an awkward hug without Gamzee offering more than a half-hearted warning growl, he knows they're all three screwed. Regardless of whatever the fuck's going through John's head right now, Karkat is hooked like the sappy sadfuck that he is.

He's put it together now, too, all the little blips where his thoughts have been forced to part around a white smudge in his memories: Rose and Dave both came to Washington with cueballs in their pockets, at least one with a connection to Doc Scratch that needed investigating, and then - nothing. No one ever followed up on the creepy things, probably because no one could remember they existed. How long were those things watching, and waiting, while they ran around with their heads up their asses pretending they could actually achieve anything in life?

That thought is enough to distract him from the breathtaking wreckage of his love life and make him want to punch a wall. No, that wouldn't communicate the full breadth of his fury right now. What the fuck did any of them do to deserve this?! Play a shitty game and end the world? Who hasn't done that, these days! Why fucking sing them out for every single possible thing that could ever go wrong, ever?! Who the fuck makes these calls. Everything's fucked up and glitched and their plans never go right and dying might literally be the best of several shitty options at this point because why the hell not? Why the fuck not -

He snaps out of it in time to catch John on his feet, hands sneaking up to pull Karkat's claws away from his head. Arms loop around his waist from behind, a cold weight pressed against the back of his neck. "DON'T YOU FUCKERS DARE SHOOSH ME!" he shrieks, loud enough to make John jerk his hands back. "TM FUCKING PISSED!"

"You're freaking out," John says, gentle to the fucking core. He's got traces of dust streaked down the front of his shirt - a new one that Karkat remembers him getting to replace an old sweater with a hole worn through the seam on the left side. John never has old, raggedy clothes for long before his - before Samuel got on his case about it. Now there's a stain on this one, sort of the same purplish splotch that Karkat has on his hoodie, because they've both had a clown crying all over them.

Freaking out seems entirely justified at this point. He's overwhelmed and sick with it. "You said - Aradia knew," he says, mostly to himself, rubbing at his closed eyes. Gamzee shifts behind him, and the noise that comes out of his mouth sounds affirmative. "She knew exactly what would happen? Typical. Rose has been trying to wring more information out her, and couldn't get any more than bullshit excuses about fucking inevitability." The words chatter out too fast, his voice dipping and
cracking at intervals as he tries to scrape himself back together and act like a functioning troll again.

"Uhhh, Karkat, we can probably worry about interrogating people and stuff until after everything settles down." John hovers nervously, with his feet a solid three inches above the ground. Karkat wonders if he's noticed yet. A hand comes up to touch the back of Karkat's, and when Karkat doesn't yell again John carefully takes Karkat's claws away from his scalp to tuck between his hands. "Though I agree that this is all total bullshit and super fucked up."

Of fucking course. "How much of that did I yell out loud?"

John screws up his face ruefully. "At a guess? All of it."

Karkat breathes in, and there's fifty-fifty odds whether what comes out next is another yell. He sighs instead. "Yeah, I figured."

"Gotta a lot of motherfucking anger 'n sad shit all twisted up in you," Gamzze says. And this is really a thing that's happening - they've switched from pacifying Gamzee to dealing with Karkat's issues and once John's issues enter the ring they're going to be here all day.

"Who doesn't." Breathe in and out. Then Karkat sets his shoulders and mentally shoves his thinkpan back into gear. "Alright, alright, I'm done. I'm fucking over it. No more hugging, you shameless fucks, we've got shit to deal with."

If Gamzee puts effort into holding onto him, this push for sanity will probably get cut very short. To Karkat's amazement, though, the purpleblood lets him go when he steps away. Before either of them can say a word Karkat stoops over the pile and starts digging. He tries to avoid disrupting Kanaya's order as much as possible; he knows some of his stuff migrated in here, but Kanaya goes through enough fabric that it's all buried deep.

Karkat finds one of his discarded jackets after some rummaging (how many discarded apple juice cartons can one Dave produce, anyway? does he fucking shed them from his person like a snake?), pulling his hoodie off with one arm so he can replace it with something not full of claw marks and holes. Then he marches back to his two dumbass friends and keeps walking, towing them along by their sleeves so that they follow him out of Kanaya's room.

"Uh, where are we going?" John asks. Karkat doesn't answer right away; he has this part of the building fucking memorized, though the cracks riddling the ceiling are all new. Fuck, this place is a wreck. But the walking is helping to clear his head, and what starts as the half-formed thought of 'get out and move' morphs into something actually useful for Karkat to do with his time. Win-win. John doesn't repeat the question, either, which Karkat takes to mean he's caught on to the where, if not the why.

"To the only bulgelicking piece of shit in this hellhole that I have faith in my ability to wring answers out of in times of confusion, stupidity, and general shitdickery," Karkat says. The door is slightly ajar to start with, but he leans back and kicks it open anyway. It's just that kind of day. "Sollux, you memeloving fuck, where the fuckflipping hell is your moirail and what is she playing at!"

Sollux has been redecorating since the last time Karkat set foot in this miserable snuff-film viewing conference room. He narrowly avoids planting his shoe right in a fresh-looking, tack puddle of teal blood (oh good, another casualty! Great!), and then Gamzee has to nudge him back upright when he stumbles over a bundle of red and blue wires that has escaped the general chaos of the modified Queen's Hub. There's no sign of Vriska or Terezi or even their possibly dead meatsuits, but the White Queen and WV are both huddled around the yellow husktop Sollux sits in front of, the screen covered in code and gold text. "The only memeloving fuck here ith you, KK," Sollux says, without
looking up from the sickly sheen of the computer monitor that illuminates his face. He looks more
tired than Karkat feels, which is fucking incredible, and his hair sticks up in tufts around his horns.
"AA'th off somewhere keeping Tav away from the fighting. Go worry about your own moirail,
aththhole."

At least Karkat has the perfect lure. "I have two," he counters, grabbing one of the office chairs and
spinning it around so he can flop down on it.

Sollux inhales without looking up from the computer, his expression pained - then he stops mid-
breath, tilts his head to the side, and turns to stare at Karkat. His eyes go to Gamzee and John, both
standing in the doorway looking lost, and then back to Karkat.

After a pause, the goldblood taps a claw on the White Queen's shoulder. "Just hit 'y' if it athkth you
anything," he says, without looking at her. Then he passes the husktop off to a very worried
carapacian to face Karkat.

WQ: Er...Yes, of course.

WV: let me!

WV waves his claws to accompany the WQ's oddly enthusiastic agreement, and with that apparently
important business settled, Sollux steeples his claws in front of his face, blue and red glasses glinting.
"You have my attention, KK."

Before Karkat can commence gloating, though, Sollux points a claw at Gamzee. "You can't kill me,
for the record. Thomething'th up with my program, me and Kanaya are glitched to fuck and back.
We won't come back unlethth I can figure out where I messed up."

"Whatever you say, motherfucker," Gamzee says. The chill act may be deceiving - Karkat
remembers distantly how totally calm Gamzee was this afternoon, right up until he decided not to
chill - but he's stopped making any sudden, jolting movements. When John shrugs and grabs more
chairs for them Gamzee sits in one fluid motion, watching with lazy eyes and a faint, fond smile.

"Ew," Sollux says, succinctly. "Okay, I believe the double moirail thing. You owe me goththip
about the details, later. What do you want to know?"

"So you've been in on Aradia's bullshitstravaganza?" Karkat says, squinting at Sollux. "Start talking.
At least three different things have gone wrong today, and I'm holding you two and this dipshit -" he
jerks a thumb at Gamzee "- accountable unless you make a really fucking convincing argument.
Spill."

Grimacing, Sollux waves a claw. "AA had me thplitting my focuth between this body and the oneth
on Prospit and Derthe for weeks, now. All that mattered was hacking into Thkaia's programming to
alter how god tiering worked so no one would end up permanently dead. I would have mentioned it
to homeone, but on top of that and Vriska and Terezi, I had all the spare brainpower of a two year
old human wriggler."

John claps his hands together. "So you're why Equius came back without a questbed." His bright
expression of realization fades a little; Karkat can tell by the tiny tilt of his head that he's listening to
something on the wind. "But. Uh. I'm pretty sure modifying how the game works is...helpful, but
could wind up getting us all doomed?"

"Tch. I'm the Doom guy, you think I don't already know that thhit?" Sollux says. "We're in the clear,
for now. The two thcratched games merging into one already borked Thkaia enough that we have
powers before the game has officially started. As long as me and AA time it right, the dream bodies die in the Medium, then resurrect wherever the main body is. Simple location ID swap. Pie the of cake, basically. Getting it to work with only the one questbed was harder." He sighs through his nose. "It would have been worse if people didn't die today, actually; doomed before you could say 'hahaha, what a geniuth plan.' We just made it so that at least they can come back."

Karkat nods slowly. "Alright, fuck. I can believe that. In fact, it's exactly what I expect from this fucking game, at this point. And the giant Horrorterror outside - whose plan was that?" Also, he's not one hundred percent certain it was dead when they last saw it. It looked like it was bleeding from a new orifice, but if anything that might have just pissed it the fuck off.

In the contest between going to help with a Horrorterror and keeping Gamzee from running amok, though, Karkat can see why the two might be equally important.

"Uh, not mine. Not AA's, either, I think, though she probably knew it would happen. Potthibly just a shitty side effect of us fucking up." Sollux sounds dubious. "Vriska triggered her auto-res down in the basement, but she was already god tier to start with, so it must have been a stupid death. If Terezi manages to drag her pixie athth back here without the two of them relapthing, we can interrogate her or thomething."

"Just how many people are god tier now? I'm counting eight, including me and Rose and Dave and Jade," John says.

With a strained look, Sollux nods. "Eight, yeah. Unlethth you count Gamzee, who is apparently 'indeterminate' no matter how many different ways I ask the system."

Almost as one, Karkat, John, and Sollux look at Gamzee.

Gamzee waves back, smiling. "Well that sure is a mystery, that happens to be a motherfucking mystery," he says, placid and completely not answering the fucking question.

"Whatever. Jackathth." Sollux mutters the last part under his breath. Then he reaches back without looking and takes his husktop back from the White Queen, who lets him have it with a bemused look. WV tries to squirm back in front of the screen instantly, but Sollux, the heartless bastard, elbows the carapacian out of the way. "Anyway. If you have any more questionth, they can wait until later," he says, cracking his knuckles. "We're due to get the encryption code for our thesis recording in an hour or tho, according to AA, and if people are done dying for today I need to finish rehauling our shitty excuse for a computer terminal so that twelve streams won't light this thucker up like a bonfire in a drought." WV manages to claw his way into Sollux's lap, and almost immediately gets lifted up by blue and red psionic sparks that casually fling the alien at Karkat. The impact knocks his rolling chair back against the conference table. "And take that one with you, he keepth trying to input commands and turn on capth lock. Fucking backseat typer."

"We should go check on the others, anyway," John says, standing up. "I think they're done fighting. Or I can't feel anything like fighting anymore, so I guess everything's settled down. Oh, and we definitely need to make sure Rose is okay."

WV huffs and folds his arms, glaring daggers at Sollux with angry white eyes. This is a prime opportunity to have quality WV time without Dave interfering, though, so Karkat doesn't argue. He needs the distraction.

WV: why would you let the queen help and not me?! she enforces the violence of monarchical tyranny, you know!
...Not that kind of distraction.

"Also, he won't shut up." Sollux snaps his claws and Karkat's chair starts rolling toward the door in a jolt of psionics, bogging down in the gross smear of Terezi's blood before Gamzee reaches out and gives it another push. Karkat is too busy staring gape-mouthed at WV to respond. John appears to be in the same state, his eyes huge as he follows them into the hall. "If he trieth to turn my cords into a fake power grid for his town one more time, I'm launching him into the Medium where he belongth."

The door slams shut behind them in a cloud of fizzling sparks.

Karkat continues to stare at WV. Beyond his personal haze of what the fuck, John appears to be in similar straits.

"Are either of you motherfuckers hungry?" Gamzee asks. When neither Karkat nor John can muster up the presence of mind to answer him, Gamzee shifts a little and scratches the back of his head. "I could eat. Is all I'm saying."

---

Jade blazing a nova through space to get them out of the blast radius jostles Dave's internal metronome back into awareness, and suddenly he's too aware that while his mental clock has been ticking along without problem, he hasn't bothered to check the time all afternoon.

Like, is that what being drunk feels like for Rose? Not totally having all of one's shit together, shooting the shit with friends without noticing that pieces of the afternoon don't line up just right? What he pictures in his head when he calls up memories of the meeting seem blurred and disjointed.

...God. Fucking shit dammit. Does that mean they need to do the whole meeting over again? Did Terezi really make paper airplanes out of his perfectly crafted AA fliers and try to use Tavros's horns as a goal post? Because that shit was hilarious and now Dave isn't even sure if it really happened or not.

The only thing that's clear in his mind is -

Someone's leaving the room. No one's supposed to leave, other than for bathroom breaks, but the meeting hasn't really started yet. Rose and Karkat have started off with their little spiel. Those two and their weird co-leadership thing. Yeesh.

"Dude, you coming back?" he asks, mostly disinterested; he's trying to scope out Momlonde's reaction to the fliers, but she's off in the back of the room, and no way is Dave being all obvious and shit when Bro's lurking around somewhere.

"..................." is all the response he gets. He twists his head around as ninja smooth as possible to watch Momlonde without tipping Bro off.

".................honk."

---

Panic only starts to gnaw at him when he realizes his lines of communication are slowly being cut off. He opens his mouth and all that comes out is gibberish; flicking the metal of his collar does nothing to improve it. Sign language is a bust, too; he doesn't expect half the people in this room to
understand it, but the mere fact that Jade just stares at his hands in complete incomprehension makes him break out in a cold sweat. Writing down notes is out, his new phone screen has all the right icons but none of the text works right, he might as well have his hands cut off, *how else is he supposed to -*

But hey. It's cool. Everyone else is just as screwed as he is, and that means he can cool his jets. I mean, sure, it makes coordinating impossible, but it's like High School Musical. They're all in this together.

There's also the matter of the abomination he can't even call music playing in one ear. The Horrorterror is just a migraine nibbling at the soft tissue of his brain, not even loud enough for him to make out words; this is something else. Dave's not sure until he checks the timetables, but sure enough the hell music has stats and a readout, which means it's some kind of terrible fraymotif. He's, like, ninety percent sure.

But it sounds godawful. Worse than that obnoxious, screeching noise that Dave had to put up with for a while there whenever he wanted to listen to fraymotifs when John's jacked up, majorly uncool use of [Eye of the Storm] went janky as hell. John's shitty coping mechanism wasn't music straight from the mouth of fucking double death Satan himself, either, which is what's playing right now. Random record scratches, the shriek of microphone feedback, snatches of whispered words so garbled Dave can't even begin to tell what the song's about and only audible in one ear at a time...

When he puts out a hand and flattens it against the timetable to his right, the readout just says [Abelbno], which tells him *nothing whatsoever.* The stats are just as muddled; there's more numbers than there should be.

Also, his latest replacement sunglasses have a new crack right down the middle of the left lens. Problems. Why do they always have *problems*? Like, Dave's gone along with some weird shit in his day, but he doesn't remember it being non-stop, 24/7 reality-bending bullshit before these past couple of months.

With a grimace, he twists the volume down as far as it can go, so he can focus without all this raw noise blaring in his ears.

Of course the volume control doesn't work.

And exactly how long has the insane clown guy been dicking around with their minds? Because Dave thinks there's probably a law against insane clown dudes and minds and the dicking around thereof, but he's drawing a blank. He needs a lawyer on call or something because Bro clearly taught him fuck all about how the law applies to keeping his mental temple sacred and clear of clown minddouchery. Terezi's idea of justice might be skewed, but maybe she has lawyer friends he can hit up.

Before he can wonder where their resident law troll might have ended up in the shuffle, green light wraps around him like a tingly blanket, and Jade lands them right beside the goddamn Horrorterror.

He could have told Jade that was a bad plan, if she could ask anyone anything and be understood. Not as bad as if she'd brought Rose along with them...but Jade knows - she was there when they were watching the game records and stuff. Bringing Dave to a Horrorterror fight seems like something she would have known to avoid at all costs on a normal day.

But hell, he gets it. Today is a spectacularly shitty day and Jade needs all hands on deck. He can handle it. Yeah.

Besides, when he gets a good look at this latest tanglebuddy shitstorm? It's a jellyfish. A giant
jellyfish. and Dave *really* shouldn't find this whole thing amusing as hell. It reminds him of his collection of dead things back in Houston; he picked up a couple of dried out jellyfish blobs on the beach at Galveston when Bro took him there one year, and figuring out how to preserve them in formalin and water with the right ratios took him ages. Only one had survived to sit on the top shelf of his packed closet. Jellyfish are almost entirely squishy bubbles of goop.

Except for the parts that sting.

As though to remind him to sit his ass back down, that nibbling migraine spikes into a sharp, stabbing roar that shocks him out of his amusement. Dave can hear the disturbing fraymotif over it, but it's a close call. His hand trembles when he tugs a sword out of the air, only half sure what he's going to do with it if the Horrorterror decides to tango with him next. What he hears next sounds like a stadium full of people sniffing in disdain - and then the murmuring rumble slacks off again, leaving him alone with the terrible music.

Alright. Cool. He didn't want to end up possessed today, anyway. Maybe this grimdark thing only wants Eridan like Gl'bgolyb only wanted Peixes - instead of, you know, being an equal opportunity douchebag like Leviathan. Convenient, since they can't really afford for Dave to take a dirt nap this time. No, not being a tanglebuddy is right up Dave's alley. When he glances down at the sword in his hand, it's only unfamiliar for a beat. Some half Welsh name that he doesn't want to bother remembering.

[activate fraymotif? y/n]

At least *that* still sounds normal. Dave tries to fiddle with the timetables, but gives up when the readout stays scrambled. He has no goddamn clue what fraymotif abilities he might be activating or what triggered them - but hell, what else is new? "Sey," he forces out (hearing the word come out like that feels like gagging on dry cornflakes), and then, "Ugh, sey."

Okay, that's not fair. "Yes."

-

In hindsight, Dave might have gone a little overboard on the music.

A lot overboard.

But he's gonna blame this shit on the game, because it's an overly-literal piece of crap.

Jade has zoomed up, her face hidden by a poof of hair as she lashes out, and everyone else scattered around the Horrorterror has started to chase after it. The grimjelly isn't moving fast, but it *is* moving. Out of the two Horrorterrors Dave has had the bad luck to get uncomfortably up close and personal with, Leviathan wanted to blow stuff up and Gl'bgolyb had a boner for Peixes, or something. If it weren't for the thing's sheer size - and the unhealthy sheen of 'you're fucked, tiny flesh things' that ebbs from the jellyfish in waves - Dave would think this one just liked floating.

He's glad he took a second to collect his shit, though, because regardless of what the Horrorterror is doing, activating three fraymotifs at once on top of whatever shit is already playing? That is a stupid ass idea, and his ears may never recover. He can barely hear the track names over the horrific, mixed up shrieking noises in his ears as he reels back.

[Recurative Accelerando]

[Warp and Weft]
He has no idea what any of those do, except one. The track names sound fine when the little not-voice announces them in his head, but of course trying to spin through the turntables to find out more gets him nothing but garbage. Do they work right when there's another fraymotif harshing on their vibes?

When he looks up, the grimjelly quivers. The main bulk of it rests heavy in the bell, where Jade's tossing green bursts of light to try to tear through. It's the dragging tentacles that people on the ground need to watch out for - but the quiver isn't enough warning before the frills and feathers wind up into a tight coil, then rip outward in a vicious, lashing spiral that tears up the grass. All of them get caught off guard by it - Kanaya takes the hit and flies backward, which doesn't worry Dave as much since Kanaya's a tank in troll form - and Oriole manages to tuck his wings down before they can get ripped off. Dave rolls under the main slice, then bites back a shout when a feather catches him across the face and arm. The barbs of the large feather feel like spines; the force drags him a yard or two before the tentacle finishes passing overhead and starts to retract back to the body. His suit jacket protected most of his arm; there's a welt swelling up on the side of his face that stings like shit when he scrubs at it.

Dave can't see Karkat from here. Dave only has tabs on Kanaya and Jade and Oriole and that's at least three people short of who he wishes he had tabs on.

Well, as long as they don't have any plan beyond the basic hit the Horrorterror until it stops moving strategy, everybody can catch on. Past that point Dave's drawing a blank - grab Eridan and run? Try to find more void bracers without the ability to ask Momlone where she keeps the spares? Herd their new giant pet jellyfish away from major population centers and let it graze free range across Idaho? No one is using Idaho for anything important right now, right?

Shit, man. This internal monologue is getting surreal. He's gonna go stab the grimjelly before he zones out completely. He spins time to a crawl so he can catch up with where Kanaya landed.

Getting closer to the Horrorterror means acknowledging not just how tall it is (how is anyone but Jade supposed to get up there?) but also how thick the humidity sits in the air, plastering his hair to his forehead and sticking to the back of his neck. There's an extra, acrid aftertaste when Dave takes a shallow breath, and he can only imagine how fucked they might be if the air turns into poison. The horrific mist mostly swirls around the Horrorterror itself, and breathing it can't be good for your long term health, right? Where's John and his windy thing when you need them?

The grimjelly's tentacles wind up again slowly, as though it has plenty of time to watch them run around like lemmings working out the best angle for leaping off a cliff en-mass. Kanaya rolls back onto her feet with her scary game face on - can't keep that troll down, for serious - and Dave wishes like hell they could talk and work out some kind of game plan with Jade, who keeps getting batted aside and having to evade each time she tries to punch through the bell.

He wishes it even more when, with a warning shout that doesn't actually do much warning, Jade flashes green - and a chunk of the massive jellyfish rips loose, a wobbly wedge of greyish-blackish-purplish jello that drips brackish blood everywhere as it gets tossed backwards over Jade's head to land in the empty field. A similar flare of yellow-green flares on the far side of the grimjelly, and more space-y shit removes a couple of the Horrorterror's spare tentacles. That creepy space hound doesn't make a sound while it does it, either, reappearing on the ground directly under the center of the jellyfish's umbrella as the whole thing quakes.

Neither tear heals over right away, which is - some kind of progress. Dave is all for progress.
Progress is great. Except just as fast as Jade and Bec strip away the grimjelly's tentacles and hack away more chunks of jelly, replacement tendrils bust out of the ragged bell in a miasma, tiny worms and thorns knotting together until they're long enough reach out and smack at Jade. Still no sign of Eridan in all the mess, either.

Dave waits - and waits - and then hacks at the next feathered, lashing tentacle that whips out at him, hearing the roar of a chainsaw as Kanaya does the same. Kanaya tries to run up the tendril, actually, and makes it up nearly ten feet before the tentacle tries to buck her off. She hooks an arm around it, hanging on as it tries to scrub her off against the ground, like gum on the sole of a shoe.

He gets the idea, though. They can't do anything useful down here. He could try to do that floating bs, like Typheus was riding his ass about, but nah.

Seriously, no.

The tentacle he slices at gives under the broken half of a sword, wobbly but quick to reform, and he flashsteps under it before it can drag him a second time. He spies the second tendril, one that's darker and limned with white rather than the other way around, as it winds back and then strikes at him from overhead. He's got this; swapping between a timetable under one hand and stabbing with a swordkind feels practiced and familiar - but before he can flash out of the way a hand knots in the back of his shirt and hauls him back further - too slow. Dave grabs whoever it is by the wrist without hesitating, and pauses time flat out to tackle them away from the tentacle coming back to smash them to a pulp. It's like a game of whack-a-mole. When he lets time unfreeze the tentacle slams the ground once before retracting, content to have left him on his ass.

He's not sure who he expects when he turns - probably Kanaya - but goddamn if Jane isn't anywhere near it. He opens his mouth, and before he can gargle out a suave hello she ditches him without a word, her giant red fork of death slung over her shoulder. Seriously, she doesn't even make a peep; just picks a tentacle of her own and starts hacking away.

Alright. No one related to John and Jade should be that quiet. The last time Dave saw him pre-clown breakdown, Jake ran his mouth like it was a presidential campaign trying to talk them into letting him leave.

More help is sweet, though. When Dave looks around to reassess his options, Oriole is hopping around like a human sized orange chicken trying to get off the ground, his wings awkward and out of sync. He somehow achieves decently radical air; his stabbing technique needs work to be up to Strider standards, but he jams the swordkind deep enough into the frill of the tentacle that it's actually not that embarrassing to watch.

Which means the only ones still on the ground are Dave and Jane, and possibly Karkat, who Dave hasn't seen since Jade dropped them here and they all got their asses pulverized by the jelly-go-round.

Shit, he's just going to keep stabbing until he hits something important. There's not as much of this thing as there was of Gl'bgholyb, which means it should be easier to hit a vital organ, right? If this thing has vital organs. Tentacle gods might not follow rules like that. See, this is why they need Rose. Why is she always coincidentally down for the count whenever they have a noodlemonster trying to stomp on their squishy bodies?

Then it starts talking, and of course they can't understand each other, but fucking chaoschatter from Horrorland is perfectly understandable.

And that kind of sucks balls.
The jellyfish's dome splits open and oh wow that's a shitton of teeth. Jellyfish shouldn't have teeth.

This would be so much less of a problem if Jade could tell him what she wanted. As it is, Dave lands directly on top of the jellyfish with zero damn warning and with one foot raised to try to step over Bec. He takes the step and winds up discovering that whatever grimjelly is made of - slime or acid or horrorblood or god only knows what - it's all gelatinous and shit. The jelly's bell bobs under his feet like a water bed and he accidentally-on-purpose uses his half of a sword as a stick to prop himself up when he staggers to the side.

This has the added bonus of looking like he totally went stabmaster all up in here right out of the gate - no one can say otherwise. He will fight them over this. Sure, stabbing appears to be as (not very) effective as anything Jade's done, but it's something. It is definitely something being done. He tries again when that first stab doesn't end with him being swallowed whole by a new maw, planting his feet as solidly as he can and wrenching the sword out to stab down again.

Five seconds too late, it occurs to him that he should be worried about hitting Eridan. Is there even a body to hit anymore? If this is - if he's not wrong, and this is somehow Leviathan, surely it would have kept its tanglebuddy intact? But Rose isn't here for him to ask her, this thing looks nothing like Leviathan did in New York, and all Dave has is a hunch and horrified sense of dread that he's trying to suppress to make him think this is the same thing that possessed Rose.

More goopy jelly parts under the sword as he plunges it down. Black-mottled pale skin glimmers with slime as it seals over the wounds. Well, he thinks, at least if he hits something solid he'll know he's hit Eridan; the bell is wide and deeper than his broken ass fancy sword can probably reach, though, so it might not stick Eridan anywhere important, either. Gotta look on the bright side and all that jazz.

"Yr't ot Indf Derian!" Jade shouts right in his ear. Dave scrambles as he nearly bobs right off the smooth top of the bell; Jade is floating when she stops glowing green, but Kanaya lands hard on both her feet and that sends ripples through the jelly that set Dave further off his center of gravity. As quickly as she appears, Jade teleports out again - and reappears with an armful of orange bird kid,
who she punts closer to the center of the bell when a tentacle comes around to try to slap them away.

Oriole looks lost. Kanaya adjusts in seconds and sweeps her chainsaw down to start carving off a slab of Horrorterror near the breach where Jade tore chunks loose. Dave still has no idea what Jade's been saying, but he figures she'd whip him upside the head with a newspaper if he did something wrong, so stabbing is what he'll keep doing. Where did Bec fuck off to? Then again, when has that beast ever done more than act like some passive-aggressive sidekick at Jade's beck and call?

Kanaya lets out a shout, and Dave spins to see a dozen bulging eyes on stalks growing out of the tear where the jadeblood has been cutting. "Where the jadeblood has been cutting. "When did you open up this place, Jeez?" - "Does this look like a place to st and to y o u?"

Kanaya flips her chainsaw sideways and slices the eyes off their freaky stems. It doesn't help. Dave's ready for the jaws to open up underneath them so they can join Eridan in horrific marination. Oriole picks the wrong place to start stabbing or something, because he cuts deep into the center of the bell and dark fluid spurts up and across the front of his shirt, sizzling as it hits and making him almost backpedal to the edge of the bell. Kanaya and Jade power through it when it happens to them - Jade rips off another writhing mass of jello and tentacles as she distracts them from hitting the people on the bell and drenches her arm in it. Whereas when Dave cuts in - oh. The acid bloodbrine hits his jacket and sleeve, for the most part, and stops burning before he can feel any pain, dripping down and leaving nothing but faint discoloration in the fabric.

Shit, these are cool pajamas. He's not sure how long they'd last if he got doused in the stuff, but that's not bad at all. Jade's outfit has gaps but it must be protecting her, too. An extra drop hits the sore spot on the side of his face and burns like a motherfucker, but he wipes it off and ignores the pain. If his and Kanaya's motif is working right, they should all be healing fast anyway.

But no one has hit Eridan yet. They've torn up a good third of the jellyfish's bell between them, counting the parts that have sealed up in their wake, and nothing. How long until they piss off the jellyfish enough that it loses what little patience it has?

"Where is he!?" Jade says, frustrated, echoing Dave's thoughts exactly. It's such a shock to understand her that Dave doesn't react for a split second. "It keeps moving him around in there -"

Before she can float away again, Dave leaves his 1/2bladekind stuck in the Horrorterror and grabs her by the shoulders. "You can talk," Dave says. Not his coolest moment.

Jade blinks - and claps her hands to her cheeks, eyes lighting up with joy. Something's wrong with the backs of her hands, though; they look scabbed and raw in some places - like Dave's face felt, before the sting of the welt died down. Up close, patches of her shirt and shorts look discolored and acid-washed where the gelatinous blood has been splattering her. "You can talk!" she says, delighted, despite the fact that her hands must be in agony.

"You don't know where we're supposed to be stabbing?" Oriole shrieks.

Jade opens her mouth to answer, beaming; then a tendril sweeps across the wide plane of the jellyfish's bell and Jade lifts them out of the way. "H'ow's bo'th e rs o' me ..." the Horrorterror says. Dave wonders where the mouth opened up this time; the vibrations running up his legs make him feel queasy. Oriole staggers when Jade sets him back down, and then his leg shoots out from under him, skidding down a slick patch where Jade's tears and stab wounds have left blood oozing everywhere. Dave darts over and pulls Oriole back upright, with some help from frantically beating wings, before another sigh disrupts the bell again. It's like trying to balance on a sentient water bed, christ - and then the whole thing tilts ninety degrees and drops, twisting and ducking to shake them
Then the jadeblood and Bec blink out of sight.

before - well, we will see how this goes. Take me to Eridan, Becquerel."

hanging out, and wraps an arm around it with a grim expression. "I would normally consult Rose
out very well," Kanaya admits. She kneels when Bec zaps in from wherever the hellbeast was
"Do something about the Horrorterror's body before it falls on anyone, I suppose. I did not think this
whistling.

"Sure, why? What can we do to help?" Jade says, putting her fingers to her mouth and then

"Which one?" Dave and Oriole say in unison, and that never bodes well. Dave knows exactly which
Jade's, and her sleeves are basically gone. "Do any of you have a plan, now that we can
one last time and pulling so hard she tears it out of the bell entirely. Her arm and hand look as
stings if I try to dig through it
wrecked as Jade's, and her sleeves are basically gone. "Do any of you have a plan, now that we can

Jane shrugs with one arm. "Something about a troll girl being dead."

- or not. Better strike that second one.

"She got better," Bro says, from out of fucking nowhere, and only years of putting up with this shit
keeps Dave from twitching like Kanaya and Oriole do. "Still irresponsible as hell, like whatever
you're doing up here; nobody's even a little bit dead yet, this might not be Leviathan at all -

Jane shrugs with one arm. "Something about a troll girl being dead."

A trio of smaller, squirming tendrils burst out from the near edge of the bell and try to wrap around
Jade's ankle. When one misses, it aims for Kanaya instead, but Jade jerks out of the way and Kanaya
brings her chainsaw down, bloodbrine speckling her face as she stoms with a foot to hold the
tentacle in place. The third whips out of the way - and a hand snaps it out from the underside of the
bell, twisting it in a knot around a wrist and yanking. Jane swings a foot up onto the unsteady
umbrella, teeth bared in a grimace as she uses the struggling tendril as a handhold to hoist herself the
rest of the way onto their level. "That stings," she says, before twisting the tentacle around her arm
one last time and pulling so hard she tears it out of the bell entirely. Her arm and hand look as
wrecked as Jade's, and her sleeves are basically gone. "Do any of you have a plan, now that we can
speak? I've tried dismembering everything underneath with Feferi and the other Strider's help, but it
either regrows them or doesn't appear to care, and I'm plumb out of ideas."

"With Roxy, as far away as I could get them," Jade says.

Bro grunts. "Plan. Someone. Go," Dave says, as Bro appears from wherever he was lurking to
hunker down by a tear that's covered with a thin skin of Horrorterror gunk. He doesn't look up when
Dave speaks, and there's something missing - hell if Dave can tell what. "I'm all for stabbing but I
doubt this thing'll put up with our bullshit for much longer."

Kanaya raises her hand. "I have one. Jade, may I borrow Becquerel?"

"Sure, why? What can we do to help?" Jade says, putting her fingers to her mouth and then
whistling.

"Do something about the Horrorterror's body before it falls on anyone, I suppose. I did not think this
out very well," Kanaya admits. She kneels when Bec zaps in from wherever the hellbeast was
hanging out, and wraps an arm around it with a grim expression. "I would normally consult Rose
before - well, we will see how this goes. Take me to Eridan, Becquerel."

Then the jadeblood and Bec blink out of sight.
Dave has two seconds to process the fact that his sister's girlfriend may have just teleported herself into a Horrorterror before creepy green glow starts emanating from under their feet, lighting up the murky inside of the jellyfish's bell which confirms that yeah, Kanaya just did that. He looks at Jade, and Jade looks at him, and they're both stuck on that shared wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare when the Horrorterror makes a really goddamn ominous burbling sound. Jade kicks off the bubbling surface in alarm, holding up her glowing hands but hesitating as she holds them out toward different sections of the bell, confused.

Bro's slow, or maybe Dave is freaked enough that his reflexes already have him turning the timetables and snatching his sword out of the jellyfish before Bro can grab him. No sign of Lil Cal, either, which is great, because that shitty puppet's the last thing Dave wants to deal with while he darts to where the green light is brightest. Oriole is closest to the bright point, but he's too startled to dodge when Bro nabs him and Jane and disappears again. "Stop it! It's Krakken," the grimjelly says. It sounds annoyed rather than pained, and Dave's migraine spikes as the jellyfish's dome starts to roll and toss like a boiling water bed. An ill-timed bubble rises up and trips Dave, and he nearly skids far enough on acid-stung hands to fly off the side. One of his pants' legs rides up and the inside of his calf starts to hurt, too. Another globule presses up as he crawls the last foot or so, and puts his ear to the surface. It makes the weal burn all over again - his face feels like it's on fire -

But he also hears the familiar, gurgling drone of a chainsaw. So that's that. Dave cuts down and wishes his hands were covered for this next part; his hands don't sting as bad as he braces himself for the inside of his calf starts to hurt, too. Another globule presses up as he crawls the last foot or so, and puts his ear to the surface. It makes the weal burn all over again - his face feels like it's on fire -

At the same time, thin white cords burst out from the dark cut and seize Jade's arm. "C'mon man! We'll get you out!" Jade yells, slapping her hands down on either side of the cut. She half-screams, "Kanaya - Hand!" Or maybe she's in too deep without the extra reach of the chainsaw to notice.

"Bec, bring them back out!" Jade yells, slapping her hands down on either side of the cut. She half-floats to keep her legs off the bell, and Dave is mildly jealous of that ability. His hands are covered to the knuckles of his fingers with dark red gloves, but his nails and the skin around them are turning a painful shade of 'caustic burn,' "This dumb, stupid thing! Ugh! Keeps changing inside, how many dimensions does it have -" And with that she plunges her whole arm into the ragged opening. Oh god she's gonna get chainsawed, Dave's seen too many shitty Saw sequels in his lifetime to believe otherwise - "Kanaya?! Bec?"

A too-pale grey claw punches into view to catch Jade by the wrist. One of the nails has flecks of nail polish on it.

At the same time, thin white cords burst out from the dark cut and seize Jade's arm. "We're going to be such good friends. Just a shot. Deair e strik' o'se." Leviathan.

Dave has never paused time faster. He has more than a few seconds to work with before it grates on him, now, but right away he can feel the gears of the timetables straining to twist in a different direction. Jade's right - Dave can stop what's happening here, but there's something about chaos gods that makes them work in squirmry ways. Did it feel this hard to stop before, in New York? He couldn't hold it as long then -

Just get them out.
The white worms are covered in tiny suckers, he sees as he starts chopping at them, digging his fingers into jello that hasn't quite stopped along with the rest of time, twitching as he cuts Jade free. Then he swallows and jams his own hand down to grasp Kanaya's wrist, pale white and luminescent where all her makeup and shit has been scrubbed off, and lets time scream back into motion. "Jade, pull now!"

Jade pulls, her other hand warm as it clamps down on top of Dave's, and Jade is way stronger than Dave would be alone.

At the same time, Bec apparently loses its patience. Dave can't think of any other logical explanation for things going boom again.

The resulting flare of green galaxies busts open the last of the jellyfish's bell in chunky burst. Jade wheels them back away from the burst, oozing sore with Kanaya in tow. Kanaya has something in her arms that might be Eridan-shaped, but they're coated in ooze. The image that burns itself into Dave's retinas before Jade teleports them back down to the ground is Bec hovering in the middle of the gaping wound, alight with green and yellow stars, sitting in midair the same way it would on the ground, and tilting its sightless head to the side to watch them go.

Maybe Jade misjudges, or maybe she just wants to rinse off the horror slime before more of them start melting. They land in the lake and Dave's sneakers slide in the muck, nearly dunking his head underneath. Drowning would be embarrassing, though. He'd never live it down. Letting the swordkind fall back into wherever things go lately when he's not thinking about them hard enough, Dave spits lake water out of his mouth as discreetly as possible and grabs the nearest person. It happens to be Kanaya; she lifts her head to look at him and he totally fails to conceal a hiss at the raw, jade-tinged burn that covers most of her face. "Not my best plan," she says.

"You should have let me do it," Jade says, worriedly. She dunked herself in the water, too, which means hey, they all look like drowned rats together, and she squeezes water out of her hair with both hands before sloshing over to them.

"I've recovered from grimlight burns before. I thought the principle would be the same." Kanaya shrugs, and heaves the Eridan lump up so his head and horns are above water. "He was in there longer, though."

Dave puts his hand out to check, cautiously raising the volume. He thought he'd tuned out the crazy song, but now he can't hear it at all regardless of what he does. Must have timed out or something - which thank fucking god John, or whatever. Dave is a man of refined musical tastes, and if he has to hear that shit again in his life he'll probably end up stricken deaf. "We have a healing motif on," he reports, rubbing the side of his face absently. "And I don't think any other music is messing with it, anymore, so it should be working for however long the music plays."

Jade sighs in relief and shakes out her hair. The ends trail through the water, so it doesn't help much. "I - oh, crap," she says, turning. "I think the Horrorterror is falling over."

It is. Dave whistles under his breath as the sagging bell collapses in on itself. Jane wasn't kidding about her and Feferi and Bro trying to cut the tentacles out from underneath - the grimjelly's bell only has a few straggling tendrils left that go limp under it, before the massive thing flutters and falls to the ground with a deceptively light-looking droop. When it actually hits the ground, the jelly is heavy enough to make the ground jolt and the water in the lake judder, but then it lies still. "Is anyone underneath it? I was only concerned in case someone ended up crushed." Kanaya asks.

"No, Feferi and Jane and Oriole and Bro are - over that aways," Jade says, pointing helpfully. Oriole stands out nice and orange next to the new hole where part of the lab used to be, with Feferi and Jane
standing a measured three feet apart as they eye each other's specibi. Dave can feel Bro's shaded stare from here. It feels like an impending ass kicking. Well, if Bro's gonna be all pissy about Dave pulling a successful dodge for once in his life, too bad. "Dave, I really don't know how to say this, buttt...is something...off about your bro?" Jade asks, scratching the side of her head.

"Who, Bro? When's something not weird about that dick?" Dave knows what she means though. He can't put his finger on it either, but he'll reserve time to freak out about it when there aren't witnesses. "Just ignore him. We beat a Horrorterror and he barely did jackshit. This is monumental. I can never let him live it down." If he focuses on gloating about that, he'll be alright.

Jade rolls her eyes at him. "Whatever, Dave. Let's just get these guys to the medical team." She sets a careful hand on Kanaya's shoulder to help the jadeblood haul Eridan the rest of the way out of the water. "Come on, let's find Doctor Lalonde, too, before he gets up -"

"W'ell, that was fun."

Jade has a gun drawn in a half a second; Dave whips Caledffyffyyfhylyl or whatever back into his hand, swallowing terror and schooling his face as smooth as he can make it when Eridan raises his head. Or, you know, Leviathan raises its head. Kanaya pulls away, not as graceful with water up to her chest as she would be normally, and the huddled body lets her go, considering them all with odd eyes. Eridan's sclera are mostly pale white, which seems wrong, but the glowworms in his pupils and the cold white fire dripping from them the same as they would have been weeks ago on Rose's face. The slime that covered him and Kanaya hid the fact that his already greyish skin has gone a distinct shade of grimdark. Fucking hell. "Let him go," Kanaya says.

Dave tightens his grip on the hilt of his sword, ready for Leviathan-in-Eridan to start firing magic bullshit at them, but it just lifts Eridan's mottled claws and cracks his neck loud enough for the sound to be terrifying. "M'sten Tl, ght tenn gtu. W' e s'ha'll n'ot t' pr'ub le, wit'h th' s dge a a a 

b ud d' y ho' s e m' i n'd i s f a r m o' re su' t ed to u' s. " It contorts its mouth into a thin smile, brackish water drooling out to drip into the lake water. Dave's backed out to where his torso is mostly above water, but now his legs feel exposed - he might be imagining the icy chill spreading out from Eridan's slouched body.

How much would gimp pollution lower Momlond's property values, anyway? "Bu' t' a n' t' e res' t' in g' a m, e , s'no n' e t h' e l' e s' s."

The barrel of Jade's current rifle looks weird. Like, Dave knows nothing about guns except don't get shot and basic level stuff like that, but he's pretty sure most guns don't have battery cartridges that glow white hot like lightning. "If you don't leave Eridan alone right now, I get to test this on you. I believe Eridan could probably take it, but you're probably screwed, buster!"

That's a weird way to word it, even for Jade. Whatever. The Horrorterror gives a liquid blink.

"U_n't l' The " Ti'n a' t' Recess, o' n in g', t' hen," Leviathan says, with enough reverberating voices that Dave staggers. It's still smiling, smiling at him, and he's not at all reassured when the grimdark aura leeches out of Eridan and into the lake. The last of the sticky mist and humidity in the air clears out almost as soon as Leviathan does, sucking down into a dark circle that's just barely visible through the churned up silt of the lake. Jade and Kanaya both shudder, and all three of them nearly let Eridan's unconscious body fall into the water. Water trolls can breathe underwater if they're asleep, right?

Fuck, Dave has no idea. But they manage to collect themselves and have Jade teleport them back into the lab with a minimum of disasters, so that's cool. Locating the doctors turns out to be a challenge because that Equius guy has gone god tier, and his voidy thing leaves Jade flummoxed
when they get too close, but it means a no Horrorterror zone that Dave trusts more than he does the idea that Leviathan would just bug off without a fight.

Which leaves Dave plenty of time to avoid thinking about the obvious.

Leviathan could have knocked him down whenever it wanted.

Why didn't it?

--turntechGodhead [TG] opened memo on board has anyone else noticed that pesterchum keeps fucking up the time stamps like wtf at --:--:-- --
TG: srsly
TG: the time stamps
TG: has anyone been keeping track of them
CG: SOME OF US HAVE BIGGER PROBLEMS, DAVE.
CG: HONKPROBLEMS.
TG: okay man whatever you say have fun with that
TG: but anyway is everyone in some state of being alive
TG: also show of hands how many people died at some point today
TG: and rose youre up right theres problems
GG: i'm alive! and so is bec!
TT: As am I. Though I feel as though I've had elder gods tapdancing through my frontal lobe with soccer cleats.
CC: Sames 38(
TG: yeah thats cause guess which horrorterror that was out there
TG: leviathan is the answer you dont get to guess sorry
TT: Hold on, Leviathan took Eridan as well? I knew it reached out to me, but I thought - I suppose I assumed his own Horrorterror would have taken precedent, there. You're positive, Dave?
TG: yeah im coming to you with kanaya so we can discuss this shit
GG: it did call you 'dear rose' or something like that :( 
EB: and you guys are sure you're all okay? Leviathan took out a city last time!
TG: were all vaguely in the EQ zone i think so were probs okay but hey maybe it was having an off day
AT: i, uH, dON'T REMEMBER DYING, AND I'M ALIVE NOW, wHICH YOU PROBABLY GUESSED. SO, THAT'S THAT,
GA: Present And Accounted For. I'm Glad You're Well Tavros. Where Have You Been?
AT: wITH ARADIA, SHe'S ALIVE TOO, bY THE WAY,
TT: I suspected as much. And I assume she had you well away from the festivities here?
EB: oh right! alive here, too!
EB: and uh...
TG: well obviously youre alive EB
TG: whatup
EB: nothing! everything is fine! calm and fine!
TG: okay so note to self bother john later until he talks
EB: ugh...
GG: ohhh! just so everyone knows, there's a section of the roof nearer to the lobby that might be about to fall in. this place isn't very structurally stable anymore in some places. watch your heads!
TC: honk
CG: YOU STOP THAT
TG: srsly dude go back into your not murderous coma or whatever
TG: (honkproblems huh)
CG: (SHUT UP DAVE.)
TC: :o(
AT: did THINGS REALLY GO THAT BADLY WRONG? i FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN OUT OF THE LOOP, oR SOMETHING,
GG: you have nooo idea :
TG: where the shit is everyone else are those douchebags ignoring my memos
TG: i already knew all of you people were alive except like tavros this memo has achieved nothing
TG: shits rude as hell

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Terezi catches up to Vriska before she can cross state lines. Issues of jurisdiction have always been one of Terezi's biggest pet peeves; if crime was afoot and she could deal with it better than some piddly scrub halfway across town, of course she would jump in to make sure justice was served. They're in Washington, but being able to fly past mountains rather than having to navigate winding roads means that they've gone farther than Terezi would like. She can smell the baked concrete and gasoline of a town underneath her feet instead of dense forest, now, but it's not Seattle. Vriska's making south and southeast, instead.

What annoys her more, though, is the fact that Vriska is stupid enough to fall for the exact same thing that got her killed the last time they went through this. It's not even the sexy kind of hate - the longer she thinks about it, checking and rechecking the branches of possibility that Vriska's actions could lead to as she zooms to catch up with the other troll, the more Terezi realizes Vriska isn't worth the hate. Vriska is like a blueberry-flavored insect throwing itself against the bug zapper of fate repeatedly because she thinks she's always right, and that's not hateful. That's just sad.

So Terezi climbs higher, and when she finally sniffs the cerulean blue glitter nail polish of Vriska's pixie wings down below, she drops like a dragon onto her prey, planting her foot between Vriska's wings and slamming her into the nearest tree.

It must be a pretty piss-poor excuse for a tree; the trunk snaps in two with a wrenching, splintering crack, and Vriska swears and snarls as they tumble and land in the middle of a parking lot. Vriska's elbow comes up and smashes into Terezi's nose, blinding her with the overwhelming wash of her own blood, but Terezi can sense the minds around them, faint blobs of mental color where humans and trolls back away from the fallen tree and run toward the doors of the store. At least half of them probably mean to call the police, who will in turn notify the FVRT and the legislacerators, and unless Terezi drags Vriska out of here in a hurry, she can see exactly how this ends with them arrested in the most humiliating sort of way. "I knew you'd be the one to follow me," Vriska says, pseudo-casually. "You can always count on Terezi Pyrope to be annoying as hell!"

"You crippled Tavros," she comments. It looks like whatever weirdness scrambled their words earlier stayed in the valley where it belonged. Vriska's fist knots in her hair, and Terezi rips free with such force an entire chunk of hair comes out. It hurts, but who cares? "You killed Aradia. Then you killed Tavros outright, and thought it would be a great idea to fly off and go face the big bad boss all by yourself."

She floats back, her foot tapping on the ground as she gets out of arms' reach when Vriska lunges at her. Vriska's mind shifts again, a throbbing mass of golden light that thinks it's being sly, and Terezi uses her cane to whap Vriska upside the chin before she can start stealing luck from everyone around them. Everything is clearer now - Terezi could deduce what people might do and what may result from those actions before, but resurrecting as a god tier gives her so much more evidence to work with!
"Are you seriously going to start being pissy about that all over again?" Vriska says, catching herself on the hood of a truck by her elbows. While she's reeling, Terezi blows her nose and pinches it once the worst of the blood has sluiced out down the front of her face. Slowly her sense of smell adjusts to the drip of blood and starts picking up other details again. "That was - ugh -" Terezi jabs her in the knee with the cane, but it fails to make Vriska stop "- that was another universe! Another life! They're both fine, now!"

"Yeah," Terezi agrees, leaning on her cane as she takes in the cars around them. The tree's unfortunate doom has clogged up this entire aisle of parking spaces, and the beep of someone honking furiously is almost drowned out by a car alarm from a minty fresh green minivan. "That doesn't mean anyone has to forgive you. Especially when you're trying to get us all killed by floating off on a power high, again." She lifts and bangs her cane back down sharply for emphasis before raising it to point at Vriska. "So! The question is one of intent! Are you deliberately endangering the lives of everyone around you, or do you just not care? Speak now, or forever hold your peace!"

"That's for weddings, not trials!"

Terezi snorts. "Hah! Says the one who has never been a member of the justice system."

"Lay off, Terezi!" Vriska flips from defensive to aggressive at the speed of light, lifting her hands and bringing them down in a burst of power. There are eight blue dice lined up between her claws, the Fluorite Octet. For a moment, Terezi feels six sweeps old again, young and even more dangerous than she has been in this lifetime.

But young or old, past or present, Terezi knows for a fact that she couldn't have caught up with Vriska unless Vriska let her. Vriska had half of a game session to adjust to her wings and her enhanced Thief of Light capabilities, treating the god tiers just as she did the echeladder - something to be beaten faster than anyone else around. Terezi killed herself today only halfway sure she'd come back in one piece, and the wings on her back are entirely new.

They're only here because Vriska likes dramatic showdowns. Because with all the luck Vriska has stolen along the way, she can make those dice land whichever way she wants.

And beneath it all, Terezi can sense a familiar sort of (almost) all-seeing omniscience trained on them. Creepy Mr Vanilla Milkshake must be getting a real eyeful.

Terezi strikes with her cane, quick as a wink, and raps Vriska's hand smartly so that four of the dice clatter out of her grasp. With Vriska startled, the dice land 1-2-1-1, numbers that have no significant associations. Vriska throws the rest of the dice at Terezi's face, and they explode into a smokescreen right under her nose, dense and foggy enough to obscure the physical senses. Not the best roll, but not bad either. The dicekind will return to Vriska's hands any second for a new roll.

Before Vriska's next strike can land, Terezi springs to safety, nostrils flaring as she makes a break for clear air. The honking car sits in her way, and Terezi smoothly backflips on top of the hood and then the roof, her wings fluttering as they scramble to balance her. She recognizes the scent of a sharp blue curve as Vriska buries a newly summoned swordkind through the hood where Terezi kicked off. But it's only the sword. Must have rolled 4-4-4-4-4-4-4-4. "Getting sloppy, Serket!" Terezi calls, which only irritates Vriska more.

While she dodges and turns, though, Terezi's Mind is elsewhere. The two easiest, most likely ways this fight could end stand out very clearly in her mind's eye, because she's seen them play out before. Either Vriska escapes because Terezi can't bear to finish her, and leads whatever monster Doc Scratch has back down on the heads of the unsuspecting humans and trolls back at the lab - or -
Another roll of the dice, blue stone chiming as the fluorite skitters across the pavement. Three end up going wild and land in the shadows under someone's car, and the five Terezi can see roll another number that's not quite good enough: 4-1-2-2-5.

Before, Terezi knew almost all of Vriska's favorite rolls like she knew Alternian law. Her memory of all the combinations and their powers rusted after all these years of Vriska having to make due with other specibi. That roll might not be incredibly powerful, but Vriska's quick to use the sonic boom that erupts to push Terezi off the car. It sends her careening backwards almost to the edge of the parking lot.

Let Vriska go, and watch everyone die, or -

Terezi can't concentrate. When Vriska tries to push her luck by jumping after her with the dice rolled into knuckledusters, the tealblood uses her cane and her wings to swing up and roundhouse kick her in the face. "Stop blaming me when I'm the only one who tries to accomplish anything around here!" Vriska shouts, glowering with an eye that's just starting to swell and bruise around the edges. "There's an evil guy trying to end the world? Then we should stop whining and go stop him! Running away on a meteor, hiding away in a valley - you guys never stop being losers!"

*Because it ends with us dead,* Terezi wants to scream. It ends in death, or it ends in - well, death. Vriska can't just stop being Vriska - Terezi can't think of a single time Vriska has tried to change herself or take responsibility for her actions, and genuinely meant it. Last time, she wanted to settle it with the flip of a coin. But on either path, Scratch wins. Terezi can see it now; he's not even trying to hide it from her, the smug criminal mastermind. He knows she knows he's watching, his reaching mind smugly serene as he waits for her to make her choice. If her Mind sense is a branching network of teal, he's the noxious green highlighter lighting up her predictions for what Vriska could unleash if someone doesn't stop her.

Even with all the best intentions in the world, Vriska *always* has to be stopped.

Terezi seizes Vriska by the hair, this time, and slams her facefirst down against the curb. "It's never that simple," she hisses instead. Vriska flares up and somehow finds the right angle to hook around Terezi's leg to reverse their positions. Terezi expects that lucky break, though; she headbutts Vriska in the chin when the ceruleanblood leans down to gloat, and jams the head of her cane right in Vriska's solar plexus. The spasm takes the breath out of Vriska for a moment.

No, Terezi can't let Vriska go. She never could. That branch of possibility withers as she makes the conscious choice to discard it. Which just leaves -

She flips them one last time, ignoring Vriska's attempt to steer her off-balance by yanking her horns to the side. All it takes is a practiced flick of her wrist to reverse the canekind and draw the blade, with inevitability weighing down her wrist and her knowledge of troll anatomy telling her exactly where to stab.

And Terezi stops, the point of the blade pressing just through the soft fabric of Vriska's shirt. It nicks skin; she can smell the tang of blood, a pinprick of blue through the sunshine of the shirt.

"Are you going to back me into this corner again?" she demands. Her claws are shaking on the hilt of the cane, one palm slamming down to pin Vriska's wrist against the street, and the sensory overload is almost too much. She has barely drawn blood, but the memory of sunshine yellow staining sickly, nauseating green as runnels of blue blood poured out of a chest wound is right there in the front of her mind, justice turned rancid by regret.

How much can Vriska remember when Terezi stabbed her in the back? Enough to make her freeze
under Terezi, staring at the cane without a hint of disbelief or sneering in her wide blue eyes. They both know Terezi can do it, has done it.

Let Vriska go, and watch everyone die, or kill Vriska and let them live -

"Terezi?"

- or talk her out of it. Or knock Vriska unconscious, drag her back to the lab, and let someone else handle her. Hell, maybe Terezi could join Vriska in flying toward their doom. Terezi already knows that Vriska has the charisma to win Terezi over, if she talks long enough. Stupid, sexy Vriska. They're each as bad as each other, so they should maybe call Sollux and have him inflict his strange, irritable mediation on them before they make a mistake they can't take back.

There's not just two choices. The world isn't that simple.

Terezi breathes in, and breathes out, and lets the cane fall to the side, her claws slowly curling back into a fist that she rests over the spot of blood. "I'm not going to kill you," she says, her voice strange in her ears. She has to swallow around a lump in her throat that she doesn't remember forming, so maybe that's why. "I'm not going to kill you."

Vriska still looks frozen, eyes flicking between Terezi's face and the cane lying on the ground. Her heart churns along under Terezi's hand, and it occurs to Terezi that she knows the exact sound Vriska would make if she had stabbed her.

Then Vriska breathes out, shaking her wild hair out of her face. "Uh. Huh." She glances briefly to the side, and Terezi lets her mind drift that direction as well, to take in the people watching them from a (relatively) safe distance. Well, at least the prosecution will have plenty of witnesses if they really do get arrested. Terezi would hate to be the defendant against a prosecutor with nothing solid to go on. The professional secondhand embarrassment would have been awful. "Are we gonna make out now?"

"No." Terezi pushes herself up and puts out a claw for Vriska to take, helping her up with barely a few inches between them. Unfortunately, it's definitely not hate that Terezi's feeling right now. Ugh. "We're going back."

"But whyyyyyyyyy?" She's back to whining, so the worst of the danger has probably passed.

Before she can get sneaky about and start thinking felonious thoughts, Terezi claps both hands on Vriska's cheeks and kisses her. Their noses bash together and Vriska tries to gnaw on her lips immediately. When that tactic fails, she tries to feel up one of Terezi's horns, but that's not a hate-worthy offense. Not at the moment, anyway.

Thankfully, Vriska is a violently self-centered miscreant, not oblivious - about a minute in she appears to register the change and surfaces for air, staring at Terezi accusingly. "You flipped on me," she says, shocked.

"This is awkward. We should probably not talk about this in front of random strangers," Terezi says. It seems like common sense, but when has Vriska ever had anything like common sense. "Or else the whole thing will escalate and we'll end up arrested for public indecency on top of everything else, and that's not how I want to go, Vriska. My spotless record is already tainted by vigilantism and destruction of public property, but you can't take this from me."

Vriska shuts her mouth, then opens it again. She looks confused with a hint of sly curiosity, and that combination is about as sinister as if she were outright scheming. "You don't hate me," she says,
slowly. "You lo-

Before she can finish, Terezi wraps an arm around her waist and dips Vriska deeply enough that only their brand new powers of flight and levitation keep them from collapsing on the ground again. This time when Terezi pulls back Vriska's face is flushed blue and she looks woozy. Which is better than 'scheming to provoke Terezi and then take off again' any day of the week. "Public indecency," she reminds the other troll.

Vriska nods along blankly and says, "Yeah? Sure." Which gives Terezi confirmation that Vriska has made the final transition from staring confusion to a kissed out muddle.

And she's not going to die.

"I said, no." Terezi pats Vriska on the cheek, stoops to retrieve her cane and sheath the blade, and then floats up into the air until her wings take over. "We're going back," she says, pointedly, unable to repress a wide, toothy grin. "If you try to take on the boss battle right now no one will be there to admire your brave dumbness, so you might as well wait until everyone else is ready to go. And if you can't beat me back to the lab, you have to apologize to Aradia and Tavros before we make out."

That last comment is a risky choice, but it pays off when Vriska's eyes light up with the fire of competition. Maybe challenging her into a contest isn't the best idea for keeping things not-rivalry, but Vriska has buttons and Terezi knows how to press them. When Vriska rockets past her in a cloud of choking blue sparkles, she's zooming back the way they came with a wild laugh.

"Hey! Move this tree, you inconsiderate fucks!" the person in the car yells. Terezi looks at the tree, and then back at the man, and then up at Vriska.

"I'm a legislacerator. I don't do clean up," she informs him. "You should probably call them and complain."

"I will!" the man snaps. He already has his phone out. "Don't think that I won't!"

"Good man. Always do your civic duty by reporting crimes and other weird goings-on." Then Terezi trails after Vriska, and doesn't look back.

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"Tell me more about you," Rose says.

She may simply think it very loudly, because Roxy does not answer right away. The other girl no longer has a death grip on Rose's hand, so clarity of thought trickles back in over time, and Rose clears her throat and asks again.

"W'dyah want to know?" Roxy says, perking up a little. She stops worrying at her fingernails with a gnawing tooth to look at Rose. "I think me and Di already covered most of training and tha brainwashing thing."

They're outside, in a narrow copse of trees a ways distant from the lab. Rose stays prone on her back, resting a void bracer against her forehead as she turns her gaze back up to the sky just barely visible through the branches. A faint green tinge to the sky had proven, upon sending Roxy to investigate, to be a Becquerel shaped object floating in the middle of the air and, for all intents and purposes, apparently content to stay there. The hanging mist cleared rather abruptly a short while ago, one of the first signs that the Horrorterror incursion had passed; her phone occasionally buzzes against her sternum as news comes in through Pesterchum and the rare email. In her void-induced stupefaction
she missed most of the confusion over communications breaking down, and now a solid thirty percent of the messages she's received appear to be private pestering from Dave. He doesn't take it well when he can't converse with others; with that and the Horrorterror, he is possibly as afraid as Dave is ever willing to admit to being.

And then there is John, who has been developing terrifyingly creative problem solving abilities whilst Rose has lain about trying not to listen to the susurrus dying off in the back of her mind, and Karkat, who has deemed Rose the only person in the world he trusts to tell him if he is currently the victim of a Punk'd episode. When she informs him that he isn't, he goes abruptly silent, which she takes to mean he is freaking out verbally rather than textually.

Messaging Gamzee only earns her a :o) and a vague, nudging headache in reply. It feels like a question - not openly hostile, but inquisitive, nonetheless. Given the state of her mental defenses right now, she hastily closes the chat before he can delve too deeply. He's not subtle at all, but she doesn't know the extent of his abilities, particularly at a distance, and is quietly relieved when the curious presence pulls back from her mind without pressing.

At least she can think clearly enough to be worried. The fact that Gamzee muddled their minds for almost an entire afternoon, presumably before activating that fraymotif, is alarming. Not subtle, no, but strong enough that subtlety didn't matter. Even with all of Aradia's ominous hints...

"Tell me about you," Rose says, for a third time, rolling her wrist a little so that the bracer's cool metal rests over her eyes. Her eyelashes brush the metal when she blinks and she can't see much around it, but the pressure seems to help her focus. Some of it, she'll already know - a refresher could never hurt.

"Hmmm." Roxy huffs and lies down next to Rose with a faint thud. Almost immediately Rose feels something tug on her hair and pull a strand across her upper lip. She smiles and blows it off, while Roxy chatters. "Well, idk. I guess...I like pink! And blue. I used to sleepwalk a lot, before Doctor Die put extra locks on the door at night. So maybe I still do, but I don't leave the room?" A jingle sounds, and Roxy cuts off to tap at her phone. "Dirk is bringing Jakey to come sit with us, issat cool?"

"Of course." Rose has the last email from her mother open on her phone; most of the areas of the lab complex they reopened for habitation are either gone or structurally unstable, and while sensors indicate the amount of void in the area have increased to almost surpass previous levels, Rue doesn't want anyone venturing into the damaged sections until she has the ward generator operational again. There's too much risk that Equius's new, unknown void abilities might fail. Mother dear would naturally prefer the relative surety of her own machines.

It would be wise to move closer to Equius, but they're still waiting for Rose's head to stop spinning. John and Karkat are somewhere near the blast zone; having them shift Gamzee away from the damage or closer to Equius would be asking for trouble, either way. Stalemate, stalemate, Rose's mind whispers, and she is almost completely certain the thought is her own, whole and entire. She may dare to sit up, soon.

"I'm thinking about trying to practice shootin' things again," Roxy goes on, rolling over from her side onto her stomach. Rose moves her wrist so she can see again, smiling and feeling tired deep in the recesses of her brain. "Not, like, people! Just to see if my hands keep being shaky. Janey-babe doesn't talk much, but I know she wants to go after Die and if I can't shoot straight..."

"You all are bound and determined to go the revenge route, then?" Rose asks, dry as chalk, without enough humor to match Roxy's brightness. Damn. "Not that I blame you, of course. If Jane wants help, trust me, I can think of at least four people who would be more than willing to assist."
Roxy nods, chin brushing over her arms as she folds them into a prop for her head. "'Fter what he did to John, I totes get it." With some maneuvering, the girl angles a thumbnail close enough to start chewing at the cuticle again. Not the best habit, but Rose doesn't have the energy to play mother. "I've...been thinkin' about something, though. Promise you won't tell Jane or Jake?"

Oh ho. Intriguing. "But I could discuss it with Dirk?"

Roxy rolls her eyes, kicking a foot up and idly swinging it. "He already knows, sort of. I talk to him about this stuff. Since we couldn't talk about it with J'n'J at all, for a long time." She pushes up a little, glances around to ensure the coast is clear, and then lowers back down to whisper in Rose's ear. "I think I might...not bow out again."

Rose blinks. She tries parsing the sentence again. Despite the lack of slurred words, however, this has to be the most incomprehensible thing Roxy has said all day. "Come again?"

Roxy bites down hard enough on her nail that this time Rose has to intervene, flicking Roxy with a finger until she stops and giggles nervously. "In the great romance showdown, I bowed out," she says, tucking her thumb into her fist and not quite meeting Rose's eyes. "On account of, Jane was my best friend and Dirk was also my best friend, so I had multiple conflicts of interest as far as the Jake caper went, and I didn't want to get in the middle of it."

Oh, that. "And now that you all have your own minds again, you're going to challenge for the rights to date Jake?"

"Uh, no." Roxy rolls over and away, hugging her stomach as she pouts at the sky. "I think...I think Jane is over all the Jake hype, from what she's been saying. S'why I'm nervous."

Rose catches on. "I see," she says, with her best sage, all-knowing smile. "Jane."

It is worth the elbow jab and the hissed, "Shaddup!" to see Roxy turn a bright shade of scarlet across her cheeks. When Rose can't suppress a chuckle, the red spreads to Roxy's ears, and when Dirk and Jake arrive - coming at them from an angle perpendicular to where the lab lies, Rose notes - the crunch of their shoes in the undergrowth tips Roxy off in time to cover her burning face with her hands. "Not a word, got it?"

Rose mimes zipping her mouth, still smiling, and tosses away the theoretical key. Then she busies herself with locating a convenient tree stump to prop herself up on; Jake looks freaked when she turns a smile on him, pulling at his collar and glancing at Dirk for guidance, so she must be radiating smug knowingness. "Er. Hullo, Rox. Hello Ms. Rose. I thought I had my noggin mostly back in order, but - this tentacle nonsense, was that normal?" Jake asks.

"Middling," Rose offers, brushing grass out of her hair. Her phone slips down the front of her shirt to land in her lap, and when she flips it in her hand she sees the screen in a mass of red text again, interspersed with green and blue and the occasional group memo notification. "That is to say, we have dealt with Horrorterrors before, with more regularity than the average being, but it's really not something we look forward to on a daily basis."

"Right." Jake looks faintly baffled.

EB: and that's basically how that happened.
EB: please help.
TT: I don't know if there is anyone on Earth who can help you now, John.
EB: rose! come on! me and karkat can't even talk this out because you know who is right there.
TT: The Dark Lord hath returned?
TT: Wait, where are you now?
EB: bathroom! it's my only escape!
EB: he doesn't need to read the phone screen to read over your shoulder!
TT: I hate to say this, but I believe, my dear John, you may be royally fucked.
TT: Also - couldn't he just appear in the bathroom?
EB: eeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEGHGHHGHG
EB: DON'T PUT IDEAS IN HIS HEAD!
TT: In the absence of any other options, I'd suggest trying Kanaya on your next restroom break. If
you had somehow managed to flip this whole thing grey, she would naturally be the best source of
information. Despite that, she may at least have some tips on how to handle two people in one
quadrant. For however long this arrangement lasts....
EB: I thought Kanaya only ever had an ashen crush on Vriska and Terezi, and they shot her down :/
TT: My advice is not to say that to her face.
TT: Really, I have absolutely no experience with accidental threesomes. Suddenly I feel
unadventurous compared to you.
TT: Perhaps Kanaya and I need to spice things up.
EB: haha. you're trying to freak me out like i'm dave. it's not working.
EB: mostly because i'm already at maximum freak out weasel capacity over here.
TT: Fair enough.

TG: and so im just saying
TG: shit was wack
TG: like how far would a horrorterror go just to fuck with people
TG: would it lose on purpose just to be a dick in some roundabout way
TT: Kanaya and I need to spice up our love life.
TG: rose wtf
TG: i dont want to hear this
TT: It just occurred to me that with John's recent foray into an emotional ménage à trois, the bar has
been raised.
TG: why the shit did you make me read those words just now
TG: wheres gamzee when you need him
TT: Do you really want to know?
TG: no
TT: To answer your question, there are few limits to what a Horrorterror could choose do, if it got
enough of its hive to agree to it.
TT: I am worried, though. The last time Leviathan played the long game, it spent years wearing me
down. Unless we do something drastic, the world doesn't have years left.
TT: Which means that if it is, conceivably, dicking with you...we should be concerned about more
immediate consequences. You said you were with Kanaya?
TG: yeah
TT: I'm thinking we could incorporate blood in some fashion. Ask her opinion for me.
TG: no fuck this im not talking to either of you
TG: im out
TG: jesus fucking herbert walker christ on a jelly donut
TT: Go stay with Equius instead. Kanaya and I can join you there shortly.
TG: are you doing this on purpose
TG: you are the worst
TT: Just stay near Equius, brother dear. For your own safety.
TG: for the sake of my untainted goddamn ears more like
TG: youre evil rose

GA: Why Did Dave Just Look At Me As Though I Was Troll Satan Incarnate And Then Tear The
Door Off Its Hinges Running Back Into The Building?
TT: I haven't the faintest, my dear.
TT: But if you're outside now, we'll come to meet you halfway.
GA: Rose.
TT: Yes, dear?
GA: Why Is John Asking Me Advice On How To Manage A Threesome?
GA: I Mean Sure I Can Give Him Some Pointers For How It Would Work In An Auspicious Triad
But Honestly I Am Beginning To Suspect Shenanigans.
GA: The Perpetrator Of Which I Am Currently Typing Messages To.
TT: Very strange. I cannot imagine how you came to that conclusion.
GA: Quite The Mystery.
GA: If I Direct Him To Websites Full Of Questionable Pale Porn, It Will Be On Your Head.
TT: I'm sure it wouldn't be anything Karkat hasn't already seen.

Rose allows herself a small laugh. Some people might describe the laugh as 'evil,' or 'wicked.' But that would be silly.

"Why is she laughing like that?" Jake asks. He sounds concerned.

"Kinda don't care," Dirk says, but he is now eyeing her speculatively as well. While Rose busied herself sowing entertainment in the ranks, Roxy has somehow finagled Dirk's sunglasses off his face and onto her own, revealing a thin, angular face similar enough to Ambrose's to give Rose a moment of hesitation - younger, less weathered, but still. The sense of dissonant recognition isn't as strong with Jake and Jane, most likely because the only pictures Rose has seen of James Harley and Joanna Egbert were from their later years, long after age had its way with them. "Unless shit's about to go down."

Time to try standing. A splinter of wood digs at Rose's palm as she boosts herself up with the tree stump as a crutch, but doesn't quite break the skin. "Oh, you know what they say," she says, "another day, another catastrophe. But things appear to be settled, for now. I'm going down to meet up with Kanaya. Will you all join me?"

"M stickin' with you, girlie," Roxy says, pouting at Dirk reproachfully when the sunglasses reappear on his face without warning.

"We will hang back here in a tactical position until Doctor Lalonde gives an all-clear," Dirk says. For a second, Rose wonders if he includes Roxy in that 'we'; but when Roxy gets to her feet and brushes off her pants, Dirk doesn't move to stop either of them from leaving. "Later."

- 

GG: well i'm shuffling some debris to keep it from falling on people, but i'm also keeping space tabs on eridan now. he's mostly unconscious.
GG: but equius makes it hard to tell :/
TG: yeah im in here jellyfish troll is down for the count
TG: equius is also here and ignoring my memo
TG: i can hear your alerts going off dude
TT: Kanaya, Roxy, and I will join you shortly. Dave. And Jade, can you check the valley over manually? You may want to retrieve your wolf creature, naturally.
TG: oh hell no where is john
TG: im not sticking around here for you two to dick with me
GG: is bec still up there? i don't know what the heck is up with that thing!
GG: grah!
GG: also, uh...what is up with john?
GG: he's acting really weird and evasive when i pester him!
TT: He and Karkat are joint-moirailing Gamzee out of murdering people to turn them god tier.
GG: wait what.
TT: So yes, he's panicking a little. Unfortunately, keeping Gamzee from freaking out in turn is also an issue that needs to be taken into consideration for the foreseeable future.
GG: are they even allowed to do that Double Bond?
GG: i mean - like - what?!?!
TG: seriously out of everything that happened today that has to be the weirdest
TG: there was a huge netherworld jellyfish outside and yet
TT: It seems to have come about due to a combination of John not knowing how to keep his hugs to himself, and Karkat having shooshed Gamzee in a previous life.
GG: oh. wow. :O
TT: Have you sensed anything of Vriska or Terezi, by the way?
GG: yeah, they're back!
GG: and also oh no, they're back :(
GA: Why Oh No?
GG: they're back and they've been like bunnies in springtime.
GG: which means i'm having to be very careful to not notice...things
GC: 4H4! 4 VOY3UR 1N OUR M1DST!
GG: i didn't!
TG: oh right! jake and dirk are outside. haven't seen janey yet but shes' textin me.
CC: $(e's with me! 38)
TG: alright cool moving right along
CT: D---> We are well
CG: YOUR FONT COLOR CHOICES ARE AWFUL AND YOU SHOULD FEEL AWFUL.
CT: D---> E%cuse me. I'm trying to work on that. It is a recent development.
AG: Well, work on it 8etter! I think I liked it more when you were a pompous freak with control issues - when'd you lose your 8ack8one?!
CT: D---> I do not have time for this. You are a menace, even with the best of intentions, and I refuse to engage with you or Makara
CT: D---> You are both...far too dangerous. I remember now. Additionally, I died today. For the record
AG: So did I, genius!!!!!!! So hop off your creepy high horse and stop holding dum8 grudges!
TG: kay you two can go back to whatever you were doing before
TG: please
CT: D---> I need to concentrate, anyway. No doubt this whole conversation will dissolve into pointless f00lishness any moment
CG: SERIOUSLY BOTH OF YOU CAN LEAVE.

The Heir of Void sits perched on a stool across the room from her. Difficult as it is to look directly at Equius, now, Rose makes a valiant effort with her sight as enhanced as she can manage. A black hole that fills almost all the room where Nepeta and Eridan lay unconscious, and the amount of void swirling around the blueblood in the corner could eclipse the sun. The difference between his aura of nothing and the nothingness Rose associates with Roxy and her mother is palpable. As she thinks it, Equius's dark shades turn toward her, more inscrutable than a Strider, and the dark blue hood that drapes down his back shifts as he hunches his shoulders. Rose averts her eyes before vertigo can set in.

She can bear through it. She doesn't even want to think about what a mess her mindscape might be
right now; she'll sweep it up later, after she's had more time to sleep and adjust. Right now, they've reached some kind of impasse, with the potential sources of misfortune and ill luck mostly neutralized or under guard, and that buys them some time. The one person they can't control or account for is Aradia - but Aradia did intimate that there would be events today, and Rose plans to heed her cryptic warnings much more carefully in the future.

She'll hold off on requesting that Equius tone it down some until later. Though actually speaking to him has proven a challenge for anyone but Rue or Roxy, Rue received confirmation that he would lower some of his void guard when Nepeta regains consciousness.

If she does. It might almost have been kinder – no, not kinder, that's not the right word, but it's the closest Rose's beleaguered mind can produce – if Gamzee had killed her before John could intervene. Now, even with the game mechanics that allow players to heal faster, it's hard to say whether she'll wake up or not.

"I do not know how much trust we can put in this arrangement they've come to," Kanaya is saying. Rose hasn't tuned out the conversation, exactly; following two trains of thought is a little much at the moment, though. When she lifts her head, massaging her forearm absently, Kanaya looks guarded, her lips pursed as she bites off the end of a thread and knots the stitches in place. Kanaya tends to sew more violently when she's concerned.

"Which arrangement?" Rose asks, picking up the cup of tea resting on the floor by her knee to sip at it. She has trained John well - once they completed a headcount and made sure all of the trolls were back in the valley, he immediately began brewing tea and shoving it into the claws and hands of anyone foolish enough to wander too close to him. Gamzee had at least three empty cups sitting by him and Rose can only imagine John's bathroom breaks aren't going to work as a diversion much longer. "Vriska and Terezi flipping red, or Karkat and John and their...er..." Mentioning Gamzee's name aloud wouldn't be the smartest of ideas, when she can't judge how much or how little attention Equius might be paying to their musings.

"Either. Both." Kanaya harrumphs and holds up the hoodie, shaking it out to inspect it properly. Not even Rose's eyes can pick out where the tears used to be in the fabric. "Mediation isn't enough for Vriska; she needs something to ground her personally, not just keep her from Terezi's throat. Right now Terezi has her off balance, I believe, but there's no way to tell how long that will last until Terezi herself vacillates again. And I spoke with Karkat and have come to the conclusion that he has little to no idea what he is doing, and may in fact be planning to improvise for as long as he can get away with it."

"Ah, well, I'm personally more concerned about how and when Karkat's going to make an honest man out of John," Rose says dryly, smiling a little when Kanaya gives her a look of tested patience. "And now he's picked up a second beau. At this rate either I or Jade will be responsible for giving Gamzee the 'if you hurt him' speech, and then where will we be?"

She winces at the slip, belatedly, but a swift check on Equius doesn't reveal more than a blocky hand reaching out to touch Nepeta's forehead, the rest of him cloaked in obscurity. He must not be listening.

"You're flippant now," Kanaya says, darkly. "But if it goes ill, John will be the one hurt. It is clear enough that Karkat is the fulcrum here; he won't be the one the juggalo turns on." She hunts through the bag hanging over the side of the chair by Eridan's cot, and throws a look in Equius's direction that Rose can only describe as 'guilty as sin.' Quick as a flash, Kanaya conceals her own cup of tea in the bag, and just as quickly takes it back out to sip.

Rose coughs, and taps the corner of her own mouth discreetly when Kanaya blinks at her over the
rim of the cup. Kanaya wipes the spot of olive green blood off her lip quickly enough, but Rose tugs the bag towards her so she can raise both eyebrows at the blood bag stashed beside a spool of black thread. "...You ran out of your own supply? Ah, she's not going to miss this, is she?"

"It was left over from the surgery," Kanaya says. A swirl of olive rises up when she sets the tea down on the floor, and she hastily stirs it with a claw while looking anxiously toward the other side of the room again. "They thought they would need more than they did, so I...procured some."

Rose smiles all the wider, and Kanaya pointedly ignores her for a good four minutes before Rose plants a kiss on her cheek, and the smear of makeup that Kanaya forgot to seal after her skin healed over stains Rose's lips and makes both of them laugh. "Fair enough," she says, dabbing at her mouth with a scrap of cloth. "I am worried about John. All we can do is take as many precautions as possible."

"We thought we had taken precautions this morning," Kanaya points out. She swallows the last gulp of blood and tea.

They both look up from the miniature pile at the sound of a faint, grumbling noise. Kanaya uses her elbow to lever herself up and stare down her nose accusingly at Eridan when his head rolls toward them. Rose contents herself by schooling her face into a mask of utmost seriousness. "Whr'm I?" he mumbles.

"The afterlife," Kanaya says, deadpan.

Eridan squints at her, then at Rose. His face looks pallid and raw, with a growing edge of desperation, and Rose has a flicker of intuition that she can't say is foresight. She hastily retrieves the nearby trash receptacle and offers it to him.

"F'kin' Horrorterrors," he says. Then he rolls over, seizes the trashcan, and vomits up whatever seawater is left in his system.

"GC: W3LL WHO PUT YOU IN CH4RG3 OF TH3 M3MO? >:
CG: IT'S NOT LIKE DAVE CAN CORRAL THIS PACK OF SHITHEADS, HE'S USUALLY HALF THE PROBLEM.
EB: does someone really need to be in charge of the memo? i'm pretty sure if everyone starts fighting over who's the friendleader in chief around here no one will win.
EB: no one.
GG: john's got a good point there!
GG: though i think rose was in charge the last time we had a consensus!
EB: good point.
EB: (rose. please moderate. hurry.)
TT: (I'll do what I can. I'm only human, John.)
TT: I don't believe everyone answered Dave's questions. Could someone ping Aradia again?
GC: OH, TH3Y'R3 BOTH 4L1V3, 4LR1GHT. 4ND 1N C4HOOTS! WH4T 3LS3 1S N3W.
AT: oH! wHILE I WAS HANGING OUT WITH HER, aND STUFF, aRADIA SAID THAT SHE NEEDED TO TALK TO THE OTHER GUY, wHO DOES THE TIME THING,
TG: so you mean me
AT: uM, yES SO IT WOULD SEEM,
TG: well here i am not being talked to yet my schedule is wide open m
TG: you would think with two timey people you'd be able to set up a designated meeting time but its all hahahahaha no f u
AA: tomorrow dave! don't worry ill come to you! ;)

AA: today has been pretty hectic already
GC: YOU WOULD KNOW, S331NG 4S YOU PL4NN3D TH3 WHOL3 TH1NG! I'M ONTO YOU NOW!
AA: hey i didnt plan everything! im not some kind of evil mastermind you know
AA: sollux and i just had the opportunity to change things up a bit and make sure people could
resurrect as god tier without quest beds!
GG: but you orchestrated all this? people died!
AA: then tell me - is anyone permanently dead? :)
EB: ummm...huh.
GG: no, i guess not!
AA: it takes a lot of precision to break a games rules without breaking it and ending up doomed
AA: what happened here today was too important in the grand scheme of things to try to stop it
entirely
TG: time is the shittiest aspect. there. i said it.
EB: so you decided instead that you'd use it as an opportunity to make people stronger at the end.
AA: right in one! :)
EB: yeah i kinda figured it out earlier.
EB: this is still really messed up. like. so messed up. it has reached a new and previously unexplored
realm of being messed up.
TG: true that
GG: like maybe if you'd set this up like an experiment...did you at least test sollux's mod before
now?
AA: nope
GG: you decided to use an untested, experimental reality altering mod on people as a trial run?
AA: yep!
GG: okay, next time, just let me help you set up proper testing procedure.
EB: JADE!
GG: what! if she's going to do it anyway we might as well do it scientifically!
GC: H3Y. B31NG 4 M4ST3RM1ND FOR GOOD DO3SN'T M4K3 YOU 4NY L3SS OF 4
CONSPIR4TOR!
AA: haha i guess not!

Gathering a party of able-bodied volunteers to venture into the demolished lounge area proves easier
than Rose anticipated. Equius won't leave Nepeta, Eridan has set about moaning in what appears to
be a purely superficial attempt at garnering sympathy, Aradia still hasn't returned Tavros, and Sollux
is found dead asleep in front of his husktop when Roxy, Jane, and Feferi stumble upon him. But
while Feferi stays to make sure Sollux isn't left alone, all of the scratch kids end up joining Rose and
Kanaya by the time Rue reports that they're secure against outside scrutiny. Oriole drags Dave in,
though he continues to eye Rose and Kanaya with trepidation.

John, Karkat, and Gamzee are the last to arrive, meeting them at the end of the most intact hallway
nearest the blast zone. Quite a few of the whiteboards blew up into pieces and scattered around the
area, and Rose finds picking through the rubble looking for something to salvage more than a little
disheartening.

Particularly since John failed to mention that the unconscious body of Samuel Egbert, guarded by
Crabdad of all creatures, is still in the middle of the hallway. The lusus skree at them with its chest
puffed out as it sits on a battered couches. The man thankfully stays unconscious while Rose sends
Dave off to get someone to lock him up again, but John has to be redirected to another room for a
few minutes before the color returns to his cheeks. He looks at her and smiles shakily as he tries to
laugh it off.
There must be a way to prevent Samuel from coming into contact with John again; Rose adds it to the extensive list of urgent things that need doing. Kanaya looks grim for an entirely different reason by the time they start out again, and Rose knows by the significant, silent look the jadeblood gives her that it's because when Gamzee isn't following Karkat like a devoted puppy, he watches John's drawn expression with a tilted head and curious eyes, languid and unreadable.

Rose doesn't know if that's cause for concern yet or not. It's not hate, and it's not love either. If curiosity staves off the worst of Gamzee's rage, she'll take it.

Jade's floating some ways above, dumping a bunch of debris in a pile just outside on the lawn. She waves at them cheerily and Rose misjudges her footing and skids a little, but Roxy's arm snakes around her waist. "You all ipsy-daisy?" Roxy asks.

"Not much anymore. I can manage." Aware of multiple pairs of eyes trained on her, Rose straightens and does something that is probably unwise. She looks at Gamzee. His eyes aren't focused on her at first, but snap to meet her gaze after only a half-second delay. "Quite done for the day, yes?"

John winces, and Karkat looks torn between slapping his hand over Rose's mouth and tackling Gamzee to the ground. But Gamzee blinks at her, and she gets the distinct feeling that she's being scrutinized with as much caution as she has directed at him. He seems more solid, less confuddling to look at, and without that psychic aura of madness he simply looks like a troll badly in need of a bath and a change of clothes.

But it would never do to think him safe. "Yeah, sister. Motherfucking done," he says, and the last word sounds like the sensation of tripping on ice while skating.

"Can you not antagonize him?" Karkat says, more tired than angry, as close to pleading as Rose has ever heard him.

It's discomfiting to see Gamzee pat Karkat on the head in reassurance. "Shit ain't antagonizing, best friend. Just getting her asking on."

"God, this is so weird," Dave mutters. Before he can fall into one of his habitual muttering rambles, Rose raises an eyebrow at him, and looks significantly toward Kanaya. She is pleased to see his carefully blanked face crease in faint horror. "Shut up."

"I said nothing, brother dear," Rose says, prim and guileless.

"You're thinking it. Menacingly, god dammit," he insists, edging away from her in fidgety bursts. "Stop thinking about - whatever the hell you're thinking of."

Successfully diverted. Rose scans the wreckage before them, and nods. "Of course. Let's see what we can do here."

In the end, the most they find is a quarter chunk of whiteboard that has been reduced to a bleary black smudge with the names of the Felt members Equius and Nepeta encountered barely legible in the bottom corner, and a messy stack of similarly useless pieces that Jake piles up with a bemused expression flickering across his face whenever Jane or Dirk or Roxy toss something else for him to catch like a frisbee. Karkat does manage to find half a board with all the writing intact, and almost hugs it to his chest in triumph before appearing to think better of it. By the time they agree to call it a day, everyone's hair is smudged with dust and Rose can feel exhaustion dogging at her heels.

But they've gone a full two hours without anyone having a break down or dying. So it's a start.
CG: GOD FUCKING DAMMIT. WHY WAS OUR SESSION RIDDLED WITH SHITHIVE LUNATICS?
CG: I MEAN NO OFFENSE ROSE, YOU TOTALLY WENT OFF THE DEEP END, TOO -
TT: None taken, I'm sure.
CG: - BUT AT FUCKING LEAST NONE OF YOU PEOPLE WENT AND STARTED MURDERING EACH OTHER! WHAT KIND OF DISGUSTINGLY LOW STANDARDS ARE THOSE, AND WHY COULDN'T WE MAKE SOME EFFORT TO MEET THEM?!
GA: Seriously, This Is Just Getting Embarrassing Now. Is It Possible To Transfer To The Human Team?
TG: hell submit your resumes and cover letters at will
TG: we have a pretty rigorous interview process though the competition is fierce
TG: can we apple?
TG: *apply
TG: sure what the hell
AG: Of course you c8n't! Who invited these randos anyway?
CG: LITERALLY NO ONE ASKED FOR YOUR OPINION, VRISKA.
AG: How hilarious, '8rave leader!' :三是) you think you get to 8e in charge when you already let one session crash and 8urn!
CG: FUCK YOU, I RESIGNED IN FAVOR OF ROSE ANYWAY. THERE. IT'S OFFICIAL.
TT: I accept your gracious surrender, Karkat.
AG: 8ullshit! I'm telling you, we don't need new8ie fakey fake heroes or surrendering, we need leader auditions.
TG: (whoa shit rose i think shes challenging you to a rap off)
TG: (are you just gonna take that)
TT: (John. Fetch me my shades. Jade, if I fall in righteous rap battle, you're my second.)
GG: (you got it!)
TC: (shiiiiit, motherfuckers, are we about to kick some rhymes up in these here sentence huggers :o?)
EB: (uh. maybe? probably not everybody though, just rose.)
CG: FOR FUCK'S SAKE, YOU FUCKING MANIACS, WE'RE NOT SETTLING THIS SHIT WITH A RAP BATTLE.
TG: yes we are
CG: NO WE'RE NOT.
CG: ALSO WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS SUCH AN ENORMOUS TOOL VRISKA? I REMEMBER THIS. YOUR UNIQUE "8RAND" OF SHITHIREY IS MEMORABLE ENOUGH THAT SOMEHOW IT TRANSCENDS SPACE AND TIME.
AG: Whatever. I remem8er everything, and I remem8er that you 8n't got shit on me! And rap 8attles are for losers, I call for a vote -
GC: NO.
GA: No.
CT: D--> No
TG: no
GG: probably not a good idea.
EB: no way in a million years ever. no offense.
CG: THERE ISN'T ENOUGH NO IN THE WORLD.
TT: I abstain from the vote, seeing as I'm the other main candidate, apparently.
AG: Ugggggggh! :三是) Fine, I see how it is! Just don't all come crying to me when you need a real 8igshot to run this show! I'll just be in charge of the troll te-
AA: well were all kind of playing one jumbled up session so there arent really separate teams nowadays
AA: the important thing is to have fun with it! :)
AG: AGGGGGGGGH!!!!!!!!
TC: HONK
Jade has no clue what is going on with Bec. It's not like the wolf ever came with much of an instruction manual - Grandpa had some notes and a neat coverstory to go with them, but Jade figured out how Bec works through trial and error, for the most part.

John's lucky. As an Heir, his aspect manifests itself as a helpful, guiding Breeze. Bec's just being a butt. So she does what she always does when Bec gets lazy. She floats up to its level, crosses her arms over her chest, and clicks her tongue.

Bec continues to hang in midair, a cloud of roiling green and yellow light that makes Jade's space sense tingle. Not even the void spreading out from Equius in a twisty blankets seems to make a dent in it. And usually the void wards would send Bec right to sleep! There's a puddle of Horrorterror goop directly beneath them that really needs to be cleaned up, because she's sure it can't bode well for the future fertility of the soil here, so the longer she spends dealing with the wolf's odd intractability, the less likely it is Doctor Lalonde will ever have a nice front lawn again. There's a puddle of Horrorterror goop directly beneath them that really needs to be cleaned up, because she's sure it can't bode well for the future fertility of the soil here, so the longer she spends dealing with the wolf's odd intractability, the less likely it is Doctor Lalonde will ever have a nice front lawn again. Figuring out how to suck things into a space warp of no return or squish Horrorterror slime down into an easily bottled vial would be a lot easier if she had Bec to help her concentrate; her memories can't tell her much except how it feels to use her powers to their full extent, not necessarily explain how she pulled it off in the heat of the moment.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty. Jade can see now, in retrospect, that she and Eridan alone should have been able to cobble together a quick summary of the troll game session and how it interacted with the humans'. Aradia could be as much of an evasive butt as she feels like. Yet instead they all got so befuddled and turned around that they had that dumb meeting. It's hard to comb through her brain and pick out what part of this communications fiasco was directly Gamzee's fault and what was just them being suuuper unlucky.

"The jellyfish is gone," she says, crossing her arms. Bec doesn't respond. Well, it's not like she expects it to, but come on! She clenches a fist and smacks it into her palm. "So buck up, chuck! We need to be on top of our game here!" Hesitantly, she adds a touch of her own space powers out to brush against Bec's aura. If fiddling with a Horrorterror broke her aspect somehow, she's gonna be so screwed. She doesn't know how she'd break the news to the others when they already have so many problems on their plates!

At the brush of her powers, the light around Bec crackles. Then the wolf lifts its head - and yawns, its bushy tail curling and uncurling around its hind legs as it settles back down into its regular shape with a thump. All the stars and galaxies fade out of its fur. Jade swoops in and hugs it close, rubbing
her face against Bec's fluff as it yawns against and sets its muzzle on her shoulder. "Good boy. Best friend," she says, scrITCHing behind its ears.

EB: uh, we'll get back to you guys in a sec...hang on...
AG: This is making me gag. Get a room you three!
TG: Which means this memo has gone too far
TT: One could argue that this entire day has gone too far.
GC: So, you're all letting Miss Apocalypse off with a slap on the wrist?
>
TT: You have to admit that we all did come out of this alive. Which is a considerably better bargain than I thought we'd get.
GA: What would you want us to do, Lynch her? And then move on to the Juggalo and provoke another catastrophe?
GC: I 3xp3ct just1c3! Or 4t L34ST 4 th0rougH 3xl4n4t10n of wh4t h3r 3nd4ng4m3 1s! Th3 Court C4n B3 M3rc1ful Th4t W4y.
AA: oh terzi! ;)) trust me my explanations will make a lot more sense once everyone's healed up and has time to review our old game session
AA: trying to explain now would just involve me repeating a lot of stuff for the people who haven't remembered it all yet! and poor sweet Nepeta won't wake up for another few hours at least
GA: There is also the matter of how the void ward machine came to be so badly damaged.
GA: Has anyone determined who might have been responsible?
GC: VR1sk4 d1SP1D w1Th Mr v4N1ll4 M1lkSh4K3 l4ST t1m3, too. Onc3 th3y b10w uP th3y'r3 g0n3.
TT: We may not be able to rely on that. If Scratch can cause us to forget about the cue balls at will, at a point when the void wards were at full capacity, he has a line of communication with us that Sollux might not be able to block.
GA: I will wake him up. Brace for the inevitable.
TG: lol literally no idea what's going on anymore here
CC: You guys seriously talk a lot. 38/hr do you expect anyone to keep up with that anymore?
AT: i've kind of stopped trying, i'm just gonna read it all later,
TG: yeah, these guys are terrible at staying on topic. lay low for a while or they'll try to drag you into it.

Jade can't find any trace of other cue balls. Unfortunately, she'd trust her senses a heck of a lot more if they hadn't failed her once already in a major way, and she says as much to Doctor Lalonde when
she drops down to the basement floor and slips into the room where Rose's mother has latched onto the ward generator. Shards of white ivory lay scattered on the floor around a towel that has sopped up a bunch of cerulean blue blood leftover from Vriska dying, presumably, and Jade snaps it away with a quick flick of her fingers because leaving it there that long can hardly be sanitary! "Any luck, Doctor Lalonde?"

Rue lifts her head and smiles at Jade, fond and weary at once. She's pinned her hair back out of her face with a black clip. "I wish I had better news, my dear," she says, passing her hand over her hair to smooth a curl out of her eyes. "Everything's back in order, yet nothing appears to be working."

Well, that's a new one! Jade shuffles around, curious, as Rue takes another instrument from a bedraggled intern and twists one of the dials. "Do you need to replace a part, maybe? We have a lot of spares in case the hub starts melting again," Jade says, finally decided to settle back on her haunches. She wants to offer her help, but she knows zilch about how void machines work - and now that she thinks about it, her head might never be able to wrap itself around more than the basics. It's just too twisty for her.

"Oh, I replaced almost every scrap of metal in this thing, by now. I'm afraid the problem is something I never thought to see in practice." Doctor Lalonde hands the detector to Jade when she asks. "The generators work by gathering ambient void and concentrating it in a single location. Now there is someone in the immediate vicinity who is infinitely more capable of gathering void to himself, and his influence appears to take precedence no matter how I adjust the settings."

Jade bites her lip, turning the device over in her hands, and does a doubletake when she realizes Doctor Lalonde is standing up; she can't make heads or tails of the readout so she levitates the handheld to the intern and helps Rue stand. The woman grimaces, stretching out a knee and picking up her heels rather than sliding them back on her feet. She must have been crouching and kneeling on the floor trying to get the generator working all afternoon - no wonder she's sore. "Soooo...Equius is all we've got?" Jade hazards a educated guess.

"So it would seem. Would you mind taking us close to him? He's just caused a paradigm shift and I'd rather like to stay on top of recent advances in the field." Rue glances toward the scorch marks on the floor, and sighs. "What a day."

Rather than risking teleportation mishaps - which is kinda something Jade feels like she needs to watch out for more as the day wears on - she and Rue head up into the wrecked section of the lab complex the old fashioned way, with Jade floating them and the intern over the parts where debris blocks the stairwell and holes have opened up in the floor. Earlier she ended up taking down a huge chunk of the roof near the ex-lounge that could have toppled at any second, and used it to cover up the biggest sizzling streak of dead grass so no one could step on Horrorterror ooze in the dark when night came. What a day, for serious. Jade's ready to change into actual pajamas and find somewhere to sleep. Wherever people are least likely to trip over her - she's not picky.

The rattle of the wheelchair registers before Jade finishes processing the pop of two people abruptly existing where they weren't before. "Whoop! There we go," a merry voice says, while Jade and Rue turn, and Aradia eases the wheelchair down from where one wheel sits unevenly on a piece of ceiling. "You alright?"

"Uh, yes. I'm fine," Tavros says, as the two of them round the corner. By now Jade has checked in on almost everyone, has seen just how exhausted and different they all look after a long afternoon of chaos and dying and strife, and to lay eyes on Tavros and Aradia looking as fresh as daisies in the middle of the shattered hallway is weird! Aradia looks up from Tavros with a sweet smile, meeting Jade's eyes with a flicker of a wink, and the two join Jade and Doctor Lalonde in the intern before
they can slow for more than a second. "This place is - um -" Tavros breaks off, scratching the side of his head where the hair's shaved close. "Wow. I guess I'm glad to have missed that. Gracias, Aradia."

"No problem!" Aradia nods at Doctor Lalonde, her rust red wings folded lazily down her back so she can shake out her hair freely. Tavros has wings out, too, his sweatshirt folded over his lap instead so that the holes in the back of his shirt are visible. "Hello, all."

Rue raises an eyebrow, but continues walking. "I am tempted to say you owe me a new building, Ms Megido."

"It'll be even more blown up by mid-April, I'm afraid," Aradia says, teeth flashing. She lifts her hands off the wheelchair as they reach a smooth section where Tavros can maneuver better, and slides her arm to hook through Jade's, smooth as butter. "The end is so near. Isn't it exciting?"

This is the closest Jade has been to Aradia since everyone arrived. She accepts the arm hook with a tiny shrug, because what the heck, and tries to be subtle about staring down at the side of the troll's face curiously. Her horns are coiled in tight rings that end in a neat point, and her nose arches outward before turning up slightly at the end. There's a faint touch of power that Jade can't quantify precisely, the same thing she can now recognize around John and Dave and Rose and Vriska and Terezi, and which she supposes would hang around Equius if his voidy thing didn't conceal him.

"Exciting is a word for it," Jade agrees, though the idea of the Reckoning coming up soon - especially after seeing how crappy their teamwork was today - makes a knot in her stomach that won't go away. And she's had years to come to terms with it.

"I think pavoroso fits better. Personally," Tavros offers. "But that's just about everything, lately."

"Ominous, at the least," Doctor Lalonde adds. Jade raises a hand to shove a random gurney into one of the side rooms so that there's room for all of them to keep walking alongside each other. "The looming end of days..."

"It has been a long time coming," Aradia says. While Doctor Lalonde trails off, Aradia lets out a dreamy sigh, and looks at Jade with a twinkle in her eye. "You have to admit, it'll be amazing to witness. The greatest things are always the most terrifying and wonderful to behold."

"No, mostly I think this is just terrifying," Tavros says. Jade wishes she agreed with him more and Aradia less.

They reach the room where Nepeta and Eridan are laid up a short while after, Aradia pressed close to Jade's side and humming tunelessly to herself as they go. Equius maybe looks up from his vigil when they enter - Jade's getting fed up with not being able to tell for sure, and it's only been a couple of hours! Yeesh! "Aradia," he says, his voice cracking from disuse but mostly level. Eridan watches them walk in with a mournful look, a trash can clutched to his chest that Jade doesn't think he really still needs.

In lieu of Equius's dumb look-away aura, Jade's eyes fall on Nepeta instead. The greenblood lays quiet, her chest rising and falling faintly, but she looks a lot better than she did the last time Jade popped by to see them. Judging from the broken comb on the side table, someone brushed her hair. Equius probably wouldn't let anyone else close enough to do it.

"No hard feelings, right?" Aradia asks breezily, her smile unfailing in the face of Equius's stare. "About Nepeta - it was about a fifty percent chance, and Gamzee was directly involved, which muddles things. I'm sorry she got so badly hurt. Though I'm happy we got the timing right for you!"
Jade's not sure, but she thinks Equius breaks out into a visible sweat. Just. From nothing to a faint sheen on his face in a split second. Which is both impressive and...kind of gross at the same time. "...No, no hard feelings," he says, fixing his sunglasses on his nose with a hand that accidentally crushes part of the frame. Jeez, he's strong! "You were...very timely. Yes."

Aradia lets her head fall to the side as she laughs. The motion turns her a little so that when the troll shifts, her hair tickles Jade's nose. Seriously, she's very close! "Good! I think Doctor Lalonde wanted to ask you about void bracers, next. Tavros, you're staying here?"

"And then there was me and you." Aradia pats the side of Jade's arm.

"What am I, chopped halibut?!" Eridan demands, craning his neck to glare at them.

"Eridan's perpetually in a mood. Some things never change." Aradia shakes her head. "I've been hoping to talk to you before Dave - or possibly the other way around - but either works, really. Things got rushed today. Could you take us out to the lake?"

"Oh, sure!" Without thinking, Jade jumps them right from the doorway to the edge of the lake - and that's not her brightest moment, probably. She needs another reminder, she thinks, because she's lucky Aradia sticks the landing when they warp out right in the middle of the lake instead of where Jade was aiming. A dark blue reminder that teleporting too close to Equius is a not-good plan. Jade catches herself before more than her left foot can get soaked, and Aradia's wings flutter like she expected this kind of thing to happen. "Sorry about that! What did you need? If you'd texted me I could have come seen you sooner." Jade scrunches up her nose. "Uh. Wherever you were, anyway. Where did you go? I couldn't find you or Tavros all this time!"

"Not so much where as when." Aradia tips her head back, her eyes luminescent in the dark, and - Actually, that's too dark. Jade knows it wasn't nearly this dark out ten minutes ago. The moon looks like a thin slice of lemon in the gaps between the clouds, and it's much chillier out. Aside from the light trickling out from the gap in the lab walls, there isn't much to see by; a faint, misty rain sprinkles down, leaving Jade's hair damp. "Somewhen quieter, so he'd be less likely to come across Vriska or Gamzee in the scuffle," Aradia continues, walking further out over the lake. "His odds of living were much better than Nepeta's, which made it easier to work around."

"That was nice of you."

Aradia leans her head against Jade's arm. "It might just be prolonging the inevitable, which I'm usually against on principle. But I hadn't seen him in so long, and it was a nice opportunity to catch up."

The lake forms a dark mirror for the moon overhead; the rain is too light to stir it up, but enough to make the reflection fuzzy. Jade sweeps over the valley mentally as Aradia raises a claw, picking out where everyone is and reassuring herself that they're all okay, despite the sudden time shift. No wonder Dave thinks his time stuff is weird. It is soooo weird. Jade can feel her own body twice - her
atoms want to go straight to there and mingle and that's even weirder. Weirdness squared.

"Why did you want to come out here?" Jade asks, remembering that she's in the middle of a conversation. "With me, I mean?

Aradia holds her hand further out, with faint red light pulsing around it in the shape of a clock face. It doesn't do much except turn the dark water an eerie red right under their feet. "Can you feel what's at the bottom?"

"Hang on." Jade takes the last of her space focus away from herself and feels down instead, beneath hers and Aradia's feet. Fewer fish swim through the water than she remembers sensing even a day ago, which is sad. A lot of the plants along the bottom feel withered, too. Dumping a Horrorterror in the water couldn't have been good for anything alive in there.

She almost doesn't catch it. It's subtle, and runs right along the scalloped bottom of the lakebed. But her brush of space power catches and snags for a moment and Jade frowns, reaching for that circle of oddness again. It feels like -

"A gate," Jade says, and she blinks and realizes she has raised her own free hand to match Aradia's, the green light cutting much deeper into the water. Aradia's nostrils flare as she nods. "When did a spirograph get down there? I would have noticed that."

"The Horrorterror carved it this afternoon, when it left Eridan. It's not active, but it's here, and that's enough reason to worry." Aradia clucks her tongue imperiously, shaking her head. "As bad as Gamzee, really." She brings her glowing hand closer to her chest, considering Jade with eyes that aren't smiling. "This needs both of us to fix."

Jade looks down, though she can't see the spirograph with her eyes from here. "Alright! What needs doing?"

At last, Aradia lets go of Jade's arm and stands facing her, both of them staring down at the water. Jade glances up long enough to see Aradia's face lit up in reds and shadows, as the burgundyblood's claws flatten out in front of her. "It would be easier if Kanaya were god tier - she could heal it over in a moment," Aradia says, while Jade hesitantly mimics her hand motions. "But she already died once, the wrong way, which makes raising her up to god tier a little more of an issue. Witches are versatile, thankfully. If you can hold it shut, I can shift in a doomed version of that part of the lakebed to replace it." Her cheeks dimple. "It helps that the planet is doomed in any timeline. Less fuss."

Must be a time thing. Jade considers calling for Bec to help her out, but she thinks she can handle this on her own. It takes some doing to figure out how to bunch space together and fold it over the spirals carved into reality, and as she does it she asks, "Really? How would Kanaya do it? Also, you can die the wrong way?"

"Of course! You have to die the right way," Aradia says, in a perfect, unsettling monotone. When she giggles it's definitely creepy, but as she brings her palms together and forms a single rust red clockface with the light, her voice goes back to its odd cheer. "And her coming back once already as a rainbow-drinker complicates things. I suppose she would sew it together, hypothetically. It depends on the Sylph!"

"And you answering questions all straightforward-like and stuff - that's gonna be how things are? Or is it just for now?"

"After the records are unlocked, I'll answer any questions you guys have!" The minute and hour hands on the clock spin so fast Jade gets a little dizzy watching them, and she's almost positive
they're moving in opposite directions from each other. The seconds hand, so thin it's barely more than a paler red seam, stays still. The symbols around the edges of the clock aren't any numbers or letters Jade is familiar with, either, but Aradia watches them intently until they seemingly match what she's looking for. She taps the center of the clock and a clear chime rings out, like a note from a music box, as faint echoes of other clocks appear on top of the original and then slot back into place. "That should do it!"

Jade has to check and recheck a couple of times before she lets her hands fall to her sides, but when she lets her grip on space loosen, the spirograph markings don't open back up. The odd snag in the bottom of the lake has been filled in with what feels like sand. It doesn't seem doomed or anything to Jade - but also, she has no idea how a doomed thing and a not-doomed thing would feel different. "That's it?"

The rotating clock fades, and so does the gleam in Aradia's eye that Jade had barely noticed glowing brighter. Aradia sags a little. "That's it." One hand comes up and Jade hastily offers her arm before she can think twice, and the sky brightens back into late evening orange between blinks while Aradia uses her as support. "Mmm. I was hoping I could stretch that a little longer. But this is still nice. Do you like sunsets?"

"I do!" The lake has turned a nice peach color, too. When Jade turns away from the sunset for a second, she can see the shadow on the sky behind them caused by the mountains and the curve of the earth, and grins.

"It looks like the sky's caught fire and the world could burn down in an instant," Aradia finishes, with a happy sigh. "It's so lovely."

Hmm. After a pause, Jade pats the back of Aradia's hand where it rests on her own arm. "I guess that's true."

"You think it's a sad thought, though. Most people would." Aradia turns her hand over and catches Jade's hand, squeezing it tight for a moment before letting go. "Heheh! But it's still a fun idea!"

TT: We're going to need another meeting. A better meeting, with a better name.
TG: what no the acronym was gold rose
TG: dont blame the meeting acronym for our collective bullshit
GG: we could just call it 'stfu 2 electric boogaloo.'
TG: i vote for supah chill sharing circle
TG: sharing is caring...
TG: okay first of all there are way too many assholes with the same handle initials here one of you back the fuck off
TG: and second no way the first name was perfect
TT: Sharing is caring, dude. I second Roxy.
TT: All in favor?
AT: sURE,
CC: I like it!
AG: Talk a8out laaaaaaame.
GC: YOU DON'T G3T 4 VOT3.
GA: It's Easier To Remember Than The Last One.
CT: D--> Why does this even matter?
GG: I also support Roxy.
GT: ...Dammit i understand absolutely none of this malarkey.
GT: Sharing is caring?
TG: john
TG: how could you
GG: i can get behind it!
CG: I HATE EVERYONE IN THIS MEMO FOR MAKING ME READ THROUGH THIS UNMITIGATED BULLSHIT.
TT: Motion passed.
TG: yeeeee :0
TG: *:
GT: Im so confused.
GA: I Am Not Certain If That Was A Majority Or Not. It's Difficult To Tell Who Abstained And Who Just Started Complaining.
AA: i already knew which would win ;)
TT: I'll take that as a vote in favor of inevitability, then. Sorry, Dave.
TG: ill live
TG: but you cut me deep john
TG: cut me real deep
EB: sorry! i didn't really catch up on the whole conversation!
EB: but it's still a better name. sorry man.
TG: i dont think i can recover from this
GA: Incoming.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined this travesty of a memo! --
TA: WHAT HAVE YOU IIDIOT2 BEEN TALKING ABOUT FOR THII2 LONG?!
GA: You Were Absent. You Should Probably Have Learned Better Than To Trust Us Alone With Pesterchum For Extended Periods Of Time.
GA: Conspirator.
TA: ii ju2t 2aved half of your a22e2 from certaiin doom and thii2 ii2 what ii wake up two.
TG: are you gonna destroy the memo again
TG: because at this point i welcome the end put it out of its misery
TA: huh. actually ii think we're okay.
GG: really?
TA: no
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned every la2t one of you horriible people [∞] from the chat! --

-- uranianUmbra [UU] opened a cheery-o on board ^u^ at UU:UU:UU --
UU: helooooo? is anyone oUt there?
GA: Are You One Of The Others Who Happens To Not Be Asleep Or Unconscious Or Possibly Dying?
UU: oh dear, is there an awfUl lot of that going on? i jUst wanted to check how things were going on yoUr end, bUt i gUess i picked a bad time...
GA: There's Never Really A Good Time, Don't Worry About It Too Much. Can I Help You With Something?
UU: not really! i'm here to help all of yoU! ^u^ or at least to cheer yoU on as best i can.
UU: if i try to do mUch more than that too soon, my brother will realize i'm *coUgh* meddling *coUgh*-
GA: Ah. So You Are A Meddling Meddler?
UU: ^u~
GA: May I Ask What You Are Meddling In? The Fact That You Have Invited Certain People To This Memo Would Hint That You Are Familiar With Certain Things.
UU: i am very familiar! my predecessor has been very stUbborn bUt also very thorUgh aboUt making sUre everything flows as coherently as possible!
UU: with what she had to work with, anyway. my brother did an eqUally thorUgh job destroying everything he coUld get his claws on, which i gUess is his specialty. for example, are yoU familiar with the sign of sixteen?
GA: I Have Never Heard Of Such A Thing.
UU: exactly! it no longer has any relevance to yoUr narratives whatsoever. he Utterly annihilated it before it coUld ever become important, or play any role in the story at all. a shame.
GA: I'm Sure That Is Really A Shame, But I Am Afraid That My Field Of Crude Sexual Verbs To Be Given Is Barren After The Weekend I Have Had. They Have All Been Harvested And The Seeds Of Fresh Fucks Have Yet To Sprout.
UU: yeah, that's fair. later i will do my best to ease yoUr mind!
GG: Hey! What's up! :)  
GG: ...wait, you're not one of the trolls, are you? i know all their handles now!
UU: UnfortUnately, i'm something a bit different. sorry aboUt the confUsion!
UU: it's good i caught the two of yoU thoUgh! it means i can give you the decryption code!
GG: hang on, for the troll game session? how do you know it? *squints*
GA: *Squints Also*
UU: i have a sort of oUtside perspective on what is happening to yoU right now. from my point of view, yoU gUys have already decrypted it!
GG: ohhhh. that makes sense!
GA: It Does?
GG: that's how karkat tried to get everyone to troll us the old fashioned way last time. you guys could see all of our session - all of our lives, actually, which was super annoying.
GG: except he was dumb about it, so a bunch of you started bullying me years before the game even existed and really pissed me and john off, and we ignored your advice for a long time.
UU: it is almost like that sitUation exactly! ^u^ that's a good analogoUs example. bUt i woUld never bully yoU!
GA: So You Are Playing A Game Session Yourself? Oh Dear. This Was Already Complicated Enough As It Was.
UU: nope! i can't really explain right now.
GA: If You Do The Spoilers Thing -
UU: the code yoU need is UrobUros. sollUx shoUld have installed all the mods you need for it to play the right recordings, even thoUgh he keeps ignoring me...
UU: and please say hello to UUv for me!
GA: You Lost Me.
GG: you mean the mayor? wv?
UU: yes! ^u^ he shoUld be able to talk now! not sUre how those wires got crossed, bUt i'm sUre skaia was doing her best!
GG: that's a relief! i was worried i messed up something when i was making him visible again. :(  
UU: haha, not yoUr bad! the final game session is always in the worst shape, i think! i've got some records of the reality before yours that are downright flabbergasting!
UU: ack, gotta rUn!
GA: Er, Goodbye Then.
GG: thank you for the code! we'll try it out right away! or whenever people stop bleeding everywhere.
-- uranianUmbra [UU] has left the chat! --
GA: Well, That Was Odd.
GG: odd has variable definitions, kanaya ;) she seems nice! we could use more nice people!
GA: That Is True. Right Now We're Surrounded By Murderous Assholes. This Can Only Be An Improvement.
GG: that's the spirit!
I enjoy Vriska for her punch-the-unbeatable-boss-in-the-face attitude, but at the same time, this child needs to learn to find her chill and be a team player.

Anyway, when is a love triangle not a triangle? When you tackle the weird clown guy into a threesome!

I'll see myself out.
A Barren Peace

Chapter Summary

Hold fast, for all that night or wind can say,
Some pale pure color yet,
Too dim for green and luminous for grey.
Between the climbing inland cliffs above
And these beneath that breast and break the bay,
A barren peace too soft for hate or love
Broods on an hour too dim for night or day.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Updates at "BQ: Or it's all just broken", "Jade commandeers the lobby", and "Having so many people around". That's a wrap!

Yet another dialog/exposition heavy recap chapter, I'm afraid, but at least this one isn't scrambled! Once again, this AU is pretty AU, and I'm playing fast and loose with canon events here. Anyway, time for everyone to calm down, dammit. In fact that's it - I'm changing - hang on -

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC VIII - UNISCENSION ===> ARC VIII SIDE B - EVERYONE CALM THE FUCK DOWN

"You know, it's surprisingly nice weather, considering where we are."

MP: Really? That's good to hear.

Zachal Keynai sits with her legs swung out the open door of the car, resting an elbow on the center console as she flicks through her phone. "Barely 70 degrees," she says, holding the phone over so the carapacian in the passenger's seat can see. Ms Paint scans the weather forecast for the day and nods. "Not bad, since Arizona is supposed to be hellmurder deathstate incarnate."

MP: Oh! What a name! I'm glad it's not so bad as all that.

They're somewhere near the junction between Highway 180 and 64, surrounded by scrub and oppressively flat land, dotted with sparse brush, the occasional power line pole, and one or two sad trees that are just trying to do their best. The lonely gas station is surrounded by what may or may not be cheap, tacky copies of Native American tipis, and the faint tang of country music emanates from a single speaker over the door like overused body spray. Zachal turns up the volume on their own music to counter it, and skips over the next song hastily upon realizing, for the fourth time this trip, that a lot of the stuff on this playlist is not suitable listening material for a lady as lovely and respectable as MP.
The road runs straight on without curving, only a single lane on either side of the faded yellow double lines. Each breath scrapes thin and arid in the lungs, and Zachal rubs at her right eye as she waits for the gas pump to shut off; she took out her contact lenses thirty miles back and replaced them with glasses when her eyes started to ache. When the pump lets out a clunk, she stands up and dumps her phone on the driver's seat behind her, closing up the gas hatch and grabbing a purple and green water bottle off the top of the dusty car roof. "Last chance to grab a snack," she starts to say, leaning on a knee with her arm on the steering wheel as she goes to sit down again - and then she turns to stare at the backseat.

Thankfully, after several such incidents, Ms Paint is familiar with the look.

MP: You need to write.

"I need to drive," Zachal fires back. But the claws of her free hand have dug into the back of the head rest, her whole body angling toward the blue backpack tossed on top of their few belongings in the back of the car. With the hatchback they could have brought along several suitcases worth of supplies, but absconding from Houston with the Felt and the Crew on their trail meant they could only obtain food and coolers and fresh clothing by buying them along the way.

There's only one thing that matters in that backpack, at this point.

MP: Allow me.

The carapacian unbuckles her seat belt, and Zachal finds herself making only a faint protest as she hops out of the passenger's side door and trots around the front of the car. "I know how carapacians drive," she tries, weakly, as MP takes her by the elbow and firmly pulls her back out of the car.

MP: We drive perfectly well, thank you.

"You all drive like you're piloting a meteor. Or a space ship. Or a giant robot. Look, cars can't punch through incoming obstacles like space debris, okay?"

MP: You still need to write.

There's not really any way to argue with that. Breathing hard through her nose, Zachal takes the backpack with her to the passenger's seat, stuffing the empty bag in the space under the glove compartment and folding her legs up on the seat as Ms Paint adjusts the mirrors drastically to accommodate her small stature. Zachal's pretty sure the carapacian can only reach the gas pedal because the car itself takes pity on her and lets her scoot the driver's seat further forward than it was ever designed to go. "Thank you," she mutters as they successfully pull out of the gas station with a minimum of near death experiences; Ms Paint almost flattens one of the rip-off tipis while laboring to turn the steering wheel all the way to the left, but that may have been on purpose.

MP: Of course, dear. Are you certain we shouldn't go straight to our destination?

Now the carapacian is giving her a sidelong glance, which means she's not watching the road. Sure, they're the only car around for miles, but Zachal still screams, muffled behind closed lips, and points at the road until MP nods and pays attention to where she's going. "We are going to see the Grand Canyon before it gets blown to smithereens. Fact." Zachal steadies the laptop across her knees to leave room for the overworked fans to breathe. She smooths a thumb claw over the crack in the case where cosmic superstrings writhe and pulse, barely contained by what's left. The battery on this shitty laptop should have died days ago, but it still reads as though it's plugged in to charge; Zachal tries not to think about it. "The thirteenth isn't for a while yet."
"Alright. Okay," the troll says. She winces when the computer finishes booting up and opens straight to the document she needs without any input from her. How did that other guy put up with this all the time? Worse, when she scrolls through - god. "He scrambled all the conversations from the meeting? Douchebag."

Well, like hell is she rewriting that all over again. In fact, no. Fuck it. Time for a summary.

Begin Recap Log:

As the great bard Nichelle Nichols once wrote, "How did it get so late so soon? It's night before it's afternoon. December is here before it's June. My goodness, how the time has flown. How did it get so late so soon?"

Look, she said it, not me.

When we left off, the four human heroes, John Egbert, Jade Harley, Rose Lalonde, and Dave Strider, as well as troll heroes Kanaya Maryam and Karkat Vantas, chose to relocate to the Lalonde mansion in Maple Valley, after watching the video recordings that documented the human game session which preceded the scratch universe. Though trying to maintain a low profile in the wake of the mayhem unleashed by Diamonds Droog, the six were soon called out by four teenage villains brought to Seattle in the service of the Midnight Crew. They were forced to face off against a brainwashed Jane, Jake, Roxy, and Dirk near the Seattle Needle. However, unbeknownst to her fellow Scratch kids, Roxy intended to go rogue from the beginning, appealing to Rose for amnesty and escaping with her after her native void stealing powers accidentally neutralized the void in Rose's bracers. Jane and Jake, both more thoroughly affected by the brainwashing inflicted upon them by the manipulative Felt member Doctor Die, turned on Roxy and Dirk, and had to be knocked unconscious before they could be safely transported to Lalonde Labs to be de-programmed. Along the way, Roxy confirmed with Rue Lalonde that someone in the heroes' immediate circle was a plant for the Midnight Crew, and Rue made arrangements for everyone in the facility to be scanned for signs of mindgrubs, the method by which Die was able to ensure the undying, unthinking loyalty of the Midnight Crew and their underlings for years.
Unfortunately, in an unpleasant turn of events, Samuel Egbert responded to the news of forced brain scans by isolating John from the rest of the group and revealing that he was the plant, before activating the sleeper mindgrub implanted in John's brain to unleash the Trickster. A future version of Dave arrived to both warn and delay the group from going to rescue John, citing the inevitability of what was to come as the reason for the many doomed copies of Dave's dead body that littered the halls. While John was unconscious, Samuel turned on the other children and Dave was shot tackling Roxy out of the line of fire. Jade lost her temper and incapacitated Samuel; when the Trickster took control of John's body, it attacked Jade before being knocked out with a tranquilizer dart. In order to keep him sedated, Jade ventured out with Becquerel to obtain a new supply of medication through the Harley Foundation. Despite the storm raging outside in reaction to the turmoil surrounding John, she found a lone office worker, Janine, willing to help her contact the medical supply company; all went as planned until Gamzee Makara appeared in the room with her and became enraged enough to attack when she lied to him about Karkat's whereabouts. She managed to escape, but Gamzee's presence in Seattle boded ill.

While Jade was away, Rose suggested that she, Karkat, and Dave venture into John's psyche in the same way he once visited her own, hoping to restore some of his conscious control before the sedatives could wear off. Once inside his mind, though, it became clear that the damage John sustained from years of suppressed memories and psychological abuse had sundered his mind, leaving it an ever-shifting, cratered wasteland shielded by violent storms. The three were quickly separated and whisked away to separate corners of John's mind, where they had to confront different aspects of John's mental trauma. Rose encountered a two-dimensional copy of the Egberts' house, where leftover contamination from John's brief encounter with the Horrorterror had been allowed to fester. In the basement she located the Breeze, the personification of John's aspect; when she set it free it agreed to help ferry her to the 'real' John. Dave, meanwhile, was carried so far from the rest of John's mind that he unknowingly wandered through the channel that links to the mind of Typheus, John's slumbering denizen. While grumpy and irritable, with little love for Rose due to the consequences of her actions in the previous game, Typheus sensed the wrongness of the Trickster's presence in John's mind, and reluctantly helped Dave return to the channel between the two minds, where John retreated in a desperate bid to avoid the pain. His abuse of the ability [Eye of the Storm] caused the fraymotif to go out of control, and it nearly killed them both before Dave managed to snap John out of his fugue. Still shaken and badly traumatized, John agreed to wrest control of his psyche back from the Trickster when it became clear it was outnumbered, then summoned the false Samuel to distract Rose while it confronted John alone. The Trickster hated John with a visceral intensity, deliberately playing on his depression and anxiety to push him towards suicide, and finally attempted to murder him outright. Rose intervened before the Trickster could finish the job, but John was left gravely injured. He and the Breeze reconciled and were able to persuade the breezes that the Trickster had won over to abandon it, allowing Rose to set it on fire. It escaped, as Rose realized that too much of it was rooted in John's deeper emotions for
her to burn it out without damaging John's mind beyond repair. Exhausted but hopeful, John retook control of his mind.

In the wake of this, the group spent a week recovering from the shock. Doctor Lalonde was able to learn from Samuel that he allowed Die to use a mindgrub on him as part of a mercenary contract with the Crew, with the implication that he murdered Joanna Egbert in order to keep John isolated and under his control. Jade, who along with Roxy, Dirk, and Sollux Captor's remote assistance, had been trying to reformat the Queen's Hub to access records of the troll game session, decided to join Kanaya on a day trip to Los Angeles to finally investigate the source of the grimlight outbreak there, while Karkat's renewed nightmares (this time centered around traumatic events in the troll's session) caused him to accidentally make contact with Feferi Peixes, who had unknowingly become a thrall to the Horrorterror. Rose chose to remain with John, who was still in the midst of a depressive episode, and Dave volunteered to go with Karkat to meet Feferi in Washington, DC when she requested help dealing with her ancestor, The Condesce. Though wary about splitting up the party, the two away teams left Saturday morning and successfully reached their destinations. In the interim, John and Rose ventured back into his mind to question Typheus, but Typheus redirected the conversation with John to focus on his new personal quest for this game - overcoming the trauma that caused John's subconscious to become inundated with the oil Typheus would normally have used to pollute his planet in-game. He and Rose then spent some time discussing this new discovery, floating and drinking tea, but the record of this appears to have been MYSTERIOUSLY SCRAMBLED by parties unknown.

It's the juggalo. I'm talking about the juggalo guy. No way am I making anyone try to read that mess.

Jade and Kanaya were able to bypass the dome keeping Los Angeles cut off from the rest of the world when Eridan Ampora sensed them from within and opened a passage for them. Leaving Becquerel outside as backup, the two ventured in to meet the few remaining citizens of LA, who had all been drafted into Eridan's princely 'court' as militia, including Ruth and the child Faith, most of them heavily influenced by Eridan's Hope aura. Eridan attempted to show off, overly confident after he realized Kanaya didn't remember him killing her in the previous session, and explained that he intended to wait out the Reckoning by hoping his dome into being impervious to harm. However, his lack of genuine remorse and fluctuating excuses for why he broke away from the Horrorterror caused Jade and Kanaya to confront him, and he summoned angels formed from the corpses of Mal's victims to attack them. Once she realized he was drawing power from the dome, Jade demolished the last of the angels and rose up to use her space powers to their full extent for the first time since stabilizing in her grandfather's lab, recalling most of her memories of the previous session in the process. Kanaya punched Eridan in the face. It was awesome.

Dave and Karkat were almost immediately ambushed by Gl'bglolyb when they met Feferi at the DC airport. Feferi had little awareness of her surroundings outside of what Gl'bglolyb allowed her to notice; any hint of disbelief or confusion was wiped away so that Feferi continued to believe whatever the Horrorterror told her. Using a perfect spirograph portal carved into the sea floor, Gl'bglolyb transported them all to the Condesce's Arctic base via the Furthest Ring, and commanded Feferi to destroy what the Condesce holds dear. Finding themselves trapped in a small Russian town at the furthest reaches of Russia, the two were forced to go along with Feferi and ended up fighting the Condesce herself when Feferi went full Rambo on the shipping yard. The Condesce, oddly (or perhaps luckily), was more concerned with attempting to snap Feferi out of her grimlight enthrallment than paying attention to the others, recognizing Dave as a serious threat to her apple juice monopoly and Karkat as a descendant of the Signless. She shooed them away seemingly to keep the Psiionics, the current object of her pale affections, from noticing the Signless's descendant was there, and the three absconded just as Gl'bglolyb smashed through the Condesce's armada of
space ships to reach the shore. As Dave, Karkat, and Feferi were carried off by the Grey Protector in the Arch Deconstructor, the Condesce and her entourage, including the E%ībimus, took on the Horrorterror with the help of a Siege Titan and drove Gl'bglyb to abandon its physical form and flee to the Furthest Ring. James Harley appeared to speak with the Condesce, his adoptive mother and John and Jade's grandmother by extension, and their history of mutual antagonism caused the Condesce to accidentally let it slip that she knew about John and Samuel being brainwashed all along. Though the Condesce expected Gl'bglyb would return soon enough, no one on the physical plane was aware that Leviathan had begun to cannibalize its fellow Horrorterrors to augment its power; it devoured both Gl'bglyb and Malā'ikah in short order, inheriting Gl'bglyb's native knowledge of spirographic gates from its time as a game sprite, as well as both Horrorterrors' connections to their old tanglebuddies.

That Sunday, the group slowly began to assemble at Lalonde Labs - Jade and Kanaya returned first with a recalcitrant Eridan in tow, while Equius Zahhak and Nepeta Leijon arrived in the company of Ambrose Strider and Oriole, brought to the labs by Rue's promise to teach Equius the void ward techniques needed to obscure them from the Crew and Felt members who have been plaguing them. Deciding that they were going to run into problems with the law no matter what, Dave, Karkat, Feferi, and the GP tried to cross Seattle in broad daylight, and the carapacian king ended up staying behind to negotiate with FVRT representative Ace Dick for the return of his impounded giant war carapacian. Jade gave them a ride back to the valley instead, but communications began to deteriorate further than they ever had before with the arrival of Gamzee, as he, Tavros Nitram, Aradia Megido, Vriska Serket, Terezi Pyrope, and Sollux arrive en-mass. Despite the fact that Jade had some memories of speaking to the trolls during the human session that John lacks, and that Eridan himself remembered almost all of what happened prior to his death thanks to Malā'ikah's invasion of his mind, neither of them seemed to be able to share what they knew with the rest of the group. Instead, after Gamzee temporarily calmed in the presence of Karkat, the complete team of twelve trolls and four humans tried to sort out the various threats that they currently face, accounting for a long list of criminal groups, arch-nemeses, and Doc Scratch himself. Due to Gamzee's presence, however, no one could actually say for certain what they talked about, and Karkat's attempts to record everything on whiteboards came out as unreadable gibberish.

It all exploded when Gamzee realized that John and Karkat were moirails, losing what little grip on his powers that he still had. In the hallucinatory, Rage-inspired chaos that ensued, Gamzee destroyed Lil Cal before the puppet could hypnotize anyone into doing its Lord's bidding, Vriska was lured by the long-forgotten cue ball to finish destroying the main void ward generator in the basement, and the valley was left exposed to both Horrorterror influence and Doc Scratch's (near) omniscience. Rose's connection to Leviathan was neutralized by Roxy, but the Horrorterror simply turned to Eridan instead, tangling him up into a massive grim-jellyfish. Gamzee also unleashed the fraymotif [Babelon] , worsening the confusion by rendering everyone incapable of understanding text, speech, or sign language, and inflicted severe hallucinations on John that caused him to die and resurrect in the explosion caused by Leviathan, rather than escaping in Jade's mass teleport. Hallucinating the Trickster and surprised by Samuel when the man escaped from his confines, John was frozen until Jane knocked Samuel out with a couch, and the two left Crabdad keeping an eye on the unconscious body while they headed outside. Gamzee then turned on Equius and Nepeta, killing Equius before John could stop him in what appeared to be a desperate bid to force them into the god tiers. He only succeeded due to Sollux's long-standing secret project, masterminded by Aradia, which modified Sburb's basic programming so that Equius resurrected as the Heir of Void. Nepeta, who didn't die of her injuries, was rushed to the new emergency surgical team on staff by Equius, while John accidentally-on-purpose pacified Gamzee long enough to take him to Karkat.

In the basement, Vriska was killed by the cue ball in an explosion as 'thanks' for being gullible enough to fall for Scratch's ploy; resurrecting with her powers and memories of being a Thief of...
Light intact, she attempted to leave the valley to track Scratch down at the Ouroboros in Las Vegas for vengeance. Upon realizing what Sollux and Aradia had done, Terezi stabbed herself to reach god tier and tore off after Vriska as a Seer of Mind, gameState 589. Karkat ended up distracted mid-fight by Gamzee and John tackling him. It took Becquerel, Kanaya, Dave, and Jade's best efforts to finally rip Eridan out of the grimjelly's bell, temporarily severing the tangle between him and Leviathan and allowing Equius's innate Voidy thing to establish new defenses. Aradia observed all this from a distance, with an unconscious Tavros by her side, while a future version of herself on Prospit casually killed Equius and Terezi's dreamself when it was time for them to resurrect. At some point WV either learned how to translate his speech into English, or was oddly understandable because of [Babelon], or communicated with Bro through sheer paradox overload - honestly, I can't even tell what happened there anymore, but I blame Gamzee for at least 65% of why it didn't make logical sense. Karkat, disturbed and uncomfortable with what John and Gamzee set in motion, found himself dragged into a threeway moirallegiance with them regardless to keep Gamzee from drowning everyone in insanity all over again.

With two newly ascendant god tiers and Vriska fully aware of her powers for the first time in this universe, they badly need to go over what occurred in the trolls' game session once and for all. Who knows what new, horrifying revelations await them, or what it could mean that Sollux has been forced to install an additional modification and update to Sburb, sent to him by a mysterious new friend. And what will they do with Vriska's new knowledge of the location of Doc Scratch's base of operations, smack in the middle of the Las Vegas strip? Will Dave's long ago prophecy of drunken shenanigans finally come to fruition?

Also where the heck did Diamonds go? She took off with Clubs and got Marlowe to steal a void generator from the old Lalonde house and then...nothing? I wonder if Hearts has gotten fired for losing the Scratch kids yet...This is such bullshit. Remember when these kids were just dumbass super heroes doing dumbass things in the name of dumbass romance and the law? Well, I guess we're never getting back to that. It's too late. We're in too deep. There are too many irons in the fire for things to ever be simple again. Genre shifts are like growing pains. Your joints ache, the doctor will probably tell your custodian that you're imagining things, no one understands what's happening anymore, Leviathan is there, one dumbass in particular is still doing dumbass things in the name of dumbass romance that manage to land him in a threesome that includes a TOTAL DOUCHE WHO RAGE-VOMITS ALL OVER FIVE PAGES WORTH OF EXPOSITORY DIALOG WHEN YOU TURN YOUR BACK FOR ONE SECOND -

"I'm never writing one of these again," Zachal says, closing the laptop. She leans her head against the window, horns clacking, the glass warm under her forehead. "I mean it."

Ms Paint passes her the half-eaten package of Twizzlers.

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She is calm.

No, better than calm. Focused.

For too long she let her control slack off, riled by something that - shouldn't have riled her. God only knows there are a million things in the world that vex her, but she strives not to let that impact her goddamn work ethic.

Well, a silent shuffle of her mental priorities, an acknowledgement of the fact that certain persons
(one, singular) might also count as a priority, apart from herself, and -

Diamonds Droog brings the cue stick around, and uses it to lean on absently as the blood blooms out from the rustblood's caved in skull in slow pulses. Marlowe is silent by her right shoulder, reloading his pistolkind with slow fingers. Lipstick that's too dark a shade of plum to suit him stains his mouth, but what he and Yavari get up to in their minimal spare time is their business. Diamonds is hardly one to speak about keeping quadrants discreet, these days.

Sloppy work, on the other hand, she will not tolerate. The five bodies littering the warehouse floor are a mixed bag of trolls and humans in street clothes, with tiny tattoos shaped like compasses on the insides of their wrists, and the fact that they're still operating in Seattle this brazenly weeks after the Midnight Crew arrived means that Hearts is slacking off. Or is, perhaps, mind-numbingly distracted. Whichever it is, he shouldn't have let this caper slide under his radar for so long.

Well. He is on his way. The man's not totally hopeless. Diamonds was just quicker. He needs to shape up; Felt or no Felt, the Midnight Crew itself has some kind of goddamn reputation that needs upholding -

(even if it's already doused in gasoline, with Diamonds holding the match.)

She settles herself on a crate of smuggled fully automatic weapons, and puts the thought to the side. One of the freight doors hangs open to let in yellowed moonlight, a standing invitation for any passing strays or cops - but Diamonds isn't overly concerned by them. With the machine Marlowe set by the door active, wandering eyes tend to turn aside unless their attention is deliberately called. Propping the cue stick at an angle by her side, Diamonds dips to rub a splash of teal blood off her boot - the arterial spray slashing across the front of her jacket will have to wait until later for a good dry-cleaning. The temperature here has finally risen to the point that after the strife the spring humidity feels disgusting; time to break out the lighter cotton and linen suits.

Her latest disposable phone jolts in her breast pocket, and Diamonds stiffens for a moment in anticipation of another buzz. Three would mean Yavari had sighted unfamiliar hoods approaching her vantage point; four for the police, or whoever else is roaming the streets with the FVRT sticking their grubby hands into everything; five for hero children. If it'd been Hearts or another form of non-emergency, two. Just one means it's personal. The text that appears on the screen when Diamonds taps it is an unfamiliar orange-yellow, and she's not nearly good enough at reading Russian to make out more than a stray word without a translator.

ВГ: Простите меня, двоюродная сестра. Это трудно отслеживать часовых поясов, когда вы окутаны. Я надеюсь, что это не слишком поздно ночью, где вы.
ВГ: Бабушка говорит, что вы искали информацию о потенциальных пристанища здесь с семьей. я думаю, вы бы привлечь слишком много внимания от существующих криминальных элементов.
DD: < It would not be for myself. But no matter. I have alternatives.
ВГ: Хорошо. Я не хочу слышать о вашей смерти, Димушка. мы семья.
DD: > Please, spare me the platitudes of the soft-hearted. I get the point.
ВГ: Мир скоро заканчивается. Я предвижу, значительное, ужасное событие. Попробуйте дожить до этого критического момента, сестра.

The phone buzzes twice in Diamonds's hand, a silent alert, and she scrambles and erases the useless conversation before putting it away. By the time the first dark suit checks around the corner, Marlowe has fallen back against the wall, his pistol at the ready. Diamonds remains seated, partially collapsing the cue stick so that she can rest her hands on it without having to stand. The brace on the right hand should come off soon; she's been tempted to strip it off plenty, but straining the barely
healed muscle and connective tissue with violent physical activity would be a stupid mistake. "Tell Hearts he's getting old," she tells the lieutenant - though with Hearts's shabby uniform standards, she only knows the lackey's rank by the familiar look of their face - "And sloppy."

"Says you," a gruff voice calls, echoing just a touch too loudly as Hearts stomps past the lieutenant before they can do more than look terrified at the sight of Diamonds. The other two thugs bobbling along in the suit card's wake are unmemorable and vague-faced, and Diamonds shoots the one on the left over Hearts's shoulder while Marlowe takes out the one on the right. Hearts flinches and scowls, rubbing his ear, while the lieutenant draws on Marlowe with a pistol of their own to match. "God dammit, Di, do yah have to fucking do that?"

"Minimize inessentials, Hearts." Diamonds inclines her head toward the lieutenant. "Well?"

Hearts watches her, sour-faced, and then relents. Like always. "Charlie's good," he says, batting a hand at the lieutenant until they lower their specibus with an injured look. "Not clear, but who the hell is, these days."

"Mm." Marlowe doesn't lower his guard, and Diamonds doesn't expect him to. Ignoring the glares being traded behind his back, Hearts continues forward and Diamonds rises to meet him. Something like sentiment almost makes her put out a hand to clasp his, but she's not that far gone. She pushes past the moment by turning on a heel and stepping over the puddle of blood that seeps under the crate, and he follows her up the stairs to the roof. "How have things been here?"

"You've been on the lam, and I've been up to my ass in feds," Hearts says, a complaint legitimate enough that Diamonds lets the exhausted whine in his voice pass without comment. "Die's freak kids took off and now he won't stop calling to screech at me to go after them. As if I've got the damn time." He scratches beneath his hat, and after a moment adds, "Also, there's a giant carapacian now."

"Didn't ask. Didn't care." Hearts grips her shoulder and squeezes as they reach the roof, hastily putting space between them when Diamonds glares. "Don't give me that look. Just - good to see you with your hat on straight, is all. Last time I saw you, you...weren't all there."

Diamonds snorts. "Please." She keeps going until she stands at the edge of the roof - away from the bodies, the air up here only stinks of the bay water. Out of the corner of her eye she spies Hearts go for his pocket after only a moment's pause, and when he wedges a cigar between his teeth she holds out her own lighter before he can so much as blink. He shrugs and cups a hand around the end of the cigar as she lights it, but his eyes are sharp as she draws out a cigarette. Little more than animal cunning, she tells herself. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, or something like that. She keeps the cigarette in her left hand, tucking the cue stick up the sleeve and hiding the right in a pocket. The first drag tastes like nothing at all, and the next is the same.

But it's something to occupy her hands while her phone sits heavy as a stone in her pocket. She's cut off all contact - all her other contracts put on hold, her network gone to ground at her signal, and any calls and messages from Felt members presumably still filtering through to the old number for the phone she destroyed. Only Yavari and Marlowe are sure to have a way to contact her from day to day, and only them because she can't guard Clubs and handle everything else at the same time.

Sometimes Clubs will beg a smoke off her, in the rare moments when he's conscious. But that's none of Hearts's business.
"We're still secure here," she says, letting smoke fall out of her mouth instead of breathing it in properly. The black, tarry cloud rising from Hearts's cigar is foul enough for the both of them. "Word from - the boss?"

It's only the faintest hitch. Hearts grunts, the white of his undershirt very obvious in the moonlight. "Same as ever. Probably knew those Scratch kids would fuck off before they did, and couldn't be assed to mention it to anyone." He sags his weight on one leg - no, he's favoring one side. She didn't notice a limp earlier, but it's there. "He asked about you."

"And?"

"I told him the truth - I didn't know shit about where you were or what you were up to." Before Diamonds can say anything, Hearts smooths his hand over his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. Up close, the skin under his eyes hangs in heavy bags. "Course, he probably got more outta me than I said straight out. Whatever you're doing about Clubs, Di, you better do it damn fast."

"I'm doing it now," she says, lightly.

The half-truth is worth it to see Hearts go from tired to bug-eyed in half a second. Diamonds holds the cigarette between her teeth as she experimentally bends the fingers of her right hand back by pressing against the palm of the left. Nothing more than a twinge of not-quite-pain. The embers at the end of the cigarette flare up as the wind gusts.

"By talking to me?" Hearts says, bewildered, and Diamonds sighs deeply.

"No, you lump." She plucks the cigarette out of her mouth - and then yanks the cigar out of his, stamping them both out with her boot. "By kidnapping you."

The shout from below cuts off with a hrgk that's too deep to be Marlowe; he needs to work on his technique, though. If it were anyone but Hearts here, Diamonds would have needed to rush to take them out before the yell put them on the defensive. As it is, Hearts throws a wounded look down at the smashed cigar, before tilting his head back and sighing the last of the smoke at the sky. "Really? You couldn't let me finish, first?"

"No. It smells horrid." She quickly assesses whether or not he has gained or lost a significant amount of weight since she last sized him up, but all appears to be as bulky as ever. Uncapping the needle in her pocket, she slides it home and depresses the plunger. There's more of him to knock out - she measured quite carefully, though. "Not to worry. Where we're going, currently, no one can see. Not even Scratch."

"M'not worried," Hearts says. He catches her elbow as she eases the needle out of the side of his neck and uses it to waveringly sit himself down, away from the roof's edge. "Fuckin' hell, what do you put in those things?"

"Enough."

Hearts has gone a little cross-eyed. "Jesus." Then he laughs, one leg folding up under him awkwardly. "Have fun carting my ass back down the stairs, yah maniac."

Diamonds sniffs. "You'll roll well enough. Trust me - I'm a professional."

"Yeah, yeah. Just don't knock the rest of my teeth out along the way."

"I make no promises."
This time, when Hearts laughs, she can hear it shake. Hmm. "Di? Do you know how fuckin' stupid it is for me to trust you?"

If he's looking up at her, she doesn't dare look down. That's fine. The view from up here isn't anything particularly special. Fairly standard warehouse district. Nothing to write home about - boxy buildings in their rows, broken up by streets just wide enough to accommodate heavy machinery and forklifts. "I'll take a wild guess, and say - very." Soft footsteps from the stairway tell her Marlowe has finished stowing the unconscious lieutenant somewhere they won't be found by anyone who might stumble across the bodies below.

As Hearts pitches over and slumps the rest of the way into unconsciousness, Diamonds saves his hat before it can get crumpled. Not that it's in good enough shape to be worth salvaging... "To the van with him," she instructs Marlowe, as Hearts begins to snore.

"Of course, ma'am." Marlowe hesitates. "Um. I may need Yavari to help lift him down the sta-"

"Roll him." Not waiting for an affirmative, Diamonds sends two rapid, blank messages to Yavari - time to leave - and heads back down the stairs. Hearts will be missed by the end of the night; despite everything, he is still nominally in charge of operations in the Seattle area.

But it's time, past time really, to pull him out before he cracks under Scratch's ever-watchful eye. Thinking of the void generator can only obscure his intentions for so much longer.

In for a dime, in for a dollar. She can't think of what possessed the good Doctor Lalonde to lift her shields for even the briefest of periods, but it was enough. Enough for Scratch to cast his eyes upon them, enough to have a memo sent out to the upper echelons of the Felt that Marlowe could intercept on Serious Business.

Enough to know the sleeper agents Diamonds had him set off prematurely were caught, and (apparently) successfully relieved of their mindgrubs. A lucrative gamble, indeed.

It means there are two parties in the world who are confirmed to have the ability to have mindgrubs surgically removed, and Diamonds Droog has a goddamn policy of not putting herself or her closest assets under the knife of someone already proven untrustworthy in the extreme. The coordinates for the shrouded Lalonde Laboratories may not be accurate for long; if Lalonde and her associates are smart, they may have already given up the place as compromised.

But it's a start. Before Diamonds can set her mind to any other objective, before she can so much as contemplate how to handle Scratch in the aftermath, this must be done.

With that in mind, she rips off the three main buckles clasping the brace around her wrist and hand, and flexes her fingers again. The scratch marks stand out almost white against the dark of her skin, the deepest cut a knoll of pale scar tissue below her ring finger. Surgery was needed to ensure the muscles and tendons healed without weakness, but the marks will fade with time.

She closes her hand into a fist.

Not even a twinge.

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It starts, as always, with a Reckoning.

-
Alternia's nightmarish. Karkat can pick out elements of that world in what he knows about himself, about the old Alternian Empire that laid the foundation for so many aspects of troll culture today - and when he sees how all of it has been inherited from a world without humans to influence and soften the worst of it, how violence and death were so normal that people being crippled or hurt barely fazed them, his stomach turns. Even quadrants in their simplest form were reduced down to a matter of survival.

He doesn't feel any guilt or regret or even the memory of it when the world ends. It's clear that none of the young trolls on the screens have any real idea what they're getting into - except Aradia; surprise, surprise - but Alternia was being put out of its misery. If there were people (kids, they're all just little kids) worth saving, they probably would have been crushed under the Alternian grindstone regardless. In the end, it's not even the meteors that finish everyone off; it's Gl'bglyb, still playing at being Feferi's lusus, that opens its mouths and makes a noise so awful the game recording can only translate it as gibberish and a high pitched squeal that blows out three of the speakers.

Finally, he puts his claw on it. For the human's game session, the world dying was a tragedy because it was messy but safe, a generally not-shitty place filled with people whose idea of a good time didn't include violent games of FLARPing. In contrast, when that younger Karkat enters the Medium, it's with the mindset that whatever comes next can only be an improvement.

And the kicker? They're good at it.

Karkat mentally prepped himself for another gorefest of epic proportions based on how horribly fucking wrong the human game went. Hell, the moment Feferi reveals Gl'bglyb of all things got prototyped in the kernel sprite, Karkat expected a Horrorterror massacre within the hour. The universe's shortest round of Sgurb, ever. Having all of their lusii die might have been mildly traumatic at the time, particularly for the few like Nepeta and Kanaya and Tavros who were genuinely attached to their caretakers, but the custodial beasts' bodies all get popped into the kernels and revived in minutes. Gl'bglyb's enormity makes some of the Sgurb enemies evolve to the size of buildings, but they don't appear to have any other horrific traits. Maybe wiping out an entire galactic empire tired the Horrorterror out.

But aside from a few incidents, their violent compulsion as a species to compete and win, turned up to eleven by how fucked up Alternia was, actually drives them to finish puzzles and blast through their land quests under the illusion that the red team and blue team were competing against each other. Better still, having endless game-generated waves of giant, prototyped ogres and other enemies to fend off meant that Eridan and Vriska both distracted themselves with a massive competition to see who could make the most boonbucks and advance up the echeladder. Gamzee spends most of his time slumming it on Karkat's planet, munching on pies made out of sopor slime and dreaming on Prospit, and in general isn't a massive murderous tool. He's harmless, actually. Karkat feels like past Karkat didn't appreciate that rare window of stonerclown bliss while it lasted.

By the time they realized both teams belonged in one Sgurb game session, half of them were already conspiring with some version of Spades Slick to dethrone the Black Queen. It's engrossing.

It's also taking for fucking ever. They shut down the terminal around eleven that night because Jade is falling asleep on Rose's shoulder, and Eridan doesn't look too far behind.

But the recording still has so much footage left. The issue with successfully playing a game through to its conclusion, apparently, is that there's a bunch of filler - days and days where nothing important happened. Vriska and Tavros keep scouring random dungeons for treasure and experience rather than trying to solve their personal quests or hunt down their denizens, and Karkat can only take so much of Vriska's self-absorbed jawing coming from those screens before he wants to punch the
current Vriska in the thorax in some kind of cross-universe defense mechanism. There's also a fuckton of adolescent hormones and frankly embarrassing quadrant gossip that will not stop happening, and Karkat can't look Terezi in the eyes once he realizes how bad his younger self had it for her. After Vriska gets fucking demolished by a mechanical Aradia and rises up to god tier, they decide that's most definitely enough for the night. Kanaya and Rose volunteer to pass on what they've observed to Nepeta and Equius, (the latter wouldn't let his barely healed moirail anywhere within a fifty foot radius of Gamzee, which caused something of a conflict of interest when Karkat didn't dare leave Gamzee somewhere out of sight long enough to pander to Equius's completely reasonable terror), and that must take hours, at the very least.

The next day, thankfully (Karkat can't believe that word just came out of his mouth), a future Dave barges in through the door right when Vriska starts arguing with Sollux that she should be in charge of fast forwarding to the important parts, since she thinks she knows what they need to see. Karkat knows for a fucking fact she means the parts where I do cool things, conveniently skimming over any more of my blatant fuckups in the process, because Vriska is predictable as fuck. The future Dave hands Sollux a piece of printer paper covered in Karkat's writing and then walks straight back out the door, waving at them casually before disappearing back to whenever he came from. It turns out to have time stamps for all the relevant parts of the game recording they need to see, and that's how they skip right from Vriska hitting god tier to Vriska helping the Derse dreamers and Slick and a very awake Karkat oust the Black Queen from Derse. Through some convoluted fuckery, Terezi turns up halfway through to save them from their own stupidity - and then cackles like a fucking lunatic as she launches a meteor to exile the White Queen, too. Which explains why neither Queen knew fucking anything about the end of the troll session.

After Terezi's moment of absolute dipshittery, the time stamps Sollux fast-forwards to show how quickly the previously competent troll session fucks itself in the wastechute with a jackhammer. Before Karkat and Kanaya - arguably the only fucking sane people in that entire session, Karkat thinks, sourly - get sidetracked making a genesis frog from scratch on the Land of Rays and Frogs, everyone except Tavros polishes off their denizens. They don't bother talking to any of the denizens, either; Karkat watches his screen, and here remembers looking down at this teeny fucking denizen - barely larger than Crabdad, a tiny little blue-black serpent limned with cyan light, shining faintly like a distant blue moon. The outside of this palace looks like any old craggy black ruin in the blood-drowned wasteland of Pulse and Haze, but this inner chamber is carved out of the rock and paneled with pale sheets of opal, the denizen curled up in a scalloped dish in the center of a pool of blood. It has same name as his old web browser. Accepting and sad and gentle, offering him a choice that isn't a choice at all because it already knows he won't listen, watching with eyes like soft stars as he lunges for it in a sudden, despairing fury.

He snaps out of it in time for Eridan's screen to white out.

Karkat adds the grimlight Horrorterror to the white board-in-progress before anyone else can comment. He's dreamed this part already, so it'll be nice (by some excruciatingly painful definition of the word) to see what happened without all his weird nightmare tangents. He and Sollux and Kanaya go to retrieve Eridan while Vriska lords it over the people readying themselves to fight the Black King on the Battlefield, and -

Well.

They find him.

Karkat just isn't sure why it takes him so long to realize Gamzee followed.
“Eridan's land is hereby renamed 'Land of Fuck You and Slimy Nubfuckers,'” Karkat says.

These new death angels smell like how Karkat imagines swallowing blood and rotten meat would taste when Sollux's psionics burn them, but it's the only way to keep them from pulling themselves back together. The ones that lurk in the sludge are worse; every time Karkat thinks they've found a clear area, a new angel will slither up from under the smooth white surface and try to wrap them up in acidic, creeping wings. More circle overhead, things with sharp teeth and wheels covered in eyes that have grafted themselves onto the dark angels that Eridan kept whining about all through the game.

"Theconded," Sollux says, as Kanaya chainsaws the head off another monster. Sollux chars the decapitated head into ash, but Karkat's close enough to see sweat streaming down the goldblood's face. After the tenth freak angel nearly tore Sollux's head off from behind, Karkat stayed back to cover him; Sollux is still in one of his 'I'm a high level psionic, I don't need you people with actual weapons grubsitting me' moods, but the other troll can't keep this kind of constant burn up forever. Karkat gets the impression there's a significant difference between lifting things and incinerating them in terms of psychic effort. If Sollux blows his fucking brains out before they find Eridan or escape this hellhole of a land, Karkat and Kanaya are probably screwed.

And none of them drop grist. Eridan complained about that, Karkat remembers, and then ignored Karkat when he scathingly tried to point out that maybe, just maybe, that meant Eridan wasn't supposed to be killing his land's consorts in the first place. That maybe there would be fucking consequences for shooting up the inhabitants of every major village on the map instead of trying to complete land quests. Sure, they were annoying side quests, but killing the locals is still fucking pointless.

These can't possibly be the original consorts, not after Eridan's fucking free for all, but if Eridan has been fighting something like these this whole time -

"We should have concentrated on finding that last frog," Kanaya says, and guilt needles Karkat like a cold knife. She's fighting still but favoring her right arm badly; it looks painfully raw; acid from the canal splashed onto her skin, leaving jade-tinged lower layers of skin exposed to the air.

"The thing got squashed or something," he argues, but the excuse sounds as flimsy now as it did the first time he tried it on for size. Kanaya hadn't wanted to give up the search, even after weeks of no new leads. "The Reckoning is already in full-swing, we can't waste time on trying to find one tiny croakbeast anymore. It'll be fine."

What he can't say out loud is that he'd rather have Eridan where he can see him than worry about the potential consequences of not finishing all the genesis sequencing. He thinks - he knows - he was one of the last people to talk to Eridan before this, and if he missed something in that conversation, so busy being irritated by Eridan's whining that he overlooked a genuine call for help... So what if they end up with a universe where up is down or something fucking stupid like that. Whichever one he chose to prioritize, he was always going to blame himself for failing at the other.

"This ith - tho weird -" For a second Karkat thinks Sollux is about to pass out; the troll sways and his whole face goes pale before he shakes his head and brings a hand full of red lightning around to catch another angel and throw it away. "They don't even registher as enemies on the therver. I jutht keep getting thome weird 'chaoth corruption' type error."

"Oh, joy! Eridan went and broke the fucking game right when we were done playing it!" Karkat uses both sickles to carve off a wing, leaving the lizard abomination to snarl and writhe on the black stone with hate in its creepy eyes. "Why am I not in any way surprised?"
"Over here!" Kanaya calls. She's gone further down the street than Karkat and Sollux, and when Sollux finishes scorching this latest angel the two of them sprint to join her. Karkat keeps one eye on the nearest canal at all times, his head aching with the effort of watching the iridescent surface for signs of movement. There's something horrific about the canals that burns his mind the same way flecks of it have left holes burned in his clothing. Then he nearly skids past Kanaya as Sollux stops, and has to catch himself on the pink fabric of her dress to turn and see what the two of them are staring at.

What's sad is, Karkat called it. Eridan is sitting on a heap of dead bodies, a gory throne that's unfortunately lacking in gore. The dark road spreads out before them in a paved strip that runs right up against a rectangular pool of dark water. At the far end a pallid white aura of grimlight burns around Eridan, a shade off from the brightness of the sky. It's clear the dark angels are dead, however; all of their diamond eyes are flat and staring, their bodies pitted with holes where Eridan shot them. They look small and mundane compared to the sickly white imitations roaming the streets and the ramparts above, piled up into a throne for Eridan.

Eridan has also gone white, dark tears like oil slicks streaming from his eyes, and when the thing riding his mind tilts his head to inspect the three trolls, the current Karkat is struck by the thought that this is what a grimlight tanglebuddy looks like. Aside from the tar streaming down his remote face, it's all white: Eridan's stupid pompous cloak, his shirt bleached with the Aquarius sign etched in royal violet, and wings with razor sharp, crystal feathers shifting and twitching with a will of their own. Not-Eridan holds something in its claws, too, something small and white and spherical, and it's a punch in the gut to recognize the cue ball.

Back then, though, his younger self had no idea what to make of this fresh fuckery. Of course his first reaction was to yell at it. "Eridan, what the fuck!"

"Uh, Karkat," Kanaya starts, because Kanaya's not a suicidal moron.

"Let me guess! You decided to alchemize one of these pieces of shit to make yourself this travesty, and accidentally unleashed a new breed of flying lizard monster on your land that totally broke the game. Bravo!" Karkat kicks one of the stray bodies for emphasis. He regrets it when the force knocks the dark angel into the lightless water, and the pool swallows it up without a sound. He can't see the bottom in all the darkness.

"KK, I don't think that's...oh, thhit," Sollux says. Kanaya catches the goldblood when he pitches forward, clutching his head, but it's a close thing. "Fuck. That's one of the outer gods. And I brought my Dersite body. Fuck."

As a Prospit dreamer who never bothered to wake up on Prospit, Karkat only knows what he does because the Derse dreamers would never stop complaining about hearing whispers in their dreams during eclipses. Well, Equius didn't appear to hear anything, and Feferi chatted with her fucked up Glubsprite before it vanished like all the other sprites, and Aradia has apparently been too dead and robotic to say much of anything at all. But Nepeta and Eridan never failed to dredge the topic up and beat it like a dead hoofbeast at least once a memo, and that was enough for Karkat to want everyone to shut the fuck up about their dumbass dreams for the duration of the game.

None of them mentioned possession being a thing. Horrorterrors aren't supposed to involve themselves in a game session beyond whispers.

But Eridan stands, considering them with eyes that don't show any sign of recognition, and Karkat shrinks back. Thirteen year old Eridan shouldn't be intimidating, but Horrorterrors tend to do that. Compared to how young Kanaya and Sollux look, Eridan looks -
"I'm sure Karkat's sinuses. As he watches the white mire below starts to churn with submerged wings. "Until you're in. It's too late. Malā'ikah, please tell me there's another gate out of here."

By this point, Karkat's caught on to the fact that they're fucked. "Kanaya."

She grits her teeth and spares him only a fleeting look. "Three."

"Idiot," Sollux hisses.

"Whatever you are, give Eridan back," Kanaya demands. She's so brave, she's so ridiculously, ludicrously brave, and wow, that's one of the soppiest friendthoughts Karkat has ever had for someone. Hearing her makes him straighten his shoulders and wish he could look as badass as tiny child-Kanaya with one arm supporting Sollux and the other wielding a giant chainsaw, her face a stormy glare. "You get until the count of three."

"Malā'ikah tilts Eridan's head to the other side. "No? We're out of time."


But the Horrorterror smiles. The wings fold over Eridan's shoulders and across the front like a mantel, and it takes a fluid step toward them. Sollux says further, making a choked noise.

"...Two," Kanaya continues, this time with clear hesitation.

There's a second pair - or maybe the wings break in two, so that another sweep can fold back around Eridan's waist. Holding out the cue ball to one side, Malā'ikah waits as an angel's dead hand rises up from the pile to clasp the orb.

By this point, Karkat's caught on to the fact that they're fucked. "Kanaya."

She grits her teeth and spares him only a fleeting look. "Three."

"Idiots," Sollux hisses.

The last dip of wings covers Eridan's eyes, black tears seeping through to run down the feathers in thin rivulets. "You're dead now. The苍白 are dead."

"That's right. Eridan's flesh is a mess, it says. "Now when we are s o... h u n g r y ."

Sollux barely manages to float them to safety as the arena starts to spill over with white acid, pouring in through the streets as the canals overflow. Malā'ikah doesn't pursue them, but Karkat can feel it watching them, looking through them, darkly amused as they land on top of a parapet. The grimlight sludge doesn't flow into the dark pool, though. A thought occurs to Karkat, his mind spinning in a million different directions as he tries to think how they're going to get Eridan to snap out of it - and he shakes Sollux's shoulder until the dazed troll tries to chomp on his hand. "Sollux, check where we are on your cheat map. Please tell me there's another gate out of here."

"It isn't cheating, KK," he says, like this is really the time to argue about dumbass hoofbeast shit like that. "And I'm a little busy here. My head feelth like it' th going to explode." He sways; Kanaya's white-knuckled grip is the only thing keeping him upright. "What am I looking for."

"Oh, for - wherever the fuck we are right now, plus gate." Karkat looks over the side of their building. "Fuck. Hurry your hacker ass. Sollux, we don't have all night."

"'re tri e v e e t h e m', 'm alak h i m'," the whisper sings, with a pressure that's sharp in Karkat's sinuses. As he watches the white mire below starts to churn with submerged wings.
Kanaya leans Sollux against the nearest battlement. “Whatever that thing is, could it have something to do with Eridan's denizen? His land quest?” she asks. "None of the other Derse dreamers went through something like this with their emissaries -"

“No,” Karkat says, only half sure he's not bullshitting on the fly. “I mean, fuck, maybe Eridan lied his fish face off, but he said he killed Phosphorus ages ago.” He'd beat Vriska to it by a narrow margin, which she'd blamed on Tavros slowing her down. "He wouldn't shut up about it. Once he realized no one with a functional fucking pair of pancells to rub together would answer him, he invited me and Feferi to a memo and monologued.Fuck!"

The first of the next round of grimlight angels lunges over the wall to their left, keening and slopping acid over the dark stone as it strikes at Kanaya. She meets it with her chainsaw, sawing through the thing's lower jaw and then switching her grip to cut its head off. Karkat spins to cover her back, using his sickles to hack into the second one and then quickly disembowel a third. Maybe he should have slept before this; he's starting to feel lightheaded, and the weight of responsibility is making his stomach curdle. He's the one who brought them here, the one whose orders all of these sad fucks have been following since they realized the two teams needed to work together to finish the whole session. Whether they choose to stay and get themselves fucking destroyed trying to save Eridan, or cut and run and abandon the violetblood to whatever fucked up shit he's gotten himself into, it's eventually going to come down to Karkat. Everything in him screams that they can't ditch Eridan no matter how much of an unrelenting taintchafe he is; but is it worth losing Kanaya or Sollux?

Dodging the spray of acidic blood from the disembowelment leaves him off balance. The next angel wallops him from the side with its trailing tail, leaving a sharp burn across his ribs as he crashes into Sollux. "No, you fucking -" Sollux says. For an instant Karkat thinks they're about to get their faces ripped off - another grimlight thing joins the angel, this one less of a winged lizard and more of a wheel of eyes with too many teeth - then Sollux pushes Karkat down and sends a sharp bolt of red psionics scything through the angel's face, tossing the wheel away with a flicker of blue. "Okay. Thhit, I think I got it," the goldblood says, panting. "Minor brain chemistry adjustment. That won't have any long term side effects at all."

“No, never,” Karkat says, rolling his eyes. He gets back on his feet and takes a running leap at the next horrific thing, pinning its wing to the ground with his sickles so that Kanaya has a clear shot to sever the limb at the shoulder joint. They fought together so much on LoRaF, trying to stoke the Forge, that this sort of cooperation feels natural. But holding this roof won't be enough - they need to reach Eridan, somehow -

"Motherfuck, that took some miracles. This stuff is all, like, burning and shit. How does it even do that? Shit's crazy."

It's the last voice in the fucking Incipisphere that Karkat wants to hear right that second. Of all the trolls to follow them here against orders, of course it would be the slime stoner clown. "How did you even get here?!" Karkat demands, as Gamzee somehow slouches his way past the explosion of viscera that erupts when Sollux tears another angel in two. "I told you to fucking stay with Tavros, you pandamaged fuck!"

Gamzee beams at him, all uncomfortable adoration in the middle of a fight. It hasn't stopped freaking Karkat out since they first met in person; it's one thing to have a weirdly docile, constantly high purpleblood pale flirting with you over Trollian, and quite another to have the real thing hanging around and offering sopor slime to your land's mini-bosses in an attempt to 'help.' And sure enough - "Came to help, best friend," he says. "Tav is chilling with Nepsis."

He stands there, beaming, until Karkat is forced to drag him out of the way and cut another angel's
throat with his sickles. Sollux fries the body with a blast of psionics, but now they're stuck with Gamzee, looking around at a loss for what to do, and it's another weight in Karkat's stomach. Gamzee's mostly harmless (something he never thought he say about a coldblood in a million sweeps) but only occasionally good in a strife. It's not like Karkat actually likes him or anything - but as friend-dictator in chief, he's responsible for Gamzee's sorry life, too.

Then Malā’ikah appears in the center of the roof, and it all goes to shit. Karkat loses track of Gamzee once Aradia arrives - or one of the failed Aradias, he can't really tell the soulbots apart - with a squadron of her hoarded failures to drop a meteor on the worst of the Horrorterror's abominations. She's supposed to be saving them for the assault on the Black King, but Sollux called her, and the goldblood rolls his eyes at Karkat's furious shouting because they both know none of them would have been able to drag Eridan's limp meatsack out of Malā’ikah's clutches without that lucky break.

He notices Gamzee again when they finish slapping Eridan awake, but Karkat is preoccupied with negotiating with Vriska - he lets her take point on the King if she'll shut up and keep a psychic check on Eridan to keep the tanglebuddy from taking over again.

(It doesn't occur to him that Vriska's juvenile mind control might not be the reason Eridan is able to pull himself together to help fight the Black King. That maybe it just found someone new to dick around with. Not until much, much later.)

He definitely notices when Gamzee wanders up to him near the end of the fight. The Black King is a quarter of its former size, the remainder hacked off and tossed into the Medium's empty space by Aradia's [Army of the Ages]. Feferi's finished carving out its immense vocal cords to prevent a Vast Glub, which was her main job in this fight. But the Black King fights harder the closer Karkat thinks they're getting to the end, slamming Eridan down against a lily pad, snatching Tavros's rocketchair out of the sky and crushing it so that Terezi has to swoop in and catch Tavros before he falls. Karkat's working his way back up the King carapacian's side to rejoin the fight at its head; falling that distance hurt, on top of all the other injuries he's accumulated throughout the strife, but healing his injuries is something he's good at.

He's the only one low enough, at the moment, to see Gamzee stumble like an idiot right behind the Black King's massive hoof. Karkat curses a blue streak and leaps down a hundred feet to the nearest huge knee, his legs burning with the strain. 'Get out of the way,' he wants to scream, because Gamzee's only role in this fight was to lightly tap the King to loosely meet the requirements that all players participate in the endgame fight and then back the fuck off.

He doesn't understand when Gamzee raises a claw and taps the back of the dark hoof. He can't see Gamzee's face from this angle.

But he sees the flare of dark purple that races up the Black King's leg in cracks, like shattered glass under Karkat's feet. It runs in grooves all the way up to the King's crown before fading away. Karkat blinks - and up above, hears Vriska's elated cry of triumph as she makes an impossibly lucky roll of the dice. When he tears his eyes away from Gamzee to watch, Vriska lashes out and hits the Black King square in the center of the highest forehead with her strongest attack.

At the time, he thinks his eyes are playing tricks on him. It's not possible that the Black King shatters in exactly the same places that lit up purple, like every weak point being hammered at once. The carapacian is fucking enormous thanks to Feferi's prototyped lusus, and collapses into so many huge shards when it dies that there's no way Karkat could piece together precisely where the breaks happened.

It's not possible, he tells himself, because that's the only thing that keeps him from inwardly freaking
the fuck out when Gamzee looks at him and smiles among the rubble, artless and oblivious.

That is how they forget about the cue ball, left behind on Eridan's land, a lonely speck of white against the white sheet of grimlight that flooded the city streets.

That is how they win the game.

But they don't see the Lord of Time. Not then.

Karkat and Kanaya had finished the genesis frog quest in a rush, but when they reach it, the victory platform at the end of the game doesn't look any worse for the wear. Ha. He knew it would be fine. Everyone's riding the post-strife buzz - Vriska's practically jittering out of her thief-jamas, on fire with what she sees as her single-handed victory over the King - and between Feferi and Karkat's efforts they've somehow emerged with everyone alive and not bleeding out of multiple orifices. It's an undeniable victory, and after so many weeks of bullshit and level grinding, it feels so sweet. Whatever's on the other side of this door, he's ready to sleep for a week. He will be the fucking god of sleep if that's what it takes.

He puts out a claw to turn the doorknob. It hums with cool power under his palm, filaments of blue plasma tingling as they dart out to touch his hand. At the very center, he can see a tiny white spirograph.

Then time cracks.

- 

It doesn't have a sound to Karkat - the deliberate absence of sound, more like. A silent scream as the door in front of him splits in two. Aradia's metal claws snatch him back as she shouts a warning. Karkat stares at the slice in front of him, the way that reality abruptly disappears. The doorknob waits for him to turn it, but the door itself hangs in two pieces, the top half stuck in the frame as though the missing chunk through the middle means nothing.

Widening fractures eat up their lands as Aradia ushers them all to the safety of one last meteor. Later, when they fall into exhausted, shocked sleep, the others report Prospit and Derse being swallowed by the spreading cracks. Then their dreamselfs must die, or whatever happens to things that time takes - all they can see when they sleep is a rainbow buzz of static.
Karkat knows that rainbow static. After Equius and Terezi's reports of what happened when they
died and went god tier, he thinks he knows exactly who took the bodies. Aradia or Gamzee or
maybe both working in tandem, like the scheming fucks that they've apparently been all along.
Collecting dreamselfs and keeping them in Gamzee's sylladex, preserving them through the scratch
of the two games so that they could be used in Aradia and Sollux's cheatsy god tier mod bullshit.

No wonder Karkat has been having fucked up nightmares. Forget all that Skaian cloud bull, he's
been waking up in a captchalogue card. And the one time he managed to drag himself out, Aradia
shoved him right back down before he could realize he was on Prospit. Between Gamzee's tendency
to leak madness and Aradia's meddling...

Seriously. Of all the people to end up masterminding these secret plans, why did it have to be those
two?

The games begin to overlap, starting with the obvious - Pesterchum; entire stretches of the humans'
game session got cut short whenever they had conversations with trolls, who could pick and choose
at what point in the timeline they wanted to smear their unique brand of nonsensical feces
everywhere. Some, Kanaya being the standout example, try to help in their own ways. Karkat makes
a fucking ass of himself, believing that the cracks in time must have originated from something gone
horribly wrong in the human session. Terezi and Vriska start vying to see who can get their
respective chosen human to progress furthest in the game, which naturally leads to a doomed timeline
or ten and the creation of Davesprite from one particular timeline where John fucking died in an
entirely new way due to this fucking shit. It also ultimately leaves Dave in possession of 99% of the
stock in the boonbucks market, a ton of which he then unloads in Terezi's account in order to
complete the circle of stupidity.

What a fucking travesty. With the rest of the trolls busy doing pointless things like amputating Tavros
and brooding around the meteor and napping, any kind of competence they demonstrated while
playing their own game takes a flying fucking leap off the cliff of redeemability. Most of them don't
even see the point of trying - Aradia's soulbot spontaneously explodes and it barely fazes them.

According to the questionable time stamps, the murder party happens in fits and starts over the course
of hours, not quite in tandem with the human session going to hell in a handbasket. Eridan decides to
fry anyone who doesn't agree with his pancracked plan to go try to join forces with the ultimate
destructive force closing in on their meteor; Vriska decides, in turn, to go completely fucking rogue
and try to duke it out with the Lord of Time by herself. By the time things hit the brakes, Kanaya and
Feferi and Tavros are all dead, Sollux is blind and short half of his teeth, and Karkat's doing his best
impression of a limp, sniveling wriggler as he makes out with Kanaya's corpse.

In the present, Kanaya pats him on the back. "I appreciate the effort."

"Not helping," Karkat says, voice muffled, from where he's slammed his head against the table. Only
partially out of mortification; he's also trying not to throw up at having watched yet another batch of
thirteen year olds die horribly. Kanayagets back up some time later as her rainbow drinker stuff kicks
in, long after the younger Karkat has vacated the room in a panic, but it still hurts. And it's all fucked
up.

Gamzee's deterioration, in comparison, is more gradual. Every time Gamzee pops up in a memo or a
chatlog, the purpleblood has been dismissed out of hand by everyone else on the meteor. He wanders
off on his own in a daze, and no one goes after him. It makes Karkat cringe in frustration, because
now that the whole thing is laid out bare in front of him it's clear that Gamzee having the freedom and time to completely flip his shitcakes was the direct result of no one giving a fuck.

Dave might be a catalyst for the breakdown - or he might buy them a little more time - it's hard to tell. Where the past versions of John and Jade tend to block the trolls whenever they got sick of the trolling, and Rose turned the trolling back on the perpetrators with interest, past Dave would talk with them for hours. Whole loops of his time fuckery are dedicated to memeing with Terezi. He shows Gamzee an idiotic music video and Gamzee almost appears to lose it - and then settles in to rap with Dave some more. The beats are frighteningly sick.

Strike that. Karkat wants to pretend he never had that thought. The rapping is just as annoying and pointless as any other rap to ever filter through Dave's mouth.

But then Dave trails off, responding less and less as the human session starts to dissolve into elder god-induced chaos, and Gamzee is left to swab up the last dregs of sopor slime from empty pie tins and mumble to himself in memos no one responds to.

Until Lil Cal does.

No one can tell where the puppet appears from - it slinks out of the shadows of the meteor and wraps itself around Gamzee's shoulders. Soon Gamzee stops using Trollian and starts acting like the puppet is talking back. Lil Cal doesn't respond (not in a way anyone can hear, anyway) while Gamzee grows more agitated, and eventually, it places plush hands on either side of his face, with a smoothness of motion that makes Karkat's skin crawl, and turns Gamzee like he's the puppet so that he stares at an empty corner of the room, and the screen whites out.

Tracing his actions past that point becomes next to impossible. They have to experience Nepeta and Equius being brutally beaten to death from their own perspectives, and neither troll resurrects afterward. They're gone, just as abruptly as Feferi, and that's it. End of story. Gamzee temporarily collides with Eridan and Vriska, but before it can move past trash talking, Kanaya interrupts in order to murder Eridan so hard that Karkat is both disgusted and awed that Eridan would have the globes to try to take her on again.

But Kanaya's not perfect. She punches Vriska and kicks Gamzee so hard that both of them go flying, which does nothing to actually neutralize them. Gamzee's blanked out screen mocks them with their own inability to know what he does in the interim, while Vriska's younger self flies off to sit on the uppermost point of the meteor and brood and talk.

To.

John.

It's fucking flagrantly pale. She unloads all her 'woe is me, I killed Tavros and also let me tell you all the horrible things I've ever done in my life in a twisted sympathy play' bullshit on his head, and a universe away, John responds by being reasonably freaked out by her explanation of the horrors of Alternian troll culture. Thank fuck. Karkat hoped the Gamzee thing was a freak incident, but no. John has a pale magnetism that is capable of reeling in bloodthirsty trolls from another universe. Who's going to try to chat him up next? It's such a fun guessing game! Karkat turns in his seat to stare at Vriska, and something in his current facial expression inspires Vriska to yell, "I don't want him!" She seizes Terezi and throws the tealblood through the wall with such force that it frees the sideways whiteboard that Jade lodged there so long ago, and absconds.

Good.
When Gamzee next emerges, on Terezi's screen, he leaves Lil Cal to whisper in her ear as she investigates the corpses of her friends, plants evidence for her to find, all with dark smears of grim shit trickling over the open wounds where Nepeta tore his face apart. Terezi solves the Vriska problem by stabbing her in the back, and who can say for sure whether she really believed that Vriska couldn't be reasoned with, or if it was the influence of the hellpuppet lingering over her all the way up the stairs. As far as Sburb - or Sgrub, or whatever the hell cosmos warping video game currently holds sway over the meteor while it's rocketing between sessions - is concerned, Vriska's death was just or something. Whichever it is, she's done for.

Just in time for Aradia to wake up - and for Gamzee himself to fizzle back into view - and for the time stamps to go to complete shit. Half of the remaining codes left by the future Dave now involve infinity signs, map coordinates, negatives, fractions, and at least one equation for a polynomial graph crammed in where the minute mark should be, and they work. While the last living trolls on the meteor cluster around Vriska's dead body, the Maid of Time is zooming back to before Sgrub ever started to snap her own neck and steal the body before Sollux can vaporize it - she's setting all her soulbots to explode on command, so that she can blow up Derse and force her own god tiering - and (Karkat fucking called it) she's severing the chain that ties down the moon where the Derse dreamers sleep so that it drifts out of the path of a crack in time.

But she doesn't go for the bodies; Gamzee does. Which is entirely fucking typical and to be expected. His recording flickers from Prospit to Derse and then - then to Derse again, but something's off about it. There's only four towers on the moon where there should be five, and massive structural damage with bits and pieces of the planet drifting off into the path of meteors, and -

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He lets the hammerkind swing between his feet where he sits, swaying as Derse rocks and pitches underneath him. If he turns his head just so, and looks with eyes most motherfucking askew, he can read words meant to be heard. It's a new thing. The horrors have fucked off and left part of his mind(s?) trailing off toward the abyss, at an angle to what is and what should be, and he looks upon it all with dizzying clarity. No more fraudulent blasphmemes, no more sickening unrighteousness.

TG: okay everyone shut the fuck up i need to concentrate

So many possible ways for this moon to shake apart. A tap of a claw against one of the seams lights up the whole thing with wicked cracks, pinpoints of weakness where the barrage of the Reckoning has already done a motherfucking number on this shit, and he smiles as he hauls the hammer back to swing.

TG: fuck

The hammer slams into the nearest weak point, and Rage reaches out with raw whimsy to find what's needed to finish the job. It rolls out through him in a juddering wavelength of vertigo, creeps out to leash one of the last of the meteors; a nudge and a twist and it comes barreling down toward him, a vessel of destruction most imminent. He cartwheels out of the way, out of space, and comes back down hard and fast somewhere different in time to watch Derse collapse in on itself.

TG:...

TG: youve got to be kidding m-

Gamzee scrapes another drying splot of green blood from his cheek, flicking it out from under his claw absently as he hums. His paint's a motherfucking mess.
Of all the times for the idiot humans to start messaging them back. When Karkat has his sickles in sweaty hands, and he smells like a cult trench with dried blood on the backs of his hands and his lips where he didn't wipe all of it away. Up here in the thin layer of artificial atmosphere between them and the meteor and the black all around, the spaces between stars and cracks and weaving tentacles, here it almost feels like the rare clear nights when Karkat snuck out onto the roof of his hive and watched the two moons in the sky without worrying (too much) that another troll might wander into the hivering and catch sight of him. It's just that Kanaya's awash in her own blood and Eridan's, and Terezi's kneeling over Vriska's body with unseeing eyes fixed on the cerulean blue puddle slowly soaking into the black of her pants, and the troll walking out of the darkness over the meteor's too-close horizon is splattered with blue and green so thick it looks like paint, smeared together and still wet, and would Nepeta and Equius still be alive if Karkat hadn't sent Equius after Gamzee like the sickest fucking excuse for a coward ever to call himself leader? Would they have been okay if Karkat had never seen them?

Karkat has felt like vomiting out of self-hatred before, but this moment - this troll Kodak moment right here - with Vriska who never knew when to quit dead on the floor and the blood of two of his shitty friends on his and Gamzee's claws alike and Tavros and Eridan and Feferi - fuck, Feferi -

He wants to sit down and just. Just wait. Aradia said the cracks in time would catch up eventually, if they didn't adjust the meteor's course and aim for the human session. They've dodged all the Horrorterrors so far because none of them will risk drawing close but something will reach down and squash Karkat out of existence, surely. This is a prime opportunity. Or maybe it'll just be Gamzee, stalking toward them with a warhammerkind dragging behind him.

Yeah. Probably Gamzee. What a fucking plot twist. Karkat sucks in a breath and lets it out, and the thin air doesn't really sink in, and he doesn't want anyone else to die.

His phone hums in his pocket, the annoying little Trollian jingle that only goes off for group memos he's invited to. He bets it's some achronological Harley, come to torment him in his last waking minutes, oblivious to her own impending doom. He can't bring himself to look; if he puts his sicklekind away now, whatever he holds next will probably just fall through his weak, shaky claws.

Kanaya hisses - a sound that's not quite troll, not anymore - and her chainsaw flickering back into existence is what nudges Karkat out of his nerveless daze. "We can take him," she says, all confidence, but Karkat is still frozen in place, watching Gamzee's feet slowly pace toward them to the beat of stupid, ominous honks, while Kanaya does the work of dragging Terezi back onto her feet. For a moment Terezi looks as lost holding her canekind as Karkat feels. But then she snaps back to attention, her lips pulling back from sharp teeth to snarl at Gamzee. Sollux is - looking in the entirely wrong direction, okay, but that's understandable considering he's fucking blind now and he's talking into his headset oh for fuck's sake.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] opened memo on board R4INBOW RUMPUS P4RTYTOWN at ±±:±±:±± --

EB: shit! we forgot the trolls!
EB: oh crap oh crap karkat! and vriska!
TA: what ab0ut me and GA? what are we, ch0pped liver?
EB: TA? GA? i don't know if we ever talked except maaybe once?
GG: it's good to hear from you anyway! how are you guys?
TA: eh, i pr0bably have a few new blind sp0ts but i can't see them s0 it's all g00d.
TT: I spoke with Kanaya a few times, but obviously not recently, depending on when you may be.
How is she?
TA: busy. we're all pretty busy as it turns out, eheheh.
TA: hang On a c0uple minutes, we have a juggal0 crisis t0 deal with bef0re the 0thers can get back online.
TA: fuck i l0ve n0t having a lisp anym0re, this is great. having half my teeth kn0cked 0ut was the best thing ever.
TT: Alright, I'll bite. What happened?
GG: yeah, spit it out!
TG: we were all dead ten minutes ago and you people just want to jump right back into pun hell
TG: tell me when it stops
EB: come on dave, don't go!
TG: too late im out
EB: alright...but if you leave, it's your floss!
TG: my bro did not die for this
TA: i'd laugh but my m0uth is full 0f gummy bl00dy g00dness and i have t0 preserve the teeth that are sticking ar0und f0r the l0ng haul.

The indignation at Sollux chatting away while Karkat is in the middle of angstily contemplating his own shittiness in the grand scheme of the universe gets Karkat's blood pumping again, at least. He jerks his gaze away from Sollux, past Kanaya and Terezi, and glares at Gamzee head on. With the waxy face paint and streaks of black and blue and green and fresh, seeping purple wounds that match the spread of Nepeta's clawkind, Karkat barely recognizes the face underneath. Gamzee's voice is a nightmare, too, all the rattling growl of a coldblood ready to tear off heads. It wasn't just Trollian fucking up; he seems to have lost all volume control, vacillating between low, marrow-grinding murmur and hoarse, throttling scream. "Best motherfucking FRIEND," he says, laughing. "You come to make me get my reconsider on AT FUCKING LAST?"

But his eyes aren't right. Karkat gets stuck there, and it strikes him that meeting Gamzee's eyes might have been a terrible mistake, because he can't seem to look away.

"Karkat. Karkat," Kanaya says, urgently. "Are you alright?" She looks to him like he's still in charge after how badly he's screwed them all over. Terezi doesn't; Terezi and Vriska, always two wildcards and royal pains in his ass, and after all the shit Terezi pulled with the White Queen and Spades, Karkat resigned himself to the fact that he is apparently deeply, deeply concupiscently attracted to trolls with a taste for conniving and cahootery. Terezi's nostrils flare and she orients herself directly at Gamzee instead. Kanaya would stop and listen to his reasoning before swinging, if Karkat asked her to. Probably. Terezi will do what she wants, cackling at his dumbstruck face all the while. "We might still be able to slap some sense into him. If - if you hate him, and he sounds as though he hates you, and - perhaps -"

"He's guilty of the deliberate obfuscation of justice," Terezi snaps, and there's still cerulean blood along the sharp edge of her sword, dripping off in jittery drops as her hand trembles. "And t-tampering with evidence! Doctor Honeytongue can testify that he must have been responsible!"

"Do you humans have popped grainkernels on your planet?" Sollux is babbling into the headset. "Because I wish I had some right now." He's still facing the entirely wrong direction.

They're right and they're wrong, at the same time. Because it's not hate in Gamzee's eyes as he and Karkat stare at each other.
And Karkat doesn't want any more of his friends to die.

TA: 0h man this shit is wild
EB: how many of the trolls were there total, exactly? the only other one i remember really is whatshersname davesprite won't let me talk to!
TG: is he still on about that whole deal come on terezi is chill as fuck
TG: dude she got my john killed
TG: you think this timeline sucks balls but at least its not doomed
TG: watching it all go dark around you because theres nowhere left to go
TG: knowing everything you suffered didn't make a damn bit of difference
TG: because it didn't matter enough to be worth anything
TG: laying it on a little heavy there dude
TG: okay you know what fuck all that i can be fucking pissed if i fucking want to none of this emotionally dead shit IM A BIRD FUCK IT

So he jumps in before Terezi can. By the time he and Gamzee collide he doesn't even have his sickles in his claws anymore, they're on the ground behind him instead of captchalogued where he could reach them if this went south - but Gamzee screams and rattles under Karkat's showshing like his skin can't hold him together anymore, doesn't claw at Karkat or push him away, and maybe if Karkat hadn't sent Equius instead, if he'd gone to take care of Gamzee himself instead of being a coward, he could have headed this off before it even began.

He's good at making things his fault. There's a haze of guilt around the bubble of rightness when Gamzee finally goes limp and purring against his neck, as Karkat keeps one hand stroking the back of Gamzee's blood-sticky hair while pulling the first alchemized phone he can reach out to finally see what these idiots have been chatting about all this time.

GC: 1 4M S3NS1NG SOM3 HOST1L1TY H3R3 >:
TG: oh you know what you can suck my feathery caw-
GG: where are you guys? i thought karkat said you were headed towards our session, but that was - a while ago :
TT: That's true. Given the many distractions we've been dealing with, I would have expected you all to arrive by now. That was your eventual plan, wasn't it?
GA: Things Happened.
GA: Many Things.
TT: What a coincidence. Things went just about as off the rails as possible here as well.
GA: Yes We Could View Most Of It Earlier, And Yet Somehow Were Too Torn Between Harassing You And Helping You To Actually Give Advice That Might Have Prevented The Inevitable.
GA: We Are Not Very Efficient Alright.
GC: 4TU4LLY FROM WH4T 1 UND3RST4ND PR3V3NT1NG TH3 1N3V1T4BL3 WOULD ONLY H4V3 DOOM3D US 4NYW4Y.
TG: yeah somehow our general incompetence was the only way
EB: but hey, we all got better! mostly.
EB: what about you all?
CG: OH WOW. AMAZING. WELCOME BACK TO THE GROUP CHAT TWO HOURS TOO LATE YOU USELESS FUCKS!
CG: PEOPLE ARE DEAD. PERMANENTLY DEAD. IT'S JUST HUNKY FUCKING DORY OVER HERE, YOU INSENSITIVE FUCK.
TG: how is it possible that weve all managed to fuck up this bad at the same time
GG: oh no :( i'm sorry, guys...
EB: vriska did say something about killing somebody, didn't she!
CG: WHEN.
EB: a while ago! for me anyway.
EB: you guys don't message us linearly so it's kind of hard to keep track.
TT: I wish I had spent less time communing with elder gods. Clearly I've missed out on a
considerable amount of the goings-on.
GA: See That Is Exactly What I Was Telling You From The Beginning. Listening To Mysterious
Disembodied Voices That Claim To Be Mentoring You Never Ends Well.
GA: Ever.
GG: okay yeah, that's probably some solid advice...
TT: You could make the same argument concerning your group's gratuitous trolling, I would point
out.
CG: ANYWAY FUCK IT ALL. WE'RE DONE. WE'RE DONE LIKE A PREPACKAGED
NUTRITION RATION THAT HAS BEEN LEFT IN THE MICROWAVE FOR A WEEK.
CG: ARADIA'S LAST ROBOT BODY EXPLODED AND SOLLUX IS BLIND AS A
FUCKING BAT AND LIKE SEVEN PEOPLE ARE DEAD BECAUSE SOME PEOPLE
CAN'T RESTRAIN THEMSELVES FROM BEING MURDEROUS DOUCHEBAGS.
CG: WE'RE NEVER GOING TO BE ABLE TO AIM FOR YOUR SESSION. ANY SECOND
NOW THIS METEOR IS GOING TO RAM ITSELF DOWN THE NEAREST TIME HOLE
AND HEY-O, BYE BYE EXISTENCE!
GG: no, come on! there must be some way we can help!
GG: we won't give up! we can still get my planet's Forge working, so you guys can finish through
our session instead!
CG: I'M SO FUCKING TIRED RIGHT NOW. I CAN'T EVEN DEAL WITH THIS.
TA: i can't believe y0u papped him kk.
CG: SHUT YOUR SHOUTHOLE SOLLUX. WE'RE DRIFTING THROUGH THE FUCKING
VOID AIMLESSLY BASED ON OUTDATED COORDINATES AND THE
MACHINATIONS OF A DEAD GIRL, SHOW A LITTLE DESPAIRING SOLIDARITY FOR
ONCE IN YOUR LIFE.
TA: h0w l0ng has he been hitting 0n y0u, and it takes him straight up murdering tw0 pe0ple t0 get
y0ur attenti0n?
TA: this is hilari0us i wish AA were here t0 laugh at y0ur pain with me it w0uld be great.
CG: YOU KNOW WHAT I WISH? I WISH I COULD GO BACK IN TIME AND
ASSASSINATE PAST ME BEFORE I COULD CREATE US IN THAT FUCKING LAB AND
SAVE MYSELF FROM YOUR JUDGMENT BY VIRTUE OF NEITHER OF US BEING
BORN IN THE FIRST PLACE.
TC: <>
CG: AGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!
TC: pap pap motherfucker
EB: is this making sense to anyone else?
GG: nope, but seems like typical karkat to me!
GG: but when do trolls ever make sense :P
TT: Rarely, if ever, in my experience.
CG: STOP BEING RACIST AGAINST TROLLS YOU XENOPHOBIC FUCKING SCRUBS. I
HOPE TO FUCK THAT WE DON'T FALL INTO THE SAME ASSCRACK OF TIME AS
YOU PEOPLE BECAUSE I REFUSE TO PUT UP WITH THIS SHITFUCKERY
ANYMORE!!!
TC: PAP
GC: OH HOW TH3 TURNS H4V3 T4BL3D. >:]
CG:
AFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
??TG: hate to interrupt the standard ragefest but incoming
TG: what is it future me
TG: could have used some help earlier
??TG: already did yo
??TG: what up jade lets do this shit
GG: do what shit? :O
??TG: times fucked
??TG: the trolls technically got here ages ago so we need to pull them forward out of the space between sessions
GG: ooooh. oh!
GA: What Is Happening And Why?
TT: Is there any way I can assist?
??TG: give directions to the yellow guy so he can course correct
??TG: cant tell if we have enough time left to work with but fuck it
EB: what about me?
TG: and me
??TG: heres a list dont fuck it up
??TG: timeshenans.txt
??TG: and john
??TG: catch them
GC: C4TCH WHO?

The meteor rumbles ominously. Then it bucks out from under Karkat's feet entirely, leaving an unpleasant lurch in his stomach as he reflexively tightens his grip on Gamzee. A horrific scream bursts out a second later, and Karkat looks up at the dark space above them to see an enormous body tumbling past, a shadowy Horrorterror shaped like an eel that leaves a trail of dark blood behind as it falls. None of the elder gods have come this close before, and this one easily dwarfs the meteor itself.

Somehow, that's not as terrifying as the new fracture tearing open the sky, a rift where the Horrorterror's blood trickles into nothingness. Smaller cracks start to branch out from it almost instantly, stretching toward them. And there's something worse - something in the nothing, hurtling straight at them -


That's the last thing he says.

TT: Alright, I think I can see - here, can you see the beacon? Pilot the meteor as fast as you can go in that direction.
TT: Jade and Dave will have been meeting you shortly.

Sollux can't see it, actually. So Terezi tries to point him in a direction that would probably have them gleefully careening into oblivion, and finally Karkat has to reach out and tug her pointing hand a few degrees up toward the faint pinprick of light in the distance. Once they've sorted out that out, Sollux yanks on Feferi's goggles and starts up his psionics. Rather than smoothing out, the meteor starts to shake in the turbulence, but they outstrip the encroaching fissures in time. The meteor was already moving pretty fast after Aradia's initial push, but now the skulking shapes of the Horrorterrors drifting around them appear to blur with how fast Sollux rushes them along. Sollux starts to smell vaguely like burning hair and ozone, but that's not unheard of where Sollux is concerned.

You know what's also not fucking unheard of? Sollux being a self-sacrificing idiot. But Karkat can admit he has no fucking clue how space between sessions works, and just how far and fast they need to go to reach the humans' Incisisphere. They're light years away - and time is breaking down all
around them - and by the time the pinprick of light resolves itself into a tiny sun Sollux is probably already fried. The cracks seem to be speeding up, too, or at least keeping pace with their acceleration; and Sollux just keeps going until they're close enough for Harley to sense them.

From the past humans' perspectives, Harley and Dave and Rose and John are floating at the very edge of the Medium, just past the ruined shell of Derse. Rose isn't projecting a beam of light or anything, just radiating light from her body like a miniature fucking sun, which means that now Jade and John are wearing copies of Dave's sunglasses and giggling about it like doofuses. They aren't acting like kids who were dead a short while ago, but who the fuck knows how you're supposed to act in circumstances like this? Hell, Vriska went on a fucking joyride through the Medium while Tavros was still sobbing over her gory, painful demise, so maybe it's Sburb itself. A game powerful enough to annihilate planets can probably break out the fucking euphoric vapors to numb its victims whenever it damn well feels like it. It's harder to get a read on Rose's expression while she's a living light bulb, but the future - now current, maybe? Current for the recordings, not current now. Fuck. Karkat hates time travel - Dave has the decency to look grim about the whole thing, spinning through a projected clock that has too many hands while Jade peers through a frame of her fingers at the darkness beyond. "Ready?" he says, taking hold of Harley's shoulder.

"Heck yeah!" Harley sparks with green. "Let 'er rip! Heheh!"

[Time And Relative Dimensions In Space]

The Dave on the screen spins the turntables back - and when he stops, he and Harley are alone, Derse whole and oddly still behind them, the entire Veil of meteors intact. There's no sign of any activity around them, not even a token battleship patrolling around Derse, but curving out of the darkness before them is a glowing meteor that is surprisingly close. Alarmingly close.

"Jade -"

"Ha! Got them!" Jade crows, green galaxies spiraling through her hair as space fire wraps around the trolls on their screens. "Aaaaand, on my mark! Go!"

The meteor blasts through the outer limit of the Veil, smashing weaker asteroids out of its way, just as the two human players spin back forward in time. Time cracks on the recording again, with a pop that Karkat feels right down to his toes as one of the speakers blows out, and the current Sollux scrambles to unplug it. On the screen, Dave and Jade flinch hard and the five extra people they've towed along for the ride go flying as Jade's control judders. John catches them with the wind before they can tumble too far, and as he grabs Rose, Jade starts glowing again and jumps them all to Skaia -

"WHAT THE BULGEGARGLING FUCK JUST HAPPENED?!" Karkat yells, as the human players unceremoniously dump them all in the middle of a Prospitian fortress. He casts his hands out for Gamzee and finds him, but the view when Karkat staggers to his feet has shifted so drastically he's stunned into outright silence for a moment. The Battlefield in the troll's session was a wreck by the time the final battle with the Black King rolled around, but it wasn't nearly as bad as this. From what the trolls' viewscreens could display, the humans never unlocked enough of their final alchemical grist hordes to shift the prototyped Skaia out of creative dormancy and into its incubator form. The Möbius net struts look badly damaged, and there are enormous craters, carved deep enough into the checkerboard surface below them that Karkat can see flecks of molten red - and deeper still, dark, hollow spaces where the ground has caved in and revealed hollow spaces.

Then he realizes what's missing, when Terezi sinks back down against one of the battlements and
blindly stares at the ground with her cane loose in her claws. "Wait, where's Vriska's body?!

Karkat demands, whirling to bare teeth at the nearest human - John, still.

Jade’s head jerks up from where she’s bent over her knees, distress written across her strange not-grey face. She and John - the hair is right, but in person Dave and Rose especially are more alien than Karkat could have imagined; not quite as fucking pale as Kanaya, but close enough. It's weird. They're all fucking bizarre looking. If it weren't for the aura of power and significance that hovers around them like it does - did - Vriska, Karkat would think they were the most pathetic things he's ever laid eyes on. No horns, no claws, blood as red as his...it's suddenly real in a way it wasn't when he was just furiously watching them on the viewscreens. Aliens.

"Wait, was she dead?" Jade chatters, and the actual words rub wrong in Karkat's ears. Trollian and Pesterchum must still be interfacing, though, because the translation comes through like an afterthought. "Sorry! I just grabbed everyone I could feel alive and moving! I didn't want to miss someone because I was focused on the dead bodies at the same time..."

Self-consciousness sets in a second later. Everyone shifts, studying the other group, and Karkat is very fucking aware that the humans are almost immaculate in their little wrigglerass pajamas, fresh from resurrection and victory, while all of the trolls are covered in blood and sweat in some form or another. Gamzee smeared his pasty assclown makeup all over Karkat's shirt like the inconsiderate shitcrumpet he is, along with smears of Nepeta and Equius's blood, so Karkat looks just as murder-happy as the rest of them.

"Wait, Vriska? She's dead?" John says, after a pause. He blathers on past Terezi's barely visible flinch, hurt and confusion on his face. "But I thought...Uh, forget it, I guess. Never mind."

"Yeah. She's dead," Terezi says, leaning her head forward to rest against the knobby head of her cane. Her hair hides most of her face. "Justice is served." A bark of bitter laughter. "Or not."

Dave hovers around, twice as awkward as anyone else here. "Also, finished the frog, for all the good that does us," he says, clearing his throat and holding up a flashing captchalogue card. "I have it. Teeny tadpole, right here. Does anyone care? Anyone? No? Just me? Kay, cool."

"How many loops did you do?" John asks, stealing Dave's phone and peering at the list on the screen while Dave socks him in the arm. "Oh, wow! No wonder future you was always busy!"

Meanwhile, Rose cranes her head back with a golden eye shaped like a sun gleaming on her forehead. Baring her throat in front of a bunch of trolls is a shitty fucking idea, but Karkat doesn't have the energy to mention all the potential for cultural misunderstandings that has just erupted in all their faces. "I can see now. It's been on John's planet all along, hasn't it? It arrived long ago, but time does move differently out past the Ring...Charting a course through all that chaos and uncertainty must have been difficult to manage, but to arrive that early...Has the distortion in time grown that extreme out there? The chronological peculiarities can only have been exacerbated by the fissures - and they're getting closer -"

He doesn't even know what it is about that that sets him off. It's probably just humans, being humans. Blasé even in the face of death. "HOW THE FUCK SHOULD WE KNOW? OUR TIME PERSON WAS DEAD ALL ALONG AND THEN SHE BLEW UP!" Karkat throws his hands in the air.

The humans have about as much of a reaction as any of the trolls - that is to say, little to none. They're all used to Karkat throwing verbalized shitfits by now, apparently, and Karkat guesses he can't blame them. "I'm sorry," John offers, looking a little spooked at the sheer volume. Harley rolls her eyes, because Harley is a douchebag who has no idea what kind of bullshit Karkat has been
putting up with over the past few hours. The euphoric vapors theory might also still be in play, here.

Gamzee pats Karkat's head with a heavy hand, sounding almost like his old dopey self again as he draws Karkat back. "Shoosh, motherfucker. Gonna bust your tiny pumpbiscuit," he says, with a creepy, smeared smile.

"Don't shoosh me," Karkat says. He can't really put any effort into pushing away, though. Gamzee's the most dangerous, reassuring thing here and god it's fucked up how romantic that is. He pulls Gamzee's hand down and folds their claws together instead, and then turns to Kanaya and Sollux, making sure they're alright still.

Sollux hasn't said a word. Kanaya and Rose already look deep in cahoots (great, now they really do have to worry about interspecies tomfoolery), but Sollux, like Terezi, has taken advantage of the pause to slump down against the inner wall of the fortress. "Sollux," Karkat starts. What does he even mean to ask him? The memory feels sharp on all the wrong edges, and Karkat can't remember what he was going to say to Sollux. Something idiotic. Some stupid insult, because he and Sollux were always a touch more heavy on the hate in hatefriends than Karkat and Kanaya. The last thing Karkat said that Sollux could hear was that he wished neither of them were ever born, and that's -

Sollux's body slumps over. Gold blood oozes in thick trails down the front of his face from where the seal on the goggles broke.

There's something clawing at the inside of Karkat's chest, twisting. He breathes in once, and the next breath hitches, and the third feels like his whole body folding in on itself with a shudder. Like bending over Kanaya and not finding a pulse all over again. He mashes his hands over his face defensively, because he can't see through the pale, red-tinted tears anyway, and his face and neck feel hot and his stomach is sick. "That's not - you stupid -" he chokes out, and -

"Hushoosh," Gamzee hums. "Next time. Gotta get it right next time. Shit like this can't abide."

"What are you talking about?" Kanaya asks. "Next time? What next time?"

Gamzee ignores her. Karkat, busy crying, can't even bring himself to look up when Harley starts muttering - and then her voice lifts abruptly, and the thread of alarm in it sends a shudder through Karkat. "Oh nooo. Guys?" He wants to turn this homicidal piece of shit game off and sit down and cry because all of his friends are dead, but no. He knows that tone: it means something's going wrong, again. Fuck this game. "Something's coming..." Another jolt runs through reality, and Karkat extricates himself from Gamzee with his face still damp, following the line of Jade's finger to where she's pointing up above, at a dark sky full of cracks. "What is that, ohmygod -"
It isn't coming through the Incipisphere horizontally, along the same axis as Prospit or Derse or the players' lands; just descending slowly from above at a ninety degree angle, like an ominous, shitawful JPEG looking sarcophagus straight out of the pits of double death hell. Which, fuck, Karkat has to give it points for originality - he can't remember one single instance where any other freakish game construct attacked them on a vertical axis. Everything else in Sgrub seemed to approach the Medium as a horizontal playing field, all the lands scattered around on the same disc.

"What the heck is that?" John asks, more fascinated than concerned. He and Jade are both drifting up with their floaty god bullshit, and Karkat has to clamp down on the urge to scream at them to get their asses back down here this instant, because flying toward the ominous, glowing coffin thing is hardly a smart idea. Karkat is struck again by how little the remaining trolls bring to this taintswilling mess of a rendezvous. None of them god tier, more than half their team gone - Sollux gone -

"Did that follow you all the way here? How did it navigate through all those cracks?" Rose raises her hand to shield her eyes, perplexed.

"It didn't have to navigate them."

She appears accompanied by a burst of musical notes, right past Terezi's head with the crumbling wreckage of the Battlefield at her back, and between her irrepressible grin and her rust red wings and the plain fact that she's alive, Karkat can feel any sense this situation made spiraling down the drain. "It caused them," Aradia says, tucking a strand of her hair back up under the cover of her hood. Her timequartz music boxes rotate slowly in the air on either side of her.
"He is here. He has always been here," she adds. There's a twinkle in her eyes as she waves, and John, Jade, and Kanaya all hesitantly wave back. Terezi is still busy heaving in huge breaths through her nose, and Karkat doesn't blame her at all for not believing what she's smelling here. He's having trouble swallowing this himself. "And unfortunately, he is always going to be here. Sorry guys, no time for a fun human-style corpse party! The Lord of Time is nigh!"

Finally, Karkat finds his words. "Oh my fucking god, you have got to be fucking with me right now. Seriously, shit a brick and fuck me with it, Aradia, you're alive?!

Aradia smiles like she could eat a planet whole and not even care. "I am very much alive. And I intend to stay that way. How about you?"

...They're all high. The fucking millisecond they hit god tier, everyone must spontaneously become fucking high as kites. It's the only logical explanation for this. "Wait, is that some new endgame enemy?" John asks, sounding curious instead of petrified as he peers up again. Upon a second consideration, Karkat thinks with mounting horror that the sarcophagus is larger than he assumed before - it just keeps looming larger and larger overhead as it bears down toward Skaia. The time fissures that spread throughout the space between sessions have started to creep and crack their way down into the Medium itself, now, and a particularly raucous SNAP from up above makes Dave and Aradia shudder and Aradia's timequartz ring a jarring note. "Rose, what can you see? What should we do?"

"I can't see, John," Rose says. Even for a human, Karkat thinks she has gone pale. "I can't - we have to get away from that thing. What did you call it - a Lord of Time?"
"The terminal process," Aradia says, softly. Karkat stumbles backwards while standing still, and rips his gaze away from Aradia to see that Gamzee is no longer behind him. He hadn't even realized he was still leaning on him. "Time's caught up with poor Bilious, and with Skaia."

**CRACK**

Dave and Aradia both flinch again - and Dave slowly sinks to one knee, his face almost translucent. He has a hand on one of his timetables that Karkat's been too distracted by Aradia to pay attention too, but the floating turntable vanishes as Dave leans his weight on that hand as well. "SHIT," he says. Karkat can barely hear the pain in his voice, mashed down beneath a tense veneer of stoicism. "Can't go back anymore with all this. Shit, that hurt."

"No, and trying it would only draw his attention to us." Aradia drifts closer with a beat of her wings, watching Dave with an expression that's as mournful as a manic smile can get. Harley and John fall back closer to the battlements, looking properly alarmed now, as Rose leans in to brush the hair back out of Dave's pale face in concern. "I think I have one last turn in me before he notices and cracks down - Maids are less flashy than Knights. You guys will have to pull off your end here linearly." She winks with perfectly painted red lashes.

"Our end of what, Aradia?" Kanaya says, her voice hard.

And Gamzee, leaning in over Jade's shoulder, says, "The motherfucking scratch." Then he holds up a captchalogue card, and rips it in two like confetti as he slouches around a spluttering, bewildered Witch of Space. "Here, Radsis," he says, holding out one half to Aradia's outstretched claw. The flickering halves of the rainbow card warp and reform as two separate cards, despite the damage Gamzee did which is not how a sylladex is supposed to work, holy fuck.

"How did you - what?!" Jade protests, spinning around with her dumb two-tailed hood whapping around everywhere. One of the ends nearly smacks Terezi across the nose and Karkat upside the back of the head. "Where did you come from? Wait, where did you go?! I didn't even notice I lost track of you!"

Gamzee shrugs, and holds the second half right out to the side, toward John. "Around," is all that he say, punctuated with a hiccup that sounds like a honk.

"A scratch - I read lore about that. It would reset our entire session." Rose helps Dave to his feet, and lets go when he finds what he thinks is a discreet wall to lean on. Everyone can see it. "A method of last resort. We would start over again from some indeterminate point of time - our entire universe would."

"That's the general idea, yeah. This session doesn't have enough time left for anything else." Aradia holds up the captchalogue card between two claws, and flips it so that the front of the card faces them. The image of a silvery, lightning-shaped needlekind flashes across it before she tucks it away. "So we'll scratch them both simultaneously, and see how much time we can salvage from our two sessions combined. You can't see any other way out of this, can you."

It isn't a question. Rose closes her eyes, chewing on her lip, and shakes her head, and Karkat feels bad for wishing the humans would calm down, because all of them look bleak now - and it was a lot more heartening when they were acting like overconfident dorks on a power trip than scared kids with some new death raining down from on high.

"Then I'll see you on the other side, everybody." Aradia's quartz music boxes begin to chime, the notes cascading higher and higher before, with a flash and a screaming CRACK, she vanishes. Karkat's pusher leaps into his throat as a fresh, thin spiderweb of time cracks blooms out from the
air where Aradia was hovering, way too close for comfort.

"No good then," Dave says, thumming his shades off and inspecting them. The lens have fragmented in exactly the same pattern as the rifts, and he looks up at them with eyes so red Karkat wants to shove a new pair of obnoxious sunglasses onto the human's bare face because he's too exposed. Gamzee is apparently the packrat king of random important junk, so he probably still has Equius's fucking shades lying around somewhere... "The juggalo asshole is right. Just fucking scratch the whole goddamn thing."

"The court session is adjourned?" Terezi asks.

Rose shakes her head. "I don't think we have another choice." She and Dave share a look that Karkat can't parse; both of them have their respective masks on, Rose calculating and set, Dave flat and barely edged with pain, but they trade tiny nods like they've come to a silent decision. Or a telepathic one. "Jade, John: take the trolls with you. You'll need to scratch the disk of the Beat Mesa, if I remember correctly, and god only knows there may still be high leveled underlings patrolling the area. Dave and I will - join you shortly."

"Hang on. What will you two be doing?" John frowns, even though his hands are already starting to unravel into the white-blue streamers of breeze. Across from him Jade's lit up like a torch, but she banks the space fires a little when she sees John hesitate. "Neither of you can teleport, what if you can't catch up in time?"

Dave and Rose take too long to answer. "Take him and go, Jade," Rose says at last, pulling a pair of plain black needles out of her own sylladex while Dave draws a broken sword. "We'll meet you there. Trust me."

"Rose -" Jade starts, and - "No!" John says, the two of them talking over each other with identical, stricken expressions.

CRACK

Dave reacts like he's been ax-kicked in the stomach, jerking forward with a hiss of pain slipping out between his lips. "Oh. We will most definitely see you there," Rose says, and her smile is the saddest, most transparent thing Karkat has ever seen. "I promise."

She means the same thing Aradia did. Karkat can't tell if the other humans pick up on that or not. But they're smarter than he tends to give them credit for. "You're gonna do something dumb, aren't you!" Jade says, stamping her foot. "Oooh, I can tell! Just come with us, please?"

"There probably isn't time left for whatever you want to do anyway!" John adds. And he looks almost worse than Dave, somehow. Looking back on it with the benefit of knowing John embarrassingly well, Karkat can see the raw, broken edged panic behind John's eyes and the way his lungs appear to be making an attempt to escape his chest with how fast and hard he's breathing.

Dave hacks, and spits up - just spit, actually. Weird clear human spit. "Always got time to be a distraction, dude." He keeps an arm wrapped around his stomach like an iron bar as he straightens. "Let's do it, Rose. Do it for the meme."

"Just for that, I should leave you here."

John's laugh sounds strangled. "You'll die."
Rose has to help Dave float off the ground, before letting her hand fall away. Once he’s up he seems to have the hang of it, but he turns his face away from John and Jade, sliding a new pair of sunglasses on before Karkat can catch another glimpse of the pain etched in his face. “Technically, we’re all going to die,” she says. “Scratch the game, and we’ll all be reset. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m certainly not looking forward to reliving my childhood. Yet it feels like this is the only way.”

John opens his mouth, and his eyes are glassy - and then his mouth snaps shut as the air shifts. There’s another far off, distant crack, not enough to make Dave do more than twitch, but John blinks and gives Rose a tiny, muted smile. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Wow, today has been a long day!” All the panic has drained out of his voice; maybe if the world weren’t falling apart around them it would register sooner that John’s Breeze has stopped fluttering the edges of his hood.

([Eye of the Storm])

“The longest.” Rose swallows. “Now, go.”

Terezi holds up a claw at the last second, just as Jade reluctantly starts revving up her space powers again. ”Yo, cherry bomb! You two need another hand?” Her grin looks like a rictus strained across her face, and before anyone can answer she decaptalogues those ridiculous rocket-powered dragon wings and snaps them into place over her roleplaying outfit. ”No offence, coolkid, but you smell like a defendant with a weksauce case kneeling before His Honorable Tyranny right now.”

”Oh, hell yeah. Why the hell not?” Dave says, with a shrug.

”Wh-no! Hell no!” Karkat scrambles to grab Terezi’s arm, but she blasts off to hover out of his reach and arch an eyebrow at Rose.

”I don’t know if what any of us can do will prove efficacious against that thing,” Rose admits, but she doesn’t turn Terezi down as the three of them fly away. ”It can’t hurt to try.”

Jade grabs them all with green fire and they get sucked away to the Beat Mesa, so that the last thing they see of Terezi and Rose and Dave are the soles of their shoes as they drift up toward the sarcophagus. A cold, numb spot forms in Karkat’s chest, like someone burned through the skin with dry ice, and the heat of Dave’s land does nothing to fix it.

- 

After that, the two sessions basically race to kill themselves off at the same time. Aradia ducks and weaves through the cliffsides of quartz that have begun to fall in massive avalanches on her planet to reach the Cardinal Movement. The branching cracks in time have fractured most of Skaia’s dew-like surface, off in the distance, the lilypads of the finalized Battlefield shredded and drifting off into the abyss, but Aradia determinedly removes the massive quill from the captachalogue card, hefts it with her psychic aura, and begins to carve a spiral into the cylinder of the building-sized music box.

Naturally, there are still underlings infesting the iron skeletons of the buildings surrounding the Beat Mesa in the humans’ session. John blithely uses the wind to direct the record needle and quill, while the few remaining trolls - god, just Kanaya and Gamzee and Karkat, and Gamzee mostly observing the proceedings instead of using his disturbing murder powers to help out for once - and Jade fend off the useless, marauding fucks who don’t have enough brains to realize when to quit. There’s no time for any of them to track down where the carapacians might have ended up, no time for anything at all. It’s a clusterfuck.

John and Aradia make it halfway through the scratch. In the space above the humans’ Skaia, Dave
darts in to try to stab through the sarcophagus's lid, and abruptly loses the ability to fly as time splinters around him.

Three quarters through, and Rose loses an arm when she misjudges the silent roar that bursts out of the sarcophagus's mouth in a wave of harsh, destructive light. She screams, and keeps diving after Dave with tears flying out behind her, and the stump of her shoulder doesn't bleed - the arm just stops. Terezi has traded out ten different alchemized canekind, growling in frustration as each one shatters uselessly against the sarcophagus without leaving so much as a nick. Part of the building nearest the Beat Mesa falls out from under Karkat's too-fucking-slow feet, and Kanaya heaves him back onto solid ground before he can plummet into the lava churning below.

And the grimlight Gamzee lands in a crouch on top of the Cardinal Movement at the very edge of Aradia's screen, peering down at the burgundyblood with a toothy grin.

Aradia waves, and continues carving the helix into the side of her scratch construct. She has no fucking fear. It's terrifying.

TC: HONK
AA: oh there you are! :)
AA: youve been jumping around quite a lot
AA: and how about your grim passenger?

Gamzee is also terrifying, because Horrorterror. Then, with a guttural laugh, he taps the side of his own head hard enough to rock it to the side. The thing falls out like a shadow, or an afterthought, formless and shrieking as it scrabbles up into the air to beat a hasty abscond.

"Then you might want to hurry. You don't want to leave them hanging!" Aradia says. Between the two of the trolls on screen, it's hard to tell whose smile wins in terms of teeth and creepiness -
Gamzee's by a narrow margin, Karkat judges gloomily, probably because his sclera are still red hot with banked rage and Aradia is just guilty of looking transcendentally ecstatic in the middle of tossing two universes into a fucking blender and slamming her fist down on purée button.

God, that troll is weird.

The sarcophagus touches down on the Battlefield (Rose and Terezi forced back by another burst of deadlight) and starts to open (Dave driven down to his knees like gravity has been turned up to eleven) and time begins to crack Skaia like an egg (Gamzee with his sylladex cards spread out in front of him, before folding them into a stack and smiling) and it's not like a Reckoning, because Skaia doesn't even try to stave off the end with defensive portals (something massive and green and white attempts to clamp down on the sarcophagus with sharp teeth, but the denizen has no strength left after fighting Cetus to a standstill)-

They don't get to see what would have happened if the Lord of Time went any farther than that. There's too much distortion from the cracks, as the sarcophagus's lid falls away.
The consensus, after some deliberation, is that their current location is no longer secure. Between Vriska’s grudging report that the cue ball spoke with Doc Scratch’s voice even before the void wards failed, and the fact that there was an unknown period of time between that and Equius’s ascension to god tier, it’s not a matter of whether Scratch is aware of their location, but when he will decide to act upon that knowledge. Since the void generator stationed to cover the Lalonde and Egbert house was compromised and stolen by persons unknown, those two locations are out as well.

"None of my other local boltholes are large enough to house as many people as we've accumulated. If we divided them up, we might be able to make it work, but somehow I think that would simply end with multiple parts of the greater Seattle area in ruins,” Rue points out, and no one can argue the point. Ambrose emerges from his shadowy, constant patrol of the lab premises to make vague intimations to the effect that they all pull up stakes, go on a pilgrimage back to Houston, and take over his and Dave's poor, unsuspecting apartment building by force. Rose manages to avert that disaster with the reasoning that Jade would never be able to shift all of them that far when Equius's teleportability remained in question, and a road trip of those proportions would likely end with half of them murdering each other out of self-preservation. Stuffing Vriska and Gamzee and Eridan into a small tube of flying metal would be the equivalent of raining cackling death down upon any city unlucky enough to be positioned under their flight path.

There’s always Canada -

TA: BC ha2 a re2trainiing order out again2t vrii2ka and terezii.
GC: W41T, 1S TH4T 3V3N L3G4L?
TA: they were tryiing two be pre-emptiively quarantiine you two a22hole2 im ontario.
GC: OH.
AG: Wowwwww. ::::\ 
CC: i could probably claim you all were part of my royal raytinue! 38) 
CC: bam! instant diploblastic immunity!
TT: Sollux. Erase this conversation. Hurry.
AG: H8ng on, this has potential!!!!!!!!
GG: *raises hand* would this count in france, too?
TC: :o?
TT: Remove it from existence.
CT: D ---> Why are we surrounded by h00ligans...
TA: oh god oh fuck oh god -
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has deleted the memo! --

Canada is absolutely out of the question. Seattle will have to continue to suffer their presence. For the greater good.

Thankfully, they have just the trump card they need.

Jade returns from a visit to the Harley Foundation with the news that, in exchange for a promise to absolutely positively come visit the heads of the board of directors, no take-backsies, she has obtained the use of a block of new apartments near Capitol Hill, just to the east of the I-5, still partially under construction and with no current tenants as yet to worry about. There will even, she promises, be coffee and tea and assorted other snacks waiting for them upon arrival, which distracts Vriska from her impromptu attempt to disingenuously swear herself into Feferi’s service. Considering what Vriska might try to pull if she could convince Feferi to go along with it (she would undoubtedly be of the school of thought that would advise overthrowing one’s incredibly powerful ancestor, rather than silent détente) this is also for the greater good of all.
From that moment on, it becomes a matter of logistics. Rose, Eridan, and Feferi for good measure must remain near Equius for the duration; however, attempting to pit Jade's abilities against Equius's gives new meaning to the phrase 'an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.' The other option for teleporting them to Seattle and avoiding an incredibly awkward road trip involves John - which in turn necessitates extricating him, however temporarily, from his and Karkat's pacifying stranglehold on Gamzee.

This proves too easy to arrange for Rose's liking. "I've got you guys, no problem!" he says, floating into the room mere moments after Rose finishes detailing this in the latest group memo. If Kanaya gives her one more significant eyebrow on the subject, Rose may be forced to extreme measures.

There is no disputing the fact that Karkat holds more emotional weight where Gamzee's stability is concerned. From an outsider's perspective, Rose can't judge whether John is being edged out or not; the three tend to isolate themselves when they need to get 'flagrantly pale,' as Dave would say. Which means no one has technically witnessed their private interactions except Feferi, who just giggles and blushes dusty fuchsia and acts as though Rose asked her to describe the details of a particularly smutty arthouse film. John shared some of it in the immediate aftermath, while they were all still coming down from the post-battle adrenaline rush, but since then he's been sparing with what he tells Rose.

Now is her chance. "So, John," she begins, just as the wind in the room begins to pick up speed. He looks at her distractedly, his eyes burning blue and focused somewhere in the distance, and she waits until the sensation of being unraveled and reraveled into a solid body dissipates before she finishes, "You and Karkat...and Gamzee."

John opens his mouth. Nepeta peels herself up from where Equius has her sitting on his shoulders, and gapes at Rose, agog. "WHAT?!" Nepeta screeches, and then whaps Equius hard on the side of a horn. "EQUIUS, HOW COULD YOU NOT TELL ME?!"

Equius doesn't budge an inch. "He tried to kill you."

Nepeta sucks in another breath. "E Q U I U S!"

"No."

"Give me my crutches!"

Equius holds out the crutches as far from his body as he can reach. "No."

Nepeta's eyes narrow. "Take me to him!" she commands, imperiously, pointing a claw at John.

This just makes Equius sigh and obey. John, staring at Rose in abject horror, jolts when Nepeta bends down with a grunt of pain to haul him up by the fabric of his shirt. "Tell me," the greenblood hisses, her olive eyes sparkling with fervent intrigue. "E v e r y t h i n g."

Addiction is a powerful thing.

"Nepeta, this is lewd."

"We're standin' in the middle of the sidewalk. In public. Do any of you fucks care?" Eridan demands. He and Feferi are standing as far apart from one another as two trolls can manage; Feferi manages to make this look almost effortless, cooing and inspecting the building before them with barely-feigned enthusiasm (she is a very enthusiastic troll), while Eridan, still dealing with a post-Horrorterror hangover, winces at the sun overhead and does a poor job of not staring after Feferi forlornly when she can't see him.
Hm. Rose checks around them. The street seems relatively quiet, though she's not familiar with the neighborhood. Most of the buildings are red brick apartments, none of them more than six stories tall, with relative little space for vehicles to park except by skirting the edge of the road. A grand total of one person appears to have noticed their unannounced arrival - a troll with serrated horns curling back over the smoothed helmet of her hair, her deep-set brown eyes bulging at them as she lets her lusus tug on the end of its harness.

"It's - uh - what about it?" John makes the mistake of asking. Either Nepeta has regained enough of her strength to hoist him up off his feet, or he's floating so that she won't strain herself by holding him a foot off the ground; Rose suspects the latter.

"Who flipped for who! What are the exact dymeowmix! If three people are involved, I need to make the adjustments to my wall accordingly!"


He fails to account for the obvious. Nepeta's pupils dilate like a cat on the hunt. "All three of you?!"

"Lewd," Equius insists. "Discuss this inside, if you must discuss it at all." To ensure this, he removes Nepeta's claws from John's shirt and ignores her protests in favor of walking towards the door in Feferi's bubbly wake. Rose's eyes start to sting when she looks directly at his back, and when she checks over her shoulder at the brownblood across the road, she has gone back to letting her lusus snuffle at the base of a tree.

Handy. At least with Equius bound and determined to keep from being noticed, the odds of their having the police called for the inevitable noise complaints may be lower than predicted. Eridan slinks in with his head ducked, tugging up the collar of his shirt; Rose expects him to start complaining about something soon, but since the jellyfish incident he has been surprisingly cooperative about sticking close to Equius. Apparently, being possessed by Leviathan was considerably less pleasant than the Malā'ikah experience.

"Why did you have to bring that up, Rose?" John asks, aggrieved, as he and Rose bring up the rear. "Seriously?"

"You've been reticent about sharing details when Gamzee is near enough to exercise his unique form of telepathic awareness. I'm trying to be quick about it, in case Jade decides not to wait for Equius and Nepeta to choose a room and get clear." Jade snapped on a fresh pair of green and blue elastics on her fingers as a reminder before leaving to round up her own, larger group of teleportees, but better safe than sorry. Rose pauses on the threshold, one hand on John's forearm to keep him from walking in with the rest of the group. "And Kanaya has been repeatedly expressing concern to me about your well-being in a relationship where one of the other parties only has interest in the third, and may attempt to displace you entirely, if he can," she says, in an undertone. "At least in part because if Gamzee tries to flip spades and force the issue, she feels obligated to mediate between the two of you in order to spare Karkat as much as possible."

John, to her utmost surprise - blushes. Most certainly not the reaction she anticipated. He mutters something she definitely can't hear, and tries to subtly nudge her inside. Rose slaps a hand against the side of the building and rebounds him back his heels. A bit like pushing back against a wall of muscle, but she gets her point across. "What was that? I didn't quite catch it."

"I said," John starts, and doesn't finish. He becomes suddenly and spontaneously more interested in scuffing the toe of his shoe against the pavement, and looking anywhere but Rose's face. His cheeks look like they're on fire. She's tempted to check his temperature with the back of her hand on his
forehead and play mother, but suspects the impulse is born solely from the fact that she had prolonged contact with Rue this morning, and the two of them were too busy being reasonable and working out logistics to give in to ironic mother-daughter sniping.

When it becomes clear that Rose isn't moving, and that the snacks within the lobby are no longer distracting the four trolls from peering at them, John sighs, and mumbles, "He might not be. Entirely uninterested."

Vague enough to be very intriguing. Rose straightens a little and raises both eyebrows in preparation to waggle. "Oh?"

"He, uh. This morning, we talked a bit." John squeezes one hand with the other, rubbing at the pads of his fingers as though to keep his hands occupied. Fidgeting. "About the Trickster, and stuff."

Never mind. Rose feels like she's been doused in cold water. Not good. "John, please tell me this wasn't a conversation I should be extremely concerned about," she says, seizing John's wrist in case she needs to prop herself upright. Falling over into the bushes by the side of the door would cause a scene, but if Gamzee has been in his head - if ever there were two beings who should never, ever come in contact with each other more than Gamzee and the Trickster -

"No, no! It was - fine!" John says hastily. "More like he was giving me advice? It was weird, okay, but not like, in a bad way."

Rose stares.

"And then we made out a little," John adds.

She stares some more.

"Rose, please stop that."

Staring continues to be a thing that is happening.

"Uh, Rose? Hello, earth to Rose?"

"Did you break her?" Eridan, of all people, demands.

Ah. Right. Rose shakes her head, and blinks a few times. She sets a hand on John's cheek, and looks into his apprehensive eyes. "Do not ever take advice from Gamzee concerning the Trickster. Please. I beg of you."

John bursts out in a snort of laughter, more relief than anything. "Well, duh, Rose, not without consulting you first. I'm not totally dumb!"

Really, Rose is more worried that Gamzee, with his unmeasured but significant ability to mentally fuck people over, might not hang around to give advice next time. Given that his modus operandi, when faced with a problem he thinks he can 'fix,' has generally been to mow people down like a particularly bloodthirsty weedwhacker... "Ah, but doesn't young love make fools of us all?" she observes dryly, taking a step back and into the lobby so that John can shuffle past her.

He glares at Rose. "I'm going back to get Roxy and the others."

"No, no, stay, John!" Feferi calls, mischief in her eyes as she exchanges a look with Nepeta. "No need to rush around, right? Stay and talk a whale!"
Not even the promise of sandwiches and other snacks can persuade John in the face of such obvious conspiracy. "Seeyouguysslaterhahabye!" he says at top speed and then the Breeze shoves the shutting door open to spill back out into the sky. Rose shakes her head and joins the trolls by the table to help herself to a glass of lemonade - and to text Kanaya, while Nepeta balances a tablet against the back of Equius's head and starts scribbling something in white across what appear to be scribbled stick figures, the end of her tongue just barely peeking out from the corner of her mouth.

TT: I bring tidings, dearest.
GA: Please Tell Me The Awful Fish Puns Are Not Rubbing Off On You Already.
TT: It's probably only a matter of time. But I won't inflict them on you yet.
GA: What Are Your Tidings Then.
TT: Apparently, between John and Gamzee, there may be...'interest.'
GA: What Does That Mean?
TT: Sloppy makeouts, presumably of the pale variety. Though I seriously question Gamzee's ability to pacify anyone without potentially resorting to murder.
GA: Oh Thank God.
GA: Wait When Did This Happen?
TT: Earlier today. You'll have to ask John for any further details yourself, I'm afraid. He may not be inclined to share them; Karkat's sense of privacy has thoroughly infected him.
GA: Oh Well If It's A Matter Of Propriety That's Fine I Can Respect That.
GA: And Yet Somehow I Am Still Intensely Curious As To How The Hell.
TT: I know, right?

- Despair would be easy. On top of the world being due to end in short order, they now have to consider the very real possibility that even playing along with the game to create a new universe will simply end with reality shattering to pieces around them.

Rose can tell some of the others can't bring themselves to believe it's real. Their memories have started to trickle in to fill the gaps, but plenty of the trolls died before they understood what the cracks in time were doing. It's worse still for the scratch kids, she thinks, because they have no context for it at all - it's just some tragedy that played out on a screen, and nothing to do with their own troubles. But that just means that if and when the Lord of Time catches up with them, the people in denial run the risk of crashing hard, and panicking when they can least afford to.

As near as Rose can discern, the general consensus of the group is to recuperate, and then to turn their attention towards dealing with Doc Scratch. March tipped over into April like a short drop and a sudden stop, and they are hyperaware that the world is due to end by the thirteenth. John gets an apocalypse for his birthday yet again.

She ends up in the camp of those still trying to puzzle out how to overcome the thorniest of the obstacles before them; she can't stop trying to see a way for them to try to preserve something of the earth's population, for example. But it would be a monumental task, even if they'd had years of advance warning - the world's population is around 7 billion people - 300 million in the States alone - and though the example of Gamzee has shown that sylladices can be used to captchalogue people with some degree of success, the amount of Dave's time travel exploits and Jade's space powers it would take to herd the entire population of the earth into a sylladex vast enough to hold them all would most likely draw the attention of the Lord long before they could finish the job. Also, Rose thinks they would have heard word of entire nations disappearing by now, if they had successfully gone back in time to start enacting that kind of plan. The only other plan that they can come up with in terms of game logistics is to cram as many people as possible into the largest buildings that still qualify as 'residences,' and hope that Sburb will import entire skyscrapers full of people into the
Medium. But there are game enemies to consider, and over their heads hangs the constant threat of
the Lord of Time. What good would saving people by bringing them to the Battlefield do, if they
were killed by underlings or swallowed by a crack in time mere moments later?

No, Aradia is quite firm. They must play the game, and break it just enough that they can survive
without dooming themselves and their timeline to an even earlier grave in the process. By merging
their two sessions into one, they have (hopefully) enough time to race through Sburb's longwinded
questlines and make it to the victory platform before the Lord can destroy them. It's - as difficult as it
is to contemplate the thought, Rose thinks they might have to resign themselves to saving only
themselves, and a scant few of the people closest to them. The complete extinction of the Earth aside,
she's still struggling to figure out how their small group of friends and family will survive the death of
reality.

Thankfully, Jade and Kanaya have a new penpal. One who both complicates and simplifies things
immensely.

Her name is Calliope.

-- uranianUmbra [UU] opened a cheery-o on board :U at UU:UU:UU --
GG: okay everyone i know you all like to talk at once but!
GG: this is calliope and she has a lot to say, so please try not to talk over her!
GG: for once this is actually important. especially you karkat, since your font is almost the same
color. :/
CG: ***WOW*** WATCH AS I MAGICALLY FORGET TO GIVE A SHIT.
GG: i will ban your butt, so help me karkat!
GC: NOW NOW, H4RL3Y, B4N H1S MOUTH, NOT H1S BUTT! H1S BUTT IS
P3RF3CTLY 4CC3PT4BL3.
EB: i don't think any of us have that kind of self control.
TG: yeah no not at all
TG: like if theres something thats the opposite of self control thats what we all have in spades
TG: we just cant be tamed yo
AA: thats okay we really shouldnt be here anyway dave! lets have a talk somewhere else
TG: what
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] has blocked turntechGodhead [TG] from the chat! --
GG: uh, why -
AA: okay sollux now do me
TA: ugh, fiine.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has blocked apocalypseArisen [AA] from the chat! --
TT: Why did that happen just now?
UU: those were yoUr time players, right? they probably already have the lord haUnting them. have
they lost certain vital senses or fUnctions?
EB: wait, you mean like how dave can't talk? typhoeus did not mention that...
UU: that woUld be an excellent example, yes! the lord has Utmost sovereignty over his dominion.
since their powers fall Under his mastery, he is more aware of them and can strike at them with
relative impUnity.
UU: if they conspired with me oUtright he coUld inflict even more powerful debUffs and cUrses in
retaliation.
CG: OH, GREAT. AWESOME. FUCKING FANTASTIC.
TT: That's...horrifying.
GA: Why You Though?
UU: hm?
GA: Why Would Talking To You Make Things Worse For Them?
GA: You Are Just Some Random Person Who Began Messaging Us Cryptically And I Have Had Enough Of It.
GA: Who Are You, Why Are You Important, And Why Is There Even A Lord Thing At All Literally Why.
GA: If You Try That Spoilers Thing I Will Change My Quirk To Match Karkat's.
EB: seconded! for both the questions and the quirk change.
CG: WHAT A JOYOUS DAY. MY DREAM OF ASSIMILATING MY CLOSEST FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES INTO A SCREAMING RAGEMOUNTAIN MAY FINALLY COME TO FRUITION.
GG: guys! this is pretty much exactly what i was afraid you were all going to do!
GG: i'll confiscate all your phones. i have that power now!
GC: TH3S3 4R3 4LL 3XC3LL3NT QU3ST1ONS! >:] ST4RT T4LK1NG, N3W GR3Y T3XT OF MYST3RY!
UU: oh, Uh. heheh! i gUess i shoUld start at the beginning. <coUghs>
UU: essentially, in plain terms, yoUr reality has reached the end of its life cycle! the terminal point! this is a perfectly normal part of mUltiversal generation from the perspective of the overarching extraverse.
GA: This Is Answering None Of My Questions And Also I Think We've Heard Some Of It Before.
UU: it's necessary backgroUnd material, i promise!
EB: so, it goes like extraverse > multiverse > universe?
UU: precisely so! thoUgh for vocabUlary pUrposes yoU might also inclUde [mUltiverse = reality] and [Universe = genesis frog].
UU: the extra-dimensional cosmic sUperstring strata of your mUse have rUn oUt of the energy needed to propagate and sUstain new Universes within the boUnds of her reality. in yoUr case, this manifests in genesis frogs that have grown progressively weaker and more sUsceptible to fatal glitches and cancers and other Unresolved paradoxes.
UU: a lord is just the Ultimate, terminal process that activates when it is time for a reality's mUse to die. and yoUrs is the final fUnctional Universe she has prodUced.
UU: bUt that doesn't mean this is the end!
CG: REALITY DYING SOUNDS PRETTY FUCKING PERMANENT TO ME. THOUGH MY THINKPAN'S CURRENT TRAIN OF THOUGHT IS MADE UP MOSTLY OF 'WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK ARE YOU FUCKING TALKING ABOUT' WITH A SIDE HELPING OF 'FUCK THIS AND EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS' FOR TASTE
CG: YOU KNOW, MORE SO THAN USUAL.
TT: Could it be possible to postpone this indefinitely? As much as I'd hate to keep playing Sburb for the rest of eternity, could we prolong reality's demise by creating new universes and scratching them? UU: even if yoU all sUccessfUlly completed the seqUencing for another frog, it woUld most likely not have enoUgh time to grow to the point of developing sentient species before the lord caUght Up and destroyed it. creating frogs takes Up a lot of energy, yoU know.
UU: bUt the appearance of the lord also means the cUrent mUse is ready to die and provide the fertile extraversal alchemical material needed to give birth to a new mUse, and thUs, a new reality!
CA: back up for a second an explain where this muse thing is comin from
CA: seein as how youre supposed to be explainin not tossin wword salad around
UU: well i gUess if yoU all want spoilers, we might as well go all in! a mUse is the...
UU: hm! it's hard to pUt into words. it is a very passive role, yet eqUivalent in power and scope to that of the lord.
UU: the mUse inflUences and forms the fUndament of her reality. where a lord destroys with, and brings about the destrUction of, his aspect, a mUse creates, and creates with, her aspect.
EB: okay, i talked to my denizen, and he just talked a lot about entropy and honking and felt and stuff.
EB: i gUess it make sense that he'd leave out all the important hopeful hints and focus on the doom
and gloom. actually that seems entirely in line with his main personality trait of being a total butt.

TT: Two questions: first, how do you know all of this?
TT: And second - has this alchemical procedure ever been successfully completed before?

UU: oh yes, it has been completed many times before! the reality before yoUrs was so long ago now that only a few beings remember it, and the changeover was based on an entire different dichotomous system of lord and Muse.

UU: once the lord of chaos finished his task, the Muse that arose and created yoUr reality was one of order. now, becaUse the lord yoU face is one of time, the Muse that will coUnter him will be one of space!

GG: oh! :) okay, that makes sense.

CG: OH YEAH, IT MAKES SENSE EXCEPT THE THING IS, WE DON'T WANT TO FUCKING DIE! WHICH IS WHY IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE IF REALITY WEREN'T SHOOTING ITSELF IN THE HEAD!

UU: oh no, of course yoU don't! i completely Understand! please don't panic! >_>

UU: this is why i will open a gate for yoU! one final Gate that will bridge the existential gap between yoUr reality and my own! it is the least i can do to thank yoU for creating it in the first place!

TT: And what about Dave?
TT: Aradia as well, I suppose.
UU: what about them?

EB: yeah, hang on, you said that this lord guy can already hurt them, and that them just talking to you would speed this along...

EB: that sucks! can they even go through this gate thing?
TT: My thoughts exactly.
TT: How will all of this work? Both of the games we have experience with resulted in us producing genesis frogs through convoluted means. What would we need to do differently to produce a Muse instead?

UU: oh, of course they can come throUgh! u_u; yoU might want to focUs on getting them throUgh the gate first, before anything else, becaUse their lord will try his best to stop them.

EB: but they can do it? definitely? phew!

UU: yes, definitely! and as for the Muse, the process shoUld be very similar to what yoU already know, with some alterations that are already accoUnted for. once you create yoUrselfs throUgh ectobiological means, yoU can negotiate with or battle yoUr denizens for the rights to their grist hoards, and then Utilize that material to prime the forge.

UU: genetically seqUence the representative animals that predominate on yoUr space planet, finish the Final Alchemy within the forge, and then take what resUlts to the very heart of yoUr Muse. the rest will take care of itself.

GG: so basically, more frogs again :/

UU: Uh, no. snakes.

CG: OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE, WHY?!
UU: <blUshes> i'm really not comfortable discUssing that...

CG: DO YOU EVEN KNOW HOW HARD IT WAS TO CATCH THOSE SLIMY FUCKING BASTARDS, AND NOW WE HAVE TO SEQUENCE THINGS THAT WILL PROBABLY TRY TO BITE US AT THE SAME TIME?!

CG: NO FUCK IT, I'M NOT HELPING WITH THIS SHIT.

GA: Karkat.
CG: I FUCKED IT UP ROYALLY LAST TIME ANYWAY, I'M THE LAST PERSON WHO SHOULD BE ON BREEDING BULLSHIT DUTY AGAIN. I WILL HELP OUT WITH ANY OF THE MANY OTHER NONSENSICAL TASKS WE HAVE TO FINISH TO PULL THIS SHIT OFF, BUT I DRAW THE FUCKING LINE AT SNAKE WRANGLING!

GA: Oh Fine. At Least We'll Have Plenty Of People To Help Out With The Process.
GA: By Which I Mean No One Will Go Off And Decide Adventuring Is More Fun And Then Getting Themselves Killed.
GA: By Which I Mean Vriska.
AG: Why are you calling out me!?!?!?!! I don't want to catch snakes either!
GA: Because Knowing You At This Very Moment You Are Already Scheming How To Sneak Off And Go Fight The Lord On Your Own.
AG: Shut up!!!!!!!!!
CA: no yeah that is pretty much entirely wwhat vvris wwould do
AG: Like you're any better! You're probably planning to go join forces with him again!
CA: uh fuck no ivve obviously learned my lesson about allying myself wwith unspeakably overpowered assholes from beyond the stars, and this guy doesn't sound like hes currently takin applications for minionhood anyway
CA: FUCK fef has me doin the fish pun thing again already
CC: 38P
UU: he does have minions actUally!
UU: yoU are already familiar with doc scratch and the felt, i know! the felt in particUlar contain fragments of his power so that they can better serve his ends.
UU: he will most likely destroy them when they are no longer UsefUL, bUt a lord's attendants have sUrvived the end of a reality before, too! many of the old lord of chaos's brood still exist in yoUr cUrrent time, thoUgh they generally cannot interfere with it directly. they still obey the existential laws of an old reality, antithetical to the order that forms the fUndament of yoUr own, so they mUst Use emissaries and other tactics to interact with reality.
TT: No.
TT: You can't possibly mean who I think you mean.
EB: ...oh my god, the horrorterrors?!
CA: oh you'vve gotta be shittin me
UU: they danced to the lord azathoth's tUne and destroyed great swathes of reality at his command. bUt then he tUrned on them, as all lords seem to, and those powerfuUL enough fled to the next reality, jUst as you now intend to.
UU: so see! yoU can definitely sUrvive! there's precedent! and since i welcome yoU to join this new reality, yoU won't hate me like the horrorterrors hate the mUses who beat them, right? <winks>
TT: Ah. There it is. I was wondering whether you would ever answer that question or not.
UU: i - oh. UUUUuh...well, i gUess that one's oUt of the bag...
CC: water you talking about, rose?
TT: She knows all of this because she is the Muse. That's how she intends to open a gate between realities for us. That's how she knows we can succeed at all.
TT: Because by speaking to us, she has guaranteed that we will. Otherwise, a paradox ensues.
TT: And so we become the Horrors of her reality.
UU: no! no no! no, not at all! U i woUld never do that to all of yoU!
UU: i have been stUdying yoUr reality specifically so that i can make yoU welcome in my own! a place where yoU can live oUt yoUr existences as you wish. it may still need some tweaking, bUt yoU shoUld be able to engage with the beings of my reality withoUt corroding them, either!
UU: i am very mUch aboUt cross-reality compatibility! i'm trying to learn from the mistakes of my predecessor.
TT: Yet even if we take all of this on faith, we'll still need to outrun the Lord of Time.
GG: and also who is she? :/
UU: who is who?
EB: you said earlier we need to take something to the heart of our muse, so yeah, where exactly is that?
UU: right, right! she is the mUse of order, but yoU perhaps know her better as skaia!
UU: er, hello? are yoU all still there?
TT: ...
GA: ...
GG: ...
EB: ...
CG: SOMEONE, MAKE WORDS. I. FUCK.
GC: ... I'VE GOT NOTHING.
UU: she is dying now, and cannot maintain order as she Used to, but it is at the moment of her total annihilation that she is truly a crucible of Unlimited creative potential.
UU: that's you Have to do is play the game, one last time.
UU: that's enough explaining for now I think! gotta run!
-- uranianumbra [UU] has closed the cheery-o! --
It all puts...rather a different spin on things.
And while it gives them a way out, it's a bleak, thin shred of hope to hang everything on.
-
They manage to shift everyone out of the valley and into the apartment complex in short order, so that bickering over roommates and floors can begin in earnest. Jade is far less concerned about transporting mass quantities of personal belongings than she is about teleporting people, but to make things even easier, Dave assists in rapidly captchalogue everything so that they can bring along sheets and piles of accumulated junk to fill the minimally furnished apartments.

According to Rue, it's difficult to determine whether the void cover remaining at the lab is left over from Equius's presence or the result of the new generator she's been trying to calibrate to ignore Equius for the past few days - the only way to tell will be to wait and see if the shields dissipate over time now that he has vacated the premises. For now, Rose finds herself with the questionable misfortune of being stuck in one of the apartments at the furthest end of the building from everybody else. Equius is a private troll. Excessively private.

Thankfully, privacy is also a powerful motivator. Even with Nepeta sprawling on him, making faces whenever she has to move under her own power, and alternating between milking the attention for all it's worth and chafing under the scrutiny, it is clear that being in close proximity to Eridan and Feferi agitates Equius in a way that his moirail can't soothe. The blueblood crushes the handle of the fridge, knees the back frame of the couch into oblivion in a frighteningly literal manner, and rams his toe through one of the empty cabinets in the kitchen, becoming increasingly flustered whenever Feferi giggles at something on her phone, and finally he sits Rose down next to Nepeta and insists that he is going to fix this so that they can all leave him alone.

"You are distracting," he says, while Rose eyes her own wrists in trepidation. Equius tends to break things when he's upset, and right now having him glaring daggers at the void bracers with thunderous, lowered brows fails to reassure her that she isn't about to be snapped like kindling. One broken wrist would be horrid, but two? She has plans to knit scarves for the sundry people in their party who most likely have warrants out for their arrest. She needs those wrists. "Please hold still."

"Of course." Rose tries to let her mind wander while Equius considers things. This is easier to accomplish than usual; this close to Equius, there is a distinct aura of nothing that encourages people to zone out. Nepeta seems relatively immune to it, perhaps the result of living in close proximity to the blueblood over the years - she never seems to lose track of Equius, no matter how strong the urge to look away becomes.

Interesting, to observe the differences between an Heir of Breath and an Heir of Void. Mentally, Rose has been referring to Equius's powers as a 'voidy thing,' because that's how she's used to thinking of the Breeze - but can the Void, or whatever it's called, communicate with Equius in some
fashion? She's tempted to ask, but a distraction might not be the best idea at the moment.

There is also the fact that Equius looks different now than he did when he first arrived at Lalonde Labs, which raises questions about how god tier resurrections work. Rose, John, Jade, and Dave all ascended with very few changes, but Vriska regrew an eye and an arm that were long gone, and all of the trolls thus far have sprouted wings that are supposed to be rare for their species, and almost unheard of the colder the blood of the troll in question. Yet Terezi is upstairs with Vriska and Sollux this very moment, her eyes just as blind as they were before she reached god tier.

And now Equius sits before Rose, just as tall and muscular as ever, but with a chest that is somehow...indistinct. Or perhaps, more accurately, so shrouded in look away that it might as well not exist anymore. And because Rose can't see properly through the void, she can't tell whether it's just Equius deliberately concealing an area that might have caused him dysphoria, or if something in the god tiering process actually altered it for him. It could have something to do with self-image, and how one perceives one's self, but Rose could also be attempting to apply a Light-related explanation to a phenomenon that varies by aspect. Both Tavros and Terezi sustained injuries in their past lives that carried over to the current universe - so what of Tavros, who has already pupated wings naturally, but can't walk? Would it have been different for that younger Tavros in another life, who could walk before Vriska paralyzed him?

This game needs to come with a manual. Between god tiering itself, and Sollux's modifications, and the fact that the whole thing may well be glitched to kingdom come, Rose is giving herself a headache. Or it's just that Equius has clamped down his focus, and the resulting flux of void is making it harder to think clearly. "This is inefficient," he announces, dragging a tooth across his bottom lip and letting go of her wrists. "I told the doctor. Enough." And with that, Equius takes the bracers off, muttering to himself as he tears the thin metal apart with his bare hands and lays it out in strips on the coffee table. It happens too quickly for Rose to protest, or do more than blink. There's a faint, paler patch on both of her arms where the bracers have kept her from getting any sunlight, and she stares at the veins of her wrists like they're a stranger's.

"What are you making instead?" Nepeta asks, batting at Equius's foot while Rose is distracted. She's stretched out on her back on the floor despite various attempts by Equius to get her to rest on the couch, her coat bundled up under her head as a cushion.

"All of this - machinery is unnecessary. I understand now. It will do as I say." And indeed, Equius shreds the bracers like they're made of tissue paper, ignoring the faint sparks that go off as the parts inside warp and bend like taffy under his fingers. Eridan, huddled up on the armchair across from them, scoots forward with reluctant interest on his face, while Feferi creeps out from the kitchen area with a claw pressed to her lips when she realizes Rose has caught her in the act. Out of the three trolls in the players with colder blood than Equius, Eridan and Feferi seem to intimidate Equius to the point of discomfort. Gamzee - well. Gamzee just makes him angry. "Where do you want it?"

"Er -" Too slow on the uptake, Rose thinks, and she shakes herself free of the sluggishness. "I suppose it would be nice to have my wrists free for once." Rings and bracelets, she thinks, would pose the same issue the bracers had in terms of Roxy's ability to steal away the void, particularly given how physically emotive Roxy is. "Can you do earrings?"

"Earring," Equius corrects, crumpling up the metal into a ball the size of the nail of Rose's little finger. The wire takes more concentration, given how thin it needs to be, and then he gestures at her. Rose takes the stud earring, then lifts the hair on the left side of her head back out of the way to slot it into place. There isn't a screw back to hold it, but there are always spares laying around. "There," Equius says, radiating satisfaction.
"I want a ring," Eridan says instantly.

Rose brushes the pad of her thumb over the crumpled front of the earring, and wonders if she'll have to get used to indistinct numbness in her earlobe. She adjusted to the void in the bracers and they were still enough of a buffer against Leviathan within her mind, but this is considerably closer to her skull and could potentially interfere with her sight, depending on how potent Equius has made it. Perhaps a bracelet would have been better, after all. "We haven't even tested if this one works, yet."

"Of course it will work." Equius has already begun fiddling with another scrap of metal, twisting it with the kind of precision anyone else would need small, specific tools for.

Rose stands and steps over a playful swipe from Nepeta's claws as she heads for the door. "I'd rather run a test run myself, now, than have dear Eridan here run for the hills and transform into a cnidarian a mile from downtown. I'll see if Roxy is free." She pauses, and gives Eridan a severe look. "Don't try to test it yourself until I get back."

"Jus' let me come with you, woman!" Eridan yells back halfheartedly.

It bodes rather well that the whispers don't immediately pick back up the moment Rose leaves the room, but Equius's general sphere of influence likely covers most of the block. A quick text to Jade brings a GG: be right there! :) almost immediately as Rose walks to the next door down the hall and knocks. A faint crash and thud reaches her ears, and she waits with eyebrow preemptively raised as the pounding of multiple pairs of feet come closer.

"Ms Rose!"

"Rosey!"

Roxy and Jake answer the door in a jumble, Roxy wrapping her arms around Jake's neck from behind and swinging with a smile stretching from ear to ear. "Please, just call me Rose, Jake," Rose says, as she looks around. Unlike the apartment she just came from, this one is still relatively undamaged. In fact, it barely looks as though the scratch kids have done more than shift the chairs around to suit their own needs; Dirk has a laptop set up on the countertop that marks the border between the living room area and the kitchen, and he gives Rose the faintest jerk of a nod when she waves.

Jake smiles self-consciously, rubbing the back of his neck. "What can we do for you, then, Rose? What brings you to our humble abode?"

"D'yah wanna come in and shoot the shit?" Without waiting for an answer, Roxy snatches up Rose's hand and starts walking backwards, with Jake struggling to stand at attention as he gets pulled along. "Only we don't have any referendums - refreshments!"

"We don't have any food at all," Jane says, from where she's rummaging through the kitchen cupboards. If they're as barren a wasteland as those in the other kitchen, today is shaping up to be a nice, long day, filled with necessary evils. Like ordering takeout. "Or cookware." She fixes a baleful stare at the oven as she shuts the cabinet with a slam that might rattle the counter more than necessary.

On the other hand, another day of feeding everyone here pizza, and they might well face a riot. "I did want to test out the new accessories Equius is handing out. Jade should be here shortly - we could run to the store, if you like," Rose says.

"An outing!" Jake exclaims. He and Roxy trade gleeful looks.
Dirk's head shoots up before the other scratch kid finishes, and though his expression doesn't appear to change, Rose can see the tension clenching Dirk in a vise grip. "Jake, hell no."

Roxy's smile falters, and Jake looks as though he's had the rug yanked out from under him, crestfallen. "I won't try anything! On my honor, Dirk!" He presses a hand to his chest, summoning up the puppy-dog eyes that must be genetically wired into the Egbert-Harley line.

"Last night you tried to sneak out," Dirk says. Which is news to Rose.

"To get a glass of water!" Jake turns pleading eyes on Jane. "Please, Jane, I'm almost cured. Surely you all can't go on an adventure like this without me?"

Rose isn't sure going to the grocery store counts as an adventure - but then, when would any of the scratch kids last had the opportunity to visit one? From what she knows, they barely left their Felt prison for more than day-long stretches at a time except for field testing in the art of villainous endeavors. Jane doesn't say anything aloud, but she and Dirk look at each other in silent consultation for a moment before she inclines her head, and Dirk's jaw twitches minutely. "Oh my god. Fine. A field trip. And if you put one goddamn trigger finger out of line, I'll make you watch the '86 MLP movie again," he says, closing the laptop with the same kind of faint, barely-concealed disquiet that Rose recognizes from Dave's example.

Jake blanches and tugs at his collar, gulping. "Oh dear. Not again. You are a cruel man, Strider!"

"MLP...? My...Little Pony?" Rose repeats, weakly.


...Good lord. No wonder Jake is desperate to get out. Forget residual brainwashing, that has to be the most unusual form of rehabilitation/torture Rose has ever heard of. A green, Jade-shaped outline forms just beside Rose, and then Jade fills in the rest of the way with a shake of her head. She is still wearing the god tier pajamas that she's been in almost constantly since she and Kanaya returned with Eridan, and Rose is beginning to feel like she needs to have a talk with Jade and Dave about weighing the convenience of transfigurable clothing against the societal need to maintain at least the appearance of being hygienic. "Here!" Jade says, bumping her hip against Rose's in greeting. "Alright! Who all's coming with?"

The door bursts open after an odd delay, considering Jade arrived without using it at all. When they all turn to stare, Jane and Dirk already going for their pockets (Rose supposes she's going to continue to turn a blind eye to the fact that two out of the four scratch kids re-armed themselves at some point without going through Rue), Eridan stares at the six of them, chest heaving slightly. "Take me with you," he says, brandishing the new ring on his claw.

Jade folds her arms, presumably taking a mental tally of the people in the room. "Uh, if there's a risk that grim stuff could happen, that miiight be one too many high risk peeps for me to keep track of," she says, after pausing to suck on her lip and pull a face.

Jade drops to his knees so hard Rose practically feels it in her own patellae. "Please, you can't leave me sufferin' in that den a' awkwardness. I beg of you. Have mercy."

Rose looks at Jade. Jade looks back at Rose, and shrugs. In the end, Rose estimates how much faith she puts in Equius's abilities and Jade and Roxy's reflexes, and makes the executive call. "Behave appropriately. Any and all suspect behavior will be punishable by exposure to winged cartoon horses." This threat proves sufficient to make Eridan gulp and nod, and he stands up with a second,
swift glance at the scratch kids before shuffling closer to Rose.

"Alrighty, then! Three!" Jade lifts her fingers to count down. "Twooo..." Roxy sidles in between Rose and Eridan, and Rose turns her palm face up so that Roxy can hold her hand over it, ready to slap. "One!"

And with a squeezing fizzle, they're on a street corner. How Jade does it without accidentally landing them on top of a passing pedestrian is truly a marvel. It doesn't stop people in the road from slamming on their breaks to do a double take, but it keeps them from having to explain why they've crushed some poor soul beneath their teleporting girth. Rose freezes in place for a full thirty seconds, her pulse throbbing in her temples - and nothing. Not even the faintest whisper of dread susurrations from the back of her mind. "Distance?"

"About five miles," Jade reports, still sparking a little at the seams. Beyond her, pedestrians have begun to part around their small group like the sea, a few hurriedly putting their phones away when Jane turns her sharp-edged stare on them. Dirk doesn't even have to turn to face them to project a field of intimidation. "How's your head?"

"Blessedly horror free." Though now that Rose thinks about it, bringing a group of young adults trained to be paranoid might have more potential pitfalls than can be blamed on just Jake. If Dirk pulls a blade on someone for looking at them the wrong way - well, actually, that would be entirely in keeping with what Rose knows of Strider personalities in general. But in a city that's on high alert, it could also quickly escalate into a literal federal fucking issue. Curse their impulsive natures and access to instantaneous travel via Jade.

Eridan looks queasy, his fins tucked in close against his head when she checks on him next, but when she asks he shakes his head and says that he's fine. She doesn't even have to order him to stay close; he edges near her as soon as Roxy takes off with a happy whoop, and sticks as close as a shadow while they suss out where the nearest grocery store lies. Rose can't even call it sulking - since the jellyfish incident, Eridan has just been...skittish. It doesn't stop him from being obnoxious to anyone who catches him on Pesterchum, but since Rose has been in close proximity to him due to their mutual need to stay near Equius these past few days, she's noticed that he's gone quiet. Another note to add to her growing mental list: consider asking permission to check on the state of Eridan's mind and see how well he might be healing, if there might be grim contamination lurking in the corners of his mindscape like it did John. The last thing they need is for Eridan to lose what few wavering, provisional morals he does have to festering rot.

The first place they stumble upon is a Safeway, and it is in no way prepared for the full convoy of humans and trolls that descends upon it like a swarm of locusts; thank goodness they kept this group relatively small. Roxy sweeps in through the automatic doors with her hands clasped in front of her, starry eyed, with Jake peering around them like someone stepping into a pharmacy in a foreign country for the first time. Dirk and Jane play it off a little more coolly, but Jade summons two grocery carts for them with a snap of her fingers and keeping a low profile was probably a pipe dream from the start. While Jade, Roxy, and Jake zoom off toward the aisles, Jane following them at a more sedate pace, Dirk and Eridan hang back with Rose. Just as well - her phone begins to buzz in her pocket.

-- temperedTitan [TT] began pestering thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] at 14:32:10
TT: kid.
TT: where the hell are you?
TT: Father?
TT: Jade and I have taken the scratches and Eridan with us on an excursion to purchase supplies.
TT: need to put goddamn bells on you kids.
TT: you got it handled?
TT: Oh, yes, no need to fret. Equius has improved upon the void bracers, and all is well.
TT: I doubt we'll be able to purchase enough food and cooking supplies for everyone in one trip, however.
TT: do you even have money?
TT: As I said, not enough to stock every apartment.
TT: Hm. Roxy has cash. I am...not entirely certain where she got it from.
TT: She just keeps insisting it's 'capitalism.'
TT: oh god not another one.
TT: ...Anyway, we should be fine.
TT: why is it whenever one of you says 'fine' I get the feeling shit's gonna get set on fire.
TT: do not blow the place up.
TT: Cross my heart.

Once that is taken care of (honestly, how does a man who apparently prefers to do his caretaking via violent puppets from the safety of ventilation systems still manage to come across as more of a concerned parent than Rue ever did?) Rose looks over the aisles and tries to put together a quick grocery list in her mind. It's harder than one would think. There's a high chance that if she cooks something, a ravening swarm of young adults will descend upon her in search of an easy meal. From the looks of things, Jane has cookware well in hand, though Rose wonders if she might not be testing the heft of that deep-dish skillet more in the manner of someone trying out the balance on a new strife specibus. Eridan has slunk off after Jade while Rose was preoccupied, fidgeting with the ring on his claw as he wanders by rows of vegetables.

Interestingly, Dirk stays close to Rose as she goes to join Jane - presumably Roxy and Jade have the actual food portion of the search well in hand, for the moment - and when Jane finishes judging the pot with a sage nod, she passes it into Dirk's waiting hands before flipping a baking sheet in a brisk circle. "I'm trying to think of something that can feed twenty or so people, the majority of them still of the mindset that if there is food, you consume as much as possible in order to fuel your vigilantism," she says, her voice almost drowned out at first by the clamor coming from the meat section. Jane and Dirk both tilt their heads slightly to hear her better, a quirk of the head that reminds her they've communicated through earpieces in the past. "Any thoughts?"

"Pancakes," Jane says. "There is a box mix...it's yellow, and -"

Rose shakes her head. "Bisquick. Owned by Betty Crocker. John would set the kitchen on fire in a futile effort to cleanse it of the enemy presence." After the Condesce incident, Karkat might well join him in constructing the bonfire, and heaven only knows if Bisquick is as flammable as flour under the right circumstances. "He has long believed that there is an evil conspiracy behind the brand, and we recently received confirmation that he is, in fact, totally correct."

"Drat," Jane says, her shoulders slumping a little.

Rose takes a package of wooden stirring spoons, considers her options, and then balances a bowl on her hip and tosses the spoons in to consolidate. "We'll figure something out. Just watch out for anything with a red spoon on the label."

"We're leaving soon."

She blinks. Jane thwaps Dirk gently with the baking sheet, but avoids Rose's eye when she looks at the two of them. Dirk has his head low and shuffles his weight from one foot to the other. "What?" Rose says, and immediately after feels foolish.

Jane becomes overpoweringly intrigued by a spatula. With a quick movement Rose only catches the
tail end of, Dirk tucks the baking sheet under his arm and checks over his shoulder, scanning the rest of the aisle and the shelves as though one of the other shoppers might be listening in. After staring down the lone man inspecting a muffin tin until he powerwalks away from them, he moves a little closer to Rose. "Don't have a lot of time left to handle things, according to all estimates," he says, and - Rose isn't sure, because Dirk is almost as deft as Ambrose at concealing his expressions behind the shades (a task Dave almost unavoidably tends to fail at), but she believes he lets her see his pale eyes slant down and fix on her hands instead of her face, radiating quiet apology. "We're caught up on the situation here. You have your own plans to take on the Felt, but if we don't track down Dienek soon, there's a totally legit seventy five point six percent chance he'll go to ground and won't resurface. From what we've pieced together he should still be in Utah right now."

She knew they had plans to go after their main tormentor and bring him to justice - she just completely failed to account for the fact that learning about the apocalypse might accelerate their plans more than a little. Damn. "Will Jake be alright with that? He's only just barely come back to his senses. Exposure to someone more familiar with his conditioning than you all -"

"High probability he'll relapse," Dirk finishes. "On the other hand, there's an equally high probability we die on the thirteenth. So who's counting." He shrugs with one shoulder, a muscle in his jaw ticcing almost imperceptibly. "Kinda reckless for my tastes. But fuck it."

The next day, they sit down for dinner as a family.

This turns out about as well as one might expect.

Rue downs three glasses of cranberry juice before Bro drags Oriole through the door, her lacquered nails drumming on the stem of the cocktail glass in a familiar tell. The hem of her purple dress falls just an inch too short, like she forgot to account for the extra height of her heels, and Rose tells herself to stop noticing such things - she's trying to keep this from devolving back into a passive-aggressive game of one-upmanship.

But it's hard. It's hard, and when she raises eyebrows at Dave in an attempt to nudge him into serving as a distraction, his face appears to have frozen over like the Arctic wastes. When the waiter came by to ask for their drink orders, Dave shut down hard, and while he always keeps his movements quick and close Rose can track how often his eyes dart to the other diners at the tables beside them. He shreds two bread rolls without eating them and leaves the scraps on his plate. Perhaps he'd feel better if John or Jade were here to cushion the tense awkwardness; Rose certainly would. With the public setting and the presence of Rue and the complete and utter lack of any sort of Egbert- or Harley-themed buffer, Dave looks ready to dive out through the window the first chance he gets.

Rose mentally catalogs the details, and smiles (don't simper) when their mother murmurs something about promptness and how they haven't gone out to eat in Seattle in years. The condensation on the glass of ice water leaves a circle on the table, her skirt seems to have magically accumulated a scattering of white canine hair, and this afternoon when she went to get ready for dinner, she realized her hair curls at the ends where it touches her shoulders, so that naturally she catches herself fiddling with the strands whenever her hands are at a loss. One of her legs feels cramped, so she switches the way she's crossed them. The drinks menu was removed at Rue's request, but not before Rose had time to scan it and see that they serve something called a lavender cosmo.

Kanaya bowed out with the claim that they can hardly afford to leave the trolls to their own devices, with only John, Jade, and Karkat to supervise a contentiously sane group of powderkegs in a fragile apartment complex. Rose can't fault the logic, either. If she could come with her own blatantly transparent excuse to escape this family outing, she would use it, too. However, too obvious an
"Traffic bad?" she asks, lifting her voice as Ambrose vanishes from the doorway and reappears in the chair between Rose and her mother. Oriole stands bereft in the open doorway for a moment before the closing door bumps into his back - or wings, really - and then rushes toward the table before the hostess can swoop down on him. He has to angle the chair sideways before sitting, the back of his coat bulging as his wings adjust. In this light, he's not quite neon. A gentle, matte orange. Like a spray tan gone horribly wrong.

Ambrose's face doesn't shift. If Dave is frozen on the edge of an anxious breakdown, Bro is a wall of granite. The restaurant is walking distance from their current lodgings, as everyone here is well aware, but all he says is, "You know it."

Touché.

Dirk and Roxy arrive five minutes later, both wearing enormous scarves that draw curious looks from everyone else. With their short sleeves and cropped shorts, they're probably not uncomfortable in the afternoon heat, per se, but the season has moved well past the point where heavy scarves could be excused as a fashion choice. All they need at this point is for someone to recognize Dave as that one hero who never wears a mask, or Dirk and Roxy as two of the people fighting by the Seattle Needle. Just to round out the evening. Rose would point out the scarves most likely draw more attention to the fact that the two have something to hide - but, well, they're trying. And Oriole is orange with lemon trimmings. It's not as though anyone in this family can fly under the radar, even on a good day.

"Hi mom!" Roxy says brightly, tackling Rue with an enthusiasm that rocks the chair back on two legs. "Hi!"

"Hello to you," Rue says. She keeps the glass in her hand from slopping juice onto the table with the ease of old practice, patting Roxy on the back with a small smile, and Rose familiarizes herself with the bottom of her water glass. By the time she emerges, Dirk and Roxy have seated themselves at the table, and Dave has edged closer to Rose to make room for them, leaving his plate of torn up bread behind for Roxy. "And how was your day out on the town, my dears? You all went to the mall?"

Rue looks around at all of them, including Dave and Rose in the sweep.

"Yup. Sure was a thing that happened," Dave says, captivated by a nondescript point in the middle of the table. Oh, Rose can already tell the Lalonde half of the family is going to be carrying the majority of this conversation. Oriole buries his face in a menu as she watches, a single wayward yellow feather sticking out at an angle from the rest of his hair.

Before Rue can try another casual segue, thankfully, the waiter interrupts. "Excuse me, ma'am? There's a call for you," the waiter says. He looks almost as confused as the rest of the table.

Rue hesitates for a fraction of a second before her indulgent expression shifts into carefully blanked poise. For once, Rose can't detect even a tremor in the hands that might have given her away. Her own attempt to sober up had its pitfalls, but she suspects that either the dependency wasn't severe enough to cause significant physical withdrawal symptoms, or perhaps game mechanics were at play. In contrast, Rue's seemingly sincere efforts at sobriety have been marked by notable shakiness - but then, the woman has been an alcoholic for longer than Rose has been alive. "I wonder who it could be," she says, taking the napkin from her lap and folding it over her hands absentely, before setting it on the table. She pushes back her chair and stands, smoothing the front of her dress. "I'll be back in a moment."

The moment she walks away, Dave sags half out of his chair, Oriole mashes his face into the menu
with a groan, and Ambrose smacks both of them upside the back of the head in a blink of an eye. "Lol. You guys are such lamers," Roxy chortles, folding her legs and propping her feet up on the edge of her seat.

All things considered, they are most likely going to perish. A bleak sentiment, but one Rue can't ignore. The children - the children are players in a game that will resurrect them except in specific circumstances. They may die, but they may yet live again.

But the guardians? They're only human. Even if she and Ambrose stayed close to whatever safe zones there are in the Medium (and Ambrose would never be content to stay safe while the children were out fighting for their lives) the fact that time itself is breaking down on a massive scale would mean that the children would have to concentrate on keeping their guardians safe on top of everything else.

The children wouldn't stop trying, though. As shaky and tentative as things are between her and Rose, the trauma of losing their guardians all over again might be just the thing that would set them over the edge. God only knows, Samuel's betrayal left an open wound in John, and to a lesser extent Rose. None of them are wholly sane anymore, Rue suspects. If any of us ever were to begin with. They'd need unimaginable mental fortitude to confront the end of reality, otherwise.

April thirteenth. Would John welcome an early birthday celebration at all? A cake is probably out of the question, unless someone other than Rue or Ambrose volunteers. Ambrose's idea of a birthday cake, the last time she checked, involves sharp objects, and Rue usually ordered Rose something elaborate and sugary from a bakery. Or commissioned Samuel's assistance.

She'll just ask John himself if he wants anything. When the waiter offers her the phone, she takes it, clicking her nails along the plastic as she leans a shoulder against the wall. She's conscious of eyes on her back. "Doctor Lalonde, speaking," she says, wrapping an arm around her ribs.

On the other end of the line, someone sighs with contentment. "I was not sure I could be so lucky as this. Here I assumed I would have to go to you, but this will do."

A pot clangs raucously against one of the stovetops in the kitchen. Frowning, Rue adjusts her grip on the phone and tries to recall where she might have heard this voice before. It's - not familiar. Not quite. But she feels as though she should know it. Not one of her usual contacts, no... "I'm sorry, I believe you have me at a disadvantage. Who is this?"

The line crackles. "A more interesting question might be - who is the man with a gun across the street with a line of sight on each member of your charming little family? Don't turn around."

Rue's body jerks automatically, stomach clenching. Stopping herself from turning at once almost wrenches a muscle in her side. Under the palm of her hand, clamped around the side of her ribs, she can feel her heart rate rising. "How uncivil," she says, raising her chin. She can't see anything from here but the exit and the entrance to the kitchen, and now doesn't dare spin around to scan the street to see if the threat is legitimate or not.

"Really? I think I'm being polite. I haven't had them shot yet." The voice sounds amused. "And won't, so long as you cooperate. A woman is about to walk up beside you. Come out the door with her, and we'll talk. Don't turn around."

Rue catches herself again. Dammit. A figure sidles around the kitchen entrance from a hidden corner: a woman with covered hair and something metallic glinting where her sleeves drape over her hand.
"About what?" she asks, swallowing. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Business, of course. Personal business. I'll level with you, Doctor Lalonde - I'm just as uncomfortable with the situation as you are. But needs must." The line clicks, and Rue sets the phone back down on its base. She stares at the door for a moment, dread threading itself through her insides, and then a mutter from the other woman causes her to lurch forward and stumble through the door, eyes fixed straight ahead.

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Rose tracks the waiter and her mother as they weave between the tables to reach the back of the restaurant, where the phone appears to rest in a crux between an exit door and the kitchen. "Why wouldn't they just call her cell?" Dave says, half to himself. His fingers creep out to steal his plate of shredded bread back from Roxy.

"An excellent question, brother dear." Rose grants him a teasing smile. "And another - what did that poor bread ever do to you?"

Dave mutters something to the effect of 'not hungry,' while Roxy nudges Rose with her foot under the table. "Heya, hey, Rose? Do you think we can go shopping again tomorrow?"

"Most likely." The world could be blown up by an overhypmed video game in a matter of days, but who's counting? Rose suspects that if their circle of those in the know didn't focus on mundane things like grocery shopping and taking vengeance on their enemies, they'd collapse. "What do you need?"

"Wanna see if I can get some new makeup stuff." The girl winks and props her chin up on her fists. "You have ta look bomb as heckles when you're on tha hunt for booty." She begins fluttering her eyelashes at Dirk with a shit-eating grin, and receives an eye roll in reply. Ambrose makes an indistinct noise that, from someone else, would have meant they'd choked on a too-fast swallow of water that went down the wrong pipe.

"Just make sure you don't trip anything and wind up gutted by a fork." Dirk rubs his temple with his fingers, looking strained. "Or worse. She might bring back the spoon. Shit, Rox, you know murder by spoon is horribly slow and inefficient."

"Janey would never," Roxy scoffs.

"So basically, the situation is like our mom getting ready to hit on John and Jade's mom," Dave says. He also finally takes a bite of the thoroughly-shredded roll - as though the general oddness of the situation has finally rendered it palatable even in his sulk. "If they got married it would be like...like Jade and John were our ecto-step-siblings-in-law via clone proxy."

Trust Dave to put things in strange, strange perspective. "I think you may have added too many modifiers in there," Rose says, letting her eyes wander back to Rue across the room. She barely see the woman, halfway around the corner with the restaurant's phone pressed to her ear. She activates some of her other sight, though all she catches, as usual, is a glimpse of Rue's void soul. "Or maybe not enough," she finishes, turning back to the table.

Two enormous flares of DANGER burn in her vision as her eyes track back across the room. It's been so long since Rose has looked for potential criminal activity with her other sight that at first she's just left speechless. Immediately to Rue's left, through the wall, one hotspot of danger - then just over Ambrose's shoulder, something on the other side of the street. Rose stands up, the chair falling out from under her with a bang that sounds like a gunshot and her water glass rocking enough to
soak part of the tablecloth, and the second, dimmer burn is somewhere further down the road - why can't she focus on it properly?

Both have an incredibly high chance of exploding into violence any moment. Only one is standing right next to her mother. "Rue," she says, her voice gone hoarse in the space of seconds. Dave's already on his feet, hovering next to her with one hand just over her shoulder; now, Ambrose vanishes in a blur, slamming between the tables and zagging around the hostess as he makes a beeline for Rue. Rose can't actually see Rue's back - she's gone, but not around the corner, out of sight - out the back door, maybe?

If she's panicking everyone over nothing, that's one thing. But this doesn't feel like nothing. This feels like a grim reminder that she can't predict anything but an absence where Rue is concerned, a gaping hole in her already vague fortune-telling abilities. "Let's go," Dave says, and she grabs his hand on impulse as they start running. They outclip Roxy and Dirk (Dirk only by the narrowest margin) and Dave slams his forearm into the exit door as it swings shut in Ambrose's wake.

She has a moment to scan the alleyway wedged between the restaurant and the next row of buildings. A black car sits with the engine running at the far end of the alley, and the woman lifting a gun to Rue's head doesn't look surprised in the least to see them. The scarf wrapped over her hair is pale pink with a pattern of tiny embroidered birds, and she pulls the pistol slide back with a sharp snap of her wrist. Of all things, Rue almost seems to relax when she lays eyes on them, shoulders sagging.

Rose has never cast a spell so fast in her life. A shield of light slams down between the gun and Rue almost before she finishes chanting the incantation. She doesn't even bother using magic to blind the woman - light erupts like a sunburst as soon as Rose thinks it. Rue spins on a heel and socks the other woman in the eye with her fist; before she can recover, Ambrose reappears next to Rue and pulls her back.

"Hey, don't I know that lady?" Roxy says, her head scooting in between Dave and Rose. "Dirk, don't we know her? We totes know her from somewhere."

Dirk must vault over their heads or something to that effect, because Rose has no idea how else he manages to get in front of them when the three of them have clogged up the doorway. "Clubs Deuce's guard. Shit," he says. "What's she doing out of uniform?"

"There's another, across the street from where we were seated." Rue catches Rose's shoulder and squeezes, while Ambrose vanishes again. "Or at least, that was what I was told. It seemed better to err on the side of caution."

Rose lets the light die down, and then renews it when the woman starts to blink and let her eyes adjust. A blurred foot slams the gun out of her hands; the woman slowly lifts both hands to show that they're now empty, while Ambrose starts disassembling the weapon into its component parts. "Told by who? The person on the phone?"

Rue nods, reaching out to touch Roxy's shoulder and then Dave's, as though to reassure herself they're all there. "I'm afraid I didn't recognize the voice." Then she freezes, eyes gone wide as she looks at all of them again, and then over Roxy toward the swinging door. "Where is Oriole?"

An excellent question. One that may, for the moment, have to go unanswered. Before Rose can consider turning to use her sight to pick him out in the restaurant, the woman speaks up, her eyes pinched shut and her voice pitched low but carrying. "My lady wants to discuss terms. Peacefully." Her mouth makes a moue of distaste.
"Peaceful? Well, she's got a real shit opener." Ambrose says from - somewhere. Rose catches a fleeting glimpse of him on the roof beside them, but he stays in constant motion. Keeping tabs on the bright fire of his aura would be easier, maybe, but something far more interesting snags Rose's attention when she switches over - an agitated, fluttering pulse that bears a remarkable resemblance to Oriole, sliding into the far side of the idling car and wrenching the glove compartment open.

"We have little practice with the concept," the woman says, shrugging and bringing her hands to rest on the back of her bowed head. "And she has reason to suspect that one-on-one negotiations with the good doctor would be preferable to dealing with multiple parties at once. Our sincere apologies."

Rose's lip tugs to the side in a not-smile. When she checks on Dave again, he still has his guard up. Actually, she's surprised he isn't on the phone hailing Jade and John to come assist. Despite how much they make fun of Dave's tendency to run time loops for mundane tasks rather than giving forewarnings about situations like this...well, what with almost the entirety of the joint Strider-Lalonde gene pool present, they might have this under control, she supposes. "Apologies fall rather flat, under these circumstances," she says, arching an eyebrow that the woman can't see.

"Kidnapping and holding someone at gunpoint doesn't particularly endear you to anyone."

"We would have returned her," the woman says, angling her head toward Rose's voice, and then switching towards Rue without missing a beat. "You may be able to do a service for us that no other can, Doctor Lalonde. Never fear - we would offer you something of equal value in exchange." A delicate pause. "Again, though, we have no wish to parley with multiple hostiles at once. Come to the secondary location, and you have our word you would be returned unharmed."

"Bull fucking shit. You've got her talking in your earpiece right now, don't you." Ambrose's voice has a sharper edge than usual. No, forget 'sharper' - he's practically spitting acid. "Droog."

"Ambrose, we don't know -" Rue starts, but he cuts her off: "They only have one 'my lady.'"

By way of confirmation, the woman bows her head further. A faint smile toys with the corners of her lips. "She asks if you appreciated her first gift of good faith."

Oh, Rose catches it now; a subtle lilt in the woman's voice that Ambrose must have picked up on first, the kind of odd emphases on words that might indicate she's relaying a message from someone else. In the car Oriole's head shoots up at the mention of Droog's name, and he catches Rose's eye before shutting the glove compartment, quiet and cautious. His wings splay out a little from under the cover of his jacket with the effort needed to contort himself into the back seat of the car. What on earth is he doing? Out of everyone here, he's the one most likely to be seen from the main road; how much longer before someone notices him, or the fact that Dirk and Dave both have bladekind drawn and aren't being subtle about it in the least?

And where is Diamonds Droog in all this? Not in the car, obviously, but if she is nearby...

Ambrose is clearly operating under a similarly uneasy train of thought - or perhaps he's in the process of going off the rails. He reappears and stays put for once, setting his sword on level with the woman's neck with a suddenness that makes Dave twitch. "What the fuck are you talking about? Talk real fast."

"Do you really believe a sleeper operative of Samuel Egbert's caliber would have been so clumsily activated, in the middle of a situation he had zero chance of extracting himself from, if we had not deliberately sold him out?" The woman gives a small bow, low enough that her throat scrapes the edge of the sword. "A gift, from us to you - and a test." Her eyes flutter open. Rose tenses, but she does nothing but look up at Bro's shades, considering. "And what we offer you now is something no one else can."
"Which would be?" Rue asks, stepping forward. Rose puts out a hand to restrain her, but Rue stops after that single step, the muscle of her arm taut under Rose's grip.

"The Felt." The woman gives a shrug, her head tipping to the side. "Their main base of operations, their defenses, their last reported operations. On a platter."

Rose's mind sputters for a moment. She's still weighing whether or not the line about Samuel Egbert being hung out to dry has any plausible merit; this tips the balance right over from potentially viable to a steaming pile of horse manure. The whole thing predicates on too many incredibly unlikely suppositions - the idea that a violent crime boss like Droog would ever be sincere being the most unlikely of the lot.

So what is their game? What purpose would taking Rue serve, after all this? Was it just a way to lure them out into the alley?

"What in the name of fuck would make you want to give them up?" Ambrose says. He's prowling; that's the only word for it. He is blatantly agitated, and the fact that Rose can detect that is making her even more unsettled in turn.

"My lady has reason to believe she has been betrayed. As have all other card suit members of the Crew." The words sound like each costs the woman immense internal struggle to put together. "There is something. In their heads. They want it gone, and only a select few have the knowledge necessary to perform such an operation. And in return, we will give you everything you need to strike at the heart of the Felt." She shudders, and blood bubbles out from her right nostril. "A-ah."

It doesn't make sense. No, it almost makes sense. And that's what worries Rose. It's a kind of warped, twisted sense that makes her question her own sanity; she can think of a dozen different ways to fake a nosebleed like that, but the logic isn't helping her claw her way out of the surrealness of the situation. "The weird shit strikes again," Dave says, shaking his head, and - he's right. It has honestly reached the point where Rose almost believes this woman's story simply because it's too ludicrous to be fake. One day she's going to toss the weird-shit-o-meter out the window, because their everyday lives have reached the saturation point.

Rue worries her lower lip with a tooth. "...Tempting offer," she says, sotto voce. Her voice lowers further still. "If they have mindgrubs in their head - we might have leverage -"

"No," Ambrose says, half a snarl. "It's a trap."

The two guardians begin to argue in fierce whispers. "Might not be. Not all the way a trap, anyway." Roxy gulps when Rose blinks at her. "Doctor Die could definitely whammy that Clubs guy, so - maybe, if they really want them out bad enough...But y'know. Droog. Still probably evil, and stuff." Dirk keeps shaking his head all the while, but he's trained his eyes on the woman while everyone else is arguing, and -

The words are halfway out of Rose's mouth before she finishes looking from Dirk to Dave - "Dave, thoughts?" - and when she registers what she's seeing she almost reconsiders the possibility that Droog might have done something to the alley. Dave sways on his feet, looking faint. Rose curses herself for not noticing earlier. He flinches hard when she touches his arm, doesn't pull away but shivers like someone wracked with fever. "Dave, what's the matter?"

He lies to her face. "Nothing. Doesn't matter. It doesn't - shit."
"I'll meet with your lady," Rue says, almost at the same time. In her haste to check on Dave, Rose let go of her, and now she walks forward until Ambrose himself leaves off guarding Droog's minion to ward her off. "But at a secondary location of my choice, not hers. If she really wants access to my doctors and facilities, I want this information she's promising up front."

"Lalonde," Bro says. "You're making a mistake."

"My risk, not yours," Rue replies, before he can say anything more. This is all going far too quickly; Dave is shaking with terror and Rose doesn't know why.

Droog's mouthpiece inclines her head. She hasn't moved an inch from where she started, watching them argue with boredom in her eyes. The blood from her nose has painted a thin line down her lip and chin, but she doesn't try to wipe it off. All she does is continue to relay the messages, as close to word for word as must be possible. "Your choice, fine. But the information - no. Meet with my lady, and then, if you can remove the mindgrub from one of her associates without incident, she will begin to share what she knows. Remove it from her second associate, and you will have everything."

"And if we remove it from her?" Rue drives home, like a falcon diving for the kill.

"Only to hit the ground. "She has no interest in such an operation. Not when the odds of her surviving it would be...slim." The woman's eyes go to Ambrose once again. All utmost care, Droog's employee takes a hand off the back of her head, reaches into a pocket, and flicks out a business card between two fingers. It lands on the ground, just missing a puddle of something unidentifiable by an inch - Rose suspects that if she'd tried to offer it to any one of them, Ambrose would have taken the woman's hand off. Smart move. "Call before nine."

The woman starts to edge backward, taking careful steps back to her car without once turning her head or looking down to watch her footing. She meets them stare for stare as she walks steadily back, her lips pressed closed, and Rose only remembers to look away and make sure Oriole is out of the car scant seconds before the woman reaches it. No sign of him.

Rue waits until the woman has driven away before dipping to pick up the card, at least. She turns it over, fingernails clicking on the paper as she refuses to look in Ambrose's direction. But Rose is more concerned about Dave than this - quagmire of a situation. Rose can guess what's going through Rue's mind; she might have made the same choice, if confronted with a similar offer. A poisonous kind of Lalonde logic. Ambrose's uncharacteristic panic is more of a mystery, but not something Rose can concern herself with right now. Dave jumps like she's slapped him when she touches the back of her hand to his forehead. "You need to sit. You look like you're going to faint," she says.

Wrong tactic. She's used to John, who sometimes needs coaxing but is generally amenable to acknowledging his vulnerable moments when pushed. Dave leaps into defensive posturing in a flash, an entirely artificial stiffness straightening his back and eliminating the shivers from his hands in seconds. "As if. I'm fine."

Roxy trades glances with Dirk over Dave's head. "Dude, you were wobobblin'," Roxy says, worried.

"Lies and slander." Dave shuts down more before their eyes. Now's not the moment to press it - no, it is, but Dave won't let them. If Rose were to get him on his own and ply him with apple juice to get back on his good side...here it won't work though. Not with so many witnesses, not with Ambrose, patriarch of unhealthy emotional stoicism, jittering on his own knife's edge. Something is off with both of them, and Rose has never flat out hated their strange brand of suppression this much before. Found it amusing and sometimes irritating, yes. But Dave nearly just collapsed, and is now doing his best to pretend it didn't happened, and after everything else that has gone wrong lately, that is
apparently where Rose draws the line.

"You guys done having fun over here without me?" Oriole - comes out through the restaurant door, behind Roxy. At Rose's questioning look, he jerks his head to the side. It's a distraction from the obvious issue, and Rose knows it's a distraction, but Dave won't meet her eyes. Too much has happened in the past fifteen minutes for it to go much further. "Went around the front. Not like it did any good. All I found in that car was a useless box."

Rue sighs as she slides Droog's card into the side pocket of her dress. "Why were you in the car in the first place, love?"

Oriole shrugs. His feathers are mussed, and he finger combs them back in line with his hair in a frustrated gesture. "Looking for stuff to take. Secret shit. I thought there was something in the backseat, but it was nothing important."

"It's the thought that counts. Though I'd appreciate if you didn't put yourself quite so far into harm's way." Rue sighs. "We'll know more soon enough."

Absence takes a moment for Rose to notice; at first she thinks he's just gone back to darting around, but her sight can pick out nothing when she blinks it back on. Ambrose is gone. "It could just be a trap," she feels the need to voice for him, since he has vanished.

"Then we will still know more, soon enough." Rue's glance lingers on Dave, a flicker of her worry escaping in her eyes, and then she summons a smile for all of them, strained enough that Rose knows no one is fooled. At least they're all in good company. "Let's get something else to eat, dears. I'm sorry."

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She reunites with her dear King late in the evening, long after the sun has descended behind the city's skyline. Long shadows paint the floor of the office space as she stands at the window, framed in light. Leaving the player's stronghold without drawing undue attention proves no hardship; she has ways of avoiding scrutiny, and they have other struggles to absorb their focus.

It is the most deliberate of coincidences that the King - Protector finds her there, when he has no reason to venture up to this floor of this particular skyscraper. For a moment, she finds herself unable to turn toward him as the door swings open. Now more than ever, she feels aware.

Sixteen players under one roof generates quite a lot of significance - and an Archdeaconstructor always has a certain weight to it -

But more than that - a white-hot note has reached the edge of the city, an echo of power welling deep in her thorax.

It is good that the Black Queen is still absent, whatever her real motives. The White Queen remains uncertain just how much the fleeting use of the Prospitian Ring affected her counterpart, but no doubt she would be able to sense its presence as well. They both gave up their rings, gave up their war for the sake of this last, broken game, and that is not an arms race she would like to reinitiate in the middle of a city full of oblivious souls. As the glitches pile up and time breaks down further, the thought troubles her more: if Skaia intends to complete the transition that Jack Noir started, and have Queens rather than Kings take to the Battlefield as in the old times, she'd hate for the first battle to take place on a planet as fragile as this. Sighing, the WQ turns at last, skimming over the portrait of the Witch of Space on the wall and feeling lighter at heart the moment she lays eyes on the face of her dearest. His carapace looks weathered and worn with age, with faint creases of brittle scars she does not remember. He hangs back a few paces away, waiting for her to finish ruminating on the
view below - how many times has he joined her in contemplation on the balconies of Prospit, before leaving to wage his wars? - but before she can sign a word he sweeps her up in an embrace, crushing her claws in a tight grip.

WQ: Oh, my dear. How long has it been?

GP: Far too long.

She cups the side of his face, rolling up onto her toes to kiss the GP properly. He bends slightly so that his mouth is in reach. After only a moment, though -

Perhaps she spoke too soon. She should have known better. Some shifts in the peripherals of her awareness, and when she pulls away the shadows begin to warp and curl into unnatural shapes. They pool in one corner, a familiar voice emerging before the figure finishes solidifying.


SS: Lemme go. Goddammit!

Two figures. The WQ lays a claw on the Protector's arm when his shoulders stiffen. Another Dersite stumbles out of the shadows, caught in the harsh grip of the Black Queen's broken claw. He wrenches himself free, clacking his teeth fiercely as he yanks his shabby suit jacket back into place. His face has none of the open curiosity and resolve of the small democratic one; it's sharp and angry and identical to Noir's in almost every way.

But there's no lingering sense of a Dersite Ring about him or her mirror twin. Thank Skaia for that. The WQ gives her husband's arm one last tap - at ease - and steps forward to greet her cousin queen.

SS: Piece of shit ancient old hag -

WQ: You've returned! I thought not to see you again, so soon.

BQ: As usual, this bothersome runt causes more trouble than he's worth.

SS: I'll give you runt, you enormous bit-

The Black Queen's voice overrides him, her claws gesturing perhaps more strongly than necessary. It would take special circumstances for an Archagent to be able to shout down a Queen, but the memories of such an occurrence are still fresh in the minds of both Queens present. The BQ turns her attention to the Protector, her eyes narrowed in clear disdain, which may be as courteous as she can bother to be for a King. Skaia only knows that the White Queen has been lucky to be graced with a King who was most of the way sane throughout their iteration of game sessions. The Black Kings in all their iterations tended to be more...ruinous. If the Black Queen had tried to clone a Dersite King all those centuries ago - but it would seem that this game is broken enough that not even the BQ thought raising up a BK would be worth the devastation.

BQ: Weren't you lording it over my useless annexed subjects?

GP: We come in peace.

BQ: It's starting to come back to me...the reason why I hate Kings. So much. I could have gone another century without having to see you.

The Protector smiles winsomely, his claws slowly clasping in front of him in a familiar, silent gesture. He's acting as though he's on his best behavior in the face of the insult, of course - but it's
hard to forget that he came charging across continents in a titan class war carapacian.

WQ: All is well, I hope? We don't want to fight, and there is much I wished to discuss with you.

BQ: I did not locate my ring, if that's what you're implying. And yes, I agree. We must talk.

SS: Whatever. Can I go, you sick broad?!

Drawing attention back to himself might not have been the best idea. But Spades Slick doesn't cower when the eyes of three monarchs rest on him; he scowls, bristling, and bares teeth at all of them in turn, a knife clenched in one claw. In general, the White Queen understands that she and her cousin queen rule very differently, but it is still difficult not to frown in disapproval when the Black Queen jams her cigarette holder into the crook of the smaller Dersite's shoulder, hard enough to draw blood.

Kindness and patience and encouragement work well with Prospitians. Perhaps with Dersites, too, if they ever received it. But the Black Queen forfeited that capacity long ago, and when the Protector shifts uneasily, clearing his throat with a click of disapproval, the BQ flashes another scornful smile at him. Spades keeps ahold of his knife despite the thin weapon stabbed through his carapace, ready to retaliate at any opportunity. When the Black Queen retracts the cigarette holder he slices open a line down her forearm.

GP: Isn't he -

WQ: Calm, my dearest heart.

BQ: No, please. Free me from this wretched chain of animosity.

SS: You know you like it.

BQ: Ugh.

The Black Queen stalks away from Spades, prowling around the Prospitians as she taps her bloodied specibus against the side of her leg. She's in new wrappings, a close black sheath with no sleeves, and as she brushes past the wide brim of her hat dips low. Her weight leans heavily to one side as she takes up almost the same position at the window that the White Queen occupied earlier, her voice blooming in their minds despite her turned back.

BQ: Though if you intend to unleash your kingly wrath on anyone, you might want to aim for his double. Noir is going to be...more than an annoyance.

That is news.

WQ: Where did you find him?

BQ: Tch. Holed up with Scratch, naturally. Difficult to investigate without the Lord's proxy catching sight of us, but the duplicate has been...experimenting. I'm surprised you couldn't sense it from here. I want to flay that Witch for letting him eat her familiar.

She casts a cold, hard stare at the painting on the wall, and in that moment, the WQ has little doubt her sister means every word.

WQ: I thought she had removed the vestiges of Space from him?

BQ: It left a mark. Before now, he was not stable. Apparently he blew up a few buildings in the nineties before his atomic structure began to decohere beyond his ability to control it. But they have
stitched him together.

GP: Skaia have mercy.

BQ: Skaia has nothing to do with him. He is a walking glitch, a freak of both Time and Space. If Scratch sees a reason to keep Noir on his payroll, I see reason to be concerned. He wields Space without compunction; we can't rely on him to have an alignment with Blood like this wretch.

SS: Eat me.

WQ: At least that correlates with what I have seen.

BQ: Oh? Do tell.

WQ: I have learned of what went on after our exit from both sessions. My dear, you would have been gone by this point.

The Protector squeezes her hand, and she leans back against him.

WQ: The Lord of Time came, shattering time, and Skaia did not fight the incursion. We are indeed on our last round, and I only anticipate that the glitching will grow worse still under his influence from here on out. There may be a way out for our players, but I think this is the end of us, my dears.

Spades Slick has walked over to the desk across the room, muttering to himself as he seizes a fistful of kleenex and wads it up to scrub at his suit. The wound itself, the White Queen notes, has already sealed over with a dark scab. He snorts when the WQ finishes speaking, rolling his eyes as he tosses shreds of tissue paper into the trash can. While he picks at the new hole in his jacket and scowls, the Black Queen voices the same sort of derision.

BQ: You sound disappointed. Did you really think she would do anything? You know better.

BQ: Precious, precious Skaia won't fight back. We're just the fucked pieces in her very last game, stuck running in the same old patterns while the clock counts down. Isn't. It. Precious.

The window cracks under the force of the Black Queen's voice, a mug on the desk rattling precariously close to the edge of the counter. SS digs the tip of a pinky claw into his ear, sour faced but worryingly unaffected. The White Queen can only have faith that her sister queen would not have kept the archagent alive if there was a chance he could follow Noir's example. As far as she knows, this particular iteration never glitched as far as that.

Still. She takes a cautious step away from her Protector, making her movements as slow and telegraphed as possible so that the other Queen can sense her approach. Touch would do nothing but cause her to lash out - the oldest instinct - but the WQ eases closer to the Black Queen all the same, trying to breathe steadfastness and reassurance. Neither are things that the BQ is the type to be affected by, but perhaps it can distract her from that deep, ancient hate written into her ectobiological code with a slightly more modulated dislike.

BQ: Desist.

WQ: We are what she made us.

BQ: Spare me your sympathy.

GP: Maybe she already has.
It's enough of a non-sequitur by that point that the White Queen, who can follow his thoughts as easily as her own, can't place exactly what the GP means. The Black Queen glances up with a cutting stare, arms folded tight over her chest.

BQ: Leave the thinking to your Queen. Spare me the ramblings of a King who thinks he has an idea.

WQ: Dear?

The broad caparacian rubs a hand over the smooth crown of his head, and the White Queen exudes one last mental wave of at ease, trying to soften the edge of the Black Queen's palpable ire where it might cut too deeply into the other two minds in the room. Another old bitterness, then, and all in the room know why the Black Queen's main impression of Kings is so tainted. Between disdain for a King she considers too soft, and memories of a Baleful King too prone to listening to the songs of the Horrors before obediently going on the warpath...

GP: Being forced to live on a single world together should have caused our two peoples to engage in mutual destruction - but they cooperate.

He says it slowly, running the claw of one finger along the nailbed of another as he frowns up at the portrait of the elderly man. Beyond him, restless, Spades Slick fidgets on the edge of the desk and tosses a knife from claw to claw, watching on the three other carapacians with an unreadable glower.

GP: Hm. What else have you learned, my dear?

WQ: The small one who speaks of democracy has returned. From what the Witch of Space has told me, his body remains afflicted by power beyond his ken.

WQ: In the records directly concerning the scratch, I believe Typheus struck out at the Lord. If any of the other denizens joined him, it was lost in the course of the scratch itself.

Of course, she wonders what Cetus may be. Hephaestus might still be largely intact, but Echidna's abode lay dangerously near to where Noir's absorption of the wolf broke the land. From Prospit the Queen might have been able to make contact with the Frostmother, at least, but not from this planet. Having Horrorterrors infest denizens to reach their corresponding players...and Cetus endured it the longest. With all the glitches, would there have been enough left for the game to recycle her data at all? If anything is left, the probability that the grimdark still lays claim to Cetus is as troubling a thought as Noir risen up as a fresh abomination.

SS: What the fuck are you all on about?

BQ: ...You think those aren't glitches. Of course you do. You have too much faith.

GP: There is a pattern that cannot be explained by random cracks and broken paradox loops.

GP: If we entered the game now, what would the Battlefield look like? Who benefits, with the armies of Prospit and Derse in detente, and denizens stirring from their slumbers not to strike at players, but at an outside threat?

SS: It would look like a fucking mess, that's what.

Spades spits on the floor. Not close enough to the Protector's feet to be an outright insult, but the fact that he would at all... What is it, the White Queen wonders, that causes archagents of Derse to turn out like this? Can it be tied to ectobiological sequences when, as far as every source the WQ could reach can tell, the Midnight Crew's DNA really was wiped from the records? The others might have resurfaced through other means, but somehow Spades exists, a carapacian who should not be, who
apparently sprung forth fully formed with no other carapacian the wiser. Perhaps he was just too significant in some way for Skaia to let the Crew fade away quietly.

Or perhaps he's as much a glitch as the Noir copy. The thought that soon Skaia's will might be unrecognizable between all the glitches in time chills the WQ to the core.

SS: What're you getting at, big guy?

GP: The players. At this rate they won't have to navigate the turmoil of the Battlefield, or concern themselves with a Black King. Will a Reckoning even truly occur, or will it simply be this Lord that threatens the session onward? You call it a mess, but Skaia has brought order from chaos before.

And now the White Queen nods along, considering the possibility that the Protector has given shape too.

WQ: Then fewer game-driven obstacles may stand between them and the end. My dear, you may be on to something with this.

BQ: Or it's all just broken, and you two will die Witless and Wishful-thinking - oh wait.

Or that. But the WQ does want to believe. Better that than becoming Wretched. She bows her head in acknowledgement nonetheless, while from behind, the GP takes her hand and gives it a faint squeeze.

WQ: What will you do now?

The other queen shrugs, tapping her cigarette holder against the crack in the window. If she were to apply pressure, the whole thing might shatter and rain down on someone below. That thought, though - the White Queen cannot quite tell whether it is a genuine concern, or a faint pulse from her ring, so near and yet so far from her.

It matters little; the Black Queen brings her specibus back, fits it with a cigarette, and lights it. Spades feigns a choking gag, though the smell or smoke could hardly have reached him where he sits.

BQ: ...Help. But if Noir locates my damn ring before I do, it'll be on this one's head.

She jabs the cigarette holder back at Spades, smoke curling in ringlets through the air as she does.

SS: Shaddup. You don't need to know where it is for it to stay hidden, you powerhungry shitty hat loving tyrant.

BQ: Oh, you insufferable -

Before the pitch beginning to circulate can rile either Dersite any further, thankfully, the Protector clears his throat and interrupts.

GP: Actually, I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.

For a moment, both the Black Queen and Spades look baffled. The White Queen is amused to catch them forgetting themselves for a moment and exchanging bewildered looks - you or me? - before the BQ snaps back into vicious regality.

BQ: ...Of...me? Is this not something you two could handle under your own power? As ineffectual as your tactics can be, I assume that you know how this works by now.

BQ: Here is a hint: find your problem, and use the giant bishop to step on it. Problem solved. Favor
granted. You are welcome.

GP: It may be more complicated than that, I'm afraid. This requires both sneaking and politics. How familiar are you with the Condesce?

Another unanticipated turn.

WQ: What of her, my dear?

GP: She is doing something most curious. I should like to pay a personal visit to her. My sources say that she has gone to a villa in Minnesota.


GP: Oh, no. I had a very friendly small one sneak onto her craft in the Arctic and go with her to Minnesota.

After a moment's pause for consideration, the BQ steps away from the window, wisps of smoke curling around her shadowed face as she saunters over. She doesn't stop until she is right in front of them, and then daintily puts a toe into that last foot of neutral buffer territory between her and the GP, leaning in just as she exhales another mouthful of cigarette smoke. It's...well, flagrant enough that the other Dersite fumbles and drops his knife on the floor with a strangled sound.

BQ: Give me one good reason I should do this for you, when I have so many other things I could be doing that I know for a fact would be more pertinent to my interests?

GP: She has an armada of spaceships scattered around the planet, of a design not seen yet in observations of this world's space faring efforts.

GP: It makes me curious what she intends to use them for.

This is all highly unorthodox. The White Queen rests a claw carefully on the crook of the GP's arm, feeling the broad, toughened shell through the fabric of his garments and knowing that even now, she could crush him with a twist of her hand. Kings, bishops, rooks, knights, pawns - there is nothing on the board a Queen could theoretically defeat. It is a sensation that she accustomed herself to over many lifetimes, so long ago now that it's simply habit to ignore the awareness. She doesn't know why it strikes her now, except perhaps as a tendril of warning, a thought tucked into her mind by Skaia herself - the Black Queen would be able to crush him, too. Has done so, though that would have been too many eons ago for the GP's limited recollection of past sessions to still hold true. Back before the Queens turned their attention away from the Battlefield and toward Prospit at Skaia's behest, it wouldn't have been uncommon.

Jack Noir wasn't ahead of the curve, in that sense. He simply revived the oldest of traditions. Queen takes King.

BQ: ...Fine. Color me interested by your bumbling proposal. And what are you going to do?

That last is again directed at her, and yet the WQ finds herself, for the briefest moment, transfixed by a flare of old, white hot memory. She has no idea what she must look like; the GP presses her claw with his own, concern in his dark eyes as he searches her face, and while the sight of Spades frowning at her past the BQ's shoulder sends a smaller spark of memory through her, in that moment far older memories hold sway.

And that troubles her. Greatly. She rocks on her heels, closing her eyes and mentally gathering up the sharp edges of memory to slip back into the deep well of her mind. When she reopens her eyes,
the Black Queen is considering her with an intent stare, as though she could dip into the WQ's mind and see what lies there. Both of them, feeling the weight of their ageless age.

WQ: I shall remain here, as a consult to the players. Though I do not know how much help my knowledge will be as this game glitches further.

Before she can dwell too deeply, the WQ touches the GP's cheek and draws him in for another kiss, sweet and light and not in the least despairing. He cradles the side of her face again for a long moment, long enough to provoke Spades into making false, gagging sounds, and then they part. He offers his arm to the BQ, the model of decorum, and the Black Queen looks bitter enough to stab him with her specibus before turning and stalking back out the door, the shadows already creeping up her legs. Unperturbed, the Protector goes after her, with a curt nod for Spades and one final message for the WQ.

GP: Then we will do what we can. Goodbye, my love.

WQ: Farewell, my dear.

She turns to the window before the door has finished closing, and contemplates the end.

SS: ...What're you lookin' at, dammit?

Without the presence of the Black Queen, there's a touch less aggravation in the Dersite's voice; the angry growl sounds like force of habit rather than true animosity. His feet make a faint thump as he jumps off the desk and shuffles awkwardly, neither moving nearer to the WQ or to the exit.

WQ: It is a nice world, isn't it?

SS: No. It's a pisspoor, glorified dirt rock, and I can't wait until it gets wasted. We done here?

WQ: Ah, well. To each their own. I've rarely seen host planets before their Reckoning; they feel very alive. It is nice to be able to appreciate it before the end.

SS: Okay, that understanding, pansier-than-thou bullshit? That's fucking annoying. Goddamn. I think you just gave me a fucking ulcer.

With that, the carapacian brushes off his pants and starts to leave, ignoring her in a way that makes it evident that he is not ignoring her in the slightest. The WQ tactfully does not call him out on this. As he goes to the door, however, she adds one last thing.

WQ: Where will you go?

SS: None of your shitty business.

WQ: Because if you intend to return to consult with the Knight of Blood, we are going to the same place.

SS: ..................

SS: Oh, goddammit. Come on, then.

---

TG: john
TG: dude
TG: the stereotypically significant espionage bird crows at midnight
TG: or some shit like that
EB: and the blue owl hoots at dawn.
EB: i don't think we're doing this right.
TG: you should have seen some of the suggestions rose was coming up with
TG: 'the violin sobs in the autumn wind'
EB: oh yeah, rose's are great!
EB: one time we had an entire conversation about the avocado harvest on the ides of March.
TG: what were you actually talking about
EB: actually...maybe that wasn't code...we might have just been talking about avocados.
EB: it was a while ago.
TG: you guys have the weirdest friendship
TG: like theres weird as in your new honkfriend thing
TG: and then theres weird as in whatever strange shit you and rose get up to in your spare time
TG: and somehow that second one is weirder than the first
TG: props dude
EB: thanks, i think.
TG: but on the subject of the honkfriend thing
EB: oh god.
TG: when i said we would get you another boy/girl/otherfriend
TG: i was mostly bullshitting
EB: it just kind of happened! in the heat of the moment!
TG: i dont know if youve noticed but it keeps happening john
TG: present tense
TG: ongoing
TG: continuous
EB: well, i mean, that's...not entirely a bad thing, right?
EB: on account of if me and karkat stopped now gamzee would freak.
EB: and he's not that bad as long as he's not trying to murder people!
TG: living is cool ill give you that one
TG: but as your number one bro joined to you in holy broship through the power vested in me by
our standing proposal i gotta tell you that keeping a dude from murdering other people sounds like a
really shady ass basis for a long term relationship
TG: but hell man i still have no idea how quadrants work for you people
EB: i'm pretty sure they don't work.
EB: everything's made up and the points don't matter.
EB: also the only reason karkat's not mad at me is because we're all confused and it sucks.
TG: bruh
EB: ...bruh?
TG: youre doing the thing again
EB: what thing?
TG: the wallowing thing
TG: probably while karkat is sitting two feet away from you
TG: that guy is always dtp right
EB: what does that even mean?
TG: down 2 pap
EB: hahahah, that's true!
TG: so ask him
EB: ask him what?
TG: if hes pissed
EB: we're trying to keep arguments to a minimum since -
TG: dude i will ride for you in bro hell
TG: but so help me i will invite shouts mcgee and your mutual honkfriend to this chat
EB: dave, don't -
TG: are you ready to get fucked up
-- terminallyCapricious [TC] has joined the chat! --
TC: honk.
TG: hold your honk horses i didnt invite you yet
EB: yeah, he tends to...show up.
TG: it's like sollux. if you mention him, he knows.
TC: ;o)
TG: no hang on this is good
EB: it is?
TG: yo makara you free for a second
TC: sure.
TG: good your boyfriends need to sort their shit out
TG: come hang with me
EB: seriously, dave? this is so not a good idea.
TG: my thinking is this
TG: if a future dave hasnt come back to kick me in the balls
TG: its probs a solid plan
TG: this line of reasoning has yet to bite me in the ass
EB: or, you know, he hasn't come back to warn you because you die.
TG: enough of your silly logic
TG: TC you in or what
TC: I'M IN MOTHERFUCKER.

Dave has been lying on his back on the couch, his cape spilling over one side and his legs hooked over one of the arms. Gamzee says that last sentence out loud, and Dave's head dips as a pair of feet land on the cushion. He blinks and mashes his sunglasses into place with the palm of his hand as the troll leans over him, perching his butt on the back of the couch.

It's only creepy because when John or Jade teleport places, they do it with wind or green light flying every which way. Gamzee just - shows up. Like he's elbowing reality until it makes room for him, even when he doesn't quite fit. Dave hears a faint hum in his head that Rose told him is the equivalent of Gamzee copping a mental feel, but it doesn't hurt or anything. Not compared to some of the shit Horrorterrors can dish out. Still - "Dude, buy me dinner or something before you hit second base, alright?"

Gamzee blinks at him, and the buzzing stops. At the kitchen counter, Oriole yanks an earbud out and looks up from his Really Important Secret Note to glower at Dave. The orange feathers on the side of his face bristle. "I can leave before you pull this kind of shit. Jesus."

"It's, like, metaphorical. Calm your bird tits." He can't resist adding, "Also, if we're taking names in vain, use John's."

Oriole throws the pencil so hard it almost pings Dave between the eyes. Nice shot, actually. Dave has to pause time to snag it in midair before it beans him. "If you can't sext your weird crushes in silence, I don't need to put up with this," Oriole grumps, crumpling the paper in his hand. He makes for the exit, which has been propped open so that people can enter temporary casa Strider at their leisure. His wings fan out like orange sheets in a really goddamn sassy way as he walks out of sight.

Okay. Dave envies that. All the trolls get wings, but no, humans just get the dumb floaty thing that Rose keeps bugging him to practice. Talk about unfair.

"I don't have crushes," Dave says, belatedly. Oriole is long gone by this point, which means only
Gamzee hears. Damn. Dave has rolled half off the couch, too, so he has to haul himself back onto it before he slides off.

"If you say so, brother," Gamzee says. The guy sounds normal - when Dave slouches in a different position so he's not lying with his fragile skull really fucking close to the troll's heel, Gamzee even looks normal - aside from the juggalo makeup deal, but Dave tries not to judge. Gamzee has all his limbs attached and his head isn't rolling around doing an impression of the Exorcist, and isn't that all they ask from people around here? The standards are so low it would take a world-class limbo dancer to miss them.

Of course, Gamzee could whip out his championship limbo dancing trophy any second now. Nothing is impossible.

He feels like he needs to explain more. "Bird me was raised by parties unknown. Dude does not understand how one true brohood works." When Gamzee nods but stays silent, his forearms resting on his knees in a relaxed slump as he stares into the middle distance, just past Dave's nervously tapping foot - that's when Dave gets uneasy. The memory of having all forms of communication cut off is too fresh in his mind for him to be down with silence, especially when he invited the cause of [Babelon] to hang out with him like a total moron. Shit. Shit, think of something else to say. "You're not still pissed about that ICP video thing, right?"

Heavy lidded eyes skim over Dave's, and it's pretty stupid to bring up shitty memories of that one time you fucking wrecked a guy's religion. But acknowledgement is acknowledgement. "Because I would say people don't hold grudges and shit about past life fuck ups, but obviously they totally do. And it was a dick move. So. Uh. Sorry about that," he adds.

Gamzee's hand comes up, waving around in the air before resting on the back of the troll's neck; he scratches idly. "I'm as chill as all what's can be," he says. Then he leans back and kicks his feet out at the same time, sliding down to sit on the actual couch with a thump. It puts him abruptly on Dave's level, and he sprawls one long leg out to rest on the table.

He doesn't seem to have anything else to add after that, though, so Dave has to scrounge around for another question to keep the flow going. "Oh. You're not down with the clown or whatever anymore?" Juggalos, man, how do they even work. That past Dave hit a nerve by sending the video - maybe one of the last nerves Gamzee had before turning into a Horrorterror-ridden rage monster - and now nothing? With his track record, Gamzee doesn't seem the type to let shit like that go.

Or else dumping all of Derse on top of Dave's head was payback enough. Who knows how the inner workings of this guy's mind work? Dave doesn't think even Rose would want to poke around in Gamzee's subconscious.

"Nah. You showed me the motherfucking ignorance of my ways, motherfucker." One of Gamzee's arms creeps up to rest along the back of the couch, and Dave eye it warily before he gets a hold of himself. "Helped me get all sorts of realizations on. You help me, I help you - we're chill as blood, brother."

Right, right. Killing people is helping. "Then why do you wear the face paint stuff still?"

The purpleblood shrugs. "Why do you wear shades, motherfucker? Because I like it."

Actually, Dave wears shades because Bro busted his ass from day one to keep emotions on the downlow. But he looks at the smile painted on Gamzee's face, and how it almost distracts from the flat corners of his mouth underneath it, and hell, who is Dave to judge a mask? "So...we're good?"
Gamzee smiles, his lips curving to match the lines of his paint. "Ain't anything but good."

"Sweet."

That appears to be that. Gamzee tilts his head back to stare at the ceiling, and hums something to himself so faintly Dave can't place it. After enough not-quite-awkward silence has passed, his thumbs find their way back to his phone.

EB: dave?
EB: gamzee is with you, right?
EB: he just kind of - went.
TG: yeee
EB: and uh...everything's okay?
TG: not dead yet
TG: i think hes pretty calm
EB: huh. that's a relief!
EB: maybe we should time this for future reference.
TG: way ahead of you man
TG: i mean i wouldn't stick him in a room with eridan or vriska or some shit
TG: due to those two not being stellar examples of peace and tranquility and oneness with the universe
EB: oneness with the universe?
TG: you know what i mean
EB: oneness with the universe.
TG: shut up
TG: ill oneness your face
EB: iiii have too much respect for your mom to type what i nearly typed just now. :/
TG: do it john
TG: finish the damn meme
EB: no way!
TG: then go back to talking with your small shouty boyfriend we dont have all day

"...S'it true?"

Dave shouldn't zone out while Gamzee is in the room. He didn't think it through before spontaneously volunteering himself as temporary clown overseer, but - yeah. Responsibility. He forces the phone back down into his pocket and folds his legs up on the couch with a mental shake. He's faster than Gamzee (probably) as long as he doesn't get caught off guard. "Is what true?" he asks, hoping that he didn't miss an entire evil monologue or some shit like that. "If you heard about it from Rose, none of it is true. She likes messing with people."

"God dammit, Oriole. "What? No. Weren't you just doing the -" Dave has no idea what to call the gesture he makes at his own temples "- spying thing? John and me are bros."

"I read," Gamzee says, all clipped and noncommittal as hell, and what does that mean? Dave has no idea. "But you, hermano - you think around and around and around in circles and never think on it."
He squints at Dave with eyes narrowed to purple slits, and there's the humming in the back of Dave's head again. "Can't tell if you're making noise to make noise, or in *motherfucking denial.*"

That tone of voice isn't worrying or anything. "Jeez, I thought we were gonna rap or something, since that's the only hobby I know we have in common. When did we decide to talk about my massive broner for John?" The words come out too fast; Dave's tripping on them. Did he just make a horrible pun with neither Jade nor John here to appreciate it? Why. "Karkat and I already had an entire 'stay away from my man' sequence, let's not do it again." Meanwhile, as discreetly as he can, Dave starts inching away. Karkat being jealous over nothing is entertaining up to a certain point; *Gamzee* being jealous might end in Dave losing important things. Like his legs. Or face. The world would be a darker place without Dave's eyebrows there to improve the view for everyone around him. Does *Gamzee* even dig John enough for jealousy to be a thing, or is Dave just beyond unlucky?

"But you up and swore to him," *Gamzee* says. He sounds unconvinced.

Dave rolls his eyes. "The proposal thing is a joke. He still owes my family cattle from last time the dowry fell through. There is like, a serious cattle deficit that needs to be made up here." Though when Dave thinks about it, demanding cattle out of John might just end with Jade teleporting in a *literal* herd of cattle, if she decides to take up the reins as the only other blood member of the Egbert-Harley clan still living and not disqualified by virtue of being a unrepentant dick. Wait no, Jake and Jane count now. Whatever. It could start another round of pranksmanship that Dave is not prepared for, and if those four all end up in cahoots, *everyone's* screwed.

In spite of Dave's explanation, *Gamzee* has moved on from suspicious squinting to leaning in close, a frown under his smile and oh no. Not another jealous troll husband. Where does *John* find these people? How does Dave always end up the unwitting mistress? Why does no one accuse *Rose* of being John's other woman, so that at least it's a mutual Strilonde struggle?

...Alright, the whole lesbians thing might be her excuse. God dammit. Should Dave have been wrangling a fresh herd for *Rose's* dowry? How *do* dowries work in the first place, because Dave isn't sure he's ever been clear on that shit. Fuck. *Gamzee* makes a muffled noise of frustration, and scratches the side of his horn. "Motherfucker, you think weird."

That's pretty much the last straw. Having *Gamzee* of all people call him weird is where Dave draws the line. He needs to lay down some shit, here. "Man, no. *No.*" He gets to his feet so he can better jab his finger at *Gamzee's* face without sticking it in biting range. "I don't want to pap on John. I don't want fucking hate makeouts with Karkat." *Gamzee* is staring at him with eyes like saucers. "Fucking hell, I know it's hard to resist this sweet bod of mine! But I will brozone the entire world if I have to! Your quadrants can't catch me now, suckers!" In the end, just flipping the bird is easier and more poignant, so Dave lets it speak for him.

"Did someone say quadrants?"

"That was, uh, definitely someone saying cuadrantes."

"No, I said *no* quadrants," Dave insists, spinning and raising an eyebrow accusingly as Tavros rolls past the open door, Nepeta hard on his wheels with a pair of crutches under her arms.

*Oh shit Nepeta.*

She can't seem to get around Tavros's wheelchair, so she stands there blinking and Dave can only imagine she's not having more of a reaction because her vision hasn't adjusted to the relative darkness
of the room compared to the hallway. Apart from the ginger way she leans on the crutches, she looks
damn fucking sprightly for someone who was laid up with severe internal injuries a while ago. Her
trenchcoat lays slung over one of the handles of the wheelchair, and without it Dave can pick out
bruises where the baggy black-and-blue tank top hangs too loose in the arms and exposes the sides of
her ribcage. "Oh, really? That's a shame, beclaws I was just telling Tavpurros how I really need to
make a new hero shipping wall!" she says, while Tavros nods. "There have been so many
developments!"

Dave looks from her to Gamzee.

Who stares at Nepeta with the creepiest look of fascination ever.

TG: PROBLEM
EB: WHAT?!
TG: MAJOR PROBLEM
EB: DAVE YOU CAN'T JUST SCREAM PROBLEM AND EXPECT PEOPLE TO KNOW
WHAT YOU MEAN!
EB: SPECIFY, DAVE, SPECIFY!
TG: OH GOD WHY AM I TEXTING YOU WHY-

Nepeta and Tavros appear to notice Gamzee at the same time. "You!" Nepeta says, eyes wide, while
Tavros raises his hand and then yanks it back.

Dave does not scream. He just makes an unintelligible not-screaming sound, throws his phone away,
and tries to understand why Nepeta is walking into the room instead of sprinting away as fast as her
crutches can carry her. Gamzee is also in motion, sitting up from his slouch with avid interest in his
eyes.

"Meowtherfucker!" Nepeta screeches, and hits Gamzee in the shin with one of her crutches. It snaps
in two on impact, and she wobbles dangerously. Tavros skids forward to nudge her back upright,
looking torn as he meets Dave's eyes with equal parts terror and apology.

Somehow, Nepeta is still not done. "That's for beating me up!" She sacrifices her last remaining
crutch to whack Gamzee upside the chin. That one snaps, too, but Gamzee gets knocked backward
at the same time, a thin pocket of purple blood welling up where his teeth smash into his lip. "That
one's fur hurting Equius!" Then, with no more crutches and Tavros doing more to haul her back to
safety than support her, Nepeta jumps forward with a hiss of pain, hooks an arm around Dave's neck
with zero warning as he finally makes an attempt to get between her and death clown incarnate, and
uses him as a pivot so she can haul her leg back and kick Gamzee in the crotch. "Don't ever touch
my Equius again!"

Okay, Dave is kind of a little impressed.

And proud. He is proud to have been a part of that moment, even if he's getting choked out by a
short cat troll in the process. Goddamn.

Then his admiration shuts down and rationality kicks back into gear as he remembers just who
Nepeta is attempting to lay a smackdown on. "Wait no wait nononono-" he babbles, as she lets go of
him and tries to fucking divebomb Gamzee by flinging her entire body at him elbow-first. Dave
catches her in what might be one of the best midair maneuvers of his goddamn life, except that he
does it by snagging her around the ribs and she lets out a yowling shriek of pain. God, you'd think
he'd have figured out a better way of manhandling people with broken ribs after the Karkat episode.
"Oh shit, oh shit! Sorry!"
"Lemmeowt him!" she yells back, and was that a badly forced pun, or is everything just getting scrambled to the point of not-sense-making again?

Thankfully, just as Gamzee rises up like a vengeance-driven slinky to rip their spines out through their spleens, the wind picks up and John appears with a very familiar projectile lifted up over his head -

"JOHN, IF YOU THROW ME ONE MORE T-"

"JUST THINK CALMING THOUGHTS, KARKAT!"

- and lobs Karkat at Gamzee.

"This is the problem, right?!" John asks, whipping around to face Dave. "Or did I just throw Karkat for nothing?"

Dave looks down at Nepeta and then back up at John, who blinks, points to the door, and belly flops on top of Karkat and Gamzee to buy Dave more time to flashstep away. Goddamn, what a trooper. Sometimes he thinks he could kiss that kid.

...And thoughts like that are probably why he's confusing even to Gamzee. God dam, he needs to stop doing that. While Karkat expels a flurry of swear words like an extinction burst (something involving a lot of fucks and the threat of Betty Crocker pie crust - who even knows), Nepeta kicks her feet between Dave's to trip him up. "No! No running!"

Dave would beg to differ. "Yes, lots of running!"

In response, Nepeta reaches out and digs her claws into the doorframe as they pass it. "Think like an apex predator, Dave!"

"Nepeta, uh, now is really not the time for that, I think!" Tavros chips in. He quickly veers backward so that Dave has more room to move, but even that isn't enough. Any and all progress in getting Nepeta a safe distance away is officially at a halt. How did she dig her claws in that deep?

"It's always time for apex purredator!" she insists, slowly dragging them back into the ground despite Dave digging his heels in. She somehow gets an elbow in around the doorframe and drags them further still.

Why does someone this much shorter than him have so much upper body strength?!

Gamzee is pinned, but for how much longer when he can teleport? Dave lifts a leg, plants his foot against the wall, and uses it for more leverage.

As though the situation couldn't get any more surreal, Tavros whips off his shirt and flaps his not-god wings. "Discúlpeme!" He wraps an arm around Dave's waist and the two of them start to drag Nepeta back out into the hall with their powers combined. But holy fuck is this awkward. All they need now is for Equius to show up and demand to know what the hell is happening; only then they will truly reach maximum awkwardness overdrive.

Gamzee's voice cuts through the awkward terror as he rolls his head back so that his neck is exposed, and smiles at them. "Nah, motherfuckers, it's okay. We're all chill in here," he says, patting Karkat on the head as the other troll and John do their best to cuddle the homicide out of him. "Nepsis got good reason to bring the motherfucking pain, what with me doing her ill. Wanna take another swing, sister?"

Dave and Tavros exchange glances, but Dave gets zero help there; Tavros looks at a loss, his wings fluttering madly as he hovers in place. So traveling around with Gamzee for weeks hasn't given him anymore insight than Dave's got. Dave doesn't want to be the one to make the call that gets Nepeta
killed, dammit. "We've got him. Go!" John says, and at the same time Karkat says, "Just get her the fuck out of here, you braindead asswipes!" Which is easier said than done.

Before they can try again, Nepeta goes limp, all the battle-ready tautness seeping out as she slowly un-hooks her claws from the wall, leaving long digs in the paint. There goes whatever measly damage deposit they may or may not have paid. She coils her body back and around to hook an elbow around Dave's head. Her shirt must definitely be borrowed from Equius - it radiates the faint smell of old sweat even through the Bounty freshness of being freshly washed. Nibbling on her lip, she looks down at Gamzee. Dave should take her and go long, or some sports metaphor like that. "...Are you going to apawlogize?" she asks.

Gamzee shrugs, his horns scraping on the floor as he tilts his head back further. "Sorry it hurt," he says. "Ain't sorry I did it, though, that ain't even a motherfucking thing." When the purpleblood breathes his throat bobs in a faint swallow, and Dave feels Nepeta's nails prickle through his hair. "Would've finished you if I could, but these sweet motherfuckers are persistent." His hand drifts over Karkat's side.

"Holy mothergrub feces, why are you people still here?!!" Karkat demands, furious. Then he twitches, his red eyes skittering from Nepeta to the line of Gamzee's exposed neck - and his expression switches at the drop of a hat. He throws an arm over Gamzee's throat and rises into a crouch. "Piss off," he says, this time a little less desperate and a little more...growly?

Whatever. It's not Dave's job to figure out Karkat's malfunction. He's too busy being Nepeta's new human-shaped climbing post. He shifts his grip from her ribs to her hips, so at least if she decides to lunge again he won't be making things worse when he drags her out of here.

"You could let her," Gamzee says. "Would be fair."

"Absolutely fucking not!" Karkat flattens himself out a little, still covering Gamzee's neck. John appears to be swapping his attention between carefully patting Gamzee's cheek and watching Karkat anxiously.

Nepeta shakes her head, hard enough that Dave wobbles. Belatedly, Tavros seems to realize he can stop helping, and lets go of Dave to sit down in his wheelchair and give the wings a break. "No," the oliveblood says, slowly, like she's tasting the words before saying them aloud. "I could, you know. But in this purrticular instance...Equius got better." She cracks her knuckles, lips widening from a pout to a crooked, toothy smile. "Hurt him again, and then we'll have a purroblem."

"He wants to hurt you," Dave points out. "Until you're dead and shit. Seriously, that's the issue here. Just saying."

He yanks his head back as, without warning, four razor sharp metal claws pop out of Nepeta's gloves with a shing! Fucking hell, she's Wolverine. Dave didn't even notice those things, and he should have - Bro would smack him for not noticing concealed clawkind right by his face. "Well, then he can cut that out until the game starts! Otherwise I'll mess him up good," Nepeta says, her chest shivering with faint laughter.

"Until the game," Gamzee says a beat later. And he smiles so fiercely that his eyes squeeze close.

The talk with Aradia is less of a talk than it is complete and total bullshit.

But she makes the traditional overture of inviting him to the roof after banning him from the latest
group memo, and Dave's pretty sure the Strider code of conduct says you can't turn down a rooftop callout. It's just not done. Hell, if she wants to strife one out for one ever reason, he wouldn't say no. Everyone here is wound up way too goddamn tight - maybe if they started training and having practice fights it would let off some steam before someone blows their lid.

It's a nice clear day, anyway. Sun shining, a healthy breeze that messes up his hair in a fond kind of way when it sweeps past him, no giant entities of a horrific, tentacled nature in sight. Unlike most rooftops in Dave's experience, this one is paved smooth, jazzed up with a small pool and an empty firepit, and has a couple of stray chairs scattered around; it still feels unfinished, like most of the building, but also it is entirely possible that's just supposed to be some 'modern aesthetic.' Whatever. Strifing up here is gonna be interesting, to say the least, and now Dave has the overwhelming need to shove someone into the pool at the first opportunity. He's surprised more people haven't wandered up here already to take advantage of this.

He doesn't draw a sword when he catches a flutter of red fabric in his peripheral vision, but it's a close call. She's turning in slow circles on her tiptoes by the edge of the firepit; her coiled, gnarled horns look heavier in the sunlight with her hair pulled into a knotted twist over her shoulder. When he thinks hard enough, he can almost hear the sound of time counting off the seconds in chimes instead of beats. Spooky, haunted music box chimes. "Planning your next corpse party? We could toast s'mores and shit as appetizers," he says, giving the place another onceover. "We'd need to buy a ton of pool floaties if we wanted to send them all off in a burial at pool."

"Is that a thing?" Aradia says, with a crooked smile. Like she knows the ironies are strong right now. "And here I thought I'd kept better track of different human funereal practices over the years!"

"It is if you're us, and your corpse tends to just rise up from the grave anyway. Then yeah, pool floaties and s'mores. And once they resurrect, they get first pick at the gods-only ice cream bar." Dave takes out his phone and starts making notes on this, just in case. While his thumbs go to work, he raises an eyebrow at Aradia, typing without looking down. "What do you think, live music? I don't know if Bro could handle DJing, he has kinda this thing about not letting people die."

Aradia snickers. "No one's going to die here. Probably. We could always have a belated party for Equius and Vriska and Terezi, though!"

Oh, wow. Holy shit. "You mean, you and Gamzee don't actually plan to murder people in their sleep while we're here?" Dave asks. His thumb swipes over to Pesterchum before he remembers that no one will be paying attention right now. Ugh.

"Alas - not that I've noticed. Sollux needs more time to fix some of the hiccups in his program. Gamzee can't always be accounted for, but he does seem to be caught in the throes of this interspecies disease we call young love. So." After Dave finishes firing off heads up messages to
Rose and Jade and John, Aradia steps down from the firepit and taps a claw on the screen of his phone. She's playing a dangerous goddamn game, there, since the thing already has a massive crack in one corner from Dave throwing it earlier. "There was something I wanted to talk to you about."

Thank god, they're finally going to have this conversation? Dave's been waiting on the edge of his seat for days - more like the middle of the seat, with a brief period of lounging back and not really caring much anymore, but there's no need to overextend the metaphor. "Uh, yeah, I got that impression like, three days ago, and then you just kept not showing up whenever I had spare time. What's up?"

"You need something to distract you at this particular moment. Otherwise you'd probably go down and try to read the memo over someone's shoulder, and that would never do!" Aradia balances with her arms out on either side, dipping a toe into the cold pool water. Dave follows her, though he keeps a couple of feet between him and the pool - no need to tempt fate. If he's thought of shoving someone in, John and Jade probably had the same thought hours ago, and they could strike at any moment. "Out of the two of us, you have the best odds of surviving to see the end of this, but only if you play your cards right. Getting cozy with the new Muse wouldn't be the best plan!"

Dave stops. So, it's going to be one of those conversations. The ones where he has little to no clue what's happening. "What," he says, flatly, since it covers pretty much his entire response. Something about what she said makes his skin crawl - he can't tell if it's her casual disregard for her own demise (which is kind of passé, by now) or the mention of a whatchamacallit - muse? Both, probs both. Yeah.

The troll doesn't stop for him, twirling and drawing her other foot through the water backwards as she keeps turning. "They'll tell us about the details later. Right now, there's something I've been curious about. Do you remember how you lost your voice?"

He frowns. "Remember...what?"

Then Aradia darts in close and reaches up to touch the side of Dave's cheek. Her hand radiates warmth, and the close contact makes Dave uncomfortable. His whole face wants to twitch and yank away, but he forces it to stay still and expressionless while Aradia watches for a reaction. She's not going to get one, dammit. "You don't remember at all, do you? What really happened that day," she says at last, with a small, sympathetic smile. "Well, let's replay it, then. It's - important that you understand, I think. Especially considering what it cost you. What it has been costing you."

The transition is pretty damn smooth. Dave's feet feel like they stay on solid ground the whole time - but when he blinks and drags his eyes away from Aradia's, they're inside a house.

Like. What the shit.

He hasn't been to a lot of houses in his life - the Egberts' place was the only one he spent any notable amount of time in, and that experience is pretty much tainted forever. This place has none of Samuel Egbert's hyper-controlling, secretly-evil-yet-homey vibe; the countertops have dishes set out to air-dry on towels patterned with blue boxes - a weirdly familiar tactic. There's a mug half full of cold coffee on the windowsill with the lipstick print of someone's lower lip dark along the brim, and a bunch of mechanical parts and sheets of paper and colorful toys lay scattered on the table in a jumble. Someone has filled a bowl with water and stuck a bunch of cut wildflowers in it to give the place some pizzazz, but they're looking pretty wilted and the water has gone green. Also, a horrible printed out, framed picture of a wizard in purple robes glares down at it from where the frame rests against the wall. Just down a tiny stretch of hall, he can make out the flickering light of a muted television in the far room.
Dave steps backward, Aradia's hand falling away without a sound, and he scares the piss out of himself when his foot lands on a heap of legos just sitting out in the middle of the kitchen floor. It doesn't hurt like stepping on legos, aka tiny nuggets of plastic hate, usually would, but it startles him and he stares at Aradia accusingly. "Where the hell are we?"

"You don't recognize it at all?" Aradia doesn't sound pitying, just curious. One of her quartz musicboxes makes slow circles in the air beside her, illuminating the dark kitchen with a faint glow and casting a blue glaze across her eyes. "It was your home."

It's not familiar. At all. His hands brush against the papers on the table as he steps over the lego heap, and he glances over handwriting that looks scribbly but with familiar, wavering loops. On a hunch, he goes to the window over the sink (full of dishes in varying states of clean) and raises the half-empty mug to his nose. Holy shit, whoever mixed this coffee must have made it at least fifty percent Bailey's, because he thinks he could get tipsy off the fumes alone. His stomach does an uneasy flip, something rising up in his throat, and he puts the mug back down before the smell can make him dizzy. A second onceover of the kitchen, and he finally notices the neat row of empty booze bottles stacked in the tiny alcove above the trash can.

Still definitely not familiar. Something moves along the floor, low to the ground and fucking fast, and Dave yanks his feet back away from it before registering what he's seen. Tiny hands start stacking the heap of legos back up into a messy tower, turning over a yellow brick with a curved edge and an eye on the side in deep meditation before shoving it into the side of a mouth to gnaw on.

Dave is not used to seeing past Daves young enough to be wearing pajamas covered in yellow ducks. "Oh, no. Hell no." The younger Dave carries on with his very important lego stacking business, ignoring Dave as he nearly elbows a glass off the counter. "Why are we here?"

Aradia hops up to sit on the counter opposite and drums a heel against the dishwasher. "We're not, really. This is an echo - more a memory than anything. Jumping back this far in time would cause more ripples than we can afford."

"Then why-"

"Mmmph. Lil man, what're you doing?"

Dave rams his elbow into the glass so hard it should by all rights crack open when it flies into the sink. But a tiny Dave zips in at the last second, catching the glass with belly pudge, and putting it back on top of the counter without looking directly at Dave once. A blink, and the little kid is back on the kitchen floor, plucking a red lego out of the mess and using it to top off the tower. Before he can start on another project, Bro wanders out of the dark room across the hall mid-yawn, part of his hair flattened out and the rest sticking up at an incredible angle and he doesn't have his shades on. It's like accidentally being flashed by someone. Good god.

"No, no legos, buddy. It's - what time is it?" Bro keeps muttering, mostly to himself. Dave doesn't think he's heard a Southern accent that strong come out of Bro's mouth except, like, when he deadpan plays it up on purpose. For that matter, when has Bro ever been that wiry? He's short at least thirty pounds of muscle, and the overall result looks so unnervingly like Dirk that Dave's honestly getting hit over the head with the 'clone' thing all over again. He walks past Aradia's back, scratching his hair, then the stubble along the side of his jaw, before stooping to scoop up the younger Dave. The kid latches onto Bro's unkempt shirt and digs a heel in.

Then he takes the yellow lego out of his mouth, drool dribbling down the sides, and says, "Nine, Boh. Nine thee two."
"9:32? Shit, that nap ran way too long. That's not even a nap anymore, kid." A sigh. "You're never getting back to sleep, are you?"

Tiny!Dave holds up the yellow lego piece and baps Bro on the shoulder with it, as though to say of course not. "Nine thee thee."

"Thought you were workin' on your R's with Rose?"

This is apparently cause for excitement; Dave scrambles up in a flash and ends up hanging off Bro's shoulder, clinging to his arm tightly. "Ose! Where's Ose?"

Bro snorts. Aradia obligingly shuffles her butt to the side so that he can open the dishwasher and take out a sippy cup. "So in other words, you're just bein' a little shit because Rue ain't here to tell you to enunciate shit right," he says, opening the tiny fridge and pulling out a jug of apple juice. "Diabolical."

"Ohmygoshwhyarewewatchingthis?" Dave demands, when it becomes clear that Bro and the younger Dave are sitting down at the kitchen table and ignoring the other two people in the room completely. An echo, she said. But what's the goddamn point? They could be participating in memo shenanigans, but instead they're watching this? "Seriously, why?"

"Because it was significant - significant enough that I felt the ripples from a different continent. But you've forgotten. I suppose you were very young." Aradia combs her claws through her hair, the black polish of her nails stark in the half light.

"Me not being able to say Rose is significant? Bullshit." Dave's - not even sure why this is making him feel uncomfortable. It's just like watching something private and personal, and okay, it is private and personal, sort of. He doesn't want Aradia here, watching; heck, he doesn't want to be watching, which says something about him on a deep, subconscious level. Or whatever. "Why do you know about this if I didn't remember, anyway?"

"Significant," Aradia repeats. "You don't remember this. You don't remember living in close proximity to one of your fellow players, and you don't remember what happened this night, when the timeline shuddered over a break so jarring that it still lingers, disrupting the flow, years later." She turns the music box at her side with a claw, so that it lets out a series of soft, falling notes, and Dave feels the time within the bubble of the echo fast-forward. At the table, Bro lifts a cordless phone, speaks into it too fast to be decipherable, and Dave sucks down the apple juice - so basically, things haven't changed at all. Other than the fact that Dave used to be a talking freak of nature instead of just a normal one. Good to know. "It starts to split, right about...now."

Aradia covers the top of the music box with her whole claw so that the sound muffles, and time resumes its regular speed. "Next time, don't forget to pack your shit when you're trying to figure out where to stash the moonshine, Rue." Bro finishes, folding the paper in front of him into perfect halves and solidifying the creases with a press of his thumb nail, until all he has left is a tiny paper throwing star. "Yeah. Uh-huh. Late-"

The knock on the door makes Dave's stomach lurch the wrong way. God, is it getting hot in here? Maybe he should be glad he doesn't remember living in Georgia, or whatever. Bro stiffens with the phone still next to his ear - and then keeps talking, in a much lower volume. "Here, talk to Dave for a sec before you pass out. Gotta get the door real quick."

Rue's reply isn't audible from where the older Dave sits, and Bro passes off the handheld to the toddler without a sound. Dave catches the minute tilt as Bro's eyes have darted to the clock on the wall - too late to have visitors, obviously not Rue, something's up - and then he goes to the fridge to
retrieve a sword from where it's resting next to a fly swatter on top of the machine before heading down the hall toward the front door. The mental image of Bro accidentally grabbing the fly swatter should give Dave a good snort of laughter, and yet...

"Why are we watching this?" Dave says, feeling his guts tying themselves in knots. This - they shouldn't be here.

Aradia looks at him, her eyes gone soft and dark with maybe-tears. "Because you don't want to."

Toddler Dave, happy to trade the empty sippy cup for the phone at first, holds the phone upside down without appearing to listen to the rustle of noise coming from the speaker. He watches Bro go down the hall just like Dave and Aradia. Bro slinks up to the door with practiced caution but he's not fast enough. Dave's been trying to ignore it, but Bro's - slower. Than Dave is used to adjusting for, anyway. He's almost regular human speed, and he looks like he strifes part-time, not out of an incessant, paranoid need to train and be ready for anything. When he gets to the door he looks out through the peephole, instead of checking one of a dozen cameras that would tell him who was approaching the booby-traps outside the apartment back home in Houston.

And he opens the door a crack, calling through it to the person standing just outside the second screen door. "Can I help you?"

"Do it already. I am bored of waiting," an unfamiliar, husky voice says.

A very familiar voice replies, "Really, now. At least try to maintain some level of professional courtesy."

"Fuck your courtesy. They are within, and I have no patience for you. Do it."

"Fine. If you insist."

Bro wrenches back away from the door, flying into a fighting stance (but not pulling a puppet, or diving for a vent - does this house even have vents big enough for him?) as someone rips it and the screen door out of the frame and tosses it aside. Three people walk in, two of them strangers. One is a woman with raven dark hair knotted at the nape of her neck, baring her teeth like a shark on speed without a hint of an actual smile, her hat bright orange and the coattails of her suit dragging behind her on the ground. After her comes a man with a bright red hat, his jaw set in a mild underbite as he worries at his top lip, with a slow, sluggish gait.

The third is Diamonds Droog, cold and poised and flicking on the light switch on the wall beside her without blinking at the sight of Bro with a sword drawn. "Let's get this done, then," she says, smacking her cue stick against the palm of her hand. Both of the other invaders stare at her back with near identical, bitter looks - the woman more full of unmasked hate, her thin eyes burning with anger - but Droog doesn't seem bothered by the fact that her apparent backup looks more likely to knife her in the back than Bro himself.

"Get out of my house," Bro snarls, and the little Dave at the table drops the phone, stirring with a faint noise of distress while Rue's garbled voice rises in volume.

"Sorry. Business is business." Droog sighs. "I would have preferred doing this a little more discreetly, but it would seem this particular job has an angry little timer, and I don't have time to fool around sneaking the boy out from under your expendable little nose." She smiles, all false politeness and obvious disdain. "Give us the boy, and I'll only hurt you a little."

"That is not going to work," the woman behind her says. "Just kill him. You are good at killing
people, are you not?"

Droog doesn't get to reply. A blur lashes out at her, and she blocks Bro's strike with the cue stick effortlessly. Dave assumed there weren't any booby-traps lying around, but Bro kicks down at a corner of the paneling lining the wall and the rack piled high with shoes launches itself at Droog's legs, trailing kids' sneakers and nailing her in the knee with a bubblegum pink high heel. She swats it aside.

"I don't need to see this. Why does it matter? We already know how shit goes down." Dave barely recognizes his own voice when he walks over and grips Aradia's sleeve, hard. He can't look at her, though, not when he's busy cataloging just how slow Bro is. "We get away. Droog fucks off." As he says it, Droog kicks Bro flat in the center of his chest, a blatantly telegraphed move that Bro should have been able to see coming, easy. But it hits him hard, and he stumbles back into a lamp with a noiseless gasp. Droog's two companions hang out by the door, the man slumping against the woman with his eyes slowly sinking shut like the fight in front of him barely registers.

Aradia says nothing. Frustrated, Dave reaches out and fumbles for his timetables. He can think of twenty other things he could be doing right this goddamn second that don't involve watching the freaky echo of something that already happened. But he can't seem to summon the concentration he needs; Bro scores a glancing slice across Droog's forearm, but it's shallow and just draws a faint scowl from the woman, and she ramps up the pace. If Bro was slow by Bro standards before - Dave cringes to see that he can hardly keep up, now. Droog drives forward, relentless, her face cast in shadow by the overhead light. Bro finally snatches up a puppet when he gets pushed back further still, but tosses it at Droog's face just as a distraction, not as a weapon for a specibus.

It almost works. Droog rolls her eyes hard, and while she's doing that Bro darts under her guard and tries to stab her. The Crew member knocks the blade aside again, yanking Bro in by the wrist and kneeling him in the stomach. He retreats with his sword still locked in his grasp, but Bro as Dave knows him would have never let that kind of punishing hit through. Even if it didn't break any bones, Droog can dish out a lot of pain. Her next hit goes wild as Bro dodges again and the cue stick punches a hole right through the wall with a noise loud enough to make the toddler in the kitchen give a startled wail.

And Bro looks. He looks back at Dave, eyes wide with momentary panic, like he's afraid someone juked him to snag Dave while his back was turned. Yeah, that's probably exactly what he thinks - that's the logical thing to be afraid of - but Bro would never act like that. He'd know better than to take his eyes away from a serious enemy like Droog in the middle of a strife; he'd leave puppetkind lying around with their strings ready to wrap around other threats as a delaying tactic.

Or maybe he's only just learning that lesson right now. God knows it's one of the first things he drilled into Dave, though Dave sucks at it; being able to pause time to look around helps make up for the many ways he's always not quite measured up. Droog sweeps his feet out from under him with a solid whack, and Bro lands wrong on his wrist but rolls out of the way. He slashes at Droog's shin to try to bring her down without standing up himself (don't fight from your knees, kid, get the fuck back up) and when she steps back he only succeeds in cutting a neat line across the front of her pants, leaving the lowest five inches of pantleg sagging and dark skin exposed.

"Enough," Droog says, and she jerks her foot up to kick Bro in the chin, snapping his head back. If she was faster than Bro before, she's cutting out all the unnecessary bullshit now and Bro can't move in time to meet her. Another kick knocks him down on his back and elbows, and he scrambles to push and roll out of the way, but Droog slams her foot down on top of his stomach, quick as you please. Bro reverses his grip on the sword and tries to slash at her leg again across his body, and she kicks it aside with the other foot, so that all of her weight momentarily rests entirely on Bro's gut.
"Give me that," she says, stabbing down with the cue stick to pin his wrist, digging the end of the weapon down until Bro's hand spasms.

"Loose ends," the man by the door says, through a yawn that makes his jaw give a small crack.

Droog uses both hands to lean more pressure on the cue stick - and the sword falls out of Bro's grip with a click. "As loath as I am to agree with you - well," she says, picking up the sword and staring down at Bro's face with a considering look. Without the shades (without years of shutting down everything) Bro looks furious and terrified and a maelstrom of ten other emotions, so unfamiliar with all that on his face that Dave can't process it.

Droog plants her other foot on Bro's shoulder and slices him open, too quick for Bro to knock her off, blood splattering up across the front of her suit and her cheek. The sword sinks in deep (toodeeptooodeep) and then deeper still once it hits the soft flesh below the rib cage. Bro bites hard on his lip but he still bucks and twitches at the sudden pain and that - makes it worse. Shit. Fuck. Shitshitshit.

On the table, Dave is screaming, his face turning red and his eyes bubbling up with hot tears. He's not - the current Dave's not screaming, he's fine, this is just so messed up and he wishes Aradia would make her point already. If this is the point she wanted to make, he has no idea what it is, and he officially un-forgives her for not warning them about the weekend clusterfuck ahead of time. It'll be fine, though. Bro makes it. They already know this.

"Enough of your games," the woman demands, glaring at Droog's back with flashing eyes, and Droog twists to glance back, her expression hidden from where Dave is standing. "I can already see what you do, and I have no patience for it."

Droog laughs, cruel and mocking, and Dave looks away out the window, at the huge tree next door. He can't watch this. But Aradia touches his chin, and turns him in time as Droog gives the sword a careless flip, watching it turn in the air, and drives it down between Bro's ribs. "Such a mess," she says, while Bro gives a stomach-turning choke. "I do charge extra for clean up, you know."

"Torch it all," the man says, dreamily. "Always got use for a good fire." The woman's nails drum against his shoulder as she hums agreement.

Dave finally gives up the struggle, yanks away from Aradia, and throws up into the sink. "This isn't real," he rasps, grinding his palms into the metal of the sink and wishing his chest weren't screaming with pain. "This is - something doomed. It didn't count."

She makes it impossible for him to ignore her, floating over to hover beside him like a dusky red moth. When he looks up (godletitnotbereal) she only has eyes for the tiny Dave on the table, bawling his eyes out. "Oh, of course," she says. "All it took was a few moment's worth of rewind, and you set it right. But a death this significant -"

The toddler Dave doesn't call up timetables or anything, so when he gives one last wail the transition is harsh and obvious - time drops out from under them like a collapsing Jenga tower, too sudden for Dave to notice that the crying has stopped. Aradia's right: the past Dave only needs to turn back time a few seconds to set things back on track. For a moment there are two toddlers sitting on the table, watching in horror and childish lack of understanding, and then Droog flips the sword in the air and brings it down -

- on Dave.

Bro didn't make a sound while he was getting stabbed before. This time around, he screams like he's
dying. Droog herself flinches back, appalled and stricken in equal measure. But then there's a thud that makes all of the adults jolt, and Bro nearly cracks his neck all the way around to stare at the toddler crawling in tiny flashes from the table down to the floor. The tiny body of the original Dave fades out from where it sat on Bro's chest, soughing away before anyone can do a doubletake.

"They probably thought it was a hallucination. Doomed bodies that end up stranded in the alpha timeline fade quickly." Aradia turns the handle of the kitchen sink, but the vomit is already vanishing. Because this isn't real. None of it is real. "It takes a lot of power for someone doomed to make a real impact on the main timeline, and not just leave an afterimage of their failure. I believe you did it once before, by prototyping yourself, right?"

"God, that's messed up. That's - there is a goddamn line, Aradia," Dave says. He kind of wants to hurl again, bile lining the back of his throat. "Seriously, there has to be a rule against dead babies in the manual somewhere!" Thirteen year old John and Rose and Jade dying all over the place was bad enough - this, this is obscene.

"Well, the alpha timeline is the one where both you and your custodian survived," she points out. Which is not. Helping. The distraction spooks Droog badly enough that when Bro grabs the sword and dives for the living Dave, she doesn't manage to stop him. The toddler latches onto Bro with a tear-stained face, and time begins to pause and start and pause again as the two Striders flashstep out. Dave wonders if Bro notices that Dave pulls him so that he could run in those pauses, too, or if he's in too much pain and terror to notice Droog couldn't even begin to catch up once they launched out the window past Aradia, in a crash of glass.

"And Knights are a protective class," she says, shrugging. "Using time to protect someone like that, though, with his own underlings as direct witnesses...was something the Lord could not overlook."

Dave can't tear his eyes away from Bro's back as he races away across the neighbor's lawn and vanishes into the night, leaving a trail of blood at random, staggering intervals. Aradia snaps her fingers and the vision pops - and Dave finds himself staring at a different night sky, his hands grasping at the hard, staccato edges of his timetables like they're the edge of the sink.

He sits.

Aradia sits next to him. Dave is busy trying not to feel shit, so he lets her. "You need to be careful." Forming words feels like it takes incredible effort. "Why did you show me that?" He could have gone his whole life not knowing that. Two images - Bro dying and that doomed Dave dying - paint themselves on the backs of his eyelids if he closes his eyes for too long.

"Because you lost your voice that day. If that's the only thing you've lost since then, I would be very surprised." The burgundyblood traces the side of her face, curving a claw around the arch of one eye, and then rests her elbows on her knees. "These are the consequences of opposing a Lord. Maids draw less attention, maybe, but I got here too soon and lived too long, waiting for the rest of you to arrive. He's almost caught up with me. Even if the others succeed in escaping his reach, I don't know for certain that I'll live to see the end. Every time I use our aspect, there's a risk he'll strike me down with something even a god tier can't live without. Time is not, and never has been, on our side."

Dave took some of this away from watching the recordings, and to be fair, people have been hinting at this shit for a while now. Having Aradia spell it out just makes it sting, like having an entire bottle of antiseptic poured onto an open wound. "Isn't there a way to stop it?"

She shrugs. "We could serve the Lord's will. But - ha. The look on your face tells me everything I'd need to know." Dave schools his expression back into a blank, but the disgust hangs around. "Serve
him, and he'd probably restore us - temporarily. Until he doesn't need us anymore, which would be
soon. The price for that short reprieve would be more than either of us would want to pay, I think.
But there's always a choice."

"That's not a fucking choice at all," Dave snaps.

Aradia stands up and dusts off the back of her sari. "I know what I want to do with what's left of my
life. You - might want to consider it for yourself."

He's really goddamn glad she leaves, and no one ends up coming up to the roof to explore or
anything like that. For a long while he lets his phone buzz in his pocket, stares at his hands, and
doesn't think about the collar looped around his neck like a noose.

- 

They go to the mall.

Hey, it's something to do. Also, when all is said and done, Mall Trip 2k14 has no casualties, and that
is goddamn insane. Unheard of. Dave is having trouble wrapping his head around this shit, which
leaves a lot less room for him to think about other stuff, which he is 100% down with. He'd rather
suck a bag of dicks than think too far ahead, and if he pesters the others too much they're bound to
catch on to the fact that something's wrong.

They've got enough of their own shit to worry about.

Anyway. Dave can't take solo credit on the overwhelming success of this trip. Kanaya and Rose
came along to do the responsible adults thing, while John and Karkat do their best to keep Gamzee
from wandering off and leveling a Macy's. Jade tags along in a haphazard way, jumping to the
apartment occasionally to ferry stuff back before anyone collapses under the weight of all the random
dumb shit they need/want to buy. It's the end of the world, after all - budgeting has officially gone
out the window. But she mostly hangs out with John and drags him into stores at random to get the
full family mall experience. Dave barely sees them for more than a couple minutes at a time before
they're charging off again; the only person he sees less of is Oriole, who just leaves the mall entirely
at one point and only turns up again forty five minutes later.

Feferi's the real MVP, though. Talk about a lifesaver. Dave shudders at the thought of the trauma his
bank account might have had to go through if Feferi hadn't looked up with a terrifying glint in her
eye, clapped her hands together in excitement, and volunteered to get the scratch kids out of their
evil-as-shit uniforms and borrowed clothes, and into something that wouldn't scream brainwashed
teenager chic. They're all kind of in dire straits by now as far as fresh clothes go. Like, shit, Dave
didn't think Gamzee even had a change of clothes until Tavros dug something out of the bottom of
his wheelchair that was tall, menacing juggalo-sized. Kanaya could only do so much with the fabric
she has, and the scientists at the lab hid their stuff...probably whenever sweatpants and lab coats
started being 'borrowed' on a semi-permanent basis as lounge wear.

Feferi walks into the first store she sees and walks out with a full ensemble including an aquamarine
patterned sundress, a hat, platform sandals, and enough necklaces to strangle five people. Once she
puts sunglasses on, she's a little less instantly recognizable - except trolls stop and gawp at her when
she strides by them, tossing the entire messy braid of her hair back over her shoulder with a claw and
ushering the scratch kids along about as well as anybody can usher four teenagers in various states
of surly and distractible. So yeah, Dave estimates they have maybe a half hour before the entire Internet
knows that Feferi Peixes is in town again. If they're lucky. Vriska and Terezi start a fistfight in the
food court in less than fifteen minutes, which would be impressive if it didn't also mean they have to
quickly switch malls and have Jade bump them over to Pacific Place before anyone can call the cops
on their collective ass. Those two can't seem to make up their minds whether they hate each other or not, which Dave guesses is giving Kanaya a migraine.

Equius vetoes Nepeta's attempt to come along, but Eridan goes, and Eridan is a mess on good days. But he sets up camp in the Barnes and Noble and won't move his ass a goddamn inch from where he plants it in the angsty teen lit section, so it's whatever. Jake must have his shit together because he acts sheepish, doesn't once make a run for it, and is way too fucking fascinated by the posters for the second Captain America movie, which apparently comes out this week. Dave doesn't even want to know what John and Karkat might be planning behind closed doors, because the idea of Gamzee in a dark, crowded theater sounds crazier than mall trip, and mall trip is pretty damn crazy. The world might be ending in a matter of weeks, but if Dave knows John, that won't stop him. If Jake tries to go along for the ride, Dave might just book it back to Houston while the going's good.

But hey. No one's dead yet. This shit is bananas.

So he takes WV to get cupcakes. There's a place on the third floor of the mall that has a ridiculous selection, but they don't have anything green, which WV has informed them all numerous times is his favorite color to eat. God, that's adorable. Anyway, Dave persuades the carapacian with a can of TaB and a salted caramel cupcake, and while WV slams back the soda like it's the elixir of life, Dave starts deconstructing his own cupcake into its component parts. Cupcakes sounded great in theory, but in practice, it turns out baked goods are just reminding him of Dickbert. Fuck that guy.

...What are they even going to do about him? Dave has totally separated himself from any discussion of what's happening with that douche, though he knows Bro has been fiddling around making sure he can't escape again. But they told Mr Egbert a bunch of their secrets before his evil evilness came out - would handing him off to the police work at this point? Or would he just turn narc on everyone and ruin John's life more than he already has? Dave would not put that kind of horsefuckery past him. The kid doesn't need any more bullshit from that dick. Hell, a word to the right people, and Rose would officially be identified as that one chick who blew up the Big Apple and probably spend the rest of her life on the top of multiple most wanted lists. Dave figures Jade couldn't give a shit about having her real name leaked, and neither would he, but Rose and John would be fucked.

Then Dave's fork scratches across the plate with an ugly noise as he remembers the world's not going to last more than a couple weeks, anyway. So who cares about any of this shit in the long run? Might as well call Droog up right now and tell her to suck it. He stares mournfully at the tiny piles of chocolate frosting he has quartered with his fork, and then sighs and eats some of it, letting the fork hang out of his mouth as he watches WV mash his cupcake into a flatcake and devour it with his claws.

WV: are you going to not eat that because you're thinking too hard?

Dave sighs again, and pushes the plate toward the carapacian. "Nah, have at it, little dude," he says through the corner of his mouth.

WV: thank you.

WV: she's going to be here soon.

"Yeah? Who?" Dave waits while WV begins to reassemble their two cupcakes as one ungodly abomination. He looks up over WV's head, but a wave of teenagers fresh out of class has flooded in and made it next to impossible to pick out familiar faces.

WV: the scary one.
That could describe about 80% of their current friend group. Then again, the last time they had a conversation like this, WV called Bro and Karkat 'the most polite ones,' so hey, WV can get a little mixed up.

Then Dave does a double take, and recognizes the circular, whirly-do thing on the left corner of the jacket of the troll prowling toward them. Dave can only stare in apprehension as Terezi descends on them, expecting Vriska to appear any second now. "Where's Serket?" he asks, still talking around the fork - then he realizes that must look ridiculous and takes it out of his mouth.

"Learning how to transform into god tier lingerie in the Victoria's Secret without paying for anything. It was ditch her or jump her or arrest her." Terezi sniffs, makes a face at the incredible concoction WV has put together, and then turns toward the cupcake place. "Why are you ruining perfectly good cupcakes?"

The worst part of that explanation is that Dave's brain automatically tries to correct Victoria's Secret to Victoria's Serket. What does that shit even mean? Is it a pun? He can't tell anymore - he's in too deep. "I don't know, trauma or some shit like that. What's your excuse?" he asks WV.

WV: they're not ruined! I'm building something better, obviously.

Terezi opens her mouth, potentially to crush all of WV's hopes and dreams, but then either Dave's frantic head shaking gets her attention, or she just does some mind seeing and realizes what a dick move that would be. To be honest, Dave has less idea how her powers work than he does Rose's. "I smell cherries," she says, instead, and wanders off toward the cupcakes to get her own haul. Dave borrows a chair from the other table nearby while they wait. Terezi is cool. Like, a shitposter with a law degree. He wonders if she still makes shitty graphic edits.

Terezi has a voice that carries, so Dave overhears an entire intense debate in which she accuses the poor man behind the counter of selling counterfeit goods because the only cherry cupcake option is gluten free. She eventually returns with three different cupcakes and WV scoots his stuff over so she has room to sit down. "If we'd been here yesterday, they'd have strawberry macaroon," she announces, shaking her head in evident disdain. "I am very disappointed. I had to get red velvet, and everyone knows that red velvet is chocolate engaging in identity theft. Falsehood incarnate."

"Sucks," Dave says, sympathetically, as Terezi tosses the strings of the hood of her jacket back over her shoulder. "What is it with you and red, anyway?"

Terezi cackles. "It tastes delicious! What can I say?" She also starts leering at Dave's shirt. Rose put her foot down and insisted he and Jade change (he didn't even notice he'd just been cycling through different variations of god tier pajamas until John pointed it out), but he is a guy of habit and most of his stuff is some shade of red. Suddenly that makes him feel exposed. Like a dumbass with a cut on his foot going swimming in shark infested waters.

Dave folds his arms over his chest, and it feels like he's giving too much away. "So, what are you planning to do?" he asks. "In a general, 'we have until the thirteenth before meteors from video game hell destroy the planet' kind of sense." Aradia has done a swell fucking job pointing out that not letting the game play out would just end in them doomed, and the timeline that would result would get mulched by the Lord of Time regardless. This Calliope person seems pretty sure she can get them out at the last second, but other than that they can't do much until the game actually starts. So, 225 hours and a couple minutes and seconds' spare change before they condemn another planet to the scrap heap.

Dave hates having such an accurate sense of time. He hates being the time dude, in general. He hates that he doesn't know how much use he's going to be before time just tears him apart. *Fuck.*
"Oh, I'll probably help out with operation Take Down The Crew and Felt, portmanteau pending."
Terezi bites a cupcake in half. Just. In half. No intermediate bites - total carnage. "Nothing like
bringing futile justice down on a pack of deserving criminals!" Then she sobers, staring into the
cupcake horror in front of WV like it holds all the answers. Or maybe like a blind person who can't
believe what her smell-synesthesia is telling her. "No way are Vriska and I going to spend the last
few days on the planet dicking around Sollux's place."

"Nothing else? 'Cause I'm pretty sure Jade would be down for a whirlwind tour of the planet where
she shrinks down famous monuments and keeps them safe in her sylladex." Dave hasn't pitched the
idea to her yet, but Jade - okay, she probably wouldn't see the morbid irony in it, but she likes doing,
not waiting around. One of the other alternatives is to try to suss out what the hell the Condesce was
doing with all those rocket ship things in Tiksi, aka eternally frozen hellscape; gearing John up for a
full on anti-Betty Crocker crusade would take minimal effort, but also, they might not have time left
to wage economic warfare against the de facto troll queen of life before the planet explodes, or
whatever. Something tells Dave the apocalypse might disrupt the stock market a little.

"Grand theft national monument? And I thought you guys were heroes!" Terezi says, snickering.

Dave shrugs. "Go big or go home, man. Things are easier to persuade to hop into interdimensional
backpacks than people are."

She clucks her tongue, waving her fork around in the air grandly, and then sticks it in the next
cupcake. "The law is what separates us from cavetrolls, Dave."

He can't help but roll his eyes at that. "Pretty sure in my case, it's the almost completely separate but
genearly convergent progression of human evolution versus troll evolution."

She slams a fist against the table, rattling WV's creation. "The law," she hisses, all seriousness - until
a cackle escapes her and she brutally decapitates the last cupcake with her teeth to stifle it. WV stares
up at her with wide white eyes.

WV: are you available as legal counsel?

"Depends on what your case is. I tend to be more about extremely proactive prosecution," Terezi
says, through a mouthful of cupcake gore.

WV: i see! have you ever dismantled a monarchical establishment and prosecuted the crown for a
millennia of war crimes before?

After a pause, Terezi tips her glasses down with a claw, and turns blank red eyes at Dave. "...Where
did you guys find this one, again?"

--

-- arachnidsGrip [AG] began pestering apocalypseArisen [AA] at ??:??:?? --
AG: Soooooooo...
AG: Aradia.
AG: ::::)
AA: vriska
AA: :)
AG: It feels like it's 8een forever since we talked! 8usy 8usy 8usy!
AA: reincarnation does tend to make things tricky that way
AA: but were picking up the pace now so thats fun!
AG: Oh good, I'm glad I caught one of your future ones. ;;;)
AG: So, I was wondering. You and I, we're friends, right?
AA: as far as im concerned all of you are my friends!
AG: holding grudges is kinda silly as far as im concerned
AG: Gr8! Awesome! I knew I could count on you not to make everything a huge federal fucking issue, Aradia.
AG: That's why I want to help you out! Since you're so on top of things, these days.
AA: go on im listening
AG: Hang on. Do you...already know what I'm about to say? ::::
AA: heheheheh vaguely
AA: but go ahead! ive been expecting this conversation for a while
AG: Oh yeah? 8een getting some future insight?
AA: technically i am the future insight
AA: and youre what we call an unstoppable force
AA: so im listening :)
AG: Hmmmmmmmm. Well, since you asked so nicely...
AG: It just occurred to me that you might be in need of a new partner in this g8me of yours.
AG: Not a nerd like Mr Four Eyes who's up to his flap in code, and definitely not a...Gamzee. Whatever.
AG: The rest of these guys? They're so paranoid and twitchy they won't be a8le to make up their minds about the real important stuff until the 8oss is shoving his speci8us up their 8utts!
AA: all fair points indeed
AG: The way I see it, we need everyone to 8ring their A game whether they like it or not.
AG: Or at least a 8 game, for the ones who just suck in general.
AG: We need...a god tier party. ;;;;)
AA: so ive heard
AG: You and Gamzee seemed on top of things, 8ut he's not gonna be too useful with his two hangers-on being all meddly.
AG: Whadya say? You tell me when you're free on your end. I'll bring all the luck we could need to get away with it.
AG: Rosey can be the friendleader, as long as we know who's reeeeeeally running the show.
AA: i already have you down for eridan if thats alright
AG: Awesome!
AG: I could have skipped that whole incrimin8ing speech, couldn't I.
AA: you like talking
AA: and a refresher never hurts anyone!
AG: Sure thing, 8uddy. So Eridan, you say? When and where? ::::)
AG: You'll see. There are perks to having me on your team.
AA: i dont doubt it
AA: youll know the opportune moment im sure
AA: or i can just text you if it looks like youre gonna miss it
AG: Please, I would never miss the opportune moment. Give me a little more credit than that.
AA: aaaand pretty much everyone else is spoken for already!
AG: Come on, spill. You know you want to.
AG: We're teammates, right? I can't help make up for my past mistakes if I don't know what's going on, miiiiiiight?
AA: well i have you or a certain other party down for nepeta already
AA: i doubt anyone else could get past equius to reach her but it depends on who nepeta goes to first
AA: theres still trouble with kanaya : ( sollux is on the case though!
AA: feferi has things in claw on her end so no worries there
AG: Good, good! See how efficient this is? I'm rubbing my claws together with glee over here.
AG: What about your nerdrail and Gamzee?
AA: sollux is also covered! i appreciate your asking
AG: ...
AG: And...you know who?
AA: indeterminate
AA: he may or may not be god tier already
AA: we just dont know
AG: Oh, wow. Here I thought you were the gal to go to for the spoilers.
AG: How'd he manage to slip you up? Weren't you two all up in each other's 8usiness?
AA: not particularly
AA: hes very clever you know
AA: you cant let his current docility and the unpredictable nature of his tactics decepticate you
AG: (Deceptic8)
AA: (yes)
AG: (::::D)
AA: for a while he was off the radar to the point im not even sure how he tabled the turns on that horroterror
AA: but if it came down to it youd probably find his sentiments on the matter align with yours somewhat
AA: hed be the first to kill himself if he still needed to go god tier
AA: and perhaps already did so before the scratch thus rendering the point moot
AG: If you say so. He is pretty effective, I guess I'll give him that.
AG: And hey, as a 8onus to cele8r8 our new friendship, I'll take care of Tavros and Karkles too.
AA: oh dear
AA: you maybe shouldnt have said that
AG: Why the heck not?
AA: speaking of gamzee
AG: Ugh. He should appreci8 that I want to look out for their sorry butts! They'll be a lot 8etter off if they're god tier! So much for effective.
AA: people dont tend to be logical about the ones they love
AA: so it goes
AG: 8oo-hoo. Newsflash - they're gonna be deadw8 one way or another.
AA: its a little early for you to worry about this anyway
AA: youll have some time to sort it out later
AG: Aaaaaaanyway. Isn't this cool, Aradia? You and me colla8or8ing, just like old times.
AG: I'm glad someone around here can see reason.
AA: the key ive found is to let people make their own choices
AA: for example you were always going to try to kill everyone for the sake of winning
AA: because you are a very competitive troll :)
AA: even if your goals overall do not necessarily coincide with my own we can still use similar tactics to achieve them
AG: Yeah! Exactly!
AG: And obviously 8etween the two of us, we can get these losers off the ground.
AG: Just you and me. With Sollux and Gamzee helping a little. A tiny 8it.
AA: glad to have you on board
AG: That's the spirit!
-- arachnidsGrip [AG] has left the chat! --
AA: anything to add?
TC: :o)
TC: :o(
AA: i am beginning to suspect that those faces mean absolutely nothing and that you are just using them to see how hilarious our reactions are to random clown emoticons
TC: :o)
When John wakes up the morning they're due to move everyone somewhere new and marginally less destroyed, it's to a cold arm slung over his waist. Gamzee won't go near a recooperacoon - he hissed balefully when Jade offered to 'port one in for him, the closest he's come freaking on someone since Sunday - and so Karkat isn't accessible for cuddles. Still muddled by sleep, John stretches an arm out over his head until his shoulder gives a satisfying crack. "Nnf."

If he were napping with Karkat, the troll would grumble and then roll closer. Gamzee, lying flat on his face, makes a similar noise of sympathetic early morning despair, but doesn't move.

And John's...alright with this. It's really weird, but it's not a disaster like John was afraid he'd created. Everyone keeps expecting him to be bothered by it, but after the initial panic died down - eh. Through the power of desensitization, the fact that Gamzee would kill any of them in a heartbeat if he thought it would help them barely makes a blip on John's danger radar. Rose says that they need to have A Talk about where the three of them all stand, and Rose generally knows what she's talking about. Finding time when no one is busy or on the edge of a meltdown, though...between the three of them, that's basically never.

Or maybe John just wants to avoid the worst case scenario. He's not one hundred percent sure what that might involve, but what if someone gets jettisoned off a metaphorical cliff into singlehood? Something in his head says it would be him. If they talk it through as a group, and Karkat or Gamzee can't put up with suddenly threesome anymore, John doesn't know how it'll play out. But if he wants the option with the least potential for catastrophe...

God, just thinking about it hurts. Sure, the possibility always existed that he and Karkat might break up - how should he know how different things might have been as they grew up, if the world wasn't ending in a couple of weeks? - but this isn't something he could have predicted and braced himself for. He can't tell (could never tell, to be honest) where their friendship and their relationship grew into each other; cutting off one might eviscerate the other.

Or maybe everything will be fine! Overreacting much? Haha, John worries over nothing too much, that's for sure. If Karkat could hear his thoughts right now, he'd roll his eyes over how dumb John is, agonizing about stuff that hasn't happened yet.

...Blah. He used to lie to himself better than this. It's harder when the fakey fake bullshit is blatantly fake; he's lost the knack for it.

"You've got a powerful rot in you, motherfucker," a voice says, a growl right against the back of John's skull, and he clears his throat with no clue what to say. Crap. What is he supposed to do? It's a little late to switch back to denying there's stuff twisted in his brain - and he needs to learn how to think stuff quieter when Gamzee is around. "A suffering gone wrong up in your pan." Needle point teeth settle in the curve of John's ear and nibble.

"Please don't eat my ear. I need it," John says, rubbing grit out of the corners of his eyes so he can see the room clearly. Between the air conditioning and Gamzee the living ice pack, it doesn't feel like the warm spring morning he can sense the Breeze looping through outside the open window. Gamzee's teeth skate over the rim of his ear one last time before being removed, and a sigh ghosts over John's cheek. "And I know. I guess I'm just still working on a plan for how to deal with it," he adds.

It's part of the challenge Typheus set him, but besides that, John would like to have his head not be a mess for once. In general, you know? He and Rose tossed around some ideas earlier, but the kind of happy funtime therapy he needs would take longer than they have. And no way is John going to be
able to get on top of his shit without doing something about the Trickster first. Where to start, though, when the mere thought of another confrontation makes him want to scream?

That's another thing to worry about - Gamzee knows the Trickster exists. Which is one of those sentences that could be replaced by loud internal screaming and still communicate the same level of deep concern. He and Rose were the ones pushing for transparency about everyone's issues, and now it sits between Gamzee and John like a bright pink elephant in the room whenever they're alone for too long. As in right now. John trawls his brain for anything in his family history that might concern a longstanding rivalry between pranksters and juggalos, but he comes up blank. He doesn't know much family history, actually.

"A screaming time, brother. Wait for a screaming time. Get it all done with as one," Gamzee advises. "Be all kindsa motherfucking EFFICIENT and shit." He draws a line down the side of John's temple, and John shivers. It's cold, but he doesn't really want to move, either. He can see the 'coon from here, the faint slosh in the green sopor where Karkat must be stirring, and they have a while before they need to be up. Gamzee's idea of cuddling might border on menacing, but John doesn't feel menaced just now. Just chilly. Instinct makes him stick his toes around in search of something warm, but there's only Gamzee's cold calves. Blerghlghghl.

Okay, John has to move. Kicking off the bottom of the sheets frees his feet and the open air is definitely warmer. Yeesh. Gamzee doesn't move his arm as John attempts a highly complicated, subtle maneuver; he winds up all twisted around, one leg bent so that he stares at the ceiling past the top of his knee. "Is that what you do?" he asks, genuinely curious. In a hypothetical way.

When he turns his head, Gamzee's face is verrry close. "Ain't no other choice in the matter. It's always a screaming time," he says. For a second, his mouth doesn't quite match up with the sound of the words. "A motherfucker learns to get things done, regardless." He presses claws along the curve of John's ribs, a drag somewhere between soothing and scratching. Shifting his weight makes Gamzee press closer and give a faint, rumbling hum that John recognizes because Karkat does it a lot more, with two people to watch out for and keep steady.

Oh. Uh. This is. How did they switch from iffy mental health advice to soothing stuff? He's hazy on how it reached the point where Gamzee is trying to help John get his head together, as opposed to the other way around. Karkat's definitive absence from the situation makes things twice as bewildering. John reaches down and puts his hand over Gamzee's, the tips of his fingers skimming the bumps of the troll's knuckles before hesitating.

It's...nice. (Also, freezing cold.) But Gamzee likes Karkat, sooo...

Crap. John has no idea what he's doing. He barely had a handle on how he and Karkat worked, and now this - he jumped into this without a single, solitary thought as to how he planned to get out of it, let alone if he would want to get out of it at all. It's just a matter of time before it stops working. Heavy hopelessness starts sinking in, and he has to swallow the need to shove it all to the back of his mind.

Or...maybe he should. Now's not the time to get all moody and stuff; he can always rake it back up to the surface later, before it has a chance to fester. Enough to punch through this morning low point and regain acceptable levels of chipperglee -

BE: i heard that~

No you didn't.

BE: oh my god. feeding stuff back for the bad john to work with when you're dating a rage player is
the most horrible idea. the most >:T

BE: dooooo nottttt

Ugh, fine.

A rough palm bonks against John's forehead. He blinks. Gamzee surveys him with a squint, then brings his hand back down in a tap that lands square on the bridge of John's nose. "Uh," John says, mentally groping around and getting his thoughts squared away. "Uhhh. Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh -"

"You're not him," Gamzee comments, one of those offhand turns of phrase that makes John tense because it nearly got him disemboweled last time. The purpleblood sits up and lets a claw droop over John's head for a second before patting John's hair. John stares back, fighting hard not to blink until his eyes start to sting. Gamzee sounds frustrated when he says, "How do you work?"

I don't, is the first response on John's tongue. Not sure if it'd be flippant or painfully serious, he clamps down before it gets out. Dredging up a smile takes effort; pushing upright is easier. "Haha, don't worry about it," he says, when Gamzee won't stop staring. Karkat shouldn't be too grumpy if John wakes him up now - better if John has coffee as an offering, though. You can never go wrong with Karkat and coffee. One day they'll hook him up to a caffeine drip and Karkat will be unstoppable.

Once he's on his feet, but before he can head to the door, Gamzee pulls him back down. A cold hand tugs his knee over, and the sudden drop ends with John whacking his forehead on Gamzee's prominent collarbone. Ow. "Sorry, sorry!" he says, when Gamzee won't stop staring. Karkat shouldn't be too grumpy if John wakes him up now - better if John has coffee as an offering, though. You can never go wrong with Karkat and coffee. One day they'll hook him up to a caffeine drip and Karkat will be unstoppable.

"Motherfuck, it's all good." Gamzee goes back to petting the top of John's head. His ragged-sharp claws catch on more tangles that Karkat's usually do. "'Cept what's a brother to do when you don't even have nubs? Look at all of these horns you don't have. What the fuck?" He gives a faint snort of frustration and sets his chin on top of John's head, the long cold line of his throat cooling the side of John's face.

John stiffens in place, kind of at a loss for what to do. One hand hugs back automatically, because hugs are pretty easy to do, but the other stays half curled up where he went to try to push away. "I...dunno?" Gamzee starts making that soft, purring noise again, hugging John close, and even if John were dumb as a sack of rocks there is literally no way to misinterpret what Gamzee is doing as anything but pale. The main stutter in John's thought process being that Gamzee might put up with John pattering around and doing stupid stuff like shooshing him as long as Karkat is there. Karkat's who matters. Why would Gamzee even bother - oh, forget it. John finally blurts out, "Why are you doing this?"

Gamzee drums fingers along the line of John's spine. "You're all messed up in your nugbone. But Karkat motherfucking likes you, and you have him. Both soft on each other, and here. comes. me."

For a second John can't tell if the rumble low in Gamzee's throat is soft or rattling, or both at once, and the Breeze wraps around one of his legs like a held breath, ready to unravel him into the air at a moment's notice. Gamzee's voice is lighter again when he starts talking, though, and John tries to relax. "Be real easy to keep hating you, but you look at me in a rage and instead of runnin', you wanna shoosh that out? And do?"

He didn't, though. John remembers how to make his hand work, sets it on Gamzee's shoulder, and considers carefully before edging back, eyes dropping down and to the side. He rubs his mouth with
the side of his hand before letting it fall away, at a loss. "Yeah, okay, I hear you, but...I just got you to Karkat," he mumbles.

"Should have up and ripped your scrambled head off before you got the chance," Gamzee says, cheerful as Jade on a science high, and John chokes on his own spit. "Talk of luck, brother, if that ain't some fortuitous fucking serendipity that you'd try anyway." He tilts his head to the side, smiling at John as he touches two fingers to one of the corners of John's mouth. "Also, Karkat wouldn't be down with the wicked decapitation thing. So shit, if you get all sad and pitiful thinking harshness at yourself like that all the time, I'll motherfucking try back." Then he plants a kiss on the tip of John's nose.

And then his mouth. Gamzee's lips are chapped, and tacky where the face paint sticks. John kisses back. Sort of. He has no idea how this works, still, and he doesn't have more than a few seconds before Gamzee pulls away.


"There is definitely some extent of motherfucking weirdness," Gamzee agrees.

John can't let this stand anymore. "I didn't say that out loud." All that gets him is a 'so-what' shrug, and he sighs. "A little weird, yeah."

"You're both fucking weirdos, that's why," Karkat says, and John jumps so hard Gamzee has to set his hands on John's hips to keep him from floating off. Dripping sopor slime onto the towel on the floor, Karkat clambers out of the recooperacoon. He puts his hands together in a mock prayer, turning a supplicating glower at the ceiling. "And now that you two have progressed to inexplicable makeouts, a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. My life's transition from drama to porn is proceeding as expected. Thank fucking troll Jesus. Now please, can one of you get me another towel?"

-Seattle feels unreal. John hasn't been back since before - well, a lot of stuff, actually. They came to fight the Scratch kids, then rushed straight through the next few crises without much of a break.

Of all things, it makes him feel self-conscious about his clothes. The only times he's been downtown in the past have usually been in the dead of night when he was in uniform, or on the weekends, or for school trips. Now it's a weekday and technically he should be in class right now, but instead he's out here in broad daylight. Only Karkat and Nepeta understand - everyone else here either graduated or never went to school regularly in the first place - and Nepeta turns out to be ecstatic about playing hooky, when John finally gets a spare moment to talk to her and Tavros. He doesn't know if he ever wants to wear a hero costume again (between the Trickster and his handler? Yikes, times a thousand), but at least then he'd have a convenient excuse for the odd looks he keeps getting from old people. They can apparently sense youths from a mile away, because each time he dares to go outside he swears that three sweet little old ladies give him the stink eye. Wandering around the city at noon? Madness.

Jade tells him he's imagining it.

Jade grew up on a deserted island in the middle of the Pacific ocean, and is totally full of bullcrap.

Jade's also gonna kick his butt, because speaking of clothes - John doesn't remember his workout shirt hanging this loose on him before. Trying to get back into a regular exercise routine has been difficult at best. Oh man. Jade will wipe the floor with him. She bounds alongside as they go up to
the roof (Striders are a horrible influence), tossing playful punches at his arm as she stretches on the
go. Better yet, they've collected a small audience - and by small, John means thank god Doctor
Lalonde dragged most of the Strilonde clan out for dinner, because John just knows they'd have
organized some kind of Dragon Ball Z-style tournament. Do they need a blanket ban on certain
people starting practice fights? Some people here lack the word 'practice' in their working
vocabulary...

Turns out, John shouldn't worry about that kind of stuff. When he and Jade and Karkat and Gamzee
reach the roof, it looks more like a pool party than anything. The only people missing apart from the
Striders and the Lalondes are Equius and Nepeta and Tavros. Crabdad clatters around the edges of
the pool like a ravening lifeguard, and when he spies John and Karkat hovering by the stairwell, lets
out a full-throated whistle that can probably be heard clear across the metropolitan area. Terezi puts
her claws to her mouth and adds a piercing wolf whistle to Crabdad's screech of greeting, directed at
some indeterminate member of their group, before her pool floaty gets overturned by Feferi and she
vanishes into the water with a burbling splash.

Well, at least if John's gonna get his behind handed to him, Kanaya is here to witness. Yeah, she'll
probably tell Rose all the embarrassing details of his inevitable butt-whooping, but with her sitting in
a lounge chair by the side of the pool, it's highly unlikely things will explode into uncontrolled chaos.
After giving the roof another once over, John wonders just where the heck they're supposed to be
practicing. He and Jade aren't exactly conducive to small, conservative fighting styles, here, and the
roof wasn't all that big before this. Thank god no one else lives in this building yet... "III think I
changed my mind. One of the empty apartments would work better," John says, sliding a foot
backward.

"Don't be silly! This will work perfect." Jade charges forward, smiling. Because of course, she has
to have known on the way up here just how crowded it was and the exact dimensions of the roof area,
and didn't say so. The Breeze could probably have told John some specifics, but he still forgets to
check sometimes, and it drives the aspect crazy. She stops by the edge of the pool, green flickering
through the strands of her hair as she knots it into a low braid down her back.

Against his better instincts, John follows her. He sneaks a glance back at Karkat and Gamzee, half-
concerned and half-looking for confirmation that this is, in fact, silly as heck. Gamzee is staring out at
the evening sky over everyone's heads, bemused by - the clouds, maybe? Karkat just has standard
disgruntled Karkat face #23 on, wrinkling his forehead and trying to glare at every single target in
range to show that he's not in any way amused by these shenanigans. "There is no way you're going
to be able to practice with all these fucknuts here," Karkat says, sighing. Then, at a louder volume:
"Why the fuck are you people all up here?!!"

"There's a pool," Vriska points out, spreading her hands wide as she gestures grandly from her pool
floaty. Her bathing suit is sunshine orange with a metallic sun symbol the only thing holding the two
halves of the top together. As far as John can count, there's only three floaties total, and the last one
belongs to WV. He doesn't even know when they could have bought those things... 'Friggin' duh,
Vantas. 'If you build it, they will come.' Especially the fish ones." Feferi's chortle comes out mostly
burbles from beneath the surface, while Vriska cups her claws around her mouth. "Unless their name
is Coward Mcstripeypants!"

Eridan, engrossed in a book by the firepit, gives her a middle claw. "Why do you feel the need to
antagonize literally everyone in exithtence?" Sollux demands, slamming the lid of his husktop part of
the way shut so he can glare at Vriska properly.

Well, crap. "You're right, Karkat, no way are we gonna be able to practice out here," John says,
keeping his sigh internal as he gives Jade a look.
"No, no, we are!" Jade says, all earnest smiles.

Then she seizes him by the wrist, spins him in close, and supplexes him into the pool.

Hindsight asks him why he's really shocked by this turn of events. Instead of saving him, the Breeze shoots up his nose before the rush of water, giggling like a maniac. Nice. Helpful, John thinks acidly, and his aspect laughs at him some more. Just chuckling up a storm over here.

Peeling his eyes open, bubbles tickling as they rush out of his nostrils, John shakes his hair out of the way. Feferi's puffed-out cheeks and crossed eyes greet him amid a puddle of inky black hair, inches from his upside down face (how do she and Jade have this much hair?) He makes a silly face back, which starts a laugh out of Feferi, and then does his best to avoid pulling anyone's hair as he pushes off the gritty bottom of the pool with his hands to get back upright.

Jade snags his foot and tugs, and John barely twists it free from her grip. He kicks away, staying low. The Breeze gives him plenty of air to work with, even as it finds the whole situation funny as heck. Feferi darts out of the way quicksilver fast, her pale pink suit and flaring gills all John keeps track of as he turns to wrangle Jade. She snapped into a lime green swim suit as they fell - no, he realizes with a squint, it's lime-patterned. And all the limes have smiley faces. She kicks off the pool wall with a bit too much nyoom to her push; that is so cheating. John rolls over her when she gets close again and aims for the surface, past one of the bobbing floaties overhead. The water's not all that deep just a few feet over from where they plunged in, and when his head and shoulders rise above the water John thinks he's clear for the moment.

His mistake is not checking which floaty was closest to him. A pair of thighs latch around his neck, and he thinks it's Jade using space powers again to teleport on top of him - but no, the legs are smooth and grey, nicked up and down by old white scars and the curving lines of a tattoo, and oh god. Vriska's blue-streaked hair sticks to his face as she bends down. "Chicken. Us versus Terezi and whatever sucker she can get to cooperate with her," Vriska declares, pleased, cracking her knuckles. John wobbles when she whips her upper body around to challenge Terezi directly, and he puts a hand on a knee to balance her.

But the urge to dump her backwards is strong. Or heck, he could just let his knees cave under him and take her down with him. Terezi's showing no signs of being willing to abandon her reclaimed floaty, so John takes a moment to breathe and pout when he spies Karkat, nice and dry off to the side. "Do you need help down there?" Karkat asks, crouching by the edge of the pool. John would warn the troll he's kinda in the danger zone as far as Feferi's antics might go, but it seems to be a prankster kind of night, and the mood is infectious. "I would offer to jump kick her off you, but with my luck she'll fucking dodge and I'll land in the water like a complete fucklord." Past Karkat's shoulder, Gamzee ambles around the pool with his head tilted back. He looks like he could bend over backward into a bridge any second now, and as he wanders closer Kanaya starts switching between giving Vriska the evil eye and watching Gamzee's circuitous route.

John shrugs at Karkat, the weight of Vriska making that more difficult than usual, and smiles. "Nah, I'm good. Though I don't know how well years of pool roughhousing experience can hold up against Jade."

Of course, right as John says that, Vriska gets the bright idea to grab his head and turn it to steer. "Don't give me that kind of depressing talk, John, we have a war to win. Terezi, come back here!" she yells at the tealblood, who paddles with her hands so that the drifting floaty outpaces the Vriska+John juggernaut. "Tereeeeeeze-hrlbbulgl!"

John's footing yanks out from under him as he and Vriska get dunked beneath the surface. He can feel Jade's victorious laughter from here as Vriska's flailing limbs make swimming free a real pain in
the butt. But he makes it out, and when Jade zooms up for another pass, John twists around and grapples her into a headlock. Which obviously she can zap out of at any second. Fighting Jade without trying to actively break or kill her might be impossible, he's realizing. Part of her happy-go-lucky approach to life is that she's just a cheerful person, but a huge part comes from the fact that she can dodge anything that's thrown at her and come back swinging.

Sure enough, after putting up the show of trying to wriggle herself free through more conventional means and realizing John's still strong enough to hold her (barely), Jade snaps out of his grip, with an accompanying burst of water rushing to fill the space where she used to be. The Breeze tags along after her regardless, blithely informing John of exactly where her lungs are once she reappears. Well, powers are on the table, after all, so -

Lungs, huh ~

The water feels very cold and very deep. Far more interesting things are going on below his feet - enormous things, hungry things, things that make him laugh - but for a moment, there's an opening up above where the idiot's defenses don't quite hold together, so he puts out their hand to twirl a finger - horrors are fun, but explosive decompression is more fun -

John wrenches his hand back down to his side, his back slamming against the side of the pool. Against every instinct he has, he tries to breathe in - his heart is going a million miles an hour - and for the second time the Breeze careens in instead of water. Mostly.

BE: What was that! Where did he come from?!

John can't answer; he scrapes a knee in his hurry to spin around and climb out of the water onto the pavement, spitting up a thin trickle of water that snuck in along with the Breeze. His nose and sinuses feel waterlogged in a way he hasn't felt since - gosh, when did he even start swim team? What a lame move. He should have known better than that.

Karkat notices immediately. "Harley, what the fuck," he demands hotly, stomping over to John before he can straighten up and play it cool.

"Whaaaat? I didn't do anything, Karkat," Jade calls back (oh thank god) from the opposite side of the pool, wringing the water out of her hair with twisty green light. Her legs swing from side to side, sloshing the water around. "John, did you try to breathe water or something? Dork."

"Fuck you, Harley, I've been sitting through four hour swim meets for ages now, and I think I would have noticed if John had a habit of periodically swilling filthy public swimming pool bilge," Karkat says. John gets it together long enough to swing around and sit on his butt instead of leaning over his spit puddle, and pats Karkat's hand to reassure him. Inside his head, he can feel the Breeze scouring around like a downburst looking for signs of the source. The impression of the intrusive thought already feels vague and fizzy at the edges, like flat soda or a bad dream, but that was the first sign they've seen of the Trickster in - a while. Long enough for John to have gotten complacent, apparently.

BE: ugh. where is he, where did he go!

"Had a weird thought," John says aloud, pinching his nose and shaking his head. "I've got it handled, I'm fine."

"Speak for yourself!" Vriska rights herself, her hair streaming water right into livid eyes, and she elbows her way onto WV’s pool floaty as it goes past her. About six different people glare at her as one, and she freezes in place before she can push the carapacian off, lowering her claw with a
perfectly innocent expression as WV huffs at her. "You just know you and Terezi would be too chicken to beat me and John, Jade. That was sabotage, clear as day!" She pronounces Jade with an '8' sound clearly thrown in instead of 'ade.' How does one troll generate so much competitive spirit? Talk about motherfucking mysteries.

That wasn't his thought. That was Gamzee, talking out loud. For a bright, hard moment, John closes his eyes, and when the Breeze does another sweep it grumbles. "Tricky little motherfucker's gone now," Gamzee says, close enough that his knees jostle Karkat's when he crouches down. His arms cross at the wrists as he lets them rest on his knees. "Got itself in good with high tier connections. Huh. Fun times."

"Tricksy. Oh, fuck no," Karkat repeats in a low hiss, realization dawning.

John snorts out through his nose one last time, resigns himself to beleaguered runny nose hell, and gives a tiny nod. A quick look around shows that most people on the roof could care less, not when Kanaya has risen to her feet to better yell at Vriska for trying to cause havoc. Jake watches curiously from where he sits on a lounge chair beside Jane, but he's a good distance off, the two of them almost as far away from the water as Sollux. "I'm good," John says. There's a shaky, sick pang in his stomach that makes him feel a little out of sorts, but the Breeze is patrolling in his mind again rather than manifesting itself, and now that he's aware of the difference it's...reassuring.

BE: just don't lock me in here... :T

I won't.

"Hey, John? You are okay, right?" Jade says, worry seeping into her tone, and John looks up in time to see a slim grey claw snake out of the water and pull Jade under with an enormous splash that half-soaks Kanaya and Eridan. Eridan screeches and curls over his book like life itself depends on it, while Kanaya keeps right on track with her tirade.

"I have avenged you," Feferi informs John sweetly, paddling over in a few strokes and leaving Jade to splutteringly zap herself out. The troll crosses her arms on the edge of the pool and leans the side of her face on them, with a sharp grin for Karkat. "Are you going to swim, Karkat?"

- 

Having so many people around at first was a headrush; now, unless John stops worrying about them constantly, it's just gonna leave him exhausted. The longer they go without screwing up and getting someone killed - he's considering investing in one of those 'this facility has gone X days without casualties!' signs - the more they mingle and loosen up about the rigid system of keeping tabs on Vriska (and Terezi by extension), Eridan, and Gamzee at all times. Jade has three rubber bands on her fingers so that she remembers to stay aware in case one of them decides to go out and punch a baby or something.

But hey! The last time this particular group of trolls spent a prolonged period of time together, they went on a rampage. John's current hypothesis is - since they already had a murder rampage, from now on everyone will be calm and reasonable. Flawless logic, obviously. As long as they keep their heads down while they're recovering and planning out how to go after the Midnight Crew and the Felt, there is a pretty good chance no one will die and/or get arrested. Yeah! And Doctor Lalonde won't come back to the apartments and announce she's going to meet Diamonds Droog! Pfff, even if that were a real thing that happened, it wouldn't be a problem. They can totally handle it.

BE: that's the spirit!
No, it's hysteria.

BE: oh

BE: are you sure? because you've been kinda depressed and stuff for a while now, so maybe you can't tell when you're having fun anymore. this could all just be healthy good humor in the face of adversity!

Yeah, let's go with that one. If you say so.

Because as it turns out, Karkat isn't going to swim. John could have told Feferi that much. The troll turns tomato red and fromgraches John and Gamzee over to sit by Jane and Jake and Eridan, fussing over John despite John insisting that he's okay. Jade joins them after chasing Feferi around the pool for a few laps, pulls several musty-smelling beach towels out of her sylladex and dumps the leftover sand out of them before offering one to John so he can dry off. And it's okay. The echoes of rush hour traffic sift up from below, but Aradia's soft humming from where she sits crosslegged beside Sollux sounds nice. There's another tense moment when Tavros flies up the stairwell with Nepeta gleefully carting his wheelchair with one arm, Equius in hot pursuit, but Nepeta brushes off Equius's protests and flops down next to Kanaya, unwilling to be moved an inch. John thinks Equius is about to literally implode and turn into a ball of voidy stuff, the better to ignore Gamzee and Vriska out of existence, but he doesn't get the chance.

See, they didn't expect the Striders and Lalondes to be back for an hour. John would have hedged his bets for around two and a half hours, give or take, but he figures with both Rose and Doctor Lalonde sober, they would probably skip the old requisite post-dinner bottle of wine and just come right back home. It's doomed to be the most awkward dinner since that first one immediately after John broke the pale dating sim that is his life, but not even Bro has the power to pry Doctor Lalonde away from a polite family dinner out in public before an hour is up.

Dave starts panic-texting a half hour in. Rose's messages sound more intelligible - except she's saying almost the same things, and none of them make sense. Doctor Lalonde wants to meet up willingly with Diamonds Droog and the Midnight Crew to cut a deal.

Now see, John knows certain things to be true regardless of his messed up head: Rue has multiple degrees, she used to be perpetually tipsy in a not-good way, she kinda messed up big time by ditching Rose the way she did - okay, she's made mistakes before.

But John wasn't around at the time to see her dig her heels in and rationalize the choice until it made sense to her. Despite this being a really, really, really, really, reeeeeeeally dumb idea that is doomed to failure, Doctor Lalonde wants to go through with it. Rose is more skeptical than outright dismissing the idea, and worse, Jade thinks Doctor Lalonde can pull this off without dying horribly, which means they're gonna have problems if she and Rue stop listening and jump right to the meeting place without backup. Bro is presumably in murder mode, but John's only guessing because he's gone totally AWOL. John can't even console himself with the mental image of Bro and Droog fighting. That might have been badass and totally cool at one point. Now he's wary because so much could go wrong; not even hero shenanigans can make the bad thoughts go away. Bro is an ass, but he's their ass, dangit.

...That came out weirder than John meant it to.

John - can admit the idea of not having to watch over their shoulder for Droog all the time would be ten kinds of awesome, but there's also no way in heck this is for real. Droog's trying to pull a fast one, and Doctor Lalonde wants to let it happen. Either it turns out Droog is sincere (John's thinking that's a big fat no, but whatever) and they work out a deal with her, which makes his skin crawl - or
she's not sincere, this whole thing is a massive, dangerous waste of time, and they need to be ready for a free for all. Whether that free for all ends with police swarming them or not depends on how smooth they can be. And they're not smooth. They're not smooth at all. As a group, they're like the world's most lumpy, uneven, hacked up ice rink. There are cacti on this planet that are more smooth than their particular friendgroup. These analogies are the worst, not even Dave could come with analogies as dumb as these, and Dave is undisputed king of terrible, long-winded analogies. It's pretty sad.

Plus, the trolls aren't helping things. If Dave could have chosen a less public way to basically announce the impending drama to the whole world than by freaking out in a memo in front of a pack of the world's most drama-hungry omnivores, this might be easier. Some of them couldn't care less, but others - well, put it this way. If the trolls hadn't gotten the gist of things before Dave switched to a private chat, maybe John wouldn't be fighting the very strong temptation to sic Vriska Serket on Diamonds Droog in a cage match to see who would emerge victorious.

She's already volunteered. One thing Vriska can't resist is a challenge. It is so tempting. So tempting.

"I'm just saying, if you all are gonna be weak, pansyass scrubs about it, I'll take care of her!" Vriska brags, tossing her hair over her shoulder, timed so that the wet hair smacks the glasses off Terezi's face. "I'm the greatest at this kind of thing!"

"If by take care of her, you are implying you would kill her - no. Just no, Vriska," Kanaya says. John recognizes the expression on the jadeblood's face, because it's the same as his own: a homemade mixture of despair and pained disbelief that this is a real life conversation that they're all having.

Vriska rolls her eyes. "I'd only kill her a little, fine! Look at me! Being accomod8ing!" She tries to make puppy dog eyes at Doctor Lalonde but the effect is ruined slightly by the eager, feverish grin she can't quite wipe off her face. John's not an expert at ashen things, but even he can tell that Terezi's expression is mirroring Vriska's too closely, like the Scourge Sisters are both way too on board with dispensing 'justice' in this case. Siccing Vriska on Droog would probably be amazing; siccing frenzied Scourges on her would be overkill. Literally.

"Apart from the obvious, another thing to consider is that Droog is asking us to let her and her fellows go, after the fact," Rose murmurs, half to herself. She stationed herself near Dave when they all gathering in a living room to talk this out, and John and Jade wound up sitting on the arms of the couch on either side, so that John has to hunker down a bit to look Rose in the face. She's just so short, sometimes. "I'm not sure what the ethical implications might be if we collaborate with them in exchange for information and then let them go to wreck felonious havoc another day."

"Ethical implications can go take a running jump off a cliff for all I care," Karkat snaps. "Watch this." He has an almost dreamy expression on his face - except, you know, for all the fury radiating off him in waves, as he slowly lifts his middle finger and holds it up for everyone to observe. "Watch as I condense all of my burning hatred into this finger. Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's definitely something," Dave says, but Karkat talks too loudly to notice the low, strained mutter as he goes on, rising in volume as he goes until he's pretty much shouting at Doctor Lalonde. "Now imagine this finger is capable of great things. Like taking your fucking shitpanned idea to chat up the person who thought beating the shit out of me was a fun way to pass the time, and slam dunking it into the Marianas Trench!"

"I understand your concern, Karkat," Doctor Lalonde says, stepping neatly around Eridan to reach a suitcase. "Ambrose voiced similar points, and they all have merit. I have simply performed my own analysis, and decided that the potential gains could outweigh the risk."
"Yeah, same! And Droog kidnapped me and stuff!" Jade points out, shrugging her shoulders, her hands encircling her ankles as she bobs in the air. "Karkat, you're forgetting one thing. Or maybe several things."

Karkat lets the middle finger drop so he can slap his forehead and drag his hand down over his eyes. He looks tired, but John successfully fends off the trained instinct to talk Karkat into a recooperacoon. "What?!"

"We have a lot more friends now." Jade's eyes laugh silently when she and John's gazes meet. He estimates it's about 60% her having a serious point about the fact that they are surrounded by people with various different super powers/weapons training, and 40% her trolling Karkat for all she's worth to lighten the mood. It sorta works. A little. It's hard not to be gloomy about Diamonds Droog hanging around Seattle and generally being a butt.

"Way more friends than Droog," John agrees, reluctant. "But also? Fewer minions. And no bombs."

Rose sucks in a breath, hissing slightly. "Right. The wanton destruction of public property. Thank you for reminding me, John, I'll keep an eye out for that."

"Also -" Tavros falters when everyone who's paying attention (Equius and Nepeta are arguing in a corner, the general flavor of which seems to be something like 'No, Nepeta, this is a foolish idea and we are surrounded by fools and you are still recovering') turns to look at him. He flushes brown, tapping his index claws together hesitantly before continuing with a heavier stutter, "I - I think you have trouble with Droog a lot? So qu-w-what would she do if you didn't show up? Wouldn't that still be increíblemente peligroso, to leave her alone?"

John rubs his forehead with the heel of his hand. He can feel a dry headache tensing in his temples, which, on top of the pool incident, is going to make him cranky. This is the last thing he wants to deal with. Rose is deep in thought, Jade's geared up to do something silly again, Dave looks like he's ready to throw himself out the nearest window and run away into the sunset to become a slam poet for the last few weeks before the Reckoning, and Karkat looks increasingly thunderous, even with Gamzee patting him on top of the head with a faraway expression.

- 

So they take everyone along. Why the heck not? **What could possibly go wrong!**

...He really needs to stop doing that. Whatever. This plan is foolproof. And by foolproof, John means if all else fails, they have Vriska. Not exactly the best fallback plan in the world, no, but at least she's enthusiastic about it. It's like having a Hulk, but she's cerulean-themed, maniacal, and wayyy more chatty.

She also thinks they're friends. Which, since Vriska's idea of friendly interactions can range anywhere between 'time to shove people off cliffs!' to 'hello guys it's murder time!' - well, since they're on top of a really tall building right now, John is keeping an eye on her. As many eyes as he can spare, which is about half of one.

He's sort of jealous, actually. The eight-fold vision thing be so useful right about now.

"So bored," Vriska sighs, her hair dangling over the side of the building and tossing in the wind. This high up the night air cuts through the fabric of John's jacket and sweater, and the scarf that Rose knitted for him keeps getting tossed back in his face when a stray gust catches it the wrong way. He can taste a faint drizzle when he licks his lips, a thin mist that isn't quite up to snuff. Vriska has her claws folded over her chest, rolling her eyes as she stares up at the greyish-purple of the clouds.
"We've only been here twenty minutes," John points out, running his fingers through his hair. There's never any point in trying to get it to lie flat, but right now he feels like the low level, misty humidity is making every single strand fuzz in a way deliberately calculated to stick out in his peripheral vision. "Stakeouts aren't that bad."

The ceruleanblood snorts and taps a claw against a blue die sitting on her stomach. Her outfit is the absolute worst for sneaking; the faint twilight dulls the orange and yellow, but if they were trying to be stealthy she'd stick out like a sore thumb. Heck, they *are* trying to be stealthy! There are federal agents patrolling to make sure they don't get up to this kind of vigilante crap, and here John is in a too-thin jacket and a soft blue scarf, Vriska in the god tier equivalent of a Starburst candy, and Gamzee humming a low note that reminds John why they're currently serving as the backup in case Droog goes nuts. Team Death from Above.

It could be worse. Kanaya and Sollux got stuck watching Eridan, aka Team Nuke the Whole Building, Just Fuckin' Annihilate It. John makes a face. When both super-emergency all-else-has-failed backup plans rely on throwing the designated murderous heavy-hitters at the enemy and crossing your fingers (and toes), it's not exactly confidence-inspiring.

But yeah. Hopefully it won't go that far. John doesn't trust Droog at all in any way, shape, or form, but he's trying to be positive! Yeah! Doctor Lalonde has Jade with her, as well as Dave and Karkat and Terezi, and the others are scattered around on their own rooftops in case Jade gets sniped with a tranq round or something again. Bro is - somewhere, John guesses. No way he isn't around, though. Not with Dave in the middle of it.

-- tipsyGnostalgic [TG] opened a memo on board improtant shizznit at 20:51:44 --
TG: lolmao does anyl know when the time stamps work
TG: how do time
TG: n e way we're set up o'er yonder how about u
TT: Sound off, people.
TT: From what I can tell, everyone is in position. Things seem a little...Mm. Equius, I can't see you - is everyone in your group where you need to be?
CT: D--> Yes
EB: we're good here! vriska is bored :P
TT: An ominous state of affairs, generally speaking.
EB: yeah, probably.
GC: T3LL VR1SK4 TH4T 1F SH3 G3TS 1D34S, SH3'LL G3T S3NT HOM3 4ND WON'T GET TO 34T D3SS3RT!
AG: I'm right here, Terezi! Geeeeeeez!
TG: ugonasdoarueubgdm
EB: dave, uh...dude, did you just hurl?
TG: only in cyberspace eb do i look that unprofessional to you irl
TG: dammit man im a smooth operator

The meeting is scheduled for nine on the dot, and the only reassurance John has right this second is that Doctor Lalonde got to choose the where. Like, there's no way Droog could rig this building to explode. Not in the short time they've had to arrange this. Jade is positive she has the Harley Foundation building's lobby on lock, thanks to her frequent visits, and she hasn't found anything blowy-uppy yet.

But Droog could set off another building. Any random warehouse - or worse, another inhabited office building - might go up in flames if she thinks that's an easy way to distract them. Which is why John is also sort of on Team Save People in the event of a crisis elsewhere. If the Breeze picks up on
anything suspicious - anything at all - they're out of here, and Droog can deal with her dumb brainwashed asshat friends on her own time. No one's getting left behind to distract her. No one's getting hurt like Karkat did.

Vriska rolls over onto her stomach and pushes up onto her knees, still crouched dangerously close to the edge of the building. Dangerously close for other people, John supposes. Dying once seems to have renewed Vriska's confidence in her ability to get away with risky stuff, but as long as she's playing on their side...

"We should get closer," she says, flashing a John a toothy grin and smacking the side of his knee. "Come on! No one will notice."

"Jade will so totally notice. So will Rose. Cool your jets, Vriska," John says, rolling his eyes back at her to express just how much that's a pointless, sketchy suggestion. Letting Vriska think she's got a foothold would be a reeeally bad idea. Knowing that she's dangerous doesn't help when she's got such a forceful personality.

"Oh, John. You ask a lot of me, you really do." Vriska sighs heavily. "Aren't you two worried about Karkles or something?" she asks, pitching her voice to carry, a sing song that Gamzee is obviously meant to hear.

John's back stiffens, and he swallows and counts to ten before answering. Vriska's pretty obvious when she tries to push buttons, thankfully. "We're all gonna be fine," he says, lightly smacking her hand away when she tries to bat his knee again. She tries to make it a miniature slap fight, jabbing at his shin with her other hand, and John's starting to get the feeling she's just keyed up and looking for a convenient outlet. Unloading her on Droog would be convenient, but also a bad plan unless literally all else fails. Of course, he sneaks a glance at Gamzee, to make sure the purpleblood is still camped out in the middle of the roof and not popping off to go check on Karkat. "Still good?" he asks.

Gamzee opens his eyes, cocking his head to look at John. "All chill," he says, blinking slow enough that John thinks he's closing his eyes again. "Don't need to get a fret on about me, brother. You know who all needs worryin' on right now."

Right. Right. John takes a few steadying breaths, taking in the static behind his closed eyelids for a second before opening them. He gives Gamzee a faint smile, then keeps his butt planted on the roof as a cold, damp breeze picks up strength and tries to lift him clear of the roof. He lifts one hand to let it sift through the wind. The Breeze nudges under his hand for a moment, like a cat arching its back into a touch, and then pours down the side of the building to reach the street below, drawing more wind along with it as it does. John tracks it, sensing when it nips into the Harley Foundation to find Jade, Dave, Karkat, and the rest, before letting most of it diffuse outward, his awareness dispersed into the cool air and ready to rush back in at the faintest signs of an impending explosion - like rapid oxidization.

And they wait.

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-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA] at ???:??::?? --
CG: SOLLUX.
CG: HEY.
CG: IF YOU'VE PASSED OUT IN FRONT OF THE HUSKTOP AND LEFT PESTERCHUM RUNNING TO GIVE ME A FALSE SENSE OPEN COMMUNICATION LINES, I WILL KICK YOUR ASS.
CG: SOLLUX YOU PIECE OF SHIT STOP IGNORING ME.
TA: oh KK don't ever change.
TA: jk you can 2top beiing a douchebag whenever you 2o plea2e.
CG: IMPOSSIBLE. THIS KIND OF ASSHOLERY DOESN'T HAVE A CONVENIENT OFF SWITCH.
TA: niice.
CG: ANYWAY. YEAH.
TA: what'2 up? it'2 the miiddle of the niight. go the fuck two 2leep liike a normal troll.
CG: SLEEPING AT NIGHT SOUNDS FUCKING ASS BACKWARDS NOW AND I WOULD LIKE TO FORCIBLY REMOVE WHATEVER SECTION OF MY BRAIN ENDED UP IN CHARGE OF HANDLING PRE SCRATCH MEMORIES AND CAST IT INTO THE DEEPEST TRENCH ON THE OCEAN FLOOR.
CG: FIRST ALL OF ITS HINTS COME IN THE FORM OF GORY DREAM DEATH LOTTERY, AND NOW THAT I VAGUELY REMEMBER MOST OF THIS SHIT, I WISH I COULD SCRUB THE LINGERING PTSD OUT OF MY THINKPAN WITH THE HIGHEST GRADE INDUSTRIAL CLEANSER YOU CAN BUY WITHOUT ALERTING THE FBI.
TA: yeah ii'm kind of iiin the 2ame boat. barely rememberiing becu2e half my braiiin ii2 bu2y wiith concentratting on 2ome other 2hiit.
TA: don't you have two moiirail2 two complaiin at?
TA: though iiif you want two go22iip about that ii will not 2top you.
CG: YOUR FREAKY DOUBLES FETISH IS SHOWING.
TA: you brought thii2 on, man. you mentioned ii two get my attentiion and now here ii am.
TA: 2eriously what ii2 that like, ii2 iiit a2 awe-iin2piiringly me22ed up a2 ii'm iiimagiiniing?
CG: PROBABLY. BUT THEY'RE JUST. UGH.
CG: DID WE REALLY HAVE THE KIND OF FRIENDSHIP WHERE WE DISCUSS PALE KINKY SHIT? BECAUSE ON THE ONE CLAW I BARELY KNOW YOU IN THIS LIFE, BUT ON THE OTHER MY ONLY OTHER LEGITIMATE OPTIONS FOR HAVING THIS CONVERSATION WOULD MAKE THIS WEIRDER THAN IT'S ALREADY GOING TO BE.
TA: buddy iif we get hung up in that 2hiit we're never gonna make any forward progre22 iiin thii2 lifetime.
TA: al2o we 2hare the common factor of haviiing moiirail2 who are be2t murderfriiend2 2o there you go.
TA: aradiia’2 iiidea of piiletalk ii2 cajoliing me iiintwo helpiing her 2et up game breakiing mod2 and chattiing iiin vague term2 about who miight pop off next.
CG: FUCK. THAT SOUNDS...REALLY FUCKING MORBID.
TA: eh. you learn two liive wiith iiit. and ii don't thiink ii could keep my 2hiit twogether wiithout her cheery morbiitiity groundiing me.
TA: liike no matter how screwy my head feel2, aradiia will alway2 be there two a22ure me iiit could be wor2e, ii could have been dealiing with thii2 con2tant miindfuck for fuckiing centuriie2.
TA: okay now ii've completed my half of thii2 embarra22ment con2ga liine, what about you?
CG: I'M ACTUALLY REGRETTING STARTING THIS CONVERSATION ALREADY. I CHANGED MY MIND, I THINK I'D RATHER BEAT MY HEAD AGAINST A BRICK WALL FOR A FEW HOURS.
TA: kay cool glad we had thii2 awkward talk.
CG: FUCK IT I'M GOING TO TELL YOU ANYWAY.
TA: dammiit.
CG: BECAUSE SHITTY ROMANCE NOVELS AND SOAP OPERAS AND PORN DO NOT PREPARE YOU FOR THE COMPLEXITIES OF REAL LIFE POLY QUADRANT DYNAMICS. THEY ARE DRAMATIZED AND FULL OF LIES.
TA: well you know thiing2 are bad when you're badmouthiing the 2oap2 KK.
CG: THAT'S JUST IT. IT'S NOT BAD.
CG: IT’S WORKING AND IT’S COMPLICATED AS FUCK AND YET SOMEHOW IT
HASN’T EXPLODED IN OUR FACES YET AND I WOULD HAVE EXPECTED AT LEAST
ONE PERSON TO HAVE A MELTDOWN AND STORM OUT BY NOW.
CG: THE SOAPS LIED TO ME, SOLLUX. THINGS ARE GOING...PASSABLY FINE.
TA: only you could find 2omethiing two complaiin about iin 2uch tryiing ciircum2tance2.
CG: IT PLACES US FURTHER ALONG THE UNREALISTIC PALE PORN SCALE THAN I
HAD ALREADY RESIGNED MYSELF TO BEING.
TA: the 2ofte2t, pale2t porn.
CG: WHAT DID I FUCKING SAY ABOUT MAKING IT WEIRD?! THAT'S EXACTLY THE
KIND OF FREAKY MEME SHIT I THOUGHT I'D GET FROM DAVE!
CG: OR WORSE, FROM ROSE, WHO CAN DROP MEMES ON YOU OUT OF FUCKING
NOWHERE WITH A COMPLETELY STRAIGHT FACE.
TA: you put way two much faiith iin me for 2ome godfor2aken rea2on.
CG: STORY OF MY FUCKING LIFE.
CG: ANYWAY YEAH. I CAUGHT THEM MAKING OUT THIS MORNING.
TA: well ii2 that a problem or??
CG: IT WAS ADORBABLE.
CG: IF YOU TELL ANYONE I SAID THAT I'LL SHANK YOU OR SOMETHING. I’LL
SHANK YOUR HUSKTOP.
TA: 2iince when do you 2hank people?
TA: waiit no ii kind of remember thi2 from la2t tiime.
TA: from when you accidentially got 2tabbed and entered iinto a blood pact wiith a carapacian and
then he got exiiled and you 2topped makiing 2tabby comment2 and went back two 2iickle themed
threat2.
CG: OH GOD. FUNNY STORY. MY SIDES ARE SPLITTING OVER HERE.
TA: ii can't believe you diid iit agaiin.
CG: ANYWAY BACK TO MY AWKWARD RELATIONSHIP STATUS.
CG: BUT YEAH THE TWO OF THEM ACTUALLY SEEM TO HAVE THE START OF
THEIR OWN RAPPORT THAT DOESN'T NECESSARILY RELY ON ME.
CG: THUS ELIMINATING ONE PARTICULAR AVENUE OF JEALOUSY THAT COULD
HAVE DEVELOPED BETWEEN THEM.
CG: GAMZEE MOVES FUCKING FAST THOUGH LIKE HOLY FUCK HE JUST GOES
ALL IN AFTER A FEW DAYS.
TA: enteriing tmii territory here.
TA: liike the le22 ii have two know about you three and your prediilliictiion2, the better.
CG: I DON'T NEED YOUR SASS HERE, I NEED SOME SYMPATHY FOR THE FACT
THAT EARLIER I HAD TWO ENDEARING FUCKWADS HOLDING HANDS AND
TRYING TO COMPEL ME INTO JOINING THEM IN SLATTERNLY CUDDLES WHILE
HARLEY’S FAN GIRL/SECRETARY WAS RIGHT! FUCKING! THERE!
TA: diid you really ju2t 2ay '2latternly'? al2o 2orry man my 2ympathy only come2 iin 2a22 form.
hazard2 of friiend2hiip wiith me.
TA: anyway yeah go complain two kanaya, 2he‘2 the friend iin charge of regular 2ympathy.
TA: what you're telling me here ii2 that everything ii2 going well, your diiamond2 are gettiing
along alright, and no one ha2 died yet.
TA: now ii ju2t want two tiip off TT 2olely two giive you 2omethiing two ACTUALLY complaiin
about.
CG: PLEASE DON’T. ROSE’LL CORNER ME IN A DARK ALLEY ANY DAY NOW
ALREADY. THE LAST THING SHE NEEDS IS YOU ENCOURAGING HER.
CG: WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK IS UP WITH YOU AND YOUR ASHEN QUADRANT,
ANYWAY?
TA: eh, vrii2ka and terezii fliipped. what ii2 there two 2ay?
CG: AND YOU’RE OKAY WITH THAT?
TA: I think KN ii2 more club2broken than ii am, tbh.
TA: I like if they flip back - which the odds of are two damn high - ii'll cool their 2hiit if need be, but ii't2 not 2omethiing that bother2 me ii2f kanaya get2 there fiir2t.

CG: FUCK YOU AND YOUR ABILITY TO HAVE CASUAL FLINGS.
TA: ii't2 a talent, my friiend. not everyone can deal wiith non-2top 2oulmate b2 when iiit come2 two their relation2hiip2.
TA: ii'd watch out for terezii btw. he has a thiing for red themed people, and he's been takiiing 2niffgander2 at you and dave.

CG: A) NO.
CG: B) AFTER WITNESSING HOW MUCH OF AN TAINTCHAFING ASS PAST ME MADE OF HIMSELF, ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT.
CG: C) THAT SOUNDS LIKE A SETUP FOR SOME HORRIFICALLY WRITTEN ROM-COM WHEREIN THE TEALBLOOD INCITES JEALOUSY IN HER PRIMARY TARGET OF VACILLATION BY USING TWO HAPLESS LOWBLOODS AS DISTRACTIONS, ONLY TO HAVE HER COLDER BLOODED LOVER WOO HER BACK IN THE LAST THIRTY MINUTES WITH AT LEAST THREE DUELS AND TWO EXPLOSIONS.
TA: you mean the one that starred troll drew barrymore and jennifer lopez?
CG: YES. I DON'T WANT TO BE JOHN CUSACK. NOT WHEN JOHN CUSACK'S CHARACTER HAS HIS COMPANY BOUGHT OUT BY JENNIFER LOPEZ IN A POWER PLAY THAT LEAVES HIM A BROKEN SHADOW OF HIS FORMER SELF.
CG: ACTUALLY, NO, DAVE'S THE ONE WITH HIS OWN APPLE JUICE EMPIRE.
CG: D) I REPEAT: NO. NO WORLD IN WHICH DAVE WOULD BE PLAYED BY JOHN CUSACK IS WORTH LIVING IN.
TA: ii don't know why you watch this2 stuff holy FUCK.

TA: god ye2. thiink fa2t. about somethiing other than rom-
CG: KANAYA.
TA: what about her?
CG: I'M HALF WONDERING WHEN SHE'LL START INCHING BETWEEN GAMZEE AND EQUIUS, HONESTLY.
TA: ii literally jut2 aaid no romance but okay.
TA: no 2hiit?
CG: SHE READS ANY HATRED AS POTENTIALLY PITCH. WHICH MIGHT BE WHY SHE'S PERPETUALLY FUCK OUT OF LUCK IN TERMS OF SETTLING INTO AN ASHEN TRIAD.
CG: IF YOU ASK ME, EQUIUS HAS MADE HIS ENTIRELY PLATONIC DESIRE TO PUNCH GAMZEE THROUGH THE CORE OF THE PLANET AND OUT THE OTHER SIDE A MATTER OF PUBLIC RECORD, BUT FUCK ONLY KNOWS EQUIUS WAS ALWAYS...UH.
TA: really fucking awkward with the world2 bigge2t troll boner for p2eudo-BD2M roleplaying at the age of thirteen.
CG: FUCK YOU FOR TYPING THAT, YOU SHITLICKING UNPLUGGED LAMP.
TA: you're welcome.
TA: but anyway yeah ii have two go now.
CG: REALLY? WHAT, ARE YOU WORKING ON SOMETHING THAT'S MORE INVIGORATING THAN US STIRRING THIS CAULDRON OF BUBBLING HOT GOSSIP?
TA: have two track down my a22hole of a cu2todian.
TA: ii've been tryiiing two run a backtrace on hi2 me22ages becau2e he barely 2ounded luciid the2e pa22t couple of week2, but ii keep 2talliing out.
TA: he's annoying but ii2f someone ii2 druggiing hiim, and that2 why he dropped off the fucking grid for a while there...
CG: DO YOU NEED HELP? I MEAN IT'S NOT LIKE I'M ANY FUCKING GOOD AT
HACKING OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, BUT I CAN SIT THERE AND ANNOY THE PISS OUT OF YOU IF THAT HELPS.
TA: if it probably wouldn't.
CG: OH.
TA: if you can't 2leep you can come over here anyway, ii gue22. knowiing you, you'd ju2t keep pe2teriing me regardle22. kanaya ii2 bringeing her 2ewiing down, two.
CG: THAT SOUNDS LIKE THE MOST COMPLETELY FUCKING LAME SLEEPOVER EVER. I SHOULDN'T EVEN LEAVE JOHN AND GAMZEE ALONE.
CG: I'M IN.
TA: fuck yii22. ii can own your a22 at prop hunt while thii2 code ii2 runniing. beatiing KN ii2 no fun when she 2uck2 2o hard.
TA: bring the leftover 2andwiich2.
CG: OF COURSE. WHAT KIND OF INCONSIDERATE FUCKGRUB DO YOU TAKE ME FOR?

--

-- arachnidsGrip [AG] began pestering caligulasAquarium [CA] at ??:??:?? --
AG: Hey, Eridan.
AG: ::::)
AG: ........
AG: Oy! Cape douche!
AG: I can see your handle lit up. 8usted!
CA: not really in the mood vvris
-- caligulasAquarium blocked arachnidsGrip from the chat! --
-- caligulasAquarium unblocked arachnidsGrip from the chat! --
CA: that is insufferable ill havve you knoww
AG: Aw. And here I thought you were just playing the washed up has-8een to fool the others, but you really have lost your touch!
AG: Guess I'll just have to find someone else to 8e in cahoots with...Someone who isn't 8ooooooooring.
CA: god fine vvris wwhat do you wwant
AG: Hm, I don't think I'm telling you. I know a sulker when I spy one.
AG: What was it? Getting your 8ss handed to you by Jade, or the incident?
AG: 8ecause you just haven't been the same since...
CA: you dont evven knoww wwhat ivve been like in this lifetime dont play stupid kiddy games
CA: ivve been meditatin on my past actions and comin to grips wwith the fact that all i do is make poor life choices that end wwith me possessed or dead and shit like that
CA: its really depressin actually not that you wwould understand
AG: I totally understand! God!
AG: All I do is fuck up and make mistakes and act like an idiot! Except now it's not just Terezi riding my 8ulge a8out it, it's everyone in this frigging apartment! Not exactly a situation conducive to getting shit done!
CA: wwell maybe they havve a point did you ever consider that
AG: Yeah, yeah, I'm the stupidest dumb to ever dumb. That's why I'm trying to make amends and friends! Instead of 8rooding and sitting around dramatically reading l8me 8ooks.
CA: theyre not lame okay they speak to me
AG: They're Harlequin Hearts cliche vampire romances that you 8orrowed from Kanaya. Aka the glow in the dark queen of meddlers.
AG: They're lame.
CA: they are not fight me
AG: No! Ugh! Look. I don't want to fight, I'm just saying, watching you 8e all depressed and lame is
giving me a headache.
AG: You think you can *read* your way through the entire game? Shyeah right.
CA: i can tell youre tryin to lead me astray into temptation wwoman its blatantly obvvious
CA: i just dont wwant horrorterrors in my head again okay it turns out thats wwhat it takes to scare me onto the straight an narroww
AG: Understandable. I tooooootally get that. I mean hey, no one wants spaghetti monsters running them into the ground. That's no way to win a game!
AG: It messed you up good last time, too, but not *this* 8ad.
CA: lalonde said it wwas leviathan not mal
CA: it felt like
AG: ...Like????????
CA: dont knoww the wwords for it
CA: wworse
CA: wwhat do you care
AG: What, I can't feel healthy concern a8out one of the teamm8s I'm gonna be relying on when we're fighting the 8oss 8attle to end all 8oss 8attles?
CA: yeah i guess that makes sense considerin wwho you are as a person
CA: fine ill return kans books an spend my time starin at the wwall instead
AG: Oorrerrrr~~~~~~~
AG: You could come hang out with me and Terezi, and get your ass in gear!
CA: remember that part wwhere i said i could tell wwhen you wwere attemptin to lead me astray into
- 
AG: Yeah, no duh. You're a real troll Sherlock Holmes!
AG: You can sit around 8eing a good little no8ody, or you can do something about it. You either make yourself useful or be a pushover for the rest of forever, and h8 to say it, but this team doesn't have room for quitters!
CA: so youre sayin i should try to be a better person
AG: Oh hell no. '8etter person' is such an ar8itrary phrase.
AG: 8e a 8etter player.
CA: i already capped out the echeladder im pretty sure i can handle blasting wwhatever needs blasting
CA: wwhilst very carefully not fucking up our last hope wwith my unparalleld powwers of hope-themed destruction
CA: i mean god betwewn me and gam youvve got all the homegrowwn internal sabotage you could ever ask for just from us bein ourselvves
AG: This is the part where I inform you that you are completely missing the GODDAMN POINT AMPORA!!!!!!!
AG: Gamzee already figured it out, and you've played wayyyyyyyyy more games than he ever has.
CA: no see the murderin people thing doesnt wwork out wwhen i do it
AG: Lol. Oh no, leave the PKing to me. We're not getting through this shitfest without 8r8king a few heads. ::::)
AG: The only question is, are you troll enough to do this the easy way, or is it gonna have to be the hard way? Well? Do you have the glo8es to get on board? Or are you gonna keep playing dum8?
CA: are you threatenin my person you infernal vvexation
AG: Hell yeah I am. And let me make this really, reeeeeeally clear, Eridan -
AG: I'm luckier than you are.
CA: oh for fucks sake
CA: do kan and sol know youre plannin to go player killer again
AG: They won't as long as you don't turn snitch, *duh*.
AG: Aradia already confirmed that this was the right thing to do so that we win! That 8asically means it's doomed to happen regardless of what all these meddling scrubs think.
AG: It could 8e worse - Gamzee wouldn't give you all these sweet options, he'd just smash your
pretty little fishface in.
CA: ivve got options
CA: wwait if i say yes are you goin to guillotine me from behind
AG: Of course not! If we do this here everyone and their human lusus would throw a fit.
AG: Though if you want to off *yourself*, I'll make sure Aradia's on call. No one could 8itch at me about that!
CA: not really all that high on my list of things i wwant to do
CA: ill think about it
AG: As long as you're thinking about getting stronger, not sulking. ::::) Got it?
CA: yeah yeah i got it
CA: wwait
AG: What now, Prince of Wishywashy Nonsense?!
CA: youre tryin to make me *stronger*
CA: oh god is this wwhat tavv wwent through
AG: No, 8ecause Tavros will only ever be a stick in the mud who likes doing pointless floaty dream quests and making friends instead of poking enemies in the soft bits with that stupid lancekind.
AG: Whereas you actually have some shiny potential for improvement, and an outstanding resume filled with lots of violence, hope-y 8ullshit, and willingness to take things into your own claws!
AG: Just stop doubting yourself, it's l8me. If you don't trust yourself not to make poor life choices, just listen to Aradia!
CA: wwho are you and wwhat have you done with vvis
AG: Hey, I mean clearly I would make a gr8 leader. The 8est leader. 8ut Aradia's on top of her shit and getting in good with her means getting a handle on allllllll the irons in the fire.
AG: So we can go along with her until she makes a mistake. ::::;) And then her irons will be ours.
AG: All of them.
CA: you are a connivvin, despicable force of nature vvis
CA: count me in i cant resist
AG: I knew you'd see things my way. ::::;) As long as you don't get any 8right ideas about allying with the guy who wants to destroy you along with everything else in reality -
CA: okay its really fuckin clear that was a shitty idea and its not gonna happen again givve me some credit here
AG: Awesome! 8etray me and I'll wreck your shit.
AG: *8etray us, I guess. You know what I mean. No Lords, no Horrorterrors. And no 8owing and scraping to these 8usy8odies. Have some frigging pride.
AG: Eyes on the prize.
CA: okay but im pretty sure kan could slice and dice me in fivve seconds if she thinks wwere schemin
CA: jade wwouldnt even need the fivve seconds i think
AG: If you were god tier, maybe you wouldn't need to worry about those two.
AG: Especially since I have it on the highest authority we've got that Kanaya isn't going god tier in the foreseeable future.
AG: Food. For. Thought.
AG: Also? We're scheming in their 8est interests! How often do you get to say *that*?
CA: wwhatevver
CA: thanks i guess
AG: Tch. Whatever yourself. Just don't get all mopey again.
AG: ::::;
CA: are wwe
CA: are wwe havvin a moment
AG: Maybe like 8% of a moment.
CA: is it that loww just because you wwanted to use an 8
AG: It is now less than 8% of a moment.
CA: coddammit
AG: Just remember to be up 8y 8 am sharp!
CA: wwait wwhat wwhy
AG: No more reading and whining. Only training now. You're going to 8e in the 8est shape by the
time we god tier you.
AG: The very 8est!
CA: ...like no one evver -
AG: If you start quoting the Fiduspawn theme song I will punch you in the throat until you go god
tier and then continue punching until it stops 8ecause it would be a just death. Do you know how
often I caught that useless wriggler humming it while we were adventuring.
CA: you started it wwoman!
AG: That doesn't count!
CA: ugh
AG: Ugh yourself!
CA: anyway i guess wwere cool noww
CA: and together wwe wwill beat all the levvels
AG: That's the idea! Just don't mess it up or get cold feet on me, and everything will 8e fucking
golden.
CA: yeah
CA: i hope so
AG: Keep doing that. You'll see. We're going to weaponize your hope thing for victory instead of
defeat, even if it kills you!
AG: Especially if it kills you!
CA: oh my god
-- arachnidsGrip [AG] stopped pestering caligulasAquarium [CA] at ??:??:?? --
---

Jade commandeers the lobby of the building the Harley Foundation is located in. It's not exactly
neutral ground or anything, and to be honest, Jade's not trying to be neutral here. Neutral would be
dumbness of the highest degree, and Rose figures they're already pushing how much dumb they can
survive before it kills them. Whether Droog means business or not, Jade's unquestioned top priority is
to keep everyone safe. Karkat insists on staying with her as part of Doctor Lalonde's honor guard;
Jade thinks it's because he's trying to prove something to himself.

Dave's a little harder to read, right now. He kinda looks like he could hurl all over the floor any
second, but whenever someone asks him about it, he shuts them down. But he doesn't need to be
here! Jade could send him somewhere else whenever he wants! He's being a stubborn dork about
this, even more than Karkat is, and the most Jade can do is shrug and let him do his thing. At least
Terezi is open and honest about her motivations! Jeez!

"Thank you very much," the tealblood says, taking a cup of tea when Janine offers it and leering at
the sugar packets with a grin. Terezi folded her wings away earlier, tucked away like a captchalogue
cards in a sylladex, and Janine doesn't appear to suspect a thing, bustling around and offering hot
beverages with shining eyes.

"Oh, of course!" Janine happily watches as Terezi tears open five sugar packets at once and begins
the process of turning her tea into a diabetic's nightmare. The ceruleanblood has already brought
everyone else in the lobby drinks, so Terezi could probably have taken every single sugar packet and
it wouldn't have fazed the other troll. "I'm so glad you all like it. Are you sure you won't need more
later?"

She offers Karkat the final cup of tea, and Karkat's mouth starts to twist into a sour scowl before Jade
coughs loudly. "This will do, thank you," Doctor Lalonde says, stirring her own tea with a closed, intently expression.

"The tea is absolutely delicious! You really should go home now, though," Jade adds, trying to reassure Janine with a hesitant pat on the head when the troll looks at her. "I'll call you right away if we need anything else!"

It seems to work. Or at least, Janine brightens and looks a little star struck, which is good enough for Jade! "Of course, ma'am," Janine says, clutching the tray to her chest. The ceruleanblood heads out the door, reeling a little.

After the door swings shut, Terezi snickers. "Definitely a fan of yours."

"She's sweet!" Jade protests.

Terezi downs the entire cup of tea in a single swig, then takes Karkat's cup out of his hands while he's still glaring at it. "Sweet as tiny little candy hearts," Terezi says, and then drinks Karkat's unsweetened tea with just as much enthusiasm as the first cup.

"It's pretty fucking blatant," Karkat agrees. Not a peep out of Dave.

"Whatever, you two." Jade bounces on her heels a few times, taking in the lobby with a fresh perspective. She yoinked Tavros out of that elevator just the other day, and so much has changed since then!

Her space sense casts wide rather than centering on specific details, but since Los Angeles she has more to work with. She can keep tabs on Eridan, Vriska, and Gamzee in their respective positions, and she just knows where Dave, Rose, and John are, as though her internal compass has three extra poles. The rest of the trolls and the scratch kids stick out, familiar forms that she would know even in the dark, even with them scattered around this block of buildings. Kanaya especially stands out, as distinct as the human players; Equius is a twisty mess of void, Doctor Lalonde and Roxy less so, but their twistiness is still something Jade can track. Mostly. The night traffic of Seattle feels blurrier, more out of focus, but she could snap her fingers and zap a vehicle at random to her location if she gave it a little nudge, passengers and all.

No sign of Bro. Or if there is, he's outside Jade's immediate radius, blending in with the rest of Seattle's population, and she can't spare the focus needed to track him down. Rose will be able to see him faster than Jade can run through the process of elimination. But if he's lurking nearby, Rose hasn't mentioned it in the group chat.

She thinks she would know the feel of Droog. Everyone knows vaguely what she looks like, now, but Droog has been tricky before. The second she shows herself, Jade'll be ready. She can evac a building full of people now, that's not even an issue! A streamer of capital b Breeze turns figure-8s around the trailing double ends of Jade's hood, ready to yank the moment John's windy senses pick up on an imminent explosion. If Droog tries to pull a fast one to separate them, she's gonna be in for a heaping helping of disappointment! Jade'll grab everyone and relocate the instant it looks like things are going south.

No fooling around. Everyone is ready to help, and it cheers Jade up a lot having them here. Sure, some of them could potentially go off and become a worse problem than Droog herself, but by gosh, do they have energy! And that counts for a lot. Jade bounces again, her hair swinging up and falling back with her as she does, and Karkat glowers at her from where he's stationed himself behind Doctor Lalonde's chair like a prickly cactus sentinel. Terezi grins, arching her back as she stretches her bony arms over her head and cracks her neck to the side. She took off her red-tinted shades and
hooked them over the collar of her shirt, so that the clouded red tissue of her eyes is visible when she
tilts her head back to sniff and her hood falls back. The effect is kinda unsettling, which Jade has
been told is the point. Terezi cackled when she asked earlier, anyway, and with Terezi that seems to
be a standard "my machinations have been a rousing success!" sort of response.

And Dave -

Dave's still jittering. He alternates erratically, drumming his fingers on his thigh for one minute before
shifting his weight so that his foot can tap soundlessly on the floor in a jerky allegro. Jade
understands why Karkat is puffed up and ready to spit acid (more than usual) but Dave's whole body
language is one huge NOPE. It's soooo out of character. Sometimes Dave can't sit still because he's
actually a dork like that, but Jade doesn't think she's ever seen him this flat out freaked before. The
on-going memo that they're all in just makes it more obvious; Jade texts with her phone in her hand,
but she has it hooked up to a tiny feed in the corner of her glasses, scrolling through with blinks of
her eye.

TG: t minus five minutes
TG: fmlfmlfml
EB: ummm, dave? are you sure you're alright?
TG: yeah im fine
TG: dude ur totes obvi not fine
TG: lies
TG: this is fine
TG: everything is fml
TG: *fine FUCK
EB: dave, i can come get you! or jade can teleport you out.
GG: seriously! :( 
TT: If you're this distressed -
TG: whos distressed
TG: i have nerves of steel
TG: could lay down a transcontinental railway with the amount of iron up in this
TG: iron man would be jealous of how steely i am
CT: D--> Iron and steel are two different materials
TG: dude
TT: Swap him with me. Roxy can hold things down here.
TG: okay hells of no
TG: just leave it
AG: Oh my gooooolllld, you guys. This is just sad!

Just. Scared. Dave? He gets nervous and flustered and worried, and then wastes a heck of a lot of
effort trying to pretend it's not happening, which always makes Jade roll her eyes. The silly coolkid
gambit is one thing. Dave hunching in on himself and turning roughly the color of moldy cheese is
another. Jade catches Karkat looking concerned before the troll shuts it down, and Doctor Lalonde's
attempts to squeeze Dave's hand when they first arrived only stopped when Dave kept being a
doofus and flashstepping away from the inbound hand. He clutches his phone like a lifeline; which is
no good, because at some point Droog is going to get here and they'll all need to at least pretend
to be subtle about their constant messaging. Like, Jade's gonna be real, they're all going to keep texting
regardless to keep everyone up to date, but Dave is starting to make her anxious by proxy.

It makes Jade wish John and Rose were closer. Having the four of them together might settle Dave's
nerves a tiny bit, right? But they're trying to keep a cap on how many people are in the room at once,
both to avoid ticking Droog off and to minimize how many people might end up in the line of fire,
and so all Jade can do for now is sidle closer, worrying her lip a little, and check the time. Ugh. She
settles on a nice friendly-yet-frowny face, and pokes Dave in the side. He jumps, one leg recoiling up, and this just won't do! He should have noticed her approach! "Dave," Jade says, and she raises her hand and presents it, making wiggly fingers when Dave fails to comply. "Hold my freaking hand and be happy about it."

Dave holds her hand. Without making a fuss or anything, which just shows how bad he's feeling. His palm feels clammy and cold like Rose's hands do sometimes, with the faint aftershocks of jitters running through his fingers. He squeezes too hard, fingernails digging into the skin, and she squeezes back until, finally, a faint snort escapes his nose. "Yeah, okay, you're stronger than me. Is this some Harley family power play tradition or some shit?" he says.

"You started it," she retorts.

"Please tell me you two are not fucking flirting over there," Karkat hisses through his teeth, his eyes glued to the lobby doors as the final minutes tick away. Can he sense hand holding or something dumb like that, now? It wouldn't be the strangest thing to happen.

Jade makes wiggly fingers at him with her other hand. "You think everything is flirting. Shut up, or I'll come over there and hold your hand too, fucknoodle," Jade says, fake-menacing, and Karkat stops watching the door and buries his face in his claws. Serves him right.

"This is so unnecessary, dude," Dave says. Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"Shut up, Dave. I'll keep you safe." Jade mulls it over for a second, which is longer than she usually gets when Dave starts talking fast enough. "And Karkat. And Doctor Lalonde, and Terezi. You're all gonna be fine." She readjusts her grip on his hand, so that instead of them awkwardly standing with their hands held up, their hands hang between them. "I promise! Everything will be okay."

Karkat emits an even more distraught grunting noise than he did before. Dave smacks his forehead with his free hand, the last of his fear evaporating as his expression turns pained. "Jade, no. That is exactly the kind of shit that jinxes us every time."

Jade rolls her eyes, and taps a thumb sternly when Dave tries to break their grip and go for a 2X facepalm combo. He's not getting out of this that easily. "That is completely ridiculous," she says, swinging their hands between them.

"I agree with the Jade human," Terezi says, lounging forward on her canekind with a cheeky grin that she can't seem to repress. "Where's the evidence of this claim, Dave?"

"We're alive, that's the evidence," Dave insists, waving a hand at Karkat. "You have to say the opposite of what you're going to do, otherwise everything blows up in your face. Like trying to shove a squash in a pressure cooker. Only the squash is someone's head, and then Horrorterrors are there, and basically no. We're not gonna be fine. This meeting is going to go completely to shit, and there is nothing you can do to stop it, Jade."

Karkat removes his head from his hands long enough to stare at the ceiling, his claws turning up beseechingly. "We're all probably going to die miserable deaths, victims of our own fucking incompetence. A-fucking-men," he says, with a straight face.

Great. Now Jade can't tell if they're dicking around or being actually serious about this mumbo-jumbo. What a pair of goofballs! "At least you guys get along now," she says, rolling her eyes, "in your new, superstitious friendship." They only have about a minute left before the meeting starts, but Droog might come fashionably late or something.
Dave starts fidgeting like there's ants in his pants when they've got thirty seconds left. "Jade. Let go."

Oooh, there's a car outside. Most of the traffic's been intermittent, but this one vehicle in particular slows to a crawl just out of sight of the main doors, then stops. Jade keeps tabs on it, adds a note to the group chat so that the others know to keep an eye on it, and continues not letting go of Dave's hand. "Nope!"

He's starting to look more vexed than scared, which is a vast improvement. Jade is a total genius. "We are not holding hands in front of Diamonds Droog. I need to be able to stab shit, Jade, come on," he says weakly.

"You've got a free hand. We're doing this man," Jade says, smiling.

Terezi seizes Karkat's arm and bends it into a crook so that she can link their arms together at the last second. "We're making this happen," she cackles, while Karkat stares at his arm like he can't believe it would betray him like this.

To be fair, Jade's pretty sure that's exactly what Karkat's thinking. She would bet cold hard cash on it.

"Children," Doctor Lalonde says, setting her tea down with a pained expression. "Please, I know you are all - excited." Her expression twists up even more. "That's not the right word for it in the slightest."

As fun as the dressing down might have been, Jade tunes right out the instant she feels a door swing open. Not the front entrance - a back door meant for employees only, located in the underground parking area. "Incoming," Jade says aloud so that Doctor Lalonde can get ready, while the group chat erupts.

GA: Eridan And I Have Spotted Movement Below. Two People In Black.
GG: im on them! i - oh.
GG: yeah that's droog :(
CG: WELL FUCK. HERE SHE COMES, TO WAVE A GNARLED OLIVE BRANCH OF PEACE AND FUCK YOU AT US. EXCEPT THE BRANCH IS A DEADLY WEAPON, AND WE ARE THE GULLIBLE SHITMOUTHS THAT WERE COMPLETELY FOOLED BY THIS FLIMSY, PAPER-THIN CHARADE OF RECONCILAMITY AND GOODWILL.
TG: yep pretty much
TG: we took one look at that shit and went like sign us the fuck up broski
TG: hell ill bet even droog didnt think wed actually fall for it
TG: then we all bent over and presented our asses to be kicked and shes like
TG: shit this is awkward i did not wear my ass kicking shoes today
TG: gonna have to reschedule you goddamn kinky freaks
TT: Dave?
TG: yeah
TT: As fascinating as this is starting to get, I'm going to stop you there. Not only for the sake of everyone else in the memo, but also due to the fact that Diamonds Droog is about to walk into that room, and you tend to talk aloud to yourself when you're rambling on the phone.
TG: stop kinkshaming me woman

Diamonds Droog walks through the doors at the opposite end of the lobby like she owns the place, which is the kind of gumption Jade (unwillingly) admires. It's been a while since their last encounter with the mobster, but she's exactly like Jade remembers – a snazzy dresser with the air of someone who could open a can of whoopass on the nearest victim at the drop of a dapper hat. Behind her, a woman with a black hijab takes up a position by the door with a wide view of most of the lobby, her
arms folded. She's not pretending to be a cool cucumber; her default expression just seems to be vaguely disgruntled.

Droog scans Jade, Dave, Karkat, and Terezi in a single smooth glance; she doesn't even hesitate at Terezi, who Jade thought might have stumped the Crew member for at least a second due to unfamiliarity. But apart from a faint sneer of acknowledgement and an extra pointed sneer at Jade holding Dave's hand, Droog dismisses them and fixes on Doctor Lalonde as she drapes a hand on the back of the chair opposite. Though the motion is smooth and calculated for maximum 'do I look like I care about your honor guard?', Jade thinks the scar across the back of the woman's hand looks new. She's positive! "You brought company," the mobster says lightly.

In the corner of Jade's eye, the chat is pinging like crazy.

GG: three guns on droog, plus cuestickkind and i think a butterfly knife. possibly a hypodermic needle?
EB: well, don't let her stick you with anything. we know she likes kidnapping people...
GG: two gun specibi on the other lady as well as a couple more sharp pointy things
GG: im not sensing any kind of explosives on them, but they both have disposable phones that could serve as remote detonators if they've programmed them right :(
TA: on it.
TT: I haven't seen anything bright enough to indicate a major event like an explosion from my vantage point in the near future. Or at least not one that's active. But...
TT: Shit. Why did no one mention to me that Droog has a void aura?
EB: really? since when?!
TT: I can only see where she isn't, the same way I can't directly observe my mother or Roxy's aura. This will make things...trickier. You can't count on me to notice if they set something in motion.
TG: for cereal? D :
GA: That's...Odd.
GC: H3H3H3H, W3LL, TH4T'S WHY I'M H3R3 >:]
GG: no sign of a sniper anywhere?
EB: not that i can feel breathing, or that the Breeze has noticed messing around.
EB: someone's definitely in the van outside. maybe Marlowe, or just a getaway driver?
TT: I may have located Deuce and Boxcars, but there's a void filter over the area making it difficult to perceive things. I don't think it's just Droog. Equius, is that you?
CT: D--> No
CT: D--> Why is one of Doctor Lalonde's void devices here
GG: what? where?!
TT: I can only think of one of Mother's machines that's unaccounted for/out of commission, currently. The one from our old house...
EB: why would it be in the middle of seattle?
EB: ...unless droog had it this whole time? oh my god she totally stole it, didn't she!
EB: that's just...that's rude! what an asshole!
TGd: dude she's a mob boss like
TG: did you really expect her to not randomly steal shit in the midst of threatening to doxx your ass
EB: i expect her to be a violent criminal who kidnaps people for kicks, not a thief!
AG: Oy! >;:::
EB: ugh. sorry vriska.
AG: 8etter 8e, 8uddy.
TT: Wouldn't kidnapping technically fall under the broader category of thievery, given that it involves stealing people?
GA: Should We Just Inform Doctor Lalonde About This?
GG: i will, she might have a way to shut it down remotely!
"We're just here to keep an eye on things," Terezi says, smiling. "Eheheh. At least, some of us are, anyway!" She inhales deeply through her nose, presumably getting a good look at the room and the people in it. There's no sign that she's using her Seer powers, but Jade just might not know what to look for. Motivations, thoughts, decisions...just how much is Terezi learning right now? More or less than Rose is able to? Hmmm.

"So did you, Ms Droog. May I call you Diamonds?" Doctor Lalonde asks. She doesn't move to shake hands with the Crew boss; she leans back in her chair, hands folded over the bend of her crossed knees. Her faint smile looks almost genuine, but she's got that faint squint to her eyes that Rose always gets when she's being passive aggressive and junk like that. Maybe Rose would be able to read Rue better through the power of mother-daughter strife experience, but all Jade can do is watch for signs that Rue might be panicking or otherwise losing control of the meeting. Droog isn't getting the upper hand here, one way or another. No way, Jose.

Jade straightens her shoulders a little more, her posture centered enough to meet Grandpa's standards, and keeps her attention circulating from Droog and her minion to each of the others scattered around the block. Equius is hard to follow, but as he moves he snags the faint layer of voidy stuff and wraps it around himself like a fuzzy blanket, so that little tweaks and discrepancies in Jade's sense of the space around them clear up before she can finish calculating just how off she might have been. As long as the twistiness is kept to a minimum, Jade can follow Feferi instead as the two trolls meet up and quickly sprint across the street, and go to investigate something two floors above in another building.

"Only if you'll allow me to call you Rue," Droog says, swinging one leg over the other idly to mirror Doctor Lalonde's positioning. For a second the two look eerily alike, poised and watchful. But Droog lets one arm swing down to the side, deliberately careless, her shoulders tilted slightly, and studies Rue with equal intensity even as her fake benign smile turns creepy. Weird how the makeup can't quite hide the shadows under her eyes, or the slight concave of her cheeks that wasn't there before. But...it was dark outside, last time. Or maybe Jade's imagining the difference.

"Naturally. You're familiar with my children, of course." Rue gestures toward the four of them, and Dave squeezes Jade's hand so hard it hurts a little. Jade's kinda proud, except under the circumstances, it's just a sign that Dave's still freaking out. Then Rue switches gears and nods toward the woman at the far end of the lobby. "Forgive me, though - I didn't catch your name, before."

The Crew member stares back impassively. Droog cuts in instead, shrugging so unapologetically that it takes Jade's breath away. "Yavari? I suppose I could apologize for her rudeness earlier. I wanted to deal with you on my own terms and my resources are limited."

"Not really an auspicious note to start things off on, and I'll confess, I was already at a loss as to why someone like you would trust someone like me to begin with." Rue's smile twitches.

The faint void cuts off almost entirely, and Jade automatically glances up in Feferi's direction despite herself; she can sense the troll skipping down toward the ground level of that building, presumably with Equius in tow. That was fast! Karkat frowns at Jade when she involuntarily looks up, his claws digging into the fabric of his jacket, and Terezi swats him while Jade shakes her head as subtly as she can.
GG: feferi, where are you guys going now?
CG: SERIOUSLY. WHATEVER THE FUCK YOU'RE DOING, IT'S MAKING JADE TWITCH, WHICH IS MAKING MY RAGGED NERVES THROW A FUCKING FIT.
CC: ---Equius killed the generaytor! We're coming to say )(i now! 38)
CG: WHY WOULD YOU THINK THAT'S EVEN REMOTELY A GOOD IDEA, YOU PAIR OF ILLEGALLY HARVESTED TONSILS?!
CC: Politics, Karcrab! And if Dave is still worried, STR----ENGTH IN NUMB----ERS!!! 38D
CC: We've got your backs!
EB: ...should we all just come there?
AG: I second that plan, John!!!!!!!!!
EB: no, no i take it back.
GC: N4H, HOLD OFF FOR 4 S3COND. TOO M4NY L4WY3RS 1N ON3 COURT SPO1LS TH3 BROTH, YOU KNOW.
CG: THAT METAPHOR MADE SHIT ALL AMOUNTS OF SENSE AND YET I AGREE. WILL YOU INGRATES AT LEAST MAKE A GOOD FAITH EFFORT AT STICKING TO THE ORIGINAL FUCKING PLAN?! THIS NEW PLAN WHERE YOU ALL ATTEMPT TO THROW YOURSELVES INTO THE PATH OF A VIOLENT SOCIOPATH IS A TERRIBLE PLAN, AND YOU SHOULD ALL FEEL TERRIBLE.
AG: Why don't you lighten up, Karkat?
CG: WHY DON'T YOU INSERT YOUR CRANIUM INTO YOUR RECTUM, VRISKA?
AG: ::::) Make me.
GC: 1 C4N'T T3LL 1F 1 SHOULD B3 CONC3RN3D OR NOT, H3R3.
EB: whoa, okay, cool it guys. seriously?
TA: hold off EB. iff they're gonna be 2tupiid let 2omeone el2e handle iit.
GA: Agreed.

...Jade thinks they're getting a little sidetracked here.

"What does trust have to do with it?" Droog drums her fingers on the table, her eyes heavy-lidded. As she talks, she reaches into a front pocket that contains one box of six cigarettes and a lighter, which is the only reason Jade doesn't punt her through the wall. The mobster taps the box open and takes one, offering the box to Rue with that crooked smile. She doesn't seem to care when Rue shakes her head 'no,' just lights her own cigarette and keeps talking. "Scratch is a liar and a cheat, a washed up double-crossing shit who's left me holding the bag one time too many, and Doctor Dienek is somehow worse. Congratulations. You're practically a goody two-shoes in comparison. That's not trust – that's common sense."

"Oh, yeah, we're fucking saintly," Karkat says, which is not in the plan at all. They're supposed to be letting Doctor Lalonde handle this, mostly because - in Karkat's own words - pretty much all of them are 'inflammatory assholes with the self-control of cordyceps-riddled ants.' "From the perspective of a criminal fuck."

Droog deliberately takes a drag of the cigarette, flicking her fingers dismissively in Karkat's direction. "Didn't I deal with you already? Disappear, brat."

Karkat puffs up like a bristly balloon, and even Terezi elbowing him in the side can make him deflate. "I'm just wondering how you came to the conclusion that you should approach me - someone who is fully aware of your crimes - rather than going to a hospital where you could be comfortably anonymous," Doctor Lalonde says, tossing her hair with a shake of her head, cutting Karkat off before he can start shouting. "Ms Yavari here gave the impression that you somehow realized you were infested with mindgrubs, and decided to set Samuel loose on us as though that would persuade me to help you." She takes another sip of what must be extremely cold tea. "True, I appreciate knowing who the traitor among us was, but it still caused plenty of pain to people I care
"I had Marlowe trigger the sleeper because it was the easiest way I knew to sabotage both sides."

Droog tilts her hat back and leans in over her side of the table, near enough that the thin cloud of smoke that trails out of her mouth almost reaches Rue. "I don't trust you, you don't trust me - but see, we're both women with a lot on our plates. And as it happens, we both want Doc Scratch to have a bad time. So I think we can make things work."

EB: what are you two talking about?
TT: I'm eighty percent sure that they're worried you're going to accidentally auspiceize between Karkat and Vriska.
CG: OH. MY GOD.
AG: Ugh! Do I look like I h8ve standards that low to you people?
AG: I'll have you know I have incredibly high standards now!
EB: uhhhhh, okay then. no, that's not going to be a thing, guys.
AC: :33 < *ac updates the google doc quadrant shipping spec chart, tapping her tablet in anticipation*
TG: whoa shit, there sa doc for that? sign me the f up
AC: :33 < just a mewment! i'll send an invite!
CG: YOU BOTH STOP THAT.
AC: :33 < nefur!
CC: Anyway, still coming over! 3B) Don't worry aboat it! We won't mess anyfin up.
CC: Whale just be...hanging out.
CG: GODDAMMIT FEFERI. YOU COULD TAKE EVERY SINGLE COMIC BOOK EVER WRITTEN, STACK ALL 200,000 MILES OF THEM IN A TOWER LONG ENOUGH TO REACH THE FUCKING MOON, AND YET IF YOU HAD THE WORD 'HATE' PAINTED ON EVERY PAGE IN THEM IT STILL WOULDN'T EQUAL A FRACTION OF THE HATE I FEEL ABOUT THAT PLAN.
CC: Dave, do you think this is a good plan?
CC: Dave? 38(
TG: i like the plan better where none of this happened in the first place
TG: instead of this
TG: all of this
TG: its like a trainwreck in slow motion with mmm whatcha say playing over and over for the rest of eternity as we slowly fade to greyscale
TG: you know
TG: as you do
EB: uh.
CG: GOD FUCKING DAMMIT, FINE, GET IN HERE FEFERI. DAVE NEEDS FUCKING MORAL SUPPORT OR SOMETHING AND JADE'S HAND HOLDING GAMBIT IS NOT CUTTING IT.

"Or," Droog finishes, idly, "you could simply set your precocious little youths on me, and hand me over to receive the justice I so rightfully deserve for as long as the police can hold me." There's enough acid in her voice to neutralize lithium diisopropylamide. "Scratch and the Felt won't stop, though. Their disturbing obsession with this pack of hellions is the only damn thing they're consistent about."

"I'm aware." Doctor Lalonde sits up a little, which puts her a little closer to Droog than Jade is really willing to allow; Jade sends a spark of green to tug at the back of Rue's dress, sinking into the thread and giving Jade an instant handhold in case something is wrong. Doctor Lalonde doesn't
acknowledge the faint tug; she stays intent on Droog. "Really, I wouldn't have bothered to prolong this conversation any longer than necessary if that weren't the case. You offered information in exchange for the removal of the mindgrubs. Here's my counter offer."

Droog's lip tightens, a little of her creepy smile fading into a coldness that's a lot scarier. "Information about the Felt is all well and good," Rue continues, ignoring the cool stare. "But if I understand correctly, you would leave with two colleagues freed of their little problems. If you turn on the children the moment the surgery is completed, I don't see the point of doing it."

The mobster snorts, grinding the stub of the cigarette out on the table. Jade winces. "Let me make it clear, then," Droog says unpleasantly, her eyes lingering on Karkat, Dave, and Jade. "Children annoy me. Dealing with hero children pisses me off to no end. The sooner I never have to put up with you people again, the happier I will be. You all and Scratch can kill each other for all I care."

"Lying!"

Terezi slams her cane on the floor with a sharp, resounding clack that makes everyone jump. Jade feels it coming before she hears it, but she's so engrossed in pinning down Droog that she startles, which is embarrassing. Dave tries to wrench his hand free, spooked. Droog's henchlady's chin jerks up and her hand makes a beeline for a gun. She stops before getting close enough to make Jade slam her through the wall, her face is tight as she closes her hand into a fist and lowers it again.

Droog herself looks at Terezi, unamused, and the fact that she doesn't pull a specibus on them might be why Yavari checked herself. "Really now?"

"Oh, yes," Terezi says, delightedly. She leans so far forward on her cane that Karkat has to shift his weight back to keep the pair of them upright, looking increasingly alarmed under Droog's irritated stare. "You absolutely reek of deception - I'd know that smell anywhere, Ms Swedish Fish! Perjury will not be tolerated on my watch!"

Droog's jaw drops. "You brought a lawyer," she says to Rue, appalled.

Amazingly, Doctor Lalonde runs with it. "You hurt my children. I don't take kindly to that." She leans back again, sips her now-cold tea, and swaps which leg is crossed over the other in a smooth swing. "Dear Terezi is a legislacerator, as it so happens."

"Freelance, now," Terezi adds, flipping her cane up and tapping it against her temple with a toothy grin.

"Oh, joy. I've never touched your children," Droog snaps, folding her arms over her chest. "The Seer of Light and young David here."

Rue slams the cup down, eyes flashing. "They're all my children, as far as you're concerned. Just pray that Ambrose stays out of this - he is far less inclined to negotiate with someone like you."

That's - that's super touching, actually! For a moment, Droog looks well and truly thrown by the gauntlet Rue just threw down. Jade gets all these warm butterflies in her stomach, the nice kind that leave her chest tight and her smile watery. It's one thing to consider Dave and Rose extended family, but even better to know that Doctor Lalonde thinks something similar. Haha, and Karkat and Kanaya probably count, too. Jade gives Karkat a grin and a wink, and he stares back at her in confusion and a little bit of quiet agony - it looks like Terezi's deliberately leaning her weight on her cane, which coincidentally landed right on top of Karkat's near foot.

"And what do you think I'm lying about - in your professional opinion, Lacerator?" Droog says,
finally. Now that she has a reason to notice Terezi, she looks positively livid. "I'm dying to know."

"Hehehe! Glad you asked!" Terezi says. She twirls her cane, nearly clocking Karkat with it. "You care. You care a lot about this caper, as it so happens! Revenge is a dish best served cold, but you still want to be there to watch Scratch burn, don't you? You think you can wind us up like little toy cars, point us at the Felt, and use us as a...distraction!"

"Shit's rude, yo," Dave adds. It's the first thing he's said aloud since Droog walked in, and Jade's surprised at how not-freaked he sounds. His voice still has an edge of tension, but his death grip on her hand is less circulation-strangling and more firm now. He looks a little peaky, but not like he's gonna drop any second, which was a quarter of the reason why Jade insisting on hand holding in the first place. Maybe he just needed time to steady his nerves? Or maybe he managed to flip a switch in his head and turn his usual coolkid attitude back on. Jade could guess better if she knew exactly what freaked him out in the first place! Now's not a good time to ask, though. "All kinds of rude."

TG: okay you know what
TG: fuck it
TG: game face back on

"That's the spirit!" Terezi responds out loud. Then she unlaces her arm from Karkat's, stepping forward with wrinkles of laughter around her eyes. She doesn't stop until she reaches the table, her cane tapping against the leg of Doctor Lalonde's chair before she finds the table and rests a hand on it. "So - with that in mind -" the tealblood bares her teeth "- how about instead of acting like you don't know what I'm talking about, you make a real deal instead of bullshitting us?"

"Back off," Droog says. A dangerous look creeps over her face, making really loud alarm sirens go off in Jade's head. Karkat is bleeding, a thin trickle of blood where he has worked a claw into the vein of his wrist, and the wiggly way he starts manipulating it into something solid and sharp intrigues Jade to no end. Unfortunately for him and Karkat, fighting is not going to happen. Not on Jade's watch. They're going to run like cowardly cowards who cower with absolutely zero shame, as per Rose's orders, and that's all there is to it. Doctor Lalonde stares daggers at Terezi as though to warn her off, but Terezi ignores her - probably on purpose - as the tension mounts.

"Shello, everybody!"

Feferi almost dances through the main entrance, twirling in a little circle and smiling sweetly as her scarf and hair whip around her. Jade's eyes skip over Equius twice before he stops sneaking under her radar, one hand balancing a portable generator that sits on his shoulder.

"What is this?" Droog says, one hand white-knuckled where it curls around the arm of the chair. Jade thinks the Crew boss's instincts for fight or flight run more along the lines of fight or fight harder, which doesn't bode well. Until, in a blink, Droog's body language loosens up again, her hand falling to make a signal Jade doesn't recognize. Yavari stops inching a hand toward her specibi, and Droog sniffs, haughty and disdainful as she almost collapses back into her chair, reserving one last glare for Terezi's proximity. Jade suspects they're still one wrong move away from trouble. "Well?" the Crew boss demands, a notch closer to violent scorn than she was even a moment ago. Jade refuses to let the pseudo-casual posture fool her for a second.

"I didn't invite them," Doctor Lalonde says, a frown creasing her forehead. She angles herself enough to see Feferi and Equius better without turning entirely away from Droog, her eyes disapproving when she momentarily looks at the other four. "Terezi, be a dear and give us some space. Is something the matter?"

"Nothing at all," Feferi says cheerily. "We just wanted to say hello, and return something of yours,
Doctor Lalonde. Here." Feferi beckons Equius forward, her eyes twinkling behind bubblegum pink glasses, and Equius looks like he can't decide whether frowning would be worth it. Sweat trickles down the side of his face, and Jade guesses if he weren't in magical god jammies he'd have sweat through them by now - god tier level moisture wicking, for the win.

It's not until Equius sets the generator down on the table, his long hair falling over his face in a black curtain, that Droog stands up from the table and Yavari rips a gun out of a holster to level at them. Dave wrenches his hand out of Jade's grip, drawing a sword out of his sylladex with a tight, cutting gesture, and Jade lets it happen so she can snap a finger with a stern flourish and grab Yavari's gun right out of her hand. Heck, she takes the rest of the weapons, too, for good measure. "You should not have that," Droog says, her voice dropping into a low growl and her eyes fixed unerringly on Equius. "Scratch will be able to see everything if you've broken it, you meddling -"

"Taken care of," Feferi says. She waves a hand, her sweet smile quirked, sashaying around the table to bump elbows with Terezi.

Equius clears his throat. "I am the Heir of Void. Compared to the machine you so rudely stole, I have more command over void in one hand." He grimaces apologetically at Rue. "I would like to state again for the record that negotiating with a known felon is the height of foolishness, Doctor Lalonde."

"Duly noted, my dear," Rue replies, blandly.

"Heir of Void," Droog says. There's a note of dawning, pained realization in her voice, and she looks incensed. "God. Tell me you brats aren't all switching over to some shared name scheme. I draw the line there."

"We also have a fucking rad team name," Dave says, and Jade nods along, juggling Yavari's pistolkind and Droog's assorted other weapons in a slow circle as she holds green-laced hands out in front of her, giving the cuestick an extra spin.

Droog notices, and glowers at Jade. "I don't care," she says, partly to Dave and partly to Jade, through gritted teeth.

"You probably should," Feferi says, pressing a hand to her cheek and smiling a little harder. "Because unless we come to an arrangement, you leave without any protection at all. Cosi va il mondo!"

- -

EB: guys.
EB: did that seriously just happen?
EB: like i can't believe what i'm hearing, holy crap.
GA: What Is Going On We Can't See Anything And No One Is Texting.
GA: Which Is Actually Incredibly Rare And I Can't Believe It Happened Even For All Of Ten Seconds.
GC: TH1NGS 4R3 B31NG T4K3N C4R3 OF, N3V3R F34R. >:]
CC: All is whale! 38)
TT: Jade? What is the situation, exactly? Give me bullet points.
GG: droog doesn't like us using a naming scheme, i've got five new pistols if jake wants some confiscated criminal merchandise, and also we're bringing wanted criminals home with us to get the worms out of their brainmeat :) 
GT: Really? Jesus christopher kringlefucker, its like christmas!
CG: YOU FORGOT THE PART WHERE SAID WANTED CRIMINALS ARE JOINING US
IN SOME UNGODLY ALLIANCE THAT WILL MOST LIKELY END IN GRATUITOUS DEATH.

GG: that part was obviously implied, duh, karkat.
CC: I atolld you we could help!
AC: :33 < does that mean we can come down there nyow? :??
CT: D--> Nepeta desist in making that 100dicrous face this instant
AC: :33 < you mean this face? :??
CT: D--> Yes that one
TC: :o?
CT: D--> Now 100k what you have done
AT: aRE WE DOING THIS FACE, nOW? }:? 
AG: 8gh, you mean we came out all this way and we don't even get a goddamn fight out of it? Such 8ullshit!!!!!!!
AG: And you people, take your dumb little kid smiley face antics to some other chat, jeez.
CC: 38?
EB: :?
GG: ehehehe! :?
TG: well alright then
TG: that went better than expected
TG: and now were all acting like assholes again so i guess everythings back to normal
TG: the natural order has been restored
TT: Isn't it a beautiful sight?
TG: like watching a zebra kick a lion in the head on national geographic
GG: but yeah! i'm gonna help get everyone where they need to go.
EB: rose? what's the plan?
TT: That depends on who here is free to keep an eye on the Midnight Crew, if they're going to the lab for surgery. Any volunteers? I'll come along, if only to speak to my mother before she can disappear into her work for the next few days.
GC: I'M ON IT. 1 C4N K33P B3TT3R TR4CK OF 4NY SCH3M1NG 1F I'M N34RBY. 
TA: ii'll go along, ii need two pull 2ome files from the hub and the wq ii2 awol or 2ome 2hiit.
GG: We will go, too.
GG: all four of you?
TT: Seems that way.
GT: Uh, yes! Right-o!
TG: should be fun!
EB: jade, you need me to help with transport?
GG: roxy and droog might be tricky at the same time. \ but you can probably come back right away if you want, no need to hang around.
GG: i think right now droog hates the felt more than she's annoyed by us, sooo...yeah!
TG: dont jinx it
TG: savor the moment
TT: It's settled, then. John, I'll come back with you, if you're amenable?
EB: no problem! let's go!
TT: Oh, and Dave? We need to talk, too.
TG: there is literally a million different ways you could have said that without it being the most ominous sentence known to man
TT: I know.
TG: fml

Chapter End Notes
@politicalmetrics, if you're still out there, search for 'redrofoesum' in chapter 21, and know that you were so close...

I had to cut things a little short, because in the spirit of Chapter 16 that came before, this chapter officially hit the AO3 character limit! /broken, half-hearted cheering/ From here, we diverge to Like One Sundered Star - Irons in the Fire, which is complete as of 3/22/2016. Then we will return here for the start of Arc IX - CORRUPTION with Chapter 27, Stifling Lips and Drowning Hair!
Stifling Lips and Drowning Hair

Chapter Summary

Let us give up, go down; she will not care.
Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
And the sea moving saw before it move
One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;
Though all those waves went over us, and drove
Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,
She would not care.

Chapter Notes

Edit: Some eye scream in Dave's section when Vriska goes near [spoiler's] face and starts chopping, as well as general Horrorterror-typical body horror and gore, and a warning for Vriska and Feferi being inappropriate about god tiering-via-suicide.

Make sure you have read Irons in the Fire before starting here - just like SLBTH, a lot of plot-relevant stuff happens, and things might not make sense without context.

The soundtrack for the next few chapters can be found here, but if you don't want to listen to all of it at once, for this chapter just stick to I'm So Sorry (Imagine Dragons) and Megalovania (Toby Fox).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ARC IX - CORRUPTION

Saturday, April 12th

Australia goes first, late Friday night. A test run. Evacuating a planet is no small feat, and it would just be orcaward if they glubbed it up on some bigger continent.

But Tethys has known the end of the world was due for a whale now. And what's one measly planetary exodus to someone with distant memories of ruling an interstellar empire, where hornswoggling the leaders, assigning a fraction of her armies to conquer that world, and sipping some champagne while moving on to the next solar system was a fun way to pass a slow weekend.

Once she shoos Zahhak away into a corner of the flagship where she can put the finishing touches on the secondary and tertiary engines and stop finterfering with the space-based tech, the mass transportalizers work like a charm. Like they're glubbin' turbot-charged, actually. The flares of space energy spike so high the monitors fry, but the people zapped out of the cities into the ark-class transport ships' holding bays don't appear to be irraydiated as they get gently 'persuaded' into the bioorganic stasis 'coons, so waterver. Figuring out how to adjust those to support human physiologies was a real beach, and they scream like wrigglers when they get dunked, but Tethys tells herself it'll be worth it in the long haul. Empires don't build themselves without subjects to rule over.
Most of their pets get swept up with them, too, a quirk of the lusus-detectors that picked up anything with a pulse or something equivalent close enough to a troll or a human. Pets are fine, whatev, but apart from the contents of every gene bank on the planet, she sees no use in making space for every single animal on the planet. Conservationists are invited to suck her bulge from here into the next millennia.

Mass-abductions are such a pain in the bass. Once they're on the move, the ark ships are gonna slow them down a shell of a lot. She'd prefer to convert them all to badass battlecruisers, but they'd need more trained crew to balance out the planet's worth of chum, and *that* would have attracted too much notice from ol' Scratch. Ledaei would make grumbly sounds if she cut the arks lose as cannon fodder now, when she's just talked him around to seeing reason. *Ugh.*

But ugh, she used to have an entire empire full of battle-hardened, violent warriors to work with. Flabby civilians are dead weight. Screechy, panicky dead weight. All her efforts to push this deadbeat planet into making strife part of everyday life always fell a little short of her standards. They'll do fine as colonizers as long as the next livable planet her battalion of naviterminators locate doesn't inconveniently develop its own sentient life before they arrive. She left all this to the last minute so that Scratch couldn't interfere. S'long as he stays focused on those brats of his, he probably won't give a glub about what happens to the rest of the population, even if he notices the transporterizer activity. He's a real piece of work and he can suck her bulge, too, for all she cares. He gets his apocalypse, she boots her empire off its terrestrial ass - everybody wins. Glubs has fucked off, to parts unknown enough that none of her people have been able to track it down so far. Superluminal travel shouldn't burn through the psionics, from the tests they've run with Zahhak's alterations, so Psii shouldn't need much papping as long as Tethys keeps him occupied on the bridge. She conchisidered tossing him in a sleeper ‘coon for the duration on the off chance that red eyed brat (they just keep popping up like motherglubbin' *daisies*) turns up, but like shell is she gonna risk him anywhere else in the fleet. When it comes down to the wire, the flagship's bridge will be the safest damn place to be; he's not dying on her that easy.

It burns cold in her chest, a surge of eagerness that's been a long time coming.

They're getting the fuck out of here.

"Time to fly, fishes," she says, with a claw jammed down on the fleet-wide intercom switch.

"Please stop using that hand, my Condescension," her closest, most trusted personal manicurist begs, in a tone suitably conchrite enough that Tethys lets her go back to laying sparkly gold swirls down over the mulberry of her painted claws. She has to be on point. They'll be picking up Nicki by morning, and that requires presentation.

"Wader you thinking?" she asks idly, one foot bobbing as the sound system starts pumping out something wordless and fast. "When're your boats coming up, buoy?"

The bulky carapacian has been calmly observing the ascension of the Crocker red fleet on the viewscreens at the forward end of the bridge, a vast array of monitors that stretch from the floor to the dome of the ceiling high above. Tethys hypothetically has eyes on the Black Queen, wherever she's fucked off to, as would befit a rival monarch - but these aliens have got betta tricks up their sleeves than she anticipated, and all the lurkers she's set on the BQ's trail have turned up as bodies scattered throughout the halls. It's annoying as shell and for all she knows that carapacian ho ain't even on board anymore.

Like. Tethys could fuck with a queen like that. She *gets* it. But unfortunately, the Condescension does not suffer a rival like that to live. Everybody's got an expiration date.
But this guy's just one of couple hundred odd world leaders Tethys already planned to have observe on the dry bridge as she lays down the fuckin' law, so reegardless of how much he annoys her, she likes to have him where she can see him. Finally, the pale carapacian turns back to gaze at her, a disconcerting amount of wisdom and surety in his button-black eyes. Tethys hates it with a visceral passion; the last person to step to her with a look like that had cherry red eyes and nubby horns and kept trying to forgive her right up until she stuck a fist through his pusher.

She learned her lesson last time. No public displays. No martyrs. Just an annoyance from a past life dying alone, the body dumped in an active volcano for maximum irony. It took her decades to convince Psii she had nothing to do with it; it helped that the two of them managed to make their own anemones while they were runnin' around playin' hero back then - some of the enemies entirely independent of the Condescence's slice of the pie, which was impressive - and they couldn't pin jack on Tethys, no matter how much that Divested woman wanted to whine. Her instincts always push her to make an example of em, but now the Signless comics are her propaganda in disguise, and she's beaten him in ways he couldn't even comprehend.

GP: Your efforts are most impressive. We had not thought such a marvel could be accomplished without the will of Skaia.

GP: The meteors should join us shortly. There were several neutral groups who wished to remain together, which required some rearranging.

Tethys smiles and waves her free claw grandly, the tourmaline and spinel-encrusted knuckleduster twinkling. "Then sit back! Shellax! There's canapes 'n cupcakes 'n shit if you're feeling nibbly. #haveasmackerel"

--

The call of war echoes.

But the Black Queen must keep her distance, or risk crossing the line of awareness. She's never strayed this close to a Waste before, and the consequences of meddling with something like that would be...unfavorable. Let the Bard of Rage play ill-fated games with the Medium of reality if he so choose; under normal circumstances, the BQ would prefer to avoid such overblown, pretentious nonsense.

A large portion of her feels that she should be back on the vast monument to one troll's vanity that is the Battleship Condescension; it's the part of her that remains tortuously aware of Skaia's guiding will, even after all these millennia. But thoughts of the ring -

It can consume you. She'd forgotten how it felt to have the urge to wear it, to fight, twining through her being. The sentient beings of this world recreated the game of chess with queens as the most potent force on the board, their subconscious minds following the pattern laid down long ago. If she cared anything for them, she would wonder if they have anything in their stories and games that deals with rings of power.

The White Queen has her ring back, though she does not yet wear it. Everyone on the planet, even the mewling creatures of no consequence, would have felt a war ring slip onto a ring claw on such a fragile plane. But possession of the ring is enough for the BQ to sense, even at a distance, and - fauh! If the Black Queen's were not around the neck of a Prospitian, in the company of the Waste, she would do almost anything to fix such a bitter, keenly-felt imbalance. Unlike that mad Noir, at least she would be able to control herself. The power was always meant for her, designed for her. She was born for this.
And then there would be balance again, on some ineffable scale. Skaia always did like her parallels, her ironic callbacks, her intricate symmetrees. There will be more glitches as the Lord breaks things down, and part of the Black Queen wishes she could rejoice in the death of this last Croaking universe without reservation.

She can't.

There are cracks spreading out beneath the surface of Lake Mead like shattered glass. They've probably been there for months, slowly siphoning out water so that a thick white band stands out around the outskirts of the lake, clearly visible from the dam. The death of reality is only a short swim away. She could warn them, she supposes. But she narrows her eyes and draws further back into the shadows instead, watching. It's arguable whether dear, detestable Skaia wants her here as witness or not, but the Black Queen tells herself that she doesn't care. If you say it enough times, it becomes more than a mantra.

The Misplaced Prospitian notices the Felt first; the Waste appears oblivious, her horns bent over a much battered laptop as she furiously attempts to repair one of the keys that has jammed. The BQ knows the one man by sight, though humans tend to look alike. Crowbar's rusty red hat low over his eyes as he and his companions muscle their way through the slim crowd. The other two she matches only by the colors of their hats; Fin and Trace, identifiable only by their ludicrous hats, both humans with grey at their temples, don't stray far from each other, though their eyes clearly follow different tracks as the three servitors move toward the Waste. The MP's colorful pastel scarves are aflutter as she shakes the Waste's arm to rouse the troll, but the Black Queen rather suspects, from the dawning look of realization on the Waste's face, that she's already catching on to the fact that something has gone awry.

Neither goes for the ring. It's the strongest weapon they could bring to bear, yet it never seems to occur to them to try. Surely the Prospitian hears that call even if the power would shatter her. Instead, she watcheshfgsdsgsuctecjaogtlaldfncoxcblbnfdhotdvdmdcoammtnesfwoedammit and backs off fast, cursing to herself as the troll clutches the damaged laptop closer to her chest. This is not a safe place to be, and to the Black Queen's disgust, the entire venture has proven to be for naught - the MP and the Waste don't make it very far before they're caught and marched off, and there's no sign of the ring falling in the scuffle. The sound of war vanishes into a dark car before any of the people made curious by the odd incident can be bothered to intervene, and the Black Queen departs in a far darker mood than she arrived in.

If Noir gets his grubby claws on her ring while she's busy keep tabs on that dopey Protector and the troll woman's efforts to snatch life from the jaws of death, someone is going to hurt.

--

Forcing Hearts into a suit that hasn't seen years of wear and tear and the occasional trip to the laundromat (Diamonds shudders at the thought) would be more satisfying if Diamonds hadn't tried this sort of thing before. It never sticks. He has only just shuffled out of the room, tugging at his collar awkwardly, before the faint pop of stitches ripping reaches her ears. Clubs totters in with an earnest look and a tell-tale smudge of gunpowder across his nose, and Diamonds knows as she talks him into washing under his claws that the suit won't stay in one piece.

Once the hats are on, it hardly matters. They go in through the front doors, splitting apart to avoid walking under the gaudy chandelier that is the lobby's worst nod to the lurid, ostentatious aesthetic of the rest of the Vegas strip. Most of the people at the counters are Clover's people, since he's in charge of keeping the finances of the casino front in harmony with the Felt's illicit activities, and few others
in the Felt are any good for maintaining public relations.

It also means that he is no doubt the one to immediately report the Midnight Crew's arrival to Scratch; the tiny man rushes up to them with his bowtie askew when they reach the accounting floor, ready as always to bait Diamonds away from the rest of his annoying cadre of clerks. The windows now sport horizontal, reinforced guards. As though that would save him.

Too bad Diamonds is in a good mood. Clover has gone through all that trouble for nothing. "Not now, Clover," she says, seizing him by the hat and redirecting him toward the nearest desk while she and Hearts and Clubs sail past. She gave them very clear, very simple instructions - *don't get distracted by the trash, stay with me*. She had to raise her voice to be heard over Spades, but thankfully, Hearts is more afraid of her than he is of the carapacian trying to stab his way into the Crew. Clubs is...well, Clubs is Clubs, and despite the fact that he treats Spades like an old friend, merrily calling him 'boss' and trying to coax him into not stabbing young Sollux every time he walks into the room, he'll listen to her.

"Wait, what?" Clover says, clearly astonished as he narrowly avoids jamming his hip against the corner of the desk. The troll at that particular desk, who leapt to her feet to wrap her arms around the computer, looks equally amazed at this stunning turn of events. Clover persists once he's recovered, though, following hard on their heels as Diamonds leads the other two up the steps to the penthouse. "Ah - w-wait, mu'am, the boss is in a meeting right now. With, er. Certain parties. Ma'am?"

"Piss off, champ," Hearts says, his voice gruff, "or we'll make yah piss off. Got it?"

"Yeah, piss off!" Clubs adds, sounding far too cheerful for it to have much oomph.

He fails to piss off. Eggs and Biscuit are huddled up by the stairs to the penthouse suite, but they exchange looks and fall back as the Crew marches by. Biscuit in particular looks - ugh - *green* in the face, as though making a bid to finally match the Felt décor. Diamonds gets the impression the Crew isn't what has spooked them, not to that extent. But backing down now would serve no purpose, and make them look like pansies in front of all the Felt minions clustered down below, so Diamonds steels herself and shoves the door of the penthouse open without waiting for a response to her harsh rap of knuckles. Like parts of the stairwell, the door looks subtly off, as though it's recently been patched up, but that's not what -

The smell of brine hangs rank in the air, with an edge of eau de ozone that overrides even Vegas's usual odor of sizzling dreams. It's overpowering, in fact, and Diamonds can almost *feel* her last meal curdling in her stomach. Hearts grinds his teeth audibly, and Clubs' claw steals up to squeeze the edge of Diamonds' suit jacket. For a dangerous moment, Diamonds can't see or hear anything, wholly distracted by the bile in her throat and the knot where her insides should be. Something is *watching them*, something enormous, something she can't fight -

And just as abruptly as it hit them, the sensation cuts off.

Now, now. Thank you for your courtesy in leaving them alone, Leviathan. We will not speak again, but this has been a most fruitful visit.

**OH YES. VERY MUCH SO. ON YOUR MARK...**

And ah, yes. My dear, dear Droog. Come in, come in. I have been expecting you.

He doesn't look any different. Diamonds thinks that he should, as she recovers and strides into the room with her jaw set. But the orb of Doc Scratch's head and suit stand out ghastly white against the green, his arms folded behind his back where he stands by the desk. The window to the balcony
hangs wide open, some of the curtains on the other windows fluttering in the breeze. As Diamonds raises her chin and comes to a stop, hoping that her makeup can conceal the veneer of sweat caused by that brief moment of horror, she takes stock of the other two people in the room, assessing them. One is Stitch, and Diamonds has to repress a sigh at the sight of him; he was so careful to avoid her before this, and now she won't even have the chance to offer him alternative employment. At least not right now.

The second is a carapacian. A botched job of a carapacian, actually - there's something wrong with the color of its shell, like someone dyed it like a marble cake with mottled swirls of black and grey and white. It has its back turned and shoulders slumped, peeking under the fall of a cloth covering the blue and white Möbius net chessboard that has been in this office for as long as Diamonds has been visiting it. It -

He turns to glare at them, and Diamonds knows him.

But the Spades Slick she met isn't half-bleached and brittle, a thick scar curling up from beneath the edge of his shirt to cut a wide, discolored crescent across his face, and this can only be Jack Noir, aka the last person Droog really wanted to run into at this point in time. His presence is irksome, and if Scratch pulls out someone else from the green-paneled woodwork, the Midnight Crew is rapidly going to be outnumbered in here.

Interestingly enough, Noir flinches back when he lays eyes on them, shock rippling across his scored face. He snatches his claw back from the cloth and swings back a pace, eyeing them warily. It entertains Droog immensely; she went through too much bull trying to hunt Slick down for the petty satisfaction of seeing his double on his guard not to warm her heart a few degrees. "Sir," she says, the faintest trace of mockery slipping in as she gives Scratch a cursory look. Hopefully the only way he knew about their approach would have been from Clover's surveillance; she has to put faith in Zahhak's void wards, and that irritates her, but until Scratch makes a needling comment that reveals something he shouldn't know, the Crew won't be able to tell how much he still sees.

That doesn't mean Diamonds has to be nice. Not anymore. She may not be able to keep control over the conversation - she never can - but she's set to endure. It's what comes after that matters.

Re-introductions, of course, are in order.

JN: I know who the hell they are, dammit. Droog - Hearts, Deuce, I - It's me, you great schlumps.

Clubs gives a little intake of breath, and Diamonds stifles the urge to look down to see what's wrong with him now. His head wound is healed. There's no need to coddle the troll in public. Or at all. "Jack Noir. Yes, we know," she drawls, dismissive. "Though I hate to say it - right now you look like shit, compared to the other one."

JN: That's the fucking fake that's been running around, ain't it? Ah, shit, Droog.

"Boss," Clubs says, his voice hushed and troubled and with an odd note to it that Diamonds can't place. Diamonds fails a stoicism check and frowns down at the troll, concerned against her will. Noir's edging closer, which isn't helping things, particularly when she sees that Clubs has his claws laced together against his chest, pressing down against his sternum nervously. "You, uh, are you feeling better now? Only last time didn't go so hot, see."

JN: Deuce - uh. You remember that?

JN: ...Shit.
Hearts looks just as at a loss as Diamonds is. Good god, and here she'd thought Noir was a damn myth made up to explain spontaneous deaths down in the basement floors. Like a murderous mob Bigfoot used to cover for other people's murderous mistakes in a criminal organization staffed largely by dangerous, brainwashed morons. A hypothetically competent boogeyman, plucked out of Boulder City and then vanished into the depths of the Felt's domain. Now, suddenly, Clubs is acting as though they've met before, and Diamonds does not like that she doesn't understand the context. First Sollux, now this?

"Oh, I remember everything!" Clubs says earnestly, and, like the bumbling fool he is, he breaks lockstep, trotting past Diamonds with his brown eyes glistening. The plan to present a united front flies clear out of his head, obviously. He makes it another step before Diamonds succumbs to sickening weakness and latches onto the back of his suit jacket to keep him from getting in range of whatever specibus the mottled carapacian might be packing. The troll hangs at the end of her hand without trying to press his luck any more. "It's good to see you again after all this time, Jack! I was worried you would be sick forever!"

She's not sure if she's going to shoosh him or murder him. "What the hell are you on now, Clubs?"

Hearts says.

"It's Jack! He's - oh, phooey. You guys never remember these things, but he was -" Clubs worries his lower lip. The carapacian shuffles from foot to foot, scowling, and the flicker in his eyes reads like...guilt? Unease, at least. He coughs into his claw, and something sparks around his fist.

JN: That was. Look. I didn't mean to get you all killed. Shit happened.

JN: I guess I'm sor- I'm. Sooooorrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr fuck my life.

The bizarre apology has roughly the same tone expected of someone having their teeth extracted from their jaw without anesthetic, a sound Diamonds has heard before in various contexts. She trades an incredulous look with Hearts, who still looks mystified, and while she's distracted Clubs wriggles free from her hold and tackles the carapacian in a hug before she can yank him back to her side. "Oh, don't be silly! We've all killed each other at one point or another! Accidents happen! Bygones be bygones!" Clubs says merrily, while Noir endures the hug with the enthusiasm of a corpse. Diamonds does her best not to look like she's about to start beating someone over the head with a cuestick in front of Doc Scratch, who appears utterly unmoved by all this, infuriatingly content to observe this latest stupidity. "I tried to come down to visit you a few times, you know, but Stitch yelled at me something fierce -"

She doesn't notice Noir draw a weapon of any kind. But a bolt of green runs down the carapacian, and Diamonds jolts forward when Clubs lets out a little yelp and she will kill him. The carapacian's face is a mask of pain as green sparks wrack him, while Clubs shuffles back with a disconsolate look as Diamonds hauls him back and shoves him toward Hearts. She keeps between the two of them and Noir and Scratch, bristling. Looking back to see if Clubs is hurt would be...foolish.

The only one Noir appears to hurt is himself. He cringes, smoking lightly at the edges, until the last wave of green runs its course. If he explodes, Diamonds knows, there won't be much left of this penthouse, or the next four floors down.

JN: Agghghghhh! Shit! Stitch, I thought you fixed this.

The tailor shrugs, leaving his post by the wall to inspect the carapacian with a critical eye. He takes out a well-worn measuring tape (Diamonds stifles a sigh of envy) and holds it up against Noir's face in several brisk movements before shrugging. "I did my best. You can do what needs doin'. Next time don't go swallowin' things that scar you into the next life and then go joyriding with void on
you. Basic self-preservation."

This time, the electric green flare is deliberate; Noir snarls, and the carpet starts lightly smoking under his feet. Clubs starts shuffling around, a tiny dance of nervousness that Diamonds cuts off with a tiny pinch to the back of his neck.

JN: Bull! Fix it better!

Stitch simply looks at Scratch, and snorts. Scratch doesn't so much as incline his dome of head, but Stitch appears to take that as commiseration. He winds the measuring tape around his fist in a few short, neat snaps and then slides it back into the deep pockets of his suit jacket. If Diamonds' passion for kidnapping were a little more pathological, she'd stop him before he got out the door; but Scratch is literally right there in front of her, and she simply has to grit her teeth and think of what could have been as Stitch walks away. "I've got more important things to do. Like clean up all the mess you made wandering around everywhere the other day." He pauses in the doorway, squints at the air, and clicks his tongue. "Need something tougher than a whip stitch on this before you go, boss?"

No, no, that'll do. We will not meet again. Farewell.

After Stitch tips his hat and leaves, Doc Scratch stands still for a moment, long enough that Noir jitters his foot. Diamonds doesn't like how aggravated the carapacian is already; she lets go of Clubs only once she's sure he won't take off again.

Now, to business. So, dear Droog, Hearts, Clubs - did you all resolve your business elsewhere? Your halo of void would suggest so.

Diamonds hasn't been so gleeful since…no. She's not gleeful. Honestly. But satisfaction curls up in her chest, thick and gloating, and she can almost feel the weight of Hearts' sagging relief from here. Relying on those children was a gamble and then some. If the situation were reversed, Diamonds would have sent them off with false tokens of void in a heartbeat; who would have thought that hero children and their ridiculous sense of integrity would ever come in handy? She drums her fingers along Clubs' shoulder, trying to tap him into toning down his swell of happiness. Even if Scratch can't see them, he's still in the same room, which makes the point rather moot. Diamonds would have hoped that the lack of obvious eyes on the cue ball would mean that space sense was quite literally how he could see them, physically as well as in his wider awareness, but that would be too good (and amusing) to be true. "Hmph. What can I say? Maybe if you knew how to keep your wandering eyes in check, we wouldn't feel the need for extra precautions," she sighs, flicking a bobbing curl of hair back away from her cheek. It's too long now to tuck all of it up under her hat, these days.

Taunting Scratch with this is not the smartest idea, maybe. But keeping his attention here, focused on them, for the moment? She'll take it.

If that is what you wish. I only ever seek to be an obliging host. You could have told me you were uncomfortable with my surveillance, and I would have done my best to accommodate it. Within reason.

What a goddamn liar, Droog thinks, as loudly as possible.

Thankfully, everything continues as expected.

And not a word from him about being called a liar, even within the recently-restored sanctity of Diamonds' thoughts. That's the kind of jab that Scratch has never been able to resist countering. Just keep thinking that, you creep.
Unfortunately, all it takes is a moment more for Diamonds’ vicious pleasure to come crashing to a halt. She should know better by now.

And you three have returned just in time to assist in a most momentous occasion. You see, a group of plucky heroes is about to lay siege to the building.

*He knows.* She can't communicate that to the annoying little brats, though; not now. From what little the suspicious, picky children shared, they meant to come later in the day, giving the Midnight Crew time to set up their own groundwork. How could Scratch have known, though? Some hole in the void obscuration? Or more mundane spies? Diamonds hates how having time travel on the table upturns the board every time she thinks she has a grip on it.

They say nothing; the awkward silence, though, is perhaps more damning than Diamonds could have imagined. Noir doesn't seem to notice, but he's secondary, an afterthought - her focus is all on Doc Scratch's silent, implied laughter. His smooth head bobs as he turns away from the Crew, and he snaps his fingers with a tiny click that spins the dial of a safe, one that Hearts has never had any particular success in liberating the contents of.

When Diamonds sees what sits inside, she's very, very grateful Hearts failed. It is as tall as the safe, almost as tall as Scratch himself, a mauve-tinted triangle of white with a serrated edge. Black veins course through it like a creeping rot, in patterns that might be runes or words. The whole thing screams *unholy goddamn artifact*, and Diamonds wishes the aura emanating from it didn't remind her distinctly of the presence of that Leviathan thing. Clubs has been edging forward again as if he thinks she hasn't noticed, bouncing on his toes while throwing looks at Noir, and she shoves him back toward Hearts one last time with a look that brooks no argument.

Rather than pick horrific relic up, Scratch snaps his fingers again and it vanishes in a fizzle that draws a corresponding wince and flicker from Noir. The thing reappears on the balcony outside, balanced on the railing like a small, potent obelisk.

Unfortunately, they have less time than they think. I have prepared for their inevitable arrival quite thoroughly, you see.

"How did you know?" Diamonds asks. Her throat clicks, too dry. That obelisk - that *tooth, call it what it is, Droog* - frightens her. There's no way around that, no way to smooth it back down into her usual poise. Some things are meant to be feared. "That they would come here, I mean?"

Oh, I told them the address. Vriska Serket is most reliable, in her own way. A delightfully, easily manipulated young woman.

The presence of so much void in the near future narrowed down the potential avenues this could take to a select few. You contribute to it yourself, dearest Droog. There are some things that I have not always known, but my deductions have proven almost flawlessly correct.

Whatever they do, they will always end up…here. By the end of this day, the Great Undoing shall be at hand.

...She hates working with children. She absolutely despises it.

And if Scratch calls her 'dear' or some variation of it one more time, she will crack open his massively oversized skull and feed him every hat she owns, as well as the contents of every bowl of candy he's ever offered them. There has to be some kind of twisted irony to murdering a monster with a cue ball for a head with a cue stick, right? "Whatever you say, big cheese," Hearts says, too loud and shaky, when Diamonds fails to fill in the silence with a suitably meaningless reply.
I believe I know who the catalyst shall be. All that is required now is the...correct incentive.

Between Scratch's usual enigmatic not-explanation and the ebb and flow of the disturbance eddying around that tooth, Diamonds can tell this isn't going to end well. "May I ask for any kind of clarification here? At all? Boss?" she asks, poison dripping from her tongue once it stops being paralyzed with rage.

Of course. Alas, I will not answer at this time. It should become clear to you soon, despite your disadvantage.

Diamonds shakes her head. Well, then. Those void wards better be functional, because she can't stop herself from thinking that she has remarkably few regrets about selling Scratch out. The moment they're out of this room, she thinks she's in the mood to sell him out more, in fact. As long as they go along with Scratch until they can fool him into letting them roam the building with minimal interference from the Felt, a quick message to the brats and their guardians might not go amiss. If Marlowe and Yavari have succeeded in coming up through the underground garage...

It always comes back to this, doesn't it. Bearing through Scratch's infuriating certainty. There's no way to win with him.

JN: You always take his shit like that?

Oh, like hell is she going to put up with that. She bares her teeth in a polite smile in the face of Noir's distaste. He wrinkles his nose in judgment, but his face is too disfigured for the expression to be clear. "That depends," she says, sweetly, letting her cuestick drop into her palm. "Do I need to take yours? Does he value you enough to stop me from shoving this up your -"

"Diamonds, wait -" Clubs begins, and if he dares shoosh her now, after the hundred and twenty talks they had about pacifying her in front of enemies, she will - she will give him a stern lecture, afterward.

Dammit. How weak has she become?

Before the troll can finish whatever he was about to say, Scratch opens one of the drawers of his desk - not with a flicker of power, surprisingly, but with a hand, the other arm tucked behind his back as he draws out a (ugh) dark green stained case. It looks like it would have been high quality wood before having that horrendous hue forced upon it, and he sets it on top of the desk with obvious care.

Diamonds wants to know what's in it. Unlike that tooth watching them (and it is watching, she's sure of it) from the balcony, the case is delightfully normal. If that's her reaction, she can't even imagine how Hearts' fingers must be burning with curiosity.

Before we begin, there is one last thing. I have presents for all of you. Parting gifts, you could call them.

Heehee.

Hearts. Shall we start with you?

The unexpected laugh makes Diamonds jolt. It's...unpleasant. Hearts takes a few steps forward until he's level with her, eyes bouncing between her and Scratch with an expression just a shade off from outright terror. He has to clear his throat twice before finding his voice, and it cracks embarrassingly before he gets ahold of himself. He sounds like a man on death row. "Oh, go- I mean, uh, sure, lay it on me, boss."
Scratch is smiling. Diamonds can *tell* he's smiling, by whatever definition of smiling an impenetrable aura of mental smugness falls under.

The best gift of all. The gift of knowledge. You should take them to the canyon. I cannot predict past a certain point, but I can deduce from the trajectory of a certain body currently about to cross the Kármán line as it re-enters the atmosphere that it will most likely land close by.

"That, boss...that makes zero goddamn sense. Alright, I guess?" Much more quietly, under his breath, Hearts mutters, "Yippee. Hiking." She'd smack him upside the head for even considering going along with Scratch's advice, but what would be the *point* anymore? Without explaining further (as if she ever expected him to in the first place) Scratch rounds on Clubs, wedged between Hearts and Diamonds in an effort to squeeze past them.

Clubs. Your gift is this - your son will not see it.

When wiggling deftly doesn't accomplish anything more than mussing the side of Diamonds' pants and getting him more firmly stuck between the two taller Crew members, Clubs pops his arm out and raises his hand. "Sollux won't see what?"

Diamonds introduces her palm to her face.

The knowledge of that is not your gift. Simply the fact that it will be so.

Clubs looks at Hearts. "Can we trade?"

Hearts takes a step away, and Clubs nearly faceplants on the floor when one half of the support holding him up disappears. His claws dig a little too deep into the back of Diamonds' pants as he catches himself. "*Hell* no. Mine almost makes sense. Yer not taking this from me." Hearts pauses. "Also I don't have a kid. I *better* not have a goddamn kid."

"Seconded," Diamonds says, with fervor. Having to coddle the Captor boy by way of Clubs is bad enough as it is. She nearly blew their entire fragile alliance out of the water the moment the Egbert boy dared to call her 'Diamoms Droog,' when Clubs gave away the fact that he was Sollux's parental unit to the group.

I could locate your offspring for you, Hearts, but they are largely irrelevant, and I doubt paying child support will matter much in the immediate future. So sad.

Diamonds barely hears Scratch's next sentence, aimed at her, over the tiny whine that emerges from Hearts' throat, barely loud enough to hint at the internal screaming within.

And for you, Droog...This.

He opens the case.

Naturally, the one time Scratch actually obliges her curiosity, the actual reveal is...disappointing. He takes out a gun and leaves the desk to hand it to her personally; she straightens her back but doesn't give in to the urge to take a step back. The strong smell of fresh leather lingers around the holster, and the strap is - what else - Felt green. Diamonds stares at it in ill-disguised disgust, until Scratch snaps his fingers and the main strap vanishes. Gingerly, still immensely uncomfortable, she takes the plain holster that remains, turning the pale gun over in her hands in a cursory, instinctive inspection.

A revolver. Apart from the color and the odd texture under her fingers, there doesn't appear to be anything too out of the ordinary about it. Actually, it feels almost - decorative. She's felt ivory gun grips before, and the whole thing has the same look to it. "How...impractical," she says, delicately.
Immensely so. It only has one bullet. But one bullet should be more than enough, if you play your cards right.

And I do think that I have.

Whatever. When the shit hits the fan, one bullet could make a minuscule difference, if she can be bothered to use a gun that might shatter under her own grip. Honestly. Diamonds shucks the grey holster and stows the cue revolver in one of her spare body holsters. What can it hurt?

No, no. Bad question. She strikes out the thought and clenches her jaw. Scratch could have any number of motivations behind giving her this. Keeping it might be playing into yet another one of his usual bullhonkey - but tossing it away in a building full of professional criminals would be putting another weapon in the hands of the Felt when it all goes down.

In the end, the instinct to keep as many weapons on her person as possible wins out. She folds her arms, the weight of the gun pressing against her side. Clubs has his lip between his teeth, like he wants to beg just to be able to see the gun really quick. Noir is eyeing her with a similar expression, longing warped with scars, and she folds her arms a little tighter, nostrils flaring with disdain. The carapacian snaps his teeth and turns to hassle Scratch.

JN: And what about me?

I would never be so ungracious a host as to forget you, Jack. In addition to the clothes on your back and the stitch in your side - another gift of knowledge.

The ring you seek will be revealed soon, as will your double. You may be tempted to kill your double. But in this case, it may be inadvisable to stick around long enough to do so. You'll have a far more important challenger to deal with.

Spades. He's talking about Spades, and Diamonds has no way to check in with Yavari or Marlowe from here. Her fingers twitch, and she almost closes them into a fist. Steady, steady. Noir deflates, apparently less than enthused by the fact that he didn't get a gun, too.

JN: The whole enigmatical thing? Is total bullshit. Jus' wanted to let you know that.

"Yup," Hearts says, nodding with a look of genuine sympathy. He's going soft in old age or something, clearly.

I am only enigmatic from your perspective. Someone else with more awareness of the greater implications of this conversation would understand exactly what my ultimate intentions are.

But you are not them. How frustrating that must be.

Heehee.

Haahaa.

Hoohoo.

And with that, and a flick of his wrist, the cloth covering the twining chessboard flies off, folding in midair to land neatly over the back of a chair. Diamonds is far, far more preoccupied by the faintest flicker - god, maybe she's hallucinating or - but she could swear there's a shadow of teeth within the cue ball of Doc Scratch's head, stretching from one side of his not-a-face to another like a skeleton grin.
She seizes Clubs by the arm, Hearts by the ear, and backs them out of the room so fast there isn't even time for Noir to finish doing a double take and yell at them to wait up. She slams the door shut behind them and by now Hearts has processed what they just saw, and joins her in dragging Clubs away through the financial floor faster than they've ever gone before. Shit. *Dammit.* "If I never hear a laugh like that again, it'll be too damn soon. Let's get outta here, Di," Hearts says, only a hair off from pleading, and she nods, mouth too dry to make words.

"Wait, guys!" Clubs protests, kicking his feet in the air whenever Hearts or Diamonds lifts too high on their end to try to keep walking. "What about Jack?"

"*F*uck that guy," Diamonds says coldly, and as they sweep down the stairwell, she can't squash the feeling that every Felt member in the room is watching her go.

--

Spades isn't much of one for second guessing himself. That kind of shit is for pansies, and he's done his best to discourage it in his new and questionably improved crew. There are a couple he didn't get around to giving a pep talk to, due to the fact that his pep talks involve inspirational stabblings and some people act like getting a teeny tiny stab wound is the end of the goddamn world. He'd have stabbed his way through the Heir of Void to get to the one wind hero kid who really needs to grow a backbone, but it turns out Spades likes his shell to stay on right-side out. The Wimpy Vagabond has both PM and the space witch watching his back whenever Spades sneaks past the Knight of Time to get at him, and that's just plain annoying. He's not sure where the other carapacians stand in relation to his gang, but PM and AR both tagged along on this trip fully intending to get right in the thick of it, so he counts them as extra bodies to throw at the Felt. As long as the democracy fetishist doesn't wander in between Spades and somebody in dire need of perforation, he doesn't give a shit.

At least the Heart girl can give Vantas a run for his nubs. And if Spades never sees the White Queen again, he'll be as happy as Hearts at a bank heist.

Anyway. When the big day comes, Spades leaves his second and third in command in charge of the new recruits and sticks with his old gang. Rose and Vantas are damn well grown up enough to run their own circuit, and they have the oldest Lalonde and Strider to keep them from getting tossed out of bars or some shit like that. Without something to give him that extra edge (something like a ring - *gah*, not thinking about it) Spades doesn't want to get tossed around by a bunch of asshole god kids. Hopefully they won't make too many amateur hour mistakes, like trying to take an ex-Villein into a mob fight. Spades thinks he's made himself clear on the subject, but these guys…aren't the sharpest cards in the deck, sometimes, and the Harley girl assumes that just because she's the big space player on the board that she can snap the useless ones to safety without consequences. Dragging them along isn't worth it in the first place. But when Spades starts agreeing with the Thief of Light, Vantas gets shouty; he takes off with Diamonds, Hearts, and Clubs. For old times' sake, to escape the yelling, and to keep an eye on Di in case she gets twitchy on the trigger finger. Running the Crew for so long's gone to her head.

Case in fuckin' point: she insists on Spades going in all stealth with her two favorite thugs, instead of guns blazing with the rest of the Crew. This is, in fact, total horseshit, and Spades goes into the hidden compartment in the trunk of the car kicking and gnashing his teeth. He chews his way through the upholstery in under ten minutes, lifts his head to snarl at the two wannabes, and freezes when he sees that the human man - *Tweety-bird? Sparrow? Some kind of feathery name - has a gun trained roughly in the direction of Spades's face. Apparently, eating the furniture is noisy enough to give even pushovers like these two humans an idea of when an escape is in progress.

Sour, Spades snaps his teeth and scrambles the rest of the way out of the hole until he's most of the
way upright, glaring daggers at the flunky and daring him to actually shoot.

SS: Bwagh!

SS: Aight, where are we? We in?

"Stay down," Tweety-bird says, taking his eyes off Spades to scan the garage around them. The human woman in carapacian-like wrappings stays focused on maneuvering the car to an empty spot tucked between two pillars, with an enormously oversized truck between them and the wide vantage point of the ramp in case of a stickup. "We don't move until we have word from Lady Droog."

That. Yeah, that's what happens when you let Diamonds put on fucking airs. Eurgh. Spades doesn't bite the stooge's hand until the gun comes off along with a couple fingers, but only 'cause his carapace is crawling too much at the skeeviness of it all. He itches to get away from these poor, deluded saps, and starts making a move for one of the door handles.

SS: That shit's not normal, you know. Why am I not surprised Diamonds decides to go on a power trip the second she gets left in charge?

SS: Just lemme out and I'll go do my thing. The coast's damn well clear enough.

A second gun swings back almost a full 180 degrees and cocks inches from his head. "No," Yavari (there, he remembers that one) says, flatly, not even looking back at him as she reverses and parks the car between the lines. "Wait."

One gunshot to the brain, he might be able to shrug off; depends on how good Karkat's word is. Two's probably pushin' it. Pfah - he gets zero fucking respect around here. Working up a good, pissed off hiss low in his throat, Spades starts spinning a knife in one hand and scoping out the garage on his own time. Judging from the downright ridiculous machines scattered around them, this is one of Clubs's cesspits. Half of them are probably hotwired to blow if you're not careful. That guy wouldn't know subtle if it rammed him in the stomach at ninety miles an hour.

Lucky for Tweety-bird - nah, it starts with a 'r,' doesn't it? - the burner phone on front dash of the car beeps before Spades gets intolerably bored, and both humans go to tap the screen at the same time, fingers brushing. They trade looks of significance, and Spades almost vomits all over the ruined upholstery. He settles for miming self-enucleation and loudly pretending to gag. Does Diamonds know what her minions get up to in their spare time? He'da thought she'd get all pissy, with that 'mind controlled professionalism' stick lodged up her -

The door to a stairwell at the far end of the garage slams open, and Spades nearly chokes and stabs himself in the eye for real. The two humans stop making googly eyes at each other real fucking fast, so that's a plus. Hearts blasts through the door like ol' Scratch himself is hot on his heels, shoulder-checking someone in felt green to the side and stepping over their unconscious, possibly dead body to make his way toward their car. The guy on the floor's hatless, so Spades can't even cross anyone off on his bingo card/hitlist of the day. Damn. When Hearts gets close, Spades starts kicking the reinforced window, ready to go, and finally the human woman looks at him with a tiny, resigned downturn to her mouth and hits the switch that unlocks the doors so he can shove it open and roll out. No one's on Hearts's tail, but that could change any second now. "Sir?" Tweety-bird says, as he and Yavari get out with more caution.

Hearts doesn't come to a full stop as he nods to them, taking off his hat to run his fingers through thinning hair on his way to the oversized car next to their spot. Spades goes over to thump him on the back, grinning toothily when Hearts removes a mustard yellow keyring from his inside pocket and starts popping the trunks of every vehicle he has Clubs's keys for. It's a helluva a lot of keys, and
when Spades leans over the edge of the nearest, he cackles at the amount of firepower Clubs's has accumulated over the years.

Still. Hearts wouldn't look that harried unless something's gone tits up. Better find out what's wrong now, before he starts digging for the close-range weapons.

SS: Hearts, what's up?

"A fresh load of crap, what else," Hearts says, tugging at his collar until it pops the top two buttons out. It looks like it was strangling him or something, and he breathes easier after that, but his face is still red as a beat. So good for him. "That Noir palooka is here, alright. Di's upstairs messin' with all the Felt stuff we know about, and Clubs is probably going to blow himself up at the rate he's goin', but the real problem is Scratch knows those chump kids are on their way. All that hubbub about void stuff didn't do squat. Says he knew exactly what the Serket kid would do."

Oh. Huh. Spades saw this coming all the way back in Seattle; weird time shit'll do that to you. Safer to just assume they're in for a real fun fight, today.

SS: Yeah, well, that surprises pretty much no one. That kid's a menace. Who're we dealin' with, the whole gang?

He skips over the array of C4, but can't quite reach the sharp, pointy objects in the deepest crevasse of the trunk; when he hooks a foot over the edge and goes to bury himself in heavy artillery, Hearts scoops up the and deposits it all into Spades's waiting arms, moving on autopilot. Ah, it's good to have the old gang back together. "I can't ever keep track of all them. I hate time travel," Hearts complains darkly, giving a curt nod to Yavari and that guy as they move to cover the door. "If you want yer shot at that other you, most of the camera's'll be out as soon as we get word from that Zahhak kid. S'the best we can do."

Alright, the beat-red is starting to transition to the eggplant range, and Spades is no expert in non-carapacian biology past what he needs to know for maximum stabbing efficiency, but that's - uh.

SS: Are you gonna hurl or some shit? You look…not normal human colored.

Hearts shakes his head and adds a semi-automatic to the pile of goodies in Spades's arms. Then he starts stowing guns in every holster in reach, wiping sweat out of his eyes with a curse. "Jus' got a bad feeling about this, and it's getting stronger every second. Shit feels too damn risky," he says - whiner, Spades thinks, rolling his eyes - "Also I apparently have kids."

The human spawn thing? Who gives a shit? If anyone should be complaining about unauthorized genetic makeup copyright violators, it's Spades, honestly. Not that that'll be a problem, once he gets his claws on that Noir creep.

SS: Uh, okay? Nothin' you can do to fix that now, I guess. Now gimme something with oomph, dammit.

With a tiny start, Hearts snaps out of it, though he's making a weird grimace as he slaps a heavy revolver into Spades's last open hand. "Yer right," he says, decisively, and slings a heavy polearm-looking thing over his back. "Fuck it. I'm headin' out to help Di, fer what good it'll do me." He waves the two lackeys over, and as one Hearts and Spades turn toward the door while the other humans quickly take what they need from the trunks. "She wants you two outta clear of the building, pronto, to play sniper and backup," Hearts says; neither Yavari nor Tweety-bird stop rummaging through the loot, but they're clearly listening. "If you getta shot at one of the Felt, take it. Only get close if yah can't avoid it; that Noir guy's a time bomb and we don't need people dying over stupid
crap." He hesitates, and Spades knows before the words come out of his mouth that what comes next ain't Diamonds talking. "...And watch each other's backs, got it?"

Spades sticks his tongue out. Marlowe's back goes rigid; Yavari doesn't look up from where she's adding scopes and a stand to a discreet black case. "Gladly," she says.

"Not a problem," the Robin guy - ha! - adds, too fast. Spades waits until the two have taken off to do their own thing before elbowing Hearts in the side, unable to decide whether to leer or glare at the big lug.

SS: Still haven't got the matchmaker outta your system, huh?

"Like they need my help," Hearts mutters. He's lost another button on his shirt, yet still manages to look constipated as he shoves a hand in to scratch nervously at his shoulder. They head for the stairwell without a word. There's another unconscious Felt lackey slumped against the wall just inside the stairwell, and before Spades can sprint away to find someone worth stabbing, Hearts clears his throat. He doesn't put a hand on Spades's shoulder to stop him, but it's a close call before he visibly rethinks it and clears his throat a second time. Very deliberately, Spades stops and rolls his eyes, waiting for Hearts to spit it out. "Hey, uh, Spades?"

SS: Yeah?

Hearts fidgets, looking uncomfortable. "Don't... get dead," he says at last, closing his eyes and massaging the wrinkly human creases at the edges with one hand. Then he wrenches his hand away and stuffs it into a pocket, eyes gone shifty. "Clubs'd throw a fit."

One day, blaming sentimental shit on Clubs isn't gonna work when they need a convenient out. Today is not that day. Spades manages a crooked smile that barely has any teeth in it, snorting at the tiny flicker of nostalgia.

SS: Heh. Sure thing. Just don't get any ideas about orderin' me around. I get enough of that from those punk brats.

Hearts isn't Diamonds; there's nothing but begrudging sympathy in his lifted eyebrows. Then he sighs, and puts a foot on the stairs. "See you up top," he says, when Spades locates a suitable vent opening and pries it open. If he adds anything else, it's lost in the faint clang of knobbly knees on metal as Spades scurries up and away.

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He is appalled when the vent plan doesn't work like a charm. Someone's done a fuckin' number on this place, and while the main stairwell has been pieced back together into something navigable, Spades eventually grumbles and drops out of the vents somewhere around the sixth floor when the ducts coil like an ominous Mobius strip. Weird space shit is almost as bad as weird time shit, and Spades won't have anything to do with it if he can help it. It makes his head throb something fierce, and the next three Felt flunkies that fall on his knife 'by accident' get a couple extra kicks for good measure. A purpleblood gets off a lucky shot, so Spades knocks her out and takes that gun for himself, sealing the score along his cheek with a pulse and shoving the limp bodies into a closet. Because stealth is hard. It's hard, and no one -

BQ: Slick. I should have known you'd turn up here. Truly a bad penny.

- well, piss. He's got one foot in the darkness of the closet as the Black Queen emerges from one of the darker corners across the room. She steps over the fresh bloodstains in the carpet, circling around
with one pale eye fixed on him and one claw massaging the shortened remains of the other. Her
dress is stark black and wrapped tight around every curve of her carapace, shoulders bare and every
inch of her shining darkly like she went and polished herself for the occasion. Spades has really,
really been hoping she'd keep her stuck-up nose out of things here; a dame like her is too dangerous
to keep on a leash. Kinda like Droog in that regard, except Droog is a hundred times less dangerous
than the BQ when she's dressed like a Queen about to put a ring on it.

His head gives an extra strong throb, and Spades hastily scuttles back from the closet into one of the
brighter areas of the room, in case she's doing something. Just 'cause she isn't using words doesn't
mean she isn't using her voice for some kind of susurration. Fighting her on top of the Felt would be
a bad idea - running would be worse. Also, they don't have time to bang it out in...other ways.
Blegh. It would give him an excuse to tear all the queenly regalia right offa her, but then she'd
probably rearrange his insides.

SS: Right back atcha, Bitch Queen.

BQ: Oh, sterling effort. I can really tell that you have put a great deal of thought into your repartee,
these days.

SS: Shaddup. What're you even doing here. I'da thought you'd be off somewhere killing the King to
get the jump on everyone by now.

The Reckoning's coming, after all. And that only means one thing. If she's not doing it, somebody is,
and only the GP knows where he stashed his scepter. Maybe he'll try to surrender it good and proper
to avoid the dying part, hand off the scepter to someone who can summon the Reckoning, but
Spades has the distinct feeling that shit isn't gonna go according to anyone's plan. While Spades
tosses his knife from one hand to the other, trying to look intimidating and not like he's yearning to
be out the door, the BQ lets her claws run over the surface of the nearest desk, the points sinking into
the wood like it's butter as she carves lines into it. The other hand snaps up and signs at him, and
there's a sting in her mental voice that Spades has to grit his teeth to bear through. On top of his
existing headache, her voice in his head is too frigging much for him to put up with right now. She's
got fighting words in her mouth, today, and that means nothing good for anyone. Least of all him
and his crew of Skaia-spawned whelps.

Why couldn't she have fucked off to go commit regicide? Doesn't she want to beat Noir to the
punch? Spades gags on the questions before they can come out, but only because he doesn't really
want to know the answer.

BQ: Please. As if I'd do it before the time was right.

BQ: I'm surprised you're coherent. Given the circumstances, I would expect you to be slavering all
over yourself, trying to find it first.

Well, there is extra spit in his mouth, but that's 'cause he's gnawed open part of his own cheek and
there's blood sitting low around his teeth that he doesn't want to swallow. Spitting it in her eyes could
be suitably insolent and buy him time to duck around her and find Noir first. He keeps tryna teach
Karkat to think of dirtier tricks, but does anyone listen to him? Of course not. Not unless he's
stabbing people to make a point, and stabbing Karkat is only a hair away from pointless. It's a damn
unsatisfactory bitch of a situation - kind of like this one he's in, right now, where he has to gargar
around his own blood to make mouthnoises.

SS: The only thing I'm lookin' for is a real member of the Felt so I can start checking off boxes. It's
the end of the world - time to hit that bucket list. Piss off before I decide to skip to the bottom. Where
you are. Dead last.
And with that, he makes a quick, inverted sign for respect with only his middle claw (he did manage to teach that one to the other Knight, thanks very much) and goes for the door. For once, the BQ doesn’t try to trip him up or reel him back in with the whip, and he almost makes a clean getaway.

Almost. But her voice, floating after him like a bad odor, sounds downright shocked, and he pauses in the doorway, hyper alert for any Felt who might come running down the hall.

BQ: Wait. You -

BQ: Can you not hear it?

He doesn't like her tone at fucking all. That's the tone of someone who started surprised, and has realized that something's gone her way. The slow realization that she has the opportunity to gloat. Anything going her way at this point is bound to mean bad shit for him and his own. Spades glares at her, resisting the urge to fidget with his hat and pull it down further over his face to cover his continued confusion.

SS: Hear what? What are you blabbing on about now? I gotta find that Noir fuck and kick his ass, too, so sorry, I'm outta here -

BQ: Surely you of all people can sense it, though. Are you…ignoring it? I didn't think you had that kind of self-control!

BQ: Consider me speechless. Or...of course you'd be the one person not to notice. This is Skaia's idea of being ironic, isn't it.

Ohhh, she's fucking glorying in it. She spits the cloud-bitch's name like the curse it is, while her subtle chuckle of amusement at the end lances the last of Spades's patience. Gah. Spades squeezes the hilt of the knife in his hand so hard that he starts digging into his own shell. This is no place to fight her - too many dark corners, not nearly enough sharp objects on him to tip the balance when she's in a mood like this - but when has that ever stopped him before?

SS: Gah! Stop mocking me! Come here and say that, dammit!

BQ: Hah. As if I would make it easy for you.

BQ: Come now, Spades. Pay attention - it's not that hard...

She turns her back on him, and there's an open slit in the back of her dress. It calls for his knife or claws like a fucking magnet, and only the fact that he'd have to cross the room - and cross her shadow - keeps him from following through on the impulse. She wants him to be a dumbass, and spiting her would be a real highlight today.

...He does have guns, though. Now there's a thought. But ranged never feels personal enough, and he'd hate to try to concentrate on aiming, or controlling one of the semi-automatics when they've got enough kick to knock him on his ass. The guns jostle and clank against each other when he starts digging through his stash, and her sigh sounds exasperated and mocking at the same time. What's he missing?! This is such a crock of shit, and he's just now realizing that his head is aching in time with the pulse of something else, something so familiar that he could almost ignore it.

And...

It shouldn't be here. He actually drops his knife, the jolt of panic rolling up from his stomach and hitting him right in the core. His eyes widen to the point that he can feel 'em bulging a little in the sockets. He'd say he was staring at the ceiling, at a corner with nothing at all - but no. That'd be a lie.
He knows exactly who he's looking for. And he can't tell if the feeling in his gut is need or nausea.

SS: …No. That can't be -

BQ: They were brought here recently. The Waste has been set loose, which, unfortunately for you, means that I no longer have any particular reason not to go and reclaim what's mine.

They. Spades staggers forward a little, his foot glancing over the knife and only just not getting sliced open while he's not paying attention. Random people with maybe-significant, possibly non-canonical titles don't matter to him, but that ring wouldn't be tolling like a bell in his head this loud if someone hadn't brought it here.

SS: Oh, fuck you, that's not what I'm worried about. Shit. Shit.

Spades clutches at his head, and his claws are shaking. No good. Taking half a step back, his eyes jump to the BQ and he sees she's looking dead at him, eyes narrow with suspicion. Ripping his hands down, Spades whirls and bolts. Hot pain slices through his foot and he swears, hopping up and down as he tries to keep moving forward and seal it up at the same time. Stabbed by his own damn knife - dammit! He tries to kick it out of the way in a spontaneous moment of fury, and only succeeds in slicing up his toeclaws. For criminy fucking-

The Black Queen's claw comes down on his shoulder like a thorny cuff, her voice a sultry, deadly hiss.

BQ: Spades. Who were you hiding from me, Spades -

He isn't sure what happens next, until much later. There'd normally be no way to tell from inside the building, in this room without windows, exactly what hits the ground outside with the weight of a creature not intended to move around without water to support its massive form. The Queen slams her shoulder and hip against the doorway, with a curse almost as nasty as anything Karkat could come up with, while Spades loses his footing entirely like a useless fuck, catching himself on his knees and elbows while the floor shudders underneath them. Even through the walls, the thing outside emits horror like an ocean wave, sucking at any minds in range with an undertow.

Brazenly, the voice of reality announces what's happening directly into Spades's skull.

[Attention - an error has been detected. A denizen is present outside the Medium.]

[Please wait. Rerouting...]

[Emergency protocol activated - Kaiju Warning.]

BQ: Oh -

BQ+SS: - shit.

When Spades tries to glare daggers at the BQ she has already moved on to staring at that particular spot several floors above, the shadows of the desks in the room reaching out to swallow her ankles and calves, and the expression on her face is 100% 'not to be fucked with.' That's the face you make when the next piece you meet on the board isn't making it to the next square alive and without thinking, Spades scrambles to latch onto her leg. Not his jazziest move ever - something worthy of that scrawny Villein, really - but instead of kicking him off, the Black Queen's claw comes down and yanks him upright alongside her as the shadows blot out his sight.

It doesn't make sense for her to do that, unless being piss-scared of a denizen (a denizen with some
major fucking issues, from the feel of it) drives her a little screwy. All that means is Spades comes out of the shadow-hop kicking and clawing, because the easiest way she'd have to level the playing field will be to get her ugly hands on the ring. She shakes him hard, twice, three times, until his brainmeats get sloshed a little too much and he has to stop kicking to get his bearings again.

Which is about when he realizes they're not alone in the new room. They're not alone at all. There're tall windows along one side of the room, Felt-green wallpaper with rust red trim on the other, and two carapacians standing with a overly fancy-schmancy fireplace stretched out behind them, the fire crackling behind an elaborate, too-sharp screen.

Spades never thought he'd feel cold terror at seeing Ms Paint's sweet face after so long apart. Her pale pink headscarf's askew and she's clutching at something around her neck. He knows what it is, just like he knows who the mottled grey carapacian backing her up against the hearth screen is, no matter how much his mind wants to shove the knowledge away.

JN: Just give it here. This doesn't need to get messy.

MP: I'm sorry, but no.

JN: I'm not askin' twice, lady.

MP: If I had salt and pepper shakers on me, you wouldn't even be -

Spades is trained to snap to attention when he hears the crack of a whip snaking out; before the Black Queen can lash out, at either Jack Noir or Ms Paint - he can't afford to let it be the second, dammit - he tackles her, driving the knobby point of his elbow as deep into her side as it will go. She shoves him back too easily, her fist clocking him across the cheek, but the damage is already done. Both Noir and MP whip around, Noir's mangled, ugly mug spasming with unfiltered rage as he lays eyes on the two of them. Ms Paint, on the other hand, lets out a tiny gasp that makes Spades's chest do some funny, twisty tango, and flattens her hand out over the ring as her bright, dark eyes meet his.

MP: Spades!

BQ: Idiot!

The Black Queen squares off, stance wide enough to menace all three of the other carapacians, and Noir brandishes the knife he's already carrying. It feels profoundly wrong not to match, so Spades pulls out one of his extras and points it right back at his double. But he can't stop glancing over at Ms Paint and straining his brain to figure just how he's gonna get her out of this shitstorm. For a moment, Noir flickers and flares with sickly green light pouring out of his seams, and the fact that he grimaces with pain doesn't really make Spades feel any better about having the sucker stand that close to MP. Why did he leave it with her? Why the shit did he think that was a good plan?

SS: Get away from her. Darlin'? You - shit - you need to put that down or something.

A really loud part of his mind whispers that MP should come here and pass him the ring and that would solve so many problems. But he's been ignoring that part apparently since he and the ring wound up in the same city at the same time, and the rest of him's a bit fucking concerned with the fact that if MP runs, there's exactly two people in this room who are gonna be gunning for her. She won't make it two steps in his direction. If she throws it, maybe -

But she shakes her head, drawing back against the grate. The claws that aren't covering up the ring reach behind her, and Spades can see the stand she's aiming for has a fire poker and a couple other implements on it. She's not gonna be able to reach it though, not without taking another step back.
He's also sure she doesn't have a specibus specialty that doesn't involve weaponized kitchen gear, though he doubts that'd stop her from using the tongs or the mini broom.

BQ: That does not belong to you. Any of you. Back off now, Noir.

BQ: You're already going to die. The only thing you're doing now is influencing my decision as to how slow and painful said death is going to be.

JN: As if I take orders from either a' you. Especially you, you royal pain in my ass. Why won't you just stay dead, dammit?!

SS: Aggh, will both of you shut up?! I can't hear myself think!

As if either of 'em care. But it gets them glaring at him instead of paying attention to Ms Paint, and that's - progress? Maybe. While he's pondering that, Spades draws a gun in his other hand to keep level at the Black Queen. Threeway stand-off with a fourth party he's gotta keep safe...not good. Bad, actually. Very bad. Fucking awful. In the grand scheme of things, he's not sure who he trusts least: the Queen, himself, or...himself. If the BQ wanted him sidin' with her against Noir, though, maybe he can work with that -

JN: Sorry, dame. I'm not askin' nice anymore.

Noir stops pointing the knife at Spades, tosses the blade up into the air, and shoves his entire claw through Ms Paint's hand and chest. The sickening crunch of carapace buckling and shattering hits Spades right in the gut, and Ms Paint's eyes widen as she stumbles. The blood doesn't look right, glossy with a green shine and splatting all along the walls and fireplace as Noir yanks his claw free with a gristly squelch. The ring's - Spades can't see the ring, he's stuck on the gaping hole in MP's torso.

SS: No!

BQ: Dammit -

Spades doesn't have eyes on the ring. That doesn't stop Noir from phasing his finger through the gap, and exploding into sovereignty. The force of abrupt ascension sends Spades flying, his limbs knocking against furniture as it all get shoved up against the walls. His vision narrows for a second, and he curls into a ball instinctively in case something sharp comes flying at him next. But the second the aura of royalty stops bursting outward, he's rolling back onto his feet, gun forgotten. Half the furniture and carpet is ablaze; what wasn't smashed by the explosion crackles with ravenous green flames, and Spades realizes belatedly that his hat, too, is on fire. It takes him too long to pick out Ms Paint's crumpled white shell between the blackened wreckage, and between him and her stands an abomination. He's got no fuckin' patience for queens at the best of times, and this -

Well. Talk about a face not even an ectobiologist could love. If Noir looks like a wolf, it's only an afterthought - mostly his face is just a warped mess, mottled but with darker shadows, and stretched into an elongated, victorious, furious sneer. The wings and tendrils got prototyped in the kids' session and they flicker in and out with pulses of green. The scars where Harley ripped the space out of Noir the first time 'round burn lightning-hot through the shredded rags of the suit he was sewn into, and the prickling sensation of radiation makes Spades's shell twinge. Nothing any carapacian worth their salt can't withstand, but MP - shit, MP is -


He raises a twisted, blood-coated hand, and points a claw at the Black Queen, spite sharp on his teeth
as green lightning starts to crackle in her direction. She pushes herself up out of a crouch, her claws tearing up the carpet with the force of her shove, and if Noir's face is butt-ugly because he's a glitch-spawned freak of nature, the BQ's almost matches him in terms of raw, unadulterated hate.

BQ: Not today.

BQ: Give your friends my regards when you start killing them, Jack. I tried to end their pain once already. What a shame they have to live through this again.

With that parting shot - and Spades is fuckin' alarmed by some of that - the Black Queen snaps her claws. Noir roars in fury and the Green Miles lance out in a branching strike. It plows through the wall and misses taking Spades's head off by goddamn inches. His smoldering hat gets shredded.

The attack misses the Black Queen by a wide mile, as she drops down into her own shadow, slippery as an eel.

She doesn't reappear.

SS: Don't you dare skip out on me - dammit!

And now it's just Spades and...him. See, this prospect was a helluva a lot more promising back before Noir decided to get all jacked up on ring juice; now, Spades is, uh, seriously reconsidering his options. His claws feel nerveless and weak as he ducks behind the nearest upturned chair, his feet splayed out around the disemboweled remains of a computer monitor. The door's off its hinges, but he can't leave. He can't.

JN: I know where you are. What'll it be, Slick? Wanna make my day?

He can't leave without...

SS: …Oh, fuck this.

He scrambles up, throws the knife wildly without really aiming for shit, and then bolts for Ms Paint. The knife stops dead in midair and starts disintegrating before it gets anywhere near Noir, and Spades swallows a shout as the asshat sends more branches of lightning after him, forcing him to weave and crawl through a mashed up pile of desks. The wood explodes around him, leaving splinters all up his arms when he covers his head, and then he's only a yard from MP so he stops giving a shit, sliding over her on his hands and knees with his back to Noir's burning green aura. If he gets blasted in the back now, he doubts Noir will bother pulling the strike to avoid MP anyway.

MP: Spades! The ring -

SS: Lemme look at this.

Ms Paint struggles to lift her head. When Spades somehow isn't blown up after five seconds pass, he huddles over her more, jamming the palm of his hand over the ragged hole in her shell. The heel of his palm skids in the blood and jams down on a shard of carapace, but he's busy and shit. Trying to remember if his oath with Karkat even covers shit like this. Weaponizing blood, sure, no problem. Healing himself a little - no shit. But this is way worse than a tiny little stab wound, and more's damaged here than just arteries. He can't regrow shell, and there's - a lot missing, or shattered and digging further into MP's squishy insides.

He tries anyway.

SS: I got it - I got you, darlin'. Not half bad, right? Eheheh.
A pulse gets the blood loss to stop, but Spades can already feel that stretching his limits. *Balls.*
Maybe he can talk the blood spreading out in a puddle around MP to go back where it came from, but he doesn't know if he can do both at the same time. Ms Paint's hand comes up to pat the back of his, her eyes dull and struggling to focus on him.

It's a warning, he figures out too late. The heavy, stomach-turning presence at his back presses closer and Spades hunches his shoulders more, gritting his teeth as he turns to look up at Noir looming over the two of them. Those wings are totally goddamn redundant - the faker's just floating along, his extra prototyped limbs spasming as his wolfish mask of a face marshalls itself into a smug grimace. Under all the green flash, Spades can see the inky darkness of the Queen's ring shifting under his carapace like molten lava.

What an overpowered asshole. That's just fucking unnecessary. Give Spades a plain old knife and a normal-shaped head, any day.

JN: *Wow.* Now I see why ol' Scratch said not to bother with you. *You're all washed up.*

SS: Would it be possible for you to shut up while I concentrate, you massive fuckface? What was the sky-bitch thinkin' when she decided to shit *you* out, is what I'm wondering -

MP: *Language,* dear.

Whoops. Ducking his head, Spades glances back at Ms Paint contrite as all shit - but *shit* there's fresh blood welling up between his hands. Too much pressure on all those broken shards just dug them in further; he whips back around to frantically focus on stopping up those leaks, too. He can't tell if her shell's going dull, or if it's just the horrendous lighting with Noir around. She's definitely clammy and pale, but pale's normal for Prospitians and shit, right? Right. Noir's *right there,* watching, and Spades is just left wondering why that guy *hasn't* killed them yet. Seems like a really weird oversight, by now.

JN: ...I'll do you one better. You're a has-been, and I've got a witch to find who's way more worth my time.

JN: And wouldya look at that? *She's right outside.*

JN: Sayonara, sucker.

See, that's the kind of snappy one liner you use when you're about to blow someone's brains out. Talk about a wasted opportunity. Green fire swallows Noir up, leaving an oddly hollow gap in the space where he was hovering, and Spades pulls his feet in tighter with a shudder. He doesn't want any part of him near that hole.

Noir's gone off to fuck with Harley, but they're still alive. Well, shit, then. Spades is *not* questioning this one.

MP: *Y-you should go…to warn -*

SS: Not going anywhere. *You're fine, see? You're alright, I got you.*

Fine's a damn strong word for it. It's also the best one he's got. The atmosphere in the room's a lot less desperate with Noir and that damn ring gone, which helps Spades concentrate on what matters. But he's not used to keep blood inside bodies at the best of times, let alone when MP's going into shock right under his claws. If she weren't a carapacian, he doesn't think she'd have lasted as long as this with *him* trying to fix her up.
MP: It did bring you back, dear. The ring.

SS: Let's just add that one to the long damn list of stupid stuff I've said that turned out not good in practice, alright? You've got one of those, right?

MP: Oh, no, of course not.

SS: Nah, never mind, I'll make it myself.

MP: Heheh. We can stick it on the fridge with a magnet, if you like, dear.

SS: Good plan. Better than any plan I ever had. I'm gonna move one hand really quick, okay?

He could try mentally shouting, or pushing through the blood oath, but Karkat's ignored him before. Dumbass kid needs to learn to pay attention to when there's an actual emergency.

MP: It wasn't stupid, though. Per…percept…r...

Ms Paint's mental voice sighs off toward the end, falling into a nearly-muted, wordless hum of background noise, and Spades panics.

SS: Hey. No, no no, keep talkin' to me!

She comes back to herself with a tiny jolt, but she's already too weak to sign at him, and her voice drops in and out of his hearing when she opens her eyes again.

MP: I just drifted off for a moment, dear. I know I'm going to be okay. She promised.

SS: Don't do it again, just - keep talking. How did you even get here, darlin'? Why come here?

MP: Mmm...

This time, when he shakes her, she doesn't snap out of it.

SS: Shit, shit, shit -

-- spadesSlick [SS] opened a memo on board Crew Business --
SS: Karkat, get your ass up here.

CG: HOLY FUCK, COULD YOU HAVE WORSE TIMING? DO YOU EVEN SEE THIS WHALE SIZED WET BAG OF HORSESHIT WE'RE DEALING WITH OUT HERE?!
SS: I mean it. I'm calling in that oath. For real.
SS: And for the love of fuck, bring your life-y one.
CG: WHAT, FEFERI? ARE YOU ACTUALLY DYING FOR REAL?
SS: Not me.

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The main problem with having Rose in charge, Karkat thinks, is that she gets a fucking kick out of ridiculous shenanigans unfolding, beautiful specimens of stupidity blossoming like a flower of fresh fuck you. Oh, she's better at keeping a straight face than Dave 'my shades hide a deep well of inner emotional torment' Strider, but when it turns out that Equius has spent the past three days smuggling horses into one of the unused sections of the Lalonde Labs and is using the valley as pasture for his clandestine herd of equines, it's Karkat who has to be the goddamn paragon of sanity, reason, and responsibility when Rose won't stop making deadpan commentary and egging on poor life choices.
"That is certainly a herd of valiant steeds," she says, once Equius lifts the voidy shit hiding his illicit horse hoard from sight, and Karkat smacks his face using both palms when Equius puffs up with pride. Someone's braided his hair back with tiny blue flowers sticking out, though Karkat suspects that they've been deliberately made to ignore that until now.

"Why the blithering fuck were you going to enable this horse-obsessed hemorrhoid?" he demands of Sollux, who is at least an accomplice in this literal horseshit, given that how long he 'forgot' to mention this to anyone in a position of authority around here. Out of all the people packed into Lalonde Labs to get ready for the Reckoning, Sollux has no fucking excuse.

In response, Sollux gazes out over the field of majestic horses; his glasses are crooked on his nose, and he looks like he hasn't seen the ass-end of a recooperacoon in years. "Frankly, KK? It's because I just do not give a shit," he says, nodding sagely, before lifting his pitcher of coffee and throwing half of it on his face in an effort to reach his mouth. Karkat tried that coffee the other day, and he swears it nearly induced spontaneous diabetes.

Sometimes Karkat doesn't know why he bothers opening his chagrin tunnel to argue with these people he calls friends. He snatches the bottle of 5 Hour Energy away from Sollux before he can use it to chase that coffee and start hallucinating giant bees all over the place. Then Karkat turns back to Rose and the main offender himself, just in time to hear the words, "No universe should have to exist without having the exquisite hoofbeast gracing its fields. I will carry them myself if necessary," emerge from Equius's shouthole.

"A tempting proposal," Rose says, stroking her chin thoughtfully.

And oh fuck. She's going to say, 'Why not?' or something equally ironic. Karkat can feel it coming, like a wave of honkbirds coming to bite him, and by extension every other normal, sensible member of their team not infected by that strange mutually communicable human-troll disease known as 'irony,' in the ass. That's a grand total of him, Jake, Tavros, Nepeta, Vriska, Eridan, and Feferi, and any one of them could succumb at any given moment.

This is why Karkat is second in command. Obviously. Someone needs to speak for the minority, here. He taps Rose's shoulder, suppressing a twitch in one eyelid, and Rose turns a benign smile on him, cackling only with her eyes. Karkat sucks in air through his snort barrels until he can say calmly, through gritted teeth, "Rose, I will weep actual puke from my actual eyeballs if you allow this. I mean it."

"Wouldn't weeping blood on command be slightly more plausible a threat?" she asks, dry as the incinerator where all of Karkat's hopes and dreams lie in ashes.

Karkat closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. "That would be too fucking easy. Give me some credit for creativity, here."

"True, true. I give you a seven out of ten for imagery." Before Karkat can defend his honor (that was at least an eight), Rose shakes her head in apology at Equius, lips pursed. "I'm sorry, Equius - the horses must stay behind. If we allowed you to bring a veritable cavalry along, everyone else might get it in their heads to bring their own thematically significant animals along, and we can't have that. We only have so much space in the buildings Sollux intends to bring into the Medium." She pauses. "...Has Nepeta been collecting cats, by any chance?"

Equius scowls; it's not intimidating at all. Very little is, anymore. The other day Karkat had to sit in a room with Diamonds Droog and Clubs Deuce because Sollux called in backup for a preposterous 'family' talk about threatening to punt someone into the next country (Sollux to Droog) and take a cuestick to very sensitive computer mainframes in retaliation (Droog to Sollux). Not even Droog can
scare him. He and Dave had some kind of platonic commiseration session last night about how nothing matters, time is a rapidly disintegrating illusion, and they might as well cover this entire grubloaf with mashed potatoes and eat it warm out of the microwave because carbs are delicious in the face of imminent doom. The logic of 'why the fuck not?' is hard to argue with.

It's been a weird week. Roxy's been learning sign language from Dave and WV while she recovers, and according to PM and AR, at least ninety percent of what they're teaching her makes no fucking sense whatsoever because they're the sign language equivalent of malapropisms. News of this development barely made Bro raise an eyebrow. Everyone has started to pick up on basic signs at this point, and Karkat suspects that at the rate they're twisting the language to suit their own """"ironic"""" purposes, they're going to have an entirely new abomination on their hands by the time reality implodes. A literally unpronounceable hell-language that would turn a Horrorterror green with envy.

"No. She has been content to have Pounce de Leon here," Equius says, relenting and crossing his arms. Everyone (meaning most of the coldbloods, bar Vriska) has learned trying to throw their weight around with Rose is a one-way ticket to pain. Equius goes for a weak, weak appeal instead. "Horses have many uses apart from their excellent physique. I implore you with the strongest of feelings -"

"Absolutely fucking not," Karkat says, flatly.

"I'm afraid Karkat speaks for both of us," Rose says, shaking her head again. "We simply cannot risk the chance that Vriska will want to bring along a legion of spiders."

"He is in possession of vast quantities of bees," Equius retaliates, jerking his chin at Sollux.

Sollux splutters into his new can of soda. The troll is a fucking mess, and if Aradia wasn't perpetually off pulling enigmatic time pixie bullshit, Karkat would have strong words with her about monitoring her moirail's completely bugfucked caffeine intake. Karkat's getting pusher pangs just from standing too close to Sollux, in a literal way. "Oh, wow," Sollux says. "Way to throw me under the buth, jackathth. My beeth are already in the Medium, I'll have you know -"

"Hive you know," Rose murmurs. Karkat screams on the inside. One day all this built up mental anguish-noise is going to burst out of his mouth and deafen everyone in a fucking five-mile radius in a Vast Vociferation, and they'll all be stuck communicating with Dave's hell-dialect and text messages for the rest of their days.

"- and they're the only reathon you're even still alive, so don't shit on the beeth!" Sollux finishes, his hair standing on end with static electricity.

"The horses could also save lives," Equius says, and Sollux looks ready to have a literal stroke. Karkat's not far behind.

"There will be no transportation of livestock along with us into the game." Rose steps gingerly in between Equius and Sollux, and Karkat sidles in after her, mostly focused on trying to confiscate another bottle of 5 Hour Energy that Sollux thinks he's being sneaky about. Kanaya took everyone with any amount of fucking self-control aside early on and started deputizing them as her personal army of mediators. She only called in Karkat during the second wave of recruitment, when it became clear that none of them have an ounce of self-control. "If you ask Calliope, you may see if she's already recreating horses in her reality. Otherwise, I would be more afraid that these horses would die horribly in the game on the way there. You don't want that, right?"

Equius would probably defend these fucking horses with his fucking life. But he backs down,
harrumphing, and strokes the nose of one of the horses that comes over to investigate the goings on. Up close, its eyes are those of a vessel of an ancient horror that wants to chew grass and scatter enemies like vermin beneath its ponderous hooves. Karkat does not say any of this out loud. Either Equius will be offended and break him like a dried up airplane pretzel stick, or he'll use it as another argument for turning Sburb into some freakish Horse Simulator 2016.

Fuck, no. 2014. Fuck. Karkat needs to keep his thinkpan straight, or he's going to be as much of a mess as Dave.

"Then I will run with them one last time," Equius says, announcing it like it's the end of the fucking world (ha), but it's marginally less than hilarious because Karkat has caught on to when this motley crew of assholes is covering up genuine sadness. He kind of hates himself for noticing that stuff, these days. They're all miserable sacks of shit. Except Vriska, but also: fuck Vriska.

Equius takes off to go herd the horses around the valley, his braid and his hood flying out behind him until Karkat's eyes get hit with a faint buzz of look away, and Rose sighs, looking very small even as she accepts a glass of tea that Arthour has brought out of the labs on a serving tray. Most of the lusii that are still alive got rounded up at the last minute, and to absolutely no one's surprise (least of all Karkat's) they've been fucking useless as far as maintaining an atmosphere of peace and goddamn quiet. Equius and Nepeta's stay in the valley - which is a shame, because Arthour is actually tolerable and not a raging, territorial, half-sentient mess - but Crabdad ended up permanently banished to the rooftop pool area after it tried to investigate Tinkerbull via ingestion.

A disturbing number of them are dead or otherwise unreachable, though. Aradia, Sollux, Kanaya, and Vriska all shrugged when asked. Eridan looked guilty for a fleeting second before explaining his lusus got shipped off to a reservation when he had a breakdown. Terezi cackled at Karkat's face, and Gamzee just looks blank whenever anyone mentions the subject. Feferi's lusus is a literal Horrorterror and thus uninvited from any and all family reunions for the rest of forever.

Oh yeah, they're a real smorgasbord of issues. When Arthour tries to offer Sollux a glass of water, Karkat allows it. "We should have tried to save more," Rose murmurs, her hair falling forward to shadow her face.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Watch. It'll turn out our uselessness in the face of global annihilation will once again be the reason why we're the alpha timeline, or some fucked upuckery like that." It probably says something that he's genuinely tempted to give her a firm, platonic pap on the back - but again, he's trying not to contribute to the clusterfuck of hormones and relationship issues beyond those he's already involved in.

She brightens on her own, her eyes closed as she smiles into her tea. "True. Aradia has implied as much. Isn't it simply wretched?"

-

The morning they're due to leave for Las Vegas, these dumbasses won't wake up.

Rose is up at the crack of dawn, smiling Vriska into restless submission when Karkat stumbles into the chosen apartment of the day. John forges through the kitchen in a bleary daze, passes Karkat coffee with his eyes still halfway welded shut by sleep, and almost plows into the table as he goes to slump on the counter again. Karkat doesn't have the heart to tell him he's got his shirt on backwards - apparently his pale grooming instincts don't kick in until he's all the way awake. No one got much sleep last night; Karkat tried to rope Doctor Lalonde into helping enforce some kind of curfew, with AR as his deputy, but she fucked back off to the labs early to check in with her people one last time, and Bro only agreed to intervene when the despair-induced movie marathon/pool party crept towards
two in the morning. They were all keyed up on adrenaline, and now they're all suffering. What else is new? Suffering is Karkat's middle fucking name, these days.

But they have to go at some point, so after sitting and mournfully contemplating his coffee for a whole minute, Karkat knocks Vriska's arm and ignores the flash of warning teeth she shoots him in reply. "Come on and help me kick the rest of these fucks out of bed."

He asks because Vriska can be almost as loud and obnoxious as him when she gets amped up - almost, thanks very much - like the decibel-based kindred spirit he never wanted. Sure enough, Vriska stops baring her teeth and perks up with smug, radiating delight, because whenever anyone so much as hints at giving her authority, she finds a way to stroke her own bulge over it. "Ha! No problem!" she says, and Karkat catches a split second of John's sympathetic grimace before the ceruleanblood catapults out of her seat and drags Karkat into the hallway.

She makes a beeline for the stairs, cackling, before Karkat's common sense decides to join the world of the living. "Go get Eridan up, and Terezi. Feferi if you can find her," he orders quickly, because he's not awake enough to deal with the shit that would hit the rotating air device if Vriska barged in on Equius, or the chunky salsa carnage if she found Tavros on his own.

Vriska swings around to pout at him. "Whaaaaaaaat? What did I do? What's with that face?"

"You know what you would do, you overcocked nubfucker. If you find Jake or Jane or whatever, wake them up too. Or is that too hard to manage?" It works, barely; Vriska tosses her hair and mutters something about 'showing him,' but Karkat tunes her out to focus on tracking down the rest of the Lazy Fuck brigade before she can. They aren't spread out through the apartment complex anymore; sleeping arrangements contracted over time, and he doesn't have to stomp around to too many doors before he starts picking up on pulses. Kanaya and Rose's door hangs open, and Kanaya nods at him from where she's kneeling in the sun, makeup sealed and arms deep in a suitcase full of fabric and other supplies. There are packets of blood tucked away with ice packs where only Karkat can sense them. It probably would have been smarter to recruit her than Vriska, but when has Karkat ever been smart about this?

Next he finds Equius and Nepeta; while Nepeta lays curled up on the couch with her lusus beside her, both purring like a car engine, Equius is packing his things with care. He's got more metal than Kanaya, including heavy objects shaped like arms and legs if Karkat squints, which sets visions of amputated limbs dancing through his thinkpan. Karkat mumbles something about waking Nepeta up, but Equius gives him a look that screams 'the horse thing will never be forgiven, and my reproach will last a thousand years,' so Karkat turns and walks right back out the door to find Tavros next - he got exiled by cat allergies, but he can't have gone far.

Instead, He finds Dave. Or should he say, he finds Dave, his merry band of carapacians, and their bottomless pile of co-conspirators in hopefully platonic cuddles. When Karkat shoves the door open the room is too dark and the blinds are pulled shut with a singular purpose: to let these fucks sleep in as long as possible. The Food Network plays on mute in the background, Guy Fieri munching his way through a hamburger no mortal should be able to open their jaws wide enough to consume, and when Karkat barges over to kick them all awake, Roxy pops up her head from where she's using Jake's stomach as a pillow to blink at Karkat and starts making grandiose 'come hither' motions. He doesn't need apartment-osmosis sign language knowledge to recognize that one.

Mostly, he's appalled at the human display of pale decadence before him. Dave, Jake, Jane, Roxy, WV, PM, and Terezi - who should know better than to partake in these shenanigans, dammit - and Karkat's used to Jade, Rose, and Dave piling all over John by now, but this is just ridiculous. They have places to go, people to beat the ever-loving fuck out of. "Wake up!" he shrieks, storming
toward the window. "Oh my fuck, you assholes, we need to leave in two hours!" A hand swipes at his ankle - either Roxy or Dave; he can't tell whose arm it's attached to - and he sidesteps it, jumps over Terezi's cane when it comes swinging at the backs of his knees, and then shreds the blinds with his bare claws. They've already laid waste to half the apartments in this complex, what's one more fucked up window? Terezi hisses and almost chokes on her own drool, and the light of the early morning sun sets the whole pile of debauchery off in a round of grumbles and quiet swear words. Only PM has the decency to sit up, looking bright eyes and alert right from the get go. WV rolls over, making nonsense clicking noises, and Dave rolls over to free his cape and toss it over everyone's eyes like some kind of diabolical fuck. "DO NOT FUCK WITH ME TODAY, DAVE!" Karkat screeches. "We're leaving with or without you! You can stay with Sollux and be totally useless some other day, when we're not about to be total fucking badass motherfuckers and feed criminal scum an entire truckload of hats!"


Karkat swells, and starts climbing onto the armrest of the nearest couch to line up for an elbow drop square in Dave's exposed stomach region. "What, Dave. Go on. Enlighten me," he says as he surveys their huddle from above and tries to decide what angle would be least likely to end with him getting impaled by Terezi's cane.

One of the bedroom doors off the main room opens, and when Karkat looks up, a second Dave leans out, toothbrush sticking out of his mouth at an angle.

Karkat stares. The other Dave stares back. A Terezi leans out the doorway behind him, using her cane to come to a stop before she falls flat on her face.

"Right. "Well, I'll just go fuck myself, then," Karkat says, talking mostly to the ceiling, because the ceiling has yet to abuse self-destructive time powers to fucking sass him today (it's still early yet), and then jumps off the couch and walks right back out of the room to find Tavros. Jake is semi-conscious and army-crawling toward the shadows of the couch by the time Karkat leaves, and that's victory enough.

God, is he tired.

Tavros is up on the roof, wide awake and feeding Crabdad enough roe cubes to gorge the fucker to bursting so that it'll ignore Tinkerbull curled up in Tavros's lap. According to him, Aradia was around until ten seconds before it would have been convenient to see her. Becquerel's flopped over by the side of the wheelchair, stretched out in the sun, and barely flicks its tail when Karkat has to sidestep Crabdad's attempt to smother him with its big, meaty claws. He returns to the chosen kitchen feeling somehow cheated of any sense of accomplishment. This time Rose hands him a new cup of coffee; John's too busy coordinating a mass breakfast relay with Jade on auto-pancake flipping duty. Kanaya plates everything the second it comes off the griddle. Rose's only responsibility appears to be monitoring the coffee and tea stations, which Karkat can approve of. "Is everyone up?" she asks, as Karkat nosedives into the coffee mug.

"Everyone who isn't MIA," he reports, after letting the coffee sit on his tongue for a moment. He's awake, now, but at what cost? "Aradia's fucked off again, what else is new."

Then he almost chokes on his own spit. "John, have you seen -"

"Here!" John calls, using an honorary spatula to point at the floor behind the kitchen partition. When Karkat leans over, Gamzee gives him a thumbs up from where he's sprawled out on the kitchen floor. John and Jade are both floating to avoid stepping on the silly fucker. "Also, don't tell Terezi,
but we used up all the cherries for milkshakes the other night, so all we have is a blueberry compote, whipped cream, chocolate chips, and syrup. If she's gonna be picky, she has to go get her own dang cherries."

"She'll probably just crunch up red chalk and use that as a topping instead," Karkat says, rolling his eyes. Troll stomachs can take a lot of shit, but Terezi is on another fucking level, both in terms of overall capacity and tolerance for consuming the inedible. He doubts dying of food poisoning would be a heroic or just death, either, so she's probably set for life. Vriska once challenged her to drink a pitcher of blended leftovers, and before Sollux or Kanaya could intervene, Terezi chugged it, burped, and declared it a hearty repast. "Should I reheat anything?" he asks, casting around for a way to help take his mind off Terezi's bottomless smelting pit of a stomach.

"Aaaactually," Jade starts. Which never ends well, ever. "Could you go check on Janine really quick?"

Karkat's first thought is 'what, Jane?' and his second is - "Your groupie? Why the fuck?" he asks, not nearly as vehemently as usual. Jade's irritating shenanigans, much like coldbloods being coldbloods, no longer faze him.

"She's at the front of the building." Jade's brow scrunches, and she snaps a finger with a distant expression. "I let her in the front door! But I don't want to leave these pancakes. Please, Karkat?"

"I'll just bring her back here so you can deal with it," he points out, but Jade's gone back to flipping ten pancakes at once, humming cheerfully. From the low echo, Gamzee's joined in from the floor - they're probably set for the next hour. Karkat passes Eridan stumbling in as he leaves; the violetblood doesn't have his eyes open and seems to have made it this far by sheer dumb luck. He emits a quiet 'wweh,' when Karkat helpfully shoves him through the door before he can ram into the wall.

Then he drags himself down to the lobby, ready for anything Jade's de facto secretary has to throw at him.

-  

It turns out they're being evicted.

Karkat can't even pretend to be surprised by this point. Rose barely raises an eyebrow when he kicks the door in and announces it at the top of his lungs. Janine herself repeats the news at a less deafening volume, nearly dropping her papers on the floor as she shuffles to the table, eyes darting around to try to pick out who's in charge here. "You all really didn't notice the maintenance staff coming through for inspection?" she asks, coughing out a weak laugh. Her eyes are filled with the frantic dread of a troll who's just informed her fickle-ass boss that she and her entire contingent of weird friends and family are getting the boot.

She shouldn't worry. This is so fucking typical that Karkat should probably add it to his ever-growing list of 'congratulations, you fucked yourselves, numnubs' tier stupidity that they've experienced together. None of them are ever going to be responsible members of society at this rate; there isn't going to be a society to be a part of, for fuck's sake.

"I can't believe we're being evicted," John says.

Jade, having essentially backpacked around the world as a teleporting, plane-driving homeless person with zero concept of how apartment life works, whistles, scratches her nose, and looks vaguely apologetic. "Well, crap," she says, turning another round of bubble-pitted pancakes with a twirl of her finger. "I noticed, but they seemed harmless and Bro launched puppets at them when
they got too curious, so eh. That sounds pretty cruddy! What a shame."

Janine winces. "Yes, er. The puppets did come up in the report. A lot."

"I can't believe we're being evicted," John repeats. He's the only one having a normal reaction to any of this, since he was raised partially with some respect for keeping up law-abiding appearances around the neighbors, and has stopped directing the food line to read the eviction notices over Rose's shoulder, looking green.

Rose taps her fingers to her nose, palms pressed together. "I've messaged Terezi and mother dearest, if that helps. But it really is a rather inconsequential development." She taps the screen of her phone with one finger, making a note to herself on a spreadsheet rather than typing in Pesterchum. "It's one less building for Sollux to import to the Medium, I suppose."

"I can't believe we're being evicted," John says, repeating himself for the third time. He looks at Karkat with mounting horror. Karkat lived most of his life in the fear that Crabdad would get them evicted, and now he can't even muster up a fuck to give. He pats John on the shoulder with renewed intent as John starts to freak out in earnest. "Oh jeez - what are we're gonna do? Where are we going to live? I've never been evicted before in my life!"

"We're leaving anyway," Karkat points out. "That is in fact a thing that was already happening. Relax, dumbass, it's not -" he checks himself, glances at Janine, and finishes, "- okay, it is the d-enay of the orld-way. But seriously. We weren't planning to live here anymore in the first place."

"You weren't?" Janine says, clapping her hands together in relief. "Oh, thank goodness."

"It still counts." John reaches the point of hyperventilating. Karkat's run out of coffee, anyway, so he hastily sets the mug down and enters full papping mode, making unintelligible shooshing sounds and smoothing his hands down John's shoulders and back with enough force to start ushering him away from the table and eviction notices. He has a strong suspicion that it's not the eviction that's really freaking John out - it's just a minor tipping point for a bunch of the shit that's been building up for a while now.

Karkat doesn't think any of them are going to be okay until after this is all over. They've reached critical 'this is so fucked up' mass. All he can do is keep an eye on his two dumbasses, wrangle his own shit, and hope no one else in their social circle has a complete and utter meltdown along the way. This is the epitome of 'fuck it, we'll do it live' culture, and he completely blames Dave for that. "No one was going to rent us an apartment for the rest of the planet's natural life," he says soothingly. John looks remarkably unsoothed by the reminder that Earth's expiration date is coming up, and may in fact be on the brink of tears; Karkat's off his game today. "Don't know what Rose is thinking, telling Terezi - knowing her, she'll probably try to enforce this herself."

John manages a watery smile. "Terezi, evicting us for great justice," he says, with a choked laugh.

Jade comes to the rescue while Rose is still mumbling and adjusting her plans on her phone. "Yeah, we'll be out of your way in a jiffy, Janine! No sweat! You're still gonna go visit the labs on the thirteenth though, right?" Another flip of her hand, and the pancakes start levitating over to Kanaya's line of plates.

The next person to bring Karkat coffee is Eridan. Busy trying to figure out the best way to tangle his fingers with John's while John focuses on deep breathing, Karkat takes the coffee without questioning its origins, and Eridan takes this as permission to sit on the nearest chair, fidgeting with his own cup of coffee and being generally uncomfortable. "We're bein' ewicted?" he asks, three minutes behind the times. When Karkat nods, Eridan looks impressed. "Wow. It took them this
"Tell me about it." Between everyone practice-fighting on the roof and Vriska and Eridan's hellish training sessions (most of which seem to involve her grilling Eridan on fraymotifs, random explosions, bragging to Terezi, and pitching dice at his face until fireworks go off at three in the morning), Karkat doesn't know how they haven't just been flat out arrested yet. Terezi and Vriska are a unique combination of 'not-subtle' and 'on America's most wanted list,' and yet here they still are. Apart from Karkat, Nepeta, and Tavros, Eridan's one of those ranked most likely to get offed by Vriska's desire to be helpful; the fact that he's still alive and kicking is like a Perigee's Eve miracle in April - all that's missing is the massive pile of behemoth leavings, and fuck, Karkat's sure that Typhus will be more than willing to contribute to the holiday spirit by shitting all over them.

John's still waxing rhapsodic about their complete failure to act like responsible adults. "How are we ever going to be trusted to rent a respectable apartment ever again if we can't even make it two weeks without destroying the place?"

"It's a real conundrum," Eridan says, sounding agreeable enough that Karkat throws him a suspicious glare.

"Codnundrum?" John suggests.

"Does it look like Fef's in the room? I'm just tryin' to live my life here."

- 

Las Vegas feels different from Seattle. Drier, with the tang of a city built on crushed dreams and an ungodly amount of sequins. The steady burn of the sun sends prickles along Karkat's scalp as he hangs out the window of the room, and he squints through the obnoxiously bright bloom of light to make out John floating over the side street. A couple of people below stop to point at this mildly fucking unusual sight, but they're far enough from the main strip that no one cares enough to form a real crowd. In Seattle, you can fucking bet a flying person is a hero; here, they think it's all a hack magician act or something. An entire pack of grubbrained fuckpuddles who can't sit their headquarters down and act natural for love, hate, money, or anything less than pizza - yet no one has given them a second glance since they arrived. The guy whose condo they're renting? Thinks they're a bunch of college students here to live it up for the weekend. Jade can bounce five feet in the air and suffer zero consequences for her actions, which is making her even more insufferable than normal.

"Want to come sit?" John asks out of the blue, leaning back on the heels of his hands as he twists around to smile at Karkat. He looks worried - everyone's a little off, these days, except fucking Vriska - but happy. There's sunlight making a fucking halo in his hair and Karkat is going to vomit and wipe it up with his own face if his thoughts get any cornier. Fuck. Terezi better not be reading him right now, or he's going to spend the next hour dealing with her excruciatingly platonic mockery. He's pale trash over John, what else is new. She and Dave need new material. Whatever. The day of the Reckoning is gearing up to shank them right in the shameglobes, and they all feel it. Rose and Terezi claim it's a constant tension headache that just keeps winding up tighter, Vriska looks like she's about to pee herself with anticipation anytime someone brings up the impending destruction of the planet, and Dave never goes anywhere without a sword in his hand. The guy was a fucking sword-obsessed prick before, but now he doesn't bother pretending to be cool about it; Karkat doesn't want to admit it, but seeing Dave wander around with a haunted look and a sword in hand makes Karkat worry about him.

He's worried about all of them.
He feels it knotted up in his chest, a pulsing sense of the end.

"I'm fine here," he says, dryly, swinging his legs over the windowsill to dangle in the air. "I'd rather not toss myself out a window unless it's absolutely fucking unavoidable."

His hanging feet knock together in a tiny breeze, and John gives him a look. "I wouldn't let you fall, dummy."

Only, see, he says it with the kind of wistful, soft voice other people would use to say shit like, 'Let us shoosh the day away in a pile of warm blankets and soft human petbeasts,' and Karkat is fucking weak. "Fine," he mumbles, holding out a hand, which John takes and uses to reel Karkat out next to him. Karkat's rump feels distinctly unsafe, considering there are people milling around on the street below, in broad daylight, but he grits his teeth and tries not to think about them. It's been hard to adjust to the fact that literally none of that matters anymore. He's spent his whole life hiding, and now - what is even the point?

But he can feel a bigger drop coming. Sollux refused to set foot in Las Vegas, citing the need to stay on top of his Skaia-hacking mods in case someone else kicks the fuckbucket. Karkat suspects it's more like a Mage of Doom not wanting to soak up the distinct reek of inevitability any more than he has to. It's crossing wires in Karkat's thinkpan that he didn't think could be crossed, and he's just the useless blood themed asshat, not the guy in charge of navigating their impending Doom and getting them out the other side.

Sollux is also the guy in charge of importing Lalonde Labs into the Medium, along with the rest of their sorry asses, so that none of them get pulverized by the Reckoning - if everything goes as planned (which it fucking won't). He used the ripped copies of Sburb courtesy of the Harley Foundation to slap together an app they could all download to their phones, since literally none of them ever get off Pesterchum, and there's so many ways this could go wrong but what else are they supposed to do? "Remind me why our merry band of shit rinsers thought this was a smart plan," Karkat says, leaning on John and resting his head on the human's shoulder. It's a really overused question by now, but no one has managed to give him a satisfactory answer yet. John's arm comes up immediately to squeeze Karkat in a hug, and it settles him a little. He still wants to chew holes in the wall from apprehension, but it's harder to focus on. Less overwhelming.

"Because we're dumb," John says, after giving it clear thought.

"Not the answer I was looking for, dumbass." Karkat sighs.

"It's Callie-approved?"

"Still not helping our case."

"...Aradia says we're still on track?"

Karkat unwraps John's arm from around his shoulder for the sole purpose of holding his hand, shaking his head in dismissal. "Aradia's idea of being on track still involves people dying. Possibly while she smiles creepily over their soon-to-be-resurrected corpses. Possibly my corpse. Again, not helping our case here.

John shrugs. "Then you got me! I have no idea why we thought this was a smart plan. Actually, I'm not sure anyone here ever thought it was a smart plan in the first place..."

"There, see, that's a theory I can get behind." John snort-giggles, and Karkat can't help but roll his eyes. "We're the most incompetent alpha timeline possible. Hilarious." Someone else starts laughing
right behind his head, and Karkat rolls his eyes right around for another pass, his head falling back to thump against Gamzee's chest. "Do you even know what the fuck we're laughing about? Are you sitting on anything? Don't answer that shitty question, of course you're not."

"Lol, brother," Gamzee says, which from him is probably the highest of compliments when it comes to terrible, unfunny humor. "Heard you two getting your discussion all on." There's a moment of disconnect where Karkat is leaning back against Gamzee, but at the same time Gamzee's folded arms prop themselves up on John's shoulders so he can lean over in all his gangly juggalo glory. Like everything else, this kind of fuckery has gotten pretty done to death - Karkat waits for the moment of broken physics to pass, unbothered. The Breeze under his butt wobbles and threatens to toss him lightly into John's lap but Karkat draws the line at floating in midair with his moirails, thanks very much; he doesn't need to give Las Vegas an eyeful.

"Well, we're better than nothing." John's hand applies more and more pressure to Karkat's; enough to make his bones twinge ominously, but not (quite) enough for Karkat to pipe up about it. "We could be doing more, I mean. Getting people together for Jade to bring along, or Sollux -"

"Now that would get us doomed! I'm not even the doomy person, and I can tell you that for facts!" A figure in red and white and grey and black slithers down out of the sky immediately to Karkat's right, and he flinches so bad he almost winds up in John's lap anyway. Both John and Gamzee prop him up before he can make even more of an ass of himself, one hand a normal temperature and the other freezing fucking cold as they keep him upright. Aradia fluffs her masses of curls out, sitting with her legs folded up under her while she grins at them.

Karkat's not sure whether he really wants to know where (or when) she just came from, but his mouth motors on without him, regardless. "Aradia, you nookbiting walnut, where the fresh flaming fuck have you been?!"

She shrugs and doesn't answer the question. He doesn't know what he was expecting. "Around. Mostly getting things set up. Lots of dominoes in a row!" Then, with a solemn nod for Gamzee - "Gazebro!"

"Radsis," Gamzee rumbles back, his voice almost mild enough to fool Karkat.

Except that was pretty fucking blatant. John purses his lips when Karkat trades him a disgusted glance, looking equally unsurprised. "If you fucks are going to have secret schemes, at least have the decency to hint at them when me and John aren't in hearing range," he says. "...Is that supposed to be like irons in the fire or some fuckery?"

"Eheheheh, maybe! I thought Dave said we were calling those 'ironies in the fieris' now, though -" Aradia starts.

"No," Karkat says. She can't be allowed to finish. If Karkat has to hear another one of Dave's latest verbal pustules with his much abused ears, he's going to be forced to hunt Dave down with a sickle and fillet him, and he doubts that would be helpful at all in this situation. Keeping Dave alive and intact is one of those big headliner goals on Rose's spreadsheet, in fact. Plus, filleting one's friends is probably frowned upon in most societies.

John, meanwhile, is still mulling it over. His hand on Karkat's waist twitches a little as he stares down at the sides of his shoes and contemplates his untied laces. "I just wish that trying to save people wouldn't screw us all over," he says wistfully. "Of all the moves this game has ever played, that is a super dick move. It makes me feel like a dick. Ugh."

"It's not so much the saving people as the huge, pointless, melodramatic fight that might ensue if you
got in the way of someone else's attempt to save people," Aradia points out. Which, okay, what the fuck?! "But don't worry about it! Either way, there's not much you can do about it aside from what you're already going to do!" she says merrily, while Karkat's still gibbering and doing enough doubletakes to make up for Gamzee's complete non-reaction to this news. John's no help, either - he looks up in shock, but after that he just stares at Aradia wordlessly, jaw slack, and in general looks like a puppy whose owner just dangled a treat in front of him. Karkat needs to train these two dumbasses to back him up when it comes to group expressions of disbelief, dammit. "No, unfortunately, I can't really explain further than that right now," Aradia finishes, and Karkat snaps his jaws back to glower at her.

John manages a good, sarcastic 'pffbt' noise. "That sounds really great and also super helpful. Thanks, Aradia."

She shoots them a pair of finger pistols and a wink. "No problem! I'll leave you guys to it!"

Karkat gags on three different aborted swear words in the second it takes Aradia to vanish again. "No, don't you fucking - oh great, she's already gone. Perfect." It's not like Aradia's not-explanations are anything new but for fuck's sake.

"Like the fizz all up and vanishing from a soda can. Where does that shit even go?" Gamzee muses. In retaliation, Karkat removes Gamzee's hand from where it's gone to pat his shoulder and relocates it to his head. If he has to put up with Aradia and Vriska and the assorted idiosyncrasies of literally all of his asshole best friends, he's getting a proper shooshpap out of this.

"Someone else trying to save people, though...I wonder who?" John's voice trails off toward the end, the quiet mumble that's almost drowned out by an obnoxious beep of a car horn somewhere to the north. When Karkat reflexively glances down to try to pick out which asshat driver is laying into it, he notes that another five people have joined the tiny clot in sidewalk traffic caused by their floating act. They're going to have to go inside soon and stop painting enormous targets on their asses for anyone below to aim at. Seriously.

A knock raps on the windowsill behind them, and Rose lifts her voice to be heard over the racket. "John? Karkat? Oh, good, you have Gamzee with you."

It's like asking Terezi where Vriska is, or checking with Kanaya to make sure she's got a weather eye on Eridan. Gamzee hums and rubs the back curve of Karkat's right horn just as John swivels them around to face the window with a cough. Rose is already in uniform, but Karkat's enough of a hero connoisseur to pick out where her transmogrified god tier outfit stops and Kanaya's additions and her leftover costume from her time in New York start. Her sleeves and hair stream out to the side as the wind tangles around her in greeting; she barely blinks, turning her phone over in slow circles. "We almost had an Aradia, but she left," John reports with a half shrug.

Gamzee raises a claw and waves. The only problem with that is Karkat isn't sure where this mysterious third hand came from when he's currently got one hand papping Karkat and the other arm still leaning on John, but that's small potatoes with Gamzee. "Sup, Rosesis?"

Rose's troubled expression sours, and she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear as she says the thing. "We...may have a problem."

"That is the opposite of what I want to hear from you right now, Rose. I think you mean, 'All of our problems are solved, the Reckoning has been canceled, and we can go back to our regularly scheduled fuck ups instead of this enormous universe-spanning clusterfuck we've entrenched ourselves in,'" he says, monotone to the point that
John gives him a worried look. He needs to reserve his voice for some proper shouting in the future, though. Hell, maybe when Rose specifies what this brand spanking new problem is, he'll make the call on whether it's worth it to flip the fuck out right this minute.

"That sounds like a lovely alternate universe you're living in, Karkat. Let me know how that goes," she says, deadpan right back. Fuck his life if anyone in the Strildon line gets the idea he's challenging their sarcastic poker-face credentials. She hasn't stopped fiddling with her phone, though, and if Karkat had any control over this floating thing, he would swim over and read it himself, since something on the screen must be to blame for whatever shitshow is about to be revealed.

"Rose?" Kanaya appears behind Rose's shoulder, her frown fixed on Rose to the exclusion of all else. "Are you reading that forum still? I cannot figure out how to make an account there, and Sollux won't respond to my emails about it anymore, but if this is true -"

"I am. And it's a good thing, too." Rose's face snaps taut, and she beckons them over with a grim cant of her head. "Did any of you three know that the entire combined population of Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and most of Oceania had gone radio silent?"

They don't go investigate. They can't afford to.

That doesn't stop Karkat from viciously sympathizing with John's earlier existential crisis, deep in his gut where the guilt won't stop putting his stomach through a meat grinder.

John, Rose, and Dave all staunchly refuse to let anyone split up the party. It takes a while to get everyone else to shut up and give a straight answer for the ensuing group poll, but they wind up with Equius and Kanaya on their side, and Feferi and Tavros too paralyzed by indecision to make up their minds. Jade, being Jade, rolls her eyes and claims she could check out what's wrong halfway across the planet and be back in an hour, with Bec and Vriska assisting, and has almost bounced out the door when Kanaya plays the 'remember that one time Dave and Karkat went to visit someone and got sidetracked all the way to the Arctic Circle' card. Karkat's both proud and embarrassed to say that's kind of a trump card. It's hard to fuck up that badly and not be filled with shameful gratification once the nostalgia filter sets in. Dave has thoroughly ensconced it in his personal mythology.

Moreover, this trip recently went from an ill-defined quest to get the Felt locked down and get Doc Scratch out of the action before the Reckoning to a rescue mission the second Dirk went fucking Winter Soldier on them, so the rest of the planet needs to get its shit together while they focus on things they can actually fix. As can be evidenced by the fact that Bro Strider turns up at the last fucking second, slinking around behind the scratch kids and silently helping to herd everyone along as they make their way to the boulevard. Karkat would be grateful for the help corollating Vriska, who stares at each casino they pass with the blissed out expression of a small child set loose with a battering ram and a shopping cart in a candy store, but Bro communicates mostly in lightning-fast puppet slaps and terse grunts when he's stressed, apparently. It's ridiculous.

Yet also ridiculously efficient. No one wants to take a puppet ass to the face. No one. Dave's the only one with the experience and uncanny sense of timing to consistently dodge whenever a reprimanding plush comes to punt him into line; the rest of them just have to walk it off. In public. When they're already getting long stares because most of the people in their group are dressed in stuff ranging from as much body armor as Kanaya could fit under the height of hero fashion to really sad, color-coordinated pajamas. Gamzee is in sweat pants and a hoodie in 87 degree heat, because not even Kanaya and Karkat combined could talk his shitty clown ass into wearing something more complicated. Jade, Roxy, Nepeta, Jake, and Dave are all being super not-subtle about the fact that they're packing strife specibi in public, and Tavros's tricked out wheelchair from hell isn't helping.
They'd blend in more if they were in Cirque du Soleil costumes.

Basically, if the Felt don't already know they're in town, they do now. Equius has almost disappeared completely with the force of his void-assisted desire not to look like a fucking weirdo but he could spontaneously implode into a black hole and it still would not, in Karkat's professional opinion, be enough to hide them.

When they finally get close enough to see it, the Felt's headquarters looks hideously ordinary. Dave shared pictures off a Google Image search on a memo the other night, and Karkat still feels vaguely let down in person. The strip is crowded with casinos that range from grotesquely bedazzled to sleek and luxurious; the Ouroboros is a squat, nondescript building, that only stands out because of the American Queen Anne's style architecture, in a dull, dark green that doesn't quite pop against its surroundings. It looks like it's made of cardboard, and the skyscraper behind it has more substance but even less pizzazz. Thanks to Slick's recon, Droog's sketchy intel, and Bro's incredibly spotty high-speed research, they know that the majority of the Felt are holed up in the taller building, and Scratch himself is up in the penthouse.

Problem: they have no fucking clue where Dirk might be in all this mess. Jade couldn't track where he might have landed after getting dragged along on the Jack Noir happy fun times ride, and he could be anywhere in the Ouroboros's manor or skyscraper. Depending on how strong his leftover brainwashing is, he's probably not going to respond well to a rescue attempt.

Solution: kick the shit out of everyone, punch Scratch and/or Jack Noir in whatever vulnerable genitalia they might have, and get Jade to scan the building for signs of Dirk until the cops show up or the world ends. Whichever comes first. Alternately, poke around the building whilst kicking the fuck out of everyone until Dirk attacks, then knock him the fuck out and drag him to safety before the cops show up, etc, etc.

Vriska approves of this plan. Karkat has the distinct feeling they're fucked. So fucked. But Roxy's out here with her neck stapled up and even if Karkat could convince Rose that it would be smarter for them to just bow out and wait for the apocalypse somewhere with fewer gambling and drinking establishments, the scratch kids will probably waltz right up to the Felt's front door and go at it alone. And Bro will hang around. And Dave'll probably throw his ass into the line of fire, because why not. And where Dave goes, John and Jade and Rose are going to end up anyway, the codependent fuckers -

Under the circumstances, he just wants to throttle all of these headstrong fucks. If only he wasn't one of them. If only he wouldn't follow John into the fucking pit, fuck the consequences. If only.

The opportunity for a good, rousing speech unfortunately came and went right around the time they were distracted by the news of entire continents' worth of people going missing. Rose's last minute pep talk is more rapid-fire advice, while they all cluster behind the corner of a building so that they're not in the middle of the fucking road. The pavement feels sticky under Karkat's shoes - like the soles will never be clean, no matter how much he shuffles his feet. "Don't go anywhere in a group of less than three people. Try not to get separated. Our main priority now is to find Dirk and extract him before something goes irrevocably wrong." Rose pauses, glances around their ragged semi-circle of friendship, then shrugs. "That is really all I've got. I could descend into the pit of purple prose, but then we'd be here longer than would generally be wise. If anyone has any earth shattering announcement, the floor is open, but make it quick."

John applauds politely, but it peters out before anyone else picks up where he left off. "Lame," Vriska mutters, mostly under her breath but carrying enough to be heard over the headache-inducing volume of the traffic just a few yards away.
Terezi snaps a finger as she raises her hand and waves it around. Sometime between leaving the sweet air conditioning of the condo and reaching the main boulevard, her teal jacket became a teal tanktop baring stringy arm muscle that is in no way going to pass Kanaya's exacting armor standards, and Vriska has adjusted her own short-sleeved hoodie combo in some kind of solidarity. "Surely we can mete out some justice while we're here? That was the original plan," she points out, using her cane to stab a yellowed flier on the ground.

Vriska jumps on that. Karkat's not sure which is more concerning: when the two of them agree like this, or when they're in the mood to either murder each other or hatebang against the wall in front of fucking everyone and their lusii. Sollux isn't here to smack sense into them if they start to rile each other up in a kismefrenzy. "Yeah! That! Exactly that. Terezi gets it!"

Kanaya has an arm guard in her claws even as she starts sidling toward Terezi; fucking called it, Karkat thinks. "If you two initiate a mutiny now, I will be forced to -"

"Get all tetchy and sit our asses down until we listen to you, riiniight?" Vriska lets out a clipped, sardonic laugh, her hands buried in her pockets as she scuffs a red boot along the sidewalk. Her earlier good mood over the high stakes fuckery of Las Vegas has twisted and come down with a razor-edge, her smile way too fucking crooked for Karkat's peace of thinkpan. It's nice that Vriska's really fucking obvious when she's scheming, but somewhat less nice when Karkat's got a sinking feeling that she's about to pull some serious bullshit. "Newsflash - that threat's getting really old, really fast."

"I will do worse," Kanaya says, folding her arms and stepping into Vriska's personal space fast to look her dead in the eye. "I will lock you in a room, where Equius will guard you. And then I shall systematically destroy every slot machine in this city."

It's just the right combination of nonsensical and dead serious to throw Vriska completely. "Wait, what?" the ceruleanblood says, taking half a step back. Equius mutters something indistinct, and Nepeta swipes at his arm in time for him to level an unreadable, implacable frown at Vriska when she looks at him in wild-eyed disbelief.

"They are rigged instruments designed to take advantage of the average being's inability to manipulate luck in their favor so as to steal indeterminate quantities of money from them. This is a very obvious connection to make," Kanaya says gravely. Then she turns away from Vriska and waits until Terezi holds out an arm.

"As if that would actually bother me! Godddddddd!" Somehow, Vriska still looks nervous. She covers for it with an obnoxious laugh and punches Eridan in the arm. "Let's just get this over with and steal that Dirk guy back, before Maryam gets any weirder. C'mon, Eridan, look sharpish. Moment of truth is almost here!" Something about that brings a sparkle of mania back to her variegated eye, while Eridan tenses; Karkat would chalk up another mark under Vriska is going to be extremely Vriska today, but his mental chalkboard is already full.

"That, uh, actually worked?" Tavros whispers behind his hands to Nepeta.

"Obscure symbolism as an abstract psychological threat," Rose says, in the conversational tone generally known as 'my matesprit is getting lucky tonight if we're not all dead before dinner.' Karkat is ashamed to say he knows way more than he wants to about that. He likes quadrant spec and all, but Jade and Terezi have far more awareness of the goings-on in the apartment complex than anyone is probably comfortable with, and very little filter when they've got someone convenient to blab to. "Not bad."

"Yes, well, I feel it's good to be in touch with the culture of one's surroundings." Kanaya looks up
from where she's buckling another bracer on Terezi's other arm to frown at up at the Ouroboros
tower, shading her face with a claw. "That being said, we should keep moving. I don't like how
exposed we are here."

"M'preshur I know th'snper angels," Roxy rasps - it doesn't come out loud enough for anyone to
hear, but Jane taps the back of John's elbow in a practiced motion, and the Breeze snatches the words
up to carry to all their ears. "I'dd dad lasnight. H'll clear 'em, he said."

"And you'll cover us from there," Rose says, her expression smooth as ice. If Karkat remembers the
screaming match it took before Roxy stopped prodding Jake to yell in her stead and agreed to hang
back with her various still healing, life-threatening injuries, he'll give himself a migraine. Roxy's
already pale, and the heat of the sun has her listing to one side. She should have stayed behind with
Doctor Lalonde and Sollux and WV or something, but see again re: headstrong assholes. It's hard to
outstubborn people when they put their minds to it around here. "I put more credence behind Father
dearest's scouting than Droog's maps, naturally, but if she wasn't lying about everything, I'd hate for
us to get bogged down in the casino front. Everyone knows their team lineup? All phones and
earpieces are on?"

"All set!" Feferi says, holding up her phone and twirling the charm that hangs from the end. Karkat
pulls his phone out to double check, and catches Dave already in the act of flipping through his own,
his lips a tight white line. The Sburb app icon looks like a tiny blue world with a spirograph overlay,
and Karkat can't tell whether it's safer to keep it on the first screen where he can push it right away if
everything turns fucked up, or on a later page so he doesn't tap it by accident and wind up stuck
alone in the Medium a day early. He's also got quick links to a map of the Las Vegas downtown area
and Rose's spreadsheet containing details of the plan, Doctor Lalonde and Bro on speed dial, and
Dave's much more ad hoc (aka fucking useless) mess of a spreadsheet that he collaborated on with
Vriska to try to figure out who had what fraymotifs, and what they do. It would have been easier if
any of the trolls remembered using fraymotifs much at all; Karkat vaguely remembers it was a toxic
warrior culture-inspired 'who needs fancy music tricks when you can just chop things up into grist
with your specibus' kind of mindset that carried them through the game, and even the people who
bought the fraymotifs for completion's sake didn't check them out much. He presses his elbow to
John's absentely, and it earns him a fleeting smile from John that's right on the knife's edge between
agonized and encouraging.

"Jade, what is that?" Kanaya asks. She's the only person who doesn't have her phone out, because
Sollux and Equius worked together to install a switch on her chainsaw rather than risk Kanaya's
ability to download spam toolbars and viruses onto even the most well-protected operating system,
and now both she and Jade are leaning out into the sidewalk to stare up at the Ouroboros tower.

Jade's usual chipper, gung-ho expression is still in place - right up until she winces, and taps Rose's
shoulder from a distance with a flicker of green. "That's, uh - oh jeez. Oh, crud. Rose, uh, can you
take a look at this? Reeeally quick?"

Maybe Karkat's just primed to assume the worst. Rose seems entirely too calm about going over to
see what this fascinating development might be, leaning into Kanaya as she does so. By now
everyone's trying to look, too, so they wind up clogging most of the sidewalk. From his position
nearest the building, one hand on the wall to avoid using Tavros's wheelchair as an incidental
handhold, Karkat can't see anything out of the ordinary. Just a building full of mobsters. Unless it
turns out Droog gave them completely wrong directions, and the Felt are really located in Las Vegas,
New Mexico instead. "At wh- oh. That," Rose says, which doesn't help matters.

John laughs, nervous. "Guys? Jade? Um, what's wrong? Please let something not be going wrong
this fast."
Terezi's nostrils flare as she focuses on the sky above the building right next to the Ouroboros, and Karkat and Kanaya reach out at the same time to redirect her toward the actual penthouse in question. Yet of all people, it's Eridan who reacts first. "Oh fuck this shit. We need to move." When Nepeta pushes past the violetblood, slinking up toward the front of their group to get a better look, Eridan grabs the back of her coat and starts backing up in the opposite direction. His face has gone sallow, fins flared with alarm. "Come on, tell me I'm not the only one here who remembers that boss music, you fuckin' drama machines!"

"Who's a glubbing drama machine?!" Feferi snaps; Karkat can't look at her though, because Equius is rounding on Eridan with a terrible nothing where his face should be, and they're about to be short an Eridan if the fucking idiot doesn't let go of Nepeta.

"Boss music," Dave repeats, and Karkat doesn't like the sudden comprehension in his voice. "Shit."

"Eridan is so right," Rose says abruptly, saving them all from Coldblood Standoff 2.0, Voidy Boogaloo. "We need to move. We need to move five seconds ago -"

She just said the words 'Eridan' and 'right' in the same sentence, which means they're official fucked. Name brand fucked. Fucked©. Karkat can't figure out why though - as much as he cranks his neck back, the penthouse is too high above for him to make anything out. This whole city smells weird to him, and now he can't tell if there's something new in the air, or if he's just noticing the eau de not-Seattle all over again. There's a thin smear that might be clouds, might be smog, slowly bleaching out the overpowering sunlight so he can see without squinting or shading his face, but he doesn't know what the fuck they're about to get blindsided by. "Can someone clue me in here?" he demands, shouting just because he can.

Jane, like Nepeta, was forging ahead with a dark look on her face, but out of thin air Bro grabs all three scratch kids and books it down the block. If they fuck around long enough, he'll probably come back and grab someone else. Still kind of at a loss, Karkat backs up while watching the tower, frantically trying to see what they're all watching -

Until finally, finally, he sees something pale and almost triangle-shaped falling against the dark backdrop of the Ouroboros tower. The shape falls at a sluggish rate, as though it's falling through pudding instead of air. For a stomach-turning second, Karkat thinks it's a person; he doesn't have his contacts blurring his vision anymore, so he doesn't have an excuse apart from the fact that he tends to assume the worst, lately.

But Rose wouldn't be ordering them to clear the area if it were something like that.

"Moving now!" John and Jade say, their voices overlapping raggedly in not-quite-unison. Kanaya hooks an arm around his waist and starts hauling him along without asking, jostling Karkat so that his eyes leave the weird falling object for a few precious seconds. Terezi is hanging off the other arm and trying to pry herself free with her cane. Then Jade hits them and they start moving a fucking lot faster, the Breeze urgently muttering something in Karkat's ear that he can't make out over the rush of wind. Belatedly Karkat sticks out his arm to seize Gamzee and drag his ass along for the ride as they and any pedestrians unfortunate enough to get caught by Jade or John start causing sidewalk traffic problems.

Except Gamzee's not there. Karkat stumbles backwards over his own feet, but the wind keeps carrying him along. He twists around in Kanaya's grip and scans the crowd of bystanders they're shoving their way through, but he can't find Gamzee, and there are too many people in his friend group that can vanish into the fucking aether at the drop of a hat, but Gamzee's the one he can't afford to lose track of like this - fucking shitfuck shitty shitty gumdrops -
The dry heat of the Las Vegas sun slams straight from 0% humidity to a wet wall of air so fast Karkat sneezes. Overhead, a greyish lavender filter rolls across the sky and the clouds thicken unnaturally fast.

Oh. "Fucking really?! Come on!" he screams into Kanaya's ear.

The teeth - the rest of the teeth - punch through to reality first, framing a mouth that could swallow an ocean and never be satisfied. Apart from the pale, lavender tinge, the towering cetacean body that plows into the ground and knocks every car on the road two feet in the air is almost unrecognizable, fins and tail lost to a thorny mass of tentacles that reach out and lash around the sides of buildings to support its enormous mass. The sound of mangled cars crunching underneath like soda cans joins a symphony of car alarms. And it just keeps growing, more and more mass pouring out into reality to fill in the thing's outline, until it's as wide as the Strip - wider - its belly is a gutted hole, tentacles that might have been intestines lolling out between rows of curving, yellowed teeth that run at a right angle to its already gaping maw - and last to appear are the eyes and thorns, greyish fire spilling out of worm-riddled pupils to drip onto the street, as the thing fixates on -

(Karkat knows the name. He's seen this thing try to swallow John whole in his nightmares how often, now?)

Cetus bellows a challenge that sets off still more car alarms and shatters most of the windows of the Luxor pyramid, and Rose goes down to one knee. Kanaya wrenches them to a stop, and it doesn't occur to Karkat to question how she does it when Jade's supposed to be the one ushering them along, because a blood vessel throbs painfully in Karkat's temple, and he has the unique privilege of feeling it as almost every single person in a five mile radius experiences a gushing nosebleed. The denizen's audible screech is a wordless roar, but the telepathic horrorspeech flays his mind.

CE: SEER

CE: FA’CE’ ME

[Attention - an error has been detected. A denizen is present outside the Medium.]

[Please wait. Rerouting...]

[Emergency protocol activated - Kaiju Warning.]

"There's a fucking PROTOCOL for that?!" Karkat shrieks.

---

Working in and around the god tier's pajama system keeps Kanaya fuming well past the time Rose would usually try to fall asleep. "Promise me you will not change your sleeves around mid-fight," Kanaya says, scraping her hair away from where it's flopped over one eye.

Rose, lying on her side and propped up on an elbow to observe Kanaya's vigorous efforts to stack different sized Kevlar vests on top of the rest of her supplies, murmurs an assurance that only takes some of the wild-eyed desperation out of Kanaya's stare. She's already settled on the configuration she'll wear her god tier uniform in when they retrieve Dirk from the Felt's clutches; it shouldn't be an issue. That won't stop Kanaya from attempting to design stylish-yet-functional armor for every eventuality, but then, they all seem to have acquired their own less than healthy ways of coping with the end of the world.

And compared to some of the others' coping mechanisms, Kanaya's is at least somewhat justified.
Just the other night Vriska and Terezi got into a minor spat that ended with Vriska settling on an entirely new way of wearing her Thief's gear - one which rendered most of Kanaya's planned armor accouterments in need of a total overhaul. Again, it could have been worse - Vriska could be trying to storm the Felt's casino in the equivalent of godly lingerie - but Kanaya refuses to skimp on anyone's uniform when their lives are all very much on the line. The jadeblood has vehemently expressed her lingering skepticism over how useful the god tier uniforms are as actual battle gear rather than "somewhat gimmicky night wear," and after the thirty third Vriska-related fashion fiasco (most fiascos involve Vriska in some form) Rose simply does her best to be quietly supportive of Kanaya's reservations.

Mm. Everything has an element of the absurd, lately. Rose tries not to let it impact her morale too much, but it's hard. It's hard, and her sense of perspective can only take so much of a thrashing before Vriska fighting Doc Scratch in a sunny bikini top stops sounding like terrible video game character design, and more like a viable method of weaponizing said absurdity on the field of battle.

Thankfully, Rose has consulted her foresight, and confirmed that having Vriska in her underwear would distract Terezi and several other members of their team far too much to be worth the risk. The fact that she had to calculate these odds at all is...well. At least she has Kanaya and her endearing sense of outrage at the mere suggestion of such extravagant bullhonkey to be her beloved rock in a churning sea of ridiculousness.

Still, it's getting late - late enough to almost be called 'early.' Kanaya's working by the light of her own faint glow, and Rose needs to expend significant effort just keeping her eyelids from sinking inexorably shut, using a flicker of power to adjust her vision so she can follow the elegant curve of Kanaya's back. "Come rest, dear," she says, mostly into her pillow; Rose isn't sure when her elbow slid out from under her, leaving her head cradled in the crook of her own arm, but the lower her head's elevation sinks, the more sleep weighs on her like an insistent blanket. "Even if you're not in the mood for sleep. Just for a little while?"

Rose summons a sleepy (yet coquettish) expression to try to woo Kanaya over. Judging by Kanaya's quick cough, which transitions into a soft smile, Rose achieves her goal solely because Kanaya is endeared by her utter failure at seduction. Kanaya still airs one last grievance as she pushes off her knees and comes over to the bed: "Equius embued the shinguards too early, and now counting them to make sure they're all even there is a trial," the troll says, huffing softly. Rose expects Kanaya to walk around and lay alongside her, but instead Kanaya gently but firmly steamrolls Rose over until Rose's on her back, and drapes herself across Rose with a final sigh.

Rose would protest that this arrangement is less than conducive to a night's sleep, but in the grand scheme of things, being slowly crushed to death under the weight of one's girlfriend probably does not qualify as either heroic or just. She's in the clear. Patting the back of Kanaya's head, her fingers a touch clumsy with sleep, she smiles when Kanaya makes a quiet, pleased rumble. "There, there," Rose says, her eyes most of the way shut and planning to stay that way for the foreseeable future, "Speak your grievances unto my human bosom."

She has a vague, dreamy recollection of Kanaya muttering while Rose made obliging sympathy noises that didn't quite have the brain power behind them to turn into words, before Rose drifted off.

- (And well below the surface, under layers of shield and sun and sand, water -)

- There never seems to be time for her to sit down and...talk things out with her mother.
She makes sure of it.

It is, perhaps, not the fair or healthy or good thing to do, but Rose wards off the looming specter of a guilty conscience with technicalities, as is her wont. As the (somehow) duly elected Leader Person, Rose finds herself tapping Rue for assistance when it comes time to hash out the grittier details of exactly who they're going to try to transport through the Medium and into Calliope's new reality, and it's next to impossible to try to foist Rue off onto Karkat alone once her mother gets started. Thankfully, Rue keeps a generously parental watch over the trolls who spend time at the lab rather than the apartment complex, while Bro alternates between stalking the Crew and sweeping through to give Rose a short nod as he checks that the apartment has not been set ablaze in his absence. Oriole complains of Ambrose's ability to track him down with uncanny ease when he goes off to meet with parties unknown, while, later, the three scratch kids fold into Bro's more intent supervision with the exhausted relief of people desperate for any kind of solid footing. While the two human custodians are thus occupied, Rose keeps any discussions with Rue tightly focused, never quite looking Rue full in the face if she can help it, and it - works, somewhat, to quell her nerves. When they fall in with the Strider half of the family for a joint family affair, there's enough tension between them all to prevent anything that might remotely resemble weakness. She considers it one of the perks of having Rue and Ambrose at odds over the Diamonds Droog question, despite how uncharitable the thought feels as it slides through her mind.

The days pass too quickly for anyone to say anything, though she catches Terezi wrinkling her nose often on the occasions when the other Seer joins Rose in casting out nets of prognostication to determine whether their latest decisions as to how to navigate the course of the Reckoning will prove too risky in the immediate future. People come together and fall apart in overlapping waves, and the days keep passing, and the simple, unfailing passage of time has never felt more...problematic. Supervising Eridan when Vriska starts drilling him on his sharpshooting seems more important than inducing some sort of strained, awkward conversation about mortality and the nature of her relationship with Rue; calming Jade with Feferi's help when Jade starts to set the carpet on fire with the force of her pacing, chattering too fast about how she could still go out and get everyone, there was still time to cram the world into her pocket and hope for the best - that takes precedence over a one-on-one with her mother, or with Ambrose, for that matter.

And even her own private second thoughts, the kind that tend to sprout like weeds when John nudges her in the side and gives her a KNOWING look - even that stops, once Dirk is taken. There are more important things to deal with, a million other things to plan for. She's aware that there are factors neither she nor Terezi can account for - they're too new to being gods, and they're up against a Seer who can outplay them with ease.

Rose would prefer to direct her limited supply of 'good life choices' toward getting all of them out alive, rather than consider what kind of fall she's set herself up for.

-(The ocean sits, deep and silent and viscous. She swallowed everything, and then something swallowed her. But she is a denizen still.)

-It comes mostly down to Sollux's efforts that they have any kind of viable evacuation plan at all. Once they get their hands on the pre-release version of Shurb Omega, Sollux sets to work, ripping even more of the game's vital functions for his own use. Client player discs have the cosmic wherewithal to import entire buildings, along with their residents and contents, directly into the
Medium - their ticket off the Earth once the Reckoning begins. Once Sollux spills his announcement
to everyone over Pesterchum, Rose's mother starts gathering a shortlist of people to bring along for a
very dangerous, very doomed ride.

"They'll all be doomed and thhit," Sollux says, with a tired grimace. "Anyone who thcheduled to
get fucking Rekt ith doomed to hell and back. Doethn't matter how we tranthport them - either the
game will find new wayth to waste them and tie up loothe ends, or it'll waste US. The more dead
weight we're carrying, the worse thingh look for the viability of our run."

The news isn't exactly news to Rose; she's well aware that the people she passes in the street
everyday have been inching towards a terminal lack of luck for ages at a rate she can only partially
attribute to Vriska being Vriska. Terezi has yet to express such an awareness. Her Mind aspect
appears to deal more with the consequences of one's intentions than with more abstract concepts like
how close the timeline is to becoming defunct. "Unless we get them to Calliope in time, before fate
catches up with them," Rose points out.

"Whatever. Just pleathe thtop planning everything in Google Docs."

"You will pry the Communal Adumbrative Tabulation of Our Impending Symmachy out of my cold,
dead fingers," Rose says, and then sweeps out of the room with all the dignity she can muster.
Karkat and John keep trying to call it the Ultimate Spreadsheet of Great Justice, with Terezi backing
them solely because they used the magic word, but Rose managed to wrest all editing power for the
main spreadsheet from Karkat and Nepeta before it could become a shipping grid, and thus achieved
ascendancy.

John has (mostly jokingly) informed her that this is why she is currently their leader. Rose suspects
that it's just Karkat's fondness for charts rubbing off on her in the most absurd way possible. And
unfortunately, she has yet figure out a way to keep Sollux from meddling with the spreadsheet - he
keeps going in to delete Rose's ever-so-casual references to his declining health. No one seems
capable of stopping Sollux's slow self-destruction. The one time Rose attempted to broach the subject
with something approaching delicacy, Sollux crabbily informed her that he had his impending death
and subsequent resurrection firmly in his Doom-sights, and would not appreciate an intervention that
might upset the timing of his controlled demise and lead to an accidental perma-death. His
explanations have yet to prevent Rue from trying to play mother, in her own stubborn, ineffectual
way, and though Rose can (somewhat) see where Sollux is going with this, she supports Rue in her
endeavors if only because without prodding from Rue's bevy of lab assistants, the hygiene situation
in Sollux's terminal room would plummet to unacceptable levels. Nothing short of the end of the
world could drive Rue to clean with something more substantial than an ironic, non-functioning
vacuum, but her passive-aggressive cajoling has motivated Sollux to telekinetically clean his work
space with acceptable regularity, and that's what counts.

This is the kind of logic they live by, now. It's common knowledge that Vriska is ready and willing
to jump anyone who isn't god tier and 'help' them, whether they like it or not, and only the
ceruleanblood's questionable competence has left the remaining trolls unscathed.

Rose thinks it would all be slightly less overwhelming to manage if either of the Strilonde parental
units were good at acting like authority figures. Or if some people weren't anti-authoritarian, vigilante
ragamuffins with little to no self-control. Clubs Deuce of all people was more effective at
encouraging people to tidy the kitchen and properly dispose of coffee grounds than Rue could ever
hope to match. In comparison, Ambrose tried to casually murder Diamonds Droog at least four times
(that Rose knows of) and has been expressing his regrets over the missed opportunity by sitting
dramatically on the edge of buildings in the downtown area and staring off into the distance.
And the lusii are...well. Rose is currently pinned under a giant two-mouthed cat who is determined to fit one pair of its jaws around her head with curious precision.

There is a great deal of slobber involved in this process. She's not sure her hair will ever feel clean again.

"This should have been you," she says to Dave, squinting at her brother. He's three feet to her right, squatting down to peer at her predicament with a faint twitch in the corner of his mouth, instead of standing where Pounce de Leon's original pouncestrike landed. "Dave."

His mouth twitches. "Problem?" When she continues to give him a look, Dave protests. "How was I supposed to know it would jump you next?" He prods the lusus tentatively in the side, then snaps his hand back as Pounce hisses through its upper mouth. "Oh god oh jeez calm down, nice cat. Good kitty."

A large tooth scrapes too close to Rose's eye for comfort. She starts to consider using magic to blast the custodian away, but Nepeta might object to a charboiled lusus, and her blasting spells are still volatile at best. Dave has gone from snickering to aimless panic, so she snaps a finger to focus him. "Call Nepeta or Tavros," Rose says, flatly, as more drool starts to sluice down one side of Pounce's mouth. "Promptly, please."

"Like greased fucking lightning," Dave says. "Yep. Right. On i-"

Nepeta announces her presence by dropping out of the broken hole in the ceiling and tacklepouncing Dave with sufficient force to knock his phone skittering across the floor. "Another successfur hunt!" Nepeta boasts, clinging to Dave's shoulders as he tries to duck out from under her. She rolls like a slinky, flipping so that her knees hook up from under Dave's armpits. Rose catches a glimpse of Dave's horrified expression as he gets forcibly flipped over backward and just barely catches himself before he faceplants on the floor. Nepeta scrambles to pin his arms and legs, but Dave blinks out from under her in a flash. "Hey! Cheetah!"

"Up your pun game." Dave reappears behind Nepeta and kicks. The quip might be more effective if he made contact, but Dave is not spectacular at kicking. Nepeta dodges and sinks low against the ground, her eyes lighting up with the thrill of the hunt.

"Nepeta. I appreciate your improved mobility -" Rose cuts off as Pounce shifts its weight, and a fresh wave of cat breath makes her eyes water "- but I would even more greatly appreciate not losing an eye. I grant my permission for you and Dave to battle each other to your hearts' content after I'm loose. Please."

Nepeta cocks her head to the side and blinks at Rose, then sighs, makes a T with her hands at Dave, and stands out of her crouch to come over and cuff Pounce de Leon. "Let her up, Pounce! No biting! We have new purrrey to hunt!"

Pounce purrs. Due to Rose's proximity, it feels like having her head stuck in a car engine as it rumbles to life. Then the lusus opens its jaw an extra inch and lets go with care. Rose holds herself very still, not daring to relax until Pounce bumps its head against Nepeta's stomach, and then rolls to safety when the cat and its charge start to prowl around and circle Dave. Rose can hear the tiny snikt of clawkind, but can't see them, thanks to Equius.

"Uh. Rose?" Dave says, taking a hesitant step back down the narrow hallway. "Tag team?"

Rose sweeps her hand forward as she stands up. "Found your phone," she reassures him. "No need to fret, brother dear."
"I *really* need a shower," Rose sighs, plucking a long strand of hair from where it's stuck to her cheek. "And a haircut. Hm." She flips Dave's phone over in her palm, making a show of not paying attention.

Nepeta lashes out, and functionally invisible clawkind crash against Dave's sword, so quickly that Rose only sees the end result rather than the parry itself. Pounce feints for Dave's side, and Dave tries one last time. "I'll sit still and we can talk about feelings and shit for a half hour!"

Dave unlocked his phone to message someone for assistance, and it hasn't turned off yet. Rose is used to catching glimpses of his lock screen - it has been a poorly copied MS Paint rendition of his apple juice company's logo for some time, complete with text at right angles and bucket-filled sections of color - but now, between the app icons that cover the home screen, she can see the picture he has for the background.

She taps the button so that the screen goes dark on John, Jade, and her own face, and turns, setting the phone down so she can draw her needlekind. "I deem this compensation worthy. The contract is sealed," she says, punctuating it with a smirk. "We'll interrogate the way you utilize lossy data compression as part of your artistic medium of choice, and how it reflects on your psyche, perhaps."

Dave just looks pained, ducking Pounce's next swipe. "...How about we not, and just say that we did."

Then Nepeta leaps up, seizes the broken edge of the hole in the ceiling, and swings herself forward to punt Dave in the chest with both feet. While Dave stumbles backward, wheezing, Nepeta pushes off and flips to face Rose, grinning.

(There must still be a choice. A challenge, and a choice, and then an end. A Choice for her Seer, and if Cetus cannot win, she can at least ensure that when the time comes, the Seer will hear, and choose.)

It's 87 degrees outside, and the only reason Rose notices anything is amiss is because she's looking at the Sburb icon on her phone when notifications from the forum start to pop up. Vriska has reached the point of walking on the ceiling, her wings trailing dust along every surface they touch as she hassles people from above with fluctuating levels of malice. They're not going to be able to contain her much longer, and she knows it. Of the other two major potential mutineers, Gamzee is pacified, and Eridan is exhausted, violent violet bags heavy under his eyes as he naps in a pile that includes Roxy and Nepeta. Vriska's run him ragged with her training and Rose honestly wonders if he might not collapse in the middle of the fight. She has him marked as part of the backup team, meant to stay outside the Felt's headquarters unless assistance is needed, just in case.

They're not going in for the sake of half-defined justice or vengeance, anymore. They're here for Dirk, first and foremost. Pointing Vriska at the Felt and telling her to have at it is just the most immediate method Rose has for burning off some of the ceruleanblood's growing restlessness.

Divine Café > Auras, Scrying, Divination > What even the actual shit is going on? We just don't know.

AN: α- Why is Australia gone -Ω
AN: α- Thaumaturge please respond -Ω
TT: I - what?
AN: α- You're right in the middle of all this, it's really obvious, so skip it. Is the entire population of Australia vanishing overnight part of the apocalypse or is it a new thing? -Ω
TT: Were there any meteors sighted in the vicinity? When did all of this happen?
LS: It's on the news! Turn on your television! They're saying parts of Southeast Asia went silent!

Rose barely remembers the last time they watched something as mundane as the news. Most of their random news updates come from -

"Dave. What's going on with Australia?" she asks, a little more harshly than she intends. Dave takes one look at her face and gulps. She copy and pastes the forum posts into a fresh group memo for the others to look at. Only Tavros and Kanaya look up in concern at the tone of Rose's voice, but she can see chat handles checking into the memo almost as fast as she can repost things.

"Whatever it is, it gets the planes, too," Dave says, which is nonsense to Rose until he explains. "As near as anybody can tell, everyone in Australia disappeared. They're not texting, they're not contributing shit to the global economy, there's no news or radio broadcasts. People only realized shit was going down when the people on flights from other countries never sent word that they landed." He pauses, eyebrows rising up as he reads further. "Also New Zealand and a couple other places are gone, but that's like. A footnote. Holy shit."

John, Karkat, and Gamzee are all outside the window, through the other room. Rose moves without looking up from her phone, walking in a bubble of disbelief as her mind scrambles to process this. They'd expected to hear increased reports of meteor sightings, and eventually impact events, but not something this abrupt.

TT: Are they dead, or just gone? If all that remains is a smoking crater where Australia used to be, that would - I mean, you can't just lose an entire country. Not one that size.
AN: α- Hard to say. Anyone in manned vehicles that get too close appear to be vanishing as well. Checking with a colleague about meteor sightings, but apparently NASA is on a media blackout for a launch at Cape Canaveral -Ω
AN: α- Which is...odd -Ω
NM: They're not dead, that's all I can f______ tell.
LS: oh, thank goodness! are you positive?
NM: That many people dying at once would be a huge deal, okay? I'd know. Unless some f____wad is d______ around with hope magic again, the dead would tell me if they suddenly got an entire continent checking in early.
TT: I'll check.
NM: Check what?

After beckoning John, Karkat, Gamzee, and now Jade in through the window, Rose turns right back around and marches to the nap pile. "Bring me Eridan," she says, an open-ended request for anyone to fulfill, and it's Jane, watching over Roxy, who lifts Eridan up like he weighs nothing and holds him up for inspection while he squawks. "Have you been to Australia recently?" Rose asks.

Eridan looks at her like she's just declared herself the queen of France. "I'm right fuckin' here!"

"Good. Stay that way." Leaving him muttering behind her, Rose goes back to the forum.

TT: Most likely not a hope dome. Why would it be odd that NASA has a launch scheduled?
AN: α- Their only launch scheduled for this week was back on the ninth, and it was an ISS resupply mission that left out of Baikonur. They've been winding down their schedule a lot with all the official
budget cuts; don't know what kind of private funding went into this
HA: could be Croatoan. that tends to spread fast and then people vanish. were there a shitton of
violent murders reported recently down under?
NM: Not that anyone has noticed.
NM: You d___s.
HA: oh for the love of - will you let it go?! it's getting real damn old!
NM: Go f___ your f___ing s_____ selves with a f___ing cactus you f___headed ghostbusting t___s

HA: wait. hang on, gotta ask cas if getting raptured is legitimately a thing brb.
NM: DO NOT.

There has to be some mistake. "We're sure no advance copies of the game got sent out?" Rose asks, as Jade dips back inside, Karkat grumpily suspended between her and John. "I thought nothing was
released until 1:00 pm our time, tomorrow -"

Jade nods emphatically before Rose finishes. "Positive! Janine had them push for as limited a release
as possible. Even the PC downloads won't work until it's the thirteenth here!" It had been the best
Jade could scrounge out of her connections to the company; canceling the release of what was
rapidly becoming one of the most anticipated games of the year just wasn't in the cards.

Rose doesn't know enough about video games to tell whether the popularity of Sburb Omega's pre-
orders came down to actual publicity hype, or to some dormant survival instinct in the general
population telling them to get their hands on something with the scant chance of saving their lives.
It'll just bring more meteors down on their heads, but the Reckoning seems to be one of those things
that's paradoxically already accounted for such details.

"Y'know, I'm pretty sure Aradia does this on purpose," John says, shaking his head.

"...Does what?" Rose asks.

TT: ...Can you all keep tabs on this? If there are any new developments, message me privately. Same
handle on Pesterchum.

NM: Sure, why the f____ not.
LS: ummm, guys? *_*...New†?
AN: α- What is it? -Ω
LS: Have you...heard from Galya la†ely? *_* Just† checking!
AN: α- She said she was still in Vladivostok the last time I - -Ω
AN: α- @ведьмаГаля? -Ω
AN: α- gdye ty? -Ω
AN: α- She must not have signal, it was cutting out a lot last week -Ω
LS: oh because, um. maybe my †ransla†or is broken again.
TT: Link?
LS: over here. I †hink †hey're saying †he really far north and eas†-ish par†s of Russia and some
o†her places are also -
AN: α- No -Ω
-- alternativeNewtonia [AN] has left the chat! --
LS: oh no...no come back! I'm sorry! I didn't† mean -
NM: F____. Ice cold, Star.
LS: But I didn't mean to!!!
-- ladyStardancer [LS] has left the chat! --
NM: F____ x2 combo.
HA: good news people, it's not the rapture!
HA: wait, where the shit did those two go?
TT: Whoever's doing this, it's still spreading.
TT: I -
TT: Well. Good luck, to all of you. I'm sorry.
NM: What. The s___. Does that even mean. What is happening.
NM: Oh my f___, Newt's right. You do know what's going on.
TT: Oh No Something Has Unfortunately Come To My Attention Which Involves Wrangling A Wayward Friend This Is So Sudden.
TT: Oh Nooo...

-- thoughtfulThaumaturge [TT] has left the chat! --
NM: COME BACK YOU FUCKERRRR!!!!!!
HA: whoa, dude. language.

(She could never close the channel. Skaia willed it, and the Horrorterrors widened it, and there's only one way to seal it.

A choice, then. A choice with enough substance and significance that the reward will be worth the price.)

"There's a fucking PROTOCOL for that?!" Karkat shrieks, which pretty much summarizes Rose's feelings exactly. She would voice agreement, but pain lances through her and keeps her knees riveted to the sidewalk beneath her. Voices roar up the channel between her mind and Cetus's, icy water pressing up against her wards to feel out cracks, and above it all music sings - low and sobbing and out of key and filled with discordant notes, but music all the same, music that grinds down into her bones. Not loud, and yet too personal for comfort. It's the kind of song she might have played once, long ago, on her violin.

Luckily, she's getting used to working through these kinds of things. The pain isn't accompanied by any particular compulsion or tangle - Equius is here, the void wrapped around him thick as any sludge a Horrorterror can produce, and that gives her more room to maneuver. Kanaya's arm is a steely bar around her back, and once Rose applies enough visual filters to see through the fog settling over her vision, she nods for Kanaya to haul her up onto her feet. Floating is a little beyond her, but she plants her feet on the ground and hopes for the best. "Eridan? Feferi?" she says, and then, belatedly, "Anyone who had Derse, really -"

"Here," Eridan says, muffled, before Equius dumps him from where the violetblood was tucked in his armpit. He looks queasy (and sweatier than normal), but reassuringly bipedal. Feferi waves from where she's down on one knee, and then shakes her heavy braid back over her shoulder as she staggers upright. "Well this has all gone to piss," Eridan says, using a car to clamber back onto his feet - and then nearly falling over again when the man in the driver's seat slams his fist down on the horn. Rose can barely distinguish the sound between the low roar of music, and the car alarms that are already going off up and down the strip.

"Kaaayyyyy, so. New plan?" Jade says.

"I'm not sure why we bothered to pretend the first plan would work out, anyway," Kanaya says, leading Rose the rest of the way behind the car. John's half-guiding Dave, too, right on their heels. The only sign of the strain Dave is under shows in the chalky white of his face. "I feel like we should have known better by now. And yet. It continues to happen."

CE: S"E"R™.
Rose wipes blood away from her nose, smearing it everywhere, no doubt, and finishes taking stock of the group - Gamzee is nowhere to be seen, to her quiet, gut-clenching horror, and Karkat looks devastated when he meets her eye - but neither Equius nor Nepeta look like the horrific denizen's presence fazes them in the slightest - and looks at Cetus, just in time to watch a deep purple tentacle almost as wide as the street itself come down on the MGM Grand.

Along with everything in between the resort and Cetus herself.

People were already screaming at the sight of an enormous monster. It's the abrupt uptick in volume, the knowledge that people obviously died just then, combined with the steady, grinding crunch of the building being crushed, that sends Rose right back to New York, and she carves right through a skyscraper without a care for the people inside because they're inconsequential. What matters is getting the ugly shape right, the curves of the spirograph emblazoned in her/their mind's eyes - "We have to get them out," Rose gasps. She can't feel her feet, and she can't tell if it's the numbness of ice water, or just shock. They have a plan, not for this exact eventuality, but for a Horrorterror appearance? She'd have been a fool not to plan for such a thing. It's doesn't escape her that Cetus's tentacles curve and coil around the Felt's headquarters, that the denizen has no qualms about slowly rolling over the next-nearest hotels and enveloping them with rotten, exposed fat and entrails. "Jade, call Becquerel, we need to shift as many people out of the way as we can."

Cetus raises her flukes, and brings them down with another, distant crunch. Rose can't see past the bulk of the denizen, but she can envision the damage being unleashed on the far end of the street too clearly. They have to confront it and stop it, before the denizen tries to come to them and crushes even more people

"Uh, oh jeez - anyone who can fly -" John starts, a warning note in his voice. Jade lets out a piercing whistle, then takes a deep breath without pausing, green light burning around her hands.

Looking directly at Cetus saps more of Rose's sanity and concentration than it should - the warped whale's shape wavers and twists in a way that's almost hypnotic. She raises a hand and slaps herself (Kanaya flinches, hard), and only then does she notice the water welling up around the grim denizen. It doesn't appear to have any specific point of origin; it also seems to be rapidly cresting in a wave that sweeps between the cars on the street, gaining momentum as it spreads outward. She can't detect whether the water itself is dangerous or not, but the default answer would probably be - yes. "Everyone, up!" she barks, almost too late.

Between them, only Jade, John, Rose, Equius, Terezi, and Vriska can reliably float. But Jade and John lift anyone who can't, sparks of power pushing up against the underside of Rose's shoes when she falters, and Tavros's wheelchair rockets upward, Nepeta slinging herself up behind him with a yowl as Equius follows hard on their wheels. They wait for the swelling wave of water to rush beneath them, murky and with a cold, bitter stench. By the time the wave settles, the water sits almost a foot deep on the road, lapping up against the wheels of all the vehicles unfortunate enough to have been on this particular section of the Strip.

And then the metal of the cars begins to hiss, and steam, which answers that question. Most of the pedestrians in eyesight are wobbling in the Breeze or in Jade's steadier hold, but the water spills over into parking lots, and side streets, and onto the grounds of the resorts themselves.

Rose wipes her face again, blinking furiously against the tears of pain that spring out as Cetus's
furious, hissing roar pounds her ears. Her hand hits someone else's along the way, and her swirling vision tracks right past Karkat to Kanaya before she refocuses and realizes it was his hand. She can't read his expression past a general impression of 'stressed,' with a tinge of guilt as he splays out his claws to show they're tipped with blood. "Your eyes," he says - she can't hear him, but she can read it on his lips.

"Why does this keep happening, anyway? Do we just attract Horrorterrors? Do we smell good, or something?" John asks. Cetus sweeps a row of cars out of the way in a ragged wave - and there are still people inside those cars. A few of them try to crawl out of the cars and quickly discover the watery sludge Cetus exudes hurts. Jade sets the non-floating members of their group down on top of the vehicles nearest them (an armored van and a blue hatchback) and starts reaching out to the cars with her aura of power burning up her arms to line her entire body with the force of her concentration. Even as Jade starts snapping her fingers to pop the vehicles next in line to be smashed under Cetus's belly out of the way, Becquerel appears on the hood of a red convertible, in the middle of licking its paw.

"We probably have cooties. Or something," Dave says. "Anyway, Karkat, whatever you do, don't start crying."

It's weird enough that it apparently snaps Karkat out of uneasily watching Rose's face. "Why the fuck would I start crying?! Do I look like I'm about to collapse into a sodden heap of useless?!" he demands, elbowing past Kanaya in a bristling fury.

Dave takes off his shades, wipes drops of sea spray off onto the edge of his god tier uniform, and then sets them back on his nose. "No, but shit's getting real damn prophetic here. Slap my butt and call me Cassandra."

"Dave, what the fuck."

"Can we have a little less talking, a little more helping?" Jade interrupts. "I'm gonna try to move a bunch of people out onto another street - hang on tigh-"

Whatever Jade is about to add, she doesn't finish. Her bright, determined warning cuts off as a foot slams into her stomach. Mottled grey wings surge out of a sickly green hole in the world, and something far smaller than Cetus rams Jade all the way back until she slams into the windshield of another car. Rose counts five separate, neon green afterimages burned into the space between Jade's old position and where she hits the car, before they resolve into one shape. The wings furl for a moment, and then flare out to their widest extent.

JN: Witch.

JN: You owe me a new torso.

"No!" John bursts toward Jade and Noir in an instinctive lunge - Jade raises her head, face frozen with startled pain, her eyes snapping to Noir, to Noir's crackling, shifting green aura, and then to Rose -

"Bec! Help them!" Jade yells, launching herself at Noir without standing, and tackling the carapacian into a teleport of her own.

They do not reappear.

(Disorder roots itself in her mind, anathema and achingly familiar, and clutches her close.)
Becquerel, to its credit, needs no further instruction - a fraction of a second after Jade bounces Noir, the white wolf turns into a haze of green stars and then begins to rapidly cycle from car to car, the civilians huddled within and screaming from the tops of their vehicles vanishing in bolts of green light. Not once does Bec acknowledge Cetus's shrieks, or even rise up from its sitting position; Rose thinks she catches it resume the inspection of its forepaw as it teleports out from under Cetus's next strike, taking five more cars along with it. It doesn't appear bothered by the situation at all, and Rose acknowledges the sad fact that she's now envious of a space dog's unemotional composure. A fond farewell to any pretense at not being her father's daughter, then.

More to the point - John's about to launch himself after Jade, and Rose can't process why she seizes his arm to stop him, almost at the same time as Karkat. Jade - Jade needs help. Rose had a whole lineup for who would be able to fight Noir with the smallest risk of fatalities, but having an enormous grimdark whale breathing death and destruction and the scent of spoiled meat down their necks requires a complete restructuring. Who can they spare? In all her earlier, hypothetical calculations for them fighting a Horrorterror, they can't even afford to spare Jade. "Who can we send to help?" she says aloud, looking over to Terezi.

TT: Jade, where are you taking him?
GG: away from people!
GG: gghk -
EB: jade?!
GG: i'm fine!
GG: you guys worry about big noodly and nasty!
GC: NOT SO F4ST! 1'TS D4NG3ROUS TO GO 4LON3! >:] T4K3 D4V3!
TG: srsly take me baby im yours
GG: i can handle noir! i'm fast enough now but if i have to keep teleporting another person i won't be able to focus so just -
TG: would people remember the time powers thing better if i wore this cape as a scanty toga
TG: and ran around with my giant time spinning tables obscuring my nethers at convenient angles
TG: like were in a shitty fan service harem anime
TG: because i can do that
GC: 1 FOR3S3 4BSOLUT3LY NO W4Y SUCH 4 BOLD F4SH1ON ST4T3M3NT COULD GO HORR1BLY WRONG TRUST M3 1 4M 4 S33R.
GA: You Also Said That About The Vriska Lingerie Plan. No.
EB: i'll go, i can keep up!
GG: nooo!
EB: you can't fight by yourself!
GG: watch me, buster. :V you stay and whisk people out of harm's way or else i'll revoke your teleport sibling license!
TT: Jade -
GG: aaagh stop talking i need to concentrate bye!

John breaks Rose's grasp too easily. "I'm going after her," he says, his voice unsteady and eyes flaring electric blue with panic. The wind's rising along with his voice, lashing the stagnant, briny haze around them, but if the Breeze is speaking Rose can't make out the words over Cetus's song. "She can't fight Noir alone, that's insane! I - she'll -"

Rose can see the same distracted film of memory in his expression; she's not sure he's seeing any of them right up until Karkat hisses, yanks back on John's arm, and grabs the side of his face to haul
him around to meet his eyes. "You're freaking out. Do not freak out on me, John." When John makes a frustrated, broken sound and tries to pull away, Karkat moves both hands to his face and bumps their foreheads together. "No. You're not allowed to go floating off in a dumbass panic and die on me!"

"Me and her were supposed to take Noir if he showed up, that's what -"

"Harley can handle herself!"

Karkat looks like he's on the edge of angry tears as he says it. Rose isn't sure whether that makes his plea more effective or not. John visibly snaps out of whatever memory he's replaying in his mind to register Karkat's face mashed up against his, and some lucidity appears to return to his panicked stare. His feet still float a good half a foot above the car, but the Breeze winds around Karkat, and Rose takes that to mean they still have John here, for now.

It will have to do.

Right now, she has to make a call.

TT: Jade. Ping the instant you need backup.
GG: got it!
TT: Please. Don't die.
GG: i'll try! :P

"Well, if she's not comin' back, I'll reiterate for her. New plan?" Eridan asks. He's managed to edge away from Equius, and Rose doesn't like how the violetblood's stationed himself on the hood of the car - as close as he can stand to Cetus, compared to the rest of their group, his shoes only a foot or so from the seething water. "S' so loud. The sea-swallowing witch's really got the volume cranked up." He raises a finger to dig around in his ear, fins folded down as far as they can bend, and it somewhat disrupts the unsettling impression Rose has that Eridan is one unfortunate thought away from stepping off.

Vriska rolls her wrist, her hood creeping back up over hair and horns as she alters her uniform again. "New plan is hit the giant monster until it stops moving, duh. Do I have to come up with all the best plans around here?"

"What about, uh, all the people?" Tavros says, peering over the side of his hovering rocketchair. It takes some doing, as he's primed two of the rocket-propelled lances Equius installed on each side of the original wheelchair's frame, and the brownblood winds up at a precarious angle. Vriska scowls up at him, eyes narrow, but apparently having some height over her makes Tavros bold. "Um, we could help Bec move them, while you do the beating up thing."

Naturally, everyone else looks to Rose. "That's...essentially the plan," she admits. Terezi is absolutely no use when Rose nudges her for backup; the troll has joined Eridan in staring up at Cetus - except her unseeing gaze is fixed on a point almost twenty degrees off from the denizen itself.

No. Terezi is watching the Ouroboros Tower.

It wouldn't do to forget that the Felt could jump in whenever they so choose. The last thing they need right now is for Doc Scratch's misbegotten gang of time manipulating thugs to sneak in while they're distracted by Cetus. Cetus has to be dealt with immediately - either banished or killed or otherwise incapacitated, somehow - but Scratch is still here. Still watching.

"Excellent," Vriska says.
And something in the way she says it stops Rose cold.

With one last flick of her hand, Vriska tosses her dice on the roof of the car, squatting and leaning in close to study the result. Her wide, vicious grin is -

A distraction. Rose feels the *yank* as Vriska casually sucks luck away from everyone in the area but their small circle, like a milkshake through an industrial vacuum cleaner. And Rose doesn't think a Thief can give back what she's stolen, which means Vriska leaves an entire streetful of people lightless, plummeting into depths of misfortune so abrupt she might as well have shot a light bulb. The fluorite octet turn into small stars of fortune as they skitter and dance and land with a clack on -

[Ancestral Awakening]

An impossible, crackling blue sun of luck erupts as Vriska's roll hits circle eights. Rose closes her eyes and it's still not enough; all that stolen significance and fortune compresses into Vriska's spikey body, bright enough to blind someone. The dice rise up off the car, plucked up by one of the sparkling plasma streamers, and slot into the hilt of a blue sword that drops into Vriska's outstretched hand. All the while, Vriska never stops laughing.

Rose's eyes feel like they're about to melt out of their sockets. She forces them open, because closing them did nothing for her. Vriska stands resplendent in lemon yellow and cerulean blue, in some kind of swashbuckling dress that's cinched tight at the waist, her wings fluttering and leaving a trail of sparkles behind her. A new gauntlet latches tight around her arm, the metal panels flexing as Vriska brings the sword up over her shoulder with none of a Strider's practiced ease. "It's go time, suckers!" she yells, full of glee, and with so much riding on the swing of her sword, none of them can react before she lops Eridan's head from his shoulders.

AG: Sollux!!!!!!!!! Now!!!!!!!!
TA: for 2hiit'2 2ake. already?! a little more waring next time FUCK
AG: G8t over it! I'm on a roll! :::D

- There is a prototyping node within Leviathan, and Cetus laughs.

The laugh comes out a scream, a thousand screams, emanating from the hollow beak that rips out through her wide throat in a fresh wave of blood and water.

Leviathan has made itself part of the Game.

Leviathan has made itself *a challenge.*

- The scant seconds between Eridan's death and his resurrection last long enough for Rose's heart to jump into her throat, thick and clogged with cold clots of blood and seaweed - it's worse than when he was just *standing* there alone, isolated, because his body dips at a horrible, lurching angle, his head arcing away with a spray of violet blood that hits Equius, the tall troll flinching back, and Vriska's still laughing -

White-gold light froths out around Eridan in a spirograph, spiraling out and enveloping him in wide ribbons of light. Arcing spurts of blood stop in midair and flatten out into thin, lightning-sharp wings the color of violet-blooded gore.
"This is the most anime shit I have ever seen," Dave says, holding out a fist for John to solemnly fistbump, and his voice sounds so quiet, drowned out by the thrum of music in Rose's ears.

"The worst kind of mahou shojo," John agrees, and Karkat looks at him as though he's questioning every decision he's ever made up that led to him being John's dearly beloved.

Eridan gasps in air when the spirograph's light starts to die down, rubbing his neck and glaring daggers at Vriska. "Vris!"

Vriska, to everyone's surprise, stops laughing and screeches in outrage at a pitch that makes several people (including Nepeta and several car-bound civilians) cover their ears in alarm. "Are you wearing a tiara?!" she demands in a scream, voice cracking halfway through.

Eridan gasps in air when the spirograph's light starts to die down, rubbing his neck and glaring daggers at Vriska. "Vris!"

Eridan in some post-not-dead-anymore daze, just clutches his head and presses down, eyeballing Vriska with a weird look as he reassures himself he's in one piece. "I'm wearin' what? Fuckin' hell, Vris, what kind of bee ess was that?! I said maybe, not inhumme me with extreme fuckin' prejudice at the drop of your shabby pirate hat!"

"Focus, dumbass!!!!!!! Is that. Or is it not? A tiara!" Vriska gestures at - well, all of Eridan's outfit, really, from the puffy shorts to the stark white tights. But mostly at the tiara.

To be fair, Rose doesn't quite know what to say, either. Groping around a little more, Eridan blinks with dawning realization in his eyes, hooking his thumb claws under the white triangle of cloth wrapped around the crown of his head. "...Holy fuck," he says, stretching it out in front of his eyes. "That's either a stretchy tiara, or a giant headband. What kind of figmental storybook prince poppycock is this shit?"

Vriska shoves him hard, and pretty much as one Rose, John, Kanaya, and Equius jolt forward to grab Eridan before he can hit the water. Eridan floats over the water effortlessly, looking wounded. "I didn't kill you so you'd go and transform into some anime magical prince bullshit!" Vriska says, petulant. "Change it so you look like a badass and not a douche!"

Eridan looks at Vriska, and then back at his tiara.

And then back at Vriska. "I like it," he says, face utterly blank as he lets the tiara snap back down on his head. "Go fuck yerself, Vris, this is badass." He pauses to flex his feet in their new violet shoes. "I'm never takin' my soft, comfortable yet stylish slipper socks off again and nothin' you say can stop me. This is what living feels like." When Vriska gives another screech and makes a grab for him, he smacks her outstretched claw away, floating further up and out over the water with an expression somewhere in the general vicinity of vengeful bliss.

Somewhere in the background, people are screaming. It reminds Rose that talking is not, in fact, a free action when there's a giant monster rampaging through Las Vegas. "Let's chat more about the eccentricities of Sburb's costume design later, please," she says, squeezing Kanaya's hand. Kanaya looks at her, aggrieved, but mercifully says nothing. "Vriska."

Vriska whips around, still lit up from within. "Yeah?" she says, with a growl of anticipation inching into her voice. She's expecting a fight out of this, Rose suspects. If she'd decided to pull a stunt like that earlier in the week, she might well have gotten one.

(Shemight be a star of stolen significance - right now, there's probably very little Vriska can't do -
but Rose can see what would stop Vriska cold. Equius, after all, is right there. She could consult Terezi for a second opinion at a moment's notice.)

But Rose would prefer to point Vriska at the biggest target and let her loose, doing something useful. They don't need in-fighting right now. "Next time, ask first and respect the person's choices. Can the two of you concentrate on fighting Cetus, or does Eridan need more time to adjust?"

"Well, too bad, Lalonde, because I don't care about pandering to you anym- say what?" Vriska says, the practiced mutinyologue sputtering to a stop as she processes what Rose actually said.

Karkat turns his head from where he's working to keep John stable and opens his mouth; Rose picks up John's hand by the wrist and manually slaps it over Karkat's mouth. "You're two of the heaviest hitters we have, and Gamzee appears to have stepped out for the moment," she says, gesturing at the Gamzee-less space around them. "Presumably Eridan just jumped the echeladder. Can the two of you take point while we work on clearing the area of bystanders?"

Make Vriska think she's the center of attention, and she's relatively easy to manipulate. Rose just wishes she didn't have to navigate the ceruleanblood's mercurial moods to prevent mutiny when her head is throbbing like this. But Vriska flutters her eyelashes and switches from 'impending rebellion' to 'look at me me me' with a toss of her head, dragging Eridan in with a toothy grin. "Pssh, Rose. Please. You're looking at the two best denizen ass-kickers on this sorry team! Tell her, Karkat!"

Karkat speaks through John's hand, and John makes a face that says 'Karkat spits when he yells.' "You're both a fucking menace to not just society, but also to this entire suppurating cesspit of a planet and probably the godfucked universe at large, and even if you both fling yourself into the gaping jaws of certain death you'd probably survive and punch your way out through death's rectum just to continue to shit on my day. Happy?!"

Vriska starts clapping. Eridan sniffs. "That was beautiful, Kar."

"I hate both of you."

"Then go and prove it," Rose says, loudly.

She finds herself on the receiving end of one of Vriska's wilder looks, vicious and eager. It is disturbingly appealing; one can't say Vriska doesn't have her own tempestuous, infuriating charisma. "Oh, it's on," the ceruleanblood says, and she thumps Eridan on the back before taking off toward Cetus like a shot. Eridan casts one last uncertain look down at his new outfit, and then hurtles after Vriska with somewhat less speed, his hood being sacrificed to form a small cape.

Terezi takes time to flick Rose in the ulnar nerve. This is such a tiny, unpleasant note compared to everything else going on that it takes Rose a second. The other Seer leans over and whispers right in her ear - though Terezi's whispers are only marginally quieter than Karkat's liberal interpretation of the concept. "I heard that," she says, the usual mocking glee marred with a trace of warning. "Don't make me call dibs on spades."

"Perish the thought," Rose replies, with a shudder.

If Cetus were still Cetus, Rose would worry more that having her friends help in the fight might
break some unspoken rule of the Skaia's - has anyone ever read an actual guide for this nightmarish game of life? - but thorns press out from under Cetus's stretched, pallid flesh, iridescent oil spilling out around the ragged edges of the swollen wounds, and Leviathan stares out hungrily through the denizen's eyes when Rose finally tears her focus away from corralling her wayward team.

It hasn't looked away from her. Not once. She knows.

Fine. If Leviathan-in-Cetus stays fixated on Rose for the duration, some quirk of Leviathan's most recent incarnation in the physical realm that distracts the Horrorterror from wreaking havoc outside this general area, Rose can and will use that to their advantage. She pushes her shades up her nose, then lets her needlekind fall into her palms from the sylladex up her sleeves.

--

Jake dislikes flashstepping. It's disconcerting when Dirk does it, and a true botheration when Ambrose does it to wrench them away from the action. Moving so abruptly discombobulates him something fierce, and the dadblasted man doesn't even have the decency to ask whether any of them want to be whisked out of harm's way before doing it. Jake's quite peeved and Jane looks properly disgruntled as they land without ceremony on some desolate rooftop miles from any buildings Jake recognizes. Roxy's incandescent, actively trying to knee Ambrose in the stomach, but the man just dumps her and Oriole next.

Ambrose stops for a minute, impassive, watching Roxy's hands as she scrambles upright and uses them to convey what her rasping voice can't quite muster the volume for. To Jake's endless consternation, he can't keep all the sign language straight in his noggin - but he can add his voice to Roxy's for good measure, while Jane and Oriole contribute sour glares. "Hold on just a minute with this cockamamie coddling nonsense -"

"That does not mean what you think it means," the eldest Strider says, signing something back at Roxy that might or might not be a correction of something she signed. Jake just doesn't know, and it bothers him. "Need to talk to that kid about what weird shit he's teaching people." Then the angular shades turn on Jake, and the stare makes him feel small and disconnected - it's not quite Dirk's face, older and tanned and rougher, and Jake's just as lost in sorting out his thoughts on that as he has been trying to follow everyone's hands this past week. "And no. Stay here 'n don't move until the shitstorm's died down, punks."

"Conflagration! Mr Strider -" Jake starts, but the invective lands on empty air as Ambrose ghosts off to hell only knows where. Probably right back to the action, blast him. Jake sucks in air, then lets loose. "Well, good riddance, you - you boorish cur!" He wants to kick - something, but there's nothing to kick here but the roof itself. That'll have to do, no matter how useless and kiddish it feels to kick the ground.

Roxy buries her face in her hands and makes a thin, frustrated noise, and Jake completely understands. Jane wastes no time on such things. "Let's move," she orders, already in motion. Instead of scouring around for a stairwell, she goes to the southern edge of the roof, her red jacket and black armor sharp against the muggy sky (Kanaya attempted to coax her into a pale blue number that Jake thought would have looked smashing, but Jane argued that it would be murder to keep clean, whereas red would blend well with the blood color of half the sentient population of the planet, and then some. This is considered sound logic). There's some betentacled filiglittery towering amidst the glittering buildings of the Strip, and despite Ambrose's efforts the abominable thing is so large that it seems unnervingly close to them, still. As if all it need do is raise a particularly formidable tentacle and it could reach them with a casual sweep. The blighted thing's just that large, and Jake's rather baffled by how things like this can emerge out of thin air without so much as a polite
handwave by way of explanation. He tries to keep up with all the rambling threads of the plot, here, but even functioning like a normal person without his old, brainwashed scripts to keep him running is honestly the limit of his ability, some days.

It gets better, slowly, day by day. But the progress is *painful*.

He wants Dirk back. Rather a lot.

"I think we're a little outclassed. No offense," Oriole says, dry as sawdust. He flaps enormous flipping wings out, tweaking a couple of errant feathers back into line, and they gleam under the desert sun like burnished metal. He mostly looks resigned but ornery as he joins Jane. "Shit like this tends to escalate before it gets better, and unlike basically all those other guys, we don't have freaky god life packages."

"That thing is inconsequential." Jane sets one foot on the very edge of the roof, testing her weight as she dismisses the tentacle monster in a wave. "We're here for Dirk. We're going to find Dirk."

Roxy perks up quick as a flash, surges up, and launches herself at Jane like a rocket, her squeak of joy almost inaudible. The Jane Jake used to know would have stopped Roxy dead with an elbow to the gut before she got anywhere near enough for a hug. He likes the strange but familiar, new Jane much better. He supposes they're more like how they should have been, now, and he likes it a lot more than he liked the fogged blur of the past few years, though it never stops making his head fuss and ache.

*If my stodgy old brain could do it, why couldn't Dirk's?*

Silly question. Just like Dirk's capacious noodle to overthink things to the point of self-sabotage, honestly. Jake misses him.

He hands back, a third wheel a ruefully aware of it, until Jane jerks her chin at him and the two girls pull Jake up alongside them on the ledge. He looks down, measuring the distance to the ground with a practiced eye, and then back at them. The edge of bandages still peeks out from under the high defensive collar of Roxy's angular pink and purple armor, her hair fluttering like candy floss, while Jane looks at Jake with a softness in her narrowed eyes that was never there before.

He's not sure anymore what he's done to deserve any consideration at all. He's the one who couldn't hold Dirk safe when it mattered most. They could have talked him out of whatever logical knot he tied to hang himself with, if only they'd had time, but Jake's suddenly got butterfingers.

But Roxy and Jane still want him here, and here still feels like coming home, so. He laughs, surprising himself, and hugs Jane from the other side as best he can. "Then let's go rescue that confounded Strider from himself, like he'd do for any of us," he says, cheery, and fighting back the urge to cry. Now cannot be a weepy moment - he has to save the waterworks in case a dramatic moment is called for to break the spell on Dirk; hellfire take Jake before he cries himself out prematurely.

"You know, Bro's gonna throw a fit if you guys jump right back in the middle of that. He might even yell," Oriole says, and Jake's embarrassed to say he almost jumps plumb out of his skin - he'd forgotten the bird hybrid gent was even present, and can't mask the guilty expression in time as Oriole joins them, squatting on the edge of the roof with his wings mantled and his face bland. Not the Strider blank look Dirk and his pernicious older doppelgänger do, but a schooled expression of neutrality that reaches Oriole's orange eyes (what *is* it with Striders and Lalondes and odd eye colors?), directed mostly at Jane.
"I think you're correct," Jane says, equally bland, "and I could not give less of a rootin'-tootin' fudge about what that guy thinks."

Oriole's face blossoms into a smug grin. "Awesome. That's 90% of why I'm coming along, anyway."

"The other ten percent?" Jake asks, curious.

"I have a family history of bad life choices, and those Felty fucks still owe me a wing and compensation for the amount of weird shit I've had to live through since I got stuck with you people."

Jane's face maintains perfect disinterest, but the humor radiates off her like a subvocal quiver. "Then keep up."

She dips Roxy back, sweeps her up bridal style while Roxy giggles, and then steps off the roof. Jake follows, using his grappling hook to ease the fall while Jane just takes it - that really must be murder on the knees, and he has no idea how she does it. Oriole glides down in an orange flutter, and then they're off. Without Dirk to guide them, Roxy sets a course, holding up a phone with Google Maps on it so she and Jane can lead the way through a wandering course to take them well around the giant monster, straight to the Ouroboros casino's back door.

JE: On our way dirk!

There's no response, still. Jake doesn't let that stop him hoping for one. Where there's a will, there's a way!

---

Dave's at one shitting hell of a disadvantage, lately. But if he times this just right, they can get through things with as little awkwardness as humanly possible.

Mistake number goddamn frigging one: 'humanly possible' does not cover Equius Zahhak. Dave needs to find out who wrote up his awkwardness insurance policy because at the rate things are going he's gonna pay for this one straight out of his own pocket. He's basically pouring a couple thousand dollars worth of apple juice empire proceeds down the tubes, here.

But if he's gonna game the system like a fucking boss, it's this or swearing allegiance to Eridan, and out of the two, Eridan's the dude with a couple murder happy joy times on his permanent record, whereas Equius is just...uncomfortable.

Jade advises him to bring towels. Which is pretty basic Zahhak 101 that Dave already planned for, but Jade snap-summons him a wheelbarrow to cart the towels around in, so she gets mad kudos for that. John and Karkat confiscated the entire box of ringpops he got off Amazon, claiming it was to save Karkat from a future heart attack but pretty damn transparently so that they could set up a monopoly on the local ringpop market and/or re-enact some shit out of Blood Diamond with Jake assisting. Dave lets it go, but only because if he has to sit through another one of Karkat's rants about mixed quadrant signals he'll probably have the damn thing memorized. So unfortunately, while proposing to everyone in some platonic quadrant orgy of hella commitment would be peak irony, Dave concedes that trying to explain the underlying not-romance-just-ironies to every one of these assholes would get lame after a while.

Plus, after the goddamn hilarious incident with John, Terezi started forwarding him links for the various sites she's apparently gone to in order to get legally ordained to perform marriages, which Dave is taking as a threat against his person. The last thing he needs is for Terezi and Vriska to blast...
in through the ceiling and legit marry him to someone because he didn't know how to let the ringpop joke die.

Dave's way too smooth to fall for that, though. He's just got to play this cool, and then run like hell. And he's been the living embodiment of cool basically since the moment he was delivered unto this planet by the stork-shaped meteor of life, so yeah. It'll be fine.

"...Good luck with that," Rose says, as Dave sets out down the hall with his wheelbarrow. From Rose, that's clearly a vote of confidence, and not at all her way of hinting that this is going to go horribly wrong.

Shows what Rose knows. Dave has timed this perfectly; Dave sneaks up to the roof to make sure Nepeta's busy sparring with Kanaya, and then gives Kanaya the signal so that she knows to keep the practice match going for as long as possible. After flashing her a thumbs up and receiving one in return, the ritual fulfilled, Dave bolts for the room where Equius was last sighted. Terezi's at the lab, either visiting, harassing, or helping Sollux - a lot can be hidden in a single >:] - which means as long as no one else decides to barge in, this should be over and done in a matter of seconds, and Dave will have a nice new status buff to try to cancel out whatever debuff the big LE tries to smack him with next time he gets too big for his boots.

He opens with a towel, flinging it at Equius's semi-visible face and scoring a bullseye. Equius flinches hard and reaches up to tear the towel away with a snarl, his muscle shirt the non-color of a black hole, while Dave chants, "Yo. I pledge allegiance to dat unreal Heir."

"What?" Equius says, still sporting that reflexive Troll© defensive snarl in the face of the unknown.

Dave pauses time, flings every super soft, fluffy, Egyptian cotton towel in his possession at Equius en masse, and then restarts time so he can walk right back out the door, shooting Equius finger pistols. "Knight, out."

He sees the exact moment the words finish processing and realization hits Equius like a gallon-jug of perspiration. "Wh-at," the troll repeats, this time with a distinct crack in his voice as it shoots up an octave.

Then the towels arrive, and at least twenty plaster themselves across Equius's face so that Dave can ditch the wheelbarrow, sprint down the hall, olly out the open window in apartment 311, and land in Jade's arms without a single drop of sweat being spilled. "All done?" she asks, with a tiny roll of her eyes.

Dave slings an arm around the back of her neck, on the off chance she decides to switch to levitating him with her powers instead of holding him. Like hell. "Karkat needs to get on my level," he says, deadpan, while Jade lightly bounces off the branch of the nearest tree to ascend to the roof. "I'm all about them game breaking roleplay bonuses."

"Well, that's good! Even if you had to be silly about it." Jade sets him down on the roof with a little twirl, and Dave owns it, his cape floating out behind him and one foot popping up as he holds her hand a second longer than necessary for the aesthetics. She obliges him and does a tiny half-bow before hopping backward and floating back to the ground, because Jade is in fact one of the coolest cats in this clowder.

"It's not silly, it's efficient and shit!" Dave calls after her. "Aradia approved!"

"That is not exactly a ringing endorsement," Kanaya points out, ducking under Nepeta's next swipe and using her longer reach to try to flip the oliveblood into the pool. Nepeta's fucking fierce,
tumbling and rolling and generally being a ball of sharp, pointy claws, but Kanaya steps around her with uncanny, deliberate grace - at one point she sidesteps a backstab without actually looking over her shoulder to see where Nepeta is at all. "Considering Aradia was recently voted 'person most likely to organize karaoke over our graves.'"

Dave doesn't exactly have a counter for that one, since it's totally true and no one can deny it. "Approved," he says, empathic, and then heads over to the makeshift non-alcoholic bar so he can scrape together a nice cold glass of sweet, sweet AJ.

He's halfway through his first glass when the roof starts to tremble underfoot, and the water in the pool ripples ominously. He chokes when the door to the stairwell flies off its hinges and nearly clocks Kanaya upside the head, just as she succeeds in pinning Nepeta.

Equius stands in the doorway, drenched.

"WHAT," the troll repeats, clutching a towel to his forehead with a jittery hand to stem the tide.

Dave stops midsip, considers his options, and then finishes his drink. There's no sense wasting good apple juice, he thinks - and then bolts for the edge of the roof.

Jade's less chivalrous about it, this time.

Dave does not have a giant fancy laser ranged attack thing hidden up his ass like Eridan does.

In fact, he's pretty sure that on the list of things he's not qualified to handle, fighting a Horrorterror should be pretty high up on the list - no, fighting Horrorterrors is the entire list. And he's not sure how he keeps getting mixed up in this kind of shit. He's a dude with a pointy object for a strife specibus and that does jack squat when he's fighting something more than ten times his size, okay? In the great rap battle of life, Cetus could whup his ass without even opening its mouth, and a grimfuckingwhatever Cetus is just the crapsprinkles on top of the fucking bullshit of his existence.

...He needs to stop talking to Karkat so much. It's ten different kinds of not fair that Oriole went and took over the empty Dave spot in the on-going roleplay/shitpost memo with nice people like Nepeta and Tavros and Feferi and Jake, who barely ever swear unless there are puns involved. Terezi and Gamzee both invited him, but a) what does Terezi know about the awkwardness inherent in having multiple ectoversions of oneself running around willy nilly? and b) on second thought, Dave doesn't even know what kind of weirdness goes on in an RP thread with Gamzee motherfucking Makara lurking and making clown nose faces at everyone.

Anyway. If he gets too creative and obvious with his time powers while they're within eyeshot of the Felt's mansion, Dave's not gonna like the additional helping of bullshit that would get piled on him. Rose, Jade, and John couldn't persuade him to talk to Bro or Momlonde about Imminent Death: The Epic Saga that is his life, but Rose did lock everyone out of the planning spreadsheet so that Dave couldn't move himself out of the healer/defense/support category and you know what? It turns out she didn't need to go full tyrant. He is a-okay with that. That is, in fact, something that he can handle. Last minute butt saving and smooth maneuvers in the name of great, just ass.

Note to self - take over position of pun master. John's been getting complacent, Feferi's too fish-centric and over-saturates the nautical pun market too often for anyone to take her seriously, and Nepeta might be in the running but no one who makes puns on the word 'yiff' can be allowed to sit the throne while Dave's alive and breathing.
Yeah. It's not like his palms are sweating enough to rehydrate and moisturize the dead. If he wanders too far and someone winds up super dead, as opposed to just kinda sorta ehhh dead, he's boned. In, like, the emotional sense. There's like, a grand total of a lot of people here who he would prefer not-dead, and at least three where if they died -

He's gotta stop thinking about this shit. His internal monologue needs to shut up so he can be a goddamn temple of badass focus and sweet sword forms. Mostly he lurks near Rose, Kanaya, and Karkat, because they're the easiest to keep track of compared to all these other assholes. John vanishes into the wind the second Karkat lets him loose, and Dave only catches glimpses of blue flickering between cars and buildings to evacuate people. It's weird, though - most of the time, when John's all the way solid, he's in the bright blue and black uniform Kanaya made to match Karkat's by request. But sometimes, when Dave's eyes start to water from the fumes rising off the hellwater all around them, he thinks he sees an overlay of sky blue, the Breeze trailing out like a long windsock in John's wake.

He's the only god tier human who hasn't swapped into his godly pajamas, and Dave doesn't know if anyone's thought to ask why John's avoiding it. Maybe Rose has. Or maybe this is actually stupid, and Dave should concentrate on tracking where everyone else is instead of getting stuck on John's fashion statements.

Their squad of four is marginally less impressive and flashy and badass than everyone else in terms of balls-to-the-walls badassery, but that's because they're going from car to car, the distance limited by how far he, Kanaya, and Karkat can jump, and dragging people out so John can grab them more easily - Jade's hellbeast of a mutt cleared most of the vehicles closest to Cetus, and promptly fucked off to parts unknown. Also, if the situation calls for them to pose as a team, they have a clear advantage that cannot be denied, so Dave's not complaining. Tavros and Nepeta zoomed off on Tavros's incredibly badass, souped-up rocketchair, which was awesome, and now they're buzzing around Cetus's back looking for somewhere to stab. Nepeta's battlecries are considerably more enthusiastic than Tavros's, but Dave chalks that up to her having more confidence and experience with emitting blood-curdling yodels while on the hunt for unsuspecting prey. The two of them have got shameglobes of steel, or whatever weird made up word Karkat is using for troll anatomy these days - and also they're going to get their asses kicked if Tavros doesn't figure out how to dodge incoming tentacles better. Dave tenses up multiple times when it looks like the two are about to get squashed like pancakes, but the rocketchair veers and judders out of the line of fire, as though someone not-quite-visible just punched it out of the way with extreme prejudice. So Equius is around, but being a shy asshole about it.

Terezi and Feferi are just as direct, but better at using Cetus's own anatomy and waving tentacles as platforms. Feferi swings around and up Cetus's flank, using her forkkind to stab and claw her way further up the smoother areas of skin, and finally ends up on top of the denizen's back, a tiny fuchsia figure that Dave has trouble making out from this distance. Terezi doesn't use her wings, and only floats to finish longer leaps when Cetus rips its tendrils away; she's also making a really suspicious beeline for the Felt's casino, skimming around Cetus's bulky front and not making much effort to wreck shit unless it gets in her way. Up to some shit, but like hell is Dave gonna call her on it at this point.

The main thing is, Vriska and Eridan are going to fucking town. Dave's not sure which is more pants-shittingly terrifying - that they seriously thought they could control Vriska when she's carving her way through tentacles in a blur of manic pixie dust and light - or that Cetus grows back twice as many tentacles to replace each stump, looking less and less like a demon whale and more like a grossly misshapen squid-whale hybrid with each passing second. Vriska darts and weaves between the denizen's annoyed slaps without even trying...or maybe she's just lucky enough that Cetus keeps missing. Soon the ceruleanblood's right up in Cetus's face, but the thing is, Cetus has a lot of face.
Vriska looks goddamn tiny compared to the vastness of Cetus's worm-infested eye, but she slices a deep gouge the length of a car deep into the whale's eye, and Cetus shrieks some incomprehensible, furious garbage-talk. The glowing, nasty-ass worms and a torrent of ichor spew out from the torn, dripping eye gunk all over the wide expanse of Cetus's face. Vriska impossibly dodges with a distant yelp of disgust, and the worms fall and splatter against the shallow water below, long enough to reach the road from the towering height of Cetus's eyes.

There is no part of this that is no gross as all fucking hell, and Dave opens his mouth to let out a warning gurgle.

"No one has vomit privileges before me, Dave," Rose say, which is all that prevents him from up-chucking directly onto her shoes. He claps his hand over his mouth, swallowing around a lump in his throat that insists no, really, throwing up is the correct response to shit like this, and when he gets himself together enough to stop going cross-eyed, he sees that Rose's eyes are tearing up red again. The whites of her eyes look pinker every time Cetus bellows, and when she spins to help the next person out of the window of their car, there's blood crusting in the hair around her ears.

"What is that thing yelling about now?" Dave asks, after another roar rocks the car under their feet and makes the water slosh up ominously. There aren't too many windows left for Cetus to shatter, at least.

Rose sets her jaw. "Apparently, Cetus dislikes being ignored," she says - and then she flinches and whips around, pointing a needlekind past Dave's arm. She fires off a spell that feels like it crisps Dave's eyebrows, and it hits a huge fucking eyeworm just as it rears up out of the sludgy water. The worm reels back, mostly stunned, but now Dave can see slow ripples in the contaminated water; it doesn't look like Cetus is gonna try to put its eye back together. Fantastic. "Don't let Father remove me if I'm knocked unconscious."

Oh wow, does she give Dave way more credit than he has the ability to live up to. "Why?" he asks, pained, as the water starts to churn around them in a real damn concerning fashion. The Breeze whooshes past them to scoop up the driver of the car they're standing on, which is a relief, at least. More of the eyeworms lance up all at once, and Dave has his sword at the ready, but Rose touches his shoulder and directs him at the closest threat in one smooth motion.

"Cetus might follow me," Rose calls over the next round of grimdark screaming.

Dave dices the worm before him into chunks in six quick slices, then dodges the nasty slime that's apparently the Horrorterror blood type of the day. "Yeah, seems like that would really suck ass," he says.

"Without question."

"WHY THE SHIT IS THIS FUCK TEXTING ME RIGHT NOW?!" Karkat screams, at a volume loud enough to rival Cetus's best efforts, his phone in one claw while he flails at a gigantic worm with a bloodsickle.

It's not like Dave's any better, considering he had Jade and Equius wire up his shades so he can stream emergency messages directly to his goddamn eyeballs like the communication thirsty asshole he is, but at some point this is going to bite them all in the ass.

Eridan, meanwhile, might not have Vriska's cheat levels of good luck, but nothing that hits him seems to stick. Almost immediately after he and Vriska take off, Cetus swatted the violetblood out of the air with a wave of a gargantuan flipper with such force that it left a trapezoidal crater in the side of a hotel. But before Karkat could finish swearing, Eridan crawled out without so much as a limp,
and flew forward again. Dave waits for him to pull out a new riflekind or something similar to the
one Jade confiscated a while back, but instead Eridan just starts blasting with white hot goddamn
lasers and shit that leaves enormous burns and blackened scorch marks anywhere Cetus turns. He
has less control than Vriska and a much wider blast radius, which could become a problem if the
fight starts shifting around the city. Dave has his weird music sense muted, mostly, because Cetus
sounds like a...well, like a hellwhale screaming in indignation and pain at the top of its lungs, and so
Dave is only distantly aware that the ongoing musical clusterfuck skitters and sparks off a new
chorus whenever Vriska and Eridan strike in unison. If nothing else, Vriska training Eridan seems to
have got their timing in sync. Vriska yells in frustration when her next skids off the side of Cetus's
body; the denizen's flesh concaves and then rebounds like jello, as if what's underneath isn't solid
flesh, just more godawful, nasty, gelatinous tentacles sloshing around in a whale-shaped meat sack.

...Dave's just grossing himself out, now. Surely his brain is just dicking with him -

Vriska's sword bounces off, but unfortunately, Eridan strikes at the right angle. White lightning burns
through layers of rubbery skin and blubber - and then a gout of bruise purple fluid erupts so far over
the street that Eridan actually gets a faceful of it, and he lets out a scream of genuine pain as he claws
at the sludge covering his face. Purple rapidly stains the front of his butter yellow shirt. While he's
blinded, tentacles spool out from the sagging tatters of skin and shoot at him, the ends hooked with
thorns. The hollow where the tendrils used to be quickly fills with still more writhing tentacles.

Dave hates being right about stuff like that. God damn.

Vriska doesn't spare a glance for Eridan. She drives down toward the tattered hole in Cetus's flank
with her sword brandished over her head, so it's up to Dave to slam time as close to a pause as he
dares and make the fucking call. Every time he blinks, the thorns sprout closer to Eridan - sometimes
the edges appear before there's a tentacle to support them, like the tentacle is already there and just
slowly ripping into view so it can stab Eridan properly.

This shit would be so much easier if he could fly on his own. But that's already bust, just like his
voice, because this game is rigged as shit. He could sprint for the nearest building and pull some
parkour shit to tackle Eridan out of the way, but that would take time.

God dammit.

TG: bro or john
TG: heads up @ eridan
TT: Got him
EB: :T

Bro knocks Eridan out of the way and reappears on the roof of the building with the troll under one
arm. Then he flashes out of sight again, and Dave can't spare the time to keep track of Bro's exact
location - Vriska starts hollering when a tentacle gets sliced off right in front of her nose, and the
hollering continues even after Dave turns back to help Kanaya with another eyeworm, so Dave
assumes Bro's filling in for the time being with some actual premium swordsmanship.

Then sharp claws clamp down on his arm, and Karkat yells at him despite the fact that they're
fighting right next to each other. This is entirely normal for Karkat, so Dave doesn't miss a beat and
keeps chopping until the next worm slithers back down into the water while Karkat shouts. "I have
to go inside, this is unbelievable. Dave, are you listening? Open your auricular clots for two fucking
seconds -"

"I hear you, dude, chill," Dave says. "In where? Please don't say 'in Cetus' because that is one
journey I'm not down for. Don't go where I can't follow."
"Don't be disgusting. The building - ugh, *that* direction, okay!" Karkat says, impatiently jabbing at the Felt's skyscraper with the tip of his sicklekind.

Dave pauses, assesses, and then gives Karkat a look. "Oh, right. The tower of bad juju and certain death. Cool. Why?"

"Spades needs help or some fuckery, I don't know. Which probably means Droog lied about some critical fucking detail and now he's gotten his alien beetle ass handed to him, and because I'm a stunning example of what we experts call 'a complete fuckup,' I need to go help or I think my pusher's going to explode," Karkat says in a rush.

"If you need to go, we should be fine here for the moment." Kanaya yanks the chainsaw out of the last eyeworm with considerable effort. The worm gives a last feeble twitch that rocks their car and then sinks back into the water, still. Compared to the rest of them, in varying states of fear-sweat and dishevelment, Kanaya looks like she just walked off the runway - a blood-spattered, post-apocalyptic runway, but any runway is better than no runway, dammit. "Unless things - well. I understand that phrases such as 'it can't possibly get any worse' are expressly forbidden, so I will refrain."

The fact that she said that shit at all, even as an example, makes Dave and Karkat exchange looks of deepest oh shit. The sky doesn't crack open, and there's no sign of a second Horrorterror noodling out of the Soleil Pool to take advantage of that convenient conversational opening, so after five seconds of watching Dave and Karkat skeptically, Kanaya rolls her eyes, slips an arm around Rose's waist like the coolest cucumber in the fridge, and then jumps to the empty truck one lane over without waiting for them.

As soon as they land a grey tentacle, much thicker than the eyeworms, wraps around the truck they've chosen and tosses it into the air, with Rose and Kanaya still in the truckbed. Kanaya tightens her grip on Rose and kicks off, now at a ninety degree angle to the ground, and it's Rose who floats the two of them a safe distance away to land on a semi-truck and confront the tentacle head-on. That puts almost half this side of the road between their two groups, and Dave and Karkat are kind of stuck by virtue of being flight-challenged, which is fun.

Rose switches to text rather than trying to yell over Cetus's next noodle monster mating call (at least, that's what Dave's calling it, anyway).

TT: Go on without us. Like I said - better I not present a moving target. Cetus is causing too much damage as is without me accidentally luring her toward a new pocket of civilians.
TG: k cool
TG: guess im with karkat
TG: eb if youve got a sec we need a lift
EB: yup! be right there guys! i have to clear these people out, but they won't get their butts away from the slot machines without a fight.
EB: somehow i blame this on vriska. because reasons.
EB: lots of reasons.
CG: HOLD YOUR HOOFBEASTS, DAVE.
CT: D-> Where
CG: NOT LITERALLY. FEFERI, STOP POKING THE CALAMARI WITH YOUR FORK, THERE'S SOMEONE WHO NEEDS LIFE-Y FUCKERY DONE AT THEM AND YOU'RE OPTION A - AKA APPARENTLY THE MOST REQUESTED OPTION.
TG: (done at them)
TG: (dude)
CG: (STOP JUDGING MY CAREFULLY HONED, ""IRONIC"" CLOWN VOCABULARY YOU ASS.)
CC: W(at's t)(at? You're calling for my K---ELP, Karkat? 38D
CG: IT DIDN'T NEED TO BE A PUN, BUT YEAH, YOU'VE BEEN ASKED FOR. DESPITE THE FACT THAT I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU DO ANYTHING RESEMBLING HEALING EXCEPT THAT ONE TIME YOU RESURRECTED YOURSELF, EVER. LOOK, ARE YOU FREE OR NOT.
TG: dude it always needs to be a pun
CG: STOP BEING PART OF THE PROBLEM, YOU ENABLING FUCK. YOU DON'T EVEN MAKE PUNS!
CA: good newws i can see again if anyone cares
CC: ...Anywave, I will be rig)t t)(ere, Karkat! Just give me a second to get krilled!
EB: wait, hang on!
CG: THE FUCK.
TT: Er. That's really not the best way to - that is - uh -
AG: DOOOOOOOO IIIIIIIIT!!!!!!!!! ::::D
TT: VRISKA.
CG: VRISKA YOU FUCK THAT'S NOT OKAY.
CC: )(a)(a, it's c)(ill, you guys. S(oallux, )(---EAD'S up!
CA: wwhoa fef wwait maybe thats not a good -
CC: WAAA)(HOOO!

Feferi's far enough back on the crown of Cetus's head that Dave can't actually see what she does - but in a clear gap in Vriska's attacks, the denizen flinches bodily and bucks in a way a whale's body probably shouldn't be able to move. Cetus thrashes and the earth rocks under it, sending the cars that litter the road jittering across the pavement and collapsing still more of that one hotel that Cetus smashed up earlier. Dave grabs the back of Karkat's jacket and drags him down onto his knees while they ride it out, and feels a claw similarly knotted up in his cape's hood.

As it thrashes, Cetus ducks its head so far that Dave can't actually see what that does - but a clear gap in Vriska's attacks, the denizen flinches bodily and bucks in a way a whale's body probably shouldn't be able to move. Cetus thrashes and the earth rocks under it, sending the cars that litter the road jittering across the pavement and collapsing still more of that one hotel that Cetus smashed up earlier. Dave grabs the back of Karkat's jacket and drags him down onto his knees while they ride it out, and feels a claw similarly knotted up in his cape's hood.

Instead of a rush of eyeworms, a single barbed tendril stabs out of the eye socket, wraps around Feferi in a neat coil - and then slams her down onto the road with a crunch of shattered concrete. Then Cetus tosses something limp and considerably more fuchsia-colored than before to the side.

Karkat makes a noise and way too fucking late, Dave claps his hands over Karkat's eyes. Karkat rips them off almost immediately, leaving thin scratches down the back of Dave's hand, but nothing deep enough to count as actual damage. "She'll be fine, stop dicking around," the troll says, his voice tight and rough.

Feferi falls somewhere out of sight, because Cetus has one hell of a throwing arm. But music swells in Dave's ears, full of bells and deep sobbing and pretty damn different from Eridan's, and he catches the tail end of the flare of fuchsia light that accompanies the standard issue magical god tier transformation sequence as Feferi rises up into the air right away, fuchsia wings fluttering excessively to leave a maximum amount of sparkling glitter in her wake as she cuts across the street toward him.
and Karkat. Her beige, green, and mahogany god tier costume shifts as she flies into something Dave recognizes from Kanaya's fashion sketches - she keeps the dark twin-tailed hood that hooks around her horns, while the long skirt shortens and sharpens, gauzy layers of pale green fabric blossoming out from underneath. Her sleeves lengthen and trail from the wrists, and when she stumbles through the landing on the car next to his and Karkat's, beaming with all her teeth, he sees her shoulders are bared to show sunburnt, freckled skin. "So, we need to go help someone!" she says, pushing a handful of tightly braided hair back up into her hood and cocking her hip. "Rayporting for duty!"

[Attention: The Witch of Life is risen.]

CA: fuckin hell fef
TG: well that happened
EB: ...
CC: W(ale, t)(at wasn't nearly as bad as last time! And s)(ut up --Eridan, mind your own business!
CC: I feel so refres)(ed! 38)
EB: you just had a huge amount of mortal crush injuries!
CC: And now I'm full of vim and vigour and LIF------E!!!
AG: ::::)
TG: wheres clownfriend i thought hed be all over this shit like salt water on taffy
EB: isn't that the final jeopardy question of the hour! eheheh...heh...
GC: W41T, YOU S3RIOUSLY LOST H1M? >:]
CG: SHUT UP, I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU DO ANY BETTER WITH A TELEPORTING VRISKA.
TA: dont even joke about that. ju2t. dont.
TA: a2o can everyone hold off on dyiing for two 2econd2 or ii2 that two much two a2k FUCK.
CC: I did warn you though, Sollux! 38C
TA: yeah well iim 2tiill gettiing a metriic fuckton of blowback from eriidan poppi2 clogs so cut iit out for while

Belatedly, Karkat shakes himself. He still looks unsettled, and Dave can't blame him because this shit? Is hells of unsettling. They can try to blip past the weirdness of people dying and then coming back to life, but he's starting to be damn grateful that he, John, Jade, and Rose got their god tiering over with in a past life so they don't have to deal with this shit live in front of an audience. "Fucking - yeah, Spades wants us inside," Karkat says, pinching the bridge of his nose and winching his eyes shut before shaking his head one last time. "Which will land us up to our eyeballs in Felt, so be ready for a fight."

Feferi arches an eyebrow, and then tilts her head back to look pointedly in Cetus's direction. Being blinded doesn't stop the denizen from continuing to lash out with all its tentacles as Vriska and Eridan assail it with renewed energy, but it has also stopped sending eyeworms and stray tentacles further along the road to harass Rose, Kanaya, and the rest of their crew. Tavros and Nepeta rake across the front of Cetus's face in a long arc, and Tavros barely has to steer to avoid the frantic tentacles. "Oh buoy. Compared to this? Piece of cake," Feferi declares, spinning her specibus in her hand. "Let's go see what I can do to help!"

"Aight then," Dave says, fighting down the urge to tense up as he pretends to hold two fingers to the side of his shades. "Egbert, three to beam up."

"I thought that was Jade's signal," John complains, reappearing in wispy pieces with his torso solidifying before his arms.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it's a multipurpose nerd signal. That's what the doctor announced when the meteor delivered you, y'know - 'my god, nurse. It's...a nerd.'"
"Hawhaw. Sooo funny, Dave." Just for that, John grabs Karkat and Feferi by the hand, pout-glaring at Dave with all his might and forcing Dave to pick who he wants to introduce to all this awesome palm sweat caused by the fighting and not, you know, recurring waves of elder god-induced terror.

He takes too long to decide - Karkat reels him in by the wrist, and just as Dave latches onto Karkat's wrist in turn, John starts to dissolve them into the Breeze.

CG: ALRIGHT THEN, WE'RE GOING IN. I'LL LET YOU KNOW HOW LONG THIS MIGHT TAKE ONCE WE FIND SPADES.
TT: Good luck.

"Rose? Rose!" Kanaya's voice reverberates through Dave on the air, but he doesn't have eyes or anything else to center himself. He can't even really tell whether John's taking them into the tower or rushing to Rose, right up until Cetus's next scream punches the last remnants of Feferi's song into oblivion, and hits the Breeze like a freight train from hell.

SS: Fucking hell! You sure took your sweet time!

Dave hits the floor with knees that aren't sure whether they're all the way solid yet. He blinks and takes in the pisspoor state of the room they've landed in - it looks like someone tore through the place and set everything on fire for shits and giggles. Some of the flames flare up as the Breeze coils through the room in a haphazard, dazed circuit, but the smoke's not bad enough to cause problems. John staggers hard, but manages to catch himself on an overturned desk with one hand, waving Karkat off when the troll tries to support his shoulder. "I'm - I'm not gonna say I'm fine, but -'- okay," he says, his voice jittery and shaky and as high as if the Breeze had fed helium into his lungs on the way over.

"--- fuck was tha-?" Karkat says, and even more of the words skitter out of hearing range.

Dave's getting sick as shit of bad guys fucking with their senses. Such bullshit. He whacks his ear, grimacing.

"Sound frequencies -ravel through a medium. That mea-- air." John says, sounding less high pitched but also miserable. "--nore it - take care of her."

He points toward Spades Slick, and this time Dave's eyes focus and take in the short mob boss glowering at their huddle. The carapacian kneels hunched over on green carpet that is almost soaked through with blood. Most of it is pouring out of the cracked open chest of a pale carapacian Dave's never seen before in his fricking life. It's...it's a lot of blood to have lost for a tiny alien lady, and Dave can spy a thin trickle of blood playing over Spades's sharp knuckles and attempting to feed back into the Prospitian's chest. He's not sure how much good that's doing, though.

SS: You gotta help her. She shouldn't'a been involved in any of this.

Feferi rushes forward, pink light playing along her hands as she crouches beside Spades. The light
extends up her arms and slowly envelops her in a fuchsia silhouette as she looks over the bleeding, unconscious carapacian. "-ere. She's sti-- breathing. Karkat, let's get kraken!"

Karkat mutters under his breath, and the weirdness makes it sound perfectly audible to Dave's ears: "Of fuc---g course, the pun comes through loud and clear." Then Karkat looks at Dave sharply, red eyes tracking from him to the massive hole in one of the walls and then to the actual door. "Keep watch?" he says, his feet carrying him away before Dave answers.

"I'm all over guard duty, my dude," Dave says. He puts on his best watchful face - it's pretty similar to his normal resting expression, but it's totally a thing - and steps around the piles of broken furniture and debris to get a vantage point where he can watch both the door and the cracks in the walls. Sounds still working a little wonky, but John nods when Dave throws him a questioning look, so he hopes the Breeze will notice if someone breathes in their general direction. One of the smoldering chunks of desk abruptly stifles as the air around it rushes away, which makes the room less likely to cook them, at least.

GA: And There Was Much Rejoicing.
TG: damn straight
TG: were in
TG: karkat and feferi are healing spades lady friend so this trip is already a total success
GA: I Shall Inform Rose Once Cetus Stops Screaming At Us In Blasphemous Tongues.
TG: yeah thats fair
TG: none of us here can hear for shit its great
TG: johns sitting so he wont puke but his hand signals tell me he should be okay soon
EB: dude, i'm right here! i can text for myself!
TG: shhhh let me
TG: i accept the heavy burden of guard and messaging duty for the team while karkat and feferi are poking at internal organs
EB: omg dave
TG: typing in all caps will be a great sacrifice but i do this for the sake of my and karkats newly minted brohood
GA: Hang On, I Must Face Off Against Your Father For Rose
TG: oh ffs
GC: YOUR3 4LL 1NS1D3?
EB: team heal is, yeah.
GC: 3XC3LLNT. WH4T FLOOR? 1 H4V3 SOM3 FR13NDS 1 SN1FF3D OUT WHO COULD US3 SOM3 H3LPS34RCH1NG, BUT W3 COULD 4LSO R3ND3ZVOUS 4ND K1CK SOM3 BUTT. >:]
-- turntechGodhead [TG2] has joined the chat! --
TG2: oh finally
TG: bro no im assdeep in felt territory can we do weird time shit later
TG2: no shut up and go cover the door to that room
GC: SHOULD 1 T4K3 TH4T 4S 4 NO?
TG2: take it as a yes
TG2: dirks up near the penthouse
EB: are we going to be timetraveling in a minute? i don't know if i can handle time stuff on top of this migraine. :T
TG2: dont worry its just me
TG: which is already one me too many what happened to staying on the dl
TG2: not my fault
TG2: im almost caught up on everything and youve got a loop to loop
TG2: i have been through some shit man and guess what
TG: what
TG2: time for you to live it
TG: why are future mes always such spectacular assholes
EB: maybe it's a personal problem?
TG2: maybe its maybelline
TG2: or yeah maybe its because we are the asshole
TG2: it is we
GA: I Feel As Though I Don't Need To Pay Attention To This Conversation Anymore.
CT: D-> This has been e%crutiatingly pointless as usual

Against his better judgement, Dave sighs through his nose and steps over a chair to head for the door. He can't hear anything apart from Karkat and Feferi and Spades talking over their patient; the Breeze winds between his feet, but John just frowns when Dave glances back at him for an update. "I'm not...feeling anyone right now," John says, uncertain. "But the Felt have different time powers and junk, so -"

For some reason, Dave does a quick check for a real life clock. The only one he spies hanging on the wall has been cooked by whatever explosion went off in here, but the time on his phone matches the internal tick in his head. Everything's normal, though the whole building has this freaky atmosphere that gives him the heebie jeebies. If he were a Seer or some shit maybe he'd have something more concrete to say than 'heebie jeebies,' but nobody's perfect. He thinks he'll know if something goes funky - the question is, will he know how to counter it? He's a pretty shitty time guy, all things considered, and it's hit or miss whether Aradia will impart some last minute wisdom through the time dudes and dudettes grapevine before he gets his ass handed to him. With an ominous knot tightening in his stomach, Dave stops before the door.

He was right. He does feel it. A split second of wrongness -

Someone knocks the door completely out of its frame, along with part of the wall the hinges are attached to, and punches Dave into next week.

Literally.

---

BE: oh wow, cetus is pissed :T

Really? I hadn't noticed, John thinks back, while his eardrums complain loudly. It feels like a full body migraine, and he wants to know who thought it would be a good idea to have soundwaves carry through air. Physics is a jerkwad. And it turns out that felt green décor looks puke green when you're nauseated so that's great. What kind of people work here? Who painted all of this stuff? Who coordinated the different shades of green for all the office furniture? John has so many questions.

BE: yep. definitely in a bad mood! haha, maybe even in a worse mood than typhoetus is always in. zing!

BE: which is a shame because she's extra mad at rose

BE: also, you know, corrupted by chaos and stuff

REALLY I HADN'T NOTICED, John thinks. Really, really loudly.

BE: well no need to get sassy with me! rude
We're in the middle of the Felt's evil lair and I'm already aware of the gigantic problem outside. Why am I even talking about this with you? It's like talking to myself, basically, but more dumb!

BE: ruuuuuude. you are in serious need of some touching base with your subconscious after all the time you spent neglecting it, i'll have you know

BE: also probably therapy

"Do you -ven know wh- you're doing!" Karkat asks, with a touch of despair in his voice.

"Sort of!" Feferi says, her face way too bright and chipper considering the fact that she's poking around in someone's chest cavity. Neither she nor Karkat look as though they feel the same level of general cruddiness that John's enduring, which is probably a good sign. The Breeze laps the room multiple times as Dave sidles toward the door on his future-self's chat orders - heck only knows what's up with the weird time stuff today - but the windy thing still has time to chatter at John while working out the shudders and kinks left by the passage of Cetus's attack.

At least they can all most of the way understand each other, right? John would hate dealing with another round of total mutual incomprehension. As fun as that was...

Speaking of.

EB: gamzee? you there?
EB: ...
EB: uh. be careful? with whatever you're doing.
TC: no worries.
EB: WAIT OH MY GOD YOU'RE ANSWERING MESSAGES?!?!
TC: Do: BLUE KARKAT?
EB: no, not karkat! where are you!
TC: shiiit, you all up and did me a startle. i'm around, my windbro.
TC: WATCH THAT UNFRIEND ALL UP AT YOUR DOOR.
EB: wha-

One second, there's no one but them in the vicinity - John hasn't sensed much activity on this floor, which he'd chalked up to the fact that everything was kinda sorta on fire or otherwise busted; the next, someone appears on his radar with a deep inhale, and the door explodes inward under the force of the ambush. John lurches off his butt, but Dave takes the hit and vanishes before the shattered pieces of the door hit the ground, and John has to pull up sharply before he collides with the newcomer.

A bulky woman with a white and maroon hat hanging at a precarious angle over one ear steps through the entrance, her felt green suit covered of dust and frayed at the seams. "Oh, yeah. Should not have come here, kiddies," she says, dusting off her knuckles and leaving the rest of her outfit in general disarray, her voice deceptively sweet. "Big mistake."

John drops his hand to the side and the Breeze shunts his warhammer into his grasp fully formed, the weight familiar as he settles into a battle stance. Feferi sits lit up with arcane light, a fuchsia aura throbbing and slowly spreading over the carapacian's gouged out chest with a hum that John feels vibrating in the air, and Karkat pulses blood back where it's supposed to be in a frantic rush, his head swiveling to check on John like a bobble head.

But the Felt has lost the element of surprise, and if John's remembering his hat colors correctly (and Droog is a lot of things, including a liar, a total douchenozzle, and a stickler for using hat fashion to identify her enemies), that means that the fifteenth member of the Felt, Cassandra 'not Cans no matter
what Spades says' Carver just used up her one free hit on Dave, whenever and wherever he may have landed. Her super dumb Kool Aid Man gambit won't work again unless she manages to get a wall between the two of them for another ambush.

And John's not in the mood to play around. "Back off," he says, as the Breeze spins in close.

Looking bored out of her mind, Cassandra tries to barrel right into him and confiscate his hammer. She literally just...tries to grab it. John doesn't know whether to be insulted or stunned. The Felt member looks baffled when this fails to work; a shadow of a frown crosses her face, then deepens into full on confusion when John wrenches back and funnels the specibus back into the wind, summoning it again after he's got more space between him and Cassandra. While she's flummoxed, he swings the hammer straight at her face. She ducks (not as fast as Droog, not even close) and John flows into the Breeze so that her grab misses. He solidifies behind her with all his momentum intact, drops to his knees in a skid, and finishes slamming the hammer into the backs of Cassandra's knees.

She staggers - and then kicks backward without so much as a wince of pain. John's kind of put out as he spins out of the way, because he's been training! With actual sparring partners, like Kanaya and Jade and sometimes Equius, who can all take hits and keep dishing them out in turn, so he's not too shabby even after a fortnight or so of silly shenanigans. If this were a regular human or troll mobster, he'd be paranoid levels of careful not to hit them too hard, in case he broke something important. But Droog wasn't kidding or lying (and that's the real shocker right there), apparently; Cassandra's time powers relate to her surprise attacks, but even once that ambush is sprung, the Felt member can take an impossible amount of damage, shrug it off, and truck along.

...Crap on a sandwich. Of all the people to run into.

Well, if she's a damage sponge, John doesn't have to worry about pulling his punches while he keeps her distracted. Feferi and Karkat will finish faster if they don't get interrupted by Kool Aid lady. John dodges the next fist to come at him, and then does the windy thing to silt around the next. The evasive maneuvers earn him a flurry of uninvetive swear words, and the third time he dissolves out of her line of fire Cassandra powers right through his patch of rustling windy-stuff and smashes through the much abused wall into the hallway. For a split second John worries that he missed the trick entirely, and that the Felt member managed to ambush someone new on the far side of the wall - but no, Cassandra jerks around and marches right back into the room, sneering two feet to the left of John where he was originally hovering.

Then she makes a break for the others. "Coward," she spits at the air, using her foot to shove debris out of the way and clear a path to Karkat and Feferi.

Bluh, bluh. John rolls his eyes and floats right in front of the Felt member's shins to play human trip wire as he turns solid again. Cassandra crashes over him with a shout, and John barrel rolls to the side so she can't grapple him down onto the floor. After teleport spam practice with Jade, this is suddenly easy. Then Spades Slick charges out to meet the toppled Felt member with a knife as she catches herself on her knees. Oh jeez - and wait, hold on. John is ninety percent sure that's the big kitchen knife last seen in the apartment kitchen back in Seattle.

God...dammit.

SS: Shit fucking name stealing dame-napping crew-appropriating felty bastards!

SS: I'll merger your ass!

Then Spades launches a stabbing extravaganza, latching onto Cassandra's shoulders and hacking at random. Which is pretty much always what Spades does, so. Yeah. It kind of throws a wrench in
things on John's part - he lifts his warhammer, then lowers it to ponder the situation. On the one hand, clobbering both of them at once would make the out of control stabbing stop, as well as hopefully knocking the Felt member out for the foreseeable future.

But does John really want to test what'll happen if he knocks Spades out with Karkat right here in the room? How much effect does that oathy business even have?

Eh. What's the worst that could happen? Shrugging, John smashes them with a hammer.

It's like all he does is lightly bonk Cassandra on the head. Talk about anticlimactic. And dumb. Spades kicks and scrambles out of the way like the Felt member's a jungle gym, and bares his teeth at John spitefully while Cassandra shakes herself off and starts marching back toward John with murder in her eyes. Now he's got two assholes glaring at him, one of whom is technically supposed to be on his side, but basically? John got their attention, which is what he wanted, so who's the real winner here? He lures Cassandra away from Karkat and Feferi, floating backward and hoping to heck that no one decides to barge in through the giant hole in the wall behind him. "Almost done!" Feferi calls.

"Great! Keep going!" John calls back, and then he dodges and twists out of Cassandra's path, trying to stay mostly solid so that she doesn't dismiss him again. It means he has to get really acrobatic about some of his turns, legs flying wide as the Breeze lashes around his knees and blasts the Felt member in the face. Spades clings to her back like a spindly koala and continues to stab wildly, but it's clear the carapacian isn't making much of a dent, either - there's hardly any blood. John can't afford to take his eyes off her for longer than it takes to avoid her punches - Droog wasn't clear on whether sucker punches count for Cassandra's powers, after her initial attack, and John won't risk it. But he's starting to worry about Dave, who still hasn't reappeared. And Rose. And Jade.

Focus! Focus, focus! John does a handspring off a desk and then flips around to bring the hammer down while bouncing back over Cassandra's head. Once again his attack fails to hurt or slow her in any noticeable way, but John follows it up with an extra-powerful blast of wind that catches the Felt member in the back at hurricane strength. He throws her careening out into the hallway, and Spades gets dragged along for the ride, but John's really not gonna insult the carapacian's cutthroat sensibilities by worrying about him (too much). He's got a lot of worries already on his plate, okay? John lands light on his toes and stations himself in the middle of the wall wreckage and gets ready to hold the line against the Felt member there until Karkat and Feferi give the all-clear.

Thankfully, this isn't too hard. Compared to how many stressful fights he's been in with members of the Midnight Crew alone, this is a breeze! A cakewalk!

Aaand the urge to text that to the group memo is way too strong. Curse Pesterchum; curse the oh-so-convenient lure of instant messaging. Maybe he should have Sollux ban him for a bit in the future, when instant communication is a little less vital to coordinating their survival.

BE: ooh, i could message for you so you don't have to worry about typing! just got to switch two letters...

EB: see? then you take out the spaces between each line, and -

_Do I even want to know the creepy metaphysical logistics of that? Don't answer, please._

BE: your loss! i just like passing on messages...

This is so not the time. _Do you have any advice for how to knock this guy out?_ John asks, watching as Spades's stabfest finally provokes Cassandra into wrenching her arms back to attempt to peel him
off her shoulders. The Breeze doesn't answer, but Spades does. The Dersite crawls down around her waist and hooks around to start stabbing her in the arm, leaving one claw free to start signing and emitting a cranky growl in John's head.

SS: We need more ammo, dammit! At least two machine guns, pronto!

"I don't shoot people!" John yells back, exasperated. "Congrats, you're stuck here with us gun-deprived heroes, so I'm just saying - literally any other plan would be great!"

SS: Ugh! Well, if you wanna piss around forever, just keep whacking her with the damn hammer!

Cassandra rips Spades off her with a vicious shout, dangling him at arm's length as she gives him a rattling shake. "He sends me to fight a coward, and you - you're just a homicidal idiot," she says, scathing.

Spades stabs his knife all the way through the meat of her wrist, stark metal jutting out of the underside of her arm at an angle. The Felt shrieks and flings Spades into a wall before he can rip the blade free, leaving the kitchen knife lodged in her wrist. Kind of put out, John pre-emptively kicks off the rubble and hits her hard, as suggested.

They're going to be here all day, at this rate, and they don't have all day. What a pain in the neck.

"Okay! Done!" Feferi says. Cassandra wheels back toward the sound and John kicks her in the face, which buys him enough time to look back and see Feferi bouncing up off her knees and lacing her claws to stretch her arms out in front of her. Behind her, the carapacian lady stands up, her kindly dark eye crinkled as she tests her footing; Karkat hovers right by her elbow to catch her if she staggers, looking marginally less high on power than Feferi does. Feferi flashes sharp teeth as she grins, her eyes as luminescent as John's "Let's get kraken!"

Spades scrambles away from the wall in a dead run, crouching and nimbly vaulting past John to reach the Prospitian lady. He takes off his scruffy suitjacket as he skids to a stop and folds it over the other carapace's shoulders so she can button it up over the smooth expanse of healed shell. Meanwhile, Feferi spins out her 2x3dent and leaps into the fray; John ducks out of her way so she can try to fork Cassandra. The Felt member dodges so that the trident lodges in the floor instead of her leg, but in doing so she walks right into the flat end of John's hammer. He feels the recoil rattle his shoulder in its socket, and still... nothing. Cassandra swings right back at his face with a screech, her stabbed arm flying a little uncontrollably out to the side.

When John comes back solid, he sees that actually, yeah, he made a dent in Cassandra's face. Half of it has already started to swell with bruises, but that doesn't faze her or slow her down. Feferi uses her trident as a pivot to kick high, nailing Cassandra smack in the nose, and then kicks with her other foot to send both of them rolling across the floor. Karkat follows right after, sliding to sweep Cassandra's legs out from under her when she tries to wrestle on top of Feferi, and then backs out of reach, one sicklekind flowing down from his wrist. When Cassandra gets up, she can't figure out who to turn towards first; her face turns a mottled red, and the knife lodged in her wrist has been jostled and left at a horrible angle, blood streaming along her sleeve.

She dives at John, which is a sneaky move - he dissolves because it's just reflex, at this point, and she charges through the gap he leaves before facing Karkat and Feferi. Thoroughly miffed, John turns solid again so she has to deal with being surrounded on three sides again. So there, haha. Feferi tosses the ends of her dark hood back over her shoulder as she straightens, then rushes forward with her trident branfished (oh, he's got to remember to tell her that one, later). Karkat reaches out a hand, claws spread wide, and Cassandra flinches and skids to a stop in front of John, agony rippling across her face as she turns sheet-white. She turns unsteadily to dodge under Feferi at the last second and
manages to avoid getting hooked around the neck by the prongs of the 2x3dent, so John puts his hands together for Feferi to bounce off before she can hit the ground. She floats just enough so that she hits his hands square on and kicks off backward, her hair and hood flying as she knocks Cassandra in the back of the head. The Felt member trips right over Karkat's crouched back and hits the ground with a heavy thud.

Then John snaps his fingers, and the wind launches Cassandra into the ceiling.

He does it twice, for good measure, then sets her down not-very-gently. "Done?" he asks Karkat, who's closest, while the Breeze cackles in his ear.

Cassandra sits bolt upright. Her nose is thoroughly broken and she's lost her hat - the Breeze is currently tossing the battered piece of headgear around near the ceiling.

"No, she's just fucking pissed, which is the story of my life," Karkat reports, kicking Cassandra in the stomach when she tries to grab him by the leg. She ignores the kick and shoves Karkat back through the hole in the wall to fall into the room where Spades and the other carapacian are huddled. Blood dribs down into her mouth as she breathes hard and glowers at Feferi. "Oh, fuck off!" bursts out of Karkat, and for a second John has to fight back laughter at the pure, unadulterated fury in Karkat's shout. He hooks Cassandra's legs out from under her, then flies back into the room to help Karkat extricate himself from the broken remains of an office chair. "What even the fuck are you made of, shit bricks?!"

John groans. "Yeah, this is getting us...absolutely nowhere. Spades, this plan is dumb!"

Spades, still hugging his...girlfriend close, gives them a sour look.

SS: Seriously, do none of you punks carry a machine gun?! All I've got are semis and revolvers.

Feferi raises her trident to parry Cassandra's wild punch, then gives Spades a mystified blink. "Aren't those illegal?"

SS: If you people weren't working for me for free, I would revoke your damn membership in this group for that kinda baloney. Illegal, my shiny ass. The fuckin' audacity.

MP: Oh dear. Does anyone else hear that -

The voice is coming from way down the hall. The Breeze swoops out to catch the sound and bring it closer to John's ear, but he doesn't need the help; they're shouting pretty loud. "Ta -!"

"Another one?" Karkat asks, cracking his neck to the side with a scowl.

"- lly -!"

Whoever's coming this way isn't trying for stealth att all. John can hear their footsteps pap-papping along the green carpet with aplomb. Feferi and Cassandra, still in the hall, look to their left in confusion. John blinks as he realizes who he's hearing. "No, wait, that's totally -"

Feferi blinks in recognition and jumps straight up into the air, fuchsia wings fluttering as she gets clear. "- HOOOOOOO!" Jake yodels at the top of his lungs, tackling Cassandra to the ground. He punches her once across the face as they hit the ground and when Cassandra doesn't sit right back up, Jake lifts his head, jumps up, and flashes them all a grin. "Wooo! Take that! Another jolly bout of fisticuffs!"

Everyone else, including John, waits for Cassandra to get up. Her head lolls to the side, her eyes
rolled back - out cold.

SS: ...How in the shit did he do that?

BE: in my professional opinion as a professional windy thing~?

SS: Don't talk to me.

BE: he didn't know he shouldn't have been able to!

Karkat rubs his temples, and John can see the exact moment in Karkat's eyes when he decides questioning this would be pointless. "Ok, wow! Fine! Is everybody good? Glad we could avoid the rest of the wacky slapstick routines that were no doubt in store for us, I'm sick to death of them."

"Nah, you love it," John says. Karkat stares at him with empty eyes that scream, 'fucking say that again, I dare you,' and John decides not to push his luck.

"Does that really work, blue razz pop rocks?" Terezi asks, using her cane to start nudging Cassandra's unconscious body out of her way. She holds out a fist for Feferi to bump as the other troll flutters down from the ceiling in a sparkly cloud.

BE: oh, more often than you'd think!

Terezi grins. "Well then. Excellent work, my green apple sour punch straw comrade."

Jake rubs the back of his neck, sheepish. "Oh, shoot. They had her on the ropes already when I got here."

John shakes his head and shrugs at Karkat and Spades' identical offended stares - do I look like I'm in charge of this stuff? - and then rolls his shoulder gingerly as he takes stock of Jane and Roxy, following on Terezi's heels. "You guys all made it in here okay?" he asks, kind of impressed, as Roxy helps Terezi wedge Cassandra into a corner. Feferi helps, mostly by pouting her lips and prodding Cassandra's limp form with her specibus; apart from the rise and fall of the Felt member's chest, though, that appears to be that. Karkat storms over with zipties in hand and squats down to tie Cassandra's wrists and ankles together. Jane stands in the busted doorway, stern and forbidding as she scans the hallway, while John whips out his phone to check Cassandra off their Felt spreadsheet (still editable by everyone, despite Rose's threats to the contrary).
"Didn't meet too many people on the way up," Terezi says, flapping her hand at John. "And when we did, I had some wonderful assistants! At this rate, we're going to run out of zipties, and you know I just cannot function without enough rainbow zipties to cuff every lawbreaker in the building." She snaps her claws and holds out an imperious hand, waggling her claws expectantly.

John checks his pockets, but he already knows what he's going to find. "I've only got blue and black," he warns.

Terezi sighs deeply as she accepts his offering. "Oh, John. John, John, John. Karkat, cough 'em up."

Karkat looks supremely pleased with himself, folding his arms. "I only use black. There was a sale on Amazon."

Terezi sighs so hard that she tilts back on her heels, and stuffs John's zipties into her pocket. John, on the other hand, has so many questions. "You...you buy your zipties online?" he says, staring at Karkat. "Doesn't that...leave a paper trail?"

Karkat sniffs. "You haven't seen the other recommended items they try to sell you on there, have you."

"No," John says, grimacing when Terezi starts snickering at him, "because I try not to buy stuff for my secret hero life off Amazon. Not without like, three proxies!"
"Let's just say that a troll above a certain age purchasing kismesis-shade restraints on the Internet doesn't draw a lot of attention," she drawls, winking at Karkat, who looks distinctly uncomfortable. "Humans are probably too squishy for zipties to work, but I mean you can always get creative -"

"Oh, my my!" Feferi giggles.

Basically, he's learned that any conversation involving Terezi is going to turn into an endless snickerbarrage at John's expense, which is always mildly infuriating in ways that John tries not to examine because hell no, and John thinks they need to cut and run before this gets any weirder. They have stuff to do. Things! "Aaanyway, you guys are heading upstairs?" he asks, begging Jake and Roxy with his eyes in the hopes that they'll answer instead of Terezi. Roxy shrugs and signs something involving 'applesauce,' a non-sequitur which John chalks up to them not actually understanding non-Dave sign language that doesn't revolve around an apple-themed vocabulary.

"Yup," Jane says, her voice clipped.

"Dirk's up there, so yes," Jake agrees.

Terezi adjusts her red glasses, spinning her cane before thumping it on the floor. "For now. I can't quite see yet, but this is the place to be! I think I'll know what I'm looking for when I see it." She nods at John, leaning in close enough that he has to take a step back. "Go see Rose, oh wayward heir. I think you have something left to do out there, before you sort anything else out."

John sidles closer to Karkat. Karkat is zero help, because Terezi trolls him just as hard sometimes as she does John, but it makes John feel better. "Oh. Uh, thanks, Terezi." Then, without pausing, he tries to talk at the scratch kids again. "Will you guys be alright on your own? I've seen enough comics and anime to know that if the boss guy is on the top floor, you're only going to run into stronger enemies as you head up."

Roxy shrugs, then punches her fist into the palm of her other hand. Jane turns and arches an eyebrow at him. Jake appears to have mentally checked out of the conversation in favor of jumping back out past Jane, a pistolkind in his hand as he jogs out of sight down the hall to do recon.

"I'll go along with them!" Feferi folds down her fingers and holds up her hand in a phone sign by her frilled ear, smiling. "Just message me if anyone need help, and you can come get me right awave!"

"What about you two?" Karkat asks, facing the exact opposite direction from John, and John turns his head before the rest of his body catches up. The Prospitian carapacian shakes her head, her dark eyes thoughtful. She's holding Spades' hand, their segmented claws interlaced so that Spades can only hold (what John can only assume is) a new knife in one hand rather than both. Seeing concern instead of vicious irritation on Spades' face is...so dang weird.

MP: I - I may need to sit, for just a bit longer.

SS: You take all the time you need, darlin'.

The Prospitian closes her eyes and pats Spades' arm with her free claw, the sleeve of his suitjacket flopping too long over the ends of her fingers.

MP: It's not safe here, though. We'll need to leave the building soon.

MP: It has been lovely to meet you all. Thank you, dear Witch.
To John’s endless gratitude, no one else is dead when they get back outside. His first instinct is to do a Vriska check, which is kinda sad. He sets himself and Karkat down as close to Rose and Kanaya as he can without getting all up in their personal bubbles, and nearly headbutts Bro when he tries to flashstep to the same empty space at the same time. That guy does not respect windy airspace. “Yo,” is all he says once John single-handedly fixes their landing situation, and it’s about twenty bajillion times more annoying than when Dave does it. He's hunkered down on the edge of the roof, sporting a wide cut across his cheek that looks stupidly badass instead of painful as he contemplates the huge whale monster swallowing up the street. "Everything cool?"

"Actually, no. Fighting giant monsters and healing gory fucking chest wounds is only 'cool' if you're a fuckface with no common sense who lives and breathes liquid bullshit," Karkat says, holding up his claws. When he realizes that there's no blood on them to prove his point, he flings them out to either side and takes a deep breath, eyes scrunched shut in apparent agony. "Fuck. All of this."

"Mm. Stay clear for a bit," Bro says, unfazed. "Serket and Ampora are going to town."

"They were doing that when we le- oh. That," John says, when he finishes registering the massive lightshow playing out along Cetus’s vast head. Vriska and Eridan are two golden and white blobs of light that dart around Cetus like super fireflies. John shades his eyes with a hand to watch the flares of light play out along the underside of the clouds; squinting to try to pick out their actual bodies inside their crackling auras doesn’t help, it just makes his eyes water. Cetus hasn't shifted from her original position much, which is a minor relief.

It would be more of a relief if it looked like the denizen was getting worn out by the fight; more than half of the denizen's body is scorched black and split to reveal nasty tentacles circulating under the skin, but Cetus's outer tentacles keep sprouting and lashing out with just as much energy as before. If John concentrates, he can hear the Breeze humming along with whatever music is playing in the background, with an occasional BE: doodoodoo-doo, doo-doo-dooooodoodoo- that just sounds silly.

Vriska slashes with her sword, and the extravagant burst of light nearly blinds John for a full three seconds. She has to be doing that on purpose. God dammit, Vriska. "Ow," John says, for emphasis. Karkat doesn't catch the hint in time, and turns to see what John's looking at. He mashes his hands over his eyes immediately, swearing up a storm.

Bro hands them both shades. John doesn't want to know how many of these things he has on his person at any given time, because John keeps losing all the pairs he's received. John gives up and puts them on; Karkat looks like he would rather throw them into the sun, even if it means setting himself on fire in the process. Instead, the troll rubs his eyes one last time and heads over to Kanaya and Rose. John goes with him, walking along the edge of the roof to get to where Kanaya is giving Bro the evil eye, her chainsaw covered in gross Horrorterror gunk and red. "Welcome back," the jadeblood says, perfectly cordial.

"Welcome to the club," Rose says, her nail clicking as she taps her visor. She leans with one arm on the side of an A/C unit, her hand curled into a fist next to her forehead, while her hood sits heavy over her brow, the orange fabric almost obscuring her eyes.

"You're okay?" John asks, because it's a dumb question but it's a normal question, and humans could probably make small-talk through the apocalypse.

"Quite." She pushes off with her arm, and a tiny trickle of blood runs down from under her golden shades. Karkat skips off with her arm, and a tiny trickle of blood runs down from under her golden shades. Karkat skips right past Kanaya like a troll on a mission and grabs Rose's hood so he can look at her face. "Okay enough to rejoin the fight," Rose says, lifting her visor and tilting her head up so that Karkat can inspect her horrifically bloodshot eyes. John hasn't seen eyes that red except in gross
Considering how much damage has been done to Cetus's eyes, John's increasingly concerned by this. Bro opens his mouth before he can. "Not happening," he says, his monotone barely audible over Cetus's next screech. John doesn't notice anything in Bro's posture that might indicate he's about to move, but Kanaya bristles and raises her chainsaw out to the side in a silent warning. Bro just tilts his head in acknowledgement and keeps watching the fight.

"I have to," Rose says, her voice tight. "This should be my fight, my responsibility. This isn't going to end, no matter what Eridan and Vriska throw at it."

It makes a gross amount of sense. "I'll take you down," John whispers, though he's sure Bro can hear well enough. Heck only knows Samuel had ears like a hawk, and Rue on a good day can hunt you down from halfway across the lab if she suspects you're about to do something dumb - parents have a sixth sense for rebellious muttering, apparently.

He wonders how they're doing. He can't remember the last time anyone let him check on Samuel - which he's alright with, considering how queasy the mere thought makes him feel. He'd be fine if he never heard from that guy again, actually.

TR: lolololol~~~~~

Karkat breaks in on John's thinky thoughts, coming in right on the tail end of Rose's quiet, 'Thank you,' with, "Vriska is going to blow both of you up if you go down there. This is Vriska we're talking about. Look at her, she's all over the fucking place! And like Eridan's any better -" Karkat gestures at the battlefield before them with enough vehemence that he jostles Rose by her hood, and she raises her eyebrows at John. Her eyes are more pinkish than oh god what happened red, but when Karkat realizes Rose is making a slow escape he snaps back to attention.

"She won't. Probably. She wants to win. She doesn't get anything out of blowing up people who are already god tier," John points out.

"She's a fucking menace, and she wants to kill alllllll the bosses." That Vriska impression could win Karkat an academy award. "She'll blow you up by accident like a glittery volcano of pixie bullshit, and I don't know why she's twiddling her claws out there in that magical shitstorm when she's already killed this denizen before." Karkat finishes sticking Rose's blood back in its capillaries, or whatever the crap he's doing with his blood thing to make Rose look less like a blood mage, and then folds his arms in a huff.

"Vriska's already won once. It might not matter how many lucky shots she gets in - it's not her denizen. Not anymore." Rose says, grim. "I have to be involved."

Kanaya keeps her chainsaw pointed at Bro with one hand, and raises the other. She doesn't wait for anyone to call on her, but John thinks it comes close. Karkat's sarcasm engine cranks into high gear when he's strained like this. "I feel like I should point out that we also do not know how to beat Horrorterrors," Kanaya says neutrally, loud enough that Bro can probably hear her, but with the tone of someone just making conversation. "Which could be a significant part of the problem. Maybe only you can defeat Cetus - or maybe Cetus is currently just ridiculously resilient because Leviathan is here. In the past, we just removed the possessed party from the equation; we've never killed a Horrorterror at all."

"Can it even be done?" John asks. It's a rhetorical question. Mostly. "Rose, you've never read a dark magic book about how to off Horrorterrors? Ever?"
"No dark magic books, kids," Bro warns half-heartedly.

Rose shakes her head. "Nothing reputable. Nothing feasible."

BE: you're on the right track

BE: so, how do do you guys get cetus un-possessed...?

John, Rose, and Karkat all answer at the same time. John thinks he gets the gist of it with, "Equius!" while Rose gets a little more wordy with, "We need Equius."

And then there's Karkat, who snaps his claws and says, "Shove Equius up its ass and call it a fucking day. Where is that fuck?"

BE: ...uh. still with nepeta and tavros

Rose gives a brisk shake of her head and steps up to stand by Kanaya. John comes up on her otherside while the two girls clasp hands, and then offers an arm to Rose as they all eyeball Bro in unison.

"Do," he says, shades glinting in Vriska and Eridan's violent light, "Not." He still won't look directly at them.

"We'll be careful," Rose says, and John can't tell if she's saying it as a legit promise or as an empty way to ensure she has some kind of plausible deniability later on. John dissolves them into the air, and the Breeze streams them away before Bro can interfere. Cetus's shouts still vibrate through the air, but she doesn't scream or renew her motif as they arrow toward the tell-tale roar of Tavros's rocketchair, which means that John can make himself and Rose solid again without issue or the full-body equivalent of his ears ringing.

He also lands them right in the wide back seat of Tavros's gratuitously expanded wheelchair, just as it surges up under them, so he and Rose both knock their knees hard. "¡La madrelarva que me parió!" Tavros shrieks, clutching his chest and whipping around so fast he nearly smacks Nepeta with his wide horns, his mohawk in total disarray.

"Can we help you?" Nepeta asks, leaning half over the side of the rocketchair and lacerating the side of one of Cetus's gargantuan tentacles with her claws. She doesn't seem fussed by two extra people popping up in the back of her ride; her olive eyes are already scanning for their next opening, and she nudges Tavros with a hand to point him down below Eridan's next burst of rapid-fire strikes.

"Need Equius!" John yells as Tavros does a loop-de-loop under one of Cetus's tentacles. This close, everything reeks of rotten seafood, and the Breeze rushing around them in screaming delight can only do so much when the smell permeates everything. It's like being on a rollercoaster from a nightmare theme park, only there's no track under their cart - just Tavros's flying intuition, and the Breeze having the time of its life rocketing them through two converging tentacles at top speed.

"Oh, sure, he's around here somewhere," Nepeta says, batting her hair out of her face and saying 'mew' so fast in 'somewhere' that John thinks he might just be hearing things. "I'll call him." She takes a deep breath, nearly chokes on her own hair when Tavros's next desperate spin of the controls sends her hair flying back, and hacks until her mouth is free. "EQUIHISSSS!!!"

"Nepeta, not in public, please -" Equius's voice emits from nowhere, apparently; the Breeze tries to amplify the oddly muted sound, but then it gets distracted by Tavros strafing the rocketchair at a weird angle.
"They need your help with something," Nepeta hollers. She lets go of the side of the rocketchair and raises both claws to dig into Cetus's side - and then Tavros spins them wildly with a hoarse scream, and John snaps out his hand to seize the back of Nepeta's jacket and pin both her and Rose to the floor of the rocketchair while it does a barrel roll. "Be nice!" Nepeta says once they stop wheeling through the air, sounding almost out of breath with excitement.

A deep sigh from the void. "What do you need?" John catches a glimpse of pitch black hair in the corner of his eye, and Equius turns solid enough that John can feel the troll's outline filling in with stuff that matters.

Unfortunately, Equius's weight also starts to fill in again, and the rocketchair starts to list to the right. "Okay, can we not do this on my wheelchair right this second? Please?" Tavros asks. "I would like to not, uh, die. I need to concentrate."

"Going, going! Sorry," John says, and he releases Nepeta's coat so she can go back to dangling over the side of the rocket without him impeding her furious swipes. "We'll get out of your hair right away." Tavros jerks the rocketchair up, and the turbulence rattles John's knees against the floor. Let's go, he tells the Breeze, in his best impression of a stern adult voice, because the Breeze seems seriously distracted by this point.

BE: silly, you could have talked here! i wouldn't have let us hit anything!

"We'll meet over there!" John says, pointing at a roof that lacks any sign of Bro lurking in the wings, and despite its complaints, the Breeze obliges him at once, Equius (hopefully) in their wake.

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Jack Noir tears pulsing gashes open in their wake, and Jade feels every one of them like a hole punching through her awareness. Jade can only hold him for a flash before she feels her hands start to burn, and she shoves him away over Los Angeles.

It's much cooler here, but that's all she can process before Noir's on her again in a blink, jaws gaping open almost 90 degrees and crunching down toward her face. Jade drops out of the way and swings back upright with a tranq gun primed and ready to fire.

Instead of dodging, Noir clenches his fist and the dart bursts into flames before it leaves the barrel. And then the gun is on fire, and everything is awful. Gritting her teeth, Jade hurls the rapidly dissolving gun at the carapace's head. She doesn't hang around to watch him blow it to smithereens; she zaps behind him and punches, catching him square at the base of his skull and bouncing both of them all the way to the desert near El Paso. In the back of her head, she's trying to aim for somewhere with as few people and/or important things as possible. But that's really, really hard when Noir fights her for every atom as she tries to end the teleport.

She screws up the landing because she's focused more on keeping her legs in one piece than on her orientation compared to the ground; her shoulder scrapes over a protruding rock before she blasts upright, skimming backward to stay out of Noir's range.

JN: This has been a long time coming.

"You know, I can barely understand you when you talk like that! Seriously!" Jade says. His voice sounds like how she imagines a radioactive snot smoothie would taste, but with the slimey sensation smeared all over her brain instead of her tongue, which is somehow worse. Like, geez! How does Terezi stand smelling and tasting colors like this? She must have an amazing tolerance to make comparisons to delicious food and candy all the time. "You sound like a runny nose, and it's nasty!"
she adds, just so that Noir, you know, knows. The odds of him changing his mental voice on command are probably pretty low, but she has to try.

JN: Get fucked, witch-bitch!

So much for that plan. "Real mature! Best insult! So creative!" Jade fires back. Noir snarls and bursts into woozy green flame, diving after her and swiping for her legs with claws that singe her leg hairs from ten feet away. He teleports with hardly any delay after her as she starts darting between the scrub. She tries to trick him into zapping right into a thistly bush, but it turns out that both avoiding the bushes and dancing around them just ends with Noir's blasts of green setting the foliage alight. It doesn't burn normally, either - the fire eats through the bushes too fast, searing down through the branches and eating into the ground itself before subsiding into sludgy ash that crackles with fitful sparks.

Jade can't fight the sinking feeling that they're leaving a trail of radioactive puddles in their wake. If the planet weren't already pretty doomed, she'd be more worried about how to come back and dispose of this properly. For now, she doesn't have the luxury of stopping to clean it up - Jack Noir's claws flare up and the space fire licks at her heels, and Jade picks up the pace as they rapidfire teleport over the border into New Mexico. She's got a mental map of the nearest roads in her head (few and far between out here, thankfully) but no matter how she mixes up her teleports and bounces in unpredictable zig zags, he keeps narrowing the gap. Jade bats him away with a kick, her foot wreathed in her own space aura, but he bounces off the ground, tumbles butt over head exactly once, and then claws his way back upright to rip open a hole and continue the chase. For a second, his face looks like a ceramic plate someone glued back together after it shattered on the floor, all the mismatched, overlapping pieces mashed back together with molten green lacquer in a bizarre parody of kintsugi, and Jade shudders with visceral horror.

Negative charge builds over her head, a stinging heat that Jade feels across her scalp, and she bounces out of the way just as green lightning forks down out of the clear sky. Noir directs the lightning with a glowing claw of power, his teeth bared so much that it further warps his facial structure. "Your face is gonna stick like that, you jerk!" Jade yells, and then sticks her tongue out. What she wants is one good, solid punch - or the time to charge up something that can really make a dent in this guy - but the way he leaves space in tatters to teleport the way he does makes it harder to tell where he's going and coming from.

And the more time they hang around here, the more the space around them feels...shredded.

Noir snaps his claws, and the lightning arcs into a cage of hot plasma around Jade. She zaps out of the way with immense effort; if she'd waited a split second longer, the lightning wouldn't branched enough that she might not have been able to find a way through before she was completely entangled. Desperate, she pushes off the ground and cartwheels all the way to New York City like a rubber band snapping.

NYC is even less good than Los Angeles - Jade hears screams ring out almost as soon as Noir plummets out of the sky after her, his marbled plumage full of sour galaxies that gobble up the space around him and leave neon green wing afterimages embedded in the sky. This city has had longer to recover from its grim incident than Los Angeles has, and there's wayyy too many people on the repaved streets. Jade pulls up sharply; her hair and hood fail to get the memo as she stops with one toe brushing the hood of someone's car. A tiny dog lets out a shrieking bark from the passenger's seat as its owner slams on the brakes. "'Scuse me pardon me heads up!" Jade chants, jumping off the car and hopping up to the streetlight, which she accidentally knocks askew. Then she races up the side of a building that's still under reconstruction, a torn-open wreck of empty windows, twisted support beams, and scaffolding. Noir bolts after her, a toxic arrow on her radar. His wings cut through the
scaffolding like it is softened butter and it starts to sag and slough off the side of the building. Jade slams her palms down against it in a handstand and captchalogues the mess before it can tumble down to the street.

It starts melting a hole in her sylladex space. This is incredibly distracting, because Jade has important stuff in there! It's distracting and very not good and a lot of other, stronger words. Jade ejects the scaffolding at top speed somewhere over the upper bay, hoping to heck that she hasn't punted it at a random sightseeing boat as she follows out of the city.

She whips around in time to see Noir shear through the waist of the Statue of Liberty and Equality in one swoop. The head and wings of the statue already got totaled after Leviathan's run through New York, and now the rest of the torso slides off the rest of the metal base with a terrible, sharp screech.

...Whoops. There goes that national monument. The colossal statue pitches down toward the island below, and Jade skids under Noir when he lunges, zaps forward, and kicks the statue with all her might. She manages to shove it a few yards to the right with a wave of force, but that's not enough, and Noir stabs at her with a sword when she pauses to reassess how much mass she needs to shift. She bounces out of the way, scrambling up the side of the statue while it simultaneously falls, and finally slams her palms together in a rush, compressing the statue into nice, person-sized proportions. It's still heavy, but this time her roundhouse kick successfully knocks it over the water, where it lands with an enormous sploosh.

Noir slams into her airspace and buffets her horizontally with his wing and elbow. The two of them tumble and skid right up to base of the pitcher's mound at Yankee Stadium, leaving a trail of green flames in the torn up dirt and bluegrass. An entire stadium full of baseball fans screams as Noir manages to land a solid punch right in Jade's stomach. She tumbles backward, more stunned than in pain, and bowls over the Yankee pitcher mid-throw. "Crap! Crap crap crap!" Jade yells, close to incoherent as she takes in all the potential civilian casualties Noir just found; the twisted carapacian raises the claw with the Queen's ring on it and green lightning starts to arc out from his hand to crisp the grass around them.

Jade jumps up, seizes the Yankee's pitcher by the back of his pinstriped jersey, and teleports out. She drops the poor guy off in the middle of Central Park, so that Noir's strike only turns the pitcher's mound into a smoldering crater. "Hi-sorry-bye!" she apologizes in a rush, leaving the stunned pitcher stranded in a tree as she streaks away to put some distance between their fight and innocent bystanders again. Noir tackles her from behind through a tear in space, and Jade yelps as New York dissolves -

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He drags them through the crust of the earth, snapping his teeth close to her ear as he tries to force them both to solidify ten kilometers under the floor of the ocean, and Jade's not braced for it. Her powers adjust to account for the sudden, crushing pressure and temperature change without her conscious input, but for a second she can almost feel the phantom sensation of ancient basalt scraping through her bones. It feels like being encased in concrete, and she jams her elbow into a giant crack in the carapacian's side until Noir lets go so she can escape his toxic aura and zap up into the water above, skipping right past the pitch black depths of the abyss to burst into the water somewhere around 300 meters below the surface, her waterproof goggles pressed firmly over her eyes.

She emerges next to something enormous, and weirdly...familiar. Actually, she might as well have skipped the goggles, because she can barely see anything down this deep, but she can sense enough to make out a ghostly white shape that ripples beside her in surprise, its vast tentacles coiling around as it maneuvers with its head fins to spiral around and look at her.
How many giant, feral fifty-foot long giant squid lusii can there be, in the world? Jade knew these coordinates felt too familiar. "Mr Squiddle!" she burbles, sacrificing the last of her air in an explosion of surprised bubbles and almost inhaling ice cold salt water before shutting her mouth, and the giant squid replies with a reverberating BLOORP that almost makes Jade giggle and choke on the sea. It must be a bloop of considerable terror, too, because the next thing she knows, Noir teleports in front of her in a flood of eerie green light, and they both get inundated in salty black ink. Mr. Squiddle is a pretty sizeable squid, and it's...a lot of ink. The giant lusus itself flees as soon as they're both blinded, and Jade can sense it slipping deeper down into the water like a pot full of cold, limp noodles slithering away. Noir vaporizes the ink - and most of the water around them - with a furious growl, but Jade swipes the ink off her goggles and teleports up into the sky straight overhead.

Somehow, Noir doesn't catch up in an instant. Caught off guard, Jade spits up a mouthful of salt water, her dark god tier uniform soaking in the ink while her hair plasters itself down her back. For a solid ten seconds, nothing happens, and Jade's heart starts to speed up. Because if Jack's not chasing her, then he could be doing anything. Like backtracking to Las Vegas. Jade casts her space sense wide, hunting for Noir's nauseating aura.

A gaping fissure tears open right behind her, and she flips around to see a Jack Noir-shaped hole in the world that crackles with solid green-yellow light. He's not teleporting in, though; instead, an entire cargo container launches at her at top speed through the portal formed by his body. Jade dodges and the container does a swandive into the ocean far below, but Noir's green afterimage follows her like a dogged shadow, propelling one twelve meter long container at her after another, like an absolutely broken combination of a shipping containerkind and a machinegunkind. Jade tries to fool him by teleporting somewhere east of the island where she grew up and then bouncing up so that the container he fires launches up in a straight line and then starts to fall right back down on his head. She lands on the short end of the container feet first and gives it an extra shove for good measure, but that just sends it rocketing into the water at mach speed - Noir's afterimage flickers out of the way and then starts to expand.

A lot.

By the time his wing span reaches fifty meters across, Jade's more than prepared to run like hell. Noir seems content to chuck it at her, regardless of the fact that she can clearly see it coming. The front end of a cargo ship peeks through. The rest of the ship follows really, really fast. It's ungainly as all heck and Jade easily shifts herself out of the way - the problem is that she can't sense anyone on board. She just gets the faint impression that somewhere in Noir's incandescent green afterimage, people are screaming. And she has no idea how to get them out, or where they'll land. The scratch kids fell butt-first into Noir's miasma and landed somewhere Jade could reach them, relatively intact, but the people who used to be on that cargo ship? She can't even begin to untangle the mangled vortex that is Noir's power. He warps the space around him, and what he doesn't warp, he destroys.

Jade can't keep dodging him forever while he makes Swiss cheese and mincemeat and other assorted metaphorical foodstuffs out of the fabric of space! The second Noir stops projectile vomiting stuff at her and exposes his physical body again, she needs to start trying different weapons from her sylladex to get that ring off him. Keeping this over the Pacific should at least minimize the chances of running into people - maybe Antarctica if she needs a backup location - but nothing's stopping Noir from hightailing it halfway around the planet if he loses interest in attacking Jade.

So it doesn't make sense when she teleports, heading further east into open water - and her powers snap her over Lake Michigan. She flails for an embarrassing few seconds, trying to wrap her head around where she went wrong. "Crap!" Improvising, she snatches up a cube of water as tall as she is
and douses Noir when he appears. Most of it evaporates on contact, but enough lake water splashes the carapacian that he stops and blinks, momentarily hornswoggled. She's successfully manage to jimmy his rustles, but that doesn't help her process why she just teleported straight to Chicago instead of Grandpa's destroyed lab in the Pacific.

Something's off. Very off. Worryingly off. But apart from Noir, reigniting his fiery aura with a snap of his claws, Jade can't put her finger on what. She plucks a rifle kind out of the air - thank goodness it comes out in one piece - and fires. Noir absorbs the shot in his torso, and then the bullet fires back at her in a pulse of green. Jade feels it rip through her hair as she ducks, ripping right through a tangle and jerking her head back a little before she recovers.

She doesn't want to pull out the gun full of Eridan's glittery hope magic. What would happened if she fired that thing? Would it just form a dome, or would it act like a laser or a bullet or what? She needs something Noir can't deflect or fire back, and Jade's running short on ideas already. All she can do is analyze Noir's twisted, destructive version of her space powers, and try to suss out a way to get that ring off him without getting sucked into the swirling vortex.

DM: ...hear me?

Jade's not sure whether that ping comes from her chat window, or if it's a mental voice; it's so faint that she almost can't make out the words. Noir charges at her and she tries to pull one of his tricks, summoning orbs of power around her fists and punching them at his face like projectiles. They make his face and shoulders shudder and creak in horrible jolts, but Noir ignores it and keeps pelting forward, nothing in his eyes but burning hate. Jade gears up for another teleport, and tries to aim for the ocean again. She just needs to stay focused -

DM: ...shouldn't come closer...

- she reappears somewhere underground. Dang it! She's somewhere under Chicago, the damp floor of some random cave squelching under her heel as she lands. Is she getting tired? They've made a bunch of rapid jumps over the course of this fight; she's practiced, obviously, but never with a murderous superpowered carapacian matching her every step of the way. Some of these exchanges have only taken seconds, and Jade is...urgh. For some reason she can't quite do the math in her head to figure out how much time it's been since she tackled them out of Las Vegas. Dave's the time guy, anyway, he could be more precise about it if he wants to. Jade's fine with just saying 'a lot happened in a short time period,' and leaving it at that.
She turns, and her eyes widen as she takes in the sight of the huge set of scales before her. On one side sits a faintly glowing, silvery blue egg the size of a small house; on the other, a gilded sarcophagus just as tall as the egg. It looks weirdly broken and fuzzy at the edges, sits balanced over a wide black pedestal that doesn't quite touch the bottom of the scales, and flickers with alarming red and green light in the dank half-light of the cavern.

...Uh. Maybe this wasn't a random cave.

DM: Oh dear. Watch out - behind you!

The voice sounds chipper and crystal clear in Jade's head, now, with a note of anxiety, but she doesn't need the warning. Jade plants her foot flat in a dip in the rocky floor, pivots with space-enhanced precision, and snaps a kick right against Noir's chin, just as he fires a blast of energy at her. They get blown back in opposite directions.

Noir hits the far wall and leaves a winged indent with an impact that makes the whole cave shudder.

Jade slams into the tall silvery egg, and knocks it off the scales. The perfect, smooth oval curve of the egg's shell cracks as neatly as if she's rapped it against the side of a countertop. Jade bounces off the egg as it wobbles to a stop where the roof of the cave slopes down to meet the floor, wincing as the sarcophagus on the other side of the scales slams down against the black pedestal with a note of finality.
And something else cracks. Jade staggers, her stomach twisting in an ominous knot as she looks around, uneasy. That...that wasn't the egg -

DM: Eeek!

The top half of the egg crumbles, the tiny shards falling away as though it broke along pre-ordained lines. Lusus white claws poke out and proceed to peel the rest of the egg shards away, revealing a thin muzzle, spikey horns, a sleek neck -

The dragon fumbles, eyes still sealed shut with some kind of caul. Jade's jaw is just permanently hanging open, at this point, because a dragon, hello?! This is amazing!

CRACK

With a sound like a grandfather clock snapping in two, the cave quakes and convulses. And - oh. Jade knows that sound. With a juddering lurch, the sense of wrongness in the cave slides into focus.

Noir pries himself out of the indent in the wall and looks around instead of leaping at Jade right away, looking agitated as he closes a spasming fist.

They're surrounded by cracks where time has broken. Jade doesn't know how she could have missed that, before. The cave walls convulse once more, and part of the rock slides down into a crack with a faint shunk. With nothing left to support it on that side, the cavern trembles, and starts to collapse.

Noir teleports out in a flash, without even a parting quip. Jade staggers as more cracks start to eat their way through the floor of the cave, and claps her hand against the dragon's elbow, her fingers skating over the slick, soft scales of the newborn lusus. "We need to go!" she yells over the roar of the collapsing cave, and the blind dragon's muzzle swings toward her. The mental voice is just as clear, but now far more urgent.

DM: Oh, yes, please!

Permission obtained. Jade wraps her power around the lusus and teleports them as far from Chicago as she can manage.

DO YOU BELIEVE I CAN ESCAPE ME BEFORE I ARRIVE?

Chapter End Notes

The Felt spreadsheet keeps getting partially cut off by AO3, so if you want to see the full image: here
Chapter Summary

Yea, I know this well: were you once sealed mine,
Mine in the blood's beat, mine in the breath,
Mixed into me as honey in wine,
Not time, that sayeth and gainsayeth,
Nor all strong things had severed us then
Not wrath of gods, nor wisdom of men.

Chapter Notes

Edit: Rose's section is full of eye scream. Cetus grows extra eyes, and they all get messed up in some fashion. John's section starts at 'TA: AA', and involves multiple Felt deaths. Jade's section starts at 'Terezi's lusus.' There are some flashy gifs in the Lord of Time's giant font style scattered throughout.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oriole lands on his ass. This happens way more often than it should, in his opinion - but no one ever asks him, now do they? The butt thud echoes weirdly through the room he's landed in, and he smoothers a groan as his wings flop out too late to help. He winces and opens his eyes, looking around as he gets to his feet, the trailing ends of his feathers skimming over the dark floor. Most of the room is dark, as it happens; Oriole turns in a slow circle to regain his bearings, his ears prickling with the sudden absence of sound. There's no sign of the scratch kids or their constant chatter, and the air here feels too still. At the far end of the room he can see a single lamp hanging from the ceiling; it casts harsh white light, and the chain it hangs from sways in time with distant, rumbling roars that make the walls and ceiling rock. The giant monster battle must be on-going, then. The thin cone of light swings in time with the lamp itself, illuminating more empty space on a stark green floor.

Something's not right. How the shit did he wind up here? Oriole's eyes start to adjust a little to the pitch black of his half of the room, but he takes his phone out and ruins it with the blinding glare of the screen. He starts two separate conversations at the same time, because he's so not in the right head-space to tackle the hell that is the group memo. One chat responds straight away, while the other pauses for several long beats - he's not even sure Aradia will answer at all.

TG: you guys, I think I fell somewhere
TG: wha? youre right here tho... :
TG: we were on the stairs two seconds ago, but there was a weird gap in the air
TG: must've fallen into the basement or something...
GT: I say, though, we haven't been on any stairs yet!
TG: what the hell?
GT: We just got to the building, so! No stairs!
TG: hang on, ill jus ask u whaddup irl
Oriole jolts. He can almost hear Terezi's cackling - because they did hear it, when she snuck up on their group just outside the Felt's casino. That was almost a half hour ago, for him. Which means his other convo needs to hurry up and happen, because when he checks the time stamp on the top of the chat, it's a row of infinity signs. The phone's clock keeps spasming and glitching, the numbers flickering at the top of the screen.

TG: it's happening again, isn't it
TG: shit
TG: Aradia -
AA: yes it has
AA: youre lucky it wasn't worse
TG: since when does broken time-y bullshit drop you into some creepy ass dungeon realm?
AA: it doesn't usually! but the building you're in is also riddled with space malformations and tears
AA: i think you're only 28 minutes behind where you were but its hard for me to tell from a safe distance
TG: how safe a distance?
AA: in the medium safe! with what's about to happen that tower is the last place i want to be
AA: i also have some important stuff to catch up on over here :P
TG: oh, cool
TG: I'll just, you know, chill in the dank dungeon realm for a bit
TG: anyway yeah I'm fucked, aren't I
AA: you'll be fine!
AA: just be careful not to fall into another nexus of destructive forces like that
TG: yeah, kinda-sorta sprite shit can probably only save my ass so many times before it runs out
TG: I guess it could be worse - I could have landed in the gross monster swamp outside
AA: fall into enough holes in time and space and ill give anybody indigestion
TG: thanks anyway aradia
AA: no problem! take care!

Well, he's stuck in a basement and has time to kill before he catches up with where he left off. God, this is already making his head hurt. Squaring his shoulders, Oriole aims for the swinging light fixture, since it's the only point of reference he has in here.

Almost immediately, he knocks into something solid and person-shaped with the edge of his wing, and he yanks away, his body stooping down in a defensive crouch. He can hear a rope creaking and can detect faint movement just a foot from him, but apart from that sighing creak, squeaking in and out of time with the swaying lamp, he can't see enough to tell who or what he hit. Another step back, just in case -

His shoulder rams into someone's hip. He can feel the bone. Oriole lurches around, his skin crawling and feathers rising, and finally pulls his head out of his ass long enough to raise his dimmed phone and shine the screen into the shadows.

A pale, faceless dummy slowly rotates on a green noose; as it swings through a second and third turn, Oriole's stomach knots up with the utter surety that the next time it turns, the blank head will have suddenly grown a face - but no, shit. He can't let this get to him. The proportions of the effigy are all wrong for a person (but he knows he felt the jut of a hip bone), the arms and legs little more than amputated stubs, and though he'd swear the thing is made of cloth, he can't find a seam anywhere. It's wearing a hat, but he can't tell in the persistent darkness whether it's orange, red, or maroon. When he turns, he sees that the first thing he ran into was another hanging effigy, with a
If he just wandered into a horror movie, Oriole creeps toward the light, using his phone to edge between more of the creepy hanged men (are they watching him while his back is turned?) His stomach cramps sickeningly as he realizes just how many of these things are lurking throughout the room; every time he thinks he's clear of the crowd, another pallid, nubby arm looms out of the darkness ahead of him. He furls his wings in closer as he squeezes between two heavyset, blank effigies, one of which reeks of gasoline and soot. He's starting to feel claustrophobic, and even though he knows the light is probably a trap, he wants to find a door or a stairwell or *something* so he can escape this bullshit mannequin hellhole before one of them starts moving without him brushing up against it. All he has to do is find the exit - a nice, normal exit that isn't a questionable, nigh-invisible hole in the space/time continuum.

As he nears the light, the dummies nearest it come into clearer focus, all of them nubby of limb and lacking in face. If he hears someone else breathe in here, he is going to *flip* his shit right off the fuck you handle and run screaming like some (god, the punbait is real) chickenshit bastard. But he steps into the lit circle without hitting anything else, and when he glances around, he spies a door at the faded, shadowy limits of his vision, past a few more rows of effigies. You could mount a sign over that door that reads 'TRAP' or 'Fuck you, all ye who enter here,' and it still wouldn't look any more ominous than it already does. Oriole sighs through gritted teeth, lips pulled back in a grimace, and then brightens his phone screen once more to creep through the last of the hanging dummies.

Three feet from the door, he hears a faint ticking sound. *Bomb*, Oriole thinks, his mental voice sounding oddly distant from the rest of his brain as he tenses and trips over his own useless feet trying to run like hell back the way he came. The floor is slick tile, unlike literally every other carpeted floor in this felty nightmare of a building, and his sneakers can't find traction until the ticking *stops* -

And a bright, cheery *ting!* rings out. Oriole freezes with his leg bent under him and his wings half-raised. No explosion follows as the seconds tick by, but - it's really weird - he would swear up and down that sound was some kind of kitchen timer. His brain, paragon of clarity and reason that it is today, spits out a nonsense cross between 'soufflé' and 'it's a trap.' Thank shitting christ he has a brain to make these stellar deductions for him in times of utter panic; he doesn't know what he'd do without it. Oriole gets up, his left knee twinging like he landed on it funny, and looks back at the effigies hanging in staggered, uneven rows as far as the light reaches behind him. Possible soufflé-bomb, or army of creepy mannequins. Bomb or mannequins, bomb or -

Soufflé bomb it is. Oriole keeps his phone clutched tight to his chest as he tests the door handle and pulls the door open a crack - just wide enough to peek inside.

There's a chronic lack of lighting down here; only one overhead lamp illuminates this room, too. A troll woman with rounded horns sits on a stool in front of an enormous orange oven, her purple and white striped hat askew as she rests her face between the stovetop burners. The oven isn't even attached to a wall or anything, it's just...sitting there, quietly buzzing. One of the troll's arms sprawls out in front of her, a compact purple egg timer clutched in the palm of her hand. For a second, Oriole thinks he can get away with sliding the door shut and pretending he didn't see anything; then the troll lifts her head, her purple eyes dreamy and distant as she shakes her hair out of her face and smiles at him. Oriole freezes - *so* busted - but the Felt member just giggles and waggles her fingers at him in a fluttering wave. "Heehee," she says, rapping her knuckles on top of the oven and scooting off her stool. "It's broken." She shakes the egg timer to demonstrate, and it rattles like the insides are all loose. "Guess I've reached my limit!"

Oriole can't remember this one's powers for shit. The spreadsheet is the *opposite* of helpful if you
weren't there and paying attention to Spades and Droog's arguments about the details, and Oriole was more concerned with Crowbar than random troll #12. "Uh. Sorry? I'm, uh, looking for Crowbar," he says, in the fleeting hope that he can bullshit his way out of this in the family tradition. "If you could point me at the stairs, I'll piss right off -"

The purpleblood's giggle turns into outright laughter; she hauls the oven door open, and a man crawls out like it's a clowncar, mashing his orange and white hat back on his head when the edge of the oven almost knocks it off. "The stairs," the troll says, tossing the purple egg timer in the air and then chucking it at Oriole's head. He ducks and the timer smashes into the wall beside the doorframe with a crack of plastic. "The stairs are behind you, little buddy."

All the lights in the two rooms turn on at the same time. Open orange ovens and trolls with purple timers look up at Oriole and bare their teeth in the same exact lackadaisical grin. Everything else in the room has been shoved to the perimeter to make space for at least a hundred duplicates of the same two people and their goddamn kitchenware.

Oriole shuts his mouth, slams the door shut, and books it back the way he came, shoving the first two dummies out of his way when he hits them. In the harsh light, most of the effigies are wearing the same two hats: it's a sea of purple and orange, with the other colors of the Felt scattered throughout. Behind him, he hears the door fly off its hinges, dozens and dozens of egg timers ringing in a shrill chorus before falling silent. Two voices babble over and over, multiplied a hundredfold, and Oriole can't understand what they're saying because each copy of the Felt duo seems to be holding their own conversation. Oriole elbows a charred black effigy so hard it flies out and whacks another dummy in a wild circle. He looks back over his shoulder to see a solid wave of duplicate people streaming out of the door, ripping the hanged dummies down from the ceiling and carrying them along in the wave of bodies. Even with the lights on, Oriole's too busy running hell for leather to take in anything more than the next row of dummies as he shoves past them. He can't tell where he first landed, or if he'll be able to even see the space/time rip before he runs headlong into it.

Everything's a fucking mess. So he starts texting; it can't get much worse, anyway.

TG: guys
TG: I hate time travel
HB: Same hat.
TG: what
HB: Y'know, same hat. It's one of those memehs. Has to do with hats.
TG: fuck my life. just. fuck it

The duplicates hit him and four pairs of hands and claws grab him around the waist, lifting him up to crowdsurf along the ranks. Someone is scream-singing 'YOU RAISE ME UPPPPP -' over the roar of the crowd, and Oriole cannot for the life of him say whether it's in his head, or if one of the Felt copies is playing the song at top volume on a phone, or if it's just the universe fucking with him, which wouldn't surprise him at all in the slightest.

The crowd charges through the hole in space and time, and Oriole shrieks as they plunge upward toward the tenth floor stairwell.

--

Bro vanishes the second that John and Rose do. No surprises there; this is a fucking textbook Bro action, at this point. Karkat thinks he sees a pair of yellow and blue dumbasses land in Tavros's nightmare of a wheelchair, but then Cetus's gargantuan face and tentacles come in between them, and Bro flashsteps too fast for Karkat to waste his time and energy on tracking him. That's what memos and spreadsheets are for, so fuck it; he can't be bothered to keep track of everyone and their
human-lusus and what they're doing. Now it's just him and Kanaya, stuck on a rooftop looking out
over a street full of frothing fuck-you and rotten grubsauce. Karkat holds up his sicklekind, at least
hoping to get an idea of what it would look like if he had a weapon large enough to eviscerate a giant
whale and make all of his dreams come true, but they're not far enough back from the fight for
perspective to work in his favor - it just emphasizes how stupidly tiny they are compared to Cetus. If
he crosses his eyes, the wavering sickle could *maybe* work as a toothpick for Cetus's jagged teeth.

Beside him, Kanaya holds up her chainsaw in one hand, her tongue peeking out a little as she tries to
line it up right. She probably gets similarly disappointing results. "Are you thinking what I'm
thinking?" Karkat asks.

"That depends," she says, without looking at him. "Are you thinking that all of this is remarkably
dangerous and absurd?"

Karkat snorts. "Well, yeah, that's constantly playing on an endless screaming loop in my pan,
regardless of what fresh bullshit is going on in our daily lives. No freebies."

Kanaya puts her chainsaw into lipstick mode and reapply it, meditating on the question. Karkat
ignores the fact that the green lipstick still has human red blood on it. "I am thinking that rejoining the
fight at this stage would just invite Vriska's unwanted, murderous advances. I should hate to be
scorched into oblivion by her 'mistakenly' firing at me, or egging Eridan on until he does it," she
says, capping the lipstick and holstering it. "Both of which seem more likely than dying in a
Horrorterror's rampage, and neither of which really rev my completely metaphorical internal
combustion engine."

...For no reason in particular, Karkat feels super exposed on this wide open rooftop. Vriska's busy
whooping and summoning a guillotine from out of fucking nowhere to chop through a bundle of
Cetus's tentacles in a gooey amputation, but any second now the ceruleanblood could get antsy, whip
around, and decide to take out two convenient not-god tier chumps loitering on the sidelines. After
the shit she pulled with Eridan earlier, they can't just rest easy thinking Vriska will spontaneously
develop self-control. As though to drive the point home further, Cetus bellows at Vriska, seizes the
model of the Statue of Liberty et al up from in front of the New York-New York hotel down the
road with a grasping tentacle, and whips it around to smash Vriska down the Strip like a baseball
with pixie wings. Vriska dodges, barely, and the statue goes flying out over the city - Karkat can't
even tell where it lands - and Eridan sets off a blindingly bright attack that sounds like screaming
pyrotechnics. "Yeah, okay, fuck this, I'm out," Karkat yells, over the throbbing in his ears.

He reaches out sideways, trying to find Kanaya's arm or something while his eyes water. She taps
him on the shoulder instead, and is already walking behind him so that he has to scramble around to
follow her when his vision clears. Kanaya gives him a fangy grin. "Do you think that we can jump
from this roof to the casino's?" she asks, as if it's a rhetorical question.

Not in a single bound, if that's what she's implying. (No, wait, that would be a John joke, the fucking
nerd.) Karkat rubs the back of his neck, then scans the roofs and gaps between them and the casino.
Cetus has a bunch of spindly tentacles dragging through the grimdark soup at street level in some of
the spaces between the buildings, but for the most part they *should* have a straight shot there. Most of
the casinos and hotels along the Strip are uneven and sprawled out, but the section around the
Ouroboros is wedged in a dense section of nondescript buildings, like there wasn't any room
elsewhere on the Strip for it to expand into a resort. "Of fucking course. Let's go fuck up their day,"
Karkat says. He lets his sicklekind dissolve back into blood so that he can jump without accidentally
fucking up his own day, and backs up so he can get a running start.
Good news: all the teleporting and floating has not affected his ability to run along rooftops. He managed not to make a complete ass out of himself in front of Kanaya, and that's always half the battle right, really. Kanaya's technique is 40% graceful rainbow drinker putting Karkat's smoothest jumps to shame and 60% charging across the rooftops at top speed with no dicking around permitted. He can hold his own. Cetus surges along the street, its tail dragging behind it as its tentacles haul it along with pants-shittingly terrifying speed, and resulting quake screws up Karkat's last jump; he rolls hard to ease the jarring impact, and Kanaya skids through her landing half a second later. They both look to try to see what's drawn the denizen's attention now, but apart from Vriska yelling insults at Cetus's back and pelting after it, whoever's pissed Cetus off now is out of sight behind the denizen's massive form. Karkat has a feeling it might be John and Rose making their move, which does nothing to help the queasy worry fermenting in his angstbladders. "They'll be fine," Kanaya says, but he can hear the question in her voice, so they're both in the overactive angstbladder boat, here.

"They'll kick its shameglobes up its own ass. Don't worry," Karkat replies, almost as convincingly.

Kanaya gives him a shifty look. "I am not worried. I never once said I was in any way concerned. In fact, I have complete confidence in them. Are you worried?"

Karkat breaks all of five seconds before breaking. "No. That's the opposite of a thing I am. Obviously. What kind of - oh fuck. They're so fucked. They're going to die stupid tragic fucked up hero deaths and leave us widowed for the rest of fucking forever. We should have gone to help, this is fucking unconscionable -"

Kanaya grabs him by the wrists and stops him before he can tear out his hair in frustration. "It would appear that we are in mutual agreement that we are worried," she says, firmly. "The size of our worry is astonishing. It could probably eclipse the sun itself. Yet while our solidarity in worrying makes me no less nervous, I am currently drawing a blank as to how we defeated any of these denizens in the first place and have no desire to figure it out right now when there are other metaphorical fish to fry."

He nods along with her until Kanaya runs out of words and lets go of his arms, stepping back as she waits for him to respond. He keeps nodding for an extra second, then snaps out of it. "Yeah, you're right. You're totally right. Not sure how Nepeta and Tavros haven't been squished flatter than grubcakes, yet," he says, tugging his jacket's sleeves down as he tries to get his thinkpan back on track. It's a little too late to get his entire life back in order, at this point, but Kanaya seems to approve of getting his outfit back in order after all the jumping around, adjusting her skirt and then fixing the shoulders of his jacket to her satisfaction. With incredibly important business taken care of, Karkat ruins it by stretching his arms out in front of him. "Over, or through?"

The manor building that makes up the casino section of the Felt's headquarters is just as horrendous up close as it was from down the street. Karkat can't tell what floor they're on; they landed on one of the few sections of the building with a flat surface, but whatever asshole architect designed this place mashed together turrets and towers and gabled, angular roofs in a jumbled, asymmetric mess, with green-tinted windows that are mostly still intact and extra balconies crammed into every available surface. He thinks he sees a door in the wall forty feet above the ground off to their left. If they go over, they'll have to claw their way up some pretty sheer, pitched roofs, and hope nobody's lurking behind a broken window to shoot them through the shattered glass. Going through could be faster, if they don't run into a Felt straggler - and if they don't get lost and/or sidetracked - and if they don't have trouble finding a way out on the far side - never mind, Karkat's talked himself out of it.

"The front door still looks inaccessible," Kanaya says, leaning over the side to survey the flooded street. Karkat thought that was a given, but when he peers over the edge of the roof he sees what Kanaya did - the grimdark sludge levels have gone down now. Cetus pulled most of it down the
Strip with her, and now Karkat can make out bleached white sections along the lower sides of the building where the acid has receded. The door of the casino still sits behind three feet of nasty monster slurry, though. "Even if we go through a window, we don't know the internal layout of the casino as well as we do the tower. I vote for over."

"Let's do that, then." Karkat maps out the easiest route in his head and takes a second to draw a bloodcicle (\textit{fuck}) out of his blood so he can use it as a shitty pickax on the steeper roofs. Kanaya jumps almost straight up vertically to reach a higher section of flat roof to start out, while Karkat takes a flying leap off the side and catches himself on the edge of the roof of another chunk of the building. He kicks off the wall under the overhanging edge with some effort and then hauls himself up using the awning over the window. When he checks, Kanaya is keeping pace with him from a level up, her claws out to the side as she hurries along balcony railing. Avoiding a sheer, concave wall of shingle that's supposed to pass for a roof, Karkat runs up the side of a chimney and uses it to gain height so he can reach a balcony that wraps around the corner of the building.

His chat alert has been going off this whole time - the group chat never fucking sleeps; it waits - but the text alert breaks the pattern by letting out an obnoxious noise, and Karkat smacks his pocket to make it stop while he hops across a set of three projecting windows to try to get back in sync with Kanaya's route. She stoops to give him a claw up over the world's saddest, most underused rain gutter, and then she turns to climb up the slick shingles of the steep, triangular roof that leads to the peak of this section of the building. Karkat gets next to no traction at all with his shoes before his momentum fails him and he starts to skid back down, and he hastily forms a blood-shank with his other hand so he can dig into the roof.

It takes him an embarrassing minute to hack his way up to the intersection of the main roof and yet another projecting window before he thinks to bite into his wrist and drip some blood on the toes of his shoes to form spikes, and by the time he reaches Kanaya again his claws feel weirdly shaky with the effort involved. Kanaya balances with a claw on a decorative green...thing that caps the turret, and Karkat gives her a defensive scowl despite the fact that there's no judgment on her face. "We can go down and cross to the tower here," she reports, while Karkat balances on the thin ridge of the roof to give his wrists a break. Looking down the far side of the building, Karkat sees more steep drops covered in shingles, but also a covered walkway that joins the casino to the Ouroboros skyscraper down at ground level. Someone has already punched a hole through the tall glass window over the Ouroboros' side of the walkway - someone he suspects was Terezi-shaped, or at least acting under her direction.

"Who goes 'ere?"

Karkat and Kanaya both stiffen, and whip around toward the central tower that rises up to their left. A square balcony wraps all the way around the tower, the floor just level with Kanaya's shoulders, and before Karkat can think twice he drags Kanaya down into a crouch with him, crawling along the ridge until they're as close to the underside of the balcony as they can reach. There's another short, sheer chunk of roof right up under it, though, which means they're still exposed if whoever just yelled happens to look down. Someone steps heavily on the green balcony above. Kanaya gives a threatening hiss, her claw stealing down to draw her lipstick out of its case, and Karkat shakes his head at her furiously, trying to convey a 'fuck no' by making an X with his claws. Another ponderous footstep, and they look up in time to see a pair of hands lean on the railing overhead.

The Felt member that stares out over the rooftops wears a green suit tailored exactly to fit his wide form. His jaw juts out in a terrifying square that makes his skin look inhumanly taut and stretched over the bone from below, and when he swivels his head to survey more of the rooftop Karkat spies a too-small blue and white hat sitting atop his head. Sawbuck, one of the few Karkat can name because both Droog and Spades declared him too annoying to fight. He'll time travel if they injure
him non-fatally in any way, and drag them along for the ride. Kanaya opens and closes her hand over her lipstick holster, one fang biting her lower lip as she sits torn with indecision, and she and Karkat tense again as Sawbuck's nostrils flare and he starts to look down. Karkat can see directly up the man's nose, and that's disgusting, honestly.

Cetus's roars have been more distant for a while now; just as Karkat's gone for his own specibus and Kanaya starts to push herself up out of their crouch to pre-empt the Felt member, an earsplitting crack stabs Karkat in the ears, and Sawbuck reels back from the balcony with an irritated yell. Karkat and Kanaya cover their ears as tons of glass shatter in the distance and more car alarms go off. The Felt member stomps away to investigate, but there's no way for Karkat to look around the tower and see what fresh fuck Cetus just pulled now. He ignores Dave's message to skip right to the group chat so he can get some straight answers without Dave's rambling.

CG: WHAT THE FUCK JUST BROKE NOW?!
EB: trump hotel!
CG: THE ENTIRE HOTEL?
CT: D --> I STRONGLY believe that no one will miss it
CT: D --> Probably
EB: sorry no time to talk ahhhhhhh!
TG: karkat where are you
TG: dude you gotta answer your texts
CG: KANAYA AND I ARE ALMOST BACK TO THE TOWER AND I CAN'T AFFORD TO GET SIDETRACKED BY YOUR INABILITY TO END A CONVERSATION IN A TIMELY FASHION, DAVE.
TG: no come on this is important
CG: LIKE FUCK IT IS! I'M CLOSING THE CHAT AS WE SPEAK!

"Can that wait?" Kanaya asks, looking at Karkat's cell phone like it's a cursed object. Which, to be fair? Karkat would not rule out.

TG: dont karkat this is serious
CG: WE JUST ESCAPED EXCESSIVE AMOUNTS OF TIME BULLSHIT AT THE CASINO BY THE TIPS OF OUR NUBS, OKAY, I'M NOT SITTING ON MY RUMP TEXTING YOU WHEN SAWBUCK COULD WANDER BACK AROUND ANY FUCKING SECOND.
TG: just let me know when you run into the crowbar guy and the lady who throws change
TG: like full on cross your heart stick a needle in your eye promise
CG: YES, DAVE, IF I RUN HEADLONG INTO AN ARBITRARY PAIR OF INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS PEOPLE, I WILL TAKE VALUABLE TIME OUT OF MY LIFE TO SEND YOU A TEXT MESSAGUWHAGGGGGGGG
TG: no its too early still im not falling for that

Kanaya scoops Karkat up into her arms, and jumps off the side of the roof. Karkat mashes his thumb claw down on what he thinks is the button to close the chat and hollers directly into her auricular sponge clots. "You may continue to message as needed," she calls over his screech, unfazed as she sticks the landing on the roof of the back porch with an impact that almost jostles Karkat's phone from his white-knuckled claws. She starts fucking ninja-running and makes another short leap onto the covered walkway that leads to the tower while Karkat's screech fizzes into incoherent spluttering. "While you are on Pesterchum, could you inquire as to where everyone else is located in the building?"

Karkat isn't sure his frozen legs would work right even if Kanaya put him down to run the rest of the way to the Ouroboros himself. One eye twitching, he raises his phone and taps away with numb clawtips.
CG: FEFERI.
CG: OR ANYONE, FUCK IT, WHERE ARE YOU IN HERE?
CC: We're upstairs! 38)
CG: SO SPECIFIC...SO HELPFUL...THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR THAT.
CC: You're the one who was dilly-dally shelly-shallying and L--EFT just to turn right around and clambake!
GG: Almost to the top two floors. Dirk is within our reach.
TG: which means janey isnt wading 4 more peeps to show up, sry
TG: * wading was entirely on purpose feff
CC: 38D
CG: WE JUST CAME IN ON THE SECOND FLOOR, I THINK.
GC: P4Y NO 4T3NT4US CR1M1N4LS H0GT13D UND3R TH3 D3SKS ON TH4T FLOOR.
GC: N3XT FLOOR SHOULD B3 R3D AND GR33N. 1 R3M3MB34 TH3 CHR1STM4S M1NT3S, Y3S.
GC: B3 C4R3FUL ON TH3 ST41RS. W3 LOST OR1OL3 ON TH3 W4Y UP 4ND H1S T1M3ST4MPS H4V3N M4D3 S3NS3 S1NC3.
TG: dependen on what shape dirk' sin we could use backup
CG: YEAH, WE'LL MEET YOU UP THERE OR ON YOUR WAY BACK DOWN.
WHICHEVER HAPPENS FIRST. JADE'S AWOL AND JOHN'S BUSY, SO WE DON'T HAVE TELEPORTING UNLESS IT'S AN EMERGENCY.
TG: FMLFMLFMLFMLFML
GC: INSTRUCT1ONS UNCL34R, BULG3 NOW STUCK 1N C31L1NG F4N -
TG: the tenth floor is a swarm of time travelling assholes
TG: I am in the swarm
TG: someone get me out of here
EB: emergency?
TG: they don't care about killing me but also they won't shut up and that boxcars guy tried to meme at me and it's making my brain hurt
CG: DON'T DIE. WE'LL GET THERE.

"Okay, put me down, I'm done," Karkat says, when Kanaya bends over and peers under a desk while still holding him, so that the blood starts to go to his thinkpan. Worse, when he looks away from the screen, he has an upside down view of two Felt members with yellow and blue hats, passed out, stuffed under the desk, and trussed up in some kind of elaborate rainbow-themed ziptie bondage that has Terezi written all over it. "Oh, for - no fucking wonder that troll keeps running out of zipties."

"She is quite thorough, is she not?" Kanaya says, struggling to keep her mouth straight when Karkat glowers at her. She then tips him back upright so he can walk on his own, and goes back to checking over the Felt members from a safe distance. "What is the word?"

Karkat rolls his eyes and stuffs his phone back into his pocket so he can't get sucked back into that black hole. "Dave says we're going to meet Crowbar and the one Nepeta and Equius met. The quarter lady. And he wants us to let him know when, so who knows what the fuck's up there. We need to help Oriole, too, because he's in some kind of trouble on the tenth floor. Terezi and Feferi and the rest are probably closer, but they're going after Dirk."

Kanaya straightens and power walks toward the door so fast Karkat jogs to catch up. "Then we shall go help him," she says, serious once more, and then kicks the door so hard it hits the far wall and cracks in two. For a second, Kanaya stays frozen with her leg raised mid-kick, then looks over at Karkat without lowering it. "...I didn't think that I applied that much force."
He checks the door's hinges while Kanaya stays like that. They've almost been ripped loose from the doorframe, which means the door was basically just propped back up in the frame for show. "Terezi and the scratch kids came through here already," he points out. Feferi could also have done it, but she wouldn't have been down here at the time.

"Ah. Jane." Kanaya lowers her leg, hops once to shake it out, and then hurries down the hall, following a trail of unconscious, hatless people toward the door for the stairwell.

When they reach it, Karkat tries to look up, and regrets it when the undersides of the stairs overhead lurch and warp sickeningly. Most of the lights in here are broken or flickering like they're on their last legs, which casts the green floor and wallpaper in murky shadows. He steps over someone with their hands zip-tied to their ankles and keeps a steady eye on the stairs themselves while Kanaya takes them two at a time. She's got her lipstickkind in hand, the lid uncapped and the jade green makeup almost invisible against the Felt green. "Watch your step," he mutters. "I can tell where the holes are," Kanaya says, flashing him a confident smile, and then she continues up the stairs, sidestepping the worst of the warped floor without looking down once, like it comes naturally to her. He follows her exact foot placement as closely as he can, with only a few sparing glances to make sure no one escapes their zip-ties and creeps after them as they ascend the tower.

No one does.

They don't reach the tenth floor. After a few close calls - Kanaya has to drag Karkat up and around when the stairs twist up along the walls like a broken funhouse, and he dangles for five seconds as gravity forgets it's supposed to be pointing down before Kanaya reels him in and jumps past the worst of the screwiness - Karkat's starting to think no, actually, teleporting everywhere is not overrated. Not when walking like a normal person leads to this. How the scratch kids and Terezi managed this alone, without a space person to help them, he will never understand. He doesn't want to ask, either, because knowing Terezi, it involved either sniffing her way around the spatial anomalies or licking them, and she'll describe the taste in excruciating detail to make him squirm. As soon as he can, Karkat wants to act like this entire day didn't exist. No sea monsters, no gangs, no dying, no horrors, no broken fucking physics when he's just trying to live his life - nothing. Hell, depending on how fucked Sburb decides to be this time around, he'll veto the thirteenth, too. Fuck everything.

From what he can tell, the Felt and Midnight Crew grunts agreed before Karkat even arrived. Apart from the people Terezi's team took care of on the first three floors, the rest of the building is almost abandoned. Kanaya doesn't stop at each floor to do a sweep, since they're making a beeline for Oriole, but when Karkat peeks through the open doors, the hallways are either in chaos or utterly pristine. At least a quarter look like they've never been used.

The seventh floor is where he left Spades and Ms Paint, earlier. It's still partly blown up, and probably in the worst shape of any of the floors, and Kanaya makes to skip right past it.

Someone is sitting in the shadows at the top of the stairs. "Slow down, slow down! What's the rush, compañeros? This building is trea-cher-ous, tú sabes?" the woman asks, laughing. Her legs sprawl down the steps in front of her, and she spins a coin like a top on the stair beside her, slapping it down with her palm without looking at it when it starts to wobble. "Had a lot of unintended renovations, and all. Wouldn't want you to fall and crack your heads open like eggs!"

“Though that would damn well simplify things,” another voice mutters from the direction of the hallway, and Karkat has trouble deciding who to glare at as another human in Felt gear walks in,
smacking a crowbarkind against his palm.

Which, if nothing else, means he and Kanaya charged headlong into two of the people with the easiest names to guess based on their unimaginative choice of weapons. So fucking convenient. He's not even a little bit sarcastic – thinking of people as 'that one guy' or 'that other human woman with the suit' tends to get real fucking old, real fast. Kanaya's skin hasn't stopped glowing since they started up the stairs, and the light intensifies when she's pissed. “I will ask you once to move,” she says. “There is still at least a small chance that you can surrender and turn yourselves in to the authorities, and we can avoid wasting everyone's time.”

Quatorze bursts out laughing, her head falling backwards against the stairs. Crowbar gives her a sour scowl, then turns it back on Kanaya and Karkat. "S'if that's even a real option," he says, rolling his eyes. "You know and I know and anyone who matters knows that cops are irrelevant. We bought out everyone on the force here ages ago."

Karkat rolls his eyes right back. "No fucking way. There must be what, a couple thousand of them? Bull fucking shit."

Crowbar's grin turns nasty. "Like any of 'em had a choice."

"The depths of your depravity truly are deep, and depraved," Kanaya says, gravely. Karkat's too busy cranking up the rage dial from 'steamed like a tender dumpling' to 'Gamzee would shed a tear of awe and swoon,' and can only tremble violently in agreement. His phone buzzes in his pocket in time with his furious shaking, but like fuck is he checking it now.

"Who gives a shit about that?" Quatorze asks the ceiling as she sits up. Her grin has a bite that reminds Karkat of Vriska, and isn't that a heartening thought. "You're talking to the wrong people, jadeblood. Has shouting at people that they're bad and wrong ever actually worked out for you?"

"You've also got the self-preservation of fucking gnats," Karkat says, "because your boss up there is right on board with ending the fucking world."

Quatorze mimes a yawn and tosses her braid back over her shoulder as she stands, tapping the heel of one foot and then the other on the edge of the stair as she starts toward them. Karkat catches Crowbar lunging and the crowbar swinging in his peripheral vision, but Kanaya reacts before he can. She smashes the crowbar away with the flat end of her chainsaw, so hard that Crowbar loses his grip on the specibus and winces as his arms get wrenched back by the impact, and then she goes to start the chainsaw. The throaty growl of the chainsaw engine doesn't start. Kanaya tries again, staring down at the weapon in confusion, but the chainsaw ignores her. Karkat hears a faint rattle in the engine when Kanaya gives it one last go, but nothing happens. She waves the chainsaw around in an attempt to turn it back into a tube of lipstick, and finally just looks around at all three people in her audience. "You broke my chainsaw," she says, non-plussed.

Crowbar tips his hat and scoops his crowbar (wow, never mind, this is almost as annoying as thinking of him as 'that guy' would have been) off the ground. It looks like a normal, unassuming crowbar, like the kind Karkat has seen dozens of random criminal pick up because it's easy to transfer childhood baseball skills to swinging an iron stick at people's heads – but Kanaya didn't even dent it with that swing, and she hit way harder than Crowbar did. "No more chatting. We got a job to do," the human says, with no explanation, raising the crowbar again. Kanaya grimaces, and pulls out a second lipstickkind, tossing the broken chainsaw back down the stairs as she immediately revs the new specibus. It jams with a painful squeal that stabs Karkat right in the ears when the teeth hit the
"Guess it's you and me, pana," Quatorze says, with a slow wink when Karkat looks back at her. "Ah, I was hoping to run into Droog before anyone else. Oh well. A lo que venimos!" She flips her coin up in the air, jumping down the last two stairs so she's level with Karkat as she calls it. "Car-"

The stairwell starts to shudder. Karkat assumes it's Cetus rampaging again, since that's the obvious answer. But then two voices babble over each other, too jumbled for Karkat to understand what the fuck they're shouting, and the shuddering resolves into several feet pounding down the stairs. Quatorze blinks, and her coin drops to the floor as she looks back over her shoulder. Crowbar and Kanaya have advanced through the door into the hallway, crowbar and broken chainsaw locked between them, and both of them look up as four five people crash down the stairs. There are two pairs of the same people, and Karkat's thinkpan takes this completely in fucking stride because Dave exists and after a while duplicated people lose their shock value. The fifth is Oriole in all his orange glory, screaming bloody murder and doing his best to kick the people carrying him on their shoulders in the face, with varying degrees of success. He bashes one of the four in the face with a flap of his enormous wing, and the man drops like a rock to slide down the last few steps. "Crowbar -" "- look, we -" "Special delivery!" "- found someone who wants to see you!" the remaining copy of the man and both trolls announce, tromping past Quatorze. With a 'hup!' one of the purplebloods hops onto the shoulders of her duplicate, hoisting Oriole up by his shoulders so it looks like he's sitting on a Felt green throne made of people.

"Time out for one sec, I need to tell these two they're a pair of idiots," Crowbar tells Kanaya. He looks haggard, like he just aged ten years in the space of two seconds. Kanaya hesitates, then shrugs. Crowbar lowers his crowbar and looks directly at the new arrivals. "Eggs. Biscuit. You're a pair of idiots. Don't you have anywhere better to be?"

"Help. Me," Oriole says, hissing through his teeth.

"We were trying," Karkat hisses back. A fit of giggles slowly consumed Quatorze, who's chomping down on half of her own fist as she wheezes, and Karkat steps behind her back to pick up the quarter she dropped. It feels heavy and cold in his palm, and he flings it back over his shoulder down the stairs without looking to see where it lands. He would stick it in his pocket or something, but like fuck does he want it to randomly turn into a machine gun and rip a hole in his pants so wide not even Kanaya could save the last vestiges of his dignity.

"The rest of us are totally there! We volunteered to come bring this guy here!" Biscuit says, dropping Oriole's leg so he can grab his unconscious duplicate and sling him over one shoulder. None of the three seem disappointed that Crowbar isn't enthused by their offering. "You really don't want to see him?"

"No!" Crowbar says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Just - go do your actual jobs, boneheads. Toss the orange kid out a window, for all I care."

Eggs and Biscuit light up with gleeful grins, like he just made their day. "Motherfucker -" Oriole starts, lunging forward, but the duplicate Eggs behind him seizes him around the waist and hauls him back. He shrugs his wings to try to dislodge her, but the purpleblood just blows air to get the feathers away from her nose and ignores the impact. "Come over here and say that!" Oriole finishes, on a weaker note.

"First off, you're a bird. Go fly or some shit, if you still can," Crowbar says, pointing the crowbar at Oriole and making some fucking bizarre gesture that Karkat thinks is supposed to represent flight. "Second off, I've seen enough of you for one lifetime. And by you, I mean collectively. Eggs,
Biscuit, feathery dipshit kid. All of you." He draws a circle in the air, then points the crowbar up at the ceiling. "Piss off."

"Wait, hang on -" Kanaya starts, reaching out toward Oriole belatedly.

Eggs and Biscuit dart away from her in sloppy unison, the second copy of Eggs dropping down from her duplicate's shoulders and supporting Oriole's shoulders as they haul ass back up the stairs. Oriole kicks and lashes out again, his wings fanning out to their full extent and knocking an Eggs in the nose, but she's purpleblood resilient. He rolls and reaches out a hand, grabbing at Kanaya's outstretched claw, but Crowbar slashes with his crowbar, back on the offensive without a word of warning, and Kanaya yanks her claw back before he can snap her forearm in two. "Kick his ass for me!" Oriole yells. Eggs and Biscuit's clamor fills the stairwell again for a moment: "Let's go find –" "- gotta be a window Droog hasn't broken already somewhere –" "Whooo!" "- Clover, too!"

Then they're out of sight again; a single orange feather lands on the third step down, the only sign that Oriole was there at all. "DEFENESTREGGTION!" an indistinct voice shouts, and a ragged chorus of cheers rises up, the last thing Karkat hears before they're well and truly gone.

"Well, that should keep them busy for five whole minutes, before they decide to become a pain in my neck again." Crowbar rolls his wrist and then swings his specibus back, frowning at Kanaya and Karkat like they're bugs that just splattered on his windshield. "What were we doing?"

"I was kicking your ass, both of my own volition and now for Oriole's sake, since he cannot do so himself," Kanaya says, and then she jumps at Crowbar with her chainsaw (broken again) at the ready, slapping his crowbar down and kicking him in the stomach with the heel of her foot. Crowbar doesn't have Droog's staying power or strength, and skids back into the hallway bent over his stomach, looking green in the face. It makes Karkat wonder - if a Felt member pukes on the Felt green carpet, does anyone give a flying fuck?

"Oh, for pete's sake. Fine, fine," Crowbar says, wheezing and clearly struggling to stand up straight. Then Kanaya's on him again, bringing her chainsaw around and using it as a blunt object to beat him back down the hall. Doubled over with pain, Crowbar's slower than Kanaya, but he manages to block her hits with the crowbar more often than he doesn't. Worse, the more Kanaya makes contact with that apparently indestructible crowbar, the more battered and rusted her chainsaw becomes.

Karkat can't keep watching, though. Quatorze rounds on him, balanced on one heel as she spins, a smile spreading across her face as she zeroes in on him. Her fingers snap reflexively, like she's flipping a coin - and then she snaps again, and pouts at her empty fingers when she realizes she has nothing to flip. "Dónde - ah, whatever," she says, after frowning at the grungy floor. When she starts digging through her suit pocket for another, Karkat makes a break for the door, using the side of the frame to swing around and fling himself down the hall in the opposite direction Kanaya and Crowbar went. Because like fuck is he sticking around long enough for her to flip a semi-automatic coin and fill him with lead, and like double fuck is he running after Kanaya and getting both of them shot in the back. He drops and somersaults through the first open door he finds, just as a round of bullets spritz the floor and wall opposite in a wild spray. Holy fuck, she's not even trying to aim. "Ay. Ay! Come back!" Quatorze shouts.

Karkat doesn't answer, because he's not fucking stupid. But hahaha, too late for that! Why did past!Karkat choose to become a close range stealth fighter? Why did he make such poor fucking life choices?! It's like the universe just loves to shove him into situations where his cover is already blown and he's up against an asshole with a gun, so he has to scrounge around for alternatives. Kanaya stuffed him and Nepeta and pretty much anyone who sat still long enough in as much body armor as she could, but that and his healing abilities can't save him if Quatorze fires a random
The lights in this room are out - Karkat falls back into the shadows behind the door, still feeling exposed, and waits for his chance. The Felt member's steps sound off-kilter as she comes after him, a little skip in her step. "So. You guys and Droog, you really are all buddy-buddy now? I knewwww it!" Quatorze says. She clicks her tongue as she walks into the room. Karkat stays in the shadow a little longer, holding his breath and hoping she doesn't think to turn around and fuck him up. A huge gun swings from a strap around her neck, loosely clutched under her arm as she surveys the dark rows of desks. She doesn't quite turn around - instead, she heads further in with mincing steps, her feet dancing and the barrel of the gun swaying with her as she swaggers through the rows. The light from the corridor casts long shadows, which means Karkat can't leave without his flickering against the wall right in front of Quatorze - he drops low and stays crouched as he takes slow, silent steps parallel to Quatorze. He keeps a desk between him and her as much as he can, so he'll have some kind of shield if she does a fucking pirouette off the semi-automatic and fires in a 360 degree arc to try to get him. "Bien brutal! That Equius guy could have saved me so much trouble if he'd just admitted it."

Quatorze turns on a heel, heading away from Karkat with a faint hum that's almost drowned out by the sound of yet another chainsaw revving outside. She lifts a hand from the gun and digs into her pocket - for another coin, though if she starts dual wielding with two machine guns or something, Karkat's fucking out of here. Fuck that noise. Now that her back's to him, Karkat takes a chance and breaks cover, staying low and then hopping as silently as he can on top of the desk nearest her, his toes aching with the effort of moving stealthily in tight quarters. Before she can swing back around to patrol his half of the room, he drops down from the desk, into the light from the hallway - his shadow looms large on the wall opposite, and Quatorze crows as her eyes dart toward it, second coin forgotten - and then he kicks the back of her knee, wrapping his arm around her neck from behind in a chokehold when her knee drops out from under her. She staggers back to her feet, but his weight hampers her far more than it would some of the other people he's fought in the past, and she stumbles and tilts over backwards when he wraps his legs around her torso. "Augh! Fu-" Karkat gasps, a horizontal line of pain jabbing across his back, just under his shoulder blades. He tightens his chokehold instead of letting go, and Quatorze drops the semi-automatic to squirm a hand between his arm and her neck. The full weight of the gun bangs against his knee, which hurts in an annoying way rather than a crippling way; Quatorze lets her feet slide out from under her, though, and as they slide to the floor Karkat feels the edge of the desk jam on every nub in his fucking spine. "Fucking - fuck Droog! Why couldn't you have bothered Terezi instead!" He thinks this is a fair fucking question, since there was no sign of either Crowbar or Quatorze the last time he was here. In the time it took for him and Kanaya to get back to the building, they somehow managed to miss the four human kids, singular orange bird-human hybrid, and two trolls running up the stairs?

Quatorze tries to head-butt him in the nose. Karkat keeps his head tucked to the side, and grits his teeth when she laughs at him, out of breath. "What, the two trolls running around with Die's toys? Su problema, not mine." She jabs an elbow into his hip, but tries again and this time manages to hit the floor instead of him (great) and rolls up onto her knees, wobbling as she digs her nails into the fabric of his jacket sleeve. She worms her fingers further between his arm and her throat, but Karkat keeps it up. Mostly because at this range, if she breaks away and gets her hands on the gun again, she's not going to miss unless he's really, really fast. Her other hand is -

Karkat is so fucking stupid. Her other hand just finished plucking a coin out of her pocket; she flips it with her thumb. "Ahaha! Cara!" she says, and the coin lands in her hand as a compact revolver that she aims over her shoulder at his face, squeezing the trigger.
Karkat blinks his eyes closed. He can't tell if that's instinct or just bad timing. He lets go - he thinks, it's so hard to tell, his head is swimming and he really didn't want to know what it felt like to get shot today, no matter how sure Sollux is that Karkat would come right back. It would still royally suck. But haha, looks like Vriska gets her way. Fucking typical.

He's had an awful long time to think all of this. At the very least he expected his screeching cicada of a thinkpan to shut the fuck up for five whole seconds while he was temp-dead, but no. Apparently he doesn't even get that much. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Told you to warn me when you ran into them," Dave says, his voice a thin rasp. "Holy shit."

Karkat finishes the longest blink in the history of trollkind, and stares at the hole in the wall left from the fight with Cassandra earlier. This is not the room he was in - same floor, obviously, but now it's him and Dave, and no sign of Quatorze. His ears ring, but he can't remember hearing the actual gunshot go off. Clumsily, Karkat grabs his face and maps it out with his claws; he's never been so fucking ecstatic to feel his nose in one piece. His costume hasn't developed a tumor in the shape of a knight's cape, so he doesn't think he died, either. Relief gusts out of him in the form of a rant. "If you're going to impart a bunch of fucking future guy wisdom, at least try to explain yourself so I don't blow it off. It's hard enough keeping tabs on your rambling bullshit when we have free time, let alone in the middle of a fucking battle." Karkat breathes only once, after the whole spiel, and then remembers to add, "And. Thanks."

Dave nods. "No prob." He helps Karkat up, but before Karkat's finished grabbing the outstretched hand Dave winces and swaps to his off hand. His left, Karkat sees, is wrapped in a tattered, days' old filthy bandage that's probably a disease vector in and of itself. Karkat grabs Dave's wrist, inspecting the scabbed over cut underneath with his power instead of looking like a normal person. It feels old but deep, inflammation licking at the edges of Karkat's awareness, and Dave hasn't gotten it stitched or stopped using his hand long enough to let it heal. Karkat would ask how he's been wielding a sword with this cut bisecting his squishy human hand, but oh wait - as if this dumbass would ever let a serious injury stand between him and a chance to stab himself in the (metaphorical or literal) foot. Dave sags while Karkat does a quick fix by sinking into the blood and blotting the infection out so he can knit things together, but the human keeps an eye on the many entrances to the room while Karkat's distracted by his pulse. "Sorry. But dude. Karkat. I am so future'd out right now. You can't even comprehend how much I'm over it. If you run into Gamzee again before I do, tell him he owes me, like, a million ice cream sundaes to make up for that. When we get to the next universe or whatever, he has to use his clown chaos magicks to recreate Dairy Queen for me. My blisters have blisters and I didn't think that loop was ever going to end."

Toward the end, Dave's voice sounds desperate; which is out of character enough that Karkat looks up, sharply. He can't sense any other obvious injuries in Dave, but there's some general wrongness hanging around him. Like he's on the edge of collapse. And here's Karkat, too fucking shitty at blood stuff to pinpoint what's wrong.

...And, if Dave's been time travelling long enough to have a cut in his hand that's been healing the regular way for days? Karkat has a sinking feeling that what's wrong with Dave isn't something he can fix. Fuck. FUCK. "Gamzee? What did he do now?" Karkat asks, swallowing the taste of bile low in his throat. "What have you been doing all this time? And for the love of fuck, why Dairy Queen?"

"Because that's what I like about Texas," Dave says, intoning it like it's some kind of freaky ritual phrase. When Karkat continues to stare at him in DEEPLY CONCERNED incomprehension, Dave coughs. "Never mind, Texas humor. I'm joking. It's fine. We need to go finish with that Quarters person now. Thanks for giving me a hand, man." He claps Karkat on the shoulder with his free
hand, and Karkat hastily shreds the disgusting bandage covering Dave's hand before he pulls back into his personal bubble. The cut looks like a stark red line across his palm, but Karkat's sure it won't tear open again after this. "Btw, I think this game was designed by an idiot."

...Well, there's only one logical response to that. "Obviously, Dave. I completely agree," Karkat replies, rolling his eyes. Dave holds out a fist. Karkat bumps it, but only because the ten minute long monologue Dave would unleash if Karkat didn't reciprocate would not be worth it. Ugh. Friendship. "Let's go, then. The last thing we need is for Quatorze to get bored and start shooting through the walls."

"The realest shit." The two of them run back out into the hallway; Dave hops over a chunk of wall on the way and as he does his cape flares out, so that Karkat catches a glimpse of scorch marks and streaks of dirt along the bottom edges. Dave's also wearing some kind of oddly shaped backpack or harness - but it's flat, like there's nothing in it, and Karkat's pretty sure that Dave is at least nominally aware of the fact that his sylladex is a thing that exists, rendering backpacks obsolete. Then again, Dave is a master of obliviousness when he really puts his mind to it; Karkat wouldn't put that kind of deliberate obtuseness past him.

They're three doors down from the room where they left Quatorze, though, and she tears out of that room in a high fucking dudgeon before Karkat can ask Dave what the fuck he's been doing since he got punched in the snout. "So pendeja- there you are!" she growls, skidding to a stop and seizing the semi-automatic as it careens around her. She clamps it to her side and fires without aiming; another blink, and Karkat and Dave are huddled behind a pile of debris, gunshots ringing out in rapid succession over the sound of Quatorze's laughter.

"I can cut the strap on that gun, if you knock her away from it afterward," Dave says, speaking right into Karkat's ear to be heard over the noise. Karkat nods and Dave flashsteps out of sight without another word. Scrambling, Karkat twists around and waits for the hail of bullets to cut off. He peeks around the corner in time to see Quatorze barreling down the hallway toward his cover, the gun still firing under her arm, and he yanks his head back under cover before it can get blasted to smithereens by a stray shot. "Right about now would be cool," Dave says, out of the blue, and Karkat chomps down on a garbled noise of irritation because he can't complain about Dave's off the cuff plan bullshit right now. Later. He'll let it simmer until it's a hearty, delicious stew of pent up annoyance. Quatorze yelps and Karkat takes that as his signal - he rolls around the debris to see Quatorze dropping the gunkind, the strap flapping loose as it bounces on the ground, and Karkat can sense every cut on Quatorze's hands in minute detail. She glowers at Karkat since he's the only one hanging around visible, and then dives for the gun.

More than likely, Dave expected him to kick her in the face. Karkat's pulse thunders low in his ears, and when he raises his hand and concentrates, the blood dripping down between Quatorze's fingers solidifies into spikes and digs back into her skin wherever it touches flesh.

Then Karkat kicks her in the face, while she flinches and yanks her hands back against her chest. Dave appears in a flash of red, his sword a blur first on one side of Quatorze, and then the other, and finally he lands in a crouch beside Karkat, his sword propping him up as he fixes his shades on his nose. There's a split second delay before Quatorze's pockets burst open, and an absolutely unnecessary amount of coins spill out in a chattering hailstorm. It's like someone took a cash register and upended it all over the floor.

For one fleeting second, Quatorze stands in stunned silence, and appears to teeter on the fence between yelling, hitting something, and bursting into tears. Karkat's familiar with the sensation.

"Fucking hell!" Crowbar shouts before Quatorze makes her move. Dave's head perks up and he
sidesteps awkwardly while still in his crouch so he can see around Quatorze. Karkat just leans to the side like a normal person. Kanaya and Crowbar went down the opposite end of the hallway, but now Crowbar's racing back along it, his crowbar forgotten as Kanaya chases after him with a broken chainsaw and a stern frown that heralds impending doom. She catches up before Crowbar reaches them and whacks his legs out from under him with a swing of her chainsaw. Crowbar reaches out with one hand, beseeching, and Kanaya smacks him upside the back of the head. His eyes roll back, and his head drops to the floor with a painful sounding clunk. "Do you two require assistance?" Kanaya asks, kneeling with a graceful swoop to check the Felt member's pulse and peel back his eyelid. She zipties his hands together and then to his ankles to keep him secure.

"Nah, we got this shit in the bag. Shit's so far in the bag we could deposit it in a waste receptacle. Keeping the dog park clean for everybody," Dave says, swapping his hands around so that he's supporting his swordkind with one and tapping away on his phone with another. Between them and Kanaya, Quatorze sidles from side to side, her braided hair snaking behind her as she looks from Karkat and Dave to Kanaya and back again with an increasingly nervous expression. Her hands stay clasped close to her chest, streaked with red.

Karkat has to say something. Something of vital importance. "Dave?"

"Yeah, man?" Dave says, cocking his head to the side to present his ear.

"If you go on a rant that combines ten different metaphors about barkbeast shit, I'm renouncing our friendship for my own mental health."

Dave snorts through his nose in an almost-laugh. Karkat twitches, and gives Dave a harder look. He noticed the state of Dave's god tier pants and cape, but snort-laughing? What the fuck?

"You think you've got me, huh?" Quatorze says, affronted, and judging by the growl in her voice Karkat's hindbrain thinks she's about to pull some last minute fuckery; he tenses and starts to reach toward Dave -

But the Felt member gives the three of them a long look, the whites of her eyes visible as she nervously fiddles with the front of her suit jacket. "...Nah, not feeling it," she finishes at last, flicking her bangs out of her face and grinning. "I'm out of here." She twists her hands in the fabric of her jacket one last time, and this time Karkat spies the coin that she's plucked out of her front pocket. She barely flips it at all, a half-assed twitch that plops the coin over from one side to the other in her hand, and it starts to flash purple and green. "Lessee what Clover's been up –"

Kanaya and Dave lunge and grab for Quatorze; when Quatorze disappears, Dave checks himself before the two collide headfirst, which is good, because Kanaya's horns would probably win. Then Dave does a double take and tackles Kanaya out of the way, just as some random fuck drops out of thin air and hits the ground back first. "Oof!" the man says, blinking watery eyes at the ceiling and lifting a hand to catch the rounded, pale purple hat that drifts down after him. "I really do not understand the appeal of throwing me out of windows at excessive hei-"

He breaks off as Karkat, Dave, and Kanaya stand over him. "Uh? Freeze?" Karkat says, resettling his weight and wondering if he should bother pulling a specibus, at this point.

"Shit no, dude, you have to say it with feeling. 'Freeze, douchenozzle!', or something like that," Dave insists. "Come up with a physiologically impossible swear word, it's tradition. Gotta uphold the Vantas brand."

Karkat wastes too much time giving Dave a disgusted look; Kanaya interjects instead. "Will you surrender and come quietly?" she asks, a spark of hope kindled in her voice. Karkat knows it's about
"Yes, yes, naturally," the man – Clover? Is this one Clover? – says, sitting up with a befuddled expression and holding his hat close. Realization hits him in visible waves as his eyes slowly widen into saucers. "Where am I – no, wait – blast it, Quatorze!"

Clover lurches up. He doesn't move fast and he's surrounded by three perfectly fucking competent hero-people. He stops to rub one knee when it emits a cracking sound. He's a middle aged dude with grubfucked knees, and at least one of them should grab him.

They all miss. Kanaya's claw skims over the top of Clover's hat; Karkat runs smack into Dave's shoulder when they both hang a sharp turn to follow the Felt member. "Sorry, pardon me," Clover says, "excuse me - ah, is that a window?" He makes a break for the hole in the wall that leads to the room Noir trashed. He ducks Kanaya's next swing by pure chance - or luck. *Fuck.* His top speed is a gentle hustle at best - Karkat could catch him, easy. Dave should have headed him off two seconds before he started running.

And yet, barely a yard into the room, Karkat trips over a chair that was not there two seconds ago, and on the way down his claw somehow snags in Kanaya's skirt, and he takes her down with him. It's probably a metaphor for his whole life, or something. Dave's cape slaps across Karkat's face in one final indignity as Dave's foot slides out from under him; Dave wasn't anywhere near them. This goes beyond shitty luck – this is embarrassing, and Vriska's not here for Karkat to yell at. Clover's luck overrides their basic ability to walk as far as Karkat can tell. He rips the plush fabric of Dave's cape away from his face so he can breathe without inhaling cloth, and then thrashes to extricate his legs from Kanaya's costume.

Meanwhile, Clover reaches one of the many broken windows on the far wall and, balanced precariously on a single foot with the other leg sticking out behind him so he can lean out over a jagged triangle of glass, sticks his hand out, palm up. "Come on, come on," the Felt member says, holding his hat down with his other hand so the wind can't lift it away.

Karkat and Kanaya free themselves first; Karkat doesn't know how or why Dave's cape spontaneously ate him alive, but Dave is barely visible amid the knots and folds of fabric rolled around him. Kanaya stops short of Clover, edging around him in full prowling mode. After an aborted effort to help free Dave from his swaddling prison that ends when Dave starts ineffectually sawing at his cape with his sword, Karkat joins her. "Should we grab him?" he asks her in a hiss, eyeballing the jagged glass still in the frame with suspicion. All it would take is a moment of shit luck -

Someone falls past the window in a rush, their scream rapidly receding. Karkat jolts back and Kanaya flinches beside him, but Clover keeps his palm up, waiting -

A coin with purple on one side and green-and-white on the other lands flat in his hand, green-and-white side up.

Oh god, not again. "Wait. You can't -" Karkat starts.

Clover smiles back at them, expression wry. "I am far too lucky to die. She isn't." He vanishes without completing his sentence.

Quatorze slams into the floor even hard than Clover did - her head hits hard enough to make Karkat twitch - and misses the edge of the window by bare inches. Her hair sticks out of its braid in frizzy, flyaway chunks, and her head rolls to the side to reveal unfocused eyes. "Ha...ha?" she mumbles, patting the floor with a clumsy hand. "Ha. That's always...fun."
Kanaya lightly tips the Felt member's head back toward her with the tip of her toe. Karkat still winces. "Kanaya."

"What. She'll be fine," Kanaya says, defensively. She taps Quatorze's shoulder with a foot this time, gently, and Quatorze lolls limply to the side, covers her head with her arms, and curls her legs up on autopilot. Not quite unconscious, but not all the way awake, either. Kanaya darts a shifty-eyed look at Karkat, and then huddles down to ziptie Quatorze's hands behind her back.

"Okay. Okay, good. Back on track. Fucking hell," Dave mutters. Karkat leaves Kanaya to it and stomps back over to Dave, whose cape looks worse for the wear but still intact as Dave rolls up onto his feet.

And then almost rolls right back off them. Karkat dives to catch him before his brain finishes processing the fact that Dave's tilting too far to the side; Dave staggers a little more and then sags on Karkat, resting his forehead on the heel of a palm. "Are you alright?" Karkat asks, alarmed. He gets a better grip on Dave by knotting a hand in the strap of the not-backpack he's wearing under his cape, which seems to help steady Dave.

Dave makes a muffled noise most accurately described as a 'mrrglh.' "I'm sorry in advance if I throw up or something. Shittin' hell, am I tired," he says, scrubbing his face with his hand. It knocks his shades askew, and for a second Karkat sees heavy bags under Dave's closed eyes. He also gets a whiff of unwashed human that not even the god tier pajamas seem to cover - Dave's put himself through the ringer without showering even once, and it shows. "Y'all know how sometimes you nap in the middle of the afternoon just because you have nothing better to do, and you wake up in a goddamn liminal space where nothing feels real and your head is one massive headache and your mouth tastes like ass -"

"You just said 'y'all,'" Kanaya says, looking up from where she's dragged Quatorze over to the scorched, half-melted fireplace. Karkat exchanges a serious look with her. "You need to rest, Dave."

Dave shakes his head and fixes his shades so Karkat can't see more than a flicker of red, bloodshot eyes. "Nah. Not enough time left. We need to go upstairs and meet up with the others before we hit the Crack."

"The Crack, with a significant capital letter because why the fuck not?" Karkat asks, with the same kind of futile hope that always fuels Kanaya when she asks people to surrender and reconsider their life choices of their own volition.

Another shake of the head. "You gotta say it like...the Crack. It's too close to ignore anymore," Dave says. A crackle of feedback echoes from his collar - Karkat jolts, because most of the time he forgets Dave's wearing that thing, and Dave pulls away before Karkat can get too good a look at it. His voice sounds weird to Karkat's ears when he continues, like Dave's talking through a filter, and he walks like he has somewhere to be in a hurry. "Or even better? You can call it...the Asscrack and piss off basically the entire universe, it's great. C'mon. Places to see, people to go. Impending doom. You know, the usual."

"What will happen up there?" Kanaya asks, stepping around Quatorze and catching up with Karkat so they can hurry after Dave. She tucks the broken chainsaw kind under her arm and takes a swipe at Dave's tattered cape, but Dave escapes her meddling range as they head down the hall to reach the stairwell again. "Dave, what is happening?"

A visible shudder runs through Dave; from behind, Karkat can see his shoulders hunch up and his fist clench. "Something shitty. Something inevitable," he says. "I'm not sure what it is, but I have word from an incredibly unreliable source that it's going to suck major balls. And trying to change
anything major this close to the breaking point...I don't think anyone can do it. We'd doom the
timeline faster than you can say 'fuck me sideways,' and then the Lord of Time will go full
Langoliers on us. So whatever goes down up there, we have to deal with it."

"You don't have some future bullshit knowledge of it already?" Karkat assumed that Dave knew
what the fuck was about to happen - what's the point of having time-travelled himself into
exhaustion, if not to get the scoop on whatever fresh fuckery Scratch has in store for them? But Dave
gives a half-shrug, which is equal to a 'nah, bruh' in Davese. "Seriously, Dave, what's been going
on? You look like complete and utter shit, and I mean that in the most platonic, concerned way
imaginable." Concern makes Karkat testy. He's distracted for a second when Kanaya drops her
chainsaw, uncaps yet another tube of lipstick, and revs the new chainsaw that pops out. "How many
of those things do you have?"

"Enough," Kanaya says, with the air of someone quietly confident in the number of spare chainsaw
concealed on her person. "I just did not see the point of breaking them all on that crowbar."

Which...makes complete sense. Point to Kanaya for acting as a beacon of normality in the face of
supreme bullshit.

"All I know," Dave says, his voice so filtered and quiet that Karkat almost misses it under Kanaya's
chainsaw test, "is that time's running out. For a lot of things." He looks over his shoulder, pausing to
give Karkat and Kanaya an unreadable look, his mouth a pinched line until he opens it. "Also, if I
fall over, could one of you, like. Haul me around for a bit. I'm running on adrenalin and caffeinated
beverages and the need to pee and holy fuck, I don't know how Sollux is functioning on this shit.
How is that guy even alive?" His tone turns admiring at the end and he picks up the pace again, but
Karkat hears the edge of tension before that.

Karkat shrugs - nobody knows the ways of Sollux - and then takes an extra wide step to pass Karkat
and pat Dave's shoulder. "We will not leave you behind," she promises.

"What kind of assholes do you take us for?" Karkat asks, keeping his voice grumpy to hide the fact
that his concern has peaked. When Dave opens his mouth, Karkat heads him off
before he can start elaborating. "Rhetorical question, rhetorical, dammit -"

"If you say so. Sweet." Dave sails right past the entrance to the stairs, and Karkat doesn't realize until
he and Kanaya have followed Dave almost to the next door. Karkat walks sideways for a second and
almost trips sideways over his own damn feet as he does a double take. Before he can demand an
explanation, Dave ducks out from under Kanaya's on-going pat and shoulders the next door open to
reveal -

A restroom.

"Ending the need to pee now. If I pass out in the bathroom, my shades are the only dignity I need,"
Dave announces, and then he flashsteps inside.

Karkat stares at the door. Kanaya seems content to stand guard outside it, checking occasionally to
make sure no one is coming out of the stairwell, but otherwise not questioning this turn of events.
With nothing else to do, Karkat cups his claws around his mouth to yell. "DAVE, YOU ASS,
ORIOLE COULD BE DYING!"

All Karkat hears is a very muffled, "He can fly!" through the door.

"Well, that's all I've got," Karkat says to Kanaya.
She has the decency to politely oblige him. "Dirk?"

Karkat nods. "WHAT ABOUT DIRK, DAVE?!" he adds at max volume.

This time all he gets out of Dave's distant mumble is, "-nship," and that makes no sense whatsoever. Maybe he should lower his expectations for a while, until Dave rests and eats something so he's no longer running on insomnia fumes. Which might not be for...a while.

Something else is bugging Karkat, though - the feeling that he's on the verge of overlooking something important. He paces back down the hall and then returns to Kanaya, brushing his clawtips over the pocket that holds his phone and wondering if he dares pull it out and delve into the group memo to poll everyone for Important Shit Karkat Is Forgetting. But that would be a fast way to lose another fifteen minutes to blathering garbage. Worse, Dave would probably join in and waste fifteen minutes loitering in the restroom before Kanaya would think to kick their asses into gear. They need to learn how to communicate succinctly, for fuck's sake.

Karkat scuffs a foot along the ground, alternating it with his regular steps, and doesn't realize he's following an unconscious rhythm until it breaks. His toe lodges against something metal on the floor and he kicks it without thinking; a crowbar clatters along the ground. Kanaya frowns at it like she holds it personally responsible for everything that's ever gone wrong in her life, and shuffles away from that spot. "We may want to move that," she says, all business. "I do not want Crowbar to wiggle over here and use it to somehow break the zipties. I would question whether that was even possible, but that weapon is annoying."

"Probably a good idea." Karkat fixes his sleeve and glove, and gingerly leans to pick the crowbar up. The specibus hangs heavy in his hand; up close, he can see splotches of rust that don't seem to affect the crowbar's usefulness or durability. He debates whether it would be smarter to toss the thing out the window (probably not - a lot of people seem to be hanging around out there right now) or to just hide it somewhere Crowbar can't find it right away.

Or he could keep it. Karkat gives it an experimental swing, adjusts his grip so it has better balance, and tries again. Kanaya's mouth twists down as she watches, her eyes tracking each swing. "...Are you certain you want to bring that thing along?" she asks, when Karkat starts patting at his hips, looking for somewhere to hook the fucking thing so that it won't get in his way.

"It breaks shit really fucking efficiently, and I want it in my life," he says, sticking a thumb claw through his belt loop and trying to judge whether he can stick a crowbar through there without tearing it. "Worst comes to worst, I give it to Spades as a wriggling day present."

Karkat sighs and gestures for him to turn in a circle. He does, and she very deliberately puts her chainsaw away before taking the crowbarkind and showing him that he has a loop for a shoulder holster of some kind. Just as the crowbar settles against his back, though, a voice cuts through the air. Karkat didn't notice until now how quiet it got, at some point. The absence of Cetus's roars doesn't register until he hears that voice, reverberating with purpose instead of corruption; Kanaya looks up at the same time he does, her lips parting slightly as they listen.

CE: Seer.

CE: Come here.

CE: I must present you with a Choice.

-
AG: H8h8! You guys are not going to 8elieve who I just caught falling out of a window! Guess, g8 on, guess!
CG: CLOVER.
AG: …
AG: Why, yes! Wh8t an amazing guess, K8rk8t!
AG: We must 8e conneeeeeeected.
CG: NO, ACTUALLY, I JUST HAVE CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE THAT GIVES ME THE INFORMATION NEEDED TO MAKE A REASONABLE GUESS.
AG: Oh, well goooooood for you! :::P
AG: 8nyway, stop 8eing 8oring and get ready. I'm on my way! Terezi, wh8t are you up to over here?!
GC: 4TT3MPT1NG TO F1GUR3 SOM3TH1NG OUT. TH1S S33R STUFF 1S NOT 4S 34SY 4S 1 M4K3 1T LOOK, YOU KNOW.
AG: Well, I've got some choice words for Doc Scratch, so hurry and figure it out!
GC: SCR4TCH 1S D3F1N1T3LY UP TO SOM3TH1NG...WHY 1S 1T SO H4RD TO S33 WH4T H1S 4NGL3 ON TH1S 1S...
AG: Wowow, don't care! Cetus is done, which means it's g8 time!

--

-- gardenGnostalgic [GG] opened a memo on board SUCKERS at error:error:error --
GG: guys!
GG: guys holy fuck!
GG: major super problems in chicago!
GG: also terezi your dragonmom says hi!
GC: T3LL H3R 1 S41D H1 B4C- W41T, WH4T?
AG: Did you 8low up the city? 8ecause honestly if you did, like, fuck that place. Please tell me you got pics.
GG: D: no!!!
TA: okay who broke what. ii mean iit, 2omethiing major ju2t went two 2hiit and ii need name2.
GG: i think.
GG: i think we might be in trouble.
TG: its pretty fucking deep
GA: Well Shit.
GG: dave, did you know this would happen?
TG: no but i felt it
TG: were so boned
TT: What exactly happened, and can dealing with it wait until after Cetus is taken care of?
GG: me and noir ran into something! i don't even know what, i wasn't gonna wait around and let it zap me!
GG: it was like that mummy movie but with a giant dragon egg and time breaking everywhere
EB: you unleashed arnold vosloo after he's spent 3000 years stuck in a tomb?
GG: maybe! it happened really fast!
EB: holy crap :o
AA: its too late
AA: it was always going to be too late
AA: and youre about to lose some time that would have really come in handy
EB: to arnold vosloo's wrath?
AA: oh yeah probably
GC: H4NG ON - J4D3, WH3R3 4R3 YOu T4K1NG MY LUSUS? >:T
GG: somewhere safe??
AG: Well, that's just vague enough for it to not 8e my pr08lem. 8ack to 8usiness!
TA: fuck all of you people and your lackadaii2iical bull2hiit.
TA: ii don't know how we get anything done around here, hone2tly.
CA: i knoww, right? like, wwho evven knowws howw wwe havve time to wwaste wwriting all
these memos.
CA: are half of us just standin around twwiddlin our thumbs wwhile Eq and Rose and John figure
out their plan?
GC: TH4T'S PR3TTY MUCH OUR D3F4ULT, Y3S. 1 DON'T KNOW WH4T YOU
3XP3CT3D.
GA: She's Right – We Mostly Engage In Strange Antics And Long Conversations, With Occasional
Intervals Of Efficiency And Violence. So It Goes.
CA: no, i meant like. twwiddlin in a literal fashion. wwere all just typing, howw are wwe getting
awway wwith this -
TG: no dude you cant point it out like that
TG: now were gonna have to actually concentrate
TT: Vriska, Eridan. We're going to approach Cetus again, and it would be nice for everyone
involved if you two would avoid shooting any of us.
CA: wwhat is the plan then
TT: We're going to go in through the eye, and keep going in until Equius has a maximum effect on
where we assume a whale's brain is located.
CA: thats awwsome im in
AG: Ugh, fiiiiiiine! It's not like I would get anything out of it, anyway. Hurry up already, then!
-
The problem is not getting Equius close enough, per se. It's that Cetus won't stay still. It's that once
they start trying to weave through the lashing tentacles to reach Cetus's gaping eyes, Cetus tries that
much hard to smack them away. It's that Rose can't see what she's doing when Equius is literally
right beside her. Between him and the sheer chaos of Leviathan's influence, charting the best path
through Cetus's onslaught is next to impossible.

It's that even with Equius right next to her, she can still hear Leviathan whispering. Not strongly
enough for her to make out words, but enough so that the churning of the ocean fills her ears and
drowns out her quieter thoughts. Her stomach churns in time with the waves, and there's a constant
lump lodged in her throat, making it difficult to swallow. Rose feels like if she reached into her
stomach and drew out her insides, they'd be julienned and rotted through in thin strings. Surely one
can only withstand so much of an old god's corrosive attention before the effects start to manifest
permanently - and Rose has made a poor habit of interacting with Leviathan on its own terms.

(It's never going to stop. She's never going to be free of this. She invited them in, and she's starting to
wonder if she'll always carry them under her skin. She'll still be tainted somehow long after everyone
else has moved on.)

(ohroseohroseohroseohrose)

Someone pokes her with a finger. It feels like getting punched with a moderate amount of force
applied directly to her brain, and Rose belatedly claps a hand to her nose to stem a fresh trickle of
blood pouring over her lip. "Sorry, sorry. I'm fine," she says, not sure who she's speaking to until
Equius shakes off the latest cloak of void.
John offers her a corner of his sleeve, but Rose shakes her head and pulls a twist of handkerchief out of one of her pockets. It's a toss-up now whether she can find one that isn't already stained with splotches of blood in various stages of drying, but Kanaya supplied her with enough excess fabric that she hasn't run out yet. "You know that thing we do?" John says, while Rose finishes mopping up her face. "That thing where we say we're fine but we're really, super obviously not?"

"I may be familiar with the concept," Rose says, pinching the offending nostril shut and tilting her head forward so her hair obscures her peripheral vision for a moment. It's not going to work, but it might buy her a few precious minutes before her god tier jacket is awash with gore. "You and I may or may not be two of the worst offenders, as I recall."

John purses his lips at her. "You are so the worst."

Rose's nostrils try to flare. There are obvious reasons this is not a resounding success. "Lies and slander."

"Au contraire -" John starts to say, with an overblown accent, before Equius lifts both of them up by the backs of their shirts and tosses them over the side of the building. "Okay, okay, going now! Break over! Jeez!"

Rose coasts along under her own power, tracking along the side of the building as she takes in Cetus's current condition. Losing both eyes hasn't slowed her in the slightest; the denizen's tentacles merely lash out with more erratic vigor to make up for it, while one gouged out socket drips black liquid that streaks down Cetus's wide face and rains down into the greyish sludge below. As though aware of being watched, a slit opens in Cetus's forehead, and another eye blinks open, strings of black ooze stretched between the lids as it rolls to stare at Rose. She clutches her needlekind tight in one fist, mouth tightening. It's hard to predict where Cetus will strike next with the sheer number of tentacles swarming from the many wounds in her flanks, but one shoots out toward Rose with laser precision. She and John knock knuckles awkwardly when they both attempt to grab the other's forearm, and in that split second of distraction, the tentacle jolts forward, suddenly fifty feet longer with extra spikes lancing out and curving toward them. The Breeze whirls them out of the way, but it's a much closer call than it should have been.

While they are air, Rose can sense a distinct, troll-shaped mass dropping through them, beside them, even though her own sight can barely register Equius as more than a faint shadow. But as soon as they solidify again it passes, and Rose has to deal with Equius's void aura on her own. They're on the opposite side of the street, on Cetus's blind side -

Just in time for ten more slits to burst open over Cetus's crying eye, and ten new, differently shaped pupils to fixate on Rose with hungry scrutiny. Three fresh tentacles dart toward them, while Cetus's bellyful of tendrils begins to ponderously creep forward along the Strip. The first rips free from where it wound up buried in the side of the building opposite, and lashes horizontally toward them, taking a good chunk of the building along with it. John and Rose dodge again without dissolving, the Breeze launching through the air more quickly than Rose's baseline floating abilities could manage, and the wind tosses her hair so that she sees Equius intercept the first tentacle head on. He takes the impact hard in the chest, his arms stretched as wide as they can to reach around half the tentacle, and he skids a little ways through the air before growling and yanking with his whole body. For a moment, nothing happens; then, Equius grits his teeth hard enough that one of them snaps in two, and the tentacle pops free from Cetus's body with a gush of dark blood. It keeps writhing and snapping back and forth, sprouting more spikes in an effort to stab Equius through the chest, but he lifts it over his head with both claws and flings it away down the street with a victorious grunt. Landing with a sluggish splash, the tentacle lays still - then twitches and snakes away beneath the
"Whoop! Heads up, turbulence!" John calls over the wind, and Rose chokes on bloody snot as they abruptly drop ten feet, stopping with an equally sudden lurch. Two of the other three tentacles attempt to wrap and coil around them in quick, snaking circles, darting along every time John tries to zip them out of reach, and one comes close enough that Rose's hood gets brushed roughly to the side as it passes around them in a single loop. John wrenches them to the side before turning them into the Breeze, and when they come out over Cetus's back, Rose has to smack her visor back down on the bridge of her nose before it can fly away.

But that's not because of the turbulence. It was just a flash, but she could have sworn that last jump happened because John caught the same glimpse of popped collar and angled shades that she did. "Did my father really just attempt to drag us out of the way?" she asks, disgruntled.

"Yeah. Is it just me, or did it get darker out here?" John says. Rose looks over and sees John...well. It's hard to tell what he's looking at, since he has sprouted a pair of dark shades. When he pulls them off and stuffs them into a pocket, he looks downright peeved. "He is so weird."

A burst of white lightning streaks past them and carves through Cetus's back. The bolt doesn't punch very deep before it grounds to a stop in the seething mass of dense tentacles within, but the accompanying flash of bright light sends John swearing and scrambling to fumble the shades back onto his face. He makes a stream of unintelligible-yet-disgruntled noises, while Eridan pulls his hand back and floats over with a look best described as apologetically terrified. He's altered his outfit somewhat since Rose last got a good look at him: his puffy shorts have lengthened, and everything looks more ornate and embroidered, as though he's crossed old princely fashion with something from the military. It might even, for all Rose knows, be historically accurate. "That was not on purpose. I didn't even graze you," he says, defensive, his sharp wings fluttering as he lands lightly on one foot and then the other.

Equius drops like a rock, landing on a fist and a knee, and Cetus's skin wobbles out in ripples around him, sending Eridan skittering for his footing. Vriska lands with a little more finesse, but Rose sees that luck notwithstanding, her awakened god tier dress is now far more tattered than before. Most of the underskirt has been shortened to shreds, and though the gauntlet on her arm remains intact, Rose can see parts where acid has starts to deform the surface of the metal. "Look who decided to show up to help with round two!" she says, all haughty poise, just a hint of teeth in her grin as she nods to herself.

"Yeah, since it looks like this is still a work in progress," John shoots back.

Vriska takes a step back and Eridan presses a fist to his mouth. "What, you think you can do better?" Vriska says, with a slight stutter before her competitive spirit kicks into high gear.

"I think you already beat Cetus once, but somehow neither you nor Eridan are making a dent," Rose interjects, keeping her voice calm and steady as she holds out a hand between Vriska and John. "Where would her weak points be were she not infested, apart from the eyes?"

Vriska starts forward again, jabbing a thumb at her chest and glaring at Rose. She brandishes her sword at Eridan, and Eridan goes cross-eyed in his hurry to duck. "We're aiming at them! We are so making a dent! This dumb denizen's life bar just keeps wigging out all over the place!" She stamps her heel down against Cetus's back to punctuate her words. "Talk! About! Cheeeeeeep!"

With her final stomp, Vriska raises her foot extra high and drives it down with excessive force. A tentacle punches straight through Cetus's skin and misses the troll's nose by an inch - if that. Vriska yells and chops it in two, her sword burning with cerulean blue light, but it's too late. The skin under
their feet begins to ripple, the wriggled tentacles within clearly visible through the denizen's bleached flesh, and Rose kicks off in sync with John as a crown of thorny spikes shoots out along the crest of Cetus's head. They rocket up, but can't seem to get out of reach - the tentacles and spines just keep growing.

"...There's a life bar?" Rose asks, as John spins them out of the way. They pause, drifting between Eridan and Equius as they hover in the air to the right of Cetus's new eye. John shrugs, and they both look back at Cetus. The denizen now looks like a cross between a sea urchin and a whale, as more and more spines pierce through along the length of her spine down to the atrophying tail. More and more of the tentacles are growing spikes as well - a truly thorncouddling brier for them to cut their way through.

There is, indeed, a life bar. Rose almost goes cross eyed herself flipping through the different filters she's mastered for her extra sight, but nothing works until she reaches one she recalls developing while most of the way drunk. It can show the filters that apply themselves to significant words like fraymotifs in text chats; when Rose studies Cetus again, she can make out a ladder of shuddering red bars, each the length of a football field. Some of them overlap each other and they clip through the road itself, making it difficult to quantify how much health Cetus has. It's an unfairly bewildering amount. "That is more excessive than the Black King," Equius observes. John scratches the back of his head, then gives another shrug.

"No shit!" Vriska says, hacking her way out of the brier the hard way. Her sword finds every weak point and fault in the spines, and she bursts out in a petulant flash of light that leaves scorch marks in her wake. "It's more 'excessive' than it ever was before!" Then her uniform flares – and reverts back to orange and gold, the cerulean-trimmed dress fading in a rush of sparkles. Vriska tightens her fist reflexively as her sword vanishes, and the dice in the handle somehow don't slip free. When Rose checks, she sees that Vriska's aura of power has already dwindled to a fraction of what it was when she threw the dice. All that luck, already poured down the metaphorical drain of Cetus's insatiable gullet. Vriska pushes away from Cetus, keeping a wary eye over her shoulder as she angles toward them. "Tch!"

It's not a retreat if Vriska's rummaging around for a fresh set of civilian bystanders to steal luck from. Rose doesn't know what happened to the first batch; she's loathe to think of what could have gone wrong for them, considering how much casual destruction Cetus has inflicted on the Strip. "If you don't know anywhere better to start, we're going to try to launch Equius through one of her eyes for the exorcism," she says, trying to draw Vriska's focus away from potential targets.

Vriska snorts derisively, though her aura doesn't fluctuate as she finishes crossing to their group. Rose gets an answer from Eridan, instead. "An' that'll make it killable? Because I'm tellin' you, this? This is ridiculous," he declares, brandishing his claws at Cetus. A thick line of violet blood runs out of his nose, and without thinking he sniffs hard so that it gets sucked back up. He gags, coughs, and then massages his throat. "You think there's a limit on amazin' cosmic hope powers?" he asks, looking pale.

Vriska launches herself at top speed and punts Eridan back five feet when she barrels into him knee-first. "Shut up! Shut! Up! Do fucking not! If you crap out too, I'll kick your ass!" Seizing him by the ear fins, she smushes his cheeks inward with her palms and barks directly into his face. "Now shut up and believe in me!"

"Vris, you...you're an inspiration," Eridan says, with exhausted sarcasm clear in his voice. He can barely open his eyes with the pressure Vriska is applying. As though to make up for it, John is looking from Vriska to Eridan and back again with his eyebrows reaching for the stars and his mouth a judgmental line.
"I do not think that's how it -" Rose starts to say. She doesn't know why she bothers, sometimes.

Vriska frees one claw to point at Rose, her face a thundercloud, before switching back to Eridan. "Shut up! And you? BELIEVE IN THE ME WHO BELIEVES IN YOU!" She then drags Eridan closer, hissing with remarkable articulation through clenched teeth, her bruise-blue gums exposed. "Aka, if you blow this for us? Believe that I will make you pay."

Eridan leans back as far as he can to escape the range of Vriska's spittle. He does not succeed; with her grip on his face, Vriska just floats on back with him until he's almost bent over backwards. "Fear-hope. Does that even count?" he asks, sounding faint. Some of the color returns to his face, but Rose suspects that might be because his head is now lower than his pusher.

"I believe the word you're looking for is, 'desperation,'" Rose says, coughing into her hand to clear her throat.

When she pulls her hand away, dark blood speckles the side of her forefinger and thumb. Cool as you please, she drops her hand to the side and dries it off on the side of her pants. The color's not an exact match, but no one will look close enough to notice it. Not while they're in the middle of all this.

She's lived most of her life up until this point doing exactly that thing where one pretends one is fine, when one is not, in fact, fine. But she'll be damned if she admits defeat to John.

John raises his hand, and Rose twitches, thinking she's been caught out. "Guys? Uh, guys?" he says instead, the line of his mouth widening still further as he stares at – ah, yes, the giant denizen that Rose ignored for all of a split second.

"Yeah, what is it now? Do you need a pep talk?!" Vriska demands, whipping around. "Oh."

Cetus stares back at them. Given the sheer breadth and quantity of her new eyes (seven on one side and one on the other – damn and blast, why eight?), this is a harrowing display. Almost all of the denizen's thrashing tentacles have fallen still, slumping in S shaped coils, and the denizen has stopped with what Rose can only describe as an impatient, unspoken message of, *we can get back to fighting any day, now."

It's a quiet roar, compared to Cetus's earlier bellows. Almost calm. Thunderous enough to rattle Rose's bones, and topple what few trees remain in the resort areas, their acid-eaten trunks landing flat and sinking beneath the sludge. Rose can't even imagine what anyone hearing left in the vicinity must think of this fight – what is this, the third major city a Horrorterror has rendered unlivable, in the space of a few months? Not counting the reportedly tiny town in Russia, anyway.

Perhaps it's rude not to answer. "Cetus," Rose says. John's grip on her hand tightens as Cetus's tentacles begin to dance and wave again, but only a few lash out – one punches toward Vriska and Eridan, who yelp and fly out of the way. With an enormous shriek of ripping metal, the tentacle smashes through the corner of the very battered building behind them. The rest don't find any target in particular, but as they stretch out they fill more and more of the air space above street-level with suckers and thorns. Insight twitches in the back of Rose's mind, above the swirling of the ocean, and she turns her eyes on the sludgy water below. Seeing through the grim aura that hangs rank over the water makes her eyes water with something that might not be lacrimal fluid, but close to Cetus's underbelly, she sees the murky, sinuous motion of many, many somethings delving beneath the surface. They waver so much that it's like looking at lenticular images. And those are just the grimdark tendrils, from what she can tell – the grimlight blends in too well for her to take their measure.
If Leviathan-in-Cetus wanted to, the Horrorterror could turn all this into a death trap. Not for them, not as long as John has a handle on things and Vriska has even a smidgeon of luck left to her name, but to anyone else who might be unfortunate enough to be hanging around. And Rose doesn't know where Becquerel took to dropping people off before vanishing…

"Lots of movement under the surface. Warn anyone who's still out here to watch out," she whispers to John through the corner of her mouth; she doesn't dare look away from Cetus long enough to message them.

The wind rushes past her mouth. "Already done," John says, with a thumbs up.

"LEVIATHAN'S INTERJECTION SOUNDS LIKE ROSE WOULD IMAGINE STICKING HER HEAD INSIDE A WASHING MACHINE LOADED WITH BRICKS MUST. SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHETHER LEVIATHAN DECIDED TO POUR MORE OF THEMSELVES INTO CETUS'S FLESHSUIT OR THE HORRORTERROR'S VOICES ARE JUST GROWING MORE CHAOTIC ON SOME RANDOM, UNKNOWABLE WHIM, BUT ERIDAN PUKE IN MIDAIR WITH A CONVulsion THAT WRACKS HIS ENTIRE BODY. SOMETHING WRENCHES JOHN'S HAND FROM HERS, AND ROSE HEARS JOHN CRY OUT BEFORE SHE'S TUCKED IN CLOSE BESIDE SOMEONE WHO WOULD REEK OF SWEAT, IF SAID SWEAT WEREN'T BEING SUCKED INTO A VOID AS FAST AS IT ACCUMULATES. ERIDAN DANGLES FROM EQUIUS'S OTHER ARM; FOR A MOMENT ROSE THINKS HE'S UNCONSCIOUS, BUT THE VIOLETBLOOD RAISES HIS HEAD SLOWLY, WITH A QUIETLY VIOLENT EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE ROSE DOESN'T THINK SHE'S SEEN BEFORE.

Equius looks down, his face momentarily visible through the void as he grimaces. The cold note in her voice reaches Eridan, though, and he hacks up a last mouthful of bile before cackling. "Lalonde's fuckin' pissed!"

Equius's claw clamps on Rose's wrist like a vice – too tight – and then he lets her go. Rose floats lopsided for a second, adjusting to the renewed weight on that one arm. This time, she doesn't bother raising her voice: Leviathan can hear her. "No. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of you." She snaps her fingers and beckons Vriska. There's never a real guarantee that Vriska will be in a cooperative mood, but the troll flies up on Rose's left, looking unimpressed but drawn by curiosity, if nothing else.

"NEVER. AGAIN."

Turning her head to the side, she speaks into Vriska's ear. Vriska tilts her head to the side too far, her wind-blown hair brushing Rose's face. "I want to steal the light from their eyes."

Vriska brandishes both her claws at Rose's face. "Blow on them for luck or some shit."

"Is there anything in particular I need to do?" Rose asks.

Vriska clenches both claws into fists, grinning at Rose like she's just been handed an octagon-shaped lollipop. "Oh, helllllllll yes!" When she unclenches her hands, her dice sit wedged between her fingers, four on each hand. "Just wait. Terezi's gonna be so pissed she missed out on a Thief/Seer combo."

"Is there anything in particular I need to do?" Rose asks.

Vriska brandishes both her claws at Rose's face. "Blow on them for luck or some shit."
"Ah, of course. As is tradition." Rose sighs on the dice, if only to get Vriska's claws away from her eyes, and music blooms in her ears with riotous chimes.

[y/n acknowledged]

[fraymotif activated: No Light, No Light]

Vriska casts her dice out in a long arc. They burn like tiny white-blue stars in Rose's vision, the light visible even after the dice are far enough away that they should have been too small to make out - and each lands with perfect precision on a tentacle or a thorn rather than plunging into the sludge below. The last to land makes it all the way to the crown of Cetus's head, and Rose can feel Vriska's whole body go taut beside her as she holds her breath and waits for the roll to finish.

It lands with a clack that Rose feels rather than hears, despite how far away the die landed; all of the dice light up once more, and eight lances materialize out of the air. Each looks about the length of a telephone pole, and before the denizen can react, they puncture Cetus's eyes. Vriska tosses her hair with a triumphant smirk, her eyes falling shut as she basks in the moment.

The street bursts into motion. And Vriska's luck must really be running low; she's still mid-hair toss when the grimdark thorns eat up the sky. Rose yanks her into a clear space before the troll can be impaled, and Vriska squawks, but more tentacles close in, growing in short, erratic bursts to cut them off. By sheer dumb luck, Vriska's dice get flung into the air and Vriska snaps her claws until they arc back to her with uncanny accuracy. Equius rips the thicket apart and muscles his way through to reopen the airspace between them, but the grimlight tentacles that follow slide up and fill in the gaps as they interlace with the rest of the thicket. They fill in almost all the space from one side of the street to the other.

She reaches out a hand, and John seizes it - one of her fingers winds up bent down between their palms by accident, but in the next moment they're not corporeal and the point is rendered moot. John pulls them all around into the air before Cetus's eyes, and Equius launches himself at one of the punctured sockets.

One of the thicker tentacles shoots up and bats him aside; Cetus's already obscenely wide mouth cracks open even more, a fresh line of teeth yawning before them. "No, you dumb- ugh!" Vriska yells, her frustrated noises spinning off on the Breeze as they all dissolve again. This time, John takes them up and up, above the black and white maze of thorns that now surrounds the denizen's body. "You think we haven't tried that?!!"

Equius doesn't quite glare at her, but the absence of any expression on his face (that Rose can make out) speaks for itself. "I haven't tried it. The longer this drags on, the more this spreads. Strider won't be able to keep Nepeta and Nitram out of the way much longer. Nepeta is becoming unruly."

Knowing Vriska, she's about to make a very unwise comment about what Nepeta and Tavros can do with that unruliness, and Rose doesn't intend to let them get sidetracked by a blood feud in the making. They need more of an opening if Equius is going to get close and stay close long enough for the void to isolate all of Cetus, and as long as Leviathan can respond with more defenses like this, they're going to be stuck dancing around until John exhausts himself.

She shouts this time - less for Leviathan-in-Cetus's benefit, and more to jolt Vriska before she can make an ass of herself. Trying to reason with or find reason in a Horrorterror is most likely futile, but
Rose wants to distract Leviathan more than anything else. And there's no denying that she's captured its attention; Cetus hasn't done anything but respond to her and her friends since she and John re-engaged.

More to the point, it feels good to scream at Leviathan, even if its responses are no doubt doomed to be obfuscating and incomprehensible to a mortal mind. "The world is ending! There won't be anything left for you here, even if you stay on the physical plane! There's no point to you doing this! Just - just leave!" Rose's voice cracks hard twice in the last two sentences.

Eridan tries to smack her arm, hissing, "Will you stop aggravatin' it -" before Rose jerks around and glares at his wayward claw. He snatches it back, tilting his horns back and blinking rapidly. Meanwhile, when Rose glances down, she sees that the uppermost eyes sockets in Cetus's face are vast enough that they can peer back at Rose with a hollow, unseeing stare. Something's rippling and unfolding within the sockets of the eyes on the left, like the dark, fluttering veils of a deep-sea creature, and it takes Rose a moment too long - John sucks in a breath first, his front teeth digging into his lower lip, and Rose realizes that a rose is blooming in Cetus's eye.

(...Roses and thorns. A brier thereof. Rose wonders if she should stop thinking of the limbs as tentacles, and start calling them stems.)

The denizen convulses, and Cetus's body doubles up in a way a whale's body was never meant to. Extra tentacles snap through the thin skin like broken springs, while several parts of the thorn maze retract and draw in close. John has to haul them away again - Rose has lost count of how many times he's done so in the past few minutes - but with a roar, Cetus lunges toward them when they reappear down the road. They're forced further and further down the Strip, and Cetus moves with startling speed through the grim sludge. "Oh god, it's like it's sliding down a giant slip 'n slide! Of death!" John yells through the wind.

Rose has something else on her mind. "'I'…" she murmurs, mostly to herself. But the Breeze has them all in its grip, and Eridan throws her a knowing, worried look as though he can sense the quotation marks.

John hears them, too. "That's weird, right? Because that seemed a little weird. A lottle weird, even," he says. He has, Rose notices, a very firm grip on Equius's trailing hood, so as to not lose track of him; Vriska, on the other hand, is being carried along on a stream of wind at least four feet from the rest of the group at any given time.

"A lottle, indeed. But then again, what do we know about chaotic alien hiveminds and their choice of pronouns?" Rose asks. The question's only half rhetorical.

"Too much," John scrunches up his nose. "Let's compare notes later."

"If there is a later, by all means."

Vriska loses her patience. "Stop whooshing us around, dammit! Some of us aren't a bunch of wimps!!!"

John rolls his eyes. "Jeez, sorry!" After one last jump along the wind, she emerges with her hair dumped in her face and one fist raised. John shrugs and Vriska drops an inch before catching herself
when the Breeze ditches her. She shakes the dice cupped in her palm with vigor as she flips all her hair back with a forearm. Some catches on her mismatched horns, but she ignores it in favor of eyeing up Cetus's rapidly approaching bulk. They've come out near the Venetian - which is worrying. The area around Cetus's initial drop site may have been evacuated, but the further they travel down the road, the more likely it is that they're going to damage inhabited buildings.

And when she looks again, Cetus's eyes are full of dark roses.

"You have nothing I want!" Not to mention the fact that, despite Leviathan's words, Rose suspects the Horroterror would be perfectly content to see her dead - the wave of thorny flagella continue to lash out at them, and one tentacle in particular seizes something from the road (a half-slag replica of the Statue of Liberty, from what little Rose recognizes) and whips it at them like a spear with tremendous force. It passes so close overhead that the shadow makes Rose's skin crawl and drops of acidic slime splatter along Rose's jacket sleeves. But it misses and continues to fly with such velocity that Rose thinks the statue might clear most of the city and land somewhere in the Vegas suburbs when all's said and done. "Cetus, I would speak to you, and only you! Can you hear me?!" she asks, switching tactics.

"Stop talking to it!" Vriska screeches back, stopping mid-throw to glower at Rose. Then she flings the dice in a wild throw - they all land on the same street lamp, but the light that flares from the dice is of a mediocre luminous flux, and only summons a single guillotine to hack off the tentacle that threw the replica statue. "Oh my god, just hurry up, horsebrain! Just pick an eyeball again and Eridan, you blast it until it stops paying attention."

"Who's crappin' out, again? Right," Eridan mutters - quietly, but not quietly enough. Vriska turns on him, livid, and Eridan flies away from the group at top speed, raw power gathering around his claws. "Going, I'm going!" He curves around Cetus in a wide circle with a bolt of pale light burning through the thorny growth that grows across his path.

Rose draws both her needlekind and levels them at Cetus. The possessed denizen hasn't attempted to grow a fresh set of eyes, and being blinded doesn't appear to hamper it much. She takes aim at the one of the sockets that isn't filled with rotting petals, and starts mentally incanting. "I'm not talking to you," she says, flatly, and then casts the spell. It bursts from both needlekind and streaks toward the denizen in a flurry of light, but Cetus blocks with two tendrils. Rose's power burns through most of them, but doesn't reach Cetus's face. "Cetus! We have a game to play! You need to wake up!" she calls, a little louder, as she starts charging up another spell.

When she checks Cetus's ludicrous lifebar, though, she sees they haven't even made a dent. Blinding Cetus made no impact on its grim-enhanced durability. She supposes this is why one might want to talk to one's denizen, rather than fighting them outright. Even if her more powerful destructive attacks weren't corrupted by Leviathan, she can't imagine taking Cetus on alone.
"Should I take you in close? I can help." John asks, his voice low. Someone Rose can't see at the moment says something in a muffled, gruff whisper - that is vexing - and John sticks out his tongue. "I am not obvious. Rude."

"I did not intend to be rude. This requires my strongest effort. You would find it - uncomfortable," the person replies, stiffly, and then Rose - comes close to forgetting that they were there at all. John's the only one with her, now; Vriska skips away, jumping between lashing tentacles to snatch her dice up and launch a barrage of low-level attacks that only affect a few of Cetus's limbs at a time. And Cetus has countless limbs to replace them with. If Leviathan weren't wholly focused on Rose, to the point that Eridan is firing at Cetus's broad, scabbed flank with complete impunity...if Vriska weren't relentlessly persistent, somersaulting and skidding between tentacles, throwing the dice down again and again with fury instead of luck fueling her...

Rose wonders. For some reason, she can't shake the impression that Leviathan's ability to multitask has suffered an abrupt decline. 'I.' Why did Leviathan say 'I'?

Something to ponder, later. Right now, Rose needs to serve as the best distraction she can manage, for someone's sake, "Cetus, you can throw them off! We need to fight!" she shouts. Light gathers and snaps between the twin points of her needlekind as she raises them over her head, and then jabs them toward Cetus, launching a line of light that scalds a burning strip through the denizen's thorn brier. Part of the attack scorches a tiny portion of Cetus's face, above the upper line of her vast mouth. Rose inflicts little more than the equivalent of a sunburn; Eridan fires five bolts of hope lightning in quick succession and they stab into Cetus's side with more raw force. All he receives for his efforts is a shudder and a swipe from a single vast tentacle. Cetus opens its mouth further still, and a gag-inducing breath heavy with the scent of dead fish and rotting blubber washes over Rose and John. John whisks it away on the wind. Rose does her best not to breathe through her nose, regardless.

"This is the last straw. Rose shouldn't be surprised; between Vriska's ego and Eridan's...everything, it was only a matter of time. She'd have bet on Vriska, but as she's noted, Vriska's luck reservoir has seen better days, and for once in her life, Vriska isn't impatient enough.

Eridan points an accusing claw at Cetus, light pulsing from his chest and running along his arm. It's so bright it almost whites out Rose's vision when she glances at his shaking hand. John shades his shades with his hand, and even then she can see the preternatural glow of his eyes squinting through the lenses. "I'm feeling real fuckin' ignored over here!" Eridan yells, the white symbol on the front of his shirt brightening in sync with his power.

Rose sees it coming. No - say rather that she sees Vriska suddenly light up like a sun again, burgeoning with stolen luck. Rose can't pinpoint the source, but - "Vri- Eridan, stop!" she shouts, switching halfway through when it's clear that what Vriska's done is done.

Eridan fires. He aims at Cetus's face, but the angle is subtly wrong. The denizen lunges to snap at John and Rose, and the beam of power cuts through the wide curve of Cetus's head - and keeps going at an upward angle. John and Rose aren't in its path; it blazes past them and over the mall across the street like a comet, between two towers and over a lopsided oval perched between them. "Crap. Crap, crapcrapcrapcrap," John starts chanting, with an odd echo that makes no sense until Rose realizes she's saying the exact same thing at the same time.
For a brief second, Rose hopes that the beam might miss. It *looks* like it's going to climb enough to clear the gold-glass building just off the Strip. Naturally, her hopes are shattered (she should really stop doing that). The beam blasts through the top two floors of the Trump International, taking an entire chunk of white stone off the top and obliterating the 'T' in the sign. With a deafening *crack*, the rest of the windows finish shattering, sloughing off the building in glittering sheets and falling to the ground. Rose flinches when a second, smaller cascade of *cracks* rattle off as each round of window glass lands and shatters further still. Eridan's attack keeps going, but with the angle, it keeps climbing and disappears into the sky in the distance without hitting anything else visible in the city.

Rose turns back toward Vriska. The ceruleanblood stands on top of the Venetian's campanile, defiant and glaring daggers at Rose already; Eridan, on the other hand, claps both hands to his face, eyes bulging with shocked embarrassment. "...Ohhh my god," John says, with dawning horror. "Vriska! Eridan! Oh my god!"

"Give me a break, John, there wasn't even anyone *on* that floor!" Vriska yells.

"*We're gonna get sued, Vriska!!!* We don't have superhero property damage insurance! That was blatant!"

"*THE WORLD IS ENDING, JOHN!"* she calls back, at twice the volume. Then Vriska hesitates, as though processing the fact that reality ending might not stop a lawsuit in action if Terezi involves herself, and points at Eridan. "Just make Eridan pay for it!"

Eridan squawks behind his hands, rips them away from his face, and starts babbling. "This is fine. This is totally. Fine!" He points a finger at Vriska, then John, then Rose. "None of you saw anythin', dammit! Just keep our story straight, it came out of the giant monster - no one got that on video, right? Right. It was all part of the giant whale's screaming rampage and no one can prove otherwise!"

"Got bad news for you, kid," Bro says over Rose's head. Rose nearly jumps out of her boots, and John wraps his arms around her neck for dear life. There's a pause while Bro vanishes and reappears on the opposite side of the Venetian's campanile, perched sideways on the steep surface of the tower, and then Vriska yelps as a puppet shaped like a square robot lands a reprimanding smack square between her horns. "There've been camera crews since about fifteen minutes ago. Can only smack down so many of them before it gets boring." The squat puppet snaps around the tower and back into Bro's gloved hands before Vriska can shred it with her claws, and Bro's shades glint in the light as he shoots a finger pistol at John.

John takes off his shades with such vehemence that Rose is almost throttled, and chucks the sunglasses at Bro with a burst of windy fury. "Wait, hang on, how do we even have time for this?!", John asks. "What - Cetus - ?"

Which is an excellent question.

Equius comes rushing back to the forefront of Rose's mind, and the thick void eases off so that Rose can look at Cetus and *see*.

Part of Cetus's head sags around the half-slagged, melted hole Eridan punched through it. No, *more* - *all* of Cetus sags, the whale's skin blanched with a pale lavender tinge as black ooze drools from the corners of her slack mouth. There's no sign of wriggling movement beneath the denizen's skin; it looks more like Cetus has started to collapse in on herself. As though there's nothing left inside to hold up her bulk outside of the water. "Equius?" Rose calls, pushing past the lingering uncertainty that the troll is really there.

Five roses finished blooming in the denizen's eyes before Eridan's blast, but when Rose floats
forward, there's one socket where Equius's dark blue outline is just barely visible, a solid troll-shaped absence lodged deep in the back of the eye. "I am here," Equius says, the last of his shroud falling away.

Rose flies closer, and John comes along with her, his windsock hood trailing behind them. Eridan skulks around the curve of Cetus's flank to rejoin the group, though Rose loses sight of him once she and John get close enough for Cetus's bulk to block him from view. As they draw closer, the odd stillness that has seized Cetus becomes more apparent. Flying through the mangled brier of tentacles, Rose reaches out and brushes her fingers tentatively along one as wide as she is; the texture feels like a woody stem, dried up and stiffened with age. John knocks on the stem with his knuckles, but there is no reaction from the denizen. The tentacles that burst out of Cetus's underside lay limp in the street, the sides shiny with what looks like sweat.

They're melting. Not that the street needed to be doused in any more acid, but still.

When they draw level with Equius, she sees that he has punched through the back of the cavernous socket. His arms are coated in dried up, pale purple blood as he keeps his fists lodged in the wall. Past that, it's hard to make out anything - all the void that Equius conjured to conceal himself must have been directed into the inside of Cetus, but Rose can't detect any of it.

"Holy crap. I can't believe we hatched a plan and it actually worked," John says, fascinated. He floats away from Rose, his -

No, John does not have a windsock hood. He's wearing the dark version of his old uniform that Kanaya touched up, with a perfectly normal sized hood. Rose stiffens, mentally scraping through her mind with a fine-toothed comb, and can't find anything...off. Leviathan's forced absence feels like a weight off her chest, and she can't hear anything except herself. "John, were you wearing something different a second ago?" she asks.

"Uh, no." John gives her a confused look. "Or...not that I know of?"

Ah. Excellent. Nothing to worry about at all, then. Clearly. Rose rubs her eyes, and John is still in dark blue and black. Equally excellent. "Equius, are you alright? Will this hold?" she asks, rubbing a little harder to make the dried blood flake off her cheeks. Her face feels sticky and filthy, her hair a coarse bird's nest, and she would quite gladly trade her soul for a hot shower. Ha. What a shame Leviathan never thought to offer that.

Equius looks back over his shoulder. It's strange, seeing him clearly for the first time since - since he ascended to god tier, Rose thinks. She'd forgotten the exact shade of blue in his Heir outfit, if she ever knew it to begin with, and his lank hair forms a blocky line down past his muscled shoulders. His nose looks as though it broke and healed wrong again recently, and something cracked the right lens of his sunglasses. His lips press together tight, and his eyes look grim, yet there's no sign of strain in his expression. "I suspect that it will not have to," Equius says, quiet. "It may be prudent to hurry, if you need to have a conversation."

CE: Seer.

CE: Come here.

CE: I must present you with a Choice.

It's embarrassing, but Rose doesn't recognize the voice right away. Instinct has her twitch at the sound, but there are no echoes, no excess syllables. An odd resonance rumbles beneath the words, but it's not painful to hear - just deep and full of old, faded power.
And pain.

Rose pulls back past John, floating away over the street to take in more of Cetus's form. In the absence of any remaining eyes, Rose finds herself stymied as to where to direct her gaze. Part of Cetus's right flank emits a faint crackling sound, like packing peanuts rustling in a box, and then collapses. The neglected fin on that side slides down along the side toward the ground, and Rose sees that without the camouflage of all the moving tentacles, the flat limb has atrophied and looks paper thin.

She thought -

She's not sure what she thought, anymore. That if Equius succeeded, they'd be forced to fight Cetus alone, rather than wasting all their energy attacking a horror that might well be unkillable. Or maybe that Rose could help Cetus build defenses in her mind to match some of what Rose has in her own, with a complement of void spells to seal the deal. They're connected the same way John and Typhus are - Rose should surely have been able to help from the inside. Denizens aren't meant to be kind or helpful, perhaps, but she doubted Cetus would turn up her nose at help when the alternative would mean remaining in Leviathan's thrall.

She didn't expect Cetus to already be dying. "Oh. I see," Rose says, her mouth dry. All those life bars are gone. To Eridan and Vriska's credit, Rose doesn't think her own final hour contributions made much of a dent in the three layers of vitality that Cetus used to have, compared to what they were dishing out.

When Cetus breathes out, this time, all Rose tastes and smells is dust. It stings her eyes.

Vriska's voice jolts Rose out of her contemplation. "You reeeeeeeeeeally want to get mixed up in that choosy crap?" the troll asks, skeptically, as she flits through the air in short bursts. Rose twitches again as Vriska lands on the upper brow of one of the denizen's extra eye sockets and scuffs it with her heel. Though the troll doesn't put any really power into the kick, Cetus crumples under her with another sigh full of sifting dust. The ceruleanblood skips back, tugging her legs up under her in case she's under attack, but when nothing else happens a terrible expression fills her face - boredom. Flaring out her wings, Vriska rises up and sneers down at them. "Whatever. If this is done and you're gonna get all schmaltzy, I'm finding Terezi. What a letdown!"

And with that, Vriska takes off down the Strip, back the way they came, toward the Ouroboros. Eridan, now visible over Cetus's crumbling form, lingers, looking uncertainly at Vriska's trail of blue sparkles. Then he edges toward Rose, floating at a slow pace and watching Cetus in the corner of his eye. He undoes the loops that hold his hood and headband-crown around his horns and lets them fall back out of the way. John sways and then floats over to intercept Eridan before he can reach Rose. Bro doesn't move from the Venetian, though Rose can feel his stare from here. If he intends to stay on guard here, now, Tavros and Nepeta will be able to extricate themselves from whatever 'helpful' trap he stuck them in to keep them safely out of the way in short order.

But Equius is right. If Cetus has something to say, she does need to hurry. "Cetus," Rose says, after coughing to clear her throat. Nothing comes up, this time, but her chest feels odd. Pinched.

(CE: Would you hear my riddle?)

John looks up sharply with a suspicious jut to his jaw, throwing Rose a worried look. "What's she saying now?" he asks, the wind already raking through his hair in preparation for a jump.

Rose can't hear any difference. "You all can't hear it?"
Eridan shrugs, scratching his hair vigorously like having it penned under the hood made him itchy.
"Sounds like a load of tintinnabulation, to me. Dunno, maybe Vris would have been able to
understand?" Not understanding, however, seems to have left him as disinterested in the goings on as
Vrisk - the violetblood hangs around, still, but starts drifting a little further away.

"One moment, then." Rose focuses on the center of Cetus's wide face, at a point just between the
clusters of empty eyes. It feels right. ".You're dying."

(CE: It is preferable to the alternative. This body was never going to be salvageable.)

(CE: I would return to Skaia, for the end.)

Say it, say it. You won't be able to say it later. Rose draws herself up straight, feeling her fingernails
dig deep into her palms as she clenches her fists. Her chest feels pinched shut; her clothes feel too
tight, and dust soughs through her hair, leaving it grey. "I'm sorry. I let them in. I said yes. It was my
choice, and I ruined both of us."

That much is...very clear. The twisted, thorny stems that Leviathan grew have begun to wither and
snap, and the branches that don't fall into dust straight away fall to the ground so lightly they barely
make an impact. Inside, Rose hears more of Cetus's driftwood-fragile, acid-eaten bones splinter and
crumble: snap, snap...

(CE: It was a choice. It is not the only one you will ever make. It is not the only choice that defines
you.)

The vast petals in Cetus's eyes begin to wilt and drop off. Rose expects them to sizzle when they hit
the grim sludge below - but the road, she sees, is beginning to dry without Leviathan's presence to
renew the acidic water. Cetus rumbles, low in her belly, and expels a pillar of dust through the
blowhole atop her head.

(CE: Listen. Leviathan has become vulnerable. Slowly, it succumbs to the influence of the game,
freely swallowed. I can set the terms of its destruction, now.)

(CE: And so, I set forth another choice. One which you must resolve not now, but in the near future.)

Rose blinks. "Tell me," she says, her lips moving before she finishes processing. Amid the tight,
squeezing pressure, her heart gives a sudden, urgent thump in her chest. Her hands reach out of their
own accord as she flies a little closer, as though she'll be able to hear better. This - whatever this is,
she cannot afford to miss it.

(CE: You can destroy the servitors of chaos and save the next world from their corruption, once and
for all - or you can see your love survive the battle that is to come. One or the other. Not both.)

(CE: For to gain anything, something of equal value must be sacrificed in exchange.)

Very suddenly, without so much as a by your leave, Rose's lungs stop working properly. She gasps
for air, her stomach full of scalding bile, and John's on her the next second in a panic. Kanaya, her
mind thinks, numbly - then: JohnDaveJadeWho - "That's - not - that's not anywhere near equal -" she
ekes out with what little air she has left. Then - "No, Eridan, stop!" Because while John and the
Breeze are doing their best to refill her lungs through her nose with a small, plucky tornado, Eridan
snaps back to attention and levels a claw at Cetus, his eyes glittering behind his glasses with vicious,
eager intent. "It's not her doing anything."

Grumbling, Eridan quenches the power gathering in his hand with a scowling pout.
(CE: We are running out of time. Let me be more clear. What goes round the house, in the house, but never touches the house? What has eyes but cannot see?)

Stomach-clenching confusion is rapidly overtaking abstract, repentant mourning in the contest for which will serve as Rose's emotion-in-chief today. It's not pleasant feeling either of them. "That's not more clear, that's changing the subject!" she insists, while her mind replays Cetus's choice over again. She tries to convince herself she misheard something - but no. Not both. How on earth could the destruction of ancient chaos gods be considered equivalent with the survival of someone she loves? That's -

That's video game logic, she thinks, in sudden horror. "Kanaya, are you talking about Kanaya?" she tries - clarification, she - she needs to know exactly what scenario Cetus is suggesting, here. If it's a riddle, it can't be this devastatingly simple to understand.

(CE: That is up to you to interpret. The choice should be clear to you, when the time comes.)

Ah, yes. The day wouldn't be complete without Rose screaming internally. Her breathing comes in choppy gasps, still, and John's trying to talk to her over Cetus. "Rose? What's she saying? Can we get like a super quick summary or something? Come on, what's -"

Rose gasps - swallows - (her throat is coated with dust) - and exhales in a shudder. She's panicking. Plain and simple. No one's going to die right now immediately. No one may have to die. If Cetus intends make this riddle stupidly vague, Rose can consult the others about it. But shaking Cetus until she gives a straight answer won't work - the denizen looks so paper thin and collapsed that a good shake might be all it takes to shave off the last sliver of her life bar. "She's plagiarizing the first law of equivalent exchange and clichéd riddles that comprise the almost unanimous bedrock of all children's joke books. Give me a minute longer, I think we're almost to the point," Rose says, half-lying, half-dizzy from the momentary lack of oxygen.

"...Wow, that sounds really nonspecific," John says, with a skeptical tug to his lip that says he knows she's avoiding an explanation on purpose.

(CE: Do you...accept these terms, Seer?)

Cetus's voice waters in and out; Rose feels a moment of biting vindication that they're both out of breath, before she recalls Cetus is dying, here, and the bitter guilt resumes. The denizen's desiccating body lists to one side, and the eye socket with Equius now sits at such a steep angle that Rose can catch a glimpse of Equius walking around up the side of the socket to keep standing.

"Is the answer supposed to be obvious? Well, I'm sorry, but it's not," Rose says, with more bitterness than she intends to let slip out. "A choice between that and...I don't suppose I can make a plea for you to be slightly more clear?"

(CE: No. I can hear her - it has been...from so very far...'The light we walk in darkens sun and moon and star.'

Cetus's voice sounds very far away. Something drips on Rose's head, leaving a damp spot in her hair. John holds out a palm beside her to watch more water drop on his hand, while Rose looks up at the clouds. All the misty, grey clouds and humidity summoned by Leviathan's presence have drawn together, and a few huge drops of rain start to fall as Rose watches. As the clouds condense, more space opens between them, and she can see the normal Las Vegas sky beyond; just a little sunlight shines through. If she weren't concerned about the horrific acid-content of the rain, the sight would be a tad too heavy-handed for her taste. "I'll find another way to keep them out," Rose says, as another raindrop runs down her face, smearing the layer of dust she's accumulated. "To bind them
here. Even if you won't explain, I'll make my own choice."

She's not even sure Cetus can still hear her. But the denizen rumbles, and Rose knows a chuckle when she hears one.

(CE: A choice is a choice.)

CE: Remember to play the rain, Rose. The *Splendor Existentiae* waits within my grist hoard.

John tilts his head to the side; Rose thinks that last bit was audible to everyone, rather than just herself.

Cetus sighs with her whole body, though, in a remarkably literal fashion. An enormous, billowing cloud of dust soughs free as the denizen's skin dissolves, and Equius goes tumbling and vanishes for a second in the grey veil. A tiny, sucking black hole appears, and the troll bursts free of the cloud before lurching to a stop on the same level as Eridan; his skin looks oddly matte under the dust, and Rose can't imagine she looks much better. As the dust settles out of the air, all that remains in the middle of the Strip is a vast ribcage and the line of a splintering spine. Cetus's skull has already mostly collapsed in on itself.

She takes up most of the street, yet she looks so small, now. Rose feels horribly, wildly lost, the ache squeezing her chest like a vice. "...Goodbye," she says, and it's too late.

Her mind feels so quiet.

Eridan speaks, and the audible sound doesn't help alleviate the sudden, hollow *loneliness* in Rose's head where Cetus, for better or for worse, always used to be, but it - distracts her. "So, do you have a clue what you're meant to be doin'?" he asks, scratching under the collar of his shirt and watching her like one watches a stranger on a bus crying in public. They're not quite strangers, and Rose double checks to makes sure the only thing on her face is rain, but the sentiment feels similar.

Her voice sounds rough and clipped. "Hopefully, it's not relevant yet. Not until later." Her lack of explanation or translation of Cetus's words is surely obvious, now, and without Cetus around, Rose no longer has an excuse to put it off. Eridan shrugs it off, giving her one last weird look.

John picks up where he left off, though, and John is harder to dissuade. "Because, uh. You mentioned Kanaya...and you sounded kind of urgent for a sec, there," he says, "- which makes me think *you're so doing the thing* -"

Rose chokes on a sudden, irrepressible giggle. John looks worried but triumphant as she coughs to cover it up. "Not - not now, John. Not here," she says. "We still have to find Dirk, and take care of Scratch. This...this is done."

*Cetus is gone.*

And after they confront Scratch, does it start being 'the near future'? Or are they already in it? When will the riddle's context take effect?

Rose does so enjoy a healthy sprinkle of paranoia to top off her day. She runs her fingers through her hair, grimaces when all she encounters are knots, and then shakes it hard to clear the dust out before the rain can mat it all together into a blob.

John applies the Breeze like a blow-dryer, his cowlicks standing up with renewed energy before the rain starts to tamp them down. "Okay. If you're sure." He gives her a look that says *we're gonna talk about Stuff and Feelings later*, and Rose nods back. "Anybody want a lift?"
Equius and Eridan raise their hands at the same time, without so much as glancing at each other. "Sure, I'm in," Eridan says. "And after this, holy fuck do I need a nap."

Equius sneezes.

---

Dave has been punched harder in his life; Jade packs a goddamn whallop even when she's playing around, and he grew up dodging puppet traps for a living. But this hit -

His head cracks to the side, and time spins out from under his fingertips. It's racing forward way too fast - he's not the one doing that - shit shit shit -

He slams his hand down on a timetable, his nails screaming in protest as he digs in and tries to wrench the sudden fast forward to a stop. The friction grinds one nail down to the quick in a sharp jolt, the pain blooming so suddenly it sucks the air out of his lungs. For a second he thinks he smells something burning, but he's more preoccupied with the jagged crunching down along the timeline to meet him.

"Shit!" He seizes the shard edge of the record and it rips his palm open. The slick blood makes his hand slip, but the acceleration finally shudders to a stop -

And time resumes a regular tempo.

Safe.

Hissing, Dave gingerly unclenches his hand and takes in the damage, a razor-thin slice that digs deep across the flat of his palm and drips blood in a wild splatter of red on the sand. His wrist is shaking a little, which means his fingers tremble, and okay maybe his whole body is shuddering a little. But that's fine, no big deal -

Wait...the sand?

Processing this fresh weirdness, Dave brings his shredded hand to his chest and uses the other to lean on his knee for support while he throws up a little. Just to get the shock out of his system. The air feels thin, arid, and gritty, and sand grinds into the knees of his pants.

When did he get outside? It's not humid with Horrorterror juices anymore, which is nice, but now the blistering hot sun beats down on his back through his cape. He can shorten the sleeves of his costume, but it wouldn't be much of a relief. Already, there's a fine prickle of sweat rising on his forehead. This is one of those days where you strip off to a swim suit and find the nearest body of cold water to lay in and pray it doesn't start boiling around you, but like hell is Dave running around shirtless in god tier trunks. There's no way he could justify that with irony, and he's not gonna besmirch his honor by trying. His nose will burn bright red in five seconds flat if he lifts his head, so he keeps his face pointed down and presses his forehead to his knee. Breathing through his mouth doesn't help with the taste of bile; he snaps his fingers uselessly a couple of times before a bright pink can of TaB appears for him to swish. He must've forgotten to give it to WV before they left.
Finally, Dave yanks his hood up to shield his face, looks up, blinks, and faces the facts. According to his internal clock, it's C/RA/CK o'clock on April the 19th, a week from where he left off, and all he can see for miles around is an ocean of pinkish-yellow sand under a flat, pale blue sky. It looks almost unreal; like someone sucked all the depth out of the sky and left a painted backdrop in its place. He swallows, and the mere sight of the desert filling the horizon makes his mouth dry.

Dave's foot slides an inch as he stands; he's on a slight incline, the sand rising in a gentle slope in front of him, and with nothing better to do in his life, he starts to walk forward to reach the top so he can get a better idea of what the world looks like after the scheduled apocalypse. His shoes skid and sink in the sand with each step as he wades uphill. About halfway up, he trips and catches himself before he can faceplant - but a fine trickle of hot sand sneaks in the front of his shoes, and Dave has to stop to dump a metric ass-load of sand out of each shoe before continuing. The sand stings the fresh, shredded wound in his hand, and if he dies of apocalypse death sand germs... Shit, would that be embarrassing. Lucky for him, no one's left to witness it.

Or maybe that's the opposite of lucky. The line between morbid humor and shit being royally fucked up grows ever thinner. Clearly his past-future self knew this was going to happen, but Dave doesn't have a clue why it had to. As he slogs up the incline, feeling more disgustingly gritty and sweaty with each step, the sense that something is fundamentally wrong deepens. Time feels fragile and worn thin, and if he makes one wrong move, Dave thinks he'll drop into a crack where time runs out, like grains of sand spilling out of the giant hourglass of the universe.

On a hunch, Dave stops, grimacing as another line of sweat creeps down beside his spine, and checks his phone. There are no bars. There's absolutely jack shit. Even the Pesterchum app, which magicked up its own wireless connection fifty fucking thousand leagues under the sea until Gl'bgofucky'self broke it, has gone dim. No little bubbles telling him how many unread messages he has left: nothing.

-- no server found --

...Not that that's a problem or anything. Dave doesn't need instant messaging to live his life. And looking around, he doesn't think anyone was left to write a news story about the end of the world, either, so the Internet wouldn't give him any context even if he could access it.

But it could have told him how to survive in a desert hellscape. Damn, he misses the Internet. It's literally only been five distorted, halting minutes, and he's got the shakes. He puts his phone away so he'll stop nervously picking at the sides of the case, and keeps going.

Reaching the top of the incline catches him by surprise. One second, Dave's worried that climbing up an endless hill of sand with no wifi is actually his Sisyphean torture in desert hell, and the next he lifts his leg extra high in anticipation of the next step, and finds nothing but air. He stops down hard and stands dead still for a second to make sure he's regained his balance, then relaxes and mops his forehead with his sleeve as he looks around. Past the crest of his sand dune, the ground drops into a small but deep crater. A thin trickle of sand scuffed up by his shoes tumbles down along the curve of the dark, exposed rock, but doesn't quite reach the meteorite at the center. Compared to the shallow slope he just climbed, the crater's a lot steeper. Dave doesn't bother trying to walk down - he turns his feet to the side and skids down, using his not-fucked arm to keep his balance so he doesn't roll down like a hot dog. It's bumpy as hell and he kicks up a shit ton of gravel. When he slides to a running stop at the bottom of the crater, he's spitting dirt out of his mouth.

Up close, he can't see anything of interest about the meteorite itself - for a rock that came from outer space, it's disappointing in person. Barely as high as his knee, it sits there like a charred black marshmallow that someone accidentally dropped in a chimenea, where it turned into a caramelized
lump of burnt sugar indistinguishable from a piece of coal. Stick that shit in someone's stocking and call it Christmas, or hell, leave it in the chimenea to fuel the next fire in the great circle of fire life. Dave kicks the rock to check if there's any secrets or shit like that, but he stubs his toe to achieve a grand total of nothing. With that important business out of the way, he hops on one foot while shaking the other one out, then heads toward the other side of the crater.

By all rights, he should just hop right back in time to when he got clocked. Leaving John to guard Karkat and Feferi against whatever asshole decided to ruin Dave's day is only the tip of the shitty idea iceberg - judging by the dried out, sandy bullshit he's standing in now, he can assume the Horrorterror didn't stick around past its expiration date, but who knows what else is going to complete and utter shit that he could be preventing? Except wait, apparently future Dave is already handling all that.

Time is such the shittiest aspect. Dave wants to find whoever signed him up for this inevitable passage of time horseshit and punt them into the nearest ass crack of time. If there's an aspect in charge of explaining things in a concise, useful, simple manner, Dave wants to retroactively sign the hell up for that. Instead of slowly succumbing to entropic curses, his personal growth challenge will be to cut back on his own internal and external rambling.

...On second thought, Dave isn't sure whether that would be an improvement or not. Since he's rambling right now. Imagining himself without loquacity problems is like imagining Karkat without shouting problems, or Rose without psychoanalysis problems, or Eridan without literally every problem. Shit's impossible.

Anyway. Hell if Dave knows where he's going, but he's gonna go there, and a little thing like lack of a concrete destination isn't going to stop him. This isn't any harder than wandering around John's Mordor mindscape. Getting up the other side of the impact crater is a little harder than sliding down, but Dave manages it by crawling on all fours and sucking it up when the fist of his injured hand starts to throb in protest. Maybe there's a way he could speed up the healing - but no, he is not stupid enough to try anything this close to the end. No shitting way is he sacrificing his left lung for a quick fix, or something disproportionate like that. If he can get to the top of this hill and see whatever there is to see, maybe he can figure out when he's supposed to go from here. Because right now, he's seeing a hell of a lot of nothing, and his future self made it sound like he'd have a little more direction than this.

But Dave looks out over the far ridge of the crater and what he sees makes him wish he'd walked right back the way he came. At first, his brain doesn't make the connection. The sight is weirdly familiar, sure, but Dave can't put a finger on why. Seeing a copy of the Statue of Liberty sunk up to its waist in sand in the middle of heldeath desertland is a little funky, but who is he to question the life choices of whoever left it here -

Hang on. Oh no. The Statue of Liberty et al, showing up out of nowhere? Dave, stuck in the post-apocalyptic future until he can figure out what time he needs to loop back to?

Well. He has no other choice. He needs to do it for the Egbert, if nothing else. Falling to his knees, Dave smacks a fist against the sand. It's just not the same without a beach, but sand is sand and John's gonna get such a kick out of this when Dave tells him about it later. "You maniacs! God damn you all to hell!" he says, as he clutches his chest.
Someone whinnies in response, and Dave nearly slides ass-first back down into the crater. Where the hell did that come from - Equius? Equius, that son of a gun, he would love making random horse noises to dick with people. He'd claim he wouldn't do it, but -

Then the first horse canters past, and Dave really does tip back as he scrambles on his knees to get out of the way. He whips his swordkind free to catch himself before he can do the full splits, then winces as the hilt scrapes along his palm in a staticky buzz of pain. More horses in various shades of brown and black blast past him, their clomping feet pounding so hard that it kicks up the sand. The blue-grey one keeps its lead as they book it for the next dune of sand, and Dave's left coughing through a haze of sand.

There were horses in Planet of the Apes, too, weren't there? Fucking christ on a slice of pizza, what hell has Dave walked in on?

"You there! Hey! Heyyy!"

Unless the horses have learned to talk in the single goddamn week since the world got bombarded with meteors, Dave thinks that must be a person. God, he hopes it's not a talking horse - it's not like he's toting around a Geiger counter to check whether the Reckoning was full of radioactive rocks or something and he's actually standing in nuclear sand soup.

But no. Dave squints through the bright sun and the sand kicked up by the horses, and sees four figures scattered around the base of the Statue of Liberty below. One person-shaped figure in particular approaches Dave at mach speed, sprinting across the sand with an unidentified, swaddled object held out at arms' length. As the man draws closer, Dave starts to recognize the steely look in the guy's eyes. Hint: it's not a steely look at all. It's fear-hope. Raw, unadulterated, unhomogenized terror-determination. Which Dave sympathizes with - there's a lot of totally valid reasons for some dude stranded in a post-apocalyptic wasteland to get a little wild eyed - but also he has a strange sun-burned guy in a tank top charging toward him while brandishing a USO that could contain literally
anything within its swaddled shell, and Dave's not about that life. He backs up, raising his hands to ward off the fresh weirdness. "Uh. Sup?" he says, to try to establish contact.

The man raises the bundle over his head with both hands. "Enough out of you. Here, take this."

And with that, the guy chucks the USO at Dave like a basketball. Common sense says Dave should dive out of the way in case it's a bomb or something. But he doesn't: the sun blinds him for a second before the dark shadow of the swaddled bundle arcs down toward his head, and Dave catches it without thinking (and does not fumble the catch at all, thanks). Then he goes dead still, unable to believe his own dumbass life choices. "Wait, what?" he asks, way too late.

The total stranger trudges back down the hill, turning only to point a finger at Dave. "He broke my space house. He's your problem now. Congratulations. A father is you," he says, deadpan. Then the guy reaches into the pocket of his pants, casts a handful of pocket sand into the air in an unfathomable dramatic gesture with his lips pursed, and jogs back down the hill toward the other three people.

...Oh, shit. Every inch of Dave threatens to start jittering right when he wants to stay perfectly still, which sucks. The USO shifts and hums in his arms, and Dave is no longer worried it's a bomb. This is worse than a bomb. "No. Please tell me this isn't what I think it is," he says, power walking down the slope after the guy. From within the bundle, he feels a tiny, nubby hand-analogue prod around in the vicinity of his ribs. This cannot be happening.

The situation only gets worse when the stranger waves a careless hand, and Dave sees the tattoo on his arm. Sees the :Y face staring back at him in dark ink. "Just dump him off when he's supposed to be. It'll be great."

Dave's screaming on the inside, and it escapes his mouth in the form of breathy, pained whine. Forget the fact that time is dying and cracking into tiny pieces in the sky overhead, forget the maybe-baby clutched in his aching hands - it's the existential crisis induced by seeing someone tattoo a shitty SBaHJ face onto their physical body that's gonna send him to an early grave. If there isn't at least one doomed timeline branching from this exact moment where Dave drops dead of a Karkat-esque aneurysm, he'll make his own sunglasses into a taco and eat them. "What are you even talking about?! I just got the ironic punched out of me - how the hell am I supposed to know when I'm going!" Dave asks. He works up the nerve to carefully peel back a fold of the swaddling cloth and peek at the thing inside.

A small not-quite-wriggler yawns at him with too many teeth. So many teeth. Definitely not human, not in any way, shape, or form; the teeth just aren't blunt enough in the right places. Dave's inability to pin down exactly what the baby looks like makes his head hurt. It doesn't open its eyes and wake up, which is only the good thing he has going for him right this second - the only thing more scary than a sleeping baby is a fully awake baby. Seriously, Dave just love love loves getting handed an unknowable, vaguely disturbing child at the end of the world. Creepy clown gods riding unicycles all the way to the nondenominational religious venue of your choice, this is the last thing Dave needs right now.

The icing on the cake? Dave pats the swaddling back into place, looks up, and sees that two of the other figures by the Statue aren't strangers like Mister 'Way Too Invested in SBaHJ' over here. Hearts Boxcars sprawls out in the meager strip of shade beside the spot where the Statue vanishes into the sand, his battered hat pulled down to cover his entire face as he lounges. Something has reduced his suit to scruffy, sun-bleached rags, and he's torn off the sleeves to bare his arms, but it's unmistakably him. The other familiar face, though -

Dave almost doesn't recognize Diamonds Droog. Key word almost. He slows his dogged pursuit of
the strange dude as he takes in Droog's presence and altered appearance. She sits apart from the others with her long legs kicked out in front of her and one arm slung around her cue stick, which she has stabbed deep in the sand. Her suave suit is as tattered as Boxcars', and she has loosened the neat knot of her tie to allow for airflow in the steady, bright heat. She's close enough to the edge of the statue's shadow that she could probably roll and get a little relief from the sun, but she appears to have been marinating in her own sweat there for way longer than Dave has been in the same chronological region. In addition to the severe wardrobe malfunction, Dave can see Droog's expression from here, and she doesn't look aloof or disdainful. She just looks...dead. Her eyes move to track Dave's approach, but the empty expression doesn't change. What, he doesn't even get a sneer?

If Droog weren't...Droog, Dave would call what he's feeling right now 'mild-to-moderate concern.' But this is Droog, so he's gonna call it 'apprehensive' peppered with 'disturbed, confused, etc' for seasoning. "What are you guys doing here?" Dave asks, distracted from sudden parenthood for a hot second.

Boxcars pinches the brim of his frayed hat between his fingers and lifts it enough to peer at Dave with one eye. "Don't ask dumb questions," he grumbles, and then drops the hat back over his face. "What're you doing here?"

"You're right, that's a way better question." Dave tips the baby...thing into one arm to free up the other one so he can do important stuff, like throwing middle fingers and wielding a sword. "What am I doing here, and why I am doing it? My smug bastard of a future self didn't say."

The last stranger answers. Dave hasn't looked at her properly yet - a troll, thin horns, hair back in a braid - but SBaHJ tat guy stops beside her, tapping his foot and making grabbing motions with a hand while the troll finishes writing something on a sheet of printer paper. She's using a dusty laptop as a makeshift desk; it looks as though it's seen better days, and considering the lack of working power outlets in the post-apocalyptic wilderness, Dave doubts the computer still has juice. "You're here to pick up that package, and this list," she says, blowing her bangs out of her face as she scribbles one more line with her sharpie. "It tells you exactly what you need to do as you go back in time. Most of it can happen in any order you want, as long as you don't bounce around too much and call attention to yourself. All the addresses and timestamps you don't know yet are on the back. Don't let the giant sea goat splash water on it before you finish everything."

Dave almost drops the baby. He takes off his sunglasses to stare at the list like it's made of solid gold. It might as well be. "I was wrong. This isn't hell. This is the other place," he whispers, taking a step toward the troll in a trance. "Holy shit."

"You don't want to walk too close," the troll says, handing the list off to the strange guy before Dave can start slow motion sprinting toward her with 'You're The Inspiration' playing in the distance. "Some of it's gonna seem vague, but that's because I can't be bothered to pin it down. All the glitches and continuity drift keep fucking up what actually happened. Check off the major points, and ignore the details as hard as you can until you get back to the present, because it's not getting any better than this. I'm very tired."

"Do I look like a messenger boy?" the strange dude asks, even as he walks back toward Dave. He tries to fling the piece of paper at Dave from a few feet away, but it flutters and drops onto the sand with a plaf well short of Dave. The thirst for knowledge sends Dave crashing to his knees to rescue it, and the wriggler thing burbles in unconscious protest.

- DO NOT WAKE UP THE BABY! DO NOT DROP THE BABY! DO NOT LOSE THE
BABY! DO NOT CAPTCHALOGUE THE BABY!

- DO NOTTTTT!
- avoid excess time shenanigans (this includes speeding up plane rides)
- stop people from rushing to john + dadbert during The Incident
- tell bro et al to head to seattle (must have the Baby with you for this one)
- free wv and spades slick from the empty magma chamber below jade's island before she takes off
  - the hidden transportalizer to the island is in the condesce's personal rooms at the betty crocker headquarters in minnesota
  - don't let her see you. her password is higherthanamothaglubba1921
  - wv will not be visible/stable due to bs made up quantum physics magic, but you will have released him, i promise
  - you cannot hug him no matter how much you try
  - please proceed through the five stages of grief to accept this fact before you get blown up in a volcano
- sabotage matchsticks' fire extinguisher in 2009
- deliver marine corps medicull brochure to kanaya in anywhere from 2004 to 2008
- go to the furthest end of gibraltar and deliver the package to its rightful custodian in 1991
  - just chuck him into the ocean
  - or you could be nice about it and get him a floatie first
- return to where you left off and paste Felt locations into the inventory for future reference (see back)
- save the karkat, save the world
- (and go help save dirk)

Dave flips the list over, and, as promised, there is a neat chart of significant addresses and times associated with each item on the list, each boxed off so he can't mix up which address goes with what names. There's advice on how to travel to certain locations that might be easier to reach in a different year. At the very top, there's a note in cramped handwriting that looks like it was written after the troll filled out the rest of the chart: it's his own address back in Houston, with a tiny 'just in case!' wedged in next to it.

The way things are going for him, Dave wouldn't be half surprised to forget his own damn apartment number at some critical moment. "This is the best thing I have ever seen in my life," he says, taking out his phone and taking pictures of the front and back halves of the list. Pesterchum may not work, but pics are forever. "11/10, would list again." He grimaces at the first few lines, because he can guess what the Incident refers to, and it means that the time has come for him to be a total shitheel for the greater good. Which is all kinds of awesome. "Is the Karkat one literal, or just a Heroes reference?"

"Why not both? Be careful, but remember - you've already done this. It's basically impossible for you to fail, at this point," the troll girl says, flipping her laptop around and folding her legs crisscross so that the computer perches on her knees. When she flips the lid open, scratching her arm absently, the screen lights up at once; it's cracked in one corner and has a bunch of dark spots where pixels have died, but it's still chugging along, apparently. "And this loop is the last one you get before everything goes completely and utterly to shit!" she adds, flipping him a thumbs up and winking. "So enjoy it while you can!"

Dave doesn’t look up from his phone for a full count of ten, and then blinks. "God...dammit," he manages, unsure how he’s supposed to react to this. "Thanks, I guess?" He hangs around awkwardly, glancing at each member of the group in case anyone has further nuggets of ominous
wisdom to share, but Boxcars can’t see anything with his hat in the way, and doesn’t appear particularly inspired to change that – Droog gazes out over the remote landscape with her dead stare while the sluggish, hot breeze lifts the frayed edges of her suit jacket and hair – the guy with the simultaneously poor/epic tattoo choices wanders over to the base of the Statue, picks up a rock, and starts hacking at the metal to finish what appears to be a life-sized, hyper-realistic portrait of a muscular centaur – what –

Nope. Dave’s leaving now. The oddness of running into these four in the middle of the desert has worn off, and the brittleness of time gnaws at him. Skidding that dangerously close to a crack in time probably drew some attention Dave didn’t want to draw; he’d better go while the going’s good.

Maybe try to hunt down a first aid kit to fix up his hand fast, once he's back in the pre-Reckoning era. After a little finagling, Dave finds a spare loop of fabric tucked around the swaddled bundle of joy and slings it onto his back without dropping it. It feels a little like strapping cold destruction in a wriggler-shaped package right in his biggest blind spot, but whatever. He’ll do the Gibraltar thing ASAP, and be free of the nonsense that is spontaneous fatherly commitment.

"One more thing!" the troll says, just as Dave summons his time tables.

"Shit," Dave mutters. Then, louder: "Yeah? What's up?"

She looks up from the keyboard to talk to him. Her claws keep typing. "Take Karkat with you to your planet when you hit the Medium. If he goes with John, it’ll suck," the troll advises, and then takes a sip from a purple water bottle.

Dave should know better than to ask by now. "Why do you even know any of this?"

Boxcars lurches upright, his hat suctioned to his face as he bellows. "Stop askin’ dumb questions! God damn, kid, just get on with your life so we can get on with ours!"

He's not an expert, but he thinks Boxcars sounds pissier than usual. That is definitely what Dave is detecting here. "What's with you two? Seriously?" he asks, waving a hand at Boxcars and then at Droog. Droog twitches - barely - but doesn't look at Dave. Her twitch knocks the cue stick askew, but she doesn't fix it.

Boxcars rips the hat off his own face, his face screwed up in a sour glare. Dave waves at Droog with both hands, but Boxcars' expression sours further still, like he's sucking on a lemon warhead as they speak. Without the shade of his hat, Dave can see Boxcars has a super bad sunburn all across his broad face. "If you can get her to answer, more power to yah. But she's not gonna," he says, when Dave waves his hands at Droog once more, this time with feeling.

Dave lets his hands drop to his sides with a slap, and his timetables bobble along in their wake. "You can't just say something like that and not, like, explain, dude," he says, flatly.

The gangster lifts a middle finger to his face and pretends to light and smoke it like a cigar. "Watch me." Then all the energy drains out of him, and Boxcars rubs his sunburned face with the flat of his hand. He eases back down on the ground, wiggling his shoulders until he fits back in the body-shaped depression his weight left in the sand. "If you can't tell who's missing here, I can't help you," he mumbles.

And there is someone missing, isn’t there? Looks like Dave got a nice headstart on that whole ‘being a monumental tool’ thing. Yeesh. “Oh. Uh. That. Sucks, man.”

Boxcars just snorts, and Droog…doesn’t react at all. Everyone seems to have tuned him out, for the most part.
Before he goes, Dave turns around, throws up a peace sign, and takes a picture with the Reck't Statue of Liberty to share with select people later. Then he takes off, with his generic wriggler-shaped object in tow.

And thus, Dave's adventure in following the questionable orders of a weird desert troll lady begin.

He's done weirder shit.

The wait time in between each stop is the most annoying part. It turns out that his power to zone out while on an airplane only works for one, maybe two trips max, and then he's left in mental purgatory. Staring out the window and memorizing the squiggly lines of the ceiling can only entertain him for so long before it gets super tempting to start texting his past self for shits and giggles. Dave does poke around at the AJ empire website while he's stuck waiting in the Seattle airport for a flight to Philadelphia, and successfully manages to shift the link sidebar five pixels to the right so that the whole thing is even more off center than he originally designed it to be, but that's small potatoes. His past self never even noticed.

He tries to fast forward in time to skip the mind-numbing wait on an airplane once. Exactly once. Time groans like a mirror slowly bending under pressure, like it's about to crack open right under his feet, and Dave snaps his timetables away before his skin finishes going cold. It doesn't matter how far back in time he jumps – the timeline still feels just as cracked and worn thin around him as it did after the Reckoning. Like it's following him. He's not even sure what it he's thinking of – the Lord of Time? or just the ever-spreading cracks themselves? – but Dave gets the feeling that he's probably leaving a hundred dead, doomed versions of himself in his wake. They're just getting munched up too fast for the bodies to leave an impression. He can't find any trace of the blood from when he split his hand open on the timetables, and can't fight the uneasy feeling that the records just went vampire on his ass.

Strangely, that thought does not make the trips between destinations any easier to stomach. How much margin of error does Dave have? Is the hour delay from going to Seattle before Houston going to screw him over? Is the several years-long time skip to find some random Felt lady's fire extinguisher, accidentally drag his cape through a fireplace, and break the pull pin while she's making out with two people in another room going to be off by a fraction of a second and let the next debuff curse carve out his liver like some back alley blackmarket organ stealer? (He likes his liver, dammit. Dave is actually pretty fond of all of his organs, come to think of it.) Will letting a lady with a baby go down the plane aisle before him piss off his own baby and lead to some kind of baby-vs-baby mortal combat that gets Dave arrested and doomed with extreme prejudice?

Speaking of which. Apparently, 'don't wake up the baby' means that the baby is literally not going to wake up. For anything. Including important bodily concerns, like eating and drinking and like. Shitting. Dave only realizes the problem with this plan when he makes his first pitstop for food at the shitty pizza joint he and Bro only ordered from once, and realizes that the wriggler probably hasn't eaten anything in…ever. For as long as Dave has been in possession of the thing, at least. Occasionally it clicks tiny claws against his back, though he could have sworn its nebulous arms were well swaddled and restrained, and then rolls over with chittering baby sounds before settling again.

(Isn't it swaddled? How is it stuck in Bro's baby carrier, then? Dave remembers looking at the kid's face again when Oriole decided to take a goddamn gander, but the thing he saw is like an open ended question. Like some complete asshole decided to make it deliberately vague and mysterious on purpose for later shock value.)
Not that he doesn't appreciate it. Hell, this is probably the easiest, most low-effort fatherhood he could ever have hoped for, despite the fact that he's earned Bro's disapproval by not getting the kid straight from the stork/meteor. But Dave's experience in the care and keeping of human kids is zero, and the care and keeping of sharp-toothed maybe-wrigglers of uncertain physical dimensions is at less than zero. Of the three parenting role models he's ever witnessed in action, Bro was a hyper-ironic, abrasive ass, Momlondre was largely absent and only recently sober, and Dadbert was…fuck that guy. Crabdad's parenting methods mostly involve forcefully hugging Karkat into nuclear oblivion and screeching out of love, and while Dave assumes it's the healthiest form of caretaking of the lot, he also suspects it might not go over too well if he wants to avoid dropping the baby. Or awakening the baby's eternal wrath. Like, he's got no clue who or what the thing really is, or if it's even a baby (for all he knows it's the wriggler equivalent of a toddler), but like hell is he gonna risk pissing it off.

Keeping it quiet and content gets most stressful when other people start yelling; when they wind up on a plane with three other babies who all start wailing as their ears pop, Dave can feel tiny claws start to tear at his back. Dave swaps the carrier around so it hangs from his chest, then mumbles and does weird baby talk to make the wriggler stop wriggling and making ominous noises in his arms. It worked better for Bro than it does for him, which sucks. He switches to rapping on their way to Minnesota, and makes it through five verses about the Obama administration, rhyming 'inauguration day' with 'Spirited Away,' before the wriggler snuggles into his armpit and falls back into deep sleep, which frees Dave up to chug as much soda as the flight attendant will bring him.

He's never experienced terrifying tedium before. But between the wriggler and the slow breakdown of time hemming him in, Dave thinks this is the epitome of it. It's all such a blur that he can barely keep track of what he's done in what order - marking off the checklist stops him from backtracking in a panic twice when he hits the twenty four hour mark.

Seriously, though, what kind of baby doesn't need a diaper change? Do...do troll wrigglers even have butts? Or is it like a Typhus situation on a much smaller scale?

These are the kinds of thoughts that keep him up at night. He came for the keyed up adrenalin rush of having set, achievable goals, and stayed for the slow, sucking drain of shitty, restless sleep. His internal rambling grows more surreal with each passing minute. He power naps on any flight that lasts longer than a few hours, and wakes with a permanent crink in his neck and a foul morning breath. All told, it takes him the better part of seventeen hours just to check a few items off his list, with all the forced downtime, and it feels like forever. He's tracking sand everywhere he goes, and no amount of dusting himself off in airport bathrooms can get rid of the dirt sticking to his godly pajamas.

The hardest shit involves places and times he isn't familiar with. He knows all about the Incident, for instance (and annoying old Karkat is a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day) and where he needs to show up for each bullet point on the list, but finding Kanaya sometime in her high school years? Delivering a brochure to her waiting claws? Somehow turns out to be a logistical challenge. Her apartment door lacks a mail slot, so after a few hours of lurking and waiting for Kanaya to leave the apartment complex, Dave hefts a giant Marine Corps manual and throws it through her apartment window in the middle of the day, when she's not home. Then he books it before anyone can come to investigate. Bad enough if one of her neighbors sees him, let alone Kanaya herself. Dave doesn't even know why he needs to do this shit, but it's presumably important and worth the not-zero risk of him getting caught dicking around on a security camera, popping up at random points in history like a time traveling, baby-toting Bigfoot.
It's not the same.

Dave knows he's travelling through these time loops through for the first time, but déjà vu gets a real damn workout today. He can feel the flecks and fragmented chunks of displaced time beneath the surface as he makes his way backward, and knows that things are not going the way they should be. Not precisely. The broad strokes are there, but the details are off. Most of the changes are minor - not game-ending, thank god. He catches himself scratching at sand that's found its way between his collar and his throat, leaving a raw patch of scraped skin around his neck, and when he finds a mirror to take it off and wipe the sand off, for a split second he thinks the collar should be a different color. Some shade of blue, maybe?

But the impression slips of his mind like a sigh, and Dave has to deal with what is. Little things like that? He just has to put them to the side to worry about later, or never. Continuity drift sucks ass.

And the further back he goes - the more loops he passes through - the more the accumulated time starts to pile up - the more the thing clinging to his back solidifies -

He starts to catch on in the bowels of Betty Crocker Kitchens.

Getting to Minnesota, home of the Betty Crocker Kitchen, tips him over to the third day, and to be perfectly honest? John's Betty Crocker thing be damned – if Dave finds a convenient package of brownie mix laying around literally anywhere in this facility, he is going to eat it. Cooking optional. As nasty as it might taste, it'll still be better than all this airport food. His insides feel like they're shriveling from prolonged exposure to over-salted peanuts and pretzels, and his lower lip has developed a minute twitch that, according to Google, might be the result of excessive caffeine intake. If he's not imagining it. If it isn't some kind of arcane nerve damage inflicted on him by Lord Douchecanoe himself for the unspeakable crime of being fly as fuck in the face of impending doom.

Anyway. Betty Crocker's food has a reputation for being wholesome, right? Right. The Condesce can't have based an entire company off lies and artificial flavoring and additives like John claims, right?

He arrives at around one in the morning, and waits until four am to start poking around. Dave explores the nineteen kitchens one at a time (who even needs that much kitchen in their lives?) and locates the goods three kitchens in. He spies the platter of cookies pushed back into the corner of an otherwise spotless countertop, right in the shadow of the cupboards. His feet walk him to the counter with only token protest from his brainmeat, and Dave reaches out to whisk away just one cookie (no one will miss just one) when suddenly -

His internal John voice intervenes. Said internal John voice sounds a lot like Dave's own internal voice, but with more giant front teeth and a blue color scheme. And it's saying that if he eats this unholy offering to the treacherous first lady of baked goods, he's gonna have a bad time.

…But just how accurate is his internal John, anyway? His internal Rose is spot-on, natch, and his internal Jade is a real go-getter, but his internal John?

Prrrobably pretty accurate, all things considered.

Maybe he should check, just in case.

The realization that he's texting a past John rather than a future John only hits after Dave's made an ass of himself. As usual.
TG: yo eb
EB: yes flashstep?
EB: do you even know what time it is?
TG: hahahahaHAHAHAHAHA
EB: ....are you okay?
TG: yeah fine why
TG: nvmd just tell me
TG: what are the odds of hypothetical evil overlord betty crocker poisoning her hypothetical leftover baked goods in some form of incredibly unfair bullshit yet hypothetical boobytrap
EB: extremely high. 100%. off the charts.
TG: goddammit
EB: wait, you hate betty crocker too?
TG: i mean mainly now that you've said it i cant get the poison thing out of my head
TG: dammit eb
EB: you're the one who said it, not me! :T
EB: anyway, since this is all hypothetical, i'm going to sleep now, because some of us just finished working and have school tomorrow.
TG: oh right your old obscene schedule
EB: old?!
TG: sleep well my sweet boy
EB: seriously, dude?
EB: you are so weird.
TG: im so sleep deprived m you dont even know
TG: did this conversation even happen before
TG: fuku
TG: oh shit
TG: was that a typo
TG: who even am i anymore
EB: i'm going to sleep now!
EB: you should probably sleep too!
TG: i cant man
TG: im having an existential crisis over poisoned cookies and typos over here
EB: GOOD NIGHT!
TG: dude wait
EB: oh no...it's happening...i'm going to close the app!
TG: dude just dont forget to delete the conversation or something
TG: for like security purposes or paranoia or some shit
EB: i'm so tired i'm barely going to remember this anyway. :P
TG: no look man im saying weird shit and its embarrassing
TG: just delete it and we can both pretend this never happened
TG: youre a good person eb youwouldnt hold onto primo blackmail material like this right
EB: :P :P :P
EB: fiine.
EB: now. good night!
TG: good night my dear sweet bro
EB: omg, i'm deleting this so i never have to read that again, you weirdo.

Nice save. Dave's stomach protests with extreme prejudice, but how the hell is Dave supposed to argue with contagious Egbert logic? The cookies must be cold by now, if they've been sitting out all night. Who just leaves delicious cookies unguarded in the open like this?
His stomach whines louder when he finds the pantry. There is no way in hell the Condesce had all her ingredients poisoned; that would be such a waste. No way. Dave finds some dried cranberries, and then cracks open two giant refrigerators to locate apples and yogurt and cheese to munch on. If it's getting bad enough that he craves healthy food, he really must be running on fumes, holy hell. With a whole block of cheese sticking out his mouth, he weaves through the rest of the kitchens foraging for supplies (as if Her Imperious Capitalism will ever notice), and then heads to the cookbook library. He has two numbers attached to this address on his List, and if the cheese doesn't kill him, Dave needs to figure out what they mean.

641.69209 takes some searching, but turns out to be the reference number for a group of obscure seafood cookbooks; he only needs to take out a book and find a tiny button set in the shelf, and then move on to more Barbie Secret Agent for the PC nonsense. 808.882 is harder, because there is no 800s section. This shitty ass library has a bunch of health-adjacent books and an entire stack dedicated to wine, but Dave sprints up and down the aisles in a rising panic because the numbers don't go very far past 663.2.

He's so dumb. It's the single row right by the entrance. Condy has a collection of books about fish puns. Dave chokes on a chunk of apple and feels only creeping despair. When he peels a particularly old, yellowed paperback out from the center of the row, he smacks the button and then stuffs the books back into order, desperately trying not to read the titles along the spines. The most he reads is 'Get Thee To a Punnery' and that's it, he's done. Dave has important shit to do. Like watching an entire bookshelf shift five feet to the side, blocking off the main entrance and revealing a hidden elevator. Dave snaps another selfie in front of the library logo for the express purpose of annoying the piss out of John later, and then heads down.

But -

- -

But -

- -

But -

It gets harder to focus as Dave descends. Dave only picks up on the change when he reaches the lowest sublevel, and realizes he can't remember any details from the ride down.

He knows, objectively, that he just went down the elevator, and that now he's in some luxurious, fuchsia-and-gold pad.

And the thing is? Dave knows this feeling. He's felt something like this before. It's more than déjà vu; it's even more insidious than him fucking up minor details and subtly altering things that should have been because, like, Dave's pretty sure the minor fuck ups are just him being an idiot. Somehow, he makes it all the way to the Condesce's hidden transportalizer without knowing exactly where the transportalizer is. One second, Dave's taking an angled picture with one of the Condesce's many, many solid gold statues, and the next he's strolling into her closet (which has almost the same square feet as her actual bedroom, and appears to have enough fabric to cloth a small town), kicking at the plush white carpet until he finds the hatch that leads down to the buried transportalizer chamber. It happened with the Felt's fire extinguisher, too - Dave just...skipped right through it, like it was barely worth mentioning.

It feels almost like...he's got something on his back...
Things slide back into focus.

On the one hand, great! Awesome! On the other hand, Dave can't tell what's causing the reality slippage. Bad. Not awesome. He scrambles onto the transportalizer with a clang as the toe of his shoe catches on the edge, and keys the password into the tiny access panel, to distract himself with something concrete. There's no option on the number pad to enter coordinates or anything - this only goes to one place, conveniently enough. He looks up at the underside of the closed metal hatch, gulps, and hits enter.

If it were a void problem, Dave doesn't think the transportalizer would work. Probably. Seems like a thing he should have tested before teleporting his atoms halfway around the world without Jade to supervise, but too late now. He appears with a zap and a faint burning smell on a transportalizer pad identical to the one he left from, in the middle of a dark room.

After much deliberation, Dave claps twice, and the lights flick on.

His cape is, once again, on fire. Or at least smoldering. Dave doesn't know what set that off, apart from the transportalizer being a piece of garbage, and wastes a full minute making the fabric lengthen so he can stamp out the sparks. Then he hops off the pad and crosses the room, scanning the corners of the walls for cameras. It's probably way too late to worry about that, but as long as he's flashstepping…

The door opens onto a small, rough-edged hallway that curves in a semi-circle. Dave knocks the wall with his knuckles and winces at the hard, irregular texture; it's sharper than expected, with tiny grains of what feels like glass or crystal sticking out. The floor has been smoothed down and paved with grey stone, but for something probably designed and paid for by the Condesce, the hallway's uncharacteristically drab and unfinished. Dave wonders if she was having an off day, or if she had better things to do - like buying giant gold statues of herself. As if you can ever have too many of those, right? Dave should think about investing in some of that shit. Just commission a couple of giant Statues of Liberty and maybe one of Rose to erect in the new world. Sure, Rose would take it as a passive-aggressive challenge, but what else are they going to do with their lives if they survive the game? Sit around and crochet for the rest of forever?

....Dave should probably get going. Zoning out like this can't be healthy. He pushes through the door at the far end of the hall and finds himself in a large, high-ceilinged chamber. His list of power did say this was all a dried up magma chamber, but you wouldn't be able to tell from in here - enormous black-and-green, old school computer screens cover most of the walls, along with a bunch of greenish, stained glass tubes and mechanical apparatuses that connect to one particularly huge monitor. All of the machines appear to be powered down or hibernating; without the blinky lights and shit, it looks a little sad, but it hasn't been left alone long enough for everything accumulate obvious dust. Most of the center of the room is taken up by a wide, low grey platform with faded circles and other geometric shapes painted on it.

Gramps Harley was into some weird shit. What else is new?

Dave takes a step into the room, and jumps as the wall slams shut behind him, catching the corner of his cape in the process. This time, it's a frayed, scorched chunk of fabric that hasn't had time to repair itself, so the corner rips with a quick pop as Dave jolts forward. When he looks back, the only sign left of a door is a faint seam in the rock wall.

"You better open when I come back," he tells the wall. The wall does not respond. Then Dave turns and crosses the room, giving the central platform a wide berth. He cups his hands around his mouth. "Yo? Anybody home?" His voice echoes thinly.
??: Let me out, dammit! Or I'll carve you a new organ cavity, you squishy fuck!

Bingo. There can be only one asshole that stabby in the world. The mental voice sounds blurred and fades in and out, but Dave figures that's because he can't see Spades Slick's claws through whatever door he's locked up behind. He jogs around the periphery of the room to reach a not-hidden passage; the metal door opens with the Condesce's password as well. Dave doesn't think Jade's weird grandparent/ecto-father intended that, either - the access panel's screen blacks out when he enters Condy's annoying ass long password and then resets with a fuchsia-colored 'Password Accepted' blinking on and off. Yikes. Dave's going to go further back in time to find Jade's grandpa and demand to know what kind of shit ass security he's been using. Oh, wait - better plan. He's gonna find Sollux, and have Sollux do the secure password lecture spiel. It'll be hilarious.

Once he's through, Dave comes out in another hall - this one isn't made of rock. It looks more like he stepped into some kind of hospital. Unlike the quiet, hibernating computers in the main chamber, Dave can hear the ventilation system running in here, and the lights are all running without him needing to clap them on. Four glass doors give him a view of the four rooms lined up to the end of the hall; the first is the only one that appears to be occupied.

Spades Slick stabs a makeshift shiv through the meal tray slot when Dave gets in range. It isn't even a proper knife - it's tied to the end of a plastic spoon, so it's more of a spear shaped object. Dave dodges, but…Classy. "I seriously don't know what Shouts McGee see in you," he informs Spades, allowing himself a split-second frown as he starts poking at the lock.

SS: We don't have time for you to mutter bullshit! Used to get enough of that from the old geezer...

SS: Let me out!

It doesn't have a passcode lock. It's just, like...a skinny vertical door handle, with a small metal nub beside it. At the top near the doorframe, there's a thin metal box. Shit. All Dave has is Condy's password on the list - just to be safe, Dave double checks, zooming in on the picture he took of the back side of the sheet just in case there's another code buried in the tiny, squished boxes. A key, where would he find a key...

He finds a note at the very bottom: magnets, man. how do they even work? also it's just a turn lock thing, man, you're overthinking it.

Dave stops reading, and lets his phone drop to his side. Without looking, lips pursed, he lifts a hand and turns the metal nub thing. With a click from the box overhead, the magnetic lock unlatches. Spades, who has been doing his utmost to angle the spearshiv at Dave's soft, squishy bits from the slot, yelps and skitters back when Dave swings the door open with a gentle push, his hard feet clacking on the floor.

SS: Gahgghghgh! Finally!

"Go hitch a ride on Jade's airplane fast, dude," Dave says, stepping aside so that Spades' attempt to throw the spearshiv flies wide. The knife clatters off the far wall and Spades lunges after it, glowing at Dave with wild white eyes. "Was there anyone in there with you?"


SS: And will yah shut that cryin' spawn up? For fuck's sake, don't you have any squishy caretaking instincts at all?

Dave's head starts throbbing. "C'mon, this is serious. Is anyone else in there?" he asks, peering into
the room Spades just vacated. There's no sign of WV anywhere; just a bunch of tally marks on the wall, some generic furniture, and a bunch of food trays snapped into sharp plastic shards in one corner. Spades' Shiv Corner. Fun times.

All he gets in response is the sound of Spades' feet clacking away as the carapacian skedaddles. Dave's eardrums throb harder and he winces, pressing a fist to the side of the glass door. "Oh, whatever," he says, to himself and the empty air. Then he goes to the other three doors and unlocks them, swinging each door open so that anyone invisible and partly incorporeal inside should be able to walk out. "Get on the plane, little dude! Be free!" Dave adds. When he gets no answer - not even a crackle of green light - his shoulders slump. Urgh. This, and now a headache? What a day. He can't wait until he's done all this shit, and can head back to the present to deal with...the rest of the shit. Dave doesn't want to waste more time than he has to but at this rate, he's gonna need to spend a few hours sleeping in a nice, dark room with minimal interruptions; he's starting to feel sore all over, genuine exhaustion weighing on his back.

No.

Wait.

Shit.

Dave slaps a hand back over his shoulder, and encounters an extra head of coarse hair. He opens his mouth, but the scream that comes out is mostly silent. All the better to hear the wriggler gurgle and then wail right over his shoulder. "Wait. Wait, no - not this, not now! How long have you been -" Dave gargles his words like they're the finest, mintiest mouth wash, and wastes thirty seconds unhooking the baby carrier with shaky fingers so he can swing it around and try to placate the hyper-destructive baby that's about to crawl on top of his head. One of the buckles catches, so the whole thing tilts at a dangerous angle before Dave scoops an arm under the wriggler's weight, and the thing emits a screaming sob. Once Dave hauls it around into his arms, he can see that more details have filled themselves in: the wriggler has a full head of hair, for one thing. When it cries again, the details waver and for a split second, Dave's holding something that's 90% massive teeth by body mass. It takes everything in his power not to drop it and scream at the top of his lungs. If he screams, the wriggler might scream, and then he'll be straight fucked.

Dave attempts a tentative rock. The wriggler...wriggles, and blinks wide eyes at him. It's very awake. It's very fucking awake. "Who's my little bouncing bundle of screams? You are! Yes, you are! Shhhh, it's okay!" he tries, dropping his voice to a whisper.

The baby blinks again, long and slow and measured, and then makes a weird, snort noise. Better than a scream. Dave rocks it more encouragingly; to an outside observer, it would look like Dave's dancing awkwardly from side to side, but that would, in fact, be an optical illusion and also a lie. Obviously. "Just one more ride, okay?" he promises. "Just - your stop is next! And everything will be cool and chill and awesome. Promise."

Overhead, the lights start to blink red; an alarm blares a second later in the form of a boisterous recording. "Self-destruct engaged, my dear girl! Let's give it the count of ten-nine-

The wriggler hiccups and gives one final snort of apparent delight, and then slumps in the carrier. Dave, in contrast, bolts for the door. The carrier swings wildly under one arm, and Dave can't stop to fix it; he hits the hidden door in the stone wall at top speed, smacking a palm against it as the seconds tick by. "Let me in!" he hisses - then - think, think, what would ancient imperialist Feferi say - "Let me in, morayon!"

The wall slides over to reveal the open door to the unfinished path at five seconds. Dave slams
through and almost runs up the rough side of the wall when he skids on the grey rock. He kicks off the wall, races down the hall, and scrambles onto the transportalizer as the walls begin to shudder. "Bye, bye, bye!" he chants, entering the Condesce's passcode faster than he's ever typed anything before and hitting 'enter' with enough force to make his hand hurt. Under his arm, the wriggler thing gives a delighted chortle at his distress.

The dim lights of the Harley's secret volcano base vanish in a haze of green, and then Dave's standing in the dark, closed-in cylinder of the Condesce's transportalizer pad, back at BC home base. Dave slumps back against the curved wall, breathing into his palm for a second as he sags. Forget the five goddamn stages of grief - this temporary custody thing is what's going to get him blown to smithereens. And the baby doesn't even have the common decency to be old enough to own up to its actions. Because it's a fucking baby. Wearly, Dave starts grooping around in the dark to find the hatch overhead, resting his chin on the wrigglers head for a second. "Right. Okay. Let's just get out of -"

"And anywayve, this has been getting out of conchtrol."

Never mind, back to the silent screaming. Can never have too much of that. Dave snatches his hand back from the hatch and drops into a crouch. The wriggler throws him off balance, so he lands mostly on the padding of his ass. "Shshsh, shhh, it'sokayit'sokay," Dave whispers, trying to pre-empt the wriggler before it can start wailing up an excited storm.

The Condesce doesn't sound like she's walking directly on top of them, but it's a near thing. The muffled thock of sharp heels stabbing into the floor overhead with each stomp sends a tiny clench through Dave's stomach as the Condesce wanders out of sight. "-win' up my island, the nerve. Waderever. You, krillp an eye on the Ukrayne for me. Glubsy's on my last nerve. Just give me a reason. Doesn't have to betta good one..."

Her island? Shit. If she decides to investigate the explosion - if she needs oh, Dave doesn't know, a transportalizer to reach the ex-island faster -

The stomps recede, growing more and more quiet as the Condesce's loud, bombastic complaints become more distant. Dave bides his time in the dark hatch, his ankles starting to ache as he crouches small by the floor, but the distant murmur of Condy's voice doesn't return for another round. No way to tell if she's hanging around in the closet, though, which sucks. As fast as he can be, Dave thinks the Condesce might notice a little thing like a secret hatch cracking open while she's prowling her closet domain.

Forget not getting to hug WV, forget the near-explosion experience - this is what's gonna take a full year off Dave's life. Crouching in this tiny ass hatch with some kind of reality-warping, prematurely-teething, snorffling armageddon baby clutched close to his side like an ice cold, baby-shaped water bottle...

...Dave thinks he knows who he is holding.

God dammit. It only took him what, this entire exhausting loop to figure it out? He should have dumped the baby off first, before anything else; he could have lived in ignorant bliss for the rest of forever.

Before the realization can consume him, Dave snaps (the tiniest snop he's ever made) and summons one timetable in the limited space he's got to maneuver. Cautiously, he cycles back ten minutes - just after his recent!past!self would have left. The room above should still be empty now - and to Dave's relief, when he shoves the hatch open with a thump, there's no one around to witness him scramble out of the hole. "Let's just...get you where you're going," he says to the wriggler.
The wriggler headbutts him in the ribs, and Dave almost topples over into one of the Condesce's hanging rows of stylish jumpsuits.

If handling a kid that's not a terror of destruction and infant rage is even a fifth as terrifying as this, Dave's glad he doesn't plan on having children ever in a million years. How do lusii keep up with this crap?

- Reaching Gibraltar in 2014 simultaneously takes twelve hours, including a layover in London, and a matter of seconds. It's really fucking disconcerting, despite the fact that Dave wholeheartedly wants this to be over with and done as soon as possible. He can't tell if the wriggler's distorting things by accident or if this is his version of...helping. But Dave's having none of it. People seem to be picking up on his destruction baby's aura, too - not one but two people stand up and walk off the plane to book a new flight, rather than stay in the same aisle as him, until finally a human woman with her own baby and her greenblood husband sit down and tough it out. To distract himself and ward off an uncomfortable conversation, Dave inflates a floaty toy he picked up from a decrepit store in Minnesota before the flight to Heathrow left as the plane takes off and his kid emits a honk that makes everyone's ears pop prematurely.

If Dave was even half as much of an unrepentant douchebag to Bro while a baby as this, he is so, so sorry. The mother beside him nudges her husband until the troll fishes a pacifier, still in the plastic packaging, out of their carry-on bag, and then she offers it to Dave with a sympathetic nod.

"Teething?" she asks kindly, when Dave stuffs the entire plastic package into the wriggler's face and the wriggler starts chewing through it with loud crunches.

"Uh, yeah, kind of," Dave says. A shard of plastic shoots away from his wriggler's indeterminate mouth region with a sharp crunch! and embeds itself in the ceiling for some poor flight attendant to pry out after the flight. It's like watching a pencil sharpener/blender hybrid from hell chow down.

The greenblood nods, sagely. "Got a good pair of jaws on that one," he says, approving. Neither of them ask why Dave, a dude in a questionable cosplay outfit, would be in charge of a teething wriggler; the mother just goes back to nursing her own kid.

They land at the Gibraltar Airport - one of the most dangerous airports in the world, Dave learned on the Internet, which is haha, so funny - and as Dave watches out the window, he sees that the airport's runway literally intersects with a road. Cars sit behind a security barrier with traffic completely stopped to let the plane land. He disembarks and makes a beeline for the airport exit as soon as he can, flashing past any and all security and customs bullshit before raising his timetables and rewinding to 1991. Like hell does he want to know what security would make of his passport being 20+ years out of date in the future direction.

Thankfully, Gibraltar is goddamn tiny. The traffic kind of sucks, but Dave's walking anyway, because his bank account doesn't exist in '91 and he doesn't have enough cash on him to bother changing it out to whatever they use here. Exhausted and sore or not, he needs to stretch after so much god fucking damm airplane time.

He has to stop flashstepping twenty minutes in when the low-level ache in his side flares up. It's another thirty five minutes to walk to light house at the far end of Europa Point, but it's not too warm yet, and he thinks it's worth it.

Aradia warned him his powers were flashy. That more shit would start breaking down as he went along. God, he just hopes it's something he can live without, or that he can replace. Like his appendix. Or better yet - why the shit couldn't his tonsils get cursed, nobody even goddamn uses
those things. This is bull. Shit.

"This is such fucking bullshit," he tells the wriggler as they head toward the lighthouse. White rail fences line the ocean side of the walkway; they're on the lowest tier of the possible walkways, closest to the water, with only a step of steep scrub between them and the sudden drop. The pathway and ramps start to meander, and Dave accidentally walks down a shallow flight of stairs without realizing it's leading him away from the lighthouse itself. He gets a running start and jumps up on top of the rocky ledge between that level of the walkway and the next to skip the ramps, and keeps hopping the barred fences as he comes to them. If he's not supposed to get close to the point without being on a tour or something, too bad - he's on a baby delivery mission, like the patron stork of fuck you I won't do what you tell me. No one stops him as he jogs around the red-and-white lighthouse, though a few normal tourists lean over the railing in the middle of their photography sesh to watch him maybe-trespass.

The water's dark, and very blue; the sky's so clear that the sunlight renders his sunglasses totally useless, because the light that sneaks in through the sides of his shades blinds him, regardless. Dave stops for a second to catch his breath once he reaches the furthest point, crouching on what amounts to a slab of concrete near the thin fence that doesn't quite extend far enough to block off access to the cliff. When he looks back toward the city, he sees the craggy rocks rising up in the distance, and also three more tourists who have joined the rest in watching him over the railing. He could get closer to the water, probably, but it would involve skidding down a slope with zero footholds, and then a near vertical drop.

This increasingly strikes Dave as an unfathomably bad idea. Nah, this shit deserves caps. This is a Bad Idea, copyright Dave Strider. To commemorate it, he takes out his phone, turns so that the ocean's behind him, and raises it to take a picture of himself.

Then, with a deep sigh, Dave opens the picture and looks at it properly. If he'd checked his selfies earlier, he probably would have caught on faster. The distortion in the selfie is minimal - he can make out himself, and the water, in almost perfect detail. But the wriggler leaning on his shoulder and holding up an (he is loathe to admit) adorable imitation of Dave's peace sign with two claws still has something off about his features - they're either too symmetrical, or not symmetrical enough, and it makes Dave's brain throb. When Dave flicks back to the previous selfies, he can see the backward progression as the wriggler's identity developed over time.

The horns are what gives it away.

"Dude, you photobombed every single one," Dave complains to Gamzee. Gamzee gives a gurgle-snuffle, and Dave hauls the baby carrier around one last time. Raising the floaty donut from under his arm, Dave lifts Gamzee's asshole wriggler form into it and makes sure both his tiny baby feet stick out the holds in the bottom. He stands up and surveys the ocean one last time, nervousness tightening his stomach. It's a hell of a drop. "Make sure you break physics or some shit on the way down, alright?" he starts babbling at Gamzee, propping the wriggler on his hip to talk to him better. "Please, I don't need more dead baby angst haunting me. Throwing you off a cliff is already gonna fuck me up in some brand new way, I can feel it in my earlobes."

Gamzee honks in his face.

Sudden, confused panic blasts Dave right in the frontal lobe. He raises Gamzee up over his head and flings the wriggler, carrier and floaty and all, like a football. "AAAAHHHHHHHHH OH GOD DON'T FALL I WASN'T READY YET SHIT SHIT SHIT!" Dave screams, way too late. Gamzee clears the edge of the cliff and starts falling, the sad pink and purple polka dots of his floaty toy a tiny blur against the dazzling-bright ocean. The light's too bright for a second and Dave loses track of the
wriggler for a panicky moment and why is he the only shitgod who can't fly?!

An enormous, ghost-white goat mermaid bursts out of the waves with a hideous, bugling goat scream. The lusus snaps Gamzee out of the air before diving back under the water with a splash that slops water a quarter of the way up the cliff face.

Dave doesn't know why he expected a sane, normal custodian to show up for Gamzee of all people, but uh. Wow. Goat mermaids sure are a thing.

At some point, Dave fell dramatically to his knees, which means he now has to stand up, brush himself off, and watch the slow ripples from the goat mermaid lusus's passage dissipate in the waves.

When he turns around, the tourists are staring at him in various states of shock. One man claps once, twice, before hesitating and looking around at the other tourists for backup.

Dave's done. He's so done. Before anyone can get any bright ideas about taking his picture, he travels forward to 2013. He's almost afraid to look up whether there's now a conspiracy theory along the lines of 'that weird dude who tosses children to giant sea monsters in the Strait of Gibraltar,' now. Almost. But hey. He has to occupy the flight back to Las Vegas somehow. Karkat isn't gonna save himself.

- 

TG: dude
TG: gamzee
TG: wtf
TC: :o)
TG: did you know about this shit
TC: that all depends on which motherfucking shit that’s up and bugging you, my brother
TC: OR SHOULD I SAY
TG: DONT YOU FUCKING DARE
TC: daddy :o)
TG: you son of a
TG: oh no
TG: oh god
TC: WHAT’S THE MATTER?
TC: i told you we were cool
TG: does
TG: does this mean
TG: if im your co lusus
TG: and john is your bf
TG: ...have i been Johns dad in law all along
TC: WELL, THAT SURE IS A MOTHERFUCKING CONUNDRUM
TG: am i karkat's dad in law
TC: :oO
TG: what about jade
TG: is there something more specific than inlaws
TC: HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE A MOTHERFUCKING MYSTERY TO ME, MY BROTHER
TG: is daughter in law right
TG: no that cant be it
They stop to pick up Dave, Karkat, and Kanaya. Equius lands in a burst of dead whale powder (eurgh), and full body spasms seize Karkat as he starts sneezing with wild abandon. Kanaya gives him a solid thwack between the shoulders that seems to help clear his lungs, and then she sweeps forward to touch Rose's face. John understands completely - Rose looks like she came a heck of a lot closer to death than she actually did. Her face is ashen where it's not smeared with blood, with dark tracks along her cheeks and in her powdered hair that make it look like she's been crying.

Then Kanaya looks at John, and then Eridan, and finally Equius with an increasingly strange look on
her face. "What did you all do out there?" she says, staring at John accusingly as she begins to produce handkerchiefs from her pocket. "Did you attack Cetus with baked goods? Was there copious amounts of flour involved in the assault? How could you not invite us to such antics?"

"That is exactly what they did," Karkat says, with one last pause for a mighty sneeze. "You are so right, Kanaya. John, you baking obsessed fuck, what were you thinking?!" He inhales the wrong way, just as Equius shakes more dust out of his trailing hood, and erupts into a coughing fit that makes John's eyes water in sympathy. "Fu-hgk-cking - kghf - fuck!"

John wipes at his own mouth; his hand comes away dusted grey. Apparently, not even a trip through the Breeze is enough to clear away most of the ashes, which is nasty. "It seemed like a good idea at the time! I think that last apple pie was what really finished her off. Old family recipe," he says, without missing a beat, snapping his fingers to blow the lingering ashes in the air down the corridor with a stiff breeze. Joking is good. Joking is easy, whereas wondering why Leviathan turned into roses and thorns makes him uneasy. Wondering why a Horrorterror does anything is basically useless, as far as John can tell. Wondering what Cetus said to upset Rose is slightly more productive, but the actual answers are still inaccessible as long as Rose is being dumb about it. "That's a restroom, right?"

Kanaya rolls her eyes as she tries to help Rose dab gore off her face. "Yes. Dave said it was a matter of the utmost urgency."

"Oh thank fuck." Eridan rams through the door, carrying Kanaya's handkerchief like a flag as he makes a beeline for the sinks. The bathroom is the exact same shade of felt green as the rest of the building; John is personally more shocked to see that the urinals are white. He floats after Eridan, and spies Dave bending over at one sink with his entire head stuck under a stream of water. Eridan promptly does the exact same thing, gargling water as he starts furiously scrubbing his hair.

Equius shakes his head outside the door. It sends up another poof of dust, and the Breeze huffs in John's ear as it directs the cloud away from Karkat's lungs, which appear to suck up air-born particles like magnets. "Is this really necessary?"

Rose knees the door back open before it finishes closing. "Yes," she says grimly, commandeering another sink to wet her borrowed cloth. "Does anyone know where Vriska went?"

"Last I hegkhhk- heard, she had Clover. Nothing since then," Karkat coughs out.

Kanaya props the door open with her foot. "I will ask around," she says, pulling out her phone.

John sneaks his hand in to stick his handkerchief under the stream of water at Rose's sink, and then floats over to poke Dave and make sure he's still alive. I mean, John can feel him breathing, yeah, but he's not exactly moving. When John sees himself in the mirror, he almost bursts out giggling at how silly he looks with grey powder all over his face. The ash is not as obvious on Equius because of his troll-grey skin, but he and Rose both look like crappy cross-species cosplayers. John wipes his eyes off first, and then his mouth, using the mirror over Dave's sink/shower. He prods Dave in the spine when Dave continues to ignore them all.

Dave raises his head with water pouring down the front of his shades, his eyes peeking out over the top as he stares at John in the mirror. "Don't go full juggalo on me, John. I can't handle more clown in-laws," he says, shaking his head.

John snickers as he wipes off the rest of his face. "What, you don't think it would be funny?" Then he soberes. Because Dave pushes himself up from the sink like it takes real effort out of him, and that's...not good. "You okay?" Dumb question. Really dumb question, on account of none of them
are okay. Not-dead and only-moderately-traumatized is their baseline existence around here.

Dave grimaces. "I really need to sleep. Like, in a bed, with a silky soft, plush as fuck pillow, and cotton jersey knit sheets, and with a fan going, and apple juice beside me. No. Cranberry juice. Fancy ass cranberry-pomegranate shit. Not in an airplane. Unless it was like, Air Force One, and Obama was there, just like, casually hanging out."

Eridan gargles one last time and spits. "That sounds fucking amazin'," he says, with his sodden hair completely obscuring the top half of his face.

"Vriska says that she is 'rescuing the feathery 8sshole, you're welcome,'" Kanaya announces, pronouncing the 8 in 8sshole in full, her voice full of dubious hesitation. "With eight exclamation points."

John looks at Dave, who looks at Rose, who looks at John, and then all of them look at Kanaya. "She's gonna murder my bird twin," Dave says, horrified.

"He doesn't have any extra lives, either," John adds, which only makes Dave clutch his head. John can't blame him - 'Vriska' and 'rescue' are two pretty risky concepts to stick together in the same sentence. Especially when Vriska herself is the one doing it.

Rose wrings out her handkerchief. "If she doesn't plan it out ahead of time, it might only be manslaughter," she says, in that nonchalant way she has that means she's secretly deeply concerned. "Maybe we should consult Terezi."

"On so many levels? Not helpful, Rose," John says, as the Breeze starts to feel around for wherever Vriska's lurking. Lucky for John, she's pretty obviously not hiding.

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AG: I am rescuing the feathery 8sshole, you're welcome!!!!!!!!
GA: Somehow I Think That You Are Being Disingenuous. Please Give Your Exact Location So That We Can Come Assist.
AG: Oh piss off, Kanaya, you're not my lusus! Jeeeeezezz!
AG: I have the 8est good luck charm here. The 8est. This is a piece of cake.
GA: Your Good Luck Charm Is A Felt Member. This Does Not Seem Safe.
TT: Vriska, I would really appreciate if you would let us catch up with you first. Just in case something unexpected occurs. I have confidence in your abilities, but the Felt might still have tricks up their sleeves.
EB: tricksies up their sleevies?
TT: No.
AG: Too l8! Oh no! I'm already rescuing him! What are you going to do about it?!
TG: vriska please dont kill oriole
TG: bro is around here somewhere
TG: hell literally go full ninja clan eternal vengeance on your ass
TT: yup.
AG: Rescuing is the opposite of killing, you m8rons!!!!! I'm not incompetent!
EB: yeah, we know, you just, uh.
EB: kind of have a track record of reckless behavior.
EB: like the kind where cities burn around you and stuff falls apart...
GA: It's True, I Was There. Rose Was Also A Witness.
AT: aND THEN YOU STAB PEOPLE, rIGHT IN THE SELF ESTEEM,
AT: aS WELL AS THE STOMACH, wHICH HURTS ALMOST AS MUCH AS THE SELF
ESTEEM,
AT: sPEAKING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE,
AG: I am going to rescue this guy so good. You'll see. You're all going to regret questioning my rescuing prowess. >:::(
CG: WELL I GUESS THAT'S A START. ASK ORIOLE WHO HE WANTS TO DO THE SPEECHES AT HIS FUNERAL, FIRST.
AA: did someone say corpse party? :D
CG: PRETTY MUCH, YEAH.
AG: No! Urgh, whatever! It's not like I'm Eridan, okay?! Go nag him about genocide or something!
CA: vvis come on im tryin not to remind them a that
AG: Yeah, I know, you're whipped! 8oohoo! You've still killed more people than I have!
EB: and if eridan went to rescue someone by himself I would be pretty worried, too!
EB: but he's hanging around with us and not doing anything, and i only have so much worry room left in my brain right now.
CG: CONGRATULATIONS, VRISKA. YOU'RE TOP PRIORITY. JUST LIKE YOU ALWAYS WANTED. WHEE.
TG: yeah we have roughly equal confidence in both of you
EB: aaanyway, found you! be right there!
AG: He's already rescued! Haha!
TG: rip dave oriole strider
TG: what a way to go man
AG: HE'S! NOT! DEAD!!!!!!!!!
TG: hes dead john
EB: suuuper dead.

Oriole is not dead when John carries everyone up a few floors. But he is screaming bloody murder while twisting and dangling from Vriska's grip, just outside the broken window.

Which means any second now Vriska will lose patience and toss him over her shoulder into the empty air. She's not exactly a patient kind of person, and while she might have snagged Oriole to prove a point, that doesn't mean she'll keep it up if he starts annoying/boring her. Oriole's not helping his case by yelling, "Let me go, woman!" in between irate bird shrieks.

"Just be grateful, you ass!" The last of the clouds from earlier have started to clear, along with the faint drizzle, and Vriska basks in the sunlight. She manages to make the faint glow outlining her wings and Thief uniform look menacing, which is a pretty cool effect. Felt-green bodies take up almost every square foot of the floor under Vriska, all in a writhing wave as the multiple copies of Eggs and Biscuit careen around like the room is a pinball machine. Vriska looks pleased as punch, with Oriole in one hand and a third Felt member tucked under her other arm - neither of them looking like they much want to be there. When she sees them appear on the far side of the room, Vriska rolls her eyes. "See? Seeeeeeeee?" she yells over the rabble, as she shakes Oriole by the back of his shirt. Oriole tries to kick her in the crotch, but he keeps spinning around so all he hits is air. She's totally gonna throw him at some point. John can feel it in his bones.

(John could catch him before he falls too far, though. Always an option!)

One of the copied Biscuits in the crowd rises up out of the mass of bodies with a massive oven held over his head – there's just a hint of a tremor in his arms, but three other Eggs and Biscuits surge up beside him and help shove the oven at Vriska. It's probably going down on the list of the silliest things John has ever seen, and he has seen some pretty silly stuff, in his life. Ovenkind may be the
stuff of kitchenkind legend, but it's also just ridiculous to see in action. The Breeze swoops under the oven as it leaves their hands, and John waves the oven to the side. It crashes into the wall with a resounding clang, then lands on two Biscuits. No one in the crowd seems bothered by this.

Vriska, on the other hand, groans in disappointment. "Egbert! If you're just here to make things boring, go away! And look, he's alive! Please, don't hold your applause!"

Without a word, John brings his hands together in a single, soft pat.

"We do see. Thank you, Vriska," Rose says. John winces; Rose's Vriskapenance voice sounds like she's reciting from a script, with hardly any pauses between words. Eventually, Vriska's ego is going to notice that Rose is just going through the motions...

For now, though - Vriska hefts Oriole and jerks her chin at John. "Yeah, you're welcome. Here."
She tosses Oriole underhand, his wings splaying out at opposing angles as he squawks, and John has the Breeze levitate him before he can land in the horde of delicious breakfast people. "And as for all of you -" she continues, using her now-free hand to cast her blue dice over the crowd, "- fore!"

The one handed throw lands somewhere in the midst of Eggs and Biscuit's copies - John sees one Biscuits lunge forward, mouth agape, to try to swallow one of the dice midthrow, but there's not enough room for him to maneuver with so many bodies crammed in close. Whatever number the dice land on, it must be a good enough roll to do something. John wafts Oriole and Kanaya in closer to the rest of the group to keep them out of the way when eight dice start to glow white-blue from the floor.

At least fifty whips materialize out of nowhere (not out of thin air - the Breeze gets cranky about the distinction, sometimes), crack around each version of Eggs and Biscuit, and yank them roughly to the side. The sound of dozens and dozens of human skulls colliding with the side of troll skulls and horns fills the room in a chorus, and more than half the crowd falls over, dazed by the whiplash. But more copies pour in through the room's entrance to fill in the gaps, trampling their copied selves in a stampede worthy of the Lion King, while Vriska summons her dicekind back with irritation creasing her brow. "Hey!" she says, giving Clover a tiny shake. "Cough it up!" Her lip curls as she tosses the dice again.

And see, Vriska's floating outside the window on her fancy pixie wings. John and a solid chunk of the people he cares about are in the room itself, along with the swarming mass of Felt members - so when Vriska's second roll snaps the walls and brings the roof down, it's perfectly lucky for her and only her. John dissolves everyone into air except one, and they suck out from under the sudden collapsing rubble and vents before it can squish them into pancakes to complete the breakfast combo platter.

The wind wraps around Vriska and smacks her own hair into her face before solidifying back into people shapes. The only one missing, when John remembers to do a headcount, is Equius. John looks back into the room they just vacated, alarmed for all of two seconds. There's an Equius shaped hole in the wreckage on the floor, and Equius himself is an obscure shadow in the air that brushes a few flecks of debris out of his hair before joining them outside the building. A few straggling copies of Eggs and Biscuits peep in through the open door, then scurry off out of sight, abandoning their unconscious copies to dig themselves out.

"Y'know, I don't know what I expected," John says. Well, that's not true. He at least half expected Vriska to slice all the Eggs and Biscuits clones' in two, or something equally murdery involving swords, after the Eridan incident earlier. Dropping a ceiling on the Felt is actually pretty mild, in comparison! It's just, y'know, that eensy weency little oversight where she didn't bother to warn anyone or wait until her friends were out of the way before doing it. John can never tell for sure if
Vriska is careless, cocky, just a massive dick, or all of the above.

"A modicum of self-restraint? From Vriska? No, you’re right, that’s too unrealistic," Karkat says, without letting anyone answer. John wafts him closer so he can hug Karkat properly, and Karkat only puts up a token eye roll before letting his head loll on John's shoulder, his horn nudging the side of John's face. "Let me guess - it was so lucky that the whole building didn't start to snap off at the top like a giant fucking Kit-Kat bar made out of shit. And concrete."

"Kit-Kat," Dave repeats, with feeling. Karkat gives him the middle finger.

John shrugs. Welp, nothing else for it. "Time to update the spreadsheet, I guess," he says, pulling it up on his phone.

Vriska plucks at the front of her god tier shirt with her hand. The fabric falls back against her slightly out of place, and she throws the Felt member over one shoulder like a trophy as she flies up and away from them. "You guys need to get over yourselves," she calls over her shoulder. "Seriously. If you ever decide to stop riding my ass, go have your honeymoon somewhere in the Arctic so you can chill out!"

"That comeback was shit tier, Serket!" Karkat yells back, bristling so much that John nearly eats a mouthful of his hair. It's not possible for Karkat to propel himself under his own power when they're this high up, but he tries to lunge toward Vriska anyway. When that doesn't work he shakes a fist at her. It's really weirdly adorable, if ineffective and apparently rage-inducing - Karkat makes a sound like steam coming out of a kettle until John draws him back in again.

Rose starts flying after Vriska with a faint frown; Kanaya gets pulled along for the ride, her grip tight on Rose's hand. "Vriska, wh-"

"Relax! I'm just going to find Terezi! Wherever that troll has run off to. Since she's still not answering my texts." Vriska slings Clover off her shoulder and his startled 'ooOOOoooh deEAAAR,' wavers in and out as she spins him up to hold over her head. "Come on, you lucky bastard, we're going on a Pyrope hunt," she cackles, before bolting up the side of the building in a trail of sparkles.

"Do we condone her kidnapping and exploiting the enemy?" Kanaya asks.

"That, my dear, is the best question anyone has asked today. And I honestly don't have an answer," Rose replies.

Oriole hasn't unfolded his wings, yet, so John supposes he's also flying Air Breeze, this afternoon. Up close, his hair and feathers form a tangled bird's nest, and one of his shoes has definitely gone missing. "This was a terrible plan. Remind me to never be proactive ever again. It's just not worth the amount of crap that I have to put up with," he says. Eridan, one of the people flying closest to Oriole, looks alarmed at having this sudden, on-going duty laid upon him, and starts edging away. "None of you could come help me out except for her? Really? I rank that low on the priority meter?"

Dave claps him on the shoulder. "Hell, we got here. Eventually. Somehow you beat out Dirk. And he's the guy we nominally came here for. Not bad, right?"

Oriole buries his face in his hands and groans. "I don't know why I hang out with you all. I really, really don't."

"Nonsense. We're family," Rose says, distracted. Oriole groans louder. "Now Dirk?"

"Yup! Now Dirk," John agrees.
Karkat tightens his claws on John's sleeve, then gives John a tiny shove. "Hang the fuck on, are you sure?"

Puzzled, John just blinks at him. "Why wouldn't I be?" he asks.

(It's all going too smoothly. John knows it, in the back of his noggin, but so few things ever go right for them that he dives in headfirst, without questioning it.)

---

AC: :33 < where did effurrybody go?!
AC: :33 < equihiss, this is bullshit! i know you're ditching meown purpose!
AT: tHIS IS, IN FACT, tOTAL BULLSHIT.
CT: D--> The situation is marginally less dangerous than it was previously
CT: D--> I would still STRONGLY recommend you stay back until the building is secured
CT: D--> And language
AC: :33 < well, too bad fur mew, i already asked fefurry where she is!
AT: aND MR STRIDER ISN'T BOTHERING US ANYMORE, sO THERE,
CT: D--> I insist that you both stay at a safe distance
AC: :33 < hmmm…no!
AT: nOT REALLY FEELING IT TODAY,
CT: D--> Yes
AC: :33 < no!
CT: D--> Yes
AT: uH, nO,
CT: D--> You do not get a say in the matter
AC: :33 < yes he does!
CT: D--> No, he does not
AC: :33 < yeah huh!
CT: D--> Nuh uh
CC: )(OLY CARP, CAN YOU GUYS CUTTL------E IT OUT?!
AC: :33 < yeah huh!
CG: WE STILL HAVE PRIVATE PESTERCHUM CHATS FOR A REASON, FOR FUCK'S SAKE.
CT: D--> No
CG: THERE IS NO REASON FOR ANY OF THESE CONVERSATIONS TO BE TAKING PLACE IN THE FUCKING GROUP MEMO. I DON'T CARE WHAT VARIATION ON FRUITY FUCKING FURRY RUMPUS BULLSHIT WE CALL IT, THIS IS SO FAR BEYOND WHAT I'M WILLING TO PUT UP WITH AS DICTATOR OF THE CHAT.
AC: :33 < yes!
TA: who the fuck put you iin charge, KK?
CG: I DID. THAT'S WHY IT'S CALLED BEING A DICTATOR.
TA: youd be nothiing wiithout me.
TA: watch thii2 2hiit
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned arsenicCatnip [AC] from the chat! --
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned centaursTesticle [CT] from the chat! --
TA: 2ay iit, KK.
TA: 2ay the word2.
CG: ...YOU'RE A FUCKING GENIUS, SOLLUX. ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?
TA: ye2. ye2 ii am.
GA: This Strikes Me As Somewhat Of A Potential Hazard, If They Cannot Communicate With The Main Group Chat In The Event Of An Emergency.

AT: i DON'T THINK THIS MEMO IS EXACTLY USEFUL FOR THAT, aNYWAY,

TG: that is the understatement

TG: of the goddamn century

TG: though considering were not making it past the 2014 year mark

TG: there's like 86 years worth of lost understatement potential well never get to see

TG: just think -

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned turntechnGodhead [TG] from the chat! --

EB: omg.

CG: HOLY FUCK, SOLLUX. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

TA: thi2 ii2 what a real dictator look2 liike.

GA: I Think You Have Broken Dave.

TA: ii have ab2olute banniing power and iim not afraaid two u2e iit, dammiit.

TA: you people have 2pammed the thread for the last time.

AG: Pffthahahahahahaha, oh my godddddddd, this is the funniest thing I have ever seen! ::::D

AG: 8an Lalonde next, please - I need to fly back and see the look on her face!

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned arachnidsGrip [AG] from the chat! --

EB: at this rate I don't think anyone is gonna be left in this memo...

CG: MAYBE IT'S TIME. LET THE MEMO DIE. SOLLUX IS FUCKING PISSED, AND NO ONE'S GOING TO SURVIVE.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned carcinoGeneticist [CG] from the chat! --

EB: D:

EB: kanaya, what do we do?!

GA: Be Strong, John. We Must Be Strong.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned grimAuxiliatrix [GA] from the chat! --

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned ectoBiologist [EB] from the chat! --

AT: sOLLUX,

AT: hAHA, we'RE SORT OF FRIENDS, rIGHT?

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned adiosToreador [AT] from the chat! --

TA: 2orry, that one was mostly for the chat handle palindrome.

TA: TA AT TA AT

TA: anyone el2e?

TA: wait. 2hiit. have ii been a complete a22hole?

TA: fuck. 2orry.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] has banned twinArmageddons [TA] from the chat! --

TT: ...What exactly happened here?

GC: *L1CKS TH3 SO1L*

GC: SOM3TH1NG T3RR1BL3.

GC: 4ND STUP1D.

CC: Yea)(, pretty muc)(!

CA: looks like hes gone noww but holy fuck

TT: Ah.

TT: Well, so it goes. We'll hold the memorial service at dawn, the next time we have a free moment.

GC: M3M3-MOR14L S3RV1C3? >;

TT: If you must.

CA: this memo wwas fuckin garbage anywway

GC: Y3S, BUT 1T W4S OUR G4RB4G3. QU4L1TY G4RB4G3. TH3 K1ND OF G4RB4GE YOU T4K3 HOM3 4ND F33D TO YOUR LUSUS.

GC: IF YOUR LUSUS D1DNT SP3ND MOST OF YOUR L1F3 4S 4N 3GG.
Next stop, Dirk. The scratch kids haven't checked in via the memo for a while, so John can only assume that they went ahead and engaged without waiting for anyone to come help. Which isn't a reassuring thought! Not even a little bit!

Not only is he anxious about what they're about to fly into, he's anxious about how many of them are flying into it. They're all here of their own free will, sure (no matter how much Oriole grumbles) but John still feels responsible for making sure he doesn't land them all right in the middle of the fight. If Dirk hasn't snapped out of his brainwashing by now, there's gonna be a stupidly fast Strider with a sword whipping around the room like a souped-up bouncy ball, and the last thing John needs is for someone he cares about to get stabbed. Like, Eridan he's pretty neutral about, and Equius could probably take a sword to the chest and use it as a toothpick afterward. But even then, John doesn't want Eridan to get hurt and set everyone in the room on fire with hope magic stuff! It would be seriously counterproductive, and also sucky. Really sucky.

Equius drops out of the Breeze with a sudden burst of gravity, and then vanishes into obscurity; John can't track exactly where the blueblood goes from there, but considering the fact that Tavros and Nepeta are circling around the building looking for a way in, John supposes it's a good bet Equius is off to hassle them. Which, hey! One less person to worry about.

Good news: John successfully coasts around the room on the Breeze, and finds a spot to land everyone, behind a stack of desks that have been violently throw to the corner of the room. Jake's grappling hooks crisscross a surprising amount of the room, making it harder to find a clear space for all of John's passengers, but he somehow manages to pull it off without bisecting anyone. Yay!

Bad news: Dirk's a blur. A very fast, very pointy blur in black and red. His stabliness levels would probably make Spades Slick proud and/or jealous. Jake, at least, is making an effort to shout some sense into him, but Dirk's a stabby whiffle ball of sword and stone-faced indifference whenever he pauses long enough for John to get a look at him, "Dirk! Dirk, listen to me!" Jake yells, his hands shaking and shooting wild. On the other hand, that might be deliberate - most of the wild shots seem to coincidentally wind up peppering the floor. Roxy can't speak too loud, still, but she's pinned between Jake and the wall, and the shots from her tranq gun are actually aimed at Dirk rather than deliberately missing. Jane and Feferi stand back to back in the center of the room, taking the brunt of Dirk's attacks: Jane blocks most of Dirk's slices with silent determination, but Feferi's glowing faintly fuchsia, her eyes luminescent. The momentary blur of Dirk slices open her arm - but Feferi heals almost instantly.

The other bad - or maybe mediocre - news: Terezi is here. While she's holding her own with ease, deflecting Dirk's sword with her canekind whenever he veers in her direction, it also means any second now, Vriska's gonna totally burst in through one of the few remaining windows and make the situation eight times more likely to blow up in their faces. Instead of focusing on Dirk, though, the tealblood's closer to the penthouse stairs than the center of the action. Closer to -

Bad news x3 combo: there's a Felt member in the room. He's wearing a green hat with his pin-like horns sticking out through the fabric, and something about him makes John want to throw up. Like, he's kind of sick of feeling nauseous so much all the time, but this is on a whole new level. The Felt member stands between Terezi and the penthouse stairs. Every time he stamps a petulant foot, Dirk darts over and drives Terezi back towards the wall with a flurry of rapid-fire slashes. It doesn't seem to do more than inconvenience Terezi, but it still keeps her from making any progress. "That's one hacked off gourd you've got on your shoulders, Pumpkin Spice!" the tealblood laughs, before
ducking low and ramming her sharp horns at Dirk's stomach. Dirk vanishes and reappears halfway across the room, and Terezi lands in a roll. She's still some distance from -

Y'know, John didn't want to acknowledge a certain name on the Felt inventory spreadsheet. Which was dumb of him, yeah, but he just. Didn't want to think about it.

Dienek is here, and John feels sick with how much he wants to toss the guy out a window. Or worse. He doesn't even recognize the troll's face; if John had any memories of his handler taking him to get brainwashed, he hasn't been able to trawl through the sludge of his mind to retrieve them, yet. But now John's stomach feels too tight, and the Breeze has to wrap around close because otherwise he can't breathe - or he'll make Die stop breathing - or - or -

Karkat seizes John around the waist and starts dragging him away, back toward the main stairwell that they skipped passed on the Breeze. It must take less effort when John's floating weightlessly above the ground, but still. They must look so silly. "Haha. Oh man," John chokes out, feeling Karkat's claws dig a little deeper into the skin of his arms. "Right. That guy. Hahaha!"

It's not a good laugh. It's not a good laugh at all. "Stay with me, dumbass," Karkat says, his voice weird and uneven and not-shouty. Karkat not shouting is never a good sign. "Fuck. This was a bad idea. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Someone, kick that fucker's bonebulge out through his esophagus!"

"I so call dibs," Dave says, and he looked and sounded exhausted not five minutes ago, but his voice sounds flat and steady and ready for casual vigilante justice as he draws a sword. John honestly can't keep track of how many shitty swords Dave owns; he's never really tried.

Rose draws two needlekind, and says, "Dibs isn't binding, brother mine. Do you think it would be uncouth of me to use his horns as a specibus?"

Dave straightens up from his crouch, and slowly stares at Rose. "...Holy shit, Rose."

Karkat slams to a stop, and John's feet drag over a computer monitor, so he squirms around in the troll's grip to see what's stopped Karkat in his tracks. A patch of whirly, distorted space fills most of the air around the stairwell - it feels worse up here than it did lower in the building, as though Jack Noir tore up more of the space here before taking off after Jade - but somehow, two people in Felt green manage to crawl through the same clear path that the scratch kids, Feferi, and Terezi took to climb this high. When they finish extricating themselves from the last of the distortion, their hats are solid red and orange. Fin must be the one with the teeth - the woman looks like she could bite through solid steel. Trace is slower than the other Felt member, and placidly allows himself to be dragged upright when Fin straightens up. The two of them link arms once they're upright. "More coming up behind!" Karkat yells back at the others, his eyes wide with alarm.

John sets down on the floor when Karkat attempts to haul him back the way they came. "Nah, I'd rather fight these guys," John says, lightly, ghosting out of Karkat's arms like a sigh. Karkat, still in emergency mode, bristles a little more - his hair looks like a living, prickly thing with the force of his worry, but now's not the time for papping it smooth - before subsiding into a less wild-eyed mood and stepping away so John has room to swing a hammer.

Dave, on the other hand, takes one look at the escalating situation by the stairs, and almost trips while standing still. "Oh, Jesus pissing christ - not today," Dave says. Then he flashsteps right into Dirk - they collide like a pair of super fast bricks, and skid across the floor, arms and legs and swords flailing in all directions. John...honestly cannot tell if Dave did that on purpose or not, but he sure rolls with it! Heheh.

Kanaya puts a claw flat on Eridan's chest and pushes him into the corner, where Oriole is already
doing his best to look like part of the wall. "Do not fire a shot in a situation this crowded," she says, staring Eridan dead in the eye until the violetblood wilts and nods with an edge of desperation.

Kanaya nods to Rose and then ducks under one of the rogue grappling hook lines to join John and Karkat by the main entrance.

Three on two. Not bad. From what John recalls, these two Felt members don't have particularly explosive powers; they can just see where people go in the past and future, or something. Not that that's something to underestimate, but still! "Stop right there," John says, since it's nice and clichéd, and his head's screaming too much for him to think up something more clever right now. Not with Die in the room. Out of sight, not out of mind. Right on cue, Karkat and Kanaya both draw their specibi and fall into fighting stances.

"Well. It's been a nice run," Trace says, with a slow sigh. He tugs a little on Fin's arm.

There's a weird smoothness to Fin's response; she starts to move before Trace has finished tugging, and drops a kiss on his mouth with almost perfect timing. As though she already knew what was about to happen. "This has been a long time coming," she agrees, before turning her unsmiling teeth back toward John, Karkat, and Kanaya. Her eyes, though - it doesn't feel like she's looking at them, really, and it's giving John the heebie-jeebies. "At least she will suffer as we have."

The two Felt leap at them - at John, mostly, since he's between Karkat and Kanaya. Instead of splitting up to confront the three heroes separately, Fin and Trace stay locked together at the elbow, both holding a gun in their free hands. Kanaya's chainsaw screams a warning, but John just dissolves out of the way, while Karkat drops and kicks Trace's feet out from under him.

Except he doesn't. Fin spins Trace out of the way, her own feet dancing over Karkat's kick and finishing with a high kick that hits John right in the face when he solidifies. His nose unleashes a pop of blood; the surprise of it shocks John more than the pain itself. Augh, sloppy! He's getting sloppy! Trace lunges at Karkat, shoulder first (why aren't they pointing their guns?), and when John seizes Trace's leg and flips him onto his back, Fin drops under Kanaya's chainsaw, feet wide, and pulls Trace back up in one smooth motion. She steps up inside Kanaya's guard and uses the hilt of her gun to try to pistolwhip Kanaya across the face. Kanaya yanks back out of the way, baring her teeth back at Fin with a faint hiss. "Just - ugh - you're outnumbered! Drawing this out is just dumb!" John says, his bloody nose making it sound stuffed and congested.

Trace stoops, and Fin rolls over his back out of Kanaya's reach, spinning Trace back around by their linked arms. "Not really. Our trails always ended here. Might as well make the most of it," Trace mutters, barely audible even to John. He steps toward Karkat, swinging his gun up, and John slams his hammerkind down on the man's hand with a gust of wind.

Fin's gun cocks right next to John's ear. "Goodbye -" she says.

A gun cracks the air once, twice.

She doesn't miss either time, and John jolts as Fin's blood sprays across his face. Trace's splatters mostly over the floor, missing Karkat's knees by inches.

Diamonds Droog sniffs, and holsters her gun. "Today has been a good day," she says, her cold eyes full of cheer as she smooths her suit jacket. Behind her, a fist punches through the wall, and Hearts Boxcars widens the stairwell entrance until he can squeeze between the wall and the distorted space, grimacing as he sucks in his stomach. Like Vriska, Boxcars has a Felt member slung over his shoulder, and a white-and-yellow hat scrunched up in his hand so it won't fall off the unconscious man's dangling head. "I'd forgotten how killing Felt always put me in a good mood," Droog says, wistful and pleased with herself.
John finds his words again, though his brain is still fumbling in the aftermath of that. "What the heck was that?!" he demands, his hammerkind dragging on the ground as he doesn't look at the two bodies slumped over on the floor. Both their hats have gone flying off, along with parts of their hea-
he's not looking, he's not looking - and Kanaya kneels down beside Fin, putting her claws to the Felt member's neck even though, from the sick look on Karkat's face, there's not gonna be a pulse to find. John lets the hammerkind drop into air and stutters on his way over to Karkat, tapping the troll's face with his hand when Karkat doesn't look up from the bodies on the floor.

"You're welcome, brat," Droog says, dismissing John's shock with a wave of her hand. Clubs Deuce, arguably the nicest Midnight Crew member, skitters out from behind Droog's legs, humming merrily to himself as he skips over the blood trail and heads further into the room. Not a care in the world.

"You didn't have to shoot them! I would've dodged!"

Droog shrugs and beckons Boxcars as she walks around John, Kanaya, and Karkat in a deliberate, condescendingly wide circle, her mouth a perfect slash of dark lipstick. "Have to? No - and yet, why not? These people have been a pain in my neck for too damn long. Don't make the mistake of thinking I pander to you and your morals, boy." As she sails past them, she lets her cuekind fall into the palm of her hand and swings it out, a little too close to John and Karkat for comfort.

The movement snaps Karkat out of his daze? "Back off," Karkat hisses, clapping his claw over John's face and doing his utmost to climb on top of John like a living shield. John grabs him around the back so they don't both topple over, but when he tries to talk, his nose makes a horrible sound and whatever blood hasn't gotten swallowed starts sucking back into the rapidly healing area. The most John manages is a 'snrglh,' and that's...not helpful at all. Kanaya snarls as well, but Droog ignores all of them, Boxcars trailing in her wake.

"C'mon, Diamonds, we're almost there!" Clubs claps his claws together and rubs them in anticipation, jumping up and clicking his heels together as he trots toward the far end of the room. "Let's race!"

"I'm sure that will go very well for them," Kanaya says - and then John and Karkat trade looks with her and each other. Kanaya goes pale. "...She would shoot Dirk."

"She'll totally shoot Dirk," John agrees, and whisks them in between Droog and Boxcars on the wind. It stops the Midnight Crew short; Droog's haughty look turns acidic. Clubs strays too close to Dirk's on-going rampage, though, and a blur of red cape knocks him back out of the way so that Dirk's sword stabs into the floor instead of through the brownblood. "Just give them a few minutes!" John says, when Droog opens her mouth.

But with Fin and Trace dead, John can't conveniently ignore the other fight, anymore. Rose has taken up a position between Oriole and Eridan's corner and the epicenter of Dirk's whirlwind, and aims with one golden eye of light while her pale lilac eyes dart to John. "You've got a little something -" Rose taps her cheek, and John half-heartedly wipes the blood off on his sleeve. Ew. There better not be brain bits on his sleeve, now... Karkat finishes stuffing all of John's personal blood supply back into his nose, and it feels a lot less swollen, but the memory of Droog shooting Fin feels like it's stuck to his skin. Nasty. Satisfied that John's cleaned his face, though, Rose shoots a burst of light from her needlekind, and Dirk turns visible for a full five seconds as light blinds him behind his pointy shades. Jane brings her forkkind around with a triumphant shout, and Dirk brings up his sword to parry it at the last second, too delayed by the temporary blindness to dart out of the way. "Droog shot someone, I take it?" Rose says, too conversationally.

"We're fine," John mumbles. Kanaya and Karkat give him the exact same look, and he rolls his eyes
at them. "Oh, wow. Fin and Trace are just. Really, super dead, huh. How is Dirk? Still not
listening?"

"Yeah, we're totally fine. I'm fucking fine, too. You and Rose - congratulations, you're both
personally responsible for the depreciation of the word 'fine.' Fine now means fuck all. Saying fine a
lot is the equivalent of printing more paper money to solve hyperinflation," Karkat mutters. "It
doesn't."

Rose tips her head in acknowledgment, then shakes her head. "John, you can't just ask a Strider
how he is. That's a faux pas of the highest magnitude." After a pause, during which Dirk races at
Jake and gets shoved away by Dave at top speed, Rose adds, "He's been better. His attacks have
been increasingly erratic, but he's still not responding. If Feferi couldn't heal, she'd be severely hurt
by now - she and Jane are taking the brunt of what Dave can't deflect. And since no one really wants
to hurt Dirk..."

She's interrupted by a sudden roar of loud engines. The fragments of glass left in the windows on the
side wall start to rattle, and sharp pieces on the floor start to vibrate so hard they tip over the edge and
fall down the side of the building. "Did somebody say -" a loud, enthusiastic voice begins.

"You will desist at once," Equius yells, his voice straining with the effort. But he's far too late to
prevent the inevitable.

"- faux paw?!

Tavros's rocket chair coasts to a stop outside the window, with Nepeta standing behind Tavros on
the seat, her arms folded over her puffed out chest. Tavros has some kind of missiles armed on the
front of the rocket and the burning light of good intentions in his eyes. Which, oh no. John raises a
hand in alarm, because the room is full of people who might get caught in the way of a hastily aimed
missile.

Before the two of them can zoom in and crowd the room even more, though, Equius shimmers into
sight behind the rocket chair and starts to physically lift it over his head, causing Nepeta to wobble
and spin her arms, trying to keep her balance. "Absolutely not," Equius says. Nervous sweat sluices
down his face, and his grimace reveals a freshly shattered tooth in his upper gums. Or maybe that
tooth has been broken a while, and John just hasn't seen enough of Equius through the constant void
aura to notice it, before now.

"How many of you are going to crawl out of the woodwork?!" Doctor Die shrieks at the top of his
lungs, and John's skin crawls at the sound of the troll's voice. Nepeta and Tavros's sudden
appearance stalled Dirk for a second, but Die stamps his foot with a wordless shriek and starts
jabbing his claw at...well, everyone in the room. "Enough! Finish them!"

With automatic obedience that makes John feel sick to his stomach, Dirk jerks his head in a nod, and
raises his sword again.

"Enough," Jane echoes, her voice much firmer. She's quiet, but her voice carries, and Jake and Roxy
both look at her with grim expressions. "We've tried words. We've tried knocking sense into him. If
he won't listen to sentiment or reason," she says, slinging her specibus over her shoulder, "then we
have no other choice."

Um. What.

Jane sounds terrifyingly somber; worse, Jake looks reluctant as he holsters his pistols, his face
achingly sad. Roxy drops her riflekind with a clatter that covers the sound of Jane cracking her
knuckles. Dirk, instead of taking advantage of the scratch kids disarming themselves, freezes in the center of the room, tense and unreadable.

But those were definitely some worrying words Jane just said! John coughs. "Uh, Jane, what...exactly are you guys...?"

Roxy looks solemn, her eyes bright with tears. 'There's no other way?' she signs, stepping out from behind Jake's guard.

Jake closes his eyes with a harsh breath. His jaw clenches. "Dirk. I'm sorry it had to come to this, old chum. I really thought - well, never mind what I thought."

Rose stows her specibi with clear alarm, raising her hands. "You three, hang on just a moment -"

Roxy reaches into the front of her jacket. Jake hikes up the back of his jacket, reaches behind, and pulls something out of the waistband of his pants, while Jane unscrews the top of her forkkind and unrolls the tightly wrapped item within. Feferi stumbles away from Jane's back, her eyes wide and bewildered. Dirk jolts and raises his sword in a defensive stance, sensing whatever the scratch kids intend to unleash. Just when John thinks the tension can't rise anymore, Dirk launches forward like a spring, aimed right at Roxy.

Who holds up a book in both hands.

Dirk skids to a stop, and in the sudden, startled hush, Roxy clears her throat. "Dirk!" she says, in a determined rasp. "The power of pones compels you!"

"Oh, fuck no," Karkat says. "This is stupid."

Beside Roxy, Jake determinedly holds up his own book in one hand. It's a Pony Pals book - ratty and with patches where the color has been rubbed off over time, the cover torn nearly in half along an old, whitened crease. Dirk spins to look at Jane, his movements jerky, but Jane raises her own book with a silent look.

Jake starts. "Dirk, you gave me this book. It's full of the most - er, splendid, esoteric annotations a man ever wrote on the subject of ponies." He sniffs, and when he speaks again, his voice sounds thick. "I've cherished this gift for many years, even with a slimy worm bastard stuffed in my gourd, and I think you still cherish it, too."

"Nn-" Dirk says, looking pained.


Karkat's furious agony only seems to intensify. "It's not allowed to work. I fucking forbid it," he hisses, before Rose hushes them with a raised finger. Everyone in the room looks on at the scene before them in disbelief; outside the window Equius has forgotten about dragging the rocket chair away and is doing his best to stuff his entire fist into his mouth.

Jane goes next. "This book," she says. Out of the three scratch kids, she looks the most like a suffering martyr, fully aware of the ridiculousness of the situation, possibly one second away from evaporating from this plane of existence out of sheer embarrassment. "Is called. The Lonely Pony. Do you want the pony to be lonely, Dirk?"

Dirk falls to one knee; his head drops low, so that all that John can see is his hair and the tips of his shades. "You...you...that's cheating..." he says, through gritted teeth. It's the most John's heard him
say since they arrived, and from the ecstatic look on Jake's face - perhaps the most Dirk's said at all.

Karkat sinks down into a crouch - John pats him on the shoulder consolingly, but Karkat just shakes his head. "Oh...my god," Karkat whispers. "This isn't real."

Dienek digs his claws into his own face, drawing dark green blood. His mouth moves, but he appears to have gone past the point of speech.

"And mine is called the Princess and the Pone!" Roxy says, her voice quality swinging wildly as she starts flipping through the pages of the picture book. She beams at Dirk as she holds up the book to show off each new picture. "Look! It sticks out its tongue! It's such a chubs pony, Dirk, and you know you love the chubby bubbies -"

Dirk clutches the side of his head, ducking further still so he can't see the books over the angular rim of his shades. Dienek, on the other hand, starts screaming audibly again, starting with a barrage of swearwords in another language. "Głupie dzieci! Idiot, idiot children! This is the height of stupidity! All of you are failures!" He snaps his claws at Dirk, who shudders and drops his sword to clutch his head with both hands. "Ugh! Worthless!"

It's the last straw.

Dirk vanishes in a blur. The sword goes, too, a dangerous slice already in motion, and John feels Dave hesitate, and then spring into action from where he's paused beside Terezi to watch the pony show.

Dienek's head separates from his neck before Dave can reach him, and the shower of green blood blends in almost perfectly with the shade of the floor. It's the third death John's seen in the past five minutes, and even more incomprehensible than the first two because one second Die is swearing at them, and then next he's decapitated. Dirk stops just past Dienek's punctuated corpse, his arms shaking minutely, with Dave's sword at his throat. The two of them make eye contact behind their shades.

Then, slowly, Dirk holds out his sword. Dave must yank time to a halt, because one second the sword hangs in Dirk's loose grip, and the next Dave slides it away into his sylladex, without breaking eye contact.

Swordless and with a tremor in one hand, Dirk turns and walks past Die without looking down. When he reaches Roxy and Jake, he stands stock-still before taking the picture book from Roxy with careful hands. After another ten seconds tick by, Dirk lifts his shades and sets them in the nest of his hair. His eyes are heavy with bags, the pale orange gaze scrutinizing the page.

"...Fuck, that is one chubby pony," Dirk says, at last. He looks up at Roxy. "I could look at this all day."

Karkat lets his head fall back and stares at the ceiling in defeat. Roxy chokes out a delighted scream, and flings her arms around Dirk's neck. "Dirk!"

Jake knocks Dirk on the arm, then briskly hugs him and Roxy in one go. "Cutting it a little close there, Dirk!" he says, with a shaky laugh. Roxy jumps up and down a few times, rocking all three of them.

Dirk lowers his eyes for a second, then rests his chin on Roxy's head, not meeting Jake's eyes. "Yeah. Sorry."

Jake rests his chin on Dirk's head in turn. "You're going to be right as rain. You hear me?" he says,
quietly enough that nobody else is probably supposed to hear it. Except John and his Breeze scoop it up automatically. Whoops.

Finally, Jane drops her pony book, walks over, and sets her hand on Dirk's back. He tilts his head as much as he can without dislodging Jake to look at her. They don't say anything, but Dirk says, and John figures that's as good as it's gonna get, right now.

Three Felt dead. John doesn't want to be the one to update the spreadsheet with *that*, holy crapola. He mostly wants to huddle with Karkat on the floor and not move for a bit, but trying to process all of this in the same room as all the bodies? Hahaha, no way. Not in a million billion years.

Dave winds up disrupting the scratch kids' hug fest. Which is a shame, since John heartily approves of hug fests over anything else today might have in store for everybody, but. So it goes. "You guys heading down?" Dave asks, using the hilt of his own sword to massage his forehead.

Jane nods without pause. "Yes. We are." She looks at Die's body with an unreadable look. "We're done here."

It's like she said the magic words. With a blur that makes Dave jump back and scramble to look sharp, Bro Strider appears, leaning on the wall. "Come on, punks. That's enough for one day," he says. He scans everyone else in the room when the scratch kids just look guilty and shuffle their feet. John can feel Bro's stare behind the shades; it lingers on Dienek, and then on Droog, and then on Dave and Rose. "Do I need to haul all your asses out, too?"

Rose purses her lips and folds her arms. "No, father, we'll be fine conveying our own buttocks off the premises. Soon. There's still unfinished business up above."

"Take me. Before I fall down another hole and get trapped in the hell basement again," Oriole says. "I'm done for the day. So done." He shoves off the wall and stalks toward Bro. One of Bro's eyebrows escapes his careful containment and rises up, but he doesn't comment out loud. He gives Rose one last significant look, which Rose pointedly ignores in polite Rose fashion.

A shrug. "Aight. I'll be around." And with that, Bro vanishes with the scratch kids in a single blur that John can barely trace as he speeds them out and away from the building. Back in the direction of the place they rented to stay in, John thinks - but the Breeze's awareness loops back close to John, unwilling to stray far from the Ouroboros tower. The wind's been mostly quiet, or at least subvocal, and all John can pick up from it is the same growing sense of unease that's been plaguing everyone since they arrived in Las Vegas. Nothing new. Nothing specific, like a warning. Just...dread.

Vriska chooses the next second to burst through the wall. She doesn't appear to have had an easy time climbing like, two floors, for some reason that John just caaan't think of (though the fact that her hair's in outright knots might be an indication that she had some trouble fighting some strong wind shear (lol)), and casts John an absolutely livid glare as she storms across the room. But rather than getting sidetracked, she marches straight up to Terezi, who waits patiently with a shit-eating grin. She leans on her cane without reacting until Vriska leans right in and yells in her face. "Enough! Pissing around! Terezi! How hard is it to text back?! I know you read all my messages, you have 'read by' on, you total 8it-

Terezi clucks her tongue, spinning her cane a little and leaning from side to side so that Vriska has to turn her head to keep glowering at her with what John assumes is deep, non-platonic loathing. "Oh, Vriska. There's an order of events in every trial, you know. We had to get through the preliminary proceedings here, and I would hate to have to hold you in contempt of court. *Now* we can move on to the main event."
Vriska sets Clover on the ground, steps on his back to keep him pinned, and then wraps her hands in her tangled hair to tug on it with a stifled shriek. "Ohhhhhhh my god. Scratch is not going on trial!" she says. Clover makes a feeble noise as Vriska tries to swat at Terezi, but Terezi bends back out of the way with remarkable flexibility, waving a claw back at Vriska in a taunting swat. She dodges every one of Vriska's next swipes, and Vriska's cheeks start to turn bright cerulean with rising irritation. "Ugh! Stop - FUUUUUUUUCK YOOOOOOOOUUUUUUU!!!!!!!!" Vriska howls, as Terezi successfully baps her in the forehead.

"I agree completely." Droog sails past Vriska with her entourage in tow; it stops Vriska with one hand ready to yank on Terezi's hair, but it does not stop Terezi's claws as they sneak up to tickle Vriska right under her ribcage. "No trial. No cops. No more squabbling little brats," Droog finishes, without looking at any of them, as she starts climbing the stairs to the penthouse. Clubs Deuce does a tiny jig in a circle around her on the landing, and then sprints on ahead, while Boxcars lags behind.

Well, whatever. They can totally take the stairs, because never in a million years is John giving Droog a lift. So their dramatic exit can suck it; John sticks out his tongue, for good measure, though none of the Crew looks back. Vriska, on the other hand, looks like she was just punched so hard she saw the face of a god. Her claws fall away from Terezi as she scrambles to look like she wasn't just in the middle of a budding hateflirt session, and she stares up after Diamonds Droog with a dazed expression.

"Vriska. Final warning. Do not make her your role model," Rose says, sternly.

Vriska makes a garbled whine. Terezi pinches her in the underside of an arm and Vriska yelps, but John isn't sure anything is enough to deter Vriska from objectively terrible life choices.

Feferi - who pointedly ignores Die's body as she skips back toward the rest of the group - pouts her lips as she bounces past them, her skirts fluttering around her stripy green socks as she stoops over Fin and Trace. She prods them with a single claw, her moue curious rather than grossed out; John has no idea how she manages that, when he still can't look at the floor near the two corpses without wanting to hurl a bit. "Oooh, they're rayly dead. Very, very dead," Feferi says, after a moment. "Huh. I don't think I could fix this, even if I wanted to. Whoops!"

"So there is a limit to what you can revive?" Kanaya asks, curious. "Would it help if their brains were less...everywhere?"

Feferi shrugs, and bounces away from the bodies. "Dunno!" she says, disconcertingly chipper as she links arms with Kanaya and walks with her toward John. Feferi's shark-toothed grin could rival Terezi's - John thinks if the two of them ever held a contest, it would be a tie. "If it were prawn of us, maybe - but I think if I tried to fix those two, it just wouldn't work right! Hm. Maybe it's a doomy thing, maybe it's a timey thing! But I don't want to mess with it over them." She wrinkles her nose. "Whoever they were."

"Wait!" Nepeta calls from the window, aggravated. "Equius, you actually made us miss efurrything!!!"

"You have not missed us dealing with Scratch," Rose points out, and Equius snaps another tooth with a barely audible creak that gives John yet another heaping helping of the jeebie-heebies. Eurgh, it makes his own teeth ache every time Equius does that. "All in favor of skipping the stairs?"

Dave nods. "Oh, hell yeah. No need to risk getting memed on at the last second."

John does a quick mental tally - with the scratch kids and Oriole gone, that only leaves Dave, Kanaya, and Karkat flightless. Everyone else is god tier or...well, flying in a rocketchair. And if
they're all heading to the roof, there's no need for John to lug extra people around to save time; it's probably a fifteen second flight, max, and he's almost had it with being an airborne taxi service, for today. "You okay?" he asks Karkat, who still hasn't emerged from his pony-related quiet time.

"I'm never going to be okay again," Karkat says, flatly. "Ponies. Fucking ponies. Every time I think it can't get worse, life proves me wrong. Three people are dead, and he snaps out of it because of tiny hoofbeasts. Do you realize Equius is never going to let that go? That fuckery is probably the stuff of his creepy horse fantasies and agh -"

Dave comes to stand at John's shoulder, and they both contemplate Karkat's crouched form as Kanaya trades Feferi for Rose. "That was some pretty top tier irony. I don't blame you for being overwhelmed," Dave says; he's got the tiniest smirk ever, his shoulders slouched and his hands stuffed into his pockets.

Karkat's head snaps up. "I changed my mind. I'm okay enough to punch Dave. It's a miracle! Amazing!"

John doesn't want to give Karkat time to test that; he lifts Dave and Karkat into the air on either side of him and then flies them out through the open windows ahead of almost everyone else. Tavros mashes the accelerator on his rocketchair and it zooms up, with Equius hanging off the side and Nepeta furiously trying to yell at him without falling over, her claws digging deep into the back of Tavros's head rest.

Vriska pelts past everyone, because literally everything is a competition with Vriska; Terezi coasts alongside Dave after a second, her teal wings almost as still as Equius's, compared to how much Feferi and Vriska flap theirs around. John waves at her, which is kind of dumb, but Terezi nods back, her cane clasped in both hands so she can rest her chin on the cap in midair. She looks...pensive. Or something! "Hey, Terezi? What's going to happen up there? Because you look..." John makes a waggly motion with his hand.

She cackles at him like she cackles at everybody, but it's a halfhearted cackle. Not the kind of cackle you'd want to enter in a cackle contest, that's for sure. "Excellent question, Egbert," she says, drumming her claws along the knobby head of her cane. The tips of her mouth are spread wide, but it's too flat to call what results a smile. Then, in a low voice: "I don't know, but I think I know more than Rose knows." Her nostrils flare.

"The nose knows?" John says. This is pretty much the only thing he can say in response to something like that. There's probably a law about it, somewhere.

Terezi nods, solemn. "Good deduction. I'll take a deep whiff when we get up there. But the closer we get, the less I like this. Mr Vanilla Milkshake knows we're here. But even this close, I still can't tell what he wants."
By the time they reach the roof, it's a beautiful day outside. Sure, the sun beats down hot enough to roast them all alive, and John breaks out in an uncomfortable sweat the instant they land on the roof, but hey, that's better than cruddy Horrorterror weather any day of the week. Plus, John has his own personal air conditioner; as soon as Dave and Karkat's feet hit the roof, a breeze twines around under John's shirt to cool him off.

It doesn't quite work to stave off fear sweat. But John's pretty resigned to that, by now.

Doc Scratch is shorter in person. It makes sense, kinda: in the recorded footage of the game session, they'd all still been scrawny, chipper thirteen year olds, and now they're all...well, most of them are slightly taller, more melodramatic young adults, and while Doc Scratch may be impeccably dressed in crisp white linen and felt green, he hasn't gotten any taller. The impossibly smooth, featureless cue ball of his head doesn't turn to look at the horde of people setting down around him in a loose semi-circle, but he greets them anyway, once Tavros picks a spot for the rocket chair to hover and stops buzzing around trying to look intimidating. Creepy.

Ah. There you all are.

May I offer you some refreshments? Being the most excellent host that I am, I've taken the liberty of procuring your favorites.

A sudden crackle of yellow-green electricity snaps around Scratch as he gestures toward a table near the northern edge of the roof. It's covered in a nice white table cloth with several pitchers of lemonade, sweet tea, water, and other ice-filled beverages, with shallow bowls of candy scattered in between. One of the pitchers is full of an ambiguous amber liquid, and sure enough, Dave shuffles closer and mutters in John's ear. "What do you think the odds are that he poisoned that AJ?"
John opens his mouth to retort that no, Dave's not allowed to drink the first suspicious beverage handed to him by an evil dude, no matter how much he likes apple juice - and then shuts it as a weird sense of déjà vu tickles his brain. "Dave...Have you asked me that before? Something like that?"

Dave avoids eye contact so hard that his whole head cranes around to stare over his shoulder instead of at John, or Scratch, or literally anybody else on the rooftop. He is so not subtle. Karkat leans over to stare at Dave, his existential disgust transferring easily from the pony incident to Dave. "Uh. Nope. Must be imagining things, EB. You're right, the AJ is too obvious a target -"

John snaps a finger, as the faded memory of some random, late night text conversation nudges him. "You totally asked me that before! God, that must have been ages ago -"

"End of the line, Scratch," Vriska says, loudly. Under direct sunlight, John has to squint to look at her straight on - which is weird, since Rose doesn't have the same radiant glow, despite the fact that the two Light heroes are standing in the same amount of sunlight. John's never thought about it before, but if Vriska could literally steal the light from the sun - well. It's just lucky that reality is collapsing, he supposes, otherwise that might have eventually been a serious problem. Because Vriska would absolutely, 100% steal the sun, if she thought it would help her win. It wouldn't matter if there wasn't anything to win. She would just want to preemptively win. Like, John has no doubt in his mind that she would do it.

Oh, naturally.

The apple juice is of your own stock, Knight. The tea should have finished steeping. There are small samples of each hemotype, Sylph, if you wish to partake.

"No one is drinking tea of questionable moral alignment today, Scratch," Kanaya says, grimly.

Dave's head snaps back around. "If some asshole past version of me sold apple juice to you, I am going to go back in time and stab myself."

Karkat stamps forward, one claw strangling the air a little but not quite clenching into a fist. "No one's taking any of your complimentary shit, you - you faceless lightbulb with a shitty, skinny base that doesn't fit in the socket like a normal fucking lightbulb," he growls in a rush. Then he points a claw accusingly at Eridan, who is edging suspiciously close to the saltwater taffy on the table. "No, shut up! Back in the circle, you fish-witted fuck!"

Eridan listens, but the second Karkat looks away, the violetblood casts a furtive look around and puts something in his mouth. Moreover, Feferi's cheeks are already poofed out not in a pout, but with the distinct look of someone who snagged an entire handful of candy when no one was looking. Despite her words to the contrary, Kanaya is eyeballing the sealed vials arranged behind a hot pot of tea, and Equius's determined lack of a presence combined with the fact that the jug of farm-fresh milk is missing half its contents just...speaks volumes. John does not say a word. "You're under arrest," Rose says instead, backing Karkat's bid for order, her eyes preternaturally bright behind the visor. Scratch does not reply. It's hard to tell, but he tilts his ominous orb head back slightly, without acknowledging Rose's words. At the far end of the roof, the door to the penthouse stairwell slams open with excessive force, and Diamonds Droog stalks out. "No," Droog says, pointing her cue stick at Rose with a disdainful twist to her lip, "he's not."

Cue stick pointing is on the list of things that John Does Not Want; he drags his hammer out of hammerspace and hauls Karkat around so that John's in a line between him, Rose, and Droog. At least half the other people in their group pull their own weapons, which actually...kind of reassuring. Really. Even with Boxcars and Clubs at her side, Droog's still super outnumbered by a bunch of
super powered people. She snorts at them, her voice full of acid as she circles around Scratch, across from their main group. "His head is a cue ball, and if I don't punt it down the Strip, my life will have been wasted. If you children can't handle that, go back downstairs."

Tick.

"No more killing people!" John says, exasperated. "I'll go back down and find that oven to stuff you in, I swear, lady -"

Droog keeps talking over him. "And really, arresting something like him? Don't be ridiculous. Which one of you inane children came up with something like that?"

"I want pin this one on Terezi, but I don't think she was even the first," Karkat says.

Terezi snickers. "I'll take the credit, anyway," she replies. Breath rushes in through her nose - it has been almost nonstop since they landed on the roof, and while the Breeze is having fun ferrying air directly from Scratch's immediate vicinity to Terezi's nose with a faint whistle, John doesn't know if what she's smell-seeing is actually gonna help her Mind powers or not.

Vriska rolls her dice in the palm of her free claw with a slow clack. "Well, if you're not letting her kill him -" she offers, her voice full of fake-fawning as she prowls around in front of Rose, tucking her dice hand behind her back to keep rolling them out of Rose's sight.

Rose can clearly still see it. "Nobody is killing any more people," she says, meeting Vriska's gaze dead on. Her expression's hard enough to make Vriska's face twitch with annoyance. Taking it as a challenge instead of a reprimand, and oh no -

Droog taps her cue stick on the ground, and swings it back over her shoulder. She's not close enough to reach Scratch's quiet form, but John knows how fast Droog can move when she wants to, and Scratch doesn't look like he's going to move out of the way. "And I still don't take orders from any of you," Droog says, mockingly.

Before she can swing, Boxcars clears his throat, his discomfort morphing into outright unease. He doesn't flinch when Droog glowers at him for interrupting her; he just shifts his weight and the weight of the unconscious Felt member under his arm. "Hang on a sec, Di. Something's not right," he says, in an undertone.

Karkat throws up his claws. "Oh, for fuck's - just stop it, Vriska! Watch, this is me, arresting this fuck with extreme prejudice so everyone will stop blathering!" He storms away from John, ripping a handful of zipties out of his pockets so hard that a couple of them fly across the rooftop - one pings Feferi in the arm - and approaches Scratch from behind. Maybe. Possibly. It's the back of Scratch's collar, anyway, and his shoes point toward Droog now that she's standing between him and the view of Las Vegas, but honestly, John doesn't like anything about this guy's lack of a face. It sets him off balance in a bad way.

"Thank you, Karkat. As lovely as the mental image of a cue stick fulfilling its original purpose on this scale might be, I'd rather avoid that, for the moment," Rose says, the strain it takes to keep her voice light clear as she deliberately steps back and away from Vriska. Droog hisses something at Boxcars, throwing an impatient look at Clubs when the troll tugs on her sleeve - another distraction.

"This is all probably a trap, anyway, and none of you can see -" Eridan is muttering.

Tock.

Karkat's still five paces from Doc Scratch when Terezi strides forward and smacks her cane against
Karkat's chest. "Wait. Wait." While Karkat sputters, she turns her cane on Eridan, who ducks on instinct when she jabs the canekind directly at his eye level. "Fanta Grape Soda, I think you're onto something."

Having a Seer in full command of her abilities does always make things interesting. Though I believe that you'll find the outcome, in this particular instance, will be inevitable.

John's stomach drops all the wishy-washy unease crap, and starts to churn in earnest. "A trap," he repeats. But the Breeze would have noticed by now if there was an explosion in the making - urgency causes John to cast about a little wildly, sending a wave of awareness through the wind throughout the building beneath them, but nothing. Two people with guns in a building across from this one - Droog's people, her minions or whatever, but when the Breeze pours furiously over them it sees that they're already unconscious. Like someone already paid them a visit, earlier. Not them, then.

But something is about to go wrong. They've all been able to feel it, today. As if John needed another reason to get a proper panic on...

Terezi sounds more and more certain as she goes on, with an air of calm conviction settling around her. "You want this," she says, tasting each of her words before continuing. She lowers her cane so that Eridan can relax, and points it at Scratch instead. "I would ask the court to consider -"

"We're not a court!" Vriska exclaims, shrilly.

"- that we have been provoked and lured here with all the squirmly bait he could hang on the hook." Terezi folds her arms behind her back, her cane tucked into one hand as she paces in front of them, her sightless eyes never leaving the back of Scratch's head. "He wanted to inveigle us. And we let ourselves be inveigled, because it was convenient. Because we wanted to come here, regardless. Something's smelled rotten since I got here, and you're the mildewed felt at the very center of it." She directs that last at Doc Scratch himself.

He says nothing. Even without a face, John thought maybe he'd be able to sense some kind of expression from this guy but...nope, that's a negative. Staring at the cue ball head and trying to interpret emotion out of it just makes John feel like the cue ball is staring back.

Feferi speaks up, having finally finished her mouthful of sticky candy. "It was all...pretty fishy. Getting his address, and everything, and now this," she says, dubiously.

"If we leave him here, he'll be able to do whatefur he wants, though!" Nepeta says, pointing her clawkind at Scratch. The motion calls everyone's attention to the rocket chair, and Tavros gulps nervously when he notices how many eyes have turned to him.

Tick tock.

I'm afraid that time is running out. Clubs, may I interest you in some licorice gummy bears? I really would hate to see it go to waste.

"Don't answer that," Droog says, before Clubs finishes looking up in clear delight.

"But Diamonds -" he starts wheedling, knocking a playful fist on her forearm and somehow not getting his head clobbered off his shoulders. "Please, just one?"

"Oh, for the love of - fine."

Karkat throws up his hands with a surly look. "So we just, what? Leave this fucker here? Final call?"
he demands, dangling his fist full of zip ties in front of Terezi when she makes another pass in front of him. She snags the ties with a lightning fast claw, grinning at Karkat's pissed expression.

"We have Dirk," Rose says slowly. "No one is permanently dead, yet. And I can't imagine a cell making any difference to him, at this point. I agree with Terezi."

John elbows Dave in the side, and whispers, "Any future advice?"

Dave gives a short shake of his head; when John does a double take he sees that Dave's skin has gone a weird color again. He looked better while they were dealing with Dirk below, but now Dave's grimacing like he's about to barf. Which, hey, John understands completely. But it doesn't speak well about Dave's current state. "Dude, I don't even know at all anymore. Shit's just making my head hurt," he says. John puts a hand on Dave's shoulder as Dave starts to hunch over and push his shades up to rub his eyes. "Oh, hell. Time feels awful."

"You don't order me around, Lalonde," Vriska says, her voice vibrating with a warning low in her chest. She's burning like a sun; Rose doesn't back down, but Vriska's not backing off, either.

Then Vriska gurgles as she's abruptly hoisted into the air by the neck of her god tier shirt. "Have your tantrum elsewhere," Equius says, hoisting Vriska and Clover easily by that one hand clutching her hood. The blueblood ignores Vriska's squalling fury and the burst of light she emits as she tries to peel Equius's claws off her shirt (in vain) and strides over to the rocket chair, pausing to seize Eridan by the cape along the way. It's a startlingly effective technique, it would seem. "Nepeta. We're leaving now."

Too easy. Even with the arguments. Too easy.

I would applaud you all, if I had not anticipated that you might prove intractable at the critical moment.

No matter.

Doc Scratch snaps his fingers.

Clubs Deuce's neck snaps.

John's across the circle from the Crew, and while the crack sounds distant and unreal, he has a perfect view of Clubs's head jerking around to an impossible angle. The Crew member had just finished trotting back to Droog's side from his trip to the table for a clawful of candy. But Droog doesn't see it; there's a full five seconds before Clubs drops where Droog stands there, her eyes darting around the circle as though searching for which of the kids made the offending, horrible sound. She doesn't even look concerned or bothered by it; just annoyed by the interruption.

Then Clubs's short body knocks into her side on the way down, and Droog yanks away in surprise, her cue stick swinging wildly in her hands. It still doesn't seem to register for her as she stares down at Clubs, her expression full of blank incomprehension. Boxcars drops his captured Felt member with a thud as realization blooms on his face; he drops down beside Clubs in a heartbeat, while Droog continues to stare.

Feferi stumbles and then bursts out of the ragged semi-circle, her claws and eyes already glowing as she races past Scratch to reach the Crew. "Let me see him! I might be able to -" she says, and even though it's horrible, John doesn't quite understand why she sounds so viscerally panicked until he remembers - Sollux -

Droog staggers unevenly, her head falling low so fast John thinks she's about to collapse, herself. But
when Feferi's a yard away, Droog lashes out with alarming speed. Feferi raises her claws and her 2x3dentrkind snaps into them at the last second, so she can parry the cue stick that comes slicing out to knock her away. "Don't touch him!" Droog snarls. Her voice doesn't even break - she just sounds awful. John wants to cover his ears, like that'll make the hideous crack stop echoing in the air, like that'll make Boxcars's attempts to check on Clubs's too-still body less upsetting to watch -

"Hey, hey!" Feferi says, spinning her trident to parry again when an incensed Droog knocks her back again. "Just let me help! Please!" She doesn't even make the obvious pun. Karkat half-heartedly moves past Terezi, but it's not like Clubs got shot. John doesn't know if this is something a blood-related power could even start to fix. But Droog's lashing out blindly, and like heck is John letting Karkat go anywhere near that, no matter how unreal everything feels.

Yes. That should take care of that.

You can make an attempt, Witch of Life, but I think you'll find your powers less efficacious when applied to non-game entities. Manipulation, not creation.

Perhaps, if they had still been carapacians you'd have more leeway.

But no. Queens always do mean well.

Boxcars sags back on his heels. He doesn't look broken - just vaguely sick. With some effort he stands up, and catches Droog's arm on the backswing, right when John rushes over on the wind to back up Karkat. "He's already gone, Di. Di," he says.

"Shut up. Shut up," Droog hisses. She rips her arm out of Boxcars's grip and turns on him. This close, John can help but feel her shuddery breathing, no matter how much he doesn't want to pay attention to the Midnight Crew's vitals. When Feferi tries to dart in and lay a glowing hand on Clubs's body, though, Droog checks the blow aimed at Boxcars and scrambles to slam the cue stick down on Feferi's head. John wafts the fuchsiablood out of the way in the nick of time, and Droog's attack dents the roof. "Get away from him!" she says, and this time her voice cracks. Boxcars grabs her from behind, wrapping both arms around her in a bear hug to drag her back with a bleak, steely expression, and abruptly Droog folds nearly in two, letting him drag her away. "Hearts -"

After a beat and a look at Boxcars, Feferi lunges forward and seizes Clubs. "I can't feel - there's nothing for me to work with - Karkat, please help me."

John can already tell, with a sickening knot in his stomach, that Karkat only came to help on instinct. Karkat opens and closes a claw, looking distant for a second - and then shakes his head. He still kneels beside Feferi, but all he can do is vaguely wave his hand at Clubs. Nothing happens. "I don't know what to do, either," he says. "There isn't anything for me to -"

Droog lets out another noise, like she wants to scream but can't risk opening her mouth. The muffled sound reverberates weirdly in John's ears - his teeth can't seem to unclench, and a weird, cold sensation throbs in his jaw. Boxcars holds Droog tighter, his arms readjusting every time she tries to free one of her hands. He speaks right into her ear, but John can still hear him say, "Not in front of him. Not in front of him."

BE: ...

BE: john.

It's the most the Breeze has said directly in...a while. John jumps a little, the surprise bringing him back to the present. Yes?
BE: i think
BE: we need to go
BE: like. right now.
BE: RIGHT NOW.

The Breeze starts seizing people even before John consciously processes it. Even people who can already fly; even the rocket chair, and everyone on it. "Leaving now! All aboard the no you don't get to argue with me express!" John says, in a rush, which earns him a bunch of startled looks. Whatever was wrong before - whatever Terezi sensed - John can suddenly feel it crashing down toward them, crushing his lungs with panic.

"John, whoa!" Karkat says, when John scoops him and Feferi up and away from Clubs Deuce.

Feferi fights harder. "No, let me try! If I can bring myself back from something like that, I can -" she says before breaking off, her voice trembling.

Karkat's phone rings. It's so out of place that John almost drops Karkat by mistake, but the Breeze isn't letting anyone go - on the contrary, it buoys Karkat up and doubles its pace, propelling everyone away from the rooftop and Doc Scratch and the Midnight Crew no matter how hard Vriska tries to fly back the way they just came. Contorting himself to reach his phone, Karkat answers the call with a violent, "Sollux, what the fuck?!" and puts it on speaker phone.

Sollux's voice sounds tinny through the speakers. "Open your apps and leave. Now."

No one even got a chance to tell him. Feferi isn't crying outright, but her breath is a heavy sob before she swallows it down. Rose has closed her eyes, but opens them when John looks at her.

She nods.

They planned to go back, maybe find a nice big building full of people and drag it along for the ride into the Medium to wherever the Sburb app decided to dump them. But just as she nods, something cracks in the air, and John grabs everyone and rockets them back to the condo in a single breath.

Tavros's rocket chair cuts out belatedly, after scorching the ceiling. The scratch kids and Oriole nearly jump out of their skins; Bro's not here, but god as infuriating as that guy is John's not putting Dave through that. "Someone, text Jade! Or else!" he shouts over the sound of everyone yelling at him, and then falls back into the Breeze.

- GG: guys, what the heck is going on down there? :(
GG: i think we're running out of time!
GG: those cracks are getting louder...and really close!
TA: we're out of here. eiither hiit your app or ii hiit iit for you.
TA: eiither way hold on two your butt.
GG: wait! don't port me in!
TA: why the 2hiit not?!
GG: ive got all the missing people up here in space ships, and an exit portal with our name on it.
GG: go on and ill catch up!
TG: jesus jade will you be okay
GG: don’t worry about me, dummy! im a professional, ill have you know!

--

Doc Scratch cannot see Diamonds Droog with any degree of clarity, of late.

He can, however, extrapolate her likely actions from what he knows of her, and of Hearts Boxcar, and of the recently departed Clubs Deuce - and from what dear Fin could see, when Scratch last brought her to this rooftop to see what Time-born sight could see, and how it compared to his own sight.

Diamonds will go down to one of the Midnight Crew's dark floors. Hearts Boxcars - not used to being a voice of reason in the strictest sense, but alarmed and, perhaps, afraid of Diamonds' sudden, broken silence. He will most likely urge her to leave it, to have their pet snipers shoot Scratch from afar, to take Clubs Deuce's body and run to a safehouse, to regroup. Not that so mundane a thing as a sniper rifle could harm Scratch. Underneath it all, his body is little more than fabric and stuffing, and his head -

Well. There is one weapon that could crack it.

Diamonds has it in her hand, when she returns to the rooftop, alone. Scratch doesn't turn to watch her, but this close, he is perfectly aware of the stiff measure of her gait, made uneven where she's snapped the heels off her shoe; the wind has died off, determined to follow its Heir into the Medium when he leaves, and between the sun beating down and the still air, sweat has begun to rise under Diamonds' midnight black suit. The white ivory gun hangs loose in her fingers, but she does not let go as she advances on Scratch.

Here, at last, Scratch has nothing more but speculation to work with. But he trusts Diamonds to follow through. Winding her up and frustrating her at every turn has been some of his most potent work; her betrayal an inevitable and yet delicate thing to encourage.

She stops several feet behind. Interesting, but irrelevant. She could fire the gun at the floor, and the projectile inside would still inexorably find its way into Scratch's cranium. All she needs to do is pull the trigger, and Scratch has ensured that she has every reason in the world to. Diamonds is not one to deny herself a death if possessed with enough rage and suitable motivation.

I've been expecting you. Shall we make this happen?

Silence. The front of Scratch's body faces the edge of the roof, the half-melted Strip laid out clear before him, but his awareness covers a complete circle all around his head. Droog stands there, watching him with a most curious expression; her hair has come loose from her hat, and her tailored shirt - all Stitches' stolen, careful work - strains as she heaves through shuddering breaths. She's bitten all the lipstick off her mouth to swallow screams, a streak of bright blood the only color in one of the cracks of her lips.

Strange, how such a little thing could so undo a person. Scratch can manipulate people like this so easily, but he understands it mostly in the abstract. All of it is done in service to his Lord.

Soon, very soon. Diamonds' hand twitches tight on the gun, but she does not raise it. Not yet.
You really should have seen this coming, you know. From the moment you made the choices you did, you ensured that we would embark upon this path.

The hints were all there. They are not for my benefit, of course. I have both the near omniscience and the unparalleled deductive reasoning necessary to eliminate the need for such things.

They are for people like you, dearest Diamonds.

People I like to call...suckers.

Diamonds stalks forward, fury twisted her face into a snarl as she lifts the gun to the smooth curve of Doc Scratch's head. It's the exact same temperature as the surface of his own cue ball. He straightens his soft shoulders, and feels the whole timeline pivot to attention. Everything turns on the axis of significance, and now that the conditions are guaranteed to be met, it is time to fulfill his ultimate purpose. Peace, fulfillment - the beginning of the end.

Haa haa.

Hee hee.

Hoo hoo.

The timeline waits. It trembles on a knife's edge - or a hair trigger, perhaps, Diamonds's trembling trigger finger. Her eyes burn with angry points of lachrymation, but she is too close to miss. All she needs to do is fire.

Right about...

Now.

Diamonds does not pull the trigger.

...

And then -

Wonder of wonders - something truly fascinating -

Diamonds lowers the gun. "I'm not going to shoot you, Scratch," she says, her voice low and ragged. She smirks at him, her eyes narrowed into cruel, amused slits, and relaxes her tight, grieving posture into something more at ease. One hand rests in her pocket, while the gun swings at her side. "That's not what he would have wanted."

If Scratch ever breathed a day in his existence, he'd have lost his breath just now. Truly, this is...an interesting turn of events. His perfectly stuffed body feels as though something hooked into the plush stuffing and tore an empty hollow in his torso, and he angles himself toward her, so that she knows she has his utmost attention.

Wait.

Really?

Diamonds presses her lips tight, and nods. Scratch looks at her, carefully, and can't find a single indication that she intends to raise the gun and attempt something as plebian as shooting him by surprise. Her motivations are opaque to him, thanks to all the stolen void she has wrapped around her like a second suit, but the longer they stand there, with time frozen around them, the more Scratch
comes to the conclusion that he has, somehow, *misjudged her*.

Incredible. What a strange, problematic turn of events. It really would have been far more convenient for Diamonds to shoot him promptly, in the throes of violent grief. The inconvenience, however, is outweighed by the fact that Scratch feels reluctantly...impressed.

Congratulations. You have...truly surprised me. Well done.

Diamonds' smirk widens, twists into something broken. She removes the remote control she must have taken from Club's body, and holds it up so Scratch can see. So *that* was the variable. Diamonds's rage and grief might be predictable, but Scratch should have considered the age old adage before making assumptions. To wit: WWCD?

What would Clubs do?

Oh.

Well. That will certainly do it. I wondered if he ever intended to make good on all those explosives he left lying around everywhere.

By all means.

Diamonds flips the cap off the detonator, and jams the trigger down with such force that it cracks the casing. Clubs Deuce wired most of the building up with explosives, over the years - quite a tenacious fellow - but never seemed inclined to set them off. Some were disabled when they might have interfered with Felt affairs; others were ignored. She only sets off the ones layered under the penthouse and the accounting floor, but that's enough to blow them both up. Scratch's puppet body bursts apart almost instantly, the fabric and stuffing catching fire like they've been doused in accelerant.

Interestingly - one final surprise - Diamonds vanishes before the explosion can consume her. But the force of the blast already knocked her back, and her finger closed reflexively on the trigger of the gun, and that's really all Scratch needs to direct the flickering cueball into his head with a world-shattering

CRACK

Scratch dies, and from the crack in his cranium something emerges, fully formed. First the hollow green skull, and then broad shoulders that strain to bursting with hulking muscle; the billiard balls representing his dead servitors roll and flicker in the empty sockets of his eyes under heavy brows. The Ouroboros tower, already rendered structurally unsound by the wanton damage and distortion inflicted by various parties over the course of the day, collapses in on itself as the metal that makes up the support beams ages and rusts a thousand years per second. From Stitches' workroom, an enormous overcoat rises up, bleeding trails of eye-searing color from the hem and the stitches as it settles around the Lord of Time's shoulders.

He raises a golden scepter, and time cracks hard enough to split the sky in twelve directions all around him, like a clockface of destruction.
It is, quite suddenly -

*Sunday, April 13th*

---

Terezi's lusus tries to fly the second Jade teleports them into open air, her damp, webbed wings rapidly drying and stretching out to their full length. In the grey light of day, the lusus has a distinct teal tinge in the veins visible through the skin of her wings. But the caul obscuring her eyes doesn't fall away, so while she manages to fly under her own power on the first try while Jade scans for where Jack Noir landed, the dragon starts flying right in the direction of a fresh crack that splits open the sky. Jade realizes just in time and yelps a warning before zapping them both away from Chicago. The pale lusus takes it in stride and turns a small loop-de-loop as they appear over Minneapolis.

DM: Oh, how exciting!!!

As worried as Jade is about whatever the heck just happened in that cave, she has to stop and watch the lusus coast along and roll in artless circles. "Dragons are so cool," she says, feeling more than a little starstruck. I mean, come on - *dragons!* Terezi is so lucky! If Jade had been born a troll, she doesn't know whether she'd want to have a canine lusus or a dragon lusus anymore - poor Bec!

DM: Why, thank you!

Space rips open, and Jack Noir burns through; glowing spittle flies from his twisted muzzle-mouth as he thrusts a sword at Jade. There's something creepy about the sword, Jade realizes as she zaps out of the way in a rush. It looks jagged and brittle, like Noir ripped off a thin chunk of his own carapace and sharpened it. She feels like if she picked the right warped crack in his shell, she could fit the sword back into him.

She only gets a split second to decide - leave Terezi's mom here, or try to drop her off somewhere safer, further from Chicago. But the dragon lusus bugles and arrows in Noir's general direction with her soft, silvery fangs bared, so Jade has to grab her and teleport them fast. Noir retaliates with a furious snap of his jaws, and speeds after them.

JN: Come back here, girl! Come back and look at what's left of me!

DM: Why does his voice smell like spoiled egg yolk?

"Because he's terrible!" Jade punches her way straight to Doctor Lalonde's valley. It's risky - she comes out as high in the clouds as she can, high enough that the air's starting to thin, and she doesn't know exactly how the lusus will react to the sudden change in pressure when she's so fresh out of the egg! But she doesn't want Noir realizing just what's down below, or testing his broken space powers against the void shields. "You'll be safe below! Go!" she tells the lusus, once the dragon flaps upright, and then instantly teleports to Los Angeles with a deliberately flashy, ostentatious burst of power.

It works. Noir's on her again in an instant. He bypasses the Cascades valley entirely to carve a path to Jade. Jade runs upside down along the underside of an overpass, then zaps back over the Pacific. *Now* it decides to work! D'oh. But Noir keeps pace with her and if anything, speeds up; his next slash knocks Jade tumbling back with a wave of force, and when she spins back upright Noir kicks her hard in the chest. His burst of green lightning drives her skidding along the dirt and snow somewhere in Russia, and the sudden cold cuts through Jade like an icicle. She slams into the side of a building and pushes off it before Noir can kick her again.
But she's not ahead of him, anymore. No matter where she jumps or what she does, Noir is on her butt. She teleports to Lapland and then back over the Atlantic, but so many long distance jumps is starting to take its toll on her stamina. Her heart hasn't stopped pounding for a second since Noir gave chase. The mottled carapacian swings at her and the punch grazes Jade's cheek as she flinches to the side, over Svalbard. With a hoarse yell, Jade shoves Noir back, which buys her some precious room to maneuver. She hops back once - on top of the Washington Monument - jumps backwards again - somewhere in Saskatchewan, in the back of a pickup truck - and again - skating upside down on the loop of a rollercoaster in Fujiyoshida -

And Noir dogs her every step of the way, teleporting only a few scant seconds out of sync from her movements. Jade starts to feel the burn over Lisbon, a crackle of heat flushing across the surface of her skin and sinking deeper, burning hotter behind her sternum and flaring up when she leaps somewhere new. They've hit pretty much every continent by now with no signs of slowing. Jade knows almost every location, but pinballing from London to Johannesburg and then launching right back to Reykjavik makes her atoms ache. It's not a fun time; she's getting desperate, here. Being chased by Clubs Deuce was relentless and horrible. This is fifty times worse, because Noir keeps up with her without pause, utterly relentless, and each time they touch down in one location for more than a breath he blasts through buildings without a care for who might still be inside them.

"Stop it! Augh!" With the worst gun safety in the world, Jade summons a fresh rifle out of her sylladex and fires one-handed, wild. Noir dodges, snarling, his mottled face twisted up with hate. Jade teleports again and comes out on the Vegas strip by mistake; every atom in her body keeps trying to come together here, but she has to lure this guy away from the others and keep it that way. Urgh! He's right on her tail as she zaps to New York City, and she gets a second to breathe before the carapacian crashes into her, wings flared.

They slam through the first building at a wonky angle; Jade seizes Noir by the neck before his teeth can crunch down on her throat, pulls her arm back, and punches him on the nose with enough force to splinter the marbled carapace shell around his eyes. The cracks spread across his face like a web, with molten green plasma leaking out of the fissures. He knees her in the gut in retaliation, roaring, and Jade hits the next wall back-first, the wind knocked out of her with one impact - then another - and finally she crash lands on a torn up street she doesn't recognize. She fumbles a backwards somersault and twists into a sloppy skid, one foot planted and the other splayed out with the knee dragging to kill her uncontrolled spin. Her back is gonna be sore tomorrow, but right now she barely feels it.

A quick scan of the area shows there's no one around - Jade's in the middle of a street with a massive, curling line carved into it, surrounded by construction machines and leftover chunks of concrete that look like Dark Star churned them up in a blender (of evil), but she can't sense a single construction worker. This place should be crawling with people trying to live around the ruin Leviathan made of the downtown area, but there's nobody here.

And there's no time to investigate. Noir zaps in, barreling toward Jade at top speed, and Jade's hands feel like they're on fire as she teleports away one more time -

Only to land dangerously close to Chicago again. Darn it! She emerges about a mile off the ground, swiping an arm across her face to mop up the faint sheen of sweat starting to drip into her eyes. This time, when Noir bounced in to tackle her, Jade zooms further up into the blue, blue sky. Noir has to bank hard and hastily realign himself in a flash of green, while Jade is free to pick up speed and push herself as fast as she can.

How far can she go before she runs out of breathable atmo and hypoxia kicks in? 8000 meters? This isn't the Medium, after all, and Jade's not carrying around a bunch of spare oxygen or anything like
...On the other hand...she does have a spare ecto-brother...Hm!

GG: john! i need air stuff fast pls!
EB: wha - why the heck are you in the upper troposphere? where are you going?!
GG: im going to space, duh!
EB: ...that's awesome.
GG: i know, right? air please!
EB: gotcha covered!
EB: but uh i'm pretty sure you need more than that to survive in space.
GG: im probably not going all the way out of the atmosphere...maybe...
GG: if i have trouble i'll turn back around. gotta go!
EB: be careful!

John has a good point. Space generally requires a lot of gear and rockets and stuff to reach without, you know. Dying. And stuff.

But Jade has god tier pajamas and a breath of air that coasts up and wraps around her just as things start getting gnarly, and also - she is the Witch of freakin' Space, thank you very much. What could possibly go wrong?

[activate fraymotif? y/n]

Nothing, that's what. "Yes!" Jade says, her voice a gasp. She laughs and speeds up through the stratosphere in a series of rapid-fire jumps, skipping tens of kilometers at a time. Each time she jumps the sky around her looks a little darker; when she looks back, Noir is right there zapping after her in spikes of green light. But if she ignores him she sees the pale blue, almost white edge of the atmosphere

[fraymotif activated: No Longer Earthbound ]
The only thing is, they're not alone up here. Jade's senses keep expanding up and outward as her focus slowly detaches from the planet, and she can feel low hanging satellites, the occasional meteor already cruising through the atmosphere and aiming for the ground below - and something else.

Somethings. Somethings that are absolutely gigantic. Things that are big enough to make her fists clench, even the smallest of them at least a couple miles long. She should have sensed them wayyy earlier than this. Curse her casual Earth-centrism! If she's picking up on what she thinks she is...

Then Noir can go directly to angry baby monster jail, do not pass Go, do not collect $200. Because things just got interesting. Jade may not have a space ship to call her own (a fact she mourns now that the thought occurs to her) but somebody has been busy! She's starting to understand why she couldn't track where all those missing people were going - how dumb was she not to check off the planet? Yeesh!

The outer hulls are a red so deep it's almost black against the backdrop of space, blending in like dark titans and blotting out the stars beyond. Jade veers up and around the largest one, close enough to the metal exterior that she could put a hand out and trace a line as she flies by. She thinks better of it when she remembers Noir's wings - he's not gonna be careful with where he's slicing, and if Jade's senses aren't wrong, there's several billion people and counting crammed into these massive ships like tins of sardines, with only a couple layers of armor and bulkhead and some kind of organic material between them and space.

Just how much fuel did it take to get these puppies into orbit, anyway? Jade is trying to calculate it off the top of her head, but without space powers or some other kind of boost she's coming up way short. Unless things are nuclear in there, which she thinks she would have been able to sense waayy before now. Fission or cold fusion engines would be amazing but also noticeable at this range. Honestly, however they pulled this off, Jade is impressed.

Anyway. Time to kick some carapacian hiney. She came out here to get away from all the other living targets Noir might have gone after on the ground, but that plan's a total bust. If someone's gone through the trouble of getting the entire population of the Earth on board a bunch of escape vessels -
who is Jade to look a gift horse in the mouth? "C'mere, asshole!" she yells, flipping herself around in a roundoff to face Noir as she lets her momentum carry her higher up, past the midline of the ship. She beckons the carapacian with a flick of her fingers that accidentally-on-purpose becomes a middle finger, and Noir howls in outrage. They have to be out of breathable atmosphere by now but the carapacian doesn't slow down at all; the only difference seems to be that his shriek echoes more in Jade's head than in her ears, now. Gosh darn alien ability to survive in near vacuum -

Speaking of which. She cheers internally for whatever combo of godliness, pajamas, and space stuff is keeping her in one piece right now. Talk about a rousing success for her very first solo non-rocket space launch! When Noir tackles her again Jade meets him with a bared-tooth grin, their trajectory careening a little out of control as they tumble backward. Jade splits her attention between blocking Noir's green-laced slashes and redirecting them so that they don't gouge a hole in the side of the ship. This particular vessel has extra spiky prongs on the prow - these things are designed so weird, like, what the heck? Noir rakes her shoulder, tearing through skin and cloth, and Jade turns it back on him, seizing him by the wrist and whipping around in a circle to fling him like a discus. Their momentum finally carries them up high enough that Jade, still turning, catches glimpses of more bright, saturated red spikes that curve out from around the back of the tall bridge module rising up near the middle of the ship. It's like the entire ship is built to be able to launch itself at an enemy ship and gut it on impact.

No. Hang on.

Jade smacks her face and groans. That's Crocker red. She uses her powers to hit the brakes, eyes running over the ship and along the side of the hull spread out beneath her until she finds a white fork on the side, emblazoned with old, jagged Alternian script as tall as Jade is, sunlight lancing off the polished armor.
"Holy crap," Jade breathes. Then Noir piledrives her from the side, yanking her hair in the cheapest move possible to pull her head to one side and sock her in the jaw while she's disoriented. Jade zaps them both away when they're inches from colliding with one of the wider prongs of the ship. Totaling the Condesce's fancy schmancy ride wouldn't be smart, Jade thinks. She can't spy any cameras, so there's no telling if the crew inside are able to detect two people duking it out in their immediate vicinity. A vessel this huge - what does their nav system look like? Do they at least have a gigantic rear view mirror or something like that?

Jade tries to yank her hair free, and her scalp gives a tiny scream. "Leggo!" she yells, blocking Noir's next jab with the flat of her arm. A significant chunk of hair tears and comes loose as she gives up and teleports behind him, kicking backwards with all her strength and nailing him right in the butt. He's able to keep hold of parts of her even when she should be teleporting free of him, and it's freaking her out. She spins and roundhouse kicks him across the face when he tries to do the same maneuver,ducking her head out of the way of his next slice. "You're! So! Annoying!"

JN: Right back atcha.

Noir tries to put a claw through her chest. It's like that one anime - Read or Die, that's the one; Jade
totally remembers because John recommended it - trying to phase right through her and crush her heart in one go. There’s a sickening second where Jade feels it coming, and her chest is full of green fire - and then she tears away before Noir finishes solidifying, seizing him with her powers and throwing him with sheer brute force. She kind of messes up, because Noir rebounds off a flat section of the flagship’s upper deck and dents the hull with a dull thump. If the Condesce didn't know they were fighting near her ship before... Oops. Jade can't sense an outright breach, though; there's still that organic stuff shifting around under the metal, like insulation that feels eerily like flesh.

The carapacian lays stunned for an instant before lighting up again; his many seams and fissures blaze from the inside with space fire as he pushes off the observation platform (isn't that kind of impractical for an interstellar vessel?) and rushes her.

JN: I'm going to kill you.

JN: You, and all of the washed up has-beens you call friends.

JN: And your little dog, too.

"You don't touch my dog!" Jade feels another wave of spatial distortion above them - which is weird, since it doesn't feel like Noir's rotten power, and if it were Bec, she'd know. Not willing to fire another rifle with all these ships around, or risk the recoil distracting her at a critical moment, Jade snaps her fingers when Noir tries to pull her in and grapple her close. She jumps backwards and leads him along in a burst of micro-jumps until the new distortion snaps into place. She drops like a rock, falling right out from under him just as he loses patience and tries to zap on top of her, and she hopes whatever caused that spatial anomaly can handle itself.

It can. Jade somersaults out of the way just in time, as a spirograph portal unfurls and launches a meteor at them. Noir fails to pull up in time, confusion written all over his face, and Jade snorts really loudly before covering her mouth with her hands as the carapacian takes a space rock to the face, splaying out against the rock like a bug on a windshield. The pock-marked meteor judders a little but otherwise appears unfazed by this turn of events. It's rather stone-faced about the whole thing, to be honest! Eheheh.

But uh, yeah. Jade reaches out a hand to push the meteor away from the flagship and the rest of the fleet, which are the most obvious accidental targets for a meteor on a mission. (No way is she going to be able to redirect all of them, if the Reckoning is kicking meteors at them already!)

The Battleship Condescension beats her to the punch. Before the meteor clears more than a few yards from the exit portal, five different guns unfold from the red prongs of the ship, each equally pointy and covered in unnecessary spikes, and charge up with a faint whine. Yelping, Jade zaps down onto the observation deck before they open fire, and then the guns spit bright red laser pulses at the meteor. To Jade's mild disappointment, Noir shakes himself and teleports out of the way, and the meteor completely fragments on impact. It leaves behind a cloud of fine particles that pelt the front of the deck.

And the exit portal stays open. If anything, it looks like it's pulsating, the flowering green spirals brightening and dimming as it gets ready to spit out another meteor. Jade grimaces, her suspicions confirmed. Skaia's starting to fend off the Reckoning, and Earth is going to get pummeled in her place. The defense spirographs can reroute meteors to different times and locations, so that doesn't tell Jade what things will look like when they all cross over to the Medium. It just tells her the Earth is screwed in the very near future. How long do they have before meteors the size of cities start coming through? Bec can't blow up all of them! Jade can't imagine the fleet around her came unprepared, but they won't be able to handle something the size of a smallish country unless they have serious fire power.
Then again. The Condesce doesn't seem to the type of lady to do things by half measures!

In a pulse of green light Noir tumbles past Jade, too close for comfort - Jade draws a gun to whap him upside the head with, then fires it at point blank range with a tiny sphere of smoke leaking out of the barrel. The carapacian dodges the shot in a blink and revolves slowly, one wing hanging limp and dragging along the ship as he squints at her. He glares at the portal and then back at her, as though insinuating that she's somehow responsible for his close encounter. Which is total bullcrap, because he brought it on himself; Jade sticks her tongue out at him. "You're the one who won't stop trying to murder me, dummy!" she says, readying for his next move. Something about that defense portal is making her brain clamor, but she can't spare the mental resources to deal with it until she's ditched this bozo once and for all. There has to be a way to pin him down.

But right when Noir springs into motion, an enormous CRACK echoes through the space around them, and Jade flinches, glancing around instinctively to try to see where the new crack in time has opened up.

And while she's looking away, Noir stabs her shoulder, clean through the muscle. She can feel it scrape under the clavicle, but the pain is unreal. Jade screams, but can't hear it - her shoulder's on fire and it's spreading -

She teleports, and the pain triples in intensity; she can't hold her shoulder together, no matter how hard she focuses through the agony. She claps her hand down on the streaming wound and clutches as tightly as she can, but when she looks down at her shoulder, she can see hot green Lichtenberg figures branching down her arm with each pulse of pain. "Haaaa." Swallowing hard and biting hard on her own lip to stifle a scream, Jade dodges Noir's next stab. He laughs at her, his hand alight with space as he claws at her.

Bec crunches down on Noir's claw and shakes. Noir yelps and flinches back; hate eats up his triumphant snarl, and the growling mutter of the carapacian's voice in her head shrieks so suddenly that Jade jumps. Her aching shoulder spikes with more pain. It's like the feedback from placing a microphone too close to an amp. At her side, Bec whines and paces back and forth. The pain finally drives Jade down on one knee, and she grits her teeth with Bec's white fur concealing her face from Noir. "Bec," she says, with a shaky smile. She can barely twitch the fingers of her stabbed arm enough to brush against Bec's fur in a welcoming pat.

JN: I ate you once, mutt, and I could do it again.

Bec growls, fur bristling and crackling with static electricity.

CRACK

Jade and Noir flinch in unison. Ohhh, no. Ohhh, nooooo. Jade still can't pinpoint where the cracks are coming from, but they're getting louder. Nearer.

Noir straightens out of his aggressive stance. For the first time since they started crisscrossing the globe, the raw power leaking through his cracked carapace dims. Not enough for him to look whole, but enough that he isn't nauseating to look at. He smirks at Jade, his voice derisive as he tucks his sword away.
"So are you!" Jade retorts, but dread is crawling along her skin, and Noir's smirk is a sickle moon of jagged teeth. With a sweep of his ragged wings, he ditches Jade and Bec, his outline limned with green fire as he wings away from the ship and makes for the defense portal. Part of Jade registers the laser guns of the Battleship tracking the carapacian's movements, like shiny, attentive red beetles, but the rest of her is readying itself to jump after Noir, depending on where he heads next. Reckoning and incoming Lord or no, Noir has to be taken care of, or he'll dick around for a while and then murderize one of her friends. She can feel it. Her shoulder throbs again, right down to the melting atoms of her stricken muscles, but Jade pushes up off her knee. "Where do you think you're going?" she says, suspicious. Her throat feels achey and dry, as if her borrowed air is getting thinner. Relocation might not be such a bad plan, if she can hold herself together long enough.

JN: Me?

JN: Ain't that obvious?

Noir lifts a claw laced with blood (Jade's blood, gross) and green sparks - and streaks for the defense portal like a rocket, more space energy building up around him in a rippling wave as he charges at the spirograph. Jade feels a twinge of unease as the portal prepares to unfurl and release another meteor; what the heck is Noir doing?

He beats the meteor out of the gate, is what. A harsh mental shout of triumph rings in Jade's head, and her insides do their best impression of a fractal as the portal - inverts? The spirograph flickers through every color of the rainbow and then Noir slashes through it, turning the inner physics of the gate inside out.

The snapback hits Jade across the face, a burst of repercussive force that knocks her silly and slaps her down against the observation deck of the Battleship Condescension as the spirograph flashes white. It settles back to a sullen green after a moment of frenzied churning, and Jade gulps a few times to get her heart rate back to normal. When her vision clears, Noir is gone, presumably through to the Medium, and Jade has to adjust her grip on her shoulder, digging her thumb into the meat on either side of the stab wound to keep it pinched close. It feels like her arm's about to fall off, but her mind bursts with a moment of sudden clarity. The pain comes second to the realization that the portal can go two ways.

Jade stares at the portal with dawning anticipation. Maybe Noir didn't mean to plant the idea in her head, but too bad for him; Jade is going to harvest this crop like you wouldn't believe. If she can stabilize her arm, just for a second, and apply all her concentration to recreating whatever Noir did to invert the spirograph -

A faint rumble jolts up her legs from the ship, and Jade turns to see a hatch opening up at the base of the bridge tower. Two people stride out, and for a moment Jade is flummoxed by the sight of them. They've both got the candy-corn horns of trolls, but their skin looks pitch black; then she realizes it's a skin tight suit. She doesn't need the fuchsia accents to be able to tell who the shorter troll is. The Condesce's horns are really pretty unmistakable.
The other troll walks deferentially at the Condesce's side as the fuchsiablood stomps over, each step latching onto the deck like there are magnets in the soles of the trolls' shoes, their suit accents and mouthpiece Crocker red. Lined grooves along the sides of the observation deck fold back and a clear cover rises up to cover the deck, closing them off from the vacuum. Jade is very impressed by the time the Condesce reaches her and the deck has been pressurized with enough air that Jade's wheezing breaths settle down a little. She'd be more worried - this lady hadn't exactly been nice to Dave, Karkat, and Feferi, after all - but Jade's in too much pain to be more than bemused by the Condesce's irritated, stamping walk. Bec is here, now, sitting at attention in front of Jade's feet with his head cocked and ears perked up to observe the Condesce's approach, so really, Jade has all the backup she needs if things get hairy.

"What the shit was that, wriggler?!" the Condesce snaps, jabbing Jade right in the chest with a claw covered in opalescent glitter and tiny squid decals. The nail décor is actually so long that they've cut through the suit to set them free. "You gonna be a problem? Huh? Because we're outta here in ten, and you're not gettin' in the way. #movebeach"

"What? Oh, no, this is great!" Jade says, enthusiasm radiating through her. "This is fantastic, actually!" She grabs the troll by the shoulder, almost ready to swing her around in a hug - except ow, no, not a good plan! Jade drops her hand and goes back to holding her shoulder together. "Where were you all planning to go? Quick, I don't know how much time we've got left!" she asks, interested and urgent at the same time. They're definitely running out of time, but she needs to figure out how to heal her shoulder a little, anyway.

The Condesce rocks back on her pointed heels, her expression unreadable through the suit's mask. "We're getting the shell out of this terrestreel little backwater," she says, guarded. "There's another galaxy out there with my name on it, and if you think you can interfere -"

Oh, wow. And she built a whole fleet of space ships to do it. That's...so awesome! Jade doesn't even have words for how impressive that is! And yet - "No, no, that won't work." This time, when Jade
spreads her awareness out over the fleet, she takes an actual count. 413 ships, counting this one. Not a bad number at all, considering how many people had to be evacuated. All of Earth's population, plus whatever else the Condesce thought to equip the ships with for an interstellar quest. "Just finding a new planet's no good, I'm sorry. Not when reality is breaking down." She blinks. "Also, how did you know you'd need to leave?"

The Condesce rolls her eyes extravagantly. "I'm in the know. Wader you talking about, 'reality is breaking'? I ain't no chum, wriggler, I ain't basic. I know how this glub goes down."

Jade shakes her head, still distracted. "Reality is getting munched on by a Lord of Time. Nothing's going to survive - I don't think you'd make it very far before everything just...stops. It's kind of a problem!" Some very colorful, fish pun-laden swearing breaks out. Some parts of it are in clicking Alterian old enough that Jade doesn't recognize the dialect. "How fast can these babies go, anyway?" she asks, tamping a foot against the deck. Running the calculations in her head wouldn't normally take this long, but Jade's operating with piecemeal info about these ships, and it's hard to think around the dizzying pain in her arm. When she experimentally flexes the fingers of her stricken arm, her shoulder is a starburst of pain.

"Fast enough. What is this bullshit?! The Reckoning is only supposed to waste this useless dump!" the Condesce demands, following Jade as she starts floating toward the prow of the battleship. She doesn't spare more than a single impatient glance at Jade's injury; the troll spends more time glowering at Bec.

The other troll clears his throat before Jade can answer, dragging a claw across his PDA. "Another meteor has appeared over the rear guard, my Condesce. The debris clearers destroyed it, but both gates are still open. Should I send word to blast it like we did the one over Cairo?"

"Yeah, shore, blast it outta the water," the Condesce says, waving a hand impatiently.

Jade slams her power down on the nearest laser turrets just in the nick of time, locking up their insides with a flared hand. The other spirograph that opened up feels too distant; it's located somewhere in the exosphere over Europe, so she doesn't expend the concentration needed to save it. No, if she can play her cards right, she should only need this one intact - if she can reverse it the same way Noir did.

Also, make it bigger. Way bigger. "Leave this one! That's your ticket out of here," Jade says, aware that she's babbling through the pain. "It's just got to work - it has to! I need to figure out what he did, hang on."

"We don't exactly have all day, wriggler!" the Condesce says, throwing up her hands in frustration. "We're aboat to get slammed by a metric glubton of space junk, and we need to move our basses! Where would that thing even take us?" She pauses, then continues in a lower tone. She sounds...strained. "Kid, you're krillin' me, here."

Jade stops, blinks, and then looks back at the troll curiously. Then she tilts her head to the side, with a tiny, reassuring smile. "No. I'm saving you." Then she flexes her hand, considers the portal one last time, and whistles with all her might.

Becquerel springs up on all fours, ears up and tail wagging, the most animated Jade has seen it in ages. It whuffles loudly, regarding the spirograph before them with nostrils flared - and then sniffs again, turns its head, and goes to smell the Condesce's feet, following the line of her leg up with snuffles of recognition. Either way, Bec's incredibly distracted. "Oh, cod," the Condesce says, looking - well, Jade can't tell, she's still wearing that space suit. But she sounds gobsmackereled (oh jeez), like she's seeing a ghost. A very, very annoying ghost.
Jade's hurting too much to do this on her own, so it would be great if Bec would concentrate. She whistles again, beckoning, and Bec snaps to attention and trots back over to her side after giving the Condesce's twitching left claw another good sniff. "There's got to be a way. Bec, help me with the gate, okay? We need to get everyone out of here," Jade says. She's got John and a couple other people messaging her back for the first time in a while, the chat alerts going off super fast, but she only spares the focus to respond to a few.

EB: aren't you almost out of air by now?
GG: wont matter in the medium. just go!
TG: fuck
AA: he is here
AA: the lord of time is nigh
EB: ...
EB: well that sucks.
TA: je2u2, okay. everyone el2e, we're out of here iin three, two, one -

Jade splits her focus between the chat memo and the spirograph, her space sense sliding over and around the gate. It feels so foreign that she almost can't get a grip on it; she doesn't think she's properly messed with one of these before, not even in the old game session, and it doesn't feel like a transportalizer would. Space is present in the portal, and Jade threads her awareness through the parts of the gate that call to her power. But there's two extra elements, one grating on her nerves like sandpaper and reverberating with the faint cracks in the distance, and the other so faint but so insistent that she finds herself inspecting it before realizing that there's a voiceover attached.

[Skaian defense portal 413611 status: active est. delay: 15 minutes - 1 hour ERROR]

'Error' is the part of that she likes the least. If either Noir or the Lord of Time are starting to mess this portal up, Jade will be pissed. This would be a liiittle bit easier if the darn thing came with a big red button for reversing the streams, but no such luck.

Deep breath. Her lungs kind of wheeze, even in the thin air of the observation deck.

Jade better make this quick. Reverse, she thinks at the portal, her hands coming up before her to frame the spirograph and twist. Her shoulder whites out again, but she braces that trembling arm with space power so that it stays level with her good arm. The nexus of the spirograph pulses under her focus, but when she applies pressure - nothing happens. Crap. Jade gives a harder push, feeling the burn that she's gotten used to along her arms flare up. This time, with her arms out in front of her, Jade catches it in the act; the usual neon green plasma of her power curdles around the stab wound and along the branching lines under her skin, flecked with darker spots of deep green as it flows up her arms and over her shoulders, stinging when it touches the scabs where Noir claws her earlier. She can't tell if it's just her powers being more flashy than normal, or if her atomic structure is just -

She needs to pay attention to what she's doing. "Come on," Jade grunts, sensing the Condesce shift behind her. Jade nudges the exit gate again with her powers and space alters underneath her touch - but then the spirograph flares a rainbow, and reasserts itself, circling back into its original
configuration. "Ugh, come on!"

What is she doing wrong? Is it only possible to reverse the gate's trajectory for a few seconds? Long enough for Noir - or Jade - to make it through, but not long enough for the whole fleet? She can feel everyone behind her if she tries, behind and around and above, an entire fleet of ships with nowhere to go if she doesn't carve them a path. That last crack in time made her stagger, and if it's starting to affect her she needs to bounce, fast. A fast scan of the fleet (trying to distract herself) shows that the gate over the hind guard is gone, swallowed up into a tear where space used to be. There's nothing there, now. Space can't knit itself together over the breach.

And all the ships are full. Time is stuttering and lurching forward with each crack, and if they don't have almost everyone on Earth up here, Jade will find a hat and eat it. That nearby crack could so easily widen and annihilate the hindmost ships. They're crowding forward, but there are too many ships packed into formation already.

Jade isn't panicking. She's not!

Never mind, Jade is panicking, a ice cold trickle of doubt curling in her stomach. "Open up!" she demands, pouring more of her power into the spirograph. Her arm erupts into neon lava that roils under her skin and into the marrow of her bones. It's so hot it's beyond pain - it feels like she's dissolving from the inside out. A faint noise escapes her mouth, but she ignores it. Bec's full of swirling galaxies, and she can feel its power supplementing her own.

And this time, the portal sits up and pays attention. Jade sobs. Bec's fluff ripples with lightning, but even as the spirograph begins to rotate and sink in on itself, even as Bec's support lends strength to her wobbly knees, it feels like Jade's being slowly overloaded. The plasma pours down her back and burns through her thighs, but - that's not right, it's not that the plasma's coming out of nowhere, it's that her body itself feels like it's decohering, all the atoms afire with too much power. Her gasp of pain comes out choked; she can hear the Condesce shouting something that's too quiet compared to the white noise singing in Jade's ears.

[Attention - an error has been detected. A defense portal is being redirected.]

[Please wait. Rerouting...]

"Hurry up hurry up hurry up," Jade starts to chants. Would chant, if she could still feel her face. She has no idea how that voiceover can sound so calm and yet so insufferable at the same darn time, while Jade's burning up over here. Will she melt into a radioactive puddle, or go supernova? Neither sounds like a particularly fun option.

[Attention - an error has been detected. A large quantity of earthbound doomed beings are attempting to gain entrance to the Medium.]

"No!" Jade screams.

[Please wait. Rerouting...]
Finally, Jade thinks, as the defense portal burns white hot, and the internal physics invert from an exit to an entrance. She collapses in a heap on the deck as the corroding space fire crawls through the rest of her body. She can see plasma swirling in the palm of her hand as she lifts it in front of her face, and she can't seem to stop shaking. All of her rubber band reminders are gone, melted down into their component atoms and circulating through the rest of her form.

It's not that she feels weak, exactly - more like she could skip from the Earth to Neptune in a snap of her fingers and hold the whole solar system laid out in the palm of her hand. It's too much, too fast, she's skating along the outer rim of what she can hold together and she can't adjust to the sudden unravelling of her powers like she did in Brazil and Los Angeles. She's going to shake apart and scatter her atoms every which way and not know how to piece herself back together the way she did WV, and she's not even going to get to say goodbye -

Bec whines and rests its muzzle on her jittering lap. The Condesce (still here?) seizes Jade's shoulder, which is pretty brave all things considered, but her claws close down on a wound that's swallowed Jade's whole body. "its not done yet," Jade whispers, her mind floating somewhere above her body as she struggles to string words together. "gotta get them all in - how wide can the portal go?" She can't tell if she's sobbing or not; three more CRACKS go off in rapid succession, jolting through her like electric shocks as the web of broken time starts to wrap around the fleet, encircling the ships. "oh bec..."

It's not done yet, she repeats to herself. The thought gets her back on her feet, swaying as she bends too much of her focus to the task of keeping her body together. Becquerel whimpers again, nosing at her fiery palm until she scratches behind its ears with drooping fingers. "bec, i think i need help," she says. But all of her friends have gone on ahead, and she told them she would be fine. "can you make the portal larger on your own?" she asks. That shouldn't be too complicated a thing to ask of Bec; these gates are supposed to get bigger to accommodate huge asteroids. Jade will keep it open, and Bec can hold it until all the ships are through. Then Jade can go through last, and let the exit portal go back to being an exit, and maybe her powers will recede a little. Maybe it'll buy her some time.

Becquerel regards her without eyes, both ears flicked toward the sound of her crackling voice. "please, bec," Jade begs, after the wolf shows no signs of acknowledging the request. "please."

Finally, Bec floats up, front paws folded up against its chest as it watches her face, all of the wolf’s fur edged with lime and filled with starstuff. Bec licks her cheek, and pulls back as though it means to go to the portal.

Then Bec zaps into Jade's body, and things go spang -

[fraymotif activated: A Familiar Spirit ]

- as familiarity floods Jade's mind. This never happened before, she wants to protest, but as Bec seals itself into her blood and bones, the tiny galaxies of her atoms realigning in a way that feels like coming home - it feels like being whole again, in a way she never knew she was missing.

She comes together almost the same as before, but with an extra thrum in her chest, and a pair of soft white ears sprouting from her scalp, the fur melded seamlessly with muscles and skin. Parts of her body are still painted with nebula as Jade uncurls herself, and her arms are covered in lightning marks, but they don't burn like she's going to burst apart in her own personal supernova anymore. When she touches her shoulder, though, she can feel a chunk of deadened scar tissue, darker than the
rest of her skin when she inspects it. She doesn't have time to test how it'll affect her, but the wound's sealed. For now.

And Bec is here, and gone, all at the same time.

It's too much. But Jade has places to be, and people to see.

Jade floated off the deck a little at some point in the proceedings. The Condesce has to stand on her toes to reach Jade's arm and shake it. "Kiddo, are you alright?" she demands, clutching Jade's arm with a hand that have seen centuries come and go and, in another time and place, conquered galaxies only to have it all fall apart. "Hey, guppy! If Jimmy's glubbin' hellbeast did some shit, tell me now and I will wreck that basshoal -"

"No, Bec is...I'm okay. Better now," Jade says, shaking the Condesce off with a gentle shrug of her arm. She floats a few feet forward along the deck, recentering herself with the spirograph above at a forty five degree angle. She needs its radius as wide as possible. "Get everybody ready to go fast enough, on my mark. I'll have to hang back to keep it open for you all."

The Condesce blinks.

After a moment's consideration Jade plants her feet on the deck firmly, and tries framing the gate with her fingers in a rectangular frame. But no, some instinct tells her that's not right. Not for manipulating a portal like this. She falters for a second, fingers curling back, and then raising her hands again with one palm overhead and the other pointing at the floor. Slowly she starts to rotate them clockwise, and the spirograph blossoms, tiny dots of brighter light racing along the curves and whorls as they expand outward. The gaps between the lines expand proportionally as well, but Jade can't see anything through them.

She doesn't need to. She knows what's on the other side.

Once the spirograph reaches 1000% of its original dimensions, it tries to shake her hands away and spiral out of control. In the space of seconds it is wide enough to fit the Battleship Condescension; five seconds, and it's 6000 meters across, the lowest parts of the gate expanding down into the exosphere. If anyone's left on Earth, it must be incredible to see. After the longest ten seconds of her life, Jade finishes bringing her hands around in a circle and closes her fists to hold. "Go!" she says, aware that she's caught fire again, and equally aware that this time, she has control. Her hair coils around her, alight with stars, and she doesn't turn her head because the Condesce is right at her side. All Jade has to do is cock her ears to better sense the Condesce; everything's so much clearer, now.

"You heard the gill," the fuchsiablood says, as the clear cover over the observation deck starts to depressurize and peel back. Jade takes a last gulp of air and gets ready to hold that, too. Hoo boy. "Everybody through! Let's blow this clambake!"

And yes, actually, this fleet can move. Jade watches as the ships to either side of the Battleship pulls away. She's so caught up in holding the portal that she almost misses that it's the Battleship moving, shifting out of the way with thrusters to rise up above the body of the fleet. The rest of the ships begin to rocket forward in precise bursts while still maintaining their formation, a well-oiled machine in motion. Each one is lined with torrents of burgundy and gold, the energy streamlined and concentrated where the engines should be. Psionics! Jade wants to say, glad to have sorted out why she couldn't figure out what kind of power could possibly be enough to lift this many ships. How many psionically-inclined trolls would it take? Jade would guess every psionic on the planet is here, barring Sollux, so that...probably answers that. She has the gate wide enough that the ships can pass through tens at a time, sometimes in rows and sometimes in lines that form giant x's and other patterns, and with each round of ships that passes through Jade can feel the spirograph struggling to
close in on itself and return to its original dimensions. As though it needs to digest or something!

But they just don't have time to wait.

The whole fleet is in motion now, the hindmost vessels firing up their engines to close the gap as the fleet vanishes through the portal ahead of them, and they can all cover ten kilometers in a second. But they just have so much space to cover - each ship at least a few kilometers long on its own, with enough room in between them to avoid crowding, and they fill up so much volume just because there's so much to account for, four hundred and thirteen ships and all the while the cracks in time rush in to fill the vacated space, snapping prongs in two and forcing some of the smaller ships to divert their trajectory to avoid plowing straight into a new break. Reality ruptures into jagged shards, and the cracks just keep spreading. Jade feels one vessel shear against a crack and several kilotons worth of metal vanish into nothingness. She flinches and fights back a scream - the organic growth that fills the underlying layer of the ship's armor seals the enormous gap, a stretch of purplish-pink flesh that somehow holds even as the ship spirals into alignment with five other vessels and hauls ass through the gate.

All Jade can do is hold on to her breath, and hope. The Battleship Condescension rises up again, forgoing thrusters for the steady crackle of powerful psionics, and lines itself up as the last few rows pass around and overhead. The Condesce widens her stance but stays beside Jade, her specibus held out before her. "You might want to go inside," Jade points out, with a gasp of air she can barely afford to lose - she's not going anywhere, since she's pretty sure the whole ship will get sucked into the Medium like a milkshake through a straw regardless of where Jade is standing. But the troll who came out with the Condesce earlier has already hustled back inside. Standing on the top of a space ship while it's ready to go full speed ahead is a silly idea.

It's also a really amazing idea. Which is reason number two why Jade is doing it, even though her head is starting to pound. Merging with Bec like this is a heady experience, but they're still exerting enormous power, here.

Rather than getting offended, the Condesce lets out a bark of laughter, raising one claw high over her head. "A little late for that, kiddo," she says. When the last ships hit the spirograph gate and get sucked through in a pulse of white, the Battleship starts to rumble. "Now!"

The troll's claw comes cutting down, and the Battleship leaps forward - faster than any of the others, so fast that Jade slides a few feet before she remembers to accelerate forward along with it. The Condesce crouches low over her specibus where it has locked into three pointed chinks in the observation deck, braced for whatever might come.

Jade hears the final crack before she sees it, and she opens her hands to let the spirograph go. It spirals inward, shrinking as the battleship shoots across the last few meters, and the crack in time that would have broken a quarter of the spirograph hits nothing but empty space. Jade's new dog ears ache, like someone just roared in frustration right beside her head.

Too bad, so sad.

The forward prongs of the ship pass through the gate.

Jade's vision whites out.
'Fishwitted fuck' is straight out of Ancillary Justice.
Light We Walk In

Chapter Summary

We mix from many lands,
We march for very far;
In hearts and lips and hands
Our staffs and weapons are;
The light we walk in darkens sun and moon and star.

Chapter Notes

Edit 2/23 Rose's section is now up, starting at 'Rose can see LoLaR from LoHaC.'
Edit 3/14 Dave's section is now up, starting at 'Crossing LoHaC isn't actually that bad.'
Edit 3/20 John's section is now up, starting at 'TY: If you want my hoard, get over here and remove this thing from my property.'
Edit 4/3 Some extra sections up, starting at 'UU: hello kanaya! ^u^ how are yoU doing?'
Edit 4/14 Jade's section is up, starting at 'Jade feels more than one portal bloom'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The thirteenth of April arrives with a crack that nearly splits Sollux's head in two. With minimal warning, a tear in reality the width of his arm nearly cleaves through his horns, and the only thing that saves him is that on the twelfth, he had just ducked down to replace yet another circuit board that's melting all over the carpet. Yesterday simultaneously feels like it just happened two second ago and like ancient history, and a sudden, blinding migraine spikes through Sollux's head when he sees that most of his setup here has melted into a slag puddle on the carpet. Hacking reality is hard. It's hard, and he's not finishing that stupid meme when his brains are about to join the computers melted all over the floor.

The problem with being a great programmer, he thinks, as he pushes out from under the desk and flings Nepeta's lusus away from where the thing sniffs his phone, is that you do stupid shit because you can. Sollux programmed his own death ages and ages ago, and tied it to the end of the world, and now that ~ATH loop is about to blow his brains out. All of them. Wherever his dream selves are, they better have had time to finish their respective projects, because they're about to be toast. He'll come back - hopefully with a computer that's not a complete piece of shit ready and waiting for him on the other side - but first -

Pounce De Leon bounds forward and bats Sollux's phone away from his claws. Then the cat springs back and wiggles its butt in anticipation of another pounce. The annoying shitheel. He regrets letting it anywhere near his computer sanctum with a sudden burning passion; just because the thing has two mouths doesn't mean Sollux needs to be a complete doubles obsessed idiot about it. Summoning his psionics fires off another cascade of agony in Sollux's thinkpan, but that's probably just the whole death thing; it doesn't impede him from shoving Pounce back again (twice is the magic number) and snapping his phone back into his waiting claw.
The Lalonde lusus catches Pounce in bear hug when the feline lusus yowls out of the door. "Sollux, if I'm not mistaken, we've run out of time," Doctor Lalonde calls, staggering back as she wraps her arms around Pounce. The lusus is pretty much the same size as her, so she's an inch away from falling backwards, and Pounce starts wriggling furious as its hind claws sink into the floor for leverage. "Terezi's dragon landed on our roof and dislodged a number of satellite dishes sometime yesterday, but now it appears to be - well, today, and she's making herself at home in the main lobby. Shall we be on our way?"

God, Sollux is so over the lusii invasion. He already has one lusus too many in his life. "Way ahead of you," Sollux says, and he opens the Shurb app. Launching the Lalonde Labs into the Medium is as simple as tapping a button, because fuck all that cruxtruder deployment and phernalia registry bullshit. If people want to waste time fucking around with alchemizing new outfits and weapons, they can do it through the app later. When they're not all stuck on a planet-sized chunk of predestined, meteor-attracting Doom.

Sollux doesn't live to see where the Labs end up. His Prospit self should have aimed all the imported buildings at John's land, since his was the world that wasn't a) plagued by grimdark oceans, b) shattered by Noir, or c) covered in fucking lava - but Aradia was the one who told him that plan, and she's pulled insane amounts of misdirecting bullshit before, so really Sollux won't know until he's at a working terminal. As the world whites out, Sollux feels something pulse in his brain. Yellow blood pours from his ears while he keels over in front of the computer monitors. It's the worst, most literal meltdown he's ever experienced. His psionics burn and burst something else in his pan, and he dies before the rest of the pain can hit him -

He misses his own announcement. Aradia grins down at him, her hair a curtain around Sollux's face so that all he can see are heavy, coarse curls and that toothy, ecstatic grin. "Wakey wakey! Rise and shine!" she sings, gaily, bumping her forehead against his and cradling his face close.

It feels like dying. It feels like coming home. For an instant, Sollux understands exactly how Aradia wants to go out, and if he were a different kind of person, he'd probably want to cry.

Instead, he's an irritable asshole, and nudges Aradia away after the nuzzling starts to crowd him. She floats off with an agreeable hum, and Sollux rights himself so he's not floating off Prospit into space. The sudden absence of caffeine and assorted other chemicals in his bloodstream feels weirdly anticlimactic, but honestly? That was probably the most efficient sobriety treatment Sollux has ever encountered; he never wants to do it again, but knowing his luck... Anyway. "I'm never doing that shit again," he mutters, rubbing a phantom ache where one of his dreamselfes burst an eye with their overloaded psionics. Then he folds away anything extraneous: the greenish-yellow wings, because the last thing he needs is to clog up the silicomb with more magic dust and shit, and then the two trailing tails of his godly tunic thing. "What's the status on the hives?" he asks, floating over to the base of the nearest mainframe to check on the worker bees. Mustard yellow splatters along the side of the healthy amber combs, which is probably Sollux's fault. Ugh.

"I haven't a clue! Sorry!" Aradia says, cheerfully, and she rubs her claws together in anticipation as she skips away from Sollux. They're surrounded by the apicultural structures - building-sized mainframes that rise up in a glistening, living imitation of the golden architecture that used to make up Prospit. One spire in particular extends far above their heads, stretching until it's little more than a thin gold line that disappears into one of the deep gouges in the distant chessboard, just visible between Skaia's swirling clouds. There's no sign of the Reckoning yet, which is...odd. No green portals, no meteors. He can't see the ring of the Veil from this side of Prospit, and with the tower of mainframes sunk into Skaia, they're officially tidally locked this way. Sollux can't remember exactly when Prospit exists compared to Earth's timeline, but they're due for a storm of meteors any second now, and when it starts he and Aradia are going to have a front row seat.
The sight is familiar, sure - Sollux's Prospitian dreamself was probably at the base of this pillar when they died - but it feels like something Sollux remembers building in a dream. His Derse memories are even fainter, possibly because time runs weirder out that close to the Furthest Ring and death may not have actually hit him yet. Sollux chose to resurrect himself through the Prospit body because he needs to refamiliarize himself with these systems ASAP, before any of his idiot friends trips over their own feet, dies, and needs to be god tiered. It's like trying to corral a bunch of extremely death-prone moose. No, actually, a moose would be more likely to trample Sollux; he doubts anyone but Equius has the body mass to be quite that annoying.

He adjusts the closest set of monitors with psionics until they're all aligned how he wants them. A grist of bees hums past him in a swirl of purple bodies and swarms into a mainframe. The whole planet is running pretty hot, but all things considered, it's in good shape. God tiering Eridan, Feferi, and Sollux in rapid succession essentially destroyed the Lalonde terminal, but Prospit should be able to hold out long enough for Tavros, Karkat, Nepeta, and Kanaya. If they don't fuck it up. If Sollux doesn't fuck it up. "Looks like the terminals here are okay, at least," Sollux says, touching the screen to bring the import status windows into focus. "Oh, for - why the fuck are the Labs coming in on Jade's planet?" The spirograph loading symbol spins and flickers; it appears to be busy 'reconciling artifacts' and 'renegotiating outlets,' which is nonsense jargon that only stays on the loading screen a split second longer than the rest of the text while the Lalonde Labs finishes entering the Medium.

"Could be worse," Aradia says, giggling. "Everyone else landed on Dave's!"

"Oh, come on. How do you mess up that badly?!" Sollux flicks an errant bee away from his face before his crackling psionics can fry it.

"Dave hit the Enter button. Probably a bad omen, but I'm not an expert on that!" Aradia kicks off a mainframe to bob back down to Sollux's level. She tugs on his arm, her smile utterly inscrutable. "Come on, we're about to have company. They won't land in lava! Probably."

Sollux shakes her off, and tabs over to the god tier tracker. "Whatever it is can wait. This is the shittiest omen, and I left off in the middle of trying to figure out how to fix Kanaya. Give me a minute."

Because that's still a federal fucking issue. Gamzee's particular brand of error is, as near as Sollux can tell, totally unfixable. Sburb's interface flat-out refuses to translate some of Gamzee's god tier coding. It's like trying to feed something other than beenary code into a mainframe; whatever rage-y, chaotic bullshit Gamzee pulled left his god tier status an unreadable, corrupted mess that Sollux doesn't want to touch with a twenty foot pole. The most he's managed to do is get the god tier status to turn into a :o), which is the absolute peak of unhelpfulness. It's officially Gamzee's problem, because Sollux doesn't have the fucks to spare anymore and Gamzee doesn't seem concerned by literally anything.

Kanaya, though. Kanaya's problematic because she's already risen from the dead. Feferi revived herself with a game-approved ability, but Kanaya's rainbow drinker resurrection is an anomaly that Sollux has yet to code his way around. It just keeps throwing up errors. Skaia never put up this much of a fight while Sollux recoded the god tier process - and to be clear, Skaia fought him every fucking step of the way - and if reality is overwriting Sollux's code and trying to doom Kanaya -

He's not sure he wants to think it, let alone say it out loud. When Kanaya finishes entering with the rest, he'll flag her down and tell her to get through the Final Gate with Dave. If she never dies, this never becomes a problem.

...On second thought, texting her should be fine. He looks at Skaia and sees just how doomed reality is.
He doesn't want to see Kanaya right now.

Without warning, Aradia scoops her hands under Sollux's arms and hoists him up. "No more time! He's coming through!" she says, urgent under all her excitement. Sollux lets her drag him up into the air above Prospit's highest, humming towers, toward the dark expanse of the Medium.

"Which one?" Sollux asks, wary and weary. He glances toward the Veil end of the Incipisphere, but it's too far away from him to make anything out in detail. There's a thin, closer ring of debris strung along between LoWaS and greyed out LoLaR that's growing thicker as Sollux watches. He can make out chunks of vast ships, the curve of an enormous, shattered teapot, fiery brains that are linked to each other by teal neurons - more and more remnants of the trolls' irreparably damaged planets filling in as the game tries and fails to load them. No sign of a meteor barrage - yet.

"There!" Aradia says, pointing. The two of them float with their arms linked as Sollux scans Skaia's cloud-covered atmosphere for whatever Aradia's yellowed claw is pointing at.

He didn't need to strain his eyes, as it turns out. With a burst of sickly red, a spirograph portal appears and unfurls right next to Sollux's long stack of mainframes. Someone shoots out in a flash of green lightning as the portal forcibly ejects him, and the figure tumbles through the Medium before righting himself.

Jack Noir has seen better days. His green aura boils and seethes around him as he glowers at Prospit. At all of Sollux's carefully stacked mainframes.

"Seriously? AA, I have shit to work on," Sollux says, exasperated.

Aradia cracks a whipkind specibus out of her deck, setting her free claw on her hip as Noir pelts toward them. "Maybe one of the others will be able to come over and help in a bit," she says, with a distracted note in her voice.

"Maybe isn't gonna save us if Sburb decides we're the shittiest timeline," Sollux snaps back. But that's all the protest he can make before Noir teleports right in front of them, skipping all the space between Prospit and Skaia in a heartbeat to lunge at Sollux with a sword that reeks of ozone and dead space.

Aradia's whip snaps around the carapacian's wrist and she flings him away from them with a twitch of her wrist. "True!" she says, as a pair of crystalline music boxes start to chime on either side of her. Aradia's smile is as wide as ever, but her gaze has a sharp edge as she grins in the face of Noir's furious snarl. "But I think we're right on track. I'll bring you back so you can work on the terminal around now, don't worry!"

Well, it's not like anything's going to get done while this asshole is flying around and carving Prospit up into pieces. Sollux never bothered fucking around with any Doom fraymotifs, but he did hit the Fatalapiarist rank for a reason, and now he's somewhere in the god tiers between Morose Moros and Prophet of Uncertain Doom (he had a shitton of built up experience and nowhere to allocate it for ages). And his psionics level up along with him. "You promise?" he says, resignedly summoning enough psionics to light up the sky.

Aradia winks. "Of course!" She winds her whip close again, her eyes glinting in the strobe light of Sollux's psionics as Noir roars and rushes them.

Down below, in the thick of the silicomb, a future Sollux bends over the terminal and feverishly begins to type.
John dumps them all in a heap before taking off after Dave and Rose's asshat custodian. Karkat lands, spluttering, on top of Terezi and Equius, who immediately breaks into a uncomfortable sweat. Swearing, Karkat scrambles off them before Terezi can make a crack at his expense, only to accidentally put the heel of his hand down right in the squishy part of Dave's abdomen. Dave grunts and doesn't even look up from his phone, which is covered in green and yellow text. "Sollux hung up?" Rose calls, as she and Roxy pull each other upright. Almost everyone else in the room is too shocked by the sudden landing to do more than roll over and remember how legs work.

"Yeah. The shriveled up lemon fucked right off," Karkat replies, with a twist in his stomach. While he's half-crushing Dave, he stops to check his own phone, but the screen has gone dark. And - shit, Sollux is an asshole, but they're all assholes and Sollux in particular is his asshole friend. As much as Karkat thinks they share a similar sentiment of being perfectly happy emancipating themselves from their respective clingy lusii, this...that's not a way you'd want a lusus to go. You want them to piss off and go back to the ocean or the caves or wherever they crawled out of to raise you, not die for no fucking reason. And someone has to tell Sollux, eventually, or else it'll get dropped as a conversation bomb mid-memo and Sollux will get ban-happy again. It's another crisis waiting to happen. Trust the Midnight Crew to screw them all over one last time, from beyond the grave.

"What happened? Did something go wrong?" Jake asks, army-crawling out from the space formed under Tavros's rocketchair (which takes up half the fucking room with all its expansions and upgrades) and the back of the couch with a pistol in one fist and a keen look in his eye.

"We're leaving, post-haste," Rose says. "Just waiting on John. No, Vriska, we're not going bac-"

The Breeze rockets in through an open window, and John drops Bro Strider on top of the couch in a tearing panic. "Hereokaygogo!" John yells; his momentum sends him skimming over the back of the couch to ram into Feferi and send them both tumbling through the air in a burst of sparkly dust. Karkat lunges up and snags John by the front of his shirt as he flies overhead, and drags him down onto the floor before he can hit the wall. Feferi hits it feet first and hovers there so she doesn't land on any of the people below.

"Gone, dude," Dave says, without a flicker of hesitation on his face. Dave must hit the Sburb app first - who else could swipe that fast? Karkat's not sure anyone else even manages to get their phones out in time to be a contender.

And it launches. Whatever Sollux did shakes the condo underfoot, and John grabs Karkat's hand as white light fills all the windows, whiting out the room -

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SBURB OMEGA
Karkat wakes up groggy.

Which implies that he has been asleep. *Fuck.* He thrashes upright, kicks off someone's cape - *too many of these fuckers are sprouting capes* - and forces his eyes open while his thinkpan still thinks he's lying on the ground. His first thought not populated entirely by swearing runs something like, 'oh, of fucking course we got sent directly to some nightmare hellscare, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred boonbucks -' but he can't figure out why he's thinking that until his eyes stop stinging and he can take in the room.

An ominous red-orange glow fills the windows of the condo room, lighting everyone's faces with a feverish tinge. The room's lights have gone dark, as though the electricity got cut off. Almost everyone has dropped to the floor dead to the world from the neck up, which settles Karkat's furious nerves a little; when he does a headcount, he spies Jane rolling up onto her knees and Tavros's open eyes blinking at the ceiling with a dazed expression. Eq-someone is lurking near the window, but it's hard to put a name to them. The air feels hot and dry enough that Karkat starts itching a patch of dry skin through the fabric of his jacket. Outside, he hears a constant stream of hissing and crackling sounds, and underneath it all a distant, rumbling drone. But as Rose raises her head from Roxy's back, a louder sound bursts outside: a metallic screech accompanied by a sludgy *glop!* Karkat shakes John's arm until John mumbles and stretches his arms over his head, and then heads for the nearest window so he can take a look at where Sburb has dumped them. Whoever's standing at the window blocks his view for a second before shuffling a step over so Karkat can lean dangerously out over the lava below.

They're on the Land of Heat and Clockwork. Karkat doesn't know what he expected to see, but it still feels unreal. There's nothing left of Las Vegas except the blistering heat and the rented rooms the app transported to the Medium along with them, from what Karkat can tell; looking down to the point where he starts to feel a twinge of vertigo shows that they're sitting on top of a hollowed out structure made of metal beams and girders. A few cogs the size of cars dot the sides of the support beams, just above the level of the simmering ocean of lava below. A few similar metal structures stick up out of the lava, but theirs is the only one with a condo on top of it that Karkat can see. Eddies of hotter, yellow-white molten rock circulate around the half-melted remains of a cog that must have just toppled into the lava; as Karkat watches, the last of the cog slides beneath the surface, and the lava folds over to fill the spot where it landed.

Then, with a splintering crash, the rest of the building across from them collapses in on itself. Karkat flinches at the sudden sound, and a few people behind him yelp, then start talking over one another in a rising babble as the crash snaps them awake. The building doesn't immediately sink beneath the surface, but Karkat gulps hard as the steel girders sag and deform in the intense heat.

Literally two seconds ago, that building looked just as implausibly sound and immune to the coursing lava ocean as the one they're perched on top of. It's like the laws of thermodynamics suddenly sat up and decided to apply themselves to fuck that one building in particular, and Karkat is *distinctly not.* *Fucking. Okay with that.*

Someone prods him in the side, and Karkat elbows them on reflex. But he forgot an indeterminate person was standing right next to him, so Equius takes the hit with a grunt, instead. "Sorry," Karkat mutters, then turns to elbow the correct target.

When he lifts his other elbow, though, Terezi ducks under his arm with a nimble twist, lifting her glasses and the low edge of her hood so she can sniff the expanse of LoHaC. Her red eyes blindly look out over the land. "Oh, that's *spicy!" she says, smirking at Karkat. "Salsa, or hot sauce?"

"* Burning hot fucking lava!*" he says, exasperated.
Terezi lifts an eyebrow. "But are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm really fucking sure! Don't fucking lick it."

She snorts at him. "You need to learn to live a little, Karkat."

Dave peers out on the other side of Terezi. She tilts her head out of the way just enough that he can do it without impaling himself on her spiky horns, and arranges herself to fold her arms over the edge of the windowsill. "God. Imagine if this were an entire ocean of boiling hot sauce, all this time. I would probably shit myself laughing," Dave says. His pale face looks almost as orange as Oriole's in this light; there's a crack splitting the left lens of his douchebag sunglasses in two, but he hasn't swapped them out for a new pair. A draft of slightly hotter air breathes up past them, ghosting through their hair and giving Terezi reason to sample the air with another deliberate inhale. "That would be planet-class irony, right there."

"If you licked it, it prooobably wouldn't be heroic or just when you died," John points out. There's no more room on eye level in front of this particular window, which means Karkat feels a faint thump as John rests his chin on top of Karkat's head, directly between the horns. "Just kind of silly and dumb."

"Tempting. You've officially piqued my interest, John," Terezi says, grinning with anticipation. "Bets on lava versus hot sauce?"

Karkat knows the exact instant she starts to float, because she rises two inches and cuts off his view of LoHaC with her wings. If she is actually about to leap down and lick the molten lava, Karkat doesn't know whether he'll try to stop her, or if the shock of witnessing such unfathomable, unplumbed depths of stupidity will drop him where he stands.

"Whatever you are doing over there - do not," Kanaya calls.

Vriska sits bolt upright. "Doooo it!"

Terezi sets back down on the floor, looking disgruntled, but Karkat doubts that'll last for long. Kanaya breathes out through her nose so hard that it's audible from across the room. "You don't even know what they're doing."

"As if that has ever stopped her." Rose folds her arms directly on top of Dave's head, her fingers steeped in front of her mouth. "Interesting. Of all the places to arrive..." She ruffles Dave's hair, and he starts batting at her hand, aggravated. "Well, it could have been worse. It could have been my land. I'd love the chance to psychoanalyze whatever remains of my ham-fisted, thematically relevant planet right off the bat, but yours will do -"

"I really, really like hot sauce. Terezi was right all along." Dave successfully flashsteps out of the way and reappears behind Rose - who sets her feet on the ground and steals his spot. "Rose. Oh my god. Rude."

"What now, fearless leader?" Karkat asks, in an undertone that strains his voicebox. There's about six people crammed around this window, but he figures it's worth the effort to keep Vriska or Eridan hearing him express any kind of uncertainty. Now that they're in the game, it feels like the rug got yanked out from under them and underneath was a dead drop water park slide at a 90 degree angle. There's so much fuckery that needs to be done before they can even try to leave, and now apparently Jade's going to have what amounts to the entire population of the planet Earth with her whenever she decides to show up. If bossing their small group of assholes around until they actually do something productive was hard, Karkat doesn't even know how Rose is going to coordinate that many people if
they decide to freak the fuck out over the end of the world.

"Attempt to contact Sollux and Jade, and see where they've entered the Medium," Rose says, prompt and perfectly reasonable. "Ask Aradia and Calliope if they're finally ready to clarify exactly what steps need to be taken, apart from breeding what I assume will be an entirely unnecessary amount of snakes on Jade's world. If Jade is bringing everyone from Earth, we especially need Calliope to open the Final Gate and point us toward it. Preferably with flashing signs and neon lights indicating exactly where we need to go, to minimize the inevitable confusion."

"So we can punt them through at lightspeed?" John says, shifting around on top of Karkat's head - Karkat can't see exactly what face he's making, but he's sure it's something dopey and not at all ironic. Not at all like he just made the inaugural pun of this stupid game.

Who is Karkat kidding. "If that pun was deliberate, you've lost head-rest privileges," he hisses. John starts giggling, whispers something like 'punt,' and hugs Karkat around the shoulders so Karkat can't even get properly pissed off.

Rose nods. "Or just as fast as we can - I'll feel a lot more secure if we don't have all those lives on our hands. This game has a troubling tendency to kill people it deems extraneous."

"Kick their plush rumps through the Gate before anything else, and then we can get down to business," Dave says.

John shifts again, and says, "You're going through, too, Dave," as sternly as he can when the last remnants of his repressed giggles continue to jostle Karkat's head.

Dave's grunt of acknowledgement sounds wishy washy. Karkat shoots Dave a sharp look, and can tell the exact moment when Dave starts avoiding his eyes behind the shades. "Don't fucking argue about it now, either, dumbass. We don't have time for bullshit heroic shenanigans," Karkat snaps, tempted to grab Dave and do - something. Karkat can't exactly fly, but if he has to recruit one of the flying fucks he calls friends to personally escort Dave across the Medium, he'll do it.

"We are heroes, dude. All of our bullshit shenanigans are heroic. It's why Spades Slick is always so pissed about our life choices," Dave points out. Which is really fucking ominous and does not help his case; now Rose is eyeballing him, too, one eyebrow shooting for the stars. John's arms tighten around Karkat's neck as he leans over to stare at Dave's eyes through the gap in his sunglasses, and Dave's forced to turn his head at increasingly unnatural angles to avoid direct eye contact. At least if Dave's seriously thinking about some kind of self-sacrificial mutiny, Karkat's not the only one ready and willing to kick his ass.

"And on that note, where the fuck is Gamzee?" Karkat mutters, looking back over his shoulder. John obligingly floats a little to the side so Karkat can survey the room, where everyone's stretching and starting to wander toward windows of their own to gander their bulbs at the molten land outside.

"Here, I think," Dave says, absently, and Karkat blinks.

John only makes it worse by chiming in, "Wait, you've heard from him, too?"

Karkat seizes John's shirt by the shoulders and hauls the floating dumbass up and over his own head so he can look John right in the eye. "What the fuck? Why was I not invited to these conversations?! Where is that fucker?" he demands, while John stares at him upside down with all his hair drooping toward the floor.

"He just said he was on the other side. Maybe not on the Land of Hot sauce and Conksuck, but he
totally ditched us to get here first," Dave answers. When Karkat whips around to include him in the group glare, Dave shrugs a shoulder. "Just try messaging him, dude. He was answering earlier. Gotta be around here somewhere."

Karkat sucks in a breath to yell at the two of them - fine, whatever, they were all a little busy earlier, but they could have mentioned Gamzee wasn't completely AWOL! - but John pecks him on the forehead while still floating upside down. "I'm sorry. We'll find him, okay? Promise," he says, looking way too fucking pleased with himself.

"You can't just Spider-man kiss me to get out of this conversation, John Egbert!"

"I'm going to message Sollux and Jade, now," Rose says, stepping onto the window and kicking off, her blue shoes the only thing that stands out well against the lava sea as she floats away. "I'm not sure this building is going to be safe to stay on much longer," she adds, spinning in a circle to look down at their support beams.

"Coming, coming," John lies, kissing Karkat's nose. Eurgh. Why does Karkat have to be weak to this kind of sappy bullshit? Fuck. Dave and Terezi are having some kind of heated debate over whether she can carry him bridal style, but Karkat's too busy grumbling and trying to text Gamzee and getting smothered with apology kisses to figure out how the two of them leave with Dave piggy-backing when Terezi still has her wings out.

"Are we all going outside now?" When she doesn't get an immediate response, Feferi shrugs at the others. "Whale, I guess we are! Who needs a lift? I'm shore I can take three at once!"

John lifts his head up, freeing Karkat from the sweet grip of conciliation. "I'll help, sorry!" he says, as the wind starts to pick up.

- 

Outside, LoHaC's heat shifts from mildly uncomfortable to sweat-inducing - and that's just for Karkat. Feferi and Eridan, the only coldbloods currently visible, look flushed within seconds; Vriska's slightly better off, but a streak of cerulean-tinged sweat streaks down from her temple as Karkat watches. Equius, who is doing his best to achieve cryptid status without fully disappearing into his own personal black hole, can't be seen long enough to determine just how much sweat he's producing after he punches a hole in the wall for Tavros to fit his rocketchair through. Karkat's sure it must be a lot.

Karkat dangles off one of John's shoulders before dropping down onto the roof. In the distance, Karkat hears another creak and a splosh as something else collapses into the lava, while a pocket near their own building starts to crackle and pop in a sudden burst of activity. There's a good number of structures still standing all around them, dotting the sea, but there's also a lot of space in between each one. As though Dave's land used to have more buildings, and this is actually an on-going process of slowly, interminable destruction. Eventually there'll be nothing left but the lava on the surface.

Ha! Hahaha! Awesome. As if he needed more stimulation for his paranoia glands.

To distract himself from their building's no doubt imminent kerfuckling, Karkat follows Tavros's wide-eyed stare and looks directly up to sees Skaia overhead. A vast circle that looks like a bunch of marshmallows swirling around shouldn't inspire such visceral dislike in him, but what can he say? He's full of excess ragejuice, and the apparently-sentient orb in the sky that stares back at them like the implacable eye of a controlling god is a convenient target, since he doesn't feel like squandering it.
TT: Sollux? Jade? Calliope?
TG: bueller
TG: bueller
EB: oh! also, gamzee?
TC: WHAT'S UP?
CG: OH THERE YOU ARE, YOU MIRTHFUL PAIN IN MY FUCKING ASS!
TC: :o(
TC: I FEEL LIKE THEM ARE ALL UP AND BEING SOME ANGRY SHOUTS, RATHER THAN REGULAR SHOUTS.
CG: THEY'RE ANGRY AND WORRIED SHOUTS! CONGRATULATIONS! IT'S A TWO FOR ONE DEAL!
TC: oh. sorry, bro :o(
EB: where are you right now? we're all here now, we can meet up!
CG: AND YOU CAN EXPLAIN WHAT WAS SO FUCKING IMPORTANT YOU HAD TO VANISH WITHOUT A FUCKING WORD IN THE MIDDLE OF A GIANT MONSTER BATTLE!
TA: was someone piingiing me?
TT: Yes, that was me. Would this be easier if we split off into two memos? I can foresee this rapidly becoming, as a wise man once said, 'a complete and total clusterfuck.'
TC: ALL UP ON THE WINDY PLANET.
EB: wait, my planet? why are you over there ?
TC: reasons.
TA: fuck iit, everyone always needs to be up to speed.
TA: shiit continues to happen. we'll never catch up if we spliit up the party.
CC: )ang on, why are you skipping your 2s? 38o
TA: because ii don't have a liisp anymore. perks of godhood.
TA: amaziing ii know.
CG: OH MY GOD, SOLLUX, YOU CAN'T JUST CHANGE YOUR QUIRK LIKE THIS. IT'S LIKE I DON'T EVEN KNOW YOU ANYMORE. HOW THE FUCK ARE WE SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHO WE'RE TALKING TO, NOW? THIS IS FUCKING OUTRAGEOUS.
CG: AND GAMZEE, WHAT THE FUCK. WHAT. THE ACTUAL. FUCK.
EB: reasons is really vague... :\nTC: MIGHT WANT TO COME SEE FOR YOURSELF.
TA: oh ffs. look. Noir iiis here at Prospiit trying to blow iit all up. iif any of you guys could come over and help me and AA defend my teriiinal that controls all our god tieriiing/contiiniing liiviing stuff, that would be FANTASTIIC.
TT: We'll add it to the agenda. Especially since we can't exactly tell when Jade will arrive... Any volunteers?
AG: Yeah, sure, I'll head over.
TT: I expected as much.
EB: ...wait, really?
AG: It's wayyyyyyyyy more interesting to fight someone than whatever dum8 stuff you guys are getting up to.
AG: So yeah. No argument. ::::)
CG: THAT IS THE MOST SUSPICIOUS SMILEY FACE I HAVE SEEN ALL DAY. ROSE, I WANT IT DOWN ON THE FUCKING RECORD THAT VRISKA IS BEING SUSPICIOUS AS FUCK.
GC: 1 S3COND TH3 MOTIION.
GA: At The Risk Of Being Redundant - Thirdeed.
TT: Motion passed. Duly noted.
AG: Whatever! I'm going to be so helpful. You don't even know.
AG: Anyway. Eridan -

Out loud, Eridan groans. "Cod, do I have to? Vris, I have the worst headache right now -"

Vriska looks up from her phone. "Yes! You do!" She flies toward Eridan. He has both his feet on the ground - considering how many fuckers can float around here, he's one of the odd ones out. The violetblood kneads his closed ganderbuls like he has a headache, and gives Vriska a withering look when she folds her arms and starts drumming her claws. "Come on, up and at 'em! Think of the experience points we'll get for finally beating the crap out of Noir!" she says, vibrating with sudden enthusiasm and hopping a little on one foot. Karkat's not convinced, but it seems like a particularly Vriska-brand logic.

She claps her hands in front of Eridan's face, but that just makes him lean back. "I'm not sure I'm feelin' it," Eridan starts, cautiously, and Vriska scoffs.

Wait. Hang on. Someone is missing. "Vriska!" Karkat yells, and Vriska whips around to give him an evil eye. "Where the fuck is your Felty spoil of war? Tell me you didn't drop him in the lava, holy fuck." He hasn't seen Clover in long enough to be suspicious. There's too much shit to keep track of without Vriska losing her Felt hostage along the way.

Vriska rolls her eyes at him and brushes a light layer of wing sparkles off her shoulders. She looks immensely pleased with herself. "Reeeeeeeelax, Karkat! I just tucked him away for safe keeping."

With a flick of a wrist, she whips something out of her sylladex - Karkat ducks on autopilot because the odds of Vriska killing him with her own dice are non-zero, but it's just a captchalogue card.

With a person's face on it. "You captchalogued someone alive?" Karkat says, unable to muster up the effort to inject disbelief into his voice. "Goddammit, Vriska."

Vriska uses the card to fan her face, then flips it away again. "You're just jealous because I have all the luck," she says, airily. "Anywaaaaaaay, Eridan -" she sneers at him as she starts to rise up into the sky "- fine! Stay here! More credit for me! As usual, it falls on my shoulders to pick up the team slack."

Rose holds up a hand to make Vriska pause; it doesn't work, though Vriska definitely sees it, judging by her annoyed huff. "Any other volunteers? I don't like sending anyone alone -"

Prospit is just barely visible, almost disappearing behind the rim of Skaia. LoLaR and LoFaF - looking surprisingly intact, from what Karkat can see - are both in sight; John's planet isn't. Which is just fucking great, considering that's where Gamzee has been holed up this whole time. APPARENTLY.

Before Vriska gets more than a few yards, though -

"Oh, shit me sideways," Dave gasps out, dropping to his knees. "Someone -"

The Lord of Time arrives with a crack so loud that it loops all the way back around to quiet - an absence. There's a tiny pop, and then the faint hum of white noise achng deep in Karkat's sponge clots. The floor tilts up to meet Karkat at a weird angle, and he only realizes that he's falling when his elbow hits in a sharp burst of pain. Which means it's not just Dave getting hit by this - John's frozen with his palms over his ears, his reaction too delayed for the Breeze to catch Karkat. Karkat pushes up onto his knees, and in the half second it takes him to do that, Equius stutters in and out of sight like a video skipping frames; Rose looks unnaturally stiff, her face fixed mid-expression; Eridan moves too fast, his claws pointing at the Lord of Time like he's fast-forwarding through the motions; Vriska's stopped dead. Only Dave is still moving at normal speed - Karkat thinks; it's not like he's got
a fucking clue what's wrong with time - and he's busy coughing up blood. Feferi reaches him before Karkat does, because she's moving closer to normal speed, but resignation sinks into Karkat faster.

They're fucked. They're all royally fucked. It was over before it even started; nice of Sollux to give them a fucking heads-up about getting fucked with the doom stick. All it'll take is one crack in time to swallow them. It's not like anyone can reliably move out of the fucking way.

And the absolute worst part, Karkat thinks, as he starts dragging himself over to Dave at a crawl, is that they're going to die at the hands of one incredibly ugly fuck. Horrorterrors have the excuse of being horrific abominations that barely resemble the much-maligned noodle, and occasionally wear a meatsuit for fun. They're not ugly, exactly - just incomprehensible and fucking obnoxious to look at, due to their annoying habit of making you bleed from every fucking orifice with terror. The Lord of Time looks like a cross between a mummified corpse and a body-builder, all of him dyed a deep, rotting green, but it doesn't hurt to look at him. Which means Karkat doesn't get the sweet release of Horrorterror-brand insanity. Oh, no. He just gets the dubious pleasure of staring at this fuckugly time-breaking lump of kale-colored shit and noticing more details with each passing second. His splitting overcoat hangs limp and shapeless on his shoulders, and both the hem and the Lord of Time's eyes flicker through Felt colors with migraine-inducing flashes. His teeth are segmented and just as green as the rest of him, locked in a ghoulish skull-grin as he gazes down at LoHaC.

Eridan isn't trying to blast the Lord of Time with a last ditch attack. He's just using his fastfowarded speed to stick up a pair of middle claws. Which Karkat can't argue with. If they're gonna die, he'd rather go down with somebody on the team flipping off Death. Let that be their legacy.

"Oh," a hushed voice says, as Equius's veil of obscurity drops. "He is...strong."

Never mind. Karkat needs to murder Equius before they all die. He can't let that comment stand. Karkat abandons hope of reaching Dave - he's not making much progress, anyway, since the time distortion gets worse the closer he gets - and starts grimly army crawling toward Equius.

"And he knows we're here," Rose says, her voice slow and stretched out. "Everyone, move."

Karkat should applaud her for the effort. She's trying to tough it out as though they still have a fucking chance in hell. And fuck, she's done better wrangling Vriska and Eridan than Karkat ever could. But all most of them can do is wait for a sudden crack in time to swallow them whole. Eridan glances around wildly, his eyes bugging out as he takes in Vriska's frozen pocket of time, but doesn't lower his claws to try to grab anyone and drag them to safety.

But the green, mummified fuckface turns, and raises the Golden Cuestaff of Fuck You (as Karkat has already christened it in his thinkpan) to point into the distance. Not at them. Away from LoHaC. Through the dark expanse of the Incipisphere, angled just to the right of LoLaR's greyed out orb. Or maybe the Lord of Time is pointing right at it. Karkat can't follow the line of the fuck-you stick properly because his pusher is racing in a panic to match Dave's.

The cuestaff glows with harsh burgundy light and then flares bright red as the Lord of Time slashes down. Reality doesn't crack right away, though Karkat sees John flinch hard in anticipation of it. Even though it's not aimed at them, Karkat covers his head and horns reflexively and peers up.

The darkness of the Medium between them and LoLaR sharpens and turns opaque. From Karkat's line of sight a chunk of Rose's planet vanishes behind the rip in time, which spreads too fast for light to escape it. The CRACK snaps hard as it reaches the distant Veil of meteors at a hard angle, swallowing part of the Reckoning's space debris -
And ripping open a hole in whatever lays past the edge of the Veil.

For a second, everything's creepily still; Karkat watches the ragged edges of reality fluttering around the fissure.

Rose, Eridan, and Feferi all drop and join Dave on the floor.

Something even more horrible than the Lord of Time stops testing the new hole in reality, and spills into the Medium in a susurrating rush. It's bigger than LoLar - it's bigger than Skaia - more and more pours in around the crack in time like oil spurting from a pipe. A chill runs down Karkat's posture pole. Each new gush slips and spills and warps into something new as he watches: a mouth yawns open to reveal rows of serrated teeth around a single, enormous eye, wide enough to be seen all the way across the Medium - a stream of thick black syrup twists and hardens into a ridged, thorn-studded wing - a belly riddled with honeycomb - thin, streaming veils that leave grey-white slicks of acid in their wake - twined filaments rippling with pale, sickly phosphorescence - a weirdly familiar symbol that burns through the thin membrane of a bulging throat in perfectly symmetrical curves -

And it doesn't stop. The flood of Horrorterror slows as it starts to fold in on itself, the many fluttering layers of teeth and tendrils and intestines coiling in wary waves away from the Lord of Time, but Karkat spies new branches growing upward and arching back to fill in more space above and below. It forms a dark ocean that tangles around and obscures all of that curve of the Veil, and all of it.

Absolutely all of it.

Is screaming in perfect unison.

LV: WELL.

LV: CHERUB LORD.

LV: ...GREETINGS AND DEFIANCE.

"Don't you just love it," Rose says, at normal speed, her face pressed against the floor, "when your eternal tormenter arrives and starts making congenial conversation with your other arch foe."

"It's...great. Fuckin'...love it," Eridan replies, struggling to turn his claw over so he can flip off Leviathan, too.

Karkat reaches Equius's ankles just as Equius's hands turn midnight black and start to steam with void essence. Feferi stops whimpering, and Rose lifts her head, looking pale but not dead. Karkat stands up without any trouble, which can only mean they're all moving at normal speed. Since Equius is busy shrouding them with void to muffle Leviathan's voice, Karkat (unfortunately) can't justly murder him for admiring the Lord of Time's fucking biceps. But he can go and haul Dave the rest of the way upright, put a palm over Dave's side where he senses blood pooling, and mash his awareness into Dave's veins to look for what's broken. It means he's distracted and sees everything through a haze of red, but Dave looks shittier than ever and Feferi is nursing her own instant-horror headache with a thin glimmer of fuchsia tears visible through her slitted eyes.

LV: PARDON ME IF I DO NOT PAY OBEISANCE. YOU ARE NOT MY LORD.

Rose's head jerks up. "It's doing it again," she says, alarmed. "Are you all hearing this?"

"That is so not right," John agrees. He still has his palms over his ears, but the pain has left his face; he looks at Leviathan and the Lord of Time's faceoff with dawning realization. "Rose, can you see that? I think that's a spiro-"
The Lord of Time unlocks his skeletal jaw, and starts laughing. It sounds high pitched and grating and makes time stutter again for a brief second. Karkat finds blood leaking in Dave’s abdomen and starts shoving it back into the correct channels, but it’s hard to tell what’s old damage and what was just inflicted. “Need some help,” he mutters to Feferi, who looks up, blinks away a tear that stains her cheek before drying, and nods, staggering to her feet and pressing her claw over Karkat’s.

Meanwhile, Leviathan recoils from the laughter. Not out of fear - though trying to figure out what the fuck a Horrorterror is feeling is not Karkat’s fucking job - but out of what feels like...embarrassment. A mouth-studded flower blooms through the membrane of one of the Horrorterror’s throats, and this time Karkat realizes what symbol glows through Leviathan’s skin with bleary light.

A spirograph. Unlike the rest of Leviathan’s body and the obscure, stomach-turning rune script that ripples across one flank, the spirograph stays lodged in Leviathan’s throat like a choker. Leviathan coils and swells with more mass in an anxious twist, and for an instant its thorny branches twine in a double helix.

**LV: THIS ISN’T WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE. I’M NOT -**

**LV: BLAST.**

**LV: WE’re A’R’mE’n NOT O’FiSK’aTA’. WE H’A’VE N’O’QU’A’R’R’EL’ W’H’TH’I’Y’O’U’.**

**LV: WE’RE ME’REL’Y’N’T’G’R’O’G’H’, ON’O’R’W’AY’ T’O’N’T’REL’A’’T’ED’’V’EN’U’E’.**

**LV: TH’IS IS AN A’CE’T’, WHICH WE ARE ST’AT’TING F’OR’R’TH’E’ R’E’C’O’R’D.**

And every single word sounds fake as fuck. Karkat never before pondered whether it’s possible to tell when a Horrorterror is blatantly lying its multiangled ass off, but...wow. Turns out he didn’t need to strain his thinkpan wondering; he just got a live demonstration. Leviathan put so much effort into making its voices sound discordant and chaotic that it came out all wrong.

"Rose," Karkat says, "what the fuck?"

"I...I’m speechless," Rose says. She and Terezi both wear identical expressions of queasiness mixed with fascination, though Terezi looking off to the left of the Lord of Time rather than straight at him. Rose’s hands curl and uncurl in her lap once. "What has happened to them? What have they done to themselves?"

The Lord of Time stops laughing. He laughed all through Leviathan's fumbling excuses and its weird forced dissonance (its? their? Karkat doesn’t know what the fuck to think), and now spins the cuestaff in one monstrous, meaty hand. It's impossible to read the Lord's expression from the vacuum sealed skin plastered to his skull. Two of Leviathan's tendrils curl up in agitation, and though one is mostly made of pebbled scales and the other is a frilled stalk, there's a weird symmetry to them.

**LV: SO’ WHAT’ W’I’L’L’ I’T B’E’?**

**LE: YOU REEK. OF SYMMETREES.**

**LE: HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO FOOL ME, WHEN I HAVE ALREADY DECIDED?**

The Lord of Time lowers the cuestaff, unhinges his jaw -
LE: DIE.

- emits an [ENTROPIC SCREAM]. Karkat can't hear anything else over the electric, thrumming roar as the flickering white beam widens and flashes the colors of the Lord's overcoat as it lances clean through Leviathan. The Lord of Time pulses at the edges, his whole creepily muscular body wreathed in eye-searing light, and when he finally rehinges his jaw and locks it back into place with a crunch of bone, the rip in time that split the Veil has widened, and a wedge of Leviathan has been carved out of existence. There's no stench of seared calamari, no acidic blood - Leviathan eddies to one side, totally silent, with clean, unmoving edges where its convoluted form doesn't knit together.

Then Leviathan shudders, and a fresh wash of shifting ooze pours through the Veil. More than enough to make up for what was just blasted into oblivion; enough that Leviathan starts to loom dangerously close to LoLaR, its tendrils cracking and sprouting yet more teeth as it hisses.

LV: THAT...WAS UNPLEASANT OF YOU.

LV: THANK YOU, THOUGH. YOU'VE DESTROYED MOST OF THE PARTS OF ME THAT WERE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO CONTEMPLATE THINGS LIKE 'PLEASANTRIES' OR 'APPEASEMENT.'

LV: SO. SHALL WE?

LE: ROTTING GARBAGE. DIE. DIE. DIE.

The Lord of Time raises the cuestaff and transforms it into a golden assault rifle-kind. The blowback as he begins to fire on Leviathan in a rain of cueballs knocks everyone's feet out from under them on LoHaC, but the Lord starts to advance on Leviathan, ignoring the kickback.

"I don't know what I expected," Rose says over the rattling and Leviathan's enraged shrieks. "But it was...not that."

Karkat breathes for the first time in what feels like forever. "Seriously," he agrees, leaning a little too much of his weight on Dave, who grunts in protest. Feferi's ice cold grip over Karkat's claw is numbing his skin, but Dave doesn't feel like he's bleeding internally anywhere Karkat can sense it. Congratulations - they achieved something.

...How the fuck is this affecting Aradia? Great, something else for Karkat to fucking worry about.

"That really isn't something you see every day," Kanaya says.

John lands on the roof with a tiny tremor in his step; Karkat looks at him sharply, but John shakes it off and scrubs his hair wildly as though turning his head into a nest of cowlicks will help the world make sense again. "If they're fighting each other, they're not trying to kill us. So tentatively, I want to say this is...good? Question mark?" he says, once he has finished rearranging his hair into a tangled mess that'll take ages to comb through.

"Don't underestimate Leviathan's ability to multitask. If it still can. This is all deeply troubling." Rose closes her eyes and retrieves her phone. She sets a hand on Equius's forearm, and Equius looks up from the void crushed between his palms to blink at her. "Thank you, by the way. I'll leave a message for Jade, whenever she arrives. Hopefully she doesn't enter in the middle of - that." Rose shakes her head at Leviathan and the Lord of Time, looking troubled.

"Travelling in between planets is going to be hazardous." Kanaya grimaces, shading her eyes with a claw as Leviathan unleashes a bleary white stream of radiant, acidic puke on the Lord of Time. "LoLaR may be unreachable. Venturing that close..."
"I don't think I have a choice. Cetus was very clear that we need something from there." When Equius mumbles something through the gathering void, Rose obligingly angles herself so he can reach her voidy jewelry. It's harder to read expressions when Equius pulls this kind of shit, but Karkat's pretty sure Rose looks rueful. "Damn. The best laid plans...well. The passably mediocre plans."

"You're still going to Prospit?" John asks, which makes no sense until Karkat spies Vriska trying to fly away. He can't exactly accuse her of sneaking around, since her outfit is almost as neon orange as Oriole, but she didn't say a word as she started to float off again, and for Vriska? That's a massive fucking flashing warning sign in bright red that screams, 'TIME FOR SNEAKY SERKET IRON FIRE FUCK YOU TIME!' Good catch on John's part.

Vriska barely pauses; the light from Dave's planet light up her yellow and orange outfit like it's on fire, and for a second she looks warmblooded. It's a weird look on her. "Look. I like to win. You want to know how we win?"

"Do tell, Vriska," Terezi says, leaning hard on her cane as she grinds her palms on the top. Her teal wings sway slightly in the drafts of hot air billowing up from the lava around them, but she doesn't shake them out to fly after Vriska.

Vriska cocks her head to the side, an easy smirk ticking her cheek. "We wait until those two have kicked the shit out of each other, and then kill both of them," she says, sweetly. "And meanwhile, I'll deal with Noir. Easy as pie. I'll handle everything and get alllllll the levels for it."

"All of them?" John says, with a perfectly straight face. Dumbass.

On the one claw, Vriska wants to fuck off and fight Noir. Again. On the other, things are about as fucked as they can get, already, so who really gives a fuck if Noir tries to follow her back to LoHaC. Karkat certainly doesn't. Kanaya exchanges a weary look with him and Rose, and Karkat thinks her resigned expression looks just as pained as his own. "We could have ended world hunger by shoveling your fucking insane excess amounts of self-importance down everyone's throats," Karkat comments; it's half hyperbole, half utter certainty. Between Vriska and Eridan they could create a perpetual motion machine fueled by ego and questionable life choices.

Vriska sticks out her tongue at Karkat for second, before bullet-proof self-confidence overtakes her again. She tosses her hair over her shoulder one last time, and then snaps her claws. Something dark appears in her hand and Karkat tenses, but she just uses it to tie her hair back up in a high ponytail. Some chunks of hair escape the tie to frame her face, but Vriska's already lean face still looks sharper with her hair up. "I get things done, Karkat. What can I say?" she says, letting the tie snap down on her hair with a twist of her hand. She waves a hand dismissively at Eridan, then fixates on Terezi.

"Feel free to blow this popsicle stand whenever you feel like growing a spine again, Eridan. Well, Py-ro-pe? You in?"

Eridan hesitates, and then shakes his head. His fins press close to the sides of his head - but he still shakes his head. "No. I'll figure out where I'm going myself in a minute." He brandishes void jewelry at Equius with a defiant pout.

Terezi strokes her chin - then she inhales deeply, and bares her teeth at Vriska. "Oh, you're in a feisty mood! As fun as some aggravation sounds...I choose cherry hot sauce planet over honey mustard!"

Vriska swells with impending pissiness. "Whatever! I'm not waiting on anyone!" she snaps, and then pelts off into the sky. Karkat can't tell whether LoHaC has an atmosphere separating it from the rest of the Medium - the whole Incipisphere is rife with broken physics and breathable air and free Wi-Fi wherever you need it, a-fucking-pparently - but she vanishes into the dark of the Medium's
interplanetary space really fucking fast. She's aimed in the right direction to reach Prospit, but that
doesn't mean she won't get sidetracked.

"Should we let her go solo?" Dave rasps; Karkat nearly jumps a foot in the air, and the smug bastard
has the audacity to smirk at Karkat as he pulls out of Feferi's grip. Dave digs his closed hand into his
side for a second, the knuckles dragging hard over the spot where Karkat remembers sealing an
internal hemorrhage. Then he straightens his shoulders and shoves his hands into his pockets. Karkat
gives him a suspicious onceover with his powers, but Dave feels as solid and not-bleeding-to-death
as Karkat's powers can detect. Feferi puts a careful hand on Dave's shoulder - she's still glowing a
faint fuchsia, her brows furrowed in intense concentration - and also allows Equius to shuffle over
and start checking on her jewelry while she does something to Dave. "Aradia and Sollux might be
able to handle her alone, but not with Noir breathing down their necks. We're blending this shit in
one high quality ass ninja blender, and it's gonna start hitting the wall soon," Dave says, finally
pulling out a fresh pair of shades to replace his shitty cracked pair. He swaps them out so fast Karkat
misses it, but the renewed bastard chic doesn't quite make up for the fact that Dave's on the end of a
Feferi and Equius train. "Hang on, which of you is texting me while we're all standing literally right
here?"

"You underestimate Aradia, coolkid. And Sollux isn't too shabby when he gets his dander up!"
Terezi says, lifting her cane and bouncing the end of it on the edge of the roof a few times. Karkat
wants to edge further away from the edge of the roof; just watching Terezi flirt with lava reminds
him just how fragile their current perch is. Then Terezi scrunches her nose up. "And yet,
underestimating Vriska would be worse. Hrm."

Equius cuts her off with a flat, "I will go," as he finishes adjusting Feferi's void jewelry. Feferi smiles
and thanks him, and Equius immediately spins and marches toward Nepeta at top speed, sweating
hard enough that he leaves dark spots on the roof. Karkat can hear the sound of teeth grinding from
here. "Nepeta, we are leaving," he says.

Nepeta, sprawled out on the back of Tavros's rocketchair as she fiddles with her clawkind, looks up
from where she's been quietly conversing with Roxy and blinks wide green eyes at Equius. "We
are?" She retracts her clawkind specibus and sits up straight with a stretch of her arms, glaring at
Equius. Tavros squirms a little in his seat as Equius pops open one of the chair's compartments and
starts manhandling a fistful of wires, while Roxy starts breathily trying to whistle as she sidesteps
back toward the other scratch kids. It's a pretty shitty whistle, but Karkat feels like a fucking asshole
for thinking that almost as soon as he does. "Will you actually let us help? Or are mew gonna be
dumb about it again? I'm onto you, Equius!" Nepeta shouts, smacking her palms down on the back
of Tavros's seat.

Equius continues to rewire the rocketchair, impassive; the burst of anxious sweat from talking to
Feferi appears to have already died down. Or Equius is just becoming harder to focus on; Karkat
catches his attention sliding away from the blueblood against his will. "We will see. I do not trust you
to remain here or in any other secure location, so it is better to keep you within range if we are all in
danger."

Nepeta's smile sharpens and she flings herself forward to tackle hug Equius. "Awww! Finally!" With
a firm stroke of Equius's hair, Nepeta falls back onto the rocketchair and starts hopping from one foot
to another. "Let's ride, Tavros!" she says, her eyes bright and glittering like a cat lusus that has a
feathery quackbeast toy in its sights, and someone who might be Equius shuts the compartment on
the rocketchair with a very careful, deliberate nudge to avoid denting the metal.

"Right! Um, we're going now, Rose," Tavros says, whipping around to look anxiously toward Rose;
Nepeta ducks the swing of his wide horns with ease. "So that, uh, you can update the spreadsheet."
"It shall be done," Rose says, her smile dry as bedrock, and then Tavros revs the rocketchair's engine. Nepeta latches onto the back of his seat with her regular claws; an increasingly obscure presence with a faint, muffled pulse Karkat can barely trace rises into the air in much the way a very heavy rock shouldn't, and the rocketchair zooms after Vriska at a more cautious pace. There's a judder in the rocketchair's flight path when another distorted electric roar bursts out of the Lord of Time's mouth, but Tavros yanks the controls to the side and the rocketchair veers hard to the left. They vanish a lot faster than Vriska did; Karkat can't tell if it's because Vriska's flashy as fuck, or because Tavros and Nepeta are travelling with someone invested in keeping them hidden from prying eyes. Probably both.

Which just leaves...a shitton of them. The scratch kids alone are a problem. Jane is alert and on guard, her specibus spinning slowly in a very Feferi-esque holding pattern as her pale eyes dart around the roof, but Dirk looks fatigued, Jake's going slowly cross-eyed trying to take in all of LoHaC and the raging battle across the Medium at the same time, and Roxy is massaging her throat as her eyelids start to droop. Who knows where Strider the eldest fucking hared off to, but if he didn't have any plans to drag the scratch kids off, that means it's all their problem.

"Where else do we need to go?" Feferi asks. She's scratching her arm with a distracted expression, hard enough to leave light grey lines along her skin where her sleeves don't cover it. Which is a lot - she has altered her god tier outfit down to the bare minimum to deal with the heat, apparently, so that she's down to a tan halter top with green wavy lines all down one side. "Weren't we supposed to hear more from -"

Dave holds up a finger. "Hold that thought. I'm getting sweet intel here." He's busy tapping on his phone at typical Dave-speed - a sight that is so fucking ordinary that Karkat didn't really pay attention to it. Except no one else here has their phones out, so fuck only knows -

"Who the fuck are you texting?" Karkat says, immediately trying to look over Dave's shoulder. The mention of 'intel' causes Rose and Terezi's heads to snap toward Dave like magnets, but Dave's in his texting zone. He mutters something that might be 'It's all in the memo, just backread,' but his voice trails off halfway through. Karkat rolls his eyes and starts reading off Dave's screen. John's trailing hood dangles in his peripheral vision like a blue tail from up above, but John rests his elbows on top of Dave's head this time, just as curious.

What Karkat reads is just as dumb as he should have expected.

HS: I would like to state.
HS: For the record.
HS: That I am uncomfortable giving you an open line of communication with me.
HS: But these are uncomfortable times, and the Lord of Time is afoot.
TG: who tf is blowing up my phone
TG: who the shit are you
HS: The Stormspeaker has informed me that you are as talkative as ever.
HS: Which bodes ill for any attempts at concise communication.
TG: well shit man
TG: glad to be a disappointment to someone i've never met
TG: except watch me shred some sweet waves of not giving a shit and olly off the handle of this mixed metaphor
TG: who even the hell are you
HS: I am Hephaestus, you phenomenal ass.
TG: oh
TG: oh shit
TG: what's gone wrong now
TG: apart from like everything
TG: were here btw don't know if you know or care
HS: I am aware of your presence.
HS: I am also aware that we are rapidly running out of time.
HS: Neither Typhheus nor Echidna are willing or capable of leaving their duties to speak with you.
HS: So the task falls to me.
TG: that's rough man
TG: must be tough for them being giant snake monsters or whatever
TG: making you do everything since you're the only guy with opposable thumbs
TG: do you even get paid overtime
HS: The Stormspeaker warned me of this persuasive tangent. We shall not speak of it.
HS: He is occupied with the presence of something threatening his land, at the moment. He may require the presence of his Heir soon, if I am not mistaken.
HS: The Frostmother and I are both on the badly misnamed Land of Frost and Frogs.
TG: let me guess
TG: snakes
HS: I have suggested changing it to the Land of Serpents and Snow.
HS: Unfortunately, Skaia is not amenable to nonessential orison or intercession at this time.
TG: to be fair how would you pronounce that shit
TG: bc john is already stuck with lowass or whatever depending on who's talking
TG: losass would match the general ass theme i guess but shitting hell
HS: This.
HS: Is also a tangent.
TG: you do have an ass right
TG: i feel like i didn't clear that up with typhheus before the whole kicking ass debate
TG: oh fuck does skeleton man up there have an ass
HS: I am placing a moratorium on this conversation.
HS: I am with Echidna. We have restored as much of the Forge on LoFaF as possible, and it should be functional enough to serve for the Final Alchemy.
HS: However, we still require the grist from our Hoards on LoHaC and LoWaS.
HS: For various reasons, LoLaR's Hoard now contains the recipe necessary for the Final Alchemy, rather than grist.
HS: All caches but Typhheus's have already been released. Bring them to the Forge. Do not get sidetracked.
TG: are you allowed to do that
HS: Oh for Skaia's sake.
TG: like i mean
TG: bounce over to echidnas house
TG: how long has that been a thing
TG: also were not doing the fancy letter things anymore with the land names
TG: need to know so i don't look like a scrub
HS: Since she has lived in a Forge.
TG: hang on is scrub a viable game name pls respond
HS: She could also theoretically come reside on LoHaC.
TG: okay so no fancy letters cool
HS: But since the Beat Mesa no longer exists, there was little point staying there. LoHaC is not a Forge.
HS: It is your hell.
TG: ...
TG: uh
TG: i feel uncomfortable now
HS: Good.
-- Hephaestus [HS] has left the chat! --

CG: WHAT THE FRESH FUCKING HELL WAS THAT.
TG: we're standing right next to each other dude
TG: you literally just had your hands on my person

CG: WATCH THIS! WATCH ME SHOUT AT YOU IN PERSON AND IN THE MEMO AT THE SAME TIME!
CG: WHY DO I NEVER THINK OF THIS INGENIOUS TECHNIQUE SOONER?! PAST KARKAT WAS FUCKING USELESS. AN INFERIOR MODEL. I'VE EVOLVED PAST THAT POINT. SOON I'LL BE THE APEX YELLING PREDATOR, WHILE THE REST OF YOU ARE STILL SQUEAKING LIKE GRUBS AS YOU WRIGGLE OUT OF THE PRIMORDIAL SHITLAKE.

GC: IS THAT 4 CH4LL3NG3? >:]
CG: NO. YOU DON'T EVEN YELL, TEREZI, YOU JUST CAPSLOCK SO EVERYTHING'S EVEN.

GC: THAT 1S 4 CH4LL3NG3!

AT: DO I GET TO PARTICIPATE, OR AM I DISQUALIFIED FOR REASONS, BECAUSE I LEFT EARLY,
AA: so whos coming to help me on prospit
AA: and whos coming to help me on lofaf :)
GA: We Get A Choice Of Two Aradias?
AA: indeed you do!

GA: Truly We Live In Remarkable Times. I May Participate In Snake Breeding Duties At A Later Point.

AA: l0f4f isn't urgent yet until rose gets the recipe
AA: doctor lalonde and her assistants are here to help with the preliminaries!
AA: i wouldn't say no to some adventurers interested in traversing a snowy snake infested jungle planet though

GT: :o

GT: At last my time has come!

"Guys, seriously?" John says, clapping his hands together in a solid, loud smack. The sudden noise breaks Karkat out of memo mode. Karkat isn't sure exactly what he has been yelling for the past minute (because it's apparently hard to keep track of what's text versus what's vocal when you're completing a yelling x2 combo) but he's sure it was fucking fantastic and articulate. "Places to go! Two evil guys battling for supremacy right on top of our collective butt!"

"Who's going where? Speak now, or forever hold your peace," Rose adds. "LoLaR here, LoHaC with Dave, I assume." She raises a finger. Kanaya shuffles closer, casting furtive looks around as though daring anyone to question her. Their collective lack of self-preservation instinct might be in the toilet, but Karkat doesn't think anyone's that far gone.

Jake's hand shoots up before anyone else can get a word in edgewise. "I want snake adventures! I won't hear any buts about it!" he says, with disturbingly Jade-like enthusiasm. He shakes Roxy's shoulder with his free hand, bouncing on his heels, and Roxy starts nodding along in time with the bounces, her lips parting in an open smile.

"Do we get to call people for our teams? Because I want Karkat and Terezi on Team LoHaC," Dave says, looking up from his phone with a serious expression. Karkat can see the reams and reams of red text from here, and no sign of any responding text from Hephaestus, which means there will be a pile of classic Dave word-vomit to scroll through the next time any of them deal with that particular memo. Joy. Moreover, Dave's serious expression means absolutely fuck all, because when he's wearing sunglasses it looks identical to his default expression. Just like 90% of his other facial
contortions, or lack thereof. Karkat only knows that he's being serious because, sadly, and to Karkat's infinite regret, being infected with the dubious gift of Friendship means that he's caught on to Dave's emotional tells.

Then the words register in his stalling thinkpan. Karkat sputters. Terezi arches an eyebrow and taps her cane one last time on the edge of the building, but doesn't contradict Dave. Karkat should know better than to look for help from Terezi's corner; she lives for this kind of shit, and trolling Karkat (in the proverbial sense) is a fucking staple of their interactions.

...Fuck, no. Just...fucking no. Being trapped on a lava land road trip with Dave and Terezi? Karkat doesn't hate himself enough (yet) to fall for that kind of ploy. They'd literally talk and irony and 'coolkid' him to death, and two out of those three things shouldn't even be verbs! "Who says you get me, fucker? No, you don't get to call teams! I just decided that right now this very second," he tells Dave, exasperated. "Recruit someone else for Team LoHaC - I'm on the opposite of that team!"

Dave shakes his phone meaningfully. Karkat resists the urge to seize everyone's fucking mobile devices and pitch them into the lava, but it's a close call. "I have it on future authority that you're stuck with me. Sorry dude. TZ?"

"You can shove temporal inevitability up your ass, Strider -" Karkat starts, while Terezi chimes in with a loud, cackling, "Why not? Sounds like fun. Your whole planet smells of spicy hot cherries - I have decided!"

Dave nods as Karkat starts to throttle the air in frustration. The air puffs a cool huff across his face in a quiet shoosh, because of course it does. "The Land of Heat and Cherries, cool. Oriole, you know where Hephaesdouche's lair is?"

Oriole wasn't even fucking involved in this conversation. Karkat's heated muttering, interspersed with the occasional pointed swear word, gets thoroughly ignored despite that fact. "I can't point to it on a map, and I'm not sure how much good trying to retrace our steps would do," Oriole says, looking up from where he's sitting cross legged by the edge of the roof. He's shed a bunch of obscuring layers of clothing in the heat, so his wings are hanging limp on either side of him. Out of everyone here, he looks the most like he could catch fire at any second; every neon orange part of him reflects LoHaC's red ambient light, and since literally all of him is neon orange... "I mean, have you looked around? Great googly moogly, this place is going to shit," he says, flapping an orangetaloned claw at the landscape.

"Thanks for volunteering as co-navigator then," Dave says, in a sterling display of not giving a fuck. Oriole shrugs in resignation.

"- and I'm still not going," Karkat says loudly.

"Dude, you have to. Come on, I'm not messing with you, I swear," Dave says. Karkat rolls his eyes, because Dave could have said pretty much anything else and sounded less suspicious, and veers off toward John's current floating position a couple yards away. Terezi turns on a dime and starts prowling after him, gracing Dave with a single pat on the shoulder, which Karkat interprets as a pretty clear nonverbal 'I'll grab the nubby one,' being communicated between fucking ironic conspirators. Karkat picks up the pace, but he's closer to John than Terezi is to him. Thank fuck.

But it looks like John floated off on his own because he was lost in thought; Dave's team bullshit must have flowed right past him. Instead, John's frowning to himself, his mouth pursed and his head cocked to one side. Seeing John look troubled isn't exactly an uncommon thing, lately, despite Karkat's efforts to be a not-awful moirail, but right now he just...looks distracted. Like he's listening to something Karkat can't hear.
Which is, again, not a fucking uncommon thing. Karkat stomps over, because his best chance to escape Dave's unending roller coaster ride of outrageous shenanigans is probably to glue himself to John's side and go find out what Gamzee's up to. Time bullshit can wait. "Please save me from the resident coolfucks," Karkat says. He undoes his jacket partway (none of these fuckers will catch him dead shedding layers, not even in this sweltering heat) but even that doesn't make much difference.

John twitches and blinks - his eyes glow often enough when he's doing windy shit that Karkat actually missed that they were glowing just now, until the light dies off and leaves just his normal eye color. He smiles at Karkat a little lopsidedly, but the corners of his eyes are still crinkled with distant confusion. "John? What's up?" Karkat asks, frowning back.

John's the opposite of sneaky, the blunt little nerd. "Me?" he says, a little too loudly to be subtle. "Oh, yeah! Sorry, just thinking. I'll go and check on Gamzee, alright?"

Karkat's sentiments exactly. He nods deeply; he can figure out whatever's set John off on their way to LoWaS, and everything will be hunky fucking dory. "I'll come with you. Dave can suck my shameglobes -" Karkat breaks off. "What. What's with that face?"

"What face?" John says, while still making the exact face. It's some kind of troubled wince, but Karkat can't pin it down any more than that. John also starts to float a little to one side, and a nervous laugh escapes the corner of his mouth as he avoids eye contact.

Karkat closes the distance and catches John's face with both hands, pushing his cheeks together. "That face you're making right now as we speak, dumbass," he says, irritably. He's so very fucking tempted to pull out his phone and take a picture so John can see what he's talking about, but by mashing his cheeks Karkat has already ruined it. Great. Fantastic.

"I don't know what face you're talking about. I can't see my own face, y'know -" John says, in a lecture voice reminiscent of Rose at her most pedantic. Incredible.

Karkat cuts him off before the silly argument can lurch into unforgivably ridiculous territory. "John. What. Is. This face?"

Behind Karkat, Terezi snickers. She lurks way too close for comfort, and is probably just itching for a chance to haul Karkat back to participate in Team Lava Bathing Dipshit bonding time. Overhearing this silliness is just the neon pink icing on the cherry cupcake for her.

John's shoulders slump, and he looks away. "Tyheus called. You should probably stay with Dave," he admits, his voice low. Karkat feels the faint smile falling off John's face under his palms, and shifts his claws at once to stroke John's cheek.

First Rose starts acting fucking weird, and now this. Karkat would ask why it's always these two, but then again, Dave and Jade have their own unique set of Game-related problems. "Why. Are you planning to do something incredibly stupid and life-threatening? Are you trying to protect me or some crock like that?" Karkat asks, fast and too sharp. John scrunches up his face in a new grimace, and Karkat starts patting his face with renewed vigor. "Oh, god. Tell me Tyheus isn't offering some bullshit choice, and is trying to just fucking fight you. If he's being a douchefucker, tell him to fuck off!"

John sighs, tilting his head slightly into one of Karkat's palms. "I don't thiink so. I think he's just being an asshole on principle," he says. This doesn't answer the actual question at all. "But if Dave thinks you need to stay with him for time reasons, we should probably do that, right?" he adds, switching gears in the one way guaranteed to distract Karkat. Terezi crows victoriously and starts circling in for the kill, leaning in on Karkat's left side with a shit-eating grin.
"I'm pretty sure half the time he's just fucking around and making that up whenever he claims a future him told him to do it," Karkat argues.

But no dice. "Haha, I don't want to risk it, though," John says as he touches Karkat's face with one hand and smiles like a total sop. It's a two for one combo. Holy fuck. "It'll be fine! Promise."

And Karkat is fucking weak. The weakest piece of romantic shit on this entire roof. John just has to look at him like that, and his thinkpan turns into idiotic jell-o. "...Fine. Dave can have his time bullshit excuse. Bring Gamzee back so I can yell at him in person, okay?" he says, after several long seconds of being completely fucking overwhelmed. Terezi's snickering graduates to sniggering, and Karkat shoots her a death glare for a split second before turning back to John. The death glare might still be in place. A little. For another split second.

Long enough for John to see it, and slap his free hand over his mouth to hide the instant giggle. "Will do!" he says, with a wobble of laughter in his voice. Karkat tries to smooth the death glare back out into something equally soppy, but the best he manages is an eye roll. Moment gone. Whatever. "Be safe, okay?"

"John is the worst. The worst. Karkat can barely talk around this inconvenient lump building up in his throat; it is entirely John's fault. "Yeah. You too," Karkat mutters, mostly to their shoes.

...John's shoes have turned a cheery, sunshiny shade of yellow, for some reason, which is weird enough that Karkat's embarrassingly sappy expression snaps back into a befuddlement right up until Terezi hooks him around the throat and starts hauling him back toward Dave. Karkat glances back at John, opening his mouth to yell one last question, but John's shoes are back to normal. Which means Karkat would just make an ass of himself. John waves one last time, his expression wavering, and then floats off to the scratch kids. Presumably, they're in need of a lift, but Karkat can't pay attention to literally every single conversation that happens around here. There's too many fuckers to keep track off, even with conversation hogs like Vriska gone.

"Where the fuck is your custodian?" Karkat asks, for lack of anything more productive to do apart from yell once Terezi finishes escorting him back to the edge of the roof. Oriole stands up as they approach, fluttering his wings so that they catch more red light, while Dave gives Rose one last fistbump of solidarity before she, Feferi, Kanaya, and Eridan all leave the roof.

"Lurking, probably," Dave says, with a boneless shrug of his shoulders. As the roof empties out more, the sound of lava roiling and popping below grows louder in Karkat's ears. He hasn't heard the crash of another metal structure toppling over in a while, now, but he still can't shake the feeling that the building they're on isn't long for this world. "Don't know if you've noticed, but when shit hits the fan, he tends to lurk and jump you when you least expect it. And set up creepy puppet traps." Dave shakes his head and stuffs his hands into his pockets. "My bet's on him either following us, or planning weird shit with Equius. At least Momlond lets us do our own shit without hovering..."

Karkat squirms free of Terezi's steering grip and glowers at her. Terezi sticks her tongue out, which is a fucking threat, and Karkat pushes past Dave with reckless abandon to get out of licking range. Dave's arms pinwheel for a second until he catches his balance again. "Yeah, when did they team up, again?" Karkat asks, as the full implications of Equius and Ambrose Strider working together on literally anything starts to hit him. "If they're being infected with the mutual lurking disease known as friendship, I'm never going to stop laughing at you," he informs Dave.

Dave stares at Karkat in almost undisguised horror. "I try not to think too hard about that kind of shit. Why did you make me think of that shit, Karkat?" he says, smacking his face with a hand.

Oriole digs his claws into one knee, then lifts his head. He looks aggrieved and disgusted at the same
time. As he shakes out his wings, he seizes Dave by the shoulders and yanks him around. "You guys want to gossip?" he asks, his voice deadly soft, "or do you want to cross half the lava planet with only two people who can fly and only our shit tier memory to guide us? Because let me tell you, suddenly, I am a lot more on board with lava planet escapades if it means you two never bring that up again."

"You inspire so much confidence. Really. It's amazing. So glad I'm on this shitshow of a team," Karkat says. A loud snap, like a cross between bubblegum popping and an eardrum popping on an airplane bursts out below, and Karkat glares down at the lava irritably. The pop of lava paints the side of the metal beams below with molten rock, and for a second, looking down at it, Karkat feels woozy - his and Dave's lands are too similar. And now that he's thought it once, he can't stop thinking that maybe Terezi and Dave are both wrong. Maybe it's not molten rock he's looking at, but a planet of boiling hot red blood and gears.

God, he's getting fucking morbid in his old age. He's not even old yet, but holy fuck.

"Oh, pipe down, you three," Terezi says, elbowing Dave and Karkat at the same time to reach the roof's edge. Belatedly, Karkat realizes she's offering them each an arm to float on - in truly obnoxious Terezi fashion. He steels himself to ignore it as long as possible, but eventually she elbows him again. The picture of fucking subtlety. "Don't worry. With investigative skills like mine and the coolkids' questionable memory, finding the Hoard will be a cinch. In my experience they don't open unless you kill a denizen, but I'm not one to turn up my nose at a freebie!" she says, fixing her red shades so they sit mostly straight on her nose.

Below, the lava settles - and then goes dark. Karkat twitches, and in the time it takes him to blink and refocus on the lava sea, the patch of molten rock that just popped at them shrivels and darkens into a hard black crust. Tiny craters of hot lava still pockmark the surface in some places, but the darkness keeps spreading across the red lava flows like cracks in a pane of glass. Karkat shifts uneasily, and looks out over the landscape again.

...Suddenly, he wonders what Terezi was smelling and Oriole was looking at, earlier. He wants to know if it's just his shitty eyes playing tricks on him, or if LoHaC legitimately looks...darker.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just find it before Fuckface McDeathshead notices us again," Karkat says, uneasy creeping into his stomach and tightening like a vice.

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Rose can see LoLaR from LoHaC. She knows, objectively, what it will look like up close.

She also has the perfectly acceptable excuse of keeping track of many super-powerful, rowdy friends as they scatter across a shattering solar system to complete tasks with varying mortality rates.

Solar system? Skaian system? Hm. Regardless of terminology, Rose is at least nominally in charge of encouraging people to check in and to cooperate with each other. A different person might have cracked down and forced each member of their Game team to bend to her will, but the fact is that there are too many unpredictable, rebellious elements for her to try to crush them. The most she dares do is gently punt their whirling vexations toward productive goals, and hope that they all continue on the most fortuitous paths. Teamwork is what is happening, here, in theory, but Rose suspects she's reached the limit of how far she can nudge Vriska along. The ceruleanblood's edging dangerously close to confronting Rose outright, and if that happens Rose doesn't know if she can salvage the situation. As long as she's focused on fighting Noir, they'll be able to account for her, but after that – ?
Moreover, Rose has both Gamzee and Equius to contend with. She can’t see Equius's most fortuitous future with any degree of confidence, and Gamzee is more of pure chaos in her mind's eye. She trusts Equius more so than she does Gamzee as far as 'going off the goddamn rails;' is concerned, but there's no way for her to predict the consequences of either trolls' actions.

The other unpredictable element joins Rose's spelunking team. So at the very least, she'll have all her eyes on him. Eridan and Feferi both look thoroughly parched in LoHaC's heat and home in on Rose with thirsty eyes as Dave and Karkat scuffle over calling teams. "Water planet?" Feferi says, less a question and more of a hopeful appeal. Her arms are now covered in pale scratch marks where the dry skin flakes off. Eridan has a similar patch on his neck under his left ear. At this rate, they're going to need a gallon of lotion to rehydrate their skin, and Rose doubts that her planet is going to be particularly forthcoming in that regard. Eridan hasn't shifted his god tier clothing to adjust for the dry heat; Rose wonders just how long it'll take him to realize he could probably will himself to cool off.

Well. Depending on the state of LoLaR, Rose could have a worse team. Two seadwellers, herself, and Kanaya against whatever's left of her land? It could be much, much worse. Locating Cetus's lair may involve delving into the ocean, and if Leviathan left any of itself behind, the water won't be safe.

After a quiet discussion (relatively speaking), Karkat and John part, and John heads over to the scratch kids. Jane relaxes a fraction when John reaches them, and after a cheerful greeting, John scoops them up, waves at Rose, and vanishes into a stream of blue wind. The sight makes Rose blink; the Breeze is totally visible in a way the normal wind isn't, here in the Medium. It reminds her of John's mindscape, in a way.

However, John also left without mentioning his destination. If he's staying with the scratch kids on LoFaF, Rose will eat her hood. Rose pinches the bridge of her nose and flips through her phone to a private chat, to see if she can still contact him whilst he's incorporeal. A lack of a physical body has never really stopped any of them before.

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TT: John? Sorry, I missed where you were going.
EB: haha, sorry! didn't mean to be spookily mysterious.
EB: lofaf to drop these guys off, and then lowas!
TT: Thank you.
TT: You're going to retrieve Gamzee?
EB: yeah, and do whatever dumb stuff typhus wants me to do.
EB: hopefully i won't screw up too bad like a goofball.
TT: You don't. You won't.
EB: :) 
TT: Now. I believe that I'm off to obtain an obscure recipe for snake-based, reality-creating life. It should be fascinating.
EB: finding some weird magic book for snake alchemy does seem like it's right up your alley :P 
TT: What can I say? My avarice for the inscrutable. It is limitless.
EB: good luck getting to lolar!
EB: they still seem pretty distracted but…
TT: The issue is going to be one of stray bullets, so to speak.
EB: yeah…
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When Rose looks up, they're the last ones left on the roof. Eridan and Feferi are standing an awkwardly obvious distance apart from each other. Eridan stares at the floor like it has personally wronged him, and Feferi fans herself with a handful of her layered skirt, desperation growing keener in her eye the longer they linger here. "I would advise keeping the wings away," Rose says to them,
while Kanaya wraps an arm around her waist. "With how close we're going to be to Leviathan and the Lord of Time, we don't want to attract any extra attention." Rose would question why Sburb felt the need to endow troll players with glittery, sparkling wing trails in the first place, but it would come very low on her question list, which is predominately made up of larger existential questions such as 'Why?' and 'What in the world were you thinking?' and 'What made you think any of this was necessary?'

All very important questions. The glitter-trails are only middling tier, in comparison.

Feferi snaps hers away with a sigh, but brightens up again as she kicks off the roof and starts floating away from LoHaC. Eridan's wings folds away without a sound and he kicks the roof one last sullen time before taking off at the same time Rose begins to lift Kanaya away. The building jolts sharply to one side the instant their feet leave the surface, and Kanaya's grip digs into Rose's side as the metal struts all warp and skew around before collapsing into the back crust of the lava sea. Rose does a mental tally - reflexively checks her own spreadsheet - but no, no one should be left in there. Some abandoned toothbrushes might have met a molten end, just now, but no people. "Well, so much for that," Kanaya says, fiercely staring down Eridan as they rapidly ascend into the dark of Medium space.

Eridan pouts back, still sullen. "Don't look at me. I was the one willin' it to hold up for the past five minutes. Those support beams wanted to give out right after we slapped a buildin' on them."

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[x]

Rose remembers the Land of Light and Rain. Magenta, cyan, yellow, oversaturated to the point of
burning one's eyes from their sockets. The islands and villages scattered across the brilliant sea were marginally less painful to look at: pastel pink and lilac marble and white, chalky sand. Rain poured down from heavy golden clouds in endless streams; Rose always expected the water to feel like glossy, thick syrup, just from the unnatural color of it, but whenever she flew through a cloudburst on her way to blow up her next destination, it always felt like a gentle sprinkle of light falling on her shoulders. The water was barely substantial enough to dampen her hair. Sometimes, when the light hit the chalk sand at the correct angle, the land would burn like white fire, and Rose would blast the sand away so she could continue to disassemble the island and extract the land's secrets without going blind.

They reach LoLaR with relatively little incident. Rose has them skirt close to Skaia, close enough to pick out the details of the deep brown cracks in the Battlefield's surface, and they continue until the bulk of the Land of Light and Rain stands between them and the on-going battle. Leviathan consumes all of the backdrop, a writhing mass of tentacles that launches crackling black-and-purple orbs of destructive magic at the Lord of Time, but the Lord himself is hidden behind LoLaR from this angle. Occasionally another roar will erupt, and ugly green and red and orange light will play over Leviathan's many-angled surface before another crack in time rips through a chunk of the Horrorterror. Sometimes the chunk drifts back and rejoins Leviathan; other times, the chunk will vanish entirely into the gulf where reality no longer knits together. But no matter how much mass Leviathan loses trying to smash the Lord of Time with borrowed meteors, more mass pours in through the Veil. It never seems to end.

And not once as they approach the greyed out, dim remains of LoLaR does Leviathan reach out to Rose's mind. Total radio silence. Eridan is the only one to nervously toy with his void-laced jewelry, but Feferi looks nonplussed, and then relieved as their group dives toward LoLaR. "As long as the Lord of Time stays pointed in that direction, I don't think the cracks will spread to LoLaR just yet," Rose observes, tracing the spreading cracks with her fingers spread out in a fan. Looking in the direction of the battle makes her stomach lurch; the combination of Leviathan's innate horror and the Lord of Time's spreading, abyssal cracks in time make for an unsettling sight. "But Leviathan…Like I said, just because it's distracted with that fight doesn't mean all of it is distracted."

"It called itself I," Eridan says, quietly. "That's not right, for them. That's not what those extrofathating bastards say."

Rose suspects that everyone has noticed that, by now. Some, like Vriska, might not particularly care about the inner workings of a Horrorterror's many minds, but the subject is relevant to almost everyone here. It makes her even more uneasy. "So I've noticed. I don't know what it could mean, though. Horrorterrors are hiveminds. If they lose that plurality, are they still a Horrorterror in the strictest sense?" Rose trails off.

Kanaya shakes her head. "I don't whether that thought is reassuring, or incredibly concerning. I would like to stop thinking it, if everyone is in favor," she says, her expression troubled. Rose concurs whole-heartedly, and they settle back into uneasy silence.

Plurality or no, Rose can't believe that Leviathan would stop haunting them so easily. All of them bar Kanaya have been grimdark or grimlight in the recent past, and while Leviathan doesn't appear to be losing, it isn't annihilating the Lord of Time, either. It should be reaching for any advantage it can take. Leviathan shrieks chaos, and the next time crack splinters off at a wild angle, cutting through an empty section of the Medium rather than the Horrorterror. An impressive feat. But the shriek sounds…forced. Artificial.

Something's deeply, deeply wrong with Leviathan. Rose can't tell if that's a good thing or a bad thing. It's something she doesn't understand, and that might get them all killed.
"Where's your denizen's cave?" Feferi asks, fluttering her wings out as they reach the point where gravity starts to reassert itself, and they all switch from flying up toward LoLaR to floating down onto its surface. From a distance, LoLaR looked almost entirely greyed out, but as they descend toward a pale, faded island, Rose can see faint hints of color in the ocean - glaucous blue, thistle purple, butter yellow, all of them drowned in stagnant, murky grey water. The rainclouds are fewer and further between than she remembers, and when Rose spies one out over the ocean to their right, she sees that it looks like an Earth-standard raincloud: grey, and drizzling thin drops of colorless water. The island itself is host to an intact, grey-streaked temple with a sizeable marble turtle shell on the highest spire, located on a high outcropping. If Rose didn't dismantle it, it must not have been one of the islands she visited in the last universe.

Rose wracks her memory as she dips and hovers over the sandy beach; Kanaya gives her a tap to indicate that she's ready to land, and Rose sets her down. The sand crunches under Kanaya's feet, and Rose presses her weight down with her toes, observing the lack of mica sparkle in the dull white chalk. "I haven't the faintest. You forget, I ignored my quest and went on a destructive grimdark spree. Underwater, I expect, but where..." she says, tearing her eyes away from the ground. Their outfits are the brightest, most saturated things on LoLaR, and it feels as though they've arrived for a funeral procession in clownish costume to make a mockery of a quietly dying land. "If I ever reached Cetus's lair, Leviathan corrupted the memory. The grimdark obscured much of my activities in the recording."

Eridan folds his arms tight over his chest, scuffing his dark purple shoe over the sand instead of landing. "Right. Sames. There's probably a way to get to it that caters to landdwellers, but..." He cuts himself off, glancing up at the sky. "- that might be the long way around, through the gates," Rose finishes for him, looking up at the same time. All she sees from here is the dark of the Medium, and the trailing edge of Leviathan's enormous, shifting tentacles. It's not a pleasant sight; she'd rather focus on Skaia in the distance. "Cetus told me to play the rain, but if that's not a prerequisite, I think we'd rather cut to the chase. I'm not sure what the water quality is like, though. It might depend on how much of Leviathan is left now that Cetus is dead." She looks at where the water meets the edge of the beach, a few yards away, and notices that the water isn't lapping against the shore. The faded water moves a little, but not enough for Rose to say whether there's a tide at work. It doesn't look like there's acid left to eat away at the island, at least; she can't hear any sizzling.

Feferi's claw shoots up into the air. "Oh, I can give it a shot! I used to clean up polluted water all the time!" she says. Rose swallows a caution against diving into the water as Feferi sprints across the beach, her god tier outfit returning to something closer to its default state as she leaves a trail of fuchsia sparkles sprinkled over the sand. The air feels chilly and almost clammy on Rose's skin, but there's still a hint of humidity, and that seems to be enough to restore Feferi and Eridan's spirits.

Her phone buzzes.

TG: Dear? Are you alright?
TG: We have landed on LoFaF, I believe.
TT: Yes. No need to fret.
TT: I don't mean to impose, but would you mind collecting significant quantities of reptiles for us?
TG: Oh, not at all. That is precisely why I have a number of interns and refugees at my beck and call.
TG: Aradia seems to have some idea of what needs doing.
TT: We'll keep you apprised of our status in trying to locate the alchemical recipe.
TG: You know, I used to have an alchemist on staff. What a shame. He would have loved this.
TT: I really do not think it's the same kind of alchemy.
TG: Just as the Game does not involve elements of chess we play?
TT: Hmph.
TG: We don't know when Jade will arrive, but it might be best to consolidate the civilians on the ships when they do.
TT: I'll bear that in mind.
TG: Do try to be careful.

Rose doesn't respond to that. One parental unit accounted for.

Rather than chasing after Feferi, Kanaya wanders a few steps inland. Her outfit stands out the most against the pallid landscape; dark grey and dark green with little exception, she stands out against the faded beach like a stroke of calligraphy ink. "This place has seen better days," Kanaya says. It's a statement of a fact; she sounds almost sad. Part of the beach rises and winds back along a plane of harder white marble, leading up toward the temple. Past Kanaya, Rose can see a handful of rounded pink buildings arranged in a semi-circle at the foot of the incline. No sign of any inhabitants, though. She'd be surprised if any of them survived the drastic grimdark climate change, let alone the transition between sessions. Then again, from what she recalls, sometimes the turtle consorts simply lived in their temples' cloisters; these smaller structures look abandoned, the pink stone dull and scored with grey streaks from the rain.

"Yes. I barely recognize it," Rose replies. She tears her eyes away from the abandoned village, but they just fix on the side of Kanaya's face instead. She should really go and see what Feferi is attempting to do, but -

Kanaya turns slightly, her lips quirked in a tiny smile that parts her lips just enough for a hint of sharp teeth to peek through. Not quite obvious enough to be called buckteeth, but enough to be excessively endearing. "I seem to recall you wrecking a few turtle villages and temples," she says, offering the quiet, awkward joke as a way to lighten the mood. Rose huffs a laugh, smiling back as best she can. It's not hard to smile, for Kanaya. "Do you think you can recall where you left off on your land quest before you decided to do that? Or anything from inside the temples that might lead us to a gate?"

Rose shrugs, shaking her head. "I remember less than I should. And I was not particularly interested in paying attention to the game lore all around me. It all seemed so…trivial at the time, apart from what I could exploit. I blew up gates as well as temples before leaving." She'd been a ruthless child, in some ways. Even now, Rose can't quite fight the notion that Sburb contains a lot of unnecessary side quests. Most of hers probably relied on living consorts, which is unfortunate.

One way or another, they're not here to unearth all of Sburb's secrets. Just the one. If she was supposed to learn anything from this land, she suspects she ruined the lesson when she accepted Leviathan into her head. Cetus is dead, and the Land of Light and Rain is close to joining her.

"Well -" Feferi trots to a stop by the edge of the greying sea, calling back over her shoulder, "- we can just get crayative!"

On impulse, Rose takes Kanaya's hand and draws her back down the beach; Kanaya blinks, still partly absorbed in the temple up the hill, but follows, her claws folded between Rose's fingers. It's overly cautious of Rose. A dead giveaway that she's worried. But she can't help it. "Can you clean it up enough to swim down?" she asks Feferi, keeping one eye on Eridan where he's crouched to inspect a mottled black-and-white salt deposit by the water's edge.

"Guess we'll find out!" Feferi says, rubbing her claws together with enthusiasm. She snaps her goggles on over her eyes and kicks her shoes off so she can step out over the water with her bare feet. Rose…has no idea how safe that is, but as she and Kanaya both open their mouths, Feferi
And stops dead, one foot planted firmly on the beach and the other frozen half an inch above the stagnant ocean. "Oooh. Oh no," she says, her eyes widening behind the goggles. Her hands slowly rise to touch her temples as her fuchsia aura burns along her skin. Not promising.

"What's wrong?" Rose asks, stepping closer. She reaches toward Feferi cautiously, in case she needs to pull her back from whatever's in the water. Kanaya clamps down on her hand, an anchor.

Feferi stumbles back of her own accord, though. Literally stumbles; only a beat of her wings keeps her upright, and when she rights herself, the fuchsiablood looks distressed. "That's...there's nothing alive in there," she says, distraught, combing her fingers through her thick hair and holding her head. 

...Ah. "No, there wouldn't be," Rose says, dropping her hand. "Cetus devoured all the aquatic life in the last session. I assume the grimdark influence took care of the turtles on land, over time." She gestures back toward the village and temple, fighting down a bitter smile. Rose remembers quite clearly how the turtle consorts used to shake and sweat whenever she arrived on one of the islands, looking for something to advance her single-minded quest. She'd been quite callous about destroying their homes and tossing them into the water - to safety, she'd thought, at the time, so she could dismantle the secrets buried beneath the islands themselves.

Feferi shivers and takes two more steps back from the water, the last of her aura cutting off. "No, I can't fix that. I need somefin alive to work with, I think," she says, her smiles shaky as she forces the pun in.

Eridan heaves a deep sigh, letting his head and horns hang between his knees for a second before pushing up out of his crouch. He scratches at his ribs, looking pre-emptively grossed out as he rolls up his sleeves. "Well, what's a gill-full of dead gunk between friends, right?" he says, rhetorically. "C'mon, Fef, we'll just swim it. We'll know once we hit the giant underwater statues, probably."

Feferi looks even more grossed out, her face turning a distinct shade of puce even as she gulps and begins to transmogrify her skirts into something swim-worthy. "I really don't think that's wise. Or sanitary," Kanaya says hastily, letting go of Rose to haul both coldbloods back from the water by the shoulder. It's hard to tell which of the two looks more relieved at being stopped before they can dunk themselves into the sluggish waves. "There must be another way to narrow down the search."

Kanaya glances at Rose, worries her lower lip with her teeth, and then sets her jaw. "Let's check the temple, at least."

They bypass the cluster of round houses - all in various stages of greying dereliction, none of them whole - and follow the marble path on foot up to the temple. It's not the largest structure Rose has ever seen, but the pastel pink pillars that flank either side of the main entrance tower over them, at least three times as tall as Kanaya. The marble of the peristyle courtyard is flecked and pitted with missing chunks where acidic rain must have eaten into the stone, leaving bleached white marks scattered across the floor. There are a few heavily weathered statues lining the courtyard that might have once been enormous turtle shells, but most of them have been worn down to featureless ovoids. A dull grey cloud starts to pass overhead just as they reach the covered entrance to the main temple, and lightless rain begins to fall in heavy sheets, flooding the pitted floor with a shallow pool of water that slowly drains away through channels that lead to the sheer drop on the eastern side of the building. Feferi stops just outside the covered roof, putting her hand out flat to catch a couple raindrops on her palm, and receives a faceful of streaming water for her efforts. She doesn't splutter, and just gulps it through her gills with a cross look as it dampens her shirt, and then follows them into the temple.
Apart from the constant stream of water splashing on the roof, the temple is utterly silent. No patter of rough webbed feet on the cool stone; no faint, nervous (always nervous) chatter from the cloisters; no wide green eyes peering at Rose from a safe distance. Carefully carved openings line the roof at intervals, and rain water falls through them into sunken rectangles in the floor, streaming away through more decorated drains to either side. If it were brighter, and if the rain was more colorful and glossy, it would have been a beautiful sight. Now, it just fills the dark room with a clammy, wet atmosphere.

Pale white dust covers the floor; Rose only notices it when she sees the dark footprints left on the stone as they enter the room. "Looks like no one has been here in a long time," Kanaya says, hushed and barely audible over the rain. Even as Rose thinks that, though, the sound of rain shifts, and the streams of water pouring down through the ceiling begin to taper off. It was only one cloud, after all.

There's nothing in the antechamber, though; Rose inspects the floor, sweeping a few of the stone tiles with a gloved hand to see if the windblown sand has obscured anything, but apart from the door at the far end of the hall, there's nothing to find. Eridan and Feferi wander through the room, inspecting the drains and the pools, but the most Rose receives from either troll is a shrug.

Kanaya, on the other hand, appears to be on a mission; she covers the first room without slowing and strides up to the far door, which takes up most of the pale purple wall. By the time Rose joins her, the troll has already slotted the tiles of a color palette puzzle into place to unlock the door. "Too easy?" Rose says, raising an eyebrow, and Kanaya nods her head absently as she steps back. The door shudders and sheds a layer of dust as it splits in two and swings open. Rose coughs into her sleeve until the dust clears. Kanaya walks in, her skin brightening to a steady glow that lights up the space around her, but it's not enough to illuminate the entire room.

"Oh, here we go," Eridan says, leaving the center pool and squinting into the dark of the unlit inner chamber. Rose waits for Feferi for a brief moment – long enough to see Feferi bend her head down to take a swig of the water in the nearest pool, screw up her face in a disgusted grimace, and silently open her mouth to spit it out. Investigation complete, Feferi charges after them. "God, Kan, you're like a nightlight," Eridan adds, before lighting himself up with hot white light. It's bright enough to wash out the details of the room and make Rose shade her eyes with a hand. Feferi hisses and covers her eyes with her arm.

Kanaya sniffs. "Your hypocrisy is duly noted."

Far, far overhead, Rose can make out a few thin strips of grey light shining through gaps in the ceiling - but they must be directly under the tallest spire, now, and the ambient light from up there doesn't quite fill the room even after her eyes start to adjust. Rose murmurs under her breath, and summons light into the palm of her hand. She flattens it out into a pane and sends it up overhead to illuminate the room from above. "Well. Let's take a look around. If we can't find anything relevant quickly, though, we may need to cut our losses. We don't have time to waste," she says, scanning the walls and the floor for any relevant engravings.

The stone in here is a darker lilac than the rest of the temple, and covered in deep engravings that stretch from the floor on up into the dark vaults of the ceiling high above. Six turtle shell statues sit on plinths around the room, less weathered than the ones outside but frosted with chalk dust, each positioned across from a recessed alcove in the wall. In the center is a small statue of a sun, carved out of clear quartz. The light from Rose's pane glints off mirrors set at angles high up on the ceiling, which might once have redirected the light from outside throughout the room, before the land greyed. Rose approaches the center statue, curious, but casts a skeptical eye at the walls; they picked a totally random island to land on, and the odds of any of the engravings being relevant to their high
priority tasks are slim to none. Feferi follows the outside of the room with one hand on the wall, her claw clicking as she skims it over the engravings, and Kanaya wanders toward the back of the naos while turning to take in all of the room. After she assures herself of Eridan's position - peering into one of the shallow alcoves - Rose inspects the rectangular table that holds the quartz sun. There's something embedded along the edge of the white marble table; thin and long, made out of a similar clear crystal, longer than most of Rose's needlekind over the years, but…familiar. She taps a nail against it, and tentatively tries to pry the thing out of its marble bed without snapping it -

"Eeeagh!"

Eridan shrieks, and something clatters hard against the floor with a hollow crack. Rose whips around to look at him, and Eridan scrambles back out from the nearest alcove on his hands and feet, kicking something pink and white away from him in a panic. Kanaya jerks around, her chainsaw already up and braced in front of her, but Feferi's the one who's closest in her tour of the room. She strides over, steps over Eridan's flailing body, and prods his assailant with the tip of her 2x3dent from a defensive crouch.

Then Feferi harrumphs, and pokes Eridan next, straightening with a disdainful look. "Stop gawping like a fish out of water, Eridan! It's just a dead turtle!" she says, scornful. Her expression softens as she crouches over the skeleton itself, using her specibus for balance. "Poor fin…"

And a turtle it is. There's enough left to still look pink, but the eyes have withered away to leave hollow sockets. Even in death, the turtle clutches an angular tool in one hand.

Rose…doesn't remember them being so small. Of course, at thirteen, she'd been even shorter than she is now. And there's something else – something that causes her to blink, and glance back at the turtle shell sculptures that line the room. "Nothing else hit you?" Rose asks Eridan, joining Feferi in her inspection of the creature. "You're alright?"

Eridan spits and starts furiously brushing dust off his clothes. He looks mollified by her show of concern, at least. "Stupid fuckin' consorts," he mutters, rolling up onto his feet and hunching his shoulders as he power walks away from his shame. Rose lets him go; she gingerly turns the turtle's hand over instead, to get a better look at the angular tool in its hand. Under a layer of white caulk, she can just make out the bright lemon yellow of the handle; she doesn't have the heart to pull the turtle's wizened fist apart to free the tool, though. Feferi sighs and gets up off her knees and pats the turtle on the head, while Rose looks up at the sculptures again. When she gets up and peers into the crack where the nearest shell meets the plinth, she can make out the caulk sealing the turtle shell in place.

Well then. When she runs a cautious finger along the curve of the shell, the sculpture isn't made of stone. It feels remarkably similar to the dead turtle in the alcove, as a matter of fact.

…Delightful. Morbid pastel turtles who turned their dead into décor. Truly, her consorts suited her. Rose decides not to voice her realization to the rest of the group; there's no point. She pushes away from the plinth and jams her toe on the edge of the stone – she covers her momentary stumble by hurrying back to the central altar. As fascinating as it would be to go back and inspect the other sculptures, Rose thinks it would only make her sad.

She begins to pry up the long crystal again, instead. It really doesn't seem to be part of the table itself – and yet, vexingly enough, she can't do more than scrape her fingernails along the smooth surface. There's just no traction; the object's wedged too tightly in its socket. Rose exhales sharply through her nose. "Anything enlightening?" she calls, dryly, while she attempts to manipulate the sun crystal next. Most likely it would be more productive for her to go help Feferi inspect the walls and try to decipher the engraved script, but she can't seem to leave the table alone.
"A bunch of punch card codes. Probably for weaprons or armor you could alchemize," Feferi calls back from the left side of the room, running her claws over a series of stylized numbers carved in rectangular sets on the far wall. "At least, that's what usually turns up in temples like this, when they don't have books. Though armoray doesn't do much when you're already in the god tiers…"

"I have found a chalkboard, I believe. The chalk is all very harsh shades of pastel," Kanaya says, from another alcove – one presumably devoid of deceased inhabitants. Though Rose doubts Kanaya would be as disturbed by such an occupant as Eridan seems to be.

"Keep it. Terezi might like it," Rose says, only half joking. Kanaya coughs a laugh into her sleeve, and Rose smiles to herself. There's something carved into the round center of the sun sculpture – but when Rose runs her fingers over it, the carving is too shallow for her to tell what the bumps are supposed to form. If she brightens the light, maybe she'd be able to see more detail –

Rose groans internally. When she looks up to the ceiling, this time she follows the angle of the mirrors with her eyes. She traces the path the light would take if it were strong enough to reflect off them. Almost all of them, Rose realizes, would center right on the altar. Perhaps if the Land of Light and Rain wasn't fading so drastically, this wouldn't even be a puzzle. It would just have been illuminated by default. Rose snaps a new sphere of light into her hand and directs it at the sun statue, her brow furrowed in concentration as she leans one hand on the table.

The sun statue refracts the light, and something **kliks** within the marble of the table. Rose still can't make out what's carved on the statue; so much for that. This time, though, when she slides her fingers over the long crystal object, it rolls loose in its indent. Rose carefully plucks it free, and squints at the sun crystal one last time before letting the light die down. She turns the crystal rod over in her hands and frowns as her thumb brushes over something rough and taut strung along the underside. Her fingers come away slightly white with powder.

A bow. It's a violin bow. She can't remember the last time she held one, actually. Rose turns it over in her hands and balances it between her fingers by each end of the bow, but can't find anything to tighten it with. It simply exists, perfectly balanced and pre-rosined.

"Someone, come help me decipher obscure iconography," Eridan yells, and Rose nearly drops the bow on the ground. She catches it and closes a fist over one end, then captchalogues it hastily before she can smash it by accident. Given Dave's proclivity for snapping swords in two, she's not about to risk that side of her heritage coming to the fore at the worst possible moment. "Lalonde! You've got snakes on your walls. Bring your luminous fuckin' bullshit over here."

Rose hastens over, after giving the sun statue one last tap to see if it has anything else to share. Eridan floats five feet up in the air at the back of the temple, using a fistful of too-bright hope light to cast the wall in sharp relief. Since she'd rather avoid any mishaps, intentional or otherwise, blowing a hole through the wall, Rose brightens her own panel of light over this half of the room. Eridan lets his own light die down and folds his arms, considering the mosaic that spreads out in front of them. Feferi bounds up to float higher than Eridan, following the sinuous curve of two intertwined snakes.

"Two snakes? Perhaps a caduceus," Rose says, remaining on the floor as Kanaya joins them. Her claws are covered in chalk dust, and she offers Rose an arm with a tiny sigh. Rose gets the impression that the gratuitous amounts of flying that Kanaya can't participate in is starting to get to her; Rose links arms, but stays on the ground. She can see just as well from down here. The mosaic appears to be made from chips of glass and stone in a wide spectrum of colors, rather than just the LoLaR tradition of pink, yellow, and blue, pieced together over a grey background. A single nondescript figure is positioned in the dead center of the wall - a rounded triangle and pointed oval serve as a head and body, but it contains an entire rainbow of colored stone within the grey-glass
outline of its form, and two pairs of arms extend out on either side. One arm (though lacking hands) holds a curving scythe over its head; the second arm length of long, thin blue ribbon that curls in an unseen breeze; the third a book, the pages depicted in mid-turn but blank; and finally, and perhaps most incongruously of all, the fourth arm holds...a cup of tea. Or perhaps coffee. No, no, that's a tea tag hanging over the rim of the cup, picked out in white stone. Smaller snakes form a rectangular border around the outer edges of the mosaic, each with a mouth ready to snap shut over the tail of the snake ahead of it. It's difficult to tell, but Rose thinks some of the dots on the grey background are meant to be raindrops – but only some of them are blue – others are pink and yellow. LoLaR rain, perhaps? Or maybe just decorative chips thrown on the wall for an extra flourish.

"That's a little fishy. Aren't snakes a thing just for this session? How did they know to make this instead of frogs?" Feferi says, her focus still on the twined, twinned snakes that form part of the mosaic's backdrop. They're flanked by an enormous Light symbol on one side, and – curiouser and curiouser – a Space symbol on the other.

"I wouldn't rule out the game just editing the iconography for its own purposes," Kanaya points out. "Or commanding the consorts to do so. Or perhaps the whole thing was artificially generated as is. I would ask Sollux, but I think he's still busy at the moment."

Rose hums; each suggestion is just as likely as the next, as far as Sburb is concerned. At the very least, it's clear that this is relevant to the snakes infesting LoFaF, and must have been inserted into this temple at some point after the last session. The timing's difficult to keep track of. "This is Jade's symbol. The Space symbol," she says, scanning the whorls of the symbol. "Referring to the Muse, do you think? If that's rain in the background, and not just polka dots - well, Cetus did ask me to play it."

"And you're going to be sippin' a hot beverage while doing so," Eridan says, with a snap of his claws. "Points for style, Lalonde. Then, out of nowhere – he swings around and squints down at Rose, so suddenly that Rose tenses on instinct. "What did Cetus say to you, exactly? On account of I was there, and you were gettin' real upset while sayin' Kan's name. And then conveniently never explained for shit."

"Eridan!" Rose is embarrassed to say that she splutters. Suddenly, having Kanaya right beside her stresses her, a silent pressure as Kanaya watches Rose with careful eyes. Feferi's fuchsia eyes are visible in the half-dark near the top of the mosaic, blinking down at Rose in wide-eyed but intent curiosity. Of all the times to be put on the spot – it's so very tempting to put them off. Rose does have another convenient excuse after all; the Lord of Time isn't going away any time soon, and sussing out the worrying implications of Cetus's last riddles is just another distraction from finding the denizen's hoard.

But Kanaya waits, watching Rose with a careful mask of an expression – steady, but unreadable. She doesn't pull away, and Rose ducks her head, trying to pull herself back together under the three trolls' scrutiny. She knows the twisting guilt in her stomach for what it is, and grits her teeth before answering. "She wasn't...it was all riddles. 'What goes round the house, in the house, but never touches the house? What has eyes but cannot see?' And - she can't look Kanaya in the eye - she said that there might be a choice I could make to destroy Leviathan, and the other Horrorterrors. But it would come at a price I'm not willing to pay. Then she wanted me to play the rain, and look for the Splendor Existentiae in her Hoard. She refused to clarify many points, except with more riddles."

Kanaya's eyes narrow, and then widen – Rose's gut clenches, and she mysteriously stops being able to maintain eye contact. Feferi breaks in first, with a bubbly laugh. "I guess we'll see Schooner or later whether the Lord of Time takes care of Leviathan for us, anyway!" she says. "'Can't see,' huh? Well, certain cavefish and salamanders have vestigial eyes but don't use them for much!"
Rose opens and shuts her mouth, and then raises both eyebrows in acknowledgement. "That - is a new answer. I could only think of things like tornadoes, or needles."

"The other one's the sun. There's literally no other answer," Eridan mumbles. He's furiously pouting; Rose suspects that pouting is simply part of his default expressions, because apart from the petulant moue of his mouth he appears to be sunk in deep thought. As soon as she thinks that, though, his lips pull back in a grimace, and he smacks the heel of his hand to his forehead. "But nothing is pointin' us toward a gate, or a shortcut. Some of this wall writing could take bloody weeks to decipher, an' I guarantee half of it will be turtle yammering about nothing at all."

"And I doubt Leviathan can keep the Lord of Time preoccupied long enough for us to find a library I didn't tear through to find the right translation tools," Rose says, immensely grateful for the change in subject. Kanaya's eyes are staring right through her – not quite daggers, but Rose feels pierced to the bone, all the same. She knows.

"So, we're still stumped." Feferi huffs, her breath pushing a stray strand of hair out of her face as she starts to float back down to the ground. Eridan stays in front of the mosaic, pushing his own cheeks into a truly stormy pout as he glowers at the images in an attempt to have them reveal their secrets. Or force them to rearrange themselves into a map.

Rose sighs. "I'll try to see the best path to the nearest gate. If it doesn't lead directly to Cetus's lair, we'll just have to work our way through them as they come. If my past self destroyed a critical link in the gate chain and it hasn't respawned, we'll just have to continue on from there." Trying to see through the whole land to find the lair itself would be like trying to see through Earth, Rose suspects; if they're on the wrong side of the planet, she might as well be trying to see a building in the Antarctic from the North Pole. She could try, but it would most likely just give her a spectacular headache.

Eridan pushes off the wall and starts motoring back toward the entrance with a sour look. "Should just vaporize the fuckin' ocean," he mutters. Feferi emits a steam-whistle screech, and Eridan starts flying three times faster, Feferi hot on his heels.

Which leaves Rose to walk out with Kanaya. Normally, this would be an entirely agreeable turn of events.

Kanaya tilts her head to the side, and Rose can't look away without being incredibly obvious about it. She starts walking instead. Kanaya puts a hand over Rose's arm, her voice quiet but carrying. "You are not being forthright. The ultimata of denizens often seem to invoke death to accomplish an important goal. But I believe it is...unusual for the choice to involve someone else's death, and not your own sacrifice." Her claws trail down and close over Rose's tight fist, working the fingers loose until Rose's fingernails stop digging into her palm and they can hold hands. "Rose, let me help."

Rose speeds up. "No one's dying. That's a choice, too," she says, tightly.

- Kanaya is not happy with her by the time they catch up with Eridan and Feferi on the beach. Not angry, maybe, but concerned and frustrated. Rose can't blame her; she also can't bring herself to let go of Kanaya's hand. It's an uncomfortable situation, but as always, more pressing issues beckon. "Let's just go under!" Feferi is saying when they're back in earshot, and Rose picks up the pace again to head off whatever the seadwellers are about to jump into. "I'll bet anyfin it's down in the deepest part of the ocean, anyway. That's where important stuff always is."

Eridan grouses, wrinkling up his nose as Feferi starts marching into the water. "This is going to be so
Feferi stops, up to her knees in grey-white water. Rose can't see anything through the water (not a promising sign) but from the lack of agonizing pain on Feferi's face, it must not be acidic. At least, not near the shore. "Cut it with the crabby attitude, Eridan!" Then Feferi claps her claws together, waving at Rose and Kanaya. "I have an idea!"

"Oh thank god," Kanaya says, under her breath.

"We're all ears," Rose adds.

"Whale, unless a whale denizen lived on land, we're gonna have to go underwater anyway, so…" Feferi rubs her hands together until they crackle with fuchsia static, and then pulls them apart again. An iridescent bubble bobs in between her palms, about the size of a soccer ball. Feferi spreads her arms further apart, keeping her claws cupped, and the bubble expands in front of her until Eridan stumbles back out of the way. When she finishes, the bubble is taller than Rose and mostly transparent, with only a faint tint of fuchsia around the edges. Feferi looks over at Rose with a tiny, pleased smirk. "Think that will work?"

Rose walks over and careful pressed a fingertip to the bubble. It feels remarkably solid, for something Feferi generated out of thin air. "A bubble?"

Feferi nods, patting the bubble so that it bounces on the chalk. "Glubby made them for Karkat and Dave! They should have enough air to get you guys underwater for a while." She shrugs. "Just because it was Glubby's idea doesn't mean it's a bad idea to borrow, for a bit."

"And we won't have to swim through a dead ocean full of possible biohazards. Good idea, Feferi," Rose says, batting the bubble back toward the water when it starts to bob toward her.

Now, the only issue is that they still need to know where to go. Which is, barring any unforeseen developments, a task that comes down to Rose's sight. While Feferi blows three more bubbles, Rose opens her sight as wide as it will go - doing her best not to look up, because seeing the full extent of Leviathan is not on her agenda for the day and she'd prefer to keep whatever remains of her last meal in her stomach, please and thank you -

And sees nothing but clouds. Rose bites down on her lip too hard, the dry skin cracking easily under her teeth, and adjusts her sight once, twice. For a moment, all the clouds in her range stand out like bright yellow highlighter against the grey sky; another twitch, and she can identify islands just over the horizon with brilliant pink aur--as another filter, and Rose is nearly blinded by the light of something burning in a card that floats by her hip as everyone's sylladices become visible. Exactly what kind of bow did she pick up, in there?

She can see nothing through the water. Nothing in her sight seems to indicate a gate; she would know it intuitively if she saw it, but there's little else on the Land of Light and Rain except the aur--as clouds and islands dotted across the ocean. An ocean which remains stubbornly opaque to her, no matter how hard Rose glares at it. "We may need to go under," she says aloud, trying not to let the unease seep into her expression. Can she see anything? If the only piece of itself Leviathan left on LoLaR was some kind of contaminant to cloud the water from her sight... How utterly inconvenient. Rose can't believe such a thing would be a coincidence.

Feferi leans back on her heels, and twirls her index claw with a smile. At her direction, the bubbles bob once and then mash up against their intended target. There's a moment where Rose can feel the bubble plastered along her, and then envelops her seamlessly. Almost as once, she feels off-balance;
attempting to float in the bubble only makes it more alarming when the life bubble lurches merrily from side to side. In a bubble of her own, Kanaya looks queasy, and attempts to sit down on the floor of the bubble without rolling. It appears to be a losing battle; she winds up in a wary half-crouch. "Alright. Down we go!" Feferi says, before sealing herself in her own bubble with a muffled pop. Then, without hesitation, she waves the bubbles out over the water, and dunks them.

The water…Well, it doesn't burn right through the bubble, which is a start. Rose still isn't sure what they're dealing with, here, but Feferi rolls them along the charcoal grey sea bed without any noticeable trouble, her claws swaying in wave-like motions as she directs them further down. About twenty feet out there is a steep dropoff, and they're left completely surrounded by clouded water. It's not quite as opaque as the milky surface, but with her normal vision, Rose can't see further than 12 feet in any direction. Below their bubbles there appears to be one of the patches of very faded cyan, but apart from that, no landmarks to speak of. When Rose looks up, she can't tell where the surface is.

"Blrblg," Kanaya says, barely audible through the bubbles. "Rbrblr?"

Right. Feferi, Eridan, and Kanaya are all watching Rose from their life bubbles, waiting on her direction. Blast this leader business. Rose closes her eyes, and opens them again with as many different perspectives as she can muster. She looks around - nothing - up - mistake - and then down, before vertigo can set in -

"There is a gate three hundred feet below us," Rose says. She blinks, and checks again, flipping herself so she can peer directly through the floor of her bubble. Her hair falls in her face, but…yes, the spirograph is unmistakable, a burning lavender epicycloid in her vision. The gate is right under them. There's no telling which gate it might be, but they somehow managed to land on an island located in direct proximity to a gate. Providence, or something else?

Feferi doesn't move them. Rose looks up, frowning, and Feferi taps her ear. Right. Rose takes out her phone.

TT: We are directly above a gate, somehow.
CC: O(! T)(at's s)(ella convenient! 38)
CA: its fuckin creepy is wwhat it is
CA: if your denizen wwerent incredibly deceased id say wwe wwere bein fucking wwith
GA: There is no way to tell where it leads?
TT: No, but worst case scenario - it takes us to another player's land and we have to backtrack. I'm not sure there's anything left on LoLaR that might be considered dangerous.
CC: If you're s)(ore…

Rose isn't sure. But the main peril of skipping gates, from what she can recall, was the risk of ending up in a place you weren't high enough on the echeladder to survive in. Except for Kanaya, they're all god tier; if there were any enemies left to fight, the players would probably be overleveled, if anything.

Rose gives a half shake of her head, then gestures to Feferi to take them down. Feferi holds her hand out flat, and slowly lowers it. The bubbles sink into the milky water gradually. Rose never feels the pressure change, but she wasn't really expecting it to be an issue, considering the fact that the Lands appear to lack certain physics that might otherwise impede progress. Perhaps the inexplicable Wi-Fi signal grows stronger as one delves deep in a land, but frankly Rose isn't ready for the existential crisis that she'd need to process such a thing, so she avoids looking at her phone.

They're almost in the gate before it's visible. The purple spirograph flutters and expands in the water,
pointed like a flower toward the surface, and fills the pale water around it with a lavender tinge. It's the most saturated color Rose has seen since they arrived. Feferi pauses their descent, waits for one last nod from Rose, and then pushes their bubbles through one at a time, starting with Rose.

Ironically, Rose is nearly impaled upon an enormous spike of bone. The bubble rams right into it on the way out of the gate, deforming and molding to the bone's surface as Rose shouts and throws her weight back against the far side - and miraculously does not pop. Her bubble rebounds after a moment and bobbles away with a slight spin. Kanaya's bubble emerges from the spirograph next and Rose can't do much except use hand signals that, under Strider terms, means something like reassurance. Eridan's garbled scream as he shoots out of the spirograph with significantly more force is audible even through the bubbles, and he ricochets off Kanaya's bubble at top speed, tumbling inside his bubble like a bobblehead. Feferi arrives with a radiant aura of complete innocence, and directs her bubble over the bone with a tiny flip.

All of them are drifting in a slow circle, though. Rose only notices the movement when she establishes where they are. They've emerged at the bottom of an immense, frothing whirlpool, at least the length of a football stadium; overhead, she can see the layered spirals of colorful water coiling in slow circles, rising up toward a surface some unfathomable distance above. Beneath them lays an immense skeleton, half buried in the glittering, smooth sand of the abyssal plain. Its ribs extend up in sharp curves with wicked points, and the whole thing must be at least 57 feet long from tail to tooth. There are other skeletons scattered about, the smallest of which is still seven feet in length. A crocodilian skeleton the length of a bus, a fifty-foot long creature that Rose would swear up and down is some kind of plesiosaur, a wisp-thin anglerfish, a turtle shell that dwarfs any of the consorts she's ever met by a factor of fifty, at least a hundred different species - all dead. All arranged in circles inside circles, centered under the whirlpool and forming a semi-circle around a large outcropping of dark lavender stone that juts up from the abyssal plain. A line of pitch black stone runs through it at a jagged angle.

At the base of the ridge is a door. Flanked by several rows of curving \( f \) shaped crystals that have been carved to frame the entrance, the door has a clear split down the center and a single bridge-like symbol affixed where a handle might sits.

Or a lock.

Someone is making impatient burbling sounds through their bubble. Rose's starts to move back against the current, and this shakes her from her reverie. All four bubbles are converging on each other, and Feferi's face is fixed with concentration as they come together with a buoyant pop! Eridan's yell sounds loud and clear in Rose's ears as all four bubbles merge into one bigger bubble; Kanaya rolls awkwardly along the expanded floor of the bubble, and Rose catches her. There is a moment where Kanaya seems to be composed of 90% elbows, and then they stop tumbling with Kanaya sprawled on Rose's lap. "There! That's better. What were you saying, Kanaya?" Feferi asks, cheerfully directing their mega-bubble toward the door. At least they're all on the same page.

"I was saying that this looks relatively final. This is pretty unambiguously a significant location," Kanaya says with a huff. She moves to shift off Rose's lap, but Rose sees absolutely no reason for this occur until they need to leave the bubble, and wraps her arms around Kanaya's waist.

Kanaya gives her a look, and Rose smiles back, the picture of virtue. "I concur. Shall we try the door?" she asks, glancing around the group. Feferi's already guiding them toward it, and Kanaya already agrees; Eridan is fiddling with his crown headband, which has somehow wound up yanked down around his nose, and just nods impatiently when Rose looks at him in askance. Unanimity is sweet indeed.
By the time they cross the boneyard and reach the door, it's clear just how huge the door is. Large enough to accommodate a denizen, if Rose were to guess. Up close, the crystalline pillars are clouded with a thin film of grey; Feferi takes their bubble all the way up to the bridge lock over the seam in the door, and it has several holes in the stone the size of Rose's head. "If that's a lock, we can probably just blast it," Eridan says, having sorted out his headgear problems; Rose doesn't like the look of the light gathering around his hand, especially not while they're still stuck in a single bubble of air together.

"I don't see a puzzle..." Kanaya says, doubt in her voice as she rolls up off Rose's lap and inspects the bridge. "This is definitely the most door-like structure around, though. Curious."

If it's a puzzle that involves light, like the one back in the temple, they may be out of luck. Rose looks uneasily at the crystal pillars, which look as though they've become discolored over time. Trying to clean them off might be a lost cause, but if Rose directed enough of her own light at the lock...Hm. She tries to look at the door with extra sight, but it appears to just be plain stone. Nothing magical or out of the ordinary about it. Perhaps the bow -

"Maybe it needs a password? Which we probably skipped." Feferi taps her chin and puts her lips together to make a popping sound as she thinks. "Hm!"

Rose hesitates. Then she floats over to the point where their bubble presses up against the lock and flattens a little. "Or perhaps...we're overthinking this," she says, slowly.

Very carefully, Rose places her palm against the side of the bubble. There's a second's delay, and then Feferi hums again; the fuchsia barrier of the bubble melts a little under Rose's hand with the bubbly texture of champagne, and then her hand is pressed against the ice cold stone of the lock. Feferi leans in over Rose's shoulder to concentrate on maintaining the integrity of the rest of the bubble, her hair coiling through the air in a mass of fuchsia light visible in Rose's periphery. Rose presses the pads of her fingers to different parts of the bridge, brushing them over the gaps in the stone, and then reaches inside one of the holes.

Something brushes her fingers. Before she can yank her hand back, it pricks her finger. Rose lunges back, pulling her hand back into the bubble and holding it close to her chest, while Feferi scrambles to close the hole. "Rose?" Kanaya says, no doubt smelling the thin point of blood now beading up on Rose's index finger. The jadeblood hurries over and gently makes Rose splay her hand out flat; it doesn't hurt at all, after the initial shock, but Rose is still ginger about doing so. It really isn't much more than a dot of blood when she looks at it. Eridan clusters in close and bristles, glaring at the door like he's ready to blast it to smithereens, while Feferi whips around to inspect Rose's hand personally. "I think it's fine," Rose says.

"Could have been poisoned," Eridan mutters, casting another wild-eyed look at the door.

Feferi shushes him, but clutches Rose's hand a little too tightly, her claws burning with life as she smooths them over the pinprick three times for good measure. "I can't feel anything wrong," she announces at last, relief evident as her face relaxes. There isn't even a scab; Rose's hand feels weirdly light compared to the rest of her, which is still dealing with the mixed effects of skipping a day, but that's hardly something to complain about.

And when Rose looks up, all she sees where the door used to be is a swirl of particulate-clouded water. The door opened inward, without even a creak, parting to either side. Beyond it lays a vast tunnel through the dark purple rock, leading down into the land.

Rose closes her hand. "We're in."
Crossing LoHaC isn't actually that bad. Which tells Dave that Hephaestus a) is melodramatic as all hell, and b) has a really high opinion of his hell-making ability. There's a convenient lack of underlings to fight (as well as a concerning lack of consort dudes) so they don't have to stop to take down amber imps or sulfur ogres every ten steps. Sure, it's hotter than Satan's morning breath, and the soundtrack is a constant burble of molten lava punctuated by shrieking, clanging metal, but that's, y'know, whatever. Dave can live with it. It's mostly just a massive pain in the ass.

He's more concerned with things he can't live without. Like his liver, or his stomach, or something like that. It's not as bad as when the Lord of Time leered down and looked right at them, but he still feels…pretty shitty. Dave's exhausted and basically in no shape to be pulling the kind of rampant shenanigans that are about to unfold all up in this.

Thank god Oriole has at least half an idea of where they're going. He coasts ahead of them on his wings, occasionally landing on an isolated metal pole that juts up out of the lava sea to figure out where the hell they need to go next. When in doubt, they aim for the nearest building that isn't melting into the ocean of lava, and bullshit the route from there. It's not perfect, but it gets them places. "The entrance should be somewhere near the equator. Opposite side from where the Beat Mesa used to be," Oriole mumbles when they first set out, but that's still a shitton of ground to cover.

"I don't know if I remember that or not," Dave says. "I remember a giant ass cave, but not really how I found it." The whole semi-possessed thing is really coming back to bite him in the ass, all these years later.
"Don't do Horrorterrors, kids," Karkat says.

But that's about the extent of the chatter - considering who they are all as people, their group is almost physically incapable of shutting up, but commenting on how hot and godawful Dave's planet is gets old after a while.

At one point they fly past a nakodile temple in the process of collapsing, the warm amber of the massive building sinking under the surface and turning the lava a molten gold. They finally reach a stretch of buildings that dot the ocean in a semi-straight line, and Terezi dumps them on their asses to run for a minute. Dave lands hard on the metal of a skeletal building, the unyielding line of the crossbeam digging hard into the soles of his feet. The impact doesn't quite bust his knees - which would suck ass - but the jolt makes him hiss and dig a thumb into the cartilage before he can force himself to straighten up. Karkat lands in a better crouch and starts running along the beam right away, and Dave can't tell if it's because Karkat just has insane troll gymnast skills, or if Dave is getting worse at this. It's not fair that he's developing old man knees this early in his life. If the Lord of goddamn Time is cursing him with arthritis of all things, Dave will be so pissed.

He hopes he's just tired. Tired is the better option, here; he'd rather be in dire need of a nap than falling apart at the seams. Dave starts after Karkat at top speed. Top speed means that either he keeps his balance on the narrow beam through sheer momentum, or else when he crashes he'll faceplant spectacularly, but Oriole isn't waiting around for them to catch up. After a few quick bursts, he catches up with Karkat, his feet already complaining at him from pounding on the too-warm metal, and Karkat gives him a pissy look because he's still sour about temporal inevitability being a shitty thing that happens. Dave would sympathize with the guy - but this is funnier, and funny shit is kind of hard to dredge up when you feel like ass.

And if there is a thing Dave feels like, it is ass.

…God. This is why he shouldn't vocalize thoughts around Rose. Or any of his friends, honestly. Or himself. Ever. Dave grimaces back at Karkat, who glowers harder before relenting, and the two of them have to pay attention as they make the jump from one building to the next. This one looks sheared off at the top, like something carved through it long before they arrived, and there's only horizontal cross beams to land on with massive gaps of empty space in between. Karkat lands on his hands and throws in a front flip. Dave hurdles the gap and lands with less knee-busting, and then starts darting from beam to beam before he can start wobbling. Bro used to have him drill with roof hopping on Houston's never ending series of construction sites downtown, so this is some kindergarten-level shit.

To be fair, Bro never imported a tank of molten rock to stick under Dave's practice sites. Dave suspects that didn't happen only because of the impossible logistics of importing or manufacturing fucking lava in goddamn metroplex.

Terezi dips down and bounds along the roof a few times ahead of Dave and Karkat to show off her unfair flying skills before taking off again. It's easier to follow her than it is to follow Oriole - neon orange blends in weirdly well depending on how hot the lava is, and how close to the ocean Oriole flies. Teal stands out more.

Dave beats Karkat to the next jump, and lands on a gear that lays flat along part of the roof, attached to nothing in particular and doing jackshit with its life. It might have once been a hell-fountain, but the central hole in the gear is full of dried up lava crust, so at least Dave doesn't land in a geyser of lava.

In the second it takes him to cross the gear, though, Karkat lands on the gear in a roll.
An ominous, metallic shriek rises up from the girders. The whole building jolts out from under Dave, dropping at least two feet down as the support beams start to collapse into the lava. "Shit!" Dave says. At the same time Karkat lets out a visceral skree, and then Dave backtracks, grabs Karkat, and bolts toward the far end of the building. The heavy gear causes the side they landed on originally to dip first, and soon they have to haul ass up a steep incline like a pair of assholes sprinting up the deck of the Titanic. They reach the far end just as Dave's feet start to lose traction on the beams, and he smacks a hand down flat on the tilting edge of the roof just in time. He and Karkat hang off the edge for a second. Dave hauls his elbow over the side, and then swings his knee up, while Karkat pushes up on his arms and scrabbles up with barely any effort. "We need to work on those landings," Dave says, off-handedly, and Karkat rolls his eyes. Their window to leap to the next building over is rapidly closing as their current building continues to sag, however, so Dave crouches and digs his feet in on the edge of the roof, ready to jump.

Karkat starts to run forward when, quietly - but with immense, scientifically quantifiable amounts of irony - the four corner struts of the building in front of them fall outward. There isn't even a sound: they just fall backward into the lava with an innocuous *glop*, and then all the crossbeams and gears and panes of sheet metal bellyflop in the molten ocean with a much louder *SPLAP*.

Which leaves them stranded on their own sinking pile of scrap.

"Oh, this is *stupid*," Karkat says, incensed. "Forget it. Fuck walking. Walking is overrated!"

"Walking teaches you character, freeloaders!" Terezi calls back over her shoulder. She doesn't turn around. Oriole *does* turn, using an updraft of hot air to pause and stare back at them incredulously. Dave doesn't blame him. This is pretty goddamn stupid.

The building judders under them, and sinks another four feet. Dave's pretty much resigned to either the sweet embrace of death or the pointy embrace of Terezi deigning to save their asses at the last minute, and sits down cross legged while Karkat struggles to stay balanced and shake a fist at Terezi at the same time. "I've been walking my strut pods off every day of my pathetic excuse for a life, and I haven't learned anything except how to stoke the fuckfires of my own unending inner hate!" he howls. "Come back here and make some weird comment about the color of our blood smelling like the liquid death of Dave's hell planet, Terezi!"

Terezi stops dead, and places a hand on her hips as she turns back toward them. She lifts her tinted glasses with one claw, her red eyes completely unamused as she arches an eyebrow in their general direction. "Well, if *you* say it, where's the fun in that?" she asks, shaking her head.

Dave shrugs. "Karkat'll probably accuse you of plagiarism, which will be funny for at least ten seconds," he says. Terezi claps her hand to her cheek, her mouth open in delight, and Karkat splutters. Then Terezi starts cackling as she descends to pick them back up, and sure, now Dave's stuck with these two sniping at each other for the rest of the trip, but it's worth it to skip the slow lava death part. Slow lava death would be the very definition of uncool; Dave intends to go out in style, if he has to go out at all.

Then Karkat kicks his way around to face backward - Terezi's holding him under the armpits like a long, fighty cat - and snaps at Dave. "And you! You've still got a spot where you're bleeding internally, dumbass."

"Figures," Dave says, before his brain ends its latest ramble and catches up with him. Even once it catches up, though, the most he can do is shrug again. He has a lowkey motif to speed up healing on fastforward in the background, but it can only do so much. He's not a Life guy; just a Fuck You Aspect guy. Karkat nearly chokes himself out on Terezi's unyielding forearm, but finally succeeds in slapping his palm over Dave's side. "Hypothetically, do you know how to, like, fix cursed organs?"
Dave asks, while the stiffness leaches out of his insides.

Karkat gives him a look. Karkat has an entire repertoire of weird-ass looks, and this one is fresh out of the ‘appalled spring fashion show’ lineup. "Dave. Literally, what the fuck kind of question is that?" he says. "I'm making this up as I go along and no, sorry, I'm pretty sure cursed organs are out of my not-godly jurisdiction! Fuck!"

Dave snaps his fingers. Gotta lighten the mood somehow. "Damn. It was worth a shot."

"If you're that bad --"

Plan L for lighten the mood is a bust. Dave engages Plan E, for evasive maneuvers. Can't catch him with those bad thoughts. "I'm fine. Peachy keen." He cups a hand around his mouth. "Oriole, you sure you know where we're going?"

Oriole stops dead in midair. He shades his eyes with a hand, scoping out the terrain before them. Like most of LoHaC, it's really goddamn red and really goddamn hot. When Dave looks around, there aren't even any more metal structures around them for miles - just a baked plain of bubbling lava. "Mostly," Oriole says at last, his orange feathers rustling a little as he turns with a grimace on his face. "Look, I -"

Then Oriole breaks off, snapping his mouth shut. He hovers there frozen for a long second, his wings half-folded and stationary; Terezi slowly floats to him and nudges Dave with her bony knuckle until he waves a hand in front of Oriole's face for her. When Oriole resumes, he's on a completely different tangent, and appears to have missed their antics. "- I am floating. What the shit. Why am I floating?" he says, confused.

Look, Dave's not the windy dude. He can't be blamed for not noticing that there isn't actually an updraft right here, or that there's not enough wind to keep Oriole up every time his bird twin stops flapping for longer than two seconds.

But the neon orange glow. Now that, he probably should have noticed. He blames LoHaC's color scheme. Oriole is already pretty neon by default, but when he spreads his fingers out, Dave sees the faint light outlining Oriole. When he rolls up his sleeves, there's even more glow, and a heck of a lot more feathers sprouting from his arms than Dave remembers.

"Sprite magic?" Dave offers. It's literally the only explanation.

Oriole clenches his hands into fists, his face the color of orange pith. "Shit."

Terezi tilts her head to the side. "Very fancy. Zesty, almost. You don't like?"

Oriole glares at her. "No! I'm not interested in being that asshole fake Dave who dies because he's part of the game that's being shredded all around us!" he yells, the sudden volume making Dave twitch. Then Oriole rakes a hand through his hair, tearing a feather loose and swinging around. He flaps his wings very deliberately to get going, but the effort it takes to remember is really obvious. His shoulders are tensed up, and he doesn't look back to make sure they're following him. "Fuck this. Let's hurry up before I pull some kind of reverse Little Mermaid and grow a tail."

Well, Dave didn't even know that was a thing they needed to worry about, but apparently it is. Nice. Terezi clears her throat, adjusts her grip on Dave and Karkat, and starts flying forward with a guilty look. Karkat sighs for thirty seconds, then lets his head droop. "Great. I feel like a fucking asshole. Let's all savor this moment of mutual assholery, and then awkwardly act like it never happened," he says.
"Agreed," Terezi says.

Dave nods. "Good plan."

The good news is, when they reach the massive, ominous cave opening that marks the entrance to Hephaestus's subterranean lair, Dave feels marginally less like shit. This may be because Leviathan is doing its best to turn the Lord of Time into a shish kebab with a hundred arching spears of bone and teeth. The attack doesn't even faze the ugly green dude, but the Horrorterror staggers each round of spears so that he has to bat each stabbing tendril aside with a swing of his golden pimpstick.

And that means he's still not paying attention to anything else. Like dicking over Dave. Karkat's blood mojo holds up a lot better when he has time to concentrate. Dave has some of his energy back by the time Terezi lands on the scorched obsidian of the cave entrance, most of his residual aches have chilled out, and his knees don't whine at him for the rough landing. A nap would still be tight as hell right now, but he can live without it. He stretches his arms behind his back and feels something pop with relief.

Hephaestus's lair is familiar, which means that they're in the right place. Two dark steel struts point up toward the sky at slightly different angles, spewing torrents of lava into the ocean in twin arcs; the solid garnet door has spun open into two jagged halves of a scratched circle, leaving a diagonal crack the size of a house for them to walk through. The cave beyond is a bottomless mouth leading down into the throat of the world. It reeks of coal smoke that somehow came to life, died, and rotted.

But the bad news is there's an entire heap of white bones arranged in a circle around a heavy black cauldron. Oriole lands with a sweep of his wings, which kicks up a bunch of weird, heat-blackened weeds that swirl across the ground in front of Dave's feet. It's a bunch of dried up, withered vegetables. Whatever water was in the cauldron evaporated ages ago.

Oh no. "Aw, shit. Seriously, are all my nakodile dudes dead?" Dave says, squatting next to one of the bone heaps. He plucks a single tooth the size of his fingernail off the ground. "This is bullshit." So much for any hope of ever reinvigorating the once-thriving LoHaC Stock Exchange.

Karkat sways, his claw banging hard on the edge of the cauldron, and he swears as he glares down into the cauldron. His face looks pale. Then his expression turns pained, and he jabs a finger down into the pot. "Why was one of them tied up in a giant soup pot? Dave, what kind of fucked up vore shit was your planet into?" he demands.

Dave closes his hand over the tooth and stands up to lean over the side of the cauldron with Karkat. Karkat keeps looking back and forth between Dave and the heap of nakodile bones in the bottom of the pot, incensed, and when Dave just shrugs Karkat throws up his hands in defeat. "Better him than me, man," Dave says. Karkat stomps away, fury having restored his usual crabby pep, and Dave surveys the lair entrance as he ambles over to Oriole. "Well, this looks...familiar. Giant cavern, check. Bottomless pit, with sharp rocks at the bottom - probably."

Oriole's wings shift restlessly, his shoulders hunched. Dave realizes his shoulders are doing the same thing and forces himself to relax. There's literally nothing to worry about, here. Hephaestus ditched ages ago, by his own admission. Denizens may be assholes, but they don't act like lying assholes.

Terezi blasts past them, clicking her canekind against the side of the gemstone door as she walks through it. "It does not appear to be locked. Which means we can lawfully enter the premises and investigate possible foul play at our leisure!" she says, kicking her foot over the wide threshold.
Dave starts forward. Karkat finishes pitching a fit over the cauldron of failed nakodile stew and stomps past him. "Hephaestus told us to come here and rob him blind. We have so much permission," Dave points out as he walks into the shadow of the door. Then he has to flash back a step, because the floor abruptly drops out in a steep cliff just past the point where Terezi swings her foot. The only light comes from the ambient red-orange light of LoHaC itself; even if they float down, once they're out of sight of the door they're gonna flashlights or some other heavyduty shit to see anything. Terezi and Karkat might be better off than Dave in that regard, but would it have killed Hephaestus to install some interior lights? Or have some kind of decorating scheme beyond 'dank pit into the fiery abyss'? Dave can't see from here how deep the pit goes, or how far in front of them the cave extends horizontally: it's shadows all the way through.

Oriole hangs back, though. Karkat catches up with an angry huff, his glare turning in so many directions as he passes through the door that Dave and Terezi both have to catch him by the arm before he stomps over the cliff. Oriole clears his throat before Karkat can get more than a few words into his furious close-call rant. "Kay, cool. Do I still need to be here? Because I'm not interested in finding out whether Hephaestus turned all the traps back on."

…Oh, for fuck's sake. Dave sticks out a hand and pushes it up under Karkat's chin so that his teeth clack together and he shuts up. Karkat swells with fury, but Dave turns back toward Oriole. "Traps? Please tell me this is a joke. Grimdark-lite me didn't have any trouble getting in."

Oriole's shoulders hunch further as he folds his arms. His orange-yellow eyes won't meet Dave's - which is great, since Dave doesn't think he's up for eye contact right now, either. "Yeah, because you and Hephaestus were both literally possessed." Oriole says, sounding vexed. As he speaks, he starts floating forward with reluctance written all over his feathers. "Denizens usually have loads of annoying puzzles and riddles and gauntlets and shit set up so you won't bother them until you've leveled up enough to be worth challenging." He pauses just as he reaches the door, then smacks his face. "Fuck, did I just info-dump? One of you, slap me if I start doing it again."

"As you wish!" Terezi says, cheerfully. "And of course, thank you for volunteering to help guide us through said traps."

Her smile is full of knives, and Oriole freezes, clearly realizing too late that he's wandered forward through the door. They're all on the thin strip of obsidian between the door and the drop-off; before Oriole can back out, Terezi pats him on the shoulder and steers him further in. Oriole throws Dave a desperate look.

Dave shrugs. "We're all in this together, dude," he says. It gets him a middle finger that isn't from Karkat - variety is the spice, and all that.

It's easy to be flippant about it before the door slams shut on them. The two halves of the door move soundlessly right up until their jagged edges clash and lock together. All four of them flinch at the sudden sound and the abrupt darkness - Karkat spins and loses his footing as his left leg flies out over the edge, and, moving almost totally blind, Dave seizes him by the wrist before he can do a flying pirouette off the handle into the abyss. It's an un-fucking-fathomably lucky grab, based only on Dave's vague memory of where Karkat stood before the light cut out, and the way the troll's eyes flash in the dark as he starts to fall, and Dave does not want to try that move again.

Luckily, in the next second, Terezi and Oriole light up like fireflies. They cast conflicting shades of teal and orange on the wall, and the light causes weird rave shadows on everyone's faces as Dave looks around. Dave has like, zero interest in helping them out by turning himself into a nighttime, but you know. Good job team.

Then light blooms on the wall, and when Dave finishes blinking, he sees a perfectly functional
lightbulb hanging in an old-timey metal lantern bell. It casts a warm yellow-white light over the landing. At least a dozen more lanterns jut out from grooves in the craggy black-brown walls, stretching out over the edge and wandering along the wall for quite some distance in a downward diagonal. The landing shudders once, and then starts emitting bursts of steam from the far edges with a high-pitched hiss and rattle. With a few squeals, a series of metal blocks slide out from the edge of the landing, overlapping with each other and smoothly forming a wide stairwell into the now-lit pit. Some of the steps have rivets the size of Dave's head bolting them together, and all of the stairs are as tall as Dave. These are not people stairs, goddammit.

But on the other hand, they are stairs, which is way more promising for a dungeon crawl than a dead drop. Look at this shitton of progress being made.

Karkat, still hanging with one foot dangling over the edge of the landing, twists free from Dave's grip and hops down to the next step in one go. He lands with a hollow metal bang, then glares back up at the rest of the group. "Well, let's get a fucking move on."

"Fun times," Oriole mutters. He casts one last longing look back at the door - and isn't that a problem for a future Dave - and then floats down, his wings canted to catch the air even though he obviously doesn't need them except to show off, anymore. Dave jumps down before Terezi can get any ideas. Because if there is one thing Terezi is, it is a troll who gets ideas.

They drop only five giant steps down before she stops them. "Hold on," Terezi says, her voice dead serious. She holds up a claw, then lets it curl, hesitating. "I smell something amiss," she says, but she sounds unsure. "On the next step. One of you toss a shoe down, or something."

"Shit," Oriole says. And then all three of these assholes look at Dave, like they expect him to peel off a shoe and belt it at the floor. As if he's gotta be responsible for whatever this shit is.

Whatever. If Hephaestus did trap this place out its ass, Dave's going to be so pissed. Dave rummages around in midair for a second, and finally pulls a spare sock that's missing its match out of wherever shit goes when he's not using it. Karkat starts to gripe, but Dave flicks the sock out over the next step and then squats to watch it fall. Oriole hunkers down beside him, feathers trailing over the edge, and they all wait while the sock flops through the air and lands with a pathetic puff of air.


The floor of the step drops out. They all crane their heads over the edge to watch as the heavy sheet of metal turns over and over and drops into the endless pit below. The rectangular frame of the step itself stays in place, leaving a wide gap between them and the next stair.

Terezi, leaning with her claws on her knees, looks back up at Dave pointedly. "…Oh, that asshole," Dave says, drawing his phone like it's a sword. "Hang on, I'm texting him."

TG: hephaestus
TG: dude
TG: seriously
HS: You've arrived at my smithy?
TG: no
TG: you have a shitton of traps set up dont you ass
TG: like legit
TG: the world is ending and you left your death traps running
HS: Yes, that was on purpose.
TG: motherfucker
TG: this is bullshit unlike any other bullshit i have ever experienced
TG: this is peak bullshit
HS: You need some kind of challenge.
HS: Otherwise what would be the point?
TG: you couldn't turn them off to speed up this process
HS: Don't be ridiculous.
HS: Why would you build a trap and not implement it?
HS: That is just silly.
TG: is this some kind of metaphor for my life
TG: are there puppets rigged up in the walls
TG: are you a daddy issues metaphor
TG: are the ghosts of adoptive juggalo children past going to haunt me throughout
HS: That is entirely up to your interpretation.
TG: copout
HS: It's your personal quest.
HS: What you take away from it is up to you.
HS: How do you want to grow?
HS: Who do you choose to be?
HS: What are you willing to sacrifice?
TG: i want your loot you ass
TG: why didn't you just take it with you when you left
TG: how hard would that have been
HS: I cannot touch the Hoard. I can only guard it, and release it to you.
HS: Technically grist is a gaming abstraction and does not actually exist on the physical plane -
TG: do you at least get a tax refund
HS: Stop that.
HS: Why do you say these things.
TG: because people like you keep giving me openings
TG: its too easy man
-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] has joined the chat! --
CG: DAVE STOP FUCKING AROUND. THIS IS JUST ABSURD.
TG: karkat no
CG: KARKAT YES! LISTEN UP, MOTHERFUCK.
HS: I am listening.
TG: dude
CG: DO YOU ACTUALLY THINK FOR ONE MOTHERFUCKING SECOND THAT THIS IS ACCEPTABLE?!
CG: WE HAVE TIME SATAN HIMSELF LITERALLY FUCKING REALITY WITH A RUSTY CHAINSAW, A MASSIVE ABOMINATION THAT NEEDS MORE SYLLABLES THAN 'LEVIATHAN' TO FULLY ENCAPSULATE ITS UTTER FUCKERY IN A SINGLE NAME UNDULATING LIKE THE MOTHER GRUB'S ASSHOLE, AND JACK 'LITERAL UNIVERSE CANCER' NOIR PISSING ON OUR HEADS!
CG: AND YOU THINK! THIS IS THE TIME! FOR SOME OSHA NON-COMPLIANT DEATH FACTORY HELL GAUNTLET?!
CG: FUCK OFF!
-- gallowsCalibrator [GC] has joined the chat! --
GC: H4V3 YOU B33N HOLD1NG TH4T ON3 1N FOR 4 LONG T1M3 NOW, OR…?
CG: SHUT UP! THE ONLY FUCKING WORDS I WANT TO SEE TYPED IN THIS MEMO ARE THE WORDS 'Yes, I will turn the traps off, no problem,' IN BLACK AND RED FONT FROM THE GUY WHOSE CHATHANDLE INITIALS ARE HS! NO EXCEPTIONS!
HS: I see.
CG: WELL?!
Karkat shrieks and stomps back along the step they're stuck on; his poor phone makes ominous creaking sounds as he clenches his claws into fists. He manages to stifle it by shoving part of a fist into his mouth, but agonized, furious wheezes continue to escape. Dave nudges Oriole in the side with an elbow. "Please tell me you remember the traps?"

Oriole straight faces it. "We're fucked."

Terezi shakes her head and steps up to the very edge of the step, teetering on her heels. She snaps her fingers, and her teal aura kicks back into gear, concentrated most strongly on her forehead between her eyes. "C'mon, cool kids. Let me see what there is to see," she says, confident and grim at the same time. "Oriole, we're on point."

Not all of the traps are death traps, per se.

Some of them are just annoying puzzles. And that's worse.

Definitely worse.

"He ripped this one off from some Final Fantasy bullshit, didn't he!" Karkat fumes, stamping his foot on and off the pressure sensitive plate so that the pale glow of the symbol carved into the metal repeatedly lights up, and the middle barrier of the bridge they're trying to perform weird puzzle shit to summon repeatedly slides in and out of the wall. Karkat started life angry and has only gotten pissier throughout the course of his life, but he has truly achieved new anger heights since Hephaestus blew him off about the trap thing. Terezi and Dave can only lighten the atmosphere with high quality banter so much when Karkat is simmering like this - Oriole doesn't even try - and Dave suspects that this may be a John-level problem. Until John finishes his whatever thing, they're stuck with the Karkat equivalent of an armed anger-warhead.

Terezi does her level best. She's a goddamn trooper, Dave will give her that - or else she just does not give a shit about Karkat's latest snit, which is also fair. "I think that, archetypally speaking, it is more likely that Final Fantasy took its inspiration from the collective subconscious of reality," she says, using her canekind to very carefully count the number of pressure plates between her and the one they have figured out through stupid amounts of trial and error will slide the last barrier out of the way and finish the bridge. Oriole floats over the third second of the bridge; he looks resigned to his fate as he floats over the block, vanishing from sight at periodic intervals as Karkat continues to tap his foot. "Also, I believe it's from Dragon Age!" she adds, in good cheer, as she reaches the fifth tile on the left. The last barrier slams into the wall with a note of finality - metal shutters close over the openings, and when Terezi eases her weight back off the pressure plate, the bridge stays intact and the barriers stay folded away.

Progress is a hell of a thing.

"Another one done. How long have we been down here?" Oriole mumbles. He waits as they all walk across the bridge past him, and only draws level with Terezi when she gives him a pointed not-look. She's been relentless about interrogating Oriole for details whenever she thinks she smells a new trap ahead of them, and despite Oriole's track record up til now - he's called traps correctly about
three times out of five - between the two of them they've probably saved everyone's asses from being handed to them the most since they decided to go through with this.

"Debatable," Dave mumbles back. They could start hurrying any time now, but hurrying would be a good way to wander face first into the next trap Hephaestus cooked up. He's just waiting for the puppet trap. It's gonna happen. Dave can feel it in his goddamn bones. By fuck - even if Bro himself had to somehow beat them down here to rig it up as a special favor for Hephaestus - it's gonna happen.

Apparently his mumble isn't mum enough, though, because everybody gives him a weird look. Karkat stops, eyes Dave incredulously, and says, "You're the time guy. You don't know -?"

Oh, right. That. "Nope. It's weird. I can barely feel Lord Doucheanocoe from down here. But also, I'm having to keep count of the seconds manually, and I only realized I needed to start doing that when we were halfway through the third puzzle." Dave scuffs his foot along the last section of the bridge, and then starts to hop down the spiral staircase to the next level. They've been descending almost straight down vertically for a while now, with only brief breaks for puzzles and traps, and this spiral extends far enough down that Dave can't see the landing below. Yeesh. "Best guess? Not more than forty five minutes," he adds. The estimate's as rough as sandpaper, but it's the best he has got. If time doesn't jolt forward elsewhere. If time is even running evenly for all the lands. If Dave isn't losing his time sense next. These ifs are huge - collectively about the size of fucking Jupiter - but explaining how many uncertainties are feeding into his estimate will just complicate shit.

They descend. After a while, Terezi gets antsy, her sharp canines audibly tapping on one another as she clicks her teeth. Then she swoops into the spiral stairwell, scoops Dave and Karkat up, and dangles them over the abyss as she and Oriole drop straight down alongside the wrought iron structure. It speeds shit up, sure, but Karkat thrashes the entire time, even when Terezi tries to pinch him in the side, and Dave's cape flaps up and plasters itself over his eyes so he can't see anything until he unwinds it from around his head.

The ominous red glow at the bottom of the endless pit brightens as they fall, and starts to resolve into clusters of red hot pools that make Dave's eyes ache. Then the pools sharpen further still, the light and heat radiating up around them, and Dave can make out the craggy edges of an opening all around them - the walls of the lair open up into a round mouth over a vast magma chamber. It's huge enough to contain a whole city, easy; instead, a path of thick, bubble-pocked black rock winds between simmering pools of magma. At the very center is an immense fortress shaped like an anvil, with a pair of blocky gears turning on either side to churn up the magma into a molten froth with a constant, rumbling drone. Two snake-like pipes rise up from the fortress's ass end, the metal glowing red with the heat.

Or - Dave's a little hazy on this one - it's an anvil shaped like a fortress. Either way, Hephaestus is an ass who built himself a lair inside of his lair. A layered lair. Goddammit.

"I have changed my mind. All this lava sauce is not my cup of scalding hot leaf fluid," Terezi says, after they touch down on the rocky, uneven path. Dave jams his foot in a pothole the size of a microwave and a chunk of rock breaks off with a dry snap. The heat from the close proximity to so much lava finally kicks in, and it's a doozy - Dave starts flapping his cape like a fan (because what the shit else are capes used for?) while Terezi droops over her cane, scrubbing irritably at the teal-tinted veneer of sweat on her face and under her arms. Karkat looks as uncomfortable as Dave, but he's too grumpy to ask for capeflaps, apparently. Out of all of them, only Oriole looks unbothered - until he notices everyone else breaking a bead. Then he looks pissed off.

"Let's just go inside," Dave says, as sweat drips near his eye and his shades threaten to slide down
his nose. He doubts the inside of a giant metal building will be any cooler, but the faster they do this shit, the less time heatstroke has to bite all of them in the ass. Once again, the door hangs open, waiting for them - and it snaps shut behind them once they're all through. So that's a 2X door problem they have, now. The gears rumbling outside echo hard through the walls here, causing a steady grinding sound that makes Dave's teeth ache and gives him an insta-headache. The air's stifling; if Equius had come along, they could just swim the rest of the way to the hoard. Despite the electric lanterns dangling from the high ceiling, Hephaestus didn't bother installing air conditioning. The ass.

The first room doesn't have much in it, except for the giant fucking hammers displayed on the walls. Each one towers over the room, all made of different materials - Dave spots one with a solid diamond hammer's head, and one that glows a creepy shade of green. One is pale lavender, with fluttering yellow ribbons and extra sharp knobs that glitter in the light, and another is deep green with black and white spikes jutting out where the claw should be. Two of the display pedestals sit empty near the far end of the hall. It's like a stern, lawnwork-loving suburban father figure's idea of a tool-themed trophy room; it fills Dave with a deep sense of kitsch and unease.

Before they go another five feet, Terezi points her cane at the wall, nearly clotheslining Oriole across the chest. When she sticks her cane out and waves it around, a line of thin slots opens up to unleash a barrage of metal javelins. They shoot so hard that they lodge themselves deep in the wall opposite, and don't stop firing until they run out of javelins - Dave can hear the rattle of an empty machine gun/javelin launcher wheeze and click inside the walls.

And then the next room has an obstacle course lined with channels of lava for atmospheric lighting. Because why the hell not? God, Hephaestus must have been bored. The dude apparently had nothing better to do with his time except make up dumb puzzles and traps, and that's sad. That's really sad. Dave might shed a single ironic tear over it, if he ever gets the chance - and if he ever stops being pissed that they have to go through this at all. This shit is just unnecessary, and it is totally a reflection of his early childhood spent with a paranoid, puppet-launching parental unit. There's literally no other logical explanation.

"You know what would make this easier? If we had Jade or John around to poof our flimsy asses into the fuckall dimension so we could bypass all this fuckery. Why did we wind up going through the Ninja fucking Warrior death course with the team of people who can't teleport, again?" Karkat demands, when they reach the part in the obstacle course where they're supposed to climb a straight vertical wall to reach the key for the next stage. Once the motion sensor kicks in, though, the floor drops out to reveal a magma death trap below if you fail the jump. It's rendered moot by virtue of Terezi's mere existence, but it's the point that matters.

The last section of the obstacle course involves a bunch of razor-sharp blades rotating around several cylinders at top speed, with no room left to fly over or around the wall of spiky death. Dave slows time and yanks everyone around through the gaps; Terezi nearly crushes his hand with an unrelenting grip, Oriole makes the whole thing as awkward as physically possible thanks to his massive wing problem, and Karkat insists on crawling as low to the floor as possible, so they have to scoot around for an extra thirty seconds finding a floor-only route. Karkat loses a tiny tuft of hair right off the top when Dave miscalculates, thinks they've safely ducked under the last blade, and lets time go a little too early, but Dave zips his mouth shut. Karkat grabs the top of his head, suspicion written all over his face, but his hair too naturally messy for him to find the missing chunk. Thank god. Terezi can't keep a straight face, but she doesn't say anything. Terezi grinning at Karkat in a highly suspect, shit-eating manner is common enough that Karkat just glares back, and that's that. Dave's in the clear.

And finally, they walk into a room so large that Dave thinks for a second that they've walked right
back out of the anvil by mistake. The high, vaulted metal archs of the ceiling have tall windows covered with wrought-iron, diamond-shaped bars. Lava flows freely along each side of the room and under the thin layer of steel mesh that serves as a floor. Their shoes are literally inches from melting right through the bars into the molten rock rolling underfoot. And in the center of the room, raised up on a heavy metal platform, is a chess set with the pieces constructed not out of carapaces (which - hell no, Dave wouldn't be able to look WV in the eye again) but instead metal sculptures in the shape of underlings and consorts. Copper wire nakodiles make up the ranks of the pawns on both sides. The rooks are dark metal giclopses, the knights platinum basilisks, the bishops golden acherons. Obsidian lich queens with fanned crowns and iron joints stand in the queen's spot, each the size of an Arch Deaconstructor, and jet tarrasques stand in for kings.

Terezi loses her shit. Only a little bit, but it makes Dave flinch when Terezi flings her cane down on the ground with a sharp clatter. "And this one's from Harry Potter! Plagiarism! It's copyright violations all the way down!" she yells, yanking a package of bright red chalk out of her pocket, ripping off the cover with her teeth, and flinging herself down to start outlining the board. "This has gone too far. Nobody touch anything! This is a crime scene!"

It occurs to Dave that the heat might be getting to them. Just a little. Oriole groans and buries his face in his hands. Karkat just stares, jaw dropped, while Terezi continues to cite federal copyright law at the top of her lungs.

"Fuck it, I'll check if John or Jade is free yet," Dave says. No one acknowledges him except Karkat, who can only shake his head in disbelief. He stares at Dave for a moment, and then back at Terezi, mute.

TG: john
TG: yo eb you alive
TG: its not really urgent were just lazy fucks who dont want to spend another half hour playing death twister chess to solve a puzzle
TG: maybe its a little urgent
TG: on account of tzs losing her damn mind over copyright shit
TG: husbando?
TG: …
TG: be careful man

TG: jade
TG: you here yet
TG: i will take the silence as a no
TG: shit

Plan Harleybert is…not a go. Dave sticks his hands in his pockets and slumps his weight to one side, shaking his head when Karkat throws him a pleading look. "Nothing. Sorry," he says, and the two of them go back to watching Terezi float upside down over the exposed magma floor around the edges of the board to outline the rest of the square. When she rubs one chalk stick down to a nub, Terezi chuck the used nub into the fiery brimstone shit and starts a new one. She shows no sign of slowing down any time soon.

"They better be okay," Karkat says, weirdly quiet. Dave does him the solid bro courtesy of not saying anything asshole-ish in response. Sometimes he's an asshole without consciously trying, though, so on the off chance this is one of those times, he just nods and gives a tiny shrug. It's hard to think of anything happening off LoHaC is real - there's something muffling and closed off about
Hephaestus's lair. Like they're isolated from the rest of the world. Dave can't even remember the last time he checked the group memos; usually he checks so often it's more a compulsion than a bad habit, flipping from the memo to text messages and back to the memo even when he knows it's too early for anyone to have responded in the past 1.2 seconds. Down here, he can barely think through the heat.

Terezi needs another two minutes to finish outlining the board. When she reaches them again, she flings down the last stub of chalk and pants. Then she picks up her cane, taps it a few times for good measure, and looks up, her expression toothy but satisfied.

Well, uh. Good for her. Dave jerks his chin at Oriole. "Fuck Harry Potter chess. We're flying."

"Good call," Terezi says, her voice droll once again. Just one weird chalk tantrum, and she's back to normal. God damn, they really need to hook Karkat up with a stress-relieving hobby like that, because yelling just seems to wind him up more.

"As if we've got time to do anything else," Oriole adds. He's looking particularly floaty, no matter how much that seems to bother him, so Dave decides to give Terezi a break and grabs Oriole's arm. Oriole makes a sound halfway between a bird warble and gargling, but Dave waits him out. After a long, significant staredown, he throws up his hands, slings Dave's arm around his own neck, and picks him up. The dude goes full princess carry. Dave nearly inhales an entirely mouthful of orange feathers that appear to be sprouting straight out of Oriole's shoulders, and instantly regrets all his life choices. The problem with trying to one-up a version of yourself - you look like an ass no matter who wins. Once Terezi gives Karkat a fresh noogie and hauls him, squirming, over one shoulder, the two fly over the chessboard in one quick hop. Easy as pie. Dave doesn't know if these metal chess pieces would have moved to block them from crossing if he and Karkat tried to walk it -

But honestly. Who is Dave kidding? Of course they would have.

Oriole dumps Dave on his ass like a tool as soon as they're through the door. Dave pauses time with a friction-spark jolting through his sternum, flails a little, and rights himself so he can land on a knee and a foot instead, the bone of his kneecap grinding hard into the hard black, smoothed stone of the floor. Terezi drops Karkat a foot off the ground, and Karkat flies forward a little with eyes the size of dinner plates before landing in a short run, arms out to either side.

Dave glances around while he's still crouched on the floor. This room is suspiciously free of weird puzzle shit, and extra long besides - more of a hallway than a room, and a pretty length hallway at that. Which means weird trap shit will be bounteous as shit. It's divided into three long lines, with channels of lava as thick as the path itself flanking them on the left and right. Unlike the chess room where the magma rode high right under their feet, this path juts high above the level of the lava, which churns in restless waves about ten feet below on either side. A complex arrangement of gears, levers, and pulleys cover the walls, creaking and turning and spinning and spewing huge bursts of steam into the air - as if the heat wasn't bad enough, and humidity was needed to achieve maximum hellishness. Two transparent pipes suck up the lava at the far end; the suction forms tiny whirlpools in the magma, while the pipes themselves carry the molten rock up through the ceiling and out of sight. He's just about to stand and start dawdling at a snail's pace while Terezi and Oriole start bickering over possible trap placement, when -

Clang!

Dave stiffens, and looks back over his shoulder.

The obsidian lich queen stares back through the chess room door with a glimmer of light in her baleful ruby of an eye. She's way too goddamn huge to fit through the door - her fanned crown alone
dwarfs the door frame. If she starts punching through the wall, though -

She doesn't. Instead, the lich queen piece lifts her head out of the way, and the smaller chess pieces burst through in a flood of clanking, shrieking metal. The nakodile pawns slap around aimlessly on their wide feet, then get shoved aside so the gleaming metal rooks, knights, and bishops can storm through. The basilisk knights gleam silvery white as they wriggle over the sides of the path, crawling along the sides just above the level of the lava. Dave can't tell if they're creepy, animated steampunk sculptures or if they've been real, metal-themed underlings loitering on a chessboard all this time.

Whichever it is, they're fucking pissed.

The king sculpture comes last of all, dragging heavy steel claws along the ground, its massive jaw hanging open to reveal knife-like teeth the size of swords. It's not as huge as the queen, but its weight causes each stomp of its feet to leave massive cracks in the path.

"Uh oh," Dave says, usefully.

Karkat lunges at him and drags Dave upright by the wrist. "Running! Now!" he yells, sprinting down the path. Dave gets his feet under him and bolts after the troll. Oriole streaks overhead. Terezi flies in low, keeping pace with Dave without touching the stone, and she turns her head back to smell the army of chess pieces better, her hair flying into her face as she concentrates. Her cane turns over in her claws once - twice - but god, Dave does not want to fight these shits right now. As long as nobody gets any terrible hero-y ideas and tries to fight them alone, Dave won't feel obligated to hang back and help fight, too.

They make it halfway. Not bad, all things considered.

And then it all goes to complete and utter shit. Most of the chess pieces are slower once Dave draws Karkat and Terezi into his running beat, but the acherons cover a huge amount of ground in a single stride. Then Terezi breaks Dave's groove, jerking to a stop and whipping around - she tries to grab Karkat - misses his sleeve by the barest inch - yells, "Wait -!

Dave doesn't miss. He hits the brakes hard, turning his feet and skidding to a stop so fast he probably shears off half the sole left on his shoes, and yanks Karkat to a stop by the back of his jacket.

Karkat stumbles with a squawk as his collar digs into his throat. His foot, however, lands square on a section of the path -

That depresses under his weight.

And starts to beep. It's barely audible under the metallic groans and screeching of the chess pieces' rusty joints, but the three of them all hear it. Karkat freezes, staring down at his foot as though it has personally betrayed him.

"Well. This smells like…a predicament. Dave, have I mentioned recently that your denizen is particularly douchetacular?" Terezi asks, her tone light and obviously forced, now. She swipes a strand of hair out of the corner of her mouth, her breath coming hard as she kneels to smell the trap. Dave turns to keep an eye on the approaching horde, but he can feel Karkat start to tremble with the effort of holding still. If the pressure plate just triggered a trap that will block off the path when they start to move again - inconvenient, but whatever. But nothing has happened immediately, and if the rest of this path is full of mines or some shit -

Dave's gonna need to run real goddamn fast. "No, but god, I feel you," Dave says, fervently. "Any idea what that trap does?"
Terezi lifts her head, looking grim. She braces with her cane and pushes up out of her crouch, letting her head hang low for a second. "No," she says, clipped. "And that horde is going to hit us any second now. So we'll just have to wing it! If we make it fast."

"Consider it done, TZ." The path shudders hard as the acherons and giclopses hammer on it, closing in fast. The more they move, the more steam pours from them in huge vents, and the clouded heat of the room only gets worse. Dave feels like he's walking in a sauna. A lava sauna. A lava sauna that is about to get flattened by a horde of metal monsters. He raises a hand, fingers ready and waiting to snap and send his turntables flying if need be. Karkat appears to have clamped his jaw shut for the first time in his life, and doesn't say a word as Terezi and Dave each wrap an arm around him. The troll's tremors from the effort to hold still and avoid pushing the trigger further have only gotten worse.

"We need to keep moving forward. If it involves the ceiling or the floor, we just need to keep moving, no matter what," Terezi says. Overhead, Oriole has finally realized their current state of boneage, and circles back on orange wings with a loud swear. He's not gonna backtrack in time to help with the immediate problem, but it's the thought that counts. "If it's a mine or something similar - well. Hope you're not overly attached to that leg, Karkat!"

Karkat snaps. "I like both my fucking legs equally, and I like them right where they fucking are!" he screeches. "And if one of them pops off, I will personally pick it back up and smack you upside the nugbone with it -"

Oh boy. Dave rolls his shoulder, and feels it pop. One of the acherons swings a massive, lumbering trunk of an arm to bash a giclops out of its path, knocking the underling into the wall where it slides down into the magma with a shrieking hiss, and fuck they are about to get royally squashed. Dave chants a countdown, too fast for either troll to keep up. "Right. Threetwoonego-"

He wrenches time as close to a stop as he dares, and nearly drops right then and there. He forces himself forward through the sudden agony, so he won't be more dead weight for Terezi to drag, but it's a close call. The three of them rocket forward, Dave and Karkat running while Terezi braces to drag them up if the floor stops being a thing. Compared to the slow crawl of the chess pieces, they're lightning fast, and Dave holds time like that until he sees the room through a pulsing haze of wobbling fog. One foot in front of the other, and even that stops mattering once Terezi pulls them off the ground. The pressure plate rises up a fraction of a fraction of an inch, and finishes only when the three of them are a good fifteen feet away and clear.

Problem one: the trap explodes, and as it turns out? Fifteen feet isn't good enough. The explosion hits them hard in the backs, propelling them forward in a spray of painful chips of stone.

Problem two, the problem that really leaves them up shit creek without a paddle: Dave forgot to keep track of the goddamn basilisks. Oriole shouts a warning, but between the explosion and the roar of the chess pieces, Dave's lucky to hear it at all. Terezi starts ascending rapidly, darker teal streaking down the back of her shirt - Karkat's got similar bits of shrapnel scattered across his back, his face screwed up as he starts healing it. Dave can't even feel if his back hurts, compared to the pain of meddling with time that sloppily.

And then the first basilisk skitters up the far wall, and leaps. It plows into Terezi with a loud clang! of metal limbs and joints crashing into each other. The impact shakes Dave hard, clearing out the haze of pain - Karkat rips blood out of his own back, and sends it pelting in tiny sharp blades at the basilisk's milky opal eyes - the second basilisk piece launches up at an angle from the side of the path, knocking them further forward but also crushing the three of them in a tangle against the first -

They hit the path and skid in a jumble of legs and hot metal. Dave gets tossed free by a kick from a
scrambling basilisk foot, smacking hard and rolling with his arms up to protect his head. He flashes back upright in an instant; his head spins from the sudden tumble, but he fixes on the first flash of teal that he sees under a shitton of platinum. "Shit!" he says, drawing a sword and darting toward the two basilisks pile on top of Terezi. He doesn't know which sword - it's heavy and mostly white, with a timetable record embedded in the hilt - but he brings it down on the nearest basilisk's foreleg in a single slice, and it cuts through so clean it's like the basilisk is made of butter. The underling rears back with a hiss of steam that makes Dave's eyes water. But then the basilisk stumbles back, and Dave sees that its opal eyes have been shattered by tiny red stars. He cuts through two of its remaining legs with a snicker-snack, and the underling collapses onto its belly, thrashing uselessly and venting more steam in a panic.

Problem three: when Dave spins around and jams his sword into the back of the second basilisk's neck, Terezi still hasn't moved. She doing the exact opposite of moving, as a matter of fact, which in more physical terms resembles laying facedown with blood spreading under her hair. "Ter-" Dave breaks off, because this basilisk isn't newly blinded and bucks to try to knock Dave off before he can finish sawing through its steel spine. He dodges the crown of barbed wire thorns that stick out from the thing's head, and stabs his sword down through the metal joint of its shoulder to make it cut that shit out. It limps with a hard list to the left, and Dave hacks off the other front leg so that the basilisk can only scramble backward on its hind legs before Dave plunges his sword through the back of its neck again. This time, the blade stabs through. He scrambles off the paralyzed metal enemy and flashsteps to Terezi. When he touches her face, she feels cold, but that's normal. "Oh, fuck. Fuck. Wake up!" There's no way - absolutely no way - that wasn't them being heroic, it was just dumb -

Terezi groans, and shifts her head to the side, her forehead scraping against the rock and strands of blood-sticky hair clinging to the floor and her cheek in a teal mess. Almost all of it is coming from her nose, which looks like it'll never run straight again. Her right eye looks horribly swollen already - Dave fractured his eye bone a long ass time ago, and it doesn't look like Terezi busted it that badly, but the bruises are gonna be nasty. "Can't smell a damn thing," Terezi croaks, dazed. She spits out a wad of phlegm and blood, and Dave hastily helps her upright. She touches her nose with a ginger claw, grimacing. "Shit. How do I make thish sight thing work without a nose, again? Where'sh Kar-"

"Hey! Can you giant fucks fuck off for three seconds!"

Dave spins around. He can't see Karkat anywhere, but fucking hell, can he hear the guy. The pair of golden acherons lumber along the path, dangerously close, gaining speed as they target Dave and Terezi again with pinprick white-gold eyes. He needs to move Terezi, fast, and unplug her goddamn nose. Beyond the acheron underlings, the king tarrasque piece looms by the very edge of the path, raising its heavy foot for another step. There's no Karkat, though, and that is incredibly concerning.

Oriole arrows down out of the sky. "Hang on - shit!" he yells, as a giclops tries to bat him aside. "Get out of the way!" He swoops down and around, wings folded in tightly so he's less of a target, and a giclops actually topples off the side of the path in a clumsy lunge that forces Oriole to spiral out of the way again with a curse. He keeps trying to fly to the tarrasque piece, for some reason…

Oh. Dave stops looking at the giant chess monsters, and looks down at the edge of the path, and finally sees the pair of tiny grey claws clinging to the edge. Karkat's just dangling there.

The tarrasque underling slams its foot down, and that entire shelf of the path shatters under its weight. "FUCK!" Karkat shrieks, as the rock all caves in and starts to fall toward the lava below. Oriole swings in one last time - but the wide tarrasque piece is falling too with an immense groan of warping metal, and -

Dave runs. "No no no no no -" he says, unsure of what his volume is doing, sword forgotten as he
half-runs, half-claws his way toward the breach. He flashsteps to slip around the acherons - *they're too close to Terezi, shit* - 

And a section of the floor depresses under Dave's weight. He's running too fast to just *stop*. "*No!*" he screams, frustration and panic choking him, and when he slams time to a stop to escape the blast radius, he doesn't know if it's the explosion or the fireworks of agony or the nearest acheron that knocks him flat.

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TY: If you want my hoard, get over here and remove this thing from my property. Now.

EB: Whoa, what -

TY: I mean it. Right now.

EB: What thing, though?!

TY: **DO IT.**

EB: Okay, fine! Jeez!

*What the heck is his damage?* he thinks at the Breeze.

BE: it could be literally anything :T he's a pretty cranky dude

BE: but...if he's actually bothering to call you, it might actually kinda sorta be an emergency :( 

Understatement of the year. John shakes his head and scrubs the side of his face with a hand, already feeling stretched in twenty different directions at once. A ginormous part of him kinda wants to tell Typhheus to deal with whatever-the-problem-is by himself, but ignoring his own personal giant boss monster might not be a good plan. At all. In the slightest. At best, it's the denizen equivalent of a prank call – at worst, it's serious business time. "Uh, guys? I think I need to go check something out on my old land for a minute," he says, feeling with the Breeze for whoever's physically closest to him. **Also, why is he the only denizen who's consistently an asshole?** He can't really count Cetus, all things considered.

BE: technically they're all assholes. in their own way. actually, the more glitched and damaged a session gets, the more likely they are to make exceptions to try to fix it

BE: and basically, this is about as broken as a not-doomed session can get...

BE: this is probably him being...helpful! in the rudest possible way

John shakes his head, grumbling. He needs to find Gamzee on LoWaS anyway; might as well suck it up and do it! Karkat comes over to try to persuade John to rescue him from Team Dave (which is secretly kiiinda funny) but John…feels uneasy. Like. Down in his goiter, or something obscure like that! Then his stomach starts to knot up, which John understands a heck of a lot better than strange goiter signals, and he watches Terezi reel Karkat away with a forlorn look once Karkat gets distracted enough not to see it. If he did, he'd probably march right back over. And for some reason, John *really* doesn't think that's a good idea. The Breeze weaves through his hair, twitching it this way and that until it's messy enough to meet the Breeze's exacting standards for 'windblown,' and John takes it as a quiet comfort.

Then it yanks on his shirt, threatening to pull it up over his head, and John rolls his eyes. He ambles
over to the scratch kids, watching Dirk as he does. Roxy and Jake look up when John approaches, their eyes lit with enthusiasm; after all the craziness of the past day(s), the promise of jungle adventures has them jiggling with anticipation. Jane's more subdued, her expression a little more bleak in a way that John sympathizes with to the max, but she nods to John.

Dirk stares at the floor like he wants to carve right through it and drop into the lava ocean below. John can't see his eyes and Dirk expresses less than Dave, but he gets it. He's been there. There's something really, really embarrassing and horrifying about having something else take over your brain and make you hurt people. Especially people you care about. Then it's *extra embarrassing*, and no amount of everyone forgiving you can make the guilt go away, or less worried that it might happen again if you mess up. "You guys need to go to LoFaF?" he asks, to make sure. Dirk's head twitches up half an inch, and the warm light of LoHaC hits his face in a way that John can almost see a tight frown on his features.

Jake hunkers down beside Dirk, and then Roxy bounces down on his other side, while Jake starts chattering. "Seems like that's the plan, for now! Not sure how much Dirk can handle, at the mo." He playfully elbows Dirk, who deliberately slumps his weight onto Roxy to knock her off balance. "If hunting through around a mysterious wilderness to wrangle snakes is what's called for, I'm sure we're up to the challenge! I've always wanted to be a gentleman adventurer," Jake adds, shooting a pair of finger pistols with a determined grin and a wink.

Roxy slumps back onto Dirk – except she pushes off with her feet in a weird frog hop, and the momentum knocks all three of them over like dominos. "Kind of hard to jump into the kerfuffle when you can't fly through the void of space," Jane says, jerking her chin up toward the Medium with a wry look she reserves for John. She reaches down to haul everybody up and stop the tiny skirmish of play-shoving; Roxy latches onto Jane's arm when it gets close enough, and whoops with delight when Jane successfully lifts her up.

Uh, yeah. Stick these guys in a room and they'll probably bounce right through the walls! Between the adrenalin and Dirk's return and the end of the world, they're on the edge of hyperactive, and John does *not* know where they're getting all this energy from. "Weird how that works, right?" he jokes back, and Jane sniff-snorts at him with mock-indignation. Dirk rises, his movements stiff like he's straining not to wobble, and Jake follows suit. He's already fiddling with his grappling hook dealios, which are so cool. John can fly, but swinging around like Spiderman is objectively cool, no matter what. "Don't worry, I've got you guys."

The Breeze gusts around John and swoops them up with laughter that unravels John down to his bones. They're probably not safe from the Lord of Time while they're air, John thinks, as he unspools the scratch kids and flies them up and away from LoHaC – but it feels safer not to be totally solid. He can dodge any cracks faster while they're all incorporeal. Skaia glistens at the center of everything, all its clouds adrift and awhirl. Its? Hers? The Lord of Time lets out another piercing, chattering scream, and Leviathan bellows right back, and Skaia does absolutely nothing interesting whatsoever as John swooshes them around to reach LoFaF.

John doesn't know what he expected – something? Some sign in the clouds that Skaia knows the end is here? One final transformation of the Battlefield? Cool apocalypse junk? Visions of carapacians playing whack-a-mole? Anything?!

Then again, he never was the cloud guy. There's only one girl to call when it comes to weird cloud stuff! Jade better get here soon…

Because her land looks like it's seen better days.
The fact that the Land of Frost and Frogs looks as intact as it does, considering how super blown up it got last session, wows John, honestly. Iridescent auroras shimmer and ripple across the land in erratic, radiant whorls. But a whole chunk of planet hangs loose near the southern pole, which is unsettling to the nth degree – the closer they get, the more John gets a sense of scale for how big the chunk is compared to the rest of the planet. A huge triangular wedge that reaches almost to the equator drifts along under LoFaF, the exposed brown rock of the crust scraping and grinding between the uneven edges that hold it roughly in the cavity it used to fill. John brushes a windy hand through the clouds as the Breeze ushers them down, and feels white, fine grained volcanic ash and frost and something pale, pale yellow-white stick between his fingers, three very different sensations that combine to make one terrible sensation. John sticks a mental tongue out – because holy crap he does not want to taste these clouds! – and lets the ash slip through his fingers. The Breeze sighs along with him, and the whole cloud blows apart and scatters as they drop into open air.

And oh boy. Hephaestus was not kidding about changing the name. John would call this the Land of Slush and Snakes, because under the obscuring prism of the auroras and the clouds, almost all the frost is gone. Wide-veined rivers and extensive wetlands spread out where snowy forests and glaciers used to swallow the landscape, and the dense rainforests that survived getting frozen are in full bloom. Despite the detached chunk of planet hanging out and doing its own thing, for the most part LoFaF looks vibrantly alive. The volcano due north pumps out a whole bunch of pale ash and glows with a boiling red light, but Jade's land grows in spite of it; all the trees are kicking up pollen in congesting droves. Pale purple hummingbirds cluster in charms around red blossoms the size of boulders; a group of them swarm through the air as John and the scratch kids descend, and the Breeze swirls the birds around in a loop before rushing them down toward a clearing in the northern hemisphere.
AA: down there! :)
EB: where there?
EB: let me guess, this isn't current you.
AA: heheheh
EB: is - is there a giant man on top of that volcano?
AA: you should probably leave him be
EB: well i mean, i'm already on my way to bug typhoeus… :P
EB: where's echidna? i could make it a full set.
AA: from what i recall she is inside the volcano
EB: darn.
AA: you might still have a chance around now though
AA: i think meeting all the denizens is a very fun goal ;)
EB: when is now?
AA: ohhh actually
AA: never mind
EB: what happened now?
AA: many things
AA: but it will be okay!
EB: can you at least tell me if i'm coincidentally choosing to land somewhere near you?
AA: the answer to that would be…yes!
EB: thanks aradia.
AA: heheh any time
EB: eyyyyyyy!
AA: eyyyyyyyy :)

The Aradia perched on the roots of an upended tree shoots John a finger pistol as he solidifies everyone. From the looks of things, when the snow melted, this turned into a big pile of slush and mud, and the trees on the incline sagged and fell over because they were too top-heavy. Even though she's high above the mud, Aradia's shoes and socks are splattered with mud. John hesitates before popping Jane, Jake, Dirk, and Roxy down on the wide trunk of Aradia's tree, but after this staying out of the muck is their problem! John's just gonna keep flying, thanks very much. Lalonde Labs now resides further up the valley, surrounded by thin streams of water that spread out in a shallow, muddy delta - two wide branching trees dwarf the labs, curving out and around either side of the main building and bob large flowers enticingly near the lobby entrance. The doors are shut, but John can see a troll in a white lab coat racing around the lobby, trying to catch what appears to be a giant blue iguana.

Sburb is so weird.

"Aaand we're here!" John announces.

Roxy starts sneezing with a vengeance the second she has a solid nose to sneeze with. Oops. Seconds after speaking, John inhales one breath of unfiltered LoFaF air and spontaneously develops pollen allergies, which causes him to come as close to hacking up a lung through his nose as he's ever been in his life. The air's thick with growth and humidity and pollen; the Breeze is the only fresh air for miles. "We have masks for that," Aradia says, beaming at Roxy and holding out a white facemask that's hooked on her pinky claw. "It's growing season, around here! Welcome to the snake planet!"

'Thanks,' Roxy signs - it's basically looks like she's blowing a kiss, instead of Dave's usual thumbs up, so she must have picked it up from somebody else. Jake rubs at his watering eyes, and Aradia starts tapping Zyrtec into her palm. The package already looks half empty.
Which bodes not-good for them! John's definitely not hanging around. Nope. "We need all hands here that we can muster," Aradia says, passing around the communal Zyrtec so each of the scratch kids can take some. Her already curly hair has achieved twice its old volume thanks to the power of humidity.

"Really? I thought you said you were okay here?" John asks. Please say yes, please say yes, he starts chanting internally; he really doesn't want to go snake hunting. He hasn't seen any snakes yet, but the mud alone is putting him off. The super high probability that Sburb might recreate mosquitoes on LoFaF for the sole purpose of annoying everyone haunts John. And the longer he lingers here, the more restlessness bites at his heels. Forget whatever Typhues wants on LoWaS; John wants to see Gamzee ASAP. He hasn't vanished for this long in ages, and it's making John nervous.

Aradia flaps a claw at him, with a knowing grin tweaking her lips. "We are! Now that we have an entire lab, a few adventurous lusii, and some eager new recruits on hand, gathering up all the ecto-snake samples we need for this genome project should be a snap! As soon as Rose brings the recipe, we can start feeding them through in the right order." A flurry of movement from the low-growing bushes that the fallen tree has half-flattened interrupts Aradia, and John and Jane both tense up as a blue iguana bursts out, frantically thipping its tongue as it sprints after a leggy green frog. It trips over a tangle of tree roots and…apparently gets stuck like that, frantically thrashing its feet as the frog flops to safety. Aradia shakes her head and sighs, then floats off her seat and plucks the consort up out of the roots. "The iguanas are trying, but they're…not the brightest consorts. They're mostly silly, and don't realize we're after snakes now," she says, giving the iguana a quick pat on the head before it takes off splashing through shallow, muddy water.

John rubs the back of his neck. "Are any consorts bright?" he asks, deeply curious.

Aradia looks him dead in the eye. "That is the best question anyone has ever asked, John."

Whelp. "Awesome!" John claps his hands together, and starts flying away from the tree trunk. Fortified by allergy meds, Jake rolls up his pants around his knees and jumps right in the mud with an ecstatic whoop, with Roxy hot on his heels. So looks like they totally have things under control here! "But, uh…if you guys need a quick evac, let me know, okay?"

Jane nods. "We will." Then she vaults off the tree trunk, using her forkkind as a pivot, and lands knee deep in the water. A new frog with glossy purple skin springs out of the water and hops toward the low bushes with a deep croak -

And something snaps it out of the air mid-hop. Roxy lets out a croaking 'yeep!' of her own, while the frog twitches and stills in the snake's mouth. It's a weird looking snake - about fifteen inches long, with ruffled, reddish-orange scales that look especially pointy around its head. It stops to get a better grip on the frog, and another snake with charcoal grey and white scales darts out of the bush to try to steal the frog. The red snake pulls back with a hiss, jaws snapped open to reveal sharp teeth.

Aradia leans down and snags the red snake by the very end of its tail, whistling cheerfully as it immediately flails around to try to lunge at her. Its body is just a little too short to reach her when she holds it at arm's length, though, and she captchalogues it with a twist before it can get worked up. "The red ones have a nasty bite," she tells the scratch kids. Jake nods so wildly he needs to fix his glasses. "The greenish yellow ones are much nicer. Yellow, brown, white, and blue can be feisty, but they haven't poisoned anyone yet, so you should be fine! Just grab any you see and they'll probably come in handy."

Dirk's the last one left on the trunk, and John - hesitates for a second before taking back off on the Breeze. It's not a good idea to poke a Strider when they're not paying attention (Dave always leaps half a foot in the air) so John floats back down with a cough and waves his hand in front of Dirk's
Aaand now John has no idea what he even wanted to say. 'I sympathize with your brain stuff,' would make it weird. 'So, does your brainwashing have a name or anything?' would make it three times as weird, especially if the answer is yes. "Brains suck, huh," he says, after considerable pondering.

Dirk nods, and then jumps off, somehow landing on the one dry spot of land just ahead of Jake and Roxy's determined charge into the water. Jane slogs after them, her specibus slung over one shoulder, while Aradia drifts off in a different direction, raising a hand to wave goodbye to John as he starts to fly away.

"John!"

Never mind. Again. John flips around, and spies Doctor Lalonde striding toward him through the water. She's wearing super fancy black rainboots that reach her thighs, a sharp-cut white coat, hot pink gloves, and a wide-brimmed hat. John has no idea how she isn't dying from the humidity like that, but apart from the wavy mess her hair is turning into, she looks perfectly comfortable. John casts a look back over his shoulder at the sky, and then flies down to meet her. "Oh. Sorry, I was about to head off to my planet. Did you need something?" he asks.

Rue's face does a thing. It goes away too fast for John to identify it as more than a thing, but it's enough for him to notice it. Then she adjusts the brim of her hat with a wry smile. "...Nothing. I simply wanted to remind you to take care of yourself." Then - "You're going alone?"

"No. Gamzee's there already." Rue's eyebrows attempt to abandon her face and ascend to god tier with the force of her skepticism. On the one hand, John feels the need to defend Gamzee - buuut, on the other hand...Gamzee. John tries to reassure her with a smile, but Rue continues to scan his facesearchingly. "Good luck with the snakes!" he says, after the silence starts to stretch too long, and gives Doctor Lalonde a tiny wave.

She closes her eyes for a long second, then opens them, her smile much more pronounced. "Do be careful," she says. She's gone all super formal with her words, in the way that always makes Rose's expression go flat before she starts sniping back. Rose always thinks her mom has some ultra-secret, passive-aggressive, ulterior motive, even when she's saying stilted but nice things. "Telling Rose and Dave to be careful is an exercise in futility, but that's the price of having strong, contrary children. All I can ask is that you come back safely." Then Rue pauses again. Her face is doing the thing again, hesitant and concerned all at once.

John hesitates, and then smiles at her. And he can feel that it's a weird smile, all wobbly and watery and other w-words. "Uh. Yes, Mom," he says, stuttering over his words. At his silent murmur, the Breeze dissolves him, wafting him back up into the sky in a cool gale. "Bye!" John calls back, and the wind carries it back down to Doctor Lalonde for him.

It takes John longer to reach the Land of Wind and Shade than it should. He slows the Breeze with a wordless nudge once they're clear of LoFaF, and the wild, whipping gale calms before it nudges him back, curious. John doesn't say anything, and after another minute of slow flying the Breeze stops pestering him for an explanation. A quiet coil of cold air streams through John, since he doesn't have a body to feel an uneasy chill with, but he can't pin down what worries him as they round Skaia and LoWaS slides into view.
It looks...deceptively peaceful. Heavy, dull grey clouds dot the land in sparse clumps, but for the most part the sky is clear. John can see the glittering, pulsating blue rock of LoWaS; a few of the taller brown plateaus and mountains are tipped with cyan rock, while the low points are a deep cobalt. There's no black oil blotting the landscape or clogging the pipes anywhere, leaving a bunch of dried up lake and riverbeds where oil used to pool. Which seems like it should be a good sign! But at the same time, John can't see any signs of movement as he scans around for Typheus's palace.

Oh. No salamanders. John pours through a village of wide pipe houses that emit off-key music as his winds pass through and around the openings, but there's no sign of the little yellow guys. Their fields of turquoise mushroom are overgrown and untended, and the thin, smooth trees that along rocky outcroppings are pale and leafless. He doesn't find any...bodies. But the total absence of consorts feels like an ill wind.

He doesn't know what he expected.

His old house is still here, a pale, angular tower pointed toward Skaia. John swallows hard, and doesn't fly anywhere near it. Looking at it makes his stomach cramp, which is not a fun time. It means he's solid again - he didn't register the transition. Being air feels just as natural as being corporeal; he only tends to notice the difference because being solid means he bangs his knees into stuff more often if he doesn't pay attention to how high he's floating.

He should probably check in with Gamzee, and then figure out what has got Typheus's giant snake knickers in a twist. That's a good plan.

EB: gamzee?
EB: i'm here! coming down through the clouds in five!
TC: you got karkat with you?
EB: no, dave said he needed him for something.
TC: GOOD.
TC: this motherfucker probably can't leave here.
TC: BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY.
EB: gamzee. what exactly is down there…
TC: you know, diamondbro.
TC: YOU DON'T NEED TO ASK.
EB: no, i really don't! you and typheus just told me to come here, so i came!
TC: denial don't suit you well, motherfucker.
EB: rude, dude.

Gamzee still won't clarify, even after all that, so John gives up. After a little more coaxing, Gamzee pings John with some coordinates, which take John over a steep blue gorge marbled with layers of darker rock. A few stunted trees grow out of crevices between fragmented rocks and an open, empty pipe that ends near the cliff's edge. Gamzee lays flopped over in front of a bright blue crystal, his legs crossed and propped up vertically against the crystal so that he watches John with an upside down painted smile. His claws sit folded on his stomach in the pouch of his dark hoodie pocket, and he pulls one free to lazily toss it over his head in greeting. Then, as John bounds to a stop, kicking up a tiny cloud of fine blue gravel, Gamzee bends both arms back and kicks off the crystal, rolling up backwards into a handstand before landing on both feet. "Hey!" John takes one step - two - and then collides with Gamzee's chest when the troll is abruptly a foot closer than he was a second ago. Undeterred by the sudden, jolting movement, John grabs Gamzee in a hug. It takes some maneuvering to hug Gamzee off his feet, since he's taller, but John manages. He's very determined, and also - he can float. It evens the playing field. Gamzee coughs and then hugs back, his claws (too many claws, but John's too distracted to remind him of the right number) tapping along John's spine under the weirdly long line of his hood.

...His hood should definitely not be that long, unless he's wearing -

Well. John's not. His hood is a perfectly normal length, thank you very much, and no one can tell him otherwise. Gamzee starts tilting over John at a precarious angle as he relaxes. After a couple seconds of leaning, John holds him out at arm's length for an inspection, trying to see if Gamzee's gotten hurt anywhere. It's kiiinda difficult to pull that off when Gamzee's so resilient, but if he doesn't check Karkat will get mad. Gamzee allows it with a slow, languid blink. Dark blue dust sprinkles his chaotic hair and his shoulders, but apart from that he seems to be okay.

Key word - seems. "You're okay?" John asks, for what feels like the millionth time today. He's tempted to pull Karkat up on speed dial so they can all talk at the same time, but he doesn't want to interrupt whatever they're up to on LoHaC, either. He doesn't trust Sburb at all. His own weirdly quiet, abandoned planet is eerie enough.

"Fine as wine, trine of mine," Gamzee says, tucking his claws back into his pockets. He tilts his head back a little, still watching John.

John scratches his head and sighs, feeling a little of the tension that's been camping out in his shoulders relax now that Gamzee's right in front of him. Ominous, sporadic text messages can only do so much as far as reassurance goes. "This place looks cruddy. As usual," he says, landing on the ground properly so he can grind his heel into the dirt. Okay, so the blue color scheme is alright - if John didn't like blue, he'd be in real trouble - but everything else about just reminds him of dying and other people dying and stuff like that. Without the consorts as a distraction, LoWaS is one big bad reminder. "What was Typhus complaining about?" he wonders, before the obvious answer finally
Gamzee, with an extra edge in it that makes John twitch. It's not a good edge. It is, in fact, a bad edge. Gamzee's face isn't smiling as much under his face paint, anymore, and there's a wild glint in his purple eyes to match. John hastily slams his evaluation of Gamzee's okayness back into the 'questionable at best' basket. "Haha. No, I've been all up and mindin' my own business, hereabouts," Gamzee says, chuckling. He meets John's eyes dead on, the uncanny light of them dizzying with its intensity, even while his tone stays pseudo-casual. "There's another motherfucker who isn't so nice hanging around, though. Could be that's all what got your denizen in a knot."

There's -

"Well, if Tyopheus wants me to take care of it, he needs to come out and say it," John snaps. The Breeze won't stop dragging between his heels, stirring up the ground and making muffled sounds that John can't seem to make out. Gamzee's eyes darken a shade, more literally than John is used to. The troll doesn't quite start grinding his teeth, but he taps a pointed tooth very carefully against the row beneath, with a faint click in his throat. John's stomach lurches and reels like a semi-truck taking a turn at top speed. He sidesteps and then spins away from Gamzee, scuffing the ground with his shoe. He accidentally kicks a loose chunk of crystal over the edge of the gorge, and it tumbles down with a series of distant, echoing clacks. The oil that used to flow at the bottom of the gorge vanished along with the rest of the goop that used to drown the planet, and there's nothing to muffle the sound when it hits the bottom. He feels weird, so weird, a weirdness that sits tight in his lungs, and John thinks about cupping his hands around his mouth - but that's dumb. He just starts yelling, because if Tyopheus hasn't said anything yet, he's just being silly and this errand he called John for can't have been too urgent. "HEY! Is anybody there? Typheus?"

The wrong voice answers.

"Oh, wow? That big snake guy really called you down here?" a sickly sweet voice says. John stops dead. "Just to deal with little old me? Hoohoo, he must really hate you~~~! A kindred spirit!"

John stares blankly out over the gorge for a long second, seeing nothing. Then he turns around, and looks up.

It's perched on top of a rock as black as obsidian, leering down at John with a derisive, lopsided smirk. The old Heir outfit is gone, and somehow, seeing the Trickster in simple, soft god tier pajamas makes John want to scream. Its shirt is pale blue and its thigh-high socks and hood are cotton candy pink, the trailing edge of the long hood draped over the side of the boulder to twist in a wind that John can't feel. Instead of a Breath symbol, the front of its hoodie sports a lemon yellow ~ with more yellow curves growing up from the hem.

"You're not real," John says. His own voice sounds very far away; he can't hear the Breeze's frantic noises at all.

"Haha! Seeeee, here's the thing." The Trickster stands up, bends with its hands on its knees, and teeters forward on its mint green shoes, balanced right at the point where the boulder starts to slope too steeply for anyone to keep their balance. It tosses its long hood back when it starts to dip over the Trickster's shoulder. "I am. Just ask your friend."

John jolts and steps between Gamzee and the Trickster in one stumbling motion. He doesn't dare tear his eyes away from the Trickster - if he so much as blinks, he's terrified it will be standing right in front of him. But his head turns jerkily back toward Gamzee, no good except to see a momentary
flash of Gamzee's expression before John's head rotates back toward the monstrous thing leaning over them. "It's not - Gamzee, that thing isn't -"

Gamzee's voice sounds very quiet. "Motherfucker's smart."

The Trickster bows to imaginary applause, looking utterly pleased with itself. Its eyes crinkle as its grin turns cocky. "You see? He agrees! What can I say, I have all kinds of tricks up my sleevsies!" he laughs, flicking one of his short sleeves with a touch of wind.

Oh, thank god he didn't bring Karkat. John owes Dave - so goddamn much. Whatever's real, whatever's not, Karkat cannot be here for it. John doesn't trust himself, let alone whatever power is letting the Trickster hop down to the ground with a palpable gust of wind, kicking up enough dust to make John gag.

"How. You're only real in my head." Which is throbbing, right now. John can feel his fingers trembling, a little, but his hands feel so far away from the rest of him. He needs to remind himself to breathe, but it's not quite working -

The Trickster pulls down the lower lid of his eye and sticks out his tongue, then bursts into giggles forceful enough to make him convulse, clutching his stomach. "I have friends, you know! Or, you know, acquaintances. They're much more fun than yours, and I've learned sooo much from watching them go at it," he gasps out between spurts of laughter. "Oh, the look on your stupid face! Worth it!"

John makes the connection when his eyes drift back down to the Trickster's shirt (he can't focus on that face too long, it's too unsettling) and sees the yellow lines waving and curling against the pink backdrop. It looks like tentacles - and Leviathan is huge enough that John can still see its immense tendrils, haloing the wide expanse of Skaia like sun's rays.

John opens his mouth and shuts it a few times. "Oh my god. You're the one who's stupid!"

The Trickster rolls his eyes all the way around in their sockets. He starts to saunter forward, arms folded behind his back as he walks toward John. John can barely remember how to stand upright, which is not helpful; he staggers back a step, stiff, trying to reach behind him to feel where Gamzee is. "Am not. You forget, they helped make me in the first place. A nice rotting spot in your useless brain, that they made sure was nice and cozy in case they ever came back to play." The Trickster spins in a circle on his heel, dangerously close to John's personal bubble, hands pressed together as he smiles dreamily up at the tendrils visible across the Medium. "A dash of trauma, a whole bunch of you being a total loser, and voila! Me!" John can't reach Gamzee's shirt. The Trickster tosses a handful of sparkly sugar and blue crystal into the air, and the light glinting off it makes John's eyes hurt. "I just decided to borrow a few more of their tricks. No need for them to know - they're plenty busy with whatever dumb stuff they're up to right now. If they don't want to play with me, that's fine!"

Then the Trickster spins in another circle, and roundhouse kicks John in the chest, his leg a pastel blur.

It's like taking a hydraulic press to the torso. John slams backfirst into the tall crystal, the sharp edges digging into his back with bruising force. He manages to get his arms up in time to shield the back of his head, but the impact still rattles him; when he peels himself off the crystal, gasping for air that isn't coming, the Trickster wavers at the edges - for a second, all the pastel is doused in black oil, toe to tip. The pastel colors come back a second later, after John presses a palm to the side of his head to steady himself, but the afterimage of the dripping figure sticks to the inside of John's eyelids every time he blinks. John raises his arms and fumbles, blind and deaf, for the Breeze - he knows how to listen to it, now! But for some reason his head feels like it's full of mush - and a ragged coil of wind
explodes around him, ready to ward off whatever the Trickster throws at him next. Not being able to hear the Breeze is bad, but John can still -

The Trickster appears right in front of him with a snap of his fingers, his pink-threaded blue eyes alight with scathing delight. "While you were being an i d i o t, I was studying important stuff," he says, seizing the front of John's shirt and slamming him back against the crystal. The breath of air John summoned unspools in weak tatters. "Like being better in every possible way."

John smacks the Trickster's hands away with his arm, flinging all his strength behind it even though he still hasn't caught his breath. His back aches as he throws a punch, but the Breeze bolsters him at the last second, blasting the Trickster with a hurricane force gust.

The Trickster dodges easily; he bends backward, with a horrific wrench that speaks not of flexibility but of something snapped right in half, and his upper body swings down between his legs so he can seize John's ankles with creeping, many-jointed fingers. He rolls into a ball the wrong way around and yanks John off his feet. John catches himself on the wind a second later - slow, too slow, he should never have been solid enough for the Trickster to nab in the first place. Gah! Jade would kick his butt for being this slow! He slides into the wind and whirls free of the Trickster's hold, and stays incorporeal to regain his bearings. Gamzee, where did he -

A rogue wind pummels him from the side, tangling him up in a snarl of conflicting air currents that threaten to scatter him. Not this again! John thought he'd gotten all the winds he accidentally ignored over the years to pay attention to him again, but the Trickster raises both hands over his head, twirling them with a grand flourish to summon a slew of wild breezes.

Then he brings his hands down, and a note like a foghorn blasts out of the pipe over the gorge. Twisted up in the wind right in front of the wide opening, John wrenches from side to side in a sudden cyclone - he snaps himself solid again in a hurry before his consciousness can get scrambled like eggs, but his head spins wildly regardless. Righting himself takes precious time, since he starts wrong-way up, and the Trickster crows right in John's ear before John can react. He brings a knee up into John's stomach; John spills around it as air, but only after the initial impact hits him hard. A brief whiff of the Trickster's rotten, sickly-sweet smell washes through him, and John gags internally. He spreads out fast, trying to reach for Gamzee, but his connection to the Breeze feels like wet sand dripping between his fingers, and more blustery winds roar out of the pipe, uncontrollable as they tear through the air. When John tries to harness them, the wild winds slap him down seemingly of their own accord, and stream up toward the clouds to lash them up into a storm.

Of their own accord. As in, John doesn't think the Trickster controls them, either. And there's only one asshole on this planet who might be using his gross giant snake breath to mess around with John right now.

Clearly this is what Typheus wanted John here for so badly. He could seriously stop making this harder than it needs to be! John's already in over his head. John sifts between the storm winds and arrows back toward the ground; he'd rather not give the Trickster a chance to slam him into the ground from high up in the air. Not after what happened the last time they fought. John survived some gruesome stuff in his mindscape - he does not want any of it to repeat in reality.

BE: JOHN!

The Breeze screams to be heard over the confusion of everything else, and John drags a hammer out of hammerspace at the very last minute, bracing it over his head just as the Trickster rockets down with his own hammerkind swinging. John catches it on the handle of his specibus, but even with the advance warning the Trickster hits with such force that John's knees go out from under him. The rogue winds that the Trickster has culled for himself rip around John, trying to suck the air out of his
lungs and force their way inside. Typhoeus's breath just ignores John - these smaller winds twist in chaotic coils and try to trick their way past John's guard, and the erratic way they move and dart and lunge reminds John too much of chaos for comfort. The Trickster yanks the hammer back and starts drilling it down against John's specibus repeatedly, each blow sending lightning bolts of pain shrieking down John's nerves all the way to his knees. The ground under him buckles a little, and by the sixth hit John's arms wobble and burn.

Staying still! Again! Stupid, stupid! The Trickster moves just as John lowers his hammer and grits his teeth; he reappears beside John and swings the hammer around by the very end - the positioning of his hands is terrible, but he makes up for it by being a complete monster - to clobber John in the side. His right arm screams with pain - his whole side lights up with pain, and John gasps for air - the Breeze already clings close to his body to fend off rival winds, but it's not enough to cushion the blow - not enough to keep him from skidding and tumbling across the ground. He can't tell if the right arm's broken or not; he digs his toes into the gravel and uses his hammer to drag himself to a stop near the edge of the cliff. The Trickster dives after him, howling with laughter, and John rolls out of the way as the Trickster swings his hammer in another wild arc. "Breaking you here is so much more satisfying!" he comments, his face alight with glee. John starts to dodge to the side, but the Trickster rams a knee right into his face - his left eye and cheek take most of the impact, and John's whole head throbs. "More…solid! But to be honest? You're still pretty boring." The Trickster snorts and shrugs, pressing a foot against John's chest and shoving him back. "What else is new?"

"Ugh!" John falls back into the wind. That's it. That's all he's got, right now. It's too much, too fast; he needs to regroup, but he doesn't know where it's safe to fall back to. A wild thought - he could coast down the pipe, follow it back to the source of the winds -

But the source is probably Typhoeus, and from the looks of the storm brewing overhead, John's denizen isn't in a help-y mood. And leaving LoWaS…out of the question. If the Trickster follows him, the first thing he'll do is attack people for being John's friend. Or for sport. John is currently drawing a blank on how to deal with this but he has to deal with it here, fast, before the Trickster really does get bored of whaling on him.

What can hurt this guy? Fire didn't do the job last time - it just burned all the dark oil coating him, and left the rotten, dead thing underneath free to escape with a snap of his fingers. The oil is back, whenever John crosses his eyes at the Trickster, but John doesn't have a Rose, or a lighter, or anything like that to help him out. Haha, all this time, and nothing's changed -

The Trickster plunges through John's gust of wind, and it feels like he swallows something greasy. Then the Trickster crooks a finger, and yanks on a seemingly random streamer of wind. The tug yanks John out of the air, choking as the long hood of his jacket digs into his throat, and that's it. His one advantage - his ability to turn into the wind and dodge anything. Dragging him down by the hood, the Trickster tries to slam him into the ground. Frustration bursts through John and he snaps the long windsock hood away again so there's nothing for the Trickster to pull on. He floats away instead, trying to stay low and away from the edge of the cliff. There is still no sign of Gamzee, and John can't decide whether to be happy Gamzee's not in danger or to be terrified out of his mind because he's alone again.

Undeterred, the Trickster hops after him, humming nonsense as he dislocates his arms hauling the hammer back and swinging it down toward John's head. John rolls to avoid getting his head squashed like a melon.

And puts his foot down on the ground. On something sharp edged and pointy that digs into the sole of his shoe. When he goes to float away, distracted, his foot won't move. John jerks his leg up, trying to wrench it free, and then looks down to see a clump of bubblegum pink crystal growing in
triangular clusters around and over his foot. It's leaking from a crack in the large blue quartz to his left, a trickle of sticky pink and grey goop, rubbery stuff that oozes over the ground to feed more material into the pink crystal pinning John's shoe.

The bottom of his foot starts to prickle and burn - like the crystals are either weeping acid or trying to grow through his foot. John can't make it turn into wind; he's stuck.

Lucky for him, the Trickster is a jerk. John whips around to face him, his knee twisting painfully to accommodate his stuck foot, and the Trickster kicks him so hard in the chest that John can't even scream right. The force of it snaps the crystals and knocks him free, and he struggles to remember how to breathe and get himself upright at the same time. Breeze, right, the Breeze can help with the first one - already is, John corrects himself, but it's not enough when the Trickster lays into him like a batting ram, knocking John's feet aside with a crushing blow of his hammer and landing kneefirst on John's stomach as they hit the ground.

John flips out. The weight pressing down on his chest hits him somewhere visceral - like there's a hand shoving through his skin, sinking between his organs, feeling for a rib to tug further out of place - were you even using that lung for anything useful - John screams and elbows the Trickster in the eye. It's not enough - he's been here before - and he slides out into the wind in that split second before the Trickster can shake it off and laugh at his face. The pain and the panic spike through his stomach, following him even when his body's gone, but he's out.

The Trickster's head does a one-eighty, grinning at John as he snaps his fingers. Ropes of black oil and tangled winds wrap around to flank John, full of echoes of hiccupped giggling and reeking of blood and decay. The Trickster solidifies and hooks John again, this time by hooking the back of John's fluttering, intangible shirt and somehow snapping him solid without a hint of effort. John's momentum carries him back against the Trickster, and a length of fabric snakes around John's neck.

"And once you're gone," the Trickster says, conversationally, yanking his pink windsock hood tight, "I'll have nothing holding me back. No useless idiots weighing me down. I'll be free! I can go anywhere I like!" He sighs happily, and his breath smells like crude oil.

John can't teleport away with the windy thing. Worse, he brings up his hands too late to get them between his neck and the tightening fabric; he scrabbles with his fingernails to try to tug it away from his neck, but can't find anywhere to grab. His fingers slide off a thin, slippery film of oil instead. Ugh! "You're not going anywhere!" he croaks, and it's such a dumb way to use up his air. He kicks backwards at the Trickster's knees, but hits nothing as the Trickster tucks his feet up out of the way.

The fabric yanks tighter, cutting off more air and bloodflow. John's head starts to throb, weirdly light on his shoulders, and his stomach churns as the Trickster pulls him back, letting his head loll on John's shoulder with a merry light in his ice-white eyes. "I totally am~" the Trickster whispers, the closest to serene John has ever heard him. "It will be so. Much. Fun. Oh! And before I forget? I brought a friend, too."

John's gotta think. Quick. But the throbbing fills his whole skull - swallowing takes an eternity. He should have known something like this would happen, but he didn't want to think about it. He never wants to think about it, and it's gonna get him killed like a total chump. The Trickster drags John's head around, not letting up the pressure for even a second, but John slips a finger between his throat and the fabric. His best effort to pull the hood loose does jack diddly, but it's more than he had a second ago.

Then John forces his eyes to stop rolling up toward the sky and focus, and sees the white thing walking out from the shadows of the metal pipe. At first, John doesn't recognize it - actually, it just creeps him the heck out, since he can't sense the person breathing. It's like some kind of a human-
shaped automaton in a white suit that has seen better, crisper days.

Then the thing looks up, tilting back the brim of its too-familiar white hat, and John sees the thin snow white skin grown over the person's hollow eyes and mouth and nostrils like an asphyxiating mask. Black, syrupy oil drips from its hands and ears and stains the inside of the skin-mask. The sight of the blank face sends a jolt of stomach-turning recognition shooting through John.

"Dad?" John says. His voice sounds - god. And he did not intend to call him that, but it just slips out, all tiny and cracking and horrible and scared, and - he starts thrashing, and elbows the Trickster in the ribs. It barely tickles him; the Trickster howls with ecstatic laughter. "That isn't my dad! Where is he?! What did you do?!

John screams. His eyes hurt. His head throbs. His lungs are empty, his dad -

The Trickster pats John on the cheek, and wraps the fabric of his pink hood idly around his hand as he pops his fingers in and out of their joints. John's vision starts to skew with dark blobs. "I made him more useful! You were done with him, right? Nobody was talking about him or thinking about him much, so I borrowed him for some fun! You didn't seem to like him very much, either, so I just...took his meatsuit!" The Trickster giggles. "I mean, he's a little dead, now, but he wasn't a very interesting person, anyway."

John doesn't want him to be dead. That's not fair, his dad-handler-dad-handler-dad isn't breathing and John feels like his insides are drowning in nauseating, sticky black oil, and it's pumping into his brain with each thudding throb. The Trickster sighs with bone-deep deep contentment and taps a finger against John's straining throat. "That's not - you're -" John wheezes, his voice a thin, breathy mess "- you're awful."

The Trickster pulls John's limp fingers out from under the too-tight fabric, wraps John's own hand around his throat, and squeezes it tight with segmented fingers. "I know what I am - what are you?" The pause lasts for a small eternity; John can't see around the throbbing darkness anymore, but the Trickster coughs out a harsh laugh right in his ear. "Oh, right. A loosser! And no one's coming to help you." He hums happily, knocking the side of his head against John's.

John should have expected as much. He was too dumb to bring anyone with him, or message them when the Trickster first appeared. People are gonna need John's help, and he's gonna get himself killed here like a total idiot instead of being there for them. "Gamzee -" he breathes out, his throat clicking with the effort it takes to force air in and out of his lungs.

"...But nobody -" the Trickster starts to sing, with the distinct air (and this may be John's lack of oxygen talking) of someone about to quote another without giving them a lick of credit.

"Yeah, bro?" an entirely different voice calls back.

John and the Trickster both blink, and then look down.

Gamzee waves up at them from a rock not twenty feet away from the weird puppet of John's dad, his tousled hair flying in the agitated storm winds. He's just...sitting there, attentive, one leg folded and the other swinging, his heavy eyes watching them. When the Trickster and John continue to stare at him, nonplussed, Gamzee blinks and scratches the back of his neck. "I thought this was all being some sicknasty shit a brother had to do for his own self," he says, his expression slowly turning sheepish. "All kinds of meaningful showdown shit, you feel? With you settin' all this high ass justice in motion -" He starts making vague claw gestures to demonstrate his point.

John reaches back over his head, seizes the Trickster by his shirt, and flips him. The wrapped hood doesn't come loose, but the Trickster yelps and breaks its neck to keep glaring at John as it rights
itself. "Oh, screw that! Help, please!" John yells, his voice raw, scraping his own neck with his nails as he tears the cloth away.

"What? No! Oh my god, you're so dumb!" the Trickster shrieks, and stamps his foot. Sharp pink crystal shoots out of the ground and John leaps back three times to avoid a new cluster trying to impale him.

Gamzee rocks back, then puts a hand down to boost himself up into a crouch. His eyes meet John's, and he grins with all his teeth. His many, many teeth. "Shit yeah, brother," he says. "I can lend a hand."

John has never felt more relieved in his life. It cuts through the panicked haze in his head; he calls his hammerkind back to his hand with a twist of wind, and smashes the next burst of bubblegum crystal that bursts out of the ground. Thunder cracks overhead - John twitches, because he had nothing to do with that - and when he looks up he sees that the dark storm clouds now hang low over every inch of the sky, turning it a sickly green-grey. The gusting winds swirl in tighter and tighter funnels and lightning starts to flash along the underside of the clouds. It's not just the pipe opening near them that's pouring out wild gales; now that he's not asphyxiating, John can sense wind rushing from other immense pipes across the land at hurricane speeds and tearing up to join the rest of the burgeoning vortex.

BE: oh wow.

BE: he's pulling out all the stops for this one. an [ Aeolian Cataclismico ]

Seriously? And this is him being helpful? John thinks.

BE: now you listen to me?!

BE: …last chance.

The Trickster ignores the storm, glaring at Gamzee with raw hate. Then he turns the stare back on John, and John can see the Trickster's glamour flicker in earnest - everything underneath is soaked in black oil and blood, and he can't count the limbs anymore. Streams of oil and wind pour around him like long, spindly tendrils instead of separate things. "Pathetic. Really, this is a new pathetic-y low, even for you! Is there anything you can do by yourself without begging your besties for help, you useless waste of breath?" the Trickster says, mockingly. "I mean, don't even get me started on this guy!"

Another crack of thunder that rolls for tens of miles, shaking the air hard enough that John feels it down in his bones, accompanies a bolt of lightning that whips out of the clouds and strikes the huge chunk of blue crystal. It bursts into electric blue light that paints over the green-tinged light of the storm and spits sparks as the lightning crackles visibly inside the crystal. Rather than frying the pale trees that grow along the rock, excess charge crackles and arcs along the slim branches and stems. "I know I'm not okay. I know I need help. So I'm asking for it now," John says. The static electricity building up makes the hair on his arms stand on end, and he hefts his hammer.

Across from him, on the far side of the Trickster, Gamzee stands up. "Only had to say so," he says, like it's the easiest thing in the word, and holds up a flashing captchalogue card that flickers through several colors of the rainbow before depositing a pair of clubkind specibi in his claws. John's pretty sure those deuce clubs were broken the last time he saw them, but that's never stopped Gamzee before.

"Just - leave my dad alone, okay?" John's voice cracks again, and he swallows hard. He doesn't look
down at the ground; he can't feel the...thing below them breathing, so he can't really track what it's doing, but he can't bear to look. He can't.

Gamzee shrugs bonelessly, his eager grin twitching into a watchful look as he glances at John. "Your call," he says, quiet and careful, like he just noticed John's about to break down.

The Trickster makes yapping gestures with his hand and rolls his eyes. "Don't you ever get tired of his whining? I mean, seriously. What a joke!" he says to Gamzee, his voice high and tight and cross. He looks annoyed, if an oil-dripping thing can look annoyed. "And you? You're just as much a monster as me! We could have so much fun together -"

The next lightning strike shoots down - and then warps in a crazed arc, blasting the dark blue boulder beside Gamzee and fizzling out. It leaves a massive scorch mark behind. Gamzee's face is full of shadows that don't match the light, the contours of his face shifting from second to second. "That shit ain't funny, motherfucker," he says, with the warning edge back in his voice. The kind of edge John needs to shoosh out of him, pronto, but they don't have time - "In fact, I think that's some flagrant mother fucking heresy you're spewing at my diamond bro, here. Hearing that kind of unfunny shit, it makes me get my sadness on to see -"

Gamzee snaps his claws. The boulder shatters in another wild lightning strike as the atmosphere turns honey-thick with dnmases; John's ears are full of sudden, frenzied, screaming music that clashes and grates against Typheus's planet-wide fraymotif. For a second John's mind trembles with the proximity to the wave of rage that dances slantwise around Gamzee, before his head clears and his ears pop. "And my rage on fucking harder," Gamzee finishes, his hoodie the same color as his blood. There's a symbol on the front that looks like a clown face, but extra lines curve and branch out and around his sides, like tendrils.

BE: welp.

BE: that'll do it.

A hyena laugh bursts out of the Trickster, who doubles up with the force of it. His pastel god tier uniform reasserts itself, but oil continues to drool from his hair and eyes. "Yeah, well. I never said you weren't a joke, too! Heehee!" He points his hammer at Gamzee and then John, bouncing from side to side to unheard fight music. John, who's already got enough on his mental plate listening to Typheus's and Gamzee's fraymotifs, doesn't try to hear whatever crazy nonsense the Trickster has playing. "Trust me - you're both garbage. One of you, give Rose a call! If I'm taking out the trash, I want to do a clean sweep before I blow this popsicle stand."

And John -

- laughs. A tiny giggle escapes him before he covers his mouth with a hand, but it's enough that the Trickster turns on him, livid. John smiles back at him, and can practically see the Trickster swelling with offended fury. "Oh, good," John says, as oil begins to rain from the clouds - slowly, at first, but rapidly increasing to a torrential downpour that streaks LoWaS with black.

The Trickster splutters. "Excuse you?!"

"You only start insulting Rose when you're intimidated." John swings his hammer back, and winks. "And she's not even here."

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UU: hello kanaya! ^u^ how are you doing?
GA: Passably Well. Why Do You Ask?
GA: Also When Are You Opening The Final Gate. Asking For A Friend.
UU: in about ten minutes! sorry for the delay!
UU: the lord of time appears to be suitably distracted, so he won't destroy the gate immediately!
UU: ugh if he tries to destroy it ahead of time, i will STRAIGHT UP FLIP A BITCH!
GA: …
GA: I see. Thank You.
GA: We're Going To Obtain A Splendor Existentiae And Are Still Not Sure Exactly What This Alchemy Entails But That Has Never Stopped Any Of Us Before, So.
UU: oh! that's very important. you should definitely do that!
GA: Reasonable Enough.
GA: How Privy Are You To Our Futures, And How Willing Might You Be To Disclose Certain Spoilers Under The Condition That They Would Be Kept Confidential?
UU: Ummm…that depends on what you would like to ask!
GA: I Have Reason To Believe That Rose Was Offered A Choice Between My Life And The Destruction Of The Horrorterrors.
GA: And That Also, Rose Reacts Badly When She Believes People She Loves May Be In Danger.
GA: So.
GA: I Have To Ask.
GA: Which Is More Important, In The Grand Scheme Of Us Not Fucking This Up Beyond Repair?
GA: What Will The Horrorterrors Do If They Infiltrate Your Reality? How Doomed Will We Be In The Literal Sense Based On This Choice?
UU: hm. fascinating question! they would probably cause a little ruckus before i shed them off like an old skin.
UU: i think you should ask rose to be more precise in recounting the choice she was offered! ^u~
UU: but also, her misunderstanding may be vital to her making the 'correct' choice which leads to your timeline being deemed viable! so perhaps not.
GA: That Is Supreme Unhelpful. And I Think That She Has Recounted It To The Best Of Her Ability Already. I Will Ask Her To Repeat It Again If I Get The Chance.
UU: would you like some other actionable advice?
UU: you don't need to help with the snake breeding! lots of people will be there to help already.
UU: and then i will see you very soon! i've pulled all the right extra-dimensional superstrings to make sure of it! ^u~
GA: That Is Marginally Reassuring. I Will Take This Advice Into Consideration.
UU: splendid!

--

Tavros adjusts the controls of the rocketchair to aim them at Prospit, but he, uh, gets the idea that he doesn't need to bother. Equius catches them up in a wave of heavy void, with enough force that Tavros feels like a baseball launched out of a pitching machine, his face eclipsed by nothingness. It insulates them from Vriska, who peels off ahead of them without looking back once, intent on her game, but also insulates them from pretty much everything else.

Equius continues to quietly and yet strenuously emanate disapproval in Tavros's general direction whenever he pays attention to him, so Tavros does his best not to. Get attention paid to him, that is. Nepeta brushes off Equius's intimidating...well, everything, but Tavros is not Nepeta. Uh, at all. Nepeta scolds Equius for it whenever it pops up, and one time Aradia smiled Equius into a drenching
sweat, but the desdén still hangs over them. Which is, um. It's actually not fine, at all, even though Tavros feels too awkward to mention it. But then Equius does things like making Tavros a flying rocket wheelchair with turbo boost and other accessories, instead of chainsawing off his legs and replacing them with turbolegs without asking first, and it's enough of an improvement that Tavros really doesn't want to pick a fight. This is, uh, not the hill he wants to die on.

But the meddling, he could live without. People call Kanaya a meddler, but Tavros honestly cannot see it. Equius horns in on anything that might hurt Nepeta. Which means he butts in on everything, lately, and Tavros gets roped in, too. Nepeta hangs off the front of Tavros's rocketchair full of excitement, slicing her clawkind against each other so that they skitter with black-blue sparks because Equius brought them along for this fight, but uh, Tavros is more skeptical. Equius letting them fly to a fight like this is...sospechoso.

AKA, he's probably got plans to prevent Tavros and Nepeta from doing anything at all useful and/or dangerous. It's super patronizing. The problem is working up the nerve to say something about it. Or maybe the gumption. Jake uses that word instead, sometimes, but Tavros can't quite muster up either. Standing up to Equius when he's in a mood like this takes a lot out of a troll.

So he nudges Nepeta instead.

Nepeta blinks and looks up from her phone. Tavros didn't notice before, but she's tossing it back and forth between her claws, batting it around under the cover of her clawkind. It's a kind of risky maneuver, considering that if she drops it, it'll fall into space. The fact that Tavros is flying them around in outer space is already kind of, uh...nonsensical. Everything about this is nonsense, but the flying through space part stands out. A lot.

"I am having some trouble, um, with maintaining my self-confidence, here," he says, choosing his words with care.

Nepeta tilts her head, her scruffy hair flapping around her face as she rocks back on her heels. "Self-confurdence? What about it?" she asks. It's not, like, dismissive when she says it - which is a nice change from people like Vriska, who just blow stuff like this off as dumb.

Unfortunately, Equius has gone all weird and void-y, so when Tavros looks around to see if the blueblood is close enough to overhear their conversation, he sees a whole bunch of nothing at all. He lowers his voice just to be safe, but Equius could be a blob of nothing two feet from them and Tavros wouldn't know. "It's just that, we haven't been particularly useful so far. I don't think we're useless, but, also, maybe a little?" he says, hesitantly.

Nepeta catches his train of thought right away, and smacks her palm against the rocketchair in frustration as she shakes her head. "No! Purr yourself together! Equius is just being over-protective and sticking his nose in all the time," she insists. "Well, we'll show him! I have a plan."

Plans are good. Better than nothing, anyway. And yet -

Nepeta hunches her shoulders, and her claws flex and scrape against the paint of the rocketchair. Like she didn't mean to say that to him. Tavros would be more offended if he knew what color the paint even is; void-colored, he guesses, depending on how close they are to Equius. Plus, it's already pretty banged up from flying around and fighting a giant monster - there's not much Nepeta can do to make it worse... "What is the plan?" he asks, confused.

Then Nepeta does shifty eyes at him. They are very shifty. So shifty. Tavros blinks, shifted, and takes a claw off the flight controls (the rocketchair continues to fly, because Equius is very, incredibly meddly) so he can haul himself forward. There's a button to launch the seat clear of the
rocketchair in a dangerous situation, and separate one to just raise it a little, but he doesn't bother with it, because mixing the two buttons up even once and launching himself hornfirst into a tree trunk was enough for him to not want to risk it in outer space. As, um, amazing as it would be to be the one to defeat Noir with a tackle horn to the face, that would also be terrifying. "Um. Nepeta…"

She shoots a look toward their right, where Equius must be flying at the moment. Then she leans in closer to whisper in his ear. ". . .It's probably gonna upset Equius. But it'll only be for a second!" she says, ansiosaa all over. This close, her one claw planted right next to Tavros's on the dash, Tavros can feel her trembling with anticipation of - something.

No. Wait. Tavros zeroes in on her phone, pinned under all her weight. Nepeta is not trembling - she has set her phone to vibrate, instead of its assortment of the latest cat sounds personalized for each friend on Pesterchum. He taps the back of her claw and she twitches away on reflex, which gives him just enough time to flip the phone over to reveal the open Pesterchum window.

TA: yeah fine iim manniing the terminaiial.
TA: iim sure equiius iis goiing two LOVE thiis
AC: :(( < its my decision! i don't like upsetting him, but this is what i f33l is right!
AG: Pfffffffft, nice! I'm glad you're seeing things my way. ::::)
AC: :33 < *wrinkles her nose*
AC: :33 < it would probably be better fur everyone if you dont help!
AG: Ah, sure. I'm in a good mood today. A gr8 mood, even!
AG: As long as you don't chicken out on us. You've been hanging out with that cowardly dwee8 a lot lately, and -

"Nepeta. Oh no," Tavros whispers.

She roughly swipes the phone out from under his nose a second later, pinning it between both her claws and hissing at herself, but it's too late. The cat is out of the bag. "Sorry, Tavpurros," she says, crawling back when Tavros makes a half-hearted move to snag her arm.

He doesn't even know what he would do if he caught her, anyway. There's nowhere for Nepeta to go on the rocketchair, um, at all. But Tavros can't seem to make words happen - Nepeta stares back at him, watchful, and he doesn't know what to say. Doesn't know what to feel.

And they're coming up on Prospit, now, which makes things a lot harder. If he squints, he can see Aradia and Sollux already, two brilliant points of red and green light swirling around like leaves as Noir bounces between them in bursts of neon green. As they get closer, he can make out more details over Nepeta's hunched head, like the tall honey-yellow building that stretches toward Skaia, and the faint music playing in the distance, and the hum of many, many, many, many bees communicating in beenary code.

So many bees. Tavros has to ignore his mental sense of them, after a bit, because all the bees are focused on their work, and with enough of them singing in perfect unison, dancing the same patterns from hive to hive, following pheromone trails so thick they almost glitter, tuned to the same code, Tavros's head starts to ache. Bees aren't really his specialty, but Sollux definitely has them doing...something. The exact lines and whorls that the bees follow aren't clear from here, but Tavros can almost trace them with the tip of his claw - they stand out so strongly in the bees' minds. If he knew Sollux better, he would check and ask (English is a terrible language, uh, as a general rule) if Tavros has the pun right, if Sollux has created a hivem-

A flash of green, so bright and hot that Tavros's skin prickles unpleasantly - and then Noir is right on top of Sollux. But Sollux raises a claw, and [Temporal Inevitability] drops like a stack of bricks. Aradia's familiar laugh rings out as she snaps her whipkind out to wrap around Noir neck and yank
him back. Noir flips backward with the force of it and snarls, trying to slice through the whip and failing.

And almost immediately, Tavros feels the rocketchair start to throttle back. He hesitates as the rocketchair slows and angles slightly away from the fight, and more toward the looming Prospit.

Vriska's way ahead of them, and races forward in a sudden burst, her hair and hood flying out behind her. She flings her dice out into the abyss - and still somehow summons a giant pendulum that knocks into Noir from the side. It's, uh, not even pivoting around anything. It's just a random pendulum, and it makes Tavros's brain throb. "Need some help, you two? The cavalry's here!" Vriska calls. She pauses to look expectantly back at Equius, her impatient eyes dismissing Tavros and Nepeta in a flash. Considering what Tavros saw in that pesterlog, it's really convincing. "I said cavalry for you, horsebrain. Appreciate it?" she says, her voice pointed when she doesn't get an immediate response.

But it's hard to pinpoint where Equius is, let alone what his face looks like right at this exact moment. Tavros can sense a whole lot of nothing, surging ahead of the rocketchair as Tavros and Nepeta are forced down and away from the fight by the wayward controls. "Nah," Sollux says, not even looking at them. "I'm already alive down there, and AA's on LoFaF. We're gonna be fine."

Aradia chimes in. "Glad to have you all!" Then she flies up out of the way as Noir tries to cut her in too, lands with one foot on top of his head, and kicks off.

Nepeta creeps forward while Tavros is distracted. "Just a little momentum? Please? I need to get right in Nyaaoir's way," she says, urgent.

If he wants to them to fly toward the fight, he has to force the controls, or - do something. Anything. But Tavros freezes - his brain feels as stiff as his hands, and when the downward tilt of the rocketchair becomes super obvious, the look that Nepeta shoots him shuts him right down. Doing nothing because he can't decide looks basically the same as siding with Equius, and his mouth feels gummed up, like he swallowed a spoonful of peanut butter, which, even in this metaphorical example, um, seems kind of unrealistic, since peanut butter is forbidden by order of Karkat.

And he doesn't know. He doesn't know what he's deciding. He can't even make the thoughts in his head form words, not with this little warning. Dying is dying, but then dead people come back, but then it still means dying, and Tavros hasn't figured out where he comes down on any side of that existential debate at the best of times, let alone right now, when Nepeta's gearing up to do something Vriska approves of -

Oh. Tavros blinks, and then frowns. That, uh. Simplifies things, as it turns out. So it is a choice that he's making after all. He swallows, and shakes his head at Nepeta. The guilt is instantaneous, but the sureness that Vriska likes terrible life choices is stronger. Nepeta flinches, her mouth tight, and she stops meeting his eyes again.

He doesn't think for a second he can convince Nepeta not to. Maybe, if he'd realized something was afoot sooner, but not now, when she has already talked herself into it, and he doesn't have time to stumble and stutter his way through a counter she hasn't heard before a million times or two. Tavros grabs her claw when he should probably call Equius (and maybe that's a decision, too) but only to get her to look at him. "I don't like, uh, the idea of helping my friend die. That's not something I can be okay with, it turns out," he says, apologetic. Then he lets go before Nepeta can yank away, puts his claws back on the controls, and presses them down at a steeper angle. The controls respond right away, once he's not trying to drive them at Noir - so Equius didn't totally mess with them. Just enough to make sure he and Nepeta can't do anything dangerous or relevant.
Nepeta curls up over her knees, her clawkind slotted away, her head bent low enough that Tavros can only see her hair. After a second she turns it so that she looks out to the side, toward the fight, just a sliver of her face visible in from the pillow of her arms. "Right. Right," she says. Her voice sounds small and young.

Then she looks up, her eyes narrowed to slits, and Tavros has time to think oh Dios before she pounces on the controls in one fluid motion. "I'm really sorry. I'll be right back in a minute!" she yells, yanking the controls up and to the side. For a second all of her weight slams Tavros back against his seat, and then he fumbles to get his arms around her somehow. The rocketchair's controls start to scream a warning as Nepeta wedges her knee right into the speed controls and props her foot up so it pins Tavros's shoulder against the seatback, the sole of her shoe digging deep into the muscle. The autopilot jerks the front of the rocketchair down when Nepeta veers too sharply toward Noir, but they're arcing in a shallow curve around the fight itself instead of aiming for Prospit, now. Tavros gets a claw on one of the controls and wraps it around Nepeta's lukewarm hand, yanking it sharply to the side.

"Literally!" Nepeta yells over the engines, as the rocketchair begins to barrel roll. Nepeta jams her elbow into another control and the rocketchair starts to climb higher, too. Neither of them are wearing seatbelts. Everything is terrible. "I will be alive again in a minute! There's nothing to be afraid of!"

"I know. But I guess knowing doesn't actually help, a whole lot!" Tavros yells back, feeling his butt slide along the seat as they rotate. He has no idea how gravity is working out here, but he doesn't want to turn upside down and get dumped into the endless abyss. They're still picking up speed, and he can't reach the windshield button with Nepeta's free shin shoving him away by the horns.

She twists around one last time, smacks his claw off the seat eject button, and then plants her feet on the dash. Shoving off the chair, Nepeta goes flying, clawkind flung out to either side. Tavros scrambles to seize the controls the oliveblood fiddled with, and tries to zoom after her. But Nepeta lets out a blood curdling battle-cry, and everyone looks right at her. Including Noir, currently hovering over Aradia with a sword in claw.

So it doesn't matter that the rocketchair is like sixty feet away from the fight, or that Nepeta's leap should land way short. The carapacian's already ugly grimace knots even further as he bares his teeth at Nepeta in a silent growl.

JN: I shoulda killed you punks years ago.

It doesn't matter, because Noir teleports in close in the blink of an eye and stabs Nepeta through the chest in one slick move, before the neon green of his space powers clears from Tavros's vision. One of Nepeta's clawkind stabs deep into Noir's shoulder, the blue-bruise metal carving through the carapacian's jaspeado shell like paper. Roaring with pain, Noir shoves Nepeta away.

Equius makes a horrible sound. Just. Just awful, and Tavros's stomach cramps hard. "Nepeta! No!" Equius yells, fully visible for the first time Tavros can remember in so long, his face ashen. Tavros pulls up hard on the controls and then dives to get under Nepeta, his heart going a million miles a second. She lands on the dash with a heavy thud, without moving to land on her feet in a crouch, and that's how he knows it's bad. It's bad enough. Tavros looks wildly at Aradia - but no good, Aradia's got nothing more for him than a sympathetic smile - Sollux, who is the guy in charge of things, but who isn't moving, date prisa -

Someone is gone. Noir lunges and slams face first into a wall of nothing - and then the nothing smacks him back, repeatedly, like an unseen fist, while Equius continues to scream. Tavros wrenches the controls to peel away from the fight, and flings an arm forward over Nepeta's limp shoulders.
when she nearly tumbles off the side. Olive blood splatters the dash and parts of Tavros's face, and he doesn't remember feeling it land there; he and Nepeta are close enough that her blood only feels damp on his face, not ice cold, not blue, not -

Oh. Someone is gone, and that's, um, weird, because -

JN: Fckrgnrgl!

Lines of spiraling light burst open under Nepeta's body, and Tavros nearly screams as all the olive blood on his rocketchair starts to pulse with color. She starts pushing herself up before the transformation's all the way done; the raspberry and maroon god tier clothes replace Nepeta's outfit only after she rolls upright, her horns peeking through the hood like cat ears. Her tall, dark green boots bang loudly against the dashboard, and she has to yank down the dark maroon cowl that obscures the lower half of her face to grin at Noir as he gets smacked halfway to the ring of debris between them and the Veil in a tidal wave of void. When she flares her new wings out, there are two dots and a two squiggly lines in darker olive against the green.

[Attention: The Rogue of Heart is risen.]

"Hahaha! Yes!" Aradia sings out, as Nepeta tightens the trailing ends of her eye mask, leaps off the rocketchair, and coasts on her new wings. She tackle-pounces Equius mid-scream, muffling his last, painful yell with her arm guards. Equius stays ashen, with two spots of blue high on his cheeks. Tavros can see a weird amount of detail, still - like, um, the way someone carefully combed Equius's hair back away from his face. The way he reaches up, and Nepeta laces their claws together with a tight squeeze so Equius doesn't have to restrain himself.

And yet -

Someone is still gone. Even though Equius is the most present he's ever been.

"Hang on, guys -" Tavros starts, barely loud enough to call his voice a creak. He raises a faltering claw and tries to clear his throat, but his mouth is so dry after all that, um, total bullshit that just went on. He feels like he just flew a marathon - his claws won't stop jittering on the controls - but Vriska is still gone.

And he remembers the last time Vriska was gone. If she's not here, trying to shove herself into the spotlight of the fight, then that can only mean one thing.

She's doing something else incredibly dangerous. And it's, uh, pretty much get them all killed.

JN: Enough!

Blinding green light smears across Tavros's vision and blurs everything around him into white-green streaks. His stomach lurches and he can feel his butt sliding again as something sends his rocketchair into a tailspin. One hand flung over his smarting eyes, he smacks three different buttons - he, uh, possibly sets off the windshield wipers in the process - until he hits the shoulder restraints, just before the rocketchair flips completely over. The restraints dig painfully into his arms as gravity drags his weight down, and the heaviness doesn't recede until Tavros flips back right side up. Slewing from side to side a few times, the rocketchair finally settles.

Tavros turns off the windshield wipers and switches into hover mode so he can just, uh. Stop worrying. About that whole driving thing. Yeah. Once that's done, he wipes away the thin film of tears leftover from the painful green light, and looks around to see where he is in relation to everything.
The Noir guy hovers in a sickly green star, one claw raised over his head and green arcs of lightning zapping out in long, head-poundingbright zigzags. The green lightning lances out and slices through a part of a honeycomb tower, but Tavros can't sense distress from the bees. Equius, Nepeta, Aradia, and Sollux look like they're alright, which...probably matters more than bees - but Tavros got thrown away further than he thought, which leaves the rocketchair idling in the empty space between Prospit and Skaia, and he's not close enough to see if any of them are injured or not.

He pauses, and then turns his head, his shoulders hunching up as he does.

Vriska is kind of dumb. When Tavros finally thinks to look just over his head, she has left a glitter trail that is clearly visible against the dark of space. Once he knows the direction, it's easy to pick her out against Skaia, like a tiny orange fly buzzing toward a pile of sh-

Tavros looks back at Noir, surrounded by miles of green lightning, and then looks back at Vriska's trail. Then back at Noir, and then back at Vriska, and then back at Noir, and honestly? Tavros has exactly zero confidence that he can deal with either one of these situations. Actually, he is uniquely unqualified to deal with a Vriska situation, and well aware of it.

But if he doesn't deal with her, who will? This is kind of short notice for a Vriska situation, after all, and there's a growing wall of lightning branching between him and everyone else nearby.

AT: uM,
AT: tHIS IS JUST TO LET EVERYONE KNOW, tHAT VRISKA IS DOING SOMETHING,
AT: aND IF I DIE BECAUSE OF IT, i, uH, rESERVE THE RIGHT TO NEVER SHOW MY FACE IN PUBLIC,
AT: eVER AGAIN,

Then Tavros shuts down Pesterchum and puts his phone away before someone can reply and make him second-guess his entire life for an hour, and sets out along Vriska's trail. It helps that for the most part, she's following along the line of one of Sollux's giant, sticky mainframes - Tavros draws close to the silicomb and collects a few curious bees on his palm before they hurry back to work. His palms feel clammy on the controls, trembling a little harder, and he smooths them against his pants' legs nervously as he pushes the engines a little faster. He doesn't have any ideas for sneaking up on Vriska - he's not a sneaky kind of person, in general - and the right engine makes a new whining sound in the wake of Noir's shockwave, so stealth mode is probably a no go.

For the most part, the ride is boring. Really, very boring. Tavros closes the gap between them as the minutes crawl by, but Vriska doesn't acknowledge him until they've gone through the twisty clouds and the tangled, checkered tendrils that form a Möbius net around the Battlefield. Vriska's trail starts to take wide, obvious turns and unnecessary loops, and Tavros slows the rocketchair when her glitter disappears behind a wide tendril. Because, uh, it's really obvious that she's messing with him. Or trying to sneak up on him. Tavros does his best to warily eye each tendril Vriska could be hiding behind, but it's...a lot.

"Bad news. I can sense your obscene incompetence from a mile away, Taaaavros."

Uh, anyway. Good thing Vriska isn't very good at hiding, or anything like that. A single blue die pings off the side of his rocketchair, scraping the metal and landing 6-side up near the edge of the dash. Tavros slams the brakes on and freezes, but Vriska surprisingly does not pelt him with the rest of her dice. Warning shot fired, Vriska instead flies out into the open with the rest of the dice clacking in her palm and her most condescendiente smirk tugging up the corner of her lip. She looks like the worst person in the world - or maybe just the meanest. And confident that her meanness is justified, too, which is bad. This was all a bad idea. Tavros is full of regret.
But it's too late to back down now. If he turns around and flies back the way he just came, either Vriska kills him, or the shame eats him alive from the inside. So Tavros forces his chin up - gulps loudly, which kind of ruins the effect he is going for, here - and then meets Vriska's eyes. Or, maybe just her cheeks. Her ear. He can talk to Vriska's ear, though he doubts she'll really listen to anything he has to say. "Um, I'm not trying to hide. Why are you going away from the fight, Vriska?"

There, that's good. Perfecto. Nothing is more effective than making Vriska talk about herself. True to form, Vriska tips her head back and laughs, harsh and biting, and she starts to slink toward him, flipping her hand in a dismissive wave as she brags. "Kanaya wants me hunting snakes, because Kanaya doesn't know when to quit. Rose wants me fighting battles for her. And hey, not gonna lie! Winning all the battles is exactly what I like doing. I am on board with that plan!" Vriska raises her claws over her head, her blue eyes squeezed shut as she smiles. Then the smile slips into something crueler. "...Was on board."

"So why are you going to Skaia, when the fights are all -" Tavros gestures back behind him "- allá." His pusher feels like it's pushing from his throat instead of his chest, which is uncomfortable. Every second Vriska prowls a little closer, and as she does he can hear the dice chattering and clicking against each other.

Vriska plucks another die from her hand, and flicks it at Tavros's head. He ducks, somehow, one horn banging painfully against the control panel, and it lands 7-side up with a spark of blue light. "Heh. I'll tell you. I can be nice when it matters," she says, and the mocking lilt in her voice makes Tavros cringe. "There's just one catch."

He knows the catch. "What catch?"

"This is a mission for A-listers, only!" Vriska taps the toe of her bright red shoe against the front of his rocketchair, and Tavros twitches - he didn't realize that she'd gotten so close. "God tiers only. No chumps allowed!" She jerks her thumb across her throat with a vicious snort.

Yup. Called it. Not like that was, uh, particularly hard to guess. Tavros breathes hard; it feels like his lungs are shaking, or maybe just his whole body. Or the rocketchair, having sympathy shakes. Vriska leans in closer, her fangs visible through the sneer, and Tavros scrunches his eyes shut. "I don't want to die," he says, and even his voice shakes.

A slow scrape fills the silence. Tavros can feel Vriska's eye staring at him with bald scorn, like an icy burn creeping up his face. He cracks an eye open and sees Vriska mid-eye roll, as she twists and grinds the sharp point of a third die deep into the metal of the rocketchair. It leaves a pale blue divot to match the lines of scratched up paint. "Tch. I forgot who I was talking to. Even if I offered to help you, you'd still chicken out," Vriska says, scraping one last circle into the paint and wrinkling her nose at him. This far from Equius, Tavros sees that the rocketchair's paint is almost shredded in thin curls. Vriska pushes up off the rocketchair and spins on a heel with a deliberate poof of glitter that chokes Tavros; his mouth tastes like he just drank dry, tasteless sparkling water, and he hacks for a solid minute to clear the thin grit of sparkles out of his mouth and throat.

Vriska flies away. She aimed at a huge, dark rift in the Battlefield - Sollux's silicomb stack looks like it points right into the crack - and Tavros can still hear her humming along with whatever music she has playing in the background. It, uh, it's kind of sad, actually, looking down at the Battlefield through watery brown eyes - most of the landscape and castles got smashed, or burned, or some combination of the two, and now Vriska - Vriska - is flying down toward it like some kind of terrible blue and orange fairy.

Tavros takes two quick breathes, dizzy - and then floors it. The rocketchair veers off to the right at top speed, and he quickly stops clutching his head and shifts the controls back on target. Equius
would, um, probably not approve of him flooring it under any circumstances, but Tavros can't afford to care about Equius's approval when he already has Vriska problems, right now.

He blasts past Vriska. Tavros is not sure exactly what she was flying toward, but that has not stopped him for the past thirty or so seconds. Her spluttering follows him, and Tavros hears it get louder as she comes after him. He doesn't slow down, even as his eyes start to water from the smoke of a burning structure near the edge of the rift. His back feels...unsafe. But he keeps his shoulders firm and lowers his head as he charges.

"What. Do you think. You're doing," Vriska snaps. Tavros keeps his eyes focused dead ahead. If he looks at Vriska, he'll panic. This is a fact. She makes it hard not to, by flying in front of him with a snarl, but staring at her armpit is at least kind of funny, and not as terrifying as her…everything else. She keeps floating down toward the rift, too, keeping pace with him, which - Tavros can't decide if it's good or not. If she stopped, he would ram into her, wheelchair first, and she'd probably kill him, uh, really fast. But it would make him laugh, too, before he turned really dead.

No la mires. "Come on," Tavros says, halfway between impatient and terrified. His mouth draws tight like he's swallowed something bitter, and when Vriska raises her claws to jam them into the front of the rocketchair, Tavros panics and brings his whole fist down on the turbo. Vriska yelps and hops out of the way as he zooms down. He keeps Sollux's beehouse mainframes on his left.

"Hey! My quest! A-listers! Do I need to repeat my entire speech! Where are you going?!" Vriska shrieks, stomping a foot useless in midair as she catches up to him. He catches a glimpse of her frustrated, bugged out eyes, and then snaps his gaze away to look at the walls of the rift. The deeper they go, the darker the stone looks, until it's almost pitch black. He doesn't know what Vriska wants down here, still, um, the deeper they go, the more nervous he feels.

"Wherever you were going," he says, not looking at her while she fumes. "But, um, it's just a coincidence. It's not like I'm coming to make sure you don't mess everything up for everyone, like usual." He can't help the trickle of sarcasm that sneaks out toward the end there, but his voice is so unsteady that Vriska doesn't seem to notice.

Or maybe she does. "Mess-?! What?!!" Vriska splutters, so vexed she starts tearing at her hair. She whips another blue die at him, and this time it pings off Tavros's horn with a white-hot shock that stings right down to his skull, and lands 8-side up in the cup holder. Tavros stares dead ahead, like he is very, very interested in the massive, pale white tendril peeking out of the darker rock at the bottom of the fissure, and wonders why Equius never installed a double-extra turbo mode for Vriska-level emergencies. This, uh, seems like a pretty serious oversight on Equius's part...

Then Vriska snaps her claws eight times - the first time her claws slip and don't make an actual snapping noise, and a frustrated, muffled scream escapes her before she goes and does the full set of eight - and the dice snap back into her hand. Tavros's stomach twists, and he squints his eyes and scrunches his mouth to avoid flinching as he waits for her to throw all of them at him. It won't be that bad, he'll be right back, it'll probably be dumb and humiliating but what else is new -

"Whatever! I'm not waiting for you, and I'm definitely not pulling your ass out of the fire if you get in the way of my irons!" Vriska flips her hair over her shoulder in a vicious swirl and puts on a last burst of speed. This time, Tavros manages to gulp down a breath of clean air before her glitter bombards him in a dry cloud, and he brushes all the sparkling dust off his face onto his sleeve once he's through the worst of it. He's pretty much coated in a layer of blue sparkles, now, so he sighs and turns on the air-conditioning so it blasts the worst of it off him.

Only then does he pause to fervently thank whichever god (tier) just let him get through that alive. Tavros is kind of at a loss for words, but Vriska continues to fly away from him, and he continues to
be not dead, and that's, um, a minor miracle. A major miracle, even. He can't relax, not really, not when Vriska is still - well, Vriska - but he lets his head slump back against his headrest and stares at the rapidly dwindling sky in a grateful daze. "Uh, alright. If you say so," he says to the clouds.

Vriska talks right past him, her voice loud and echoing weirdly between the narrowing walls of the rift. "I should just off you. Or maybe you'd still be just as wet and wishy-washy as you are right now, and it would just be a waste of my time," she says, the aimless chatter buzzing a little in Tavros's ears.

…No. That's not just him, is it? There's some kind of weird reverb in Vriska's voice, or maybe in the echoes playing off the walls. When Tavros fidgets in his chair and reaches out to the bees in the mainframe stack, he can hear the same echo in their beenary thoughts as they follow the grass-green coils of Sollux's program. Except, uh, shouldn't there be a delay, if it was an echo? Tavros doesn't know, but the buzz makes his horns throb. "Yeah, probably something like that," he says, too late to really be responding to Vriska. His voice cracks halfway through. "Where are we going, again?"

He has trouble concentrating on Vriska's reply. She comes to a stop a few feet above the enormous white curve that fills the bottom of the fissure. The rift stops here, and the walls look like crystal instead of stone. Tavros drifts to a stop beside Sollux's last beehive, and hugs himself as he glances at the walls close on either side. There are motes of light or dust swirling in the stone in familiar, symmetrical patterns, and Tavros rubs his eyes when they start to ache from looking at them too long.

"Come oooooooon, you haven't guessed already? Jeez, this is an easy one!" Vriska drawls. After a pause - long enough for Tavros to notice it, and wonder why she's hesitating at all - Vriska lands with a light tap on the white curve, her shoes gliding over the - bark? If this is some kind of tree buried underground, this unearthed chunk of branch must be three miles long. It's absurdo. And he can't even see how much is still buried below.

"Not really. You just kind of do dangerous things, and since you are not going toward the uh, actual bad guys, I guess you're going toward something even more dangerous, so you can be the one to beat it instead," Tavros says. It's the truth. Vriska is very predictable, most of the time. Not being dead yet is kind of a surprise, but he is not going to complain about it, either.

He tries to keep his voice neutral, but Vriska looks up at him over her shoulder with a wild edge in her smirk, holding up her eight dice between her claws as she grins at him. It's not even a mean look, because secretly Tavros thinks Vriska likes it way better when she has an audience. It's just a look that says Tavros could die in a freak rockfall accident right now this second, and Vriska wouldn't stop for even a second. Not while she has things to do. "Heh. That's because I'm the only one smart and strong enough to handle the really important stuff. Not even Aradia knows about this plan! Pretty hush hush stuff!" she says, and then she pops a whole person out of nowhere. The small human wriggles the second he hits the white branch, his green clothes in disarray and his hat lopsided on his head, but Vriska plants her foot on his back before he can make an escape. Tavros winces with sympathy. "Cough it up, Lucky Charms," she says, tapping her foot on the Felt guy's shoulder.

"That is not my name," the Felt member says, weakly - then Vriska snarls, and the man cringes. Vriska's dice start to burn white-blue with heat - so hot that Tavros can almost see waves in the air, just barely visible against the backdrop of the rift walls. The rift starts to shake around them before she casts the dice down into the point where the branch meets the black crystal at the lowest point of the fissure, and Tavros puts a hand against the beehive mainframe beside him on reflex.

All he gets is a handful of sticky comb, and the growing realization that this may have been, um, a
The dice hit the stone with a shattering *crack*, and the rock splinters in the bright flare of Vriska's attack. More sharp cracks spread up and down the length of the branch - and then the stone crumbles into chunks the size of houses, and falls apart with a low, rumbling series of creaks.

And the space beneath it all is hollow. Tavros blinks, and wipes honey off on the edge of his rocketchair as the fissure opens up to reveal empty space that leads down into the dark. The white branch holds firm, without a scorch mark anywhere on the pale bark to show where Vriska's hit landed, and as the crystalline rock firmament of the Battlefield continues to crumble, Tavros can see that the branch extends further down, like a pale thread through the hollow space, dotted with thin ivory leaves. The bark must glow with some kind of light, because he sees it clearly even though he can't see anything else in the dark.

Vriska hops off the branch, captchaloguing the Felt man with an off-handed sweep of her claw, and falls down into the abyss with her hair streaming out behind her. Her god tier clothes burn like the sun. "Tavros? Get ready to meet your maker," she says, her voice smug, and full of perfectly synced echoes.

Vriska, Tavros can grudgingly admit, is very good at dramatic effect.

He follows her down into Skaia.

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Jade feels more than one portal bloom as they arrive; there's a second where all she can see is white and spiraling green, but she *feels* them with perfect clarity, and with a rush and a pop of her ears - both sets! - the dark of the Medium opens up before her. She gets at least three and a half seconds to enjoy it, victory hot and fierce in her chest like fire – and then Leviathan screams, and Jade realizes that there's a heaping helping of *oh no* writhing around right head of them. The ships that zapped through ahead of the Condesce's battleship scatter in three different directions, in ways that look weirdly practiced – evasive maneuvers that put the smaller gunships between the bulkier, heavy-bellied arks full of people in storage. They're all still riding the fast burn of the psionics that catapulted them through the gate, but Jade can feel them *all* slowing down, despite the *really urgent emergency going on here!* One could actually call this an urgency -

"Good glubbin' fuck. What has that massive seabeach done now?" the Condesce says. She practically rips the mouthpiece off her face once she realizes the Medium has air, and once her face is free the troll immediately grips her teeth, shading her eyes with a claw as a burst of hot yellow light rips through the Medium and gouges through the edge of the Furthest Ring. Jade can *feel* all the meteors of the Reckoning all the way from here, with almost no effort - and she can also feel all the gaping holes where reality cuts off, instead.

Leviathan - it *is* Leviathan, she thinks, with weird certainty that she'll want to examine later - is *kiiinda* distracting, in all its super ugly, convoluted glory. From this angle, Jade can see rippling shards of warped glass flaring from the Horrorterror's side. Except its side is a mound of coils, wrapping over and around and feeding into each other like immersed Klein bottles, and brackish purple-black blood pours through the transparent loops. And it's - unfathomable, in the usual Horrorterror way where Jade just can't wrap her head around all of it, but also *unfathomable huge*, in a way Jade has never felt before. She flattens Bec's ears to her head with a shudder, but there's just *so much*.

That's the only excuse Jade has for not realizing the even more immediate issue, which is the creepy bodybuilder skeleton man firing a machine gun at the Horrorterror. It's apparently more effective than
He's also directly ahead on the same plane as the *Battleship Condescension*, and the Condesce rises to her feet like a swelling tide, her hair blown back in a wild tumble that almost defies gravity and her trident detached from the hull. Jade doesn't exactly know the Condesce very well - but when she blinks in the troll's direction, she recognizes a 'I'm about to give the order to ram this guy' look when she sees one! "Not a good plan!" Jade says fast, just as the Condesce raises her trident, and all the *Battleship's* weapons (even the ones halfway down the ship from them) follow her aim like extensions of her body. Both shooting and ramming are unequivocally terribad plans, and Jade's having serious reservations about the smaller ships trying to cover the ark ships' retreat by zooming around in Leviathan's general vicinity like a bunch of maniacs.

The Condesce snarls and angles her glare at Jade, impatience and irritation and trench-cold calculation warring in her fuchsia stained eyes. She doesn't turn her head to do it, which is good, since her long horns have lowered into an aggressive slant, and Jade would probably get impaled. But this close, Jade isn't too-too concerned as far as impalement goes; with Bec's awareness enhancing her own, she thinks she could feel even the teeniest, tiniest twitch of the Condesce's pinky claw. Stuff in the distance is still fuzzy and indistinct, but she *could* focus in on them, if she tried. "You guys have to get out! Not get munched on by a Horrorterror!" she says.

"Then which way is out, gill?" the Condesce demands, with her most demanding voice - and that's a doozy of a demanding voice, if Jade is any judge. They're still arrowing forward, though the *Battleship*'s speed declines almost as sharply as all the other ships', and if they're gonna avoid hitting green Skeletor, they need to turn fast. Jade can probably boost the turn herself, but her head feels like it's still turning in spirals. If she has to fight the Condesce herself to do it -

And wait. Hang on. She's asking a good question. Because Jade can feel most of the big things in the Medium, now, from the distracting chaos of Leviathan to the harmony of the four intact lands, and there's one thing that's kinda sorta missing. Something that Jade assumed would be super obvious, and possibly lit up in giant flashing neon green signs to her space sense, at the very least!

But when she casts her awareness wide like a spirographic net, she can't feel anything like the kind of exit Calliope promised.

So they might be kind of screwed. "Noooot entirely sure yet," she says, turning around to look with her actual eyes in case she's missing the obvious. But no - no matter which direction Jade looks, her movements increasingly twitchy as she scans and rescans the same patches of the Medium, she can't see anything that screams 'escape.' Either both her space sense *and* her eyes are failing her...or there's nothing here.

Also, green Skeletor did not stop being a thing that is happening. Jade realizes they're still plowing toward him with all their leftover momentum, and even though the creepy guy's busy with Leviathan, Jade *thinks* he'll notice if they run into him. "Uh, that way!" Jade says, snapping and pointing a finger at LoHaC. Better than faded LoLaR, which Jade almost didn't recognize, and which is located wayyy too close to Leviathan for comfort. The Condesce gives her a *look*, her lips pursed with disbelief, and Jade smacks herself internally until her brain stops futzing around and comes up with a believable tone of voice. Fake it til you make it! "Seriously, any direction is better than here!"

"Oh, the fins I do for - Fine!" The Condesce swears.

And keeps swearing.

And doesn't stop until she's turned fuchsia in the face, as the *Battleship* rumbles and then turns
smoothly, just angled enough that they shear past green Skeletor by a mile. Jade reaches out and hauls the nose of the ship to the side with a little extra oomph, to make sure they're gonna clear him by...a lot. A lot sounds like a good, quantifiable way of putting it! But -

"Now, where are we aimin'?" the Condesce says, her voice grating, and oh, right. That's stilll a work in progress. 'Away from the fighting monsters' can only take them so far, Jade guesses, and 'toward LoHaC' is a stopgap. The small ships and the arks turn - the gunships on a dime, the arks in wide, sluggish arcs - to follow in the Battleship's wake, so at least Jade doesn't have to worry about any of them charging away at psionic speeds.

Hm. This is definitely a pickle, and the longer Jade's at a loss, the more likely the Condesce will do something dumb. They need a destination.

So Jade smiles at the Condesce (it's more of a wince, but who's counting?) and takes out her phone to check in, laughing awkwardly through her teeth as the Condesce inhales deeply. People probably noticed the ships arrive, and maybe Calliope talked to them while Jade was busy in gatespace. Finally, just as Jade thinks she's about to have another swearing, angry trollfit on her hands, the Condesce rolls her eyes, her diamond-sharp teeth bared in a grimace - and then takes out her own gold and gem-encrusted phone, tapping on the screen using the pads of her fingers instead of her elaborately decorated claws with precise stabs. Jade casts one last look over her shoulder, shudders as her awareness brushes over several wide tears where time has cracked, and makes sure that green muscle man hasn't decided to fire at them.

But he's just hanging there, like dead weight. Jade can't keep calling him green Skeletor forever - she thinks she knows his name, just like she knows what to call the massive Horrorterror coiling around the Medium - but on the other hand, calling him that makes him a lot less intimidating, and Jade is all about faking it until you make it. They might have gotten away with it; apparently Leviathan is just way more interesting, for now.

GG: hey guys!
TT: Jade!
AC: :33 < you made it!
TG: i call dibs obijade please your my only ho
TA: oh my god will you calm your shiit
EB: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
TA: WILL YOU CALM YOUR SHIIT TOO FUCK
GG: whoa, whoa! one at a time, everyone! whatd I miss?"
CC: A W)(OL----E lot of stuff!
CT: D--> We are holding Noir off but if Serket has %% us -
TG: oh god
TG: sollux hurry up
TA: iim handliing it
GG: sorry! slight delay on the portal!
GG: should have been here sooner, but i think noir busted mine a little :/
GA: Oh Jade. I Have Asked Calliope, And She Says The Gate Should Open Shortly.
GG: oh, thank you!
GG: where is everyone at?
TT: We have a delectably crisp new spreadsheet for our current locations and status. Vriska, naturally, has not checked in. Tavros has gone AWOL as well, which bodes ill.
GG: D: it bodes indeed.
TA: hes not dead yet so he can get iin liine
GG: ...guys, literally all of your entries on this spreadsheet say you need help!
GG: except rose and feferi and kanaya!
CC: 38O
CA: I feel like we need help just on principle
GG: Oh Nepeta, you're god tier now? :O
AC: :33 < WHOOOOOO HOOO! >:33c *The rogue of heart cannily steals the > from her
meowrail's quirk to use as eyebrows!*
GC: I H4D3 CONG3ST1ON.
AA: Hade?
GC: H4D3.
GC: 4UGH! H4T3!
GG: Guys, seriously? Guys! I have a bunch of civilian ships here and there's a giant monster battle
right up on our butts and no way out! I need help!
TT: There's a help deficit, at the moment. We'll try to wrap up here on LoLaR fast, since we're in the
best shape.
GA: Oh, I Am Supposed To Come Help With That. The Ships Thing. At Some Point.
CC: We're (urrying! ) (ang on!
-- (er Imperious Condescension [)(IC] has joined the chat! --
)(IC: yo
TG: sup
CA: wwait no
)(IC: w)(ats up w this s)(it )ere
CC: 38o
CA: Oh fuck me
EB: AA AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
TT: Sollux, abort the memo.
GG: Guys, stop! She's in charge of the ships, she's helping!
)(IC: wrigglers are panicky af
TG: nope nope nope
)(IC: and my gill
CC: O)()()()()( D---EAR
)(IC: w)(eres t)(e s)(outy one
GG: Just hope we're going the right direction, then...
GC: S1L3NC3!
GC: 1 W1LL H4V3 ORDER 1N TH1S RUMPUS BLOCK!
TT: Really? I thought things were relatively in hand, all things considered.
GC: YOU’R3 4LL TYP1ING TOO F4ST 4ND 1 C4N B4R3LY SM3LL F4SD 3NOUGH TO
K33P UP.
TG: Tzs snotblind everyone post sick memes
TA: Werent you panicking two seconds ago
TG: Dude I can multitask
CA: I cannot believe you idiots are acting like this in front of the hic
TT: Well, I'm not sure why you would expect anything better.
TT: Expecting a modicum of manners and/or self-preservation instinct out of this memo is frankly
unrealistic.
CA: Yeah that's fair

"Your fronds are ridiculous," the Condesce observes. One of her assistants - maybe the same troll as
last time - has joined them again now that the Battleship isn't pelting along at crazy-speed, bearing a
tray that holds several glasses of water and one bright pink margarita garnished with a jewel-studded
umbrella. Jade gives herself one guess who that's for.
A sigh whistles through Jade's nose. "Yeah, a liiittle bit." She tears her eyes away from Pesterchum long enough to look back at Leviathan and the Lord of Time, as they recede into the distance. Not fast enough for Jade's comfort, though! "Just...give those two a wide berth. Our way out should be opening soon."

"Betta hope so. What are we looking for?"

"We'll know it when we see it, definitely," Jade bullshits. Dave would probably be proud of how smooth that went! But Jade gets the impression that the Condesce is nooot fooled. Not even a little bit. "Would it be okay if some of my friends came and helped guard the ships and meteors, once they're free? As in, please don't shoot them if they do?" There! A nice, casual subject change that also happens to cover something that might be an issue in the future! Jade is on a roll, here.

The Condesce groans, picks up the margarita, and drains it in one swig. Jade doesn't know how she feels about the merits of getting drunk right in the middle of all this silliness, but nope! Not the hill she's gonna die on! Not even once. "Shore, whatever. As long as they don't fuck with me, I don't fuck with them," the Condesce says at last, though her eyelids lower in a suspicious-looking glance at Jade. Like she's trying to see if her own bullshit is gonna fly with Jade. Then, before Jade can cross her arms and mention the suspiciousness, the Condesce picks up a glass of water and hands it to Jade. "Here."

"Jimmy'd pitch a fish if I let you run around lookin' all green around the gills," the Condesce adds, raising a claw and inspecting the nail décor with a faint frown.

If she's gonna wait for Jade to chug the water, she's gonna wait for a while! Jade heads back to the memo one last time. Five minutes, Kanaya said, and it's almost been that long -

GG: okay! ANYWAY!
TT: Hm? Oh, right. Problems.
GG: once we have a heading i'll get the ships going toward the gate
GG: who here actually seriously needs help!!! last call!
)(IC: w)(o says youre ditching my s)(ips?
AA: you probably should stay with them for a while :
GG: probably as in will, or probably as in helpful advice?
AA: why not both?
TG: goddamnit
GG: but wait!
GG: first you guys have to see my new look!
)(IC: )(old tf up im gettin in on this gill

Jade really only intends to take a quick picture of herself and use it as an excuse to float her glass of water back onto the assistant's tray, but the instant she holds up her phone the Condesce leans into the frame. By which Jade means, the Condesce practically takes over the entire frame, with the huge mass of her hair smushing against Jade's and cutting off all but a few red points of the Battleship behind them, her skin dry ice cold against Jade's cheek. The fuchsiablood throws up two claws in her signature two-horns sign, which looks remarkably like a peace sign but more intimidating and possibly trademarked, and after a moment's pause Jade gulps and puts up a regular peace sign.
Because Jade is a lot of things! But she's not dumb enough to try to kick Her Imperious Condescension out of a photo op when she's got one arm slung around Jade's back and teeth close to her face. Her smile feels kind of weird and the corner of her lip won't stop twitching, but she takes the picture anyway and sends it off.

TT: Bec?
GG: uh huh
TT: My condolences.
TG: oh fucking christ youve gone full furry
GG: youre just jealous dave! :P
TG: honestly jade
TG: probably yeah on some level
CA: unbelievable
AC: :33 < *the rogue of heart sniffs carefully, unsure how to f33l about this development*
AC: :33 < (I LOVE IT PURRPURRPURR!)
probably in a better place than the ships right now, all things considered, but the ships should be able to catch up. Jade starts bouncing on her heels, unable to contain the energy bubbling up in her chest.

The Condesce's nostrils flare, her eyes cold, glass-sharp as she stares at Jade, then at the Gate. "That our way out?" she says, even though it should be obvious. The tips of her claws drum along Jade's arm.

"Oh yeah. That is very definitely the way out." And...it's weird. Jade catches herself nodding her head, so face and jerkily that it makes her head bobble, and that snaps her out of the euphoric, magnetic daze that swamped her with the Gate's opening. It doesn't feel like that was a bad thing, but once a tiny shard of calm pinches Jade in the mental butt, her head clears a little so she's not lost in it. She'll need to remember not to get caught up in the Gate; she can't afford to forget all the civilians under her feet. Really quick, she pats around in her sylladex for a rubber band to tie around her finger - but most of her collection got kiiinda mixed in with the rest of her when she started melting, so the rainbow-striped rubber band that she finds and knots around her index finger will just have to stand in for all of the ones she lost.

With that done, she looks up and meets the Condesce's eyes instead of past her. The tension in the Condesce's short frame eases off - Jade blinks; she must have been acting weirder than she thought! - and the troll rakes her claws through her hair. "Alright, then. You got your head on your shoulders?" the Condesce asks, even as she snaps her claws and points the claw-pistol that ensues at the Gate. Her assistant bends their head and starts tapping frantically on a palmhusk.

The fleet turns further, and Jade can sense them aligning into some kind of formation again. It's a lot heavier on the rear guard, she thinks, with the ark ships falling in wide ranks just ahead of the Battleship itself rather than forming a long string. Which is weird, unless you consider that one crack in time screaming through them from behind is all it would take to break the fleet, if they were all in a line. Spreading them out like this makes more targets...

And they're all moving at the speed of slow. Jade can barely feel the crackle of the psionics at all, when before the ships lit up like fireworks! "Oh yeah, I'm fine. You guys can't go any faster?" she asks, both impatience and anxiety leaking into her voice.

The Condesce scowls, but doesn't direct it at Jade -. "Not sure how soon we can do another craysea fast burn like that. Damn ships are built for long distance shit. And my buoy will also pitch a fit if I start burnin' people out. Cod dammit. Hmm..." She folds her arms and starts drumming her nails along her own arm like drills.

That's so conveniently inconvenient. Jade shakes her head, as reality sits its butt down on the last of her euphoria and squishes it. "As fast as you can. I'll try to give you a boost, but it sounds like my friends have gotten in an awful lot of trouble without me..." Jade says, sighing. "Well, we're probably fine! For now! But the Reckoning could start any minute, and also -" she waves both hands behind them "- all of that is still a thing."

The Condesce bares her teeth in a troll not-smile; the leer looks as natural on her face as the look of cold calculation. "Conchsider it done - I'll go kick Zahhak into glubbin' gear, see if he can rework some -"

SS: Gerroff me! I'll stab all of yo-

The carapacian equivalent of a furious snarl interrupts them, jolting through Jade's brain. Spades Slick has a pretty distinctive voice, Jade's gotta admit - he and Noir don't sound anything alike, anymore. Jade tunes in just in time to feel the last of a scuffle at the hatch, and then Noir shoves his way out of the Battleship with his teeth buried in the meat of some unfortunate troll's claw. He pretty
much hauls himself up onto the platform one-handed, since the other claw is busy stabbing anyone who blinks at him funny. She makes a mental note to ask Karkat why he made friends with the most knife-happy possible friend on the planet, then teleports Spades away from the tangle of troll assistants attempting to drag him away from the Condesce. He should land flat on his butt, but - Spades being Spades - he starts writhing and hissing furiously the second Jade brings his atoms together again, and lands in a rolling heap instead. A short Prospitian carapacian lady follows him out of the hatch, clutching a gossamer, sparkly black shawl around her shoulders as she politely sidesteps the pile of red-clad trolls that collapsed when their target teleported away.

MP: Excuse us! Dear, please put that away.

"Oh, what is this fresh shell? Why ain't these two in sleepers, yet?" the Condesce demands. "If they ain't necessary or politically relevant, they glubbin' well shouldn't be wandering around my ship!"

The nearest assistant gives a remarkable nuanced shrug that somehow manages to communicate 'I have no idea, but the reason is probably really, really dumb' in a single motion, which requires a lot of talent to pull off! Meanwhile, Spades Slick finishes flailing (after nearly stabbing himself once in the shin, Jade notes) and pulls himself together, his white eyes narrowed to slits as he jabs a purple-and burgundy-splotched knife at Jade. Not in an attacking sense! Just in a pointing sense, like how a normal person would jab a finger at you. With Spades, the difference between pointing and stabbing tends to be a matter of degree, and how much blood gets drawn on impact.

SS: Witch, we've got problems.

...Oh boy! Those words that Jade just loves to hear. "That happens a lot, yeah. What kind?" she says, summoning a weak smile. Bec's - her ears flatten out a little to either side, but she's kinda new to figuring out her new canine-body language stuff, so she doesn't know what kind of impression she's giving off. Thankfully, neither Spades nor the Condesce probably have any experience with that kind of thing, either.

SS: The Black Queen's gone. I know that bitch was here -

MP: Oh, language.

"*beach," the Condesce adds. She says 'asterisk' out loud.

SS: - beach, whatever. And now she's pissed off to who fucking knows where, and let me tell you, that means bad news.

Jade is about two seconds from pulling a Karkat. Seriously. She's on the verge, here. So she takes a couple seconds (or okay, twenty seconds) to press her lips together in the weirdest not-smile she's ever made, swallowing a looot of choice words in the process. The Condesce passes her another glass of water, one eyebrow arched, and this time Jade just drinks it in one long chug, because worrying about that kind of stuff just drops lower and lower on her echeladder of caring with each passing second. "You're sure?" she asks with a gasp as she lowers the glass, feeling refreshed. "Because she hasn't really messed with everyone too-too much, so far -"

SS: It takes a monarch to start a Reckoning, you naïve, squishy ass!

SS: YES I KNOW ABOUT THE LANGUAGE.

The Prospitian dame blinks wide, dark eyes, then draws back and looks disconsolate. Spades flinches and smacks his own face at once, looking like he regrets all his life choices. The Condesce clicks her tongue, and says, "*bass," with the harsh, imperious voice of a very disappointed leader-
person. Despairing, Spades stares at Jade. She folds her arms, 'cause he's not getting any help from her corner! His head droops and his shoulders hunch, but his apology sounds sincere, even if he mumbles a little.

SS: ...Sorry.

SS: Vantas is also doing some dangerous shit that feels like it's givin' me a goddam infarction, so. Yeah. So send me there so I can do somethin' about it.

MP: It'll be alright. I have it on very good authority that it will all be alright, dear.

MP shakes her head, then places a gentle claw on Spades' arm, tipping her head onto his shoulder. It's actually really sweet - Spades turns as bristly as Karkat does sometimes when doing PDA stuff in front of witnesses, but MP more than makes up for him in the adorable sweetness department. Jade can't see it, but can feel Spades' hand come up to touch the Prospitian's back - no, supporting her, because she's listing to one side. Because MP has a sealed over crack in her chest that Jade can still feel, on some level; it's fixed now, but Jade has a similar healed-over stab wound knotted in her shoulder, and like calls to like.

It's hard to try to stay mad at Spades when he darts miserable, worried looks at MP, thinly disguised by his bare-toothed grimace. "Er. Which there?" Jade asks, cycling through a sigh internally. He snarls at her at once, stamping a foot on the metal floor. His mental voice sounds increasingly erratic.

SS: Either there! No, forget Vantas, he's got one free shot left in him before his heroic stupidity gets urgent.

SS: Agh! Where'd the beach go?!

"If he's lookin' for the carapacific Queen, she's on the skyball," the Condesce answers, her tone deceptively mild, before Jade even has a chance to check for herself. The fuchsiablud hooks a thumb claw toward Skaia when Jade looks at her; the troll's disapproval has turned into heavy-eyed amusement. Tolerating shenanigans like this is something everybody needs to get used to, eventually, and Jade really hopes the Condesce has some seriously high tolerance underneath all her...well, everything. Amusement is better than impatience, which is way better than anger. "As if I wouldn't notice her and the GP jettisoning one of my own escape pods. Can send you coordinates, gill." The Condesce's smile turns sly, and she starts waggling her eyebrow.

Jade can't quite repress a giggle-snort. The Condesce's smile inches up a little more. Whiiich is good! Jade likes cooperative tyrant lady trolls! Cooperation and jokes are good, and definitely a thing to be encouraged. "Right. Okay!" she says, clapping her hands together. "Then I'll be right back once I drop Spades off!"

The Condesce plants one claw on her hip, cocking it a little to the side as she gives Jade a piercing look. "We got you?" she says, dead serious.

Well. Jade bounces on her heels once, then tilts her hand from side to side in a so-so motion. "Probably! I'll try to check in with John one last time. I haven't heard from him yet, so..." If John's in super-deep trouble, bad enough that he can't even answer, that definitely calls for a check-in. Or maybe his phone got busted. There's a ton of explanations for why he might not be answering, and while Jade is trying to keep her 'bad news' pile on the smallish side, she'd rather hear more bad news than wander around the Medium blissfully unaware of it!

And the Condesce's face does something...weird, when Jade mentions John. Some kind of flicker, her eyes darting to the side - but then it's gone again, smoothed under a mask of imperial indifference
as the troll starts to snap more orders out at her bevy of assistants, and Jade just has to tuck it away to wonder about later. Right now, instead of John, somebody with purple text is messaging her back. Urghghhhh. Gamzee isn't really who she wants to hear from, but if he has news ab-

TC: hes fine
GG: uh...scuse me for not believing that right away :/
GG: if hes fine, why isn't he messaging me himself?
TC: BROTHER'S ALL BUSY WITH A BOSS FIGHT
TC: we've got it motherfuckin covered though
TC: PROMISE :o)
GG: agh!
GG: the clown face is not reassuring! on so many levels!
TC: :o(
GG: ...no, don't do the sad face either.
TC: :o(
GG: oh for - you guys are fine? you wouldn't lie to me about that?
TC: i don't get my lie on for shit like this, you feel?
TC: WOULD NEED TO HAVE A GOOD MOTHER FUCKIN REASON
GG: urgggh.
GG: i'll be checking on you guys if i don't hear back soon
GG: sorry, i just -
TC: i get it, jadesis
TC: BUT ALSO
TC: don't you trust a motherfucker? :o)
GG: not with the clown face emoticon! jeez!
GG: and i'm trying but everything happens a lot right now, and the worry doesn't stop from happening!
TC: FAIR ENOUGH
GG: anyway, watch out for him
GG: you might want to concentrate on fighting and not texting, i guess
GG: good luck with the boss fight!
TC: i don't text
TC: :o)
TC: thanks

And that's about as much sense as Gamzee ever makes, so Jade just has to live with it. Urgh. Jade taps the side of her head with the heel of her palm a couple times for good measure - for a second there, she thought she was hearing Gamzee instead of reading the words in Pesterchum, and Gamzee-induced synesthesia isn't something she wants to navigate while teleporting around the Medium. She floats over to Spades Slick, who eyeballs her suspiciously as she enters his stabby radius. Even if Spades wants MP coming along, Jade can tell already that wouldn't be a good idea; the other carapacian can barely keep her eyes open. Jade bites her lip, then looks at the Condesce. Nooot the most ideal person to ask, but also - probably the only person. "Um, could she get someplace to sit, please?" Jade asks, doing her best to look nice and supplicant-y.

The Condesce flicks her claws at Jade impatiently; she seems absorbed in pursing her lips and reapplying her bright lipstick. Another assistant arrives with a compact full of gold, glittery makeup, and the Condesce starts drawing sharp lines along her cheekbones, the flare of her fins, and the bones of her claws, to link up with her jewelry. "Yeah, shore," she says, distracted. "Now bounce, before the tunaverse breaks some more."

Spades peels away from MP very reluctantly, and only once someone has produced a chair from heck only knows where - Jade is the space person, and even she's not sure when they brought that up
here. "Okay! Now, no stabbing on the Jade Express, buster," she tells him, with exactly zero expectation that that'll, y'know. Actually work.

SS: That's just unrealistic.

-

BQ: Where is it.

BQ: My patience wears thin.

The Black Queen does not pace; the small confines of the wretched little pod they've commandeered for this wouldn't let her stalk properly, and she wouldn't stoop to something as plebeian as pacing in present company. The Grey Protector sits at the controls, mild and benign as he guides the pod with easy, practiced grace down through Skaia's well of clouds, when she wants him to grate on the nerves. She wants him to give her a reason. It doesn't have to be a good one: an unintended insult, a twitch that might be interpreted as a threat. But instead the pale carapacian radiates calm and steadfast understanding, and in such close quarters, the mental resonance of a King is strong enough that the BQ can't dismiss him out of claw. He's as sane and quiet and contemplative as the Black King never could have been, and she perversely hates him for it all the more.

Her very shell feels like it has been scraped raw - her body screams for antagonism, recalcitrant in the face of unrelenting forbearance. She can sense stupid, stupid Noir from here, boiling over with the power of her ring, and the rocking pulse of warsong reverberates in her shell, in her blood, and the urge to dig her claws into her own caparace to free it, to tear down the sky is - is -

GP: The engines are giving us all they've got. We should arrive shortly.

BQ: Stop that.

GP: Mmm.

GP: This looks like a nice place to land, don't you agree?

BQ: It's inconsequential. It will all be destroyed soon.

Not maddening. She is not mad. Merely furious, and a tad impatient, but who would not be? The Black Queen is deeply, irritably aware of Skaia's will, as the GP lands the pod with carapacian ease - namely, by crashing it to a skidding stop just outside the walls of a half-demolished Prospitian cathedral, as one would any meteor worth crashlanding - and the contradiction roiling within her soul has never stung so keenly as it does now. Hate and loyalty, bound into one.

Someone has cracked Skaia open, and Her attention fills the air with perfect echoes. It's not an atmosphere conducive to calming down, not when every part of you wants to wage war. The BQ kicks the pressurized door open the instant they roll to a stop, shredding the metal with a [Phthartic Phonation] that causes the controls to explode. To her displeasure, the Protector moves away just in time to avoid scorching his claws in the electrical fire that ensues, and he absorbs the rending sound waves without so much as a flinch. Her scowl cements itself on her face as she yanks the brim of her hat down to block Skaia's ambient light. The pod will never fly again after her scream finishes rattling every screw and bolt out of its socket, but she could care less how the GP plans to escape this horrible place without the squishy, troll-built pile of scrap metal. She has yet to decide if she'll let him live, even if he does cooperate - she's in the mood for a spot of regicide that only a select few carapacians can satisfy.

The widely-built carapacian stops to tilt his bared head back, gazing up at the blue and white of the
sky. Fires burn in the distance, still, leftovers from the previous session, but the pale grey cathedral nearest them appears to have been demolished by a heavy impact rather than fire, so there’s no smoke to blot out the sky. They sigh at the same time, the GP with a wistful look on his placid face, the Black Queen with a grimace as she begins to tap her foot hard enough to send tiny tremors through the ground for miles around them. Parts of the cathedral that have remained stable until now begin to crumble further. The longer this useless King dawdles, the more the Black Queen needs to remind herself that without him, she could spend the rest of her time digging through piles of Prospitian garbage and never find what they’ve come to retrieve.

He never had it in the makeshift capital on Earth. As if she hadn't scoured that place from top to bottom, the first time her cousin-queen so much as hinted at the possibility. Perhaps the White Queen knew, or perhaps the White King scraped together a meager amount of subterfuge from his pale bones to conceal this knowledge even from her, before willingly becoming this faded shell of his former self.

GP: Ah, yes. The weather is lovely. This way.

Objectively speaking, the weather is shit. Horridly bright, with reality dying overhead. But the GP finally, finally takes the lead, and the Black Queen stalks along in his stately wake. The cathedral ruins stand still and empty as they venture through the roof-less entry way, the faint checkboard pattern of the stone chipped or scraped clean in many places along the walls. Tattered black, white, and golden banners hang from the few walls that remain intact, most of them bleached by Skaia's light until the fabric is just as faded and threadbare as their not-King. This would have served as a spawn and launch point for Prospitian bishops and their Arch Deaconstructors, were the Game still functioning as intended; as it stands, nothing has spawned here in a very, very long time.
And the Grey Protector walks her down into the dark of a chamber beneath the surface level of the cathedral. The shadows of the spiraling staircase wrap around the Black Queen at once, pliant under her feet, and she replaces the wispy shawl she gave to the little Prospitian earlier - for the express purpose of giving Spades Slick a heart attack and a half when the blind fool finally notices - with a heavy black plates of armor, which mantle her shoulders and clasp over the soft, vulnerable seams in her carapace at the front of her chest. The GP pays her no heed; his wide, unprotected back waits before her, an easy target. **War** sings through her, and summoning a dark blade from the shadows would be *so easy.*

He hasn't even locked the door to the vault. This is an old place, the walls still carved with hideous frogs and other amphibious and reptilian lifeforms, the shelves lined with purple and gold-bound books, the center taken up by a low writing desk. A suitably dull place for a Writ Keeper. What *really* matters is not the outdated information contained in the books, but the slowly blooming pink lotus flower which fills the far half of the room, the petals splayed heavy and wide over the square base. Every few moments, the countdown in the readout along the base flickers and jitters as time shatters outside, but inevitability causes it to keep its course - Skaia wants this to happen too much - only a few seconds to go.

**BQ:** You used a lotus time capsule.

**GP:** They are remarkably useful.
The last two seconds blink by too fast as something cracks over the cathedral. As the lotus finishes blooming, the Grey Protector steps forward, and the Black Queen -

- does not strike him down where he stands. It takes agonizing effort not to, as he closes his hand over the pale scepter. The Black Queen watches it happen and feels it at the same time: the hateful jolt of a monarch laying claw upon that which is theirs. The abstract representation of Skaia swirls sync over the tip of the king's scepter, with four tiny orbs orbiting the base. The G- the White King holds it carefully in both palms, the white light of latent power beginning to shine through his carapace, and all it will take is a twist for him to activate it and emerge with whatever prototyping remains in this damned session.

WK: Here we are.

And all it will take is a step forward, and he will have a lance through his back. Check. He brought her here with him without even a token attempt to dissuade her, and she hates him for it. Sometimes she thinks she has nothing left but hate, and a war that she cannot win for losing. What Skaia wills is Her own destruction, session after session after session, and the Black Queen is just as much a piece of that pattern as she ever was.

The White King turns to her, still Wistful, still radiating kingly power like a beacon in the dark, unlit vault.

BQ: Well?

He has not stopped smiling, regal and Weary, even as he bows his head and holds out the King’s Scepter with open palms.

WK: We surrender our scepter. The Battlefield is yours, Black Queen.

Checkmate. She doesn't hesitate for an instant before accepting the feather-light scepter. It adjusts itself to her size, growing heavier until it feels balanced in her claws. Scepters are not like rings - their prototyping is not transferrable to another carapacian, even one of the same kingdom. Only a King can become a King. The White King dims once the scepter leaves his claws, while the Black Queen remains wreathed in shadow.

Once captured or surrendered, a King's Scepter isn't intended to raise the new wielder as a King. A White King's scepter really only has one purpose.

BQ: Tell your Queen to bring me Noir.

BQ: It's time for a Reckoning.

Chapter End Notes

Did you know that 'pulling out all the stops' originally alluded to pipe organ stops?

It's puns all the way down.
Sickness of Soul

Chapter Summary

They are smitten asunder with pain, their bones are smitten apart. There is none of them all that is whole; their lips gape open for breath; They are clothed with sickness of soul, and the shape of the shadow of death. The wind is thwart in their feet; it is full of the shouting of mirth.

Chapter Notes

Bad things happen in this chapter. Follow the [x] links and occasional in-text links throughout for relevant music.

Edit 5/4 Karkat's section starts at 'Karkat hits the lava hard.' Whoops.
Edit 5/8 Rose's section starts at 'There are no traps.' Warning for abrupt but not gory eye trauma.
Edit 5/17 Dave's section starts at 'Dave stares.' I don't know why he has to talk so much, honestly...
Edit 5/29 John's section starts at "'You're really just terrible at this"'. Warning for some gore, particularly of the Trickster variety, and a possible epilepsy warning for a flashy gif after 'John miight be doing...less than okay.'
Edit 6/9 Jade's section starts at 'Jade lands on Skaia.'

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His voice comes to her from a great way off, solemn and echoing of Skaia and very much alive, and the White Queen closes her eyes and tilts her head back as she listens. LoFaF inundates her with the rich scent of wild growth and imminent genesis, and for a brief, heady moment, she cannot tell whether Skaia or the Forge or the distant, fluttering curtains of the Final Gate ring with the undeniable sound of creation. Something stronger than a Lord is on the rise, but they're at a crux - WK: We are on her mark.

She has lived so many lives, but hearing him is never less of a sweet thing. The White Queen folds her claws together, and opens her eyes.

The ring rests in the cupped bowl of her palms; here and now, it lays contented and still, when it has spent every waking moment since she retrieved it from PM clamoring with war bells and inching toward her ring claw. Balance is a hard thing to resist - if one Queen's Ring has found a claw, surely the other must follow suit. But then it would have come to war far earlier than the White Queen would have liked, against an opponent with no care for collateral damage and no true purpose beyond his own vicious gratification.

This is not a war that she can win. But it is one that she can help end.
WQ: Pardon me, Doctor Lalonde. I'm afraid the time has come.

It is difficult to raise her gaze from the soft, waiting ring, but the White Queen does so, meeting the wine-red eyes of the woman next to her as she looks up from the small, yellow-orange snake that winds between the fingers of her gloves and flicks its tongue over the clipboard. The doctor arches an eyebrow, her expression searching as she wordlessly passes the snake off to the lab assistant who offers up a mesh net. Most of her makeup remains in place, but since their arrival she has chewed and wet her lips enough in worried thought that the bright lipstick has vanished. But the White Queen has had the chance to observe Rue Lalonde on and off for some time, now, and despite the worry and the strenuous exercise needed to hunt for snakes in the growing heat and humidity of LoFaF, there's no hint of tremor in her gloved hands, and the color of her skin is neither flushed nor Prospitian pale. She has reached some sort of equilibrium, and clings to it with every inch of poise that was once obfuscated with the use of inebriants.

Then Doctor Lalonde's eyes narrow, and she crosses her arms, lifting a single finger to silence an assistant's question as she turns to face the White Queen head on. "What are you going to do?" she asks - which is the correct question. The doctor has already catalogued the ring, and knows enough to realize that the White Queen has brought it forth now, of all times. As the White Queen watches, sweat trickles down along the doctor's temple, close enough to her eye that she blinks hard to keep it out.

WQ: Rectify an old error.

WQ: There must be a Reckoning for what Noir has done.

She keeps the carapace of her face smooth and serene, and though she cannot keep from voicing the emphatic capitalization of the Reckoning with her mind, she can maintain her composure well enough that Doctor Lalonde does not quite register it, or what it portends. Doctor Lalonde's frown deepens with a faint twitch, but with one final, respectful dip of her head, the White Queen steps away. There is nothing that any of the people in the immediate vicinity could do to stop her - but the ascension of a War Queen will be uncomfortable for bystanders at best, even if she does her best to curb the strongest flares of sovereignty. She would rather not bring down the jungle on top of all these people working to assist the heroes.

Thirty feet should be enough of a buffer zone, if she's any judge - it leaves her up to her dress hem in silt-brown water that has long since stilled, as the snakes that churned the flats into a froth have been gathered up systemically under the Maid's direction. But just as she sighs, and spreads the claws of her hand wide -

PM: Wait!

Under the water, something cool and smooth lands with a plap! on the toe of her foot - and PM tramples toward her through the water, kicking up splashing arcs of water as she pelts toward the White Queen by the most direct route possible. The smaller carapacian was retrieving and delivering snakes captured by the children further field the last WQ heard from her, and so this process requires her to wade through deeper water up around her elbows. As she splashes across the flooded plain, the ring teetering on the tip of the White Queen's claw sparks off her claw nail and threatens to fall into the water before she claps her hand shut on it. A low bourdon bell clangs harshly against her palm, throbbing in alternating beats with a sharp alarm siren, before the call to war eases back into a tolerable, shell-cracking drumbeat under her carapace. The brief audible note bursts through the water in an aborted shockwave; with a dip that dunks her chin in the water, PM stumbles and then ploughs through the water to the White Queen's side.
PM: Take me with you!

WQ: That may not be wise.

She says this without looking up. Frowning, the White Queen stoops and reaches blindly into the water, feeling about for a moment before locating the creature that hopped onto her foot. A white frog scrambles on her palm and wraps a webbed foot around one claw, shining and smooth as it finds a suitable position in her hand. It is perfect in every way - round with slim limbs and wide feet, its eyes flashing blue to lilac to red to green and back again - and the honor of it causes something in her torso to clench tight. Ring forgotten, for the moment, the White Queen cups the frog with both claws, and takes a moment to regain her composure before turning back to PM. It would not do to weep. Not now.

WQ: Go with your friends. Live a good life.

PM blinks at the frog in her hands with wide eyes; the moment of awe silences her - but only for a moment. Then she clenches her claws into fists, raises her chin, and shakes her head, staring the White Queen dead in the eye.

PM: …

PM: If you don't take me with you, I'll find my own way.

WQ: I do not know if I can protect you. Whatever you choose, you will still have been a most wonderful protégé.

Then again, the White Queen does not know what lays ahead for those carapacians who have chosen to make their pilgrimage to the new reality. No one's safety is guaranteed. Here, in the Medium, she can almost see the underlying lacework of strings, drawing her on toward Skaia's inevitable will - but that knowing coincidence stops at the Final Gate, and the meteors and ark ships all streak across the Medium in a wild rush that tears straight through it.

What lays through that gate is beyond her imagination. The mere thought of trying to comprehend a world without Skaia pierces her through the heart, stops up her throat, paralyzes her hands. No, no. She might have followed the heroes there, but she would not belong. It would not be home. Once, in passing, she speculated that she could follow them and be content - but no. If she left Skaia, she would dwell in regret for the rest of her days.

If it ends, let it end here.

PM: I'm coming with you.

And this time, it is a statement of a fact, which is often more effective than a plain order. The Prospective Monarch has caught the trick of it, and the White Queen finds herself inclining her head after only a brief hesitation. Sorrow almost stops her. But PM folds her arms, her jet black eyes implacable, and the White Queen acquiesces.

WQ: Very well.

By now, Doctor Lalonde has waded out - so much for thirty feet, the White Queen thinks, woeful - and stops short of them. She stands heedless of the water drenching her long coat. Enough time has passed for her quick mind to piece together the hints, the context clues, and now she stares at the White Queen with a bleak look. Like a woman at an unironic funeral, the fingers of her hand pressed tight where years of holding a cocktail glass stem have left the memory in the form of a callus in her skin. The frog in the White Queen's claws croaks, and its throat brushes the ring, trapped in the
crease between two claws. Her vascular system and the ring's pulse have long since synchronized, but the note that echoes from the frog's touch is something quietly mournful. Desolation, she thinks, or a piano refrain heard long, long ago.

WQ: Please, take care of yourself, and the few carapacians here.

"I'll do what I can," Doctor Lalonde says; PM jerks, as though she hadn't even noticed the doctor's approach. A few of the lab assistants have gathered in the shallows at the water's edge, but they remain at a safe distance. One of them drags a wayward blue iguana back before it can sprint into the shallows, but for the most part the humans and trolls watch and whisper amongst themselves, their eyes curious and wary. "Do try to come back in one piece? I'd miss your enigmatic conversation."

She sounds wistful and wry, rather than firm. Doctor Lalonde has a firm grasp on the situation, it would seem. All the White Queen can give her in return is another nod, matching the human's twist of a smile with a soft smile of her own.

WQ: It will be as Skaia wills.

Then she feels the frog shift in her palms, its throat fluttering in another croak, and she thinks that perhaps she has one other thing to give. The White Queen walks back through the water toward Doctor Lalonde and holds out both hands. The human blinks, confused for a moment, before hesitantly holding out her own hands. Murmuring an invocation of respect, the WQ places the frog gently in her gloved palms, and smiles as the plump amphibian plops itself down in its new home. Doctor Lalonde nearly goes cross-eyed as it ribbits at her.

WQ: …Don't forget.

"I -"

Doctor Lalonde cuts off after her voice cracks. The White Queen turns and strides away when she doesn't continue, marching past PM and pausing only briefly to put a claw on the young carapacian's shoulder to indicate she should stand back. Of all the people here, another carapacian would be most able to withstand what comes next, but that does not mean a queenly aura is something to be treated lightly.

She puts the ring on, and just barely remembers to corral the wave of force and power that rushes through her carapace. From across the Medium, she senses Jack Noir flinch in recognition - her King a steady, familiar beacon - the Black Queen, incomplete, snarling - at the center of the Battlefield, a fissure, a branch -

When the White Queen comes back to herself, something is streaming down her face. Tears, or power - it's been a considerable amount of time since she last channeled the power of the ring on a war footing. So long. Too long, maybe; her aura evaporated the water around her in a five foot radius in her distraction, and even now the curving edges of her aura hold the water at a distance. She swallows and pre-emptively lowers the echoing volume of her mental voice, before she can speak some half-forgotten war motif and flatten everyone in the vicinity. PM stands merely a claws-width from the edge of the circle, her expression fierce and utterly unafraid, and she boldly steps into the circle of wet, scorched soil when the White Queen beckons.

WV: wait! don't go with her!

The flare of panicked green that accompanies WV at his most agitated almost dooms him; the White Queen zeroes in on the flicker of Space music that is too close, far too close for her not to have sensed it earlier, and - war, the ring urges - it's Noir -
But WV has ever been and remains a curious thing, and she checks her instinctive crackle of power before it reaches past her burning wrist. Her whole body is alight with hot white power, and she knows it could overwhelm her if she doesn't catch it and stream it back within her carapace. All the muffled sound and other such limiters that have marked Queen-hood in the millennia since their roles within the Game first changed - stripped away. She could burn or tear at a touch; she would have rent the flimsy Earth with a careless thought. It would be harder, here, with two denizens safeguarding LoFaF’s structural integrity, but she is here for War.

PM: I'm sorry. I'll be back.

WV dashes to PM, and consternation displaces PM's ferocious certainty. The other Dersite lingers in the cover of the trees; while he points a sniper rifle in the White Queen's general direction, he doesn't venture closer. PM folds her claws between WV's, while the strange carapacian continues to fuss. PM's answer does not satisfy WV. He starts shaking his head, waving a claw in erratic gestures that lend further agitation to his words.

WV: she's a queen! you don't have to go with her if you don't want to!

PM: But I do.

This stumps the dark carapacian; he stops, his white eyes blank as he reassesses the situation, but there is no more time. Time is perhaps the rarest commodity left to them. Though the White Queen interrupts as gently as she can, it is still not enough for WV, who begins to tremble with ill-repressed indignation when she addresses him. The extra note of power in a war voice shouldn't influence or otherwise affect them since she muted it, but she cannot keep him from taking offense. It seems ingrained in his personality, a cornerstone of his being, to reject royal authority, and she can't begrudge him that.

WQ: You have strange, interesting ideas. You will be a Worthy Visionary.

WV: i'm not interested in your approval!

WV: you're going to fight, and all the common carapacians suffer for it!

If he were one of her own subjects - but he is not. A reassuring gesture or word will only distress him more. She tries, regardless, because it is in her nature, but without any real hope of reaching him.

WQ: Not this time. Not if I can help it.

WV: i don't believe you.

WQ: I am not sure of the logistics, but I believe that you are meant to go on to live on a new world. You can cast off such things as rings and scepters, and live as you choose.

WQ: I've lived too many rounds of the great Game to leave her now. But I believe in you.

That will have to suffice; she seems to have run dry her well of words. Stymied, WV steps back, suspicious and lost at the same time. He neither anticipates nor accepts her approval, and that's fine. PM draws away from him and comes to stand before the White Queen, and his suspicion turns to piercing worry again.

PM: I'll see you guys soon! I promise.

The White Queen spreads her prototyped wings wide, shaking them out until they feel less cramped from disuse by way of non-existence. Carrying any of her people has never been a particular
challenge - but now, she has to take great care as she takes PM into her arms to ensure she isn't scalded by the power pouring silver-bright under the thin shell of her carapace, or cracked by a careless twitch of the White Queen's claws.

Has it always been so overwhelming a sensation, to be a War Queen? Or have the long years so dimmed the memories that it all feels fresh? Her control used to be perfect and consummate, the power of war just as much an extension of her will and Skaia's will that commanding it felt no more difficult than walking or raising a hand. Her will was Skaia's will; her whole being an extension of Skaia's.

Was. She missed the moment when she stopped being a perfect part of a whole, and started to act more and more under her own aegis. Skaia's coincidences and will are still open and clear to her, and yet -

There is no more time. She draws PM close, and puts such thoughts aside. Flight comes effortlessly; she streaks upward, clearing LoFaF's sphere of influence in one smooth burst, and PM clings to her with all her limbs.

WQ: Come. If the Mage has not completely sealed over Prospit, there should be a suitable vessel there for you to commandeer.

WQ: Let us bring this to a close.

--

Karkat hits the lava hard; it feels pretty much the same as slamming into a wall of concrete. Something snaps, but he doesn't sink under until the jet-black underling lands on top of him. It's like being slammed into a wall of concrete by another wall of concrete, and Karkat only feels the boiling, screaming hot rock slip over him for a few seconds before worse than third degree burns set in and his nerve endings stop feeling pain. He opens his mouth - stupid - but he can't hear anything, can't see anything that isn't red and black and nothing, can't gasp down air because all that's left to breathe is churning, molten rock -
Karkat dies once more in rapid succession, thrashing and flailing and gagging on a mouthful of molten rock before he finally succeeds in shoving out from underneath the underling with his everything on fire. "Fuck ugly sack of fucking -" he yells hoarsely, once he breaks the surface, and then promptly succumbs to the lava. A-fucking-gain. Thank god it's just a stupid, inconvenient death, or he would be forced to show this entire piece of slag molten pit of a planet what a real rage eruption looks like from beyond the fucking grave. The second resurrection buys him enough time to get clear of the lava, and he slams into the side of the walkway, claws scrabbling for purchase. He's reeling - his head throbs in time with his thundering pulse, and his spine and chest feel like they're going to burn through his skin. Dizzy, he looks at his claws, and thinks he can follow the tracery of his veins and arteries, lit from within by fire.

They're not. He's just out of his fucking mind on adrenalin and the latest and greatest post-death *what the fuck* hormone to ever be produced by his rageglands. The lava pops at him, spraying molten rock as the giant chess piece underling vanishes beneath the surface, and Karkat starts scaling the walkway before Dave's horrible land of shit and death decides to sprout a molten lava hand and yank him back down into the fiery bowels of the earth.

There aren't any handholds on the side of the path - not even tiny crevasses for him to wedge his claws into. Ignoring the fact that he's mostly flying his way up to solid ground, Karkat starts voicing his vociferage at top volume long before he rolls onto the path and plasters himself flat against the walkway, half his face mashed against the floor as he fights back vertigo. The stone burns against his cheek but feels almost normal under his claws - like he got scraped raw, and his face is over sensitized. The ridiculous Knight cape is not helping his temperature regulation issues. "What the fuck! What the *fuck*!"

Dave's at his side in a split second. He looks like absolute shit. Which might be putting it kindly - his face has gone dead white again instead of normal borderline albino-white, one of his shades has cracked enough that Karkat can see red through the tinted glass, and the side of his face is covered with a spider web of cuts that almost seem to extend along the same lines as the cracks in his sunglasses. "Yeah, just - just let it all out, man," he advises, before dashing off again. A fight. Right. There's still a fight going on.

Fuck the fight. Karkat needs a minute. Or ten. He swears again, but all that comes out is a stream of *fuck*'s sprinkled over a wordless 'hrrghlaammllgl.' It's a pisspoor attempt, is what it is. "Fucking! Fucking! Fuck, what do I - Dave, help me think of another swear word!" he calls, raising his head enough that it strains his throat.

"Shit!" Dave says, as he dodges under a swing of the lich queen piece's long arm. The enormous underling still can't fit through the door they entered through, but her arm extends enough for her to try and smack them around, apparently. His custodian stabs the chess piece though its ruby eye before vanishing again in a blur that knocks an acheron over backward.

...Dave's *Bro* is here. For fuck's sake! "Fucking! Shitfuck!" Karkat yells, before letting his aching neck relax, his head thumping against the stone. The maggotfucking asshole of an underling that crushed him into the lava left the path in crumbling fragments just to Karkat's right, with only a sliver of solid path left intact, and there are fresh scorch marks and shattered rock fragments scattered around, like the idiots he calls friends have been setting off traps with wild fucking abandon.

Dying hurt too much. He doesn't have the strength to yell at them individually right now, not while there are still chess pieces running around. All the pawns are gone - since they were based on consorts, that's the opposite of surprising - and only the queen and the bishops are still up and trying to batter Dave and his custodian into the lava. "I'm just. Gonna lay down here for a second," Karkat finishes, and then flops over onto his back so his face will stop burning.
Terezi leans over him with a gore-streaked face, grinning. Karkat flinches, but that's because something digs into his aching spine like a motherfucker, and he has to flop over onto his side again to make it stop throbbing. Not because of Terezi. Not at all. "Oh, it's nod that bad," Terezi says. She sounds like she inserted ten cotton balls directly into her sinuses. "Wish I could ged a whiff of you, but my node is temporarily indisposed. Whad color is your cape?"

She snatches up a corner of Karkat's cape and presses it to her nose, smearing teal blood all over it as she strains to smell it. Karkat snatches it back and rolls when she tries to stab the fabric against the floor with her cane. With her nose plugged, like fuck does he want her trying to stab anything in a two-foot radius of him - the odds of her stabbing him in the arm is too damn high already. "Yes, it is that bad!" he snaps. When she lunges again, he smacks his palm against her nose. She lets out a snrgl at the jolt, but Karkat starts shunting her blood back where it's supposed to go with weird ease, and after a second she goes still, with only a few token feints at his cape. "I fucking died! Lo and behold, today I joined the elite undead person club, and it was fucking shitastic!"

And his outfit is full of loose, baggy fabric. This kind of fuckery is fine for actual pajamas or if you're Dave fucking Strider, but it's not something Karkat would want to fight in. He glares his dark red pants into submission and cinches his shirt and the long-sleeved shirt underneath tight until it feels less like he's wearing multiple pillow cases and more like the body suit of his old hero costume. Kanaya's Kevlar armor additions appears to have gone up in smoke or merged into parts of the darker red fabric, leaving him with ridged black elbow and knee pads. Darkening parts of the fabric from dark reddish brown to black takes more doing, and he can't do fuck all about the bright, blood red symbol and accents that slash across his chest and lace the baggy ends of his pants tight around his calves. But he's long past the point of giving a fuck about that.

The cape refuses to fuck off. He can darken it and shorten the trailing end and shift some of the fabric so it forms a dark jacket over his other two layers of shirt - not helpful, but better - but the fringe defies him and the back of the jacket hangs longer than he wants. Terezi breaks his concentration by licking the palm of his teal-stained hand, though, and he gives up. God tier outfits can go fuck themselves; he pushes Terezi away, since he's done all his powers can do for other people, and she cackles at him as she rolls away. Her nose is still a little swollen and visibly broken, but the worst of the bruising and the bloody nose is gone. "You're welcome."

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Oriole says, morosely. Karkat jumps and nearly falls back over the cliff, because apparently Oriole has been hovering on his other side the entire time he's been fucking around with Terezi. Karkat didn't even notice. If possible, he looks more orange than before Karkat died, and that's...Karkat has no comment on it. His wings hang limp over the edge of the path, and he watches Bro and Dave bisect the last acheron with an exhausted expression. "I tried to catch you. I fucked it up."

Karkat remembers. It was all a loud, hot blur right before he landed ass first in the lava, but he remembers the confused flashes of orange and the shouts that he could barely hear over the crash of metal. "...Not your fault," he mutters. He wants it to be someone's fault, and the most convenient someone is Karkat himself. He should have dug in his heels or swung himself up faster, before the chess piece got close enough to make the path shudder and buck under his claws. He's spent fuck knows how long jumping across roof tops and making death-defying leaps, and he dies by falling off a fucking cliff? Karkat let himself down, for fuck's sake. This is pretty much exactly what he should have expected: the peak of the Karkat Vantas experience.

"Seriously, it's not that bad," Terezi says, settling back on her ass with a huff and rubbing the last of the dried blood off on the cyan blue of her sleeve. Looks like all three of them are going to do their best impressions of lazy sacks of shit by sitting back and letting Dave and his custodian finish dicing up the chess pieces. Karkat can live with that.
Though he's starting to wonder if he got the fuckery end of the god tiering stick, because dying? Hurt. It still hurts; the memory of burning is right there adjacent to the ongoing internal rant in his skull, and he doesn't want to examine it too closely. Which...someone else probably would have mentioned lingering pain by now, right?

Dave stops in again; Oriole barely looks up from his feet in acknowledgement. "Look, not everyone's cool with it. Okay, TZ?" Dave says. He sits down with careful, ginger movements, and Karkat focuses on the sense of blood this time. It's not just Dave's face that's shredded with the lines of a clock face - somehow his whole right arm got shoved down a garbage disposal, and if the idiot bothered to accelerate his healing factor with a fraymotif, Karkat can't feel it doing any good.

Well. Looks like he's back on blood guy duty. Now with new and improved blood powers! Exactly like the old ones, but with a worse outfit. "Arm," Karkat orders, rolling his eyes at Dave. Dave makes a face, then hunkers down in a crouch, looking anywhere except Karkat as he offers his arm. Both of them get nice red uniforms to hide their stupid colored blood, and that's convenient enough that Karkat finds it highly suspect. He starts forcing shrapnel out of the way and scabbing over the small marks and deep lines that pepper Dave's arm.

"You should have heard him screaming at Sollux," Terezi says, reminiscing.

Dave shakes his head, and uses his free hand to start texting. Karkat isn't sure if Dave really ever stops texting, but he didn't have the phone out before, so fuck only knows. "If this resurrection shit ain't instantaneous, I want our money back."

"Are we even fucking paying Sollux anything?" Oriole mumbles.

With a twitch, Dave slowly lifts his head, thunderstruck. "...Holy shit," he says, touching the unhurt side of his face in dawning realization. "I'm part of the problem."

"What problem?" Terezi asks, cocking her head to the side.

"Sburb's ongoing slave labor problem. Shit, we've been forcing him to do unpaid internship work for his resume." Dave stares down at his hands. "Capitalism makes monsters of us all."

Karkat glances at Oriole - who is too busy zoning out in a haze of neon orange guilt - and then at Terezi, looking for some kind of help. Terezi taps her chin with a claw, but doesn't comment.

He checks the memo instead, wrapping his claws around Dave's wrist as an afterthought. If Dave's going to launch into some kind of fugue right here and now, Karkat isn't about to get sucked into one of his weird fucking midlife crises. Not when he could be checking in on everyone else and their marginally less weird problems.

CG: I FUCKING DIED.
CG: I! FUCKING! DIED!
CG: VRISKA, WHERE ARE YOU, YOU SMUG FUCK, I'M ABOUT TO MAKE YOUR GODDAMN DAY.
TT: Vriska and Tavros have stopped responding to messages. Or at least, we aren't receiving a response.
CG: OH, FOR - IS THERE EVEN A FUCKING DIFFERENCE?!
TT: It depends on one's perspective.
CG: KAY COOL, GLAD TO KNOW I'M NOT THE ONLY SCHLUB WHO'S DYING IN STUPID WAYS, AT LEAST.
GA: It Probably Wasn't Too Stupid. We're In A Remarkable Dangerous Setting Right Now.
EB: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
CG: JOHN, IT'S FINE, I'M ALIVE AGAIN.
EB: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
CA: okay that's starting to get a little unnerving.
CG: WAIT, HOW F**KING LONG HAS HE BEEN DOING THAT? JOHN, WHAT THE F**K?
TG: look
TG: i might have panicked
TG: and prematurely announced your demise
TA: you panicked a lot
CA: no, actually i think when you said Karkat was in trouble...
TT: You're right. Gamzee has been reassuring me that they're both fighting something on John's land, but that John is otherwise fine and intact.
TG: I am not entirely reassured.
CG: I KNEW I SHOULD HAVE GONE WITH THOSE F**KS! GOD, I THINK I'M ABOUT TO PROJECTILE VOMIT WITH UTTER F**KING DISGUST AT MY OWN PAST STUPIDITY.
CG: GAMZEE, IF YOU TWO AREN'T IN PAN-NUMBING AMOUNTS OF DANGER, GET JOHN IN THE F**KING MEMO INSTEAD OF MASHING THE A KEY RIGHT F**KING YESTERDAY! I HAVE ***WORDS*** FOR THE TWO OF YOU!
TC: I'M HERE.
CG: GOOD, ONE OUT OF TWO. I'M BLOWING THIS RAGING HOT MOLTEN SHIT OF A PLANET AND COMING OVER THERE THE F**KING SECOND JADE SHOWS UP.
GA: Technically she is here already. However, she is escorting people to the final gate.
GA: I will see if she is available yet. I need a ride soon, too.
TC: not a good plan karkat :o(
TC: THERE'S A SICKNASTY FUCKER YOU DON'T WANT TO TANGLE WITH OVER HEREWAYS.
CG: WHO.
TC: a guy
CG: GAMZEE.
TC: A DUDE
CG: GAMZEE WHAT THE F**K.
TC: a not funny not-brother
CG: OKAY, SEE, THIS IS WHAT WE CALL THE OPPOSITE OF CLEAR, HONEST COMMUNICATION! DO I NEED TO USE A WORRIED FACE EMOTICON TO GET MY POINT ACROSS HERE?!
CG: BECAUSE I'LL F**KING DO IT!
TG: doooo it
TT: Wait. Gamzee, are you talking about -
CG: ):B
TC: Do:
TA: i'm two seconds from banishing both of you and your terrible emoticon choices two the shadow realm
GA: 7:k
GA: Am I Doing This Right?
TA: no, you're unleashing some kind of negaverse computer code on the universe and i won't stand for it KN
GA: So I Am Doing It Right. Excellent.
TC: you'll get hurt, and then john'll get his hurt on
TC: SHIT WON'T END ANY KIND OF WELL
TT: I think Gamzee is speaking of some form of temporal inevitability constraint. Going to LoWaS
might doom the timeline in some fashion, and he's afraid of triggering it.
CG: OH?! SINCE WHEN ARE YOU THE GAMZEE WHISPERER?
TT: I'm not. I'm concerned about John, but there are enough hints here that you joining him on LoWaS would end poorly that I'm more concerned on that front.
TC: ...
TC: SIS'S GOT A PROPER READ ON THE SITCH.
CG: GOD FUCKING DAMMIT. THEN JUST...SAY THAT NEXT TIME, OKAY? PLEASE?
TC: sure thing
CG: FUCK, I'M TIRED.
CA: really? no post-revvivvification rush?
CG: DON'T EVER TYPE THAT WORD AT ME AGAIN.

None of them have eaten – they’ve skipped right from one day into the middle of another, and Karkat’s meatsack has yet to make the executive decision about whether he feels hungry after fighting and running around bullshit traps for a few hours, or hungry after not eating for almost a full day. His back and torso are all one giant ache, which makes it hard to tell whether he has stomach cramps from not eating. "Remind me again why Dave's asshole custodian didn't save my useless ass, too?" he asks, since it's a valid question.

It's also bothering him. Because dying a fiery magma death was not on his to-do list today; because Bro is fucking infamous for pulling last minute bullfuckery to pull people's asses out of the fire; because Karkat was super fucking dead not five minutes ago, and his lungs and pusher strain against his ribs trying to work up to a nice panic attack that he's repressing through sheer will because if he flips off the red hot handle now, there's no one around even remotely capable of calming him back down, and everything is too fucking much right now. He wants to stick his head in a freezer and let the chilled roe cubes melt on his face until he feels less like exploding, but guess what isn't in the cards today?

"Made a call."

Karkat doesn't look up at the sound of Bro's stupid fucking voice. "I wasn't actually asking you," he mutters, ducking his head more to glower at his dull grey shoes. Oh, sure, the rest of his outfit needed to be shades of red by default, but his fucking shoes remembered how hemononymity worked. Fucking priceless.

Bro squats in front of him. Instinct kicks in and Karkat's teeth slam together, bared, as he lowers his head and bristles. Fuck his nubby horn life, but if Dave's custodian tries to pull more of the awkward, incompetent adoptive caretaker fuckery that he and Doctor Lalonde have been implementing, Karkat reserves the right to bite his hand off. Radiating more hostility than usual doesn't require much physical effort, but renews the throbbing ache in his pan. "Knew you had one shot in you. Dave was running around doing hero business." Bro pauses, and Karkat hears the rustle of fabric as he shrugs his shoulders. "Made a call."

It figures the answer was something like that. It's the kind of ruthless logic that happens when you're playing a completely arbitrary game for completely arbitrary reasons, and haha! Go fuck yourself if you think that maybe not wanting to die should be a part of the equation. Dave's head hangs almost as low as Karkat's and he hasn't looked Karkat in the eye once - so, great! Fucking fantastic! They all feel like stirfried, rancid shit, and the only person Karkat could reasonably yell at without feeling like a fucking vile piece of shit two minutes after the fact is a giant sky-themed fuck looming over them.

Dave's arm won't finish healing. The small marks where he got hit by shrapnel heal over just fine; the longer, deeper marks that score his face and extend down his shoulder and arm, though...no matter what Karkat does or how much he concentrates on that to avoid eye contact, they won't do anything
but scab and scar. He honestly can't tell if he's just fucking incompetent, if it's some limit on his blood powers, or if Dave's just -

Karkat's pusher stops straining in his chest, and turns into a cold stone that sinks into his stomach. Whatever Dave did, that crotchstained shitmouth skeleton fuck noticed, and backhanded him with a clock face. Better than more internal bleeding, or cursed fucking organs, but - fuck, does it feel personal. Mashing his palm against Dave's face until Dave purses his lips tight in a pout, Karkat waits until the marks are little more than shiny, pale lines against Dave's already pale face before answering. "Whatever. Not like I expect a lusus to pick a random fuck over their own kid. I'm not stupid," Karkat says, though his voice sounds a long way away from his own ears. That's what it'll come down to, if Bro has to intervene again. No more 'one free death' excuses - Karkat and Dave are both officially stuck in the just/heroic trap. Feels great. Feels so fucking great.

Terezi interferes before Bro can open his mouth and make it more awkward. "Ah! Excellent work, Karkat. Let's get moving!" she says, right as Karkat deems Dave's face as fixed as it might ever be. Then Terezi rocks back and hops back up onto her feet without using her hands, which is just showing off, and starts mincing her way down the path toward the long-forgotten exit, punting sliced up chunks of underling out of her way. An acheron lays in a battered heap, its face and torso punctured in multiple places with no apparent pattern. Karkat stares, first at Dave and then the blur where Bro is before the custodian completely vanishes into nth level of the puppet helldimension, but this doesn't look like anything Dave would do unless he was in a blind panic. Terezi hums to herself, sets the heel of her foot against the acheron's forehead, and gives it a shove so that the rest of its body slides off the path with a rattle of loose parts and dislocated shoulders. "What even happened here? Did one of you spontaneously transform into a springloaded drunken fuckweasel and start stabbing at random?" he asks, because the only other logical option is that Spades Slick paid them a visit while he was unconscious, like a knife-happy troll Santa Claus. This is the kind of shoddy-yet-apparently-effective work that Karkat would expect if past!Doctor Lalonde and Bro fused into one tipsy, sword-obsessed being.

Terezi sniffs and shakes her head, her expression disdainful. "Not my best work, but still. Rude, Karkat!" Then, before he can dodge, she swipes the last of the blood off her chin and smears it down his shoulder, streaking him with teal. God dammit.

Meanwhile, Dave sticks his hands in his pockets as they make their way toward the exit. His mouth hasn't opened to blab in almost a full minute. Which means Karkat can either assume he's sulking and ignore him, or ask what's wrong. He rubs his sore back, grimaces at the ceiling, and then elbows Dave in the good arm when both incredibly subtle conversation openers fail. Dave twitches, and Karkat scowls. "What are you pissing yourself over now, Dave? I'm at my limit for evasive bullshit, so as much as your family adores its emotional constipation, I would prefer a straight fucking answer in five seconds or less."

Whipping his head around to make sure of - something, fuck if Karkat knows what's going through Dave's head right now - Dave gives a tiny shrug, rubbing the back of his neck as they walk between a grid-pattern of blown mines and scorched puppet stuffing. "Dude, there were like. Ten different dead Daves hanging around for a second there, before you got back up. Surprised Aradia didn't show up for an impromptu corpse party," he says, which kills whatever good mood was left after this gauntlet of bullshit and death. Dave raises a hand and starts picking at his face, and Karkat smacks his hand down before he can pick a scar back open. It earns him another look, before Dave goes on, without even a hint of irony to make him sound less sober. "I get the feeling we just dodged a nexus of bad life choices, right there. Fist bump for the alpha timeline, man."
He holds up a fist, but it's loose, like he doesn't actually expect Karkat to bump it. After a moment to question his life and friend choices, Karkat taps it with his knuckles like he's knocking on the door. "...Your custodian is still a douchebag," he feels the need to mention, when Dave stares at him in shocked awe.

A shrug. "Well, that's Bro for you."

Absolutely nothing else goes wrong as they reach the innermost chamber of Hephaestus's lair.

Nothing. Karkat is fucking appalled. After the chess room and the minefield, they follow a set of dark stone stairs down - Karkat has no fucking clue where they are, anymore - and then go through a short unlit hallway made of pitch-black stone, guiding only by Terezi's nose and Oriole's glow. A Time gear symbol works as a door knob, but only Dave can turn it, after several aborted jiggling attempts. Karkat keeps a pair of sickles ready the entire time; summoning them from his blood is easy, and they flow instantaneously when he snaps his claws, so he guesses this is his life now. Knight perks abound.

But the door opens and the ceiling doesn't try to crush them, which means they've apparently cleared the traps. Instead, they step out into a circular room that could not possibly have fit inside the giant anvil they saw from the outside of the lair. Part of the floor is solid obsidian glass, covered in curving lines that catch the electric light from the spotlights that hang from the ceiling like they're in a stadium; the other half of the room has no floor at all - just a series of metal poles that stick up out of a wide swath of lava, churning in a slow whirlpool large enough for a denizen to stand in. There's a seam in the metal ceiling and the wall opposite them, and Karkat is suddenly very certain that this entire room could open onto the sea of lava outside the anvil fortress, if someone knew how to work the controls.

But no one here knows. Hephaestus's inner sanctum stands empty - a boss arena without the boss, with only the slow clank of metal machinery and a steady drip of molten rock cycling into the pool from faucets on the walls to break the silence of the large, echoing room. The heat is stifling.

It's bigger than the chamber where Karkat found his denizen. He shoves the memories away and lets his sicklekind fall away. Oriole floats ahead over the semi-circle of obsidian, one foot dragging on the floor like a reminder as he bats his wings for show. "I can't believe we actually made it," Dave mutters as he hops down the steep step from the doorway to the dull black whorls of the floor. Karkat sits down and then hops off, the better to spite his god tier status, and lands without a sound. The previously mentioned heat decides to ratchet up to un-fucking-bearable, drying up Karkat's shoutbox and lungs and literally everything else in the blink of an eye. He licks his lips instinctively, and only succeeds in getting a good idea of how cracked and dry they are after spending the last forever and a day wandering around LoHaC, aka the Land of Hell and Clusterfucks. The corner of his lip splits and starts dribbling blood, and Karkat furiously scabs it over. If rehydration isn't in his power set, then what the fuck is even the point of them. Feferi can probably rehydrate herself. This is hemoist.

"Haha, Terezi. Come up with more original material," Karkat says, throwing her a middle finger. It makes no impact on her shit-eating grin, but it's the principle of the thing, at this point. If you can't beat 'em, flip them off. He catches up to Dave, rotating his arm so that the middle claw remains pointed at Terezi as he goes.

Oriole lingers over the one break in the obsidian floor - a ten-foot-wide translucent, honey-yellow circle that bulges slightly above the level of the rest of the floor, polished and smooth. "What is this made of, amber?" Terezi asks out loud, kicking the edge of the curve with her foot. "It smells like
honey!"

"Looks like." Dave crouches down to poke it with a finger, while Oriole rolls his eyes visibly at both of them. Then Dave's face turns thoughtful. "Or maybe crystallized AJ..."

Karkat considers letting that one go, but a) that is too ridiculous to let stand, and b) it'll be a frigid day in hell before he suffers Dave's ridiculousness without enforcing consequences for the random shit that comes flying out of this guy's mouth, because there is a non-zero chance that Dave or Terezi will test this theory by licking things. "Or frozen piss!" Karkat yells, brandishing a hand toward the amber circle. Dave stares at him in abject horror. "Yeah, there, I said it! Someone had to! And if either of you try to lick it after I said that, you're fucking dead to me."

"What, again?" Terezi says, idly, her smiling inching up.

Karkat glares at her, then at Dave. "Just figure out how to crack the grist hoard open so we can move on with our lives!"

Terezi sticks out her tongue, staring Karkat dead in the eye as she leans on both hands and lowers herself toward the amber. It's a fucking bluff. "Any ideas on how to open it?" Oriole asks, his voice cracking hard, loud enough that it echoes through the whole room and makes Terezi pause. Thank fuck.

"Just the one," Dave says, drawing a sword. He walks out on top of the amber to Oriole, who lingers for a second before floating out of the way. Dave swings the sword like a dowsing rod for a second, grits his teeth as he concentrates - and then stabs it down into the amber. It sinks in deep, and the circle snaps neatly along a pre-carved, jagged line. Wobbling as it starts to rotate open under his feet, Dave hops off while the turning circle widens to reveal a helical staircase. This one's more ornate and embellished than the stairwells they saw earlier, with ruby-studded gears turning in the space between the handrails and the steps themselves. Dave smirks for the first time in forever. "Hell yeah. Works like a charm."

"Are there any problems in your life that can't be solved by stabbing things?" Karkat asks. It's the most painful rhetorical question of his life.

Dave shakes his head. "I literally cannot think of a single one."

Well, with an opening like that handed to him on a silver fucking platter - "Are you in the market for a stabdad/mob boss?" Karkat asks. He inches closer to Dave, glaring 'please take him' daggers from his ganderbulbs when Dave makes the mistake of looking at him. He's already foisted Crabdad off on John -

Dave snorts. "Nice try, dude. Though now that you mention it, he may already be my adopted dad in law." While Karkat's struggling to understand what the fuck kind of context he's missing for that to make sense, Dave appears to count something off on his fingers, his forehead wrinkled as he does some kind of mental math. "Maybe. Fuck if I know how in-laws work. But I have a policy against calling anyone dad, so maybe uncle in law works better."

Karkat stops glaring and starts massaging his closed eyelids with his claws. "Do I even want to know what the fuck you're talking about right now in the vicinity of my auricular sponges?"

"...Probably not," Dave says, at last. He jumps down onto the stairwell with a loud clang and starts tromping down into the pit. Oriole folds his wings in, stops even pretending to flap them, and floats after him. Karkat almost beats Terezi to it, but she streaks past him and flings herself onto the railing to slide down sideways with her legs pointed inward, forcing Dave to dodge out of her way. "This
shit better be mad impressive," Dave says, as they continue down. "I want wall to wall grist, like I'm goddamn Harry Potter at Diagon Alley realizing his giant denizen parent was fucking loaded."

Terezi reaches the bottom of the stairs first and bounces off at the end. "Is this enough loot for you, coolkid?" she calls over her shoulder, tossing a wayward chunk of hair back out of her face as she starts poking around. Dave flashsteps down to the bottom, which is fucking cheap, and Karkat gives up and jumps over the railing into the hollow center.

Dave whistles, shading his shades with a hand - redundancy in action. Hephaestus's Hoard glitters from wall to wall, as per Dave's ironic request: tear drop shaped Amber and Copper as tall as Karkat, brilliant cut Diamond and Sphene, gusher shaped Garnet and Ruby and Citrine the size of houses, and solid cubes of Gold and Rust and Sulphur they couldn't hope to lift even if all of them could fly. All of it crammed together so tightly it looks like it's about to burst outward and bury them in a tidal wave of game resources. Karkat spots entire wads of boonbucks and the occasional booncase wedged in the crevasses between the giant grist - as if money actually fucking matters, at this point.

Dave takes a step forward, and touches the nearest chunk of Ruby.

It vanishes instantly. All of it. The entire hoard winks out of existence with a swoosh! sound, and that's it. They're left with a barren, gold-plated room and three empty pedestals.

Karkat's dropped jaw slams shut with a click of his teeth. "Shit was nice while it lasted, I guess," Dave says, his voice hoarse for a second before he visibly controls his emotions.

"Eh, you'll get over it. All that glitters is not grist, or something like that," Terezi says, with the wisdom of someone who doesn't actually give a fuck.

Fuck it. That's enough. Karkat needs to sit again. He sprawls out on the floor as gingerly as he can, his spine giving an extra powerful throb as he throws his arms wide, raises his feet up toward the roof, and stares dully at the ceiling. "Glad to know I died for an anticlimactic pile of bullshit. That's pretty much what I should have expected from this game, and yet - somehow, Sburb still managed to stuff me in a coffin so it could let me down one last time," he says in a dead, defeated monotone.

"You're alright, right?" Oriole asks.

Karkat lifts his head up and thumps it back against the gold floor. "No. I'm remembering my blood boiling in excruciating detail and my spine hurts for fun. It's great, I love it," he says, dry as a bone. It shitting well hurts, there's not a fucking chance this is a normal side effect of resurrecting in the god tiers, and they don't even get the satisfaction of hauling a metric fuckton of grist around and launching it at Hephaestus's head with a catapult. Fuck everything.


It hasn't happened, but that doesn't stop Dave's dumb offhand comment from making Karkat triple check to see if he can hear a fraymotif playing, just in case. He can't hear anything playing but LoHaC's ambient soundtrack, with some triumphant dubstep and trumpets added in for flavor. They've technically beaten Dave's denizen quest by reaching the hoard. "Just let me fucking sit for a second," he says, which earns him a shrug before Dave goes back to inspecting the empty pedestals. Karkat can't remember anything even remotely similar to them from his own faded, piecemeal memories of the troll game session, so he assumes they're either incredibly plot critical in ways he cannot give a fuck about, or totally irrelevant. "Where're you headed next, Terezi?" he asks the ceiling, too sore to inject the proper amount of hatefriend venom into his voice.
Terezi cocks an eyebrow at him; she doesn't sit, but she does press her lips together in thought. "Perhaps to confront Vriska!" Before Karkat can leap up and do the Kanaya approved thing, which would be to shout FUCK NO and list in detail the many reasons why that would probably end in violent chaos, Terezi snorts. "Perhaps not. Aradia's been hounding at me to go help with the arks, but I want to take a sniff myself on LoFaF before I make up my mind."

At the mention of Aradia and her incredibly unsubtle meddling, his nostrils flare, and he opens his mouth to mention in passing just how infuriating it's been - 'in passing' being a relative term - when pain lances through his back, and he screams instead. Terezi jolts, instantly drawing the sharp blade her canekind and darting down to grab his shoulder, but Karkat's too busy writhing, rolling over, reaching back over his shoulder and grabbing the crowbar he completely forgot -

It nearly breaks his fingers as it wrenches free from his grasp, finally free of the straps that held it close along his back when he went god tier. The rusty length of metal arrows through the air like a magnet, and nearly impales Dave through the stomach. He flashsteps at the last second - Karkat feels the spurt of blood from half a room away as a fresh line rips open down his arm - and the crowbar smacks into the side of the central pedestal with a sharp crack that echoes sharply through the room. Fucked up spine forgotten - no, it's fine now, it was the fucking crowbar this whole time - Karkat attempts to roll up onto his feet, but Terezi crouches over him, a chainsaw grinding in her throat, with one claw to pin him down and her cane at the ready, like she thinks the crowbar is going to come flying back for round two.

But it doesn't. The crowbar latches onto the pedestal, ramrod straight, and the pedestal starts to tremble. Dave, flat on the floor with his hands covering his head, rolls over to take a look, and then starts rolling at top speed away from the pedestal as the trembling worsens and jarring, metallic squeals fill the room. The other two empty pedestals start to rotate in circles, emitting steam. "Karkat, dude, what the shit did you just turn on?" Dave demands, when he finishes rolling like a log all the way to Terezi and Karkat.

Karkat squirms out from under Terezi, snapping, "Do I look like I fucking know?! That stupid Felt crowbar just went flying!"

"Why did you even have that thing?!" Oriole says, yelling to be heard as the metal screeches reach such a grinding pitch that Karkat's teeth ache. The outside pedestals appear to be transparent, which gives them a clear view of them filling up with lava. The offending crowbar itself sinks deeper into the center column, and a panel slides shut in front of it. Of course. Because LoHaC can suck his bulge.

"Because it seemed like a not-shitty idea at the time! Like literally all of our terrible ideas!" Karkat howls back. He feels absolutely fine - better than he has since dying, and of course the price is him triggering some final doomsday trap Hephaestus left behind. So. Fucking. Typical.

"Fair enough." Terezi raises her hand to her temple; one claw grazes through her hair. "This would have been a pisspoor excuse for a denizen lair if there hadn't been something blowing up at the last second!"

But they don't even get a chance to bolt for the exit. The pedestal's shrieking turns into a rumble that rocks the whole room - the golden walls start to sweat and melt as the heat rises sharply -

And then it all stops. All three pedestals shut up, god-forsaken fucking shrieks silenced in a split second. The gold floor softened to the point that when the three pedestals turn counterclockwise and vanish like screws into the floor, the gold molds around it. Once the stands sink, all that's left is a dull, rust-red sword, hanging vertically on a steel rack. Molten rock drips off the tip, but the sword itself doesn't appear to be affected by what must be un-fucking-bearably hot rock.
"...Wow. It wasn't a death trap," Dave says, sounding relieved and let down at the same time as he rests his forehead on his arms.

Karkat can't stop one eye from twitching. His one knee feels wobbly, too, in a 'too much adrenalin, not enough follow-through' way. Too much fuckery keeps transpiring for him to relax, and it's starting to take its toll. He doesn't know how Dave thinks laying flat on the floor is a safe bet when the floor was thisclose to literally melting not five seconds ago. "Why does your asshole denizen have a machine specifically for turning random objects into swords? Wait, ignore that question. I forgot who I was talking to," he spews in a fucking flood of wordvom. Dave makes some muffled sound (and if he accidentally glued his face to the half-melted floor, Karkat will never let him live it down) and Karkat steps over him to stomp toward the sword.

Up close, it's much more obvious that the sword used to be the crowbar. It's thinner than most of the piece of shit bladekind Striders like to throw around, with the familiar curved, notched end of a crowbar doubled to form a cross guard.

Actually, Karkat takes that back. The piece of shit swords that Dave uses are probably a step up from this chucklefucked hunk of rusted garbage. The Felt crowbar wasn't nearly this corroded when Karkat last got a good look at it with his pre-death eyes. Getting tossed into a lava blender didn't do it any favors; it looks like it'll either singe his claws or crumble if he so much as glares at it funny. And oh, is he glaring.

"That thing is..." Terezi starts, sticking her head in. Karkat didn't hear her stalking after him; she prowls around the sword in a circle, her eyes laced with streamers of teal light around the edges of her shades, flaring in time with her breathing.

And after a long minute, all she comes up with is: "...interesting."

Karkat, who's been waiting for her questionably professional Seer analysis with bated fucking breath, smacks his face. "Riveting, Terezi."

"It's definitely not a crowbar anymore," she says, imparting yet another bundle of wisdom unto the fucking world. "But I think if you pick it up, it'll affect something very important." She spins and jabs her claw square into Karkat's chest, her face a tight frown of concentration. "When did you pick up bladekind, again? Because no offense, but I think you'd need permits for that."

Not in Texas, Karkat opens his mouth to say, because as far as he's concerned that's the only reason any of the Striders were allowed within ten feet of a bladekind specialization. But Dave shuffles up in a blur and sticks his face in on Karkat's other side. He grimaces with open disgust, and shakes his head. "It's not a sword, either."

This is the last fucking straw. No, Karkat ran out of straws fucking ages ago. This is the last fucking fuckstraw, and he's had it. "It's clearly a fucking sword, Dave," he says, so incensed that his voice wraps all the way around from loud to a whisper.

Dave shakes his head again, curtly. "...No, dude. That's not a sword, I swear. Just like. A sharp crowbar."

Karkat's volume controls recalibrate to normal shout standards. "I'm not fucking blind, you ass -" he yells, flaring his claws at the sword shaped fucking object right in front of them.

"He says, in front of the blind girl," Terezi says, her voice full of mock sadness as she mimes wiping away a teal tear, and Karkat's train of thought stutters.
"Yeah, Karkat, how could you?" Dave says.

Karkat cuts him off before the two of them can dogpile him in the name of irony. Again. For the fiftieth fucking time this week. He's not sure how much more of a beating his sanity can take. "Augh - it smells sword-shaped, doesn't it?!"

Terezi tips her head to the side, and then walks another circuit around the sword (it is a fucking sword!) with an intent expression, twirling a strand of hair around her claw as she goes. "It smells...pointy. And slicey. And like rust," she announces, like these are incredibly fucking revelations. Then her eyebrows slam down and she hisses, glaring at Dave, then Karkat, and then back at the sword. "I don't think you should try to pick it up, coolkid. Or -" She gnashes her teeth, the most obvious sign of frustration Karkat has ever seen her make. Terezi not grinning and/or cackling is a weird thing. But the next second she starts squatting and leaning her weight from one side to the other as she inspects the sword, resting her chin on her palm, and generally looks so fucking ridiculous that it saps all the tension out of her weird prognostigofuckyourself. "Oh, this is a briny pickle."

While she scans it again, Dave turns to Karkat and says, for what Karkat can only assume is the sole purpose of driving Karkat over the edge into a raging breakdown, "It's not a sword."

Literally the only thing that saves Dave from impending suplex is the fact that he looks uneasy, the waxy scars on his face just visible in the half light of the hoard room, and Karkat has a strict policy of not suplexing friends in the middle of an on-going crisis. No matter how tempting it is. "What the fuck is it then, according to the official Strider family fucking lore?!!" he asks, pinching the bridge of his nose and exhaling hard. "Enlighten me."

The whole room rocks underfoot without warning, bucking so hard that a jolt runs through Karkat's knees as he catches himself mid-fall. Everyone but Oriole - still floating - braces themselves to ride out the shockwave. "Dangerous," Dave says; a catastrophically loud shriek punctuates his answer, barely muffled by the roof between them and whatever the fuck is going on above in Hephaestus's chamber.

Bro appears behind Dave when Karkat opens his mouth. Karkat didn't get a good look at the fucker before, but his shirt is stained slightly with grey ash and a scorch mark streaks along the side of his right shoe. "Need to blow this joint, kids. Shit up top is starting to fall down," he says, his voice as unaffected as when he informed Karkat he made a fucking call. Bitter who?

But also, with the Strider habit of either wildly over- or under-estimating the seriousness of a situation for ironic shit, 'starting to fall down' could mean a fucking cornucopia of bad things. "Ohhh. Fun times," Oriole says, furling his wings and actually using them to go faster as he arrows up the center of the stairwell to get out. Suddenly, flying sounds like a fucking excellent idea. Karkat can't believe he's lived his whole previously pathetic life as an ignoramus without that option available to him.

Terezi's claw snaps out and seizes the sword by the hilt; she doesn't hesitate for a fucking second before shoving it into Karkat's chest. Karkat smacks a hand against the sword to catch it automatically, before his thinkpan catches up and starts screaming that Terezi just tossed him a rancid hot potato. "Don't let Dave take that from you," she says, her face dead serious.

Dave shows no sign of wanting to duke it out for the cursed not-sword in the nearest convenient war arena - after one uneasy look at the sword, he books it for the stairs. Because he can't fly. Which means any second now, Karkat is probably going to have airlifting duties foisted on him. Terezi tries to slink past Karkat and spring for the exit, too, but Karkat recovers from his frozen surprise fast enough to catch up with her. "I don't even know how to use the fucking thing, and quite frankly, I'd
rather toss it into the lava before it fucking jinxes us or something! This is some kind of jinx vector and you know it, Terezi!" he yells as the gold roof dents and the sound of collapsing, crashing metal rumbles from the entrance at the top of the stairs.

Terezi stops dead and swivels in midair, swinging Karkat around by the fabric of his god tier jacket and dragging him close. Her breath is freezing cold on his ear; the not-sword Karkat holds awkwardly in between them feels too heavy for how fragile it looks, the hilt jabbing into Terezi's collar bone. "That thing is very significant, Karkat. The actions you and Dave would take wielding it would diverge a lot! I'm still not sure which is the better path," she says in a rush; the teal lace of sight doesn't line her shades, but Karkat's close enough to see a keen, feverish glint of light burning through the red lenses.

He closes his hand around the hilt of the sword, because holding it awkwardly around the blade and hoping it doesn't slice him open when they start running again strikes him as a shitastic idea. "Then what should I do with it?" he hisses back, as he tries to captchalogue the damn thing so he doesn't have to sling it across his back and re-invite magical spine problems back into his fucking life. "God, you pick now to be serious?"

But it won't go. He can't make it go away. Fuck if he remembers how to captchalogue specibi that isn't self-generated from one's own circulatory system. He'll fuck around with it later.

"These are serious times. Keep it," Terezi says, before releasing him with a tiny push. "I can't tell which of the main paths is most fortuitous; I can just see a lot of possibilities." She sighs - and then makes a beeline up and away. Karkat scrambles after her, kicking off two different curves of the stair railing before remembering he doesn't need to parkour shit anymore. "I need Rose. Soonish, rather than laterish. Promise me you won't pre-emptively stab Dave, alright?"

- 

AA: karkat, hey!
CG: OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE.
CG: YOU'RE NOT EVEN BEING SUBLTLE ABOUT IT ANYMORE!
AA: oh were well past the point of subtle! :)
CG: NO. I NEED TO GO CHECK ON JOHN AND GAMZEE. I'M NOT PISSING AROUND WITH SPADES'S SHITTY BARFPUPPET HELLTWIN OR WHATEVER YOU WANT ME DOING.
AA: oh no dont worry about him
AA: it would just be nice to have a pair of knights help with the forge
AA: since we cant have a space player in person just yet!
CG: IS THIS MORE MYSTICAL FUCKING FROG SCIENCE, BUT WITH SNAKES? BECAUSE A) NO AND B) HELL FUCKING NO.
CG: AND AN ENTIRE CACOPHONY OF GODDAMN NO IF YOU'RE TRYING TO WRANGLE ME INTO SPAWNING US WITH ECTO FUCKERY.
AA: sollux will take care of that already dont worry
CG: FUCK YOUR TENSES AND THE HORSE THEY RODE IN ON.
AA: but yes im afraid it does involve mystical fucking snake science :)
AA: dave for speeding up the process
AA: and you for providing your expertise with ecto creature breeding
CG: HAH. HAHahaha. FUNNY JOKE, ARADIA.
CG: I'M MORE THAN A SLIME SNAKE BREEDER, STOP OBJECTIFYING ME.
AA: and also blood
CG: ...
AA: ...
CG: ...I DON'T GET AN EXPLANATION FOR THAT ONE?!
AA: im calling in feferi too actually
AA: you need to protect dave
CG: FROM WHAT. HIS WEIRD CURSED ORGAN SHIT?
AA: pretty much!
AA: its not too late for him
AA: but if he pushes himself too far his fate could go either way
CG: WHAT ABOUT YOU?
AA: oh i already know what im doing
AA: lofaf is the safest place the three of you can be
AA: and i promise...
CG: THIS BETTER BE A GOOD ONE.
AA: john and gamzee win
CG: AGAINST WHO.
AA: nice catch!
CG: THERE'S NO REASON FOR YOU FUCKS TO BE THIS EVASIVE ABOUT IT IF THEY'RE FIGHTING JOHN'S SHIT-SNAKING DENIZEN.
AA: oh theyre not
AA: its just the trickster
CG: uh.
CG: aradia.
AA: mhm?
CG: WHAT THE FUCK!!!!!!
AA: if you go to lowas hell fixate on you
AA: theyll both panic
AA: youll all lose
AA: in a wide variety of disastrous ways i might add!
CG: JOHN'S BEEN SCREAMING OVER PESTERCHUM FOR AT LEAST HALF AN HOUR! THEY'RE NOT WINNING!
AA: oh no thats just the wind
CG: YOU'RE SHITTING ME.
AA: typhere coughed up a giant storm for a dramatic backdrop
AA: between that and gamzee being himself its pretty much a bunch of nonsense
CG: I HATE EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS GAME.
CG: EVERYTHING.
AA: really? i love it
AA: were getting to the good stuff right now!
CG: YOUR DEFINITION OF GOOD STUFF IS TERRIBLE AND I CHANGED MY MIND. I DON'T WANT YOU TO TELL ME WHAT THE GOOD STUFF IS, EVER.
AA: heheheh
AA: hm
AA: i guess i should say something before i go
AA: hey karkat?
CG: WHAT.
AA: see you on the other side
CG: ON LOFAF? I KIND OF TOOK THAT FOR GRANTED, SINCE I'M GRUDGINGLY GOING THERE. WITH A GRUDGE. HAVE I MENTIONED THE GRUDGE?
CG: OR ARE YOU FUCKING DITCHING ME IN SNAKE HELL?
AA: itll be okay
AA: its wonderful
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] will _________ --
CG: ARADIA?
CG: WAIT. FUCK. ARE YOU OKAY?
CG: PLEASE TELL ME YOU'RE NOT DEAD.
CG: OH GOD.
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] has joined the chat! --
AA: whoops!
AA: i guess thats a thing that happens!
CG: I CAN'T TAKE THIS KIND OF WHIPLASH, HOLY FUCK.
AA: dont worry about it!
AA: but please hurry
AA: i think roxy and jake are trying to pick pet snakes
AA: and unfortunately soon those snakes will be ecto slime :(  
CG: I -
CG: YEAH. ON OUR WAY.
-
[x]

There are no traps.

There are no underlings.

There is, in fact, nothing at all to impede their progress. Cetus's lair feels like a tomb, absent the body.

The composition of the walls changes as they descend the long, slow coils of the ramp that leads ever downward: the layers of sediment shade from dead white to pale pink, then lilac, and back again to white; nodules of dark purple and blue appear at intervals, carved as smooth as the walls themselves. At one point they find themselves surrounded by layer after layer of fossilized skeletons carefully exposed along the walls, the sediment full of wild, overlapping splashes of blue and lemon yellow and pink that remind Rose of pastel blood.

It's one thing to know, in abstract, that Cetus quite literally killed everything in the oceans of LoLaR - it's quite another to be faced with the fossil record. From what Rose knows of fossilization and sedimentary rock, having skeletons buried this deep and strewn about as decoration on the plain above isn't entirely realistic, unless there has been more than one Cetus-induced extinction event over the course of LoLaR's elusive history.

Or, perhaps, the turtles picked up their habit of decorating temples with their own shells from Cetus's example of decorating her lair with her favorite skeletons for suitably dramatic effect.

Well. It's a way to pass the time, Rose supposes. She's had worse hobbies in her life - consorting with otherworldly abominations comes first to mind. She tucks herself in closer against Kanaya's side, and does her utmost not to fall asleep. As eminently comfortable as Kanaya is, and as tempting as a power nap sounds, she'd rather keep tabs on the group memo as well as their immediate surroundings. Rose can't discern whether she feels tired because of the recent adrenaline rush from fighting Cetus, or because of the skipped day that curls up like Schrödinger's cat in her mind. The exhaustion simply rolls over her like a wave, and then falls back with no discernible pattern, leaving her in a flexible state of 'not quite wide awake.'

After what feels like an age, the wide walls of the passageway begin to widen, and the faint light cast by Feferi's bubble doesn't quite extend far enough to illuminate them through the increasingly dim water. Rose raises a hand and summons enough light to keep them going for a while longer, but the
walls continue to recede, until they're left with only the pale floor beneath them as a landmark - and Feferi becomes paranoid enough that she deliberately presses the bubble down so it flattens out against the floor, to make absolutely sure that they're still at the bottom and not floating over a clouded abyss of deeper water. They continue to roll along for a few yards before unease sets in. Rose and Eridan take turns nearly blinding everyone in the bubble with their respective auras before admitting that there's nothing around for them to see. Working blind like this is the opposite of Rose's forte; when she checks with other forms of sight, all she can see is a dim expanse of white water around them, without even a swirl of pastel color to break up the hovering, dead white sediment.

Then Rose blinks, and looks up. There’s no vestigial afterimage of Leviathan visible, not with so many layers of LoLaR’s sediment piled heavy on top of them. A faint lavender glow stains the water above, not quite bright enough to penetrate all the way through the water – unless one knows how to look.

They break the surface of the water, to find a cavern just as deathly quiet and still as the passage down. The roof extends in a wide shallow bowl overhead, pockmarked with jagged stalactites the color of bone. Rose cannot say for certain that they are not in fact bone, given her planet’s predilections in that direction. Ripples spread out from their bobbing bubble and disturb the quiet surface of the water; they’ve come up near the center of the chamber, about half a mile from a glittering expanse of lilac beach.

"So. Progress," Kanaya says, cautiously, as though saying it aloud might curse them with another half hour of rolling along the bottom of the world in a magical hamster ball.

"Or something like it," Rose agrees.

Eridan slumps further down in his curve of the bubble and scrunches his nose, casting long, suspicious looks at the beach and the water and - well, everything. He hasn't relaxed once since they came down here, and Rose worries. The odds of him turning on them seem relatively slim, by this point - he burns so brightly that it's difficult to see, but Eridan seems to be on their side. Running to side with either the Horrorterrors or the Lord of Time would be suicide. "I don't like it," he says, sinking at last so low that his glasses get pushed forward slightly off the crook of his ear fins and fall over the point of no return on his nose as he huddles his shoulders. The bags under his eyes look like bright streaks of violet Expo marker; his skin's paler than it looked before they came to the Medium, and Rose frowns, making a mental note to keep closer tabs on him. His powers are so bright - burning so bright that they make her eyes water - was it this strong before?

Eridan's as strong as he believes himself to be, and can probably will himself back to health as long as his Hope abilities hold out. And yet - her stomach sinks, a knot of unpleasant coils. Maybe it's not that Eridan's powers are whiting out her own vision - maybe what she's seeing is -

How much longer does Eridan have before he burns himself out? Destroys himself, from the inside out? Dave's powers threaten him from the outside, but Rose completely overlooked Eridan. He destroys with Hope, he destroys Hope - how much more can he bring to bear before he destroys himself?

"Do you like anyfin?!" Feferi points out, indignant. Then she raises a yellow claw and draws it along the top curve of their life support bubble, carving a seam in the iridescent surface. The bubble melts away from the seam like cotton candy in water, until all that remains is a shallow raft that ushers the four of them up onto the beach. Feferi rides the last of the bubble like a goddess emerging from the sea, tossing her hair, while Rose and Kanaya float the last few steps when the bubble finishes dissolving. Eridan catches himself at the last second, his Prince costume dipping into the water so that it leaves a dark, wet line along his back.
Eridan glowers at Feferi and stomps onto the beach with crunching footsteps. "I'm just saying there should be more rigmarole here. Where are the snares and the inveiglements and underlings and all the other crap to get in our way?"

"I assumed everything must have shut down with - when Cetus died," Rose says. She scanned for traps and unlucky pitfalls on and off for parts of the trip down, but there simply hasn't been much to see. Boring seems a strong word for it - solemn is better. It should be a relief not to hit any stumbling blocks or game enemies to fight, but the quiet atmosphere exhausts Rose too much for her to appreciate it.

Feferi blows a raspberry at Eridan, then puts on her most regal expression to nod at Rose. "Proebably. Just ignore Eridan, he's paranoid."

Eridan explodes. "No, I'm not! I fuckin' fine, your majesty! I'm justifiably concerned about us walking right into some kind of naufrageous bullshit. Constant vigilance!" he snarls, striding up to Feferi, his aura boiling white hot around him.

Feferi bursts into fuchsia fire; it seethes around her like tendrils and coils through her hair. This obviously helps de-escalate the situation. And by 'obviously,' Rose means - doesn't, in any way, shape, or form. "I know what you're quoting! You're so full of shit!" she says, dropping all fish puns. When she snarls, the gritty sand jitters and shivers underfoot.

Kanaya forces her way in between them; of course she does. "Eridan. Feferi. No." When Feferi tries to growl, Kanaya puts a claw on each of their chests and shoves them apart, her natural luminescence flickering and flashing with pent-up irritation. Eridan's suitably intimidated by Kanaya to the point that he hesitates when she bares her teeth and growls at both of them like a chainsaw, but then Feferi tries to elbow Kanaya in the side and squirm around her, and Eridan tries to dart in while Kanaya's distracted, and, incensed, Kanaya seizes them in a headlock, one on each side.

Rose is unsure when this became an ashen thing. But auspisticism appears to be called for, and she would rather this be a sudden pitch meltdown between two trolls who've been sniping at each other for weeks than have it be some kind of genuine throwdown that ends in explosions. For a second there the hostility between Eridan and Feferi was solid enough to cut with a knife, or with a particularly shitty sword. Delicately, Rose sidles closer and bends over slightly so she can snap her finger pointedly in the middle point where Feferi and Eridan are glaring at each other. "That's enough, both of you," she says, quiet but firm, as Eridan's face begins to turn violet and Feferi's turns fuchsia-tinted from the pressure. "Not here. Not now." Another snap, and they both flinch and look at her. She repeats herself while Kanaya looks on, the wild flicker of her skin dimming back to normal levels.

Feferi raises her foot and kicks the sand with her toe one last time before subsiding, jerking her head to the side as her face flushes with embarrassment. Or perhaps with lack of oxygen. Eridan, on the other hand, goes totally limp in Kanaya's chokehold, letting his head lol as he smacks his forehead with a palm. "God dammit," he says, sounding forlorn. "Fuckin'. Let's just pretend that never happened."

"Agreed," Feferi says, her voice clipped and her accent slipping out stronger than usual. Kanaya holds them for another count of three before easing her grip, pointing two claws at her eyes and then pointing them at each seadweller in turn as they turn away from each other. Feferi lopes ahead, marching determinedly toward a cave opening across the beach, while Eridan falls back, crosses his arms, and starts glaring at his own feet as though they are personally responsible for his current embarrassment.

Rose takes Kanaya's arm, and Kanaya flexes instinctively before blinking and relaxing her arm. The
two of them follow Feferi and take care to stay in the middle. "You don't think they'd suit each other, pitch?" Rose murmurs, and waggles her eyebrow.

"I think that now is not the time, or the place," Kanaya says, a sentiment that Rose completely agrees with. Rose casts one look with her physical eyes at Eridan, to reorient herself, and then slows.

Behind her stretches a trail of glowing footprints. This wouldn't surprise Rose much, given LoLaR's general predilection for light motifs, but only Rose has left footprints in the lilac sand. Everyone leaves indents in the crunchy gravel, yet only Rose's gleam, right up to the half-made footprint under her lifted heel. There doesn't appear to be any secondary effect from this, but Rose lifts off the ground regardless - just high enough that her soles can't skim the sand. It seems to stop her leaving any more easily-traced prints but she's not sure if doing so really accomplished anything worthwhile. The four of them cross the beach unhindered and walk into yet another expansive chamber.

Enormous crystal growths line the winding path as they venture deeper, clustering thick along the high lavender walls and effectively hedging them in with spires of crystal that form an impenetrable lattice on either side of the walkway. Rose can't identify all of them, but all of LoLaR's trademark colors are represented, ranging from milky, frosty celestite to rosy pink rhodochrosite to something so vibrantly yellow that it makes her eyes cross slightly if she looks at it too long. Smaller outcroppings of quartz and fluorite in a rainbow of colors grow along and on the path, almost like it has become overgrown in Cetus's absence.

It takes Rose longer than she wants to admit to notice the crystals alongside the path shine from within as she floats by. She tests this by falling back, letting Kanaya and Eridan draw ahead of her for a moment before she advances back to Kanaya's side. The bright cyan crystal on their left fades as Rose drifts back, then brightens again as she passes by.

The largest of the crystals look wide enough to walk on without the risk of shattering; Rose wonders what kind of traps might have been set here, if anything in the lair were still active. The luminescence of her footprints is the most clear sign that something is still running, like the Sburb equivalent of emergency lighting or an autonomic system, but that appears to be all. Cetus is dead, yet her lair still reacts to Rose's presence. Thus far, the effects seem benign, but...

Something slices violently across her vision like viscous, sticky lightning, and Rose flinches. She unlinked her arm from Kanaya's a moment ago and hasn't caught up yet, so no one notices. Rose lowers her eyes, attempts to regulate her breathing, and then checks again, this time with another layer of vision. Most of the room, apart from the four of them, glows only with a dim light, faded and heavy with dust. The crystals are more translucent with this particular filter -

Which makes it laughably easy to spot the dark lines crawling through the crystal nearest the exit. Then, before Rose can blink, the lines flex and retract, and vanish around the corner of the exit like a scuttling starfish, without a sound.

"Eridan," she says.

She's trying to stay composed; Eridan, oblivious to the circumstances, snaps, "I'm not doing anything!"

Rose shakes her head, and curls her fingers slightly to beckon him nearer to the rest of the group.

"No, you're not," she says, in a lower voice. Eridan dips his head slightly, down and to the side, his expression wary before something appears to click - then he takes wider strides until he's level with her, keeping one eye over his shoulder at all times. Kanaya looks back over her shoulder, curiosity writ large across her face; when Rose tips her head slightly and jerks it back - group up - Kanaya understands at once, taps Feferi on the shoulder to get her attention, and then stops until Rose and
Eridan catch up.

Rose stops them all at a safe distance when they near the entrance and trains her sight on the room beyond, trying to pick out as much detail as she can. Her stomach clenches as she does, because she already has an inkling of what she's about to see.

She needn't have bothered. Though the creature beat a hasty retreat when it sensed it had been spotted, it has not bothered to conceal its presence in the next room. Apparently, it's had enough free time left to its own devices, undisturbed, that it simply...made itself at home.

Sickly yellow glowworms coil in heavy swallows' nests of sticky, brackish purple tar, dripping phosphorescent fire from their ever-gaping mouths that eats through infinitely reflecting mirrors that line the walls, ceiling, and floor of the entire room. Waterfalls pour from several levitating crystal platforms throughout the room, some pointed at right angles to the floor and defying gravity to spill against the wall, each one full of iridescent, acidic oil that coagulates in thick puddles that obscures the mirrors further still. Thorny tendrils twine along thin wires that stretch across the room, flexing and tightening and shattering the tiny diamonds of stained glass that flutter along the lines like leaves. An enormous crystalline sun suspended in the dead center of the room has been irreparably cracked and hollowed out by something moist and tangled, that writhes and exhales more grimdark acid to splash in with ragged bursts.

A single eye opens up in the center of the sun, yellow and aniridic and pitted with dark dashes and lines that form uneven circles.

"Have I mentioned I actually hate bein' right?" Eridan says.

"Well. It's like walking in on the baleful eye of Sauron," Rose says, wrinkling her nose, "whilst it's having a bath."

The Horrorterror splinter within the sun does not reply. The eye stays fixed upon them, but the film of dark ooze, roughly the color and consistency of plum juice, covers more and more of the crystal's hollow interior, dyeing the eye a brownish-purple.

"What do you think it's doing in here?" Kanaya asks, grimly. She doesn't sound like she expects a serious answer; her claws dance over her folded knees. Rose can sense how badly she itches to pull her specibus free. Despite the fact that the eye has already spotted them, they've fallen back further into the crystal room, forming a huddle between purple quartz and a rounded heap of chalcedony. Feferi and Eridan are both sallow in the face, Feferi has a fierce, too-tight, closed lip smile that looks like she's about to split her lips open on her own teeth, and Rose suspects that she doesn't look much better. Kanaya is the only one present who has not been directly influenced by a Horrorterror, and they're far enough away from Equius by now that if something goes awry -

It won't. They'll simply have to handle this flawlessly, with a perfectly executed plan. There is absolutely no way that this could go wrong.

Eventually, Rose is going to convince herself with that line. One day.

"Knowing Leviathan? Nothing good," she says, turning her needlekind over and over between her fingers, fast and erratic to the point that it threatens to fly away and impale someone with each wild flip. But if she doesn't do something with her hands, she - "If it has its tentacles all over the recipe for the Final Alchemy, the potential for sabotage is immense," she adds. The terror the thought inspires runs slimy and cold down her spine. However much of Leviathan stayed here, it's had sufficient time
to create a rotting, sludgy nest of the mirror room; there's no telling how much deeper the infestation spreads with the dead, opaque aura of LoLaR obscuring her vision between rooms. There's another door, all the way across the infested room, but no way for her to know where they are in relation to the hoard itself.

Feferi shivers; Rose shivers, too, but that's more because crouching in close proximity to Feferi is a chilly business. "I wonder if it is fresh, or if it has been here for a whale," Feferi says, fluttering her wings a little and dusting the ground with a fall of twinkling glitter. She spins her 2x3dent between her palms, so that the central tine digs deeper into the ground, fast enough to occasionally draw a spark.

"I'm leaning towards it never having left. It infected Cetus and I in the last session, and made a home here. Leviathan has had time. Too much time." Rose trains her extra sight on the gateway between their room and the next, to make sure the spindly splinter of the many-angled being doesn't try to slip through while they're distracted.

Eridan is more jittery than Rose and Feferi combined; he trembles as though any moment he could vault over them and start lashing out at the infested chamber in a frenzy. "We can blast this nest to kingdom come, yeah?" he says, his eyes digging into Rose's with a fervent abandon.

And normally, Rose would whole-heartedly agree. Burning Horrorterror remnants out is the fastest and best way she can think of to eliminate the threat and perhaps restore the chamber to a healthier state, and she has almost no compunctions about turning Eridan loose on Leviathan's scion.

But. She winces, knowing that none of the three trolls looking askance at her will take this laying down. "I'd prefer if we attempted this...discreetly."

Kanaya understands at once. Of course she does. She gives Rose a strange look, leaning back slightly on her heels. "You don't want to fight it," she says, trying the words on for size. Feferi blinks, her mouth a startled 'o' - a storm gathers on Eridan's face, and he opens his mouth at once to start arguing.

They've already lost any semblance of control over Vriska's dangerous antics; if Eridan goes rogue, fired up by the thought that he's the only one willing to do what's necessary to survive, he'll carve a path through anyone who tries to slow him down. "First and foremost, I want to secure the Splendor Existentiae. Blowing everything to kingdom come, and possibly blasting the Final Alchemy away in the cross fire, is the opposite of what we need, right now."

"Rose. We are not getting through that room without a fight," Kanaya says, cutting Eridan off again. Feferi nods along, her eyes wide as she continues to stare at Rose in confusion. Eridan opens his mouth one more time, raising a claw, and then the fact that Kanaya is opposing Rose's suggestion hits on him. He folds one arm, and uses the other to curtly gesture at Kanaya - see?

They're probably right. Rose sighs. "We won't know until we try. It didn't react when it saw us; if it turns hostile when we cross the threshold, then we'll deal with it here and now. I doubt Leviathan has the resources to spare much investing in a battle here. Not with what's going on outside." The offshoot here is probably self-sufficient, to a degree, but with the odd way Leviathan spoke earlier - Rose wonders.

She narrowly misses a near-mutiny. Feferi and Kanaya eye each other around Rose, mutually skeptical and unsubtle, but having heard Rose concede that a fight is most likely unavoidable, Kanaya relaxes a little. Rose straightens, her specibus still in hand, and rounds the crystal-studded corner. Turning her back on Eridan is a calculated risk; she's banking on the theory that he'll still aim at the Horrorterrors rather than her, given the choice. "We'll float through. Try not to touch
anything," she says, tamping her voice down to an even lower whisper.

TT: Equius.
TT: This is just to let you know that we are about to fly into a grimdark infested zone.
TT: ...
GA: No Answer?
TT: No. At least, not one that my eyes can see, which isn't always a reliable indicator where Equius is concerned.
GA: Really, How Are We Supposed To Keep Track Of All These Villains And Heroes Coming And Going.
GA: When No One Updates The Spreadsheets And We Are Too Busy To Communicate In A Timely Fashion.
GA: Oh No.
TT: What is it?
GA: A Timely Fashion.
GA: Do You Think The Lord Of Time Is Capable Of Breaking Things For The Sake Of Puns?
GA: Or Breaking Puns For The Sake Of Things?
TT: ...
GA: ...
TT: If he takes puns from us, there really is no hope left for either of our species.

"There is no way this is gonna work," Eridan grumbles. But Kanaya loops an arm around Rose's waist, crooked in such a way that much of Kanaya's front presses along Rose's back like a body shield, and Rose lifts the two of them up over the first greenish-purple pool of grimdark sludge. Feferi bounds up alongside them; Eridan jumps up belatedly, but he coasts over the threshold without immediately lighting everything in a five-foot radius on fire, so it's something.

The eye pulsates like a toxic star. Nothing else in the room moves or makes a sound, apart from the steady trickle of phosphorescent fire from the glowing worms. Rose lets out a silent breath that shakes her, leaving her lungs strangely empty, and Kanaya's grip on her tightens. Then she begins to chart them a slow course through the room: avoiding the polluted waterfalls and the worm takes some winding curves to accomplish, and at one point requires them to float totally horizontal to the ground, their reflections visible and yet liquidly warped in the mirror below as Rose supports Kanaya's torso and Feferi her legs and ankles. Kanaya puts up with this trollhandling with a stoic yet subtly despairing expression.

"...I cannot believe this is working," Kanaya says, through the corner of her mouth, when the Horrorterror continues to ignore them. Well, ignore might be a strong way of putting it: the eye stays glued to them, turning slowly in its crystal sphere, but nothing lashes out at them. Feferi hushes Kanaya with a 'shhh!' that somehow manages to be louder than Kanaya's actual words, but still. Nothing.

Horrorterrors are dangerous, mutable things. The fact that this offshoot hasn't so much as attempted to contact or otherwise influence them feels...strange. Rose does so dislike it when one of her plans comes together and simultaneously heightens her unease.

The tendrils wound tight around the wire give them the most trouble when they're only scant yards from the exit - a round, smooth slab of pink-grey marble, the carvings eroded away by acid and the hinges coated with slime that reeks of blood and gangrene. Rose suspects that there was some sort of puzzle involved in this room: most of the thorny wires lead either to the sun in the center or to a circle above this door, but she doubts anything is still active, from the trashed state of the room. The tendrils slither along the wires as the four of them approach, the thorns blooming like flower petals. A few glowworms droop from the center like sickly stamen. Another bridge-like lock crests over the
center of the door, smaller in dimensions than the one that locked the lair itself but with similar holes, all of them caked with foul sludge.

Like hell is Rose putting her hand in there. She grimaces, and with some difficulty passes a quietly indignant Kanaya over to Feferi's arms so she can free up both hands, ignoring the way Feferi quietly says, "Holy carp. It really did work," under her breath. Drawing her needlekind, Rose starts mentally preparing the most concentrated blasting spell she can think of; at the same time, she nods to Eridan, who starts charging up his aura with a scowl, turning to face the rest of the chamber. The grimdark tendrils squirm and begin to thrash restlessly on the wires, as though anticipating what comes next.

And then, just as Rose points her needlekind at the bridge -

A sharp crack of nauseating lightning snaps and pops along the wires, sizzling the glowworms, who emit tiny crunches as they fry instantly. The circle at the apex of the door lights up in an ugly, pulsing rainbow of colors that makes Rose feel ill to look at - she's not sure any of them have names, and she sees some of them only through her other sight, as though they break too many laws of physics to appear in the normal range of visible light. The circular door rattles as the gunk in the hinges strains to pop them loose, and a few spare tendrils loop around the bridge itself and tug -

But the door doesn't budge. Despite the acid, the lock holds firm.

"Oh no," Rose says, when the lightning stops and the tendrils subside. Worse, the thorns draw away from the door - the underlying wires strain like they're about to break - as though to give them...room to work. She does not bother whispering. It's quite clear there wasn't a point in trying to be stealthy about this.

Kanaya says what they're all thinking. "It wants us to open the door for it."

"Damn." Rose bites down on her lip, hard, The creature in the crystal sun burbles incoherent nonsense, with echoes that sound like horrible snickering. It can see them, it can hear them, and it wants them here. "I don’t think we have any other recourse. We need to get through." They've spent so much time down here already - maybe they could backtrack and start drilling through the stone with Eridan's raw force, but that might take another age, and there's little guarantee they would wind up lost.

Why is it out here, she wonders, glaring with one eye at the grimdark offshoot from under the shield of her bangs. Why not in Cetus's innermost sanctum, where the denizen was presumably made a tanglebuddy in the last session? It is so hard to tell what is new, what is old, and what is just dead in this game. The temple above must have been altered, at some point; perhaps the hoard was reset to include the Splendor Existentiae, and the Horrorterror splinter wound up...displaced.

Or maybe there's something worse already in the room beyond, and they're being herded deeper into Cetus's lair like lambs to the slaughter.

"I'll throw up a wall," Eridan says. Though the air down here is damp and cool - apart from the humid reek of the Horrorterror - he rolls up his sleeves and presses his palms together. "Just goin' to have to do it fast."

"We don't know if this is a ruse. There could be more of it through the door already," Rose says. Then, on second thought - "Though if we are being rused, I'd rather deal with what's before us than worry about this thing attacking from behind at the same time." She hesitates, then adds, "You have permission to use the nuclear option, as long as everyone else is clear, and as long as you're pointing it back the way we came." Brute forcing their way out of the lair might suck away precious time, if the rooms begin to collapse, but letting Eridan loose to fire willy-nilly in the vague direction of the
hoard would be worse. More importantly, the last of Eridan's mutinous scowl clears, and his expression turns ferociously gleeful as his hands and arms light up in preparation, the shadows under his eyes deepening to a frightful mask.

Then, without looking away from Eridan and the Horrorterror offshoot, Rose points her needlekind back at the lock and sets it alight. Every grimdark thing in the room recoils, and something hisses menacingly from one of the heavy hives of glowworms near the ceiling. The grime clogging the lock itself sizzles, then rolls away in the form of black slugs, which drop to the ground and wiggle into the nearest puddles. Once she's sure the gaps in the bridge lock have been scoured clean - she has serious concerns about just how sanitary this is going to be, particularly if this lock plans to prick her finger again - she lets up and peers into the lock.

It's barely wide enough for her to squeeze her whole hand inside without curling her fingers up, which strikes her as odd. The stone inside is pale pink and pebbled, and clean of grimdark influence, as far as she can see. She tilts her head closer, squinting a little as she tries to see what mechanism will be prodding at her. A small hole in the far end of the hollow glints oddly when she directs a thin beam of light inside, but apart from that - nothing recognizable as a needle. "I think I would prefer more sliding puzzles," Kanaya says, her voice quiet, as Rose sighs and sticks her hand inside the lock.

"Wouldn't we all?" Rose asks. Then she frowns, and waves her hand a little more to try to invoke the mechanism.

Nothing happens. She whips her head around and shoots the Horrorterror a look that might be more than a little incensed, because if the idiotic thing has broken the lock, it's just as out of luck as the rest of them. The Horrorterror's eye rotates slowly in its crystal; it only looks sheepish if Rose were to stretch the definition of 'sheepish' to severely anthropomorphize its incomprehensible reactions. No, it looks more like it's watching. Waiting.

And if the wires need to be working whilst Rose activates the lock in order to complete the door puzzle, what is the thing waiting for? Why is Rose relying on a Horrorterror to help, anyway? Today has been a long day.

She removes her hand and leans in again, pressing her face against the lock. Could it still be jammed up?

She doesn't notice the moment when her eye socket lines up perfectly with the lock.

She feels it when the tiny needle inside the lock shoots out and stabs into the pupil of her eye. It's over and done before she can flinch - and flinch she does, jolting against the lock and slamming her hands frantically against it to push away. A spasm of terror shoots through her chest; many pairs of claws grab her and haul her away. Rose claps a hand over her eye, and tries to elbow the person who attempts to pry her hand away to get a look. "Let me see!" Feferi says, half-snarling with panic. Rose is preoccupied with not fainting. She can't even say the procedure hurt - but the suddenness and the ensuing shock leaves her cold at the extremities, a dizzy heat clouding her thoughts as her vision swirls. Briefly, she registers the shock of horrific lightning as it zaps down the lines to power the door open, but then she attempts to open her eye under Feferi's cautious, icy clawtips, and her eye slams shut in another wince as Eridan's shield blazes over and around them. Dull maroon swirls across the back of her eyelids, and a cold claw rests lightly on her closed eye, and she loses a few minutes to the sightlessness as the shock slowly recedes.

After a moment, Feferi draws her hand away, and someone sighs close enough that Rose feels it brush against her face. They've lain her out on a floor, so they must be through the door. She cracks
the unpricked eye, then cautiously peels the other open. It feels sore, and dry, but Kanaya's face
comes into clear focus directly above Rose's without delay or any sharp pain. Seeing Kanaya is, as
ever, a joy. "Mmm. Lovely," Rose says, summoning a crooked smile for Kanaya as she reaches up
and touches the jadeblood's cheek.

Feferi throws up her claws. "She lives!" she announces, with an extravagant roll of her eyes, and the
sound echoes throughout the chamber. "She's perfectly fine!" Then she taps Rose's cheek, her mouth
pursed. "Rose, why does your planet like jabbing you? This is getting raydiculous."

"I don't like your planet, Rose," Kanaya informs her. She catches Rose's hand and stands up, staying
bent over when Rose stays on the floor but refuses to relinquish her hand. "And the feeling appears
to be mutual."

"I can think of a few reasons," Rose says to Feferi, sighing. Once she's sure her head has stopped
spinning, she sits up and takes a moment to absorb the room around them.

Eridan's shield fills the whole round doorway, a field of white, bubbly white that completely
obscures the mirror room. A pool of saturated magenta, yellow, and cyan completely fills the vast
room, apart from the small, thin circle of white marble floor that wraps around the walls. This is the
brightest Rose has seen LoLaR's vivid water since arriving, and the color is a brilliant shock to her
beleaguered eye. The walls themselves rise and come together smoothly to form a curved roof, all of
it painted with iridescent nacre. Three polished mirrors used to hang from various parts of the ceiling,
as far as Rose can tell; unfortunately, all but one have fallen into the deep water of the pool, and the
last one still hanging in its frame is covered in jagged cracks, with fallen shards as long as a bus
stabbing into the floor and the pool. Another three openings in the walls, spaced between the mirror
frames, occasionally drip water like sad fountains - but only a few drops, with long gaps in between.
Nothing like the sort of torrential force Rose expects the fountains could have produced were Cetus
here, and alive.

Three pillars of chalk, one each in yellow, magenta, and cyan, rise above the water level, positioned
so that if all the mirrors were hanging and the fountain openings worked, they would form a kind of
rough circle together. The sides of the chalk pillars are damp and worn down, the color much darker
where they meet the water than the small ring of dry chalk at the top. Rose kneels by the side of the
water and dips her hand into it as a test. The particulates drifting in the water here are so thick that it
feels like she's picked up a handful of wet sand; chalk doesn't dissolve in water particularly well. The
silt-heavy water drips in between her fingers before she turns her hand over to let it fall.

No wonder LoLaR above is so faded. Some critical mechanism must have shut down in Cetus's lair,
and the chalk has collected in this one pool.

And in the very center, a large Light symbol made from solid diamond lays almost flush with the
water, bearing three pedestals. There doesn't appear to be anywhere else to go from here. "Did
anything follow us in?" Rose asks, far too late. She raises a hand to rub her eye, absently, and Feferi
intercepts her with a muttered series of glubs. Eridan gives her a haughty look and sniffs, as though
the mere mention of him possibly failing is offensive to his ears. He's not as sensitive as Vriska is
about such things, but really. But tact. Tact is key. Even if she did just get jabbed in the eye to
unlock a damn door. "Everyone. Keep your eyes open for me, regardless," Rose says, with a touch
of humor in her voice. Kanaya snorts, then looks cross at herself for having succumbed to the urge.
Rose floats in the air to test herself - the last of the light-headed wooziness has passed - and then
helps Kanaya over as they fly to the central platform. Feferi dips her toes in the water as she skims
across like a skipping stone, kicking up arcs of water.

One object sits on each pedestal - one of them in particular Rose is relieved to see, the second
something she half-expected, and the third just...odd. The *Splendor Existentiae*, at least, is instantly recognizable.

"Is that it?" Eridan hisses.

Kanaya arches an eyebrow. "It would appear to be so."

He glares at the object on the pedestal. "You sure?"

"It has the title in thirty point, overly elaborate cursive font. I think this is it," Rose assures him.

"It could be a trap!" he says, insistently.

Feferi raises a claw to bop him on the back of the head - then she twitches and retracts it, with a desperate smile directed at Kanaya. "It's naut a trap!" she says, instead.

Rose was expecting a comfortable, classic book format - a tome worthy of kind of deep, arcane alchemical majyyks of the reality-building caliber they're going to be dealing with today. But the object on the center pedestal is a razor thin black tablet, the title fading slowly from green to red and back again, with stars and galaxies drifting across the liquid black surface. The cursive S at the start is oddly shaped: it looks as though the basic shape is actually a tangled ouroboros, with alternating halves of the tangled snakes lighting up as the color changes so that only half of the doubled S is visible at once. Rose lifts it carefully off the stand; it feels wafer-light, and when she taps the screen with a finger, the title screen fades to black, then reveals a series of snakes in a rainbow of colors squiggling across the screen.

The scroll bar is ridiculously small.

And this is only page one. Heaven forbid this thing have infinite scrolling. Rose captchaalogues it at once, before anything else can go wrong. And something will go wrong. It's only a matter of time, really. Beating a hasty retreat might be for the best -

But the other two pedestals lure her in. Curse her curiosity. While Feferi bounces and claps her claws together, a genuine laugh bursting out as she does a small, victorious dance, Rose starts to walk over to the second pedestal, the one that she has been expecting since she found the bow in the temple. A violin rests diagonally on the molded pedestal, the body made of clear crystal and covered in delicate, twining gold filigree.

"Rose," Kanaya says, "this smells like your blood."

Which quite thoroughly distracts Rose; she blinks, and her feet carry her away from the violin and across the diamond platform to the third pedestal. Kanaya indicates a thin, clear sheet of glass that rests on a pedestal that's more complex than the other two - an extra sheet of marble holds the glass up at an angle, while a mechanical device uses a diamond to carve tiny marks into the glass.

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It's on. It's not broken or defunct, unlike almost everything else in Cetus's abandoned lair. As Rose watches and Feferi and Eridan crowd around Kanaya, fascinated, the diamond-tipped device reaches the end of the rectangular sheet of glass and folds away into the pedestal, which proceeds to whirr and send out another mechanical device to complete its strange task. "That. There," Kanaya says, pointing, as a clear vial full of red blood emerges, clamped between what appears to be an overly embellished test tube holder. Rose is almost one hundred percent sure that's more blood than what she must have contributed earlier, when pricking her finger to open the outer door. The clamps turn the vial over, and blood pours out over the glass in thin rivulets, settling into the diamond-carved marks with eerie precision.
The blood fills in row after row of musical notation in treble clef. As soon as Rose reads it, she knows it. Almost like she's played it before; the fingers of her left hand unconsciously begin to flex and stretch into the position they'd need to be in on the strings to produce the correct notes. It was in her blood, all along -

Eridan grunts. "Land quest shit," he says, dismissively.

Well, considering the hash he made of his own land quest - Rose stops herself. She's hardly one to talk about dismissing land quests. "Most likely," she says, closing her eyes. The musical notes burn behind her eyelids, waiting to be played. "She did say to play the rain."

And in the instant her physical eyes close, Rose sees what she should have seen five minutes ago.

The second, scuttling mobile splinter of Leviathan launches up from under the edge of the diamond platform, aimed straight at the Rose's back, splattering saturated water everywhere as it sacrifices stealth for speed. "Shit!" Rose yells, whipping around and raising an arm to protect her face. The offshoot in the sun didn't try to follow them because it wasn't the scuttling thing Rose saw spying on them among the crystals. **There were two this whole time.**

The spindly, many-legged thing winds around her forearm as soon as it hits, wrapping so tight it almost cuts off circulation. But rather than securing itself or snapping her wrist, it aims next at her face, the feathered barbs at the ends of its many-jointed limbs shooting for her eyes in one swift motion. "No! Get off!" Rose says, almost a scream, raising her needlekind -

A grey hand seizes the Horrorterror splinter and crunches it, yanking it away from Rose's face and flinging it at the ground with enough force that the amorphous, shifting gelatin of its musculature splatters against the platform. "Rose!" Kanaya says, pushing Rose further away from the writhing creature.

Not far enough. The splinter regroups quickly, and when Feferi lunges forward with a battle cry, her 2x3dent skitters off the diamond with a horrendous screech as the Horrorterror shoots lightning-fast back toward Rose, covering the distance between them with long, ranging strides. "Hold still!" Feferi shrieks, stabbing at it multiple times in quick succession as she tries to skewer it. The thing is fast.

Rose's arm burns. She raises her needlekind with the other hand instead, an explosion already waiting on her lips. Eridan's incandescent across from her, his glasses and claws burning with smoldering white light to the point where she can't see his eyes - just two square frames of white. Feferi leaps out of the way -

And the Horrorterror zags at the last second, and bolts into the water like a thin black arrow. This time Rose tracks it with single-minded focus, following its dark trail of corruption and tracing it with her finger so that Eridan whirls to redirect his building power. But Feferi dives into the water trident first, vanishing beneath the colorful, swirling waves, and Eridan pulls his claws back with a curse. "Can still hear it," Eridan says, his voice echoing with the heavy resonance of his power, and grits his teeth.

how many gods rose won't you help us s a v e u s s a v e t h e m s a v e y o u

Feferi cuts through the water like it's perfectly clear - all Rose can make out through the swirling
chalk is her brilliant fuchsia aura, but Feferi swims after the Horrorterror with firm strokes, hot on its tail. The two streak deep down into the pool - to the very limits of what Rose can see through the opaqueness - and then abruptly Feferi lashes out with a coil of fuchsia light, and the Horrorterror lurches out of the way with another burst of speed. It scuttles toward the far wall and Feferi continues to harry it under the water until it slams into the wall. The crawling thing swarms up the wall immediately, dripping purple, brackish blood in its wake, so that it's out of arm's reach when Feferi breaks the surface. The fuchsiablood shoves her hair back out of her face, her god tier clothes streaked with pink and yellow. "Clam back here!"

The Horrorterror, predictably, fails to listen. It continues to slip words to them, its small mental choir overlapping and talking over itself in a way that...the Leviathan outside doesn't, anymore. Rose doesn't know what to make of it; she's more preoccupied with taking aim again, as the grimdark tendril clammers up along the edge of the shattered mirror.

LV: she {horrible} won't let you leave!
LV: so many D̃̈́ͬ͆̈́ͯ̉̅̆̇̂̏̑̓̌̃̆̇̋̏̋̓E̅̆̈́̅̂̔̊̐̋̓̌̚L̆̈́̅̂̔̊̐̋̓̌̈́͂̋̊̐Ỉ̌̌̉̐Î̖̊̑̎̊̑́̐̌̊̐̔̊̐̚J̉̌̌̉̐Î̖̊̑̎̊̑́̐̌̊̐̔̊̈́̚Ỏ̌̌̉̐Î̖̊̑̎̊̑́̐̌̊̐̔̊̈́̚Ủ̌̌̉̐Î̖̊̑̎̊̑́̐̌̊̐̔̊̈́̚S Its doomed minds
LV: you're {betrayed} all going to die

"Wrong," Rose says, coolly. A few insecurities immediately fire off in the back of her mind, but they're false pings - she knows better than to believe a word out of a Horrorterror's mouth(s), by now. She fires at the creature, but it dodges at the most inauspicious moment, and her bolt of light reflects off a shard of mirror to lance through the water instead.

LV: dear precious futile minds
LV: we can offer you a better deal
LV: a better Ĉ̃̑̎̊̐̔̊̐̕HOIC̈́̅Ĕ̇̆̊̌̊̐̊̔̈̑̈́̊̐̐̈́̅̂̔̊̐I

She nearly snaps her needlekind in half. "All you offer is a lie. I don't need you. I've never needed you," she says, even as panic thunders through her chest. Feferi zooms up after the Horrorterror on her wings, bringing her arm back to throw her specibus, and - now Rose can see the intersection - Feferi throws, and Rose fires at the same time. One tine of the trident snags in the trailing end of the Horrorterror offshoot's spindly form, and while it scrambles to free itself, Rose's blasting spell pulverizes it. It's too small and thin to survive the flash of light and heat that follows, and all that's left as Feferi bounds up to retrieve her specibus is a blackened scorch mark against the mirror.

LV: fine then

The voice sounds much deeper, this time. With a resounding crack, a massive black tendril slams through the rock beside Eridan's glowing shield rather than trying to break through it, clearing a new space for the eyeball offshoot to glare at them through. Which circumvents the door entirely.

Convenient.

LV: Ė̃Ṙ̃̔̊̐̑̄̄̈̑TḊ̃̔̊̐̑̄̄̈̑̑̎̈̑Ȧ̇̇̊̐̓̂̂̐̐̈̑̈̑̐̐̐̐N -

Eridan shoots it.

Eridan, who has been storing up power this whole time, ready to fire at the other grimdark tendril.

Eridan, who fires a shot that screams a hole straight through the defensive tentacle that the eyeball
uses to defend itself, and lands a direct hit on the crystal where the eyeball has made itself at home.

The crystal sun promptly explodes, along with everything in the room. Rose doesn't think Eridan threw *that* much power - but the mirror room's puzzle must have involved some kind of power amplifier in the sun, and when it blows, it incinerates *everything* in a wash of electric white fire. The flames billow out through the door when Eridan's shield falters under his own power, licking along the surface of the water. The acid burned skin on Rose's arm prickles, and her whole face feels like it received a sudden sun burn.

"Eridan!" Kanaya says, appalled.

"What! You saw it! Self-defense!" Eridan bawls back; they both have to shout to be heard over the roar of the flames.

"It'll be fine." Rose says - though she thinks that if Cetus were here, the denizen would beg to differ. "We'll simply wait for it to burn itself out, and then head out." She was the one who authorized Eridan to fire in that direction, after all. The violetblood folds his arms, half-defensive, half-convinced he's in the right, and she can't really fault him for this one. If he hadn't shot the thing, Rose probably would have, with probably only slightly less explosive results.

Which is when a low creak cuts through the air. Enough of a pause follows for all four of them to trade curious glances, as Feferi bobs back over to rejoin them on the platform. "Actshoally, I can probably shift enough water to put out the fire," she says, twirling her claw and causing a thing spiral of colorful water to rise up out of the pool. "It's more alive in here than it is outside -"

Which is when the ceiling in the mirror room finishes cracking. Several hundred thousand gallons of dull, milky white water crash through and drown the flames in a single swamping tidal wave - and it just keeps pouring in. "- Orrr that will do it," Feferi says, her voice faltering and hesitant.

But the water doesn't stop pouring through. It's just a solid wall of clouded water, and the first indication that they're *really* in trouble, now, comes when a fresh wave of water overflows into the pool room, and slaps into Rose's knees.

Another creak, and a jagged *crunch*, and the nacred walls and ceiling of the pool room begin to fragment and crack, like tectonic plates splitting.

"Eridan. Why do you do these things?" Kanaya asks, defeated, as the roof trembles and begins to cave under the weight of all the water of LoLaR.

It doesn't all go at once, thankfully, but another enormous wall of water sheets down through the spreading crack, slamming into the pool. It causes another immense wave that rolls through the water and completely swamps the platform. Feferi seizes Rose from behind, her arm an ice cold bar around Rose's ribs, and then she hauls Rose and Kanaya both out of the way of the incoming water.

Water bursts through another fault line, so that there are multiple geysers flooding the room. A stream with the pressure of ten firehoses almost hits them, but Eridan's shield flickers back over their heads, dimmer than before. "We've got the thing! Let's go!" Feferi calls over the din of crashing water; she lets go of Rose, probably assuming that carrying Kanaya out of here is going to require both arms.

The instant Feferi releases her, Rose drops back down into the water. "Wait!" someone yells - then, a shout that's garbled by the water as Rose submerges: "Rogrbgl-"

The conflicting currents batter Rose to the side as soon as she hits - the water's either tepid or freezes her hands, depending on where she's tossed. The breath she took and held before hitting the water
starts to ache in her chest at once. She flips over at least once, one hand clamped tight over her mouth and nose to physically hold her breath in, in case a rogue current hits her chest. Rose opens her eyes to see where she's going, but all the bleached white chalk particles in the water and the extra-concentrated swirls of pink, yellow, and cyan leave her drifting in a phantasmagorical soup. If the violin has a distinguishable aura, it might well be lost in all the bright yellow.

She dove in right on top of where they started, but the platform has vanished in the rapidly rising water, and she's all turned around. Rose kicks herself around as her lungs scream at her to go back up, before the ever-rising surface is out of reach - or worse, the whole room floods and all the air's swallowed up.

But she can't leave it here. This whole endeavor is a pointless exercise: Cetus is dead, and soon reality will be, too. The last request of a dying denizen - and of course it could get Rose killed. That shouldn't even surprise her, by this point. She kicks perpendicular to the current that has her at the moment, trying to regain her bearings. Her god tier costume feels heavy in the water, but not to the point where it pulls her down. Not that it does any good, when she's swimming blind, trusting only her gut instinct that she's swimming in a vaguely downward direction and not toward the door back into the flooded mirror room.

Her air runs out just as her hand knocks against something hard and solid in the water mid-stroke. Rose's lung try to expel the pent-up air through her nose, and Rose stretches the exhale as long as she can to stave off the urge to breathe back in. The hard object comes free in her hand and she hugs it to her chest, feeling the diamond-sharp strings along her sternum through her shirt. She closes her hand over the tuning pegs and captchalogue the damn thing before it can be torn away.

Problem: she may or may not still be in danger of drowning. That hasn't stopped being a thing that is happening. When she looks up, lungs strained to the limit, she can't see anything but the swirling, tumbling chaos of the ocean rolling overhead. If there's any light left above, she can't make it out. Every time she blinks, the chalk in the water stings her eyes more.

Her traitorous mouth bursts open, the urge irresistible now, and breathes -

She chokes on a mouthful of water, just in time for Feferi's bubble to snap into place around her. Rose hits the bottom of the bubble on her knees, immediately retching up a decent amount of bright pink water.

Right. Life support bubbles.

...Damn her flair for the melodramatic. Rose wheezes air in rapidly, her body acclimating to not-drowning with remarkable acumen. Almost as though not-drowning should be one's default state.

"Why are you like this?" Kanaya asks, sounding aggrieved, which is...a very fair question. Without waiting for a response - Rose could write a dissertation on her own spontaneous bursts of melodramatic impulsiveness - Kanaya hugs Rose with back-cracking force, heedless of the fact that Rose is soaked through. Rose coughs one last time into her sleeve to spare Kanaya a shoulder-full of rainbow drool, and then hugs her back. Kanaya's claws dig in a little tightly, but Rose says nothing, feeling a faint tremble run through them. She's probably soaking Kanaya's outfit; Kanaya does not appear to care.

Then, to reassure herself, Rose decaotchalogue the violin. It is the violin, not simply a convenient violin-shaped object - Kanaya pulls away to watch while Rose turns the instrument over in her hands. The crystal looks stained faintly with LoLaR's colors - she remembers it being so clear, earlier - but when she tries to tip it so any water that snuck into the body will come out, nothing emerges. It's oddly dry, for something that she just retrieved underwater. "I would greatly appreciate it if you
gave me prior warning the next time you decide to dive after an instrument,” Kanaya says, dryly, brushing Rose's wet bangs back into place. There's an odd note in her voice, like she's affected more than she's letting on. Between that, and the tremble in her claws as she laces them with Rose's fingers -

Ah. Rose might have nearly died one too many times, today. She feels like a bit of an ass. "Duly -" Rose stops to cough, though there's nothing left. Her throat feels raw. "- noted. I'm sorry."

"Great! Now, we just have to find a glubbing way out of here!” Feferi chimes in, her eyebrows a weird wobble halfway between a smile and a frown.

They all look around. The bubble is, by now, completely immersed in water; fizzling bubbles drift by, and the exhausted white ocean water diluted the saturated colors of the pool to the point where they're back in a foggy, featureless oceanscape. Feferi takes them up and they find a thin sliver of quickly diminishing air that at least confirms they've found the roof.

"Fuck it,” Eridan says, after a pause, and Feferi lets his claw out of the bubble so he can start blasting through what little is left of the roof.

They leave the last, incinerated remains of Leviathan's infestation to the watery tomb.

They reach open ocean with ease. Eridan pulls his soaked claw back in and sits down with a huff as Rose realizes Cetus's lair is crumbling all of its own accord. Enormous chunks of lilac stone fragment and drift apart - shattering in slow motion. A few other air pockets within the lair release their air in enormous bubbles that rise inexorably toward the surface, and Feferi follows them, navigating the large chunks of stone that sink to the bottom of the ocean.

Eridan is in favor of taking off and leaving LoLaR at once, as soon as they reach the surface and Feferi melts part of her bubble down so they can take a breather. Yet when Rose tells him he is free to go help with Noir, or guard the ark ships, he huddles down and wrinkles his nose, apparently unwilling to actually go off on his own. Feferi hums rather than saying anything aloud, then sends the bubble raft skimming across the sea toward the nearest island and watches with intrigued eyes as Rose attempts to tune the violin. "Are you going to play it?" she asks, excitement already infecting her voice. "I think that you should!"

Rose tilts her head in a nod, and splays her fingers over the board to test her reach. Feferi soothed the acid burns to the best of her ability, but Rose's fingers feel stiff and out of practice when she presses down the E string. The string digs into her skin, just a touch too sharp, and Rose has a strong feeling she knows what her fingers will look like by the end of this. Perhaps she should have borrowed Karkat; LoLaR likes blood. "Hopefully a good drenching won't impact the sound quality," she murmurs, as they come to ground at the edge of the island. More of a glorified sandbar, really - a few chunks of roughhewn marble sit in lopsided piles, but there's little else apart from white, chalky sand and a lone outcrop of pink rock. Nothing to mark that Cetus's lair used to lay beneath the surface nearby; even the whirlpool from earlier is nowhere to be seen.

"Do we even have time for this?" Eridan asks, sounding more stressed than annoyed as he joins them on the beach. Rose retrieves the bow from her sylladex and holds it loose in her hand, then steps up onto the pink outcrop, gazing out across the grey, desolate expanse of LoLaR's ocean.

It does have a name. But it seemed so trivial when Rose had matters of arcane, game-breaking significance on her mind. Oceanus Lúminum. And all the villages had names, in consort-speech, and the temples had books in their libraries on more than just rambling, arcane nonsense, and there were
a thousand puzzles and games needed to unlock LoLaR's deeper secrets, and Cetus probably had another Choice waiting for her before their session fell apart around their ears, and Rose never cared about any of it.

Her chest is hurting again. "...Yes. For this."

Then she raises the violin to the crook of her shoulder and chin, and plays her song.

It starts slow, as her fingers adjust - and her grip on the bow feels off, and she has to pause to fix it. Finally, she succeeds in drawing the bow in one long stroke, and the note reverberates through the air like a low roll of thunder, far too loud to have come from such a normal-sized instrument. After that, Rose's fingers press the strings with fluid ease, and she folds the bow down to pluck pizzicato for a spell. The notes she's already played hover and layer in the air, until it sounds like she has three violins to play rather than just one. The A and E string draw blood each the first time she has to slide her fingers up the board with them for a higher note, but it doesn't slow her for a moment.

(It's less about the blood, and more about the code inside it.)

Sheet music burns bright in her mind's eye, and her whole body feels like an extension of the violin as she plays the Land of Light and Rain back to life. When she runs out of notes that fit on the glass sheet down below, Rose opens her eyes - she doesn't know when she closed them - and sees more dancing down the brilliant lines of rain sheeting down from the nearest cloud, through the film of tears that course down her cheeks. With a sob, Rose continues to play. The rain cascades down into the ocean as she plays it, drumming up the surface of the ocean into a wild froth. She plays the next raincloud, and then next, and then the next; her sight extends further out, farther than she can physically see, as she follows the music across the land. The light brightens with each bar of music, until the clouds all shine like stars, casting rainbows of light through their endless showers. The nearest cloud, the first, stops to drench Rose in light rain that feels warm on her shining skin; she's aware that she's flown well over the ocean, now, but can't recall when she left the ground. The water clears as the rain sheets down and clears the chalk particulates.

When she's finished - it -

It ends right as it should, but Rose's heart aches as it comes to a close. For a moment she hears the echoes of other, distant instruments, the faint resonance of a fraymotif that might never come together again, and one last sob shudders through her chest. There's light enough here for thousands of temples, for as many happy turtles as can be, but it was too late for them the moment Rose arrived here.

The violin dissolves into starry fragments, the gold filigree winking in the light for a moment before the crystalline dust sifts through Rose's fingers and whirls away into the water below. The bow remains in her hand, though the hair falls away on the wind.

A bit long for a needlekind. Rose takes several rapid, shallow breaths before she manages to swallow the sobs down with a wet chuckle. She turns and drifts back down toward the island, far below. Feferi wades up to her knees in the luminous ocean, her hands clearly visible through the radiant water. Kanaya waits with her claw shading her face, beaming at Rose with teary eyes in such a way that Rose is required to cup her face and kiss her before she touches down. It's harder than she can say - for a moment, her body feels almost insubstantial and light, before solidity reasserts itself. She only pulls away when Feferi lets out a triumphant shout, and Kanaya turns to look with her as Feferi trumps out of the water, her god tier skirts knotted up around her hips. "They're here!" she says, grinning too hard to even notice when Eridan sidles up to peer over her shoulder at the small, pale pink turtle hatchling cupped in her palm. It flails a little, in typical consort fashion, waving finger-length flippers before realizing it can't get any traction. Then, in even more typical consort fashion,
the hatchling appears to forget this lesson and renews its flailing with redoubled vigor.

Feferi holds it out toward Rose - "Here, sea!" - and Rose freezes. 'I don't think that I should,' she wants to say; 'I didn't care, and they died,' might be better. It would certainly get the point across.

She turns her hands over, palm up, and Feferi places the turtle in her hands with perhaps more aplomb than is wise, when dealing with a newborn. The turtle squirms in Rose's palm, and then stills, only occasionally patting one flipper against the meat of her thumb. Other turtles, none bigger than her hand, crawl out of the waves and onto the beach. Rose sees them when she can finally bear to tear her eyes away from the one she's holding. It's rather the reverse of how turtles normally go about such things, but the consort hatchlings don't appear too fussed about this. Another raincloud races overhead, blazing with light as it sprinkles them all, and then moves on.

Rose kneels and sets the turtle near the water's edge. It flounders for a second, and then hauls itself around to join its fellow hatchlings in making a beeline for the scraps of marble in the middle of the island. She presses the pad of her thumb to her eye, and smears one last tear away. Her chest feels light and aching, all at once.

She thinks that she's cried out, at last.

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[x]

Dave stares.

What he's looking at doesn't change.

He squints, and stares harder, his mouth parting slightly.

Nope. He's still seeing the same thing.

Dave's been staring at the pointy crowbar strapped to Karkat's back for an escape sequence-length of time before the obvious hits him. If he stares any longer, it will officially cross the line into uncool territory - and hell if Dave knows where Bro fucked off to, but he has to assume the guy's everywhere and nowhere at the same damn time. The man has his ways. As it is -

"Dude. Do you not get wings?"

The reaction is instantaneous. Karkat raises his arm and smacks his hand between his shoulder blades. He catches part of his thumb on the edge of the not-sword from hell, but somehow gets away without a scratch as he smacks himself repeatedly. This is already better than Dave could have ever imagined. Then the troll whips around, and keeps feeling up his back and flying backward at the same speed as he glares at Dave with dawning outrage. Dave doesn't take it personally. "Oh, fuck me in both ears! What the bulge-crushing fuck! This game has ripped me off for the last fucking time!" Karkat shrieks. He seizes the end of his unironically sad, reduced cape-coat and starts flapping it with a vengeance. "What the fuck! What the fuck kind of consolation prize is this!"

"Ohhh, he's gonna be steaming over that one for a while." Terezi bats her wings so that teal sparkles waft all around them. Dave desperately clenches his jaw and forces himself not to sneeze. Karkat visibly inhales so goddamn hard his eyes look ready to pop out of their sockets. He throttles his cape one last time and then speeds ahead to flip off Skaia with both middle claws as they skirt around to reach LoFaF - a gesture that Dave truly, unironically respects.

Keeping his expression completely flat, Dave kicks his feet and wiggles from side to side, in what
Terezi insists is the only signal she'll respond to if Dave wants to ask her to fly forward or faster or any shit like that. (Terezi's into some weird shit, is all Dave has to say on the matter.) Once they coast up alongside Karkat again, Dave raises one of his dangling arms in a sympathy thumbs up. Karkat rotates one arm around to flip them and Skaia off at the same time. "It's okay man, we don't get them either," Dave says. He pulls it off with a straight face, but the edge of irony in his voice just can't be tamed. But hey, Dave doesn't even get to fly. Goddamn. "Also, what kind of bullshit is it that Sburb didn't set me up with a fly as hell set of redundant wings? We could have been opposite bros. What the shit? Missed. Opportunity."

Karkat groans and rolls his eyes, then tries to zip away from them. Terezi catches up without apparent effort, snickering. "It's arbitrary shitfuckery and you know it, Strider!" Karkat says. His voice sounds weirdly clogged up, and the 'oh god I've been an asshole oh god oh shit,' feeling hits Dave when Karkat goes on. "And as far as I'm concerned, there's zero fucking reason for me not to go flying off into the sweet storm of fuck on LoWaS that isn't just as arbitrary, so don't fucking tempt me!"

Shit, he's actually upset. Not just default Karkat-level angry, but legit on the verge of tears. Goddammit. Karkat puts on a burst of speed; Terezi doesn't speed up, and Dave doesn't wiggle at her. Soon Karkat's a dark red figure against LoFaF's ridiculously green backdrop, and augh. If he's crying, Dave owes him a chocolate-dipped fruit arrangement of apology. One of the expensive ones. Cruising over to LoWaS for sneaky bro times isn't exactly on the table. Dave just got an eyeful of, like, ten corpse-Daves to let him know exactly how close they're cutting it, here. At this point, there aren't really doomed timeline offshoots so much as there are a shitton of instant fucking deathlines, plus the one alpha timeline that just keeps limping along. Dave feels like he took a clock-firing railgun to the face, and if Aradia says Karkat goes to LoFaF, by fucking christ Karkat is going to LoFaF. They're all going to LoFaF. The time for dicking around with timelines has officially gone to hell in a handbasket. Sure, they can still complain - complaining is a free action - but -

(There's a timeline where Bro knocks Karkat back onto solid ground instead, and - pain - Dave's shredded by shrapnel and - pain - the Lord of Time shatters it just after Karkat kills himself pouring blood back into Dave, because Knights make for shitty healers - HURTS -)

(And another - shit - on LoWaS - he and Karkat both go - Dave's legs stop working the second they hit, and the timeline crunches down on him with shattered fragments of white hot pain as he lays there, useless and grounded, and the Trickster uses that moment of distraction to try to stab his hand through Karkat's chest, giggling with delight -

- John knocks him out of the way, very heroically, and then it breaks -)

"There goes a troll who really knows his way around an expletive," Terezi says, after they spend a shared moment in deep 'we fucked up'-itude.

Scratch that - Dave doesn't know where his head was at, just now. Probably rambling on internally, as per uzh. The green smell of Jade's planet hits him smack in the nose with near-physical force, and between that and Terezi's comment, he's back to the present. It smells like how Dave imagines a Houston-area lawn must smell if you don't live in a sweltering city hellscape, and by fucking god, if he doesn't make at least one (1) successful weed joke on this day, it'll be a complete loss. Note to self - make the weed jokes. Be the rider. "I know, right?" he says, shelving away weed jokes for later.
"Sweet storm of fuck'? That shit's classic Karkat."

"A Karclassic," Terezi agrees as they descend. The closer they get, the muckier Jade's land looks, and Dave bids a silent farewell to the sanctity of his shoes. Slip and fall into one puddle, and his god tier pajamas are never gonna be the same. Which, knowing Dave, is exactly what's gonna happen. God dammit.

Oriole, who doesn't have to worry about this mundane shit due to his unfair flying prowess, grunts and soars closer to them - he's been dicking around off to the side, giving them all a wide berth. "Uh oh. Lusus incoming," he says, pulling his wings in tighter. Dave stopped paying attention for a second there; now he swivels around as best he can, until he spies a white goddamn motherfucking dragon zooming up at them from the left. It bypasses Karkat with a flap of its wings that buffets the troll to the side, his shout audible from here, and does a loop de loop as it makes a beeline for them with a joyful trill.

Terezi stiffens, sniffs, then tosses Dave to the side with no warning. "Oh - that's for me!" she says, delighted, while Dave not-screams and flails his arms in a shit attempt at flight before he rams into Oriole. Terezi tears off, arms flung wide as she dives for the dragon face first. "Smell you later, coolkids. Mom!"

DM: Terezi!!! Daughter!!!!!

And that's how Terezi and her dragonmom slam into each other for a mid-air dragon hug. The lusus's wings fold up for a second and they tumble down in free fall for a few seconds before figuring their flying hug shit out. Terezi can't seem to stop smiling, and her lusus trills out loud, her mental voice rising and falling as Oriole and Dave wobble toward the ground.

It's pretty goddamn cool, even if Oriole winds up carting Dave around in the world's worst princess hold. You can't begrudge a person for going in for dragon hugs. Shit would be rude as hell. Oriole catches up to Karkat while Dave attempts to fix his position by crawling around into a piggy-back formation, but Oriole is the opposite of helpful and Dave strains his own arms hanging off Oriole's elbow and slinging a leg over his shoulder. No, shit, now he's hanging most of the way upside down, his shades hanging precariously from just his ears. It's a damn unsalvageable mess of a situation, but whatever. They're almost to the ground, and Karkat gives Dave a look without commenting on the uncoolness of the matter. "Why are you so hard on Crabdad all the time, again?" Dave asks, to change the subject.

Karkat snorts; his eyes look a little swollen and red-stained, but Dave does him a solid and pretends it's because of glowing eye Blood powers. "Because it's overbearing, idiotic, and used to eat me out of house and home on a daily basis. And if it tries to come at me while we're here, I will personally drop kick it into the volcano," Karkat says, without a single moment of hesitation. Then he scrapes at his temple with his claw and sighs, raising his voice as they skim over a tall tree full of giant ass flowers. "Oh thank god, there's Aradia. Our not dead hero," he calls. His deadpan sarcasm slips at the last second into genuine frustration, but again. Dave's not about to call him on it.

Aradia, currently not-dead (though Dave's at a loss as to why Karkat's commenting on that), waves at them from beside a spikey statue of Jade's denizen. Ropy vines twine around each curve of the statue, and once she flags them down Aradia turns back to the statue and tugs a bright yellow snake with vivid green eyes off the vine. "Hello Karkat! Hello Dave! Hello Oriole!" she says, stroking the snake's nose. It winds along her arm, tongue flicking out at intervals, and Aradia lets it explore her shoulder as she floats along to the next heavy loop of greenery.

Dave taps his sunglasses with his fingers in a salute. He doesn't know how obvious the marks are - but hell, Aradia probably knew this would happen, like, last week. "Sup," he says, a greeting and a
question. Karkat refuses to land; he's got a fresh, sour glare express-shipped right to Aradia's doorstep, and he's not letting a little thing like standing on his own two feet distract him. Oriole, on the other hand, drops Dave immediately as soon as the white stone statue is in jumping distance.

"Nothing much. Just a ton of snake wrangling and wriggling." Aradia hums as she coaxes another snake away from a heavy, purplish-red flower the size of a watermelon. This one's orange, and snaps at her claws with sharp fangs. She baps it on the nose with a purse of her lips, while the original snake starts to climb and sift through her hair to reach the curl of her horns. "Rose started sending snapshots of the Final Alchemy recipe to the group memo, which is pretty innovative if you ask me! So we can get started right away!"

"I would rather toss myself into the nearest volcano to see if it feels as good as last time," Karkat snaps. Then, like the snarky ass he is, Karkat whirls around and brandishes a claw toward the giant ass volcano, smoking quietly in the distance. "Oh wait. There one is! How convenient!"

The volcano. Is smoking. What's more, there's a giant dude hanging out near the top of it. It's probably Hephaestus. Shit. "Guys. This is really important," Dave says, urgency in his voice. Aradia looks up, sharply, while Oriole groans and Karkat looks back over his shoulder, more than a little wild eyed. Dave points in the same direction as Karkat's claw. "Exactly how long has my denizen been smoking weed with the world's biggest bong?"

His delivery could probably use a little work. Karkat drops his arms to his sides, one side of his mouth hanging open more than the other as he stares at Dave in brutal disappointment. "Dave. I hate to say this, but I think you fundamentally misunderstand the mechanics of a bong," Oriole says, defeated, with the air of someone who actually does have a vague idea of how weed shit works outside of the realm of memes, and who is currently two seconds from a face palm.

Aradia flashes her teeth in a brilliant grin, and snaps a finger pistol down at a pair of bright blue lizard-y consort dudes waddling around the base of the statue. "Well, we are surrounded by… mariguanas!" She sounds utterly pleased with herself.

The smack of Oriole's double facepalm echoes through the air.

This calls for a high five. Dave sits on the statue and leans down, hand outstretched, and Aradia hops up to smack his palm.

"We're not friends anymore. At all," Karkat informs them. "I'm officially renouncing our friendship, Strider. I'm going to personally write up a contract of our hatefriendship with my own fucking blood, cram it down my meat tunnel, vomit it back up, and then set it on fucking fire with the power of my own rage. Watch me." He jabs a claw at his own face, and comes dangerously close to stabbing his own twitching eye. "You see this, Aradia? This is my 'I don't know why I expected better from you' face."

"Please tell me there's a bench for people who just want to lay down and contemplate their radioactive orange glow," Oriole begs through the shield of his hands, slowly dragging his claws down his face.

Aradia laughs, and reaches up to untangle the snake that's knotted itself between the coils of her horns. "We have refreshments and cookies and allergy meds in the lab, if you need a break," she says. "But that's also where we're keeping a lot of snakes!"

Oriole flies off before she even finishes. "Awesome. Sold. I'm peacing out." He nods to Dave, a tight jerk of his chin accompanied by a lingering grimace, and then heads off into the jungle, just one more neon orange dude among a shitton of brilliantly colored plants. A swarm of purple hummingbirds
darts after him, which is gonna make for a hilarious case of mistaken identity when they catch up. Dave would wish him good luck with not losing his legs to weird sprite shit, but with their luck, he'd just jinx it.

Karkat, though, isn't done. "Oh, and for the love of fuck, why is there a giant man on the volcano?" he demands, sounding scandalized. "How the fuck am I supposed to fling myself into the lava as a sacrifice if there's a giant denizen judging me the whole fucking time!"

"It does put a bit of a damper on such things," Aradia says, serenely. Without taking her eyes away from Karkat and Dave, her claw snaps out and closes on the neck of the orange, nippy snake, before the snake can bite her. It lashes its tail furiously as she captchaluges it, and the green snake tastes the air with its tongue before slithering back under the cover of Aradia's hair.

All jokes aside - "Huh. Do you think Hephaestus will try to eat me if I swing by?" Dave asks. He scratches his arm - literally every part of him feels sticky in all this humidity, so it feels like home - and squints, trying to make out more details of Hephaestus. He's got vague, shaky memories of what the denizen looked like up close and personal, but from this distance he can't make much out apart from how fucking huge the dude is.

Aradia shrugs; her new snake friend nose up along the side of her ear in protest. "Probably not! Cetus and Typheus are the only two who seem to be very keen on eating people." Which is news to Dave. He just assumed the whole denizens eating people thing was a standard Sburb meme. "Also, the snake ectobiology apparatus is located on the edge of the volcano, so we need to start sequencing and appearifying them for slime ASAP. Being eaten would be a liiittle inconvenient."

"Inconvenient has literally never stopped Hephaestus in his life. Trust me," Dave says. He swings his feet up on the statue and stands up on his toes to flick the sole of Karkat's shoe. Karkat, still muttering his way through his latest expletive-riddled existential crisis of the day, glares down at him, his hair shadowing his face. "You grabbing snakes, dude?"

"Hell fucking no," Karkat snaps, before rolling right along into, "Fine! We do snake breeding. I needed something to distract me from the utter disaster of my life, anyway." Without waiting for a response, Karkat drops down, and his glare raises several notches from 'furious' to 'near homicidal' before Dave takes the hint and jumps into a piggy back. Karkat Air is already a notch above Terezi Airways and Strider United.

Aradia waves goodbye with a distant shout of, "Remember! Don't drink and drive, smoke and fly!" and they make record goddamn time to the volcano because Karkat runs on rage and furious despair and coffee, and right now he's fueled up on the first two. Dave checks multiple times to make sure he's not crying again as they book it over the green landscape in a straight line to the Forge. Between the asshole moment and the weed thing, Dave definitely owes the dude a fruit basket.

But right now, they have serious business to take care of. Shit's more serious than Dave's default expression. The Forge volcano towers over them, but Hephaestus looms with slightly more presence since he's, y'know, alive, and watching. Waiting. The Forge may bubble with bright red lava in a very active volcano-y way, but Hephaestus is approximately a million square feet of giant monster person, and being vaguely human shaped doesn't help when he's ridiculous tall in person. A heavy grey-beige apron covers his front - which gives Dave horrible, haunting thoughts about the as-yet-unconfirmed existence of denizen ass - with huge metal tools sized for giant hands slung through loops and sticking out of thickly padded pockets. His eyes burn white hot behind heavy metal goggles, with veins of magma pulsing around the edges where the goggles dig into his shifting, cracked layer of obsidian skin. A dark grey mask covers most of his lower face, like some kind of
gas mask or respirator. As they rise up and up, with Karkat giving both Hephaestus and the gaping vents that ooze lava at random points along the Forge's sides a wide berth, Dave gets a good look at the bright, lava-polished metal braces that run along Hephaestus's twisted up legs, so he can support himself against the side of the Forge and keep his hands free to wield a hammerkind in each hand. One of them, Dave thinks he recognizes - Fear No Anvil, red and grey and tipped with garnet, with two twitching clock hands struggling to move forward against the perpetual, counterclockwise turn of gears. The other's name stands out in ice-white letters along the handle, which makes shit real easy: Ice Versa is a cool blue with tiny electron things orbiting in rings around it, a crystal clear grip, and spikes of crystal jutting out in both directions where the hammer head should be.

After a long moment, Hephaestus turns his gloopy lava eyes away from them, and leans back over the Forge. The sound of his obsidian crust crunching and shattering to adjust to his new position cracks through the air like a landslide. He exhales: his respirator mask emits a sound like a thousand Darth Vader Halloween masks run through a hell filter, and steam wafts up around his face in a billowing cloud.

Vaping.

God, Dave can't unsee it, now.

A platform juts out from the craggy edge of the volcano, with a high lip of stone the only thing between them and a fuck ton of yet more lava, and the ectobiology thing sitting square in the middle. They can't seem to get away from this molten bullshit. Karkat lands with a shudder right in front of the machine, which consists mostly of a giant flat screen monitor the size of a wall, a tiny console, and four glass tubes with random knobs and dials and readouts along the base. Karkat kicks some poor frozen-ass frog off the raised grey appearifying platform, and it bounces and rolls off a smaller white platform; then Karkat smacks buttons with all the impatient finesse of a troll on a goddamn mission. Nothing happens, but Karkat could probably use the stress relief, so Dave gives him a couple minutes before he shuffles his weight, glances super-fast over his shoulder at Hephaestus's looming, expectant stare, and then coughs, edging up to Karkat's side to watch him bash the console. At the rate Karkat's escalating, there won't be a console in a few minutes. "You can boot this thing up, right?"

"God, I hope not -" Karkat starts, his face full of fervent hope - which gets brutally murdered when the screen blinks on right after he opens his mouth. As it flashes through the Shurb Omega logo and then an ouroboros like the beginning credits of a game before switching to a spirograph loading screen, he slumps onto his elbows, face buried in his claws. His voice sounds dead with resignation. "Fuck me."

"You're gonna give Sollux a run for his money one day, dude," Dave says. Karkat kicks at him half-assedly; Dave basically just steps over his leg. No flash stepping required. Which is good because, at the rate he's going -

Eh. Well. It's a thing for him to not think about.

Abruptly, the monitor flickers, the psychedelic backdrop behind the spirograph turns into fuzzy static, and an error window pops up in the middle of the screen.

[This program is not compatible with the version of reality you are running. Check your universe's system information to see whether you need a different version of the program, and then contact the software publisher.]

[Error type: mod download incomplete; awaiting Administrator level approval]
Dave pokes Karkat's shoulder so he'll look up. Exhausted, Karkat knocks his head against the console, raises a fist, and lets it fall against the console. "Piece. Of. Shit!" Without raising his head, still slumped over, he drags his phone out of his pocket like it weighs fifty pounds and starts jabbing the screen. "Sollux Captor? More like Shitty -"

Karkat isn't messaging Sollux; he's literally calling him. Which probably means shit's about to get loud. Dave slides one foot away and then brings the other one over to meet it - but a single red eye glares at him through the space under Karkat's outstretched armpit. Dave freezes, and points over his shoulder with a thumb. "Uh, while you get that thing running, I'm gonna go talk to my mondo monster dude."

"Why?" The faint dial tone from Karkat's phone clicks, and Sollux's tiny voice is just barely audible. Karkat's armpit eye of death glares focuses on the screen as he attempts to mash the phone against his ear without moving his head. "Sollux, goddammit, your shit is fucked!"

Honestly. It's a pretty damn excellent question. "Pass the time? I don't know, man," Dave says - the best nonanswer he can come up with - and starts sidling away again. "BRB."

"Fine. Don't get yourself blasted to fucking smithereens," Karkat snaps. "No, not you! Sollux, you fuck, you need to finish installing something! If you don't hurry up, I'll come over there and personally shit an entire planetful of snakes all over your fucking life! Yes, from my own a-"

Dave so doesn't need to hear the rest of this conversation. If Sollux is Karkat's new shout target, Dave feels guilt free about bouncing. He walks over to the edge of the platform and scans the creases of rock between him and Hephaestus's side of the mountain. The denizen perches closer to the ecto platform than Dave's actually cool with, but continues to watch Dave from a distance instead of just, y'know, leaning over with his massive body so they can talk. Once he finds a route that won't involve a premature lava bath, Dave darts off the platform and sprints along the edge. He skids to a stop while he's still got distance between him and Hephaestus's forearm, but he's very aware that Hephaestus's arms reach far enough that he could flick Dave and Karkat off the side of the Forge like ants.

It's great. So awesome. Dave loves talking to giant monster people taller than skyscrapers. Hephaestus just looks at him, his blazing goggles and face mask rendering him extra unreadable, even for a -

Son of a fuck.

Dave very carefully doesn't let his jaw drop. Instead, he grabs the front of his Knight cape and tugs on the fabric until it covers his lower face like a John mask. Two can play at this shit. If this were Bro, he'd shoot down a scarf or a mask as cheating - but Bro's off hell only knows where, and Hephaestus inclines his massive head in acknowledgement.

And says nothing.

Haha. Dave's not gonna try to outwait a denizen. Not even once. His mouth can't stay still that long. As awkward as it is, he jumps in first. "Uh. Yo."

Steam erupts from Hephaestus's respirator, and he turns to face Dave. The looming gets...loomier. Shit. Fuck. Dave stands his ground, but his mental monologue is already shorting out with pants-shitting terror.

HS: Knight.
Hephaestus sounds...familiar. Like there's an extra note under his voice, slightly off-beat from the actual words. The denizen's mask shit *does* extend down to cover his throat, doesn't it? Dave doesn't do anything as obvious as touch his own collar, but he can't quite stop the twitch of his fingers. "Hevapestus," he says, to cover his momentary slip.

For a split second, Dave gets the small win of seeing Hephaestus close his eyes in despair - before it all backfires on him.

HS: …

HS: No.

HS: I'm not dealing with you alone.

Then Hephaestus raises Ice Versa, and taps it against the side of the Forge.

For a denizen, it's probably a light tap. The shockwave nearly knocks Dave's feet from under him, and the whole Forge rumbles.

Before Dave can recover, Echidna pops out of the lava like a long, snake-shaped daisy. Lava showers off her and slops up against the edges of the volcano. Multiple rows of glittering, jagged teeth that look like solid diamond grin down at him as she heaves herself out. Her head and the joined part of her neck and torso shine a cold, icy blue, and thin quills grow out from under the skin of her head, neck, and back like a thorny crown that marches down her spine. You could, like, impale elephants on those spikes. Or something.

Apparently Skaia ripped her off on the arms front, though: once she's finished making everyone in a five-mile radius shit themselves, Echidna leans on a folded coil of her long noodle body to stare them down, and the lava tosses dangerously before calming the hell down to a light simmer. Still half buried in the lava, the denizen's two dark blue tails peek out like tiny hills, stirring the Forge like it's the world biggest pot of stew. She exhales, her anime-sized seaglass blue eyes bright and huge and framed by diamond-encrusted eyelashes sharp enough to *literally kill a man*, and Dave shivers as the chilly breath washes over them, dropping the temperature from 'comfortably sweltering' to 'freezes off bits you don't want to lose.' The volcanic heat hits again as soon as Echidna pulls back, looking satisfied, but.

Like.

Holy shit.

EC: ----- -----!

To top it all off, Dave doesn't understand a word of what the denizen just said. Her voice roars like an avalanche of chiming bells, with buzzsaw churning in the distance, and Echidna grins down at him again like she knows *exactly* what she sounds like to anyone who's not Jade.

"Why are there two!" Karkat howls, voice cracking. "Dave, what the *fuck* did you do?!"

"It's okay, I think we're cool!" Dave calls back. Sure, Hephaestus radiates smugness like a furnace, and Echidna is a massive new problem for them to deal with. But hey. Not dead yet. Both denizens loom over him, sure, but neither one seems inclined to move more than necessary - Echidna's head cocks to the side with a look of amusement. If Dave were dealing with Typhues, it would have devolved into 'I'm gonna eat you' threats already.

If they want to talk, then hell. Dave can goddamn talk. He can outtalk anyone.
"There's lava dripping everywhere! That's the opposite of cool!" Karkat says. It's funny - from this distance, with the volcano churning in the background, Karkat's shout almost sounds like he's talking at a normal volume. Dave throws him a thumb's up, regardless, and Karkat tucks his phone between his ear and his shoulder as he flips him off, and starts using his middle claws to push buttons on the console keyboard, glaring at Dave nonstop.

Which gives Dave an idea. Much like swords and stabbing things, there are few problems in Dave's life that can't be solved by taking out his phone. He does so, and opens a new Pesterchum chatroom.

TG: wait wait hold up
TG: cant you text like this

The response is instantaneous.

EC: Technically, yes!
EC: But shall I indulge you?
EC: I think not.
TG: psych you already did
EC: :CE

Echidna pushes off the edge of her volcano pool to take a lap, swirling through the molten rock like it's water. Hephaestus lets loose another harrumph of steam, and bends his neck so he can peer down at Dave up close and personal. The white-hot glow of his eyes really does look like it could start dripping down in huge globs on Dave at any second, so Dave shifts his weight from side to side, ready to book it if Hephaestus starts to tear up or otherwise be a douche about this whole thing.

HS: Why do you approach us, Knight?
HS: Be warned. I am now wary of your tangents. You shall not sway me.

Hephaestus talks and types at the same time, apparently: a weird not-echo bounces through Dave's ears as he reads the words on the screen, but he's not complaining. His brain craps out if he tries to follow both at once, though. Probably better to just stick to reading. The question on the tip of his tongue - 'what counts as a tangent, man' - gets put on pause for now. Dave's not letting a prime opening like that go to waste. But he's got something to say, right up front, and it can't wait. "First of all, the trap thing? Real dick move, dude. That was horseshit and you know it."

HS: There is supposed to be an order to such things.
HS: Perhaps it is a cruel order, to you. It is...difficult to fathom your mindset, so many iterations down the line.
EC: There are stranger things...
EC: Though not many!

Oh no. Dave should have just stuck with the tangent line. Seriously, clearing up what counts as a tangent when Dave hasn't even established what they're talking about would have been the smart place to start. He forgot - he's dealing with not one, but two cryptic assholes, right now. Echidna jumps in without even glancing over her...snake...shoulder. (Shit). All their random bullshit powers combined...

"I seriously stopped giving a shit about patterns and order shit around the time when I had to do the Peter Panda dance to solve a random ass puzzle, with Terezi trying to change all the animal names by yelling over Karkat." Dave says, flatly. "Anyway. So like, for the record, what counts as a tangent, exactly?" His delivery's weak on that last part. God dammit.

HS: I know one when I hear one.
HS: You heretical ass.
HS: If you think I will succumb to a tangent about tangents...
HS: You are sorely mistaken.

Dave raises a single eyebrow. Hephaestus's massive face doesn't move, apart from the occasional crack and pop of lava in the cracks. "If you say so, man," Dave says, after the silence sits too long and starts to turn all kinds of awkward. Trying to figure out the facial tells of a denizen with a mask on is going to be ridiculous. Whether Hephaestus knows and/or gives a shit about human facial expressions is a goddamn mystery that's probably gonna stay a mystery.

Echidna finishes her parade circuit of the Forge - considering how long she is, it doesn't take long for her to catch up with her own helix tails - and swoops down right next to Karkat to bare her teeth at him before circling back around to Dave and Hephaestus. Dave's not sure whether to call what she's doing a smile or not, on account of he's not sure she can even close her mouth. It's just...a lot of teeth.

A lot of teeth.

Anyway. Right. What now? This really isn't one of Dave's top of the line, well-thought out plans. "On a scale of one to super fucked, how doomed are we, anyway?" he asks, as he stuffs his free hand into his pocket. He's tempted to start signing at them to see if that works, but he'll save that for if he gets jittery and needs something to occupy his hands.

HS: Honestly.
EC: If you were doomed, we would not be bothering with trivialities here.
HS: Doomed timelines aren't lasting long enough to be very significant, anymore.
HS: Did you know that doomed timelines used to be rare?
HS: There was a time when all games proceeded as they should, all paradox loops were closed, and to glitch was unprecedented.
EC: An esoteric mental exercise, contemplated only by the most subversive of thinkers.
EC: Like Metis. Remember Metis? She and Themis always argued over the existence of entropic force.
HS: I'm sure they'd be delighted to be here right now.
EC: Eheheh, maybe!
HS: Regardless. You succeeded. You were suitably challenged.
HS: And now the hoard may be used to start priming the Forge.
HS: The timeline remains viable.

Dave's jaw drops. He can't even make his head nod.

They go on their own tangents.

It's like kringlefucking Christmas.

Hephaestus seems to catch on exactly five seconds too late, and cuts Dave off before he can do more than open his mouth to call them out on it.

HS: That didn't count.

"It so counted." Dave takes a screenshot of the conversation. Perfect. Smug's probably a strong word for what he's feeling, but oh man. This is gonna be priceless. Then he raises a hand. "But also, really? The grist pulled a Bro earlier and vanished into fucking nowhere, so I wasn't sure if it made it." They got distracted by Karkat's crowbar problems and then the whole lava pouring down as the planet starts to collapse sitch, but Dave's sure he's not carting around several thousand tons of grist unawares.
HS: The grist arrived with you, incorporeally. You can release it at your leisure.
HS: Simply empty your grist cache into the Forge.

Dave can't tell which is better - straight answers, or hilarious tangents. "Oh, sweet," he says, on autopilot. Figuring out how to empty grist takes about fifteen seconds as he goes through five different variations on finger snaps, taps his heels together, checks his pocket for a magical game wallet. Sweat beads along the back of his neck; he's got two denizens creating a hostile work environment who both think emptying a grist cache is 'simple.' After trying literally everything he can think of - which includes signing 'cash money' at the Forge - Dave just shoots finger pistols at the lava.

An entire denizen-sized hoard of grist rains down from the sky. All of it conveniently misses hitting Echidna and thunders into the lava of the center of the volcano. Each bit of grist pops like a gusher when it lands and melts into the red-hot rock, which bubbles and froths like someone just dumped a couple thousand bucks' worth of bath bombs into a hot tub. Echidna rumbles out a coo like a bizarre cat-bird hybrid person, then ducks her head under the surface as she sloughs around the circle to kick up a wave of sparkly rainbow lava in the direction of Hephaestus's perch.

Five minutes pass before the whole hoard stops pouring out of nowhere. Five minutes for Dave to mourn all the material game wealth burning to death before his very eyes. If he had a hat, he'd take it off for a moment of silence or something. "And we're broke again," he says, once the flood of grist slows to a trickle. "There go all my plans to jumpstart the economy."

HS: Why must everything be a joke to you.

Dave clicks his tongue and folds his arms. "Because that's the rule. Everything has to be at least partially a joke, or we'd all be screwed in the head." More so than they already are, anyway. By the time this is all over, they're probably all gonna be stone cold fucked - if they live. Realistically? Dave doesn't like his odds. "Calling it out like that is pretty bad form, dude."

Hephaestus blows out so much steam Dave wonders if he's broken him that fast; then the denizen slumps down to press a giant claw to his brow, shaking his head. He waits until Echidna comes up from her boiling lava bath before speaking.

HS: This is precisely why he gives Typhus migraines, you know.

Gold-and-scarlet tinged lava pours from jagged cracks between Echidna's wall of teeth as she parts them, her torso skimming over the lava as she sidles back up to Hephaestus.

EC: Oh, that's because Typhus is a stick in the mud!
EC: And yet he has such ideas, lately…
EC: Most intriguing ideas. :Ec

Echidna brings the ends of her tails up in a curl under her chin, and her quills rustle against each other like a whole forest of shivering, iced over tree branches. Hephaestus sags further with a groan.

HS: This.
HS: Is all my Knight's fault.

Dave's got literally no idea what Hephaestus blames him for. But hell, he'll take credit for it. Why the hell not? Until Karkat gets the snake thing running, he's got nothing better to do with his time. Over at the apparatus, Karkat taps his foot, his face flushed the color of a nuclear grade meltdown only just under his control as he holds his phone toward the flat screen. It looks like he has Sollux up on Facetime or something.
So yeah. Nothing better to do for now. Popping some popcorn and pulling up a seat to the Karkat show would require hiking down the volcano unless someone gives him a lift.

...

TG: jade its urgent
GG: yes?
TG: need popcorn karkat is about to lose it on sollux
GG: dave...
GG: as fun as that sounds, i'm kind of busy here :T
TG: jade please
TG: i guarantee you theres some right down at the lab
GG: cant karkat fly you now?
TG: that would defeat the purpose
GG: whoops! and i need to borrow terezi in a bit too :P
TG: youre killin me harley
GG: hang on...
GG: okay! check your sylladex for me real quick!
TG: does it have magical space popcorn
GG: yup! :D
TG: jade
TG: omg

Dave hesitates, then sticks his hand into his extra pocket thing.

The first thing he finds is a hot bag of popcorn. Like, this is hot out of the microwave fresh.

TG: holy shit
TG: friendship with john over
TG: now jade is my best friend
GG: i'll tell him you said that! :P
TG: wait no
GG: just kidding!
GG: but you're very easy to bribe dave
TG: im a dude of simple needs
GG: youre a dude of very weird needs!
GG: friendship is weird…
TG: no argument there

Tucking the bag of popcorn into the crook of his elbow, Dave starts to chow down. He can't tell if he's hungry or not - hell only knows where that skipped day went, but he pulled so much time bs before rejoining the group that he's objectively starving. Or at least...he could eat. And he's still in dire need of a nap, but like that's gonna happen any time soon. "So, do I get to skip the ominous capitalized Choice thing? Because that would be badass," he says, through a mouthful of popcorn that scorches his tongue. On impulse, he flicks the first unpopped kernel he finds into the Forge to see if it'll pop - but it's too small and he loses it against a patch of melted gold grist. Then he winces and tries not to look at Echidna in case he's about to get eaten for contaminating the super important reality-creating volcano.

HS: I have given it much consideration.
EC: We have been brainstorming!

He chokes on popcorn, and frantically coughs it back up out of his airway. Fuck. Why did Dave say
anything? Fuck, fuck, fuck. "Two of you are working on this shit? No, come on, that's not fair!" he protests, popcorn spraying from his mouth, too close to yelling for comfort. Karkat jerks around from the ectobiology console, spooked by the sudden volume, and Dave forces it back down. He has an image to maintain, here.

HS: In an ideal cosmos, you would have no issue with this.
HS: I do not live in an ideal cosmos any longer.
HS: You have no idea how much this pains me.
EC: Oh hush, you.
HS: Agony.
EC: You're getting worse than Typhesus in your old age.
HS: Suffering.
EC: AHEM.
EC: The Choice shall be this -
HS: My Knight, not yours.
EC: You are too slow!

Echidna lashes her tails, and flicks a dollop of lava at Hephaestus. "He goes on a lot of tangents, doesn't he?" Dave says in a stage-whisper to Echidna, covering his mouth with a hand so Hephaestus can't see his mouth as he shovels another handful of popcorn in. Jade's denizen rustles her quills again in a denizen-laugh, sinking back up to her shoulders in the Forge and leaning up against the opposite side from Hephaestus. With a loud series of thunderous creaks and crushed stone, Hephaestus leans right on over Dave - shit shit shit - his face mere feet from Dave even as Dave twitches back a few steps, and stares at him with bottomless eyes.

HS: The other Knight bears the Sword of Sunderance.
HS: The Choice we offer you is this:
HS: Save yourself, or sacrifice yourself.

A cloud of steam billows around Dave and blows his cape back, giving him an instant humidity shower. Then Hephaestus, content in his douchebag delivery technique, settles back, satisfied.

Dave finishes swallowing his popcorn; his throat works extra hard on that shit whilst he mulls that choice over.

Once he's done with that, he mops some of the extra humidity sweat off his forehead and clears his throat. "...Well, that was about as clear as preserved dead shit in jars that have gone off and left you with a weird, cloudy brine and a lid seal that's popped out, but you're not sure if you can get botulism from that shit on account of who would even want to eat that shit but I mean, have you seen that shit? You can't even see if the bones are still in there or not, so for all you know you could have accidentally swapped it for a jar of home-canned peaches and it could be like - the nectar of the gods, in peach form - or really cloudy apple juice which has more antioxidants and shit -"

EC: Oh.
HS: Yes. Oh.

" - and anyway, that thing's not a sword," Dave finishes, and points back at Karkat.

Karkat swears instantly when Echidna and Hephaestus tip their massive heads to look at him. "Hang on, are you talking about me? Stop pointing at me, you'll give them ideas!" he hisses, loud enough that Dave can hear him.

Dave shrugs. "Hate to say it, man, but they already have ideas. Your not-sword thing is apparently part of my shit." Terezi hadn't been very clear on that. Ominous hedging and cryptic hints aren't the
most useful of seer stuff, but Dave got the main takeaway - something about that pointy crowbar sucks ass. The fact that Hephaestus, Dave's own personal douchizen, screwed around with it on LoHaC for reasons unknown to make it extra pointy is mad suspicious.

Karkat reaches back over his shoulder. "Take it then. I don't want it!" he yells. He throws a wild look at Echidna as he snatches the not-sword up and waggles it at Dave. God dammit, he's not even holding it by the handle - if that was a real sword and not, y'know, an obvious, creepy fake, Dave would be secretly appalled by such terribad bladekind skills.

He holds up his arms in an 'x' before Karkat can fly over and shove the crowbar at him. "Hell to the no. They still haven't told me what it does," he calls, which only makes Karkat swell up with further aggravation. Dave cranes his neck around to look at Hephaestus. "What does it do?"

The two denizens exchange looks. Since they're giant ass boss monsters, it's not subtle. At all. Hephaestus gives a whistling sigh, while Echidna sinks a little further into the Forge until lava covers her up to the eyes. Her tails stir the volcano in coiling 's' shapes, while Hephaestus shakes his head.

HS: That...is a weapon of last resort.
HS: It was refined and forged from a powerful juju of breaking. One capable of affecting many things on the motificorical level, and beyond.
HS: The last of LoHaC's energy was sacrificed to fuel the transmutation.
EC: It can't cut things. Not physically!
EC: But fall upon thy sword, oh Knight -
HS: And it will set you free.

Dave didn't expect them to rhyme that shit. They didn't have to go that extra ominous mile, but hey! They did. It heebies his jeebies so fucking fast he shudders involuntarily, and the popcorn in his mouth loses its delicious, buttery flavor. "That rhyme shit? Hell no," he says, putting the popcorn away so he doesn't eat another tasteless mouthful just to have something to do. "Let's not do that anymore. If you could give me a paper with complete instructions and timestamps and addresses, now, that would be awesome -"

HS: Riddles are supposed to be enigmatic.
HS: This is kiddie tier riddling.
EC: Rhyme, alliteration, palindrome, parallelism. Such things used to come so easily!
EC: Each word in its place, each verse rich with layered allusion.
HS: You are a vassal to something that will destroy you, Knight.
HS: To save yourself, you must abstain from the fight.

Dave almost busts out laughing right then and there. "Dude. Now it's just corny."

HS: That is because children these days have no respect.

Children these days also don't like thinking about ominous rhyming choice shit with their lives on the line, but Dave's not about to complain about that out loud. What kind of weird ass lecture would Hephaestus give him then? Not one he's bored enough to sit through. "Y'all don't get paid enough for this, trust me."

Echidna sits bolt upright so fucking fast Dave barely has time to register the choppy waves of lava parting around her. The denizen slices across the Forge in one slither, and suddenly she's got her enormous head all up in Dave's business. Hephaestus shifts a little, but doesn't move. Her teeth glitter and glitter in the light of the Forge.

His mouth suddenly glued shut, Dave leans back so far he almost falls on his ass. He can't remember
how feet work with *that many teeth* right in front of him.

EC: Ah yes!
EC: This is what you spoke of, yes?
HS: Don't encourage him.
EC: To Typhus! You said these things!

It clicks, then. Dave should have picked up what Echidna was laying down sooner, but to be fair, denizen hints are the *worst* hints. He eases upright, despite the fact that this puts him closer to Echidna's ludicrous jaws, and stares, unable to keep a straight face as the realization hits him. "…No," he says, frowning. "No way. Are you guys…actually trying to get a salary?"

The denizens exchange significant looks again. The Forge rumbles, the only sound as the second ticks by and the two turn to stare at Dave with weirdly intense eyes.

No. Way.

This changes *everything*. All this time, these giant assholes have been acting like Dave annoyed them, and now - shitting hell. What has Dave unleashed? "Are you ditching? Gonna pull the denizen equivalent of retiring in Hawaii and plant your asses in the new reality?" he asks, the words spilling out faster and faster. The possibilities here are *endless*. "Because I was ninety percent fucking with you this whole time, but *oh my god* -"

Dave throttles back the dawning glee, but the corners of his mouth twitch up. Traitors. But how is he supposed to keep a straight face when *the denizens want to retire*. These are *unparalleled* extenuating circumstances.

EC: That is a matter…
HS: …of some debate.
EC: It will depend on Typhus!
EC: Once he is finished with his Heir…
HS: The two of us cannot be spared.
HS: We must remain with the Forge to stoke it, in the absence of a ring.

Holy mother of exposition. It really *is* Christmas. Dave does a spot-check on his time sense, which is currently a mangled mess in the back of his head, but it still registers as April 13th. Maybe the universe decided to shower him with this snazzy ass gift as an apology for literally everything else fucked up in his life. Dave's more in the market for a spare set of kidneys or lungs, in case his get snatched by the Lord of Back-alley Organ Harvesting next, but this is a *gift*. "That is the best thing I have ever heard. Ever," he informs them, with a contented sigh. Damn. He can die happy now, knowing that he's planted the seeds of workers' rights in the minds of giant monsters that have been around since the beginning of reality. "Anyway. One cryptic ass choice, pulled straight from the ass" - he checks himself before making 'ass' plural - "of the most cryptic fucks this side of the Medium. And no 2X boss fight combo? Guess I can live with that."

HS: I remember well the last time I attempted to fight a version of you.
HS: I would prefer not to repeat the experience.
HS: You're chatty enough as it is without provoking you into a rap battle.

Dave raises a hand, ready to beatbox at a moment's notice. Hephaestus twitches - which takes some doing, since there's a lot of him to twitch - and pulls away. He raises a lava-veined hand and slams it down on one of the gears attached to his leg braces; his whole mountaineering shit starts to rattle around the Forge and carries Hephaestus away from Dave. It doesn't make much of a difference in denizen terms, but for Dave, it's a hike and half. "We can still rap from here," he says, half-yelling.
Nothing's stopping them from holding the best text rap battle the universe has ever seen except Hephaestus being lame.

If the conversation doesn't distract Dave, he'll have time to think. Not the biggest fan of thinking, right now. His internal monologue will take him for a goddamn ride - it'll start with 'fall on your sword,' and then go from -

EC: Mmm.
EC: Interesting. Stormspeaker is engaging.
EC: Something must have irritated him…
EC: More than usual!

Perfect timing. Echidna perks up her quills; all of them chime as they rustle against each other, and the denizen does another restless lap of the Forge, while Dave sags from relief at the nice, distracting segue. But Echidna sets up shop next to Karkat, this time - she folds up right along the rim of the volcano and rests her torso almost on top of the ectobiology computer. Some hefty chunks of lava sizzle as they drip off her and land on the very edge of the platform.

Karkat, predictably, starts shrieking. He holds out his phone like someone holding up a generic religious symbol or chucking raw garlic at a vampire and scoots his entire butt onto the console as Echidna rumbles aloud and leans in for a closer look. Or a Karkat-sized snack. "Oh fuck. What does it want, Dave?" Karkat shouts.

"Do I look like the goddamn Denizen Whisperer or something, dude?" Dave heads over to help anyway, since Hephaestus appears to be somewhere between middling to completely done with the conversation. The lava cools fast on the platform without eating through it by the time Dave arrives - which is cool, but raises a hell of a lot of questions about what exactly the platform is made of. Heat transfer is so fucking busted in this game. It only seems to work based on dramatic effect - which is something Dave can respect, but makes his brain hurt if he thinks about it too hard. Physics is such a crapshoot. Echidna's eyes glitter at him as he crosses the platform, but she doesn't even breathe at them, let alone make a move to get her munchies on.

Dave's heart rate spikes. Fuck. He forgot about the weed jokes. If the denizens did get high up here, they'd probably munch their way through the Forge in a matter of minutes.

"You've been talking to them for like fifteen minutes now! So yes!" Karkat exclaims, exasperated, as Dave comes and leans his weight on the corner of the console. The screen now sports a fancy ass, high definition image of a snoozing snake with a red targeting reticle flashing over it, and all the console buttons flash and beep as Karkat hauls his feet up on the console with him. He glares at Dave in a silent dare for him to make a comment.

"Shit. You're right. I need my own TV show," Dave says. Because damn. If he can talk denizens into retiring, he can do anything. The world is his goddamn oyster. Then he takes pity on Karkat and adds, "They're on Pesterchum, so if she's chime-roaring at you, there's a high chance she's just dickering with you."

With a dark glare, Karkat raises his phone without taking his eyes off Dave and ends the call with such force that his claw jams against the screen. Dave adds him to the chat with a shrug and pokes at the nearest blue button to science the shit out of it. Karkat smacks his hand away and starts mashing out messages at the same time. Silently, Dave starts poking at all the buttons he can reach, until Karkat's reduced to playing a furious round of whack-a-mole while he types.

CG: WHAT! WHAT DO YOU WANT!
EC: I am simply observing.
EC: You are dealing with a process that I preside over.
EC: Do continue to do excellent work. EC:

Well, Karkat wouldn't be Karkat if he didn't shout at giant monsters first and ask questions later. Echidna rattles her quills in a silent laugh - that's how Dave reads it, anyway - seems like Karkat's rage makes her smile.

Out loud, Karkat yells, "No, sorry, I was just planning to fuck the plan, dump all this snake slime garbage into the death volcano, and free style it like my last name was Strider. Get out of my way so I can vom into the shitchurner and return the favor!"

EC: Heheh, a good joke!
EC: You are creating something truly awful today.

She doesn't even blink as she says it. Dave's not sure Echidna physically can blink, and that's just sad. Then his brain rewinds about five seconds back to the moment before his instant rambling, and 'awful' starts flashing giant red sirens. Karkat splutters, half-formed swear words curdling before he emits more than a syllable or two. "...Come the fuck again?" Dave says, his voice a little weak, when Karkat stutters his way into a coughing fit.

Echidna wriggles her whole body, and her lowest row of protruding teeth scrapes with jarring force against the edge of the Forge as she pulls away, her eyes fixed on them and the console.

EC: Awe-ful. Something terrifyingly profound, and profoundly beautiful.
EC: A matter of beginnings and endings.
EC: Call upon me again when the Space player arrives.

And just like that, the denizen ducks her head and carves her way back down into the lava. Her head doesn't re-emerge - the rest of her body flows after her like a ribbon, the twined ends of her tails vanishing last of all. The Forge burbles once, then goes back to its usual bubbling deal without even a ripple to show where Echidna dove in. Across the Forge, Hephaestus just stares up at the sky: the very picture of not giving a shit.

Karkat turns and mouths, silently, 'What the fuck.'

Dave shrugs in reply.

HS: Ah. It has begun.

They're gonna need to have a talk about the whole ominous proclamation thing - that'll be Dave's next project, if they don't all die an abrupt, screaming death in the near future. It's bad enough when Rose and Terezi do it. Hephaestus vents a massive burst of steam that engulfs his whole head and drifts up into the sky, augmenting the cloud of smoke. The clouds and auroras that cover most of the planet hang thin here, like a giant hole in the ozone layer centered over the Forge. Through a gap in the steam and smoke, Dave can just make out the dark Medium beyond -

Karkat sucks in a breath; one of his legs wobbles and slides off the console, limp, as he sees what Dave's seeing. "Is that -?"

White streaks shoot across the sky. Only a couple, right now, scattered and easy to miss between the flashes of light bursting out of the fight between the Lord of Time and Leviathan. But all of them streak toward Skaia at top speed, and more and more pepper the sky every time Dave blinks.

HS: The Black Queen has summoned the Reckoning.
Which means just like that, whatever's left of Earth is toast. Chronologically speaking, Earth got wrecked by meteors probably the second they slammed through the door to a premature 4/13, but here in the Medium, the Reckoning's only just now revved its engines. Every fiery dot that zips toward Skaia is another meteor about to get redirected to crash on Earth and create the sandy wasteland Dave left the Midnight Crew in.

A weird, loose feeling sucks a hole in his chest, and Dave's suddenly grateful for past!Dave leaning on the console. Telling himself that it's fine, that the ark ships have everyone, that he's already seen the aftermath of the apocalypse - doesn't help (for some bizarre reason). It was still Earth. It existed for billions and billions of years, and yet by the end of the day, whether they win or lose, the whole planet will be destroyed. Every city, every grocery store, every shitty corner CVS, every car, every half-dead potted plant. His room in Houston. All the stuff and junk and things he accumulated in his life, that he didn't have the time or inclination to pack up for a trip to Seattle -

Up until this minute, some part of Dave's brain just kind of…assumed. He could wake up the next day, and he'd be able to go grab a jug of milk or chips or pain killers from the store, like normal.

Karkat shudders, and keeps shuddering, hard enough that Dave can pick up on it despite the space between them. He doesn't dare look, in case the dude's crying again. "God dammit," the troll says, his claws closed tight on his phone. "We didn't know her that well but. Fuck."

HS: If it was not her, it would have been the other sovereign.
HS: There would have been no gate through which your world ships entered if there were not a Reckoning to spur Skaia into generating them.
HS: You yourselves would not have existed without meteors to deliver you to your homes.
HS: So it goes.

"Yeah, well, inevitable shit is getting super damn annoying," Dave says, too exhausted to raise his voice. Hephaestus can hear him just fine. The meteors start to clog up the sky, still distant but whizzing by at top speed, and they're probably tiny for now, but -

"They're going to get royally fucked out there," Karkat says, grimly. When Dave looks at him, Karkat sets his jaw and pushes off the console. He looks like he really is ready to hurl every which way, and Dave freezes, undergoing an immense inner struggle, before passing Karkat a paper bag. "The Condesce's fucking space ships are still pissing around -"

"Or at least, Jade's gonna be punting meteors everywhere like we're in an interstellar pinball machine," Dave agrees. The wibbly, disconnected feeling in his chest zips tight again with tension. So much for that minor existential crisis. Time's running out on them like a deadbeat dad with a bunch of debt leaving his spouse and kids to foot the bill, and there's no way to reset the clock.

Instead, Dave pulls up Pesterchum, and looks at the memo Rose locked down so she could post image after image of weird snake shit. It's just a literal wall of snake nudes, or noods - snoodle, if you're gonna get picky about it - essentially, and Dave is absolutely going to confront Rose about the phallic imagery shit she's dedicated this memo to when he gets a chance. In person, though; he has to see her face for it. When he presses the first snake pic, the bright red snake fills the screen, and a tiny set of stats pops up along the bottom of his phone. Shit like length, acoustic resonance, age, coordinates in space and time -

Which…makes this really easy, as it happens. Dave braves Karkat's vom radius and enters the coordinates into the console between one blink and the next. Karkat bats his arm away instinctively with a snarl, but only after Dave's already done the dark deed. The targeting crosshairs on the screen stays clear while the image behind it blurs - and then the video feed turns crystal clear again, with a red snake hanging in loops over a tree branch. It almost blends in with the red flower bobbing at the
end of the branch, but with the wacky camera angle on this console, they've got a clear view of it. Karkat grumbles and starts fiddling with the controls and readouts, but Dave's sure this shit will be easy. "Fuck, man. Let's do this shit," he says, cracking his knuckles. Karkat can handle punching in coordinates; Dave will scroll through their recipe. Teamwork.

"We're making this happen," Karkat mutters under his breath.

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[танец]

"You're really just terrible at this, you know," the Trickster says, conversationally.

John can barely hear the words as he shoves John's face deeper into the river of oil.

They're doing just fine, until John realizes that they're not.

They're not making any headway at all.

He's not dumb enough to think he and the Trickster are evenly matched. Even when the Trickster pulls itself together, reeling in too-long arms and snapping its jaw back into place until it looks human-ish again, it possesses that edge of horrific grossness that John - doesn't. It bends and contorts itself in ways John just can't, and every time it takes a hit that should have busted its rib cage or knocked its head clean off, the Trickster laughs and clicks its fingers, and then it's whole again. Or worse, it doesn't bother, and keeps fighting with one leg wrenched around the wrong way or a broken bone jutting through the skin. Gamzee cuts in and does something John can't follow that rips the Trickster's arm off, but the thing dips away with a giggle, twirls down through the air like a Cirque du Soleil performer, then dunks its shoulder into torrent of oil that floods LoWaS's rapidly darkening riverbeds. Two new arms sprout from the same shoulder, oil flecking its cheeks like freckles, and the Trickster lunges again.

Each time, it molds itself back into John's image faster and faster. It doesn't seem to matter that Gamzee's got the weird limb displacement and chaotic agility and strength, too. The Trickster camped out on LoWaS for a reason - with all the oil raining down from the sky, it's in its element. Its home turf, complete with a never-ending supply of gross, sludgy oil to replenish itself with.

Thunder cracks through the air right as lightning shoots down, missing John's swirl of half-formed limbs by bare inches. Forget the hurricane-force winds that buffet John like he's a piece of trash - the electrical charge building up between the sparking trees on the ground and the roiling thunderclouds pulses constantly, and jolts John solid if he's not careful. Lightning spiders across the underside of the clouds and lights up LoWaS with eerie, flickering blue.

Typhoeus is not helping. No lightning has struck John full on - yet - which is probably Gamzee's doing, but Gamzee doesn't control it, either. He just makes it go haywire in chaotic, dangerous ways.

A sheet of black, oily rain slaps through the air almost horizontally, and a heavy glob smacks John across the eyes. It glues them shut for a split second, just long enough for him to be disoriented when he finishes turning into air - just long enough for him to lose track of the Trickster in the storm. For the hundredth time.

A heavy claw jerks John down by his abruptly corporeal elbow, and he drops like a stone, the oil
Gamzee's claws have extra joints sometimes, but they're not dripping with oil - this should be Gamzee, but John barely trusts his eyes right now, and floating around blinded in this storm is a one-way ticket to smashing against a cliff face. The Trickster howls in frustration overhead right as a cold claw helps clear away the last sticky gunk blinding him. "Augh! Go away! You're just intruding! You think anyone even wants you barging in and sticking your creepiness into everything?!" the Trickster shrieks in their wake, its swirling cotton candy eyes the only bright point against the dark sky.

Then lightning strikes the Trickster square in the back of the neck. John catches a glimpse of a skeleton that doesn't make sense as the Trickster insta-fries. The oil burns off in a rush, and the Trickster reeks of cooked-yet-rotted meat as it shudders itself back to normal. Loops of oil rise up from the gulch and feed into its sides. "Awww. A loser's first tantrum!" the Trickster says, with a rictus grin just for Gamzee while it still has more teeth than it does face. "Oh wait. You flip your lid all the time! One day you're gonna hurt someone like that~!"

It claps its hands together, and bursts apart in a spray of black oil that swirls away with the rest of the rain.

"Motherfucker spits some nasty shit," Gamzee says. He stands on a sharp spire of rock approximately two feet to the left of where John thought he sensed Gamzee's lungs, which is about normal as far as these things go. His hoodie glitches and billows in the opposite direction of the wind screaming between the thin rocks clustered here.

The wind behind John veers sharply, and he swings his hammer around without looking first, with so much force that the rest of his body flails around after it when the momentum catches up with him. He catches a glimpse of the Trickster sticking out its tongue before his hammer collides with the nearest pillar of rock and snaps the top off in a single hit. One of Typheus's wild gales spins the chunk of rock away immediately and smashes it against the nearest cliffside, with no rhyme or reason to it - the only thing really affected is a single pale tree, whose branches bounce back undamaged by the impact. "Yeah, he does that," John replies, spinning his hammerkind with one hand. He rolls the shoulder of the other, trying to figure out how much more his joints can take. If he lets himself think about it too much, he feels kinda cruddy - so he's focused on fighting! If the Trickster would stop messing around…

Without warning, the Trickster slings an arm around Gamzee's shoulders, busting a gut in a grossly literal way with uncontrollable laughter. "Nope! Not me!" he says. "Watch this!" And he snaps his fingers -

John chokes, and doubles over as oil bubbles up in his throat. Tastes like blood - like - it spills over through his fingers when he tries to cover his mouth with a hand, and he coughs up two more mouthfuls in mounting panic as his lungs struggle for air. "Yuck!" The Trickster chatters over the rising wind; he kicks his legs up into a handstand when Gamzee lashes out sideway, then uses Gamzee's horns to flip him toward a sharp spike of rock. "Pretty gross, amiright?"

Gamzee's horns glitch out of the Trickster's hands, and his arms reach back at an impossible angle to seize the Trickster by the head to fling him forward. For a good ten seconds, the Trickster and Gamzee grapple and try to throw each other against the rock in a rolling chain of flips, and John nearly goes cross eyed watching it. He kicks off the decapitated pillar of rock and bounds toward them - Gamzee ducks out of the way at the last second, so John's next swing catches the Trickster square in the chest. He splats against the rock like a cartoon character, pink and yellow and flat all over; it's too exaggerated. John doesn't need Gamzee plucking at his hood to back off fast and put some distance between them.
Sure enough, the Trickster pops back into 3D after a split second, and bubblegum pink spikes of crystal shoot out of the splatter mark left behind on the rock, long enough to impale anyone nearby. The Trickster ignores impalement like it does pretty much everything else, humming -

Lightning strikes him again.

John gives Gamzee a look. Gamzee shrugs.

The Trickster hangs in the air for a second, stunned and crispy, before exploding back into color and oil. "Ow! That fucking hurt!" he snaps with venom, uselessly stamping a foot in the air. Then he grins again, leftover sparks of lightning shivering down his arms and legs as they start to distort. "I have to admit! It was smart of that idiot to bring a monster to a monster fight!"

Gamzee's face - what John can make out of it - looks totally unaffected. The tendrils sewn into his god tier hoodie start to twist and twine over his shoulders.

John's the one who loses his temper. "Stop calling him that! No one is a monster here but you!"

It explodes out of him, and the Trickster switches his smiling stare to John with sudden, intense focus. "Say that again," he says, sounding almost breathless. "I dare you -"

His chest feels like it's about to explode. John tightens his grip on his specibus, and starts to say, "You're -"

A cold hand wraps around John's ankle, and yanks - but it's wrong, the wrong kind of cold (not enough to be Gamzee) and when John looks down between his feet, a pallid white mask of a face stares back at him with skin-covered eye sockets.

The scream rips out of him and he raises a foot to smash down against his handler's face before he finishes processing the sight. They're at least thirty feet above the actual ground - John stops himself at the last second, because if he kicks - he's already dead -

The Trickster dropkicks Gamzee in the face with both feet. "- too slow!" he cheers, throwing his arms high as he and Gamzee sail away through the air.

John gasps in a breath a second too late, and the panic crawling through his body in cold waves finally registers as panic when he starts trying to jiggle his leg frantically to shake his dad - is it? - off without knocking away his grip on the rock. His handler - he's dead he's so dead it's not - clings with a corpse's determination, the tattered sleeve of his suit jacket swaying as his hand follows the kicks of John's leg. John can't take his eyes away; he just latches onto smaller and smaller details as panic settles into his chest - he'd roll up his sleeves before he'd walk around with them messed up and covered in blood like that -

"You're never gonna win. Have you guessed why, yet?" the Trickster asks, without even a giggle to restart the conversation. Which is pretty rude, if you ask John - but no one's asking - his brain won't focus on anything but his dumb stupid asshole handler's sleeves - his dad -

He can't keep it straight in his head. Too much stimuli: the wind, screaming muffled words at him; thunder, crashing over head as someone, somewhere, plays sonorous notes through the massive pipes - and John's ninety percent sure that's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, until it turns and Typhus starts playing something else dumb and dramatic and straight out of some old movie; the Trickster, laughing gleefully as he punches John's face to the side. The hit jars him loose from Samuel's grip and snaps through John's frozen panic long enough for him to spin around and raise his hammer to block the Trickster's next swing. "You're wrong," John forces out between gasps, as he unspools
himself to avoid getting caught in another beatdown loop. Lightning crackles and crazes out of the sky to slam into a tree, and the sparking light as electricity arcs from one tree to the next casts weird shadows through the rock spires. "We can -"

John's back rams into someone's chest - the Trickster makes him solid with a hum and a snap, and then, when John flies off in another direction, oil pelting his face as he tries to put distance between them again, the Trickster floats after him almost lazily, leaning one cheek on his hand as he follows John up and over the rock forest. "Nope!" he says, before John can try to finish his sentence. "Because no matter how many times you swing your silly hammer -"

Gamzee plummets out of the sky and smashes a juggling club down on the top of the Trickster's head. It pops like a bubble of gum, spraying Gamzee's face with pink, sticky gunk, and then the Trickster hops over Gamzee leapfrog style, his head reforming in a matter of seconds. "- or cry and have someone else come save you -" the Trickster continues, yellow tentacles growing and crawling all over his shirt as he stuffs his lolling, horribly long tongue back into distended jaws. Behind him, Gamzee nearly - or maybe does - tear his own face off with a snarl to claw the bubblegum off, but John can't go back to help, because the Trickster's still all over him like a dirty shirt. John streaks toward the clouds, but the constant web of lightning flashing through and along the underside of the clouds means he can't use it to lose the Trickster - heck, he can't even get near it before all the hair on his body stands on end in a silent, staticky warning. It's like a ceiling of lightning and storm clouds and vicious winds traps them here.

"- I'm. Just. Better," the Trickster finishes, sugary as artificial sweetener as he smashes his hammer down three more times. John dodges and darts around all of them, and lashes out with a swing of his own.

He's hit the Trickster so many times now. But it doesn't make a dent. Nothing permanently fazes the guy. The Trickster rolls his eyes as well as his head on his shoulders as John's hammer hits his shoulder, his grin turning and turning like a horrible pinwheel. John throws all his strength into the offensive - dodging never gets him anywhere - and drives the Trickster around so they fly over the river of oil. The Trickster barks out a laugh and then turns it around on John; they trade back and forth, driving each other on further over the landscape. But while John gives it his all, his muscles and throat aching as the strife drags on, the Trickster looks completely unaffected. John can't keep tabs on whatever his dad is now, since he isn't breathing. It's like he's a ghost.

Or just dead. Super, super dead.

Dead dads don't get better.

John miiight be doing…less than okay.
The wind rises with a sound like a foghorn that booms across LoWaS, accompanied by a crack of lightning so strong it sets half of LoWaS below alight; it rocks John down to his toes, and a flicker of a wince creases the Trickster’s nose for a split second - John almost thinks he imagined it. Flying around in weather like this may be a terrible plan. Maybe. Possibly. The Trickster contorts his body into a too-literal knot so John’s next attack misses, then lashes out like a jack-in-the-box to tackle John by the waist. They sail toward the ground without slowing - John bursts into air at the last second before the Trickster crashes through the wall of an empty salamander house.

John coasts for a second to catch his breath. When he glances around, he has to squint to see through the coursing oily rain. Oil runs in thick rivulets over an untended mushroom farm, coating the pale blue fungi in black, but apart from that - no sign of his dad, or Gamzee. Worse, John sees a weirdly familiar outcropping of blue shale: it reminds him of the area around Typhetus's lair, which means they’re worryingly close. A ton of large pipes crisscross the rugged terrain around them for miles in all directions, with thinner pipes splitting off at intervals, and Typhetus's fraymotif feels like a constant, palpable sensation ringing through the air.

The Trickster brushes rubble off his sleeves with a hand, then bounces out of the demolished house. He flies toward John in whimsical circles, and John boosts himself higher in the air. A second passes where his arms feel too heavy and exhausted to lift his specibus, which is…bad. Probably really bad. He can't afford to lose his momentum now. Especially since he still has that minor problem where he doesn't know how to beat this guy. Like, at all.

He never has.

One of the Trickster's legs jerks back hard and he yelps, as Gamzee's arms appear a solid two
seconds before the rest of Gamzee catches up, and proceed to whip him around hard enough to dislocate his hip. The Trickster lashes out without fixing his hip first, leg flopping at a horrible angle as he forms a ribbon of oil into a sharp cord and sends it slicing right in time to catch Gamzee in the side. John's eyes throb and he mashes his hand over them fast as Gamzee temporarily turns into a purple, fractalling thing before snapping back to comprehensibility. "Nah. This ain't a fight you're set to win, unfunny fucker," Gamzee says, low and mocking, as he slams the Trickster down into the blue dirt.

He convulses with laughter. "Winning? Who needs to win?" Tipping his head to the side, the Trickster grins slyly at Gamzee. "You're probably more chaotic than me, sure! But I don't need to beat you at anything."

Then the Trickster raises his arm and smashes his own elbow against the ground, right in a puddle of oil. Something dead and human-shaped and awful - oh, right, Dad - bursts out of the pool with a lurch, all the black-filled veins pulsing across his face as he grabs Gamzee. John rushes down to them, while the Trickster kicks up off his back in one motion, elbowing Gamzee out of the way while he struggles to shove John's handler away.

…Because John asked him not to hurt him. Crap crap crap! "Gam-" John starts to shout over the shrieking wind, when the Trickster bounces right into him, punching John in the gut. It knocks all the wind out of him, and the sky and earth turn dizzily around John for a stomach-turning minute as he and the Trickster tumble through the air at top speed. "Oof!" John focuses on bringing the handle of his hammerkind up and slamming it awkwardly into the Trickster's stomach to return the favor instead of trying to stop their wild flight, then raises his hand and slams the Trickster's chin with the heel of his palm so that his head snaps back.

A vine of oil wraps around John's hand and wrenches it around so hard and fast tears spring into John's eyes, and his specibus spins out of his grip. Normally the wind smacks his hammer right back into his palm when John asks, but one of Typheus's gales rips it away in one direction while the Trickster furiously pummels them in another. They're too close to Typheus's palace - John can feel each resonant note of the denizen's storm song like something solid slapping him in the chest. John loses sight of his hammer between one pulse and the next, as they turn butt over heels one last time before plunging into the wide, spreading river.

Compared to the harsh song and thunder pealing through the air, the oil deadens all sound; it's too quiet and muffling, and closes over their heads so that the sky vanishes in an enveloping wave of inky black. Nothing immediately strikes his back or legs as they dive, which means the river's deeper than it looked from above - the flat, monochrome black surface fooled him. John drags his knee up at a forced, sluggish pace through the heavy, sticky liquid, to knee the Trickster off him. The oil coats him all over, cold and pouring in right in his ears and along his scalp and under his shirt and sinking slick into his shoes, and John thrashes in a jolt of panic when his knee does nothing. He shoves with his hands instead; this time he hits something solid, and pushes the Trickster off him with a grunt. Swimming blind, John claws his way to the surface of the river. It takes so much more effort to swim through this crud than through water, and when he breaks the surface and gasps in air through his mouth, treading the oil only seems to cause him to sink back down. John casts out a hand so that his breeze can spiral down and yank him out of the oil like a cork out of a bottle -

The Trickster slams back down. Foot, meet face. John gags on oil as the Trickster cartwheels off his face, but his nose streams blood in earnest, along with all the oil that shot up his nose when they went under. "I just need to kill you! ♥" the Trickster coos, and John catches one last glimpse of a delighted, toothy grin before the Trickster plants both hands on his shoulders and shoves him back under. John punches back immediately and tries to squirm out from under the Trickster's weight - but something bursts in the back of his throat, and suddenly he has a mouthful of oil he needs to spit out,
even though his mouth's clamped shut.

If he drowns in oil and dies, Typhues will literally never let him live it down. He can't turn into air when he's surrounded by suffocating oil, and the Trickster laughs and starts talking loud enough for John to hear it through the muffling liquid on purpose when John tries to punch him off again. It's more of his usual garbage, so John tries to tune him out. Something whips around John's wrist and pushes it further down. He thrashes one last time, blowing the last of the oil out of his mouth and squeezing his eyes shut as he lets his body go limp.

Then he kicks his leg up and to the side, and dissolves himself into the wind leg-first when his toe hits fresh air. The Trickster faceplants into the river without John to kneel on. "Hey!" he yells, enraged, glowering up at John's unspooled wind with livid eyes.

John makes his head solid enough to stick his tongue out, then zooms away from the river as fast as the rampaging storm lets him. The tide of the air currents blows hard at a ninety-degree angle to where John wants to go - then another gale almost shunts him back the way he came. He shades his face with a hand to stop the rain from hitting him right in the eyes and scans the ground frantically for some sign of Gamzhee or his dad. His handler. His dadler.

Before he spies either of them, though, a sound like a freight train ploughing into a water dam starts up behind John. Glancing back, he sees a tidal wave of oil rising out of the river, with the Trickster a half-submerged pink-and-blue figure in the very center of it. The wall of water keeps stretching up, draining the river, until it completely shadows the village, and when the Trickster points a finger at John, the whole wall falls forward.

That's just dumb. That's completely unfair! John puts on another burst of speed to fly out from under the tidal wave's reach -

And hits Gamzee. "Head's up, motherfuck," Gamzee says, his voice almost mild, as he chucks John's dad at the Trickster like a basketball.

The zomdad hits the Trickster dead on, knocking him back into the oil, and the Trickster shrieks as half the wall loses its momentum and slumps down to drown half the village in oil slicks. "Oh, for - I told you to keep him busy, you useless dummy!" He flings John's dad down, and the thing makes no effort to flail its arms or grab onto anything before it hits the ground.

Something skips hard in John's chest, and he makes an aborted move to race forward. Gamzee snags him by the back of the shirt and John tries to shove him away. "Dad? Dad, no -"

His dad sits up, his leg bent at a crooked angle as a tendril of oil hauls him back upright. Like a puppet on a string. He dangles there for a second before the oil falls away, but even then, when he looks up at John with unseeing eyes, there's nothing actually looking at John.

He feels sick again. He tastes oil on the back of his teeth, and now bile in his throat, too. Gamzee moves his claw from John's shirt to his shoulder, a steady weight, and John grasps it with his hand while he tries to swallow down a heave of nausea. "Alright?" Gamzee asks.

John can barely force words out; something in his chest feels like a violin string tightened too far, on the verge of snapping against his face. Except that's a simile so corny that only Rose would think it, so maybe not. "I'm fine, I'm - sorry," he says, tearing his eyes away from his handler. He shouldn't care, but it's so hard to turn it off when they're here - he needs to go back to ignoring whatever the Trickster did to his dad, because caring is -

A slow clap cuts through the air. The Trickster has to slap his own hands together ridiculously hard
to make it audible over the storm, but he does it with relish, a lopsided grin spreading across his face so widely that it deforms his other features. "Wow! That's rich! No really, that's too funny!" he says, jeering, and mimes wiping away a tear from his oil-streaked face. John tightens his grip on Gamzee, as something in his stomach drops. "You're actually upset that he's dead! After everything he did to you!"

Caring was…a mistake.

The Trickster goes on, folding one leg over the other as he lounges in the air, his tidal wave forgotten with a dismissive flick of his hand. John meets his piercingly blue eyes and shudders. He looks like he's been handed a bowl of straight brown sugar and a soup spoon to shovel it down with, and John can't seem to tear his gaze away. "And here I thought you would appreciate something good, for once in your life! But no. RIP - here lays John Egbert's taste." The Trickster clicks his tongue scornfully, and pretends to hang himself, one hand jerking on an imaginary noose. "It was bad taste to begin with, but now it's dead and rotting, just like the rest of him!" He spins in a circle, arms flung wide to indicate all of LoWaS.

"I'm startin' to get the feeling that a motherfucker might be a fuckton quieter if he didn't have mouth flaps to make all kinds of heresy noises with. Or if he didn't have a thinkpan all up and twixt his shoulders," Gamzee says, idly, which is when John realizes Gamzee's mild voice earlier didn't mean he'd calmed down at all. Gamzee starts to slide in front of John, his outline all messy and glitching at the edges, and his claws wind up somewhere that's not in John's grip.

The Trickster claps his hands together one last time and throws his head back, laughing. "Hahahaha! Oh, Gamzee. We should be besties. You and me really do think alike!"

Then the Trickster's head snaps back down. He grins at John as he snaps his fingers, and Dad's head explodes.

The next few seconds are a quiet, peaceful blank.

John can't stop screaming as he tackles the Trickster and rams him into the nearest open pipe. Typhus's breath rattles around them, but John's ragged, throat-tearing scream echoes louder, and they dive deeper into the pipe with the walls shuddering and the scream reverberating around them. They slam into the first bend in the pipe at full-tilt, leaving a dent in the shape of the Trickster's back, but the Trickster keeps howling with laughter, and John keeps screaming his lungs out, and propels them down deeper into the pipes.

Into the bowels of LoWaS. All pipes lead to -

The wind whips around them, rank and hot, as John drives them down and down and down, following the curves and sudden bends in the pipe with very little awareness. His own shoulder smashes into a corner when they take a turn too fast, but he barely notices it. The Trickster chokes back laughter long enough to say, "After everything he did! You should be thanking me."

And John's -

Gone for a while, again. The rage blissfully whites everything out, until all that's left is numb screaming, and -
Typhus's eerie, roaring storm music cuts off super-fast when John and the Trickster shoot out of the pipe and slam into the nearest dark teal pillar. They emerge in some kind of immense, cylindrical room, with dark blue stone paving the whole floor and dull grey pipe openings dotting the walls all the way up to the distant ceiling. The pillar John and the Trickster hit swings and crashes into another beside it with a resonant burst of sound; enormous windchimes hang throughout the whole room, and their arrival sets off a chain reaction that turns the whole place into an echo chamber.

It's not a large enough chamber for all of Typhus, though - the denizen's head slithers out from one of the lowest pipes, teeth bared in a snarl, and he slams against one of the grey metal pipes so the whole room rumbles and judders with his fury.

Ty: FOOLS.

John ignores him, and goes back to trying to punch the Trickster. The wind howls around them in a tuneless roar, and the Trickster contorts his body with laughable ease so John just barely misses him every time. His fist hits the wind chime instead, and the towering pillar of corroded metal cracks and shatters. If it hurts, John can't feel it; the Trickster slides away and makes a stupid face at John, sticking his tongue out. Realizing that his scream broke off - he ran out of air, at some point - John sucks in a breath and reaches up, yanking on one of Typhus's winds in a blind fury.

To his distant surprise (he's too busy screaming to feel much of anything else), the wind comes when he calls, and the hurricane-force gale catches the Trickster and piledrives him against the floor far below in a torrent of wind. The Trickster lays splayed out in another cartoonish splatter of pink bubblegum and oil -

And Typhus lunges at John, his ragged, claw-tipped wings clattering along the floor as his ropy neck shoots straight for John with all his teeth. It's like being bum-rushed by a rocket-propelled freight train, and John snaps out of his rage-y daze just in time to move. Typhus roars past him as John bounces out of the way and crunches down on a mouthful of clamoring wind chimes instead. He crushes them with a snap of powerful jaws and snakes around to glower at John again, his green eyes smoldering with fury. "Hey!" John protests - or tries to. His voice is totally gone. Typhus gouges the ground with silver claws and plunges toward John again. John darts to the side, but Typhus flares out the tattered veil of his pale wings and the leading edge smacks John right in the stomach knocking him into the wall. "Ow! Not trying to fight you!" John yells as he peels himself off the wall, his voice so hoarse and broken he can barely hear himself over the cacophony of Typhus's movements and the shattering chimes. The denizen writhes around, his many coils curling and looping over each other in the cramped room as he lines himself up for another strike.

Ty: Too bad.

"Hoohooohoo! Hoo, boy! You're a real sucker for pain, huh?" the Trickster says, delighted - he's hanging upside down over John's head now, arms folded behind his head as he smiles. John twitches, his chest one huge ache for a split second as another scream surges out of him, and he slaps a hand against the wall. The ferocious storm wind scoops the Trickster up and bashes him against another teal chime in a smear of oil. He bends around it in a way that makes it clear his back broke on impact, and then lolls back upright with an ecstatic grin.
It vanishes when Typhius whips another wing up and smashes the pillar aside. The billowing skin of his wings wraps the Trickster up in coil after coil until an enormous claw presses along the Trickster's whole body.

TY: I didn’t forget about you, abomination.

John kicks off the wall and arcs high over Typhus's head. Now that he's not lost in a blank rage, his chest really does hurt like he's shredded something in his lungs; it hurts to breathe, and as he flies the effort it takes to stay aloft feels similar to how treading oil did earlier. He can float, but only just, and the thunderous, booming echoes in this enclosed space shake him ten times worse than the fraymotif storm outside. His whole body feels like it's about to unspool into the wind in a not-good way, and he's not sure he'll be able to wind himself back together if he lets go now. His focus is totally shot.

…Why did he think dragging the Trickster down here would help? He can't really remember thinking at all, actually. This was a terribad plan and John wants a refund.

The Trickster slithers out of Typhus's grip with a giggle, points a finger pistol at the denizen's face, and pretends to shoot. Typhus seems unaffected, but the Trickster explodes backward out of range before the denizen can rewrap him, and Typhus snarls and snaps forward again. But abruptly the denizen jerks to a halt, and turns to snarl at his own looping body. When John looks down he sees that the part of Typhus's lengthy body coming out of the pipe is just too wide to let the denizen reach in any further without getting stuck. "Whoops!" the Trickster laughs - and then he vanishes and reappears in front of John. John guards his face with both arms as the Trickster punches him, then grunts as he tackles him into the nearest pipe. This one's narrower than the line they followed down into the lair, and Typhus roars with anger, first trying to shove his jaws in and then swiping after them with a ragged wing before the Trickster and John tumble out into the next chamber over.

TY: Oh. Joy.

John hears Typhus muttering through the pipe, and then the faint sound of an enormous snake guy slithering away - but now the Trickster tears at his arms in a frenzy, clawing him up and raking deep lines into his forearms, and John's a little distracted by the effort needed to put some space between them again. They've fallen out in a room that seems half finished - a thin, rickety pair of ropes cross a cavernous, deep blue chamber, like an unfinished rope bridge. The gorge drops steeply below, and a river of oil churns at the distant bottom of the cave. Bright cyan splotches of bioluminescence cover wide swathes of the ceiling, clustered between stalactites, and here and there a few dots of light drift through the air and get caught in air currents that lead them into the pipes. There's no sign of the dark teal, etched walls that make up most of Typhus's palace, and only a few pipes and pipe openings scattered around the room.

With the Trickster bearing them down, the two of them plummet past the bridge and fall toward the river below. Noot happening. John takes advantage of the quieter air here and turns into the breeze, then rushes back up toward the ceiling. He tries to pick out a pipe that looks easy to navigate, but apart from the one they fell through, all of the pipes look like they lead into a dark maze of conduits. Stupid pipelines leaking stupid oil everywhere and messing up stupid LoWaS and John's head and god, if there's an oil and gas industry in the next reality John is going to personally drop kick it into space -

"He hates you," the Trickster says, like he's sharing a deep, dark secret, and John dodges just before the Trickster ploughs him into the pointy end of a stalactite. The Trickster twists around and lands upside down on the ceiling, planting one foot right in the middle of a pile of cyan glowworms. A few sprout wings and zoom away, flash with pale light, and scatter to join the other mature fireflies dancing away down the smaller pipes, but most of the patch just darkens with a squishy sound.
"Yeah, well, I never expected him to like me! He's an asshole!" John replies hotly, rolling his eyes. Then he flips around and makes a beeline for the next pipe over, one of the ones that the fireflies drifted through. Typheus rumbles, his rank voice emanating through the pipelines from some indistinct point. John solidifies his foot fast before it can shake apart his breezes, but none of the branching tubes off this pipe look large enough for Typheus to fit through.

TY: Those are remarkably reasonable expectations.

The Trickster slides in ridiculous fast, his arm too long for a second as he uses it to skid around a corner and stalk after John. His voice cuts through Typheus's, high and mocking. John throws himself down several quick turns, without really hoping to lose him - he just wants to find a way to a new room, at this point. These pipes really are a maze of dull grey and oily streaks. John spies a firefly in the corner of his eye and takes off after it. "Your Breeze? Hates you too. Your ~friends~ are getting sick of propping you up all the time. You're all alone down here, and no one's coming to help you," the Trickster calls after him, with a soft laugh that winds up amplified and menacing as it echoes through the pipes. And it's not like he's wrong - John has no idea where Gamzee is or how they lost him but it's probably -

BE: no! why do you always listen to him and not me!

BE: what am I doing wrong?!

John nearly rams facefirst into a wall at the junction of two pipes. A sudden, horrible thought occurs to him and he spins in a circle, his hand cast out as he tries to find the Breeze. Typheus's stray wind hovers around him, writhing and restless, but the Breeze skitters away from him, the faint, visible blue streaks of its presence fading against the dull metal background.

He can't remember when he last heard it. Crap. Dizzy for a second, John flies forward and finally sees a pipe opening in down a left turn. I'm sorry! he thinks, as loudly as he can, but the Breeze doesn't respond. He hurries toward the exit and glances back over his shoulder, but the Trickster seems to have fallen behind -

Turning back around, John gets exactly two seconds to register the giant glass-green eye looming at the end of the pipe, and yells as he smacks into Typheus's eyeball. On the one hand, this is hilarious, because Typheus flinches back like he did not expect that to actually happen; on the other hand, John tumbles out into a room shaped like an orb, the walls covered in iridescent, gold-lined labradorite and the blue stone of the very top and lower surfaces rough, unpolished blue-and-gold lapis lazuli. One of the widest pipes opens up on one curved wall and Typheus has more than enough space for his whole body to pile up in coils in the deep bowl of the room, while all the fireflies bumble their way up to a wide yellow, glowing dome near the roof.

The Trickster careens out of the pipe after John, and knocks both of them almost into Typheus's waiting mouth. On the one hand, this is hilarious, because Typheus flinches back like he did not expect that to actually happen; on the other hand, John tumbles out into a room shaped like an orb, the walls covered in iridescent, gold-lined labradorite and the blue stone of the very top and lower surfaces rough, unpolished blue-and-gold lapis lazuli. One of the widest pipes opens up on one curved wall and Typheus has more than enough space for his whole body to pile up in coils in the deep bowl of the room, while all the fireflies bumble their way up to a wide yellow, glowing dome near the roof.

The Trickster careens out of the pipe after John, and knocks both of them almost into Typheus's waiting mouth. John scrambles around and kicks off a tooth, with a steadily rising, "AaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" escaping him as he aims for the only other pipe opening in the room. His aims off and he winds up running along the pipe for a weird, wobbly second before shooting off again. A cackle echoes through the wide pipe as the Trickster leaps after him - and then Typheus pours into the pipe in their wake to drown everything else out.

John wishes he could kick his own butt for this plan. The worst possible plan. He's got no clue where he's trying to get to or how to beat the Trickster or how to get Typheus to calm the heck down, and now the Breeze is mad at him for probably the last time. He veers along the pipe as it shoots down a steep incline like a slide - the Trickster's right on his tail, though, with Typheus sliding not far behind, and the Trickster starts to say, "You're not -"
They burst out into a forest of vertical metal pipes - there's barely enough room to fly through them, even for someone John's size, and Typhoeus roars in frustration as he slides out the pipe and has to dip lower, twining his heavy coils around the larger pipes in practiced spirals like it's a huge jungle gym. There's a teal platform hanging up above, with a set of pipes just visible from the level John's flying at and a pathway winding between the pipes to reach it from an opening in the distant wall. The underside sports a giant Breath symbol that glows faintly in the twilight of the lair. Typhoeus bellows and a wall of wind slams through the pipes, knocking John and the Trickster for a loop.

A pair of arms catch John under his armpits and pull him away behind one of the heavy pipes. John kicks his feet like an idiot a few times before he thinks to look up, and sees Gamzee sailing along with his legs hooked over an invisible trapeze. "You found us!" John says, relieved.

Gamzee doesn't look at him, or else John just can't tell with Gamzee's hood dangling loose between them. "Sorry. Got all kinds of caught up in the mad rage noises all slamming in my ducts," he says.

Down below, Typhoeus scrapes his claws along the pipes, leaving deep silver gouges in the metal. They swing up and hit the curving edge of the winding green platform in a roll, and John hugs the ground for a second before pushing up to peer at Gamzee's face. His hair and hood keep most of it covered up, which makes John wonder what Gamzee looks like. He seems…upset. Or ashamed? John honestly can't tell. "Are you sure you're okay? It's really windy in here!" John starts to say, stumbling over his words, torn between trying to grab Gamzee's claw - it keeps not being where John reaches, and at one point pops up on John's far side, which means Gamzee's not holding himself together all that well - and scanning for the Trickster's next move. Typhoeus at least is easy to keep track of…

Then John realizes his second comment didn't help at all, and he smacks his hands against his cheeks a little harder than necessary. He feels woozy, now that they're on solid ground, and his lips are chapped. "What am I saying? God, let's get it together, John…"

"I've got my shit back on motherfuckin' lock. Breathe, bro," Gamzee says, steadying John with a hand.

Except - wait - that's John's job; John tries to pat Gamzee between the horns, because god knows they're both hells of messed up right now, but his lungs can't seem to remember how breathing works, and his faltering hand hits Gamzee's back instead. "I can't -" John says, curling up over his knees as air fails to make it to his lungs. "- that's not - normal -"

Gamzee spins around with a growl, and the Trickster's quiet, barely audible giggle turns into a shriek of laughter as Gamzee pushes John's head down and then launches himself at something out of sight. John keeps his head between his knees, gasping for air, and the bands around his chest loosen with sudden relief. He staggers to his feet, and rounds on the two of them just in time to see Gamzee tear a hole through the Trickster's stomach. The Trickster spits candy-pink blood at Gamzee's face, and the hole in his side bares oil-streaked teeth for a split second before the mouth closes and his candy-coated god tier shirt grows back over the gap.

They're so busy fighting each other that John's the only one who seems to notice Typhoeus's slender wing unfurling behind them. "Gamzee!" John shouts, and Gamzee jerks his gaze away from the Trickster just in time to get batted to the side with a flick of Typhoeus's humongous claw.

TY: You don't get to walk where you wish, Bard. This is none of your concern. I will have no more Chaos here.

"Haha, have fun with that!" the Trickster says, breezily, and then he turns back on John with a bloodthirsty grin. He teleports in front of John and John bounces away, zapping from one pipe to the
next with the Trickster zooming in spirals after him, but then Typhoon roars and upsets the air again. "Boop!" the Trickster sings, reappearing and tapping John's nose with a stinging claw. "Looks like you ruined everything again!"

"Ugh!" John swings his arm at the Trickster - that tends to work a heck of a lot better if you have a hammer in hand, or something equivalent - and then swings himself around a thinner pole, his hands burning with friction as he aims for Gamzee. The troll's already kicked off the pipe that Typhoon flicked him at, and looks around before snapping his eyes to John's.

The Trickster hip checks John into a pipe. "And now all your Breeze is gone. Too bad!" he sighs, with nauseating amounts of fake-sympathy whine in his voice. He does a tiny dance and a spin with a flourish of his arms.

John grits his teeth and drops into free fall. Instead of hitting him, the Trickster's next kick buckles the pipe, and then John's busy falling toward a loop of Typhoon. Off to the side he sees Gamzee tear right through one of Typhoon's shredded wings and collide with a pipe, which he proceeds to wrench in two and swings at Typhoon like a baseball bat. With a ripple that runs the entire length of his body, Typhoon sets off another wave of sound as he pulls back and then lunges at Gamzee, pinning him against the far wall and obscuring the troll from view in a cloud of dust.

TY: This much chaos. Maddening.

TY: I won't hesitate, glitch -

No. John doesn't break his free fall - he just teleports in a burst of air and drops right in front of Typhoon's face as the denizen crushes Gamzee against the wall. "Stop that! Leave him alone!" he yells, waving his hands frantically over his head. When Typhoon just roars, lashing his body furiously, John groans, braces himself, and then shoots forward to kick Typhoon in the middle of his forehead, with all the storm wind behind him. Typhoon blinks hard - like he's afraid John's gonna ram him in the eye again, which is a totally unreasonable fear - and twitches back for half a second, which is long enough for John to flip around and blow his wing away from Gamzee with another gust.

But John doesn't get a chance - the Trickster catches up for the millionth time, and hits John like a meteor. All the air sucks out of John's lungs in a rush, which leaves him fumbling while his stomach drops in dismay, and the Trickster loops his breath around his disjointed fingers for a second before kicking John toward the floor. "So! How many deaths do you think before it turns just?" he asks, following John down as Typhoon rallies overhead. John stops himself before he hits the ground by floating and lands hard on one knee with the other leg splayed out. With his air in short supply, he concentrates on gulping down what he can and rolls to the side the old-fashioned way when the Trickster tries to stomp on him. "Cowardly doesn't count as just, which just makes my job even funnier!" the Trickster continues, with a cocky grin. "Of course, you couldn’t die heroic if you tried. Heeheehe-"

A large wing swats the Trickster against the ground. "Uh, ow!" the Trickster yells pointedly, squirming out from under the wing on his hands and knees, his hair flopped over his face.

TY: Foul thing. Did I say you were welcome here, at any point in time?

TY: All of you would do well to get out of my house.

John bolts while the Trickster's distracted by Typhoon's ensuing rant about people wandering around his lair when he's trying to sleep and play music and live his life (Typhoon might be more than a little weird) and bounces to Gamzee again. This time, he pushes the wing away with a poof of air, then
grabs Gamzee and zaps them halfway across the chamber, before the Trickster or Typhoe can get any ideas. Gamzee lets out a rattling snarl right in John's ear when they turn solid again, sharp claws raking at John's back, and John hastily pats his hand against Gamzee's face before the livid pulse of red starts burning in his eyes. "Just me!" he says, trying to project reassurance. Gamzee's face is about 90% teeth, but he doesn't chomp down on John's hand, so that's a win. Once Gamzee loses a few rows of teeth and has just two eyes again, John adds, "Okay, we should probably not have come down here."

"Might not've been the best of all plans," Gamzee agrees, the rattling echo in his voice dwindling to something manageable. He snorts, and a trickle of purple blood shoots back up into his sort-of broken nose. "You feel?"

"Yeah, I feel." John sighs, and hovers for a second behind a pipe. From here, they're level with the hanging platform - a smaller array of pipes rise up from something covered in a deep blue cloth, and merge with the larger pipes as they climb up through the ceiling. "Let's just fight around Typhoe, okay? I get the idea that killing denizens doesn't actually help anything." Considering the fact that Typhoe thought the trolls murderizing their denizens without bothering with choice stuff was heathen-ish, it's funny - read: not funny - that he likes to eat people and provoke them into fights all the dang time.

Gamzee mumbles something with the syllables all out of order, and then lifts his head. His face looks tired, but it's definitely a face, again. "Good call. But that candy fucker's burning hard," he says. "And his material's getting motherfuckin' repetitive."

"Is it really? Awww," the Trickster complains, from directly behind them. Gamzee's loose arm tightens around John's back and the two of them jolt to the side, while the Trickster brings a hammer down through the air where they used to be. "I hate to be a disappointment, like certain people we know! Maybe it's a 'like father like son' kind of thing.-"

- Another blip, and -

- John comes out of it with an aborted scream, just as he and the Trickster skid across the platform. John gets his feet under him and gets upright first, panting, while the Trickster lays still and blinks for a second, oil streaming from his nose. "That's enough," John says; his voice cracks halfway through, and for a second, he teeters on the edge of some kind of numbing fury -

- rage. Call it what it is. "Motherfuck! Sorry!" Gamzee calls, from somewhere so deep in one of the pipes John can barely pick up the sound on the wind. Getting distance between them, because right. Crap. John just exploded like a can of rapid rage weasels right next to the Rage-y guy, and neither of them have Karkat to shoosh them down if they transform into some kind of self-perpetuating rage tornado. Typhoe jams his wing claw-first into the pipe Gamzee retreated into, his teeth crashing against the wall as he scrabbles to try to reach him, but it's too small an opening for him to duck in headfirst.

The Trickster coughs, and spits viscous pink, sugary blood onto John's face. It reeks of gasoline and stings like acid. "Oooh, so intimidating," he says, his voice low and spiteful as he stomps back onto his feet. "God, no wonder everyone hates you! You're so useless!"

"No, I'm not!" John can feel the wind shrieking around him in a tight funnel, and when he raises a hand the storm gale picks the Trickster up and smacks him back down against the floor, shaking the
You're the one who doesn't do anything but hurt people! *No one* likes you! You're dangerous and horrible!"

The Trickster hugs his splitting sides as he laughs, bouncing off the floor like a rubber ball with resounding cracks as John tries smashing him again. "Hahaha! Nice try!"

But -

- something is -

"And I'm not letting you hurt my friends! Ever! Again!" John says, lifting both hands and smashing the Trickster down with *two* storm winds. He can barely see through the tears stinging his eyes.

- and the next time the Trickster hits the ground, a weird gurgling sound burbles out of his mouth. He doesn't bounce, and when John blinks and his tears leave tracks through the sugar and dried oil on his face, he sees the Trickster staring back at him, his mouth weirdly…flat. Black oil bubbles up through the pink of his shirt, and the Trickster pokes one of the sharp, curved rib bones that just poked through his chest with a curious finger. "Haa! Haaa..." he says, wetly, through a mouth of bubbling oil that spills over his chin and starts to dye the front of his hoodie. "…….Well? That's… haa...it? That's all you've got?"

He looks up at John, expectant, his mouth hanging open a little so he can breathe but *not smile*, and John freezes.

The silence rings in John's ears. Too loud. It's too *loudly* quiet, and when John slowly lowers his arms, trembling with the sudden, unpleasant shock roiling in his stomach, he turns his head a fraction of an inch to see Typheus hovering behind him. The denizen's snarl is gone, and without it, with his mouth shut over his teeth and his eyes grave, he looks terrifyingly daunting. Even though John's just gone and stolen another wind from him completely by mistake, Typheus doesn't move - his wings rustle a little, almost totally silent in the too-quiet chamber, but he doesn't so much as blink.

TY: This is your challenge. Your choice.

John feels like all the air's gone out of him again. All he can hear is his own harsh, shuddery breaths, and the sound of the Trickster's smashed bones creaking as he levers himself up onto his elbows, staring at John with hostile, expectant eyes. Like he's waiting for John to make a move, when he should be - should be bouncing back onto his feet, or putting his ribcage back together like a jigsaw puzzle, or - *something*.

Pinned between two stares, feeling hollow where his stomach should be, John drops his hands to his sides, and does what he probably should have done ages ago.

EB: Breeze?

EB: I think I've been really, really dumb.

No response. Typheus's winds twine around John's heels, restive and agitated and impatient as ever, and John shudders and waves them away, reaching down to flap his hands at them until they swirl away over the edges of the platform. Then he tries again, painfully aware of Typhues staring foreboding daggers between his shoulder blades. If the denizen wanted to swat him from behind, he would have *done* it already. Somehow, John's on the precipice of something that feels awfully significant, and oh crap, he does *not* want to screw up now. Not this time.

EB: Breeze…?
EB: do you know how I heal my mind?

Because *that's* the choice Typhues told him to figure out. His challenge. And John wouldn't have a
denizen breathing down his neck, and the Trickster laying with his chest burst open like a split
pomegranate, oozing black sludge all over the platform like a crime scene, if he weren't about to
faceplant right in the middle of it.

Just when he thinks he's *really* done it, this time, and starts to close his eyes -

BE: why do you think I know?

The Breeze ruffles John's long hood. It's too long, yeah, but John's too worn and strung thin to fix it
now. A few visible streams of the Breeze circle around him, standoffish and skimming only over his
clothes, rather than his bare hands or face.

John swallows hard around everything that feels skinned raw in his chest, and closes his eyes all the
way so he can concentrate.

EB: because I keep forgetting to listen to you!

EB: but I think that's a symptom, not the root of the problem.

BE: so?

The Trickster sucks in a clattering, wet breath, and starts laughing to himself. John cracks one eye
open to peek, but all the Trickster does is lean further back on his elbows until he can hit the back of
his head against the floor.

EB: so I stop hearing you when I need you the most.

EB: I stop hearing you when I *hurt* the most.

EB: but I'm still asking the wrong question, right?

BE: then what question do you want to ask?

The Breeze doesn't give John an inch. Not even a teeny tiny hint. It swirls and eddies around in front
of him, completely distinct from the faint remnants of Typhues's breath that permeates every bit of
the air in the palace (no wonder Typhues could follow them so easily), but it doesn't curl in close the
way John misses it doing. He's always had the Breeze in and around him, and the absence *aches*,
maybe even more than the shredded wreck he made screaming with Rage earlier.

Which is…fair. Probably as fair as anything ever is, in this dumb game that is John's life. John closes
his hands, pressing them subconsciously against his stomach, and shuts his eyes all the way again.

EB: I can't push a magic button and fix myself. I can't kill someone and think it'll solve all my
problems.

EB: so, Breeze…please. how do I *start* healing?

BE: well.

BE: as it so happens…I *do* have an answer for that.

A faint touch of wind wisps over John's hands, and then swirls away. John opens his eyes.
The Breeze swooshes down and under the cloth, and spins it away from the object at the edge of the platform. For a second, John sees a mini version of himself pouting between the swirls of the cloth, before it falls away over the edge and the Breeze hovers over a bright blue pipe organ that hooks right into all the pipes in the palace.

BE: I think that you should play your song.

Typheus doesn't budge; he doesn't even say a word when John glances between him and the pipe organ. Gamzee's here now, though - he sits cross-legged with one foot swinging over the edge of the platform, off to one side. He pulls his shadowing hoodie back from his face when John pauses and looks at him, and meets John's eyes with a tired smile. All his arms and legs are in place - it's mostly just his hair that is in dire need of a brush.

John takes two steps toward the pipe organ, his shoes dragging on the floor. The Trickster starts talking - his voice sounds as awful as John's, now, deep and sharp with hate, and John doesn't look at him. "That…haahaaa…that won't solve anything. You're horrible. You're beyond fixing."

Another step, and John's right in front of the array of manuals. There's no sheet music in the stand - but to be fair, John's never played a pipe organ in his life, hasn't played a piano since the last one, and even if he can hear a faint, familiar set of simple notes in his head, that doesn't mean he remembers how to play them. "I - haaaaa - should know. I know better than anyone, I hate you more than anyone," the Trickster says, vehemently.

John looks back over his shoulder, and sees the Trickster has rolled onto his side, oil streaking down from the corners of his mouth and eyes. "Yeah, I know," John says at last, feeling something tighten in his chest. "I need to work on hating myself less." He uncurls his hands, and sets them on the keys. "Goodbye."

Once he starts, the notes come easy. His hands remember how to play, even if John doesn't. It's only those quiet, simple notes at first, and then the song builds on itself. The Breeze pours gently into the pipes, and John can follow it as the wind flows through all the pipes in slow, swelling streams, cleaning out the last of the oil and drawing storm winds along into its wake as the music reaches the uppermost pipes and fills the sky above. John's shoulders hunch and start to shudder, and he bends his head - he doesn't have any music to follow, so it doesn't matter that he can't see through the tears. A few drops land on the keys, but most of it just soaks his face. It's raining somewhere else, he thinks, and hiccups out a laugh through the heavy weight in his throat. He leans a little too hard on the keys as the song goes on, but the sound comes through clear - pipe organs work different than pianos, and he's never been more grateful.

It drifts to an end. When John lifts his hands and steps away, the Trickster has grown into a tree. One of the cyan ones from outside, veined and splotched with discolored black streaks, with stunted branches that reach up toward the ceiling like pipes, or broken ribs. Most of the chamber looks much the same - vast, glowing trees pushed up through the floor below while John played, and now wrap around the pipes like pale vines; electric blue sparks crackle and pop between the branches of one tree and the next, filling the whole room with humming charge and light. Typheus lays artfully draped between the trees, unfazed by the electrical current, his sea glass eyes reflecting the light as he regards John. Not from above, but on level with John's eyes, though that takes some doing.

TY: Not the method I would have chosen. Growing through that thing has risks of its own.

TY: It was corrupted with too many foreign elements and thoughts. You'll need to sift through them, at some point, or the job's only half done.

John shuffles back from the pipe organ, and tucks his hands into his pockets. Typheus isn't looming anymore; it feels weird, but also...John doesn't feel threatened anymore. Not even a little. Not even
by the teeth. "I'd rather grow through it than pretend it never happened," he says. Then he raises his eyebrows. "Or eat my problems away."

Typhes huffs. John scrunches up his nose, because his denizen's breath is still gross morning breath.

TY: Impudent Heir.

TY: I never said it had to be the Choice I would have made.

TY: The Grist Hoard should be open to you, now.

And just like that, Typhes dips down and under a large tree branch, and begins to wind his way toward the ceiling. Far overhead, a part of the ceiling splits in two, and Typhes slips between the pipes to ascend from the depths of the lair.

John blinks, and then flies after him. The Breeze buoys him up first, but a rush of temperamental, wild storm winds boost him along as well, and John hastily reins them in before he shoots past Typhes. He's gonna need to work on that. "Wait, really? Does that count as the Choice...thing?" he says, giving Typhes a weird look as he weaves his way toward the opening. They pass through the hole in the ceiling of the organ chamber, and into a grand hall with a wide, short pipe in the ceiling that opens onto the courtyard above. Typhes pauses for a moment and squints, sliding around the room instead of immediately slithering out of the lair.

TY: You made it. You'll live with these consequences for the rest of your life.

TY: Try to make it a good one.

TY: The Breeze is yours. Now, I have business to attend to. Go down and empty the hoard.

...That seems weird. It's weird, right? "Wait - where are you going? What are you looking for?" John asks. Something prods at the back of his mind - something that feels like...suspicion. Yeah, definitely a lot of suspicion, here. "Business?"

Typhes noses at a round door of chrysocolla, and snorts hard enough that John's hair flutters and the Breeze smooths it back down with a possessive huff.

TY: Once, I would have said - to rejoin Skaia.

TY: Now? We have been informed on multiple occasions that perhaps we require...legal representation.

It hits John like a hammer. "...No. No way," he says, his eyes widening.

TY: All your planet's inhabitants are en route to that gate, correct?

He answers on auto-pilot, still shocked, and only realizes his mistake too late. "Yeah, but -" Typhes nods his enormous head, and starts prying up the disc of polished crystal. "Typhes?! Typhes, where are you going?!

Typhes tilts his head around and bares his teeth in a hungry grin.

TY: Sounds like you already know, Heir.

TY: But you are officially no longer my problem, and I am no longer yours.

TY: So stop following me.
TY: Come out. I know you're there.

The denizen digs his claws behind the disc, and pops it out of its frame. A flood of yellow salamanders pours out in a tidal wave - thousands of them, John thinks, his eyes boggling even more, and all of them fidgeting hyperactively and popping bubbles in their mouths as they flail over each other to stay upright. An entire sprinkle - nay, hoard of fireflies rushes out, twinkling all over. John would swear one of them is blinking in Morse code, but honestly, it's just. So much to take in. His jaw drops, and he smacks one hand to his cheek. "They're alive!” he says, a little too loudly - it sets off a cough in his hoarse throat.

Then the nearest salamanders finish flopping upright, glubbing furiously - and start hopping up and down. Having several thousand salamander consorts wave at you is…an experience, but John snaps out of his amazement in time to give a friendly wave back.

One of the salamanders faints. Which sets off a hundred more. Whoops.

The fireflies sprinkle around Typheus in waves and trace light all around him in a glittering cloud, and the denizen raises his tattered wings to hoist himself up through the final pipe.

TY: Hmph. Come along, Lampyridae, Salamandridae. There is nothing left for you here.

Typheus breathes out one last wind, heavy and stuffy and gross, and it shovels all the salamanders up in a yellow wave. A few of them flail their way free and bounce off the denizen's looping coils, but Typheus smacks them back into the air with his lower sets of wings. Before John can stop them Typheus hauls the entire population of LoWaS up into the clear, damp air and snakes his way up into the sky.

"Tyheus! What kind of legal representation?!!" John shouts, distractedly, as he follows the denizen. The sky's perfectly clear, and the air smells of damp soil and growing things. The walls of the palace are overgrown with more vast, electric trees, as though every single one growing on LoWaS burst into vigorous, electrical growth while John played down below.

TY: One who was recommended to me as a being of some significance among your kind.

TY: Farewell, my Heir.

And then, with a rush of speed, Tyheus winds away into the dark of the Medium, a pale streak of white with a crown of lightning bugs, and yellow salamanders bobbing in his wake.

…He looks totally ridiculous. One single firefly drifts down, meandering in circles around John's head with its butt flickering contentedly, and John holds up a finger for it to land on.

And then he takes out his phone.

-

EB: dave!
TG: john oh thank shit youre alive
EB: you know how you have been harassing all the denizens you meet about retirement and salaries and vacation time and stuff?
TG: well yeah
TG: just met hephaestus and echidna in person to give them the whats what
TG: shits sad eb they dont even get health care
EB: i think you just sicced tyheus on the arks because he's looking for legal representation.
EB: and he's taking all my salamanders with him!
TG: dude holy shit
EB: there is like no way in which this ends well!
EB: who in the name of your bro's dumb buttpuppets did you recommend to him?!
TG: oh
TG: oh no
TG: oh my god
EB: what?!
TG: hes going to steal former president barack obama

After he empties the grist from the hoard - it's a pile of inedible fruit gushers, basically, swaddled up in fancy schmancy names like Quartz and Mercury and Cobalt and Shale and - rudely - Tar -

Gamzee doesn't say much, until the two of them get back to the surface of LoWaS and put some distance between them and Typheus's empty lair. He lurks behind John, who catches him peering over his shoulder a couple times, and every time John tries to nudge him alongside, the troll falls back, silent and watchful. Up above, they fly over a barely recognizable landscape: all the trees have grown, spreading wide and twining together in an interlaced network of lightning-fueled branches, that crisscross the blue earth and cover the craggy cliffs and canyons with flexible boughs that reach toward the clear, dark sky. Their roots have sunk deep into all the riverbeds and lakes and oceans that Typhone's storm temporarily filled with oil, and drunk them dry, leaving only a thick bed of mushrooms glittering in between the trees and the bright chunks of crystal that thrust out of the earth. It's hard to even retrace their flight - John was pretty lost in his head while driving the Trickster to the palace, and the landscape really is hard to recognize when it all glows.

But eventually, they find the village again.

And they find the body.

John shakes off his weird mood - Gamzee's quiet was infectious - and smiles at Gamzee as hard as he can, chanting act normal, act normal in his head. "Uh. Sorry. You can get back to Karkat and the others, now. I think pretty much everything's wrapped up here! I'll come help in a bit!"

Gamzee just gives him a look. Not a judgy look, but one that says, quite clearly, 'nah.' "You got unfinished business," Gamzee says, his voice steady and level in a way that's really weird, for him. He looks at John, and looks too deep, and this time John's the one who shies away from eye contact.

"Kind of. I guess." He doesn't know what he's doing here. He didn't know, even while they were flying over here. The Trickster grew into some weird metaphor bullshit tree, but Da- John's handler is just a pallid white body on the ground, all the oil sucked out of his veins and his skin more alive-looking than it was when he was still up and moving. That makes it worse. He looks like a body-bodied now, instead of one of the Trickster's horrible, plastic jokes, and that makes it real. At least his dad's body bled actual blood, before, which made it worse/better.

Nothing about this is okay.

"Then you just be doing what feels right in your pump biscuit, brother," Gamzee says, and hangs back a step while John thinks it over.

Finally, John raises a hand and calls the Breeze as a tornado to drill into the ground. He picks the only open spot left in the village, since uprooting one of the trees would feel wrong, and keeps
drilling with a perfectly flat expression. His eyes start to ache with the effort of holding them dry and open, but he manages it by unfocusing his gaze and staring into the middle ground, at one of the empty mail pipes outside the nearest salamander house, and pretending that it's happening to another person. It leaves his chest hollow again, and he has to keep shifting his eyes so they won't tear up, but soon he's got a deep hole dug into the ground, and no more excuses to put off looking at his father.

"I tried to ignore him, because I didn't know how to deal with him anymore. With how much he hurt me," comes out of his mouth, without permission - but once John starts, Gamzee tilts his head to the side in silent acknowledgement, and John doesn't stop the rest from pouring out. He doesn't know if he could. "And now he's dead, and I guess now I can't ever try to figure out -"

What I did? What was different? Why he didn't love me this time around -

He chokes on something horrible that isn't oil, and has to start again a few times. He laughs without any mirth. "I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't have ever wanted to contact him again, or anything like that. I didn't even want to see him now. He was never really my dad, here, but…now I'm stuck remembering that he used to be different. That before the scratch, he was - Dad. And I'll never even get that option, ever again. So."

His voice wobbles at the end. He runs out of words to string together into sentences that mean something. All things considered, it's probably not a very good speech. It just makes John feel heavy and sluggish inside.

Gamzee doesn't say anything. John raises a hand and nudges the body ever so slightly to the left, and lowers it in. The Breeze swirls the dirt back over his dad of its own accord, without waiting for John to say so and that's - that's fine. That's good. John's swallow gets interrupted by something convulsing in his chest, and he ducks his head, talking fast before he loses the ability to. "You should d-definitely go. I just need a sec -"

"Nah." Gamzee hugs John from behind, his arms wrapped around his waist, and leans a cool cheek against the side of John's face. It feels like John's whole body's burning, and his face feels hot and miserable as it starts to screw up in a sob. "Everything else can keep for a spell longer. When you're good and ready."

- So they stay for a spell.

Until he's ready.

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x

Jade lands on Skaia right as a shudder runs through the planet - or maybe through everything - she thinks, as she blinks and plants her feet on the ground to keep her balance. Spades hits slightly harder on his back, since Jade's mostly focused on keeping herself steady in the middle of the shockwave, and comes up hissing and stabbing. Sooo she confiscates that knife (temporarily) until the quake eases off and the chessboard ground beneath her stops rattling with loose pebbles. Shading her eyes, Jade looks up, searching the sky for clues as to what latest kerfluffery is going on past LoLaR. The layered, chess-patterned tendrils that ring Skaia's outer atmosphere obscure some of the view, and a bunch of bright, over-saturated blue and white clouds block out another huge chunk, and for a sec Jade feels some tingly nostalgia. Apart from the Möbius net of tendrils, the sky from here looks a lot
like Earth's. The same shade of blue as a clear summer day. Even though gigantic rifts and craters scar the surface of the planet itself - Jade skipped most of the descent to be speedy about it - the weather seems just fine here. For a second, Jade tilts her head to the side and eyes the clouds, in case they feel like giving out some last-minute tips.

But nah. Black and white strings that look kiiinda familiar flicker inside the clouds, but scratchy stuff in the sky doesn't tell Jade anything she doesn't already know. Namely, that this game is a little dumb, and a lottle broken.

SS: Where is she?!

Spades scrambles to his feet, a fresh knife already in his claw as he sizes Jade up with an accusatory blink. He could try to hit her, but honestly, Jade's gonna develop a sixth sense for impending stab wounds with this guy around, and she's not afraid to yoink all his pointy stuff if he pushes her.

He's right, though. These are the closest coordinates the Condesce could give Jade, with some adjustment for Jade's own space sense when they reached Skaia, but all Jade sees is a super beat up hunk of junk that probably used to be an escape pod, and a smashed-up cathedral that used to sport Prospit colors. The escape pod looks worse off than the cathedral by a lot - maybe it used to be space worthy, but the impact reduced it to its component parts, so that there's just a bunch of metal panels and screws and busted engines laying around like an escape pod-shaped modern art display. "Wow, they really did a number on this thing..." Jade says, folding her arms behind her back and tapping a foot against one of the dismantled engines.

SS: What? They barely banged it up. There isn't even a real crater.

Spades crouches and shuffles up to one of the panels, prods it with a claw, and bares his teeth in a grimace.

SS: Dammit, they musta landed ages ago –

Jade pulls a face at him, rolling her eyes. "It can't have been that long ago! We barely just came through -"
SS: Time is broken as shit, and you're still pushing that line?

SS: Nah. Time was already wonky if you went from Derse to Prospit the wrong way – the disconnect is only gonna get more and more fucked.

SS: Stupid piece of shit glorified checkerboard can't even hold herself together anymore.

With that, Spades knocks the panel away and stalks toward the cathedral. Jade bounces after him, and spreads out her awareness. The space here feels…odd. Not broken! Not the way the Lord of Time keeps breaking reality in a spreading, warping crack as he tangles with Leviathan, but…as though things are too orderly. Like, she can't measure it with 100% accuracy, since she's focused on trying to find the Black Queen, but Jade thinks the nearby castles and fortifications all line up along a golden spiral - which would technically make them super easy to find, especially from above. Jade wonders if Prospitians and Dersites just really like patterns that much, or if the buildings here all came pre-fabricated.

Before they even cross the threshold, a shockwave hits them again, rattling the cathedral and the air, and Spades growls with fury as he claps his claws to his head.

Oh. But it's not an explosion, Jade realizes, eyes widening. It's -

SS: Shit. She already did it.

"No! Don't be so negative -“ Jade starts to snap.

[Reckoning]

- a fraymotif pitched almost too low for her ears to register it. Bec's ears can, though. All of Skaia reverberates with the sound of a million foghorns, followed by a loop of tornado sirens that follow one after the other without end. Jade whines and covers both sets of ears as best she can as the piercing sirens throb in her eardrums, until the volume drops to a background din.

When she cracks an eye open - Jade doesn't remember closing them in the first place! - the air shimmers with echoes. She stands up, a little out of sorts, and shifts Spades's new knife away so she can help him up with a snap of her fingers without getting shanked. For a sec, she sees two - no… four? seven? - copies of the cathedral layered over each other, each damaged in slightly different ways and one perfectly whole, like the template from which a hundred - yeah, at least a hundred - other cathedrals came. The shimmer refuses to clear up, no matter how hard Jade mashes her palms against her eyes and tries to blink it away, and when Spades gets up out of his defensive crouch, his carapace looks ultra crisp at the edges. Stuff at a distance echoes, but up close he looks almost too clear. Like…like she's watching something on an HD TV screen that's too HD, so everything looks and moves like a crappy soap opera.

Jade looks up at the sky again, but she doesn't have to: the defense spirographs blaze and bloom in her space sense like new-formed suns in a ring around Skaia as the Reckoning begins.

Well. It was worth a shot! Jade can't fault them for optimism - it's all she's got left. Spades doesn't even look devastated - just peeved, which is, like, his default setting. She floats through the echoing air, and concentrates on the figures standing in the courtyard of the ruins to prevent her space sense from flying out and following the spirals outward to encompass all of Skaia, the whole Medium.

The Black Queen stands with her claws folded around a white scepter, and scowls an extra special scowl for Spades. An extra layer of black armor plating mantles her shoulders and extends down her back in sharp ridges. A safe-ish distance to the side, a Grey Protector - or maybe White King? -
gazes at Jade with clear eyes, his claws folded together over his chest in a way that kinda mimics the Black Queen's.

BQ: Spades. Witch.

BQ: What did you hope to accomplish by coming here?

She talks without using her claws, which is always strange; the scepter acts like a microphone and helps fill the air with the BQ's presence, but it doesn't seem like the scepter's necessary. The Black Queen doesn't need the scepter to intimidate people - she does that just fine on her own! For all his bluster in insisting they get here, Spades doesn't even try to wade into the Black Queen's radius. He looks bitterly pissed off, but Jade suspects he wouldn't even be able to get close.

Jade probably can. Which is an interesting thought, but not something she's particularly interested in testing out. They're already on the clock here! The Reckoning is happening, and she needs to bounce back to the ark ships ASAP. It would've been nice if the Black Queen waited until after the fleet escaped through the gate, but since when do they get to have nice things? Jade huffs, wanting to lash a tail that she's not sure she has, and says, "You're gonna hit the ships! We need those!"

BQ: I'm fully aware. I don't care. There are no gates without a Reckoning.

BQ: You're welcome.

Then she bends her head toward the White King with a stiff neck, and the atmosphere in the courtyard shifts. The hostility baking the dry air around the Black Queen ratchets up a few degrees, on the very edge of homicidal, and Jade stiffens. The White King weathers it without a flinch.

BQ: Take him, if you want. He's irrelevant, now, and irrelevancy is...

WK: Then we shall b-

BQ: Do not.

BQ: If you're so concerned about your people, then go.

The White King lowers his hands with a wistful crease to his eyes, and then walks around the Black Queen, giving her a politely wide berth. He rests one broad claw on the arched entrance to the courtyard and bows his head for a moment before coming to a halt on Jade's other side. Hostility radiates off the BQ to the point that Jade bristles and flicks her canine ears back, rigid and tense, part of her lip curling back in a snarl. Spades curses and backs away from her, but the White King puts a careful claw over the part of Jade's hand that flexes and boils with galaxies.

WK: We must rejoin the exodus. You need not worry - our meteor pilots are well versed in navigating the Reckoning, but your ships may require assistance.

His voice sounds very grave, but very calm at the same time. Jade reels it in and tamps down the green fire crackling along part of her shirt as she tears her eyes away from the Black Queen's aggressive stare. Try me, that stare seems to challenge her, but nope! Jade's not falling for that one! If the Black Queen wants a fight, she can get it from someone else. "We can definitely stop off on the meteors!" she agrees, shaking her shoulders one last time. If the Black Queen needs to get anywhere after she's done with the Reckoning, Jade guesses that'll be up to her. Orrr Jade will come pick her up, if she asks. Reluctantly. The Queens do have access to the group memo, even if they hardly ever use it.

WK: Our thanks. We shall boldly go where no one has gone before. But - ah.
The White King closes his eyes, and then clears his throat.

GP: Not as a monarch.

BQ: Pathetic.

Overhead, something goes *spang*, and a burst of lightning sours space up above. The knot in Jade's shoulder throbs, and her hands snap out to snag Spades and the GP at the same time, ready to jump. Jack Noir's been an ugly blip on her radar that she's *trying* to ignore, since Equius filled the space immediately adjacent to Prospit with a blinding amount of void, but Noir's aura abruptly cuts through all that. Augh, doesn't that guy know when to quit?! Jade doesn't even know what he's after anymore, apart from trying to kill people.

WQ: [Cancelocution]

And just like that, the destructive outburst of space power overhead cuts off; Jade can barely sense anything near Prospit for a solid five seconds. It's not Equius's voidy thing - more like the sickening crackle of Noir's powers just...shuts up. She stares, even though she knows she can't really see anything physically through the clouds from here. Not something involving Space, but something - someone - *powerful* just arrived and counteracted Noir; Jade can hear the clamoring of hounds, or maybe bells.

BQ: Now. That would be my cousin-queen. Go away.


Spades jerks his arm out of Jade's grasp and marches forward with gritted teeth. "Uhhh," Jade says, in her best display of rhetoric all day, but when she reaches out to snap Spades out of the Black Queen's reach, she hesitates. The shorter carapacian stomps over the invisible line where the BQ's hostile aura of intimidating-ness turns palpable and keeps going, while the Black Queen glares down at him with a raised chin.

She doesn't bend a single inch, even when Spades starts climbing her like a prickly tree. Her claws clench harder on the scepter, hard enough that Jade hears tiny *plinks* as the shell of her knuckles cracks under the strain, but Spades just claws his way up her armor and bites her face.

Carapacians do that a *liiittle*, teeny tiny bit more literally than regular kismeses do. Jade winces and covers her mouth in reflexive sympathy pain. Seething shadows writhe under the Black Queen's feet as she angles her head to bite-kiss him back, and Spades rakes his claws down her neck and back plating.

Jade coughs really loudly when Spades flings a leg around the Queen's waist, switches to gnawing on her neck, and doesn't appear inclined to hop off. That seems to snap the Black Queen out of it, at least - which is a major relief! - and she wrenches her mouth away from Spades's before blasting him off her with a shockwave of force. It's not as strong as earlier, but it still knocks Spades on his butt, and he gnashes his teeth as he staggers back upright. Blood trickling from the fresh chips in her mouth, the Black Queen stays utterly still, her expression regal and sneering and the tiniest bit - exhausted? Pained? Jade can't quite peg that last one!

BQ: Get you hence, and trouble me no more.

SS: You're a real piece o' work, you know that?

BQ: Tch. If you think you could have resisted the urge to start the Reckoning after tearing the scepter from my claws, you're even more naïve than I ever imagined.
BQ: Go away, Spades. You make me tired.

SS: You make me - ugh -

After picking himself off the ground, Spades licks the blood off his mouth - a lot more of it looks like his than the Black Queen's, judging by how the deep the bite marks go on his chin, but the blood trickles back into the marks like a Karkat-y thing.

Then, right as he starts to give the Queen backtalk, he vomits without any warning or heaving. A tiny ‘eep!’ escapes Jade, more out of surprise than anything, while Spades tilts his head forward and lets the throw up drool out of his mouth. Some of it still lands on his clothes, and he stumbles back with a woozy look. Okay, Jade's worried now! Alarmed, even.

SS: Bleurgh.

SS: Shit. That's never gonna come out…

He plucks at his own shirt and scowls at the bile, but he's still reeling back - Jade catches him with a hasty burst of green before Spades can topple over. She levitates him back, trying not to jostle him along the way, but Spades finishes spitting and glowers at her, his face suddenly shimmery and haggard at the same time.

No. Not just his face, Jade realizes. Everything feels…weird. Echo is the wrong word for it, when it keeps happening in perfect sync. Shimmer is the wrong word for it, when everything around her is outlined with unnatural clarity. "What's wrong with him?" she demands, her lips pursed with suspicion as she glares at the Black Queen. Then - "Wait…what's wrong with you?"

The Black Queen's shoulders buckle, like something presses down on her with immense, unseen weight. Her grip on the scepter never falters, even for an instant, but she really does look exhausted by the sheer amount of restraint she's exerting.

This…this is her level of hostility toward Spades - toward all of them - when she's controlling herself with an iron fist? Holy crap. Jade double-checks the Black Queen's claw, just to remind herself that the Queen doesn't have a ring claw, and doesn't have a ring to wear - there's just a ragged, weeping scar there that drips more blood down the dark lines of the Queen's talons as she towers over them all.

BQ: Do you know what I should do? I should rain ruination down upon your pathetic ships full of doomed, irrelevant cargo.

BQ: I should redirect every meteor here for the express purpose of annihilating them, and then smash this pathetic excuse for a Battlefield into a shattered pulp.

BQ: I should crack Skaia open all the way, and let that awful thing end this here and now.

BQ: I should rip him apart.

BQ: Not doing so is. Harder than I anticipated.

And suddenly the hostile tension straining the air curls back in on itself. Jade lets out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, while the Black Queen flexes and refolds her claws over the scepter with a deliberate inhale. She trembles with the effort of not lashing out and looks close to throwing up herself with the effort required to reign - heh - herself in, and Jade marvels at it for a second. "So why aren't you?" she asks, fascinated.
BQ: Because it's what Skaia wants. Here, especially, her will echoes. She wants paradoxes loops resolved. She wants doomed things scoured away. She wants everything to proceed in an...ha! In an orderly fashion.

BQ: She doesn't get what she wants. Not this time.

If that doesn't deserve a hug, Jade isn't sure what *does*. Buuut a hug wouldn't go over well with the Black Queen at the best of times, let alone now - not when the Black Queen trembles with the effort of not knocking them all flat. Jade takes a half-step forward before checking herself, her eyes widening with dawning realization, but she just restricts herself to a smile that feels like it might burst her cheeks. "Thank you!" When the Black Queen breaks her stern, regal glare to stare at Jade like she's talking nonsense, Jade adds, "Really! Even if you let some of the meteors come at us, thank you anyway! I don't really know you all that well, but - yeah!"

Saying thanks not only helps satisfy some of the gratitude swelling in Jade's chest; it makes the Black Queen look distinctly uncomfortable, like she just swallowed a slimy frog sandwich at a fancy restaurant and wants to hoark it back up in a napkin to save face.

BQ: I'm not doing it for you. I don't care about any of you.

SS: …Well, I'll be damned. You're a liar.

SS: You've gone soft! You're squishy!

The Black Queen backhands Spades from twenty feet away with a slap of force, and Jade lunges forward to snap him like a rogue football before he can catapult backward into the nearest crevasse. Jade can sense the trajectory he would have taken, and the Black Queen has very good aim.

BQ: Go. My patience is gone.

"Okay, okay!" Jade snags Spades around the neck in a headlock, which sets off a fit of kicking that prevents him from opening his mouth and making more smartbutt comments to get them creamed by a super annoyed Queen. Under her breath, she adds, "Jeez louise," and then zaps them out and away, bypassing Prospit's void field entirely and hauling butt toward the carapacians' fleet.

Jade lands on the *Battleship Condescension* just in time for the Condesce's trident to nearly nick her nose. That one's probably on Jade - it looks like the Condesce was busy giving a speech, complete with grand trident flailing for emphasis, which Jade interrupts without really caring. Speeches come after inbound meteor bombardment in her mind! "Lots of incoming!" Jade says, over the Condesce's 'cod dammit,' and then she shoos Spades toward the spot where Ms Paint sits on a super out of place red swivel chair by the hatch entrance of the ship. Spades wobbles for a second; he still wears a puke-y kind of look, but it clears after a few seconds. If he goes below decks with Ms Paint, whoever he stabs is nott Jade's problem.

She's got serious business to take care of, here. According to her space sense and her plain old eyeballs, the fleet here made a smidge of progress while Jade was gone - but only a smidge. They're coasting along at a cool couple of hundreds of thousands of miles an hour, but they still have a ways to go, and not a lot of time to do it in. Jade checks on the Lord of Time really quick, but most of her attention gets sucked in by the millions of tons of space rock that just decided hey! You know what would be fun? Shooting out of orbit at top speed instead to be giant butts. Trying to measure the mass and acceleration of some of these bad boys nearest them makes Jade wince at the logistics; having *all* of them streak toward Skaia at once feels like staring down a hundred gun barrels while...
they fire. "Some of those are gonna be Texas-sized," she says, equal parts awed, wondering whether she should ask Dave if he wants to name one of them 'Literally Texas,' and worried. "Do you guys have anything that can handle that?"

"Wave got the firepower, but somefin that big'll smack us with a debris field more than a thousand kilometers wide if we blow it up," the Condesce says, lowering her specibus with a stern, haughty pout. She glitters all over, and even as Jade floats beside her, yet another of the Condesce's entourage hurries over with an entire bowlful of gold and pink glitter to apply liberally along the fuchsia lines of her skintight suit. Someone sprinkled her hair, too, while Jade was gone - and that's a heck of a lot of hair! "These guppies can handle a little debris if we plough through it with the psionics burning hot, but we'll start losin' shit I ain't happy about losing."

And Jade can't just kick all the ships through the Gate. Or...maybe she could get them close, but Jade can feel her body ache just thinking about the raw power she'd need to shove so many enormous space ships full of people whose atoms she can't afford to mix up in rapid succession. With Bec's help she has the power and focus to move them one at a time - probably - but she's not sure she can do it without bursting at the seams again, and she doesn't know if she could put herself back together enough to be useful if someone needs help afterward.

Plus, the urge to go through the Gate herself is...really strong! Jade's surprised at how distracting it is! Maybe it makes sense, since Calliope is a Muse of Space and all, but Jade can't afford to cross over just yet. Even if there is no place like home... "Right!" Jade says; she mashes her temples with her knuckles for a second to keep from getting transfixed by the Gate again. "I'll bounce what I can." Then she stops for a second to mull something over, and looks at the Condesce. "...Can I have some glitter, by the way?"

What? It doesn't hurt to ask!

There must be something glowy in the glitter - the Condesce shimmers against the dark of the Medium, fuchsia and gold and bone white teeth. "Finally! Someone in fish fam who asks for war glitter when she needs it!" she announces to the cluster of trolls around them, and an encouraging round of applause breaks out before two of them sprint back toward the hatch. The Condesce slings an arm around Jade's shoulders with a tiny jump to reach Jade's floating height, smacking a kiss on Jade's cheek with hopefully sealed lipstick. "If you see my gill, you need to talk some sense into her -"

LV: IT'S NOT ENOUGH. NOT NEARLY ENOUGH.

LV: I REQUIRE...MORE.

Jade and the Condesce make the same face at the same time - which would be funny under any other circumstances - and Jade turns them around so they can squint in exasperation back across the Medium, toward Leviathan.

Who is not across the Medium anymore. Not all of it, anyway. Jade didn't even feel it move, but wild tendrils covered in streaks of unhealthy-looking green and purple rings snake around the Medium in a wide, circumscribed arc, stretched long and thin to avoid the pulsating cracks around the Lord of Time. Meteors the size of cities shatter against the outer sides of the rushing tentacles - smaller, faster meteors cut through the gross Horrorterror flesh like bullets, but dissolve into fine dust in a spray of acidic blood on the other side. Squid beak mouths rip out of the ends of the tendrils as they pick up speed and sometimes tear and eat through each other in a lightning-fast frenzy as they lance toward the fleet.

Jade groans and smacks her face.
When she takes her hand away, Leviathan -

- Leviuh - uhhh -

- the whole world's painted in bubbles and pastels, like an underwater cartoon. Botanical drawings of seaweed and coral dance and float in the distance, like they're bits of cardboard taped to popsicle sticks to be used as puppets. For a second, Jade's mind throbs, and she can hear an old cartoon theme song playing in the distance, muffled as though she's hearing it through a wall. A bunch of round, adorably chubby Squiddles bounce from bubble to bubble in synchronized swirls, their tiny :D smiles visible from a distance as they bob through the bright, sunny water to the beat. They're adorable! They want to play! They're -

- not real.

Jade doesn't remember getting whammied as hard as Rose ever was, but the insistent wave of fun! and friends, new friends, come play! that spreads through the illusion blinds her for a split second. It's super effective - but the mass and velocity don't match up with what she can sense outside of her head, and the disconnect jolts her free a half second later. Leviathan tried to make the Squiddles slow and bouncy and playful, but the contrast between that and the actual velocity of the tendrils riding hard toward the fleet is just too obvious. "Squiddish beach," the Condesce says. She sounds like she's winded, but there's a vicious edge of clarity in her eyes as she glowers at the Horrorterror. "They're mine."

"Remember how I said we had incoming?" Jade says, half-joking. It earns her a grimace.

"Overgrown, rotten, oversalted calamari." The Condesce raises her trident and slams it down against the ship with resounding force, jolting all the dazed trolls around her out of their bewildered stupor. A couple stumble, then slump, their eyes still glassy and lost in Leviathan's coaxing illusion, and the Condesce snarls at them like they've personally offended her. "We're aboat to have a party up here, fam! Up and at 'em!"

Whiiich is Jade's cue. She calculates the trajectories in her head in a split second - the meteors move slower than Leviathan, but only just, and only because she thinks Leviathan cheats and skips through dimensions Jade can't sense when it wants to speed up. The meteors on a collision course with the fleet, Jade can predict with some certainty; Leviathan is a capital-P Problem. "I'll go grab who I can!" she tells the Condesce, already sending out a last call on the group memo for volunteers.

Snorting, the Condesce snaps her claws and every red, spikey gun built into the Battleship rises out of its socket. With some slight delays that make the fuchsiablood mutter under her breath, the rest of the fleet follows suit - Jade feels rather than hears the mechanical whine multiplied hundreds of thousands of times over as laser turrets begin to charge up and take aim. "Take your time, gill," the Condesce says, half-distracted, half-sarcastic, and then Jade's gone -

- GG: hey everyone!
  GG: leviathan is waving hi at the ships with its noodly appendages
  GG: so my help levels have gone up a bit!
  GA: We Are On Our Way.
  GA: Except For Feferi I Guess.
  CC: w){oops! t)(at's rig)t!(
  CC: I will be on LoFaF if anybody needs kelp!
  CA: does this mean i can start blastin things wwith impunity finally
TT: No.
CA: god dammit
TT: Hitting one of the ark ships would result in a significantly higher body count than cracking Cetus's lair like an egg.
TT: I rather not do Leviathan's dark bidding for them, at this juncture.
CA: i havve good aim i swwear
TT: That would be a matter of some debate.
GA: To Be Fair, He Has Not Killed Any Of Us Yet.
GA: Accidentally Or Otherwise.
TT: True. Very true. Would you sign a blood pact to promise not to aim at anyone we know?
CA: goddammit rose wwhy you knoww thats a crock of bullshit
GG: ill come give you guys a lift the rest of the way!
GG: anybody else?
TG: me and karkat are apparently doomed to make toothy snake babies together for the rest of our lives
CG: DAVE.
TG: yes dude
CG: SHUT THE FUCK UP.
GC: 1 SH4LL COM3 4ND 4SS1ST! >:]
GC: 1 C4N'T S33 MUCH S1GN1F1C4NT FOR M3 TO DO H3R3...
GC: BUT TH3 4RK SH1PS R33K OF TURQUO1S3 UNT4PP3D POT3NT14L!
GG: i'll take your word for it!
GG: gamzee? john?
TG: they're alive but i mean at what cost
TC: NOT MOVING YET.
TC: but we'll be along :o)
GG: then i'll be there to pick up everyone in two shakes!
GG: last call?
CT: D -- Prospit took damage
CT: D -- Also there is something trying to get into our heads; it is making me angry
CT: D -- I am STRONGLY opposed to going c100ser to Skaia
GG: …
TT: Vriska's absence is such a subtle thing, isn't it.
GG: she normally would call us all suuuuuuuuper dum8 and incompetent by now :P
AA: me and sollux are occupied for a spell
AA: the fight with noir should be done soon
AA: but we two will still be occupied :) 
GG: cool beans!

- 

First, she grabs Rose and Kanaya and Eridan - they were already on their way to LoFaF with Feferi, and Jade zeroes in on them with pinpoint accuracy. "Gotcha!" A quick wave for Feferi, who waves back, and then Jade sweeps her along for the ride, too, everyone in a merry chain as she arrows down toward LoFaF to snag Terezi. Something humungous shifts in the Forge as Jade reappears just over the fiercely growing jungle, but no time! Terezi reaches up with one claw, her fierce smirk quirking up higher on one corner of her mouth as Jade obligingly smacks her with a high five to swap her out for Feferi. "And!" The jump back to the fleet - a couple hops, still, but Jade's getting so much practice crossing the Medium that at this rate they're all gonna smear together into one flood of movement -

"Back!" Jade finishes, snapping her fingers on both hands as Rose, Kanaya, Eridan, and Terezi
come back together into people-shapes rather than component particles. Every one of them hits the deck a little harder than Jade intended, and her eyebrows snap together in a frown. Everything she does has a little more oomph to it than she's used to, but she'd expected it to have smoothed out by now - oorr else -

In the maybe ten seconds she was gone, a bunch of new people have joined the Condesce on the deck; a goldblood heaves himself out of the hatch as Jade blinks and takes it all in, and he scowls at anyone who tries to help him up as he levitates via psionics. His horns look weirdly familiar. A blueblood towers beside the Condesce, but that's all Jade can make out because the troll is a walking black hole of void. Urgh - which means Jade needs to work around her, or risk splinching somebody mid-teleport with the unexpected pockets of void now obscuring parts of the deck and the surrounding Medium. Fun fun. "My crew," the Condesce says off-handedly, flicking her hair over her shoulder with a claw.

Eridan makes a sound like he's gargling his own spit in his gills, which can't be fun, and hunches his shoulders defensively as he looks anywhere but directly at the Condesce. Kanaya straightens so much she reaches peak 'rigidly formal' while her stance widens, and her intense, guarded stare when her eyes land on the fuchsiablood would probably shoot lasers if lasers were a thing that Kanaya could do.

Terezi's the one who steps forward, leans right into the Condesce's personal bubble, and inhales sharply through her nose like a scent connoisseur. Like a Terezi, basically. The Condesce puts up with it for exactly two seconds before leaning back away from Terezi, one eye narrowed more than the other as she eyeballs Terezi back. "Heheh. You smell like gold glitter liqueur and the sea," Terezi says, by way of greeting - Jade thinks she's literally inhaling glitter, with how much wafts off the Condesce when she moves.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Rose adds, before the Condesce can respond. Jade does a double take - she yoinked everyone here at top speed, without paying attention apart from making sure they were all intact and not-bleeding.

Even with Leviathan muttering and susurrating right around the corner, Rose glows like she's lit from within. It's different from the aura of power they sometimes get when using their powers: Rose holds a crystal needlekind loose in her fingers, with the quiet, discreet assurance of someone who knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that she won't drop it. Heavy smudges from makeup that ran something fierce underscore her pale eyes where Kanaya's handkerchiefs apparently didn't cut it, but she radiates confident readiness instead of exhaustion, and it makes something swell in Jade's chest to see Rose looking...exorcised. Like she went for a nice walk in the rain, and came back hollowed out but refreshed and alive.

Having her here is the next best thing to having Dave or John or both here. Heartened, Jade beams at Rose until Rose blinks and looks at her - and then Rose smiles back, a little bit lopsided at one corner but with wide, clear eyes.

The Condesce interrupts a perfectly good girl smiling at girl moment, of course. "I can't tell if you've brought me help, or sass," she says, her acerbic voice pitched to carry as she shoulders past her giant blueblood friend.

Jade shrugs. "...Both?"

"Oh, most definitely both," Rose agrees, with an even drier smile.

"This is sauce." With a hmph, the Condesce spins on her dangerously pointy heel and walks toward the Leviathan-facing side of the deck like an angry troll runway model about to stab her rival in the
foot. Which is a weirdly specific simile to use, but the Condesce is just...like that. Kanaya dips her head slightly toward Rose, and something silent passes between them, but Rose doesn't make a move to follow the Condesce forward; her new needlekind begins to radiate golden light, and Eridan scrambles to shake off his uncomfortable sulk in time to participate. Up and down the fleet, Jade can feel the wave of motion as whatever guards the Condesce smacked out of their Horrorterror daze brace all at once.

A troll with yellow eyes races up to Jade at the last second, a pot of silver glitter clutched close to his chest. It's a liiiittle late to get creative with it, so Jade just takes it and dumps it over her head like she's her own fairy godmother. Eridan gives her a weird, desperate look, and Terezi whips around and zeroes in on Jade with laser-like focus, but it's too late! All the glitter is hers, now.

"Tear the beach apart," the Condesce says, idly inspecting her own claws, as the first turrets fire on Leviathan.

Jade plots out the trajectory of every meteoroid near them, and starts dropkicking them toward Leviathan. Moving one of the state/province/small country sized ones sounds like a fun way to kick off the day. The best part is, Jade doesn't even need to expend a whole bunch of energy to do it - she picks out a few smaller meteors and spends a quick flurry of teleports and power bursts knocking them into collision courses with the Texas-sized one so that the collective force of the impacts does the work for her, like a huge game of billiards. These meteors go so fast as they zoom toward Skaia that all Jade has to do is redirect them and they break the scary-large ones down with bone-buzzing crashes! Easy peasy. A disturbingly Florida-shaped chunk of meteor pinwheels past the fleet by a narrow margin - Jade doesn't try to mess with it, because when she thinks 'disturbingly,' what she really means is that it might very well be proto-Florida, about to slam through a gate to mess up the Gulf Coastal Plain's day some 50 odd million years ago. Jade shunts most of the resulting scarred, shattered chunks of rock toward Leviathan, along with a bunch of intact meteors small enough for her to juggle with minimal extra effort, because Leviathan deserves it. Plus, stuff that hits Leviathan doesn't hit the fleet, and Jade doesn't have to worry about them spinning off toward LoFaF or Skaia.

Some of them are too small to bother with, though. Jade jumps through the incoming barrage and fans out her awareness to catch any more ridiculously large meteors that might lurk in the dark of the Veil, but planet-killing asteroids seem rare among the hundreds of thousands of smaller meteors that streak above and around Jade on all sides. She flips around to look back at the fleet when she starts to near the outer edge of the meteors - the place where the thin remnants of the Veil hang back, stationary, like cold rock sentinels on the very brink of the Gate. Behind Jade, she can see the Battleship Condescension charging through the salvo of small-to-mediumish meteors like a spikey red tank, while a bunch of the small ships soar around to fire at either Leviathan's noodle arms or the large meteors that come too close for comfort. The impacts shake and rattle the ship something fierce, but there are clear shields to deflect the dust and debris. Almost everyone's busy fighting off Leviathan, and after one last check for super big meteors, Jade uses a flare of green power to teleport a nice chunk of meteor butt along with her, then whips it around at Leviathan's near arm before it can wrap around Kanaya. It's a gross, insectoid tentacle, too, with stingers and teeth and bristles, and Kanaya jumps away from the grabby end, raises her chainsaw, and cleaves through the jointed point in the armor. Then - yikes! - it sprouts three more tendrils in a burst of acidic blood, and Jade scoops Kanaya out of the way to land on the Battleship again. Kanaya nods and then takes off toward the tendrils again with a grim expression; Jade rolls her eyes, and zaps in place so she can cup her hands together and give Kanaya a boost when she jumps back into the fray. "We're holding up okay?" she asks Rose, instead, since Rose stands on the very tip of one of the Battleship's curved horns, and seems less likely to be distracted from firing spells if Jade strikes up a conversation than Kanaya and Terezi, who are taking turns hacking and stabbing Leviathan with extreme prejudice wherever they
Rose casts a bolt of light through her needlekind, and it punctures one of Leviathan's dumb extra eyes. "Surprisingly so. Leviathan's very distracted," Rose says, raising a hand to wave off the next troll to offer her more glitter. "Or perhaps it's worse off than I thought. I wasn't sure before who would win in a contest between the Lord of Time and Leviathan, but I think at this point the odds are in the Lord's favor." The last part she adds in a low murmur, her forehead wrinkled in Rose's patented look of Deep Deliberation. "Splitting its attention to come raid us wouldn't normally impact a Horrorterror's processing ability. The bulk of their hivemind should be located in the Furthest Ring, but Leviathan isn't channeling itself through proxies anymore. It's here. And I think it's losing."

"Well, good!" Jade says, then catches herself. "Er, actually, I'm not sure who we were rooting for, there..." This is what she gets for showing up late to the party! Which bad guy would they rather fight after the Lord of Time and Leviathan finish beating each other up? If there was a poll in the memo, Jade missed it.

"We root for us," Kanaya calls, as she punches a tentacle away.

Which is both the answer Jade should have expected, and also the best one. "Works for me!" she calls back, cheerfully, and then flings herself back into the fray. A squidlike offshoot of gooey horrormatter tries to cut one of the gunships that has broken formation and started shillyshallying toward Leviathan like a piece of mobile, wiggly jello - Jade wreathes herself in green fire and kicks through the squidding hot and fast, so that all its gross gunk burns off before it can touch her. A wiggle in her brain alerts her to the fact that Leviathan just knocked another meteor onto a collision course with one of the foremost ark ships, and Jade dissolves into space and drops onto the meteor with both feet so it curves under the fleet in a wobbly arc before pelting off in a straight line toward Skaia. White hot, fizzly light blooms in the peripheral of her left eye, and Jade cartwheels back out of the way as one of Eridan's massive potshots at Leviathan goes wild. She rolls her eyes at the same time, but lets it slide. This time.

When she flips back upright, Leviathan has an eye on her. This doesn't mean much, since Leviathan's got a lot of eyeballs to spare, but Jade gulps and summons a rifle so she can shoot it from a distance. That look made her skin crawl all over. But then another meteor judders into motion, and Jade goes back to playing hot potato by batting more meteors in Leviathan's general direction. They put dents in the Horrorterror's noodly appendages - but the dents just bounce back out, or sprout some new appendages if Jade clips through an arm with enough force to sever it, and really, Jade doesn't know what it takes to beat this thing! She just knows that as long as they can keep Leviathan from overwhelming the minds of the people in the fleet, and get them through the gate - everything will be okay. Or maybe not everything, but enough things!

One of Leviathan's main tentacles rips in two, revealing four long chains of teeth and lines of tiny green eyes, and the new mouth expels a heavy cloud of frothing, shadowy fog-drool. One half of the distended mouth lashes out and easily smacks the Battleship aside like it's a plastic submarine toy bobbing along in a bath tub, instead of a gigantic space ship, and Jade teleports back to bounce the ship back on course from the other side. Not her most precise work, but she puts exactly enough force and spin into it to stop the Battleship from spinning like a top and turning into a vomit comet. "Stop taking the paint off a' my ships, cod dammit!" the Condesce howls from the top of the bridge tower, but it sounds like it's directed at Leviathan rather than Jade. Then the fuchsiablood curses and uses her specibus as a pivot to push off the ship and start stabbing Leviathan's crazy-daisy arms. "What kind of time are we making?"

Again, Jade suspects that the Condesce is talking to someone else - probably with an ear piece - but Jade answers, since she's close by. "Still a little ways off. But we're doing better than expected!" she
reports, as she skims alongside the Condesce and helpfully calls up two fresh riflekind to start shooting the distant end of the mouth, where the skin splits and the tentacle looks thin enough to sever. Terezi races along the other half of the tendril - she doesn't stab anything that doesn't come at her first, but she appears to take extra care to step on any of the bulging eyeballs she can with huge, stomping jumps.

Kanaya and Rose continue to tag team the bundle of writhing tendrils that try to coil around the Battleship, while the horrifically split mouth drifts toward the rest of the fleet. Eridan shoots another bolt of uncontrolled white lightning, and Jade shoots him a stern look. He's trying to recover from his jerky jerk-ish ways, sure, but seriously! Letting Vriska train him even a little bit has not improved his terrible aim at all. Even if Leviathan is a pretty hard-to-miss target, Eridan will find a way. "Just don't jinx it," Eridan says, snarky, which is the kind of thing Dave and Karkat would totally kick his butt for saying.

And sure enough, not a moment later, the black, brackish fog spewing from Leviathan's throat-mouth-tooth tunnel thing turns into heavy ink that rises up into the air and draws a mouthful of broad teeth in a wide not-smile across the Medium.

LV: HOW MANY GODS DOES IT TAKE TO MATCH A LORD?
LV: LET'S FIND OUT.

Then more arms stab out of the base of the tentacle - covered in coarse thorns, with multiple joints that bend in zigzags - and reach out to grab them. Specifically them - the original tendrils continue to coil and weave, trying to break past the fleet's defenses, but the creepy, skittering arms shoot for Jade, for Terezi, for Eridan, for Rose -

An arrow of void darts across Jade's field of vision, blanking out her view of the Medium for a blink (or maybe she just blinks like normal - her eyes are watering with the strain of staying focused on everything around them for thousands of miles) - and Jade bounces to Terezi - then Kanaya - then Eridan - and Rose in a fast push, before hauling them all back to one of the ark ships as Leviathan closes a rippling, knobby fist on the space where they all were. A patch of voidy stuff exploded, taking a huge gunk out of the hand, which buys them some more time. "Oh, it's aiming at us now. Strike 'very distracted' off the record," Rose drawls - Jade grabbed her upside down, whoops - as she shakes her hair out of her face.

"It is stricken," Kanaya says, her voice muffled in Jade's hair. Jade's got them all stuck close to her like she's a people magnet, which means nobody is really upright at the moment.

Eridan peels himself away from the huddle with sheer, desperate hope-strength, and Jade rolls her eyes and lets him. "Why do I open my mouth! Why?!" he says furiously, white sparks of static making his hair stand on end. His power lights up his arms with lightning marks that seem weirdly familiar - Jade wonders why he hasn't summoned his silly hope wandkind thing yet, if channeling his power through his arms looks so painful. Eridan kicks out of the buddyhuddle (not to be confused with tanglebuddyhuddles) and starts shooting rapid-fire bolts of hope magic again, before Jade can catch more than a glimpse of his drained face.

Out of all of them here, he and Rose would normally suffer the most trying to resist grimdark stuff. Even with Equius's accessories helping out, Jade tags Eridan in her head with an inner sigh - she's got a lot of stuff on her plate! - so she'll at least get a heads up if he starts moving erratically. "You're holding up okay?" she asks Rose, as she sets everyone down on their feet. Terezi grumbles something Jade can't make out before she sprints along the wide hull of the ark ship, her eyes alight behind her shades as she scopes out her next angle. Her lips twisted down in a grimace, Kanaya tosses the half-melted, acid-eaten remnants of her latest chainsaw to the side, and draws a fresh tube
of lipstick to rev and hold out to the side as she runs to intercept one of the other gnarled hands.

"I feel remarkably clear," Rose replies, cracking her neck to the side. Then she gestures toward the ship below them and the two beside, mostly with two fingers with a third only making it part of the way up. "But Jade? These three ships are going to need to shift about ten miles to -" Rose grimaces "- that way." She indicates it with a wiggle of her hand that Jade…cannot decipher, for the life of her. Four miles, sure, she can probably bump them hard enough to get them moving. It's 'that way' that's a little…meh.

But Rose's expression is very certain, and her eyes burn with clarity, and Jade thinks she knows the perfect solution. "That's a little vague!" she says, jokingly, and then raises her hand. "Let's do this right."

Rose pauses, and then smiles back. "Oh yes, let's," she agrees, and then clasps Jade's hand as the fraymotif starts to play.

[Awareness Brilliante]

The world bursts into golden light. It's Rose's vision, and this time, when she gestures with her free hand, Jade can see the whorls of light glowing brighter 4.13 miles to their right, a position higher than their current one at about a 35-degree angle. The most fortuitous place for this particular ark ship to be, if they want it to escape Leviathan's encroaching tangles. And there's tons and tons of other, different colored swirls and auras and outlines all around them, a constantly shifting blaze of light - way too much for Jade to sort through with just her eyes. On the other hand, she catches a fleeting impression of Rose turning over Jade's spatial awareness of every single meteor and ship she's mapped out and updating constantly in her brain, complete with potential calculations for where to push and relative velocities and projections for where the meteors might go through the gates and the chaotic hodgepodge of Leviathan's dimensions and the lacuna where Void leaves pockets both of their powers can't quite grasp - and then Rose and Jade lace their fingers together in a mutual agreement to not trade, ever, and Jade follows the clear line of sight Rose pulls to the fore of all the background light. Jade wheels them around and brings Rose along for the ride, and shoves with enough force to knock all three ships into place. It earns them a frustrated shout from one of the psionic guys who've come out to defend the ships, but then a couple other ships fire up their psionic propulsion in earnest and strafe to the side to fall back in line with the ones Jade and Rose shifted. Leviathan writhes forward, still reaching, but falls short again.

This time, when Rose points, it's with a very steady index finger. "A new tentacle is branching up through the interstices – there. Twenty degrees down, but coming straight up under us -"

Still a little imprecise, but much better now that Jade can map out what Rose indicates with ease. "Up and over!" Jade announces, and then spins them out of the way of each person-sized thorn that shoots up under their feet. Eridan drifts over one of the distorted pools unawares, and Jade yells, "Eridan? They're underneath!"

The violetblood mutters something to himself and glare-pouts at Jade. "There's nothing under-" he starts, and Jade sucks in a huge breath, raising her hand to yank him out of the way manually, when Eridan's eyes widen. 'I'm an idiot! We're workin' in three dimensions!' He raises his hands, white light churning between them in a way that makes Jade's Rose-eyes hurt - then fires straight down with a supersized beam of raw hope laser. The distorted patch where the tentacle tries to emerge gets incinerated in seconds, along with anything unfortunate enough to be underneath Eridan for like. Five miles.

"Well, yeah! That's how space tends to work!" Jade yells after him, exasperated, but Eridan rockets off like a shot, abandons any and all sense of aim, and starts chucking huge bursts of lightning at
Leviathan's tentacles from above. A bunch more spindly hands form and stretch toward Eridan with single-minded focus, but none of them can get close before they start to turn crispy.

So he doesn't have to worry about hitting one of the ships anymore. Which is great! But also...one of these days, Jade really needs to take that guy to a firing range and teach him how to shoot in a straight line. Everything reeks of burnt calamari, now. But that's probably a good thing. Probably.

"Problem!" Rose says, sharply, and Jade whips around just in time to see a triangular, barbed hook shoot from one of Leviathan's writhing tangles - and punch through an ark ship halfway down the line. It happens to fast for Jade to do anything but flinch at the sudden shock. "Damn!"

"Ark Defiance is leaking!" the goldblood psionic calls with a hoarse voice, his claws rising to scrape at his horns as he staggers. Down the line, Leviathan's hook begins to reel the ark back in with ponderous tugs - seeing the ark move in such fast jerks sends unpleasant jitters through Jade's stomach. "Ah - Ar- Ark - Kh -"

Swearing, the Condesce backflips off the tentacle she's locked in a stabbing match with, her face one big snarl as she tears down the tendril and back toward "That ain't 'leaking', that's hooked through the helm deck! Stop listenin', they're dead -"

Before she can reach him, the psionic levitates himself with pulsing psionics the same color as Sollux's. "I can reroute them," he says, his voice abruptly flattened out into a dead monotone.

The Condesce tackles him just as he surges forward, pinning him to the deck. "No. They're dead in the water!" she says, grimly; when the goldblood snaps his teeth and lunges up to push her away, the Condesce plants a palm against his face, her eyes hard and glittering with calculations as she surveys her fleet once more. Probably estimating how many she can afford to lose -

"Not if I jump them all the way to the gate!" Jade says; her skin prickles at the thought, but she trades a glance with Rose and sees the same steely resolve there as Rose nods.

That's the trouble with Rose's powers, Jade guesses. Everyone on the fleet should have been doomed and stuck on Earth while the Reckoning rained down. They have the worst luck of pretty much everything in the Medium consolidated right here, and every move Rose makes to make them safer is a tenuous guess based on already super bad luck.

But if they make it to Calliope, all of that baloney means nothing.

"Can you? Why haven't you done it before?" the Condesce demands, cold and heavy as the deep ocean. Her eyes burn, slightly reddish-fuchsia in the yellows with the battle-fury pulsing through her body.

Jade raises her chin. She's not about to be intimidated by the Condesce right now! "I don't know if I can do it for all of them -" she warns instead, mentally sidelining all but the most super important meteor trackers in her head so she can focus on the harpooned ark when they get there. Jade could shove it, probably, and save herself the concentration and raw power of teleporting it wholesale - but the ship would still be adrift and apparently pilot- and engineless, unable to make any of its own adjustments on the spur of the moment.

"It's probably not going to be a sustainable method." Rose holds her hand up, casting an eye between the ark and her hand and the Gate, and Jade can almost feel Rose's estimate as she measures their odds. "But we have to try."

"Borrowing Eridan! Be right back!" Jade calls, broadcasting it via Pesterchum as well so that
Kanaya and Terezi can hear it back near the Battleship over and Leviathan's triumphant shriek. Jade keeps a grip on Rose's hand and jumps them to Eridan. He looks harried, violet-tinged sweat streaking down his pallid face as he looks up at them in instinctive suspicion, but just puts out a claw with a grimace when he sees they're not a tangle.

"Jade, wai-" Terezi calls, her voice small over the distance between them, right as Jade teleports the three of them down the line to Ark Defiance. They're miles and miles and miles away from Terezi now, and Eridan immediately snarls and slices through the sticky, barbed line attaching the hook to Leviathan, so Jade switches entirely to Pesterchum while Rose strides forward to burn the hook itself.

GG: what is it? D:
GC: SH1T. 1 C4N’T S33 – B3FOR3 YOU L3FT, TH3R3 W4SN’T A FL4SH OF SOM3TH1NG WRONG –
GG: oh no!
GG: keep me posted if it gets clearer
GC: NO… 1T W4SN’T YOU. 3XC3PT M4NY POT3NT14L MOM3NTS OF STUP1D L1F3 CHO1C3S, H3R3. >:T
GC: 1 W1SH YOU H4DN’T STOL3N ROS3. >;
GG: i pinky promise!
GC: SOM3TH1NG 1S 4BOUT TO H4PP3N. 4GH! WH4T DO 1 N33D TO CH4NG3?!

"Can you keep them off me while I focus?" Jade calls to Rose and Eridan, as she kneels to lay both hands on the hull of Ark Defiance. As Rose and Eridan work to sear and blast away Leviathan, Jade can feel the gaping hole in the side of the ark ship, the metal wrenched and torn so that entire blocks are exposed to the ambient air of the Medium. At least they don't have to worry about the sudden pressure change sucking everyone out of the hole, like they would've if they were in regular outer space!

"I have a good thing goin' here," Eridan says, as he starts to rise up and fire more wild bolts at Leviathan from above. Leviathan, realizing that they're stealing its one catch, bellows with three distinct voices that make the metal under Jade's hands ripple uncomfortably, but the ark holds. "How long do you need?"

"Hopefully only a few seconds! Relocating this much mass without messing everyone up inside needs some concentration." Then Jade sinks herself into it, and casts her space sense through the ship to size everything up with Bec's extra layer of perception. Her doggy ears perk up, unconsciously, but Jade's more concerned with - ah, there. The same organic growth that underlies the ark's metal armor struggles to grow and cover the massive, smoking hole, but it's almost there - one more second and there will be a makeshift patch holding everyone inside the ark. "Are you coming along for the ride?" she asks Eridan, as her skin begins to boil and churn with galaxies and neon green starlight.

"No!" Eridan flies further out, peppering Leviathan with more lightning, which distracts the Horrorterror from trying to form another harpoon. When the original harpoon burns away, leaving acid and scorch marks around the ragged metal edges of the sealed gap, Rose runs back to Jade and slides to a stop, laying her palms over the back of Jade's hands. Jade doesn't need the extra focus, per se, but Rose lights up the most fortuitous location for them to teleport Ark Defiance - just close enough that it'll be through the Gate in less than a minute, but not close to the point that she and Jade get sucked along for the ride to parts unknown.
Jade nods her head, a fierce grin spreading across her face as she spreads her power all around the ark in a layer of crackling green light -

GC: NO, W41T!
GC: K4N-

Teleporting it smacks her apart at the seams, and for a second, Jade burns like a fusion core. Rose's hands on hers stay solid and real, and Jade strains against the tight grip for a second before remembering that she's supposed to want to be person-shaped again after they're through. There's a second's delay, and then Ark Defiance snaps back together like a rubber band, so far from the rest of the fleet that the Battleship looks like a bright red tugboat in the distance. Jade's fizzes like starry soda for a second more before collapsing herself into a nice, not-fizzy Jade body again, releasing her held breath and swaying as she gathers her thoughts again. "Made it," she says, with a silly laugh, and Rose sighs in turn, with a short chuckle at the end.

Rose raises her eyes, and sees the fleet over Jade's shoulder.

Jade looks up, and sees the Gate blazing with light right before them, radiating calm and welcome and -

"No," Rose says, her voice horribly flat, in a way that drops Jade's stomach out from under her in an unpleasant, cold twist. "No, no!"

- and Rose tears away from Jade, running along the ship with an agonizing scream. Jade launches after her, moving on pure instinct, kicking Ark Defiance toward the Gate without looking or measuring or anything as she zaps Rose right back to the rest of the fleet. Terezi's screaming too, while Jade's ears ring and pop with the terrible, awful scream Rose makes right in her ear -

- Terezi hacks through the tentacle in one go, but there's already jade blood everywhere, and Kanaya comes out in terrible, crushed pieces, like a horrible look at what happened to Feferi earlier -

Rose wrestles free from Jade's grip, while Jade waits, sluggish and still with her ears ringing and throbbing, for Kanaya to come back.

Jade reaches out to Prospit, brute-forces her senses past the veil of Equius's power.

Half of Prospit is gone.

Half of Sollux's huge, reality-hacking work -

- is in shattered pieces, while the rest shudders and liquifies and collapses in on itself in a meltdown.

This is how it ends.

The White Queen tosses PM to Prospit's altered towers, and then veers away, brushing past the Heir of Void and the Rogue of Heart in a sweet, singing sweep of her wings. Noir has poisoned the space around him with sickly Green Miles and radiation to such an extent that only the Heir can approach him - and approach he has, bearing the Rogue along on his shoulders in the safety of his void shields. They strike at Noir again and again - the Heir's fists roil with black shadows that cut off Noir's attacks, while the Rogue's clawkind slice into Noir's shoulder and come away with soulstuff
streaming in her wake. Between the two of them, with the Mage and Maid striking from afar, they've
driven Noir further from Prospit and Skaia.

The War Queen knows precisely when to slide in alongside them and thrusts her sword through
Noir's hip joint. With a twist, she pops his leg from the joint before his greedy, destroying insides can
eat through her blade, and Noir howls at her in mindless rage as green sludge pours from the stump
of his leg.

WQ: Enough.

JN: Interferin' bitch.

Despite the beat of war playing through her, the White Queen feels remarkably at peace. Noir is not
the right Queen, but then, she is not sure she would want to fight her cousin-queen anymore. Queen
versus Queen, one of War and one corrupted, corroding himself with his own rotted powers -

This is how it ends.

Yes. This is how it ends.

JN: You can't win this one.

He is, in this instance, completely correct.

But that does not mean that he is going to win. It never has. The WQ raises her sword and shakes her
head, with a smile that comes easily to her mouth. Noir snarls back, parts of his mottled carapace
cracking further still with the force of his fury - he looks like a molten planet, the plates of his shell
shifting over the seething green core within him, and his eyes are overflowing green saucers that eat
away at his face with raw power.

Instead of charging her and commencing their battle in earnest, though, Noir sneers - and teleports
away, bypassing her and reappearing as a green star beside one of Prospit's tallest towers. He leaves
a star of dead space in his wake, that will not repair itself before the end. Green lightning erupts from
the half-melted wreck of his arm, and shears through Prospit like a forest of branching spears.
Several towers erupt into flame and begin to sag, dripping enormous quantities of molten honey, and
the bees that swarm around the towering mainframes shriek and shrill in the White Queen's mind.

"Keep him away from the terminals!" the Mage of Doom yells, clutching his head. "Kanaya's not
-Motherfucker!" Then he races forward toward Prospit, oblivious to the danger of flying so close to
Noir as his wings begin to singe at the edges -

The Maid of Time snaps her claws, and the Mage vanishes back in time with the turn of a rust-red
clock. A future version of him has been down at the terminal for some time now, and Skaia echoes
contentment at a loop complete. Wincing, the Maid falls back, her claw pressed to her side as she
sags. Meanwhile, Noir's attack sinks deeper and deeper, and entire spires built of honeycomb split
apart and erupt with blazing liquid as it melts into slag.

Her kingdom is dying.

Her people are safe, and gone.

And yet this is what it feels like, to watch one's world fall apart. No wonder every species that
participates in the great Game mourns so fiercely. The pain shatters something in her, for she knows
there will never be another incarnation of Prospit. Soaring through the fresh grief, the White Queen
seizes both the Heir and the Rogue and carries them forward. "Thanks for the lyift!" the Rogue
says, as she and the Heir peel away and, borne along by the momentum of the WQ's flight, slam into Noir like cannonballs. The Heir slams a wave of void over Noir's head, and the Green Miles cut off with a shudder as Noir falls back.

It is not enough. Prospit continues to boil, while the Mage works frantically below to salvage what he can, while the White Queen's awareness follows PM as she struggles to free a half-submerged ship from the flooded remains of a launch bay.

He will fail. PM will not. Skaia wants this too much - but the WQ does not want it at all. It breaks her heart, when she realizes, but -

*This is how it ends.*

Noir lashes out with his ring hand and shoves the Heir away with brute force when space fails him. Then he turns his claw toward the reeling Maid, his eyes narrowed with hate for all the world.

**JN: Die.**

**WQ: [Abating Refutation]**

The White Queen cancels him out before his corrupted power can leave his skin; she smothers him for an instant, and then his sickly fire burns through her restriction. He glowers at her and only her, and stamps his foot as he lashes out at her with sharp blades of force.

**JN: Shut up! Shut up shut up!**

**WQ: [Passive Quietude]**

**JN: Hbnrgl! –**

It will only quiet him for a moment, though. If this were a battle against a true Queen, against her sister, they would draw. Again and again, they would clash, but no matter how much they destroyed as collateral, they could never kill each other. Their part of the game was always a draw, in some fashion.

Noir is too corrupted to be a proper Queen, though.

And through the shining curtain at the edge of the Medium, the Muse of Space's influence empowers anyone sharing her essential nature. The Witch of Space, the Sylph of Space, Doctor Scratch, the transportalizers aboard the ships -

Jack Noir.

This was not a battle the White Queen could ever win, even as a War Queen. Space is simply too powerful an aspect, in this final game. She could refute him a thousand times, but he'll bounce back and inflict another molten crater in Prospit the moment she loses focus. It is a strife that could last a thousand years before the WQ's strength began to fail her.

They do not have another thousand years. PM's presence rises from Prospit; her spaceship's engines choke and sputter - it won't fly much longer, but PM pushes it on with the driven determination of any carapacian behind the wheel.

Even if she were to arrive in time, it would not be enough. The White Queen can sense Skaia's will quite clearly from here, bleeding through the broken crust of the Battlefield with heady resonance, and now -
Time for a Reckoning. The fastest meteors have already had plenty of time to cross the expanse of the Medium, but one bears the tell-tale signs that someone whipped it along with furious intent, hard and fast enough that it almost shook apart into fragments with the sheer force of its flight.

Noir will teleport out of the way.

The White Queen lowers her sword, and forces down the cry of War that urges her to fight to the very end.

WQ: PM.

PM: What is it?

WQ: You are an excellent Protégé.

PM: Wait, no!

The White Queen casts herself upon Noir with a piercing shriek - he shouts back, something harsh and riddled with green static, but she pays no heed as he stabs her through the torso. The ring slips easily from her claw - the only challenge requires her to throw it back over her shoulder, and then grapple Noir close. She has utterly bewildered him; he's caught mid-snarl, stalled out for three precious, fleeting seconds as he stares at her uncomprehendingly. Beyond the hate, beyond the madness, she thinks she catches a glimpse of the confused carapacian who cracked under his own wild grasp at power.

WQ: Farewell.

WQ: I'll see you soon.

The Black Queen's meteor slams into them at nearly a hundred kilometers a second. Noir's sword snaps in two, the point still lodged deep under her shell, and the White Queen holds onto him with grim determination, using her bare claws to smash his reeling head against the meteor with crushing force to keep him stunned as the meteor drives them down toward the Battlefield.

Behind her, the White Queen's ring falls over and over in seven perfect turns before it finds PM's outstretched claw.

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The Black Queen raises the King's Scepter over her head, and slams it down in time with the meteor that levels the cathedral. She stands stock still for a moment, oblivious to the shockwave and the gravel and dust that slews past her in great clouds - all that remains of the cathedral apart from the ground it stood on - and absorbs what it feels like to be utterly alone. She's been torn in half before in more than one round of the Game, but it never felt like this -

BQ: [The Queen Is Dead]

No. They can't come back from this.

She wants to be angry at the stupid, stupid waste of it all - and so: she is. Rage is a heady drug, one her King lost himself in, and the Black Queen spins on her heel to stare down the crater at Noir. It is easy to cut off and cauterize anything she might feel, seeing the shattered White Queen tossed to the side while Noir continues to breathe - the Black Queen carved anything resembling love or grief out of herself long ago. This is fine.
BQ: Noir.

She raises the scepter, and pulls another meteor down from the sky. *This* is why she shrugs off Skaia's intimations, the hints that she should coordinate the meteors to take care of the doomed creatures trying to escape their preordained end. Avoiding the defense portals and calling more meteors to hammer down on Noir takes all her concentrated fury. Noir drags himself out of the way at the last moment, half of his body mangled and sluicing sickly green fluid from a stump of a leg and a crushed arm. He flickers all over, and the Black Queen recognizes the rancid rage that burns in his eyes as he spits up irradiated blood.

JN: Fuck you!

It requires all her exhausted reserves of patience to speak coherently as she takes another step forward, and flattens him with another meteor strike.

BQ: You killed my sister.

Another step, and the next meteor cracks the Battlefield open. White and black shrapnel shoots toward her, but she knocks most of it aside with a wave of shadow. Noir wheezes rather than teleporting; most of his shell is broken, and he leaks from every pathetic orifice. One eye has burst, and the remains hang dead and dark in their socket compared to the festering green of his exposed body. He digs his ring claw into the churned earth and drags himself forward - his arm stays barely out of the impact zone as the Black Queen calls meteor after meteor, each one smaller and more compact than the last.

BQ: You stole my ring.

Each meteor cracks the Battlefield further. If she goes too far, she might hit something…unfortunate.

She can't bring herself to care. Oh so carefully, the Black Queen takes one final step, and Noir brushes the tip of her toe before he freezes, raises his head on a weak, snapped neck, and gazes up at her. Like a supplicant. Flat on his belly. Imploring.

As he should be.

BQ: And if you think you can still win…

She lifts her toe, forcing his chin up, and smiles deeply at the agony that flickers across his broken shell of a face.

BQ: …you're even more pathetic than I thought.

JN: You - can't kill me - *bitch* -

The Black Queen lowers her foot, and then kicks it up, snapping Noir's head back and knocking him backward. He doesn't even have the strength or wherewithal to catch himself before slamming into a chunk of the cathedral's cornerstone.

BQ: Watch me.

JN: Mggmlghagh

She swathes her whole claw in shadowy armor, the scepter forgotten now as she strides forward and hauls Noir up by his neck. The last of his coursing green power makes her carapace crawl and sizzle - but up close, she can see the deep gouges in his shoulder where someone tore into his soul.
Rogue. One of her own resident annoyances, no less. If she had any room in her scorched, hollow cardiovascular center to feel anything but fury, she'd be amused. Rogues of Heart are deceptively deadly creatures; Noir probably doesn't realize why his power slowly wanes. He can be as powerful as he wants, can poison as much space as he so desires with his rage. But the very essence of his self drains away in slow, subtle leaks, and the ring cannot save him from this.

BQ: You're stronger than any Queen, by virtue of your mutated nature. Stronger even a War Queen.

BQ: But you forget one thing, Jack.

The Black Queen raises her ring claw, and splays out what remains of her individual claws before Noir's sagging, rage-twisted face. He bares his teeth and tries to bite her claws off, but she doesn't have a ring claw at the moment - only the weeping, bleeding stump where the wound has never healed. She smiles, forcing his head back, and sets her mutilated claw to his shoulder.


And then she rips his arm off. Noir screams as the ring detaches, and the horrible mess of his insides begins to ooze out from his unstrung, shattered shell of a carapace. He has pushed his body to the utter limits of what a carapacian body can survive, but without the power of Queenhood to sustain him, he's little more than mottled shell fragments and irradiated pulp.

With deep relish, the Black Queen removes the ring from his claw. Noir thrashes on the ground as she dumps him like the irrelevant waste he is, slowly liquifying the ground beneath him as he and Prospit rupture and melt down in delightfully droll unison. Two fresh claws thrust out of the bleeding stumps in the Black Queen's hands, fresh grown and with the brilliant polish of new shell growth.

Jack Noir attempts to say something. But his voice can no longer reach her.

BQ: And it sings for more than your contemptible temper tantrums.

The Black Queen dons her ring, and does not contain herself. Noir lets out an audible shout of pain as the tide of shadows surges from her, singing and silencing and fracturing the ground as the Black Queen tips back her head and knocks Jack Noir back for the last time. [Long Live The Queen] rolls through the air, and the Black Queen summons a real sword - one black as the Void with a shadowy hilt; something fitting for the execution of the wretched, contemptible traitor who has stolen her cousin-queen from her for the last time, stolen any hope of them fighting Queen to true Queen, and dying in glorious battle -

BQ: It sings for War.

She raises her sword.

A Prospitian Monarch plunges from the sky, and drives her pale sword through Jack Noir's chest with a piercing cry. The impact finishes cracking the crust of the Battlefield, and the Black Queen's heart stops and trembles, as though it may not start again, as she stares through the cloud of dust in bleak, useless hope -

It is not her. It could never be her, ever again. She should have known better, but the White Queen's ring fits well on this new claw, and the resemblance is uncanny. Disappointment proves a bitter pill to swallow.

She would rather rage than feel pain.

BQ: Really now.
The Prospitian Meddler looks up slowly. Her claws tremble slightly on her sword as she yanks it from Noir's lifeless body and looks back down at her hands.

PM: He killed her!

PM: …I killed him?

Croaking abomination, spare her from inexperienced, ascendant pawns. The Black Queen chains her hostility long enough to snort in contempt; she judges the PM with a sweep of her eyes, and finds her lacking. She's never in the mood to be charitable.

BQ: Your delivery could use some work.

BQ: Now, the only question is: how stupid are you going to be today?

Rather than acknowledging the Black Queen's challenge, the Prospitian Monarch opens and closes her claws, her dark eyes full of confusion and stark grief. Then she closes her eyes and pulls herself together - finally, the Black Queen thinks, already tapping her foot impatiently - and glares at the Black Queen, firm and resolute.

PM: I'm not stupid, thank you.

PM: And my DELIVERIES are always made in a timely fashion!

She boosts herself upright, using her sword as a temporary crutch, and then steadies herself after her prototyped wings almost unbalance her. The PM is clearly unused to the channeled force of being Queen; she doesn't raise her sword, and instead watches the Black Queen warily. War, the ring cries, more immediate and urgent and persuasive now than all of Skaia's insistence, and the Black Queen eagerly curls her claws. *Come, then.*

The Prospitian Monarch continues to disappoint. She hesitates, her thin body trembling with some ill-repressed mirror of the BQ's hostility - and then lowers her sword again with a shake of her head, all the tension slackening from her shoulders in a rush.

Drowning in rage at the silent refutation, the Black Queen snarls.

BQ: Well?!

PM: I don't want to fight you.

PM: A friend of mine always says that when Monarchs fight, everyone else pays for it.

PM: I won't do it.

It's unfair. It's - the Black Queen does not have words for how utterly ridiculous that response is. The best she could do to approximate it would be a fraught, ululating shriek with many voices, and a stab. But she checks herself before it bursts forth from her chest. She is not her King, no matter how tempting it would be to crush this infuriating, pale shadow of a Queen for her impudence.

BQ: Your friend is a rebellious heretic whom I could squash with one claw.

Then the Black Queen turns her back on the Prospitian Monarch. A calculated insult, an opening no one gripped by war's throes would normally be able to ignore.
But neither of them are normal. The rage extinguishes in her chest in a dull crush, and the Black Queen scrubs her face with the back of her claw. If the Prospitian Monarch can't even bring herself to stab her in the back, there's really no hope for a final battle. She hefts the King's Scepter instead and stalks away, layering herself with more overlapping scales of shadowy armor as she leaves the Monarch in her wake.

BQ: Begone. I have a Reckoning to complete.

PM: Not if you're going to hurt them!

The sharp, clear challenge in her voice does not go unheard. Spinning wildly - too eagerly - the Black Queen rounds on her. The Prospitian stands her ground, despite the flood of aggression that roils between them. She has raised her sword against the Black Queen, and the ecstatic distraction of battle burns through the BQ's veins.

BQ: It must be finished.

BQ: Unless you would prefer your heroes were never born at all.

She says it mockingly. She should not have said it at all. It does the opposite of what war begs of her - it causes the Prospitian Monarch to hesitate, and then slump her shoulders as she lets her sword droop and stab into the dirt.

If the Prospitian won't see sense on her own, the Black Queen fails to see the point of fighting her. A pale imitation, indeed. There wouldn't be any true satisfaction in killing her.

She will never be satisfied.

BQ: Go. Deliver them.

This time, she does not stop as she walks away. There's no point to moving - she can finish summoning the Reckoning from anywhere on the Battlefield - but if she stands here a moment longer she will strike the Pretending Monarch down just for a burst of impotent, pointless gratification that will flicker and die before her body hits the ground.

PM: Why are you helping?

Her mental voice is quiet, the Black Queen thinks, but not weak. Since all she has left is spite and an emptiness inside her, she lets both fill her voice.

BQ: Because Skaia wishes it. Because she does not wish it.

BQ: Because all her grand paradoxes and contradictions and arbitrary loops have finally come back to undo her.

BQ: Because this is the end of all things, and my cousin-queen is dead for the last time.

BQ: Take our people, and get them out of my sight. I am sick to death of caring.

She goes. When the Prospitian Monarch launches herself into the Medium, bearing the hollow shell of the Black Queen's other half, the Black Queen does not look back.

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The last thing, uh, that Tavros wants to do at this point, is draw Vriska's attention. So far, Vriska's been happy to monologue at him, a stream of chatter and snide comments that comes in fits and starts as they descend further into Skaia, and hasn't mentioned killing him to make him go god tier more than three or four times. For Vriska, that's almost nice.

But Tavros can't not say it anymore. He gulps deeply and huddles his shoulders so that his body stops shivering with apprehension. "Uh, Vriska."

"Yeah?" she says, distractedly. She's been humming to herself for a while now rather than actively talking at him, but the weird echo overlapping all the sounds down here didn't make it a very, uh, nice silence. Skaia is not hollow on the inside, like Tavros thought it was when they started flying down here. The crystal firmament extends in almost all directions, apart from the path down along the branch that they are following, so dark that it only looks like hollow, empty space. But Tavros can put out his claw and touch it - he'd really rather not, though. That sounds like, uh, a phenomenally bad idea. Even worse than all his current ideas combined. The branch winds through the dark, almost imperceptible facets of crystal, and Tavros fears that they'll be floating down forever. His pan shudders at the sudden certainty that they'll be falling down an endless corridor of dark stone in an endless loop - just him and Vriska, and the echoes.

"I really, uh, get the feeling we shouldn't be down here," he says. It's, uh, the biggest uhnderstatement (haha…) of his life. But he thinks it gets his point across.

Vriska throws an annoyed look back at him, her nose scrunched up and nostrils flaring in a way that would be kind of funny if it were anyone but Vriska making the face. "God! You're such a wimp! How did I get stuck with you, again?" she demands. Then she tosses her hair with a flick of her claw and zooms away from him, her faint 'tch!' whispering again and again through the shimmering, not-quiet-enough air of the branching corridor. Tavros half-imagines that he can see a couple of echoes pool and vibrate in the cup of one of the giant ivory leaves that grow from the branch - like shimmery silver spools of text that sink into the leaf's pale grey veins.

He thinks that this place might be driving him a little bit crazy. It makes him miss Gamzee - at least Gamzee would be able to help him laugh about it. Vriska's just mean about it.

Down they go. Tavros loses all sense of time. The thought of checking his phone makes him feel woozy, and he can't tell which would be worse - if he looks and sees that they've only been down here for a few minutes, or if they've been falling for days. The only point of reference that he has is the pale white branch itself, and it stretches on ahead of them and behind them now like a winding ribbon through the dark, with no sign of the rift they entered through. Tavros feels his lungs constrict at the thought that maybe the rift sealed behind them and shut them in down here forever. The thought echoes and throbs in his head, and he shivers in his seat as he pushes his rocketchair faster to catch up with Vriska.

The only thing that could make being trapped down here worse is if he were trapped alone. He scoots all the way until he's level with Vriska. It draws her ire for a second before she dismisses him again, and they descend.

The change is so sudden, but so imperceptible, that Tavros blinks and misses it. One moment, they're surrounded by claustrophobic crystal and echoes and the faint tracery of light flickering through the stone around them - the next, he realizes that he's not looking at faint, swirling patterns anymore.

It's another branch, far off in the distance. It radiates pale light just like the one they're following, and the light refracts over and over through the kilometers of transparent crystal between them. Vriska speeds up again, with a sharp 'Ha!' and Tavros keeps pace with her as she skips and bounces along the bark of their branch with her arms flung wide. Ahead of them, a wall of silver slowly comes into
view. It stretches as far as Tavros can make out, up and down.

But it's not until they hit the bottom of the tunnel that Tavros realizes he is looking at the trunk of an immense tree. Their branch joins the trunk in a slow gradient, from white to silver, and Vriska follows the trunk straight down until they hit the glass-clear surface of the dark ground. Through the crystal, Tavros can just barely make out the white, branching roots spreading down below - like mirror images of the branches above. He looks up, and dizziness rolls his head in circles as he struggles to take in the size of the tree. There are more branches visible from down here, an entire crown of them stretching out into the dark. The grooves in its bark are as twice as wide as he is, and then some. Glossy blue apples cluster near the intersection of the branches and the trunk and at points where the branches meet further out in the firmament, and occasionally the light shifts and makes them look extra shiny.

And more silver trees rise up in the distance - so far away that they probably branch out underneath an entirely different hemisphere of the Battlefield, but so ridiculously enormous that Tavros can see them from half a planet away.

"These trees are huge," Tavros whispers, mostly to himself. He, uh, doesn't need Vriska to tell him that he's stating the obvious, thanks. It just…needs to be said. Or his pan might just not absorb it.

[HannaH: We have visitors.srotisiv evah eW]

"Let's go. This way," Vriska says, laughing with excitement as she starts to fly around the trunk of the tree. For a split second, Tavros pauses, something echoing and cramping in his stomach. He could have sworn he heard something in that pause, but Vriska talked right over it. Maybe it was just another echo.

He doesn't think it was another echo. Tavros shivers a little harder, and looks back over his shoulder worriedly as they go around the tree and find another passage deeper into the core. "Did you hear something whisper?" he asks, after he's worked up his nerve again, as he eyes the branches laced over their heads warily.

Vriska sighs in exasperation. "No, I didn-' she starts to say, scornfully - but then her face freezes in a frown, her eye with too many pupils flicking to the side.

As though she just heard something. Slowly, Vriska starts to laugh, with an edge that makes Tavros ease away from her like she's wearing eight peligro signs. "Haha. Come out, come out, wherever you are…" she says, turning in slow circles like a shark as she prowls further down the tunnel.

A blue apple the size of a cantaloupe bounces off Vriska's horns like a gummy, squishy bouncy ball. "Ouch!" Vriska exclaims, smacking her head with a claw, and she whips around to stare at Tavros in disbelief. "Who threw that?! Tavros, what the fuck?!"

"It wasn't me!" Tavros says, hastily, holding up both claws. Another bouncy apple drops from above to prove his innocence a second later - Vriska spins around, her hair flying out behind her, and drops into a defensive crouch as she stares suspiciously at the branches above. There's a lot of fruit growing over their heads, actually. "No one threw it. It just, um, fell from the branch," Tavros says - it's what he wants to be true, anyway. The thought that there's someone else down here with them suddenly turns his stomach ice cold.

[EvE: No respect for apples these days!syad eseht selppa rof tcepser oN]

[NooN: - music seen as light -]
"I know you're there!" Vriska yells, and her voice makes real echoes this time as she snarls and whirls in a wild circle. Her dice glitter between her claws, but without a target to throw them at Vriska stalls out. She shoots a searching glare at Tavros, but all he can do is shake his head back. He can barely hear the words, let alone make out where they're coming from. *Who* they're coming from.

Vriska flies back to him, raking the dark crystal and the silver trees with her glowing eyes. When she reaches the rocketchair, she grabs Tavros by the shoulder - and hoists herself up behind him into Nepeta's spot. The clicking growl in her throat reaches Tavros's ears very easily from here, and he shudders at the sudden coolness behind his back.

On the one hand, he'd rather have her there than - nothing. Better Vriska, who he *knows* wants to kill him a little, than having his back exposed to whatever is whispering in here…

On the other, he knows better than to think Vriska would *ever* let him fly back the way they came. Sucking in a breath to fill his tight lungs (how is there enough *air* down here) Tavros directs the rocketchair forward again, at a snail's pace compared to their speed earlier.

It says a lot that Vriska doesn't comment on his little baby attitude.

The branches over their heads, growing between the trunks rather than away from them, are different. The deeper they go down this path, the tighter the branches lace together - always in perfect coils, always matching the exact patterns of the roots below the clear ground. Perfectly symmetrical. But the branches overhead begin to shade a darker grey, while the heavy clusters of apples begin to thin out. The passage curves around very slowly - until, uh, Tavros looks up again and realizes that through the lacey ceiling of dark grey branches, he can see they're almost in the middle of the four trees. They're so huge that it's hard to tell, but he thinks they really are all symmetrical -

"Dammit!" Vriska swears, and Tavros wrenches his attention away from the trees in time to slam on the brakes before he rams them into a wall of black branches. The dark grey of the branches above fooled him; they shade to black so quickly that it blends into the dark crystal. Vriska rises up on her feet and leans over Tavros, her dice at the ready. "Fine. The hard w-"

[**LuuL:** They have been granted right of passage.egassap fo thgir detnarg neeb evah yehT]

[**NooN:** - born out of the world of sunless things -]

"They're letting us in," Tavros says, super fast, before Vriska can cast her dice.

"They? Tavros, what are you mumbling about?" she says, harshly, glaring down at him from above - but Tavros sits with his back straight and refuses to crumple under her angry glare. She heard them earlier. He *knows* she did.

And he thinks he knows who it is. "I'm pretty sure the trees are talking!" he hisses, unwilling to raise his voice above a whisper - but it's no good. His words echo and reverberate, and the branches soak all the sound in with a rustle of their leaves. "Just *listen!*"

[**EvE:** Tweak the strings for NooN.NooN rof sgnirts eht kaewT]

[**NooN:** - flows and ebbs and flows -]

Finally, after a pause, Vriska's lips twitch, and she laughs in his face before pushing herself back. "Guess we're not in Kansas anymore." She keeps talking, her voice rising in volume, even as the pitch black branches before them start to slither and part in measured coils. They open the path with disturbingly precise motions as curve after curve of branch sinks into the crystal firmament. "If the
trees want a fight, they can have one. But we're here for the big shot. The CEO! The boss herself!"

Vriska gestures grandly as the final four branches curve away at the same time, and Tavros fumbles
the controls with shaky claws before driving them forward through the entrance. His pusher feels like
it's lodged somewhere in his throat. He cannot talk, so it's, uh, great to have Vriska talking a lot.
Otherwise the anxious anticipation might actually strangle him -

[LuuL: They have arrived.devirra evah yehT]

They emerge in the core, and Tavros realizes, with a sinking sensation…

That he knows exactly what lives here, at the heart of all things.

Dark crystal branches surround them in a spiraling sphere of endlessly linked spirographs. The
symmetrytrees loop and rise to dizzying heights around them, as the being that coils in
incomprehensible, mind-breaking whorls of perfect Order shifts, and produces two bright, shining
eyes to fondly regard Tavros and Vriska. The eyes are both copies of Skaia, white and blue and
swirling in constant motion, complete with all the rifts and fires and shattered buildings up above.

Vriska says it. Tavros can't even breathe, pinned by that endlessly, horribly benevolent gaze.

[…]That's a Horrorterror.]

[Wait. Is that…my voice?]

The Horrorterror slides two branches - tendrils - from sockets in the walls of the sphere, and twines
them in a double helix.

[Attention: the Page of Breath and Thief of Light have Arrived.]

[Children.]

Skaia leans forward.

[Do I remind you so much of my Brother?]
Music Seen As Light

Chapter Summary

Light heard as music, music seen as light.
And with that second moondawn of the spring's
That fosters the first rose,
A sun-child brighter than the sunlit snows
Was born out of the world of sunless things
That round the round earth flows and ebbs and flows.

Chapter Notes

Chapters 30 and 31 have haunted me for, like, two years now.

Edit 7/4 Happy anniversary! Will I ever remember ahead of time and prepare something substantial for the special day? Probably not...
Edit 7/24 Well, Dave and Karkat are fighting me, so...everyone else gets posted before them! :V Kanaya's next section starts at "Kanaya steps through a door" and it continues on through the end of the chapter.
Edit 8/12 WELL THIS CONTINUES TO TAKE FOREVER. I'm live posting Karkat's sections as I finish them but honestly progress has been so stilted that I don't even know what's wrong with my writing brain. Starts at "John's not here to make a dumb movie reference."
Edit 8/25 My god...I hate when a chapter takes this long...I have three sections from Chapter 32 already done, while Dave's been languishing here unwritten. Starts at "Dave starts dying around page 45." and we're done! We're fucking done!

Please, please click the [x] link for the music in Jade's section. Of Gods and Witches is the theme of the whole chapter, but especially for her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARC X - ABSOLUTION

Ectobiology is boring, and what does it get Sollux? A bunch of pudgy human babies, a bunch of equally pudgy yet spikey wrigglers, and the sad, pathetic scraps of his remaining fucks to give. Shooting a dour glare at grub Kanaya does exactly jack shit to stop her from gnawing on the corner of the computer terminal, and no matter what he does both Gamzee and Dave keep vanishing and reappearing to crawl up his damn legs. Aradia is somehow worse - right now she's curled up on the top of his head, so it feels like he's wandering around wearing a squishy, grub-shaped crown that occasionally rearranges itself.

Goddammit. He should have just made Karkat do this, no matter how convoluted the process would have been. Sollux has better things to do than wipe human spawn slobber off his pajamas and strap
babies onto fate-riddled chunks of space rock.

Like dying. That's still a thing he has to do. Living on Derse gave this body some wiggle room, and the journey through the Veil to find the ectobiology lab bought him extra time, but eventually death's gonna hit him like a stack of bricks and he'll only have one body left to work with. Sollux set this rolling resurrection chain up specifically to minimize his chances of dying permanently anywhere along the line or in the future, and he wants it over with now before someone with the cosmic heft to smack him down decides to pay attention.

So baby Jade can stop hiccuping off her meteor any day now. Fuck, even as babies, all of his friends are still rampant assholes. Seething (literally) from his eyes as mustard yellow blood dribbles from his ears along with Aradia's extra warm spit-up, Sollux flings Eridan at the next meteor with a blast of psionics. The grub lands and somehow wedges in between two chunks of rock. Grub Eridan chirrs at him irritably as he floats past; Sollux flips him a middle claw, instantly feels shitty about it, and then moves on with his life. There's a god tier out there with his name on it - he doesn't have time to waffle around wondering if there might be karmic consequences to teaching impressionable grubs how to flip someone off.

…If all else fails, he can blame Karkat. There's no way that Karkat didn't flip the grubs off repeatedly while cloning them in the last game session; in fact, Sollux would bet a year's supply of abusable medications that Karkat is paradoxically responsible for his own foul mouth.

Tremors roll through the Medium as Sollux stuffs John onto the last meteor. A whole bunch of fresh nonsense flushes down toward them: Sollux's death starts to kick in right when the Reckoning lurches into motion, calling the meteors of the Veil in staggered waves. But Leviathan shrieks, and the Lord of Time cracks another huge section of reality into shards and gaping crevasses, and Sollux wobbles away from the line of baby-laden meteors with a loud snort of his nose - one last, futile attempt to inhale his imploding brain phlegm back into his cranium. One of Leviathan's stray tentacles smashes the ectobiology lab meteor into smithereens in a flailing spasm of pain as Sollux raises a claw and shoves against the air.

The meteors are going to make it without any problems. That's an incontrovertible fact - for the alpha timeline, at least, it's guaranteed. No ifs, ands, or glitches about it. Sollux laces them with extra geas mostly for the hell of it, since fuck help them all if any of his asshole friends smack their heads open on their carriage of space rock in this, the worst method of safe baby delivery ever devised by the universe. Then a burst of blood erupts in his mouth because fuck his life anyway, right?

A crack tears what's left of Derse in two, and meteors take care of the rest while Sollux spins out in a blood-fogged, agonized daze. He dies, and catches up with the rest of himself all in a rush, while the temporal distortion of the Veil deepens and warps into something utterly unsalvageable. A Gordian knot of malformed, delayed, inaccurate time, that can only be resolved in one fashion.

A quick, simple [crack], to slice the time apart.

Near the center of the Incipisphere, a Queen leaves her burden on LoFaF, and then flies out through the dark to meet the meteors halfway. She has several VIPs (very important packages) to deliver to their exit portals.

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John's not here to make a dumb movie reference.
That doesn't stop Karkat's useless brainsponge from coming up with it when they reach page 75 out of a total of four hundred and thirteen. He can only take so much coordinate-punching, slime-producing monotony before his thinkpan starts to fry up some Egbert-worthy lines.

By page 154, he loses the internal fight and messages John the bait to respond to…whenever he responds to it. Yeah. No, Karkat's not fucking worried, why would you even ask -

CG: JOHN.
CG: I AM SO FUCKING SICK OF ALL THESE SNAKES.

And whenever John remembers how to use a fucking phone, he'll say on a plane? :D and Karkat will inform him that no planes are involved at all whatsoever, but John will just keep giggling over it. Karkat can picture it in his head as clear as day. He's spent too much time hanging around John while he chatters about his goofball movies, obviously.

"Next," he says, irritably - Dave's cue to reel off the info about the next snake they need to appearify genetic paradox slime from. They've got a terrible, boring snake-cloning rhythm here, which says awful things about the state of Karkat's life. But the flow of Dave reading off coordinates, Karkat typing them in and then slamming the appearify button before moving onto the next lets them speed through this far faster than he and Kanaya could, back in the day - tiny Sburb achievement notifications pop up in the bottom right corner of the screen with terrible snake puns with annoying frequency. They learned all the frog breeding nonsense slowly, through immense amounts of bullshit trial and error, and pieced most of the instructions together from clues scattered across both their lands - thank fuck this time they don't have to mess around with all that. And thanks to Aradia, they don't have to trek around Jade's steaming rainforest cesspit of a planet for fucking ages to grab the snakes after the fact. More and more often, Karkat aims the appearifier based on very familiar coordinates, and the screen fills up with one of many giant nets and tanks and in one memorable case, a weird magic circle, full of snakes tucked in and around Doctor Lalonde's lab.

Karkat hasn't touched the genetic anomaly settings. He doesn't even dare blink at them the wrong way. Those controls appear to adjust themselves automatically, and he's fine with it. Less chance of him fucking up and giving the Final Alchemy fucking reality-level cancer.

When Dave doesn't answer, Karkat's nostrils flare as he forces himself to take a deep breath. "Dave," he says, his claws digging tiny pinpricks into the console keys as he turns to glare at Dave.

"One second, man. Jeez," Dave says, without looking away from a hoard of multicolored snake eggs that fills that entire half of the platform. Dave shovels another fifty swirly, glittering eggs onto one of the main hills formed by the thousands of snake eggs, using his ridiculous fucking cape as an egg hamper, but that just sets off a small rainbow avalanche of eggs that roll down the side of the pile and across the platform in wobbly circles.

Karkat strongly considers how much satisfaction he would get out of storming down the mountainside and burying himself in a muddy grave. The answer: not enough. Not yet. "For fuck's sake - how many of these snake-shitting fucks do we need to clone, again?!" Because at the rate they're going, they're going to run out of volcano to stand on.

"Way too many. Like, what, fifty per page? 413 pages?" Dave pauses as he does the math in his head. "…Like 20k snakes, bro."

That muddy grave sounds more and more appealing. Like a full body mud mask to clear his pores and presumably fix his entire half-baked disaster of a life. Writhing around in a pile of LoFaF excrement is exactly how Karkat wants to go. "Fuck. I'd rather be dealing with sixteen chubby-cheeked shit-factories than this. I didn't miss regular ectobiology this much when cloning frogs."
Dave nods his head, and then gets that look on his face. The one he wears when he's about to suggest something terrible. "Could be worse. They could be showing up as baby snakes instead of eggs."

Which is just tempting fate. Karkat thought they had a handle on that, but it's too fucking late now. "God fucking - I'm blaming you if they start hatching now, Dave!" he says. While Dave grimaces and smacks his own forehead as realization hits, Karkat turns back to the terminal. "I'm gonna forge a fucking snake omelet," he mutters, mostly to himself.

Of course Dave hears him. "If you cook up a delicious snake brunch in the middle of the end of the world and no one has time to come eat it, would that be fucked up, or what?"

Karkat's phone goes off in his pocket.

EC: Please don't do that.

EC: At the very least, it would give you indigestion.

Karkat's head jerks up and he stares at the lava in disbelief. Echidna peeks out at him like a massive crocodile, her eyes and quills just barely visible over the churning surface of the Forge. Hephaestus gives him a reproving look, which is fucking bullshit. "Come on, you have giant ass hammers. Make a frying pan or something!" Dave says, waving a snake egg at Hephaestus.

HS: I'm not enabling either of you.

HS: Frying pans are a witch's specibus.

Hephaestus cracks his neck to the side with a sound like a boulder snapping in two; Karkat's so distracted by flinching at the sound that he almost misses Feferi swoop down to buzz Dave. Tucking her legs up before she can collide with him, Feferi careens cheerfully over Dave and then lands. "Shello!" she says, waggling her claws at the denizens.

"Feferi. Fucking finally. Tell that fuck to make us a frying pan," Karkat says. Hephaestus grumbles overhead and adjusts his mechanical brace, while Echidna starts snort-laughing bubbles into the lava.

Dave chokes - on his own spit, probably - while Feferi raises an eyebrow at Karkat. "Uh, no," she says, as she trots right up to the rocky edge of the Forge. Echidna rises up from the lava to bare all her teeth in a grin, and Feferi blows the giant monster a kiss. "Anything else I could do to kelp?" she asks.

"Depends. How good are you at juggling snake eggs?" Dave asks, deadpan.

Clicking her tongue, Feferi dips a weird curtsey to the denizens and then spins. Dave's back is turned to her as he hunches over more eggs - Karkat could swear those things are multiplying, despite the fact that progress has stalled out - so he misses the predatory glint flash in Feferi's eyes. Karkat sees it, with the well-honed instincts of someone trained not to fuck with cold-bloods in a hunting mood, and the only reason his instincts don't plaster him back against the terminal as Feferi leaps is that she's clearly aimed at Dave. Dave somehow doesn't flashstep out of the way in time, which means he probably deserves it when Feferi smacks her claw against the back of his head. "You are both terrible," she informs the air and the world at large, as she holds Dave's head in a vice grip and starts to pour Life shit over him.

…Karkat really needs to work on his visual imagery. Eurgh. Why does he do this to himself?

Dave twitches and goes stiff, still bent over the snake eggs with his head ducted so all Karkat can
see is the back of his head while Feferi hums and heals whatever's gone wrong now. "Uh. Uncomfortable," he says, weakly.

"Sorry! If you don't want to conch out, you need take better care of yourself! Every time I see you, you've gotten worse," Feferi says, and pats him on the head before clicking her tongue a few times in time with whatever song she's humming to herself.

Then her claw goes very still, and she frowns. "Wait a second. Are you -"

Without warning, Dave twitches and farts off into thin air; Feferi yanks her claw back out of the way, with a belated yelp. Karkat, who by now is used to people rubbing their ability to disappear at will in his Aspect-challenged facehole (if he can't summon himself through conveniently placed puddles of blood, *what is the fucking point?*), scrapes his claws down his face and pulls out his phone so hard he nearly chucks it into the Forge. If their collective focus is this shot, he's just going to read the fucking recipe himself.

It only takes a few seconds for Dave to twitch back into view about two feet from where he started, but Karkat already has several choice paragraphs full of swearing saved for just such an occasion. Which takes some of the spontaneity out of yelling at Dave, but gives him the immense satisfaction of finally living out a scenario he's practiced over and over in his head ever since they realized Dave's time powers *are fucking killing him*. Dave's sense of obligation to inevitable misfortune is the bane of Karkat's fucking existence. "You're running a time loop?! Now? To bring back *more* eggs?!" Karkat demands, scandalized, as their pile of omelet fodder nearly doubles in size - they need to pick another breakfast-related egg dish to fry up because FUCK, this is ridiculous. And Dave *SOMEHOW* brings WV with him in the mini tidal wave of eggs; fuck only knows where the carapacian came from in the first place, but Dave reappears with the stoic expression of an idiot who doesn't fear gods, death, or Karkat dropkicking him through the Final Gate, and Karkat needs to fix *that*, ASAP. Preferably by dropkicking Dave through the Final Gate from across the Medium. With witnesses. "I hate you. I don't even a *little* bit like you."

"Have to," is all this future Dave says. The worst and most infuriating kind of excuse. It emerges too fast, his chattering erratic and tense, which means he's keyed up enough that he can't maintain the monotone. "The last third, we start mixing slime from appearifying the eggs instead. Gotta breed the shiniest, swirliest egg this side of a chicken's feathery ass." Just as WV cowers with a squeak of alarm and vanishes under a collapsing tower of eggs, Dave pauses and raises his head. He's apparently too distracted by his own terrible turn of phrase to rescue WV as the carapacian tries to flail his way free. "…Don't tell Oriole I said that shit."

Another two clock line scar point down his face at slightly different angles, toward his other shoulder. Already scabbed over. Of course. Because why would Dave do things by safe, carefully thought out halves, when he has stupidity down to *such* a science? After trying to come up with something more explicit and verbose to say and coming up dry, Karkat just settles for: "They're not. Fucking. Chicken eggs. Dave."

Dave presses his hands together, then taps them against his mouth as he stares at Karkat implacably. Karkat stares right back, stretched to the outer limits of his own sanity. "I'm on page 365, man. They can be whatever eggs we want them to be, at this point," Dave says, at last.

Feferi buries her face in her claws. Karkat may not understand all of words in the flurry of Italian that she mutters into her palms, but by fuck, he knows a torrent of swear words when he hears them.

And he completely agrees.
EB: you're sick of all these fucking snakes on this plane? :D
TC: don't a motherfucker mean motherfucking snakes
TC: ON A MOTHERFUCKING PLANE?
TC: :3)
CG: THIS IS UNAC-FUCKING-CEPTABLE. YOU TWO AREN'T ALLOWED TO TAG
TEAM ME WITH PAN-THROBBINGLY STUPID BULLSHIT LIKE THIS.
EB: karkat you totally set that up on purpose, don't lie. :P
CG: SHUT THE FUCK UP.
CG: ARE YOU EVEN OKAY? WHAT HAPPENED OVER THERE?!
EB: uh, yeah, we're fine! otherwise we wouldn't be able to message you.
TC: SHIT'S FINE AS SHIT, BROTHER.
CG: NO. SHIT IS THE OPPOSITE OF ***FINE***. YOU TWO WERE FIGHTING THE
TRICKSTER AND ARADIA HAD TO BE THE ONE TO TELL ME YOU WERE IN
DANGER!
EB: i mean, i didn't realize he was gonna show up and be his usual self…
EB: and then stuff happened a lot!
CG: BUT YOU WON?
EB: kiiinda? typheus said it was an okay choice and now i have all the grist hoard so…
CG: …AND THE TRICKSTER? WHY WAS HE EVEN THERE TO BEGIN WITH?
EB: he got turned into a tree.
EB: kinda.
CG: YOU KEEP SAYING 'KINDA.' WHICH COULD MEAN FUCKING ANYTHING.
'KINDA' CAN SUCK MY BULGE, I WANT QUANTIFIABLE HARD FACTS AND
PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE SO I CAN CROSS HIM OFF MY CHART OF 'ENEMIES WE
SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT BUT WHOM I DIDN'T FUCKING THINK WOULD BE
RELEVANT TODAY SO WHAT THE EVERBURNING FUCK IS UP WITH THAT?'
TC: is that a real longass chart?
CG: YOU'D BE SURPRISED.
EB: yeah, he's gone.
EB: and.
EB: uh.
EB: so is my dad.
TC: :o(
CG: …HOW.
EB: i. don't think i can talk about it right now.
EB: not yet.
EB: but he's really dead so you don't have to worry about him at all anymore! :)
CG: I'M LOOKING INTO THAT SMILEY FACE'S DEAD, BLANK EYES, AND IT'S NOT
WORKING, JOHN. I'M NOT FOOLED.
EB: after, okay?
EB: please.
TC: SHIT'LL GET MOTHERFUCKING SHOOSHED.
CG: WILL IT? BECAUSE TODAY SWAN DIVED INTO THE DEEP END OF GET
FUCKED A LONG TIME AGO, AND OUR TRACK RECORD ISN'T GREAT.
TC: shi'll get shooshed on all ends.
EB: also dave set typheus on barack obama for weird legal reasons which…i don't even know where
to start. :P
CG: YEAH, HE STARTED MUTTERING ABOUT THAT. AND I'M NOT SURPRISED.
THIS IS ENTIRELY IN KEEPING WITH WHO DAVE IS AS A HUMAN BEING, AND I
CAN ONLY FEEL THE FAINTEST STIRRINGS OF APPALLED DISBELIEF.
CG: THE ONLY WAY THIS COULD POSSIBLY BE WORSE WAS IF TEREZI DECIDED
tO HELP HIM.
-- gallowsCalibrator [GC] has joined the chat! --
GC: H3H3.
GC: H3H3H3H3H3H3H3H3H3H3.
GC: >;
GC: …
GC: JOHN. GAMZEE.
TC: yeah bro
EB: karkat?
CG: THIS GAME IS FUCKING STUPID, AND I'M PRETTY SURE WHOEVER WAS IN CHARGE OF DESIGNING IT WAS SNORTING THE STRONGEST COCAINE IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE.
CG: I'M RADIATING SO MUCH IONIZED HATE RIGHT NOW THAT I COULD SET OFF A FUCKING DOSIMETER.
TC: PREACH, BROTHER.
EB: pfft.
CG: YOU LAUGH NOW, JOHN.
EB: anyway, i think we'll be at lofaf soonish! gotta drop off all this gristy goodness.
CG: PLEASE NEVER SAY GRISTY GOODNESS IN FRONT OF DAVE.
CG: BUT FUCK PLEASE GET OVER HERE, I CAN ONLY TAKE SO MUCH MORE SNAKE ZAPPING BEFORE I'M FORCED TO CRACK MY THINKPAN OPEN ON THE COMPUTER MONITOR. DAVE KEEPS CALLING THEM CHICKEN EGGS. I CAN PHYSICALLY FEEL MY BRAIN DISSOLVING INTO A RARE, FOUL SLUDGE WITH EACH PASSING SECOND, AND SOLLUX ISN'T EVEN HERE FOR ME TO COMPARE BRAIN-MELTING NOTES WITH.
TC: …
EB: yeah, yeah, on our way.
EB: man, i can't wait for this birthday to be over.
-
"DAVE!" Karkat shrieks over his shoulder. Sure, it's not that much louder than his normal volume, but he's been engrossed in texting and appearifying for the past few minutes, so the sudden escalation makes Feferi flinch and accidentally ram her elbow back into a towering pile of eggs, further burying WV in his egg grave.

The pursed lip bastard himself apparently expected this conversation. Depending on when Dave's at in the timeline right now on his incredibly ill-advised, self-destructive egg bender, he totally saw it coming, and Karkat quietly fumes over this. "Nubs McGee?" he says in return, as he swings around and leans half off one of the ectobiology…things. Fuck if Karkat knows what half this useless crap is called. As far as he's concerned, most if not all of the shit on this platform is decorative and exists only because Skaia felt like cluttering up the place.

"We skipped to the thirteenth! It's John's birthday right now!"

Of all the things to focus on, this is probably the least important. But it strikes Karkat all of a sudden, like a sharp slap to the face in the middle of a confused, milling crowd. John's birthday is happening right now as they speak, and on top of the usual apocalypse (fucking festive) he's just dealt with the Trickster and his dad all at once. Doctor Lalonde hinted and floated around the idea of a birthday cake but…baked goods? No one wanted to poke that one with a ten foot pole; then, suddenly, they were all rushing towards Las Vegas with their noses to the grindstone, and any talk of birthdays or presents mostly faded into the background. Karkat has a present for him, but in all this fresh fucking nonsense -
Dave holds up an egg with a lemon yellow swirl, like he's about to recite some kind of monologue to a skull. "Don't worry, dude. We're gonna get him a new universe. He's gonna love it," he says, sagely. As he does, he slowly leans further and further away from the ectobiology thing until he hangs off it at an angle. He looks like he's about to keel over -

PM: Witch of Life!

PM: Please!

Because their lives consist of an endless parade of random shit happening in a consistently disruptive fashion, of course a Prospitian Monarch crash lands in one of the few remaining clear pockets of space on the egg-laden platform. The carapacian carves through the air and dents the floor with both feet; the impact jolts Karkat off his feet for a split second, and he starts floating rather than worry about landing. Dave wheels his arms frantically to try to keep his balance, and narrowly avoids landing on his ass. Across the platform, WV surges up to push an arm out of his egg-heap with serious effort, but only makes it halfway before green light flashes and he phases on top of the pile. The body in PM's arms smolders and looks nine-tenths cracked; Karkat makes an aborted move forward, but the carapacian isn't bleeding, by this point. Feferi gives up trying to pin Dave for the fifth time and vaults over WV's pile to reach PM and the shattered White Queen in her arms. "What happened?!" Feferi says, her eyes darting over the WQ's smoking form as she puts out a claw to gingerly prod one of cracked plates of shell.

PM: She took off her ring and gave it to me. And then got hit by a meteor.

PM: I have to go. But you, Witch -

PM: Please.

PM raises her head and stares at Feferi, her dark eyes bleak; she clutches the White Queen's body close to her chest instead of laying her on the platform, like she already expects to hear 'it's too late.' Karkat sags back against the terminal, woozy, as the heat of the Forge suddenly sends a dizzy rush through his head. He doesn't think he can feel a pulse from here - if it were just him up here, that's probably the answer PM would get. He's basically just the Knight of Fuckall when half of her blood got left behind wherever this happened -

Feferi closes her claws into a fist - and then splays them gingerly over the White Queen's chest, limned with fuchsia. "I think I've got her," she says, after a moment, as her other claws joins the first. PM sags back on her heels and her wings droop with relief. On the egg pile, WV sits up, dead quiet, and watches as PM uncurls her stiff arms and sets the White Queen down for Feferi to inspect properly. With the new angle, Karkat sees part of the WQ's torso has caved in. Steady, curling fuchsia light pools between Feferi's hands and streams into the cracks; the color deepens into a stronger color that almost edges on maroon as Feferi concentrates.

"She's alive?" Karkat hisses. He can almost - almost - feel a thready, shitty excuse for a pulse, now, but fuck only knows how much power Feferi's doling out to make that happen. If there was ever an award for MVP…fucking fuck.

"Only just." Feferi smiles distractedly, and shifts her claws slightly. The light of her power follows and licks along the White Queen's shattered shoulders like fire, scouring the scorch marks and neon green burns away. "Carapacians - they can take a lot. As long as there's still a spark…"

PM: Thank you.
PM rises out of her crouch and turns her head up toward the sky. The Reckoning's still fucking along to wreck Earth's day, and meteors streak across the sky in uneven waves. Karkat hasn't looked up from the platform in a while, and now that he does, it looks like the bullshit barrage thinned itself out - but the chunks of space rock that pass overhead now are fucking gigantic. Moving up along the space debris food chain from 'mildly inconvenient craters like acne punching the Earth's face from orbit' to 'fuck this one planet in particular' size, they hurtle more slowly through the Medium but turn Karkat's stomach all the more for the slow, inevitable weight of their passage.

WV: Where are you going now?

PM: To make a delivery.

Wings fully unfurled, PM takes a step away from Feferi and the White Queen, then hesitates. Her gaze flicks toward the Forge, downcast - and then she peeks at WV, most of her body angled away as though it's taking everything she has to keep her ground-bound. She puts out a hand with a glint of gold on her ring finger, and reaches toward WV with a tiny wave.

The Dersite carapacian sits motionless, hugging his torso and staring at PM's claw like it's a foreign object, and for a second this is it. Karkat's hooked. This is the last fucking soap opera he's ever gonna get to watch unless they recreate the genre in Calliope's reality, and he's invested after only five minutes of watching it play out before him. He's such a fucking sucker.

Finally, WV reaches out and touches the tips of his claws to PM's.

WV: Come back safe.

PM: Always.

Then she leaps up and wings away in three smooth beats, arcing away from LoFaF and becoming a pinprick of white as she slices a wayward meteor in two, then vanishes into the dark sky.

Karkat shunts the carapacian side drama out of his thinkpan, and goes back to work. The radiating light of Feferi healing the White Queen fills the peripheral of his right eye, just bright enough that he can't quite ignore it. And Dave -

- that fucking idiot -

Karkat loses track of the snake count. He stumbles and second guesses himself around page 194, and never gets the rhythm back.

This is because Dave is an inconsiderate fuck who announces his current page count whenever he decides to pop in to serve up a fresh nutrition plateau of go fuck yourself, with a side helping of another hundred eggs to rebury WV. How is Karkat supposed to function in bullshit working conditions like this? He fucking can't, that's how. Spamming the appearify button can only take him so far. He can feel his thinkpan slowly liquifying again under the staggering weight of his adrenalin-laced boredom.

And then the festering, shit-smear hoof of Lady Destiny herself stomps on their throats once more.

From this distance, something judders and twists sharply in Karkat's ribcage. The kind of sudden, there-and-gone pain that he'd normally dismiss as either a momentary twinge or a sign he has fucking cancer or something before going about his day as normal.
But Echidna bursts out of the Forge in a shower of lava - liquid rock actually *spills* over the lip of the Forge and slops over the side of the volcano, instead of just churning wildly, and the low warble that ripples through the denizen's throat sets her quills ringing and clattering against each other. And there's no way the timing is a coincidence -

Feferi scrambles away from the White Queen with a cry, reeling like someone who has worked her way through half of Doctor Lalonde's long-lost alcohol supply. "Feferi?!" Karkat says, but his voice sounds more terrified than his numb body really feels. He's rapidly reaching his mental capacity for emotions today, and any second now he's tempted to either lay down and scream into a pillow, or just scream in general. He's got nothing left to sop up his leaking dismay fluid, anymore. Dave - Dave doesn't even react to Feferi; he just pulls up the next snake bio on the list, while Karkat's focus nearly splits in two.

"I - oh no. Oh no. Is that - what that feels like? I could sense it all the way from here -" Feferi says. Just as suddenly as she lurches upright, she sinks back, away from the unconscious White Queen, to sit back against the nearest egghoard. Her expression is - awful. Resigned in the worst possible way. The sharp jolt in Karkat's torso twinges again, while foreboding settles in low, knotted and cramped in his guts. "What happened?" When Dave tries to rattle off the next set of coordinates, Karkat reaches toward him without looking and tries to smack the phone out of his hands. "Dave, cut that out! Something's wrong."

"Already know," Dave mumbles - *of fucking course* he knows, because this is some random fucking Dave who has an oh-so-amazing ten second lead on them.

Another twinge in Karkat's chest -

That's not his heart. He's only feeling that in his own chest because of sympathy pangs. Karkat spins around and *slaps* Dave's timetable away from the human's shaky hand. "Okay, time out for the fucking idiot! Stop that!" Karkat yells, right in Dave's ash-white, sweat-streaked face, because *he feels a heart attack coming on* -

"Kanaya. Oh - I think she's gone. I don't think she can come back," Feferi says, her focus far and away across the Medium. She clutches her hair and the base of her horns, her knuckles pale. The words sound like nothing over the thundering pulse in Karkat's ears; the leaden weight in Karkat's stomach can only sink lower. "I can't feel her anymore...He - Sollux can't bring her back. There's nothing left. She's *gone*.

For a second, the pain is a white-hot explosion in Karkat's heart. In his head. He wonders if it's possible to stroke out from grief, from losing a friend - and the fact that Dave crumples against the terminal and sways, pressing his phone to his forehead as though that'll make the zigzag shudder of his heart ease up, just makes it worse. Karkat latches onto Dave's free wrist, but he can't stop people - read: Dave 'B) would be sacrilegious yo' Strider - from time travelling with his shitty blood-based skillset.

Dave's head wobbles on his neck, and he stays rooted in the present not because Karkat's got a death grip on him, but because he's one vigorous jumping jack away from *dying*. This is Dave as far along as he can get in his time loops, and *fuck*. Just.

Fuck. Losing Kanaya is bad enough that Karkat can't process it. It hurts, and somewhere out there, *Rose* has to be hurting worse, and if they lose Dave on top of that…

Karkat's pusher lurches out of beat, so hard that he feels like it's about to slam a bruise along the inside of his meatsack. "No. Fuck this. Feferi!" he shouts, jolting Feferi out of her distant fugue.
Karkat snaps his claws until Feferi shakes her head and lunges toward them, stumbling over the White Queen to reach the terminal. "This snake garbage could wait!" Karkat then bawls right in Dave's ear, before wrenching the world out of focus and following the stilted jolt of Dave's pulse to the source in a red fog.

"Nah. It couldn't," Dave says, his voice an exhaust mumble that sounds too close and too quiet, at the same time.

Karkat gnashes his teeth, mouths 'Nah' to himself, and struggles to recall the feel of his own normal heart rate - not exactly the same as human normal, but close enough to say fuck it and pray. He just needs to level both of them out, while Feferi provides the raw not dying juice. "Oh, fuck you, Dave!" bursts out of him a second later, as Dave's head starts to loll back, and FUCK is he going to regret that if Dave dies.

(What was the last thing he said to Kanaya? He can't fucking remember.)

"No, no, no, no -" Feferi chants, a steady counterpoint to Karkat and Dave's reeling pulse, her voice slowly rising in volume.

Which is about when Prospit explodes.

---

There is Rose, before.

And there is Rose, after.

-

Rose before lasts approximately fifty six seconds, numb as she stares down at Kanaya's face - she tries to count down a full minute before shaking apart, but she loses the last four seconds to the blind, towering panic that swamps her. Her hand shoots out to the side of its own accord, and misses Jade the first time - Jade catches her hand on the second attempt. "Prospit - we have to go -" she says, her voice wretched and ragged, and Jade jerks her head in a nod. Rose can see the distant reflection of her own despair mirrored in Jade's horrified eyes, but nothing can compare. She presses her hands to Kanaya's cheeks, trying to find patches that aren't stained with acid so that she doesn't hurt her anymore, and lowers her head to touch her forehead to Kanaya's while Jade shouts something meaningless and garbled to the others. It doesn't matter. What matters has narrowed to a very small window in Rose's tunneling vision, a ring of black with the blurred image of Kanaya pulsing at the center. A rush of green consumes her vision for a fraction of a second that feels like an eternity, dragging on and on while Rose tries to clutch Kanaya closer. It doesn't do any good; they're frustratingly incorporeal, at the moment. She almost manages to convince herself that the green light is Kanaya resurrecting, and not Jade teleporting them to Prospit -

But then they land with a sticky squelch, glittering amber honey ebbing at the edges of Rose's tunnel vision, and Rose drags the toe of her shoe through the melting, liquified comb before catching herself and Kanaya. Jade's trying to help carry her, but Rose won't let go; she cradles Kanaya closer, a heavy dead weight with her head lolling against Rose's chest.

Sollux proves harder to find than expected - than Rose can bear without breaking. Objectively, Rose can tell something is wrong with Prospit. It's quite literally falling apart all around them: the vast spires of golden honeycomb sag and drip enormous clumps that hit the rising ocean of liquid honey and beeswax that sloshes through the streets with glopping sounds. Jade teleports them in above the welling sea, but another half-melted tower sluices half its mass into the honey sea, exposing a
concave cross-section of the molten silicomb within, and level of the sea surges higher, threatening to swallow them up like insects in sticky amber. The heady scent of charred comb and melting honey spins Rose's head dizzily as her ears fill with the dull roaring buzz of bees in distress. "Where's he?" Rose says, her words slurring, as Jade boosts them higher up again. "Sollux, where is -"

"There!" Jade says, pointing - she teleports them again before Rose can force her spinning vision to focus.

Sollux stands knee-deep in honey when they reach him. His psionics jitter and crackle through the air with electric force to hold the towering walls of beehouse mainframes up, as the two half-liquified buildings on either side slump toward him at dangerous angles. Jade punches the sagging walls away with a burst of force so he can concentrate. He spares them a glance but doesn't stop typing for a second; melting honey coats the computer terminal's screen in a sticky layer that distorts the programs on it with a shifting, bubbling gold film, but Sollux's frantic claws fly blind across the gummed-up keys. "I can do this, I can - I can - FUCK," he shouts, doing a double take. His glasses nearly fly off the bridge of his nose with the force of his spin, and behind them his expression is utterly distraught, wild-eyed, as he stares at Kanaya -

No.

"You have to god tier her!" Rose says. Her senses appear to have shifted: she can hear and see, aware of the way Prospit collapses and melts around them, but her stomach feels too tight, her heart beats too hard in her chest. Her head spins and hitches in time with her juddering pulse - it feels too densely packed with numb, detached panic for any other thoughts to squeeze through to the front of her mind. "Sollux, please -"

"It's not," he starts, and does not finish. Rose's thoughts seem to be sluggishly floating through the honey around them; she can't understand why Sollux wouldn't be able to fix this, when Kanaya is his friend, when she's right here in front of him, that - that should make it easier, shouldn't it? So why does he panic-stricken, and clutch his hair hard enough to tear it, before flinging himself back onto the keyboard, slamming the keys with the heel of his palm to force them down as more honey sticks between them. "I couldn't figure it out in time - no, there's still time, I can - fuck, don't panic -"

No. There should be a dream Kanaya here, tucked away by Gamzee for safekeeping. Rose can't let go of Kanaya right now, but this is suddenly of vital importance. "Her dreamself. Where is it?!" she says, as she reaches out and catches Sollux's shoulder. He shakes her off with a convulsive shudder, and a sob rasps out of his throat as he uses his psionics to scorch the honey off the keyboard and screen. It singes his god tier costume in the process, but it doesn't seem to register for him. To be fair, Rose barely registers it, either - her eyes simply catalog the details, while the rest of her mind circles and circles around the one thing that matters.

"She wouldn't even wake up! They were always in the captchalogue cards - everyone else came out fine," Sollux says, emphatic, his words tumbling over each other as his voice slowly speeds up into incomprehensible babble in Rose's ears. He waves a wild claw back in a cutting motion, toward the gooey, viscous honey that pours through the street channel behind the terminal. "In a few seconds, we're not going to have the processing power left to -"

With the drone of bees and Sollux's words grinding in her ears, Rose turns, her feet catching and stumbling on the sticky floor of the platform as she races up the stairs to the lookout point and drops to her knees. The Kanaya cradled in her arms and the Kanaya lying flat on the ground both lack a pulse or any other hint of life; both persist in not opening their eyes, even when Rose drops a precious hand needed to support Kanaya's head and shakes the shoulder of her dreamself.

Nothing. Not even a flicker of an eyelash. The dream of Kanaya wears a honey-yellow dress, her
claws folded over her torso where Eridan once shot a hole through her, her hair messy and sticky. Distantly, Rose can hear herself whimpering, chanting something like nonono, as she fumbles and tries to talk to both Kanayas at the same time. "Come on, wake up. Can you hear me? It'll be alright, it'll be okay," another voice says - no, that's still Rose's voice, as she folds up, her stomach in knots, and bends her head between the two bodies. "Ple-ase, I - I promise, you'll wake up - please? Sollux, please!" Voice cracking, she raises her head, her ends of her hair dripping with honey.

Jade and Sollux both lean over the computer now. She can't make out their conversation over the droning white noise that fills her ears - Jade gestures, and Sollux tries to shoulder her out of the way, arguing with her about something. Rose can't make out what. Down the street - Rose can't recall turning to the side to look, her thoughts adrift in a sea of mead - another tower of mainframes topples in a waterfall of honey and sunken comb, and hits the treacly surface of the sea. A wave of honey washes over the edge of their platform, around Kanaya's resting head and Rose's neat blue shoes.

Sollux won't be able to fix this.

That is, Rose believes, the gist of why he and Jade are arguing, though she hears it from an odd distance. Dissociation, her mind supplies - though why it believes this is an appropriate moment to remind her basic psychological vocabulary, Rose does not know. Jade tosses another flood of dripping honey away from the screen with a wave of her hand and starts typing at a furious pace, while Sollux turns, his face wretched and smeared with yellow, and sinks slowly into the welling honey as he slides down the front of the terminal. For a moment his eyes stare uncomprehendingly at Kanaya, before meeting Rose's.

He remade all of Prospit to change the game in their favor, and now all that work is melting around them in a steady cascade. Perhaps, Rose thinks blearily, her mind stuttering to a stop and grasping for one last straw, he could rebuild it all again. If he could transmute an entire small planet into a beenary satellite once, surely he could do so again. If he had enough time.

They'll never have enough time. Rose knows it with a perfect, crystalline clarity. Time, to build it all again; time, to recreate all of Sollux's modifications; time, to figure out what went so wrong with Kanaya's resurrection - something Sollux must surely have known about, and yet couldn't fix in time -

Rose draws Kanaya close; she makes a short effort to lift her dreamself's head above the level of the honey, but then Rose curls up over Kanaya, and loses track of - many things. Denial scrambles her thoughts, and she presses her mouth to Kanaya's blood streaked forehead. She can feel her whole body coiled and shaking with some nameless emotion that threatens to tear out of her gut and spill her inside out -

The dizzy, swirling sensation in Rose's mind abruptly clears. Lifting her face, she feels her lips part slightly as she gazes unseeing down the street.

Kanaya is dead.

Leviathan killed her.

These are the facts, which shine in the wretched hollow of Rose's mind like twin stars. All she need do is draw the obvious line between them, and follow it to its inevitable conclusion. As she does so, the honey rises up around Rose's crouched form, swallowing her hips. She meets Sollux's eyes one last time, and does not know what he sees in her expression. Jade still hasn't looked away from the computer terminal; she pours her whole self into trying to stabilize Sollux's code even as Prospit implodes around them.
Dear, determined Jade. Sollux, breaking on the inside, confusion in his face as he raises a hesitant claw toward Rose - perhaps with an inkling of what comes next. Darling Kanaya, who won't wake up.

Rose smiles as she sets Kanaya down, very gently, on the flooded platform.

And then she explodes.

- X

Rose isn't sure what to call the emotion that scorches her from the inside out. Something more violent than grief; something too keenly focused to call rage. In an instant, she's incandescent - light blazes under her skin and pulses around her, seething and unquenchable. The honey burns away in a flash, leaving her hair and clothes free to billow and fly out around her. She hangs there for a moment, burning like a sun and waiting for the light and heat to reduce her to ashes, as she half expects it to.

It doesn't. Jade turns to look at Rose at last, worried and upset, and has to shade her eyes while her ears flatten back against her hair. Sollux's sensitive troll eyes can't handle it; he buries his whole face in his hands to shield them, and yells something nonsensical at Rose. "Turn it down!", maybe, but he should know by now that she can't do that. Rose centers herself at the intersection of anguish and fury, and summons more light, and more light still, until it's all she can see with luminous eyes.

Why is it, she wonders, between her and Terezi and Sollux, that they never seem to realize in time that someone's fortunes are failing? What's the point, if the terrible things happen anyway? Of all the possible ways today could have fallen out, this is what horrendous drivel passes for an alpha timeline? Reality expects Rose to put up with this?

She'd rather tear the sky down. For a wild moment, ablaze with fury, Rose considers how she might go about dismantling Skaia as she once did LoLaR, island by island. She wouldn't need to be particular careful about extracting any knowledge from the wreckage. It wouldn't be a careless, callous mission for information on the part of a girl too assured of her own intellect to second guess her actions. It wouldn't even be a reckoning. It would be a demolition.

It won't bring Kanaya back. But Rose doesn't think anything can. A reckless crusade, worthy of Eridan's and her own legacy. Rose raises a hand to inspect it, her mouth twisted in a pained smile, and closes it into a fist so that her fingers stop shaking. The bow in her other hand vibrates with pent-up energy as her light refracts through it, and Rose wonder how much it can take before it shatters in her grip.

"Rose. Rose. TT."

Sollux's sharp call finally cracks through the searing glare of Rose's aura. She wouldn't bother to look - she has places to be - but hope is a pernicious thing, and she meets his gaze with enough force that he flinches, his teeth gritted as he dangles from Jade's grip. Prospit's meltdown nearly swamps their platform; the computer terminal and all its useless hacks lay buried under the sheen of hot honey. Rose is only clear of it where she stands by virtue of her radiant rage. Almost none of Prospit's towers remain standing - only a few points still stick out of the swirling sea, and those points look like melted candle wax. A sluggish whirlpool turns down the street, where Prospit's hollow center has presumably cracked and the honey drains into the internal chamber. Grim and mute, still smeared with honey, Sollux raises a claw swathed in Doom. All the expression has vanished from his face, but there are streaks on his face that aren't honey. Rose looks where he's pointing and notes the Medium spread out behind them. Skaia looms huge beside them, it's cloud-bedecked surface
deceptively calm and quiescent as the cloud cover swirls over the checkerboard tendrils that wrap around it in a net, in stark contrast to the first round of meteors that have reached the defense portals and fill the space between all the lands with meteoric hail. Rose wants to ruin that placid, unaffected surface; she wants Jade's power and more beside, so she could shrink Skaia down to the size of a marble, and crush it between her teeth.

That's not what Sollux points at. From Prospit, Skaia fills most of their view, with dark LoHaC and brilliant LoWaS just visible around opposite ends of the curvature of the pseudo-sun - but Leviathan's main tangle wraps around the outside of the shifting Veil, all the same, spread unfathomably wide like a dark corona.

…Point taken.

Rose blasts away from Prospit at a breakneck pace, and doesn't look back. "Rose!" Jade says, abruptly alongside her, her voice fading in the distance as Rose continues to rocket around Skaia, flying low through the clouds to shave time off her flight. Jade keeps teleporting in, her voice rising and falling as Rose streaks past her each time. "Rose! This is really dangerous - we need to - have a plan - or grab Equius! - Rose, hang on!"

Rose has a plan. It's a very well thought out, scrupulous plan, considering the circumstances. "Go back to the ships, Jade," she says. Hundreds of motes of light blur in her skewed vision, and she's in no state of mind to coalesce them together and attempt to divine their future fortune from them, but that proves inconsequential: this is a matter of common sense. The ark ships are important, and besieged by meteors and Leviathan's wandering tendrils at every turn; ergo, Jade is most needed there. "Get them through."

Jade's worried frown deepens, her eyebrows inching mutinously towards 'cross' as she spams her teleport to keep up with Rose's breakneck pace. Then Rose sees the moment that the reminder about the ships' precarious state set in, and Jade whips around with her eyes unfocused and her ears perked as she scopes out the distant arks and carapacian meteors. She shakes her head and bites her lip before replying. "No - you're planning to - do something dangerous! I won't leave you alone!" she insists, reaching out to catch Rose's sleeve. "You can't fight Leviathan all by yourself!"

Somehow, impossibly, Jade misses Rose's arm. Rose doesn't think she can attain light speed without perhaps Dave's help - [Light Speed]? It has the emphasis of a fraymotif in her mind, so it must be a possibility - but she's certainly moving faster than she ever has before at her default flight speed. "I'm not fighting Leviathan," Rose says with flat conviction, and then tears her gaze away from Jade's flicker-fast teleportation to contemplate the bright line of light that stretches out before her, like sunlight pouring into a dark house through a distant windowpane.

"Cetus said I could destroy them. I'm making my choice," she says, simply.

The arc of her aura crests and begins to propel Jade away from her on waves of light. Each teleport lands Jade a little further out from Rose, and Jade's flying with her eyes scrunched shut against the light, navigating solely by space impulse. LoLaR comes into view, still resplendent with rainbows, and all Rose can think as she looks at it is that any moment now a stray [crack] from the Lord of Time will cleave it in two, and all the bright water and sand and consorts will be left adrift in the cracking, crazing mess of broken time that slowly but surely transforms this region of the Medium into a fissured wasteland. "And I'll go with you," Jade says, adamant, but Rose sees only one opening, here. Perhaps her grief blinds her to other viable options; ironically, she'll be the last person to notice, if that's the case. It wouldn't be the first time.

But all of their choices and mistakes and stumbles have brought them here, to this point, where Kanaya is dead and yet the timeline rolls on with damning indifference. And when Rose meets Jade's
eyes one last time, her mind feels very clear and cold and filled with hard light. "Jade. Trust me." *I'll make the right choice, this time,* she thinks, but does not say; *I need the rest of you safe,* she refrains from adding. Because losing Kanaya has cracked something inside her, and when Rose's rage falters, she isn't sure what will remain. Losing Jade or Dave or John as well as Kanaya - the thought screeches to a halt before she can complete it. If she thinks the unthinkable right now, she'll shatter.

Perhaps a brief, flickering timeline where Jade *does* stay with her, to the bitter end, branches off at that moment. Rose cannot say; such things are not her field of expertise.

But Jade stares Rose dead in the eye, and tears bubble up so that her eyelashes gleam with lachrymal stars to match the galaxy threaded through her hair as she trusts Rose. She sticks her hand through Rose's aura, finally in perfect sync with Rose's blazing speed, and catches her hand. "I believe in you," she says, with a wobbly smile that comes as close to anything to dissuading Rose from her course. Then Jade vanishes in a burst of green light that drops sharply behind Rose as she pelts along her beam of light, and Rose is alone.

She aims for Leviathan, and the last route straight through the Lord of Time's fractured wreckage shines in her mind's eye with perfect clarity, right up to the pulsating, chaotic foot of Leviathan’s nebulous form.

A form that is neither as nebulous nor chaotic as it might have been, Rose thinks, not even a few weeks ago. Leviathan deflects the Lord of Time's barrage of rending bullets and forces his vast [cracks] to part around it, but in the time that has passed since Rose last properly surveyed the battlefield, the Lord has thoroughly hemmed Leviathan into this section of the Medium. Apart from its desperate, grasping tentacles cast forth toward the ark ships, Leviathan writhes in the dark spaces remaining to it, a whirl of tendrils and teeth and wing and thorn and segmented bands of flesh that comes together in a dark knot larger than LoLaR.

But only just.

As the Lord of Time ripped and tore and drove Leviathan back in a relentless onslaught, the Horrorterror has folded in on itself in countless compacted layers; what once resembled a dark ocean swallowing most of this half of the Incipisphere like a horrific shadow over reality has coalesced and fused into a dense kernel of roiling blood brine and ink and acidic viscera. A perfect spirograph etches the distended skin of one of Leviathan's throats like a brand, and Rose knows with perfect lucidity that the fact that Leviathan *hasn't* dissolved and distorted that symbol yet means something. It means everything.

She just needs to fly past the Lord of Time, first.

This proves as easily said as done, oddly enough. Rose raises her bow, which burns almost as white hot as Eridan at his brightest, and prepares to fend off whatever stray - or deliberate - attacks might come her way as she fixes the illuminated path through the [cracks] and Leviathan's tendrils in her mind's eye. She'll give the Lord as wide a berth as possible to avoid drawing his scrutiny, but she already feels…uneven. The temporal distortion worsens as she nears the hulking green figure - dwarfed by Leviathan, but still imposing - but with only the Lord himself and Leviathan as wholly unreliable points of reference, Rose cannot tell whether her perception of time has sped up or slowed down. But with any luck, her passage will go unremarked and she won't need to deal with the Lord of Time until after. Come what may, if she can just squeeze past him and under two intersecting cracks -

The Lord of Time looks directly at Rose as she streaks past him.

It belatedly occurs to Rose that, regardless of how incensed she may be, it might have been wiser to
tamp down her blazing aura before attempting to bypass an incomprehensibly powerful, apocalyptically destructive demon of the end-times. She's not particular subtle, at the moment. But she notes this only distantly, the rest of her emotions still crushed under the emotion driving her onward. Rose isn't sure she could smother the light even if she wanted to, and she grits her teeth, ready to dodge. Her path doesn't waver - she doesn't know if her foresight can register a time crack, or if it would just be a blip she can't interpret, like Void, or like Leviathan's Chaos.

The Lord of Time cracks his jaw open, and laughs at her. Rose's teeth creak painfully as her whole body tenses - she doesn't think she can dodge an [Entropic Scream], at this range - and pushes herself in one last burst of speed. Dying pointlessly before she can even avenge Kanaya would be such a horrible, stomach-turning waste of a life -

Then he raises his assault riflekind, and brings it down as a cuestick, his high cackle grating on Rose's ears as the sound follows her into the field of broken time before falling eerily silent. An ominous beat stills Rose's heart for a moment, like a shadow passing over her, and, ill at ease, she watches disconcertedly as the Lord of Time hangs like a hulking lump of dead, rotting green meat, his skeleton smile fixed upon her as she slips between the cracks unaccosted.

And deep inside, part of Rose screams that if she succeeds, Leviathan won't be around to distract the Lord of Time, anymore.

A deeper, bone-cold part of her whispers that she doesn't care. Not anymore. The curse of inevitability - if this monstrous, remorseless wreck is the timeline that matters, then why would Rose care? How many worlds and friends has Sburb eaten alive to fuel its endless cycle of doomed creation, for no reason other than the indifferent cosmos decided those were the rules? That those people didn't matter enough, in the grand scheme of things.

He came here to unravel reality and kill Skaia.

Good.

Spiteful vindication ripples through Rose's aura, and then burns away as the piercing light of her fury. The cracks in reality arch around her in stilted zig-zags of opaque nothingness, but Rose's safe route through the hazards remains clear. It really is almost a perfectly straight line, she notes in the abstract, which seems remarkably improbable given the nature of the two beings fighting here.

Now, with the Lord of Time behind her, she's forced to confront the Leviathan's full, towering mass. Thousands of sunken, ichor-infested murky teal eyes wink open along the Horrorterror's lower curves and many mouths twist into open, slavering smiles at her approach, while many more still gape in agonized, full-throated screams. An immense, arched, blind beak rests front and center above the spirograph that has gradually corrupted Leviathan's fundamental nature. A small, thin mouth emerges along with two small eyes along an auxiliary knot of the hive, but Rose can make out the yawning maw of an even larger mouth splitting the back of its head in two as it gawks at her.

Another tangle, mostly merged with the side of Leviathan's squirming central form, bears a half-melted yellow mask the size of a continent and for half an instant Rose's sanity flickers. More so than it already has. She can imagine wearing that mask so vividly, the inside covered with grimlight tendrils that feed into her mouth and down her throat - in through her pupils - her pale hands folded over the sucking hole in her chest as she eats and eats in a delicate but ceaseless tide under a distorted pink sky, funneling the madness of millions of minds back to her true body in the Furthest Ring, always drawn so thin with noble hunger, never truly sated -

Tendrils wrap around Rose in a twining torus, and she snaps back to herself with a snarl, raises her bow, and scorches the circling tentacles before they can close around her. She surges onward without slowing, but she's now aware of just how deceptively close she already is to the vast
Horrorterror; the cracks in time have fallen away in her wake, and now thorny tendrils lined with
eyes and jointed claws watch her from overhead as well - Leviathan may *look* like a compact mass
from a distance, but at this angle Rose can see that the Horrorterror still has a thousand different
rippling layers tucked away, visible only when one has the right perspective on them. Technically,
she is already *inside* Leviathan's sphere of influence.

Whatever residual Void lingers around Rose from Equius's efforts can't possibly withstand this level
of exposure. All Rose has left is her own light, blistering the insides of her mind to sustain her rage as
well as her independence. If she falters, so will her shields, and then she'll be utterly surrounded, at
the mercy of the thoughthorde that eclipses her view.

Kanaya's dead. Rose isn't going to falter.

**LV: ROSE. HOW PRECIOUS YOU ARE.**

The tendrils that flank her on either side begin to sprout roses as Leviathan's oddly singular voice
hammers into her mind with all the soft subtlety of a semi-truck. Cliché, Rose thinks, acerbically.
Embarrassing trite. Layer after layer of mauve petals flower around the buds, until they've swollen to
the point that they look like pretentious cabbages, or brain matter. A nightmarish face drifts past
under Rose, like something drowned watching her from deep below the surface, but then it ripples,
and the Incipisphere goes dark under her once more. The closer she comes to Leviathan, the more it
feels as though she's descending instead toward the surface of a planet - or sinking into cold water.

**LV: ARE YOU ANGRY, ROSE?**

**LV: ARE YOU G R I E V I N G, ROSE?**

Rose clamps her teeth together and convulses with a silent scream. It knows, it fucking well knows
exactly what it did, and it has the *gall* -

**LV: I CAN FIX IT, ROSE. WE CAN FIX EVERYTHING.**

Then Leviathan's roiling belly of tentacles parts before her, to reveal thin bones that jut out at the
wrong angles to actually support any of its flesh or immense mass - and parts further still, acid now
slicing from dangling tendrils like saliva from teeth, and Rose flies inside without hesitation. The
skin seals behind her like a gelatinous sea, rubbery smooth, and Rose serves as the only light in the
terrible geometries of Leviathan's insides. Her minds and eyes threaten burst from the ambient
pressure, as though she's been transported to the very core of a planet with nothing to preserve her.

But Leviathan doesn't rush in to engulf her. Broken fractals and obscure glyphs flash and pulsate
along the Horrorterror's insides, oozing black liquid misery in black-and-purple patterns.
Occasionally Rose catches glimpses of other angles - shafts of dark brown and black that intersect
with the vast walls and rotate through them from oddways dimensions, as she delves deeper still. An
object with an impossible number of vertices turns and twists and bristles with jutting spikes, like a
pyramid with too many edges and not enough, all at once. No digestive oceans swirl in to dissolve
her, as Rose still half-expects. In fact, the inside of Leviathan resembles less the visceral, stomach-turning body horror of its exterior, and more a place of broken dimensions and terrifying physics that
defy the natural order of things.

Rose is too furious to go mad. If all Leviathan can throw at her is the pathetic, planet-sized equivalent
of sentient abstract art, she could care less. Foolishly, she wonders what Kanaya would think of it all
- and for an instant pain stabs through her burning light. She shudders and forces it back down,
tamping it down to be *felt* later, before it can steal the breath and purpose out of her.
Leviathan's words echo strangely (even for a Horrorterror's default level of strange), and the few extra, disconcerting layers of sound that haunt the Horrorterror's singular chorus sound like they're emanating from halfway across the world, too quiet to register as more than drops of water in a pond.

LV: I WARNED YOU THAT YOUR FRIENDS WOULD ALL DIE.

LV: YOUR SKAIA WAS THE ONE WHO REPUDIATED HER RESURRECTION. WHAT HAS ORDER EVER DONE FOR YOU BUT ENSURE YOUR SUFFERING?

She does so despise it when Leviathan has a point. It's unfair.

Nothing impedes her. Rose flies further down into the dark, and her light casts long shadows that stretch and then fade in the incalculable distance.

Somehow, Leviathan’s throat hangs over its core - Rose can see three odd reflections of the dizzying walls intersect around her as she nears the center, at the end of her flight path, so that it feels like she's about to fly into walls of flickering purple hexagonal comb. The great spiograph shines overhead, high and dry and burning its pattern into Leviathan's dermis, and that means everything.

It means Cetus spoke true. Leviathan isn't inherently game-breaking, anymore. The spiograph's half-light palls compared to Rose's coruscating aura, and she concentrates instead on the immense flower blossoming in the pallid light. A rose, again - but unlike the ones outside, this one has had time to grow and swell to the size of a small country, full of crenellations and folds and resembling a vast, misshapen brain so closely that Rose's inner psychologist rises up through the pain and rage just long enough to make an aborted attempt at analyzing the heavy handed symbolic implications.

The visual equivalent of purple prose. Of course. All of Rose's over-dramatic, woegothic imaginings from another time and place come to life. Leviathan swallowed her once, mind and body and soul, and never let that impression go.

Rose knows, then, with stark clarity, what she would write waiting for her, at the heart of Leviathan.

And she is not disappointed.

A crisp white table emerges from the flower of Leviathan's many condescend minds, a splatter of blood shimmering in the spiograph's dim spotlight. A pink bottle of lavender wine waits for Rose, glossy and gummy to the eye as she slows to a stop.

LV: I WON'T FORCE YOU. YOU NEED TO CHOOSE.

LV: TOGETHER, WE CAN LEAVE ALL THIS BEHIND. WE CAN BRING ALL YOUR FRIENDS, AND YOU WILL NEVER MISS THEM AGAIN. YOU'LL NEVER BE ALONE AGAIN.

LV: COME TO ME, ROSE. LET US SETTLE THE SCORE.

A small sip would wash the grief down, nepenthean, like mulled mead. Under Rose's will - Leviathan's softer voices insist, in line with her own thoughts - they would be able to escape all this. A portion would be left behind to occupy the cherub Lord, as Hastur once sacrificed a portion of his hoarded self so all the servitors could survive the apocalyptic, whirling, crippling dance of their old Lord, and Rose would usher them out the gate to somewhere new, somewhere not fundamentally hostile and opposed to their very essence. They'd enshrine her securely here, and trust to her lilac-tinted vision to deliver them. No need to stay in the Space realm next door - there are other worlds than these, worlds of Rage, of Nonsense, of true-bred Chaos to match their own. All will be well, and they will be free to multiply unhindered by such trivial things as rule or order. Her friends can
come, too, all of them prized but only Rose loved and adorned with a crown of thorns. Oversead, the dry, gnarled branches of Leviathan’s sprouting rose bush rattle and scrape against each other in oddly symmetric coils, crawling across the wide expanse of the room in anticipation.

It might have persuaded Rose at thirteen.

It might even have won her over not a year past, alone in the darkness of a hollow home. Here and now, Leviathan wants her, as Malā’ikah invested itself in Eridan, as Gl’bgolyb loved Feferi to death. *I’ll never let you go*, Leviathan promises, as Rose reaches out with a lightless hand, and raises the bottle of her own spilt ink. There is no cork or stopper; only an open neck and opening to press to her lips.

Expression remote, lips pressed tight, Rose turns her trembling hand over and pours out the bottle. "Bottom's up," she says, coldly, and feels many unseen eyes watch in fascination as a small, torrential ocean of liquid spills over the table and soaks the immense rose, spilling and spilling in endless waves. Far more than the bottle, cold against her palm, should have held, the liquid pours on in a dark, shifting fall of colors - now black, syrupy oil - now thin, fizzling acid - now briny seawater that stinks of blood - now dark, jade green, swirling all together in a tumultuous sea that would have burst Rose at the seams.

Slowly the cascade trickles to a stop. A grim ocean glitters darkly under her feet; it spans the bowels of Leviathan from one continent-wide wall to another. Rose lets the bottle drop, and it bounces off the alcohol-soaked rose to tumble into the rollicking water below.

Her aura has dimmed; the only light that lingers streams from Rose's eyes. A small tendril looms out of the dark, the whole world too quiet for a Horrorterror. While Rose focuses and breathes deep, turning the scents of blood and alcohol and gasoline over in her thoughts, the tendril touches her streaming cheek, imploring, needling.

LV: Rose…?

Rose laughs, and it echoes in odd ways. "Leviathan? Answer me this, if you can. 'What goes round the house, in the house, but never touches the house?'"

Dead silence answers her.

No…dread. *That's* that word for it. Dread silence answers her, and the tendril draws away from her face. *Rose*, Leviathan says, as though it has the *slightest fucking clue* what Rose intends, what Cetus hinted would be possible here, what Leviathan *ensured* would happen from the moment it snapped Kanaya and Rose's heart along with her.

Rose shuts her glowing eyes against the dark.

[Fill 'Em With Daylight]

And erupts into light.

A sun fills Leviathan from the inside out, its churning core molten in Rose's chest, her eyes blazing, unseen in as sunlight expands around her. It illuminates every angle, every cranny; it spills out, and the spreading corona of plasma scorches the broken patterns and fractals from Leviathan's internals - and burns through them. Fueled with love and rage and grief and all the accelerant Leviathan offered her like a sacrament, Light travels faster than the Horrorterror's vast, horrendous, uncharacteristically unanimous hive of Chaotically swallowed minds can, slowed as Leviathan's reaction time is by one
final, shattering burst of dissent and indecision. Rose incinerates it all, and then *them* all as Leviathan's tenuous order breaks - the strong voices of Hastur, the scurrying remnants of patrician Fluthlu, before they can splinter themselves and flee her surging sun. Soon she shines through the translucent skin of Leviathan's external form, all of its inner mass evaporated into ash, all its branches and thorns and roses scoured away, their chaotic component particles fed through the fusion core of Rose's sun and melded together into something inert yet shining. Rays of her light pierce Leviathan's empty meatsuit, and then burn it away into dust so that she shines throughout the Medium like a dawn. The sun revolves slowly in the spaces between the [cracks] -

- and then vanishes, so that only the afterimage of a Light symbol remains against the backdrop of the Furthest Ring, emptied of all its demons for the first and final time. The dark stays.

Rose opens her eyes.

The dark stays.

*What has eyes but cannot see?*

Silently, as the last of the scorching emotion drains out of her, Rose touches her face and traces the blurred, indistinct edges of marks that spread out from her eyes with many arms, like a star or a compass rose.

Or two suns, the arms mingling as they spread out, one around each sightless eye.

Which leaves her blind, with [cracks] groaning on all sides, and no way to navigate. Nothing happens when Rose attempts to summon other forms of sight. She has no point of reference after delving so deep into Leviathan's many angles, but abruptly realizes that she's drifting as she floats, and jerks herself to a blind, tense stop with a rasping sob. Another sob follows hard after the first, uneven, and Rose curls up as her insides crumple and judder in what promises to be a thorough implosion. Losing Kanaya broke her already - and now, *this*, and she's alone in the dark as she's ever been. Only a few seconds blind and Rose already thinks she feels some looming presence right behind her - the Lord of Time, perhaps, or maybe one last drifting tendril of Leviathan that she missed, that has been there all along, as long as she can remember - that will reach out and snap her in two mid-sob. Nothing is okay, her chest feels like she carved out the organs and cauterized it with her own burning hands, and if she'd never invited Leviathan in then *Kanaya would still be alive.* *That* was the choice she made, and that is all she can see, the clear thread of misfortune spun through all their lives to ruin Rose, and ruin Kanaya, and ruin John, and knot it all together around Rose's useless, blood-stained hands.

The searing rage seeps out of her through the widening cracks, and what fills in her empty spaces is pain, wordless and chest-splitting. Distantly, Rose feels herself droop and drop, drifting blindly down at an angle toward who knows what, who *cares* what.

Someone grunts behind her, and a cold claw nudges her back upright. "Not down there, sis," someone mumbles with a muted chuckle, on the edge of incomprehensibility, and Rose's heart spasms in a paroxysm of throbbing grief and choking terror because she can't see who it is -

"*Rose!*

John tackles her in a whirlwind, his voice perfectly clear, and the wind catches her up in a wild flurry of concern. Rose instinctively clamps a hand over his arm to hold him where she can sense him when he hugs her; the panic drops off sharply, but the pain refuses to ebb. Another hoarse sob cuts
her off when she tries to reply, to explain - his desperate hug reminds her that she's still solid, not bleeding off into the dark, so that she's not crying in a vacuum anymore but in the tight confines of her own chest. "Rose, I've got you, okay? Can you - oh, man -" John says, as the wind brushes the hanging hair out of Rose's face.

"She's gone," Rose tells him. Her voice cracks hard, and she can't speak again as her lungs heave. It all pours out of her now, all the grief left behind in rage's wake, and from the wetness on her cheeks her eyes can still cry just fine, despite the scars. "Kanaya couldn't - couldn't come back -"

Guilt twists her into endless tangles, Leviathan's last legacy, and Rose wants to claw what's left of her eyes out, because she's never seen anything that mattered in time and she'll never see Kanaya again.

John clutches her closer, and she turns her face into his shirt so that she doesn't feel the unseen, wide world turning around her. Then the Breeze whirls them away, and they're both mingling streams of grief on the wind as they leave the empty space where Leviathan will never be again.

- Coming together again requires compressing Rose's pain back into a human-shaped container; she'd prefer a bottle. But only in a distant, tired way. The Breeze doesn't sweep grief away. Not anymore, and Rose understands it even as something horrible inside her wants to lash out at John over it. Neither of them has a history of dealing with pain like this well; Rose can't picture a future beyond the raw pain of the present, but she imagines they'll have to survive it somehow.

"I've got you," John repeats, and the back of Rose's legs bump against a platform before she registers that they're sitting down on something. Rose leans against him with a shuddering nod. She can't see where they've come - away from the Lord of Time, at least, but it's not the melting heat of Prospit. If he had - Rose wouldn't want to see it, anyway. Whatever remains of Sollux's frantic efforts; of Kanaya's unmoving remains. It won't help - not right now.

Nothing, Rose thinks uncharitably, will ever help.

"Just a sec." Rose is only half aware of John moving his arm, doing something. A familiar sound rustles over their heads, like an immense curtain billowing in an unfelt breeze. Apart from that, and a faint hum, Rose can't make anything else out. "Okay - Rose?"

"Yes, John," she manages.

"We're pretty much sitting in the safest place we can be, so, you...Don't worry about that." He hugs her with both arms again, and Rose reaches up with a stiff hand, sightless, to find the side of his face and bring his chin down on top of her head.

- AA: can you read me now?
TT: No.
AA: good!
AA: thankfully there is very little difference between reading and hearing so far as were concerned AA: ive been taking advantage of that for a while now
TT: Not now, Aradia.
AA: i know
AA: but when youre ready
TT: Aradia.
TT: How much time do we have left?
AA: weve never had any time at all

Kanaya opens her eyes.

The back of her neck prickles, and she slaps a hand against it as memory rushes in - she probes at the cervical vertebrae and trying to feel for the crushed bone -

There's nothing there, but she remembers it so vividly. With a shiver of apprehension burrowing in her stomach, she looks around and takes in her surroundings.

Ah. She appears to be running. Interesting. The person running alongside her skids to a stop before a simple, closed door, and jerks the knob with a pale, skeletal hand. When the knob refuses to turn, she turns away with a curse. "Late, late! Right at death's door, and - blast!" Janine wails, snatching up Kanaya's claw and ushering her back into the hallway.

This certainly doesn't look anything like Kanaya would imagine the inside of a Horrorterror looks like - or even the afterlife, such as it were. Windows make up most of the walls of the hallway, opaque enough on all sides that the sunlight filters through soft and fuzzy. The ceiling seems so clear that for a moment Kanaya thinks it's just open to the air There's no sign of rainbow-spewing clouds in the sky, so they're not on Rose's land; just a clear periwinkle sky above, and a distant, pale blue sun.

…She is sure that is a blue sun, and not Skaia. Almost entirely positive. Janine does not seem concerned about this. "Here. Drink this, dear," she says, as she hastily passes Kanaya a cup of tea, her dark hood falling over her head as she pours over a heavy tome full of scribbled ink and tries to pull Kanaya down the hall at the same time. Kanaya can't quite read the words - they look odd and fuzzy, like she's trying to read in a dream.

Is she dreaming? Kanaya takes a sip of the tea obligingly - their footsteps fall so lightly on the soft, plain floor that Kanaya barely jolts the cup as she drinks, which is remarkably convenient - and her mind drifts off as she attempts to suss that one out. "Where are we?" she asks; her voice sounds oddly distant and small in the hall.

Janine replies at once, and her voice sounds perfectly normal. She continues to flick through the tome in the crook of her arm, looking irritated. "In between domains. Please leave everything to me - as your resurrepresentative, I should be able to negotiate this properly. But we need to find the right door, and someone has double-filed you in two realities -"

She drags Kanaya to a halt, gnaws on her lower lip for a second, and then leads Kanaya down a second hallway that wasn't there before. Kanaya takes another deep sip of her tea as her legs fly out from under her, contemplating her surroundings while Janine races down the hall toward a second room.

When they reach it, Kanaya sees that the door bears a familiar symbol. She can't quite put a name to it, though. Maybe it's hers? It's all a bit fuzzy. "There!" Janine says - then she whirls on Kanaya, and aggressively pours more steaming hot tea into her cup, plunking cubes of sugar into it with extreme prejudice. She stirs it with a very small scythe, and then gestures for Kanaya to drink it. Then she affixes a bright smile on her face, and tugs Kanaya's dangling stoles so that they lay flat. "Just drink your tea, dear. This is probably just some paper-pusher class -" Janine begins, turning and pushing
the door open without issue as she consults her tome one last time. Kanaya is really starting to wonder just what is going on, but her field of fucks to give seems very far away, where she can't harvest them.

She drinks more tea. Very odd.

"Paper-pusher? Who, me?" a new voice asks, cheerfully, and Janine shrieks and slams her book shut. Kanaya's body feels slow to respond, like she's moving through honey; she takes another sip of her tea, finishing the cup, before she manages to raise her sluggish head and look at the person who has appeared across from them.

"Ohuhhellohowdoyoudo!" Janine babbles. Her eyes bulge with terror that Kanaya can't seem to process - then Janine gulps and plasters on her best, most gracious smile, and laughs. "I mean - how…lovely to meet you! I hope we can resolve this in short order." She clears her throat. "My client, as you can see -"

The new person is a human perhaps around Kanaya's age, fiddling with the blood red leaves of the plant on the desk before her; the desk itself sits jammed into the too-small room at an uncomfortable angle, as though someone dragged it into the room in a hurry and didn't have time to straighten it so it was centered before they arrived. Somehow, this unevenness is more disconcerting than the fact that the plant on the desk looks like it has been bathing in the blood of the innocent to maintain its youthful appearance. The blood drips and forms new leaves. "Boring. Dull. Skip it. I want to be here about as much as you do. Which is not at all," she says, and frowns at Janine. "What happened to this one's resurrection?"

Janine scowls back as she pours tea out of the steaming pot at her side table. Kanaya does not remember there being a side table. "Incorrect jurisdiction," Janine argues, sweeping the hem of her dark robes to the side as she gives Kanaya yet another cup of tea without a word. Kanaya takes it, at a loss for what else to do, and takes a slow sip in the hopes it will make things better. It is incredibly delicious - perhaps the best tea she's ever had - but explains nothing. "Why is one of you even here? I am certain she can return through this door, without any red tape."

Kanaya raises a claw to ask a question. She's not even sure why the impulse comes over her. Janine and the strange woman continue to bicker without acknowledging her. "Eh. Had nothing better to do," the woman says, jiggling her foot and turning a page in the packet of papers in her hand. "Right - right here. Double filed? I'm totally reading this right, right?"

"Shouldn't you know for sure if you're interfering this blatantly?" Janine takes the packet regardless, tucking her scythe into the crook of her elbow as she scans it.

"Excuse me," Kanaya says, raising her voice rather than her hand. "May I ask what's going on? Who are you people?" Those seem like the most relevant questions thus far; more are percolating in her head at the moment, but her head seems slow to percolate, this morning.

"Oh, you're a little bit dead, dear. Pay no attention to the bureaucracy beyond the veil of death; you won't remember it much longer," Janine says, her frown breaking for a moment as she smiles sadly at Kanaya. She turns another page in the packet, and the frown builds again as she stares down at it. "I'm your liaison, I'll get this sorted out…"

The being dead thing doesn't even bother her all that much.

Kanaya strongly suspects that this is a bad sign.

A faint breeze picks up in the room - so no, that isn't a ceiling after all, just a hole where a ceiling
should be - and stirs the thin bars of a silvery wind chime hanging at a right angle from a corner of the wall. On the desk beside the not-human woman, a pale white flower bobs on a red stem, the petals rotating like a pinwheel. "Why do I need a liaison to be dead?" Kanaya asks, after another thoughtful sip of tea. She feels as though she missed some time, there, but it is very difficult to keep track of.

The woman answers instead of Janine. "You're invested with immense narrative weight as an agent in a Muse-level entity's reality, so you get a liaison assigned to your deaths. Unfortunately, there's a conflict of jurisdiction because, you lucky kiddo - you've got dual citizenship. Someone's been breaking the rules!" She sings the last part, and winks at Kanaya with a cheeky grin. "And Order entities don't like when other people meddle with their rules."

Janine shakes her head, the hood of her cloak bobbing around her horns. She taps the packet with a claw, and says, "This is all in order. In the event of a conflict, I am to take her to the new Muse. Right through this door, heere -"

Sidling around the desk, Janine attempts to squeeze through. The woman sticks out her foot and blocks the way without looking up. "Yeah, but I want her input," the woman says, waving a hand at Kanaya. "I'm not big on shoving people through doors without them getting a choice." Her wild eyes glint, and her smile turns crooked at the edges. "So: kid, where do you want your spawn point to be?"

"Please, no," Janine says, fervently. "I understand you're Free Will aligned, but she's dead."

"I'm dead?" Kanaya repeats, her voice shaking in her throat. Ah. There's the apprehension again. She'd been wondering when it would start to hit her.

"Drink your tea, dear, we'll get this sorted out for you. Panicking is the last thing you want to do."
Janine gives Kanaya another strained smile, beaming unwaveringly. Kanaya meets her stare for stare, clamping down on the cup of tea, until Janine falters and starts frowning again. "Does it need more sugar?" she asks, squinting at Kanaya and rattling a small bowl of sugar cubes at Kanaya.

Kanaya hastily takes a sip, and that - that is a mistake. It is very good tea, but she's starting to wonder if it's full of sedatives, because she finds herself slouching back again, a faint warm pressure behind her eyes. No more tea, she thinks, rubbing her forehead and setting the half-drunk cup down on her own side table. Definitely no more tea. "No more tea," she says, gritting her teeth. "Where am I, and how can I get back -"

Back to Rose. Rose, who, if she thinks Kanaya is dead - Kanaya is dead - god -

"I get a say in this?" Kanaya asks, as the realization hits her (too slow; everything feels so dreamlike, fuzzy and felted at the seams), and she sets the cup of tea down so she won't be tempted anymore -

No. She...she already set it down once, didn't she? And yet, to her dismay, when the cup clinks against the table it is now completely empty. She doesn't remember taking more than two sips.

The woman snaps a finger pistol at her, grinning, while Janine hastily pours out another cup of tea. "Yup. Totally up to you," the woman says, cheerfully. "I'm very Free Will aligned."

The sugar hits the tea with such velocity that the cup nearly overflows, followed by a dangerous slosh as Janine presses it into Kanaya's waiting claws. "She barely even knows what's happening here!"

Kanaya nods in agreement. "Really, I don't have a clue." The two women move in fast, deft
movements; Kanaya can barely keep up with them. She drinks some more tea, remembers abruptly that she'd told herself not to do that again, and finally resigns herself to it. The combination of the fuzzy, pale illumination and the overwhelming absurdity of the entire situation (why on Earth is Jade's secretary her resurrepresentative? Liaison for what? A crisis of mortality? A near death experience?), she decides that possibly-drugged tea that she can't remember drinking should probably be at the bottom of her list of concerns.

Being dead in general is right at the top. Her horrendous lack of a chainsaw come right after. She feels naked, honestly.

The woman shakes the packet of papers so that it wobbles, looking very satisfied with herself. "No, really, this is pretty simple. You technically belong to two different realities. It looks like a relatively new Muse who didn't realize metaphysical redundancy leads to bad shit like this."

"I have no idea what you're saying," Kanaya says, flatly. "Please get back to the part where I leave."

"You can try to resurrect in your reality of origin - which frankly I don't recommend, since your reality of origin is totally fucked. Its lifespan is measured in, like, minutes." The woman pulls another leaf off the poor plant, arranging it in a little half-circle with other dismembered leaves.

Janine heaves a sigh, rubbing the bridge of her nose with the back of her scythe. "She can't go back now, anyway. The door is shut."

"I could push her through manually. The not-fun way." The woman checks the wrist of her chrome tattooed arm, glancing at a watch that isn't there. She drums her claws on the papers, her smile lopsided but thoughtful. "The new Muse probably does have a stronger case for you, here. Like calls to like. But I'm not the one making the call here." She looks at Kanaya with eyes that have shifted color, and arches an eyebrow.

It reminds Kanaya very strongly of Rose. Her dream-befuddled mind latches onto that. "I need to get back and help my friends," she says, slowly, struggling to piece her thoughts together into words. "I don't care what it takes -"

Her phone buzzes in her pocket.

…Honestly, Kanaya is not sure why she is surprised to learn that she still has cell service in the afterlife. It makes perfect sense, in fact. She holds up a claw to pause the conversation and answers the texts waiting for her in Pesterchum.

UU: kanaya? are you there?
GA: What In The Hell Is Happening To Me Explain Immediately.
GA: Why Is The Troll Obsessed With Hot Beverages And Jade In Charge of My Afterlife?
UU: is that who you're seeing? how weird.
GA: I Don't Even Know Who They Are.
GA: Apparently Something Went Wrong When I Died.
GA: I Need A Lawyer. Where Is Terezi When You Need Her?
UU: hehehe.
UU: are they giving you a choice?
GA: Yes How Did You Know?
UU: i know where you are but can't reach you Under my own power. you're in the domain of a very whimsical extraversal being, i suspect. it is the only explanation i have come Up with. i guess i broke the rules enough that someone had to intervene.
UU: if you can, ask them if they can resurrect you in my reality!
GA: What? No I Have To Go Back And Help The Others.
GA: Why Would You Think That Was A Good Idea Ever?
UU: becaUse it is! trUst me!
UU: i was actUally hoping this woUld happen when yoU died, except that yoU were meant to be
eroUted right to me. the intervention was Unexpected.
GA: I'm Sorry, But I Can't Leave Them To Finish This Alone.
UU: yoU won't have to!
GA: What Do You Mean?
UU: did yoU really think that final portal was a one way thing?
UU: ~u^ 

"I changed my mind. I'd like to go to Calliope's reality, if that is still an option which I can choose,"
Kanaya says, as fast as she can. Her brain can't quite keep up with the words flooding out of her, but
that - seems right? She's not sure she wants to be dead much longer, in any case. This is becoming
very uncomfortable, and she takes a steadying sip of tea when her stomach begins to churn.

"You're sure that's what you want?" the woman asks.

"Absolutely positive." Belatedly, Kanaya flips the fold of her dark skirt over the phone to conceal it,
then looks up and blinks innocently at the woman and Janine.

Just in time to see the strange woman wink at her. "Good times, all around," she says. At some point
during Kanaya's distracted conversation with Calliope, the woman's chrome tattoo has crawled up
her arm and across her collarbones to curve up the other side of her face. "Well, liaison? Are you
feeling it now?"

"Yes. Thank you for your cooperation," Janine grumbles, pulling a thick tome out of her robes and
resting it in her lap as she turns a massive chunk of the pages at once. It falls open to the page she
must want, because she clicks the top of her scythe and uses it as a pen to scribble something on the
parchment. Then she passes it to the woman at the desk.

The woman takes the tome, and digs one of her claws into the pad of a thumb. The blood that comes
out is a pinkish-red and too thick as she mashes her thumb down to leave a syrupy print beside
Janine's signature. "Liaise away."

Janine squints as she snaps the tome shut, and takes Kanaya's claw in hers one last time. "This is
definitely permitted, right? I don't want to be dragged up in front of someone more impressive than
you to explain why I'm ferrying a wayward soul to a protoreality fresh out of genesis."

"Defiantly permitted," the woman says, gleefully, and then she hauls the door open for them. Her
desk vanishes, and suddenly the door fills Kanaya's entire field of vision. All she sees at the edges is
white – the dark of her skirt and stoles and hood suck toward the door, as though drawn by an
inexorable gravity.

"Oh, let's just go," Janine harrumphs, her voice clear over the rushing sound as Kanaya's head begins
to throb. "Do you need a top off for the road?"

"I think if I drink tea ever again in my lifetime, it will be too soon," Kanaya says. "For the record."
Then - "Janine. May I ask why you, of all people, are doing this? It's nothing personal, I just thought
you weren't all that important."

Janine blinks at her with black, empty eye sockets. "Janine? Who? Is that how you perceive me?
Mortals can be so odd."

Kanaya blinks.
Death stares back at her with sightless eyes, the hinge of its skeletal jaw locked in place by calcified spurs as it squeezes her hand.

**DEATH:** WELL. SHALL WE?

---

Dave starts dying around page 45.

Which is a load of ass. He ignores it up until it comes time to drop some fat stacks of snake eggs on the platform, and then -

- His concentration never falters - not even once, or he'd skid off into a dead crack before he could catch himself - but when time itself is going down the tubes, it's hard as shit to focus and remember more than bits and pieces as he hops around egg-napping from doomed timelines.

Yeah. It took him way too long to realize that the recipe called for a shitton of snake eggs that he and Karkat *haven't made*. A dozen or so pages of eggs don't exist in the alpha timeline, no matter how dangerously close Dave skates along with his timetables, and that's straight up horse shit. Like, straight from the horse's ass shit.

So he sucks it up, and feels pain lance down across his chest as he scratches the records. The timetables whine alarmingly and their diamond-sharp grooves start cutting up the pads of his fingers (awesome) and Dave takes a step forward and diagonally into a broken shard of timeline that's dead from the instant it branches off his.

Because every. Fucking. Keystroke. Any time Karkat (or later, Jade) mistypes, it strangles another vestigial timeline, already faded and ashen and crumbling under the Lord of Time's garbage tantrum throes when Dave arrives, gasping to breathe when the air's full of heavy, dead shards of broken time. He works each doomed version of the platform over for all it's got; it's grand theft egg all up in here. Another scrub of the record and he's back in the land of the not-doomed-yet, and the brilliant, living color of Jade's land is a fucking symphony for his retinas after the horrible stillness of the doomed dead ends all around them.

He catches glimpses of stuff that never was - including stuff Dave can't even begin to figure out how it even happened. There are timelines with Vriska and Typhueus competing to see who can be the tooliest of tools, duking it out in the distance where LoWaS used to be; there's a world where Jack fucking Noir hangs in the distance, riddled with grimdark tentacles and frozen in the act of drilling into Skaia; one where Feferi's fighting the Lord of Time with Kanaya instead of helping at the Forge; and another, where Echidna arches over the Forge with a snarl as Eridan tears down out of the sky in a blazing rage, his body half-eaten up by Hope wings; and another still, where Karkat and Eridan are frozen mid-blood pact, for no reason Dave can figure out from what's left of the timeline -

He sees enough incomprehensible shit that when he zaps back into the main timeline, the sun rising beyond Skaia on LoLaR's side of the Medium doesn't register as weird for a split second. It burns so bright that Karkat snarls and shields his eyes with his claws - Dave's offer of a broken pair of sunglasses gets waved away with a growl, which is fair, since all his shades are *officially* broken pieces of shit by now - and the light scatters and shines through the cracked facets of reality, casting faint, prismatic rainbows across Skaia's clouds. The sun turns, a shining disc with oddly two-dimensional rays in the shape of a Light symbol rotating around it in slow circles, and then fades. When it goes, there's no sign of Leviathan on the far side of Skaia; no horrific mutters, no tentacle arms - nothing.
The end of a fucking era. Rose does not do shit by halves. Dave whistles and takes off his shades for a second, in a moment of respect. "Holy shit, Rose."

"That was Rose?!" Karkat repeats, wiping at his watery eyes with a hiss.

"A light show that extra? That's so Rose. My Strider sense is tingling," Dave says, with complete confidence. There's probably a future Dave running around here that knows for sure what happened - the whole platform's awhirl with Dave doubles, all of them with progressively scarred up faces - but Dave's not caught up just yet.

Then Feferi blinks and looks up, her eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "Hang on," she says, squinting at Dave, and then back down at the nearly dead Dave passed out on the floor between her and Karkat.

Dave's too busy to get bogged down in worrying about that shit. He spins the turntables again, and contemplates the world without the gift of his godly musical tunes.

-

LoHaC melted down into a lump of cold slag a while ago. The Lord of Time screaming it into fractured pieces is just a douchey formality. A guy could give himself a hernia trying to out-douche the Lord of Douches.

In the back of Dave's head, he can hear records smashing against the wall and a set of stationary turntables cave in with a dying burst of noise.

But the timetables keep turning under his hands, as riddled with painful, clockwork scars as Dave.

-

AA: dave
TG: aradia
AA: ill take over in a second
TG: hell no
AA: its about that time!
AA: all the snakes are right where they need to be down here
AA: jades coming to teleport everyone to the arks
AA: so i can come up there and stall for time
TG: you can feel that right
TG: our shit is wrecked
TG: i was never making it out that gate
AA: yes you are
TG: nah no time
TG: gotta go fast
AA: only relatively speaking
AA: technically we have all the time in the world to finish the snake breeding
TG: hes not dicking around with the dark god of tentacle pr0n anymore
TG: lohacs already straight fucked and lofafs next on the chopping block
AA: ironically enough lofaf is perfectly safe
TG: what
TG: how do you know
AA: this is what i want dave
AA: you dont want to die no matter what your self sacrificial knight brainmeat is telling you
TG: yeah w/e its fine
TG: i can make it
AA: youve done enough
AA: time to rest dave

But yeah. So he has a tiny heart attack.

Maybe Aradia has a point about his sacrificial brainmeat. Because Dave thinks he's not nearly as freaked out about that as he should be. His body's one big, walking ache - for a given value of 'walking' - and when Feferi sags back, her fancy fairy wings drooping behind her like she's about to wilt from the effort of hauling his ass back out of the grave, Dave finally feels a prickle of - something. Like, haha, remember all those plans people made to throw him through the gate as soon as it opened? Nothing ever goes according to plan, dammit.

"Dave," Feferi says, a pissed off growl of warning in her voice as she tries to push him back down flat against the floor.

Dave scoots out from under her with a quick twitch of his timetables - and then collapses on one knee, one hand buried in a pile of eggs as he struggles to keep himself upright with blood in his mouth and some fun new, unfamiliar pain lancing through his chest. His flailing hand knocks the eggs down in a tumble that buries WV for like the fifth time since Dave rescued him from Jade's teleporting clutches for emotional support, and Karkat tackles Dave with a shriek, setting off an avalanche of his own. "Dave, that's enough!" he howls right in Dave's ear, and attempts to grapple Dave by wrapping his legs around his waist and clinging to his back like a spider monkey.

On a normal day, Dave would have just dodged that. Shit. He thinks he's officially run out of steam. One more flashstep is all he can squeeze out of himself; then he hits the terminal, dizzy, and just barely manages to prop himself up without passing out. Karkat hits the ground and rolls with a noise in his throat like a chainsaw grinding against a concrete floor - and then rips that goddamn piece of shit crowbar off his back, pointing it at Dave like it's a stabbing utensil. Which…isn't entirely wrong, but offends Dave's bladekind user sensibilities regardless, because it's not a sword - it's a lying crowbar.

But seriously. This is just sad. "Dude. You can't pull a sword on me. I'm like, decrepit, but I'm still the sword guy, so I'm pretty sure that's illegal," Dave says. Breathing takes concentrated effort, and with the way his legs wobble under him like possessed noodles, he knows this is the end of the road. At this point, he's arguing with Karkat just because Karkat likes to be argued with.

"Oh, fuck off," Karkat snarls, exasperated, waving the not-sword around as he rolls his eyes.

Feferi edges around on Dave's left, the opposite of subtle. She doesn't even bother pulling a specibus; she could bench-press him any day of the week. "You can't continue like this," she says, half pleading.

"He's coming around the Medium clockwise. We're next," Dave says. So close. They're slow close, but only one timetable's still intact under his palm when he puts out his hand.

Karkat loses his shit. "Fuck you, Dave! I'm not watching you kill yourself out of some stupid hero complex! We've already got too many dumbasses with hero complexes as it is! Yours can take a back seat for once!" he explodes, absolutely livid as he strides toward Dave and jams his claw right into Dave's chest.

Dave winces, but doesn't have the energy to flinch. "You want me to sit around and be useless?! I
already know what that shit's gonna do to me!" he yells back, and Karkat and Feferi both look absolutely appalled. Thank fucking god Jade took Bro along with Doctor Lalonde to the last of the ark ships approximately five minutes ago, or Dave would be forced to give a fuck. "This is fine," he says, leveling his voice out with a ton of effort.

"Liar," Karkat hisses. A bubble of lava the size of a minivan pops beside them, radiating a wave of heat from the Forge, and Dave abruptly realizes that Echidna has paused in her pot-stirring to watch them, steam and lava dribbling from between her teeth as she cocks her head to side.

Watching them.

"We're out of options. I'm the time guy." And Aradia's not here yet, despite her insistence that she take over. They've still got pages and pages to go before the end, and the [crack]s are spreading across the sky, eating up the Medium on their way towards LoFaF. Wrapping an arm around his own stomach, Dave gingerly hauls himself upright to test his balance.

"Uh. I feel like I've interrupted something," Jade says, landing on the terminal with a tap of her foot as she bends over and buries Dave in a bunch of hair. Which smells like ozone and wet dog, at the moment. She eyeballs Dave upside down, her eyebrows shooting up in alarm as she takes in the sight of his face.

"Harley! Tell this idiot to stop killing himself!" Karkat yells.

"Dave, stop killing yourself!" Jade says instantly, though she rolls her eyes at Dave in the privacy her hair wall. Then she flips her hair back out of the way to glance at Echidna, who stares at them all like a giant, frosty snake monster at a buffet. "I don't think you're supposed to play in lava," she says.

EC: That is because you people only die in lava. EC:

"Fair enough!" Jade claps her hands together and hops over Dave's shoulder to bounce to the floor.

"Rose okay?" Dave asks, as Jade surveys the egg pile with a slow nod of her head.

She's very quiet for a second, and then gives a tiny shake of her head. "No. She isn't," she says, not meeting anyone's eyes. Her furry ears press flat against her hair, and she closes her hands into fists for a second. "John took her to the Gate, so they're both safe now!" she adds, injecting super fake enthusiasm into her voice.

"And Kanaya…" Feferi starts to say, and then stops when Jade's shoulders hunch up. "She'll be missed."

Karkat shakes his head and breathes out hard, but isn't distracted enough. "Swap John and Dave. We need the grist for the alchemy fucking yesterday," he says, using his not-sword as a pointing utensil to gesture wildly at Dave and then up in the general direction of the sky. This is only marginally less hilaggravating than him using it as a stabbing utensil. "As soon as we run through these eggs, we're done."

"No," Dave says.

Karkat's nostrils flare. "Uh, let me fix that for you. Yes."

"No."

"Yes."
"Nu-uh."

Karkat throws the crowbar on the ground and points a claw at Dave, furious. "Fuck you!"

"Let me die like a real man, you ass! By skipping a bunch of frames and clipping through a wall like a decent, respectable -"

"IF YOU BABBLE UNTIL YOUR DYING BREATH, I WILL MURDER YOU!" Karkat bellows, picking the crowbar right back up so he can wave it dramatically.

Jade stares at both of them, her fists on her hips, like she can’t believe they're having this stupid of a conversation right now. "You guys are such a bunch of drama queens."

"This is getting a little silly," Aradia agrees, clapping her hands together as she sits down on the terminal beside Dave with a thump. "Time to wrap things up!"

LE: INSOLENT VASSALS.

Too much time having dumb, rambling arguments - too little time spent keeping track of how far along the Lord of Time was. Story of Dave's fucking life. Aradia groans and flinches like she's been sucker punched and slides off the terminal, but when Dave instinctively reaches for her, she wears a resigned smile. Trust Aradia to know exactly when this was gonna happen -

Time turns into a blob of gelatin; Dave stands up and tries to walk through it, but he's only moving a little faster than a crawl. Karkat stands stock still, only his eyes able to move enough for him to look frantic; Feferi and Jade are a little better off, but Jade whirs around too slowly for her to possible react in time.

The Lord of Time hasn't even descended on LoFaF yet. But he hangs there like an omen in the sky, his skull of a face tipped disdainfully back so he can look down his nose at Dave and Aradia even more than he already is from miles and miles up above their heads. The freaky colors rolling down the hem of his overcoat paint the Medium around a sickly rainbow; just looking at him's enough to make Dave dizzy.

Dave forces himself forward another step. His time powers are pretty much fucked, anyway; unless Aradia has something planned, LoFaF isn't going to last long enough to finish the snake project. The Lord of Time doesn't have to pick them off one at a time, when he can cracks the planet open with a snap of his fingers.

LE: ONE LAST CHANCE. TO SERVE YOUR LORD.

"Sorry, Karkat," Dave grinds out - he's not sure if the words will reach Karkat, in this pocket of slowed time.

…He doesn't think Echidna's frozen in time. The denizen is still watching them.

Denizens are fucking assholes. Dave pulls the crowbar down more so it's level with his chest; there's not enough time for him to go through the agonizingly slow process of prying it out of Karkat's frozen hand.

Which means this is going to suck.

Dave winds his timetable up one last time, and flashsteps forward.

The crowbar stabs him before the Lord of Time can smite his ass -
"Hold him! Hold him -"

Equius slams into the Lord of Time like a brick shithouse.

It's the best thing Dave's ever seen before passing out.

[ERROR]

[The Knight of [ _ _ _ ] cannot be found.]

Kanaya steps through a door in a flood of hummingbirds, with no particular recollection of having approached a door in the first place.

For some reason, that irritates her more than she thinks is reasonable. Not the door, she has no problem with the door - it just vexes her that she doesn’t understand what's going on. As though this is just the latest in a string of nonsensical events for which she's been given only a partial explanation, and which no one seems inclined to elaborate on further.

But the irritation trickles away along with the faded, dream-like memories that nag at the back of her mind - something about tea? - and Kanaya's left to look around, cautious and faintly bewildered, at the space around her.

Darkness fills the chamber, though Kanaya's quite certain she can't sense any walls. In the distance, past the edges of the platform, she can make out streams of green fire, dancing in slow, silent spirals around the dark center, but she thinks the fire's further away than it looks. Like the light from a far-off galaxy. The floor feels very dark and solid and smooth under her green shoes, so dense that light can't quite escape it - except that here, at least, it can. Each step Kanaya takes causes a faint flicker of light to shine underfoot, and then slowly fade with a muted, musical note. The trailing ends of her stole drifts across the floor alongside the grey of her lower skirt, the black overskirt parted at the front so that the grey is visible from her waist down. Though her arms are bare, she's not cold here.

Ahead of her, thin lines of white outline a curtain so dark, even compared to the soft density of the
floor, that Kanaya thinks it looks more like someone blacked out the color using a basic image editor. Though it's a curtain, she can't see folds in the cloth - only the outline, and a faint green glow that peeks out from under the bottom of the curtain.

From behind the curtain, someone plays a lyre. Kanaya can't hear a song in it: just a few scattered, experimental notes, and then a long, considering pause, as though the player composes something new on the fly. Kanaya looks behind her, at the thin trail of jade glitter dusted in her wake along the dark floor by her moth-veined wings, and then raises a claw to part the curtain and peer inside. "Hello?" she asks.

A flurry of pale purple hummingbirds with wine-purple throats startle into the air as the curtain shifts - Kanaya gets the impression of a whole flock before they abruptly vanish into the heavy, dark stillness of the air, so that only a scattered few hover and zip around the chamber. An immense vertical loom stands at the far edge of the platform, full of shimmering fabric so deep a green it's almost black, and dotted with stars. The upper edge of the fabric, already woven, seems to fade off the loom as Kanaya watches, and deepens to become part of the space beyond the edge of the platform. For a dizzying second, Kanaya thinks she can hear the music woven into the fabric - but if she listens too closely, she'll want to hear it till the end. She'll want to learn how to weave it herself, and that would be the work of eons.

At the very center, a figure sits on a low chair with outcurved legs carved to resemble snakes, her lyre hovering in midair beside her and an inkwell full of gleaming white light perched on the arm rest. She looks up from her work on a deep green tablet to blink at Kanaya with wide, glossy green eyes, and then smiles, raising a green claw in fond greeting. And Kanaya knows that face. Has known it, since the Lord of Time appeared before them. She flinches back with a cry and stumbles on the too-long hem of her own dress. The brief flicker of irritation at the god tier dress's length - if Kanaya had sewn this herself, she wouldn't be tripping on it - cancels out her momentary panic, and she remembers her manners a second later. After she lands hard on the ground, of course. The floor seems to jump up to meet her, and the impact doesn't hurt at all, but it's still terribly embarrassing.

Calliope - it can only be her - doesn't need to stand up; she simply appears next to Kanaya, the long, cascading fall of her space-black chiton and white mantle almost swallowing Kanaya in a disproportionate tide of fabric that mingles with the dense floor. Her white sandals peep out from under the outlined hem, the same color as the symbol on the front of her chest. "Egad! I hope I didn't frighten you," the Muse says, cocking her head to the side as she peers down at Kanaya without blinking. It's more than a little disconcerting: her dark hood covers most of her smooth green skull, but the very back of the hood appears to open out onto a small galaxy, laced into the fabric by a red bowtie.

"...Calliope," Kanaya says, finally, as she pushes herself upright; Calliope doesn't offer a claw to assist, and instead simply stares in wide-eyed, curious delight, her tongue occasionally zipping out to taste the air as Kanaya half-lifts a hand to shake. Then, when Calliope stares at her claw curiously, she drops it. "You look like -" she tries to start again. This isn't how she might have imagined meeting the creator of an entire reality; the Muse is both more anthropomorphic and more...not than expected. When Kanaya stands and tries to gauge how tall Calliope is compared to her, the answer seems vary from moment to moment, without Calliope looking any different. "I mean, you look well," she recovers, belatedly.

That snakelike tongue slips out one last time, and then Calliope turns her eyes down in acknowledgement, with a tiny, sharp smile. "I know. I'm sorry. I nearly let it slip, from time to time, but I'm not sure any of you quite realized the implications of my relationship with my brother," she
says, then takes a single step that crosses half the room, back through the curtain. Kanaya follows her with regular steps. She's...aware that she's god tier, now, and might well be able to teleport like Jade - or at least cut some corners, as far as space is concerned. How and when that happened, she's not sure, but she doesn't want to test it out here. The atmosphere here doesn't feel dangerous. Weighty, maybe, heavy with potential. Not some place she wants to muck around, no matter how her powers feel like a simple extension of herself.

It seems obvious, in retrospect. Calliope and her brother. The Muse and the Lord.

Kanaya can guess, now, what's going to happen on LoFaF. What they're creating, there. The Final Alchemy was never a recipe for just a muse. She's not sure how the others will take it. Karkat won't take it well, at the very least, because Karkat doesn't take anything well, let alone the kind of guilt generated by ensuring the doom of reality. Calliope waits - not patiently, but as though the extra time it takes for Kanaya to cross the room, guiltily speeding up when she realizes that the Muse finished crossing the room way ahead of her, means nothing to her - and when Kanaya catches up the Muse puts out a claw to touch the loom and smooth a thread down into a half-woven nebula. Here at the edge of the open-walled room, Kanaya feels like they've taken a dizzying step closer to the green fire that dances in the distance; her sense of scale seems broken, because she can't tell whether the galaxies on the loom are life-size or not. If they are...

"Why am I here?" she asks, after admiring the fine weave a little longer. Calliope continues to smile at her, but the skeletal tautness of her features renders the expression almost unreadable by both human and troll standards; Kanaya only has human and troll body language to go off, too, so her impression that the Muse is calm could just be her projecting. "This is the other side of the gate. I don't mean to be rude, but I really need to go. Right now," she says, emphatic, when Calliope only tilts her head again. The gate glows in the distance - not quite as far away as the green, fiery swirls, but far enough that it looks like a black house outlined in white against the fabric of space. Kanaya points toward it, aware of how useless the gesture is.

"You don't remember?" Calliope says, with an unmistakable note of disappointment in her voice as she stares at Kanaya with imploring eyes. Then she shakes her head and rearranges her pale mantle without using her claws in a smooth rustle of fabric. "Oh! You were a little dead. But you're alive now!" she adds.

It must have happened somehow, for Kanaya to be god tier now. Still, chatting blithely about one's demise never becomes less awkward. Kanaya tugs on her collar a little, as faint pangs run through her neck. Remembering how she died would be unpleasant, and she'd rather not. "Well then. I guess that would explain it," she agrees. "But I can't stay."

Calliope dips her head to the side. If she were less...alien, Kanaya would expect her to shut her eyes and sigh. But Calliope doesn't appear to have eyelids. "Ah, well. My research into the nature of extraversal matters is a bit of a side project, anyway. I have so very many theories...but this is what really matters," she says, and angles herself toward the stars again.

It looks remarkably similar to space back home. Kanaya can't recognize any of the stars or galaxies, and every so often the view shifts and folds in a new way as another layer reveals itself, sheet after sheet interspersed with occasional swaths of darkness. But stars are still stars. Not that different after all -

Kanaya squints, her mouth opening a little as she concentrates. The distance feels quite literally astronomical - and ah. Oh dear. Not stars. Those are superclusters.

And this time, Calliope does sigh, but she wears her skeletal grin as she does. "So many places, so many different stories to tell. I want all kinds of possibility and variation - not just one game,
following the same patterns, forcing its own mandates and discarding whatever it deems insignificant. It sounds quite boring! And in many ways unkind. Why need the universe be uncaring?” she says, all in a rush, her claws slowly coming up to fold under her chin in trembling earnestness. Then she shoots Kanaya an intent, searching look, before sweeping away from the edge of the dark platform. She folds the dense space to return to her low seat, and this time Kanaya's aware enough to pay attention to the technique she uses to do so.

As fascinating as a discussion of cosmic indifference might be, Kanaya still feels like she's on the clock, here. "It looks very nice," she agrees. "And it is nice to get some insight into the philosophy going into its creation. But that is the way back?" Floating off the platform a little, her wings whirring a little as she momentarily struggles to lift off the hefty chunk of super-dense space, probably isn't very tactful, but Kanaya's more than a little concerned about however long she might have been dead and absent for. Resurrecting here is all well and good, but if none of her friends know that she's resurrected here...suffice to say it would be best to clear up any such misconceptions before someone does something rash.

It's Rose. She's talking about Rose.

Calliope makes no attempt to stop her, and it occurs to Kanaya that the Muse hasn't touched her at all. "Yes. I'll hold it open until the very last moment," she says. "I'm very glad to have met one of you all in person, though! It's a nice confirmation that you will be able to exist comfortably here, without issue."

Kanaya nods, a little hesitant to charge off toward the gate; nothing in the Muse's body language indicates that she has more to say, but Kanaya just can't read her well. If at all.

Just as she convinces herself to start flying and escape the event horizon, Calliope speaks again without warning, the rustle of her mantle the only sign she might have moved at all. "But now you're here! So...I wanted to give you something to assist you in dealing with my brother." She beckons almost imperceptibly with a claw - a little late, in Kanaya's opinion, but better now than when Kanaya's already halfway through the gate. Urgh.

Kanaya sets back down on the platform with a soft, muted thump. 'Assist' could mean anything. "Um. That's nice. Why did it have to be me, though?" she asks, fighting to keep her face neutral instead of impatient as Calliope removes something from the galaxy-rich folds of her sweeping skirt and levitates the inkwell full of white light beside her.

The Muse turns and seamlessly moves to stand before Kanaya without so much as a twitch of her feet. "You and Jade both share an aspect with me! But there were more factors hinting at your doom than for Jade, so I made the necessary modifications," she says, as she dips a wand into the inkwell and brings it up, drops of pearly light beading along the surface as she observes Kanaya. This close, with the Muse's strange eyes fixed right on Kanaya at point blank range, Kanaya can make out the thin, transparent scale that covers her unblinking eyes with permanent gloss. "I believe I have the measure of you, but please let me know if anything feels - uncomfortable," she says, and Kanaya tenses up, raising her chin as the wand taps her firmly between the horns.

'Assist' means precisely what Kanaya hoped it would. The world spins out from under her feet for a brief moment - and they're standing on space so heavy and dense with matter and power that it has wrapped around to become void, she thinks, dizzily, almost drunk on the heady tide running through her from her horns to her toes. Every atom in her shifts into sharp focus, as do the superclusters that previously looked like stars to her straining eyes, before her perception pops back into something that her brain can manage without exploding to meet it.

She opens her eyes, and a chainsaw rests in her waiting claws. A Space symbol hangs at the end of
the starter cord like a charm; the teeth running around the length of the chain appear to be small stars.

It's ridiculous. She falls in love at once. Kanaya's not entirely sure how Rose will feel sharing Kanaya's heart with the finest, most ostentatiously magnificent weapon in two realities, but Kanaya is confident that she has more than enough love for both. "Please tell me that this is what I think it is," she says, fighting the soul-deep urge to rev it instantaneously and start waving it around like a love-struck fool. Changes to her outfit - like the shaped plates of void under her god tier dress, and the white, decorative snakes that curl around her waist - can be dealt with later.

Calliope definitely looks pleased, her taut skin dimpled as she smiles and steps back. "Oh, yes. I would not send you back without a little something to help! You've come back as a god as defined here, not by my predecessor, so - give my brother a taste of what waits for him, and then come back safe to me with all your friends." Her wand vanishes back into her mantle, as the Muse inclines her head. "My chosen arbiter."

Hitting the echeladder rank of Sepulchritudinous Sylph with a chainsaw in her claws feels very right. Very - dare she say it - badass. "I am sure that this is against the rules. Somehow," she says. Though she is doing the opposite of complaining, at the moment.

Very deliberately, Calliope sticks out her tongue. "Rules are complicated and often shifting things, depending on how you interpret them, and often over-complicate things. But then, I think I am more fluid than my predecessor in that regard. I've analyzed her rules and patterns so that I can better understand how to integrate you all here, but they sometimes just don't make sense and appear to be completely arbitrary," she says, before clicking her tongue in frustration.

Kanaya nods. "I'm glad that even a being of unfathomable cosmic power feels the same way we do. It's weirdly reassuring."

Calliope's grin brightens, which has the unfortunate side effect of stretching it to the point of ghoulishness. Kanaya tamps down her instinctive terror. "Heheheh. I hope you will all like it here."

Space folds, and Kanaya catches herself without missing a beat as Calliope brings them up before the dark house of the final gate, leaving reality's center far behind. "Now - there you go. It should be a straight path back, but there will be a light to guide the way," the Muse promises, her chiton and mantle billowing a little in the gentle breeze that soughs the gate - and occasionally in the exact opposite direction.

Kanaya steps forward, and tucks her chainsaw down into its more compact lipstick form with a twinge of reluctance that quickly vanishes as she realizes the black lipstick also glitters with stars. She applies it, eyeing the white outline of the gate with a measuring stare. Even with her space sense enhanced, it's difficult to tell where this reality becomes the gate to the old one - she could step through into the passage between quite easily without noticing a perceptible difference in the quality of the darkness.

But deep in the dark, at the very limits of what Kanaya can see... She narrows her eyes to focus better, and can make out a small star of light, shining in the distance, bright enough to be visible all the way through.

"Calliope? Can we really do this?" she asks, though it's more a rhetorical question, these days. Kanaya's standing here, on the far side of the transition between two realities. Over here, time is irrelevant. It is already done.

"Yes. From my perspective, you already have," Calliope confirms, quietly, for the last time.
Kanaya steps through the gate.

Rose lost her visor somewhere along the way.

Or at least, that's the weird, pointless detail that John's scrambled up brain decides to focus on as he sets them down right at the foot of the final gate. He figured there was about a fifty percent chance that the gate would just suck them in like milkshake through a straw the second they touched it, but there is a tiny little sliver where they can sit and dangle their feet over the edge. A slight breeze sighs through the skyscraper-sized curtains on either side of them, producing a familiar note, like wind tangling through windchimes; John doesn't mess with it. Right now, a giant ark ship looms overhead and just to the right of them. Two of the smaller space ships accompany the ark through the gate; all three just seem to cut off as they sink into the blinding white gate. A few meteors piloted by carapacians whizz by every so often, and a bunch of the guns on the Battleship Condescension flutter to attention as the carapacians sneak in around the sides of the bigger ships.

Without the visor, Rose's eyes have faded to a pale grey, with only a few streaks of the original purple left in the irises - she stares out over the Medium toward Skaia without seeing it. The matching Light-symbol scars bloom out from her eyes: one set of arms overlap and merge at the bridge of her nose, while two vanish into her hair, two stretch out to her temples, and the bottom pair run down her cheeks. The tears come in fits and bursts, and Rose's whole body hitches each time a fresh wave hits, her face straining and then screwing up as she swallows.

And he doesn't know if she'll ever be okay again. He doesn't know exactly how she feels, because - because it's not the same, with how messy and screwed up things were with his dad. But he thinks they're both left with the similar serrated-edged hole in their chests, that shifts and tears open fresh wounds whenever it digs its teeth into their insides.

...Now he's got the mental image of the two of them walking around with bread knives sticking out of their chests. Urgh. Heck, John doesn't even know how to process that Kanaya's gone - maybe they weren't the closest, but she was friendly, and Karkat's friend, and Rose's everything, and now she's just...not. It's an extra deep pocket of aching soreness for John to deal with, and he doesn't know how.

This close to the gate - nothing happens. Nada. Zip.

Which means John's got a front row seat as half the Medium shatters. Skaia itself stays intact, a great blue orb in the center of it all as enormous cracks thrust out, splintering everything between LoLaR and LoHaC. LoLaR itself is hidden from here, but Rose jerks and clutches her head in a way that tells John it's gone. LoHaC, already a half-melted, slowly darkening mess, fragments in a lightning fast count of 1-2-3 as cracks spread wider and further. It joins the debris from the trolls' planets, but that asteroid belt mostly vanished as the Reckoning's meteoric storm thundered across the Medium to reach the center and knocked all the chunks of brain and driftwood and masonry into the spirograph portals that festoon Skaia like an army of doilies. What's left hangs around in a pretty sad, threadbare shadow of its former self, and now a bunch of that debris vanishes into forking [cracks] that eat up
everything they touch.

The cracks spread past LoHaC, and march around clockwise, with an unmistakable skeleton Hulk at their fore. His golden cuestaff clenched in one meaty fist, the Lord of Time opens his jaw and screams a fresh epicenter of cracks into the space between LoHaC and LoFaF before shutting it. Just listening to the horrible, breaking sound of his entropic, migraine-inducing scream from this distance makes John's head throb.

And that's just what he can hear and sense from here, which is probably the safest place he and Rose can be. After the way the Lord of Time smacked them all down on LoHaC, trapped in different pockets of messed up time and totally at his mercy...

"Oh, crap," John says. He presses the heels of his palms to his temples to try to ward off the incoming headache.

On the one hand, it turns out that grief takes a backseat to the dawning realization that they're in deep trouble. On the other hand, they're in deep trouble.

He needs to do - something, but heck if he knows what. Luckily, Rose catches him by the sleeve as he starts to float off the platform. "Describe what you see," she says, her voice still cracked and exhausted from crying.

Right. John shakes himself and clears his throat. "Uh. Terrible skeleton Hulk is really tearing the place apart. Everything's...breaking up." Another [crack] ripples through the world as John says that, and the Medium between LoLaR and LoHaC crunches. John doesn't even have words to describe it: all the cracked expanse of reality, already broken by Leviathan's fight with the Lord of Time, seems to sink in on itself and fade. Only the cracks themselves look real while the rest of reality looks like a shattered, 2-dimensional shadow of its former self.

Before, John and Gamzee could navigate between the cracks to reach Rose. Now, John's suddenly very sure that there's nothing left to navigate. An entire quarter of the Medium just died right in front of him.

Beside him, Rose laughs. Belatedly, John raises a hand and grabs hers, the one that she used to hold him back, and then squeezes it. He's not sure which of them he's trying to comfort more. "He's free to concentrate now. I...I knew that would happen. But ending Leviathan mattered to me more than buying us more time," she says, a bitter smile creasing her face as she stares sightlessly down at her feet.

"I'm glad you did," John says, and the second he says it, he knows it's true. Even watching the Lord of Time march around the Incisisphere, breaking what little is left of reality - yeah. If he had to watch Earth shatter into pieces, it might have been different. Especially if all the people hadn't been evacuated... But deep down, Sburb has always been a game; watching parts of it fade out in the distance just feels like watching a game map go dark.

Still. For all of Sburb's (many, ridiculous) faults, it was one heck of a game. The biggest game that ever was. And it's sad to watch something that's played such a huge role in his strange life die like this.

Okay, maybe it's not that sad. Sburb is mostly terrible. But somewhere in the back of his mind, John's uncomfortably aware that this is all that's left. Full stop. Earth, the Solar System, their whole galaxy, their universe - all that unfathomably huge amount of stuff that he never really thought about
- must be riddled with [cracks] in time now, with the pieces fading away into nothingness. And whatever's waiting for them on the other side will never be the same.

"As fun as our nefarious, shadowy tentacle overlords have been, I thiink they kind of overstayed their welcome. Fighting them all the way up to the end would have been a huge hassle," John says, once the tiny existential crisis stops happening. Yeesh.

He pats Rose on the shoulder, and she sighs. "They could've distracted him for a while longer," she says, her voice full of bitter, rueful guilt. Then she tilts her head back, her smile unsteady and her eyes wet. "Or maybe there's just a part of me that can't bear to see it all end. I don't want to let go."

John winces, as it occurs to him that 'terrible skeleton Hulk' maybe doesn't quite capture everything that's going on here. He clears his throat and starts over. "Um...Okay. Everything's all...dark and glossy. Y'know how it looks like glass shattering when he cracks stuff?" When Rose gives a slight nod, he goes on. "The more he screams at it, the more the Medium looks weirdly flat. LoHaC and everything around that side...a lot of it's dark and faded. The Veil's almost all gone and launched at Skaia, and I don't think anything's left outside of where we are, Rose. There's just us here in the game, and the Battleship hanging around to guard everyone, and maybe a quarter of the ark ships and carapacian guys left." John does a quick count to make sure of that, but he isn't sure how many ships there were to start with! And the carapacian meteors spiral around in crazy loops before shooting through the gate, which makes it hard to keep track of who is where. Whoops. He could probably find a more accurate number buried in the memos somewhere..."Skaia and this gate are the only things that still seem bright," he finishes, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Rose nods almost imperceptibly as he talks, but he knows that his rambling description can't make up for what she can't see anymore.

"And us," Rose murmurs; John hears her on the wind, easy, but it's so quiet he's not sure he's supposed to. "We shine, too." Before John can ask what she means - Seer stuff? - she steeples her hands in front of her face. "It was our home. Is it possible to miss something you never gave much thought to? Of all the things to take for granted, I never thought reality itself would be at the top of the list," she says, with just a hint of her usual, ironic lilt. "Somehow, I don't think there will be a Seattle equivalent on the other side. Or a New York. It all...ended."

They must be on the same depression wavelength. John sniffs and wipes his nose awkwardly (he's got a grand total of no tissues on him right now) as something trembles in his throat. "Yeah, seriously. Maybe it wasn't all good, but endings are still the saddest part," he says, thickly, and looks down for a sec to breathe a few times. It works. A little. When he looks back, Rose is crying, big wet streams of tears that run down her face without a sound, and whoops, there all his work goes out the window. John feels his face start to scrunch up in a wave of sympathy tears. "I'm sorry, Rose."

"Don't be."

"We're both a mess, huh?"

Just as John's about to offer the end of his windsock hood for - uh, reasons - Rose plucks a handkerchief out of nowhere and blows her nose. Man, that is a handy trick. "Maybe so," she says, sounding stuffed up.

"Uh -" John starts to say, before becoming incredibly distracted by a [crack] that splits the air. Jerking his head up, John reels for a second as the echoes roll across the Medium.
When his head stops freaking out and his ears stop ringing, the Lord of Time is hanging directly between them and the Land of Frost and Frogs. The time cracks stop dead along a perfect line that slices the Medium almost in half - the few remaining ships in the Condesce's fleet almost ram into each other as the formation closest to the web of cracks veers sharply to escape it. Eridan dives down a muttered swear that John only just barely catches on the wind, white fire bleeding off him in waves as he slices down between an ark about to lose a slice of its hull and blasts the ship away from the cracks with a ragged smack of power.

A shot of ice-cold adrenalin rushes through John as he shoots upright, his whole body jittering with the abrupt need to move, because even if Jade already evacuated Doctor Lalonde and her lab full of people, Karkat and Dave and Jade are still there - all it'll take is one world-splitting scream and the Lord of Time could shear LoFaF in two.

LE: INSOLENT VASSALS.

LE: ONE LAST CHANCE. TO SERVE YOUR LORD.

EB: guys?! everyone -
CC: Dave needs to leave, now!
GG: i've got h-
TG: fuck it well do it live
CG: DAVE, YOU EXTRAVAGENT FUCKING DIPSHIT - NO!

John has no context for what happens next. His whole body strains to burst apart and rush to LoFaF, the Breeze whipping around him in a tempest, ready to help -

But then the Lord of Time snarls, the sound so loud that it makes all the shattered reality around them rattle and crunch in a burst of cacophonous noise that makes John's winds snap in close to his body. His sinuses ache, of all things, but that kinda falls by the wayside as the Lord of Time transforms his cuestaff into a golden machine gun, levels it at LoFaF -

And Equius punches him with the fists of a god. John didn't even sense Equius moving. He still can't really pinpoint him, actually! But the pocket of void where Equius determinedly isn't slides into weird focus as the Lord of Time wheels around to face it, despite how far away they are, and John catches flickers of deep blue and grey as Equius knocks the machine gun aside and pummels the Lord of Time's skeletal face from one side to the other.

Nepeta tears out of the void with a bloodthirsty yowl, leaps off Equius's shoulders and over the Lord's head in a flash of pink light, and slams down onto the Lord of Time with her claws slashing along his back.

John's jaw drops open, and stays that way. He's still in the process of saying, "UHHHHH," but by now it has gone through many dips and twists, from "UH," to "uhhhhh" and back again, and risen in volume to the point that he's basically screaming it. Meanwhile, Rose's repeated attempts to ask what's going on fell on very distracted ears, and she has given up asking him to describe what's going on in favor just staring off sightlessly into the distance with a look that says she's questioning
"Equius and Nepeta are trying to fight the Lord of Time," John says. 'Trying' is a little wishy-washy - they are fighting him, present-tense and with ferocious energy. John can't tell if they're actually hurting him, but the two trolls fight almost perfectly in tune with one another. They must have three different fraymotifs running, though the main one John hears are [Catch Me If You Can] and the muted, not-sound of [Nicolas Cage's 4' 33''], which sounds kind of like if you were listening to dead silence through a wall. Nepeta springs off the Lord of Time and dodges a wild swing of his cuestaff as it rapidly flickers between forms, then vanishes back into the inky blot of pure void as Equius conceals them again. The Lord of Time wrenches his jaw apart as his chest swells, ready to scream - then Equius tackles him around the waist, and Nepeta raises both claws and stabs them down into the Lord's flashing eyes. "Nepeta just got him in the face!"

"What about LoFaF?" Rose asks, tersely - then she blinks and cocks her head. "Wait. Never mind. I can still hear it."

TT: Status report, everyone.
CA: wwait aren't you blind noww
AA: actually the tangible difference between text and voice communication is pretty negligible in this Medium!
AA: ive been talking to you all via text this whole time!
TT: It certainly doesn't seem to be stopping me. I can think of more than a few occasions where it has seemed like we've been using some kind of merged text/voice chat at the same time, but our brains tend to process it as one or the other depending on context.
CG: I HATE THAT I BELIEVE YOU.
CC: We )ad to stab Dave! )e's unconscious but )is deterioraytion )as stopped...
CG: YOU MEAN HE STABBED HIS OWN FUCKING SELF, OKAY.
EB: but he's okay?
CC: ...U). Not dying! I'm still working on )im.
TT: I - good. He's spent enough time here. He should have been out through the gate ages ago.
CG: WE KNOW. HE JUST WOULDN'T FUCKING GO. THE DUMB, STUPID, STUBBORN FUCK.
GG: as soon as feferi finishes going over him, trust me, hes gone :T
EB: knowing dave, he's gonna try to keep helping.
GG: if i can punt bro through the gate i can punt anyone
EB: also equius, nepeta...holy crap.
AC: :33 < APEX
AC: :33 < PREDATOR!!!
EB: seriously!
CT: D--> We can't keep this f00lishness up much longer
AC: :33 < We're doing fine, you worrywart!
CT: D--> How much more time is needed before we can make our e%it?
CG: FUCK. JOHN, WE STILL NEED YOUR GRIST!
EB: aagh! i forgot! D:

John's about to say something to Rose - out loud, not in the...weird Pesterchum way - before he takes off, but he's distracted again by the fight raging between LoFaF and the gate. The Lord of Time batters Nepeta away; she catches herself and flips in midair with a snarl. Weird light drips from her clawkind, flicking through the same rainbows as the Lord of Time's eyes and the hem of his overcoat, and also from his Skeletor eye holes. The overcoat that strains around his bulging, weird skeleton man muscles hangs in shredded tatters around the Lord's shoulders, and his jaw hangs askew from his face where Equius punched it.
Then the Lord of Time raises his hand, and snaps his fingers.

His whole body snaps back to normal. His jaw wrenches back into place in a twitch; his coat resets itself, all the slash marks from Nepeta's attacks gone. John has to cross his eyes to see it, but his eyes pass over the Lord of Time's health bar and -

There's only one bar.

With a snake over it, in the shape of an infinity sign.

Nothing either Equius or Nepeta did even shaved off a sliver.

"Something's off," Rose says, a faint frown on her face as she ponders. "I...think he should have been able to hit LoFaF by now. Why wouldn't he? Those cracks – why did they stop right here? Are we really distracting him that much -"

And just as that realization twists John's stomach up into a knot of foreboding, something behind him...ripples. The Breeze swirls around before John can, the many layers of wind wrapping around him and Rose as he stares into the soft white glow of the gate.

The curtains flutter again, in their own alien breeze. One of the last ark ships sticks out at a slight angle, but it's more than three quarters through the final gate. The weird, fluttering ripple doesn't appear to bother it, but how could John tell?

Another foreign breeze stirs around him. Almost as though -

BE: ...Something's coming through.

EB: oh crap.
EB: something's up with the gate.
CG: WHAT. LIKE WHAT?!
EB: it's like a cosmic burp or something!
GG: ...
TT: ...
CG: ...
CC: ...
CA: ...
AC: :33 <...
GG: oh! wait, i feel it too!
GG: yeah, that kind of is like a cosmic burp, isn't it!
EB: exactly!
CG: OH MY FUCKING GOD YOU TWO. CAN YOU HAVE A SHARED HUMAN SIBLING EPIPHANY ABOUT COSMIC BURPS AFTER WE'RE DONE HERE?
EB: sorry karkat, this is a pretty important bonding moment for us.
GG: yup! eheheh.

"John? Is something coming through?" Rose says, with a note of urgency. John reaches down and gives her a hand up so that she doesn't miss her footing on the edge of the platform, and the two of
them turn back toward the gate as it sighs further open. But he doesn't have an answer for her - all he can feel is the wind of some other place as it pours through. It's familiar and unfamiliar at the same time...

The ark ship finishes crossing into the gate, its ponderous, looming presence swallowed up into the soft light.

One breath, two, and the whole gate inverts in color with a dizzying ripple as Kanaya strides through like a walking storm, her face etched with determination. She wears black and white Space clothing so stark and crisp that the rest of the Medium looks faded and dull in comparison, and stars glitter on her mouth and her very, very awesome chainsaw.

"Kanaya!" bursts out of John's mouth. Something pent up in his chest snaps open and a bubble of irrepressible relief and amazement pops out. He doesn't remember when he started smiling, but he sure as heck is now, and it feels like his lip is about to split with how wide his grin spreads.

Rose makes a strangled sound, and steps forward, her hands reaching out. "Kanaya?!" she says, distraught.

Kanaya zeroed in over their heads to glare at the Lord of Time; now, she meets Rose's eyes and teleports right up to them without missing a beat. She flips her chainsaw away for a second, and it twirls slowly in the space behind her as she catches Rose up, dips her back, and kisses her.

When they resurface, some of Kanaya's glittery star lipstick stays on Rose's face. "Sorry for making you wait," she says, gravely, as Rose touches her cheek. Rose isn't smiling, but from the look in her eyes, it's because a smile wouldn't be enough.

Then Kanaya straightens them back upright, and puts out a claw. Her chainsaw zips back into her waiting palm and revs of its own accord. Now Rose smiles, with a sharp edge, and Kanaya leaps off the platform. She skips right past the Battleship and the remaining ark ships before vanishing, and John does a mental count of three in his head before Kanaya reappears in a flood of neon green, right in front of the Lord of Time. "Calliope sends her regards, you turgid green despot!" she shrieks, and brings her chainsaw down into his green skull.

This. Is something Rose needs to hear right this second. "Kanaya just chainsawed the Lord of Time in the face. And it was awesome," John says. Rose turns and follows the action with unfailing accuracy, her mouth parted slightly as Kanaya goes to town.

The Lord of Time rips his head free a second later, and to John's (kind of grossed out) amazement, Kanaya's chainsaw leaves a ragged fissure in his skull that doesn't seal up right away. He roars furiously and lashes out with his cuestaff to clock Kanaya across the face - but Kanaya spins away easily, her skirts floating around her with galaxies pinwheeling across the fabric, and the next second Equius rams into the Lord of Time from the side, so hard that it sends the cherub Lord flying back into the crunching mass of cracks. John whoops and pumps a fist in the air, unable to keep his feet on the platform with how much excitement bubbles up through the Breeze.

But the Lord of Time emerges from the shattered mess of cracks almost immediately, hanging heavy in the air as his head twitches on his neck in a series of rapid spasms. The ragged wound in his head stays, but the flickering rainbow fluid stops leaking from the cut and turns dark, dull green.

LE: THAT. IS CHEATING.

He raises his machine gun, and braces it with both claws.
Equius slams into visibility for a second as he tackles Nepeta down out of the way, to her yowling protest. The Lord of Time unleashes a barrage of bullets that set reality jangling in a series of ear-popping bursts.

Kanaya throws her claws out to either side, and space rearranges itself around her. The bullets carve through the space so fast that they should have hit her almost instantly - but they curve around instead and shoot off into the dark Medium between LoFaF and LoWaS. They leave tiny trails of broken reality behind them, but space knits back together in a wave, the green stitches clearly visible for a moment before Kanaya smooths them away. "I refuse!" she says, hefting her chainsaw again.

"I'm going to marry that girl," Rose says. John finally puts a finger on the word for her expression: she's only managed to smile with a tiny corner of her mouth, but she watches Kanaya unerringly with a look of utter devotion that wipes away all the grief and worry and tension of the past few hours.

"...Was that a statement of a fact, or like, a prophecy kind of thing?" John asks. Since Rose's eyes are still faded and blind, but she has that look to her. The proph-seeing kind of look.

"Why not both?" Rose says, with a short, self-conscious laugh. Then she wrinkles up her nose. "Is there something for me to cover my eyes with? They're starting to itch appallingly, and I'd rather not be distracted."

John knows for a fact that he has a wayward pair of Strider brand (literally) sunglasses somewhere on his person or in his sylladex. But. No. He's not giving Bro the satisfaction. He pats his pocket for a second, and then eyes the trailing end of his super long hood.

...Good thing Rose had that handkerchief. The Breeze grumbles at John as he rips off a strip of fabric, but the hood fixes itself the second John wants it too, and really, it is so long. So stupidly long. Who needs that obvious of a handhold for bad guys to grab on their uniform? It's nice and cool and waves in the breeze like a cape, which is pretty cool despite John's better judgement, but he's not gonna miss an inch off the end. "Here you go," he says, passing it to her.

Rose accepts it, and ties it around her eyes in a blindfold at once. "There. That'll do," she says, after she finishes fluffing her hair back over it. The trailing ends of the blindfold hang down her back, and almost matches the color of her shoes exactly.

"Rose," John says, solemnly. "That's the most anime thing I have ever seen you do. And I've seen you do a lot of anime shit."

Rose tilts her head back as she clearly rolls her eyes behind her blindfold, and then shoots John a wry smile. "Then go bother dear Dave until he wakes up, so he can be properly envious," she says, her smile turning mischievous.

Which is a very good idea. Mostly because John still needs to deliver his grist. Holy crap. "I'll be back," he says, and just barely resists the urge to fake an awful Arnold Schwarzenegger accent.

Rose arches an eyebrow over her blindfold, so uh. Maybe John doesn't resist the accent in time. "Go. Hurry. I think now's your last chance," she says, cryptically, before she turns back to not-watch the battle between the Lord of Time and Kanaya, Equius, and Nepeta.

John goes.
"I come in peace!" John announces, at the top of his lungs, because he arrives in the middle of an earthquake.

"Finally!" Karkat shouts at the heavens, and reaches out to John with one claw. He and Feferi kneel shoulder to shoulder over Dave, who doesn't move at all where he lays on the ectobiology platform when John arrives in a gust of tumultuous wind. Marks like the face of a clock form almost a complete circle around Dave's eye - he looks deathly pale and too young with his shades off, like this - but it's not finished. A rusty crowbar shaped like a sword lays between Karkat's knees and Dave's side, covered in human blood up to the hilt. While they work over Dave's unconscious body, Aradia and Jade are all over the ectobiology terminal itself - Jade zaps newly cloned snake eggs off the platform as soon as they form, while Aradia leans heavily on the computer itself, rusty blood dripping from her nose as she enters coordinates.

Somehow, Aradia still finds time to smile at John, not even a trace of pain on her features as more blood leaks from the shell of her ear. Snake eggs cover half the platform in a rainbow of colors; they fall off by the dozens as the earth continues to shake and shudder underfoot, and disappear to roll down the craggy side of the Forge. Somewhere under a tiny hill of snake eggs, next to the prone body of the White Queen, John catches a glimpse of WV's waving claws – but he's still breathing under that tiny avalanche, so John figures he must be fine. The White Queen's chest rises and falls in such shallow breaths that you almost would have missed them, if you weren't a Breath kind of guy; the healed scars of deep cracks cover her carapace, but her face rests easy in sleep.

John lunges forward and catches Karkat's hand with a desperate squeeze. He can't see any sign of time cracks here. All the volatile tremors seem to come from the Forge itself as it roils and tosses in agitated waves.

HS: Grist! Now, Heir, now!

Also, two denizens loom overhead. Hephaestus towers over them, hitched to the side of the volcano with some kind of mechanical device, two hammers clutched in his massive hands. Echidna rises up out of the lava of the Forge itself, swimming in frantic loops and delving beneath the surface as the Forge churns and bubbles around her in a wild boil. Then the denizen erupts from under the surface in a torrent of lava, her voice thundering loud enough that everyone can hear.

EC: A breach, in the western hemisphere! The Forge leaks!

HS: Hup!

And just like that, Hephaestus's metal chassis detaches from the side of the Forge in an avalanche of movement. John ducks instinctively, but the denizen pivots around and uses his hammers like crutches to vault off the side of the volcano. Far off across the tangled, half-drowned jungles of LoFaF, John can just barely make out smoke and a deep, ominous red glow bubbling up through the crust - Hephaestus reaches it in five vast swings of his body, and crushes an entire swathe of flowering trees beneath his hammers before slamming them down on the ruptured earth. Still agitated, Echidna crests over the edge of the Forge's mouth, lava sluicing down her quills.

EC: Witch of Space! Hurry!

"Hurrying!" Jade yells back, as she and Aradia continue to run through the Final Alchemy at a break-neck pace. "Hurrying really - hey John! - really fast!"
John drops down and plants a kiss on Karkat's forehead on impulse, and then has to let go of his hand. Karkat bites back something, but lets him, and John flies over the edge of the Forge into a wall of roaring heat. Echidna coils away from him in a rushing slither of motion, and John snaps his fingers. A cascade of grist rains out of the sky with such force that a few pieces nearly careen over the side of the volcano; the Breeze bumps them back in until every last piece of grist sinks into the magma. Echidna roars with triumph, her voice full of chimes that remind John of Typhus's windchimes.

If anything, the volcanic Forge swells and rolls even harder. Finally, with all the grist it needs to fuel the Final Alchemy, the volcano burns with intense heat. Jewel-like colors shift and glimmer beneath the surface of the molten rock as Echidna stirs the grist into the crucible. John trembles along with it for a second, as the finality of it all thrums through his chest. All it needs, he thinks, is the final ingredient. Aradia and Jade must be almost there; he doesn't know if they have much time left before the Forge grows so wild and energetic that it erupts the old-fashioned volcano way. "I'm headed back to Rose! You've got this?!!" he asks, whipping around.

"Yeah! I'll bring them! Go!" Jade calls over her shoulder. Karkat's still watching John, with a look on his face like he's about to beg John to stay here - (And maybe, in another time and place, he does.)

- and John waves one last time as he dissolves into the wind, and streaks back toward Rose at the gate.

Then the Lord of Time speaks, his voice booming throughout the Medium and shuddering John out of the air somewhere over the Battleship Condescension, and their fates are sealed.

LE: NONE OF YOU CAN ESCAPE.

And too much happens, too fast.

Kanaya brings her chainsaw down, and lops off the Lord's arm at the elbow. Nepeta leaps forward right behind her, shouting with ferocious glee.

LE: AND SOON. I WILL NOT NEED YOU ANYMORE.

LE: NOW. LISTEN CAREFULLY. YOU MAY LEARN SOMETHING.

"We have nothing to learn from you," Kanaya says, as she winds her chainsaw back for another blow.

The Lord of Time unhinges his jaw, and screams. The force of it blasts Kanaya back so hard John loses sight of her as a fresh [crack] punctures reality around the Lord of Time - Equius shoves Nepeta out of the way, just in time to take a round of machine gun bullets directly to the chest. The void cuts out around him with an inaudible pop, and Equius's body drops like a stone as Nepeta screams, one of her claws missing from the wrist down -

The Lord of Time turns the machine gun on LoFaF, and opens fire - "NO!" John yells, and the Breeze screams his lower body apart in preparation to fly back -
Time stutters, and its Lord levels the machine gun toward the Final Gate while John's still frozen in that second.

**LE:** YOU'RE ALL JUST AS OBSOLETE. AS THAT ROTTING WRITHING WALKING CORPSE. YOU CALL A MUSE.

John gets half a second as the frenzied panic in his brain gels into something cold and clear.

The Lord of Time wasn't distracted. He's just been playing with them.

They weren't ever going to win.

He uses the half-second to wrench himself back to Rose's side, with the half-formed thought of tackling her through the gate. But they don't have enough time. The machine gun rattles off a fresh hail of bullets, and John senses a few rip through people's lungs on the deck of the Battleship before ten bullets tear through his own chest with a nauseating shock. At the last second Rose tries to elbow her way between him and the worst of it, her cry ringing through John's ears as darkness ebbs across his vision, but since he's trying to shield her -

When the next bullet hits Rose in the eye, they're both gonna die being stupid, big damn heroes.

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**Earlier**

"What," the Condesce says, flatly, "the fuck is that?"

To be perfectly honest, Terezi expected Typheus to show up sooner. Seventy five percent of the ark ships have reached and passed through the Gate, now, along with a good half of the carapacian meteors, who arrive in staggered, less organized bunches before gunning it past the Battleship Condescension and its sentry ships. But then again, a dramatic entrance probably trumps punctuality. Terezi and Eridan had plenty of time to alert the most extravagantly powerful troll on Earth to the impending arrival of John's giant boss monster, but Eridan's only half paying attention to the group memo at the best of times - typical rookie mistake - and Terezi prefers to get a good whiff of the look on the Condesce's face as the small, pale white and green blob pelting toward them in the distance turns into a giant white and green blob. He may have taken his sweet time leaving LoWaS, but now that he's visible, Typheus flies too fast for anyone on the Battleship to do more than stop and stare. The meteors mean nothing to him - he blasts them aside in a tidal wave of wind and keeps on coming. "It's fine! Dave and John said this might happen!" Terezi calls, anticipation leaking into her voice as her shout carries. The Condesce grimaces at her from half a ship away, while Eridan screws his face up and drifts closer. His claws smolder with white light, and Terezi arches an eyebrow at him with intense focus until he screws his face up more and turns to keep one eye on the Lord of Time's progress. He keeps the other eye trained on Typheus, which is probably smart - but Terezi leaps from her lookout perch on top of the Battleship and strides to the forward end, confident in her ability to handle the situation. Dave tried to play it cool, while John's report mostly focused on the sheer ridiculousness of Typheus's goal, but Terezi can read between the lines.

Oddly, Typheus's coming up from under Skaia, rather than from the direction of LoWaS's bright cyan pop-rock glow of mental activity; straggling ranks of carapacian-controlled meteors scatter in wild loop-di-loops as the denizen barrels through them with all the relentless, restless determination
Then the extra blobs swirling around him come into focus as the incoming storm carries the smells directly to Terezi's nostrils, and Typhaeus's little side trip becomes obvious. The hoard of fireflies scatter before they can slam into the Battleship and splatter like teeny glowing projectiles, but the hapless pink turtles and yellow salamanders flounder and flap their feet without making much progress until Typhaeus flicks them at Ark with a twist of his tail. The salamanders bounce like jelly, as Consorts tend to do; the immature turtles pull back into their shells at the last minute and pepper the side of the immense Battleship like pink macaron-flavored cannonballs. The ship rocks a little, but Terezi keeps her feet under her with ease. The perks of riding a heavily armored space-worthy ship, built by a rich Tyrant with her eyes on the intergalactic prize - this giant red sucker's built to take a hit and keep on coming.

Typhaeus slams into it at top speed, naturally. Because denizens are assholes. The Condesce shrieks her disapproval, her lackeys rushing forward as best they can while an enormous snake winds himself around the Battleship in a series of adroit twists that make the ship emit some frankly alarming crunches. Eridan flips around and raises a hand but doesn't fire more than a warning shot, sweat rolling down his pale face and leaving violet streaks. Terezi's feet jitter a little as the ship bounces and rolls under her, but she stays put even as Typhaeus brings his face down close over the Battleship, his mouth open to greet them all teeth first.

His physical speech comes out as a bunch of shrieking denizen-standard gibberish; Terezi suspects that he only bothers with it because it gives him an excuse to waft rancid snake breath over them all. It muddles her impressions of the area around them for a moment, but the stiff breeze that circulates around and over the deck nearest Typhaeus's tight coils carries it away in a moment.

Which leaves Terezi free to contemplate the free set of actions available to her, now that Typhaeus quit dragging his metaphorical heels, while his mental voice bypasses the language barrier and drowns out all the demands that he stand down and unhand the Condesce's ride. A couple of the Fuchsia's followers drop on the spot, probably more from lingering Horrorterror damage done to their minds than from the sudden slap of mental force Typhaeus puts behind his words.

TY: I SEEK THE ONE KNOWN AS BARACK OBAMA.

TY: His legal representation is required in a matter of the utmost urgency.

All Terezi can do is shrug and nudge a greenblood who drops like a rock too close to the edge back onto safer ground with her cane - if they wanted a healer of Mind, they'd need a Sylph or something. When she looks for it Terezi can see the soft spots and burns in people's craniums. She'd just rather apply her classpect in other ways — decisions and their consequences. Rose can wander around in people's heads with Terezi's cackling blessing; Terezi's more interested in staring up Typhaeus's gullet with unseeing eyes and seeing just what the two of them could accomplish together.

(It distracts her from Kanaya being dead, and how she should have seen it faster; it gives her something more productive to do than be aware of Rose and John perched on the edge of the Gate, both of them leaking pain and grief like human-shaped pockets of misery.)

((Better still, it distracts her from Gamzee, being himself in the most difficult way possible and clogging up her sight with just enough raw chaos to make her sneeze.))

When Typhaeus fails to immediately snap someone up in his jaws and start crunching, and instead stares down at them with the imperious air of a giant snake monster expecting a prompt response, the Condesce swells up like a balloon and bawls, at the top of her lungs, "GET THE SHELL OFFA MY SHIP!"
Hm. Sizing up the situation, Terezi waves her cane to get Typheus attention, her trademark grin already in place as she waits for him to glare down at her. As fun as it would be to watch the Condesce tackle a denizen, they're in a time crunch here that's more literal than Terezi likes. While the Condesce distracted the retired Psiioniic (as if any hero worth their salt wouldn't recognize that guy) from his grief seizure by sending him off to slingshot the ships whose navigators and psionics got whammied hard by Leviathan toward the Gate, they've still got one of the heaviest hitters left in the Condesce's crew - her awkward void-riddled Equius look alike.

(If Terezi was a betting troll, she'd bet they've got more than one ancestor up here. In fact, she is a betting troll.)

Condy and her crew, plus a solid probably on Eridan jumping into the fray, versus one denizen? Terezi doesn't see this ending well...for...

...Uh. Huh.

Terezi adjusts her estimations of how much of a threat Typheus might be in a moment of quiet alarm. As far as her mind's eye can see, Typheus wins, despite the fact that against a god tiered Eridan alone he should be well matched. Terezi's powers feed her a quick montage of Typheus flicking people through the gate with impatient backhanded slaps of his wings, and forcibly decompressing the ships by sucking the air out of them if truly threatened.

Denizens aren't nice, and Typheus has a terrible temper.

The realization isn't enough to dampen Terezi's anticipation, not entirely, but it galvanizes her into waving her cane with a little more force when Typheus doesn't react. "Hey!" she calls, with a snap of her claws.

Typheus lowers his massive head slightly without so much as glancing at Terezi and digs his scattered claws into the metal of the Battleship like a cat kneading a blanket, dismissing the Condesce's demand with a laughing huff of foul breath. The salamanders bob up the sides of the ship, some of them crawling out from under Typheus's coils with tiny glubs as their squishy bodies reinflate.

TY: Impudence. You will bring him to me, or I will retrieve him for myself.

"You're not kidnapping one of my VIPs! #fuckouttahere!" the Condesce insists, as she slams her specibus against the deck with jarring force. Typheus doesn't budge, his coils shifting a little to reaffirm his grip on the ship. "You got till the count of five!"

Well! Terezi gets the distinct impression that she's being pointedly ignored! That simply won't do at all. With a sigh, she stuffs her cane under her arm and sticks her claws into her mouth to whistle hard and loud. "Simmer down, people!" she says, loud enough to carry but mild, as Typheus finally glowers down at her with a pinched expression. "Did someone say...legal representation?"

Typheus snakes around the Battleship in a sudden burst of motion that coils a new loop of his body around the ship. For all his mass, he does it so neatly that the wind barely buffets the ship, and his head rises up on the far side of the deck as he twists around to bring his head down right in front of Terezi. The salamanders scramble out of the way, which means they run straight into the Condesce's people and clog up their efforts to reorient themselves to face the marauding denizen - typical consort buffoonery.

TY: Yes. That is correct.
TY: Murderer.

As if Terezi minds going snoot to snoot with a denizen. She grins ferociously, flips her cane out from under her armpit, and flicks it against Typheus's nearest canine. "Heheheh. Hello to you, too," she says, when he sneezes at her. The outraged gust knocks her back on her heels, but she digs her cane into the deck and holds her ground. If he knocks her silly, she doubts he'll give her a chance to regain her footing. In the air, he'd win - no ifs, ands, or buts about it. "I understand you're looking for a lawyer."

TY: Not you.

TY: I seek -

Terezi clicks her tongue and shakes her head, her grin tilting into a smirk. "Yeah, I can smell Dave's handiwork from a mile away," she says, chidingly, and shoots Typheus a shrewd wink. The denizen grumbles, but if he's come this far without realizing Dave is a one man instigator of ridiculous nonsense under the thin veneer of coolkid posturing, there's really no hope for them. Dave's actions have far-reaching - and endlessly entertaining! - consequences; Terezi's just here to have fun with it. "Let me guess. You're looking for compensation. A chance at retirement. Payment for services rendered," she says, shrugging with both arms spread wide as she continues to smile the denizen down, tooth for tooth.

TY: I said no such thing.

"This late in the game? You need to be aggressive about this. You need someone familiar with your case, who can cut through the red tape," Terezi continues, her voice light as her mind runs calculations under the surface. Manipulating a denizen isn't hard - not when you really do have what they want. But with one as ornery as Typheus, he might eat her just to make her shut up while he sticks to his original plan; he has more than enough aversion to the troll players that she has to play this exactly right.

The denizen's wing scrapes up along the deck, and idly carves a deep gouge through the paint as he encircles her with tattered skin and claws. Terezi lets her grin drop into a steady, unyielding line, her jaw locked up against her will as the denizen angles his head -

- turns his jaws to the side, so that one eye peers down at her with distaste.

And intrigue.

TY: ...Go on.

As if he could resist. Terezi leans over her cane. "You need...a legislacerator."

Typheus stares at her without blinking. Then, with a disdainful sniff, he pulls his wing away and lifts his colossal head up from the deck, dismissing her with a grunt.

TY: I do not actually believe that you are the kind of legal representation that I require.

She rolls her eyes behind her glasses. "Trust me. There's no one on these ships more qualified," Terezi calls, cupping her claws around her mouth to be heard as Typheus rolls his own eyes and smacks a row of turtles up onto the deck when they get in his way of circling another coil around the ship. The turtles rattle around like pinballs, still curled up in their shells as they join the chaos of the salamander hoard currently swamping the rest of the deck. One of the turtles ricochets toward Terezi, and she uses her cane like a golf club to send it spinning away in another direction. Moreover, the fireflies descend at last in a flickering hoard that distracts even the most focused of the Condesce's
crew - hundreds of them land on the void-cloaked blueblood and light up the void like a Christmas tree. "And more willing to work with a denizen of your intimidating stature," she adds.

Between the aimless chaos of the consorts thronging through the deck and the Condesce's furious shrieks as she attempts to personally stuff the salamanders and turtles down through the hatch, Terezi stands out from the crowd - cool, collected, unbothered by the utter nonsense raging off to her right. Really. It's no contest.

Tyheus blows a tiny tornado over the miniature salamander rave, which just sends more consorts bouncing around to add to the chaos inundating the crew, and then sighs. The tail end of his coils slips away from the ship, releasing it from his grip in slow turns as the denizen turns back to Terezi with a cold, assessing stare. Once he finishes unwinding himself from around the Battleship, his foremost wing sprawls out along the deck, flattening a couple turtles and rolling to a stop before Terezi's feet.

TY: You fly too slow.

Oh, hell yes. Terezi launches herself up, and skips over the wing to land on the back of the denizen's neck. Near enough to his head, she hopes, that Tyheus can't whip around and snap her up in his jaws - it wouldn't do to tempt him when she's so very snack-sized. "Wait 'til I tell Dragonmom about this!" she crows, unable to fully repress a rush of grubbish glee.

Tyheus peels away from the fleet and fans out his wings; Terezi gathers enough presence of mind to crouch down and wedge her claws into the nearest handholds before he blasts away from the Battleship in a spiral and zooms toward Skaia. His neck ripples and rolls under her feet in vast, sinuous coils that run down his whole body, but the wind proves less of an issue than Terezi thought it might; it's not blowing her back, it's carrying them both forward at a speed approximately equivalent to 'ludicrously fast,' and she suspects that if she lets go, Tyheus will just scoop her up off his neck and hurl her along like he did the consorts. She'd rather ride under her own power than get tossed around like a ping pong ball, though.

Plus, how many people can say they've ridden a denizen? And lived? Terezi's putting this on her resume in bold, fifty-point font. One does not sweet-talk a giant boss monster into taking them on as a lawyer and not brag about it into the next life.

They streak back toward Skaia, and swing past LoFaF by the narrowest of margins. Tyheus takes great care to fly around the hemisphere opposite the Forge in the least subtle dodge Terezi has ever seen, so she can't even wave down at Karkat and Dave from death-defying heights. Covering the remaining space in a rush, Tyheus threads between the checkered tendrils that form a net around Skaia and then bursts through the clouds, filling them with dull grey and thunder for a split second as he roars down toward a great crevasse that splits the chessboard Battlefield apart. Part of Sollux's Prospit project juts out of the gorge at a low angle, dripping half melted comb and molten honey in huge splatters across the landscape while bees swarm around it in oddly precise figure-8s.

Terezi squints, and sniffs the air. "Vriska has been here," she announces. Some people would claim those bees were just flying in an infinity-sign. Those people would be goddamn idiots, and would not survive the Vriska-induced nuclear winter to follow.

If Tyheus were a human or a troll, Terezi would call the noise that emerges from his throat 'internal screaming.'

TY: I hate all of you.
BQ: I heard that.

Typhues banks sharply, and rather than plunging into the dark depths of the fissure (which appears to extend deep into the dark of Skaia's insides) hovers to one side, looming over the landscape as a black carapacian stalks toward them, glaring up with eyes that blaze with power under a knife-sharp crown. She covers ground in gulping, earth-eating strides, in such a way that the black squares of the chessboard seem to tug along in her wake and feed into her shadowy train, and Terezi is abruptly reminded that thanks to their collusion with Spades Slick, the trolls never had to fight the Black Queen.


TY: Denizen business.

And Typhues straight-faces it. To be fair, Terezi can't read his facial expressions - such as they are - but he radiates such a powerful, disgruntled aura of nothing to see here that Terezi could smell it a mile away.

The Black Queen isn't fooled in the slightest. She clutches the King's Scepter in her fist, and judging by the enormous, smoking craters scattered around the Battlefield as far as Terezi can smell, she hasn't skimped on calling the Reckoning down around her own head. If the carapacian queen picks a fight, Terezi doesn't foresee them getting out of here without one hell of a fight. She can easily follow the prospective trail of a future where Typhues calls Echidna and Hephaestus for aid, and the Forge implodes in a wash of fiery doom in their absence.

Then the Black Queen snorts, and steps away, her shining dark armor rippling like a forest of sharp blades as she dismisses them with a curt, bitter wave.

BQ: ...Hm. Well, if you feel like wasting your time arguing with a brick wall, be my guest.

BQ: Though if you could put in a word, I would like to spend the twilight of my life not dealing with an Order-induced migraine.

BQ: But I doubt it will change anything. It's too late. She's too stuck in her ways.

TY: Pah.

TY: That will depend on the skill of my legal representative.

Terezi dances to keep her feet under her as Typhues ripples again. "Oh, don’t you worry. I'm the best that money can't buy," she says, squatting down drop a facetious pat on his back.

Another, deliberate twitch knocks her flat on her butt. Fair enough! She can't say she wasn't asking for it. Typhues bends his head and slithers down into the fissure, and Terezi clamps down on him again as the denizen descends at a very steep incline. He digs his claws into the deep brown earth that makes up the top layers of the fissure, but scrapes them almost cautiously over the black, starry stone that takes over as they descend deeper and deeper into Skaia. Typhues slows for nothing; once he reaches a wide white branch - which, fascinatingly enough, smells like smooth and melty mints - he uses it to pull himself along at ever-accelerating speeds. The wind screams in Terezi's ears with wild fury at funneling through such tight confines between the walls of dark crystal, and Typhues roar-hums along with it, driving it along to a break-neck pace. Terezi flattens out along his neck and keeps her head low; he hasn't slammed into a wall yet, but at the speed they're going an impact would smear her flat as roadkill. When she turns her head to the side, she spits wayward strands of hair out of her mouth, and tries to find patterns in the constellation of lights playing throughout the
vast expanse of dark crystal.

It's easy to figure out that she's watching the Medium, the events playing out in miniature. (For a given value of miniature.) Countless dots of light shoot across the wide expanse of Skaia's insides, while here and there bright, tight-knit whorls of light cluster around each other, close to the shimmering orbs of LoLaR, LoFaF, and LoWaS. The branches of the trees fill the space in between the shifting constellations with symmetrical loops and branches, while lightless cracks slowly spread out in spider webs, shattering the crystal the same way the [cracks] up in the Incipisphere itself carve giant swathes out of reality. As Typheus claws his way down toward the vast trunks, the symmetrees obscure most of the view with their own ambient glow, and Terezi turns her head back to watch where they're going as Typheus barrels around the trees and through an open door.

Nothing she sees really surprises Terezi. In fact, this is pretty much exactly what she expected to see: Vriska Serket, walking disaster, whirling around to stare at Terezi and her ride with an expression of the purest, most raw outrage ever worn by a troll. Tavros looks relieved - and then terrified - and then relieved again, which is an entirely reasonable sequence of emotions to feel when confronted by the sudden arrival of a denizen, whose thunderous roar crashes and echoes around the chamber, and Terezi.

The Horror- no, Orderterror at the very center of Skaia merely shifts herself around, the interlacing spirals of her tendrils resorting themselves into a new arrangement in a smooth, precise shuffle. No overlapping, no clipping through walls, no broken physics - Skaia's nothing if not scrupulous with her many angles.

Naturally, Vriska talks first. They're in the presence of reality's maker herself, and Vriska shrieks at the top of her lungs with all the audacity Terezi hates and loves her for. "Terezi! No! Oh my god, what are you doing?!

"Why am I not surprised that this is where you ran off to?" Terezi says. Since Typheus seems to have settled, his restless coils filling up a lot of what space isn't taken up by Skaia's unfathomably immense mass, Terezi walks forward and plants herself on the very top of his head. The denizen huffs at her cheek, but doesn't shake his head to dislodge her, which is basically the same as permission to continue. Besides, there's a striking lack of courtroom furnishings around them, Imperial or modern day - making her arguments from on top of a giant monster in the spirit of His Honorable Tyranny is at least in keeping with ancient tradition. His Honorable Typheus certainly has a ring to it! "Tavros," she adds, shooting him a finger gun of greeting.

Tavros waves his hand, looking entirely overwhelmed as he falls back on common courtesy. "Uh. Hey, Terezi. Nice to see you -"

"Ughhhhhhh! You're always trying to horn in on my action! Take your giant overgrown worm thing and stop nannying me, Terezi!" Vriska yells, cutting Tavros off.

TY: AHEM.

Typheus snaps his teeth together with a ringing crash; down here, it echoes like harsh bells, something Terezi attributes to Skai. Everything reverberates strangely, this close to the center. Vriska snarls back - because of course she does - and Typheus directs his next words at Terezi.

TY: ...Does the law favor me if I eat her?

Terezi thinks it over. "Yeah, probably. But also, if you do, I reserve the right to eat you," she says, with a warning grin.
She gets the impression that Typheus isn't used to people threatening to eat him back. His shocked silence lasts a good ten seconds.

TY: You. Are a frightening child.

"Unfortunately, Vriska grows on you. I'm somewhat attached, by this point," Terezi sighs, shaking her head.

"'Somewhat'?!" Vriska chucks a blue die at Terezi; Terezi tilts her head to the side and it flies over her shoulder and lands somewhere in the midst of Tyheus's coils. Vriska recovers fast, though, her outrage morphing into bravado as soon as she seizes a chance to boast. "Whatever, Terezi! You can take your incredible spiel and shove it. Coming down here to fight Skaia was my idea first, and I've earned the right to first dibs by dint of being awesome! You can wait your turn!"

Sooo...Typical Vriska plan. Barely thought out, fixated heavily on her own central role in the Vriska narrative™, guaranteed to have terrible, unforeseeable consequences if she gets her way. Terezi can't see what this would accomplish, apart from potentially dooming their timeline by damaging Skaia before the Lord of Time can even kick it into high gear. Sometimes, Vriska's incessant drive to do the most important, risky, game-changing thing possible is just...wow. Terezi smacks her face, mashing her palm against the bridge of her glasses so they press down against her nose and help stave off the impending headache.

But they're here, now, at least.

And like hell is she letting Vriska doom them all with her astonishingly vast quantities of ego.

"Wrong!" Terezi says, raising her voice so that it echoes like Tyheus's lingering roar. Vriska bares her teeth, horns lowered to an aggressive slant - but Terezi's on top of a denizen, a million possible actions not-yet-taken branching out through her mind's eye, and for once in her life? Vriska can take a backseat.

Because it's time.

Terezi takes her shades off and rubs the lenses on her shirt. "Sorry to steal your spotlight, Vriska. But I'm afraid that this is a matter...."

She puts the sunglasses back on.

"...of [Law and Order]."

Two familiar notes ring out, and Terezi turns her smile on Skaia as Vriska's mouth opens and closes, to no avail. Vriska can just deal with being overruled.

Terezi has work to do.

Across from Terezi and Tyheus, Skaia's eyes flicker into a haze of black and white and grey superstring strata, and the Orderterror contemplates Terezi's declaration with implacable, incomprehensible intent. It would be very, very easy, Terezi thinks, for Skaia to pressure them back into line. To lean on them until their words match her script exactly; to strip away their silliness and mistakes and free will, until they follow the plan laid before them to its inevitable conclusion. Terezi can't comprehend the overwhelming, alien organization of the many-layered mind before her; Skaia's priorities are too...absolute, and devastating, in how little room they leave for what the individuals before her want.

They've changed. Skaia never has, even as her progeny drifted further and further out of sync with
her. As long as they play her game within acceptable parameters, they haven't been doomed. But coming down here, barging in like this...could cross the line. Terezi can't read Skaia well enough to know for sure.

Which means she's going to have to pull this off totally blind.

[...An ancient invocation.]

[What case do you bring before me, Seer of Mind?]

--

Sollux was going to head over to LoFaF.

Instead, he finds himself hovering over a huge fucking crack in Skaia.

He squints down into the dark, as his psionics collect the wandering, hapless bees whose mainframes have collapsed.

"...Who is dicking around down there?"

--

[x]

They die so suddenly that all Jade feels is a tiny jolt in her belly, like a fish hook sunk into her guts that tugs her numb insides into a new, awful configuration. The Lord of Time finishes his turn and sprays more machine gun rounds toward the Gate with lazy ease before Jade can process the bright red splatter pouring out from Karkat's shredded chest; the precision shot right through Dave's head that burst through his eye, at the center of his clockwork scars; Aradia crumpled up on the floor beside the terminal - not dead yet, but with blood oozing from her mouth as her breaths turn shallow, like she doesn't have the energy to wipe it away as she meets Jade's eyes with a dull, crooked smile. In the group memo visible in the corner of Jade's glasses, multiple people cut off mid-sentence, and Jade knows: Rose, John, Eridan, Equius -

LE: Too easy.

Overhead, Kanaya screams in an awful, gut-cutting way. Nepeta screams louder, and launches herself at the Lord of Time in a burst of raspberry pink light. Feferi crumples in on herself, her eyes wide and stark against the sheet-white shock of her face, clutching her head as a low, agonized sound escapes her - something you'd expect to hear from a creature at the bottom of the ocean, not from a living troll's throat. Jade can't tell if the red blood splattered across Feferi's face and clothes came from Dave or Karkat (Karkat, her stupid, stupid space brain informs her, since the angle that the Lord of Time shot them from is obvious, and Feferi probably only survived because the trajectory of the shots that hit Karkat knocked him sideways onto her like a troll shield while the rest of the bullets caught Karkat right in the side, right through the heart -)

He didn't even try to shoot Jade.

She stands there stock still for a long moment, caught mid-lunge where she leapt away from the terminal to try to grab someone - anyone - one shoulder sagging a little as she struggles to take in - everything. WV cries out, banging his fists against his own head as he crawls out of the snake eggs, but the sound seems to come from a long way off. Raising her hands slowly, Jade presses them against the front of her god tier uniform.
But nothing hit her. She didn't even have to teleport out of the way; forget that, he didn't give her enough time for her to move out of the way, or to move anyone else to safety, and something about that strikes Jade as so perfectly, shockingly wrong that she can't breathe. "No, No, no," she says, stilted, and stumbles as one of her feet knocks against the ground. Everything feels off-kilter. Like - hahaha, kind of like John and Rose and Dave are all dead and Jade can feel the sudden gaping holes in her world where they should always be. "Why..." she starts again, her voice thinning in and out of hearing, "didn't he shoot..."

She can't lose them like this. That's not - that's not fair, she can't be alone again.

Kanaya brings her chainsaw down on the Lord of Time's machine gun with a guttural roar; bright sparks fly between them, while the Lord of Time laughs his dumb, terrible, broken up laugh right in Kanaya's face. Nepeta clings to his back, driving her last remaining clawkind deep into the grotesque muscle of his back again and again, while Kanaya hauls her fist back and punches him across the face so hard his jaw breaks off his face in a spurt of rainbow blood. But the cherub Lord swats them both away the next second, and smacks Nepeta away with the back of his hand when she rakes her claws along his arm. Kanaya intercepts her in a smooth flash of green, while the Lord of Time snaps his jaw back into place with a single jerk of his head. And all the while, the dark void of Equius's drifting body slowly fades from Jade's perception, so that she can almost sense him directly for the first time in forever, and Aradia's chest stops moving, and Jade's sense spiral further out, on the brink of unwinding her at the seams: the Condesce is missing an arm and half her chest, bleeding out on the deck of the Battleship, her crew reduced to a pulp if they weren't safely inside, while beyond that Rose and John slump over each other at the edge of the Gate, unmoving -

Feferi scrunches her claws up in her hair so hard that Jade can see the strands pulled tight near her scalp, her fists shaking as she shakes her head.

Then Feferi releases her death grip on her own head, and slams both fists down against the platform with a fraught, hitched exhale. "Haaaaghh!" Fuchsia light bursts out and seethes around her in a sudden, vivid blaze. Feferi raises her head, the strain of it causing her to shake like she's about to explode, and meets Jade's lost stare with a scowl of pure concentration. "I've - I've got them, but - ow," Feferi says, before she has to stop, swear, and punch the platform again, so hard that it pulverizes the stone. Tyrianblood punches don't mess around. They're tough cookies, Jade's mind babbles, as she furrows her brow and tries to understand what Feferi's talking about. The troll keeps speaking as she struggles to push herself up onto her knees, and then up onto her feet, through sheer determination. "The further away they are, the more my reach slips. John and Rose - I don't know how much longer I can hold them here. They're - so far away -"

It clicks. "Wait. They're alive?!!" Jade says, snapping back into the present with a sharp, painful jolt. The agony that threatens to squeeze her chest shut gets skipped right over - pretty conveniently! - so that she can feel heart-pounding disbelief instead. The people shot by the Lord of Time still aren't moving, but as Feferi continues to boil over with life, fuchsia light spreads from her aura and runs along the floor to outline Dave, Aradia, and Karkat with similar flickers of cold fire.

Jade stumbles once more and seizes Feferi's outstretched claw; Feferi clenches it reflexively in a fist again, her expression contorted into desperation for a split second as she bites a single fang through her lower lip, and Jade lifts the troll the rest of the way onto her feet as Feferi focuses on something out of sight. "I won't let them die. I won't," she insists; the troll looks down at the blood on her shirt for a second, and the sight seems to bolster her wild resolve. Clutching Jade with cold claws, Feferi looks utterly ferocious. "I have more than enough to share. It's not heroic if they're not dead yet."

That's all Jade needs to hear. Feferi trembles and burns cold, and Jade recognizes it in an instant - maybe it's a Witch thing, to summon up so much raw power and need inside your body that you
could go nova with it.

"They're not too far away for me," Jade says, folding her hand over Feferi's. Feferi, hunched over slightly as she concentrates, jerks upright and meets Jade's dawning excitement with a smile.

[Hecate's Crescendo]

Life rolls out from them with a flourish; since they're Witches, they don't pause to see where it all needs to go. They just do. Jade whirls Feferi around in a circle, their feet spinning out from under them as joy bubbles up in her chest. Feferi slides an arm around Jade's back, and then Jade pulls her up and away, leaving Aradia, Dave, and Karkat - drenched in a foamy wave of life as they bounce up to Equius. Feferi turns them in another circle with a laugh as Equius spasms and kicks back upright, and her wings leave a pulse of bright glitter that sparks and crackles like a firework in the mingled fires of space and life dousing everyone they dance past in a bubbling tide.
Another spin, and Jade sticks her tongue out at the Lord of Time as he roars after them - but he can't catch Jade! Not now, not ever, and especially not when Kanaya brings her chainsaw down and tears it through the side of his neck as a distraction.

Feferi draws them on again toward Eridan, her skirt twirling in a wild arc as they drench him in fuchsia life. For a second, it feels like pouring a thin trickle into a bucket with a hole at the bottom - like it's pouring right through him without sticking - but then Eridan thrashes back to awareness, and Jade spins them into the next step of the irresistible dance. And the music draws them on with insistent, exultant beats that will not be denied, and Jade's ties to Rose and John snap them to the very edge of reality like magnets. Jade dips Feferi down and life swoops down along the troll's claws like a tracery along her veins to settle over them in a wave of coursing light.

They manipulate, but they can't create new material from nothing.

Feferi's got a tyrian lifespan, though, and Jade doesn't need to be a Life player to feel her muster it all up, pouring it into everyone they can reach.

The fraymotif stutters - Jade almost jars right out of it at the sudden jolt, but Feferi presses the music until it restarts as they backtrack to the Battleship. "Tethys," she says, frustration bleeding into her voice as they swing around and come to a stop over the Condesce. "You -"

"Oh, don't give me any of that sentimantal crap," the Condesce says, scowling. A wide trail of tyrian blood smears under her from where she's dragged herself across the deck to reach a blueblood with very Equius-y horns. They've clamped down on the ragged stump of the Condesce's arm with a plate of metal, but the damage goes deeper than that - the Zahhak's got one broad claw deep in the Condesce's rib cage but to Feferi's and Jade's shared life sense, it's still leaking out of her like water through spread fingers. "It's only a flesh wound."

Losing an arm's not too much for a troll; but that chest wound... "Don't play dumb. You're dying, ava," Feferi snaps, as she drops to her knees. "I don't even know if I can save you. If I should." The fraymotif judders again and starts to ebb out of Jade's ears, but they've covered all the ground they need to: everyone's alive.

Everyone that Sburb thought relevant enough to save. Even as Jade watches, her joined sense of Feferi's powers fading by the second, Feferi raises a claw and freezes before touching the Condesce's forehead, her face screwed up in consternation. "I don't know if it will even take," Feferi says, her eyes wet with frustration as she closes her claws into a fist. "A player I could raise up all the way from death, but that's because we've got resurrection potential built in. Carapacians and consorts, a little bit harder, but almost everyone else hit here is already gone, and doomed on top of that -"

It's not hard, to follow the trail of Feferi's tendrils of life as they run through the bodies scattered here and there across the deck - some of them Jade guesses just need healing, for relatively minor stuff, but a few Feferi's aura shies away from without touching. And if Feferi can't force it, there's nothing Jade can do except wait for Feferi to finish what she can. All across the Medium, everyone's stirring and getting back on their feet, while Kanaya knits more space together for her to keep fighting the Lord of Time amidst the widening cracks.

"No more blabbing, little bubbler," the Condesce retorts, and her remaining hand shoots out to grasp Feferi by the wrist. "If you're making it happen, make it." She coughs, and something deep in her chest clogs up, rather than her throat. Hoarse, her grin turning into a leer, the Condesce pushes on, ignoring Zahhak as they deftly twist their claws in a bid to keep the Condesce from sprouting another leak. "Or if you're makin' your move to inherit - the birthday cake vodka's down in the imperial suite.
Just make sure to let the Battleship know who's in charge first, so it doesn't poison the shot glasses on you -“

Feferi cuts her off. "Neither of us is going to live past another century if I do this. I'm almost out of spare life to share around, right now." Exasperated but somehow, oddly, with a fond expression, Feferi taps her claws against the Condesce's cheek and sends a streamer of life into her. Her ancestor stares back at her, suddenly cold and remote. "No moray empires for you."

"Now, that's just quitter talk, baybe," the Condesce says, marshalling her smirk again, and when Feferi finishes dumping fuchsia fire into her, the Condesce hauls herself up on the blueblood's arm. Which takes some maneuvering, since they're still plugging up the ragged hole in her side with a fist. "Take me to my buoy, Meteos. We're outta here."

Jade doesn't wait for them to go out of earshot. "That's everyone we can help?" she asks, though a minute ago she knew. It never hurts to confirm - especially if someone got hurt toward the end of the fraymotif as the music faded out.

Feferi rises up out of her crouch after a pause, and then whirls on Jade. Her smile's split down the middle between triumphant relief and regret, wobbling all over the place; then she lunges and grabs Jade up in a spinning hug, her lips cold as she plants a kiss on Jade's cheek.

At some point, they're gonna need to tally up the people they couldn't save, because the number hasn't been zero since Leviathan hooked that one ark and killed everyone in the engine room. It's a bit higher, just counting the bodies that don't get back up as Feferi's aura draws back into her body, and each one twists something up in Jade's throat - because here she is, happy that they saved Rose and John and Dave and their friends, and that selfish happiness won't go away despite all the people dead past Feferi's arbitrary, game-imposed limits.

But...not right now.

Right now, Jade thinks, as the Battleship shudders into motion under their feet, they have alchemy to finish.

It's time for some science.

Chapter End Notes

The absolutely fantastic Jade and Feferi artwork commission this chapter came from the wonderful rose-ebottles over on Tumblr!

Edit 9/12/2017 the wonderful ladyknightlesbian also did an entire awesome sequence of art of Rose and Kanaya over on Tumblr!
And Time Remembered

Chapter Summary

For winter's rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows, and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

Chapter Notes

Our power anthem is How Far We've Come.

Time to bring it home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

About one minute in, Terezi realizes that she may not be the best kind of legal representative for the job.

For one thing, she can't exactly arrest reality itself for violating worker's rights. She doesn't have enough zip ties to handle that many arms - something she intends to rectify at her earliest convenience! But Skaia doesn't make a break for it, or try to resist arrest; Skaia is just the offender and the judge and jury, all in one cosmic package. This is so far beyond the scope of even international law that Skaia might well just shrug the concept of human and troll rights as beneath her. Irrelevant, in the grand scheme of things. Terezi doesn't have evidence lined up or anything, and this is in no way, shape, or form an area of law she's familiar with apart from the basics.

All Terezi can do is make her arguments. Plead her client's case.

And not let Vriska get a word in edgewise.

"I'm here to represent my clients - Typhoeus, Hephaestus, Echidna -" Terezi starts to count on her claws "- the Black Queen, the White Queen, the extant King, and any and all sentient entities who have worked in the game, hereafter referred to as Sburb."

TY: What.

TY: Since when? We did not discuss this.

"Since from what I can tell, all of you have been exploited grossly as an unpaid labor force, and the accused has no intention of ever repaying you or allowing you to quit and live your life," Terezi fires back. The symmetrees outside the chamber fill the back of her mind with a constant, quiet stream of
game mechanics and tweaks, even as Skaia gazes at them with (apparently) undivided attention. Terezi plants her feet and cane and does her best to put the murmuring trees on mute: all of Skaia, from the core to the surface, functions as a vast, impossibly complex mind, and if she concentrates Terezi could lose herself in it. "You were right at the gate already. You should have been able to leave right then and there. So why didn't you."

TY: That is -

Typheus bates, his thin wings fluttering in rustling agitation that sounds like a gale rushing through a forest. His claws clack against the woven black branches of the chamber floor as he sidles and does not make eye contact with Skaia. Since Skaia has eyeballs bigger than anyone else here, that takes some doing!

TY: It is not the fate intended for us. It is not what we were created for.

"Weeeeeeecak," Vriska calls from the sidelines. Terezi snaps her claws and points a finger at Tavros, who smells utterly mortified at the implication that he's somehow responsible for shutting Vriska up. To be fair, he's not exactly the troll best suited to the task, but he's all Terezi has to work with short of telling her client to play bailiff and sneeze Vriska into next week. Tavros, to his credit, gulps and starts to edge his rocketchair toward Vriska - who rolls her eyes and folds her arms with another pointedly loud sigh of boredom.

Having Typheus along may not be a good thing. Denizens don’t have a reputation for being wishy washy or reticent. The fact that after barreling all the way in here Typheus has suddenly started to withdraw reeks to Terezi of outside pressure. When Terezi rummages around the room to sense if Skaia's doing it on purpose, though...the results are inconclusive! She can't sense any deliberate fuckery going on - but she's dealing with the Muse of reality itself. It might not even be deliberate on Skaia's part. If Terezi can't think of a way to safeguard her client's will in here, she needs to relocate him pronto.

Skaia takes Vriska's interruption as an opening.

[The denizens have always functioned as intended. They fulfill their roles, and experience fulfillment in kind. They return to me and become part of the whole once more, in the end. This will allow for an orderly transition of -]

"Objection!" Terezi shouts, at the top of her lungs. The acoustics in here are excellent; the whole chamber vibrates with her words, and Skaia's tendrils rearrange themselves as Terezi presses on. "Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration! We wouldn't be here if my clients felt fulfilled by their eons of servitude!" She raises her cane in one hand and slaps it down against the palm of the other - the sharp smack actually makes Typheus twitch under her feet.

Without slowing or falling on her ass, Terezi ruthlessly presses on. "Second objection! The accused will cease coercing my client to bend to her will or I will personally shove him through the final gate to prevent you from doing further harm!"

The Muse finishes rippling and furling her noodly appendages through another sequence of rearrangement. Apart from that, Skaia has no translatable expression: the denizen problem, multiplied by several orders of magnitude. Terezi's declaration finishes echoing through the chamber, and she holds herself rigid, her horns pointed straight toward the ceiling - no aggressive tilt; just unyielding. No: you move.

And then Skaia rearranges another set of coils, and Terezi realizes, abruptly, that the motion has nothing to do with their dispute. She can barely - barely - comprehend the extent of the Muse's vast mind, and in comparison? Expecting a reality-creating Muse to give her complete attention to
something like this is probably unrealistic. Like expected a super computer to devote more than a
fraction of its processing power to a casual game of Solitaire. Maybe Skaia has devoted more
attention to them because they're here, all up in her face and difficult to ignore and presenting a moral
dilemma, and because it involves the denizens and Terezi as a Seer, but meanwhile Skaia is still
running what's left of reality.

[They hear and are aware of what needs to be done so that the timeline can proceed with a minimum
of irreconcilable glitches to the next phase. My denizens are not harmed by this. Nor are my queens
and kings. They are fundamental parts of this reality; this is simply how the system is designed.]

Which means Terezi's arguing with someone who simultaneously can spew the same rote,
memorized excuses, and possesses the capacity to create a multiverse based on that impersonal logic.
Maybe the super computer is a more accurate parallel than Terezi thought: a long time ago, Skaia
created a reality that was also a game, and never expected the NPCs to become more than that. It
explains the mess they're in, on a cosmic level.

They really don't have much in common at all. If the difference in perspectives is just that huge,
Terezi doesn't think any single Mind player could ever bridge this kind of gap. Give her a hoard of
Terezis and not only would they have the best courtroom drama re-enactment in the history of
paradox space, but also maybe persuade Skaia to see things from their point of view.

Terezi grits her teeth. "People are more than just parts of a system, or parts of you. They have the
right to rest and leisure, including limitation of working hours and holidays with pay," she says, as
she paces around the broad surface of Typheus's head. The denizen stays very still under her; only
the occasional faint spasm under her feet alerts her to changes in his expression or an adjustment of
his long body. In fact, he shifts so gradually that Terezi only realizes he's lifting her up higher, over
the center of the chamber, when she does a quick smell check to make sure Vriska isn't up to
shenanigans. Typheus still says nothing, his winds held tight in whorls around his wings and body,
but he holds firm,adamant and immovable.

[Such strangeness. You are less orderly than intended, but still within acceptable parameters; I'm not
sure why this has any bearing on the matter. Such things are irrelevant here. Game entities are
extension of -]

She snaps. Just a little. "Bullshit," Terezi says, with a snarl in her voice as she jabs her cane toward
Skaia.

"Terezi," Tavros says, hushed. Under her feet, Typheus clearly concurs; the denizen shudders hard
enough that Terezi has to float to remain upright and unbending.

But bullshit is what it is. "These are independent, sentient beings. They outgrew just being an
extension of your will. They want," Terezi says, pacing faster and faster, using her cane to gesture to
Typheus, to the world outside this chamber, to - gah! She wants a convenient projector screen so she
can pull up the United Nations Declaration of Sentient Rights, so she can underline the relevant
articles with bright red chalk and then flash it until it burns into Skaia's otherworldly retinas. "- to
retire. To leave. Not be destroyed because you want them to stay with you. They're more than just
extensions of you, now."

And Skaia sighs. Her tendrils re-sort themselves, folding over a paradox that Terezi can trace through
the path of through the glitch and [crack] riddled mess of Skaia to its source. The susurrus of the
symmetrees rises in volume, to the point where they aren't just white text on the white background of
reality, and then subsides again.

[This would appear to be an unfortunate glitch. There have been many, this last round, as the Lord of
Time has begun his work. This, at least, I can repair as they return to the core.] Skaia peers down at Terezi, and capital-D Disappointment suddenly clogs the air. Terezi locks her knees to keep from swaying, but it's a close call. Tycheus reels, his head shaking from side to side. [This is the Order of things, Seer of Mind. I have maintained internal consistency, as much as I am capable in the twilight of my existence. You have not brought this before me as a true matter of Law, or you would understand this.]

"Ohhhh, burn!" Vriska calls, one claw cupped around her mouth.

"Shut up, Vriska," Terezi yells back.

Yet, at the same time - thank god for Vriska. The flare of familiar aggravation lights in Terezi's chest and burns right through the Stern Look of Creator's Disapproval. Terezi slams her cane down squarely on Tycheus's head; he doesn't have the advantage of a vacillating girlfriend to provoke him into thinking clearly, but a sharp rap on his skull jerks him out of it with a gust of infuriated wind pouring out in a huff. If he planned to take a chunk out of her hide for it, he would have tried to eat her properly by now.

It's so damn hard to tell whether Skaia did that on purpose. If the Muse even realizes what effect she has to lean on them. But Terezi's done playing nice about it. "The Law takes more into account than your 'system'!" she snaps, "and so do worker's rights! Wanting the freedom to leave and make our own choices is not a glitch! The justice issues are pretty cut and dried here, actually!"

[Do you truly not understand…] Skaia shuffles around, and this time, to Terezi's immense satisfaction, it is because of them, rather than some minute detail of maintaining reality; she can smell the pinkish-grey uncooked-chicken scent of unease that runs through Skaia's thoughts before the Muse stifles it. [Even you, my heroes, seek to leave. I do not understand why -]

"Why we would want to leave?!" Vriska bursts in, with a roar of laughter. She's sitting on the front end of Tavros's rocketchair right now, a lean smear of cerulean blue and lemony yellow to Terezi's nose, one leg dangling and the other curled up so she can rest her arm on it, and she throws back her head as she laughs in Skaia's face. Her dice spark and roll between her claws in sharp loops, over and over, and her eyes are sharper and more derisive than her laugh as she stares at Skaia. "Ha! More like: why would we want to sit around here and die with a washed up old has-been?!

She's not wrong; it's just a very Vriska way of putting it. Zero tact. Terezi doesn't have much tact left, either, but if Vriska gains momentum, this is gonna end in a fight that Terezi highly suspects not even Vriska can win. "Vriska, stop helping," she says, and then takes aim at Skaia again. "We're not talking about us. I opened this to discuss the rights of your denizens and monarchs, and how they've been infringed upon. But it's all part of the same thing, isn't it? They've done what you wanted for billions and billions of years, without compensation, without vacation, with no freedom to choose anything different because if they did, you'd just slap it down as a doomed timeline. You've doomed entire worlds full of living beings and launched meteors at them when you could have just pointed your portals at the nearest black hole, because you decided they were insignificant! That this is the method you designed to create new Genesis Frogs with." Terezi lowers her voice, implacable and cold. She leans forward, hands folded over her cane, and her horns pointed straight up with every ounce of rightness in her body. "And that's something worse than illegal."

Another wave of disentangling and entangling to rearrange Skaia's tendrils; another shuffle of the board. When the Muse replies, she sounds almost plaintive. [Worse? I do not understand you, children. There is an Order to such things.]

"That," Tavros says, very quietly, "is bullshit." When Terezi and Vriska both whip around to gape at him, Tavros hunches his shoulders, then forces them down to make it smell like a smudged shrug to
Terezi's nose. "Uh. Sorry. I'm not sorry," he adds, a stubborn twist in his mouth as he frowns at Skaia. Typhus lifts his head again, at an almost imperceptible angle - Terezi mentally judges the angle, and she's sure one of the denizen's eyes has fixed itself on Tavros. "It's wrong. You can't hold people captive and act like you own them."

"We want the freedom to make our own decisions without being doomed for not making the choices you require of us," Terezi adds.

Skaia judders, and one of her limbs clips through the other. Point. An unfathomably immense chunk of the Muse's vast mind shifts toward them, causing some fundamental portion of reality to shift along with it, and Terezi pinches her nose shut with prescient timing to stem the nosebleed before it starts.

[ERROR - You have reached the end of the viable alpha timeline, as you were always meant to. You made your choices and reached the inevitable conclusion. You've finished the game.]

The Muse says it like that's supposed to mean anything. Terezi snorts; Vriska beats her to the punch. "And every version of us that fucked up too hard got written off!" Vriska rolls her eyes. "Just because we're the best doesn't mean we owe you jack shit after the fact!"

"All you've done," Terezi says, "is make this whole mess a big self-fulfilling clusterfuck. We finished your game. So if you're done here, we should all be free to go." And then the obvious hits her. "If you force us to stay here - if you treat the denizens and queens like they're all part of your hivemind - how are you any better than a Horrorterror?"

Typhus rips his head out from under Terezi and slams her against a wall with whip crack speed. Vriska shouts, a belly-deep growl rising in her voice, and the ensuing chain of what-might-happen flashes through Terezi's mind like a warning siren.

TY: You go too far.

Skaia, meanwhile, starts to stutter.

[That - th - - _ terror - ERROR ERROR ERROR -]

Before Vriska can launch herself at Typhus, Terezi raises her cane and slams it into the wall at her back. The whole chamber rings like a bell around them, the vibrations of the sound clashing with the echoing vibes from Skaia herself, and Terezi brings it down again like a gavel. "Free will is the right of all sentient beings!" she yells, whipping off her sunglasses and flinging them down.

They shatter against the chamber floor as the shuddering, half-glitched Muse stills. For a terrible, piercing moment, Terezi feels all of Skaia's tremendous mental focus on her, and it feels like she's pinned under a microscope.

[...]

[...]

[...]

[I see.]

Skaia uncoils herself. A few glitched kinks remain, scattered throughout the Muse's many angles - but she does it, unwinding the folded, intertwined patterns of her many limbs and reaches out to draw Typhus away from Terezi with a single, vast tendril. The sheer scale of the Orderterror abruptly
reasserts itself; Typhheus is huge, but Skaia is massive, and Terezi staggers away from the wall with the sudden hyperawareness that all Skaia has to do is roll forward a little, and this whole side of the chamber would be filled, crushing them all in an instant. Typhheus goes rigid and still for a long moment under the Muse's scrutiny.

[It is a strange thing: to realize one's children have grown up to be so different, in so many ways.]

The tendril draws away from Typhheus - and the denizen jolts as if struck by lightning. He reels back and slams into the back wall himself, thrashing against the woven black branches in a frantic spasm, and Vriska yelps and ducks out of the way at the last second when Typhheus's tail lashes across the chamber.

The sudden convulsion, however, isn't enough to distract Terezi from the quiet, fundamental lurch as Skaia alters something in reality. It feels like having her nose recalibrated, but not knowing how to parse exactly what just changed - far too much of Skaia's hivemind is involved in the process for Terezi to follow all of it with her brain already crammed to bursting.

Then Typhheus shakes one last time, a tremor running the length of his body, and lifts his head. Skaia coils that tendril back into her mass.

TY: …We will not forget.

And then a smaller tendril shoots out and seizes Tavros. Skaia's nominal eyes don't even glance in Tavros's direction. For a split second Vriska, who lunged forward toward Typhheus and Terezi before, doesn't realize what's going on behind her back. "Whoa, uh - hang on," Tavros says, alarmed; even the smallest of Skaia's limbs dwarfs him as it touches him under the chin.

Vriska whirls; Terezi is already in motion, but Vriska is still closer. "Back up!" she snarls.

Too late. It only takes a tap. Terezi can't even catch a whiff of death - one second Tavros is reaching for a lever on his rocketchair, and the next he smells of sparkles and blueberries.

Vriska screeches to a stop and throws up her claws. "Oh, come on! But when I try to do it, everyone flips out at me?! Bullshit on top of all the other bullshit!"

The abruptness of being god tiered is enough to make anyone lose their train of thought. Skaia withdraws the tendril while Tavros pats at the front of his shirt, stunned and blinking. His wings still smell mostly the same, but with a thin, sugary dusting of god tier sprinkles; his rocketchair now sports blue Breath symbols and a yellow paintjob in place of the excellent, very cool flames. "…I'm okay?" he says, hesitantly, before glancing down. Something he sees makes him flush deep brown.

"Uh. Why does my god tier costume…not have pants?"

Skaia doesn't answer the question. Which is a shame, since it's the best question anyone has ever asked about the Page class ever in the history of existence. Instead, the Muse of Order coils back in on herself, a few shudders running through her as the overlapping angles come back together. Finally, Skaia finishes shifting and is folded up again into her coiled, interwoven form. Something's different, but Terezi can't put her claw on what. [There. A complete set.] the Muse says, cryptically. [Go then. There are other worlds than these.]

And that, it would appear, is that. Like a series of unseen eyelids folding down, Skaia's focus turns inward and tunes them back out; the symmetrees resume their murmured conversations. Terezi catches only a fleeting snatch of sadness before Typhheus rises in a rush, his winds whirling around the innermost chamber with renewed vigor. It catches up Tavros, rocketchair and all, and then a strong breeze knocks the wind out of Terezi and pulls her in close as well. Typhheus sneezes, and
Vriska gets caught by a small gale. Then he yanks them all in close - too close. Terezi and Vriska lands hard on Tavros's rocketchair from opposite directions and set it rocking, while Typheus continues to drag them along in his wake as he turns toward the chamber entrance.

TY: We're leaving now.

TY: Farewell.

If he receives a response before launching out into the dark, cracked crystal of the mantle, Terezi never hears it.

"Um, what now?" Tavros asks, which is the second-best question anyone has ever asked. Typheus winds his way out of the faceted corridor from Skaia's core to the surface of the Battlefield with sinuous ease once more; the wind buffets the three players around, but Terezi suspects that's less Typheus being sloppy, and more him not particularly giving a fuck. He hasn't splattered them against the rock yet, which is an opportunity she wasn't sure he could resist. They erupt from the fissure in the Battlefield just in time to hear a [CRACK] shatter the air, but Typheus doesn't slow for an instant.

TY: Hephaestus and Echidna know the verdict. But they must hold the Forge still.

TY: As thanks, Seer, I shall refrain from eating you all.

"I appreciate it!" Terezi cackles, letting her head fall back as she settles down to sit on Typheus's head. He doesn't even try to shake her off! They have a real connection, here. Tavros's rocketchair flips over several times in the breeze as they zoom past LoFaF, and Prospit's melted remains, and finally Tavros sighs and hits a button on the dashboard that fires up the stabilizers in a crispy burst. "I think I can retire as a lawyer, now. How am I supposed to top this?"

Flying on Terezi's right, still caught in the power of Typheus's sneeze, Vriska rolls her eyes. "You're not even a lawyer, you heinous -"

TY: WHAT.

Typheus throws on the brakes. Vriska goes flying forward with a shrill shriek before stopping herself, her hair flopping all over her face; Tavros's rocketchair flips once more in protest. Typheus tears his head out from under Terezi and glares at her accusingly. "She's a glorified cop! She's never worked a worker's rights case or whatever in her life!" Vriska yells from behind her curtain of tangled, flyaway hair, her voice full of glee. "Everything she knows about courtroom drama, she learned from Ace -"

"It takes a master video game lawyer to beat a video game, Vriska," Terezi says, in her snottiest voice. Then the full horror of that logic occurs to her, and Terezi's left momentarily speechless at the implications of such a thing.

TY: Oh, that's enough. I am officially no longer obligated to deal with you people anymore.

With that comment, Terezi expects Typheus to ditch them. She wouldn't blame him! But the wind picks up again, even wilder than before, and tosses the three of them into motion again as Typheus flies toward the gate. He can't take the same circuitous route he did to reach the Battleship in the first place - the [crack]s have spread since then, and only a narrow passage remains between Skaia and the rapidly-approaching gate.

"You can drop us off .-" Terezi starts to say, before Typhus blasts right past the ongoing battle
between the Lord of Time and Kanaya, of all people, without slowing for an instant. "Or…not," she says, trailing off as they hurtle onward.

"Yeah, no, this is my stop. If I don't get to fight reality itself, like hell am I missing out on this shitshow," Vriska says, tossing her hair back out of her way. She fans her wings out and wrenches herself free from Typheus's tempest.

Typheus snags Vriska with a claw and flings her at Terezi. The wind picks up to a shrieking pitch, whistling between the encroaching cracks like train whistle multiplied a hundred times over, and Terezi seizes Vriska by the arm before the troll can toss her dice down onto the surface of Typheus's skull. "Really, we should be able to go on from here -" Terezi starts to say, her teeth clattering together as the turbulence jostles them with rattling force.

The denizen doesn't respond, except to wheel around and slow down.

He slows down. The wind flings Terezi, Vriska, and Tavros ahead of him, straight and true, and wind gusting around them makes Terezi's exposed eyes prickle and sting.

TY: Get. Out.

In the brief moment before the wind flicks them through the final gate, Terezi inhales sharply, and catches a whiff of John waving to them like a complete goober. With Tavros's thoroughly jostled and dizzy from getting flipped around like a chocolate chip pancake, there's no one to put a stop to the nonsense before the three of them hit the gate and vanish into the unknown.

-  

TY: Now then.

TY: I'm starving.

Ignoring a shout from his Heir, Typheus turns and flies back the way he came to meet the Lord of Time teeth-first.

---

[Farewell.]

Direct communication? The Black Queen opens her mouth, teeth bared and ready to snarl - and in the next instant staggers as everything -

- stops,

- And she is alone on her knees, in a quiet, detached universe. A hush falls over the Battlefield as the insistent, echoing vibrations retreat within the core; the guiding lines of significance and coincidence unwind from around her claw and heart and crown and spool back to Skaia, and all she's left with is the scepter in her hand and the ring on her finger and a hush. An instant later, the Black Queen drops the King's Scepter from loose claws - it hits the dark ground beneath her and shatters with a sharp snap.

The Reckoning is done. The clarion call of war extinguishes without warning, and when the Black Queen gazes around her, she sees nothing but a cracked, cratered Battlefield, bestrewn with rubble. The fissure that exposes the raw nerves of the core lays quiescent.
Which means no one saw her fall to her knees. Small blessings. The Black Queen's lip curls derisively as she flicks one of the chunks of the depleted scepter away from her; it clatters across the ground like nothing more than a chunk of white rock. Then she cracks her neck to the side to rid it of the kink from remaining rigidly in one place with her joints locked, withstanding the persistent compulsion to go to war, and stands.

There is nothing she must do. No contradictory strictures or mandates interlaced with her nature.

_Farewell._

BQ: …I can't believe it. Those idiots actually…

She closes her claw into a fist, and silently commands a burst of power from the ring that glitters so vibrantly gold against her carapace.

It answers freely and without stipulation, and drills a hexagonal hole a mile deep into the crystalline mantel of Skaia in under five seconds. The Black Queen recalls the sharp talon of power and surveys the grooves of the deep gouge with a calculating eye, her awareness attuned to the massive bitch beneath the surface.

Nothing stops her. The call to war doesn't rolls over her and insist she fly after that silly pawn, or redirect her attentions to the heroes making their pointless last stand. She hasn't been shunted to doomed timeline.

It would appear that she can do…whatever she wants.

BQ: Huh. So that's how it feels.

The temptation to riddle Skaia with the Miles and pry the whole thing apart piece by piece dangles itself before her like fresh meat. But she's not _that_ stupid. Getting drunk on freedom and laying waste to the world would most likely cross a line. After all, a certain Lord has first claim on such things. As immensely gratifying as it would be to rip Skaia's final game apart around her as retribution for all those games the massive bitch has forced them to play out her patterns, the Black Queen has no illusions that this sudden reprieve would extend to such a thing.

She casts her wings wide and launches into the sky instead, and lets herself feel unmitigated grief for the first time in far too long.

_How many millennia? How many games have she and her sister-queen fought, and for _what_? The Black Queen forcibly stopped caring for her subjects, stopped caring for her mad, destructive King, stopped caring for the White Queen, and for _what_? Skaia strung all of Derse along for game after game, universe after universe, forcing them to march against her and then ripping away their final victory on her arbitrary whim, and for _WHAT_? For Skaia to cut her loose at the last minute, when it's too late for the White Queen? Free from the all-consuming song of war, the Black Queen cannot hear the White Queen _anywhere_, anymore. She isn't _anywhere at all_. Simple, clawing anguish guts her, in a way the amalgamated frustration of grief and compulsion and rage could not while she directed the Reckoning, and with her strings cut, she has no convenient, Skaia-mandated outlet for the violence she wants to wreak. Freedom is useless. A joke.

She attacks the Lord of Time rather than Typheus only because Typheus would be far more annoying to fight. If she's to join her fellow Queen for the last time, she'd rather it not be at the hands of one of the most persistently aggravating denizens she's had to deal with through the years.
Moreover, waiting for Typhes to digest her would be *boring* beyond the ability of words to describe; only once, thank you, and never again.

The Black Queen elbows the Rogue of Heart out of the way by sheer coincidence. The troll freezes in the way of her approach - caught in a bubble of sluggish time, as the cherub Lord raises his machine gunkind - and the Black Queen crashes into her with an impatient toss of her head. No other reason. Caring about her dreamers was one of the first things she put a stop to, and little sentimentality remains.

**BQ:** Honestly. Are you all *trying* to get yourselves killed?

The Rogue, much to the Queen's exasperation, clings to her elbow and hitchets a ride as the Black Queen angles past the Lord of Time. "Not really!" the troll says, scrabbling with a claw and an abruptly shortened arm to keep her grip, her feet finding purchase on the Queen's hip. Then she grins, sharp and bloodthirsty and in such a way that the BQ reluctantly approves, and lets her abridged wrist drop so that she hangs off the Black Queen at an angle as they turn for another pass. "Hrah!" A leap, and the Rogue bounds onto the top of Typhes's head, her clawkind skittering off his pale scales.

Here, in the thick of it, the Black Queen has a better perspective on how little space there is to maneuver around the Lord of Time. The space between Skaia the Battlefield and the gate at the edge of the Medium looked deceptively empty from the Battlefield, but up close, [crack]s vein the area, almost indistinguishable from some angles against the dark of the Medium. Typhes weaves himself between them with incredible precision, but more than a quarter of his mass has dissolved into the wind where his coils simply would not fit were they solid. She suspects the only reason there's enough *space* at all is because the Sylph has willed it so.

Which is not, typically speaking, part of a Sylph's powerset. A Witch or an Heir or a Maid's, maybe, but not a Sylph's. For anyone familiar with such things, it's clear that a surplus of power suffuses the troll, all of it foreign to the senses. Her weapon reeks of exotic matter that should have no place here.

But that's none of the Black Queen's business.

**LE:** MORE INSUBORDINATE TRASH.

His voice grates even more up close. The mental component is more straightforward and focused than any Horrorterror, and shoots into the mind with autocratic insistence. An imperative of annihilation that doesn't even have the common decency to take the form of a fraymotif. Wreathing herself with a fresh layer of armor, the Black Queen raises a shadow-bladed sword and slashes down on her next pass; he sees her obvious approach and bats herself with a slap of his hand, while the Rogue emerges from a Void umbra and slams her clawkind home in a fleshy tear left by the Sylph's chainsaw. A thin trickle of soulstuff leaks into the air when the troll rears back, which is more than the Black Queen expected - then the Sylph sidesteps in and whisks the greenblood out of the way as the Lord throws back his skull and *shrieks* an outline of miniscule [crack]s all around himself. Naturally they don't impede his own movement, the despotic cheat - the Lord of Time simply floats free, unnaturally removed from reality as he bypasses the cracks of nothingness, and raises the hanging fabric of his overcoat to shield himself from a blistering, white hot bolt of Hope. The Sylph deftly casts the Rogue back into the miasma of Void, then sweeps her claw before her to make more room for them.

The Black Queen can already tell they will last - but only just. The Sylph channels power from another source, radiant and resplendent with a sepulchritudinous aura, but the Prince is already going the way of most Princes. It's really only a matter of time, there. The Rogue can sustain herself for a while longer by redistributing what soulstuff she pilfers from the Lord of Time, but stealing power
from such a destructive source will only last for so long without detrimental side effects. And the Heir -

Narrowing her eyes, the Black Queen recalculates her options. Risky, with a Prince in such close proximity - the [Claimant to the Throne] emergency protocol has been glitched for almost as long as the Black Queen has been alive.

But a true Heir is hard to overthrow.

Typhus interrupts her calculations by snapping his jaws shut on the Lord of Time's overcoat, shaking him like a ragdoll, and tossing him up overhead to try to swallow him, gullet wide. It's a feint - even Cetus would know better than to eat a Lord, and Typhus has (marginally) more restraint, depending on his tempestuous moods. The Black Queen snarls and darts up past Typhus's eye, summons a Mile of power, and slaps the Lord of Time out of the way.

An unnatural stillness jerks the Lord of Time to a stop. Instead of flying back, his head turns, inch by slow inch - and continues to turn, long past the point any carapacian or flesh being would have snapped their necks, until a skeleton grin glares down at the Black Queen. His eyes are filled with a hellish, flickering light, and the Black Queen realizes with a horrible start that she's the one who has gone too still.

**LE: DON'T FLATTER YOURSELVES.**

**LE: NONE OF YOU. ARE WORTH MY TIME.**

A ragged, thin veil of wing wraps around her, and bats her down and to the side while Typhus's claw winds up hooked in the slow pocket of time. The Black Queen rights herself at once and feels a wave of insulted fury pour through her without being forced through contradictory channels. A lashing forest of shadowy Miles rips out of the empty air as her fury manifests, and whips toward the Lord of Time; at the same time, an unrelenting bolt of Hope lights up the sky, where the Prince has risen to shoot straight down at the Lord's head.

They hit at the same time. The Prince's bolt hits first, vaporizing the leading edge of the Black Queen's attack before shooting down in a beam of light that vanishes into a vast [crack] that runs far below their feet; then with a small line of smoke rising from the Lord of Time's crisped overcoat, the Miles hit, slamming into the cherub Lord in a rush.

None of them pierce his flesh. The Black Queen shrieks in impotent fury.

(It would be easy, so easy, to be Jack, or her King. To lash out senselessly at targets she can harm. But she came here to dash herself against a suitable rock, and there's little point in turning aside.)

**LE: IT'S GOING TO HAPPEN SOON. I CAN FEEL IT.**

**LE: THESE USELESS THINGS. HAVE ALMOST OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS.**

**LE: THIS SHOULD BE SELF EVIDENT. AS THEY ARE IDIOTIC.**

Ah. He's speaking to her - or perhaps to what he assumes is Skaia, through her. Once upon a hateful time, that might even have been the case. The Lord of Time raises his skull as the last of the smoke dissipates, and cuts the Miles off with a slice of his cuestaff. His leering eyes remain fixed on the Black Queen, even as the Sylph dives in again, radiant with starlight.

The Black Queen snorts.
BQ: Oh, I completely agree. Everyone here has almost outlived their usefulness.

BQ: Isn't that right?

The Lord's smile vanishes. An incredible feat, for someone whose teeth are permanently bared.

The Sylph hits nothing but empty space, her hair flying wildly around her face as she whips around. But the Lord of Time moves too quickly - or he slows them all at once, including all of Typhus's considerable bulk, and then a heavy hand locks around the thin shell of the Black Queen's neck. A great deal of her shadow armor snaps on impact as he shakes her. Her power may be her own, now, but it's still born of Skaia.

And Skaia is what this loathsome abomination exists to destroy.

LE: I HAVE TOLERATED MANY AGGRAVATIONS. BUT YOU. ARE ALREADY GARBAGE.

The Black Queen hisses at him, lets the shadow swords drop away, and raises her lancekind as a cigarette-holder to stab into the Lord's right eye. It takes a few attempts, her claws raking down the bare bones of his face, but she manages to wedge it between the socket and the whirling billiard balls that flicker within.

In response, the Lord of Time simply unhinges his jaw. Nothing lays within except a slithering tongue, and the cruel, shattering light of entropy that gathers in his throat, framed by green teeth. He's hulking enough that he could swallow her whole.

A thin crack lances out through the shell of her cheek - a chip where nothing remains.

LE: YOU DIE. JUST LIKE YOUR MUSE.

She smiles cruelly right back at him.

BQ: And you'll die to yours. Pathetic.

And these claws were brand new. Of all the things the Black Queen regrets, though, that one's low on her list. The ring slides from her claw with little resistance; there's no overwhelming compulsion to affix it in place, anymore. She tosses it over her shoulder, and trusts that even if Skaia released her from her bonds, a chance to meddle in an event of such significance should prove irresistible.

BQ: Heir! I abdicate!

The Queen's Ring lands unerringly in the Heir of Void's outstretched grey palm.

[Attention - an error has been detected. The Heir has been crowned.]

[Please wait. Rerouting...]


Despite everything, there is still a certain satisfaction in balancing the scales. Completing the matched set, however belatedly. If Prospit can glitch its dreaming Heir into ascendency, so can Derse. The Black Queen continues to grin crookedly at the Lord of Time, determined to stare him down until the end. The cherub Lord ignores the wild roil of power as the ring takes the form best suited to its unorthodox bearer - a set of Queenly Knucklerings - and the searing light of broken time and dead space spreads the cracks across the Black Queen's face.
PM: NO!

The Prospitian Monarch barrels into her at warp speed, the Sylph of Space clasping her elbow to assist even as the troll carves through the Lord of Time's wrist. The chainsaw emits a visceral, gut-crunching rattle - the Sylph throws the two Queens aside, and plants a high-heeled foot on the Lord's chest as she wrenches the chainsaw free from the splintered bone. A glaring beam of destroying light bursts from the Lord of Time's jaws and carves uselessly through the empty air as the Rogue attempts to strangle him from behind. Black fire boils from the crowned Heir's fist as he launches himself into the fray.

Without looking back, the Prospitian Monarch tosses the Black Queen gently into the air and catches her with one arm under her knees - and pelts toward the gate, her dark eyes squinting in concentration as she streaks across the Medium.

*Of all fucking things.*

PM: See? A Parcel Mistress always arrives in a timely fashion!

BQ: Finish me, or put me down.

PM: You don't even have a ring on! Calm down.

True, very true. But her lancekind is her own and - she left it embedded in that ogre's eye socket. The Black Queen does not groan in ire, but she does dig sharp claws into PM's arm to pry herself free. With the Sylph's touch of speed they're making excellent time toward the final gate, and the Prospitian Monarch shows no signs of slowing down or turning back. If anything, she's speeding up.

What does she have to do to be spared the stupid, interfering, well-intentioned machinations of Prospitian Meddlers?!

BQ: I *will* fall in battle, you useless excuse for a pawn -

PM: She's not dead.

- For the second time, the whole world seems to stop, and tilt around her, and come back down in an unfamiliar configuration which leaves the Black Queen...at a loss. Words refuse to form coherently in her mind for a long moment, wobbling and bouncing off one another in her mind as she stares at the Prospitian Monarch and attempts to deduce the point of the lie. Lying is a Dersite tactic, but Prospitians are not incapable (no matter how frustratingly straightforward they can be at the worst possible times). There must be - something - she can't - she's not anywhere anymore -

BQ: ...What?

PM: She's not dead! The Witch of Life healed her, and the Witch of Space has taken her through the gate by now! So cut the melodramatic crap and get ready!

The Black Queen's arms fall limp. Her white eyes scrape over the Prospitian's face, hunting for the lie, for anything. But there's nothing in PM's expression but steely determination and a hint of exasperation, as she angles her wings slightly and they begin to spiral toward the gate. No more of the ridiculous ark ships remain, nor any of the White King's wandering fleet - the Black Queen senses the presence of the Seer of Light and the Heir of Breath rapidly nearing, and then the wall of unfamiliar, alien Space that is the gate, and nothing more.
But perhaps, on the other side -

She shakes her head: **no**. Hope is still a dangerous thing, with a Prince at the end of his tenure in the vicinity. He’ll end in flames, as most Princes do, but it wouldn’t do to tempt fate.

**BQ:** I - what are you doing?!

A bright smile fills the Prospitian Monarch’s face, and she turns it on the Black Queen, alight with determination.

**PM:** Making my last delivery as Parcel Mistress. And all the heroes are safely delivered, so now I have a promise to keep!

**BQ:** Unbelievable. Do I look like some delusional denizen to you? Beings like us don’t *retire.*

**PM:** Says who?

For the third time, the Black Queen pauses, momentarily stunned. She really mustn’t, she thinks, distantly, let the Prospitian Monarch get the wrong impression of such things. Under normal circumstances, it isn't so easy to stun a Black Queen speechless.

**BQ:** …Says Skaia.

The small, wicked, contrary grin that creases the Black Queen’s face is reserved entirely for herself; the fact that PM spies it and beams back is simply a matter of coincidence.

**BQ:** Well, fuck her. Shall we?

The Prospitian Monarch at least has the presence of mind not to stop and chat with the heroes perched on the edge of the gate. One of them waves at them - the Heir, ugh - and PM hovers for a moment to wave back, but does not descend.

She does something worse, if that’s even possible.

PM beats her wings one last time to send them drifting toward the gate - and then pulls her ring off with her teeth and lets it fall into the palm of her hand. Then she winds up, and before the appalled Black Queen can stop her, Prospitian Monarch hurls the Queen’s Ring back the way they came. Not toward the Prospit Heir, even - no, the ring twinkles at the highest point in its arc, and then vanishes. All its power, swallowed up by a [crack].

In the absence of wings or Queenly power, the Parcel Mistress obviously tumbles out of the air, taking the Black Queen along with her.

**BQ:** What. Have you done.

**PM:** No rings! No Queens! We’ll just have to get along with one another like sensible people.

**BQ:** …I’m going to kill you.

Before she can make good on her promise, they fall through the gate.

---

Karkat wakes up riddled with the memory of bullet holes. More than what actually hit him. As he bolts upright, clawing at his chest and trying to find the actual mortal wound, the Pulse echoes and fills his head with a blood-red haze. His claws scrape over undamaged skin no matter where he
reaches to stem the bleeding, and after a second of pawing around like a mindless, shitmouthed behemoth, he realizes that he's rattled over nothing. He's had nightmares that left him this rattled before -

But none that left him covered in bloodstains. Incredulous, Karkat peels his shirt away from where it sticks to him with barely-dried blood. For fuck's sake, he doesn't think all of this is even his. He's been lying in some gory puddle formed by anyone who got shot up here. Feferi's Life-y thing sealed him up, but didn't put all the blood back where it belongs. As Karkat makes himself breathe and rolls back up onto his knees, he realizes that the blood soaking his god tier clothes isn't just dried, though; the cloth slowly absorbs it, until Karkat can't even see the stains anymore. A fraymotif pulses in time with his pusher - [Blood is the New Black] - but even as he tries to listen for what the fuck it would do, the silent activation prompt fades away. It can't have been that important, anyway.

He looks around, struggling to get his shit together, and realizes three things, one right after the other.

Thing one: Jade and Feferi have fucked off to god knows where.

Thing two: the whole fucking planet shakes under them - he thought it was just his heartbeat pounding in his skull, but no. The Forge tosses and vomits up freshly churned, grist-streaked lava with violent gurgles, and Echidna cuts through the molten rock in a feverish holding pattern.

Thing three: all the color has bled out of Dave's god tier uniform, leaving him in grey and black, with a cracked white gear flickering in the center of his chest.

-  

CG: OH. MY GOD.
CG: WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED? EVERYONE, SOUND THE FUCK OFF.
GG: karkat! you're alive! :D
CG: SHOULDN'T YOU HAVE MADE SURE OF THAT BEFORE YOU TOOK OFF?!
CC: W)(ale, we were PR---ETTY s)(ore you were fine!
GG: anyway, everyone should be a-okay now! me and feferi had to pull an intervention.
GA: Will You Be Able To Do That Again?
GA: Just Hypothetically Speaking.
CC: I don't know. 38( I'm starting to run dry, )ere…
CA: im alivve but at wwhat cost
CA: uh
CA: thank you for savving my life fef
CC: Yea)( yea)(.
EB: anyway, my jackass denizen just flipped terezi and vriska and tavros through the gate at mach speed and took off again.
EB: in a super jackass fashion.
TT: It's true. I was there, I saw the whole thing.
TT: Damn and blast. The blind jokes aren't reaching their full potential without Terezi here.
EB: see! such a jackass!
CG: GLAD TO KNOW WE STILL HAVE ALL OUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER.
TT: Has anyone heard from Equius? His messages were getting difficult to read at the best of times, and my ability to select text with a black background to read it has failed me.
AC: :33 < he's here! he's alive! he's…
AC: >:33c < feline!
CT: D --> Nepeta, please
CT: D --> It would behoove you not to behoof this way
AC: :33 < *snorts*
CT: D --> Is the alchemy at 100% yet
EB: not when i last checked!
GG: no, but it's almost there, i think!
TT: The ships have all gone through, so far as I can tell. Any more carapacians, John?
EB: a couple. i'm gonna go give them a boost, since it looks like typheus knocked them off course.
P
GG: he kind of really is a jackass :T
GA: Then It Might Be Best If We Start To Consolidate Ourselves.
GA: I'm Not Sure How Much Longer We Can Prolong This Fight Considering Nepeta Lost A Hand.
AC: :33 < errrrrrgh, i'm fine!
CT: D --> No you're not
AC: :33 < yes i am!
GA: Our Time Is Relatively Short Is What I'm Saying.
CA: im comin to help
GA: I Don't Know If That's A Good Idea.
CA: ivve got literally nothin else to do here
CT: D --> It is strange though
CT: D --> We have not been steering him clear of LoFaF
CT: D --> He just hasn't gone near it even though he is…very STRONG
GA: I Think I Understand Why That Is -
AC: :33 < st33r as in livestock? :PP
CT: D --> Yes
CG: LOOK. ARADIA AND DAVE ARE HERE WITH ME, WHICH IS THE OPPOSITE OF THE PLACE THEY SHOULD BE, IF YOU CATCH MY SUBTLE, HINTING DRIFT.
GG: read you loud and clear! brb!
EB: so basically we're just missing sollux and gamzee, right?
EB: again. :T
CC: I'm pretty sure S)(oallux wasn't )(urt or anyfin like that! I would )(ave notfis)(ed.
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has joined the chat! --
TA: yeah ii'm fiine, just tryiing two iignore the exiistence of thiis hot mess of a memo for the sake of my sanity.
TA: does anyone know why the fuck terezii and vriiska of all people were diicking around in Skaiia?
EB: legal stuff.
TA: what the fuck does that even mean.
EB: nobody knows what it means. :P
TA: that's not a fucking answer.
EB: but it's true.
TA: ii'm nukiing the damn memo. wrap thiis up you fucks.
-- apocalypseArisen [AA] will join the chat! --
AA: jade and I finished in time!
TT: Ah, of course. Inevitability, our old friend…
TA: fuck it, good enough for me.
AA: karkat you can go with dave to the gate
AA: no worries you guys did an awesome job
CG: IS THAT FUTURE ARADIA SPEAK FOR 'FUCK OFF ASSWIPE'?
AA: but nicer!
CG: HAVE FUN MAKING THE LAST FEW MISERABLE CROPS OF LIFEFORMS WITH THE ECTOFUN TIMES MACHINE FROM HELL! IT'S ALL YOURS.
AC: :33 < then should we keep fighting? fur how much longer?
AC: :33 < *the furocious fighter is nyaat complaining! she hisses at the big windy snake who k33ps
blustering around though*
EB: WHY! IS HE! SUCH! A JACKASS?!
GA: He Is Trying To Help.
GA: I Think.
TT: I…may be able to help with that.
TA: good then everyone knows what they're doing.
TA: go nuts and don't die after all the shit ii went through to get you alive you fucks
CG: WAIT, WE STILL HAVEN'T HEARD FROM GAMZEE.
TA: oh, for - @terminallyCapricious. this is your chat god speaking.
TC: :o?
TA: he's fine. has literally anyone here ever tried to @ hiim with hiis actual chumhandle when he's fucked off to parts unknown?
CG: …
EB: …i mean, for a while there, you just had to mention him -
TA: for fuck's sake
-- twinArmageddons [TA] has nuked the chat! --

- Dave stubbornly refuses to wake up. Not even when the Lord of Time screams LoWaS apart into fractured blue chunks, and Tyopheus screams back twice as loud. John's asshole Denizen is everywhere at once, all teeth and coils, which means Kanaya, Equius, Nepeta, and Eridan have to fight on or around a volatile, writhing mass of air-snake if they want to accomplish anything, or risk pissing off a giant boss monster on top of the Lord of Assholes.

Karkat can't keep track of it all to save his fucking life. His thinkpan has reached its fucking limit; a heavy, dull buzz drones through it as he leans over Dave. Feferi - when did Feferi get back? - hoists Dave upright and braces him with an arm around his shoulders once Karkat's sure the stab wound itself is gone, yet Dave doesn't raise his own head. Karkat flicks him on the cheek near the eye and Dave's whole face twitches.

Better than nothing. Karkat will take the ambiguous combination of vaguely unconscious and vaguely responsive over dead any day of the week, even if Dave looks faded and pale compared to the black of his stupid bullshit cloak.

A warm claw taps Karkat lightly on the shoulder, and he looks up with bleary eyes to see Aradia stooped beside him. Jade hovers in the air right beside Feferi, her hands clasped around her knees - Karkat hadn't fucking realized they had an audience. He didn't even register Jade and Feferi arriving.

"Is he going to wake up?" pukes out of his mouth without permission; Karkat scrubs furiously at his own scalp with his claws, trying to shake the bleariness out of his thinkpan, but - fuck, it's hard right now. Aradia's up and moving already, which is fantastic! Awesome! "I mean, you're too smart to fucking impale yourself on a sword-shaped crowbar without warning and possibly contract tetanus on top of a chronic case of stab wound, but this dumb fuck -!"

"I'm fairly sure, yes!" Aradia says. She squats down with a hum that almost - but doesn't quite - cover her wince of pain as she reaches out and pats Dave on the cheek. Dave twitches again, but still refuses to open his eyes. Jade cranes forward to try to peer over all three of them, and puts her hands
on Feferi's shoulders to boost herself up. "He's not a Hero of Time, anymore; the Lord can't demand loyalty, or curse him for not obeying. There's still a lot of old damage that might never go away. But he's free."

She says that last part...weirdly. Karkat can't put a claw on what her voice sounds like: not sad or wistful, but maybe old. "What about you? We've got this stupid fucking not-sword right here -" he starts, fumbling around for the piece of shit in question. Not like he's volunteering to help **more** people stab themselves (where was Vriska when you fucking needed her to 'help' with that kind of shit?) but he assumes Aradia is hardcore enough to...do the thing. On her own. Preferably while Karkat's not looking so he doesn't have to deal with more post-stabbing nausea.

His claw finally finds the crowbar, and the gritty, dried texture of it scraps on his skin in a way that feels abso-fucking-lutely **awful**; Karkat snatches his claw back with a visceral wince and glares at the thing while his skin crawls. It doesn't **feel** like dried blood coats it - Karkat could handle dried blood just fine. It feels like the crowbar **absorbed** whatever was left of Dave's blood on it, leaving it sandpaper-rough and dry. The thought of picking it up and handing it over to Aradia makes his stomach twist.

And Aradia shakes her head, with a thoughtful tilt to her head as she nudges the crowbar away from Karkat's side with the toe of her shoe. "...No. Maybe I could! But no." Tiny sparks hiss and crackle between the not-sword and the ground as it scraaapes along, and some of them arc from the crowbar to Aradia's foot like a warning. Karkat awkwardly leans on one palm and one leg so his other foot can shoot out and kick the crowbar away, toward the edge of the platform. It skids to a stop just before it can fly off the edge; Karkat almost wishes it **had** fucked off over the edge of the cliff, to be honest. The instinctive, hindbrain part of his thinkpan that **personally** feels that the crowbar is a semi-malevolent, bloodthirsty cursed object is arguing with the part of his pan that thinks it can't be that bad if it stripped away the aspect that almost killed Dave by inches, and the hindbrain is winning. "Heheh. I have places to be, too."

Aradia murmurs the last bit, like she's talking to herself. If Karkat hadn't had that weird fucking conversation with her over Pesterchum - that Aradia from some unspecified point in the timeline - he probably wouldn't think about it twice. But he has, and he does, and it hits him that there aren't many places left to go **to**. At least three quarters of the Incipisphere are a complete clusterfuck -

[Clarity]

And something in the way Aradia says it hints that she's not going where the rest of them are.

Karkat's been so fucking anxious about all his dumbfuck heroic/dangerous friends that the worry has melded together into a giant ball in his brain. Okay, maybe he worries less about, say, Vriska, or Eridan, or Equius, or Jade, because they're stupidly overpowered in their own unique ways. He hasn't worried about Aradia, on the other hand, because she's always three steps ahead of them and cool as a fucking cucumber.

That extra shard of worry that's been ballooning ever since their conversation jams itself right between Karkat's ribs, and twists.

Jade doesn't notice. Karkat stands up; his body feels detached from his center, like he's adrift, and he only realizes belatedly that he's started to float. God fucking dammit. "Have we got everyone? WV, are you still breathing under there?" Jade chatters, parting a pile of eggs like an ovoid sea to pluck the re-buried carapacian from it. WV starts to kick at once in true carapacian reflex, and looks singularly aggrieved as Jade sets him down. "Everyone but the denizens and us should be clear from LoFaF, so this is the last trip!" She waggles her eyebrows significantly at Karkat and Karkat grimaces back. He has no reason to feel called out by that - **Dave's** the dumb ass who didn't know when to quit.
He still feels guilty. Obviously. Ugh.

Feferi scoops Dave up like he weighs nothing; Dave emits another strangled, incomprehensible groan and shifts restlessly, but subsides back into unconsciousness right after. Jade's significant eyebrow contortions escalate - but Karkat still stands stock still. He's facing Jade, but that dull, jabbing shard of knowing lodges in his chest and locks his awareness on Aradia.

"Hang on," he says, and whips around before Jade can finish rolling her ganderbulbs up at the sky. "Aradia, you're a morbid fucking asshole," Karkat says, and barges across the platform toward her. Aradia watches him storm toward her, bemused.

Karkat hugs, and it feels like hugging a hot water bottle - too warm, some part of his thinkpan catalogs, even for a burgundyblood - almost feverish - in troll form. Aradia doesn't miss a beat, a quiet laugh in her throat as she hugs him back. "Oh, love you too!" she says, and gives him a good-natured tap of her horns. She sports enormous fucking coiled horns, though, so even a tap knocks Karkat a little silly. "I think I look at death a little differently than you do," she adds quietly in his ear, and then lets him go with a smile and a wave. "Bye-bye!"

Seriously. A morbid fucking asshole, right until the bitter end. Karkat turns on his heel and floats back to Jade, furiously wiping at his face. "Great, awesome. Let's get going," he says, without sniffling, thanks very fucking much.

For once in her life, Jade lets him get away with it. Then again, she does have an extra set of ears; no more pisspoor excuses for not being able to hear things. "I'll be right back, Aradia!" Jade promises, without making a comment about Karkat's wet face. Karkat feels the exact moment her space powers reach out and grab him like the fist of a careless god instead of letting him float of his own accord.

"I'll be waiting," Aradia replies. She boosts herself up onto the terminal and sits there cross-legged to wave them off.

Jade slingshots them at the gate at approximately ninety fucking miles an hour. At least, that's how fast Karkat feels like he's going on Jade's Wild Ride, and he screeches loudly enough that he almost deafens himself. Sitting on the edge of the platform, Rose and John blink in unison as Karkat shoots by - then John leans back, his legs kicking out in front of him as he reaches out. A blue curl of wind catches Karkat with an airy, insubstantial grip around his ankle, then wafts him away from the gate. "Gotcha!" John says, satisfied, and his grin lights up the whole platform.

Karkat dangles there for a second with his head hanging low, which relieves some of the headachy buzz in his skull. The sudden absence of the Forge's insistent, broiling heat and LoFaF's humidity leaves his skin prickling but cool out here near the very edge of the Medium, and fucking fuck, it's such a relief. Jade teleports out the instant Feferi sets down on the platform; Karkat accidentally catches a glimpse of neon green stars recreating the hyperdrive effect from Star Wars and nearly erupts like a vomit volcano at the wrenching vertigo before Jade's green outline vanishes.


Rose moves deliberately, swinging her legs up onto the platform with a noticeable pause that doesn't makes sense - until she brushes her slightly singed bangs back, the draping edge of her orange hood pulled back so she can see better, and Karkat remembers that off-hand comment about the fact that Rose can't see. At all. Moving her hair just seems to happen by force of habit; sun scars ring her eyes, with more sharply defined edges than Terezi's old burn scars, from staring into the sun a lifetime ago. One of John's breezes twitches her sleeve with a light tug in Feferi and Dave's direction,
and after that Rose walks toward Feferi of her own accord. "He's long overdue to go through," she says, homing in on Dave with only a few stutters in her gait. John floats after her with a detour to grab Karkat in a hug.

Then he goes and joins Rose in crowding around Dave, who remains unconscious like the stubborn douche that he is even when Rose puts out a hand to judge the distance and mashes her palm accidentally against his nose. Feferi covers her snrk of laughter by pretending to cough - by which Karkat means she completely fails to cover it up in any way, shape, or form. "I'll take him through. Not sure what all's the other side of that thing, but he shouldn't wash up on shore alone," Feferi says, sounding strangled. A faint mauve blush stains her face when Rose arches an eyebrow at her, and, with a perfectly level expression, pushes Dave's nose like it's a button.

"I mean, Kanaya came back okay," John points out. "But yeah, you're right. Knowing Dave, he'll go through and fall down the first set of stairs ever built."

Everyone, including Karkat, takes a moment to process that mental image. "...You're so right," Karkat says, with the utter certainty that there will be a stairwell on the other side of this damn gate. Especially now that John has warned them specifically about the stairs, and tempted fate like this. Maybe Calliope's reality is marginally less of an omnipresent fucklord obsessed with drubbing them over the head with memetic bullshit than their current place of residence, but they can't take that chance.

- Feferi and Dave fuck off. To Karkat's TOTALLY MILD disappointment, WV wanders in after them before anyone can stop him: the carapacian leaves glowing green footprints that seem to continue into the gate instead of vanishing in the wall of white, which gives Karkat the weirdest sense of the passage looming behind them.

Then it's just him and John and Rose, and nothing better to do than sit on their claws and shittalk the Lord of Time. Karkat takes a full minute to watch the fight raging on in the space between them and Skaia, and thinks - not even fucking once. The [Clarity] fraymotif still rings quietly in his ears, and Karkat knows with utter certainty that Kanaya and Equius and Nepeta can handle themselves just fine without Karkat hamfistedly wading into the fight. Or worse - the universe will dropkick him assfirst into a situation where he has to make some kind of sacrificial choice, like Dave.

If everything's winding down, Karkat thinks he'd rather sit here and let his stress-hazed thinkpan clear.

"First of all, I hate that guy," he says, to start things off, once they're all settled.

Rose nods in wise agreement. John puts on his 'I'm gonna pull one of my best japes yet' face, which looks about the same as him trying and failing to keep a straight face, and says, innocently, "Really? I mean, he's an ugly green skull jerk, sure, but he's just kind of doing his job." After a moment, he adds, "And being a dick about it."

Karkat knocks his shoulder into John, who pretends to wobble like Jell-O and knocks into Rose on his other side. Rose presses the back of her hand to her forehead and mimics a swoon. "Don't question the sincerity of my hate, John," Karkat says, and is both vexed and pleased to see John actually say that exact sentence along with him. Fuck, he's getting predictable. "All hate which courses through my veins is pure, unadulterated, and freshly distilled into its most concentrated form. You could bottle my hatred for that pungent fuck and auction it off like a Château Gofuckyourself 1840 vintage to the highest bidder!"
"You have such a remarkable talent with words, Karkat. It's inspirational in so many ways," Rose says, still leaning over in a fake faint. A breeze that isn't John's stirs, sighing between the three of them and sending flutters through John's cape, Rose's sleeves, and Karkat's stupid cloak.

Holy fuck, does Karkat look forward to wearing normal person clothes again. As soon as this is over, he's going to wear the oldest, most worn out jeans and hoodie available for the rest of his natural existence and live with Gamzee in unwashed-hoodie-squalor.

"One of these days we need to go through Pesterchum and publish a book with all your top yelling moments," John says, and then starts giggling. The Breeze twists his windsock hood at an angle against the flow of the gate's faint wind, probably to be a contrary fuck.

"Haha. Not if I publish it first," Karkat replies, rolling his eyes.

Rose snorts and sits upright. "We could approach it as a form of historical documentation," she says, with an impish smile. "Which do you think would prove a more significant primary document: Karkat's turns of phrase, or an ensemble collection of all our various and sundry puns?"

Bowled over by the terrible, seductive power of that suggestion, John gasps. Karkat groans and drops his head into his claws.

"…All and Pundry," they say, at the same time: Rose thoughtfully, Karkat despairingly, and John gleefully. Karkat flops over in the opposite direction and attempts to curl up into a ball of denial that this is going to be a Thing, but John just leans on top of him like he's a glorified lounge chair, cackling with wild abandon. "It's nice to hang out while we're all in mortal peril and reality is slowly crumbling, huh?" John says, with a cheerful, airy tone that forces Karkat to peel his eyes open incredulously to make sure John hasn't spontaneously swapped places with Aradia just to fuck with him.

No. Still John. Sometimes Karkat wonders how on fucking Earth he managed to make friends with people who have such singularly awful senses of humor. "I mean, the mortal peril thing's getting kind of old."

"Really? But what is life without an ever-escalating series of life-threatening conflicts and a somber cortege of mysterious happenings dogging your every move? I don't know how we shall survive without them," Rose says, examining her fingernails and looking for all the world like she's commenting on the price of yarn in the post-apocalyptic economy.

"Like our lives will ever be simple," John says. Karkat wriggles out from under him and sits up, but John just scoots so that he can keep leaning on him. Which isn't exactly something Karkat can complain about. Dammit. "I mean, we all get, like, partial credit for creating a whole new existence! That's unironically awesome, no matter how much Dave probably wants it to be super ironic."

Karkat grumbles, and drags his mind away from the pan-crackingly huge task that might be resettling an entire civilization that just got grubnapped from its original planet and sailed into another reality. They won't even know what they have to work with until they get there - it's giving him a migraine just thinking about it. "Fuck. Don't remind me," he mumbles. And then - "Gamzee better show up yesterday."

Rose says nothing. John's hand finds Karkat's, and squeezes. "He'll be here. I'm sure of it," John says, confidently, and it's almost enough.

Out in the distance, another piece of reality shatters, and goes dark.
TT: Kanaya.
GA: Yes Dear?
TT: The logistics of how to re-establish civilization in ūniversa incognita seem a bit beyond us, and I think it might be preferable to do what feels right for us, first and foremost.
GA: Rose I Feel The Same Way.
GA: But If You Attempt To Propose While I Am In The Middle Of Chainsawing A Reality-Killing Abomination In The Face, I'm Going To Be Very Distracted.
TT: What better time could there be than whilst you are in the middle of chainsawing a reality-killing abomination in the face?
GA: Fair Point.

Rose carries on multiple conversations at once, with relative ease. Navigating Pesterchum just by speaking and listening (and occasionally *thinking* in someone's general direction) proves much easier to grasp than it probably should. The chat appears to exist simultaneously in text and voice form, and yet Rose has never given it much thought until necessity thrust it upon her. Occasionally she'll slip up and respond to something Karkat or John has said through a memo, but the two of them check their phones almost without conscious thought and answer without missing a beat.

[Clarity] sings on, clarifying points of confusion, organizing scattered hints into clear realization, illuminating opportune moments. Rose still can't see or See, in any of her old myriad forms, but she doesn't need to see to *know* that Nepeta pivots and bounds between Typhus's coils with crisp precision to drag her one remaining claw through the Lord of Time's right thigh; that Equius lunges into place with a perfect understanding of where he needs to be to intercept the Lord's retaliating swing and meet it with a ring-enhanced punch. Equius voids the force of the impact that would otherwise blast him flying back and vanishes from Rose's awareness again - but she can sense almost every key moment where one of Kanaya's devastating strikes could land almost before it happens.
It's not the most precise thing, by any means, and not something Rose intends to rely on when they leave. But it lets her murmur vague warnings to Nepeta when Typheus abruptly ripples and changes course, and it's enough.

Karkat shifts - if it were John, Rose would feel the movement on her right side, but since it's Karkat she only hears the scrape of fabric on the platform as he moves. The three of them aren't doing much anything of importance aside from sitting, which (aggravatingly enough) leaves Rose little to work with. She's going to need to trade her needlekind in for a grand, wizardly staff that she can use for everyday matters, such as walking and dueling with Terezi for Seer supremacy. "Oh. You're the one blasting the music."

Ah. "Naturally. I can only imagine how that might have worked if I'd had Terezi here to double it," Rose says, as the chorus begins again and washing across the Medium in a wave of sound that reaches anyone who's listening and recoils from the empty, cracked wasteland the Lord of Time has made all around them.

"It feels like it forcibly removed my eyeballs from my head, crossed them, and then uncrossed them so that they're better than they were before," John says, descriptively, and Rose's eyes widen into saucers in a bid to join her eyebrows in orbit.

"Intriguing. Any other notable side effects?"

John hesitates, the seconds ticking away as he sits there. Rose turns her eyes on him to stare intently, though it doesn't do much for her now apart from communicate dramatic effect. Finally, quietly, John
"...I don't think Con Air was actually all that good of a film anymore."

This is the revelation of the century. Rose flinches back in shock and clasps a hand to her chest. "Really?" she says, absolutely fascinated.

"It's not that big of a deal!" John protests. The Breeze around him in gales of snickering laughter.

Karkat scrambles to reach around John and seizes Rose's free hand, amazement in his voice. "Oh my god. Rose. You've worked a miracle. Fuck Dave praying to John, 'thank Rose' is the new, totally unironic meme."

"I welcome your completely unironic reverence as your exalted friendleader, naturally." Rose inclines her head, as regally as one can while one's best friend pretends to die in a spasm of embarrassment beside her.

"It's cheesy and silly and stupid and I still love it! And we're watching it on the first TV or computer that exists in the next universe!" John says, insistently.

"How dare you?" Karkat says, and there's a scuffle of movement that jostles Rose a little while he attempts to turn around to face John without dropping Rose's hand. "Obviously we're going to watch Sleepless in Seattle -"

Rose freezes, rigid as she whips her head around toward the Medium. Something - if she could just see, maybe she'd know how to interpret what she just sensed better. After years of living as such a visual creature, relying on her hearing and her awareness leaves her scrambling for a moment. "Damn," she says, her voice curt, and her tone immediately snaps Karkat and John out of their play fight.

"What's up?" John asks. "I didn't - I don’t see anything different out there...I think. Everyone's still up and going, I don't think anyone's hit. Eridan and Equius are both hard to see, but also Eridan's a giant white ball of fire so -"

It's useful data. Rose breathes out slowly through her nose, in stages, as she attempts to understand what set off her internal alarms. Something old - something from earlier, which just came to a head. "Equius...it's hard to tell," she murmurs. But that's nothing new; the Queen's Ring on Equius's hand is easier to follow as it slowly burns his arm from the inside out, but it's not the thing that just went critical. "Nepeta and Kanaya are fine, but -" there it is - "Eridan's the real problem. He can't keep throwing power around like that."

He shouldn't, Rose thinks, her stomach sinking through her like a cold stone, have been throwing power around at all.

- 

By the time she realizes, it's too late.

- 

TT: Eridan, I can't see you.
CA: do i really need to say it
TT: If you aren't careful, you're going to burn yourself up.
TT: You and Equius are both channeling too much power, but you started before he did -
CA: this shit is gonna be pretty epic i knoww
TT: ...How long have you known?
CA: wwhat, that my awfual aspect is about a minute from immolatin me wwith the wwhite-hot
intensity of fifty thousand wwrathful crying angels
CA: i thought that part wwas obvvious
TT: Don't be ridiculous. No one is dying today. Not permanently.
CA: look i bleww past the point of no return before fef evven brought me back
CA: noww it just keeps pourin out and i think it wwould start destroyin eveverything if it hadnt been beaten to the punch.
TT: Because the Prince role revolves around destruction.
CA: oh good i don't havve to spell out all that pointless pseudo-mythological rubbish
TT: Equius can shut your powers down. You can still -
CA: it would be so fuckin easy to break that gate
CA: or lofaf
CA: lot of hope ridin on both those things and [Hopecrusher] is literally right fuckin there
TT: You wouldn't. You're better than that.
CA: maybe
CA: maybe i'm not all the way there though
CA: sometimes i barely know what being a better person would mean with all the shit ive done -
TT: We're more than these arbitrary roles.
TT: Atonement and apologies work better when you're alive to do them, I find.
CA: yeah probably
CA: but i wasnt kiddin about the whole point of no return thing so
TT: So get out of there. Fall back to the gate and get through to somewhere isolated, so you're not fighting when it happens. Then it won't be heroic or just.
CA: all this hope-y shit has to go somewhere
CA: and i think times up
TT: Eridan -
CA: will you tell fef im sorry
CA: and god fuck i dont want to die but i managed to fuck that one right up of course
CA: dont watch -

"Close your eyes," Rose blurts out. She can't tell if John or Karkat or any of the others she speaks to through Pesterchum obey her in time. Eridan's Hope scorches through her awareness, recklessly bright, until it blots out everything else with the sheer, blinding force of it. There's just Eridan, and the Lord of Time, solid and resistant, and the sudden falling sensation in Rose's stomach as one final bloom of white rips through Eridan. The violet blood most likely evaporates off the searing, sharp-edged white wings on contact - but Rose can only imagine it, curled up small around her knees and unable to tear her unseeing eyes away as Eridan collides with the Lord of Time and his core collapses with a thunderclap -

Eridan explodes, and all of Rose's awareness whites out except for one distant, lingering note.

[It Is Not Despair]

- Rose comes back to awareness with Karkat's claws cupped around her ears - burst eardrums, probably. John's voice sounds distorted and tinny. "Eridan's -"

[HEROIC] slams into Rose's head like the foot a cruel, self-satisfied god.

"- I know," she says, bleakly. Her fraymotif has gone silent; she can barely hear more than Karkat and John. All her awareness of Pesterchum feels like a scorched, blank sheet.
"What the fuck. What the fuck?" Karkat yells, loud enough that to Rose's throbbing ears it sounds like a normal, twinge-inducing volume. "Who said he was allowed to die?! Fuck!" He sounds upset, his claws trembling where they press against either side of Rose's skull, and Rose wonders if it makes it worse that Eridan was one of their friends that they trusted the least. Or perhaps not worse, but perhaps just as bad as losing a closer friend in a different kind of way.

"Karkat -" John says, sounding closer as he comes back to them - he sounds as shaken as Rose feels at the suddenness of the loss.

Karkat's hands drop away from Rose, and his furious shouting cracks mid-stream, so all he's left with is an angry whisper. "Melodramatic asshole. Fuck. Fuck."

Rose stumbles back - knocks into Karkat when she misjudges how far he's moved - and turns away from the edge of the platform as the guilt threads itself between her organs like hot wires. She should have stopped him sooner. She knew, she saw Eridan burning back on LoLaR, saw the Hope consuming him until there was nothing left, but she didn't say anything then. His own overriding aura blinded her to the consequences of not warning him, and that's -

"I - I need to go." Rose gulps hard, and takes another unsteady step back toward - something. She's lost her bearings again; at least here, if she steps off the platform, there's no [crack]s around for her to fall into for miles.

"Right now?" John catches her by the elbow when she stumbles, and for some reason that sets off a prickle of tears in her blasted eyes.

(It hurts less than losing Kanaya. But guilt is a crawling, hungry, horrific thing.)

She swallows hard. "That explosion - I'm not sure what it did. I can't hear any fraymotifs, at the moment. Eridan did say not to watch." Rose allows herself a small, bitter smile. "Or perhaps there's just…not much left to See, here."

For a moment, she's aware only of John's hand, and the sound of Karkat muttering invectives - and crying a little - behind them. "…'Kay. Be careful," John says, and then his hand falls away.

Rose goes, with the Lord of Time's roar in her ear, as her last hope that Eridan might not have died for nothing burns away into ash.

- GA: Suit Or Dress?
TT: For me or you?
GA: This Is Still All Hypothetical But Both.
TT: Suit for me, dress for you. I'm not sure if we want to resurrect black and white wedding fashion, though.
GA: Oh Of Course Not I'm Already Planning Swatches Of Champagne And Rose And Possibly Lavender.
GA: I Almost Wish You Hadn't Hinted At This Because Now I Have To Fight A Horrendous Skeleton Bodybuilder And Plan At The Same Time.
TT: Hypothetical plans?
GA: Oh Hush.
GA: Would You Be Opposed To Black If I Were To Wear A Black Dress With Stars?
GA: On Second Thought That Might Be Too Dark.
TT: Kanaya, you're saying this to a girl who spent a good chunk of her life communing with eldritch beings in the woegothic throes and playing her violin in dark rooms during thunderstorms to achieve
the proper atmosphere.
GA: True, Very True.
GA: Rainbow Drinker Costumes?
TT: Only if I get a cape to surpass Dave's.
GA: Duly Noted.
TT: John is attempting to give me a play by play of exactly how the fight is going. Unfortunately, Karkat is also here, and their joint story-telling method leaves…something to be desired.
GA: To Be Fair We Just Seem To Be At An Impasse.
GA: I Don't Think We Can Win. But It Is Hard Even For Bloated Skeleton Men To Beat A Chainsaw.
TT: Just a little longer, and Aradia says they'll be done.
TT: ...I may go through the gate. Eridan...did a number on me.
GA: Go On. I'll Be There Soon.

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Dave wakes up, and doesn't know what time it is.

…He's going to have to buy a watch. Or just, y'know, check his phone. But the raw, powerful levels of irony inherent in him owning a watch to tell the time cannot be dismissed. Shit's gonna be wild.

"Mrggl," he mumbles, to try to convey this to the nearest convenient target - Feferi, he thinks. But he can't open his eyes wider than a squint, since literally everything hurts like fuck, so it could just be a Feferi-shaped person.

He drifts off for a second, in a haze of not-pain, and when he comes back, he signs instead. 'Piece of shit crowbar,' he manages, before his sluggish hand flops back down against his chest like an anvil.

Feferi's too busy carting his ass toward a wall of white, her eyes focused back over her shoulder as she waves goodbye to someone. Part of Dave wants to protest - but that would involve effort. Effort that he doesn't have in him, as of right this second.

Besides, if they're blowing this popsicle stand, he's got his priorities. Raising his hands one last time, he holds them out to the side, so that anyone watching can see him around Feferi.

'Fuck you, you fucking fuck,' Dave signs in the Lord of Time's general direction, and then passes out one last time as they walk through the gate.

---

The Lord of Time still hasn't destroyed LoFaF.

(Just like he didn't kill Jade.)

Jade can't concentrate on that right now, though - Dave and Karkat left sixteen pages of snake eggs for her and Aradia to run through the appearifier, and these prove finicky. The bulk of the egghoard consists of bog-standard snake eggs: leathery, oblong, kinda beige with shades of color depending on what kind of snake's genetic code it's came from. But now a layer of jewel-bright, saturated eggs spill over the dull white clutch; on top of that layer, the eggs turn glossy and smooth like gumballs, with different patterns swirling across the shells - stars, diamonds, stripes, scallops, and one vibrant case of bright pink and yellow paisley that makes Jade giggle just looking at it. More and more often, though, as Aradia reads off the coordinates with a quiet, confident smile, swirls and spirals predominate on the egg shells; a couple turn out almost space-green, close enough that Jade's heart skips a beat - but the spiral will be off-center, and it just won't do!
The colors should have tipped her off. But Jade's just so focused on finishing. It's so close, she can almost taste it! Slowly, the oranges and yellows and blues blend out of the gene pool as she and Aradia narrow it down, and soon very other egg they appearify comes out either a vibrant green or a rusty red, with spiral patterns that run clockwise or counterclockwise depending on the egg scanned before it. "Almost got it," Aradia murmurs, telekinetically shifting entire heaps of eggs off the platform so that they have more room to target the last remaining eggs without the risk of appearifying one right next to them.

Like Jade would mess up coordinates, ever. [Clarity] hums through the air, piercing and sweet, and she never misses a key stroke. But this isn't the time to get sloppy! The eggs swell in size as Aradia calls off coordinates, and they run two of the biggest eggs that just spawned a couple minutes ago through the ectobiology terminal several times in rapid succession until the baseline egg is twice the size of an American football.

And all the while, the Lord of Time screams the world apart.

(But not LoFaF. Never LoFaF.)

The cracks in time widen and burst, spreading of their own accord between [Entropic Screams] and skittering over reality like possessed erasers, until Jade feels the critical moment where there are more vast, gaping cracks of non-existence than unbroken reality left in the Medium. When reality isn't enough, anymore. It's not exactly a space thing; it's everything suddenly canting to the left, trembling, on the edge of tipping in on itself. When Jade reaches out toward Skaia, at the very center, huge rents and fissures shred the whole Battlefield and spread deeper with each passing second. She locks her focus onto the final gate - the last solid, steady point in the whole world - and uses it to keep her feet under her.

And -

"Five!" Aradia calls, as the Forge churns - "Four!" - as Eridan goes supernova, burning up into hot white light and ash, and Jade can't sense anything left after the light swirls away in the tempest - "Two," and Jade missed the count of three -

"Last one!" Aradia calls, her voice cracking; Jade doesn't know exactly how long she's been counting down (maybe since twenty), but between that and shouting to be heard over the Forge and Typhues's wind, her rough voice sounds ragged. Time stumbles and slows for a piercing second as Jade types the coordinates - her fingers slip once, but she still hits the corner of the right key and an egg fills the screen, finally, after a pause that leaves Jade ready and willing to kick the terminal if that'll make it go -

The achievement [Egg-cellent Work!] pops up in the bottom corner of Jade's glasses as a green-and-red swirled egg pops into existence on the appearifying platform, sizzling with waves of heat.

EC: Quickly! It's not done yet! Into the Forge!

The denizen rises up out of the lava - and keeps going, up and up, until Echidna reaches the limit of what she can support of her own body weight, and slithers down around the outside of the Forge. Her twinned tails flick through the churning, molten rock one last time before she draws them out and wraps herself around the volcano, her huge chompers raking along the side of the platform as Echidna settles herself. Stirred up lava and melted grist boils right up to the very edge of the volcano, and LoFaF quakes with the amount of raw power welling up inside it. If they hadn't finished in the nick of time, Jade thinks it might have erupted and swamped the whole planet with molten rock. One of the main reasons why lava is not better than snow. Aradia staggered and drops to one knee by the appearifier, so Jade lifts the final egg up with her space powers - no way is she putting her mitts on
that thing when it steams like it's already boiled! - and slam dunks it into the Forge.

Somehow, the egg almost spins off the edge to fly off into the distance. An internal force jerks it hard to the side, almost ripping it clean out of Jade's grip, like the egg itself is trying to fight free. "Not today!" Jade orders, with a snap of her fingers. A teeny tiny spark to course correct, and the egg rockets into the Forge like a candy-coated missile.

The Forge evaporates instantly on contact. All the energy and matter soaks into the egg so fast Jade can't detect it; a flash of light blinds her and she throws up an arm to cover her eyes. More and more molten power sucks up out of LoFaF like the planet's one huge milkshake and the Forge is the straw, and suddenly Jade powerfully aware of the hollowness left under her feet as the egg absorbs it all, and the beings inside grow stronger -

...Beings. Superimposed over each other - they haven't made just one egg.

Jade sucks in a breath with a ragged noise, and rips her arm away from her hands. She's not sure what her expression does, but by the time the two eggs wrench apart and hover above the gaping, scorched-black cavity of the emptied Forge, she feels like strangled, her head full of horrible, throbbing clarity.

The two eggs float forward under the impulse of Aradia's power, not Jade's. The troll leans heavily on the appearifying apparatus just like Dave did, toward the end, curling her claw to pull the green-swirl egg toward her. The egg with the red swirl pulses with angry light, giving off plumes of steam as it judders and twitches under its own power when Aradia's powers fail her. It hits the platform with a bone-jarring crunch, and keeps rolling. "Oh no," Jade says, which is kiiinda the understatement of the day, if not the year. Her lips feel so dry, and she wets them as the red egg wobbles past her. Instead of trying to pick the wayward egg up, she pulls her hands back - pulls her whole body back, actually, and stares at it with blank, perfect comprehension. It's too quiet, without the Forge's persistent rumbling and roaring; a dull, empty buzz fills Jade's ears instead.

The red-swirled egg wobbles to a halt only when it runs into a neat white shoe.

Doc Scratch bends down and plucks the egg off the ground.

DS: S u c k e r s.

Then he smiles. No - his whole head splits in two, the top half lopped off neat as you please, and drops open on an unseen hinge to reveal the ivory white, empty inside where brains should be. Doc Scratch lifts the red egg and sets it between his shoulders, inside the bottom half of the cue ball, and then swings his head shut with a casual snap. The afterimage of the smile parting his bulbous head hangs in Jade's vision for a split second - then the after-afterimage of a skull's head, sharp in tooth and with a permanent, victorious sneer -

And then Doc Scratch vanishes in a fizzle of green light. Gone, Jade thinks, back to wherever and whenever he first started out. Back to Earth - decades ago, centuries, maybe - to set everything in motion, so that the Lord of Time will always have been there.

...So this is where the story starts.

"Oh no," Jade says, and this time her voice cracks instead. Then - "He doesn't need to leave LoFaF alone anymore," and she bolts toward Aradia to grab her and teleport them - somewhere. Anywhere but here. The Lord of Time probably knew all along exactly when they were doomed to create him.

Echidna sighs through her teeth, and relaxes her squeezing grip on the hollow Forge; Jade wonders if
she was the only one left here at the Forge who didn't realize. It's a pretty obvious inference to make, in hindsight, she thinks, aware that her brain is on the verge of breaking. Too much frantic science, followed by results too damning for her to deny.

All this time, she and Karkat and Dave and Aradia have been rushing to create Calliope and the Lord of Time…and only Aradia knew.

Of course she did.

Jade closes her eyes, her hand curling closed as she sucks in another breath - feels her chest hitch - then slams it down, and opens her eyes to meet Aradia's sad, crushing smile. "You see," Aradia says, conversationally, her hair tossed around her head in the blowback from another shattering screech. Too close; a [crack] rips a jagged hole across the sky, closer than any have come before. "When one talks about an alpha timeline, there are three different, though closely related, definitions.

"One," she says, as Jade looks down at the green-helix patterned egg in Aradia's arms, "is, 'the timeline which reality designates as canonical.'" For a moment, Aradia sounds her age - and then she smiles at Jade, her grin lopsided and fond and rueful all at once. "The second is, 'the timeline which leads to the conclusion.' And third - the one most relevant for our purposes - 'the timeline which gives birth to the Lord and the Muse.'"

And Jade can't even be mad at her for it. The indignation comes from somewhere way deeper: it makes her want to summon a - a giant green spacey hand, and use it to smack Skaia right in the planet-sized face! She wants Doc Scratch to come back here right this second so she can shake the egg out of his big empty head. But that would be dumb, and she doesn't have enough time, no matter how much frustration it would relieve. With an angry sob, she zeroes in on the dented part of the platform instead and buckles it further with a burst of force, clutching her head in her hands.

"Y'know, Aradia. I am just...SUPER done with inevitability!" she demands, even though the answer is right there, right in front of her nose, and she and Aradia both know it. Aradia's just known it longer.

Long enough that she keeps smiling crookedly at Jade, and bounces the green egg in her arms with a light-hearted laugh. "Heheh. That's fine! It'll all be over soon," she says, and pats the egg as she skips neatly off the platform. Another [CRACK] rings out, and Jade doubles over as a bolt of entropy shoots jaggedly through Doctor Lalonde's abandoned lab full of snakes, annihilating them all in one blast that cracks a third of the planet and sends it spinning away from the rest like a chunk of broken egg shell.

And the eggs next, Jade thinks, with a jolt of knowing. The appearifier wouldn't have worked if the original snakes and eggs didn't have somewhere to be. Jade just planned to teleport all of them ten feet sideways really quick after they finished the genetic sequencing, but the Lord of Time doesn't care.

They need to go. They need to be gone, like, right now. "Aradia, are you -?" Jade starts to say, as the planet begins to rumble. All the molten rock got sucked out of LoFaF, and now she can sense it caving in on itself - one big chunk of rock was already loose when they entered the Medium, and with another third flying away into space (on a collision course with what's left of LoWaS, as a matter of fact!) there's not enough structural integrity left to hold the land together. One more [crack]
and they're hooped.

Unaffected by the gash splitting time apart only a few miles away (or else really good at hiding it), Aradia waves back at Jade one last time, the egg cupped in the cradle of her other arm. "I'll take it to Skaia. Get everyone else through the gate!" she says, cheerfully, as her quartz music boxes levitate around her.

(It's the last time Jade ever sees her.)

"I - Right!" Jade's chest tightens like a vice. Behind her, the sinuous mass of Echidna shifts to make room as Hephaestus catapults himself up the side of the Forge; Jade wonders if the denizens count as 'everyone else,' too, and errs on the side of 'yeah, probably.' "See you there!"

One final [CRACK] carves through the air between them and Aradia. For a second it looks like it splits Aradia horizontally at the waist; then Aradia flies up in a spiral, the egg tucked carefully under her arm as she summons a rust red, transparent clock face in the air over them. "I'll see you on the other side!" she corrects, and then - "Don't wait!" - the clock flares bright red, crackling with bolts of stray energy. It sets off some weird chain reaction in the cracks crisscrossing the sky - annihilation-red light burns along the edges of broken reality, and Aradia disappears just in the nick of time.

Something deeper and more fundamental than LoFaF shudders under Jade, as the literal existential crisis all around them starts to cramp her stomach. "Time to go!" she says, hastily whipping around to face Echidna and Hephaestus. Echidna watches her, motes of red, reflected light playing across the facets of her quills and the sharp discs of her eyes, full of monstrous, motherly pride as she inclines her head respectfully to Jade.

EC: Yes. Time to go.

HS: At last.

They could probably transport themselves to the gate - Hephaestus hopped all the way to LoFaF from LoHaC, after all! - but that happened before the cracks splintered reality this badly, and Jade doesn't think any of them would stand a chance crossing the Medium the long way. The thin, fractured slivers of reality left between the Lord of Time's mess radiate that angry, dying red light, slowly dyeing everything like a bloody sunset. Jade brushes a hand over the appearifier one last time, only for her hand to come away covered in flakes of rust.

The gate to the next world calls her Space powers like a magnetic beacon; Jade sweeps the denizens up in a dancing wave, and brings them along with her as she goes to find who's left.

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Kanaya and Typhheus and Equius fall back a little, doggedly fighting for every inch of reality left between Skaia and the final gate - but then something goes spang, firing off a dizzying cascade of sensory nonsense in John's ears as the sudden pressure shift makes his ears pop before the Breeze can adjust, and Jade leaves a single word in the chat that explains everything.

GG: done!

And after that, the Lord of Time stops pretending to be distracted by any of them. He bats Equius aside with a casual backhand, so hard that Kanaya pelts after him to tackle the troll away from a crack. Then the Lord turns on LoFaF and fires off three [Entropic Screams] one right after the other, in such a jagged crash of broken time that John hears each scream in three-part harmony. The Lord of Time finishes screaming fresh tears into reality and snaps his jaw shut with a crunch that grates on
John's eardrums. He hangs there for a moment, his coat in tatters, teeth missing from his skeletal grimace from Equius's punches, and his body covered in pockmarks from the Black Queen and Nepeta, and deep, scabbed over creases where Kanaya's super-powered chainsaw dug deep into his bulging skeleton-muscles -

Then the cherub Lord flexes, and snaps his fingers.

All the injuries vanish. His overcoat resets in a blink of an eye, and time slurs in an uncomfortable smear as the Lord of Time cracks his neck to the side. He looks just like he did when he first arrived in the Medium - cartoonishly over-muscled, covered in flickering, ugly rainbows, and untouchable. With a flourish, the Lord of Time raises his cuestaff over his head, transforms it into a pale white conductor's baton, and starts to grind reality down into nothing. He turns his broad back on Tyheus and faces the crack-riddled, faded space where LoHaC used to be instead; then the baton comes down, and the shattered fragments of reality dissolve. The particles glint and hang around in a susurrating, iridescent cloud - and then even that sucks away into the deep, stark emptiness, and nothing remains.

It's not like Equius's Voidy thing, where John could toss around words like 'heavy' or 'hidden' or 'muted' and have people nod and understand the weird, Void sensation he's talking about. It's just... nothing.

Nothing at all.

[Desolation]

John's kinda past the point of terror, right now. His bones feel slack and loose, floating freely in his body, like he could drift apart in a stiff breeze. Some indescribable emotion sits high in his throat: something beyond sadness, something that tastes like nostalgia but isn't. Like all the tension built up over the course of his life just took a powerdrill to the chest and gushes out in a draining, bittersweet flood. Watching everything break down like this, with nothing left but a distant background riiiiing in his ears where music used to be - it doesn't feel real, in more than one sense. All John can do is witness it, his eyes glassy and struggling to focus on any one thing, while he stubbornly keeps track of the mental rollcall in his head: Eridan dead, Jade and Kanaya and Equius and Nepeta still in the thick of it, Dave and Rose through, Tavros and Terezi and Vriska and Feferi through, Aradia and Sollux still unaccounted for out there (probably until the very end), Karkat holding John's hand like a lifeline, one claw thrust into the gate as they wait for -

Well, everyone. But -

"Gotta go!" Jade shouts. She careens past the Lord of Time in a streak of green, like a meteor that has gotten super turned around on its way to mess up the Earth's day, and hurtles into Tyheus's side with such force that part of the denizen's long body jerks to the side and makes a noise like a punctured squeaky toy the size of a skyscraper. John slaps a hand over his mouth and nose to suppress a snicker, because he can't focus on being the backup emergency teleport guy if he's too busy laughing his head off at Tyheus wiggling like a Slinky. Then the denizen dissolves into a shower of neon green as he gets the Jade treatment, and Jade pulls down her eyelid and sticks out her tongue at the Lord of Time as she bounces away. "No more stalling for time! We're outta here!" she calls.

Kanaya, bearing Equius over her head like she's gonna launch him like a cannonball, redirects her headlong charge at the Lord of Time and puts on her own burst of speed, the star-studded fabric of her god tier outfit swirling as she hauls Equius toward John and Karkat. A [crack] streaks along in Jade's wake, shooting toward the gate-end of the Medium at an alarming rate - and then tapers off, only part of the way here.
Apparently, the Lord of Time just...loses interest. A rumble that causes time to flinch and stops John's breath rolls out from the Lord's clamped jaws; but then nothing. In the distance, LoFaF crumbles into smaller and smaller pieces, and its wild green growth accelerates into brown, faded decay.

"All done?" John asks, as Jade skips across the last few miles separating them. Another horrible, breaking noise roils through the Medium and Jade trips, tumbling wildly heels over head before she hits the Gate and sticks the landing.

"Done like dinner," Jade agrees, and three humongo denizens burst into solidity in a massive clusterfuck as Jade snaps them all into place. Karkat shrieks directly into John's ear at the top of his lungs, which is a totally fair reaction to have when three giant boss monsters just popped into existence right over your head. Typhheus unwinds himself from the tangle of snake bodies and Hephaestus's limbs first, bristling as he snorts a deliberate, affronted gust of wind on Jade that messes up her hair and almost flattens her against the platform. Then, before Jade can retaliate, John's asshole denizen whirls away into the bright light of the gate, tossing the faint curtains aside with one last blast of wind. Hephaestus rights himself and clammers over the three players with a quieter grumble, his hammers sending *thuds* through the floor that reverberate through John and set his teeth aching - it probably doesn't do any favors for Karkat's horns, either.

Echidna ducks her giant head and shakes herself out with a ripple that runs the length of her iridescent body, as she stoops and lowers her eyes to stare level with Jade. Her jutting angler teeth creep John out on a primal level - but her eyes smile at Jade with recognizable, un-denizen-y softness.

EC: You have kept your old promise.

EC: Farewell.

Then the last denizen slithers up on the far end of the platform, her vast, twined coils passing over them, and vanishes into the gate.

In the end, nothing stops them. John wonders if the denizens could have just left all along - or if maybe the only thing keeping them here was some old sense of obligation, and nothing more. He's not sure what he expected from Terezi and Dave's silly insistence that the denizens needed to fight for right to retire; Skaia's not exactly breaking any worldwide speed records trying to keep them from absconding. The Lord of Time, preoccupied with dissolving and swallowing everything in shattering waves of entropy, barely seems to notice that they're pulling a fast one on him. "Jeez, that guy is just - he really doesn't care anymore, does he?" John comments, scratching the back of his head, as the Lord of Time momentarily switches back to a machine gun and fires it once with a BANG to burst the faint, faraway scraps of the Furthest Ring into dust, and then into nothing at all.

"We already did what he wanted," Jade says, her voice too quiet. When John looks at her, worried, Jade just smiles at him weirdly, her lower lip scrunched up like she's barely repressing some serious wobbling. "Tell you later," she adds, sadly, which earns a suspicious squint from Karkat - but then one of Typhheus's straggling winds tears between the three of them, rumbling clothes and tossing Jade's hair absolutely everywhere, and Jade clears her throat and falls into a ready, alert bounce on her heels. There's no sign of whatever bothered her on her face as she waves Kanaya and Equius and Nepeta in for their landing, and John can see Karkat's mouth on the verge of popping open; the troll looks like he's swishing the words around behind his teeth, but his mouth stays shut despite the overwhelming amount of shout pressure that must be building up behind it.

"He doesn't appear overly concerned with holding us here. We should go, before he changes his mind," Kanaya says, echoing John's thoughts almost exactly. After all that fighting and going toe to toe
toe with the Lord of Time, Kanaya looks as pristine and sharply-dressed as she did the second she stepped through the gate. The sight of Equius's arm sends a visceral flinch through John, though. Kanaya supports more of Equius's weight than either troll lets on from their expressions, but the arm Equius has used to wield the Queen's Knucklerings looks like the sheer power boiled through it from the inside out: the grey skin's charred black, shiny and threaded with cracks where blue blood oozes through. Parts where the shell-like wreckage of Equius's flesh have broken and fallen away, so that John can see clear through the hollowed-out limb.

It could have happened to John, if he'd used the Hammering for too long. More of Equius's arm falls away in tiny chips and pieces as he watches, clattering against the platform with tiny clinks. The ring itself sits in a bed of scorched flesh around a hollowed out claw, powered down and glistening a soft, innocuous gold in the light of the gate. In a weird way, he and Nepeta match now, though Nepeta's missing the opposite hand, the end of her wrist a clean stump. Her face is covered in tiny cuts and scorch marks, and she sticks close to Equius's other side with a grim frown, her split lip tightly pursed.

"That's pretty much the smartest idea I've heard all day," John says, since it is, and a tiny smile quirks Kanaya's mouth up before she readjusts her grip on Equius and starts into the gate. The two trolls pass through it with a one last reverse cosmic burp as Kanaya vanishes, and then Nepeta lopes through hard on their heels, and that's it. Denizens gone, Kanaya and Equius and Nepeta through, and it's just him, Jade, and Karkat left on the threshold of the next world.

A sudden, squirming loneliness curls through his chest. Everyone's…gone. The Medium's shattered and dying; Earth, out of sight, is empty, and its last, indestructible demon is here to pick apart reality's corpse.

…He has got to tell that one with Rose. She's gonna love it, he can already tell.

"Fuck - I don't think Aradia's coming!" Karkat yells, as another fractured chunk of reality smashes into smithereens. John tightens his death grip on Karkat's hand, trying to squeeze reassurance to him, but they're both running on the last dregs of their adrenaline + desperation combob and the second they get through this gate, John suspects they're all gonna collapse. Like, literally everyone. He doesn't know how long it takes to get from one reality to the next, but Calliope had better have a ton of pillows ready when they get there. "Something she said on Pesterchum -"

A shockwave rolls over them with physical force, and John thinks he hears a low, sharp sound in the back of his head as something fundamental snaps like a violin string. Karkat stumbles back and John rocks on his heels, but Jade buffs them with a tingly green wave of power so that they don't fly butt-first backwards through the gate as the world. "Yeah, she said to go through without her," Jade says; her voice cracks weirdly, and John - yeah. He knows, even though Jade doesn't say it. "She's taking the egg to Skaia."

John shuffles forward against the heavy press of Jade's steadying spell. His arm and Karkat's stretch out between them as he puts a hand on Jade's shoulder. Her wildly tossing hair kinda lashes him across the face a little; Jade huddles in on herself for a second, her face horribly sad for a second, before she very obviously scoops up one last spoonful of fortitude to straighten her shoulders and smile in Skaia's direction. John sucks in a deep breath, and then sighs. "Then there's just -"

"Gamzee," Karkat finishes, his voice tight as he clamps down on John's hand, his claws digging sharply into John's skin. He's shaking, a little, and John can't blame him.

"I'll stay with you guys, but -" Jade starts to say.

John's only paying attention to the Lord of Time through the corner of his eye - time's going in fits
and broken starts, and more of the Medium is a bleak, empty, textureless space every time John's eyes drift to check on his progress; it kinda makes him queasy if he tries to focus on it, though.

But he catches the grand flourish as the Lord of Time raises his cuestaff as a conductor's baton, and brings it down, and another one of reality's unseen instruments *smashes* like a bass guitar hitting the floor. Jade doubles over with a pained gasp, clutching her head as green lightning frizzles along her hands and ears, and John hastily yanks her back from the edge of the platform. "Crap! I don't know how much time we've got left!" Jade finishes, distressed, as the out of tune fraymotif (the last one) playing in all their heads staggers along with two - no, three of its instruments silenced in *[Desolation]*'s wake.

Karkat starts swearing, while John feels a faint sweat breaking out on his own forehead. He's not *doing* anything, but the fact that only a piano is left playing, somewhere in the distance, makes him feel like he's under a spotlight. No pressure, or anything...it'll probably break when he least expects it. "Where is that fucker?! Fuck, of all the times for him to fuck off without telling us," Karkat yells, ripping his claw free from the gate as he gives up the pretense that they're about to hop right through.

They're not. But Jade is. "Jade, you go on," John says, quietly.

Jade whirls on him so fast John backpedals into Karkat. Her eyes burn electric green, but it's not enough to hide the tears bubbling up in the corner of her eyes. "No way! I'm not leaving you guys in this mess!" she yells, louder than Karkat. The sweep of her hand encompasses Skaia, too, and John suddenly knows it's not just about them staying behind to wait.

It's about the fact that Aradia's not planning to come through at all, and even now, Jade wants to save everyone. Because they're the heroes - it's them. They might have screwed up a little (or a lot) along the way, but no one's supposed to get left behind.

John drags Jade into a hug. "We'll be right through. Promise," he says, trying for breezy confidence, and coming through instead with something solemn that clogs his throat up all over again.

A faint snuffle, and a tremor that runs all through Jade - and then Jade steps back, wiping her nose off furiously on her sleeve. "You'd better be," she says, and shoots them an extra stern glare, her fists planted on her hips -

And then she turns and steps through the gate.

Having dropped John's hand to let the hug happen, Karkat goes to the edge of the platform, his claws digging into his own elbows as he folds his arms over his chest. He's got a Knight cape now, no matter how hard he's clearly tried to magic it into something more reasonable and less Dave-y, but John can't seem to make any silly teasing come out of his mouth, right now. Probably because, y'know, of the circumstances. The whole world ending thing. He'll save them for later. "There's no way he tripped and landed his clown ass in that mess," Karkat mutters, and hugs himself harder as he stares out at the half-cracked, half-erased mess of reality, his arms belted across the Blood symbol of his uniform.

"Definitely. No way at all," John agrees. He hasn't seen or sensed Gamzee clearly since…since LoWaS, he realizes, and a little bit after, when they went to help Rose. But John thiiinks they would have all noticed if Gamzee wound up in enough trouble that he fell into one of the cracks in time - Gamzee's powerset is ten different kinds of not-subtle, when you know what to look for.

But another maybe-minute ticks by - the clock on both of their phones is utterly broken, and has been for ages, now - and still Gamzee doesn't show. The Lord of Time works his way around, destroying the area where LoHaC and LoLaR used to be thoroughly before shifting to work on the shattered
quarter with LoWaS. Not LoFaF, still, not yet; it's shattered, but not gone.

"John, I'm starting to feel the slightest sense of agitation, here!" Karkat says, his claws tightening on the knobs of his elbows to the point where he tears through the fabric and starts to draw blood. A shudder runs through John, and he floats off the platform an inch, just enough that the Breeze tenses around him. If they have to go search for Gamzee one last time through the fragmented, broken shards of reality - he'll do it. The Breeze will help. "Come on, Gamzee…"

Or…the Breeze could help. John snaps his fingers - not, for once, for dramatic super power effect - but because an idea pops into his head, and he likes the classics. "I have an idea," he says, turning to Karkat. Karkat jerks his head up from where he's glaring at his arms, the faint, reddish-pink glimmer of tears blinked away with furious effort. "But it's pretty risky," John adds, as the Breeze gathers all of itself up. It lassoes the last of Typheus's lingering gusts in for the ride, and the wilder winds obey without question.

"Oh god, what now?!" Karkat says, but he doesn't make any move to stop John as John picks him up under the arms and scoots him to the side, so that Karkat's not standing in his way.

John cups his hands around his mouth, and yells at the top of his lungs. The Breeze blasts it out, ratcheting up the volume and carrying his voice in every direction it still can.

"HONK!"

Then he pauses, and tilts his head to the side, listening for a response. It's strangely quiet; the Lord of Time pauses for a split second, and slowly, terrifyingly turns his skeletal head to stare gateward. Then, with a scoff audible from half the Medium away, the Lord of Time goes back to his work.

Which is fair. Random people honking in the middle of a catastrophe would probably weird John out, too. In hindsight, he's probably spent too much time hanging around a juggalo in his life. He's only known Gamzee for like, a month.

Karkat says, in a dangerously quiet voice, "John. You have got to be -"

Gamzee appears with a lurch, his hair a wild, tousled black tangle around his face and horns as he stares at John like John's out of his mind. "Honk?" he says, in some kind of instinctive clown reflex. Or maybe that's just disbelief.

"- a fucking genius!" Karkat crows, clapping a hand on John's shoulder as he rushes forward and seizes both of them by the front of their shirts. He keeps chattering, occasionally letting go of one of them to jab an accusing claw at Gamzee for punctuation. "And you! Where the bulge-blistering honk-happy fuck have you been?! Let's blow this shitty excuse for a popsicle stand, we haven't exactly got all fucking day -"

With a muffled noise, Gamzee digs his heels in. Karkat keeps walking for a second - John float along, letting Karkat haul him toward the gate in a haze of blissful relief, before both of them get pulled up short.

John's stomach sinks before he even turns to look at Gamzee. "Might be best for a motherfucker to get his chill on in the hornheap paradise of the next life, yeah," he says, for all intents and purposes agreeable - but then Gamzee reaches up and does his chaotic trick, so that his hoodie (and torso) clips three feet to the left and out of Karkat's grasping claws, before reappearing in sync with the long, lean line of his body. He takes another step back, and John gets a clear view of his face as the troll lowers his eyes and doesn't look at either of them.
Like John called him away from something...important.

"Hold up," John says, and unease makes a home in the pit of his stomach.

"This is a pretty big motherfucking deal, my man." No matter how far John or Karkat stretch out their hands, Gamzee remains stubbornly just out of reach. Pain and guilt flicker across Gamzee's face again and again; he can't seem to hold his smile in place long enough to fool either of them. "Just gonna go crack a cold one open with Rad-sis, real quick -"

"Holy shit, Aradia can take care of herself and get out on her own!" Karkat says, his voice more raw, ragged crack than shout. Still talking as though Aradia wants to get out, when John thinks all three of them realize what's going on here.

John has to say it. Someone has to, and Gamzee's two seconds away from vanishing in a dizzying rush. "You don't plan on coming," John says. He doesn't recognize the sound of his own voice.

"Of course he's coming!" Karkat snaps, with a flare of genuine temper that makes John jolt under his sudden glare. But the anger isn't aimed John, not really - and the color drains out of Karkat a second later. Stricken, he takes a step away from both of them. He raises and lowers his claws, at a sudden loss. "Gamzee?"

"A brother wants to see what was the point of what we were all up and doing," Gamzee says, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. He sounds steady and even, unlike either of them, and when he finally meets John's eye and then Karkat's, his eyes are very clear. Unwavering.

Karkat goes in with his claws shooshing the air long before they reach Gamzee's face as he starts to babble and trip over his own tongue: "Fuck. No. This is me, using my supreme secret leader powers to veto that shit. None of you voted for me, I just still have them by virtue of being the original leader guy. No, no, absolutely not -"

"No. C'mon, man, this is a no-brainer - you come and see it on the other side. With us." Even as he says it, John can tell it's not enough. That maybe it was never going to be enough. He thinks back to however long ago, when only Aradia and Gamzee had half a clue what was going on, long before the rest of them remembered anything - and feels so cold. His hands hang numb and useless at his sides; surely there's something else he can do to change Gamzee's mind.

"Yeah, there's a motherfuck of a good universe next door," Gamzee says. He twitches forward, and then his arms wrap around Karkat in a tight, desperate hug. Karkat pats his face with a ragged sob of relief, his claws papping everywhere he can reach.

Gamzee presses his face into Karkat's hair for a second - and then meets John's eyes, like they're sharing a sad, melancholy in-joke. "Go and get gone, brother. Take care of your bad self, you hear me?" he says, and presses a kiss between Karkat's horns, and then his mouth.

And then shoves him unceremoniously through the gate. "No!" Karkat shrieks, and then he's gone, raw betrayal in his red eyes before the gate swallows him up.

John doesn't have any illusions who could push who through the gate first, here. Heck, he could probably make Gamzee work for it, but...

But Gamzee's face after Karkat disappears is a twist of grief and quickly smoothed-over regret, and it cuts deep in John's gut. And - it's not fair - "Please," he says, as Gamzee refocuses on him with stark, deep purple eyes. He thinks they're wearing the same exhausted, broken expression and - we never had enough time - "Please don't do this. Don't leave like this."
An awful, harsh thought occurs to him: Gamzee has cared about Karkat way longer than he's cared about John, in the grand scheme of things. And if Karkat appealing to him wasn't enough, John's not gonna make a lick of difference. John's surprised Gamzee hung around long enough for John to say anything at all.

Gamzee waits, though, despite the fact that they both know nothing can change his mind. He stands there, watches John as more of the world crumbles behind his back, and waits. Only a thin strip of reality remains between Skaia and the gate - the Lord of Time churns on and on, the only living thing that can navigate the nothing left in his own wake.

(Somewhere, a piano drops and smashes against the ground like an old cartoon, and the music cuts off.)

(This hurts worse.)

"...Nothing I can say, huh. Or maybe I'm just too dumb to think of a good enough argument," John admits, with a short, stilted laugh. He ducks his head and smiles sadly at his shoes; the smile hurts his cheeks, which is easier to focus on than the fact that he's crying. Again. For what feels like the millionth time today.

Gamzee's hands are, as always, icy cold as he presses them on either side of John's face. "A brother's gotta learn how to be less harsh on himself," he says, without even a ghost of a chuckle in his voice. He sounds just as wistful as he did saying goodbye to Karkat, and John sobs as he reaches up and feels the gaunt, strained planes of Gamzee's facial features to try to remember - to feel if there's any difference between now and when they first met. "Nah, brother. Been planning this one for...a long ass time," Gamzee says, and that makes it better and worse at the same time.

John's throat winds up in a tight coil of pain. He blinks through the tears, and sees one last spider-web of [cracks] shoot up and down the length of the corridor between them and Skaia.

"See you on the other side," John forces out, and then Gamzee kisses him twice while the world beyond them starts to flicker and fade out. Cracks ring around Skaia entirely like a broken, bristly thorn bush, but past the faded, ebbing shards of reality, Skaia shines a bright, brilliant blue.

Gamzee pushes John back and disappears in a blur. The Rage symbol on his chest hangs in the air a second longer than the rest of his disjointed parts - and then the gate sucks John in with a familiar Breeze wrapped close around him, and there's nothing left to see at all.

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Time ceases to be a factor.

It's oddly refreshing! While the Lord of Time carves up the last of reality around Skaia, Aradia sneaks in through the tunnel that Vriska so kindly opened, and Typhesus widened, and descends with ease. As far as she's concerned, the Lord of Time could spend a thousand years screaming reality apart, and it would make no difference. Her perception of time has died an early death, and quite frankly, Aradia won't miss it.

Sollux waits for her on a splinter of broken earth at the top of the fissure, everyone's fate spinning in Doom-green runes before his exhausted, shadowed eyes. Most of them, Aradia's sure, are open ended. Question marks, followed by a strange, undefined realm of possibility, like a white blank page. The orderly ink lines have run dry, and all that's left is what they make of it.

If Sollux hadn't altered things so, they wouldn't have even had that much. Death is such a neat,
Orderly way to tie up loose ends, if you're a being as wide and all-encompassing as reality itself - and so emotionally messy, if your priorities are more personal in nature. A matter of perspective, really.

Bees cover him like a living carpet and lap at the cooled Prospit-honey still clinging to his god tier clothes. "Sollux," Aradia says gently, "you don't want to stay here." When what she means is: you don't want to die, Sollux.

To be fair, neither does she! What she wants is something far more complex. Death is just an interesting side effect, from her perspective.

"Well, no shit, AA," Sollux replies with a snort, flicking away a bee that bumbles too close to his right eye. For a while now, Sollux has known exactly where Aradia stands. She's known where he stands for considerably longer, but only because she's always had a tiny bit of a headstart on him. "Like I'm about to let you ditch without saying goodbye. What kind of asshole do you take me for, Karkat?" Then Sollux grimaces like he's bitten into a piece of sour candy. "Or we could skip the melodramatic bullshit, and just go."

Aradia chuckles, and delicately relocates a few swathes of bees so that she can reach Sollux without disturbing his last swarm. Sollux takes off his glasses, and she sees that he's still waging an internal war between resignation and despair. Once he shrugs a round of bees off with an impatient flicker of psionics, Aradia levitates the egg to the side for a moment and leans in to catch him in a tight, clinging hug. The scent of scorched cloth and overheated mindhoney and exhaustion rolls over her, and she adds it to all her other long-memorized impressions of Sollux. One last memory for the road. "I'll miss you, too," she says, and bunts her horns against his.

"Hope it's everything you've hyped it up to be," he says, staring at her face and memorizing it in turn. Between resignation and despair, something more tender than acceptance has won, and Aradia knows he's going to be okay. He'll make it through, before the Lord of Time finishes cutting Skaia off from the gate. That wasn't something she was sure of!

And it might not be a permanent thing: Sollux's moods can swing so low, and he has a talent for blaming himself that John might envy. But Aradia thinks he'll be just fine. It'll be hard, for a Doom player, transitioning to a world where fate might only be an interesting suggestion rather than a pushy, brittle-edged fact of life.

He won't be alone, though.

When she arrives, the symmetrees dim and fall silent. The green-swirl egg in Aradia's arms radiates light that prickles and burns the skin of her arms, but such concerns (heh) are relative compared to what Aradia has come to do.

What she's determined to witness.

It doesn't surprise her to find Gamzee inside Skaia's chamber. They both always meant to find themselves here. Perched on a fallen section of dark branch, Gamzee looks distinctly uncomfortable in his plain old body, and itches his arm with feverish intensity as though that will let him escape Skaia's direct observation and return to his semi-chaotic state. Skaia herself lays disentangled in the very center, all of her symmetrical hiveminds drawn close, and watches Aradia with turning, blooming eyes that spiral down into bottomless wells. Or, rather - she watches all of them, everything
in the chamber, with perfect perception.

The Muse of Order looks tired. Aradia can sympathize. "It's time!" she says - one last pun for the road - and holds the final egg up with a smile.

Calliope's egg floats up of its own accord, brushing lightly against Aradia's palms before moving weightlessly toward Skaia. A vast **CRUNCH** shudders around them, as the Lord of Time roars in impotent fury and tries to crack Skaia's outer shell. He could probably do it, too.

But - heheheh - time is not on his side.

Aradia's pusher throbs and begins to thump and thud with wild skips between beats, and she drifts over to Gamzee with a wheezing breath to sit down and wait for the end. Gamzee feels so quiet and small here - just a regular sized troll in a regular sized body. When he glances at her, his eyes are just eyes. No banked, wild fires, no chaos lingering in his outline. "Rad-sis," he says, with half an exhausted smile.

Aradia alights on the branch beside him, and clunks her horn against one of his in brief greeting before settling down to watch. Skaia opens a perfectly circular mouth, and the egg, shining like a star, floats into the crucible just as the light turns unbearably bright. It shines through Skaia's skin, brighter and then brighter still, until Aradia shades her eyes with a claw. The world shatters and crunches and crumbles outside in the throes of the Lord of Time's final tantrum, but Aradia doesn't feel it when her heart bursts. Gamzee has to prop her upright, one arm slung around her shoulders, but time is too broken for her to die before the world ends.

With a sound like a soft sigh, Skaia implodes into a point of infinite heat and light and density, and reality implodes along with her, feeding into the fledging Muse at the center of it all. Hot white light envelops Aradia and Gamzee, and then on and out, to swallow all the shattered pieces of the world.

So this is what it's like, Aradia thinks dreamily, as she hears the Lord of Time cut off mid-scream, and everything begins to dissolve into the fundamental particles of creation. She closes her eyes - she thinks - and sees a warm, red sunset melt across the inside of her eyelids.

*This is what happens when it all breaks apart -*

Chapter End Notes

There will be one more chapter.
Chapter Summary

Who are these shining like one sundered star?

O sweetest kin to me in all the world,
O twin-born blood of Leda, gracious heads
Like kindled lights in untempestuous heaven,
Fair flower-like stars on the iron foam of fight,
With what glad heart and kindliness of soul,
Even to the staining of both eyes with tears
And kindling of warm eyelids with desire,
A great way off I greet you, and rejoice
Seeing you so fair, and moulded like as gods.

Chapter Notes

Some tunes.

You're not beating me this time, Hussie. /shakes fist at Hiveswap in the distance/

Edit 10/8 New art at the end, thanks to the wonderful Meruz Go check them out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Depending on how fast they went through the gate, they pop out in different ways. Vriska, Terezi, and Tavros, who had the hilarious misfortune to get punted through at high speeds by Typhus, apparently came flying out miles away from shore and skipped over the water like stones until they stopped flopping around and remembered how to float themselves the rest of the way to shore - John gets to hear all about that one when Vriska regales everyone with the story at top volume around the 'We're Not Dead, Time To Commit Celebratory Arson!' bonfire on the beach. The denizens themselves take off the second they come through - Typhus scoops them all up in a tempest and flies up into the sky without a word to anyone else. The Black Queen and PM, dropping out of the air with no wings left between them, fall out of the gate fifty yards down the beach and into a deep inlet of water, so they don't splat like pancakes by landing in the shallows. Dripping and half-strangled due to reasons unknown (but which are really obvious, considering) PM trudges down the beach a half hour late and tackles AR and WV in a scuffling, arm-flailing reunion.

(No one seems to know where the Black Queen went. The White Queen sleeps on a shallow, grassy incline near the edge of the treeline, her carapace riddled with faint grey seams, and no one remembers how she got there, either.)
The ones who walked through like normal people step out into knee-deep water. Karkat's still kneeling where he landed when John stumbles through a minute later, the sobs ripping out of his chest in broken, choked, wordless screams, with a dark red bloom around him that's either dried blood washing off his clothes, or water spontaneously turning into blood.

The small, shining white door vanishes half a second after John steps through. He drops down and wraps his arms around Karkat, instead, and rocks him as the cold water seeps into his shoes. Something hot and gnarled forms a lump in his chest, too high up for the water to cool it - John blinks furiously to keep the tears away, and watches with blurred vision as Kanaya walks out on top of the water, to come help them to shore.

- It's Jade's island, but not. The volcano that dominates the northern half blew its top a long, long time before they arrived - it's half the size Jade says it used to be, and greenery covers the wide caldera almost as thickly as it does the rest of the island, like it hasn't erupted since. Several small, white-domed observatories poke out here and there along the edge of the volcano - with the familiar, blocky shape of Lalonde Labs stuck crookedly next to a thin waterfall like an afterthought - while the shallow white dish of a radio telescope is just visible in a ragged dip in the caldera's edge. Glass-clear fish dart through the water under their feet as Kanaya and John, between them, coax Karkat to dry land; when they get closer, John sees that some of the flowers dotted along the beach twirl in the breeze, like tiny spirographs blooming and cycling over and over again in a rainbow of colors. When he leans all the way back and scans the sky, he can just barely make out a dark red ark ship, so far off in the distance that it looks tiny compared to the lush green moon that hangs in the early morning sky.

So, yeah. Things are weird. When are they ever not?

Feferi doesn't look up as the three of them finally hit the beach and Karkat sinks back down onto his knees on the wet sand. She sits with her knees curled up to her chest, her mouth hidden behind her folded arms as she stares out over the water with a flat expression in her eyes. Her frilled ears stay clamped down against the sides of her head. Occasionally a wild strand of her hair bobs in the breeze. But apart from that she doesn't move an inch as she waits. She looks like she just finished crying.

Kanaya leads them around Feferi in a circle to give her space - which is harder than it sounds, when Karkat's determined to bury himself in a pile of sand like a crab - and over to a grove of trees with thick, branching leaves and rough-looking yellow-green fruit. It's not actually that hot out, even in direct sun, with the Breeze winding around the beach and exploring everywhere; John still sags with relief the second they're in the shade and he sees Rose sitting cross-legged next to Dave. "Jade spied Oriole over the forest," Rose says, in an undertone. "She thinks the scratch kids are roaming around there, as well."

"That's good," John says, but his mouth moves on autopilot. He knows he sounds weird, even though he's not snuffling and gasping for air like Karkat. Rose reassesses their group with a flicker of confusion; then her mouth parts, and John looks away from the shock as she realizes who's missing, and why.

Because of all people, who would've thought Gamzee wouldn't make it?

Jade returns from her short jaunt through the jungle flushed and grinning, with her hair full of leaves and Jane and Roxy in tow. Nepeta prowls away to hunt down Dirk and Jake the traditional way, but
the general consensus is that all of the scratch kids are okay. Roxy sprawls out next to Dave, occasionally poking his cheek to make him pull a weird face in his sleep until she grows bored and joins Terezi and Vriska down the beach, while Jane leans against a tree where she can keep an eye on the edge of the jungle. Oriole circles around on orange, sail-like wings over the observatories in the distance, wheeling closer to the replica of Lalonde Labs with each pass. He gives them a barely-visible thumbs up when pinged.

Sollux arrives last, right when they're about to give up on anyone else making it through. For John, it's been half an hour since he and Karkat got here. Surrounded by very confused bees, Sollux just flies out of the gate, shrugs, and says he left only a few minutes after everyone else went quiet. Time was kinda busted, though. He takes one look around the beach and plops down with Jade next to Feferi to watch, and wait. His bees fill the air with a low hum as they bumble their way to the slowly spiraling flowers and investigate in the lazy heat of the day.

The gate doesn't open again. Feferi stands up, brushes the sand off the back of her clothes, and walks into the water until it closes over her horns. Thankfully, universal Wi-Fi is still in effect: she messages Jade that she just need to 'clear her head,' and vanishes into the sea.

For the most part, the only people on the island are people that they know - including some that Jade teleported onto an ark ship to evacuate, and who now have no idea how they walked out of the gate on their own two feet apart from 'weird Space reasons.'

Which, in practice? Means that instead of finding someone cool and famous that John recognizes (like, say, Nicolas Cage), they find people like Diamonds Droog and Hearts Boxcars on one of the islets that form a circle around the bay. By the time Jake and Nepeta stumble across them on their quest to scout the islands (before Jade can tell them she knows every inch of the place backwards and forwards), Boxcars has stripped off his shirt and ripped the ragged legs of his pants off so that they're shorts, and laid out on a rock to fry himself beat red in the sun. Droog sits under a tree, watching the tiny, scattered clouds drift by on the wind overhead, apparently without expression. Neither Jake nor Nepeta recognize the third person on the islet - it's just some random troll with a brand new laptop, who has discovered the wonders of an omnipresent internet connection and is going to town. "Beats the desert, any day," the troll apparently tells them, without looking up from her screen. "Please send water, we've been sitting out in the sun for fucking ever."

"But how did you even get here?" Jake asks, nonplussed, as he hands over his water canteen and Nepeta lines herself up to tacklepounce Boxcars.

"Heck if I know." The troll shrugs. "And if you see a sunburned guy carving horses into the rocks around here, with a dumb meme face painted onto a volleyball? Just…let him do his thing. I think it's a part of his 'process.'"

Spades Slick and Ms Paint turn up on the next islet over, all set up with a pair of beach chairs and the shade of an rocky arch where the underside of a cliff has been worn away. Ms Paint hushes them with a claw tapped against her mouth, smiling, and Spades slumbers on, the knife he has strapped to the end of a pole stuck point first into the sand.
Bro finds them.

Well, he just shows up all of a sudden, crouched silently on a tree branch in the shady grove like some kind of shady…guy. When John finally notices him with a jolt, Bro sticks a hand in his pocket and pulls out a second set of pointy sunglasses to wear on top of his usual pair. Kanaya tilts her head back a half second too late to see it, her claws falling still where they've been carding through Rose's hair, and then she nudges Rose with a low murmur while John's jaw drops.

(As far as John can tell, he's the only person who sees this happen. When he tries to mention it to Rose later, all subtle-like, she just raises an skeptical eyebrow. In the end Dave agrees that Bro probably did that entirely on purpose so no one would ever believe John.)

"Been checking the place out," Bro says, like he's picking up a conversation where they left off. "There's a greenhouse at the base of the volcano."

"We're doing fine, too," John replies, which is the snarkiest thing he can come up with when he feels this burnt out. It's also a big fat lie. Karkat, laying on John's lap as he nurses a crying headache, shifts and makes a terrible, small sound into John's stomach, and John blinks a couple of times. Dave rolls over in his sleep, his face buried in the dark fabric of his wadded-up cape, but otherwise doesn't react to Bro's appearance.

Bro tips his head ever so slightly in the world's tiniest maybe-nod of acknowledgement. John's too worn out to get aggravated by it. "Might want to check it out, later," Bro adds, cryptically, and then exchanges a series of increasingly arched eyebrows with Rose in a silent contest of wills. Or possibly a Strider patented variation on Morse code, communicated solely through snarky eyebrows - Strider-Lalondes are really super weird, and John wouldn't put it past them.

…Rose can't even see Bro's eyebrows. John digs his fingers into the side of his head and tries to massage his brain until it stops whimpering. Then, with a grumble, he pulls out his phone and scrolls through Pesterchum, where he finally finds a memo with Rose and Bro's chat handles and an endless stream of TT: *raises eyebrow* and TT: *Raises eyebrow even higher* and the occasional TG: *raises eyebrow the highest* from Oriole.

"All in good time," Rose says, matching Bro's neutral, cryptic voice almost exactly. "Father dearest."

Bro raises a second eyebrow to join the first, then settles in a crouch on the balls of his feet. The patchy rays of light that fork through the thick leaves catch his sunglasses as the Breeze picks up. From the tilt of his head and the way he's angled, John knows that Bro is standing guard - covering the side of the beach that falls in Jane's blind spot. This could be the most peaceful place in the world, but John isn't sure any of them are gonna be able to really relax for…a while. The Breeze might be doing loops around the island with wild, boundless excitement that filters through John whenever it comes back around to greet him, but regular old John still has a horrible weight in his stomach, and his ears prickle in anticipation of hearing another [crack] at any given moment.

John finally takes the bait. "Why? What's in the greenhouse?" he asks, with a sigh. Karkat curls up into a tighter ball; John calls a soft, discreet breeze through his fingers and runs it over Karkat to keep him from overheating.

"Someone you punks should probably meet."

-Doctor Lalonde turns up wandering the radio telescope facility rather than the beach. John, who left the Strilonde memo open as he let his hand rest on the cool, shaded sand, catches a sudden TG:
*Raises eyebrow at 4,207.3 meters* appear at the bottom of the screen. According to her and Oriole, Lalonde Labs itself is deserted: there's no sign of any of the scientists and interns that Doctor Lalonde boarded an ark ship with. No one can find any of the oodles and oodles of snakes that they gathered in the labs, either, which is probably for the best. An unknown, probably giant crab-shaped party raided all the refrigerators and left empty packages of chilled roe cubes scattered all over the floor, and no one can find any of the colorful Expo markers or chalk, which means they've got at least two lusii roaming the island – a problem for another day.

Equius goes. First, he approaches them stiffly, like Rose sits on some kind of friendleader throne instead of in the crook between two gnarled tree roots. For the first time in a long time, John can see Equius with no trouble at all; his hair is blue-black in the sun, and he squints to see in the sudden shade, his eyes exhausted but surprisingly clear of pain. His arm ends in a clean slice just short of his shoulder; John's so happy he wasn't here when Equius asked Kanaya for some classic medicull assistance with her super-powered space chainsaw. Because eugh. "I require parts to begin the construction of prosthetics for Nepeta and myself," Equius says, stiltedly. "If the facility still has power, it should also contain most of the necessary tools for prototyping."

A shift up above - so slight that the leaves don't even rustle. "Need help," Bro says. It's not a question.

Equius stiffens, and then relents with a sigh. "Another hand might be useful, since Nepeta has cavalierly run off on her own."

"Then let's bounce."

"We'll keep you in the loop," Rose says.

By the end of the day, Equius has accumulated more help than he knows what to do with. Jade and Roxy and Dirk and Jake and Nepeta arrive in staggered waves, mostly curious, with Doctor Lalonde 'supervising,' a glass of mango juice in hand, and Bro darting in and out. A huge crash! rings out over the island late in the evening, audible even from the beach, followed by the sounds of Equius throwing them all out of the lab for distracting him.

"Nobody say anything," Nepeta hisses, and then she treks off into the jungle with a glass of coconut milk held high over her head, a prankster's glee in her eye. Her cackles carry through the trees over the crackle and snap of the bonfire after John salutes her pranking zeal.

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The Black Queen's ring appears to be a shiny, powerless piece of jewelry here, and nothing more. Equius keeps it in a pocket of void for a few years after - until, one day, he reaches in to check on it and comes up empty.

(A Queen always has her ways.)

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Dave wakes up with an indescribable expression - John would sum it up as three-fifths 'not dead yet' yuckiness and two-fifths 'I just napped for an ungodly length of time and nothing feels real and my mouth tastes like dying' grogginess, but there's an extra element in there that defies simple words. John sympathizes with it immensely. "What time is it?" he asks, peeling himself up off the ground. His face scrunches up in a very recognizable post-nap headache pang as he flops over on his back.

"How the tables have turned…" Rose trails off. She's beaming like the sun, like the relief finally has
unknotted something inside her that wound up tighter the longer Dave was unconscious. Then she pretends to consult the clock on her phone. Dave's too distracted by his post-stab nap revival to appreciate it. John stifles a laugh - Rose's grin is contagious - and fires off a quick message to Jade to give her a heads up.

Kanaya rolls her eyes at both of them and checks the time herself. She scrutinizes her phone for a solid minute, perplexed. "I don't think anyone's phone clocks are working, at the moment. Something about surviving close proximity to the Lord of Time seems to have disagreed with them," Kanaya informs Dave at last, as Rose plants a kiss on her cheek and pushes away from the base of the tree.

"Hell, that's fair. It sure as fuck disagreed with me," Dave mumbles. He scratches one of the scars that run down the length of his face, then sticks a hand into the sand under him and raises, squinting as the sand trickles out between his fingers. Then he grunts and pushes up on his elbows, taking in the early afternoon sun and the ocean lapping against the beach in front of them. "This is peak fucking irony. My last pair of shades, fucked - and I'm on a beach."

Rose reaches him first; John's still gently extricating himself from Karkat's exhausted deathgrip when Rose very elegantly pats Dave's head and messes up his hair. "Glad you're okay," she says, still smiling the hardest John has ever seen her smile, while Dave does his best to look up at her with one eye scrunched up.

Jade teleports in and performs the most gentle yet merciless body slam hug ever performed by a human being; John crawls out from under Karkat a second later and joins her, monitoring Dave's 'oof!' for any sign of real pain. "Dude. Let's not do that ever again," John says, muffled, and then their whole pile jolts as Rose flops on top of them. Dave grumbles, but Jade is defying gravity with scientific precision to avoid putting any of her weight on him, and John's floating on a thin cushion of air, so it appears to be a token grumble. Dave makes a valiant effort to pat them all on the back to complete the group hug.

"Then again, if we run into another situation where reality is breaking down and we're stuck with a Lord of something or other, we've probably done something wrong!" Jade says, laughing. This close, when John turns his head to nod with her in agreement, they only avoid headbutting each other by a narrow margin.

"Don't fucking put that idea out there! The universe will hear you!" Karkat yells from his curl-huddle. John nearly topples the whole friendpile with a jump - he thought Karkat had passed out from crying - and Dave tenses up. There's a weird sensation for a split second, like John's ears are about to pop -

Nothing happens. "Huh. Gonna have to get used to that," Dave says, scratching his face again. Rose shifts a little to prop herself up, her hand absently climbing toward her eye, and Jade rolls her eyes at John as she quickly flicks both of them before they can start picking at the skin.

"You don't have any time powers at all, anymore?" Rose asks, quietly, in sharp contrast to her silent, pretend slap fight with Jade. Her hand shoots out with unfailing accuracy to boop Jade on one of her Bec ears, and Jade's mouth pops open.

"None that I can tell. Shit, dude," Dave says, with feeling. Another one John can't quite pin down - a little bit wistful, a little bit relieved. Dave starts to fidget, and John pokes Jade in the stomach to get her attention back so they can all give Dave some space to breathe. "No aspect, no nothing. I can finally call myself the Dude of Guy, just like I always dreamed of.-" Dave starts to ramble, and that's when it hits John.

His hand shoots out and he grabs Dave by the shoulder; Dave twitches, blinking in alarm, and John
stares at him solemnly. "Dave. Dude. You don't have an aspect." John pauses, and then waggles his eyebrows with weighty significance. Dave stares back at him, still uncomprehending. "You know what this means, man."

Slowly, Dave's hand creeps up, and he presses it to the side of his face as his jaw drops. "Oh…my god," Dave says, faintly.

John grins. "You're ass-less."

"RIP my ass," Dave says, a grin blooming on his face.

Jade buries her face in her hands, and bursts into helpless snort-giggles.

Terezi stops dead just outside the shade of the trees. Shaking her head, she turns and starts walking away. "Never mind, I'm going back to the normal side of the beach. The Vriska side of the beach."

After a moment to let the shame of that sink in, she waves. "Smell you later, coolkid."

"Take me with you," Karkat groans, waving a useless claw in the general direction of Terezi's back.

They head over to investigate the greenhouse as soon as Dave finishes transforming his white-and-grey clothes into something more tropical beach-worthy. He flatly refuses to give up his hooded cloak aesthetic for perfectly understandable reasons, but eventually winds up sleeveless and in shorts. John's default state is short-sleeved and 'breezy,' so he's good to go. Rose and Kanaya are both down to tank tops and wrapped skirts; they have to leave excess fabric in the form of god tier hoodies behind in a pile on the beach. Karkat's miserably red in the face from sweltering in the heat by the time John convinces him to shrug off his jacket and swap things around so he has short sleeves. He looks a little less likely to faint after that, but the misery doesn't go away - it just fades into fatigue and resignation. John's not sure it will go away for…a long time. His own smile feels kinda brittle, but after sitting on the beach for a few hours he's built up enough restless energy that the Breeze tugs him along with infectious drive.

As one, they all opt to fly over the thick jungle rather than walking through it. Dave is wobbly and can barely fly above the level of the treetops on his own, but it's more than he was ever able to do as a Time player. Eventually Jade slings an arm around him and they bound ahead of the rest of the group.

On the one hand, it feels dangerous to leave Vriska sunbathing on the beach. On the other hand? Worrying about Vriska is getting pretty overrated.

John almost flies right over the greenhouse itself. Unlike the astronomy observatories crowning the volcano, the greenhouse blends in almost seamlessly with the lush growth around it. The sunlight winks off a pane of glass before he gets too far. From above, it's clearly built in the shape of a Space symbol, the arms spiraling out between the trees. Ropy vines and interlocking tree branches obscure parts of the glass roof. A wide, round atrium sits in the center of the symbol, clear of the trees and lit up with direct sunlight, and Jade and Kanaya gravitate toward it like magic.

The door isn't locked or anything. After Jade slides it open, they leave it hanging wide open behind them as they wander inside. John brings up the rear and turns in a slow circle. The humidity in here feels slightly damper than it does outside. In a small pond right by the entrance, a pudgy white frog with flickering eyes sits in the center of a lily pad as wide as John is tall. It ribbits at him when he comes over to check it out, then hops off the lily pad into the water with a tiny *plop*. 
John looks back over his shoulder and considers closing the door with a tiny loop of wind -

For a second, he swears someone is lurking in the trees outside the doorway. It sends a weird, familiar jolt through him, like he just banged his funny bone against the wall.

He leaves the door, and floats faster to catch up with everyone else. Karkat stumbles a little on the gravel path that winds through the plants, his head hanging low and his swollen eyes mostly fixed on his feet. John brushes their shoulders together and Karkat raises his head just long enough to smile at him, quiet and small. Then, up ahead, Dave says, "Uh, hello? Anyone home?" and Karkat's expression morphs into horror as Dave nearly sticks his whole head into a huge lily flower.

"She's here," Kanaya says, absently. She reaches out, carefully plucks a sky blue flower with a globe of thin petals from one of the nearby plants, and tucks it into Rose's hair - and doesn't explain at all who she's talking about. The pond water burbles behind them, and the sound carries through the room under the faint hum and chirring of unseen insects.

"She?" Karkat asks, his voice rough. He reaches out and seizes Dave by the back of his hood as they walk by, and proceeds to drag him away from the plant without looking back once. John checks over his shoulder again, but enough plants grow between them and the entrance that he can't see much through the leaves.

"She!" Jade replies, with a sudden bounce in her...bounce. Her eyes spark with sudden delight, and she skips ahead of Kanaya and Rose to round the last bend in the path. "Hey, wait -"

John hurries up. Karkat matches his pace after a lurch, towing Dave along in their wake. "Pardon our intrusion." Rose says, as they step beneath the curve of one of the huge flowers from LoFaF, and John automatically raises his hand to wave at the two people sitting on the edge of a round, stone platform, lit up by the sun. But he catches only a glimpse of the second person - a tumble of curly dark hair and faded red cloth - and then, without warning, the only one remaining on the platform is a young, short girl in a pale green sundress and a red bowtie.

Her face is a familiar skull, with sharp incisors and deeply carved bone structure, but her glossy eyes are the brilliant green of Jade's power, and the odd, deep green skin that covers her skeletal frame doesn't stretch to bursting over unnatural muscle. She folds her claws together in front of her chest; they're longer and more hooked than any troll's claws. "Oh! Yes, um...Hello! Welcome!" Calliope says, and her voice sounds nothing like her brother's.

"Hello again, Calliope," Kanaya says with a toothy smile. Jade's busy frowning at the spot next to Calliope like it has personally offended her; John does a quick check with the Breeze, but whoever sat there a second ago has vacated the premises.

Calliope hops down off the platform - she's actually super short. John blinks as the cherub walks over to them with a clatter of clawed toes and bony heels on the smooth stone that covers the floor here. "Sorry, sorry. I'm not used to having visitors yet! I had a whole speech planned out, and everything..." she says, trailing off, while John gets used to the fact that the Muse of Space is shorter than Rose, with the bright, earnest voice and eyes of someone who doesn't look or sound much older than any of them.

"Was someone there, just now?" John asks, to be sure - after the weird lurking at the entrance, he's not sure what he just saw.

"Yes! A cosmic cryptid, one might say. We were in the middle of a conversation, but – well, never mind!" Calliope sidesteps a little, her movements fluttering and flustered as she flits around to look at each of them in turn, like a hummingbird. "First! How are you all adapting? What do you think of
the place? Does everything here work the way you're used to? Any problems with gravity?" she asks, darting in on the tips of her toes to inspect Dave's face. Dave takes a step back automatically, his exposed eyes a little wild as he looks at John for backup.

John shrugs, and puts in his two cents. "I mean, most of us can fly - so."

Calliope nods seriously, her expression fiercely intent as she takes John's words into consideration. "Right, right! I really hoped you wouldn't have too many issues! I think that I am quite good with gravity, if I do say so myself!"

"This is Jade's island, correct? Have you recreated Earth in its entirety?" Rose asks, running her hand along the edge of a large pot near the edge of the floor, while Kanaya approaches the central dais.

The cherub Muse twirls around to face Rose, a bright, skeletal grin crinkling the skin around her eyes as she hurries to explain. John catches a glimpse of Calliope's ribcage through the loose armholes of her dress - even with the strange, thin layer of skin, it's a little unsettling to look right at someone's bones. "Pretty much! I, uh, might have improved it all a little," Calliope admits, scratching her zygomatic bone with a sheepish look in her eye. "I tried to make a study of your world and your people, even while my predecessor was rather determined to wipe them off the map, and I noticed that your solar system seemed a little difficult to live in, as a general rule. I checked with my consultants, but they didn't really have any opinion on it."

"You improved the solar system?" Karkat says - it's the loudest thing he's said all afternoon. Apparently, being appalled by someone casually altering the solar system in her spare time is enough to make him jerk his head up and stare in abject horror.

"Which is why the moon is suddenly covered in trees? And air!" John says, snapping his fingers. He can feel it way, wayyy off in the sky, if he concentrates - it's kind of hard to miss that there's an extra Moon-sized atmosphere full of breathable air that begs to be visited by a Breath player. It's just that the second they were back on Earth 2.0 (or maybe they're on 3.0, by now), John's focus automatically fixed back on his immediate vicinity, rather than wandering around the way it did in the Medium.

"Er, I may have gotten a little creative with the physics to make things more hospitable. Earth is pretty bog standard, with a few tweaks here and there, but figuring out how to live on some of the outer planets may prove an interesting challenge for you, still!" Calliope folds her claws together again and squeezes tight, her eyes shining with excitement as she hurries back over to the dais. She hops up next to Kanaya and taps part of the stone with a claw. A diagram of the solar system appears in the air over the platform, with all the planets outlined with green light, and Calliope starts pointing at each one with a claw as she chatters on. "And I added a few extra decent-sized planets, since 16 seemed like a nice, round number, and the denizens requested a larger place where they wouldn't have to deal with tiny uninvited people for a few millennia -"

"She improved the solar system," Karkat says, dropping his face into his hands, his voice muffled.

"That's going to be...interesting," John agrees.

Dave, free from scrutiny, sticks his hands back in his pockets - then reconsideres it and removes one so he can jerk a thumb up at the sky. "And Condy has interstellar travel down, so the sky's not exactly the limit," he says. "Where's that King dude? We need him to start quoting Star Trek."

Which is...a weird thought that John has never even thought of before. They all flew around the Medium at will throughout the final round of the game, yet the thought of having easy access to the rest of the solar system still feels bizarrely unreal. Heck, the Condesce's fleet of giant space ships
doesn't seem half-real, either. Out on the beach, with the sea-salty air and the warm sun, the
overwhelming fact that their whole world was gone seemed to fade into something distant and
aching. "Space - the final frontier," Jade says, enchanted, as she walks forward to float on the other
side of Calliope, her eyes full of stars.

Rose does the rounds of the central area - one foot skims along the edge between stone and gravel as
she paces the circle, her pale eyes drifting as she starts to frown in concentration. "The Condesce has
billions of people in those ark ships that need to be resettled, and they've been kept in stasis while
their entire reality was destroyed. I don't even know where we would start here." That thought's almost as overwhelming as the recent apocalypse - but more stressful, since it's still
gotta happen. At least the end of the world is over with and done. "Urgh. I hate to say it, but being
responsible for telling a bajillion people that they need to sort their crap out and get along on a whole
new planet sounds like it's way above our paygrade," John says, one side of his mouth twisting
downward skeptically.

"Aka, we'd only fuck it up," Karkat says, with an almost identical expression. He goes on a short
face journey as another thought occurs to him. "Can you imagine Vriska trying to stick her irons in
it? But - fuck, letting the Condesce run it alone would be fucking worse. Her Imperious Go-fuck-
herself, with a whole new assortment of planet-sized shameglobes for her to conquer."

All joking aside, that does raise a lot of unfortunate questions. Rose pinches the bridge of her nose
with her fingers as though her sinuses just screamed in unison; Kanaya tears her gaze away from the
planets dancing over the central platform and walks around to intersect with Rose's pacing circle.
"We, um. May need some time to sort all this out," Kanaya says.

Calliope turns and smiles at them. It's a smile that's too old for her oddly young skele-face - gentle
and understanding and rueful all at once. "Pshh, time," she says, with a flip of her wrist, and then she
hops down from the dais in a clatter. "You can have all the time you need! Time isn't very important
here, in the grand scheme of things." The cherub Muse pats the stone platform with her claws. "You
can stay here whenever you like, for as long as you like. This is a nexus point where you can create
anything you might want to live and relax, or where you can leave if you want to visit other places.
That bit's more experimental, though..."

To demonstrate, Calliope pats the platform again. The real-time model of the solar system winks out,
and a white tablet zaps out of the air, hovering before Calliope at eye level. A few other screens
appear around the nexus of the greenhouse - dark projections with eye-searingly bright green
command line interfaces.

Sollux, John thinks, is gonna freak.

"Can it create therapists?" Rose asks. Because they can always count on Rose to ask the most
important questions.

Calliope taps her chin with a claw. "You might need the transportalizer for that," she says, after
giving it some deep thought. "I'm not sure I would recommend creating new people wholesale or
duplicating existing ones until you've had more practice with it!"

Rose rubs her hands together in anticipation. "Excellent. We shall need to import them in bulk, I
think."

Okay, good. John wanted to skip past the 'creating new people' part, too. Karkat, already appalled by
the solar system, looks like he's ready to storm out and start shouting at the volcano.
"What about you? Are you staying here like this?" Jade asks, suddenly, tearing her eyes away from the nexus interface - she's already started typing something on the touchscreen. Her curiosity fixates on Calliope, though, and that's also a good question, now that John thinks about it. It feels right that they found Calliope here, but also...yeah. Strange skeleton girls who form the firmament of all reality with their unfathomable cosmic power - not exactly the type of person John expects to see wandering around with a surprisingly normal, corporeal form.

"Yes! This is an avatar of me - I want to be able to see and experience everything." Calliope does another twirl, and beams at Jade as her sundress swishes around her. Her bowtie has fallen askew around her neck with all the whirling, caught on the jut of her vertebra. Then she ducks her head, sheepish again, and scuffs her foot along the floor. "This is so awkward to admit, but I'm not sure where to begin, either. I think I would be so dreadfully lonely without people like you to talk to: people who have caught a glimpse of how realities become - well, reality!" She smiles again, shyly, and catches John with it, so he can't help but smile back and give her a thumbs up. He's not really sure what he's thumbs up-ing about, but the instinct can't be denied.

Then Calliope frowns and balances on one leg, leaning around to peer back the way they all came. "Though, speaking of which..." she says, half to herself, tapping one of her teeth against one on the bottom row with deliberate clicks.

John is suddenly very sure that they're being watched. He blinks and whips his head around, but can't make out more than a quarter of the doorway from here. "Is someone there?" he asks, while the Breeze sneaks along the gravel path and swishes around through trees, trying and failing to find anyone.

"I really don't know why they're being so shy," Calliope murmurs. She leans over a little more, one gangly leg stuck out in the air to keep her balanced, and begins to absently gnaw on one of her finger claws. Then she shrugs and sets her hands on her hips, the frown easing off her face. "They've been here longer than you all - maybe they're embarrassed? From what I understand, they were very dramatic about coming to see me and didn't realize I wouldn't let people who came to visit me die just because I was distracted with being born."

She says it so matter-of-factly. Like it's a perfectly normal thing to say.

John suddenly can't breathe. "Wait."

Karkat lifts his head. "No," he says, and for a second his haggard expression stabs something hard and rusted through John's chest - it's the same mess of grief and disbelief that John would be feeling, if he weren't totally frozen in place. The Breeze sends streamers combing through the jungle, and with a silent request from John, stops frantically searching for breath and lungs and just - listens.

He knows what he's listening for now.

"Aradia was just here -" Calliope starts to say, gesturing at the platform with both hands and a look of rueful exasperation. Somewhere, out near the old ruins deep in the jungle, the Breeze catches a faint whisper of chimes.

"They're okay?!" John yells, loud enough that he hears a panicked ribbit and then a considerably louder splash from the direction of the pond. Rose and Kanaya, deep in their own conversation on the far side of the nexus, look up almost in unison, confused by the sudden outburst.

Calliope's smile inches up at the corner of her mouth, almost imperceptible with the way her teeth are already showing, an impish look in her eye. "They were in a crucible of unlimited creative potential as a new Muse was being born. So they're a tiny bit different, now. But that's no reason for them to
not come say hello!" she says, rising up on her toes again and shouting the last bit pointedly in the direction of the door. Jade frowns in concentration, now - the distant, focused look of her reaching out with her own powers the same way John did earlier - while Dave starts frantically batting at John's arm.

Karkat surges forward and seizes Calliope by the shoulders. There's a weird moment where John's eyes cross and Calliope looks like she's halfway across the room instead, before she settles back into place and allows it. "Is he here?!" Karkat says, voice cracking.

Calliope smiles, pats Karkat's hand, and then points toward the entrance.

At the edge of the jungle outside the atrium, someone shifts their weight, then ducks behind a tree. The Breeze snatches up a quiet, murmured honk and rushes it into the greenhouse in a flurry of excitement for all of them to hear.

Karkat lets go of Calliope and books it. "GAMZEE, YOU CRYPTID FUCK! GET BACK HERE!" he howls, vaulting over a potted plant and charging back toward the entrance. "Don't make me fucking honk at you -!

"What - Gamzee?" Rose repeats, but there's no time to explain; John takes off at a dead sprint, gravel flying out from under his shoes as he races to catch up with Karkat. The plants and flowers whip by his face, but he can't stop for anything.

"Karkat, John, where are you going?" Kanaya shouts after them.

Karkat bursts out through the doorway and flings himself in between the trees without hesitating for a second. John answers for him. "Clown hunting!" he calls back over his shoulder, and a bright, uncontrollable grin takes over his whole face as he waves.

Then he's out the door and under the sun. The grass provides more traction under his feet than the gravel did, and when the wind rushes around him it smells like fresh, uncut grass and damp earth, and nothing feels empty or missing or lacking at all.

It's a beautiful day outside, and John can finally breathe.
Chapter End Notes

We made it. We climbed this entire mountain, you guys. Art credit to Meruz again!
Some music for the road: [https://homestuck.bandcamp.com/track/heir-of-grief](https://homestuck.bandcamp.com/track/heir-of-grief) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47FRn_ye5lc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47FRn_ye5lc) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcps2fJKuA1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcps2fJKuA1) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ)

(Because how was I supposed to choose just one?)

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Acknowledgements:

Back in 2013, all I wanted was head canons for the rest of the beta kids as super heroes in RMWT - and naturally it all spun wildly out of control. The inspiration for Dad Egbert's face-heel turn and brainwashing of John came from *Lightning on the Wave's Sacrifices Arc*, while many of the game mechanics and fraymotif theory were inspired by or borrowed from the *Sburb Glitch FAQ*. I'm not even going to try to list the memes.

To Bananaramses, PanicIsMyRain, and SergeantMeow, original creators of Real Men Wear Tights, for letting me take this superhero AU of an AU about as far down the rabbit hole as one can go; for the use of Heir and Hemogoblin's aliases and the confrontation with Hearts Boxcars as backstory from which to perform a magnificent pirouette off the handle into Sburb madness. Without you this monster spin-off could never have been.

To all of you who have been commenting on this fic and giving me mini-heart attacks over the state of my inbox throughout this sicknasty roller coaster ride. You guys spell-checked me, put up with my cryptic/silly plot twists, early-installment weirdness, and sporadic partial updates during plot-critical chapters, and actually inspired the entire confrontation with Eridan in Los Angeles. You also terrified and impressed me with how savvy you were at predicting the future course of the story sometimes. You are the smartest, coolest, loveliest readers. It is you.

And to Katie, who read Homestuck so she could read and understand this story in context - that's commitment, right there.

I didn't think we'd actually make it here. But let's see how far we've come.
Like One Sundered Star - 07/04/2013 to 09/13/2017

Works inspired by this one: Sunsets Over the Trinity by laZardo, milesss, Not Computing by ArbitrarilyImportant, Happy Endings by PhoenixAccio

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!